

THEOPHILUS—HIGH PRIEST OF ISRAEL?

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There are some who think that Luke and/or Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1) were Jews, and so they tell me that's why Luke write of the Feasts of Israel as Time Markers in Acts, 34 years *after* the Resurrection. Christian Jews like Luke and Theophilus would certainly know when those Feasts were.¹ Some go as far to say that Theophilus was also a High Priest of Israel, for a certain Theophilus was a High Priest of Israel from 37-41 AD, but this wasn't the Theophilus that Luke wrote to. I'll address both these issues about Theophilus, being a Jew and a High Priest, but first we'll look at how Luke addresses Theophilus in his Gospel.

Most Excellent Theophilus

In Luke 1:3 Luke addresses Theophilus as κράτιστε Θεόφιλε (*kratistay Theophile* or most excellent Theophilae). The term κράτιστος (most excellent or noble) appears in only three other places in the New Testament, and that solely by Luke in Acts, which helps to reveal what race and type of person Theophilus was:

1. In Acts 23:26, the centurion Claudius Lysias begins his letter on Paul's behalf "to the most excellent (τω κρατίστω) governor Felix: Greetings!"
2. In Acts 24:3, Tertullus, the lawyer for the Jewish Council against Paul, addresses the Roman ruler Felix, in a court setting, by saying, "most excellent Felix" (κράτιστε Φήλιξ).
3. Likewise, Paul addresses the Roman ruler Festus as "most excellent" (κράτιστε Φήστε) in another official court setting (Acts 26:25).

These cites in Acts reflect that Luke uses, "*most excellent*," toward two Roman governors of Judah. In all three instances in the Book of Acts, an article entitled, "*Who is Theophilus*," states that,

"the term is used in connection with an explicit identification of the person's *official* status as a Roman governor (also Bock 1994:63)."²

The Pulpit Commentary for Luke 1:3 has of Luke's, "Most excellent Theophilus" that,

"The term rendered 'most excellent' (κράτιστε) denotes that the friend of Luke for whom ...his Gospel was written *was a man of high rank in the Roman world* of that day...He was most likely, from Luke's connection with Antioch, *a noble* of that great and wealthy city, and may fairly be taken as a representative of that cultured, thoughtful class for whom in a measure St. Luke especially wrote. The title κράτιστε, by which Theophilus is here addressed, we find several times *applied to high Roman officials, such as Felix and Festus* (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25)."³

¹ For why Luke isn't a Jew, see [Luke the Jew?](#) For why the Feasts in Acts reveal that all of Christianity were keeping the Feasts of Israel more than 30 years after the Resurrection, see the two page article, [The Feasts of Israel and the Church](#) and its bigger brother, [The Feasts of Israel as Time Markers After the Resurrection](#).

² [Who is Theophilus?](#) Under the heading, *Most Excellent Theophilus*, about one-fourth down the page.

³ J. Marshall Lang, author. Henry D. M. Spence-Jones and Joseph S. Excell, Editors. *The Pulpit Commentary* Se-

Other than the Roman governors that are addressed as “most excellent,” Theophilus seems to have been a nobleman of Antioch whom Luke wrote to. It may have been that Luke originally came into contact with Theophilus as his physician, and that when Luke came to believe in Yeshua, he told Theophilus about his new found faith in person, and then some time later in writing (cf. Luke 1:1-4). Again from the article, *Who is Theophilus? Discovering the Original Reader of Luke-Acts*, the authors, Creamer, Spencer and Vijoen of South Africa, continue, giving references for the address:

“The designation *κράτιστος* (most excellent) may be used as part of an honorary address to a person of high political standing...This is the case with the use of *κράτιστος* with the proper names Felix and Festus.”⁴

Respected scholars Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida state of “most excellent” that it pertains,

“*to having noble status*, with the implication of power and authority, often employed as a title— ‘excellency, most excellent, your honor.’”⁵

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary writes of the title, “most excellent,” that it’s “used by Luke only of officials or of nobility (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25).”⁶

Obviously, none of the references thought the term, “most excellent,” could pertain to a High Priest of Israel. The title or formal address, “most excellent,” is only used for Roman governors by Luke in Acts. His calling Theophilus “most excellent” points us to the fact that if Theophilus was not a Roman governor, he was certainly a Roman citizen of high rank, most likely of nobility.

Theophilus—A Very Common Name

Craig Evans writes that the name Theophilus was a common name among Greeks, Romans and even Jews. He negates the possibility of Luke using the name Theophilus in a symbolic way to imply that Luke wrote both his Gospel and Acts to any and every “friend or lover of God” who might read it, as symbolically that’s what Theophilus means:

“Theophilus was a name common to Jews, Greeks, and Romans in the first century. Moreover, had Luke meant to address his Gospel to ‘friends of God and not to a person named Theophilus, he could (and I think would) have done so in plain speech.”⁷

Theophilus was an actual person and not just Luke’s way of writing to any “friend of God” who might read his Gospel and/or Acts. Joel Green affirms the commonality of the name, stating that it goes back several centuries before Luke wrote his Gospel, and that no one in the ancient world would have used it symbolically:

ries: *St. Luke* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1890; Accordance Bible Software, 2017), paragraph 21,657.

⁴ [Who is Theophilus?](#) Under the heading, *Most Excellent Theophilus*, about one-fourth down the page.

⁵ Johannes Louw and Eugene A. Nida, Editors, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), p. 739. See Moulton & Milligan 1930: §2,405; Louw & Nida 1989: §3,837; Liddell & Scott, *ibid*: pp. 991-992; Thayer 1997: §3075; Friberg, Friberg & Miller 2000: §16,573.

⁶ Charles F. Pfeiffer, Old Testament; Everett F. Harrison, New Testament, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), p. 1,030.

⁷ Craig A. Evans, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1990), p. 20, note 1:3.

“Theophilus is a common name found in the papyri and inscriptions as early as the third century BCE” and so “such a symbolic rendering is highly unlikely, for some have suggested the name is only symbolic, as it means, ‘lover of God.’” Also, “the appellation ‘most excellent’ would then be pointless; and a symbolic dedication of this sort *would be unparalleled in Luke’s literary culture.*” The title, most excellent, is “‘normally reserved for Roman political officials’ and ‘we are dealing with a person of advanced status’”⁸ in Theophilus.

In other words, if the name Theophilus was used symbolically by Luke, it would have made no sense to call “him” most excellent. Also, there were many people named Theophilus in Luke’s time, and so just because a High Priest has that name doesn’t mean that he was the Theophilus Luke was writing to.

Theophilus—A Gentile

Nothing in Luke or Acts, or even Church history, even hints at, let alone reveals, Luke writing to a former Jewish High Priest of Israel, even though a “Theophilus ben Ananus” served as High Priest of Israel for four years, from 37-41 AD.⁹ The Jewish Theophilus’ term as High Priest would have ended more than 20 years prior to Luke writing his Gospel and Acts (62 and 64 AD respectively). This Theophilus may very well have been dead long before Luke wrote his Gospel and Acts, and so he couldn’t have been the Theophilus that Luke was writing to, as High Priests of Israel were not young men when they were assigned to the office, but elderly men. Also, there is nothing in Jewish or Christian history that speaks of the High Priest Theophilus being a Christian, but Luke’s Theophilus certainly was and most likely was a Gentile. The article, *Who is Theophilus*, states that,

“Theophilus would have been, by every indication, a Gentile rather than a Jew. It would have been unlikely for a Jew to hold political office (see also Bock 2007: p. 52). Luke’s emphasis on the inclusive nature of the kingdom of God in his gospel as well as the major theme of the breaking in of the Gentiles in Acts,” further supports “the likelihood that Theophilus was a Gentile. Bock (1994) suggests that Theophilus may have been a” (Gentile) “God-fearer before coming to faith in Christ. He lists passages from Acts that refer to God-fearers (including Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 17:4, 17; 18:7) as a possible explanation for their inclusion in the narrative.”¹⁰

In other words, Luke’s speaking of the inclusion of Gentiles into the Kingdom would be an identification that Gentile Theophilus would appreciate.

Lutheran theologian R.C.H. Lenski writes,

“Theophilus was not ‘probably,’ *but most certainly a Gentile*; the entire Gospel permits no other conclusion.”¹¹

Lenski may have said that because of the many times in Luke’s writings where Luke *explains* “Jewish

⁸ Joel B. Green, Author; Gordon D. Fee, Editor, *New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 44.

⁹ [High Priests of Israel](#)

¹⁰ [Who is Theophilus?](#) Under the heading, *Theophilus and the Gentile Inclusion in Acts*, about one-third down the page.

¹¹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, Lenski’s Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961; Accordance Bible Software), p. 33.

things,” instead of taking them for granted as one would with a Jewish High Priest. For instance, Luke 1:26 says,

“Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God *to a city of Galilee* named Nazareth.”

There would have been no need to speak of Nazareth as “a city of Galilee.” to any Jew, let alone the High Priest of Israel. Every Jew knew where Nazareth was.

In Luke 2:4 he writes,

“Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judah, to the city of David, *which is called Bethlehem*, because he was of the House and lineage of David.”

Again, if Theophilus were a High Priest of Israel, Luke would not have needed to say, “*to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem*,” because every Jew knew where King David had been born, just as the angel did when He spoke of Messiah’s birth to the shepherds in the field (Luke 2:11, cf. 2:15).

Also, if Theophilus were the Jewish High Priest there would have been no need for Luke to quote the Mosaic law for Mary’s purification after childbirth:

“Now when the days of her purification according to the Law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord, as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘*Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.*’” (Luke 2:22-23)

Every Jew knew Mosaic Law and its commandments to women after childbirth (cf. Lev. 12:1-8; Num. 18:15). No, Luke’s Theophilus wasn’t a Jew and he certainly wasn’t a High Priest of Israel. It doesn’t seem reasonable or likely for Luke, a Gentile, to even know a High Priest of Israel, let alone write to him both his Gospel and Acts, *and not say anything to indicate that Theophilus had been a Jewish High Priest of Israel* at one time.

Also, if the High Priest Theophilus was whom Luke was writing to, Luke would have addressed him as such, saying something like, “To Theophilus, High Priest of Israel,” even if Theophilus had left his time of actually serving as High Priest 20 years earlier. This would have been common courtesy, recognizing his former position, which as High Priest is the “head” of Israel, and would have been addresses that way by Jews. Therefore, for Luke *not* to call Theophilus by the title of High Priest is a glaring omission and another indication that the Theophilus whom Luke was writing to had never been a High Priest of Israel nor even a Jew, as the title, “most excellent,” Luke reserves for Roman governors in Acts. Theophilus was a Gentile of prominence, most likely a Roman nobleman.¹²

¹² Created on Sunday, August 21, 2022.