

# 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 say that's why Luke could write of the Feasts of Israel, and they as Time Markers in Acts, 34 years *after* the Resurrection. Christian-Jews like Luke and Theophilus, they say, would certainly know when those Feasts were.<sup>1</sup> Some go as far to say that Theophilus was also a High Priest of Israel, for there was a certain Theophilus who was High Priest of Israel from 37-41 AD. He though, wasn't the Theophilus whom 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 and the Book of Acts.

## *Most Excellent Theophilus*

In Luke 1:3 Luke addresses Theophilus as *κράτιστε Θεόφιλε* (*kratistay Theophile* or most excellent Theophilus). The term *κράτιστος* (most excellent or noble) appears in front of only three other names in the entire New Testament, and it's used solely by Luke in Acts, which helps to reveal what race and type of person "our" 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, in another official court setting (Acts 26:25), addresses the Roman ruler Festus as "most excellent" (*κράτιστε Φήστε*).

These three cites in Acts reflect that Luke uses "*most excellent*" toward two Roman governors of Judah. In these 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)."<sup>2</sup>

*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)."<sup>3</sup>

Other than the Roman governors that are addressed as "most excellent," which Theophilus may have

<sup>1</sup> For why Luke isn't a Jew, see [Luke the Jew?](#) For why the Feasts in Acts reveal that all of Christianity kept 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](#).

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

<sup>3</sup> J. Marshall Lang, author. Henry D. M. Spence-Jones and Joseph S. Excell, Editors. *The Pulpit Commentary Series: St. Luke* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1890; Accordance Bible Software, 2017), paragraph 21,657.

been, it seems he was certainly a nobleman of Antioch whom Luke wrote to. It may be 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). 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.’”<sup>4</sup>

*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).”<sup>5</sup> None of the references though, thought the term, “most excellent,” pertained to a Jewish 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 to the fact that if Theophilus was not a Roman governor, he was certainly a Roman citizen of nobility and high rank.

## *Theophilus—A Very Common Name*

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, 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 the name 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.”<sup>6</sup>

Theophilus was an actual person and not a symbolic way for Luke to write to any “friend of God” who might read his Gospel *and* Acts. Reading Luke 1:3 it comes across as Luke is writing to a real person:

“it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus.” (Luke 1:3)

Joel Green, in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, 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*:

“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...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*” or “a person of advanced status.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer, Old Testament; Everett F. Harrison, New Testament, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), p. 1,030.

<sup>6</sup> Craig A. Evans, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1990), p. 20, note 1:3.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

In other words, if the name Theophilus was used symbolically by Luke, it would have made no sense to anyone reading it. 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.<sup>8</sup> The Jewish Theophilus' term as High Priest though, would have ended more than 20 years prior to Luke writing his Gospel and Acts (62 and 64 AD respectively). This Jewish Theophilus may very well have been dead long before Luke wrote his Gospel and Acts, and so he would not have been the Theophilus that Luke was writing to. 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. The article, *Who is Theophilus*, addresses the issue of whether Luke's Theophilus was a Jew or a Gentile, and chooses the latter:

*"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."<sup>9</sup>

The title of "most excellent" would not have been used for a Jewish High Priest, and for a Jew to hold high political office in or outside the land of Judah, doesn't seem to be feasible. Also, with Luke writing of the inclusion of Gentiles into the Kingdom of the Jewish Messiah, it would present an identification that Gentile Theophilus would appreciate.

Respected Lutheran theologian R.C.H. Lenski is certain that Theophilus was a Gentile:

"Theophilus was not "probably," *but most certainly a Gentile*; the entire Gospel permits no other conclusion."<sup>10</sup>

Lenski may have said that because of the many times in Luke's Gospel where Luke *explains* "Jewish things," instead of taking them for granted. If Theophilus was the Jewish High Priest, Luke would have not have to have done that. 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, whether living inside or outside of Israel, knew where Nazareth was. In Luke 2:4 the traveling companion of Paul writes,

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<sup>8</sup> [High Priests of Israel](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Who is Theophilus?](#) Under the heading, *Theophilus and the Gentile Inclusion in Acts*, about one-third of the way down the page.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

“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 or even a common Jew, Luke would not have needed to say, “*to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem.*” Every Jew knew where King David had been born, just as the angel spoke to the shepherds when He spoke of Messiah’s birth to them in the field (Luke 2:11, cf. 2:15).

Also, if Theophilus had been the Jewish High Priest there would have been no need for Luke to quote the Mosaic law for Mary’s purification after childbirth, the way that he did. Luke might only have spoken of them as fulfilling it:

“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; cf. Ex. 13:2; Num. 3:12)

Every Jew knew Mosaic Law and its commandments to women after childbirth (cf. Lev. 12:1-8; Num. 18:15). Also, as a High Priest, Theophilus would have had no problem speaking with Peter or John, or any of the other Apostles, including Paul, to know more about Jesus. There would have been no need for Luke to have written his Gospel and Acts “to the most excellent Theophilus.”

## *Conclusion*

If Theophilus had been a High Priest 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 office more than 20 years earlier. This would have been just common courtesy, recognizing his former position, which as High Priest is the “head” of Israel. Luke would not have addressed him as “most excellent,” a title reserved in Acts for only Gentile Roman governors of Judah and the Gentile, Theophilus.

Therefore, for Luke *not* to call Theophilus by the title of High Priest is a glaring omission.<sup>11</sup> It’s also an indication that the Theophilus whom Luke wrote to had never been a High Priest of Israel nor even a Jew, but most likely a Gentile of noble prominence, as Luke reserves the title for Roman governors in Acts. Luke’s Theophilus wasn’t a Jew and he certainly hadn’t been a High Priest of Israel. It doesn’t seem reasonable or likely for Luke, a Gentile, to even personally 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, there’s nothing in either the Gospel of Luke or Acts to even hint that Theophilus was a Jew, let alone a High Priest of Israel. Yet, there are a number of things in both accounts that reveal that Theophilus wasn’t a Jew at all, let alone a High Priest of Israel, with Luke needing to name where Nazareth was, and what city King David was born in. Every Jew would know those things. Also Acts 1:12,

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet, *which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey.*”

No Jew would have to be told that Olivet was “near Jerusalem,” nor “a Sabbath day’s journey” from the city, which is about two-thirds of a mile.<sup>12</sup> Given all this, and that the name “Theophilus” was very common among Jews and Greeks, it’s not possible that Luke’s Theophilus was a High Priest or a Jew.

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<sup>11</sup> Luke has no problem speaking of the title of “High Priest” (cf. Luke 22:50; Acts 4:6, 5:17, 21, 24, 27; 7:1; 9:1; 22:5; 23:4-5; 24:1; 25:2).

<sup>12</sup> Created on Sunday, August 21, 2022 and updated on Saturday, August 12, 2023.