

ST. LUKE, THE PHYSICIAN

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That,

“Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Went to bed with their britches on,”

epitomizes in a jingle from childhood all that most of us know of the lives and habits of the four Evangelists. Indeed, one measure of their greatness is that they did not intrude themselves into their books. Still, writers who are so widely read and whose influence is so momentous should not remain to us more as names than as men. Unfortunately, time and the greater significance of their messages obscure the record. Across the 2000 years we have to inform us only “faint clues and vague indirections.”

The life of St. Luke, author of the Third Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, is of particular interest to physicians, because he was one of us. His feast day is October 18; he is appropriately remembered at this later date because most that we associate with the Christmas season is of his telling; he describes the Annunciation by the Angel, Mary’s hymn of praise, the Magnificat, her visit to Elizabeth, the scene at Bethlehem and the story of the shepherds watching their flocks by night. Perhaps because he could paint so well in words, tradition has it that he used colors too; at least, his graphic descriptions have inspired many centuries of Christian art.

Any approach to telling the story of his life requires some guessing and a measure of presumption. First, to place him in his setting; the Roman Empire had spread over all the shores of the Mediterranean; with the freedoms of many other peoples, Rome had captured those of disunited Greece. Horace expressed the general feeling of Roman intellectuals when he acknowledged that, “Conquered Greece still had the Victory”; the Greeks acknowledged Roman law, but retained their positions as teachers, traders and professional men on all the shores of the Inland Sea. Everyone, Greek and Cypriot, Roman and Jew, Syrian and Phoenician, had a common bond of Hellenistic culture.

The Roman Peace spread in ever widening circles; but the prosperity and commerce and opportunities for leisure brought stability and order in only a superficial sense. The souls of the people were restless. Many recognized that the gods of Olympus were dying or dead, so that polytheism persisted as more of a social than a religious system. The idea of one God was renewed time after time by cults which arose at the eastern borders of the Empire, usually at the edges of the deserts. These in their various forms, some of them hideous, gained eager candidates. Even a nationalistic and nonproselyting Judaism had almost grudgingly to accept many pious Gentiles; these, like the youthful St. Luke

and the "centurion in Caesarea called Cornelius" entered the company of those who "feared God" by accepting decalogue and synagogue.

St. Luke's family were Greeks of Antioch in Syria, where probably he was born (c. 17 B.C.). His name (Lukas) is the Hellenized form of the common Roman name, Lucanus, and it may have been that his father was the freed slave of a Roman family. Slavery did not then imply the mental degradation which it does now, and it is likely that his education and that of his family were exceedingly advanced. In any case, it was an education for a bright boy merely to live in the currents of trade and opinion that flowed from Arabia and Persia to Gaul and farthest Britain.

Part of his education may have been rabbinical; at least, he was profoundly versed in the Law and the Prophets. He was also well trained in Greek, and St. Jerome considered him the "most learned in the Greek tongue of all the evangelists." As a result, his style can be "as Hebraistic as the Septuagint and as free from Hebraisms as Plutarch." He is Biblical when he treats of the Law or records the songs of Simeon and of Mary; when free to report events which have no specific connotations, he does so in straightforward and erudite Greek, avoiding and correcting the flaws of grammar and phrasing of the earlier Gospel of St. Mark. In fact his style is that of the written word, while the other Gospels have the character of speech and declamation; this is because the other Evangelists were not lettered men, but preachers.

He probably obtained his medical education in Tarsus, a school which at that time rivaled those of Alexandria and of Athens. It may have been there that he first met Saul, later Paul, at that time filled with fervor from the knees of Gamaliel at Jerusalem. They had at least the opportunity to meet, for Saul, a native of the town, was a Roman citizen by birth while Luke attained that dignity with his profession. In any case, tradition goes on to relate that Luke first practiced at Antioch. He tells us that it was here that the disciples were "first called Christians." Here, perhaps for the second time, he fell under the spell of the convert Paul, joined him, and after a delay which may have allowed the disposal of his practice, set out in the fall of the year 50 to meet St. Paul at Troas.

There, from the site of ancient Troy whence Ulysses and Aeneas had sailed a thousand years before, began St. Luke's journeys as "the beloved physician." At this point in Acts, the account changes from an impersonal recital (pronoun, "they") to the diary form of a companion and eyewitness (pronoun, "we"): "straightway we sought to go forth into Macedonia." First they went to Phillipi, "the chief city of that part of Macedonia and a (Roman) colony," where St. Luke stayed while St. Paul went on to preach at the altar of the Unknown God in Athens and to Corinth and Ephesus. Meanwhile, a feeling had grown against St. Paul in the Palestinian Church, where many of the new Christians regarded his mission to the Gentiles and their conversions with jealousy. St. Paul decided to go to Jerusalem where this feeling was most intense. He disregarded warnings of persecution and set sail with St. Luke in their first long journey together.

St. Luke's next long journey began with St. Paul's imprisonment, his trials and the attempt at torture which resulted in the appeal to Caesar. They set out for Rome under guard and were shipwrecked at Malta on the way. His account ends about two years after their arrival in Rome, where St. Paul was still awaiting his trial. It may have been there that he wrote his books, "the Gospel as he had heard it, the Acts of the Apostles as he had witnessed it." (St. Jerome) St. Paul was condemned and executed some three miles from Rome at a place on the Ostian Way called Tres Tabernae. Only a little while before he wrote from prison that "only Luke is with me." From this time on, St. Luke's career is obscure. Tradition has it that he died at the age of 84 in Bithynia on the Asiatic shore of the Black Sea. St. Jerome states that his bones, with those of the apostle Andrew, were buried in Constantinople.

Thus, tenuously pieced, is the record of his life. More is revealed by indirection in his writings. The length of a book was then limited by the convenient dimensions of a manuscript roll. His two books are therefore brief, even though they contain more than one third of the New Testament. The canonical arrangement interposes the Gospel of St. John between books intended as volumes in a single work which were intended "to contain all things from the very first" in order to confirm the reader in "the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed." "The first four verses of the Third Gospel of 42 words in the Greek (82 in English) exhibit more competency as witness and greater accuracy and convictions as to the truth of what he is about to write than, as far as I can discover, any equal number of words ever written, and that without the slightest apparent effort." (Dr. Howard Kelly) The books are clearly intended for general use, so that Theophilus, to whom they are dedicated, was probably not a person but a pun (Theophilus meaning lover of God). The abrupt ending with St. Paul still "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him" suggests that a third volume was projected. It is unlikely that it was written and lost; perhaps St. Luke's Grecian sense of the fitness of things was so outraged by the fatal judgment of Nero's court in the case of his friend and patient, that he had not the heart to continue the record.

The books show more than erudition and an ability to carry over into Greek the imagery and mannerisms of Semites. The fact that most Greeks thought anyone else a barbarian, emphasizes St. Luke's uncanny empathy. The story of the Good Samaritan, which he is the only one to tell, characterizes his spirit and is in keeping with the highest traditions of our profession. "But . . . (a certain lawyer) . . . said unto Jesus, and who is my neighbor? and Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves . . . (who) . . . wounded him and departed, leaving him half dead." Some passed him by, but the Samaritan, himself an outcast, had compassion and "went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine and . . . took care of him." Incidentally, the passage indicates St. Luke's profession; the lay custom was to pour oil in wounds, but its use with wine was medical.

That St. Luke was a physician and that he even existed, was questioned and denied in the tide of the 19 century skepticism which began by rejecting tradition and ended in accepting much that was more fantastic and less credible. Someone recently managed to analyze St. Luke's works over several hundred pages without any noteworthy reference to its medical character. Such viewpoints are easily challenged for, tradition apart, St. Paul called him "the beloved physician." The other evidences are many and cumulative and only a few examples can be given here. Thus St. Mark, who was one of St. Luke's sources, says, "and a certain woman which had an issue of blood twelve years, and *had suffered many things* of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was *nothing bettered*, but rather grew worse"; St. Luke's revision reads "and a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had spent all her living upon physicians, neither *could she be healed of any*"; he thus corrects a slur on a profession too often blamed for not doing that which no one can do. St. Luke is medically specific in his descriptions of illness: St. Mark tells of a man with a withered hand, while St. Luke says it was the right hand; St. Mark tells of a man with an unclean spirit who came out of the tombs, and St. Luke characterizes the insanity by noting that "he . . . had for a long time worn no clothes, neither abode in any house." Then there is the brief but thorough description of the case of Publius' father in Malta who "lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux." What may be a clinching argument is the occasional use of medical words in a nonmedical sense; for example, when he tells of the strengthening of the ship during the storm, he uses a word which means splinting, as in surgery.

Thus, St. Luke was a devoted man and a learned man and a physician who, although he left his profession, never forsook it. St. Jerome says that "Luke the physician by leaving to the Churches his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, has shown us how the Apostles became from fishers of fish, fishers of man; for he himself became from a physician of the body, a physician of the soul . . . and as often as his Book is read in the Church, so often does his medicine flow out." His Gospel, according to Renan, is "the most beautiful book ever written." Because he wrote with the mind and ordered manner of a scientifically trained intellectual Greek, his writings had the greatest possible influence on his contemporaries, and they have continued to wield this influence through successive generations. In part this reflects the noble spirit and high medical character of their author. The Mass of his feast has the appropriate phrase: "To me, O God, how wonderful are thy friends! Their power is exceedingly strong!"