

Essays » Was Luke a Gentile?

by Thomas S. McCall, Th.D.

Dr. Thomas McCall, the Senior Theologian of our ministry, has written many articles for the *Levitt Letter*. He holds a Th.M. in Old Testament studies and a Th.D. in Semitic languages and Old Testament. He has served as Zola's co-author, mentor, pastor, and friend for nearly 30 years.

This article appeared originally in the [March 1996](#) Levitt Letter.

Introduction

As we speak and teach the Word, we often mention that the whole Bible is a Jewish book, and that all the writers of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, were Jews. Frequently, someone asks the question, "What about Luke, wasn't he a Gentile?" This has been taught throughout church history for so long and so consistently, that it is assumed without question it must be true. However, when you study how this conclusion was reached by biblical commentators, you realize how slender their evidence is. The idea that Luke was a Gentile seems to be based more on tradition than any strong biblical evidence.

Importance of the Question

It may not seem important whether or not Luke was a Gentile, but when you think about the magnitude of his work, the issue becomes truly significant. By counting the pages written by Luke in both his Gospel and Acts, it is clear that Luke wrote more pages of the New Testament than any other writer, including Paul and John. If Luke was a Gentile, then the Lord entrusted more pages of New Testament revelation to a Gentile than to any other writer. This would be remarkable, to say the least.

Personally, as a Gentile Christian, I would love to have one of "our guys" as a writer in the canon of Scripture, so I am naturally reluctant to find otherwise. However, the evidence appears overwhelming to me that Luke was, in fact, a Jew. The matter cannot be settled conclusively, because the Scriptures never specifically tell us Luke's background, but the arguments for his being a Jew appear to far outweigh those for his being a Gentile.

Arguments for Luke Being A Gentile

Usually, biblical commentators simply assert that Luke was a Gentile, without offering any proof at all, as it is so universally believed. Some commentaries, though, present arguments for sustaining the concept of the Gentile background of Luke. Chief among these arguments are the lists from the Epistle to the Colossians.

The Lists in Colossians

In Colossians 4, the Apostle Paul closes his letter by listing the various people who are with him as he writes the epistle, and some of those who are addressed. In these lists Paul makes mention of some who are of “the circumcision” ([Col. 4:10–11](#)), and are, therefore, Jews. Although it is not perfectly clear which men are referred to, they are presumably the previous three: Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus called Justus. Paul apparently does not include Tychicus and Onesimus, mentioned before in verses 7–9, as being in the circumcision group.

Later in this same chapter, in verse 14, Paul refers to Luke, the beloved physician. The argument is made that, as Luke is not mentioned in the list of those of “the circumcision”, he therefore must not be a Jew. However, this is very slim evidence, indeed. In the above reference, Paul is speaking of his fellow workers in the preaching ministry. However, Luke was not ever described as being actively involved in the work of preaching, but was rather Paul’s personal physician and historian. It would not be appropriate to put Luke in the list with those who were active in the preaching ministry, regardless of background.

Thus, there are reasons other than background why Luke would not be included in the list of “the circumcision.” It is risky to build a concept on evidence which is so weak, and this is the strongest evidence in the Bible that those who believe Luke was a Gentile use to prove their point.

The Name and Profession Arguments

Proponents have also argued that the name Luke (Lucas) is, in itself, evidence that he was a Gentile. However, the very names mentioned in [Col. 4](#) as being in “the circumcision” are Gentile names: Aristarchus, Marcus and Justus. Paul’s name itself is a Roman name, which he used throughout his ministry among the Gentiles, instead of his Hebrew name, Saul. In the same way Peter’s Hebrew name was Simon. The fact of the matter is that most Jews who lived in the Diaspora used two names: one, a Jewish name, which was used in the synagogue, and the other, a Gentile name, which was used in business. So Luke could well be the public name of a Jew who lived among the Gentiles.

Others have actually claimed that Luke’s profession as a physician would be evidence that he was a Gentile. This would assume that there were no Jewish doctors in the Roman world. Such an idea is postposterous. Christ referred to physicians in Israel on several occasions:

“Physician, heal thyself...” ([Luke 4:23](#))

“They that are sick have need of a physician...” ([Matt. 9:12](#))

There is as much reason to believe that Jews were in the medical profession in ancient times as they are today.

Thus, none of the arguments supporting the idea that Luke was a Gentile are strong. It is helpful, then, to turn to the arguments that Luke was a Jew.

Arguments for Luke Being a Jew

There are several arguments that support the idea that Luke was a Jew. As has already been stated, there are no specific statements as to the background of Dr. Luke. Therefore, the only way we can know anything about Luke's background is from inferences in the Scriptures.

The Rule: Oracles Given to Jews

After showing the sinful condition of the Jewish people, explaining how the Jews are just as much subject to sin as are the Gentiles, Paul asks the question, "What advantage has the Jew?" His answer was "Much every way, chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles of God" ([Rom. 3:1-2](#)). The main advantage that Paul recognizes in the Jewish people was that when God gave revelation to the human race, He gave it to and through the Jews. He did not utilize the Gentile people for this purpose. This was the rule: that Jews were the vehicle for revelation. If Luke was an exception, the burden of proof is on those who would claim that he is an exception.

Thus, one has to prove conclusively that Luke was a Gentile before one should abandon the clear rule about the Jewish writing of Scripture. We must assume that Luke is a Jew unless the evidence is so overwhelming that we must conclude he is a Gentile. As we have seen above, the evidence from the lists in Colossians is so weak that it does not meet that criterion. Gentiles are blessed in many ways, especially during this Church Age, but God has never indicated that He has changed His rule of using only Jews to record His revelation.

Trophimus, Not Luke, the Cause of Paul's Arrest

Dr. Luke was a constant companion of the Apostle Paul from the time that he joined the missionary apostle when he sailed from Troas to Europe. Luke accompanied Paul on his fateful last return trip to Jerusalem, and was an eyewitness to the arrest of Paul in the Temple in Acts 21. The crowd was greatly agitated by the presence of Paul in the Temple, and charged him with bringing Gentiles into the Temple precincts. This was a crime punishable by death. Luke explains that Paul never did bring any Gentiles into the Temple, but he was seen on the streets of Jerusalem with "Trophimus an Ephesian." Apparently, Paul brought Trophimus with him to Jerusalem so that the apostles and the mother church there could see first-hand the fruits of his labor among the Gentiles. Even though the charge was false, they were able to spread the rumor among the people, and cause a near riot against Paul on the Temple Mount, and for this reason he was arrested.

The point is that, when the Jewish people wanted to accuse Paul of bringing a Gentile into the Temple, they chose Trophimus. Why didn't they choose Luke, who was also with Paul, and was an eyewitness to these events? If Luke were a Gentile, it would have been far easier, and far more believable, to accuse Paul of bringing Luke with him into the Temple, rather than Trophimus. The fact that Luke was not mentioned in the accusation is a strong indication that he was not a Gentile. Luke was with Paul on several occasions when they made the various trips to Jerusalem in order to report on their missionary efforts to the apostolic church. The issue was never raised about Luke being a Gentile, although he was there in Jerusalem with Paul.

As Luke was not controversial when he travelled with Paul to Jerusalem and the Temple, our assumption must be that he was also a Jew. Thus, there was no mention of Luke as a problem when Paul was arrested.

Luke's Intimate Knowledge of the Temple

Another argument for the idea that Luke was a Jew is that he showed such an intimate knowledge of the Temple, more than any other of the Gospel writers. When he described the announcement to Zacharias concerning the birth of John the Baptist, Luke went into considerable detail to describe the rotating selection of the Levitical priests for service according to their families. He further described the position of the priest before the altar of incense, where the angel appeared to Zacharias ([Luke 1:8–20](#)).

The fact that Luke alone of the four Gospel writers gives this account, and he does so with such vivid detail, argues for his being a Jew, familiar with the Temple procedures. One could even speculate that Luke might have been a Levite as well, as he knew so much about how the Temple operated. Is it logical to assume, without question, that Luke was a Gentile, when he had such a clear understanding of the most intimate workings of the Temple, where no Gentile was allowed to go?

Luke's Intimate Acquaintance with Mary

Yet another argument is the striking intimacy that Luke had with the mother of Jesus, Mary. He relates the story of the birth of Jesus primarily from Mary's point of view, and then said that she hid these things "in her heart" ([Luke 2:19, 51](#)). How did Luke, of all the Gospel writers, get so close to Mary that he was able to find out what she had hidden in her heart? As close-knit as the Jerusalem church was, and as difficult as it must have been for Gentiles to have gotten to the "inner circle" of the apostolic leadership, it seems highly unlikely that Luke could have gotten that close to Mary if he were a Gentile.

Actually, it appears that Luke might have served Mary for a time as her personal physician. This is speculation, but how else could he have had such a close relationship with her, so that he could draw from her the details she had hidden in her heart, and had discussed with few others? Luke would have had the opportunity to consult with Mary on the occasions when Paul made his reporting trips to Jerusalem, and especially while Paul was in prison in Caesarea for two years. Such access would have been quite understandable if Luke were a Jew, but would have been most unlikely if he were a Gentile.

Conclusion

My conclusion is, then, that we must infer that Luke was a Jew. The idea that he was a Gentile appears to be based on nothing more than wishful thinking and tradition. The biblical evidence strongly supports the position that Luke was a Jew, and we should always believe the Scriptures over tradition, when there is a conflict between the two.