Authorship of Luke’s Gospel

What Is Generally Accepted

- The author of Luke is not an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus but rather depends on those who were (1:2).
- The author of Luke is a well-educated person who is acquainted with both Old Testament literary tradition (especially the Septuagint) and Hellenistic literary techniques.

What Is Disputed

Was the Author “Luke the Physician,” a Companion of Paul?

Evidence in favor:


However: this is taken by some as a literary device or as a carryover from the author’s source rather than as evidence that the author himself was present with Paul.

- Church tradition identifies the author as “Luke the physician,” who Paul refers to in Colossians 4:14 as being among his companions (see also Rom. 16:21; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). The earliest such witness is the Muratorian Canon, dated 170–180. It is unlikely that the church would invent a tradition attributing authorship to a relatively unknown and unimportant figure.

However: this identification may be based on a prior assumption (deduced from the “we passages”) that the author is Paul’s companion and so cannot be used as evidence for that point.


However: it has been shown that Luke’s so-called medical vocabulary is used by nonmedical writers and is evidence only of a well-educated author rather than of one who is necessarily a physician.

Evidence against:

- The theology of Luke’s Gospel and Acts differs from that of Paul in important areas.
  - A “theology of glory” replaces Paul’s “theology of the cross.” The death of Jesus is not expiatory (Mark 10:45 is omitted) but rather is viewed as a martyr’s death (23:47; cf. Mark 15:39).
  - Paul’s imminent eschatology is replaced by a concept of salvation history that allows for an extended era of “the church.”
However: the validity of these and other distinctions is debated. Numerous points of contact between the theology of Luke/Acts and the theology of Paul may also be pointed out. Moreover, the author could have been a companion of Paul without being his disciple and so would not necessarily conform to his theology.

- The picture of Paul presented in the book of Acts is historically inconsistent with that presented by Paul himself in his own letters.
  - The account of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is quite different from that given by Paul in Galatians 2.
  - Acts does not usually call Paul an “apostle,” a title that was very important for Paul (but see Acts 14:4, 14).
  - Acts presents Paul as a mighty miracle worker, but Paul’s own letters make no mention of the miracles that he is said to have performed.
  - Acts 17 portrays Paul as saying that Gentile pagans may worship God without knowing him, but Paul himself says just the opposite in Romans 1:21: “Knowing God, they worship him not.”
  - In Acts, Paul does not preach justification by faith or proclaim freedom from the law for Gentiles, although these are two of the most important recurring themes in his letters.
  - Acts reports neither the several floggings and shipwrecks that Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 11:24–25 nor the sojourn in Arabia that he mentions in Galatians 1:17–22. It leaves out other information basic to his biography: he wrote letters to his churches; he planned to visit Spain; the collection for Jerusalem was the motive for his fatal return to that city; he was executed in Rome.

However: all these discrepancies may be interpreted as Luke’s idealization of Paul in the interests of making him serve the author’s own theological purpose; on the other hand, there is enough reliable historical information to infer that the author might have had limited contact with Paul and some knowledge of his travels.

**Was the author Jewish or Gentile?**

**Evidence that he was Jewish:**


However: these and other portions of Luke’s writings that reflect Jewish heritage could be drawn from sources not written by the evangelist himself; furthermore, it is not unlikely that an educated Gentile Christian was interested and well versed in Jewish scripture.

- If the author is identified as “Luke the physician,” it may be that Paul refers to him as among his “kinsmen” in Romans 16:21.
However: it is not certain that the Loukios of Romans 16:21 is the same person as the Loukas of Colossians 4:14; also, it is not clear whether Luke is here referred to as the kinsman of Paul or of Tertius (Rom. 16:22).

Evidence that he was Gentile:

- Luke’s Gospel and Acts avoid the use of Semitic words (except Amen), and transform certain Palestinian details into Hellenistic counterparts.

However: these aspects of Luke’s Gospel could be accommodations for Hellenistic and Gentile readers that do not reflect the ethnic character of the author himself.

- If the author is identified as “Luke the physician,” it may be that Paul distinguishes him from his companions who are “of the circumcision” in Colossians 4:14 (cf. Col. 4:10–11).

However: it is not certain that the phrase “the circumcision” refers to all Jews or simply to a party within Judaism to which Luke does not belong.