

# THE OCCASION AND NARRATIVE PURPOSE OF LUKE<sup>1</sup>

(Mark Strauss)

## Occasion and Purpose

Who was this Theophilus to whom Luke and Acts are addressed? The name means "one who loves God," and some claim Luke is writing generally to believers. More likely, Theophilus is an individual, probably the patron who sponsored Luke's project. The writing of a book of this length was an expensive endeavor in the ancient world, and it was common to dedicate such a work to an influential patron (see fig. 9.1). The address "most excellent" indicates Theophilus's high social or political status. Luke's claim to be providing "certainty" concerning "the things you have been taught" may suggest that Theophilus is a new Christian needing instruction or an interested unbeliever. Apart from these observations, his identity remains a mystery.

Though dedicated to Theophilus, the Gospel and Acts are almost certainly intended for a wider audience, perhaps the church or churches with which Luke and Theophilus are associated. Yet the specific provenance (place of origin) and destination remain a mystery. Many suggestions have been made (Rome, Philippi, Achaia, Antioch, etc.), but little evidence can be marshaled for any of them.

We are on firmer ground concerning the general purpose for which Luke wrote. He states that, having investigated everything carefully, he is confirming for Theophilus "the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4). Luke writes to confirm the gospel; that is, to demonstrate the authenticity of the claims of Christianity. This confirmation certainly relates to accusations made by the church's Jewish opponents. The author takes pains to show that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, that it was God's purpose for him to suffer, die, and rise again, that the mission to the Gentiles was ordained and instigated by God, and that Paul is not a renegade Jew but a faithful servant of the Lord. There are also indications that Luke seeks to deflect Roman criticism. Both Jesus (in the Gospel) and Paul (in Acts) are repeatedly confirmed as innocent of Roman charges. Christianity is not a dangerous new religion but the fulfillment of Judaism (a legal religion in Roman eyes), the consummation of God's plan of salvation.

The diversity of Luke's work suggests that he is writing for a variety of reasons: to teach believers about the origin of their faith, to defend Christianity against its opponents, and to establish a firm historical foundation for the gospel now advancing around the world.

## Apostles in Training

As we have seen, the disciples in Mark appear as failures, and in Matthew as having little faith. Luke provides a more positive slant. We might say they are "apostles in training." The narrator clearly has his eyes on Acts, where the apostles will play a decisive leadership role in the expansion of the church. Six times in the Gospel, the Twelve are already called "apostles" (in Matthew once, in Mark twice).

This is not to say the picture is all rosy. The disciples still have many failings. They argue over who is the greatest (9:46; 22:24), jealously



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<sup>1</sup> This resource has been adapted from the highly recommended *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic 2007).

exclude others from Jesus' ministry (9:49; 18:15-16), and are rebuked by Jesus for vindictiveness against a Samaritan village (9:53-55). Their faith is weak (8:22-25; 9:12-13, 40-41), they sleep when they should be alert (9:32; 22:45-46), and they fail to comprehend the meaning of Jesus' passion (9:45; 18:34). Peter still denies Jesus (22:54-62), and the disciples cowardly watch Jesus die from a distance (23:49).

Yet negative scenes are softened. In the healing of the boy with seizures, Luke omits the statement about the disciples' lack of faith (9:41-43; Mat. 17:20). Twice the narrator excuses their failure to understand the passion by noting that "its meaning was concealed from them" (9:45; 18:34). After the first passion prediction, Luke omits all reference to Peter's challenge and Jesus' rebuke "Get behind me Satan!" (9:21-22; Mark 8:32-33). He omits Mark's statement that the disciples scattered in fear at Jesus' arrest (9:53; Mark 14:50).

Positive statements are also made. Through the Son, the disciples have received unique divine revelation hidden from others (10:21-24). They have left all to follow Jesus, and so will be rewarded many times over (18:28-30). Jesus confers on them a kingdom—they will reign on thrones judging the twelve tribes—because they have remained through his trials (22:28-30). Though predicting Peter's denial, Jesus prays for his restoration. Peter's horrific denial now becomes a growth-producing ordeal after which he will "turn back" and strengthen his brothers (22:32).

These are no longer the "antidisciples" of Mark's Gospel but immature disciples on the road to becoming authoritative leaders in the church.