An Introduction to Saint Luke’s Gospel
First-century Life in Palestine:
Romans and Jews

Every country is ruled by a person or a political party.
Then there is the town, city or community which is governed at a local level.
In every school, business or shop there is someone who is in charge.
In families there is usually someone who has the final word.
In a group of two or three friends there is often one person who makes most of the decisions.

Think for a minute how you respond to people in authority.
- Do you always respect them?
- Do you usually respect them, depending on who is in charge?
- Do you rarely respect them, because you are suspicious?
- Do you never respect authority?

Roman rule
In first-century Palestine the Romans were in charge. They had conquered the country in 63 BC and ruled in a harsh way. Although the Romans held the real power, they allowed the Jews to be ruled by local 'kings'.

The most famous of these was Herod the Great, who ruled from 37 BC until his death in AD 4. After his death, the kingdom was divided between three of Herod's sons. However, these sons were poor rulers, and so the Romans stepped in and began to rule Judea directly. The men who now wielded ultimate power were called Procurators (Governors). One of them was Pontius Pilate, who appears later on in Luke's story.

The mountain fortress of Masada was the last stronghold of the Jewish resistance against the Romans, after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The ruins of Herod's palace can be clearly seen.
The Jews responded to this new form of direct Roman authority in different ways...
- The Sadducees adapted to it.
- The Pharisees rejected it and put their energies into their religion.
- The Essenes reacted to it by opting out of society and into the desert.
- The Zealots opposed it and became a revolutionary force.

**The Pharisees - the people's religious party**

The term 'Pharisee' comes from the Hebrew word meaning 'separated' - but separated from what or whom is not known. The traditional view is that they tried very hard to obey the Jewish religious laws and so kept themselves apart from the ordinary people who were not as devout as they were. They also added their oral (spoken) teachings to the written Law. These were not written down but were spoken comments which applied the old written Law to every situation in life.

For instance, the Law said you had to have the seventh day of the week (the Sabbath, a Saturday) free from work. The Pharisees said what could and could not be counted as work on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees hoped for a Messiah. This meant they were waiting for a leader, specially chosen and empowered (or anointed) by God to set their country free from foreign rule. They thought this special leader would be like King David of old and descended from his family. The Pharisees also believed in a future Kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead.

Most importantly, the Pharisees were well-organized and enthusiastic. They were laymen, not priests, and they defended the Law fiercely when the priests forgot it. The Pharisees created a specific sort of society with rules for membership. These groups were 'communities' which met for study, friendship and meals on Friday afternoons before the Sabbath day began. These communities were open to only a few people and some scholars think they had secret teachings.

Even if the Pharisees were exclusive, they were powerful because they were the people's religious party and they kept the Jewish faith alive in the towns and villages of first-century Palestine.

Though the Gospels generally give a negative picture of the Pharisees, we need to remember that many of the Pharisees were sincere, devout people. Not all of them were opposed to Jesus, and several of them were his friends.

**The Sadducees - the privileged party**

The Sadducees were a party of wealthy property owners living in Jerusalem. Some were priests and some were laymen. They supported the status quo and worked in co-operation with the Romans. Centred on the great Temple in Jerusalem and all the influence that went with it, they were anxious not to upset the Romans who allowed them such power.

The Sadducees were enemies of the Pharisees and disagreed with them violently. Unlike the Pharisees, they were not expecting a Messiah to deliver them from Roman rule. They did not accept the oral law which had been added to the written Law (the Torah). They rejected the...
belief in a resurrection from the dead and did not believe in angels. They were quite content with the services of the Jerusalem Temple.

The Essenes – the desert party
A third group was the Essenes. They are not mentioned in the Bible, but they have become well known since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. These scrolls belonged to the Essene community who were monks at Qumran near the Dead Sea. The scrolls were hidden when the Romans invaded Judea in 66 AD and they remained a secret for almost nineteen centuries.

The community at Qumran was founded after the Maccabean wars. Some Jews felt that religious life was being corrupted. People preferred winning wars and gaining fame rather than obeying God’s laws. The community’s aim was to prepare for the coming of God’s Messiah. They believed that by living in their monastery in the desert they were obeying the word of the prophet Isaiah:

‘Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God’ (Isaiah 40:3).

Three ancient historians tell us something about the Essenes.

Philo of Alexandria says:
There were about 4,000 of them. They lived in villages working hard at agriculture and studying moral and religious questions. All their property was shared. They were celibate – i.e. they did not marry or have sex. They did not keep slaves. They would not fight or work for money. They took care of the sick and the aged.

Pliny tells us:
The Essenes renounced women and money, yet their numbers kept up because so many others came regularly to join them. Pliny says that there were many like them who were tired of the ordinary way of living and were looking for something else.

Josephus says:
The Essenes were found in all the cities of Judea, including Jerusalem. They were very kind and hospitable, especially to other Essenes who had come from far away. They treated them as brothers.

To be an Essene you had to have a three-year training. At the end of the first year the novice was allowed to be involved in the ritual purification in water, but it took another two years to share the community meal. This meant you were a full member.

A typical Essene day recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus

- Get up before sunrise. Morning prayers.
- Work until noon at a given task.
- Bathe at noon and have a simple meal together.
- Put on working clothes again and continue work until evening.
- Evening meal.

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The Essene’s Essential Diary

10 BC

Sunday 26th
- Get up. Say morning prayers.
- Watch for rise.
- A.M. Work on wall building.
- Noon. Rest.
- Lunch.
- P.M. More wall building.
- Supper.

The same as yesterday...

20 BC
Zealots – the revolutionary party

The Zealots were a group of different revolutionary movements, all totally opposed to Roman rule. They believed that Israel should be free of the Romans, and carried out terrorist attacks on the Roman troops, using all the techniques of guerrilla warfare. Because the Jewish establishment (the Sadducees, the priests and the wealthy) worked with the Romans, the Zealots hated them.

The origins of the Zealots is usually traced back to Judas of Galilee. In AD6 Judas refused to pay tribute to the Roman emperor and caused a Jewish revolt against Rome. The revolt was brutally crushed by the Romans, but the Zealots kept their revolutionary spirit alive for sixty more years. The last Zealot stronghold, the mountain fort of Masada, fell in May AD73. But even after that it was difficult to quench the Zealots’ zeal and desire for freedom.

EVENTS IN JUDEA UNDER ROMAN RULE

- 63BC-AD70
- 63ac: Roman general Pompey conquers Palestine, enters Jerusalem
- 37: Herod the Great appointed King of the Jews by Roman senate
- 31: Battle of Actium: Antony and Cleopatra defeated: Egypt subject to Rome
- 30: Augustus becomes Roman emperor
- 27: Birth of Jesus
- 4: Death of Herod the Great
- 14: Tiberius becomes Roman emperor
- 18: Caiaphas made High Priest in Jerusalem
- 26: Pontius Pilate becomes governor of Judea Jesus’ ministry begins
- 30: Jesus’ death and resurrection
- 33: Conversion of Paul
- 37: Caligula succeeds Tiberius as emperor
- 41: Claudius succeeds Caligula as emperor
- 46-48: Paul’s first missionary tour
- 54: Nero becomes emperor
- 64: Rome burns: Nero persecutes the Christians
- 64/66: Deaths of Peter and Paul
- 66-70: Jewish revolt against the Romans
- 70: Romans capture and destroy Jerusalem

Question time

1. What do you know about Roman rule in Palestine after 63BC?

2. Explain what is meant by the term ‘Pharisee’.

3. Write a sentence on each of the following:
   - the oral (spoken) teachings of the Pharisees
   - their Messianic hopes
   - how they organized themselves.

4. Complete the following sentences:
   - The Essenes have become well known through the discovery of _______.
   - Some Essenes lived in the community at _______ near the _______.
   - The aim of the community was to _______.
   - They believed they were obeying the word of the prophet _______, which said _______.
   - To be an Essene you had to train for _______ years.
   - The Essenes renounced _______.
   - Here is a list of some of the things they did _______.

To do

Write a letter to a first-century newspaper. Imagine you are a Sadducee complaining about the Pharisees and their beliefs and practices. What would you write?
Luke: A Personal Profile

Luke is mentioned three times by name in the New Testament. Each time it happens when Paul, a famous Christian, is writing one of his letters to the early believers:

‘Luke, our dear doctor, and Demas send you their greetings.’
Letter to the Ephesians – Ephesians 6:21

‘Do your best to come to me soon... only Luke is with me.’
Letter to Timothy – 2 Timothy 4:9-11

Epaphras, who is in prison with me for the sake of Christ Jesus, sends his greetings and so do my fellow workers, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke.
Letter to Philemon verse 2

From these mentions we know that Luke was a doctor and a good friend of Paul. Outside the New Testament Luke is mentioned by several people. In particular, the Bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus, writing about AD 170, said, ‘Luke, a companion of Paul, recorded in a book, the Gospel.’


So far we have looked at Luke the writer, the traveller and the friend of Paul. But what about Luke the person? What was he like? Can we know anything about him? We can find out certain things from reading his Gospel.

What was Luke like?

- **Luke's style**: He was a clever, educated man. Luke was a Gentile (a non-Jew). All four Gospels were written in Greek, but his very careful use of the language shows he was a first-class communicator. Sometimes he is formal – sometimes he sounds more like a TV commentator reporting action stories first-hand. At other times he shows himself to have sensitive artistic ability, especially when writing personal stories about men and women.

- **Luke cares for people**: He writes about people: poor people, outcasts, people who have made a mess of their lives and need to get sorted out (read the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32). As you read his Gospel, notice how he has great sympathy for those in any sort of trouble – especially the sick.

- **Luke likes things to be well-ordered**: Not only did he write in good Greek, but Luke’s Gospel reflects a Greek approach to life. The Greeks were different from the Jews. They liked precise order and accuracy. Luke places a lot of his stories about Jesus into the framework of a journey to Jerusalem. This is to give the events and teaching Luke writes about a proper place and order that can be followed by his readers. He has a tidy mind.
• Luke likes history. He writes as a historian. Look at the way he names emperors and kings and cites different specific dates. If you read Luke 3:1-2 you can find seven officials and five territories named in just two verses.

• Luke enjoys being a Christian. Throughout the twenty-four chapters of Luke’s Gospel, there are people who are joyful because of what Jesus does for them. It would be interesting to count how many stories Luke includes where people ‘rejoice and praise God’. Certainly at the beginning of the Gospel the angels (in chapter 2) and the disciples at the end of the Gospel (in chapter 24) are full of joy. Luke begins and ends with joy.

The writing of the Gospels

The Gospels were written in the Greek language. Many Greek words have made their way into English (for example, chorus, plastic, photograph). If you look in a dictionary you will often find that words have a Greek root to them. Here is the Greek alphabet.

The oldest complete copies of the New Testament are from the fourth century. The most famous is the Codex Sinaiticus which was found in St Catherine’s monastery on Mount Sinai. You can see it in the British Museum in London. It is copied on vellum which is made from the skin of sheep or goats.

Very early copies of the New Testament were written on papyrus. Our word ‘paper’ comes from the word ‘papyrus’. Papyrus was made from reed-plants that grew near water. However, papyrus rots much more easily than vellum, so the original copies of the New Testament have not lasted. Very few pieces or fragments have survived the test of time. The oldest discovered fragment of the New Testament is in the John Rylands Library in Manchester. It is a scrap from the Gospel of John and dates back to between AD 100 and 150.

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a copy of the Psalms, rolled up.

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**THE GREEK ALPHABET**

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How can we know what the New Testament authors really wrote, when all we have are copies written in the fourth century—long after the events?

Although we have only later manuscripts, portions of the New Testament were copied and recopied with great care right from the start. Christian writers were translated into other languages as well as Greek—e.g., Latin and Syriac.

Syriac is a language similar to Aramaic. Aramaic is the language that Jesus spoke. These translations were made from very early copies which are now lost. So, although what we have now are not original, they were copied very carefully from much older scripts.

It is amazing how some of these fragments have survived almost 2,000 years. Some have been destroyed by those who opposed the Christian faith, but many have been preserved throughout the centuries.

**Question time**

Write in your books the word(s) which best complete each of the following. Write in sentences.

1. Luke is mentioned three times by name in the New Testament. You can find the references in the letters of James/Peter/Paul.

2. From the New Testament we know that Luke was a rabbi/teacher/doctor.

3. Luke did not only write the Gospel. He also wrote ________

4. Luke is mentioned outside the New Testament writings by a man called ____________, who was Bishop of Rome/Lyons/Galilee.


6. A Gentile is a Jewish person’s non-Jewish person.

7. What evidence is there in his Gospel to show that Luke was a clever, educated man?

8. How do we know that Luke likes history and writes like a historian?

**To do**

We know about Luke mainly through what he himself wrote. If someone found your exercise book, diary or a letter, what might it say to them about the sort of person you are? Would your handwriting be small/large? Sloping/non-sloping? Would you be well-ordered? What is your personal style?

Look at the way you write things and see if you can become more aware of what comes across in what you write. It could be useful to know more about the messages you send out about yourself, especially when you write for jobs or interviews.

Try your hand at writing Greek. Using the Greek alphabet in this unit, try to write your name using the Greek letters. Then see if you can write and decipher what these mean...

[BÝVLÔS XÝRÎTÔS IΣRAÎL]