

Luke's Introduction to His Narrative (Lk.1.1-4)

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Luke 1:1-4 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.

Introduction

The prologue to Luke's Gospel in 1.1-4 is a single sentence consisting of more than forty words. This fact causes Stonehouse to state that the prologue is "so weighty in its declarations and implications that it commands minute and painstaking examination" (*Witness* 24). We may compare Luke's opening words to the blueprints of an architect that we have in our hands as we inspect the completed building. Of course, we do not just look at the blueprints to understand what he intended to accomplish; we have the building in front of us; we have the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts at our disposal. Still, there may be things of a foundational nature that are hidden from our eyes that help us appreciate the final product. Things of that nature we get from the blueprints or, in this case, from the prologue (1.1-4). In a foundational way, Luke goes, as it were, behind the *history recorded* in the Gospels to the *history of the writing* of the Gospels.

So, for perspective on what Luke is doing, we need to date the writing of the books of the NT (he points us down this path). Luke wrote his account about 65 AD. At the time of his writing (per Carson/Moo, *Intro to NT*), the books of the NT in existence were James (about 45 AD), Paul's epistles (Galatians, 48 AD; 1-2 Thessalonians, 50-51 AD; 1-2 Corinthians, 55-56 AD; Romans, 57 AD; Colossians, 55-65 AD; 1-2 Timothy, 60's; Philemon, 60's) and Mark (early 60's). The rest of the NT dates from the 60's to the 90's AD (60-70: Jude, 1-2 Peter, Hebrews; 70: Matthew; 80-85: John; 90's: 1-2-3 John and Revelation). When Luke wrote his narrative, Mark had already been written and Matthew and John were yet to be written.

In this context, the prologue gives us a peek into the history of the writing the Gospel of Luke. We only have some hints but they are important hints regarding the process by which the knowledge we have of Jesus was transmitted from Him (from the beginning of His life) to arrive eventually in a written record. Opening the curtain for a glance backstage is how Luke introduces his narrative, and his heavily front-loaded introduction yields a two part outline. He directs us to the predecessors of his Gospel, and to the nature of his Gospel.

1A. The predecessors of Luke's Gospel

Up front, Luke identifies the sources of his knowledge regarding the gospel of Jesus. The sources are his predecessors of which he says there were many (1.1). We need to do some careful work here regarding the project of these predecessors, their source, and their trustworthiness.

1B. The project of his predecessors

The project of Luke's predecessors was the composition of a narrative of recent redemptive events: **as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us** (1.1). Note the important difference in translation in the ESV, **accomplished**, versus the KJV, which has "believed." The word that Luke uses has the meaning of fulfill, establish, and accomplish. This word directs us to Luke's philosophy of history. The facts he documents did not just come about or "accomplish themselves in the onrush of the stream of history" (Stonehouse 26). Indeed, as know from Acts 1.1, the facts are the doings and teachings of Jesus in the accomplishment of God's plan, the covenant plan from eternity. All the events of His humiliation (Luke) and of His exaltation (Acts) are realizations of the eternal covenant of redemption.

The facts in view occurred **among us**, Luke says (1.1), that is, among those of the Christian community in Palestine (from the beginning in the days of Herod when John and Jesus were

born). These facts are “of epochal meaning for the life of the Christian church” they are “of foundational significance for the Church, including especially the birth, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ” and the verb here (**have been accomplished**) indicates that these historical realities continue to have “abiding significance” ([the verb is in the perfect tense], Stonehouse 27). Thus, compiling a narrative of the remarkable accomplishments of Jesus in history, in the history of redemption, was the project of Luke’s predecessors.

2B. The source behind the predecessors

Their source, that is, the well from which they drew, is the apostolic witness: **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** (1.1-2).

The people in view in 1.2 are eyewitness-ministers of the word *as one group*, not eyewitnesses on one hand and ministers on the other. This is so because of the nature of what they did: they **delivered them** [the things accomplished] **to us**. They handed down the narrative of facts, events, and accomplishments of Christ. The point is that eyewitnesses receive information and do not necessarily transmit it; whereas, ministers transmit information as ministers of the word. “The word” is the message on their lips, the gospel message about what happened! Therefore, Luke adds the category of eyewitnesses to the category of ministers “not to designate a separate group, but in order to call attention to the historical qualification of these ministers of the word to transmit the facts” (Stonehouse 28).

Therefore, in 1.2, Luke is referring to ministers of the word who were eyewitnesses from the beginning (27; not just eyewitnesses of the things that go back to the beginning, but **who from the beginning were eyewitnesses** of the things Jesus accomplished). He must be speaking of the apostles, the appointed eyewitnesses from the beginning who were commissioned to bear witness to Jesus regarding what they saw and heard. In the book of Acts, Luke identifies the apostles as those “who went in and out among us *beginning* with the baptism of John (Acts 1.22, 2.42; 6.4).

The apostles have the greatest importance here for Luke who “intimates that there was a small well-defined group of persons who had been in immediate touch with the events and who had special authority and responsibility for their earliest proclamation” (29). In this connection, we need to remember that Jesus appointed and commissioned the apostles to be His witnesses in a unique and authoritative way (Jn. 14.16, 25-26).

But in 1.1, Luke refers to his predecessor-narrators. The communications that Luke includes among his sources for his Gospel come from people who, like him, depended on the authoritative eyewitness testimony of the apostles. The narrations of these early narrators have a subordinate place in relation to the apostolic witness.

In this connection, we can outline the path that the transmission of the knowledge of accomplishment took.

- 1) Step one: announcements by angels and prophets (Lk. 1-3)
- 2) Step two: the accomplishment itself by Jesus in deed-word proclamation
- 3) Step three: the apostles testify to Him as He promised they would
- 4) Step four: narrators compile written accounts of the apostolic-preaching-teaching witness to Christ.
- 5) Step five: Luke formulates his Gospel based on the narrators *and* the apostles with this emphasis: it is from the apostles! His Gospel comes from them through the narrators.

3B. The trustworthiness of Luke’s predecessors

The connective “**just as**” (1.2) indicates that the narrations of the predecessors followed the witness of the apostles *with harmony and accord*. The narrators depended on the apostolic testimony; their work was subordinate and dependent. So, how did Luke “gauge” their work in relation to his own? It is clear that Luke acknowledges their positive worth (Stonehouse 31). For example, the parallelism of their work (cited in 1.1-2) with his (cited in 1.3-4) shows that their level of care and accuracy is the same as his. The way he puts his work side by side with their

work (**good to me also**) indicates that his work is not novel but stands in intimate connection with these early narratives (32). Luke looks to the narrators with confidence that their work accords with the deliverances of the apostles: **many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as [the apostles] delivered them to us [to the narrators and to Luke].** They depended on the original company of eye-witness ministers of the word and “not upon persons whose connection with the history was more tenuous” (32). In other words, the predecessors were trustworthy narrators who were in close touch with the apostles having received what they reported from the apostles. Based on these comments about the predecessors (vs. 1-2), Luke comments on the nature of his account (vs. 3-4).

2A. The nature of Luke’s Gospel

Let’s state this in a single sentence: Luke tells us that his Gospel is a narrative; it is a written, accurate, comprehensive, orderly, and purposeful narrative of the things Jesus accomplished in deed and word. We will do well to comment on each item in this sentence.

1) First, his Gospel is a narrative in parallel with their narrations (cf. *it seemed good to me also*, v. 2, in relation to the narratives cited in v. 1). Thus, he is a narrator and a master of it.

2) Second, Luke set out **to write** (1.3). The use of writing is beneficial and necessary for the long haul; it preserves the witness to Christ in a rich form for the time between.

3) Third, this Gospel is accurate based on “**having traced** [followed, ESV, 1.3] **the course of all things**.” Luke is telling us that he pursued accuracy in his knowledge by examination of the sources. He sought familiarity with all the events of accomplishment by engaging in extensive investigation over time: **having followed all things closely for some time past** (1.3). Luke was in the important position of being able to compare what the narrators received from the apostles one with the other and with what he received from the apostles.

So, although Luke’s work is not simple historiography like modern historians do history (Stonehouse 34), nevertheless, he had an eye for explicit accurate knowledge by following all things accurately, closely, and painstakingly, he says, **for some time past**.

4) Fourth, his Gospel is comprehensive; it regards **all things** (1.3), all that Jesus began to do and teach. The comprehensiveness is not absolute; it is comprehensive with regard to the narrations and testimony he followed closely for an extended period of time.

To understand Luke’s intentions, we should comment on the possible weakness in the work of the predecessor-narrators. The implication from Luke’s project is that they were brief and fragmented; thus he does not change the stories they told (say, by correcting weaknesses). Instead, he improves on them by selectively incorporating them into a fuller and more continuous whole. They sought to arrange the story of our Lord in narrative form. Thus, Luke is, so to speak, the first harmony of the gospel narratives. He drew from the well of predecessor-narrations to compile a Gospel with a greater fullness and richness than any of them possessed by drawing from *all* of them.

He looks to the narrators with confidence in their work, but he is not dependent on them because he had access to apostolic testimony directly in his use of the writings of the narrators. From comparisons with Mark, it is reasonable to conclude that the canonical Gospel of Mark is included in the writings that Luke investigated. On this basis, he is not a reviser of the work of the narrators, but he worked as one who made accurate and careful use of their work for something more comprehensive: for a larger narrative including the best of what was there with the design to be more inclusive.

For example, consider the flexibility in his use of the Gospel of Mark. Note that the main events of the story line are the same in Mark and in Luke, but Luke has sections that are shorter only following Mark to a point, *and* Luke has huge sections that Mark does not have such as ten times what Mark has on the journey to Jerusalem.

Clearly, this reveals that Luke is theological narrative! His Gospel is not unhistorical or anti-historical; it is historical-theological narrative.

5) Fifth, it is orderly: **it seemed good to me... to write an orderly account** (1.3)

This is not referring to chronological order of events *per se*. It is narrative that is orderly and continuous. Luke's interest in chronological order is not stated here in the prologue. That we can determine from his narrative itself. He is not as concerned "with exact chronological sequence of the separate events" as Mark is (Stonehouse 41). He has some of that concern here and there; there is general overall sequence in the story line of Luke-Acts.

But, as Stonehouse states, the point is in the connectedness and comprehensiveness of Luke over his predecessors who deal with various phases in a discontinuous and piece-meal way (41). In contrast, Luke intends to construct a connected and orderly account, to produce a continuous and comprehensive narrative (41). Luke (and Acts) excels in orderliness as in comprehensiveness (it is the largest Gospel, Luke-Acts is one fourth of the NT, and there is marvelous continuity in each book and between the books of Luke and Acts).

6) Sixth, the Gospel is purposeful

Luke says: **it seemed good to me ... to write an orderly account ...that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught** (1.3-4). The disciple Theophilus had a decent understanding of the facts, but his knowledge was not thorough and to that degree it lacked certainty being fragmented and unsystematic. Therefore, Luke writes to give "a completely trustworthy record of all things from the beginning that faith might be further informed and receive confirmation" (44).

Conclusion

We can conclude from the prologue with three comments on confidence.

1) The prologue is confidence building

It gives explicit expression to the conviction, which obviously all the writers of the NT share, that Christianity is true and is capable of confirmation by appeal to what had happened. Luke shows that Christian assurance rests on the objective reality of historical events which took place in the full light of day, on the deliverances of authoritative eyewitnesses, and on written, accurate, comprehensive, orderly, and purposeful narrative of the things Jesus accomplished in deed and word.

2) The prologue promises confidence building

It points us to the work of Christ that satisfies the need of people who lack assurance. The Gospel of Luke is out in front of us as a promise of certainty regarding the things that Jesus did and taught among men. In other words, the bottom line is that Luke's Gospel is gospel promise in more than one way. On one hand, it is the *good news of the promises* that flow to needy sinners from what Jesus accomplished in word and deed, and in death and resurrection. On the other hand, as we begin follow Luke's narration of what Jesus began to do and teach, we have the promise of assurance, growth in confidence, and the confirmation of our faith.

3) The prologue guides confidence building

These opening words indicate that the way to assurance is on the path of discipleship. Confidence grows in the process of learning. Learning is not just information gathering. It is wonderfully personal because the study of Luke brings us into contact, fact by fact, with Jesus Christ, the resurrection Lord of the church He founded and presently continues to build. Discipleship takes place at the feet of Jesus and it has a marvelous subject matter: so great a salvation that was first declared by our Lord in His humiliation and that He continues to proclaim in the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Luke.

Therefore, from Hebrews you know that you must pay close attention to hear what He first declared for the development of your faith and for its confirmation and strengthening. And *the prologue adds something more specific*: assurance promised by our Lord is for those who study the Gospel of Luke with an eye for its continuity and wholeness. Fragmented

understanding is not sufficient; you must grow in your familiarity with the events and the teachings. In this way, you will find peace of heart, assurance of mind, and confidence of soul. In a word, take hold of it by prayer, thought, and study until it takes hold of you. Then you will know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Now may we fall down before the majesty of God with praise for the work He did in Christ “when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1.20-21), amen.

Rough and ready dates of the writing of the NT books

(Per Carson/Moo, *Intro to the NT*, 2005)

James (about 45 AD)

Paul’s epistles (from 48-60’s)

[Galatians, 48 AD, the same date as the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15; 1-2 Thessalonians, 50-51 AD; 1-2 Corinthians, 55-56 AD; Romans, 57 AD; Colossians, 55-65 AD; 1-2 Timothy, 60’s; Philemon, 60’s]

Mark, early 60’s

Luke-Acts: mid-60’s

The rest of the NT appears in the 60’s to the 90’s AD

[60-70: Jude, 1-2 Peter, Hebrews; 70: Matthew; 80-85: John; 90’s: 1-2-3 John and Revelation]