

1

TRUTHFUL HISTORY *LUKE 1:1-4*

The Gospel of Luke

An American student asked James Denney, a Scottish scholar, to recommend a good book on the life of Christ. Professor Denney responded, “Have you ever tried that one Luke wrote?”

The Gospel of Luke is one of the most beautiful books in the world. Its superb stories — some told by the Master Storyteller, others recorded by a masterful writer — make it a captivating book to read. Apparently Luke did not know history is supposed to be dull. Luke told the story of what Jesus did and said it with disarming freshness and compelling human interest.

The book of Luke is the longest of the four gospels, in fact, the longest book in the New Testament. Luke’s two volumes, Luke and Acts, constitute the most comprehensive first-century history we have of the origins of Christianity. His history recorded facts concerning Jesus and the early church from the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist through Paul’s imprisonment in Rome.

The Beloved Physician

Paul described Luke as "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14). William Hobart has argued effectively that Luke made accurate use of first-century medical terms. Luke traveled extensively with Paul in his missionary tours. The Gospel of Luke was written before or near the first of Paul's imprisonments in Rome. It was written about 60 A.D. while Paul was held at Caesarea. Near the end of Paul's first imprisonment, two or three years later, Luke wrote his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles.

Strong, united testimony exists in second century Christian writers to identify Luke as the author of the third Gospel. No writers from that period expressed doubts or alternatives. We can affirm with confidence that Luke, the traveling companion and physician with Paul, was the author of the Gospel which bears his name.

Luke is the only Gentile writer of a New Testament book. He addressed his Gospel to Theophilus, likely a Gentile convert. Luke does not assume the reader has a knowledge of the Old Testament. Hebrew words are given in the Greek equivalent. The Hebrew *rabbi* never appears in his Gospel, rather the Greek word for master is used. William Barclay said, "There is nothing in the gospel that a Gentile could not grasp and understand . . . Luke is the easiest of all the gospels to read. He was writing, not for Jews, but for people very like ourselves" (*Luke*, p. xv).

Luke the Historian

Luke made every effort to give an accurate historical record so that his readers might know for certain the truth concerning Jesus. Luke's books, Luke and Acts, have both been attacked by negative critics. Archaeological research has confirmed their trustworthiness. William Ramsay, who began his research from a skeptical position, was convinced by his research of Luke's reliability as an historian. In his writings Ramsay has shown that Luke was correct in his political, geographical and nautical statements in both Luke and Acts.

The preface to the third Gospel is a formal introduction similar to those found in the Greek historical works. Judging from the book and the preface we can conclude that Luke was a well-educated, cultured and careful author.

Luke was no mere chronicler of facts. He showed the spiritual importance and meaning of the events he narrated. In the preface Luke

identified his sources and stated the method and purpose for his Gospel.

Luke 1:1-4

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, ²just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

1:1. Luke was acquainted with some short reports of facts concerning Jesus. He does not reject them as inaccurate but rather views them as incomplete. The “things which have been accomplished among us” underscores the fact that in Christ God’s promised redeemer came and ushered in a new era in God’s relation to man.

1:2. Through the apostles the Holy Spirit authoritatively taught and guided the church as it spread the good news about Jesus throughout the world. As the church expanded and the apostles began to pass from the scene, the need for written records of the gospel became more urgent.

In helping to meet this need Luke received his information from the best sources — eyewitnesses and ministers of the word — especially the apostles (Acts 6:4). In his travels with Paul, Luke availed himself of the excellent opportunities to gather information for his history. Luke’s account of the birth of Christ is from Mary’s point of view. Perhaps Luke interviewed her when he was with Paul in Caesarea, not far from Nazareth.

Luke lists both secondary sources (short accounts) and primary sources (eyewitnesses). Luke wrote with inspiration by the Holy Spirit, but that did not keep him from gaining some of his information in a normal fashion. God guided the writers of scripture by His Spirit so that they wrote the truth He wanted written. They were supernaturally guided in the use of sources so that they did not fall into error in what they wrote.

1:3. Through careful investigation and diligent research Luke had become accurately informed so he could make his Gospel as complete and comprehensive as possible. The word translated “having followed all things” conveys the idea of careful research. The word translated

“closely” means accurately. Careful with the facts, Luke wrote only what was true. “For some time past” would be better translated “from the beginning.” Luke had investigated the story of Christ from the very first, from the beginning of the story. Luke organized his book well. The *New American Standard Bible* perhaps overtranslates “in consecutive order.” Much of Luke is arranged in chronological order, but part of it seems to have been arranged topically.

Historian Earle E. Cairns, after teaching history and historical method for over twenty years, said that Luke summarized in a few verses the best ideas of modern experts on historical method. He saw Luke “as a careful practitioner of the finest historical methods.”

Theophilus may have been an important public official as the address “most excellent” indicates. See Acts 23:16; 24:3; 26:25. Ancient books were commonly dedicated to important persons thus insuring a wider reading. Theophilus may have financed the publication of the books of Luke and Acts. Theophilus means “lover of God” so some take it as a symbol of the people of God. More likely Theophilus was an actual person who had received some teaching about Christ but was eager for more.

1:4. Oral preaching of the gospel needed more permanent written expression. Luke wrote to substantiate what Theophilus had learned about Jesus. Luke promised official, complete knowledge that would give Theophilus certainty. These four verses constitute one Greek sentence which climaxed with the word “certainty.”

The purpose of Luke’s Gospel is to provide a true account about Jesus so that his readers can have confident assurance concerning the historical truthfulness of the gospel facts.

Special Characteristics of Luke’s Gospel

Luke’s Gospel has an emphasis on the universal implications of the gospel of salvation. When Simeon blessed the child Jesus, he spoke of “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (2:32). The prophet Isaiah is quoted as saying, “All flesh shall see the salvation of God” (3:6). Samaritans are persons cared for by God — 9:54; 10:33; 17:16. God’s favor on non-Jews in the Old Testament is mentioned (4:25-27). In a parable on the kingdom Jesus tells of a banquet where those on the highway and the hedges are invited to come (14:21-23). The commission was to preach forgiveness of sin to all nations (24:27). The message of Luke is not different from the other Gospels but “the universality of Christ’s promises are more

distinctly marked; the invitations to the careless, to the wanderer, to the forsaken of man . . . are more marked, more definite, more urgent" (Spence, p. 14).

Surely Luke was interested in people. He sketched pictures of many unforgettable characters — Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Mary and Martha, Zacchaeus, Cleopas and his companion. Luke's Gospel showed Jesus' concern for social outcasts — the immoral woman (7:36ff), Zacchaeus, the tax collector (19:8ff), the robber on the cross (23:39ff), the prodigal son (15:11-24), a publican at prayer (18:9-14), Samaritans (10:33; 17:16). Luke mentioned thirteen women not mentioned in the other Gospels. Women are prominent in the birth narratives (1,2), at the cross (23:49) and in the resurrection narrative (23:55-24:11). Luke told of several times Jesus dined with Pharisees (7:36-50; 11:37-44; 14:1-4) and ate in the home of Mary and Martha (10:38-42), in Zacchaeus' house (19:1-10) and in Cleopas' home (24:13-32).

Luke gave more attention to the prayer life of Jesus than do the other Gospel writers. He recorded nine prayers of Jesus (only two of these are listed elsewhere). Jesus prayed in connection with the following events: baptism (3:21), after performing miracles (5:15-16), before choosing the apostles (6:12), before foretelling His death (9:18-22), at His transfiguration (9:29), when the seventy returned (10:17-21), before teaching the disciples how to pray (11:1), in the Garden of Gethsemane (22:39-46) and on the cross (23:34,46).

Jesus withdrew to pray (6:12). He prayed for Peter (22:31-32). He encouraged the disciples to pray (22:40). He prayed for Himself (22:41) and for His enemies (23:34). Of the parables listed only in Luke's Gospel, three deal with prayer — the Friends at Midnight (11:5), the Unrighteous Judge (18:1-8) and the Pharisee and the Publican (18:9-17).

Savior and Lord

The angel announced to the shepherds the birth of "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). The aged Simeon declared "for mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (2:30). Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:32). Jesus told Zacchaeus "today salvation has come to this house . . . For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (19:9-10). Cleopas and his friend said, "We had hoped that he [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel" (24:21). Indeed He was. Jesus commissioned the disciples "that repen-

tance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:47). The theme of Luke's Gospel is *Jesus — Savior and Lord*.

The Gospel of Luke may be briefly outlined as follows:

Jesus — Savior and Lord

- I. Preface (1:1-4)
- II. Birth and Childhood (1:5-2:52)
- III. Preparation for Ministry (3:1-4:13)
- IV. Ministry in Galilee (4:14-9:50)
- V. From Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27)
- VI. Final Week in Jerusalem (19:28-23:56)
- VII. Resurrection Appearances (24:1-53)

Select List of Commentaries

Butler, Paul. *Bible Study Textbook: The Gospel of Luke*. Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 1981. Basic explanation of the text, includes several special studies.

Morris, Leon. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to Luke*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974. Concise and valuable. One of the best shorter commentaries.

Goldenhuis, Norval. *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1951. Thorough introduction. Both general explanation and technical notes on the text. Includes special studies.

Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978. Thorough exegesis and exposition by a Calvinist scholar.

Plummer, Alfred. *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*; 10th edition. Classic commentary on the Greek text. Outstanding commentary but not recommended for those unfamiliar with Greek.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How important are Luke's writings to our historical knowledge of first-century Christianity?

TRUTHFUL HISTORY, LUKE 1:1-4

2. What do we know of Luke's background?
3. Who was the skeptical scholar whose research convinced him of Luke's reliability as an historian?
4. What three things do we learn from Luke 1:1-4 about Luke's writing of his gospel?
5. Whom does Luke list as sources of information?
6. Did Holy Spirit inspiration keep biblical writers from also learning things through natural sources?
7. What was historian Earle Cairns' assessment of Luke as an historian?
8. Who was Theophilus?
9. Show evidence of Luke's emphasis on the universal implications of the gospel.
10. Which Gospel writer gives the most attention to Jesus' prayer life?
11. Cite four statements in Luke's Gospel that point to Jesus' role as Savior.

