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## ST. LUKE AS ARTIST.

ST. LUKE, the Evangelist, physician and historian, is said by tradition to have been a painter, and perhaps in the picturesque qualities of his writing we may trace the origin of this pious opinion. There is a legend that he painted the portrait of the Virgin, and certainly the greater part of the little we know of our Lord's mother is due to St. Luke, who preserved for us the Magnificat, and drew in words that poetic picture of the Nativity, adorned with the Nunc Dimittis and the Benedictus, which pictorial art has never ceased to reproduce. There is just now a widespread desire to discover the [R3244 : page 360] personalities of all great writers, and surely there is no one who has any feeling for Christianity but must regret our ignorance about the four Evangelists. St. Luke is the only one of whose character it is possible to form any definite idea. Even in his case we must rely mainly upon conjecture, for the modest chronicler of the Acts of the Apostles has purposely withdrawn himself from the gaze of his readers. He never tells us who he was, nor asks for our sympathy or our praise for the many hardships which he and St. Paul bore, and the many heroisms they displayed together. He never even betrays his presence except by the use of the pronoun "we." All we know for certain is that the "beloved physician" never failed his friend, but was alone with him when he made "ready to be offered." There is no direct evidence as to whether he was a Jew or a Greek, but many authorities, including Renan and Professor Ramsay, adhere to the latter conclusion. To the ordinary reader their view would appear the more plausible. St. Luke shows little sympathy with the Jews as a nation, and always paints them as hindering the work of the Church. On the other hand, he betrays some tolerance for the heathen religion around him, and a just and sympathetic comprehension of the attitude of the Roman Governors towards the new faith.

But whether he belonged to "the people" or "the nations," the historian was an artist, – a man of great literary genius, whose heaven-instilled purpose, while it inspired his work, never for a moment obscured his artistic skill. The object of the book of the Acts is, as we read it, twofold. First, the author desires to draw a picture of the early Church while it was still but an offshoot of Judaism; and secondly, to describe the bursting of the Judaic bonds by the real hero of the book – St. Paul. Inspired by his wonderful – we are tempted to say his Greek – love of beauty and happiness, St. Luke begins with an exquisite picture of the early Christian community. An ideal social life prevailed among the brethren. "No man lacked anything," for "they had but one heart and one mind." No one "called anything his own, but they had all things in common," and "breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart." We are told that "a great peace was upon them all," and that they possessed singular gifts of healing. Their increasing influence with the people disquieted the high priests, who, "doubting how far this would grow," summoned the apostles to appear before them and tried to bind them over to silence. Peter and John, however, replied to their accusers with light-hearted courage, saying, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than to God, judge ye," and so far impressed the learned Gamaliel with their assurance that he begged his brethren to let them alone lest they themselves should be found fighting against God. When persecution threatened them St. Luke shows us the disciples assembling themselves together and praying that God, seeing their peril, would "grant unto his servants that with all boldness they might speak his word by stretching out his hand to heal, that signs and wonders might be done by the might of his holy child." In the next picture which St. Luke puts before us the state of the Church is somewhat changed. The brotherhood has been greatly enlarged, and we trace some diminution in the early simplicity and joyousness. There arose, we are told, a murmuring among the Christian poor because some were better cared for than others; – evidently there is no longer community of goods. Certain men are chosen for the work of practical

philanthropy, among them Stephen, who, by giving offence to the orthodox Jews, became the first martyr. In presenting Stephen to his readers St. Luke departs a little from his ordinary method of character-drawing. Generally he adheres strictly to the dramatic method, and allows his characters to reveal themselves by their own words. But in the case of Stephen it is not so, and the world knows Stephen better by what St. Luke tells us about him than by the long discourse which is reported as his. We are convinced by his biographer rather than by his eloquence that "he was full of faith and power," and that his hearers "were not able to resist the wisdom and power by which he spake," so that "all that sat in the council looking steadfastly upon him saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." By the description of his actual martyrdom this impression of spiritual fascination is confirmed in the reader's mind, and perhaps the picture of Stephen "looking into heaven," seeing the "glory of God," and forgiving his enemies, while they, "cut to the heart, gnashed upon him with their teeth," is for mere beauty of depiction the finest passage in the Acts. This moment of tragedy is the one which St. Luke chooses as the one in which to present St. Paul. "The witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man whose name was Saul."

Once more the scene changes. Henceforward the reader's interest centers round Paul, – his conversion, his perils, his trials and his defences. As we read St. Paul's words as recorded by his friend it is impossible not to wonder to what extent they have been modified by passing through the medium of another mind. Was St. Luke's report always accurate? Verbal accuracy was surely impossible. It is out of the question. If a speech took some hours to deliver it is not possible to compress it into a short paragraph and **[R3244 : page 361]** maintain verbal accuracy. All the same, the short report may be a true one. A man may give in ten minutes an account of a speech he has heard in the House of Commons, and may convey truly both the subject matter of what was spoken, and also the manner and mental characteristics of the speaker, though he give up all attempt at a literal

repetition of the sentences. Such a report could not be called imaginary, though it makes of necessity some tax upon the understanding and imagination of the reporter. The account would remain essentially true, and in this matter of essential truth, so far as St. Paul is concerned, every reader of the Bible who has the smallest grasp of character is in a position to check St. Luke. Is the Paul whose adventures we follow in the Acts the same perfectly original character who reveals himself to us so unreservedly in his letters? Undoubtedly he is. No one could fail to recognize the Great Apostle.

Nevertheless, every portrait reveals the painter in some degree, and in all St. Luke's sketches of character we see the same aversion to dogmatism, and the same fair attitude toward "those of the contrary part." He dwells particularly upon any sympathetic allusion to the classical standpoint made by the apostles, repeating with evident sympathy the words spoken by St. Paul suggesting the nearness of God toward those philosophers who had "felt after him"; and again, when Paul prevents the populace from worshiping him, we catch a glimpse of St. Luke's artistic appreciation of the joyousness inherent in a point of view which, however erroneous, bore testimony to the goodness of God, "who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without a witness in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

All through his book St. Luke shows the characteristics of a man of much education. He seems almost to share the high priest's surprise at the eloquence and force of Peter and John, "seeing that they were unlearned and ignorant men," and he displays that distrust of the multitude so common in men of exceptional gifts exceptionally cultivated. Witness his allusions to "fellows of the baser sort," and his account of the mass meeting of the Ephesian silversmiths, where "some cried one thing and some another, for the more part knew not why they were come together." The sudden changes of mind observable in crowds strike the historian's notice. He describes how

the barbarians of the island on which Paul was shipwrecked, on seeing him bitten by a snake, concluded that he must be some murderer flying from justice whom vengeance had overtaken. "They looked that he should have swollen and fallen down dead suddenly; but after they had looked a great while and seen no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god." Again we see a trace of the same feeling in the almost satirical account of the behavior of the Jewish rabble before Gallio, when with utter inconsequence they beat Sosthenes in the Judgment Hall because they could not be revenged on Paul, and we feel St. Luke is not wholly out of sympathy with the supercilious Gallio, who looked on at what he considered a quarrel "about words and names and their law," and "cared for none of these things." To Gallio himself it can never have occurred that his name would be known two thousand years later solely in connection with a petty riot he hardly noticed, any more than it occurred to Festus how bitterly the course of history would satirize his contemptuous summing-up of Christianity as a question of Jewish "superstition," and of "one Jesus who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive." Man has a treacherous memory. It is hopeless to say what he may remember, or to gauge how much he will forget. Agrippa, Felix, Festus, Gallio, would have been as dead men out of mind but for St. Luke's pencil. St. Luke showed wherein lies "the artist's vantage o'er the king."

– *London Spectator.*

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