

Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up! **Luke 1:1-4**

Intro: Do you remember years ago a game show called “To tell the truth”? Some of you will remember this show in which three people would each announce that they had the same identity (“My name is John Smith”) and then take their seats at a desk. Two of them were impostors; one was real. The crux of the game was for a panel to determine which one of them was telling the truth by asking them various questions that would reveal information about them. After a period of questioning each panel member would express his opinion about which was truly the person who had been named. The drama would continue until at last the host would say, “Would the real (calling the person’s name, John Smith) please stand up!” At that moment, the real person would arise from his seat and the impostors would make known their identity afterward.

Today in religious circles it is contended that we can no longer identify or know the real Jesus of the first century. Some argue that he never lived; others that we can know little about him. Over the past several years, a group of scholars known as the “Jesus Seminar” meet from time to time to determine which Biblical accounts are true and which are not, which sayings of Jesus came from him and which did not. They pass the information through various scholarly sieves of their own devising and by which they believe they can sort out reality from myth.

Can we know the real truth about Jesus? For an answer, let’s turn tonight to Luke 1:1-4. I’ve entitled my lesson, “Will the real Jesus, please stand up!”

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

This prologue to the third gospel is packed with powerful ideas to help our faith. But first we should ask,

Who is the author of this work?

It is interesting that none of the gospels we possess includes in their text the name of their human writer. The titles that appear in our Bibles are apparently not a part of the original manuscripts but editorial insertions based on the traditional evidence we have concerning the authorship of that particular book. So, this third gospel is called “the gospel according to Luke”.

What evidence supports the Lucan authorship of this gospel?

The author appears to be the same as the author of the book of Acts

“The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen” (Ac. 1:1-2)

However, in this treatise known as “Acts of the apostles” we can see that this man was a traveling companion of Paul (Ac. 16:10).

And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:10)

Beginning at this text the author of Acts often writes from an eye-witness perspective using the word “we” as describes the travels of Paul. By examining the companions of Paul throughout his life, we may quickly narrow the author of Acts to Luke and then by implication we may show that the author of the third gospel is also Luke. It is clear that the former treatise mentioned in Luke 1 is indeed the third gospel.

The early church had accepted the third gospel as written by Luke. Irenaeus, for example, affirmed, “Luke, the follower of Paul, recorded the gospel that was preached by him”. (Against Heresies III. i. 1)

What claims does Luke make in the prologue to his gospel?

Many had compiled accounts of Jesus’ life.

We would not be surprised by that fact. I could hardly imagine that anyone who had come to know about the Lord would not be eager to hear as much as possible about him from those who had known his life. I can see how they might be eager to write down what they had learned to keep for themselves and for others with whom they would like to share the gospel. Thus, many had compiled accounts of Jesus’ life.

Luke uses an interesting word to describe Jesus life—“the things accomplished among us”. . It is the same word used in 2 Tim. 4:5 “fulfill your ministry”. The word verb may either convey the idea of what had been believed and accepted (thus, KJV) or what had been fulfilled or accomplished. The word itself might even suggest that Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of the OT prophecies concerning the Messiah.

The source of information for Luke’s gospel were the apostles.

Luke refers to them as “eye-witnesses and servants of the word”. This description calls to our attention men whose ministry it was to tell their experiences with the Lord. This description is important because it affirms that the truth about Jesus was available and transmitted to Luke’s generation.

Luke himself had investigated everything carefully from the beginning.

Luke chooses to use a word that means “to follow closely”, or “trace along” and indicates in-depth understanding of the details and experiences reported by the apostles (and perhaps others).

The expression “from the beginning” makes clear that Luke was not uninformed about any essential details of Jesus’ life.

And Luke assures the reader that his knowledge is “accurate”. The word, akribos, is related to the word for the top of something “akron”. So it has the sense of “to the top” of understanding.

Luke writes his message “in order”.

The language does not demand chronological order; but in an orderly way. It is interesting that Mark and Luke however present the same general sequence of events; this may point to a general chronological framework; and many scholars often arrange the events of Jesus’ life on Luke’s order. However, Luke may only be thinking of an organized approach.

Luke claims that the reading of his work will give the reader knowledge of the exact truth about Jesus.

Luke’s reader is “Theophilus” whose name means “lover of God”.

The use of “most excellent” seems to suggest someone of position or authority. It is used in Acts in addressing dignitaries. This may indicate that Theophilus was not yet a Christian but eager to learn more about him. If so, this gospel would particularly commend itself in teaching those seeking to know about Jesus. However it may be that Theophilus was already a believer seeking more information about Jesus.

Luke affirms that the real Jesus could be known through the recorded testimony of his gospel.

What was Luke’s character as a witness and recorder of history?

Luke’s gospel was accepted by the early church (even among groups that disagreed about Jesus and his teachings). This is strong evidence that he was a trustworthy man in the reporting of Jesus’ life as he had investigated it.

The greatest proof of his reliability and trustworthiness is in his close association with Paul as a traveling companion with him through much of his preaching life.

Appears to have first joined with Paul when he left Troas to go to Macedonia. Appears to have been left behind to serve the congregation in Paul’s absence.

Later he would join Paul in the journey to Jerusalem. It was during this time that Paul was captured and kept at Caesurae for two long years. During this period Luke would have had access to many of those people in Jerusalem who could tell him about Jesus’ life, such as Mary.

He would accompany Paul on the dangerous journey that took him to Rome. These experiences would cause Luke to have the highest regard by the apostle Paul. While in prison, Paul mentions Luke in his letters, each time with fondness and respect.

Perhaps the greatest testimony of his reliability comes from the apostle Paul himself:

Paul speaks of him as “the beloved, physician” (Col. 4:14). This description supports his competence to investigate and evaluate the evidence of the apostles.

Paul refers to him as among his “fellow-workers” (Philemon 24) indicating that he was a Christian and a teacher of the gospel.

He remained true to Paul as a friend even when other forsook him, a tribute to Luke’s character (2 Tim. 4:11).

Thus, the internal Biblical evidence shows Luke to be a Christian man of compassion and competence, a teacher of the gospel, a respect companion of Paul.

Is there other evidence to Luke’s accuracy as a historian?

Sir William Ramsay spent much of his life investigating the areas where Paul traveled. Initially he was very skeptical about the accuracy of Luke-Acts. However, after a lifetime of archaeological investigation he wrote in his book “St. Paul, the traveler”:

“I may fairly claim to have entered on this investigation without prejudice in favour of the conclusion which I shall now seek to justify to the reader. On the contrary, I began with a mind unfavorable to it, for the ingenuity and the apparent completeness of the Tubingen theory had at one time quite convinced me. It did not then lie in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely; but more recently I found myself brought into contact with the book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne upon me that in various details the narrative showed the marvelous truth. In fact, beginning with a fixed idea that the work was essentially a second century composition, and never relying on its evidence for first century conditions, I gradually came to find it a useful ally in some obscure and difficult investigations”

Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”

“Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness.”

And so this great archaeologist of the late nineteenth century verifies that Luke was a great historian.

Conclusion: So then, in Luke’s introductory remarks, we find all we need to know to believe that we can know the real Jesus of history. There is every reason to believe that Luke was telling the truth when he assured Theophilus “you may know the exact truth about the things concerning which you have been taught.” What an assurance this gives us! And what a wonderful basis upon which to examine Luke’s testimony about Jesus.

I have discussed this text tonight because of my future plans to study with you some of the wonderful stories found in the book of Luke. This lesson I hope is a fitting introduction to this study and assures us that we can know the real Jesus.

