

Gospel of Luke

INTRODUCTION

Focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, this Gospel is part one of a two-part history, the book of Acts being part two. Both were dedicated to “most honorable Theophilus” (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Nothing else is known about him. The Greek name Theophilus means “lover of God” or “friend of God” and implies that he was a Gentile, probably Greek. He seems to have been a relatively new believer, recently instructed about Jesus and the Christian faith (Luke 1:4). The title “most honorable” indicates that, at the least, he was a person of high standing and financial substance. It may also reflect that he was an official with some governmental authority and power.

AUTHOR

The author of the third Gospel is not named. Considerable evidence points to Luke as its author. Much of that proof is found in the book of Acts, which identifies itself as a sequel to Luke (Acts 1:1-3). A major line of evidence has to do with the so-called “we” sections of the book (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-37; 28:1-16). This indicates that the author had joined the apostle Paul for the events recorded in those passages. Since there are no “we” passages in the Gospel of Luke, that fits with the author stating that he used eyewitness testimony to the life of Jesus (1:2), indicating he was not such an eyewitness himself.

Among Paul’s well-known coworkers, the most likely candidate is Luke, the doctor (see Col. 4:14; Phil. 24). That is also the unanimous testimony of the earliest Christian writers (e.g., Justin Martyr, the Muratorian Canon, and Tertullian). Since Luke is not named among the workers who were “of the circumcised” (i.e., a Jew; Col. 4:11), he was almost certainly a Gentile. That explains the healthy emphasis on Gentiles in Luke (6:17; 7:1-10). Luke also reflects an interest in medical matters (e.g., 4:38; 14:2).

BACKGROUND

Traditionally, the Gospel of Luke is believed to have been written after both Matthew and Mark. Those who date Matthew and Mark in the AD 60s or 70s have tended to push the dating of Luke back to the AD 70s or 80s. Since Luke wrote both the third Gospel and the book of Acts (Acts 1:1-3), it is relevant to consider the dating of both books together. The events at the end of Acts occurred around AD 62–63. That is the earliest point at which Acts could have been written. If Acts was written in the early AD 60s from Rome, where Paul was

imprisoned for two years (Acts 28:30), the third Gospel could date from an earlier stage of that period of imprisonment. The other reasonable possibility is during Paul’s earlier two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 24:27). From that location, Luke would have been able to travel and interview the eyewitnesses to Jesus’s life and ministry who were still alive.

STRUCTURE

Luke’s distinctive “narrative about the events” (1:1) of the life of Jesus is written in “orderly sequence” (1:3), though not strict chronological sequence in many cases (as the notes will explain at various points). Generally, after the key events leading up to the beginning of Christ’s public ministry (1:5–4:13), the flow of the book is from His early ministry in and around Galilee (4:14–9:50), through an extended description of ministry related to His journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:44), climaxing in the events of Passion Week and post-resurrection appearances in and around Jerusalem (19:45–24:53).

MESSAGE AND PURPOSE

The Gospel of Luke is a carefully researched (1:3), selective presentation of the person and life of Jesus Christ, designed to strengthen the faith of believers (1:3-4) and to challenge the misconceptions of unbelievers, especially those from a Greek background. Its portrait of Jesus is well balanced, skillfully emphasizing His divinity and perfect humanity.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE BIBLE

Nearly 60 percent of the material in the Gospel of Luke is unique. Thus, there is a great deal that readers of Scripture would not know if the third Gospel were not in the Bible. Notable among the larger distinctive portions are: (1) much of the material in Luke 1–2 about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, (2) the only biblical material on Jesus’s childhood and pre-ministry adult life (2:40-52), (3) a genealogy for Jesus (3:23-38) that is significantly different from the one in Matthew 1:1-17, (4) most of the “travelogue” section about Jesus’s journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:44), (5) a considerably different slant on the destruction of the temple (21:5-38) from the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24–25 and Mark 13, and (6) quite a bit of fresh material in the post-resurrection appearances, including the Emmaus Road, a distinctive statement of the Great Commission, and the only description in the Gospels of Jesus’s ascension into heaven (Luke 24:13-53).