

§ 001

IN THE DEDICATION LUKE EXPLAINS HIS METHOD OF RESEARCH

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. ¹

Luke 1:1-4

Introduction

1. Luke begins his Gospel with a carefully composed literary preface which has a deliberately _____² style and invites comparison of his work with that of the historians of his day.³

¹ *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Lk 1:4). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² **secular**

³ "The Historicity of Acts and Luke." The preface is very noncommittal about the subject matter of the work, beyond saying that Theophilus already knows what it is about. This suggests that we need to take quite seriously the focus of the work on Theophilus.

Luke introduces the fact that quite a number of others have already written about these matters as being an indication of their importance and as establishing a precedent for his own work. Contrary to many claims, Luke suggests not the slightest criticism of their work. They have taken in hand the task of producing an ordered narrative presentation of the events, much as Luke intends to do. They have written about the things that stand as accomplishments of supreme importance.

Alongside these written works, Luke speaks of an oral transmission. Those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning (Luke will have in mind the baptism of John) have made it their business, as devoted servants, to preserve and propagate the knowledge of these matters; the church has its knowledge of these things not vaguely, by hearsay, but confidently from eyewitness report. The activity of the eyewitnesses also establishes a precedent for Luke: the many who wrote, the eyewitnesses who passed on the gospel orally, and Luke himself are bound together by a devotion to making known these great accomplishments. (Luke's use of "the word" for what the eyewitnesses transmitted is the one point at which a Christian notion is presupposed in the preface.)

Luke has investigated carefully everything from way back, even back to the events surrounding the birth of Jesus (he has the historian-cum-biographer's sense that that is where to begin the account of an important figure). Attention to investigation will be matched by attention to composition. Luke will arrange and present his materials not in a disjointed manner, and not merely as a chronicler, but rather as a coherently conceived whole: as a message (cf. the use of "message" in v 2). Further, he will write it in relation to the concrete situation of Theophilus, or at least in relation to the kind of issues and questions that Luke knows will be of concern to a man like Theophilus.

2. The prologue of Luke includes his purposes:
 - to provide for gentile readers (Theophilus in particular) an orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and
 - to certify that He who was the promised Messiah for Israel is indeed the Son of God who became the Son of man, and that His ministry provided the way for Gentiles as well as Jews to enter the kingdom of God.⁴

3. The opening paragraph is one sentence in good Greek style, with classical vocabulary, rhythm and balance.
 - Luke has a feeling for style and clearly he sees a somewhat Semitic accent as right for the kind of book he is writing.
 - But this excellently rounded sentence is equally right for a literary opening.
 - And a literary opening, of course, implies that what follows was meant for circulation.
 - Some of our oldest manuscripts, incidentally, give the book the simple title: ‘According to Luke’.

Commentary⁵

1. Luke begins by drawing attention to *many* who had written before him.

The identity of Theophilus must remain unknown. But in Luke’s eyes he was a person of substance and distinction, who had become acquainted with Christianity and, perhaps, had expressed a considerable interest (the Gospel is no tract for the casually interested).

Luke talks in his preface of Theophilus coming to know about the foundational facts of Christianity in the way that he might learn accurately about any other significant historical events. But Luke doesn’t really think that knowing about Christianity like that makes a person a Christian. The preface may talk about secular knowledge, but what follows is religious testimony. It is true that Luke is more self-conscious than the other evangelists about the role of historical evidence in commending the Christian faith: the preface reflects this consciousness. But Luke’s understanding of the relationship between faith and history must not be read out of a preface in which Christian conviction has been deliberately kept out of sight.

Though we know Luke followed the Gospel with a second volume, and that the completed work is a two-volume unity, the preface as such addresses only the contents of the Gospel, and only in a derived and secondary sense should its statements be applied to the contents of the second volume. (Nolland, J. (2002). *Vol. 35A: Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (11). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.)

⁴ Bailey, M., Constable, T., Swindoll, C. R., & Zuck, R. B. (1999). *Nelson’s New Testament Survey: Discover the Background, Theology and Meaning of Every Book in the New Testament* (104). Nashville: Word.

⁵ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press ; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (81). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- Many ancient writers begin by _____⁶ their predecessors.
 - Not Luke. He is out to convey certainty (v. 4), but he does not disparage others.
 - They had set out to compose a *narrative*, a general term which leaves it open whether they had written gospels or some other kind of narrative.
 - He does not say who they were but most agree that Mark was one of them.
 - The verb *accomplished* can be used of being fully persuaded (AV, 'most surely believed'), but this meaning is unlikely here.
 - The word has about it the air of fulfilment (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5) and Luke may be hinting at the working out of God's purpose, a thought which will be so much with him throughout his Gospel and its sequel.⁷
2. Luke has good authority for what he writes.
- He was not himself an eyewitness, but had consulted others who were.
 - Some have thought the reference to *eyewitnesses* to be nothing more than conventional, but, as Creed says, 'an ancient writer would no more claim the authority of eye-witnesses without expecting his statement to be believed than a modern'.
3. The eyewitnesses were also *ministers of the word*.
- This unusual expression (found nowhere else in the New Testament) appears to mean 'men who preached the Christian gospel'.
 - But we should not overlook the facts that John speaks of Jesus as 'the Word' (John 1:1) and that elsewhere Luke seems to regard preaching Jesus and preaching the word as much the same thing (Acts 8:4; 9:20; cf. also Acts 10:36ff.).
 - He is approaching John's thought, for these men were servants of the Word as well as of the word.
 - He is also implying that his authorities were not so much academic historians as men who knew and lived by the word they preached.
4. *From the beginning* takes us back to the ministry of John the Baptist.
- Luke was not missing out on anything essential but going back to the very roots of the Christian movement.
 - *Delivered* is wide enough to cover both oral and written tradition; Luke may well have both in mind.

⁶ criticizing

AV Authorized (King James) Version, 1611.

⁷ H. J. Cadbury thinks there is probably nothing more to it than a desire for a long and sonorous word (F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity 2*, Macmillan, 1922, p. 496). But this is unlikely to be correct.

5. He claims to have *followed all things closely*.
 - Some (e.g. Cadbury) hold that this means that he was personally present (as he was at some of the events in Acts).
 - But this seems to read too much into his verb.
 - We should take it rather in the sense ‘track down’, ‘investigate’, for, on his own admission, Luke was not an eyewitness of some at least of what he narrates.
 - MM think that the verb implies, not that Luke had ‘investigated’ all his facts afresh, but that he had acquired such familiarity with them and had so kept in touch with them ‘that his witness is practically contemporary witness’.

6. He claims to have followed the events ‘accurately’ (as mg., rather than *closely*).
 - He is saying that his information is _____;⁸ he knows what he is writing about.
 - He goes on to say that he has traced the story from its beginning (*for some time past* should rather be ‘from the very first’ as AV).

7. There has been a good deal of discussion of the word translated *orderly* (*kathexēs*), used by Luke alone in the New Testament.
 - The view that it means ‘in chronological order’ seems to be reading too much into it.
 - Geldenhuys, while not overlooking the chronological possibilities, sees in the word ‘logical and artistic arrangement’ and some such view is probably correct.
 - *Theophilus* (= ‘lover of God’) is unlikely to be a symbolic name; it points to a _____⁹ who would probably, as Luke’s patron, have met the costs of publishing the book.
 - The epithet *most excellent* probably indicates a person of rank (cf. Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25), though the possibility remains that it is no more than a courtesy title.

8. The verb *informed* is often used of the instruction of Christian converts or inquirers (*katēcheō*; see Acts 18:25; 1 Cor. 14:19, etc.).
 - Some deduce that Theophilus was a believer, and support this with the contention that he was unlikely to have been Luke’s literary patron if he was not.
 - But against this it is urged that he would probably have been called ‘brother’ if he was.

MM James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1914–29).

mg. margin.

⁸ good

⁹ real person

- In any case the verb may be used of a report both hostile and wrong (e.g. Acts 21:21, 24), so we must keep open the possibility that he was no more than an interested outsider.
 - He certainly knew something about the Christian faith and Luke wants him to know *the truth* (Hendriksen 'exact truth'; the word means 'certainty' and it is in an emphatic position) about it.
 - Ned B. Stonehouse sees truth as specially important here.
9. The 'main impact' of the Prologue is 'that Christianity is _____¹⁰ and is capable of confirmation by appeal to what had happened'.¹¹

Conclusion¹²

1. The preface is written in excellent Greek with a most carefully wrought sentence structure, and stands in contrast to the style adopted in the following narrative.
2. It claims a place for the Gospel as a work of literature, worthy of an educated audience.
3. Although the book is addressed to one reader, Theophilus, he is evidently Luke's literary patron, and although it must remain doubtful whether the Gospel was in fact meant 'for the book market' (Dibelius, *Studies*, 135; but see the cautious study of Vögtle, 31-42), it was meant to circulate widely.
 - Luke has adopted the literary conventions of the time, but the resulting work is an expression of his own personality and purpose.
 - We should not, therefore, interpret his statements in too conventional a manner, as if what he said was dictated purely by the style and vocabulary of his literary models.
 - He was concerned to hand on tradition rather than to be a *littérateur*.
4. By writing in this fashion, then, Luke was claiming a place for Christianity on the stage of world history.
 - How far his predecessors had made such claims we do not know, but the likelihood is that earlier Christian literature was produced for church purposes.
 - Luke also had in mind the non-Christian world.

¹⁰ true

¹¹ Stonehouse, N.B. *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (London, 1951), 44.

¹² Marshall, I. H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (38). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.

5. He justified his work by reference to the precedent of earlier, similar writings, to the trustworthy nature of his sources, and to his own qualifications to produce an orderly narrative based on careful research.
 - He shows no disparagement of his predecessors; rather he felt that their example justified his own attempt to write a Gospel intended for the particular situation which he addressed.
 - He does not question their accuracy, for they, like he, had received the tradition handed down by eyewitnesses of the events.

6. Luke's purpose was to give an historical account which would form the basis for a sound Christian faith on the part of those who had already been instructed, perhaps imperfectly and incompletely, in the story of Jesus.
 - Throughout the preface there is a stress on the historical accuracy of the material presented.
 - It has been argued that the preface is concerned to show that the career of Jesus was a series of divine acts rather than to affirm the factual certainty of those acts (U. Luck, 'Kerygma, Tradition und Geschichte bei Lukas', ZTK 57, 1960, 51-66).
 - This thesis is correct in what it affirms, but wrong in what it denies.
 - It is clear from Luke 7:21 and Acts 1:3 that Luke was concerned with the historical reliability of his material (cf. H. Strathmann, TDNT IV, 492).
 - It may be that the existence of gnosticizing or docetic teaching which minimized the importance of the historical Jesus played a part in shaping his aim.

7. Luke does not name himself in the preface; he is content to be seen as a member of the church which he serves, like the servants of the Word before him.