

“Recognizing the Jewishness of the Gospel of Luke”¹
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The question of Luke’s attitude toward the Jews has received intense scrutiny in the past 50 years. The prevailing paradigm of Luke’s supposed Gentile provenance and orientation began to be seriously challenged in the 1970s by Jacob Jervell’s *Luke and the People of God* (1972), and Eric Franklin’s *Christ the Lord: A Study in the Purpose and Theology of Luke-Acts* (1975), both of whom argued that the traditional understanding of Luke’s background and purpose was in error. Lukan scholars have probed this subject with the result that both Luke’s Gospel and Acts are now viewed by many against a Jewish background.²

For example, Joseph Tyson’s *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* is a significant study on this subject. He noted a “remarkable imbalance” in that Luke displays keen interest in the Jews who accepted Jesus and those who did not, but there is no such emphasis placed on Gentiles, especially those who reject the gospel. He further stated:

Story after story in both the gospel and Acts tells of Jewish acceptance or rejection of the message of Jesus, the apostles, and Paul. In addition, verbal images of Jewish people, institutions, piety, and religious practices add color to the narratives. The interest in Jewish religious life is remarkable, especially in Acts, and, despite the author’s sympathy with the mission to the Gentiles, there is no corresponding interest in Gentile religious life. What little there is pales into insignificance when compared with the rich detail about Jewish traditions.³

Tyson pointed out that many of the activities, experiences, and conflicts reflected in the lead characters of Acts involve questions of Jewish religious observance. Furthermore, conflict internal to the early church has implications for the wider Jewish community. “These relationships are among the fundamental concerns revealed in Luke- Acts.”

¹ This paper presents material from my *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), particularly chapter 6.

² The collection of essays dealing with this topic in Tyson 1988, where eight scholars present their views pro and con on the issue, is very helpful on this subject. See also J. Tyson, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* (Columbia: university of South Carolina Press, 1992), and S. Mason, “Chief Priests, Sadducees, Pharisees and Sanhedrin in Acts,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. R. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 115–78. J. Sanders in *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) presents the argument defending the view that Luke had a strongly anti-Jewish bias. A balanced presentation appears in Part III, the last six chapters of *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson*, ed. R. Thompson and T. Phillips (Macon: Mercer university Press, 1998), 235–344, where Susannah Heschel, Robert Tannehill, Robert Brawley, Jack Sanders, Thomas Phillips, and Richard Thompson all address this subject.

See also J. Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (1984), and his *Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (1990).

³ Joseph Tyson, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 3.

Luke has skillfully integrated both Hellenistic and Jewish components in his two-volume work. While not denying the Hellenistic outlook of Luke-Acts, or Luke's obvious interest in the Gentile mission, Jervell and others have shown that it is possible to interpret them as having been written from a Jewish perspective and for a Jewish audience.

First, Luke emphasizes the large-scale success of the Christian mission in and around Jerusalem. "This material sits uneasily with the blanket condemnations of Israel elsewhere; and if Luke's dominant attitude towards Judaism is to emphasize God's well-merited judgment upon it, then it is hard to understand his deliberate introduction of episodes that point the mind in another direction." The fact is, Luke does not view judgment on Judaism and Jewish support for Jesus and the new church as incompatible. Second, Luke depicts the foundation of Jesus' ministry and the church as being built on Jewish background in a way unparalleled in the New Testament. Third, Jesus and the early church "lean in a Jewish direction." Examples include their temple attendance and Paul's Nazarite vow. Strelan noted that in addition to Luke's allusions to the OT throughout Luke-Acts, "Luke's choice of vocabulary in his narrative to describe people's reactions is so typically 'Jewish'."⁴

Birth Narratives of Luke 1-2

Luke begins his two-volume work with a very stately Hellenistic prologue, then plunges the reader into two chapters of distinctly and sometimes minutely detailed Jewish events and terminology. It is not only Luke's knowledge of these details, much of which one could come by via a thorough knowledge of the LXX, but the fact that in many cases his knowledge extends beyond the LXX.

For example, in Luke 1:5, Luke indicates knowledge of the recommended marriage of priests to the "daughters of Aaron." What is significant about this detail is that it is not found in the LXX and goes beyond anything in the Pentateuch concerning priests. It is, however, part and parcel of first-century practice within Judaism.⁷⁹ Likewise, the use of lots to determine who among the priests should offer incense (Luke 1:9) is not found in canonical Scripture but implied in extrabiblical Jewish literature.

The Greek of the Lukan infancy narrative is heavily Semitic when compared with the rest of the Gospel. It is not only the style of these two chapters that is Septuagintal but the content as well. C. K. Barrett sought to argue that Luke was a historian in the Greek tradition, but J. Drury noted that Luke is more of a historian in the Jewish tradition. For Drury, Luke is Jewish in the storytelling tradition of the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and Josephus. Gartner evaluated the Greek and Jewish methods of historiography and concluded that Luke followed the course of events from a Jewish perspective, both in his narrative sections as well as his use of speeches.

Both the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) and the *Benedictus* (Luke 2:28-32) are filled with statements and references that would make little sense to a Gentile reader unfamiliar with Jewish customs. Emphasis is placed on Jesus' circumcision, a point omitted by the other Gospel writers. It is Luke alone who feels the need to record the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple, and his subsequent teaching activity there as a child of twelve.

⁴ R. Strelan, *Luke the Priest* (London: Ashgate, 2008), 112.

Jerusalem and especially the temple stand at the center of attention in Luke 1 and 2. The geographical center is Jerusalem, with the temple at the center of the center (Luke 1:5–23; 2:22–39,41–51). Notice the prominence of temple activity in the references to the burning of incense, circumcision and naming of the child Jesus, the purification rite with its accompanying sacrifice, and the celebration of the Pass-over. Focus on spiritual piety is evidenced by references to obedience to the law, prayer, and fasting. Theologically, Luke is at pains to demonstrate first-century Israel as the people of God in continuity with the Israel of the Old Testament law, prophets, and promises. Take note of the references to Aaron (1:5), Elijah (1:17), Nazarites (1:15), David (1:27,32,69; 2:4,11), Abraham (1:55,73), the prophets (1:70), the fathers (1:72), Moses (2:22), scribes (2:46), and not least the many references to the Jewish messianic hope that pervades the two chapters (1:32–33; 2:11,25–26,29–32,38).

Priests in Luke-Acts

It can be easily established from Luke's writings that he had a definite interest in matters pertaining to priests. His Gospel begins with the story of Zechariah the priest performing his temple duty. Luke betrays knowledge of priestly duties by lot, which is attested only in the Mishnah.⁸⁹ Luke informs us Zechariah was a priest "of the division of Abijah" (1:5), and gives no explanation as to what this means. Details about the manner in which he served "according to the customs of the priesthood" (1:9) are given. Even when Luke describes Elizabeth, he indicates that she is from a priestly family, being "of the daughters of Aaron" (1:5). By his use of these statements Luke assumes a great deal of Jewish knowledge in his readers.⁹⁰ In Luke 3:1–3, he refers to Annas and Caiaphas as the reigning high priests.

According to Luke 22:54, Jesus is led to the house of the high priest during His trial. He was then led into the council chamber in Luke 22:66. This chamber is the *sunedrion*, a place distinguished by the members of the high council also called by this name. The other Gospel writers do not add this latter detail. Mason suggested that Luke knew trials were conducted in a special chamber and not in the home of the high priest. One may at least say that if Luke were a Gentile, he was thoroughly conversant with Jewish priestly practices and took valuable space to record a number of details that might otherwise have been of little interest to a Gentile reader.

Jerusalem and the Temple in Luke-Acts

The Jewish nature of Luke-Acts is also seen in Luke's concept and use of the temple in his narrative. He speaks more about it than any other writer in the New Testament. His Gospel begins and ends in the temple, and this is significant in understanding Luke's purpose and theology. Luke has topically highlighted the importance of the temple by sandwiching his first volume between two appearances of this important lexical item. The word "temple" occurs in Luke 1:9 and again in Luke 24:53, the last verse of the last chapter.

It occurs 14 times in Luke and 24 times in Acts. The Gospel of Luke can be divided into three principle parts based on Luke's use of the construct "Temple/Jerusalem": (1) Luke 1-2, (2) Luke 3:1-19:27, and (3) Luke 19:28-24:52.

In fact, there appears to be a chiasmic arrangement by Luke at the beginning and end of his Gospel relative to the temple:

"Temple" (Luke 1:5)

"Descent" Luke 1:9,26-27 (Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary)

"Blessing" (Luke 1:67)

"Temple" (Luke 24:53)

"Ascent" (Luke 24:51)

"Blessing" (Luke 24:50)

For Luke, the temple is the place where the gospel is first announced. Luke records that Jesus visited the temple four times. The first visit was as an infant when He was brought there by his parents in fulfillment of the Jewish law (Luke 1-2). The second visit came when Jesus was a boy of 12 and He talks with the teachers within the temple precincts. The third visit occurred at the climax of the temptation of Christ, where Luke changed the order of Matthew and Mark and had Jesus come to the temple last. On his final visit to the temple, Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, moved immediately to the temple area and cleansed it, and confronted the leaders of Israel with the choice of acceptance or rejection.

K. Baltzer has argued that Luke presents a Christological interpretation of the temple. In Ezekiel, the "glory of Jahweh" in the temple is a significant motif. During the intertestamental period there developed a connection between the divine presence of the Lord in the temple and the presence of salvation. This divine presence was equated with "glory" in rabbinic literature. The Targumim of Ezekiel mentions the divine presence leaving the temple and moving to the Mount of Olives to stir the people to repentance. Baltzer then related this to Luke's constant association of the concept of "glory" with Jesus, as in Luke 2:32; 19:38; and 24:26. He observed further that each of these references appears in material unique to Luke. For Luke, Jesus represents the presence of God's salvation (Luke 2:30). Unlike Mark, Luke adds the detail of Jesus' descent from the Mount of Olives (Luke 19:37). For Baltzer, Jesus is the new "divine presence" and "glory," which in Jewish thought was associated with the temple. The meaning and significance of the temple for Luke is to be found Christologically.

In Luke 19:47-48 and 21:37-38, Luke summarizes Jesus' confrontation with Israel for the last time. It is "not unimportant" that the location of these encounters was the temple. Luke has consciously focused on the temple location in a way different from Mark. Unlike Mark, who has Jesus coming and going from the temple area, Luke omits all indications that Jesus left the temple area. "In Luke, once Jesus enters the temple, he never

leaves its precincts until he finally departs.” Luke 19:47–49 and 21:37–38 serve as summaries that bracket the temple scenes, thus giving Jesus’ temple ministry a definite beginning and ending.

LUKE: GENTILE OR JEW?

Not one of the Church Fathers identified Luke as a Gentile. Lardner’s knowledge of the church fathers, reflected in his *The Credibility of the Gospel History*, published in the eighteenth century, is undisputed. He commented on Luke’s ethnic background from the perspective of the fathers: “None of the writers . . . call him a Gentile. Some in Jerom’s [sic] time, whose names we do not know, said, Luke had been a Jewish proselyte . . . none that I remember, expressly say that he was converted from Gentilism to Christianity. . . . All our writers who speak of Luke as a companion and disciple of apostles, must have supposed him to be a Jew.” Lardner himself held this view, and considered the matter so clear-cut that he was nothing short of surprised that the subject was even debated. A. Plummer, writing late in the nineteenth century, mentioned Hoffmann, Tiele, and Wittichen as holding the same view. A host of scholars advocate(d) Luke’s Jewish background, including A. C. Clarke, A. Schlatter, B. S. Easton, E. Ellis, J. Drury, D. Juel, R. Denova, and J. Jervell, while others admit the possibility.

Most scholars up until the mid-twentieth century believed Luke to be a Gentile, and a Greek rather than Roman. The majority of New Testament scholars tend to view Luke as a Gentile Christian, and the only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament. The evidential basis for such a conclusion consists in Luke’s command of the Greek language, his occasional avoidance of Semitic words when compared with the other Synoptics, the omission of Jesus’ controversies with the Pharisaic understanding of the law in Luke’s Gospel, the transformation of Palestinian local color and certain details into Hellenistic counterparts, and an inference drawn from Col 4:10–14. This evidence, though admittedly skimpy and capable of differing interpretations, has been enough to convince most scholars of Luke’s Gentile origin. However, each of these evidences has been brought into question in more recent years.

But the evidence may just as readily yield to another interpretation. We have seen numerous examples from Luke-Acts that could suggest Luke was writing from a Jewish perspective and primarily for a Jewish audience.

“Luke” & “Lucius” - Acts 20:4-6 & Romans 16:21

Notice that among the names in the lists of people with Paul when he wrote Romans from Romans 16:21 and Acts 20:4-6 include several identical names. There is a mention of “Lucius” in Romans 16:21, but no mention of “Lucius” in Acts 20:4-6. However, Luke is the author of Acts 20 and includes himself as present by the use of “we.” Thus there was in Paul’s company at the same time both “Lukas” and “Lucius.”

William Ramsay discovered in the papyri of Pisidian Antioch that the names *Loukas* and *Lucius* were interchangeable. The latter is the more formal while the former is the more familiar name. If the Lucius in Romans 16:21 is Luke himself from Acts 20:4-5, then

Luke is Jewish because Paul refers to Lucius in Romans 16:21 as among “my kinsmen.” This reference is always used in the New Testament to refer to one who is Jewish.

It is often argued that Colossians 4:14 indicates Luke is a Gentile. The text itself makes no such assertion. Paul refers to three men in vv. 10-11 as “these alone who were circumcised are my coworkers....” Since Luke is mentioned later in v. 14, then the assumption is he is a Gentile. However, note the train of thought has been interrupted with the reference to Epaphras in v. 12, and we should also take note that it is not obvious that Epaphras is a Gentile, though he may be. Paul is not complaining that only three Jewish men served with him for the sake of the gospel, as that is obviously untrue. Rather, he is commending them for their support in some specific but unnamed situation in the past. Moreover, Luke may be mentioned last because he was especially dear to Paul.

Origen attests to this identity of Luke and Lucius, giving us a rather early tradition in its favor. Bo Reicke, who also believes that Luke and Lucius should be identified as the same individual, concluded:

If this hypothesis is accepted, the New Testament indicates that Luke the Evangelist was Jewish in origin. This is the simplest explanation of interest shown by the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles in the redemptive history of the Old Testament, in preaching among the Jews, and in Jewish Christian traditions.⁵

David Pao stated: “Luke is most likely a god-fearer if not himself a Jew.”⁶ Clarke, in reference to Plummer’s comment about Luke being the “versatile Gentile,” supported strongly the opposite idea that Luke must have been a Jew if he is to be considered the author of Luke- Acts.

I find this theory of the versatile Gentile very unconvincing. Greek was the literary language of the East and known to all Jews with any claim to culture. It is easy to see that a Jew when writing Greek would from time to time use native idioms and constructions. It is difficult to conceive the case of a Greek who became so saturated with Hebraic idioms as to use them when writing in his own tongue. If, therefore, the meaning of Col. iv. 10–14 is that Loukas was a Greek, it is hard to suppose that he wrote either of the works attributed to him.⁷

Jacob Jervell, Scandinavian scholar, came to a similar conclusion.

That Luke was able to write Greek in a good style does not show that he was a Gentile—many Jews did so. In spite of his ability to write decent Greek, he does so only seldom and sporadically. Most of his work he presents in what may be called biblical Greek, clearly influenced by the Septuagint, a Jewish book, written for Jews and not for Gentiles. Luke’s stylistic home was the synagogue. He was a Jewish Christian.⁸

⁵ Bo Reicke, *The Gospel of Luke*, trans. R McKenzie (Richmond: John Knox, 1964), 24.

⁶ *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 25.

⁷ A. C. Clarke, *Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933), 393.

⁸ Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

Rebecca Denova sums up the matter well:

In the case of Luke-Acts we have an example of an author who was able to relate the books of Isaiah, Psalms, and the books of the Minor Prophets and produce a story that demonstrated the harmony of the rest of Scripture and contemporary events. In other words, when Luke combines portions of Isaiah with Psalms, or Amos with Jeremiah and the Pentateuch, he never understands them to be “out of context” in relation to his understanding that “all the scriptures” are fulfilled in the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. At other times, he could create an association with Scripture without citation, relying upon a nuanced understanding of narrative type. This suggests that Luke knew precisely where to look for the elements of his story. Far from being a “recent” Gentile convert, such knowledge surely marks our author as someone steeped in the biblical traditions of Israel. Luke-Acts, we may conclude on the basis of a narrative-critical reading, was written by a Jew to persuade other Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah of Scripture and that the words of the prophets concerning “restoration” have been “fulfilled.”⁹

In conclusion, Luke may very well have been Jewish. If this is the case, then every writer of the New Testament was Jewish.

⁹ R. Denova, *The Things Accomplished Among Us: Prophetic Tradition in the Structural Pattern of Luke-Acts*. JSNTSup 141 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1977), 230-31.