

An Introduction to Luke's Gospel

Who?

Finally, we come to a book of the Bible that introduces its author as 'I'. In the introduction to Luke's gospel we're told that the book has been written for someone named Theophilus, who appears to have already begun to follow Jesus. 'I too decided' says the author, 'to write an orderly account for you ... so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.'

The trouble is, that although the author introduces himself, he doesn't actually tell us his name. It is also difficult to work out who exactly the recipient of the book is, since Theophilus translates as 'lover of God' and therefore could be a general name being applied to anyone who might read the gospel.

There are some ways to narrow down who the author may be, however. Luke is the first volume of a two-volume work, which includes the book of Acts as well. In Acts, there are several passages that use the first-person plural 'we' rather than the third person, 'they.' This suggests that the author of Luke accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys and this is partly how the gospel has been attributed.

The Luke referred to in Acts is a doctor, and the introduction to Luke's gospel presents a writer interested in what we might understand today as the historical method. Here is someone gathering facts to piece together a story.

When?

We know that the apostle Paul arrived in Rome under house arrest in 60AD. He was intending to appeal against his conviction there. The book of Acts tells us that Paul stayed in Rome for two years after his arrival, which means that the final versions of Luke and Acts could not have been completed before 62AD. If we also take into consideration that Luke follows the structure of Mark, and probably used this gospel as the basis for arranging its chronology, it must have been written later than Mark was written.

Whilst it is accepted that Jesus prophesied the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, it is also believed that Luke includes in his account of this prophecy, some detail that is more likely to come from the event itself. This pushes the composition

of the book back a little further again, and the consensus view is that it reached its final form in around 80AD.

Why?

In chapter three of Luke's gospel, we find the genealogy of Jesus. We have already read a similar genealogy in Matthew's gospel, but whereas Matthew took us back to Abraham, Luke goes all the way back to Adam and to God. This tells us something about their differing agendas.

If you remember back to the early chapters of Genesis, before the character of Abraham was introduced, we saw that it began with a universal scope before focussing in on the Israelites. Matthew was writing for a predominantly Jewish audience, although he wanted to make sure they were open to including Gentile believers in their congregations. Luke is interested in going back to those opening chapters of Genesis, because he wants to return to the universal vision. He is writing for Gentiles.

Luke, as he tells Theophilus in his short preface, is trying to make sense of all church history to date, in light of the larger picture presented by the Hebrew Scriptures. He wants to do so in order to show his readers exactly how they fit into the picture so that they can move forward as a worshipping community. In this way, Luke's gospel is possibly the most appropriate for us to read today. It was written for those separated by time and place from the person and ministry of Jesus, to draw them in and assure them of their place in God's great plan.