

INTRODUCTION

Author

The document we call the Gospel of Luke carries no author's name, and chances are that the author never intended to put his or her name on it. The author knew Theophilus (1:3), and presumably Theophilus knew the author and expected to receive this book; thus there was no need for biographical details. As for other readers who might not know "Luke," the author must have felt that a name would add nothing—no extra authority, no greater credibility—beyond what he or she claims anonymously in the preface (1:1-4).

Yet the name "Luke" comes to us from early Christian tradition. The earliest known copy of the Gospel of Luke, dating from AD 175–225, had the title "according to Luke" at the end of the text.¹ Around 185, Irenaeus wrote, "Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him."² The collection of four Gospels that Irenaeus knows was probably already circulating by the middle of the second century (Justin Martyr, a Christian in Rome who died around 150, writes of "the memoirs of the apostles," as if there were more than one known to him). We presume that when somebody put Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together and called the collection "the Gospels," somebody also assigned names to the four: "according to Matthew," etc. The great and ultimately irresolvable question is how that collector knew the names. Since the originals were all anonymous, were the traditions about the authors passed down orally, or did second-century Christians take their best guesses about who wrote them?

Whoever wrote the Gospel of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and there are sections of Acts written in the first person: "We set sail from Troas," etc. These sections cover parts of Paul's ministry, and one would naturally think of trying to look in Paul's letters to see who, from the list of Paul's companions, would be the most likely author of our two volumes. The name "Luke" appears in three places:

- Colossians 4:14: "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you."

- Philemon 23–24: “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Jesus Christ, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.”
- 2 Timothy 4:9-11: “Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone off to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia; Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me.”

Someone could have reasoned this way: “Luke” is a Greek rather than a Jewish name, fitting better the Gentile tone of the Gospel. Luke is identified as a physician, and whoever wrote Luke-Acts was educated. The 2 Timothy passage indicates a person who was loyal to Paul, and that fits with the way Paul is the hero of the last half of Acts. In fact, Irenaeus makes that final point the thrust of an argument against the heretics. He writes, “But that this Luke was inseparable from Paul, and his fellow-laborer in the gospel, he himself clearly evinces.” Irenaeus then narrates a number of episodes from the “we” sections of Acts, arguing that Luke saw it all and wrote it all down. He then quotes 2 Timothy 4:10-11 and Colossians 4:4, concluding that Luke “always preached in company with Paul and is called by him ‘the beloved,’ and with him performed the work of an evangelist, and was entrusted to hand down to us a Gospel”³ Irenaeus did this exegetical work to prove that Paul never taught any secret doctrines to anyone, and that Luke was always there to write down what Paul said. Irenaeus himself was transmitting what he was taught, not creating this chain of reasoning; but his close readings of the New Testament show how the name “Luke” could have been deduced from the letters of Paul.

On the other hand, our evidence does not prove that “Luke” was a deduction rather than a tradition. Maybe the second-century collector who named the third part of his Gospel collection “According to Luke” did so because the author’s name had been part of early Christian oral tradition passed along from the first recipients of the Gospel of Luke, who knew the author personally. The arguments for and against this scenario—that Paul’s friend Luke wrote the Gospel and Acts, and that the church remembered this—are mostly based on comparisons between Acts and Paul’s letters, which we will not take up in this commentary. One’s position on this question does not affect interpretations of the Gospel, since Paul never knew Jesus personally and could not have added any eyewitness testimony. As a matter of convenience, I will use the name “Luke” and the male pronoun for the author of the Gospel of

Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, not drawing any conclusions about the validity of the ancient tradition.

“Luke” read the Old Testament in Greek, rather than in Hebrew, and he knew it well. He imitates the style of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), especially in his first two chapters, and cites or alludes to it in many places. In contrast to Matthew, however, Luke does not devote much space to the interpretation of the Old Testament, and does not assume that his audience keeps kosher or worships on Sabbath. I presume, then, that neither Luke nor the audience he kept in mind as he wrote was Jewish. Luke shows no greater knowledge of Palestinian geography than he could have read in Mark, so I presume that he lived outside Palestine. Luke knows the rules of speech-making and can shift from a more colloquial style to a more elevated one; this is a sign of having had a good education, so I presume that Luke was either wealthy or well-born or both. I will also presume that he lived in a city; his education and the publication of his Gospel would have been more easily obtained there than in some rural setting.

Although some, most notably William K. Hobart (*The Medical Language of St. Luke* [Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1882]), have argued that Luke’s vocabulary was laced with specialized medical terms, this has been shown not to be the case. Luke’s words for illnesses and cures were common ones, found “in the Septuagint, Josephus, Plutarch, and Lucian, all non-medical writings.”⁴ Maybe the author of this Gospel was a physician, but we could not prove it by his language.

Audience

The Gospel is addressed to Theophilus, whom I assume to have been a real person, and a Christian who wanted (or who was going to get, whether he wanted it or not!) further instruction in the life and teachings of Jesus. (This argument is elaborated in the commentary on 1:1-4.)

I presume that the author hoped or knew his book would be heard by more than just Theophilus. Luke may have expected that the congregation where Theophilus worshiped would hear the Gospel read aloud to them and would then share it with others. The New Testament indicates that congregations shared letters (Col 4:16, “when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea”). If Theophilus was a wealthy or influential person—a plausible guess, but only a guess—Luke may have

expected or hoped that Theophilus would use his contacts and networks to encourage the Gospel's spread.⁵

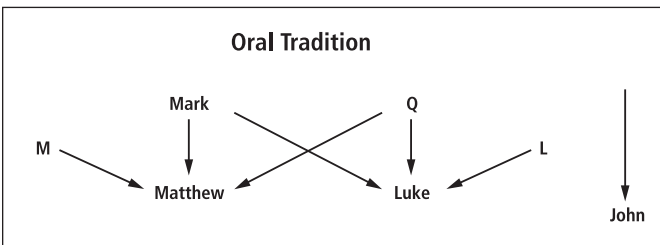
Luke's Gospel is very much concerned with wealth and poverty, specifically with how the wealthy should give to the poor. Although he records that Jesus met people who were poor—the blind beggar in 18:35, for instance, was certainly poor—the text never identifies them by the term “poor.” While Jesus speaks about the poor (e.g., 6:20), and while the fictive character Lazarus is called “a poor man” (16:20), Jesus is not pictured interacting with folks labeled “poor.” On the other hand, Jesus does meet two men described as “rich”: the “ruler” or “leader,” who is described as “very rich” after he refuses to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor (18:23), and Zacchaeus, who promises to give away half his possessions and restore four-fold what he had taken by fraud. This combination of factors suggests that Luke's audience—that is, the people he had in mind as he wrote—included rich people.

Sources

Luke writes that “many” had written narratives before he started his work (1:1)—don't we wish he had named them! But for many years, most students of the New Testament have concluded, based on comparisons of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, that Luke used Mark and another source—now commonly called “Q”—to provide him with most of his material, and that Matthew's author did the same. “Q” (an abbreviation of the German word *Quelle*,

“source”), according to the standard theory, was a collection of sayings and stories that existed in the 50s; Luke and Matthew, independently of each other, knit together sections of Mark, of Q, and of other materials known to them.

Luke and Matthew's Sources



Here is the data that any theory about the relationship between Mark, Matthew, and Luke must explain:

- Mark, Matthew, and Luke (when we speak of them as a group, we call them the Synoptics, meaning that you can align their contents in three parallel columns and see that the three mostly tell one story) share the same basic outline, if you leave off the birth narratives on the front end (Mark has none) and the resurrection appearances on the back end (the oldest copies of Mark have

none). Sometimes Luke disagrees with the order of Matthew and Mark. Sometimes Matthew disagrees with the order of Luke and Mark. But the order of the stories in Mark always (or almost always, depending on how small you slice up the stories) agrees either with Matthew or Luke. Mark's order is the middle term, somehow explaining why Luke and Matthew are as much alike as they are.

- The Synoptics share a great many words in common. Some passages are word-for-word the same in all three. Some of these word-for-word passages are in editorial or narrative material. Thus, one can't explain the Synoptics' close similarities by appealing to how early Christians memorized the sayings of Jesus. Our theory must involve one or two of them copying from one or two of the others.
- To complicate things, Matthew and Luke also share some word-for-word identical passages in places where Mark has nothing parallel. This material includes things like the story of Jesus' three temptations—narrative and editorial material as well as sayings of Jesus. Once again, the evidence demands that either Luke read Matthew, or Matthew read Luke, or they both read the same source independently of each other. This body of material is the so-called "Q" material, and it includes significant teachings by Jesus: the Lord's Prayer; the parable of the lost sheep; some of the Beatitudes; "love your enemies," "turn the other cheek," etc. It seems unlikely to most New Testament interpreters that Mark, had he read Matthew and Luke, would have omitted that material. Thus, most conclude that Mark came first and that Matthew and Luke read and edited Mark.
- Finally, when Mark is absent, Matthew and Luke tend to go their own way. They each have birth narratives, but they are very different, as are their stories of the resurrected Jesus. The "Q" material also falls mostly in different places relative to the outline of Mark; for instance, Matthew puts the Lord's Prayer early, as a part of his Sermon on the Mount. Luke has a parallel sermon early on, but saves the prayer until Jesus has begun his journey to Jerusalem. This sort of thing encourages most New Testament interpreters to think that Matthew and Luke independently used Mark and Q. It also is the main reason most New Testament interpreters do not think that Matthew read Luke or vice-versa: why would one change the other's order so often, and leave out so much good stuff?

To repeat, the most common theory has Matthew and Luke independently editing Mark and Q. My own opinion is that

Matthew and Luke used Mark, but I am much less certain about Q.⁶ However, since this commentary is designed mostly to be used by pastors and other Bible teachers, it is not the place for the kind of detailed source analysis that would be necessary to argue for or against the standard theory. So I will content myself with the occasional “if Q really exists” and worry about more important issues. Generally speaking, even if we could know for certain that there was a Q, we cannot be certain about the exact words it contained, since we have to reconstruct it from Matthew and Luke. To do redaction criticism (tracking an author’s emphases by noting how he changes his sources) on the Q passages in Luke, we’d need to know what Q read so that we could track Luke’s changes. But we can’t. Take for instance Luke 3:7, “John said to the crowds,” and Matthew 3:7, “When he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees, [John] said to them.” Luke has a demonstrable interest in “crowds” as an audience for the gospel, while it can also be shown that Matthew increases the number of places where somebody, usually Jesus, blasts the Pharisees. Which evangelist changed Q to suit his own setting? We can’t be certain. So I mostly steer clear of conclusions drawn from Luke’s putative editing of Q.

Ministers and others who teach the Bible in a church context will sometimes encounter the possibility or presumption that Mary the mother of Jesus was Luke’s principle source for the material in Luke 1–2. Luke never claims this, and never gives any hints of what his special sources might have been.

Date

The short answer is “no later than the middle of the second century.” The standard date assigned in textbooks and commentaries is between 70 and 150. Luke cannot have been written earlier than AD 70 because it used Mark, which is usually dated 65–70. It cannot have been written much later than 150, since Irenaeus, quoted earlier, knew it as a part of a four-fold Gospel collection. Most commentators tend to narrow the range to 85–100, putting it well after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and well after Nero’s brief persecution of Christians in Rome, but before the persecutions of Christians under Trajan. Under this standard scenario, Luke writes during a brief period of relative calm for the church, trying to push the comfortably wealthy into a more rigorously ascetic faith.

Some recent commentators have argued for an early second-century date, when the church was trying to come to grips with its

place in the empire.⁷ During this period, when Christians were identified as such and when the magistrate was interested enough to arrest them, they could be executed if they would not recant (see [Pliny's Letter to Trajan]). By the mid-second century, Justin Martyr and the anonymous author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* wrote apologies, treatises arguing that Christians posed no danger to the empire and should not be punished unless they were actual criminals. In those same years, some wrote martyrologies urging Christians to hold fast to their faith even if death might be the result.

By AD 150 or so, Christianity was a fairly diverse movement. Some sectors allowed women to function as prophets, deacons, and apostles, while other sectors prohibited this, ruling that women could not teach or lead men. Christians debated whether Jesus was truly or only seemingly human; more precisely, those who thought Christ was truly human cursed those who did not and tried to exclude them from congregations. All of these strands—martyrdom, imperial values, roles of women, diverse christologies—can be seen in Luke-Acts, and so the early second-century date is as plausible as the late first-century date. In the commentary sections within each chapter, I will attempt to keep both possible contexts as options open to the interpreter.

Structure of the Gospel

If one looks at large-scale units, then Luke seems to have taken Mark's outline and expanded it, in some places by inserting blocks of non-Markan material, and in others by weaving together Markan and non-Markan verses.

Mark		Luke	
1:1	Superscription	1:1-4	Prologue
		1:5-2:52	Birth Narratives
1:2-11	John's Preaching, Baptism	3:1-22	John's Preaching, Baptism
		3:23-38	Genealogy
1:12-13	Temptation	4:1-13	Temptation
1:14-9:50	Ministry in Galilee	4:14-9:50	Ministry in Galilee
10:1-52	Journey	9:51-19:28	Journey
11:1-13:37	Entry; Teaching in Jerusalem	19:29-21:38	Entry, Teaching in Jerusalem
14:1-15:47	Passion Narrative	22:1-23:56	Passion Narrative
16:1-8	Empty Tomb	24:1-11	Empty Tomb
		24:12-52	Resurrection Narratives

This outline oversimplifies things, but it probably gives an accurate picture of Luke's overall writing plan. One way to think of Luke is as a revised and expanded Mark. He had access to material—birth stories, resurrection accounts, parables, sayings—that Mark either did not know or chose not to include. Luke, believing that this extra material was important for understanding what Jesus was about, produced what he no doubt felt was a “new and improved” Mark.

A closer look at the way Luke deals with Mark, however, shows that things are more complex than the outline above indicates. Look, for instance, at “John’s Preaching, Baptism.”

Mark		Luke	
1:2-3	Citations from Isaiah and Malachi	3:4-5	Citation from Isaiah
1:4	“Baptism of repentance”	3:3	“Baptism of repentance”
1:5	Popular response	3:10-15	More detailed popular response
1:6	John’s dress	No parallel	
1:7-8	“More powerful/ baptize with water”	3:16	“More powerful/ baptize with water”
1:9-11	Baptism of Jesus	3:21-22	Baptism of Jesus

Note that Luke reverses the order of Mark’s first two items; substitutes a more detailed account of the public response to John; omits the hairy coat, locusts, and wild honey; and, in 3:4-9 and 17-20, inserts material not found in Mark. This section exhibits more complicated editing than most, but it demonstrates that Luke felt free to add, to delete, to change order, and to insert new material—in short, to make whatever changes he felt would improve his source. For example, Luke has no parallel to Mark 6:45–8:26 (called the “Great Omission”) or to Mark 9:41–10:12 (the “Little Omission”), and most of Luke 9:51–18:14 has no parallel in Mark. Scholars wonder whether Luke really left out that much of Mark, or whether perhaps his copy of Mark was shorter than ours.

A brief outline of Luke looks something like this:

1:1–2:52	Prologue and Birth Narratives
3:1–4:13	Baptism and Temptation
4:14–9:50	Ministry in Galilee
9:51–19:28	Journey to Jerusalem
19:29–21:38	Teaching in Jerusalem
22:1–23:56	Passion Narrative
24:1-53	Resurrection Narratives

Within each section, and sometimes across sections, Luke has ways of tying one episode to another. In the birth narratives, he lines up two sets of events, one for John and one for Jesus, inviting the reader to compare and contrast what God was doing in each man. At the beginning of the “Ministry in Galilee” section, Jesus announces themes for his ministry in his opening sermon. Luke then narrates examples of those activities, and repeats the list in 7:22, this time challenging the readers to recognize what they “have seen and heard.” In 8:1-3 Jesus is on mission, supported by some women, and the twelve are with him; in 9:1-6, the Twelve go on mission; in 10:1-20, a larger group of seventy (or seventy-two) disciples go on mission. In 5:29-32, Jesus attends the first of seven banquets. Luke uses these events to illustrate the great banquet that symbolizes the kingdom of God; there are two meals in the “Ministry in Galilee” section, three in the “Journey” section, one in the Passion Narrative, and one in Luke’s final chapter, so it is a theme that helps to unify the whole work.

The longest section by far is the Journey to Jerusalem. While some scholars find a pattern in the arrangement of the stories, others do not; as explained in the commentary on 9:51-62, Luke gives regular reminders that Jesus is on a journey, but they do not seem to me to fall into predictable patterns. Instead, the journey itself is how Luke organized the teaching material he found in his other source(s): Jesus was on a mission for God, heading resolutely toward Jerusalem and his destiny. But God’s mission required him to preach the good news, heal, exorcise, and share food with people in every village and town along the way. For most of the Journey section, you could not plot Jesus’ progress on a map, and you never get any sense of the passage of time. The point is that the gospel is moving, always moving, and nobody—not Herod Antipas, nor the Romans, nor the Pharisees—will turn Jesus around.

In a surprising move, Luke also erases most of the chronological notes in Mark that give us the tradition of Holy Week. Luke’s Jesus enters the temple and then “day by day” teaches there for an indeterminate period. Luke keeps most of Mark’s sequence of stories intact, so it isn’t the outline he wants to disrupt. Instead, Luke’s structure emphasizes the difference between the period of Jesus’ teaching, when the people gathered to hear him, shielding him from the anger of the temple authorities, and the time after Satan entered Judas, when the people agreed with the temple authorities in demanding Jesus’ crucifixion.

Luke’s final chapter begins, like Mark’s, with women finding the empty tomb. But then things change: the women, prompted by

heavenly messengers to remember Jesus' teachings, believe he is alive. Two disciples walk with the risen Jesus but fail to recognize him until he breaks bread with them. Finally, he appears to the whole group, apostles and disciples, opening their minds to understand how the Scriptures apply to him and sending them on mission one more time.

Themes

The Kingdom of God. The Old Testament, especially the Psalms, frequently refers to God as King of all creation, reigning over everything and everyone. But the phrase "kingdom of God," as a marker for a future age when God's will would prevail everywhere, does not appear in the Old Testament (although 1 Chr 28:5 and 2 Chr 13:8 use "kingdom of YHWH"). *Psalms of Solomon* 17:3 (usually dated to the first century BC) is the earliest pre-Christian use of the phrase: "But we hope in God our savior, for the strength of our God is forever with mercy, and the Kingdom of our God is forever over the nations in judgment." The author of *Psalms of Solomon* 17 hopes for God to raise up the Messiah, who will "destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth" and gather the tribes of Israel together (*Pss. Sol.* 17:21-26). The resulting kingdom will be absolutely righteous: "There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days, for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah" (*Pss. Sol.* 17:32).

Luke's Jesus says that his purpose is to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (4:43); he also gives this task to the twelve apostles (9:2) and to the seventy(-two) (10:9). His primary symbol for the kingdom is a banquet, where "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (13:29); where beggars like Lazarus will recline on the couch with patriarchs like Abraham (16:23); where the banquet hall will be filled with "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (14:21), but where some who expected to be there will be excluded. The feast can be imagined as a wedding party (5:34), or as a meal served by the new bridegroom to his household slaves (12:35-37), but unlike Matthew, Luke never uses the image of a king throwing a party.

Luke seems to waste no chance to capitalize on this banqueting image. Jesus is constantly eating with someone, and conspicuously eats with Pharisees and tax collectors (not at the same time!), illustrating the wideness of God's mercy. Jesus' followers are sent out with nothing, not even a bag, so that the success of the mission to

spread the gospel depends on the hospitality of the people they encounter. Eat with anyone, eat whatever they offer: do this in imitation of life in the kingdom of God.

God's kingdom also means relief from disease. Luke's Jesus heals and exorcises, releasing those "bound by Satan" (13:16), as do the apostles (9:1, 6) and disciples (10:9, 17). Satan, who claimed authority over all the kingdoms of the world (4:6), was being pushed out, overmastered by the emissaries of God's kingdom (10:18; 12:20-22).

This raises the question of timing: did Luke think that the kingdom was present in Jesus' ministry or that it was still to come? Yes—Luke's eschatology is paradoxical, insisting that Jesus' exorcisms are proof that the kingdom had taken (or retaken) ground from Satan (12:20) and that the kingdom could be granted by Jesus to his followers (22:29). The famous "the kingdom of God is among (or within) you" (17:21) may express the same idea: in the healing, exorcising, preaching, and sharing of food that characterize the ministry of Jesus and his followers, the kingdom has drawn near (see my commentary on that passage for alternate interpretations). On the other side of the ledger, his disciples are to pray, "Let your kingdom come" (11:2); Jesus vows that he will not again eat Passover or drink wine until he can do it in the kingdom (22:15-18); believers can endure much in this life because they can look forward to rewards in the kingdom (14:14; 18:29-30). Despite being a generation or two beyond Jesus' promise to return soon, Luke-Acts still anticipates the Parousia as the moment when God's kingdom will be fully realized.

Luke's Jesus anticipates the kingdom and preaches its nearness but never calls himself "king," nor does he respond positively when others do. For Luke, "king" is not a positive rubric. Kings rule over others and like to be called benefactor, but among Jesus' followers, things should be different (22:25-26). Kings would like to see what the disciples have seen, but they cannot (10:24). Kings will be part of the group that persecutes Jesus' followers in the future (21:12). The actual kings who have some active role in Luke-Acts are all sorry specimens. Herod Antipas imprisons and beheads John and mocks Jesus. Herod Agrippa I executes James the son of Zebedee and imprisons Peter, and is then struck down by God—eaten, like Jonah's gourd vine, by worms—when he accepts the crowd's acclamation that he sounds like a god. Herod Agrippa II wants to hear Paul's case but cannot make up his mind about it; he admits that in any case he has no authority to change his situation. The king in the parable of the pounds (19:11-27) is Jesus' opposite number: he

draws his authority from Rome and exercises it ruthlessly in pursuit of wealth and revenge.

Luke has constructed his narrative to disrupt the widespread expectation among early Christians that Jesus would return to rule as king over a reconstituted Israel (Luke 19:11; Acts 1:6). Gabriel predicts that Jesus will sit on David's throne, ruling over the house of Jacob forever (1:32-33), and unwary readers may expect something like the scenario in *Psalms of Solomon* 17. But then Luke piles up examples of real-life kings—why would we want more of this?—and repeated sayings of Jesus that make “servant” the proper goal for Christian leaders. Jesus is falsely accused of claiming to be king, and then even though Pilate knows the charge is false, he is forced to crucify Jesus. What use is a kingdom or an empire that cannot do right even when it has the lawful authority to enforce justice? Luke presents the “King of the Jews” theme as a cruel joke, something that led only to Jesus' murder, in order to get readers to see that God's kingdom is something entirely different. God raises Jesus from the dead, enthroning him at God's right hand, fulfilling Gabriel's prediction, and releasing the church from needing to emulate any form of earthly empire.

Empire? Seems like we've heard a lot about that lately, debates about how America, being the world's only superpower, should exercise its *imperium*. Paying attention to Luke will help us question Christian involvement in empire, or Christian assumption of imperial values.

Wealth and Poverty. In order to enter the kingdom of God, people must divest themselves of their possessions (12:32-33; 18:24-25), receiving the kingdom as God's gift. Luke's Jesus hammers at this throughout the Gospel:

- Blessed are you who are poor/Woe to you who are rich (6:20, 24)
- The seeds choked by thorns are those who hear the word, but “are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (8:14)
- Take nothing for your journey (9:3)
- Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals (10:4)
- But give the inner things for alms (11:41)
- Parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-21)
- Sell your possessions, and give alms (12:33)
- When you give a banquet, invite the poor (14:13)
- None of you can be my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions (14:33)
- You cannot serve God and mammon (16:13)

- Parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31)
- How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! (18:24-25)
- Zacchaeus repents, giving away most or all of his wealth (19:1-10)

Because of its uncompromising stance against wealth and its insistence that disciples divest themselves of their stuff, Luke is both ideally suited to speak to modern American Christians and practically guaranteed to be ignored by the same folks. Luke's message is so counter-cultural that interpreters must face the urge to make it easier for church members to swallow. "Luke doesn't mean that we have to give away our possessions; we just have to be willing to do it if God ever asked us," we might say, although how God could make things clearer than Luke does is beyond me. "Luke means spiritual poverty; he means that we shouldn't put money or things ahead of God." That's true, but he also clearly means that we are supposed to feed the hungry, which if we took seriously would mean sacrificing much of what separates us from the poor. Zacchaeus didn't just promise to put God first in his life; he gave half his money to the poor and then gave back four times what he had overcharged.

Readers will probably grow tired of this commentary's regular harangues against American Christianity's acceptance of materialism. It's just that if we don't listen to Luke, we're unlikely to hear a similarly steely-eyed critique anywhere else. Our whole culture is designed to reinforce the drive to accumulate more stuff, and too often we're seduced into praying, "Thank you, Lord, for blessing me with all this stuff" when we should be praying, "Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner, for buying more stuff when I should have been saving somebody's life."

A Prophet's Work. Luke's favorite category for the good guys in his two volumes is "prophet." Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna preview the type: a person filled by the Holy Spirit who speaks the word under divine inspiration. With John the Baptist, Luke elaborates the type:

- He preaches repentance of sins.
- He warns of the coming judgment on the wicked.
- He urges people to share their possessions.
- He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- He opposes the wicked actions of a king.

- He suffers the prophet's fate, being killed by the king he criticized.

Luke characterizes Jesus as a prophet: the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him for his work (4:18-21), and like John, he preaches the coming of God's kingdom, judgment for the wealthy and the wicked, and good news for the poor. When he does miracles that resemble the deeds of Elijah and Elisha, the crowd responds, "A great prophet has risen among us!" (7:1-17). Simon the Pharisee doubts that Jesus is truly a prophet (7:39), but this is because he cannot see what Jesus sees, a woman who has shown great love and whose sins are forgiven (7:44-50). Jesus predicts that he will die as all prophets do, that Jerusalem will not see him until they say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," and that Jerusalem will be destroyed (13:32-35); the first two predictions are fulfilled in the narrative, and the third had come true before Luke composed his Gospel.

Thus, "prophet" gives Luke a hook by which to explain how various parts of Jesus' life, especially his death, could have fit into God's plan. It also gives him a way to present Jesus as a model for church leaders to imitate. In Acts, Peter, members of the Seven, and Paul speak prophetically, advocate for the poor, do prophetic-type miracles, and are hauled up before governors and kings. While "Messiah" and "Son of God" are also true characterizations of Luke's Jesus, Luke emphasizes "prophet," probably because it helps him connect Jesus' story to the story of the early church.

Repentance and Forgiveness. These are some of Luke's favorite terms, appearing over and over in both volumes. They are connected so often that one must assume that when Luke speaks of forgiveness he presumes repentance, and vice-versa:

Luke 3:3	Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins
3:8	Bear fruits worthy of repentance
5:8	Go away from me—I'm a sinner man, O Lord
5:32	I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance
6:21b	Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh
7:29	The people, even tax collectors, acknowledge God's justice, since they were baptized with John's baptism [of repentance]
10:13-16	Chorazin and Bethsaida are cursed because they did not repent when they saw deeds of power

- 11:4 Forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive our debtors
- 11:32 The people of Nineveh condemn this generation because they repented
- 13:3, 5 Unless you repent, you'll all likewise perish
- 13:6-9 Give the fig tree one more year, more manure, etc.; if it bears fruit, fine; if not, cut it down
- 15:7,10 More joy in heaven (with God) over one sinner who repents
- 15:11ff. Prodigal son (if "coming to his senses" is the equivalent of repentance)
- 16:30 "if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent"
- 17:3-4 If someone repents seven times a day, you must forgive
- 18:13 Tax collector: "Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner."
- 23:39-43 Penitent thief
- 24:47 Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Jesus' name to all nations
- Acts 2:38 Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- 3:19 Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out
- 5:31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.
- 8:22 Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours
- 11:18 God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.
- 13:24 before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.
- 17:30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent
- 19:4 John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.
- 26:20 . . . that the Gentiles should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance.

“Repentance and forgiveness of sins” can therefore function as a sort of shorthand for what Luke means when he writes that characters preach the good news or the gospel (24:47).

Jesus not only speaks about God’s forgiveness of the penitent’s sins, but requires his disciples to forgive each other (11:4), even if a fellow disciple wrongs us the same way seven times daily (17:4). More than that, we are to love our enemies, not only forgiving them but finding ways to do them good (6:27-38). The unforgiving elder brother who refused to join his brother’s welcome-home party; the Pharisee who held the penitent tax collector in contempt; the rich ruler whose wealth kept him from repenting and entering the kingdom; the rich fool (12:16-21); Dives (16:19-31); the unfruitful fig tree (13:6-9)—all these are negative examples demonstrating the consequences of non-repentance (13:3, 5). Levi (5:27-28), Zacchaeus (19:1-10), and the disciples (18:28-30) are all examples of repenting from one’s possessions; the prodigal son, the penitent tax collector, and the penitent thief all realize their sins and repent. Repentance, in fact, is Luke’s model for how one begins discipleship (5:8).

Apostles, Disciples, Crowds, and Enemies. During the Journey section, these four groups are always around Jesus. Luke seems to expect us to remember this; sometimes he will have Jesus speak to one group and then to another. For instance, note the rapid change of audience in chapter 12. There’s a large crowd stepping over each other, but Jesus speaks to the disciples about the Pharisees (12:1). He is interrupted by a member of the crowd (12:13) and answers him (12:14), but then speaks to “them” (12:15-21)—probably the crowds, since he next turns back to the disciples (12:22). In 13:22-30 he answers a question from “someone” and then immediately responds to a warning from the Pharisees (13:31-35). Luke seems to think of these four groups sort of milling around Jesus as he travels, since he rarely explains where they came from.

The apostles are the twelve men named in 6:12-16, sent out on mission in 9:1-6, at table with Jesus for the Last Supper in 22:14, and appearing as witnesses to the resurrection in the first six chapters of Acts. The disciples are a larger group—70 (or 72) in chapter 10 and 120 in Acts 1—that includes women who began following him in Galilee and who supported him with their own resources (8:1-3). Luke writes that “all who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee,” saw the crucifixion (23:49). These women were the first to believe the resurrection, while two disciples who were not part of the Twelve were the first to see Jesus

alive, or at least their story is narrated before the report that Jesus had appeared also to Peter. Jesus' final appearance in the Gospel is to the apostles and disciples together (24:33-53). Luke's disciples are given the same authority and commissions as the Twelve (cf. 9:1-6 to 10:1-20, and note that 24:44-49 is given to the larger group), and are no less witnesses to the resurrection.

The Pharisees, sometimes paired with scribes, fill the role of Jesus' enemies up to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. They object to Jesus' healings on Sabbath; they criticize him for eating with tax collectors and sinners; they treat him inhospitably (7:44-46) and mock his teachings on possessions (16:14). Yet they invite him to dinner three times, and they deliver what they seem to regard as a legitimate warning about Herod Antipas's plans to murder him. Jesus rips into them twice (11:39-52; 20:45-47), but he keeps accepting their dinner invitations. "Love your enemies," says Jesus, and when it turns out that some Pharisees are members of the church (Acts 15:5), we can see how that pays off.

After Jesus gets to Jerusalem, his enemies are the chief priests, scribes, and elders: the temple leadership, the heads of non-priestly families, and their secretaries and advisers. They immediately decide that Jesus must be put to death but are afraid to seize him openly because he is a favorite with the crowds. Once Satan takes over Judas, however, they are able to arrest Jesus in the dark, away from the city. In the first five chapters of Acts, the apostles accuse these men of murdering the Son of God by the hands of the Gentiles, and offer them the chance to repent. While Luke says that many priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7), he does not claim that any of those who arrested Jesus ever repented. Instead, they become the chief opponents of the apostles in Acts 1-6; they arrest and stone Stephen (Acts 7:1-8:1) and begin a persecution of the church in Jerusalem (8:2-3); and they urge the death of Paul on baseless charges (Acts 21-24).

Luke's crowds are a variable element in the story. They try to interfere with Jesus' mandate to preach to every village (4:42-44), but they correctly identify him as God's prophet (7:16). They ask questions indicating that they are not willing to give up everything to follow him (12:13) and are rebuked as hypocrites (12:56), but they are enthralled by Jesus' teachings (19:48) and thus prevent Jesus' immediate arrest once he enters Jerusalem. They come daily to listen to him teach in the temple (21:38), but then join the temple leaders to clamor for Jesus to be crucified. Peter blames them, too, for murdering Jesus (Acts 2:22-23; 4:27); he tells them to repent, and thousands do and are baptized. Luke's account

prepares for this mass conversion by depicting the crowds watching Jesus die, but not joining in the mocking (23:35-37), and then leaving the killing grounds “beating their breasts” in mourning or repentance or both (23:48).

Luke and Women. The current state of opinion about Luke’s attitude toward women in the Christian movement is divided. This may come as a surprise to those who have read books celebrating Luke as the Gospel that liberated women, but there are those who consider Luke a dangerous work for women. In the opinion of these scholars, Luke is all the more damaging because it does not simply treat women as invisible, but spotlights them in order to domesticate them.⁸

When one compares Luke to Matthew or Mark, there is no question that “the author of Luke-Acts appears to have deliberately multiplied representations of women within the narrative.”⁹ There are women paired with men at numerous points:

- Annunciations to Zechariah and to Mary
- Mary’s Magnificat, Zechariah’s Benedictus
- Simeon and Anna, two prophets in the temple
- Jesus heals the centurion’s slave and the widow’s son
- Healings of the bent-over woman (13:10-17) and the man with dropsy (14:1-6)
- Twin parables: male shepherd loses sheep, female loses coin; man plants mustard seed, woman puts leaven in dough; unjust judge and widow, Pharisee and tax collector (first female, then male as righteous characters)
- Twelve male apostles, seven named female disciples (see commentary at 8:1-3)

There are also women who stand alone, whose stories are not (or at least not obviously) paired with any man’s story: Elizabeth’s prophecy, the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet, the hospitality of Mary and Martha. The point is that Luke has taken pains to make women visible in his Gospel—thus far, everyone agrees. But some argue that if we set Mary and Elizabeth aside—they act before Jesus appears on the scene, and so might be taken to belong to the period of the law and the prophets¹⁰—then women generally do not have important things to say, and are often put into more traditional roles compared to Mark. For instance, the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet (7:36-50) is probably a variant of the story of the woman who anoints Jesus’ head in Mark 14:3-9. Mark’s woman,

alone in that Gospel, believes Jesus when he says he will die and does something to try to prepare him for his death. She anoints Jesus' head—as a prophet might—and is singled out for the monetary sacrifice she makes. Luke's woman anoints Jesus' feet, weeps over them, and wipes them with her hair. These are not prophetic acts, but quasi-erotic acts, and the question becomes why Jesus, as a prophet, allows her to do this.

In another example, Luke takes Mark's note about women who provided for Jesus (Mark 15:40-41) and moves it from the Passion Narrative to an early point in Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Luke also says that Jesus had cured these women of demon possession and diseases. Luke, so the argument goes, is moving the women from Mark's category of disciple into the more respectable category of patron, and providing a reason—gratitude for healing—for why they might have provided for Jesus.¹¹

In the commentary on relevant sections, I will argue that it does not appear plausible to me that Luke is, in these sections, trying to relegate women to safe, respectable roles. The women in Luke 8:1-3 are traipsing around Galilee with Jesus and the Twelve—not a traditional role for wealthy Roman matrons. Martha receives Jesus into her house—Luke bats not an eyelash over the potential scandal. The woman who anoints Jesus' feet is taking charge, doing what hospitality demands, making up for Simon the inhospitable Pharisee who invited Jesus but then snubbed him. I will argue that Luke means for us to imagine women constantly with Jesus from 8:2 on, always among the disciples even when they are not specifically mentioned. [\[Resources on Luke\]](#)

Nevertheless, we must pay attention to the suspicious readings of Luke, listening carefully to those who find Luke's treatment of women dangerous or damaging. Those of us who believe that patriarchy is a systemic and systematic evil cannot ignore such readings, because they stem, unfortunately, from real experiences. For some believers, it is important to admit that stories like Martha and Mary are dangerous because they can be used to exclude women from pastoral ministries. But many others cannot abandon Luke and the women of the Third Gospel; for those it is necessary to find a way to read these stories that supports the desire to be open and affirming of anyone who feels the call to ministry. Call it an ethics, or a pragmatics, of interpretation: it is part of the goal of this commentary's interpretation of Luke to offer readings that support the full participation of women in ministry.

Resources on Luke



- Bovon, François. *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*. Hermeneia. Edited by Helmut Koester. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002. [Technical, but readable for those who know Greek. Bovon proposes many new ways to interpret familiar passages]
- Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Interpretation. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990. [Insights from redaction-critical approaches, homiletic suggestions]
- Culpepper, R. Alan. *The Gospel of Luke*. Volume 9 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995. [Especially good insights from literary analysis]
- Danker, Frederick W. *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel*. Revised edition. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988. [Valuable citations of Greek and Roman authors from antiquity]
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Gospel According to Luke*. Volumes 28 and 28A of Anchor Bible. Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1981. [Technical; comments on syntax, grammar, and etymology, as well as insights from source and redaction criticism]
- Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. [Very thorough close reading, with use of discourse theory and theories of intertextuality]
- Hornik, Heidi J., and Mikeal C. Parsons. *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting*. Harrisburg PA: Trinity, 2003. [Parsons is an expert on Luke; Hornik is an expert on Italian Renaissance art; their books demonstrate how art interprets text and how text affects art]
- . *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting*. New York: Trinity, 2005.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Gospel of Luke*. Volume 3 of SP. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1991. [Valuable insights from literary analysis]
- Just, Jr., Arthur A., editor. *Luke*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, volume 3. Downer's Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003. [A compendium of quotations from ancient Christians on Luke, excerpted and ordered by the chapters and verses on which they comment]
- Parsons, Mikeal C. *Luke: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2007. [A brief introduction to the Gospel of Luke and its author]
- Schaberg, Jane. "Luke." In *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992. [A valuable and "suspicious" feminist reading of Luke]
- Talbert, Charles H. *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*. Revised edition. Macon GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2002. [A thorough analysis of the structure of Luke, with particular attention to chiasm and parallelism]
- Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. [Both this volume and *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* are extremely helpful guides to Luke's literary methods and themes]
- . *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*. Volume 1 of *The Gospel According to Luke*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986.

NOTES

¹ This is Bodmer Papyrus P⁷⁵, which contains "parts of Luke 3–24 and all of John 1–15" (Jack Finegan, *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 104). All assume that the "Luke" meant was the Luke from Paul's letters. Although this is not a necessary conclusion, it is probably correct, since there is no other famous "Luke" from early Christianity. See Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 4; Alan R. Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIB, vol. 9; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 4.

² Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.1.1 (ANF 1:414).

³ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.14.1 (ANF 1:438).

⁴ Parsons, *Luke*, 6. Parsons is summarizing the work of H. J. Cadbury's monumental *The Style and Literary Method of Luke* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920).

⁵ Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context In Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 194–200.

⁶ My main objections to the standard theory are the places where, according to the theory, Matthew and Luke make the same corrections of Mark. In my opinion, this happens too often for the standard theory to be true. The truly curious (or obsessive) should read my article, "How Minor? Assessing the Significance of the Minor Agreements as an Argument against the Two-Source Hypothesis," in *Questioning Q*, ed. Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin (London: SPCK, 2004).

⁷ Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2006), argues that Luke and Acts were both composed in the first quarter of the second century. He thinks that in AD 70–90, an early version of Luke was constructed depending on Mark, containing approximately the material in Luke 3–23. Marcion edited this into what more orthodox Christians called a "mutilated version of Luke" around 115–120. The final, anti-Marcionite version of Luke is what we know as the Gospel of Luke. See especially Tyson, pp. 79–120. Tyson's arguments are intriguing, and I will take up some of them in my treatment of the passion and resurrection accounts.

⁸ For example, Mary Rose D'Angelo, "(Re)Presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke-Acts," in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1993); Jane Schaberg, "Luke," *The Woman's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

⁹ D'Angelo, "(Re)Presentations," 181.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹ Corley, *Private Women*, 145.

NATIVITY STORIES, PART 1

Luke 1

COMMENTARY

Preface, Luke 1:1-4

The first four verses of Luke are one long sentence in Greek, lauded by some scholars as the best in the New Testament: “a model of precisely crafted prose” or “a perfectly constructed Greek period.”¹ Others are not so impressed: “In a sense, Luke writes with exaggerated artistry; the long sentence in 1:1-4 illustrates effort as much as ability.”² However we judge its sublimity [(Pseudo)-Longinus’s Preface to *On the Sublime*], the sentence gives us more information about the writer, his sources, his audience, and his purpose than do the introductory sentences of Matthew or Mark. At the end of it, however, the reader is still left with more questions than answers.

Greek authors of the period sometimes, but not always, provided the reader with a preface. Because narratives were still produced as scrolls, the preface helpfully served as a brief introduction, giving the reader a peek at what could not be thumbed through.³ Prefaces often included the author’s name, a dedication, remarks about others who had written on this subject, claims to authenticity, and a description of the contents of the volume.⁴ Luke’s preface does not name the author; perhaps he was following the example of the Gospel of Mark or of the anonymous editor of 2 Maccabees (“all this, which has been set forth by Jason of Cyrene in five volumes, we shall attempt to condense into a single book” [2 Mac 2:23]).

As to the other expected elements, they are present, but only as suggestions. There were “many” who had come before Luke. How

(Pseudo)-Longinus’s Preface to *On the Sublime*



As I am writing for you, Terentianus, who are a man of some erudition, I almost feel I can dispense with a long preamble showing that sublimity consists in a certain excellence. . . . For the effect of elevated language is, not to persuade the hearers, but to entrance them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us.

Longinus, *Subl.*, 1.3-4, *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T. S. Dorsch (New York: Penguin, 1965).

many? Whom did he mean? Luke writes in the first verse that they had “set their hands to compose a narrative.” Does he mean that these earlier efforts were admirable failures, so that “set their hands” means “tried, but did not succeed”?⁵ There is a claim to have “followed all things closely” and to “write an orderly account,” but the author is unclear about what makes him an authority on the matters he covers in his Gospel. He does not claim to be an eyewitness or even a “servant of the word.” Such people handed on narratives of “the things accomplished among us” to “us,” in which group Luke includes himself, but this is no claim for special knowledge or for expert status. There is a dedication—“to write to you, most excellent Theophilus”—but who this person was, what his relation was to Luke, or even whether he was a real person is famously debated (see discussion below). And finally, there is no actual description of the work. Others wrote narrative (*diēgēsis*), but Luke does not name his own effort. The adverb “orderly” goes with the infinitive “to write,” so that a literal translation of v. 3 would be, “it also seemed well for me, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write in an orderly way to you, most excellent Theophilus.” Would Luke call his project a narrative, like the others that came before him? And why not name Jesus somewhere in the four verses—“an account of the things accomplished among us by our Lord”?

Everything in order! We cannot know which written narratives Luke had in mind, but as noted in the introduction, this commentary follows the standard view that Luke copied from Mark and either from Q or from Matthew. Luke, as a practicing Christian, was also exposed to the reading and interpretation of Scripture in worship—perhaps Luke was a preacher himself—and those “oral traditions” no doubt influenced his work. But in v. 1, he focuses on the written accounts, the “narratives,” because that is what he is providing, and because he wants his work to be seen in relation to these other written accounts. It is not so surprising that he does not

name them. If Luke used Mark, for example, he almost certainly knew it by some other name—“the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” for example—since the current titles were most likely not in use until after all four Gospels were circulated together (Justin Martyr, around 150, calls the Gospels “the memoirs of the apostles”). Perhaps in Luke’s circles, “narratives of the things accomplished among us” is as much of a name as Luke’s predecessors had. [Early Christians

Read the Gospels]

Early Christians Read the Gospels



Justin, *1 Apol.* 67: “On the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in the cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites us to the imitation of these noble things.”

“The First Apology of Justin, the Martyr,” ed. and trans. Edward Rochie Hardy, in Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 287.

If Luke is making a critique of these earlier Gospels, it is quite oblique. Contemporary prefaces tended to be less subtle and more caustic. Here are two examples of how authors writing near the end of the first century took a whack at rivals in their prefaces.

- Longinus, *On the Sublime*: “You know, my dear Postumius Terentianus, that when we were studying together Caecilius’ little treatise on the Sublime it appeared to us to fall below the level of its subject and to fail to address the main points . . .” (1.1).
- Josephus, *Jewish War*: “While those that were present [during the War] have given false accounts of things, and this either out of a humor of flattery to the Romans, or out of hatred to the Jews, and while their writings contain sometimes accusations, and sometimes encomiums, but nowhere the accurate truth of the facts . . .” (Preface, 1.2)

If Luke’s preface intends to criticize his predecessors, he only implies this by the nuances of his words: “they set their hands” may imply “they did not succeed”; the use of “closely” and “orderly” in v. 3 may mean that Luke found the other narratives to be disorganized and inaccurate; and the whole of v. 4, “so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed,” may be meant to contrast the certainty of this Gospel with the inaccuracy of what Theophilus has learned up to this point.⁶ More likely Luke means to engender the reader’s trust in this narrative, to characterize it as organized, accurate, and reliable, and has no great interest in what the reader, who may never have read or heard the other narratives, thinks about the earlier works.

Luke positions himself, first, as part of the community who has received the testimony of eyewitnesses and “ministers of the word.” The word translated “minister” means an assistant of some kind; Luke uses it in Acts 5:22, 26 for the men who assisted the captain of the temple guards and in Luke 4:20 for the person in the synagogue service who handed Jesus the scroll to read. The word also appears in one of Paul’s speeches as his self-characterization (Acts 26:16)—Jesus, who appeared to him, appointed him as “minister” and “martyr” (or witness). It is not as clear to me, then, as it is to others, that Luke thinks of “eyewitness” and “minister of the word” as separate, serial categories, as if Luke were describing first- and second-generation Christians and putting himself in a third generation.⁷ Rather, he seems to want to connect the whole Christian community of his day to those who saw Jesus. Perhaps Luke would think of himself as a “minister of the word,” but perhaps he, like

Paul, would have claimed to have seen Jesus; since we do not have his personal testimony, we cannot say.

As we can see from the citation from Josephus just above, eyewitness testimony was no proof of veracity in Luke's day. Luke claims no special sources of information about Jesus, but he does claim to be especially diligent. The verb he uses to describe his research often means "follow," but ancient writers of history often used it to mean "investigated" or "informing oneself."⁸ The object of the verb is "everything," and the two adverbs attached to the verb are "from the first" and "accurately" or "carefully." This, then, is not so much a claim about his qualifications as his commitment.

And what has he written? The balanced structure of the preface would imply another "narrative" (*diēgēsis*), a word that covered written or oral recitals of events. They wrote narratives; it seemed good to Luke also to write . . . well, there is no other choice but "narrative." This sort of ellipsis is not uncommon in Luke's Gospel, as we will see in later passages.⁹ Perhaps Luke avoids calling his book a "narrative" because he does not want to say that it is just like the others. Readers can supply their own designation. He does, however, claim that it was written "in an orderly manner" so that Theophilus, or anyone else who reads it, may know the reliability of the contents of their instruction. Verse 4 presumes that most readers will not be coming to the topic of Jesus *de novo*, as neophytes who have previously heard nothing about Jesus; they will have heard something, and reading Luke's Gospel will give them an orderly treatment that will affirm what they have heard. Perhaps "orderly" implies that what Theophilus and the others may have heard lacked organization, but v. 4 argues that Luke presumed that his book would be largely consonant with what had come before.

"Theophilus" as the Ideal Reader



Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 1.6: "Someone might think that Luke addressed the Gospel to a specific man named Theophilus. But if you are the sort of people God can love, then all of you who hear us speaking are Theophiluses, and the Gospel is addressed to you."

Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 1.12: "So the Gospel was written to Theophilus, that is, to him whom God loves. If you love God, it was written to you."

Both are cited in Arthur A. Just Jr., ed., *Luke* (ACCS: NT, vol. 3; Downer's Grove IL: Intersarsity Press, 2003), 4.

Finally, we know nothing of "most excellent Theophilus" except that the name is repeated at the beginning of Acts. Christian interpreters from the time of Origen have wondered if the name, which means "God's friend," were symbolic, as if Luke had written "dear Christian reader,"¹⁰ but most scholars now believe that Luke was addressing a real person. ["Theophilus" as the Ideal Reader] The name is Greek, used by Jews and Gentiles, found in inscriptions and literature from the third century BC. The courtesy title "most excellent" was used in the first century for persons in official positions but also in prefaces as a way to honor the person to

whom the work was dedicated.¹¹ Unfortunately, then, we cannot use this dedication as a window into the social world of Luke. Perhaps Theophilus was a wealthy Christian supporting a church in his house, and Luke was providing a written account of Jesus' life for his library, knowing that other Christians would thereby have access to it.¹² Perhaps Theophilus was Luke's patron, supporting him financially in return for being immortalized in this way. Perhaps Theophilus was a wealthy man and a new Christian, needing some assurance that this new sect that emphasized ministry to the poor and sharing of property was the group for him.¹³ Perhaps Theophilus was a Christian and a person of some standing in the city where he lived, and this Gospel is intended to demonstrate to him and to others that the Way could be a respectable option for the well born and well placed. All of these, and more, are possible.

[How Did Luke Get Published?]

The preface gives us no clarity about the author's sources or the dedicatee, and it does not describe the work to be undertaken. It does, however, indicate that the author knew how prefaces to important works were supposed to sound. The fact that he took the trouble to write a long, balanced sentence full of polysyllabic words means that he wanted this book to be taken seriously.¹⁴ He does not claim first-hand knowledge of Jesus, but asserts his own diligence, and promises that the Christian reader will be the more assured for having read his book. He does not clear the ground for his own work by impugning those who came before him, and for his own work does not claim inerrancy but orderliness. All in all, and especially in comparison to writers of his period, this is a serious but understated beginning. Luke no doubt agreed with the author of 2 Maccabees: "At this point therefore let us begin our narrative, without adding anything more to what has already been said; for it would be foolish to lengthen the preface while cutting short the history itself."

How Did Luke Get Published?



In our modern world, there are authors and publishers and booksellers.

Everyone in the chain hopes to make money in the process. You get book advertisements by direct mail, through the Internet, through magazines, through book reviews in newspapers and journals, and by physical displays of books in stores. Harry Gamble, who has written the definitive treatment of bookmaking and distribution during ancient times, states flatly, "In these matters modern conceptions of publication, edition, and book trade are irrelevant and misleading" (83).

First, an author wrote and then often showed the work or read parts of it aloud to a select group of friends, who made comments. Next, the author might arrange a public reading in a larger setting and for a bigger group. If the author had an influential and wealthy patron, the reading might be organized by the patron. In this way, both would benefit: the author, by the patron's wider and more prestigious circle of friends; the patron, by the public standing that comes from giving help to brilliant authors. The author might, at the same time or later, have copies made of the manuscript, to give to the patron and his friends. If the public reading went well, and if the patron and friends talked up the excellence of the work, then other people would want to make their own copies, either for their own use or to give away to friends or to their own patrons. "In principle the work became public property: copies were disseminated without regulation through an informal network composed of people who learned of the work, were interested enough to have a copy made, and knew someone who possessed the text and would permit it to be duplicated" (85).

Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).