

LUKE

Luke was not a follower of Jesus during his ministry, for he was a Greek, probably from the west coast of Turkey. He comes into the Bible story during the second great missionary journey of the Apostle Paul, who became his close friend. It is from a passing reference by Paul in one of his letters that we learn that Luke was a doctor by profession (see Colossians 4:14).

Luke defines his task clearly as he sets about his version of Jesus' life:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

We have no idea who Theophilus was. He may even have been a hypothetical character, representing any genuine enquirer, for the name simply means "Lover of God". But clearly Luke intends to write a chronological account of what happened, and he has taken pains to interview the first-hand witnesses who followed Jesus from the beginning. His style is painstaking and scholarly, and you get the feeling he was an educated man.

We owe to Luke a detailed description of the remarkable birth of John the Baptist, the only son of aged parents, and set apart for God by a vow of separation from his birth. He was to be the herald of Jesus, preparing men's hearts for the appearing of their promised King.

But first Luke lays down the events which led up to the birth of Jesus – how the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth, and told her she would bear the Son of God, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

He emphasises the solemn declaration by the angel that the baby must be named "Jesus" (it means "God Saves"), and that he was going to fulfil the promise to King David that his descendant would sit on his throne for ever (see chapter 1:31-35).

It is from Luke we learn that although Mary came from Nazareth, her baby was born in Bethlehem. It so happened, he explains, that just at the time she was due to be delivered, the Emperor Augustus had decreed all his subjects must go to their ancestral homes to be registered for taxes. As Mary was descended from David, she was obliged to report to David's town of Bethlehem. So by a dramatic irony, the King who will one day rule the whole earth arrived into the world, not in a gleaming maternity wing attended by famous physicians and a sea of reporters, but cradled in a cattle stall, his only visitors a bunch of shepherds.

Luke leaves us one tiny glimpse of the childhood of Jesus. It is a snapshot of a particular weekend when Jesus, Mary and Joseph his stepfather went up with the family to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. He was twelve. They lose track of him, assuming he is with the other people from the village. They find he is missing, and desperately worried, return to the city to search for him. After three days they find him, in the Temple, deep in discussion with the learned experts in the Law of Moses. "I had to be in my Father's house", he protested to them (Luke 2:49)!

Around 25 AD (Luke defines the date precisely – see chapter 3:1-3), John the Baptist began his work in the wilderness of Judea. He had come to prepare the hearts of the people for the appearing of the Messiah, Israel's long awaited king. He preached a necessary change of life style, and a need for cleansing, symbolised by baptism in the River Jordan. Luke carefully records how Jesus himself joined the queue, and

dedicated his life in service to God. At this point Luke adds his version of Jesus' genealogy, which follows the line of descent from King David by another route. It leads us to Joseph, Jesus' stepfather but legal parent, so that both from Mary and through his legal father his credentials were impeccable as 'Son of David'.

After his baptism, Luke records the Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness, a final test of his readiness to begin his life's work. Then he begins his chronology of the Ministry, starting in Galilee. It is the most comprehensive of the four gospels, and includes many of the parables omitted from the other records.

It is fascinating to see Luke, as a medical professional, noting carefully the symptoms of the people that came to Jesus for healing. The man, for example, who was 'full of leprosy'. Or the woman who had been bent double with osteoarthritis for 18 years. Or another woman who had suffered a haemorrhage 12 years and who had spent all her savings on physicians without being cured. In all these cases, Luke observes, Jesus could bring about an instantaneous cure.

We can be grateful to Luke for a detailed record of one of Jesus' most dramatic prophecies (Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets, was frequently inspired by the Holy Spirit to make predictions). This one was delivered on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city of Jerusalem, a few days before he died. He had warned the apostles that the magnificent buildings of the Temple, just across the valley from where they sat, would all be destroyed. They had asked him when this would be. He told them that before it came to pass they would preach the gospel to kings and rulers, and would suffer persecution in consequence (see Luke 21:5-19). But when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies, that would be the signal for them to flee for their lives. They could be sure the destruction of the

city was imminent. After that the Jews would be scattered as captives amongst all nations, and Jerusalem would be trodden underfoot by the Gentile nations, "*until*", he said, "*the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*".

Then he moved on to that far distant time, when the sands in God's hourglass would run out. He foresaw

"on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

And then", he said, "they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

And he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near'" (Luke 21:25-31).

As we might have come to expect, Jesus was right. After he ascended to heaven, the apostles did preach the gospel throughout the world, and suffered imprisonment, cruel beatings and even death for their pains. But in AD70, only forty years after Jesus' prophecy, the Roman armies besieged Jerusalem, and razed its buildings to the ground, including Herod's beautiful Temple. You can still see the Roman victory inscription with bas-reliefs of the Roman soldiers sacking the city, on the Arch of Titus in Rome. The Jews were scattered throughout the nations, as Jesus said, and Jerusalem lay for many centuries under the control of Gentile powers (Saracens, Crusaders and Turks). Israel had become a fig tree without leaves. However, in the

course of the Twentieth century, life returned to the ancient tree. The leaves came out. Israel took her place amongst the United Nations, and millions of scattered Jews have gone back to the land of their fathers. This, Jesus said, would be a great sign that his Coming is near. So we can be glad that, though the world is certainly full of fear and trouble, Jesus the King will soon be here to take over the government of the nations, and reward those who have served him faithfully while he was away.

Luke ends his gospel with the trial, crucifixion and resurrection. He leaves his readers with a most detailed account of the ascension from the Mount of Olives, thus paving the way for the beginning of his next work, the Acts of the Apostles.

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