

## Luke's Destination, Occasion, and Purpose

(Dan Wallace)

### Destination

The gospel is addressed to one Theophilus. He is called "most excellent" (κράτιστε), a term usually indicating some sort of government official, or at least high social rank.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to view the name as symbolic ("lover of God," or "loved by God"), as if the real addressee needed to be incognito for some reason. But since this name was well attested up to three centuries before Luke wrote, it may well have been his real name. If Theophilus was a Roman official, then he certainly was a Gentile, and the contents of this gospel, as well as the Acts, bear eloquent testimony of a Gentile readership.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see in our discussion of the purpose of Acts, Theophilus was not only a Roman official (in all likelihood), but also was in Rome.

Although Luke-Acts is addressed to Theophilus, something must be said for the probability that Luke intended to have this work published and consequently envisioned an audience broader in scope than one man. His prologue to both the gospel and Acts emulates so much the ancient historians' prefaces that it is quite evident that he wanted the work published. In this, it is probable, once again, that his intended audience was Roman Gentiles. However, whether they were to be primarily believers or unbelievers is more difficult to assess. In fact, whether Theophilus was a believer or not is difficult to assess.<sup>3</sup> The key issue is the meaning of *κατηχήθης* ("of what you have been informed" or "of what you have been taught"; from *κατηχέω*) in Luke 1:4. The term can refer either to Christian instruction (Acts 18:25; Gal. 6:6) or simply information, even a negative report (Acts 21:21, 24). Thus, even in the key term there is an impasse. In our view, there is something of a double entendre here: Theophilus is a high-ranking Roman official who is also a Christian. If his name is symbolic, then this is almost certainly the case.<sup>4</sup> But since he seems to be a government official, then he has been "informed" about Christianity. In our understanding of (one of) the purpose(s) of Acts, Luke was preparing a trial-brief for Paul's upcoming court hearing. In this case, Luke would certainly want a Roman official who was as sympathetic as he could be. *κατηχήθης*, then, seems to indicate that Luke wanted to set the record straight about the origins of Christianity (thus, information) while "Theophilus" suggests that this particular recipient had been more than informed—he had believed.<sup>5</sup>

### Occasion and Purpose

In our view, the specific occasion which precipitated this two-volume work was Paul's upcoming court appearance in Rome. We will deal with that in our introduction to Acts, without any defense of it here.



<sup>1</sup> Cf. its use in Acts 23:26; 24:3; and 26:25 of the Roman governors Felix and Festus.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, the exoneration at almost every turn of the Romans and the heavy blame on the Jews throughout both works, coupled with a quite universal outlook (culminating in the legitimacy of the Gentile mission of Paul), render this judgment certain.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the helpful discussion in Caird, Luke, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Although Theophilus could mean "loved by God," since the NT nowhere speaks of God having *φιλέω* toward unbelievers, to call this man "loved by God" probably implies that he was a believer. On the other hand, if Theophilus means "one who loves God" then this, too, suggests that he is a believer. That Luke plays on names in his second volume (cf. Talbert's work, and classnotes of student in Zane Hodges' "Acts" [Dallas Seminary, 1978]) suggests that the name here is symbolic, too.

<sup>5</sup> This issue is quite complicated and cannot be divorced from a carefully nuanced view of the multiple purposes of both Luke and Acts. One of the issues which seems to have been neglected is the amount of time Luke spends on Peter in Acts, and then parallels this with events in the life of Paul. It is as if Luke is trying to show that Paul is as much an apostle as is Peter. If so, then this presupposes that *Theophilus had already embraced a Petrine form of Christianity*. We will discuss this in our look at Acts, but suffice it to say here that Theophilus is in all probability a believer, though he had had doubts about Paul.

Regarding the *purpose*, this ties in quite closely with the occasion. However, it does seem that all of the gospels have more than one purpose. Guthrie well cautions us:

Whereas an author specifically states his own intentions, that must always be given more weight than any scholarly conjectures. Fortunately, Luke obliges us in his preface. . . . In short, Luke meant to write a historical account. [Yet,] in discussion of Luke's purpose . . . it is impossible to treat this gospel apart from its sequel, the book of Acts. It may be reasonably supposed that any motives which become clearly apparent in Acts had their origin in the design of the gospel, and if this supposition is correct it is at least possible that the double work had an apologetic purpose. . . . Yet there is a sense in which the gospel is complete in itself.<sup>6</sup>

In our understanding of both the gospel and Acts, there is this twin purpose interwoven throughout: history and apologetic. The *time* at which Luke decided to publish this work strongly suggests an apologetic tone;<sup>7</sup> but the explicit *statement* of his purpose indicates that he also intended to write an accurate account of the beginnings of Christianity. Suffice it to say here that the twin purpose of this two-volume work will be examined in greater detail in our discussion of Acts.<sup>8</sup>

### **Theme**

Luke presents Jesus as the Son of Man, rejected by Israel, offered to the Gentiles. In this presentation, Jesus is seen as a universal Savior. This theme dovetails nicely with the purpose and theme of Acts, for in Acts Luke is especially concerned with Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles.

---

<sup>6</sup> Guthrie, 107-108.

<sup>7</sup> This is related both to our hypothesis of a trial-brief for Paul and to the larger issue of vindication of Christianity before the State.

<sup>8</sup> At the same time, one criticism should be mentioned here: If Acts is really intended (in part) to be a trial-brief for Paul, then how does Luke fit into this picture? Since both works really belong together, the purpose of Acts is seemingly the purpose of Luke-Acts. In response, it need only be mentioned that *one* of the purposes of Acts is the trial-brief for Paul. It is true that Luke does not neatly fit into this purpose, though it does fit into the broader picture of apologetic of Christianity before the Roman government. The occasion for Acts necessitated the publication of Luke, but it did not thereby dictate the purpose of Luke.