

Jesus and History

Luke 1: 1-4

Introduction

Luke wrote his gospel to give us a reliable and precise record of the history of Jesus Christ's life. Luke explains his purpose for writing in the first four verses of chapter one. As it turns out, Luke was not only a medical doctor; he was also a good historian. In his writing, he pays a lot of attention to detail, including dates and events that happened throughout the life of Christ.

Luke also emphasizes the humanity of Jesus and his perfection as a human. Luke was convinced that Jesus was the perfect man who gave the perfect sacrifice for sin, providing the perfect Savior for humankind.

Let's read the first four verses of the Gospel of Luke. "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed." (Luke 1:1-4 NKJV)

Of course, the author of this gospel doesn't identify himself, and we know that the title was added much later. But we also know that the author wrote the Book of Acts as part of a 2-volume work intended for a person named "Theophilus" according to Acts 1:1. The "we" sections in the Book of Acts point to Luke as a companion of Paul. Luke was with Paul during both of Paul's Jerusalem and Roman imprisonments. By process of elimination, the best candidate for the writer is Luke, the physician. Luke is also the only Gentile author in the New Testament.

Luke writes his account to the "most excellent Theophilus." "Theophilus" means "lover of God" and was a fairly common name at that time. "Most excellent" suggests that Theophilus was a man of official rank in the Roman world. Some wonder if he might have been Paul's defense attorney and Luke was helping him prepare his defense for Paul's trial. Maybe he was a wealthy Christian businessman who served as Luke's patron, helping subsidize the research and writing of his gospel. The truth is we don't really know who he was.

In verses 3 and 4, Luke reveals that his purpose is to carefully document the life of Jesus in a way that would assure Theophilus of the historical accuracy of Jesus' life and teachings. Of the 1,149 verses in Luke, 350 verses come from the Gospel of Mark. But Luke also did his own investigation, which accounts for some 564 verses of unique material. And it seems a lot of this

information comes from eye-witnesses. Luke refers to Mary and Elizabeth in Chapter 2, which raises an important discussion about the relationship between historical evidence and Jesus.

Many people today see no need to connect history and spirituality. Many people today view history as just dry academia completely separate from truth and experience. But Luke sees history as very important. He wants what Theophilus believes about spiritual things to be connected to historical events that actually happened.

But why is this so important?

I. God's Blessings are Real.

Luke wanted his readers to know that God's blessings are real and that God imparts spiritual blessings that can be verified through historical events. The goal of many religions is to escape from or get beyond history. But the God of the Bible acts within history to bring salvation to all people of the world.

He acted through Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt, and he acted through Jesus to deliver us from the guilt of our sins. When Israel began to worship the Canaanites' gods, God would get angry with them because those gods didn't actually do anything in history. The same was true with the Greek and Roman gods. And none of the Eastern religions had gods who were active in history.

Something similar is widespread today in the New Age - Postmodern notion that somehow our beliefs create reality. But according to the Bible, spiritual blessings come from what God did in history through Jesus. If it didn't happen in history, there are no enduring or authentic benefits to it! Faith in Christ is only as good as what Jesus actually did in history.

You'll sometimes hear intelligent people say, "What does it matter whether Jesus actually rose from the dead? If believing in him gives you relief from your guilt feelings, then Christianity works for you." But compare that to what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:14-19, "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching *is* empty, and your faith *is* also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if, in fact, the dead do not rise. For if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable." (1 Corinthians 15:14-19 NKJV)

Do you see his point? Unless Jesus was truly resurrected in history, God's forgiveness for our sins is not available, and our faith is useless. In other words, our faith doesn't create spiritual blessings; it can only acknowledge the spiritual blessing that God gives and has granted through historical

events. Luke wants us to know that God's blessings are real and that they have been historically documented.

II. Historical events can be verified.

Historical accuracy provides a rational basis for belief in Christianity's spiritual truth claims. Or, as the children's song puts it, "Jesus loves me, this I know—for the Bible tells me so." But why should we trust what the Bible says? Biblical faith is not choosing to believe in spite of the evidence; that's called gullibility.

We choose to believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior because of the overwhelming evidence. And the main kind of evidence is historical. Luke makes his claims about Jesus with references to specific people, places, times, and events that can be verified from historical research.

For example, he tells us in Luke 3 verses 1-2 when John the Baptist began his ministry. "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness." (Luke 3:1-2 NKJV)

This is a statement that can be tested. If we find that these people held different offices or never ruled concurrently, how confident can we be about Luke's claims about Jesus? But it turns out that John is correct, after all. Every one of these people (except for Zacharias) is mentioned in other, extra-biblical sources and their terms of office harmonize in dating them all between 26-29 AD.

During the late 1800s, a renowned archeologist, Sir William Ramsay, was convinced that Luke was fundamentally untrustworthy. He believed, among other things, that Luke's assertion that Sergius Paulus had been proconsul of Cyprus in Acts 13:7 couldn't have been true. He excavated the Roman government building on Cyprus, and what do you think he discovered? Sergius Paulus' name on the cornerstone!

That discovery began a systematic archeological investigation of Luke's historical references. Here was Ramsay's verdict at the end of his research, "Luke's historicity is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness. Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy - this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

Ramsay didn't stop there—he became a Christian as a result of this research. Why? Because if Luke was accurate in things that could be tested, he was probably honest about the things that couldn't be tested.

The Bible records historical predictions of key people and events, with sufficient detail and time between the prophecy and its fulfillment that can be tested. The point is obvious: if the Bible can predict the future with this kind of accuracy, the evidence of its divine authorship provides an adequate basis for us to trust what it says about God, Jesus Christ, and salvation.

Luke 1:55 refers to Jesus' coming as the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham 2100 years earlier. The Messianic promise was incredibly detailed, including his exact ancestry, place of birth, time, and manner of death.

Many other religions don't deal with history at all, or their facts are clearly false, or their predictions are untrue or hopelessly vague. But all the historical details concerning the life of Jesus are verifiable.

III. Honest Examination Produces Belief.

A historical examination of Christianity also exposes the counterfeit versions of Christianity. Jesus predicted that false claims about him would abound between his first and second comings. Verse 4 hints at bogus information about Jesus that was circulating even during Luke's time.

Movies like the Davinci Code or writings like the so-called "Gospel of Thomas" present a New Age type Jesus that many want to believe is the truth about him. How do you know the difference between authentic and perverted accounts of Jesus' life and mission? Many of these questionable works were composed much later and are obviously legendary when you examine their "historical" material.

For instance, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas dates from the middle of the third century. It alleges many spurious incidents in Jesus' early childhood. For example, it says that Jesus molded clay pigeons on the Sabbath, and when the people object to this, he clapped his hands, and the pigeons flew away. Another passage says that when a child released the water from a pool of water Jesus made, Jesus calls him an insolent, godless dunderhead and then paralyzes him.

And when another child bumps into his shoulder, Jesus becomes upset and kills the child by cursing him. And when his parents complain about this to Joseph, Jesus smites them with blindness. These accounts clearly portray Jesus as an a-moral (or immoral) miracle worker.

The New Testament gospels state that Jesus did not perform miracles until the wedding at Cana (John 2:11; Mark 6:2-3). Many of these false works provide us with no historical information at all, so there is no way to test their accuracy.

Another writing, simply called The Gospel of Thomas, is probably the best known of these works. Recently, it has been used by New Age advocates to

claim that Jesus' teachings support their views of spirituality. It was written in the early second century and was discovered in 1945 among the literature excavated at Nag Hammadi.

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 alleged sayings of Jesus. Some of them are similar to canonical sayings of the four New Testament gospels, but many of them clearly contradict the New Testament gospels. The Gospel of Thomas records, "The disciples said, `We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?' Jesus said to them, "Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.'" (12) What? Heaven and earth weren't made for James the righteous!

In another passage of the Gospel of Thomas, "Jesus said to his disciples, `Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like.' . . . Thomas said to Him, `Master, my mouth is totally incapable of saying what you are like.' Jesus said, `I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out.'" (13)

Seriously! Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Lord, the Master (John 13:13), and when Thomas worshipped him as "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28), Jesus accepted this worship.

The Gospel of Thomas records, "Simon Peter said to them, `Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.' Jesus said, `I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'" (114) You have to wonder why New Age advocates of this book don't quote this saying. The Gospel of Thomas is a bunch of nonsense!

What does Luke tell us about Jesus? Luke selects his material to communicate who Jesus is! He presents Jesus as the Savior. Gabriel tells Mary to name him "Jesus," which means "YHWH saves" (1:31). Mary rejoices in "God my Savior" (1:47). The angels tell the shepherds, "there has been born for you a Savior, Christ the Lord" (2:11). Simeon holds Jesus and prays, "My eyes have seen your salvation" (2:30). Jesus describes his mission as coming to "seek and save that which is lost" (19:10).

Conclusion

Jesus didn't come as a spiritual guru to guide you into the self-realization of your own divinity as Oprah would have you think. Jesus didn't come to be your moral example so you can try a little harder to be good. He came to rescue you and save you from your sins. Jesus came to be the Savior of all people. He came to save Jews and Samaritans, as well as gentiles and

outcasts. He came to save the poor and the rich, as well as the unsavory and respectable.

Paul sums it all up in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." ([Galatians 3:28 NKJV](#))

Someone wrote, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." Even if you are rich or respectable, you still need to be saved by Jesus. Even if you are sinful, Jesus still loves you and wants to save you.

God's offer of salvation is real! His promises are grounded in truth. Faith in Christ is not a leap in the dark; it is based on accurate, reliable, and verifiable historical evidence. Simply put, Faith in Christ makes sense.