

## Luke the Physician

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Colossians 4:14, “Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, salute you.” Colossians is a deutero-Pauline text, but this does not mean that it must be wrong about Luke.<sup>1</sup> Hobart in 1882 sought to show that Luke used Greek medical language. Cadbury in 1912 showed that there is no specifically medical language in Greek; the medical texts use ordinary Greek. And there the matter has stood.<sup>2</sup> But attention to the way the Gospel of Luke treats the stories in Mark shows a certain medical sensibility, an awareness of diagnostic details, and a feel for the doctor’s relationship to the patient – or with child patients, to the family. The case is perhaps best examined by reading Mark and Luke in parallel. I here give what I find to be convincing contrasts. A complication is the proposal<sup>3</sup> that there were three phases in the formation of Luke: A, B, and C. I consider those strata separately.

### Instances of Medical Sensibility in Luke A

Texts are presented in parallel, italicizing words of special interest. For reader convenience, examples are given in the order of our canonical Mark, ignoring the relocation of some of these passages, at one stage or another, in Luke.

Jesus has been tempted, including a long period of privation. Following that:

<b>Mk 1:12.</b> And straightway the Spirit	<b>Lk 4:1.</b> And Jesus, full of the Holy
<i>driveth</i> him forth into the wilderness.	Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and
	was <i>led</i> in the Spirit
	in the wilderness

In Luke, Jesus is not a victim, but from his baptism rather the possessor, of the Spirit. The Spirit is the indispensable equipment of the charismatic healer.

**Lk 4:14.** And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee.

This is supplied by Luke, who understands that Jesus’ possession of the Spirit has been strengthened (given effective power) by his privation. Of this Mark knows nothing, but the initiation of the medicine man in many cultures shows similar traits.

<sup>1</sup>“Physician” statements in the Muratorian Canon and the anti-Marcionite Prologues probably derive from Colossians, and do not provide independent evidence.

<sup>2</sup>Fitzmyer (1970) 1/51-53, “In reality, it is a matter of little consequence for the interpretation of the Third Gospel whether its author was a physician or not. He is said to have been such in Col 4:14, if one accepts the traditional ascription of the Third Gospel to him; but that is the extent of the matter.” The issue is ignored or dismissed in Nolland (1989) xxxvi-xxxvii, Johnson (1991) 3, Bock (1994) 1/7, Culpepper (1995) 4-5, Green (1997) 21, and Bovon (2002) 1/7.

<sup>3</sup>See Brooks **Acts-Luke**.

The first healing in Mark is in the synagogue at Capernaum. Luke identifies Capernaum (a town not well known in Antioch). He also specifies with more precision exactly what was troubling the man who interrupts Jesus' teaching:

**Mk 1:23.** And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit;

**Mk 1:26.** And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

**Lk 4:33.** And in the synagogue there was a man who had *the spirit of an unclean demon*.

**Lk 4:35b.** And when the demon had thrown him down in the midst, he came out of him, *having done him no harm*.

Note Luke's care to record, not just the healing, but the postoperative situation.

In the next healing. Luke again identifies the complaint more precisely:

**Mk 1:30.** Now Simon's wife's mother lay sick of a fever, and straightway they tell him of her.

**Lk 4:38b.** And Simon's wife's mother was holden with a *great fever*, and they besought him for her.

and has Jesus cure by a word of power, not a touch:

**Mk 1:31.** And he came and took her by the hand, and raised her up, and the fever left her, and she ministered to them

**Lk 4:39.** And he *stood over her*, and *rebuked the fever*, and it left her, and it left her, and immediately she *rose up* and ministered to them.

First the cure, Mark baby, then the recovery. Jesus does not haul her up; she gets up of her own accord, after he has rebuked (sent away) the fever, and she is able to rise.

Later that day,

**Mk 1:32.** That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons . . . [34] And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons . . .

**Lk 4:40.** And when the sun was setting, *all they that had any sick* with divers diseases brought them unto him; and he *laid his hands on every one of them*, and healed them. [41] And demons also came out from many . . .

The caregivers of the sick figure more strongly in Luke, as does the individual physical attention needed for each of the sick, including direct contact with them.

Here, Luke separates the patient from his illness:

**Mk 1:40.** And there cometh to him a leper

**Lk 5:12b.** there came *a man full of leprosy*

[42]. And immediately the leprosy left him, *and he was made clean*.

[13b] And immediately the leprosy left him.

Luke from the beginning distinguishes the man from his disease (Mk "a leper" versus Lk "a man"). He also avoids Mark's redundancy, which merely clutters the record.

Next comes the paralytic, lowered through the roof to Jesus. Jesus has just said that the man's sins are forgiven:

**Mk 2:8.** And straightway Jesus, perceiving *in his spirit* that they so reasoned within themselves . . .

**Lk 5:22.** But Jesus perceiving their reasonings,

Luke, as always, ignores Mark's breathless "straightway; he is factual rather than narratively urgent." He also does not think of Jesus' spirit as a seat of sensory perception, as Mark does. For Luke, the spirit is a locus and source of healing power.

From the story of the healing of Jairus' daughter:

<b>Mk 5:36.</b> But Jesus, not heeding the word spoken, saith unto the ruler of the synagogue, Fear not, only believe,	<b>Lk 8:50.</b> But Jesus hearing it, answered him, Fear not, only believe, <i>and she shall be made whole.</i>
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Luke specifies what the father's energy of faith should be directed toward: healing.

<b>Mk 5:41.</b> Taking her by the hand, he said to her, Talitha cumi, which means, Little girl, I say to you, arise. And immediately the girl got up and walked.	<b>Lk 8:54.</b> But he, taking her by the hand, <i>called</i> , saying, Maiden, arise. And <i>her spirit returned</i> , and she rose up immediately.
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In Luke, Jesus calls (not merely speaks),<sup>4</sup> summoning her spirit, and her spirit returns. According to widespread belief, the soul leaves the body when dreaming or in a coma, and must be called back if the sleeper or seemingly dead person is to recover.<sup>5</sup>

<b>Mk 5:42b.</b> And they were amazed <i>straightway with a great amazement.</i>	<b>Lk 8:55b.</b> And he <i>commanded that something be given her to eat.</i>
[43] And he charged them much that <i>no man should know this</i> , and he commanded that something should <i>be given her to eat.</i>	[56] And her parents were amazed, but he charged them to tell no man what had been done.

Luke rearranges the elements of Mark's story: *first* the instructions for postoperative care, *then* the parents' reaction, *then* the caution about maintaining secrecy outside.

The interruptive story of the Woman With the Flow of Blood is medically notable:

<b>Mk 8:26.</b> and had <i>suffered many things</i> under many physicians, and had spent all she had, and was nothing bettered, <i>but rather grew worse . . .</i>	<b>Lk 8:43b.</b> who had spent all her living on physicians, and could not be healed of any . . .
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Luke admits the expense, but not the suffering, and the fact that other physicians not merely failed, but made her worse (the Hippocratic principle is *Primum non nocere*). Luke protects the guild from bad publicity. His sparer account sufficiently magnifies the achievement of Jesus, who succeeded where many others had failed.

As the cure is effected,

<b>Mk 5:30.</b> And Jesus, perceiving <i>in himself</i> that power had gone forth from him, . . .	<b>Lk 8:46.</b> But Jesus said, Some one touched me, for I perceive that power has gone forth from me.
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Only here does Mark seem to be aware of the charismatic healer's loss of power in the act of healing. For perception "in himself," an error which Luke suppresses, compare Mk 2:8, above.

<sup>4</sup>Luke regularly suppresses Mark's Aramaisms, and no specifically medical significance should be attributed to this omission of Jesus' exact words.

<sup>5</sup>The Confucian practice of calling back the soul of a sick or seemingly dead person, though ridiculed by the Micians (MZ 39), underlies some of the most beautiful passages in Chinese literature (Brooks **Emergence** 170, 229f).

The Sending of the Twelve contains this contrast:

**Mk 6:7b.** and he gave them  
authority over the unclean spirits

**Lk 9:1b.** and gave them *power and*  
authority over all demons,  
*and to cure diseases, [2] and he sent*  
*them out to preach the Kingdom of God*  
*and to heal.*

Authority is nothing without power, and power to exorcize also means power to heal. Luke also insists that preaching the Kingdom of God is the main purpose for which they are sent out, adding healing to the exorcisms with which Mark contents himself.

In the description of the activity of the Twelve, we have:

**Mk 6:12.** And they went out, and  
preached that men should repent.  
[13] And they *cast out many*  
*demons, and anointed with oil* many  
that were sick, and healed them.

**Lk 9:6.** And they departed, and went  
throughout the villages, preaching  
preaching *the Gospel*  
and healing everywhere

Luke omits the exorcisms.<sup>6</sup> Theologically, he does not limit the Gospel to repentance; he will give its contents in the next passage. Medically, he ignores the home remedy of anointing with oil,<sup>7</sup> and lets it be understood that, as promised earlier in this passage, the Twelve will instead be charismatic healers.

Luke takes a similar line with this passage, insisting on the healings of Jesus:

**Mk 6:34.** As he went ashore he saw  
a great throng, and he had  
had compassion on them  
*because they were like sheep*  
*without a shepherd,*  
and he began to teach them  
many things.

**Lk 9:11.** When the crowds learned it,  
they followed him, and he  
welcomed them  
  
and spoke to them  
of the Kingdom of God,  
*and cured those*  
*who had need of healing.*

Luke's Jesus is less condescending, treating the crowd with dignity, not ridiculing their helplessness, preaching to them specifically the Kingdom of God (as in 9:1b, above), and healing all who were in need of it (not mentioned in Mark).

In the healing of an epileptic boy (Mk 9:14-29), Luke preserves the symptoms, with the report of the disciples' failure (Lk 9:38-42a), Jesus' word of rebuke to the unclean spirit (Lk 9:42b), and the cure (Lk 9:42c). He omits the discussion with the disciples about just why they had failed (Mk 9:28-29; absent in Luke). Medical failure is not of interest to Luke, and Mark's recommendation of prayer (Mk 9:29) may strike him as technically incorrect.

Prayer may *refresh* power, but it is power, not prayer, that heals.

<sup>6</sup>Casting out demons implies power over demons, which the prince of demons surely has, and brings up the charge (already in Mk 3:22-30) that Jesus is in league with Beelzebub. This made exorcism a somewhat dangerous accomplishment to attribute to Jesus. Perhaps for that reason, the Gospel of John contains no exorcisms at all.

<sup>7</sup>We will later see the Samaritan using this first aid treatment. In the Epistle of Jacob 5:14, anointing with oil is what the elders of the church do, when called upon to help the sick.

### An Instance of Medical Sensibility in Luke B

Luke B consists of later reworked sections derived from Mark, sections derived from Matthew, and some additional material of Luke's own.

The Nazareth scene is the most obviously relocated section in Luke. Here is a passage from the Luke B addition, made at that time. It has no Markan parallel.

**Lk 4:23.** And he said unto them,  
Doubtless ye will say unto me this  
parable, *Physician, heal thyself:*  
whatsoever we have heard done at  
Capernaum, do also here in thine  
own country.

The jeer at the physician is probably a standard one, and it rankled with Luke, who brings it in when the crowd demand healings like those at Capernaum. There are two problems: the jeer is irrelevant to the situation (the failure to work healings where Jesus is well known), and as Luke has relocated this passage, at this point in the story *Jesus has not yet been to Capernaum*. The latter difficulty is merely an artifact of Luke's relocation.<sup>8</sup> The former suggests a physician sensitive to criticism.

### An Instance of Medical Sensibility in Luke C

Luke C is a few passages added to Luke to harmonize it with the Separation from Judaism theme of Acts II. Of them, the Samaritan story contains a medical aspect:

**Lk 10:34.** and he came to him, and  
*bound up his wounds, pouring on oil  
and wine,* and he set him on his own  
beast, and brought him to an inn,  
and *took care of him.* [35] And on the  
morrow he took out two shillings, and  
gave them to the host, and said, *Take  
care of him,* and whatsoever thou  
spendest more, when I come back again,  
I will repay thee.

Here is the first-aid treatment with oil mentioned above, adding wine (the alcohol is an antiseptic; we are here dealing with wounds), following up with bed rest and care at the next inn.<sup>9</sup> These details are not necessary to the theme of the story, which is the concern of the foreigner for the wounded man, but just because they are not necessary, they show the author's interest in the practical medical aspects of a situation.

In Acts II much of medical interest is found, especially in the "we" passages, but without a Markan or other parallel, it cannot be shown that Luke is more concerned in this area than os anyone else.<sup>10</sup>

I will accordingly conclude the survey at this point.

<sup>8</sup>For the reasons for this and other relocations, see Brooks **Relocated**.

<sup>9</sup>We may note that as in his revision of the Woman With the Flow of Blood story, Lk 8:34b, so also here, Luke does not hesitate to mention the cost of treatment.

<sup>10</sup>For a careful consideration of the Acts material, see Harnack **Physician** 176-181.

### Conclusions

What does all this prove? It proves nothing; proof belongs to Euclidean geometry. Some of Luke's changes in Mark can be ascribed to literary rather than medical motives: tightening up Mark's narrative. But others suggest that Luke did have an eye for medical details, and an insider view of the medical profession. In rewriting Mark, Luke is consistently concerned to correct Mark's perhaps not very clear idea of the mechanism of charismatic healing, of what "Spirit" means in a charismatic healer.

That this personal medical sensibility can be found in all three Luke A/B/C strata suggests that the same author, and not a series of authors or institutional proprietors, was responsible for all the Luke-Acts material.

Further, as an educated professional, Luke would naturally be competent in Greek; his Greek has been found to be stylistically competent by those in a position to judge. These two facts do not prove each other, but they are consistent with each other.

There are other learned professions, such as the law. But though Luke has things to say when Mark gets on a medical topic, he does not respond to Mark's legal topics. Luke lacks the psychology of the hanging judge, which Matthew so well displays.<sup>11</sup> When Matthew recasts Luke's Parable of the Lost Son as the Parable of Two Sons,<sup>12</sup> a note of judging appears. To the contrast with Mark, in support of Luke the Physician, may be added this contrast of Luke with Matthew the Magistrate.

Mark's account of the Healing of Jairus' Daughter is already affecting. It is hard to put down Luke's medically more sensitive version of that story without suspecting that here is the ideal pediatrician, or imagining the mothers of Antioch as lining up, scratching and shoving, to be on Luke's house-call list.

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<sup>11</sup>Matthew revels in the "gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30). The only Lukan occurrence of this phrase is in Lk 13:28, a Luke B borrowing from Mt 8:12.

<sup>12</sup>See Gundry **Sons**.