

Introduction to the Gospel of St. Luke

None of the Gospels identify its *author* by name. The Evangelists were content to tell the story of Jesus and remain in the background. What was most important to the Church was to establish the *authority* behind the material presented in the Gospel rather than the person who actually wrote it down (author and authority, of course, may be the same person). Tradition has associated this Gospel with Luke who was a companion of St. Paul (2 Tim 4:11) and a physician (Col 4:14). So, following the Church, we will simply refer to the author of this Gospel as St. Luke.

Biblical scholars can tell us a little about St. Luke from the analysis of his gospel. He probably spoke Greek as his native language, was formally educated and was a skilled writer. In addition to writing the longest of the Gospels, St. Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles.

St. Luke can also speak to us directly, as when he describes his purpose in writing the Gospel (Luke 1:1-4):

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

He tells us directly that he is not the first to write a Gospel and that he will use the eyewitness testimony currently circulating. This suggests that St. Luke was not an eyewitness himself. At the same time St. Luke is confident that he can write an *orderly* account. In other words he can put together the material about Jesus in a way that will strengthen the faith of his community.

What sources did St. Luke use? Most scholars believe that Luke used Mark as his basic outline (as did St. Matthew). To this Luke adds a significant number of sayings, both from a source also used by St. Matthew and another source that is his own. It is not unusual that different Gospels use common material. This is what you would expect, since they are all writing about the same person, Jesus.

But what bothers some readers is that the Gospels sometimes tell the same stories a little differently. That is because they are addressing different communities with different backgrounds. St. Matthew, for example, addressed a Jewish community and helped them see Jesus as the Messiah promised to the Jews in their Scriptures.

St. Luke, as a follower of St. Paul, addressed an audience of gentile Christians. He points to the promise of salvation that God extended to *all peoples* in the same Scriptures. That salvation is demonstrated in the reconciliation and forgiveness that Jesus brings to those on the margins of society.

St. Luke is also writing shortly after a major Jewish rebellion in Palestine put down by Roman forces which, in the process, destroyed Jerusalem. He helps both gentile and Roman readers understand that the good news of Jesus Christ is a message of peace not a revolutionary threat.

Where was St. Luke's community located? Because of the instability caused by the Jewish War, it was outside of Palestine. Some think of Antioch in Syria because tradition suggested that Luke came from there. Most scholars think that St. Luke addressed one or more of the communities founded or visited by St. Paul in Asia Minor or Greece. The most likely location would be in Greece.

As for the time of composition, it is usually placed between 80 and 100 A.D, with the best guess at 85 A.D. This is based on the use of the Gospel of Mark (written around 70 A.D.) and the fact that St. Luke's Acts of the Apostles does not mention some persecutions and controversies that occur very early in the 2nd Century.

S.Csontos, 10 February 2013