

I, Lukas,  
Wrote the Book



DONALD R. FLETCHER

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# Dedication

To Martha,  
loving companion in all the turnings  
of our road.

# Note to the Reader

**W**hat was it like, in the Greco-Roman world of the late first century, to sit down to write a gospel, the story of Jesus, called Christ? And how might it have been, if it was the **Gospel According to Luke**, the most carefully crafted of them all?

This present book is not a novel based freely on some biblical events, nor is it a scholarly commentary on Luke's Gospel. It is something of both. It offers to put us inside Lukas, a real, living person, sharing his struggles and perplexities as he produces his "orderly account" of what he believes God has done in Jesus Christ. We follow through the Gospel paragraph by paragraph, as it may have been when Lukas was writing it. We are with him in his world and time, listening to his thoughts as he prepares and writes, and as he encounters the people around him.

This book is for serious readers and admirers of the New Testament message everywhere. It may help you to understand some of Luke's more difficult passages. It should enhance for you the humanity of this noble, fallible, first-century fellow servant of Jesus Christ.

Luke's creation has fascinated me as I have been absorbed by the Synoptic Gospels, studying them and teaching them over many years. As a student of literature I take delight, and believe you will also, in what this spiritual brother accomplished in his time, prompted by the Spirit. Excellent scholars have written voluminously on Luke-Acts, currently one of the liveliest areas of biblical study, and I am indebted to many of them, but most particularly to Joseph Fitzmyer. Some finely imaginative fiction has also focused on these events of history. I do not

attempt to duplicate either sort of achievement, but to explore imaginatively the very act of creating the monumental **Gospel According to Luke**.

To make the reading easier to follow, what Lukas writes is printed in italics, to distinguish it from what he is thinking and remembering. I have put in square brackets, after each passage in his writing, the conventional chapter and verse numbers for your convenience in referring to them, as likewise the numbers for passages quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures. For the text of the Gospel I have generally used the New Revised Standard Version, but have followed in places Fitzmyer's translation (in *The Anchor Bible Commentary*) both of these used by permission, and have occasionally proposed a personal reading.

I wish you as much satisfaction in reading *Lukas* as I have had in writing it.

Donald R. Fletcher  
Rossmoor, November 2002

# I

## ATHENS

I must have been staring a long time into the coals in the bronze brazier tonight. The murmured talk around me ebbed and went silent. Different ones yawned or stretched, said something and left. The quick blue flames, sometimes yellow-fringed, licked with light the burnished form of Zeus in bas-relief on the brazier rim, Zeus the bull carrying off Europa.

“Are you going to bed?” Trophimus asked. His voice came from far away.

“Not yet. There’s something I have to think about.”

Finally the courtyard was empty, washed with white moonlight—benches, pillars, the brazier itself, its coals veiled with ash, seen in a perspective of white and dark, line and shadow. I picked up my thick new cloak, which I bought today in the agora, wrapped myself against the chill and came away, climbing here toward the Propylaia of the Acropolis.

Zeus the bull carrying away Europa. I am here, really here, in Athens. Hellas, Greece, I was only a boy in the *gymnasium* in Antioch of Syria when your strong, harmonious wisdom carried me away. Eagerly I wore the short white tunic, trained eagerly for the games, rubbing my limbs with olive oil until they gleamed like bronze. And eagerly I read the fine, long speeches, the sonorous soliloquies.

“What are those good for, son?” Father used to ask. “Are they better than Moses and the prophets?”

I learned by heart the philosophy of the calm, clear-minded Stoics, who could stand serene in the welter of their times, seeing beyond the idle gods a purpose: all-fulfilling Wisdom. Chrysippus and Cleanthes, your exalted Logos, controlling all things, turning into good all ills in life—it was like a wine to my young mind. I drank it thirstily; it was the first that I had proved quite on my own. But as I drank I mixed and mingled it with what I heard in the synagogue with my father.

You see, we weren’t Jews; but he had embraced belief in the one mysterious Deity, Yahweh, God of the mountain, cloud and fire, who gives his people a covenant and Torah, law to live by.

“This,” my father said, “is an end to wanderings, a certain way.”

I don’t remember his saying it the first time—I was too small—but he would repeat it on occasion. He himself had been a desert man, a son of nomads who settled at Palmyra. Dimly out of my earliest childhood I can see the fortress up on the mountain there, hulking dark against the flames of a sunset sky. I can see the caravans of camels drinking noisily at their troughs, splashing and dripping water that to me was shoulder-deep. What was I then, two or three?

Then we moved to Antioch and had a shop selling almonds, raisins, and the flat, warm, tawny barley cakes. Just at dusk the wispy fragrance from my mother’s oven would bring them clustering around, laborers, sailors, stevedores, women hurrying home and needing something for their families. It was a good life; and the synagogue became a center for us.

While he lived Father kept the customs. On Sabbath eves he shuttered up the shop. His customers knew they had to come before sundown, before the Sabbath lamp was lit, the food laid out, the small, low-timbered room a cove of peace washed distantly by street noise as Father spoke the blessing, “Blessed art thou who givest bread.” My mother and my sisters, their Sabbath dress glimmering in the lamplight, part of the sweet calm, would respond, and so would I. It was a good life.

With Rabbi Jochanan I sat each day and learned to read the scrolls,

to pore over the mystic passages—in Greek, of course, but calling up a far, mysterious past into which we were engrafted to become children of the covenant. But I aspired more to be a son of the prophets. Isaiah with his eagle flights; Amos, ruggedly imagistic; Hosea yearning after the faithless wife—they moved heart and imagination both to soar.

It's strange and silent here, a little eerie, coming up the steps of the Propylaea in the moonlight—no festival crowd, no music, no one in sight at all. I almost hesitate to go on. I can see how the Athenians feel about this place. It would be easy to sense a Presence here—Athena Nike, goddess victorious and supreme.

But down below there, while I was staring into the coals, I was back in the crowded streets of my old home, Antioch of Syria, jostling my way almost two score years ago through the joyous welter of the place: smoky, silver-beaded bedouins; a corpulent merchant ushering along some sun-and-wind-burned camel drivers, men whose caravan, a thread of brown, had crossed the vastness of the Scythian steppes, at last to disgorge here a gorgeous, fragrant flood of silks and sandalwood, incense and jade. I was seeing and hearing and smelling it all again.

What a place it was to grow up in! What exhilaration, every day when school was out to run to the riverfront and watch the ships come up the brown Orontes, sails bellying, oars thudding into place with shouts in foreign tongues and creaking gear, and foreign faces peering overside when they finally were berthed! I loved to see the stout hawsers snubbed, the gangways set; and then to see baskets and bales, clay amphorae, goatskins of wine, even cages of live birds, bright-plumaged, raucous, rising from the holds on sweating shoulders that gleamed, while bare feet padded down the swaying plank, pausing where the fox-eyed clerk kept his tally, quick to spot an oozing jar or ruptured bale. I reveled when the rich olive oil leaked out, or choice stuff from Arabia down the coast, myrrh and cinnamon. They made a heady mix with hemp and tar and sweat and smoke and salt of two weeks at sea, and the refuse floating underneath the stern.

Look! There it is, coming into view: the Parthenon. There can't be anything of human invention more superb. Pericles, your ancient, magnificent spirit welcomes me here. The long lines of graceful columns,

more graceful in this still moonlight, breathe serenity. High up, triangular, the eastern gable floats on a milky sky, its pediment framed in shadow. There is Athena armed, wisdom sprung from the head of Zeus Olympios attended by Hephaestus with his axe. The forms stand out pale, half seen, half sunk in darkness—like the myth, crude and quaint; but Phidias' rendering is masterful even after these centuries.

Wisdom. "We preach only Christ," you used to say, Paulus, "Christ crucified, foolishness to Greeks who seek after wisdom." True; but a holy wisdom, *Hagia Sophia*, sprung from the mind of God; what would you say of such a divine Logos? This Christ, Lord, Revealer—Paulus, you said you wouldn't try to know him "after the flesh." It was the risen Christ whose splendor seized and threw you in the dusty road and spoke to you out of the blinding light, "I am Yeshua, Jesus, whom you persecute." They took your shaking hand and led you into Damascus.

Here in the white, chill moonlight, under the marble gaze of Zeus whom the Stoics call All-Father, I have to ask the questions that you left unasked, Paulus, old Jewish friend. Do you know that Onesimus came today bringing a message from one Theophilus, official of the very household of Caesar in Rome? Such a man knows of Markus' sparse account of Jesus and has received, furthermore, a writing containing in passable Greek many sayings of the Lord. He sends them both on to me—a copy of Markus' roll and a copy of these collected sayings of Jesus—and with them his modest request that I verify, collect and set down a full account. He says he has known from Onesimus and others my reputation for learning and eloquence!

The holy Spirit constrains me, Paulus, the Spirit who broods over God's people Israel in these times, renewing the covenant, although by fire. I have also seen other writings of this and that, remembrances of what was said and done in the Lord's days. I'll bring together what I can. I will verify for Theophilus; I will weave a clear, harmonious account, so that he may see how God in these last times has visited his people. The prophetic word comes to fulfillment; God's salvation breaks through to the pagan world. Jesus is made both Lord and Messiah, Christ.

You spirits of Socrates, Zeno, and all you others, here among the moon-blanching porticoes of splendid Athenian wisdom, I declare to

you: The veil is thrust aside. Into the mass of simple life in an obscure habitat the Mystery erupts; a man is there. "For as by a man came death, by a man has come the resurrection of the dead." Paulus, you used to put it so. I will set out to gather the materials. I'll go to Judea and to the Galilee to see what I can find; and I'll set it down in order, from beginning to consummation.