

Gospel of Luke: Greek Physician, Historian & Friend of Mary

By Steve Ray

Her face shone as she related the stories—the words were vibrant, and though older now, her memory was excellent. He sat enraptured as she brought the past into living color. He had traveled a long way to see her and he sat motionless, with furled brow, taking careful notes on his parchment. He spent hours asking questions and listening. Mary's stories seemed incredible; but Luke had been a Christian long enough to know the stories were true. He was compiling an orderly account for his Excellency Theophilus.

Luke's Gospel stands third among the gospels and is the only one written by a non-Jew; in fact, Luke is the only Gentile author in the Bible. He wrote a sequel to his gospel, the *Acts of the Apostles* which is the first history of the fledgling Church, also addressed to Theophilus who was probably a governmental dignitary. *Luke* and *Acts* together span the initial sixty years of the first century. Luke was a physician by trade from Antioch in Syria and he often accompanied Paul on his apostolic journeys (Col 4:14; Philem 24) and was loyal to him until the end (2 Tim 4:11).

The gentle physician interviewed Mary and other eye-witnesses because he “he did not see the Lord in His flesh” himself and was therefore compiling an account, and some of the most unique stories could have come only from Mary. Luke's purpose was to collect the many stories and historical events from various sources and to compile them into a convincing and orderly account so that everyone would believe in Jesus the savior of the world. Mark's gospel was a primary source for Luke. Of Luke's 1149 verses, about 320 are from Mark's gospel. The date of his writing was around AD 62, probably while caring for Paul under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30).

Neither Mark nor Luke were apostles. Both recorded Christ's life as told to them by others: Mark is the scribe for Peter, and Luke does the same for Paul writing with a beautiful Greek style which surpasses the writing skills of the other New Testament writers. Being closely associated with Paul, Luke's account is often referred to as “Paul's gospel”. St. Irenaeus, not far removed from the Apostolic Age writes, “Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by [Paul]” (Endnote 1). Pulling back the curtain of time is such a thrill, giving us a glimpse into the past. The *Muratorian Fragment* (late 2nd century) gives a fascinating and ancient witness to the ministerial relationship between Paul and Luke and the early acceptance of Luke's gospel into the canon of Scripture. Origen (185-245) informs us the Paul approved of Luke's gospel (Endnote 2) and Tertullian (c. 160-225) informs his opponents that “this gospel of Luke has been received without contradiction from the moment of its publication.” (Endnote 3).

John's gospel presents Jesus as God, Mark's as a servant, Matthew's as the king. Luke reveals Jesus Christ as the perfect Man to a Hellenistic audience steeped in Greek philosophy and struggling for human perfection and meaning in the aftermath of their failed “glory days”. Luke impresses this point upon his readers by explaining Jesus' human lineage all the way back to Adam, the first Man— “the son of God” (Lk 3:38).

His opening narration is glorious, telling the story of a young Jewish girl approached by Gabriel the Archangel announcing the birth of a son whose Father would be none other than God Himself—accomplished by an overshadowing of the Holy Spirit (see Text Box). No science fiction has ever reached such heights of simplicity and profundity. Truth is stranger than fiction—God has become Man. As St. Augustine wrote, “[Jesus was] the Revealer of His Father, Creator of His mother; Son of God from His Father without a mother, the Son of Man through his mother without a father.” (Endnote 4)

The young Jewish girl who would many years later tell Luke about her Son, is not the only woman warmly profiled in this Gospel. Luke is affectionately often called the Gospel of Women since he honors many women in his moving account—with great sensitivity—, including Mary, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, Anna the prophetess, Mary Magdalene, and many others. We know more about Mary from Luke’s opening passages than from anywhere else in Scripture. Here he proves himself a theologian *par excellence* as we shall see. This sympathy and kindness toward women is unusual for the ancient world where women were often scorned and Pharisees would not even stoop to converse with them. Luke ennobles women and shows their dignity and essential place in the work of God.

Poetry and music was important for Greeks as well as the Hebrews; Luke alone includes such artistry in his gospel, thus his is frequently referred to as *The Gospel of Hymns*. Many of these poems play an important role even today in the Divine Office of the Church: the *Hail Mary*, the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*. The text of the *Rosary* is taken directly from words spoken by Elizabeth and Gabriel (Lk 1:28, 42), both under the influence of the Holy Spirit. What tradition still, to this day, calls Mary “blessed” (Lk 1:48; *Catechism*, 971)? Emphases on the six prayers of Christ have also earned it the title *The Gospel of Prayer*.

The first two chapters are unique to the New Testament—to *all* of literature. The intimate details obviously came from an eyewitness and the most likely eyewitness was Mary. The conversations with the archangel, the visit to Elizabeth and the leaping of the baby in her womb, the beautiful prayers and hymns to God are examples. We have an acknowledgement of Jesus’ divinity when Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit exclaims, “And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43). Here we have a foundational understanding of Mary as the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. Luke also lays the groundwork for understanding the Immaculate Conception and Mary as the Ark of the Covenant. He cleverly uses the word “overshadowed”, drawing our attention to the Old Testament. Mary would be “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit and would become the ark of the New Covenant carrying the physical presence of the holy God Himself in her very womb. This was prefigured in the Old Covenant when “Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Ex 34:35). Thus, erudite readers and those familiar with the Law of Moses would see Mary as the new ark of the covenant, containing the second person of the Blessed Trinity within her very womb.

The initial chapters in Luke’s gospel—before he picks up where St. Mark begins, with

John baptizing in the wilderness—form a bridge between the Old and New Covenants. This reality is clearly demonstrated by Zacharias the priest and father of John the Baptist who was the last “Old Testament” prophet, Simeon who announces that the Christ has arrived as a light to the Gentiles, and Anna the prophetess pronouncing the arrival of God’s anointed. Jerusalem is always central and Jesus weeps over the city as a hen that’s failed to gather her chicks (Lk 13:34) and prophesies judgment against Jerusalem “because you did not recognize the time of your visitation” (Lk 19:44).

The Gospel ends with the crucifixion and burial; then Jesus proves He has risen *really* and bodily from the grave before ascending into heaven. But nestled within these appearances is one of the most sublime passages in all the New Testament. Jesus walks with two men on the road to Emmaus explaining His death and resurrection. Even though they have heard the most inspired Gospel message in all of history, they don’t understand who He is until “they recognized him in the breaking of the bread” (Lk 24:13–35). Here the Eucharist is presented—Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave—in the same words as the Institution in the Upper Room. They recognized him in the Eucharist and Luke is teaching us two thousand years later to also find Christ in the Sacrifice of the Mass. The transition from the Old Covenant to the Eucharistic celebration and presence of Christ in the New Covenant is fulfilled. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Text Box: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, 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 know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed” (Lk 1:1–4). (Endnote 5)

Text Box: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus’.... And the angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God’ (Lk 1:26–31, 35). (Endnote 6)

Text Box: *Muratorian Fragment* (about AD 170) “The third book of the gospels, that according to Luke. Luke, the physician, compiled it in his own name in order, when, after the ascension of Christ, Paul had taken him to be with him like a student of law. Yet neither did he see the Lord in the flesh; and he, too, as he was able to ascertain events, so set them down. So he began his story from the birth of John. (Endnote 7)

Text Box: On June 26, 1912, the Biblical Commission handed down the following decisions concerning the Gospel of St. Luke: The Gospel of St. Luke is authentic. It is not lawful to call in question the inspiration and canonicity of Luke's narrative touching the Infancy of Christ, or of his account of the appearance of an Angel who strengthened Christ, or of the sweat of blood. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the author of the *Magnificat*. Luke is the third in order of time among the Evangelists. He wrote before the end of the first captivity of St. Paul (AD 61–63). Besides the preaching of St. Paul, it may be admitted that he used other sources, oral and written. (Endnote 8)

Endnotes:

1. Against Heresies 3, 1. Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1989.
2. Eusebius' *History of the Church*, 6, 25.
3. Against Marcion, 4, 5 from *Catholic Scripture Manuals: Luke* by Madame Cicilia.
4. Sermo in Natale Domini IV from *Holy Night* ed. Johann Moser (Manchester NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1995), 96.
5. Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (Ignatius Press).
6. Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (Ignatius Press).
7. Ayer, Joseph Cullen, *A Source Book for Ancient Church History* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948], 118).
8. Laux, John, *Introduction to the Bible* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1990), 240.