

AN INTRODUCTION TO LUKE

Luke 1:1-4

"Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. ³ It also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed."

INTRODUCTION

How confident can we be that what we read in our Bibles is actually God's truth? The first English-language Bible to be printed in Ireland, in 1716, encouraged its readers to "sin on more" rather than "sin no more," as **Jesus** commanded the woman taken in adultery in **John 8:11**. A similar error in 1653 printed **I Corinthians 6:9** as, "Know ye not that the unrighteous *shall* inherit the kingdom of God?" (italics added) instead of, "the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God." What has become known as the "Wicked Bible" of 1631 printed the 7th Commandment as "Thou shalt commit adultery." This mistake so infuriated King Charles I of England that he ordered all copies destroyed and fined all printers whose hands had touched this edition without correcting this hideous error. A 19th-century blunder had **Jesus** declare in **Mark 7:27**, "Let the children first be killed" instead of "be filled." A 1702 KJV edition misquoted **Psalms 119:16**. Instead of the psalmist decrying, "Princes have persecuted me without cause," he complains, "*Printers* have persecuted me without cause" (italics added), which sounds more accurate in today's world!

Even without an excuse that the Bible we read might be filled with misprints, we often misinterpret what God is telling us in the words of Scripture or we fail to grasp how we should apply God's words to our lives and to the needs of those around us. You can imagine the confusion swirling in the minds of early Christians some 30+ years after Christ's Resurrection, when the Gospel of **Luke** was likely written and few New Testament documents were yet available. "What could they know with certainty," they must have asked themselves, "about who **Jesus** actually was, what He taught, and what He did?" Most of what these early Christians knew about **Jesus** they'd heard word of mouth. In 1902, William Louis Stern, who coined the term intelligence quotient (I.Q.), developed an experiment in which a "chain" of people told and retold a story to study how each person would change that story just a little. By the end of the "chain," the final story would often have little to do with the original story. Stern discovered many use their own ideas and experiences to add things that weren't there or to take out things that were. One such example is from the First World War when communication systems were poor. A British colonel requested that the following message be passed down the line of soldiers fighting in the trenches: "*Send reinforcements, we're going to advance!*" But after it had passed from soldier to soldier and finally reached its destination, the message received at headquarters was quite different: "*Send three and four pence, we're going to a dance!*"

Today we will focus upon Luke's words in **vs. 4**, "so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed," as we explore Who Luke Is and What *Luke* Is.

I. WHO LUKE IS

Luke first appears by name in the New Testament in Paul's letters to the **Colossians** and to **Philemon** (apparently a wealthy businessman in whose home the Church in the town of Colossae then met). Both letters were written in A. D. 61, 31 years after **Jesus'** Ascension. In **vs. 24** of **Philemon**, Paul spoke of, "Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my coworkers." Irenaeus, an early Church leader in the town of Lyon, in what is now France, described Luke in A.D. 185 as an "inseparable" companion of the Apostle Paul. This is borne out by Paul confiding to Timothy, from his imprisonment in Rome just months before his death, "Only Luke is with me" (**II Timothy 4:11**). Luke's close association with Paul qualified his writings to be included in the New Testament. Only writings written by Christ's first Apostles or backed by

an Apostle's authority were accepted into the canon of writings inspired by God's Spirit. The Apostle Peter called Mark "my son" (**I Peter 5:13**) due to their close association. The Gospel of **Mark** has the stamp of Peter's authority upon it, as the Gospel of **Luke** and **Acts** have the stamp of Paul's authority.

Luke has the distinction of being the only Gentile, or non-Jewish, New Testament writer. In **Colossians 4:7-11**, Paul includes Gospel writer "Mark" among "the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision" ("the only Jewish believers among my co-workers," NLT). Paul then states in **Colossians 4:14**, "Luke, the dearly loved physician, and Demas greet you." This clearly identifies Luke as a non-Jewish follower of Christ. As a "physician," Luke was one of the most highly educated of all of the early Christian leaders. He strove for accuracy and excellence in all he did. His Greek of **Luke 1:1-4** may be the finest Greek of the New Testament. Luke's medical training also helped him to be careful in all he believed. By declaring, "I have carefully investigated everything from the very first" pertaining to the life and person of **Jesus Christ**, Luke assures us he's carefully separated the facts from mere fancy.

Let's look again at Luke's opening words, "Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us,"² just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us." Luke thus places himself among the "us" of second-generation believers who were not among "the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (of the Gospel). Again, Luke is the only New Testament writer with this distinction. Verses in the **Book of Acts** reveal Luke embraced **Jesus** as His Lord and Savior 20 years after Christ's Resurrection. He was not rooted in the centuries-old faith of the Jews and probably never heard of **Jesus** during **Jesus'** earthly years in Israel. Luke thus came to faith in Christ much as we did, and he presented his overview of **Jesus'** life to make most sense to people like us.

All the letters and books making up the Christian New Testament were almost surely originally written on an early form of paper made from strips of the papyrus plant native to Africa. Three thousand years before **Jesus'** birth, Egyptians began slicing, pressing together, and drying these papyrus strips together into a form of polished paper. Pages of papyrus could be stitched together into rolls upon which books could be written. Papyrus became the universal medium for making books in Greece and Rome. *Biblos*, the Greek word for "papyrus," came to mean "a book." In the early centuries of the Christian Church, when the Old and New Testament Scriptures came to be understood as the writings of our common Creator God, they were given the collective name "Bible" to signify, "*The Book*."

Luke and **Acts** are two of the nine New Testament writings that appear to be anonymous, without the author's name stated in the text. This is also true of **Matthew**, **Mark**, **John**, **Hebrews**, and **1, 2, 3 John**. Due to the strength of the papyrus pages, rolls of about 30' were the longest that books could then be made. Interestingly, **Luke** and **Acts**, the two longest books of the New Testament, each required almost exactly a roll of 30' to contain them. The title and author of such lengthy books were often named on a separate tag originally attached to them, which understandably often later fell off.

There is strong internal and external evidence confirming Luke as the author of these two works, even without such tags. The internal evidence begins with the common authorship of **Luke** and **Acts**. **Luke's** author clearly intended to present **Acts** as a sequel to his work. After he established "the certainty" of the events and teachings associated with the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord," as the angel proclaimed **Jesus** at His birth in Bethlehem (**Luke 2:8-11**, NASB), **Luke's** author closed his account by having **Jesus** commission His disciples with the heart of the Savior's "good news of great joy which will be for all the people" (as the angel promised in **Luke 2:10**): "that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day,"⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (**Luke 24:46-47**, NASB). Without the Book of **Acts**, there would be only the scanty record found within the letters of the New Testament of how thoroughly Christ's earliest followers fulfilled this commission. **Acts** alone also answers critical questions that needed answering, such as how

the predominantly Jewish Christian Church transformed within a few decades into a predominantly Gentile Church, without the necessity of the throngs of Gentile who embraced the Jewish Messiah **Jesus** as their Savior needing to become observant Jews, as most of **Jesus'** first Apostles expected. For over 1,000 years, all Gentiles who chose to embrace Israel's God as their God had to follow all Jewish rites and ceremonies.

The most compelling internal evidence of Luke's authorship is the "we" passages found in **Acts**. **Acts** is written in the third person, from an outsider's viewpoint, until a subtle but dramatic "we" is inserted to indicate **Acts'** writer became a first person participant in the story. In A. D. 49-52, Paul and Silas engaged in what is now called Paul's second missionary journey, spreading the good news about **Jesus** and establishing churches throughout the Roman Empire. "The Spirit of Jesus" (**Acts 16:6-8**) had brought them to the town of Troas, near the western shore of what is now modern Turkey. Look now at **Acts 16:9-13**: "During the night a vision appeared to Paul: A Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him, 'Cross over to Macedonia and help us!' ¹⁰ After he had seen the vision, *we* immediately made efforts to set out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called *us* to evangelize them. ¹¹ Then, setting sail from Troas, *we* ran a straight course to Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, a Roman colony, which is a leading city of that district of Macedonia. *We* stayed in that city for a number of days. ¹³ On the Sabbath day *we* went outside the city gate by the river, where *we* thought there was a place of prayer. *We* sat down and spoke to the women gathered there" (italics added). Similar "we" insertions are found in **Acts 20:5-16; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16**. Of the handful of Paul's coworkers and close associates who might be candidates for the unnamed person who inserted himself into the action at these strategic times in **Acts**, no one better meets all the necessary conditions than Luke. **Acts 21:1-8** even brings him with Paul in A. D. 57 to Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea, Rome's capital over the lands of Israel and Syria. He did not sail with Paul for Rome until more than two full years later, which gave Luke ample time to "carefully investigate" the facts about **Jesus** and to personally interview many of those who knew Him on earth.

The external evidence of history is unanimous in attesting Luke as the author of this Gospel. Of all Christian leaders who lived closest to New Testament times, none ever suggested anyone else. The oldest surviving manuscript of **Luke**, dating to the end of the 2nd century, includes the title, "Gospel according to Luke," at the end of the manuscript. We can have full confidence today that "Luke, the dearly loved physician," one of the Apostle Paul's "coworkers" and his "inseparable" companion, wrote **Luke** and **Acts**!

II. WHAT LUKE IS

There's an old joke about a country Dr. who delivered a baby boy in a backwoods home years ago. While shaking his head with obvious concern, he asked the parents if they'd decided on a name for their baby yet. "No," they replied. The Dr. said, "I'd name him Theophilus, like in the Bible." "Why would you name him that?" asked the father. "Because that's the awfulest looking child I've ever seen."

"Most honorable Theophilus," to whom Luke addressed **Luke** and **Acts**, appears to have been a Gentile believer of some wealth and social status. Aside from his name in Greek meaning, "friend of God," nothing else is known of him. Theophilus may have wanted assurance about embracing the Messiah promised to the Jews as his Savior when the majority of Jews had rejected Him. Luke thus sets the tone he envisions a Gentile audience for his writing. He wants people who know next to nothing of the Jewish faith or have never been to Israel to understand his words and to realize Jesus is the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord" for both *Gentiles* and Jews. Luke, therefore, seldom quotes the Old Testament. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and John, Luke's purpose is not to confirm to Jews that **Jesus** is the fulfillment of prophecy. Luke uses a Greek word for "Master" to refer to **Jesus** and never calls Him "Rabbi" (which would mean little to a Gentile), and he often substitutes "lawyer" for the Jewish term "scribe" (**Luke 10:25; 11:52**). He substitutes non-Palestinian terms of architecture, weather, and geography for words commonly used in Israel, and includes more explanation of Jewish customs unknown to Gentiles than other Gospels (**Luke 22, 1, 7**). Luke also extends **Jesus'** genealogy past Abraham, the father of the Jews, to Adam (**Luke 3:38**), the father of us all.

Luke's Gospel places more emphasis upon women than do **Matthew**, **Mark**, or **John**. Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, for example, are featured extensively in **Luke 1 & 2**. Luke alone tells of the "widow" of the town of "Nain" for whom **Jesus** restored her dead son to life (**Luke 7:11-17**), or the "woman" "bent over" by demonic affliction whom **Jesus** set free (**Luke 13:10-17**), or of the "many" "women" "who were supporting" **Jesus** and His disciples "from their possessions" (**Luke 8:1-3**). Luke also most emphasizes the value of individuals to our Heavenly Father and how much the good news of salvation through Christ is available to the most disreputable. Luke alone conveys stories of **Jesus** embracing "Zaccheus who was a chief tax collector" and despised as a Roman collaborator (**Luke 19:1-10**), forgiving the woman of "many sins" who repentantly "washed" His "feet" "with her tears," "wiped them with her hair," and "anointed" His "feet with fragrant oil" (**Luke 7:36-50**), and **Jesus'** memorable tale of the repentant Prodigal Son still being welcomed unconditionally into his father's arms (**Luke 15:11-31**). We shall see in coming weeks how **Luke** also emphasizes the person of the Holy Spirit and the power of prayer more than any Gospel.

At least 42% of what **Luke** records is not found elsewhere in the New Testament, including four miracles, and 10 parables or stories (including the Good Samaritan & the Rich Man and Lazarus). Aside from all Luke reveals to us about the birth and early years of John the Baptist and **Jesus** in **Luke 1 & 2** (and can you imagine celebrating Christ's Birth without the "Christmas story" of **Luke 2**?), most of what Luke records in the central section of his Gospel, **Luke 9:51-19:44**, is unique to **Luke**. Luke proves that he "carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, . . .⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed" concerning **Jesus Christ**. We have a lot to look forward to during our grand tour through **Luke**!

CONCLUSION

Michael Faraday (1791-1867) discovered electromagnetic induction in 1831 (the principle behind the electric transformer and generator). This discovery was crucial in allowing electricity to be transformed from a curiosity into a powerful new technology. His stature among scientists is so renowned that Albert Einstein kept a picture of Faraday on his study wall, alongside a picture of Isaac Newton. When Faraday became critically ill, a group of fellow scientists came to see him—not so much to talk about science as to talk about his death. One scientist said to him: "Mr. Faraday, what are your speculations about your future?" With evident surprise, he replied: "Speculations! I have none. I am resting on certainties." Then he quoted **II Timothy 1:12** (KJV): "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."