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ST. LUKE THE PHYSICIAN*

By JAMES J. WALSH, M.D., Ph.D.

A number of physicians, not to mention other people, are inclined to doubt the tradition that St. Luke, the disciple of St. Paul and the writer of the third Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, was a physician. In the midst of what, in the last generation of the nineteenth century, came to be called the Higher Criticism of the Bible, one of the long accepted traditions that has been most strenuously assailed, and indeed in the minds of many scholars for a time at least quite discredited, was that with regard to St. Luke's being a physician.

By far the most important contribution to this discussion in recent years came about the beginning of the twentieth century from the pen of Professor Harnack, professor of Church History in the University of Berlin. Harnack's name is usually cited as that of one of the most respected of the higher critics. His book, *Luke the Physician*, is an entire submission to the old-fashioned viewpoint that the writer of the third Gospel and of the Act of the Apostles had been a physician and was evidently well versed in all the medical lore of that time. Harnack is known for his knowledge of the history of medicine so that he is in a favorable position to

write with regard to this subject. Some of his works on medical conditions just before and after Christ are quoted confidently by the distinguished German medical historians.

Here is his demonstration of St. Luke's place as a physician:

"St. Luke, according to St. Paul, was a physician. When a physician writes an historical work it does not necessarily follow that his profession reveals itself in his writing, yet it is only natural for one to look for traces of the author's medical profession in such a work. These traces may be of different kinds: 1, the whole character of the narrative may be determined by points of view, aims and ideals which are more or less medical (disease and its treatment); 2, marked preference may be shown for stories concerning the healing of diseases, which stories may be given in great number and detail; 3, the language may be colored by the language of physicians (medical technical terms, metaphors of medical character, etc.). All these three groups of characteristic signs," Harnack continues, "are found, as we shall see, in the historical work which bears the name of St. Luke. Here, however, it may be objected that the subject matter itself is responsible for these traits so that their evidence is not decisive for the medical calling of the author."

Harnack insists that "Jesus ap-

* This is an excerpt from the Appendix of *Old Time Makers of Medicine*, published twenty-five years ago. This fact will account for some of the dates seeming to be far off.

peared as a great physician and healer. All the evangelists say this of Him; hence it is not surprising that one of them has set this phase of His ministry in the foreground and has regarded it as the most important. Our evangelist need not, therefore, have been a physician, especially if he were a Greek, seeing that in those days Greeks with religious interests were disposed to regard religion mainly under the category of healing and salvation. This is true, yet such a combination of characteristic points will compel us to believe that the author was a physician, if, 4, the description of the particular cases of disease shows distinct traces of medical diagnosis and scientific knowledge; 5, if the language even where questions of healing and medicine are not touched upon is colored by medical phraseology; and, 6, if in those passages where the author speaks as an eye witness medical traits are especially and prominently apparent. These three kinds of tokens are also found in the historical work of our author, Luke. It is accordingly proved that it proceeds from the pen of a physician."

The importance of the concession that Luke was a physician should be properly appreciated. His whole gospel is written from that standpoint. For him, the Saviour was the healer, the good physician who went about curing the ills of the body while ministering to people's souls. He has more accounts of miracles of heal-

ing than any of the other Evangelists. In a number of cases the correction of Mark's popular language in the description of ailments is made in terms that could not have been used except by one thoroughly versed in the Greek medical terminology of the times.

When Luke told the story of the good Samaritan, he added some interesting details which indicate medical interest on the part of the writer. The use of oil and wine, for instance, was typically medical at that time, and Hippocrates had a number of recommendations for this combination for wounds. The wine had a certain antiseptic quality, while the oil covered over the wound and kept bacteria in the air from finding their way into it. The ancients did not know why, but they knew from empirical experience that wounds thus treated, healed better, and Luke was in touch with that tradition and was careful to insert it into the Gospel story.

Dr. Robinson, the well-known Scottish writer on the history of medicine, summed up the evidence with regard to Luke's being a physician, very strikingly. He said:

"It is manifest from his Gospel that Luke was an acute observer and had even given professional attention to all our Saviour's miracles of healing. Originally among the Egyptians, divinity and physics were united in the same order of men, so that the priest had the care of souls and was also the physician. It was much the same

under the Jewish economy, but after physic came to be studied by the Greeks they separated the two professions. That a physician should write the history of our Saviour's life was appropriate as there were divers mysterious things to be noticed concerning which his education enabled him to form a becoming judgment."

Forty years ago many scholars were prone to doubt the idea of Luke's being a physician. Twenty years ago a number of biblical scholars were convinced that the Luke traditions were not justified by recent investigations. Now we have come back once more to the complete acceptance of the old tradition, and no doubt is left that Luke was a physician, a follower of that Greek tradition of medicine which runs so clearly from Herodotus down to Galen and which has meant so much in the history of medicine. These two men who lived more than five centuries apart have left a very deep impress on the history of medicine. For nearly fifteen hundred years Galen continued to be the great teacher of European medicine. Even in his time, Professor Osler used to say that every physician ought to read some Hippocrates every day so as to keep afresh his practice of observation, for observation is the most important thing in the world in the practice of medicine, and diagnosis means ever so much more than treatment.

Perhaps the most unfortunate characteristic of much nineteenth

century criticism in all departments, even those strictly scientific, was the marked tendency to reject previous opinions for new ones. Somehow men felt themselves so far ahead of old-time writers and thinkers that they concluded they must hold opinions different from their ancestors. In nearly every case, the new ideas that they evolved by supposedly newer methods are not standing the test of time and further study. There had been a continuous belief in men's minds having its basis very probably on a passage in one of St. Peter's Epistles that the earth would dissolve by fire. This was openly contradicted all during the nineteenth century and the time when the earth would freeze up definitely calculated by our mathematicians. Now after having studied radio-activity and learned from the physicist that the earth is heating up and will eventually get too hot for life, we calmly go back to the old Petrine declaration. Some of the most distinguished of the German biologists of the present day, such men as Driesch and others, calmly tell us that the edifice erected by Darwin will have to come down because of newly discovered evidence and indeed some of them go so far as to declare that Darwinism was a crude hypothesis very superficial in its philosophical aspects and therefore acceptable to a great many people who, because it was easy to understand and was very different from what our fathers had believed, hastened to

accept it. Nothing shows the necessity for being conservative in the matter of new views in science or ethics or religion than the curious transition state in which we are with regard to many opinions at the present time with a distinct tendency toward reaction to older views that a few years ago were thought quite untenable. We are rather proud of the advance that we are supposed to be mak-

ing along many lines in science and scholarship and yet over and over again after years of work, we prove to have been following a wrong lead and must come back to where we started. This has been the way of man from the beginning and doubtless will continue, and the present generation is having this curious regression that follows supposed progress strongly emphasized for them.

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