



HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers Dr Luke and Pontius Pilate

HERO 3: DR LUKE + PONTIUS PILATE

HERO: Dr Luke – a doctor who wrote the highest impact text of all time

The author of the third gospel is an obvious hero for medics. The 'beloved doctor'¹ wrote a gospel and Acts, accounting for about 30% of the New Testament. His training as a Greek physician prepared him for painstaking research, thorough history taking and meticulous documentation. He outlines his research methods in his abstract:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the

*things you have been taught.*²

Luke never met Jesus, so like us he had to follow the trail of evidence wherever it led. He was not a religious fanatic twisting the truth for his own ends, but rather a scholar who wanted to be found 'on the side of truth',³ rightly aligned with reality. He took case histories from eyewitnesses, and carefully investigated the facts, and wrote up his findings in an orderly account for publication. I sometimes joke with my surgical colleagues that the New Testament would have been much shorter and scrappier if Luke had trained in surgery! Would Luke have imagined that his own paper, one of many circulating at the time, would be disseminated in *the highest impact text of all time*, the Bible? I suspect he would be delighted that countless 'God lovers' (that is the meaning of Theophilus' name) have gained confidence in Christ as a result. So why did the early church choose to keep

Luke's research?

First, Luke was very conscious of writing history. Each gospel has a different emphasis. Luke grounds his account of Jesus' life and the early church in the context of time, person and place. He wants us to know the gospel is not a spiritual fantasy, however heart-warming. Luke-Acts is littered with hundreds of names of historical figures by which we can precisely date the events, and places. Luke has given sceptics every opportunity to refute him. But where his record can be tested, time and time again Luke has been vindicated.⁴

Second, Luke shows great *humanity*. Whilst Mark records the healing of a man's shrivelled hand on the Sabbath, Luke the physician notes that it was his *right hand*.⁵ Presumably it was his dominant hand, which caused a greater disability and social disadvantage. Luke especially detailed the breadth

of God's compassion for the marginalised and excluded, and in Acts his grace extending to 'the ends of the earth'.⁶

Third, Luke gives reason for real *hope and healing*. As a doctor Luke knew about the brokenness of humanity. Not just bodies disintegrating fast, but lost souls without a future.⁷ Luke described many healings, but the greatest he described was resurrection. He realised that Jesus' resurrection changes everything, it offers real hope. Jesus didn't come to empty the hospitals, but the graveyards!

As he was perhaps the first doctor to write up a resurrection, he was careful to refute the differential diagnoses of hallucination by the witnesses, mistaken identity⁸ or merely resuscitation.⁹ Luke writes the 'fleshiest' account of Jesus post-resurrection,¹⁰ describing Jesus' body as recognisably human (walking, talking, and eating) but transformed. But the glorified Jesus seemed less limited by the usual physical constraints of doors and walls! Those who 'follow Jesus' will also follow him in resurrection transformation, the greatest healing of all.¹¹



Antonio Gisbert's depiction of Pontius Pilate presenting a scourged Christ to the people Ecce homo! (Behold the man!)

HERETIC:
Pontius Pilate – the dangerous relativist

Contrast Luke with the infamous Pontius Pilate. Luke followed the evidence where it led, and encouraged others to do the same. He had a high view of truth, meaning that reality is bigger than us, and we are not free to manipulate it for our own convenience.

In his trial, Jesus claimed that his life's mission was to reveal truth. In fact he had even called himself *the Truth*.¹² This truth is bigger than each one of us, a truth we must listen to, and submit to. But Pilate rejected the very notion.

*You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me. 'What is truth?' Pilate asked.*¹³

Pilate was the worst kind of politician, for whom there was no truth, only opinion. For him, public opinion was all that mattered. Pilate's attitude is commonplace today, it's called *relativism*. Arguably it is the greatest modern myth, and the most basic heresy, in the light of God's revelation. It's the idea that truth (outside oneself) is unknowable, based on the assumption that God has not made himself known. Even when, as in Pilate's case, he is speaking to you face to face! Pilate demonstrated a commitment to remaining uncommitted, and as a result knowingly sent an innocent man to his death.

Relativism can sound tolerant and humble, but it is at best naïve, and at worst dangerous and arrogant. This is a key issue for any thinking Christian; hopefully that means every *Nucleus* reader!

There are many great resources on it,¹⁴ but here is a short response to Pilate's question.

To say 'there are no absolute truths' is *self-contradictory*, the same as a statement like 'every sentence in English has three words'! If it is absolutely true that there are no absolute truths, then that is an example of one! Or if it is only relatively true, there must be exceptions which therefore are absolutes!

Relativists are not as humble as they first sound. They say that much of what we believe is shaped by our time and place in history, and we should agree. And it is the case that as finite individuals, any one of us has a limited grasp of universal timeless truths.

Yet relativists break the very rules they want to impose on others. Consider the classic metaphor of the mountain of truth. Mere mortals scale a variety of paths (representing different religions, philosophies etc), but the relativist assures us that we all arrive at the same place. Now where is the relativist in this picture? He must be the *only* one who has already arrived at the top, the *only* one with a 'God's-eye view' of ultimate reality. That is a phenomenal claim to omniscience! Christians are accused of arrogance when we

make truth claims from the Bible, but these are only on the basis that God himself has come down the mountain to meet us, not that we have arrived before other mortals at the top! Dogmatic relativists need to be politely challenged that their position is *arrogant* and *hypocritical*.

Consistent relativists do not exist, any more than unicorns do. But there are many *selective relativists*. When it comes to the relativist's own cherished beliefs or vested interests, they become strangely moralistic. A Christian speaker tells of an occasion when he was invited to a student's room to continue a heated discussion about morality. The student was adamant that the 'God squad' should not impose any morality on society, although he was mostly upset about rules on sexual behaviour. The speaker then picked up the student's prized *iPod*, and made for the door. The student was outraged and told him to stop. The speaker defended himself: 'Don't you impose *your* morality on *me*!' We all live as if there are moral standards above us, which we did not invent. The next time someone disputes this, just ask them 'so exactly when do you think it is allowable to be racist?' I hope never.

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SUMMARY

HERO DR LUKE

I thank God for Dr Luke, and pray that we would share his appreciation of God's compassion for all, and his hope for the greatest healing offered to all, the resurrection. And I pray that as medics, we would share that hope faithfully with all who are ready to receive it.

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- John 14:6
- John 18:37-38
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FURTHER READING

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