

“They’re Real People!”

By Pastor Jim Ayars

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Luke 1:1-4

1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, 2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 3 it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. [ESV]

“They’re Real People!”

If it were not for Luke’s dedication of his two-volume historical record to him, we would never know of a man named Theophilus. Luke mentions him twice, first in the preface to his first book, now called the *Gospel According to Luke*, and second, in the opening lines of his second book, now called *The Acts of the Apostles*.

In his dedication of the second volume, Luke wrote:

“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” [Acts 1:1-3 ESV]

Who was he? Most scholars have no clue. As early as the beginning of the third century, Origen, an early Christian commentator and theologian from Alexandria, Egypt, who lived from 184/185 – 253/254, suggested that the name Theophilus is really a metaphor for all believers. The name means either “God-lover,” or “Beloved of God.” Origen wrote:

“Someone might think that Luke addressed the Gospel to a specific man named Theophilus. But, if you are the sort of people God can love, then all of you who hear us speaking are Theophiluses, and the Gospel is addressed to you. Anyone who is a Theophilus is both ‘excellent’ and ‘very strong.’... No Theophilus is weak... I could say boldly that everyone who is a Theophilus is robust. He has vigor and strength from both God and His Word. He can recognize the ‘truth’ of those ‘words, by which he has been instructed’ and understand the Word of the Gospel in Christ — to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen!” [Origen, *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 1.6; *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947–; J.-P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca*. 166 vols. Paris: Migne, 1857–1886.]

In this sense, then, Luke addressed his two volumes to us today who love God and are beloved of God. Many commentators on the Gospel of Luke continue to follow Origen’s lead in this interpretation.

However, there actually was a historical person named Theophilus at the time Luke wrote these two books. He was well-known to the early church in Jerusalem: he was the High Priest in the temple for the years A.D. 37 to A.D. 41. Paul and Theophilus would have known each other.

Remember that Saul the Pharisee had persecuted the church from A.D. 31 to his conversion around A.D. 34/35. Stephan had been executed by stoning in A.D. 34. Saul had agreed to that execution, and later traveled to Damascus with *Letters of Authority* from the Sanhedrin (of which

Theophilus was already a part) to arrest the Christians there. Fortunately, Jesus had interrupted his plans with a blinding flash of light. Saul the slayer now became Paul the Preacher. Theophilus, of the High Priestly family, would have surely heard of this miraculous conversion.

According to ancient Jewish records preserved in the Talmud and by the historian Josephus, Theophilus was one of the sons of Annas who was High Priest when John the Baptist began preaching [Luke 3:1], and the brother-in-law of Joseph Caiaphas, the High Priest before whom Jesus appeared for trial and execution [John 18:13, 24]. Theophilus' son, Matthias, served as High Priest shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Theophilus had another son, Johannan, who also served briefly as High Priest before his younger brother Matthias.

Johannan had a daughter named Johanna (named after her father). Her ossuary has been found with the inscription "Johanna, daughter of Johannan, son of Theophilus the High Priest." [D. Barag and D. Flusser, "The Ossuary of Yehohanah Granddaughter of the High Priest Theophilus", *Israel Exploration Journal*, 36 (1986), 39-44.].

We know that this lady was one of several influential women who followed Jesus as women disciples. We meet her first in Luke 8:2-3 — she was one of the women who provided for the welfare of Jesus and His disciples. We meet her again at the empty tomb of Jesus in Luke 24:10 — she, Mary of Magdala, Mary mother of James, along with some other women, were the first to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. These were all eye-witnesses to Jesus — His life, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension.

What's the big deal? It's this: Luke was writing the story of Jesus and the early church for none other than one of the highest officials of the Jewish faith. Theophilus was not merely a euphemism for all believers as Origen of Alexandria thought — he was a dignitary of the highest order, whose own granddaughter was a faithful follower of Jesus.

Luke addresses him with deep, sincere courtesy. He calls him "most excellent [or "highly esteemed"] Theophilus." [Luke 1:3]

We learn something else about Theophilus, too — Luke affirms that he had already heard or learned about Jesus. Luke wrote, explaining why he was writing these two documentaries, "that you may have certainty *concerning the things you have been taught.*" [Luke 1:4]

For many scholars who have actually studied these familial connections, it is clear that Theophilus, the son of Annas, the brother-in-law to Caiaphas, whose granddaughter was a faithful follower of Jesus, *had himself become a follower of Jesus!* [See for example Richard H. Anderson, J.D., *Who are Johanna and Theophilus? The Irony of the Intended Audience of the Gospel of Luke*, Kindle Edition, 2011.]

It was the Apostle John who clearly alluded to this:

"Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in Him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." [John 12:42-43 ESV]

Luke was a regular companion of Paul. We see this in the *Book of Acts*. Whenever Luke joined Paul in his missionary travels, the pronouns change from "he," "them," and "they" to "we" and "us." While Luke was not an eyewitness to Jesus, he certainly knew those who were. He wrote:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been

accomplished among us, *just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us*, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus..." [Luke 1:1-3]

Others, such as Matthew and Mark, had written their recollections. Now Luke compiled, like any great historian, the recollections of all of the eyewitnesses, adding his own personal experiences while traveling with Paul, into a formal document for one of the highest dignitaries in Judaism, Theophilus, of the long line of High Priests from Aaron to his day. In a very deep sense, this made Luke Theophilus' teacher, as he sharing with him the Gospel and portrayals of the work of the Holy Spirit in the formation of the first Christian Church. Luke's gift to Theophilus remains a vital witness to us today of the reality of Jesus Christ.

For Further Contemplation:

We have great reason to praise God that we have the inspired record that is given us in the *Book of Acts*, a narrative of the works of the apostles. We have the sure word of inspiration respecting the foundation of the Christian church. The *Acts of the Apostles* is full of instruction, and light, and knowledge. As Christ's disciples living down in the last days, in the very close of earth's history, we have the same work to do to prepare for Christ's second coming as they had in developing the Christian church.

How grateful we should be for the record that the early disciples have given concerning the resurrection of a crucified Saviour! He was among them, and confirmed the words he had spoken to them before his great humiliation, suffering, and death. With what intense interest would they listen to his teachings, as he appeared among them—a Saviour risen from the dead! ¹

Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, and Theophilus, to whom it is addressed, had been pleasantly associated. From Luke, Theophilus had received much instruction and great light. Luke had been Theophilus' teacher, and he still felt a responsibility to direct and instruct him, and to sustain and protect him in his work.

At that time it was customary for a writer to send his manuscript to someone for examination and criticism. Luke chose Theophilus, as a man in whom he had confidence, to perform this important work. He first directs the attention of Theophilus to the record of Christ's life as given in the book of Luke, which had also been addressed by the same writer to Theophilus... The teachings of Christ were to be preserved in manuscripts and books. ²

¹ Ellen G. White, "By Many Infallible Proofs," *The Youth's Instructor*, November 18, 1897.

² Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 40*, 1903.