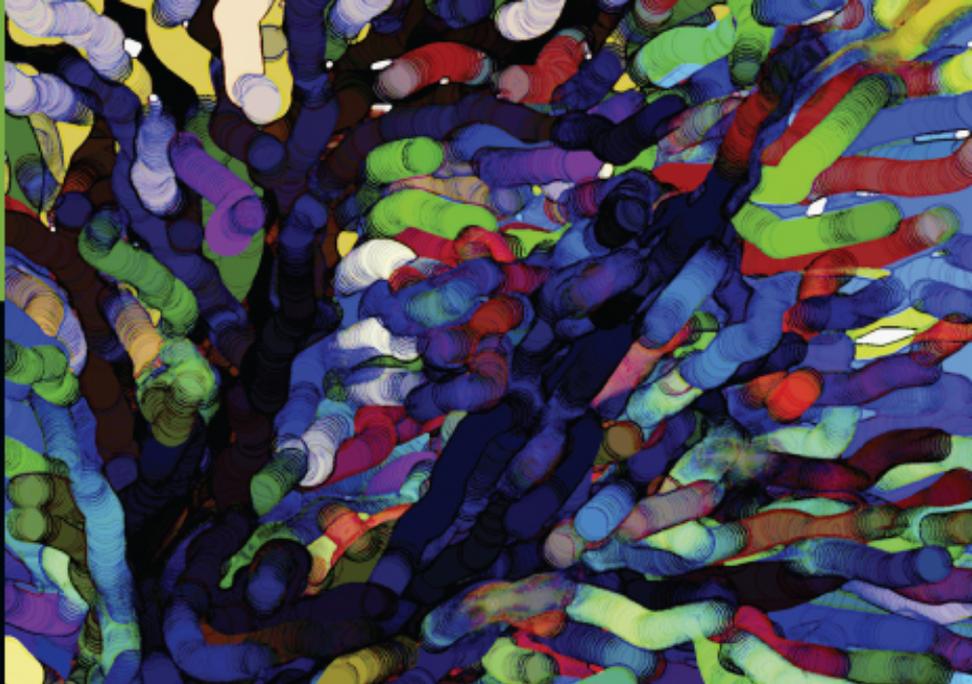


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MICHAEL WILCOCK

The Message of **Luke**

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of Luke

The Saviour of the world

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www.ivpress.com/academic/

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400
Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
E-mail: email@ivpress.com

© Michael Wilcock 1979

Originally published under the title *Saviour of the World*

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ISBN 978-0-8308-9793-3 (digital)
ISBN 978-0-87784-291-0 (print)

General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

Author's preface

When I embarked on my previous contribution to this series, I had great misgivings about tackling so long and difficult a book as Revelation. The same misgivings have loomed even larger in the case of this present exposition. With regard to difficulty, I think the task of expounding Luke's Gospel is quite as hard as that of expounding John's Revelation, though for the opposite reason: whereas the latter is so unfamiliar, the former is too familiar by half. If there is one thing harder than to chart a region where the foot of man has seldom trod, it is to produce a worthwhile guide book to a place that everyone knows already.

So I can claim no more than to be offering a personal view of what Luke is saying to us. It has been subjected to the criticisms of several discerning friends, in particular those of an articulate (not to say argumentative!) congregation at St Faith's, Maidstone, who recently 'listened to Luke' for the best part of a year, and my thanks are due to them all. But the final responsibility for this book is my own.

Having mentioned the difficulties, I should say something about the matter of length also. The third Gospel, although it has fewer chapters than Matthew or Acts, is actually the longest book in the whole New Testament. Therefore it poses, more acutely than any other which will be dealt with in this series, the problem of selectivity. Godel's old commentary on Luke runs to 903 pages, and Marshall's new one, though produced in a less discursive age, to 928; ^[1] in an exposition less than a quarter of that size, what is to be put in and what left out?

Readers will notice the practical ways in which I have tried to grasp this nettle. For a start, Luke's text is not printed in full, but only quoted, a few verses at a time. It will probably be found helpful, therefore, to have a Bible to hand, and to read the whole of the relevant passage there before turning to the exposition here. For another thing, this book *is* strictly an exposition. It is not a commentary; you will not find systematic comment on each verse and its problems. In fact, while acknowledging the value of detailed Bible study, I have been constantly aware of the danger of not seeing the wood for the trees, and have deliberately tried to stand back and get a view of the landscape as a whole. As a result, I believe I discern in the Gospel a shape, a structure—not the kind *imposed* by a preacher who is determined to find three points all beginning with P, but the kind which is *exposed* by a careful and prayerful study of what Luke was aiming to 'put across'.

Somewhere between two extremes, a fugal complexity on the one hand and a shapeless jumble on the other, ^[2] is the pattern which Luke had in mind when he constructed his 'orderly account' (1:3). In the pages that follow, I have attempted to find that pattern, to bring out its meaning, and to show, as I understand it, what Luke is about.

Trinity College, Bristol
MICHAEL WILCOCK

Chief abbreviations

- AG A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1957).
- AV *The Authorized (King James') Version* of the Bible (1611).
- Caird *The Gospel of St Luke* by G. B. Caird (Pelican, 1963).
- Drury *Luke* by John Drury (*The J. B. Phillips' Commentaries*, Collins Fontana, 1973).
- Ellis *The Gospel of Luke* edited by E. Earle Ellis (*The New Century Bible*, Nelson, 1966).
- Geldenhuis *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* by Norval Geldenhuis (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1950).
- Godet *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* by F. L. Godet (T. & T. Clark, 1887).
- JB *The Jerusalem Bible* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966).
- JBP *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).
- Moffatt *The New Testament: a New Translation* by James Moffatt (Hodder and Stoughton, revised edition, 1935).
- Morris *The Gospel according to St Luke* by Leon Morris (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1974).
- NEB *The New English Bible* (New Testament, 1961; 2nd edition 1970; OT 1970).
- Plummer *The Gospel according to St Luke* by Alfred Plummer (*The International Critical Commentary*, T. & T. Clark, fifth edition, 1922).
- RSV *The Revised Standard Version* of the Bible (NT 1946, 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952).
- RV *The Revised Version* of the Bible (1885).
- Stonehouse *The Witness of Luke to Christ* by N. B. Stonehouse (Tyndale Press, 1951).
- Weymouth *The New Testament in Modern Speech* by R. F. Weymouth (James Clarke, 1903).

Introduction

Since I am what some of my friends (regrettably) think of as a ‘professional’ Christian, many of the books on my shelves are the tools of my profession, and tend to be rather more heavy going than the books which these friends keep on *their* shelves. Such ‘professional’ books would be even more daunting for a non-professional reader who, instead of dipping in here and there, preferred to start at page 1, because he would find their introductions even more technical than the rest. I hasten to say that I am in no way decrying the value of this sort of writing. It provides the raw material out of which something more readable, though more superficial, can be made. There is no denying, however, that the kind thing to say about most of these introductions is that they are Worthy but Dull.

The book before you is not technical, and it does not—I hope—begin with a Worthy but Dull Introduction. According to the opening sentence of a classic which I had read many times long before I had even heard of the word ‘commentary’, ‘an Introduction is to introduce people’.^[1] So without more ado, dear reader, I should like you to meet Doctor Luke.

Many of the things which you will learn about him from the introductions of commentaries—his object in writing his Gospel, his interest in history and in theology and in the relation between the two, his methods, his style, and his characteristics—are touched on as they arise in the main part of this book. The only matter which I shall not mention elsewhere, but to which the commentators devote considerable space, is that of the date when he wrote. I think it likely myself that his two books, the Gospel and the book of Acts, were both produced in the early sixties of the first century. He cannot have completed them sooner, since they include an account of Paul’s imprisonment at Rome at the beginning of that decade; and if he had written them later, they could hardly have failed to bear traces of the events of the next few years, especially Nero’s persecution of the church in AD 64. But a great variety of suggestions have been made, and no one really knows for certain.

It is with Luke himself, however, that this introduction is chiefly concerned, the man for whose commemorative day the English reformers provided a wonderfully suggestive prayer:

Almighty God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul: May it please thee that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.^[2]

As this collect assumes, the ‘Evangelist’—the author of the third Gospel—was indeed Luke, the apostle Paul’s friend and travelling companion, whose presence can be detected in those parts of the book of Acts where the writer says that ‘we’ did such-and-such. This at any rate has been the view most widely held from the earliest times. Secondly, we know from Paul’s own testimony in Colossians 4:14 that Luke was a physician. These two identifications (that the evangelist was Luke, and that he was a physician) are generally accepted; but a third statement, that he was also the unnamed person ‘whose praise is in the gospel’, mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:18, is an assumption only. We shall return to this later. First, we meet our author simply as Luke.

1. Luke

It is a fair guess that he was not a Jew but a Gentile. His Greek name might indicate this; although Greek names might be borne by Jews (by Andrew and Philip, for example, among the twelve apostles, rubbing shoulders with two Jacobs, two Simeons, two Judahs, and a Levi!).^[3] His command of the Greek language is excellent; although that also might be true of many an educated Jew. The passage which seems to most scholars to show that Luke really was a Gentile is in Colossians 4, where Paul appears to list his Jewish fellow workers in verses 10 and 11, and the rest, including Luke, in verses 12 to 14. Even here, opinion is not unanimous.^[4] But what cannot be denied is that this Gospel is thoroughly Gentile in its spirit and outlook.

When you consider this, it is a stirring thought. The so-called ‘Gentile mission’, the spread of the good news beyond the bounds of the Israelite nation, is a major theme both in the Gospel and in Acts, but the two books are themselves an integral part of that mission, and an instrument of it. In an age when many in the church were still very conscious of their Jewish roots, it is striking that this spacious and beautiful work—its first volume the longest book in the New Testament and the fullest of the four Gospels, and the two volumes together making Luke’s contribution to the New Testament bigger than that of any other writer—should have been produced by a Gentile for Gentiles. Had there been coffee tables in the homes of the Roman Empire, they, I think, would have been one destination which Luke would have wanted his books to reach. And this is one reason why they are so relevant today. Most of us, in the western world, are the kind of people to whom Luke was addressing himself. We have so few material needs, but our spiritual need as Gentiles, if we are still both ‘separated from Christ’ and ‘alienated from the commonwealth of Israel’,^[5] is even greater than that of Jews. The good news, therefore, is even better for us than for them. And we could hardly have it more attractively presented.

One aspect of the Gospel’s Gentile outlook is its humanity. It is about man and his needs. True, it centres on a divine Saviour, but he is the Saviour of the *world*. This world view of Luke’s has two focal lengths, one close and one distant. First he stands back so as to take in a wide vision of mankind and its world. The commentaries call this his universalism. For example, all four of the Gospels quote, in connection with John the Baptist, the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the voice which cries ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’; but only Luke completes the quotation—‘All flesh shall see the salvation

of God.’^[6] This universalism should not be understood to mean that God will save every single individual of the human race, even those who wilfully reject him; such a doctrine runs counter to the basic teaching of the New Testament. Rather, it means that there is no kind of person the gospel cannot reach, no boundary it cannot cross. Luke is saying not that *everyone will* be saved, but that *anyone can* be saved, and his view corresponds to Paul’s vision of the final abolishing of barriers: in the Christian church ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’^[7] This is one respect in which the gospel is for all.

But then focusing closely, Luke shows on the other hand that ‘all’ does nevertheless mean ‘everyone’, provided we understand this is the sense he intends, and that the world is after all made up of individuals. He is depicting many classes of people; but he goes further, and shows us particular persons within those classes. As I have already suggested, the gospel is not only for Jews, but also for Greeks—and for Romans and for Samaritans too. It is not only for males, but also for females—and not simply important women like the wife of Herod’s steward, but widows and cripples and prostitutes as well. It is not only for freemen, but also for slaves—and indeed for all whom society despises: for the poor, the weak, and the outcast, for the thief and the quisling. And all of these Luke delights to show as particular individuals. A galaxy of such portraits glitters across his twenty-four chapters. These are real people, and among them the human condition is really to be found. Like the Roman playwright before him, Luke might have said, ‘*Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto.*’^[8] Like the English essayist long after him, he might reckon himself a *Citizen of the World.*^[9]

And what he writes, he writes in good clear Greek. A thousand years later he would no doubt have used Latin; a thousand years later still, probably English—choosing his language not so much for its literary qualities, as because it is the one which will be most readily understood by the world at large. He is, after all, telling the story of the Saviour of the world.

2. The physician

We have seen how Luke’s background and culture as a Gentile have fitted him for the writing of a Gospel for the world. Now we turn to his training and his calling, and see the effect which they have had on his work as a Gospel writer.

Luke, you see, is a doctor. His business is to heal.

Now Greek is a language of great richness; yet here is a case in which it might seem that English is richer, with a choice of two words where Greek has one.^[10] The Greek word is *sōzō*. Is the translator to render it ‘heal’, or ‘save’? For it has to do duty for both ideas.

Yet perhaps it is not a case of the older language being less rich than the newer. Perhaps the Greeks had a truer understanding of the nature of things when they reckoned that to save a man and to heal him were fundamentally the same, and that a single word should convey the double meaning. And perhaps we can see in Luke’s eye a keen *professional* interest (to put it no higher) in the story of how there had been born ‘in the city of David a *Sōtēr*’,^[11] a Healer/Saviour, who had come into the world to deliver men both from sickness and from sin. We whose mother tongue is English would have had to make a choice between different translations, and to decide when it was appropriate to call this Man ‘Saviour’, and when it was more fitting to call him ‘Healer’; but the Greeks had a word for it—a word, one word—and this word with its layers of meaning fascinated Doctor Luke. *Sōzō* and its related nouns are found much more often in his writings than in those of any of the other evangelists. He is telling of a man who has the power and authority to do the kind of work that he himself has been trained to do, but at depths undreamed-of, and in regions unexplored, and with effects so far-reaching as to confound his own elementary ideas of healing/salvation.^[12]

Introductions generally get written last; and as I write this, having worked through his Gospel many times and in great detail, it seems to me clearer than ever that if in the modern fashion he had given it a title, he might well have called it ‘The Saviour of the World’. As Luke, the Gentile, he writes about this human world of ours; as the physician, he writes about its divine Healer, the one who can save from all ills and is a Saviour for all men.

3. Whose praise is in the gospel

In 2 Corinthians 8:18 the apostle Paul refers to a certain fellow Christian ‘whose praise’, according to the Authorized Version, ‘is in the gospel’, and who has been chosen to travel with him in his missionary journeying. He omits to mention the name of this Christian brother, and commentators down the ages have not been slow to supply it. Barnabas and Silas, Timothy and Mark, and half a dozen others whose names occur in the book of Acts as travelling companions of Paul, have all been suggested. The compilers of the Prayer Book assumed however that Luke was the person referred to, and so the phrase quoted above finds its place in their St Luke’s Day collect. In deciding for this interpretation they were following a strong and ancient tradition, the opinion of many scholars, and the direction in which the relevant facts (such as they are) seem to point.

It is only a possibility, of course, and one reason why some may have thought that Paul was here speaking about Luke is in fact a very poor reason. This is that when the apostle speaks of his unnamed brother’s ‘praise’ being ‘in the gospel’, he means that the said brother was famous for the Gospel, *i.e.* the book, which he had written. It is extremely unlikely, however, that this is what Paul meant. Much more probably the brother is highly regarded for his services to the gospel (JBP, NEB), or for his preaching of the gospel (RSV), in the wider sense of the word.

But even if this verse has no reference to the third book of the New Testament, the fact remains that Luke’s praise is indeed in his Gospel. Christopher Wren’s epitaph in St Paul’s Cathedral—*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice* (‘If you

seek his monument, look around you')—directs your gaze to a great work of art. Glorious it is; but also inanimate. As you make your way into the Gospel of Luke, the same words might be said of him, except that in this case your attention is turned towards something more than a great work of art. These pages are not only glorious, they are also alive. On account of them, we do not think it at all improper to praise their author, the beloved physician turned evangelist, for the skill and insight with which he has given us this living picture of a living Saviour. Or, still more properly, we praise that Saviour himself, who having healed the soul of this gifted Greek doctor, then engaged his talents in the writing of a book of salvation for the world to read.

The coming of the Saviour

Luke introduces the Gospel (1:1–4)

The first four verses of his Gospel form Luke's introduction to it. We shall be giving more detailed attention to them than to any of the following sections; but they are worth such close study, because they are the foundation of all the rest.

It is the commentaries, rather than expositions like this one, which discuss *how* Luke has written his preface—the good classical Greek style of it—and also the person *to whom* Luke is writing; whether he is actual or imaginary, whether Theophilus is his real name or a pseudonym, whether 'Your Excellency' indicates his official rank or is merely a courtesy title, and whether he is a Christian convert or an interested outsider. (None of these questions has a certain answer, except perhaps that 1:4 seems to imply that he is a real person). We shall concentrate rather on *what* Luke claims to be writing. What may we expect to find as we begin to read his Gospel? What, according to this introduction, is it?

We shall find, first, that it is one of many 'Gospels' produced about the same time, each of which claimed to be a narrative of certain facts about Jesus Christ; secondly, that it is Luke's own particular presentation of the facts; and thirdly, that it is a handbook designed to be of real value to all who put themselves in the position of Theophilus, as interested readers. This is what Luke's preface will tell us.

1. His pattern: the gospel in the second-generation church

The first generation of the Christian church was that of the apostles. It comprised many people who had known Jesus personally. They had no need of books to tell them about him, for their memories, minds, and hearts were full of him. Nor did they pass on their knowledge to others in the form of orderly narratives. An early history of the church describes how Peter, for example, 'used to adapt his instructions to the needs [of the moment]',¹ drawing readily on whichever of his vivid recollections of Jesus was most appropriate for the audience to which he happened to be speaking.

The next generation, to which Luke and others like him belonged, was in a different position. In a sense such people could say, 'The words and deeds of Jesus were "accomplished among us"' (1:1), being part of the story of their own times. But since nevertheless those facts had had to be 'delivered' to them (1:2), they—the men of the second generation—were not actual eyewitnesses. The facts had come to them in various forms (accounts of the Lord's death and resurrection, of his sayings, of his miracles, and of other matters concerning him which it was important for Christian converts to know); the reconstruction and study of these early accounts are therefore known as *form-criticism*. For their own benefit, however, and for the benefit of generations yet to come, these men saw the value of having the facts about Jesus woven into a systematic whole. With this object in mind, Mark, for instance, is said to have written down what the apostle Peter used to tell of the 'Jesus story'.² Luke claims to have followed the same way.

He tells us that many writers set about this task. Little of their work however has survived,³ and only the four Gospels included in our New Testament have stood the tests of time and use. Even so, it is worth considering these literary efforts, of which Luke's Gospel is an outstanding example, to see what exactly they were.

a. The sources of the 'Gospels' (1:2)

For convenience we may call them 'Gospels', and although hardly anything of them remains we may yet draw some conclusions about them from the way Luke refers to them here.

They all derived from 'those who ... were eyewitnesses and ministers'. These were not two groups of people, but two descriptions of the same group: men who witnessed, in the double sense of that word—as they had *seen*, so they *spoke*. The following would be a literal translation of what Luke calls them: 'Those who were-eyewitnesses-from-the-beginning and became-ministers-of-the-word'. In fact, of the two books by Luke which we have in our Bible, his Gospel might be summarized by the first phrase, and the book of Acts by the second. The ascension of Jesus is the pivot between the two.⁴ From that event Luke's first volume looks back to 'the beginning',⁵ and beyond; it tells us what the eyewitnesses had seen. His second volume looks onwards from the ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, and tells us what they said and did once they had become ministers of the word.

We have pictured Mark and Luke both engaged in the same kind of work, writing down what they heard from eyewitnesses. Another factor however needs to be borne in mind. There is so close a resemblance between much of Mark's Gospel and much of Luke's (and of Matthew's too, for that matter) that scholars presume some sort of literary connection between the first three Gospels. In the case of Luke, for example, it is usually suggested that he had Mark's Gospel before him as he wrote, and probably other written records, now lost, as well. If this is so, it means that Luke saw nothing incongruous about claiming that his account rested on first-hand testimony, yet incorporating in it much of Mark's second-hand report. The point surely was that the accuracy of all these accounts could still be checked with original eyewitnesses.⁶ The commission of the twelve was, in part, that they should act as just such a testimony to apostolic truth,⁷ and by that standard all New Testament scripture not actually written by them—even the teachings of Paul⁸—might be judged apostolic, and therefore dominical.

b. *The contents of the 'Gospels' (1:1b)*

Accordingly, the Gospel narratives consisted of the things which were 'accomplished' by Jesus in the sight of the apostles, and then 'delivered' by them to those who had not themselves seen him.

They were, basically, a set of facts. It is true that no amount of head-knowledge can save a man's soul, and in that sense a mere 'set of facts' does not in itself have any spiritual value. Yet a well-defined series of statements seems to have been precisely what successive generations of the church were to guard and to hand on—the 'traditions' about Jesus. ⁹ They were the things which the 'eyewitnesses' had seen 'accomplished', a settled group of facts which were to be reported 'exactly as' they had been received, ¹⁰ and from which a continuous 'narrative' could be composed by arranging them in a certain order (which is the meaning of 'to compile').

These are what we find as the core of the earliest Christian message, when in Acts 2:22f. we read a set of statements about Jesus. But the context there shows that we have to do with something much more far-reaching than mere academic head-knowledge. For the facts, selected with the interpreting wisdom of the Spirit of God which turns history into theology, are now being *preached*, in the living power of that same Spirit; and the result is that they cut men to the heart and bring them to repentance. ¹¹

So what had been 'accomplished' is now being 'delivered'; Peter the eyewitness has now become Peter the minister of the word, and that word is proving itself to be 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' ¹² The apostles 'had discovered among their memories of Jesus that which met the deepest needs of men.' ¹³

We can see, then, what these earliest 'Gospels' attempted to be, with greater or less success, and therefore what we may expect Luke's Gospel to be, since it is one of them. We shall find that it is, in fact, a version of the 'Jesus story', an account of actual events. It is not a theory, or an idea, or a philosophy, or even a religion. It is the tale of a thing that really happened. Yet it is not mere history, for it does something to the people to whom it is proclaimed. Those who witnessed the original events found that when the story was preached, it changed men's lives. And those who, like Luke, wrote it up, reckoned that in this form also it would have a similar effect on those who, like Theophilus, would read it.

The Victorian heyday of preaching was followed by a long period of reaction, in which the authoritative declaring of facts was at a discount and

suave politeness, tempering bigot zeal,

Corrected 'I believe' to 'One does feel'. ¹⁴

It would be pleasant to know that we are now out of that particular wood; but I doubt whether we are. So it is worth reminding ourselves how much store these early Christians set by the plain proclamation of the 'Jesus story'. Whether it was spoken by the first-generation apostles, or written by the second-generation evangelists, they expected it to be effective; and it is so still.

2. His presentation: the Gospel 'according to Luke'

So far, we have considered the ways in which all these early 'Gospels' were alike; now we consider how Luke's presentation of the facts claims to differ from the others. The earliest title given to the book was simply *Kata Loukan*, 'According to Luke'. Let us then see how, according to him, the events of Jesus's life may best be presented, and note the particular features of his Gospel: thoroughness, accuracy, and order.

a. *Thoroughness*

In three Greek words Luke indicates how thorough his researches have been in gathering material for his Gospel. He has 'followed' these events, not of course in the sense of observing them, since he was not himself an eyewitness, but in the sense of investigating them. He has followed 'all things' that could possibly be relevant to his theme. And he has done so 'for some time past', or (better, as in RV) 'from the start'; by which he means, as we shall see, not 'from the beginning' of Jesus's ministry (as in 1:2), but 'from the start' of his earthly life, and even earlier. He is like 'a traveller who tries to discover the source of a river, in order that he may descend it again, and follow its entire course.' ¹⁵

b. *Accuracy*

Luke has surveyed his materials 'closely', says RSV. The word carries the idea of exactness, and so RV and other versions agree with RSV's marginal note in translating it as 'accurately'. He would undoubtedly have checked and re-checked his findings, and in any case a wealth of archaeological discovery over the past hundred years has shown him to have a remarkably correct eye for detail. The writer who never puts a foot wrong in matters which we can verify may well be trusted implicitly in the rest.

His thoroughness and his accuracy combine to show us someone who would have had little patience with certain modern approaches to the gospel story. A shift away from old-fashioned destructive criticism, which was so good at seeing through Scripture that it was in danger eventually of seeing nothing in it, is more than welcome. But Luke would have been chagrined to find it replaced by a 'biblical theology' which distinguishes between truth and fact, and which enthuses over the one while caring little about the other. For him the two are inseparable. The truth of his Gospel is factual truth. Of course this is not to say that a spiritual message may not sometimes be conveyed by means of myth or fable, where the question 'Did it really happen?' is irrelevant. But it is to say that that sort of writing is precisely what Luke is *not*

engaged in. He claims to be investigating, thoroughly and accurately, the facts.

c. Order

Some have thought that Luke's 'orderly account' meant a story told in chronological order. None of the Gospels, however, yields any very obvious chronology of the life of Jesus, and Luke's order is much more likely to be a 'logical and artistic arrangement' of some kind. ^[16] We may take it that with such an arrangement in mind, he must have surveyed the vast wealth of material—'all things' that he had been able to find out about Jesus—and selected from it, as John did in writing his Gospel, ^[17] the items which would best fit his scheme.

What that scheme is, is not easy to detect at a casual reading. Presumably it is a framework which, like a skeleton, supports the whole structure without making itself obvious. Indeed, this present exposition is to some degree an exercise in anatomy—an attempt to understand the body of the Gospel better by studying its bones.

Some readers may feel, especially with regard to the central section of the Gospel (9:51–19:44), that Luke is unlikely to have had in mind a framework as elaborate as the one I suggest. In this connection three points may be made. The first is that, in the absence of explicit headings and sub-headings provided by Luke himself, no analysis can be anything more than a matter of suggestion. This is all that the present one is meant to be, and it is for the reader to judge whether or not it squares with the contents of Luke's book. Secondly, it is not unnatural that the critical dissection of the Gospel should seem more complex than any scheme which the author may consciously have planned. The same thing happens with the analysis of a novel or a symphony; and the reason is of course that the critic is interested in the subconscious, as well as the conscious, workings of the maker's mind. Thirdly, of the two extremes mentioned in my Preface, complexity on the one hand and shapelessness on the other, ^[18] I think it is truer to the character of Luke's writing as he himself describes it in this verse—thorough, accurate, and (in particular) orderly—that a suggested analysis should err on the side of complexity.

Here then is a version of the things 'accomplished' and 'delivered' which is claimed by its author to be in several respects an improvement on similar versions produced by his contemporaries. It should whet our appetite, especially if we have become too accustomed to living on spiritual snacks, to know what pains Luke has taken to prepare this feast. It consists basically of the living facts which were common to all the early 'Gospels', but it has been carefully prepared, supplemented with extra courses, and attractively served. We owe it more than a perfunctory nibble.

3. His purpose: the Gospel for Theophilus

'Poetry', said the French poet Baudelaire, has 'no other aim but itself ... If the poet has pursued a moral aim, he will have diminished his poetic power; nor will it be incautious to bet that his work is bad.' ^[19] Not one of the Bible writers would have agreed (and some of them were very fine poets indeed). Baudelaire, with his belief in 'art for art's sake', would for his part have dismissed Luke after reading the first ten lines of the Gospel, for Luke declares unashamedly that his literary work has a 'moral aim': he aims to bring Theophilus to a sure knowledge of the truth of Christianity.

a. What Theophilus has already heard

The 'things' of 1:4 are of a different kind from the 'things' of 1:1; they are in fact 'words'. What Theophilus has heard is something more than the mere events of the days of Jesus. It is a significant choice of those events, which has been preached, with incandescent power, by the apostles. It is a word which changes the lives of men.

Even so, Theophilus apparently still lacks a thorough grasp of the facts, and that is the lack which this Gospel sets out to supply. It is what he needs, whether he is already a convert or still merely an onlooker; for it is not clear how Theophilus stands in relation to the Christian faith ('informed' represents a Greek word which could imply either that he has undergone Christian instruction or that he has heard an unfriendly report). ^[20] But in either case—if he is on the one hand a new Christian with a rudimentary knowledge of the faith, or on the other hand a non-Christian who is interested enough to learn what it is really about—this Gospel is written especially for such as him.

b. What Luke's Gospel can do for him

The reading of this book, which is written particularly with Theophilus in mind, will enable him to 'know the certainty' (AV, RV) of these things.

Luke places the word 'certainty' emphatically at the end of his long sentence: 'I have written all this, Theophilus, so that you may be *sure*.' Like many men of his day, this man, presumably brought up in a pagan religion which had become increasingly meaningless, may well have felt 'a strong desire for firmly established truth', and 'yearned for trustworthy knowledge concerning religious matters.' ^[21] And, we may add, like many men of our own day—men for whom both the Christian church under its popular image, and the many beliefs which are offered as alternatives to it, seem very insecure foundations for living. But my Gospel, says Luke, will offer you *certainty*. And in saying this he grasps yet another twentieth-century nettle. For the word is *asphaleia*, which might be translated 'infallibility'—a concept around which long warfare has been waged. Without apology Luke claims it for his Gospel, and its real meaning becomes plain. Read what I have written, he says, and you will see the facts on which Christianity is based; and you will find there something firm and solid and absolutely trustworthy, a sure foundation for faith.

And 'know' also is a special word. It means a deep, thorough knowledge. Luke wants his reader to know the certainty of the gospel not only in his mind but in his heart, so that it becomes part of the fibre of his being. Such knowledge may be yours, says Luke. How? By some mystical experience? By a deep study of philosophy? No: by reading and meditating on

the plain facts of the story of Jesus, set out here in my Gospel. *That* is where you may come to know the basic certainties of life.

This, then, is what we look for as we embark on our reading of the Gospel according to Luke. Like many another book of the same kind, most of them now lost, it recounts ‘the tradition’, the facts about Jesus: though they are not merely facts, but truth which when proclaimed changes the lives of men. This book, moreover, sets them out with a remarkable fullness, accuracy, and meaningful order, and demands our closest attention. Granted this, we may expect it to lay deep in our hearts the infallible basis of spiritual certainty in a world where all else is changing and inconstant. Let us then go to our study of it with a will.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word;
What more can he say than to you he hath said,
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled? ^[22]

‘His people’s hope’ (1:5–80)

Luke begins his Gospel proper with a sequence of four incidents which lead up to the birth of Jesus. The first takes place in Jerusalem, the second in Nazareth; the other two are set in an unnamed village in the hill country of Judea.

His claim to have followed out the story ‘from the very first’ (1:3, AV) means, in fact, that he intends to begin not with Jesus’s baptism (the start of his ministry), ^[1] nor even with his birth (the start of his earthly life), but with something earlier still. For Luke the story begins at the point where after four hundred years of silence the voice of God was heard again by his people Israel, ^[2] with the announcement, shortly before each was born, of due coming of Jesus and his forerunner John.

There is nothing like this chapter anywhere else in the Gospels, and it may arouse our curiosity in more respects than one.

1. A matter of style and content

Bearing in mind the sort of person to whom Luke addresses his book, one wonders whether at the outset his style and his content are not somewhat at odds. The first of the four incidents in this chapter (1:5–25) highlights a curious contrast between what he has to say and how he says it.

a. *The style of the passage*

The first group of verses just quoted is from AV, rather than RSV, for a purpose. Its seventeenth-century English conveys a little of the picturesqueness of these events. They have about them something supernatural, with their angelic appearances and predictions, and something alien, with their setting in Eastern society and Jewish religion. This is a different world from the cultured paganism of Greece and Rome, and a world still more different from our own. There is something remote, even legendary, about it. It has ‘the general tone’, suggests Drury, ‘... of a rich and resonant fairy tale (“once upon a time there were two old people, a man and his wife ...”).’ ^[3] It is, in the strict sense of the word, *exotic*—‘outside’ the normal experience of the readers Luke has in mind.

Yet what is the drama that Luke unfolds amid this scenery of a world of far away and long ago?

b. *The content of the passage*

If the first quotation above gives an idea, of the style and atmosphere of Luke’s opening chapter, the second pinpoints its subject-matter. The reason for Gabriel’s visit is the bringing of good news; and the news is the promised birth of a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

But there is more to that than meets the eye. For we are told that the good news was brought in answer to Zechariah’s prayer (1:13); yet the promise of John’s birth was so unexpected and surprising to Zechariah, that we may question whether his desire for a son was really the prayer that was in his heart on this occasion. Two factors throw a different light on the matter. First, this pious couple was surely among those who, like Simeon and Anna in the next chapter, were looking for the ‘consolation of Israel’ and the ‘redemption of Jerusalem’ (2:25, 38). Secondly, the awesome once-in-a-lifetime privilege of serving in the temple must have carried Zechariah’s mind beyond the personal tragedy of childlessness to the even more poignant longings of the nation to which he belonged. In short, we may take it that his prayer was for the coming of Israel’s Saviour; and the ‘good news’ which the angel brings is not so much that Elizabeth shall bear a son, as that she shall bear a son who is to announce the Saviour’s immediate coming.

This good news is the ‘evangel’ (*euangelion*), the gospel. 1:19 is the first place where the term appears in Luke’s book, ^[4] and the subject is to be one of his main themes. He might well have said himself what he reports Gabriel as saying: ‘I was sent ... to bring you this good news.’

In view of the importance of this, Luke’s grand subject, Theophilus might well ask why (like the ‘heavenly Child’ soon to be ‘wrapped in swathing bands’) it is first ‘to human view displayed’ ^[5] in such unexpected garb. To that matter, the

story-book atmosphere in which the good news is announced, we shall return later. But first we must grasp the message itself, as its content and meaning are unfolded in the remaining three incidents which Luke narrates here in chapter 1.

2. The content unfolded

We trace through the rest of this chapter the reason why its subject is so important. We have already seen in the first incident, how when the angel tells Zechariah that his wife is to bear a son in spite of their old age and her barrenness, the birth of that son is called ‘good news’ (1:19)—it is ‘gospel’. For John is to be the herald of *salvation*; salvation more than anything else is to be the basic theme of Luke’s story; and salvation is what makes the news so good. It is the common factor in the three quotations above, one from each of the remaining three incidents which Luke narrates. The meaning of it comes into focus as we look at these more closely.

a. The Bringer of salvation (1:26–38)

Zechariah saw his vision in the temple at Jerusalem. From there we are taken northwards, to Galilee: this second story is located in Nazareth, the home of Joseph and his betrothed wife Mary. The same angel who announced to Zechariah the birth of John now announces to Mary the birth of Jesus.

The stupendous claims which the angel makes for this unborn baby (1:32–33) would have staggered Jewish readers of the Gospel, and we may guess that they would not have been without effect on Theophilus also. For the Son of Mary is a colossal figure. He will be the greatest, ruler that not only Israel (1:32b–33a), but the world (1:33b), has ever seen.

The universal authority of Christ is another of Luke’s chief themes, and is first introduced here. It is ‘an arresting feature of the earlier prophetic testimony’, as Stonehouse points out, quoting a series of passages from Isaiah: ‘The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of *all the nations* ... *All flesh* shall see it together ... That my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’ [6] It will be taken up again in Luke’s next chapter, in the words of Simeon, which echo those of Isaiah. [7]

Nevertheless, in this portrait of ‘the Saviour of the world’ we concentrate for the moment not so much on ‘the world’ as on ‘the Saviour’. What kind of man must this be, to whom in the end ‘every knee should bow, ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord’? [8]

For a start, Luke tells us that so great a person is to have no ordinary birth. Mary’s virginity is an integral part of the story. Three lines of thought converge to put the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus, to my mind, beyond question. The first is the character of Luke. His accuracy as a painstaking historian we have already noted. Myths and legends may be the stock-in-trade of some religious writers, and may in their hands convey much spiritual truth, but these are not what Luke deals in. The second is the character of his material. For all his cool objectivity, he does not hesitate to record miracles where he is persuaded that miracles have occurred. If he says Jesus was born of a virgin, it is because he believes that to be a historical fact. The third is the character of the Saviour he is depicting. If the One coming into the world is so sublime a figure, what more appropriate than that the manner of his coming should be miraculous—and that not as a matter of Luke’s poetic imagination, but (again) as a matter of fact?

This, then, is the One whom we are first to know by ‘his name Jesus’ (1:31). And ‘Jesus’ means ‘The Lord is salvation’. [9]

b. The scope of salvation (1:39–56)

In the third story the narrative moves again southwards, ‘into the hill country, to a city of Judah’ (1:39), where Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. As the two women share their good news, Mary is inspired to utter the great hymn known to generations of Christians as the *Magnificat*. ‘My soul magnifies the Lord’, she sings; and then, describing him more specifically, ‘my spirit rejoices in God my *Saviour*.’

The saving work for which she praises him is one of total renewal. ‘He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away’ (1:51–53).

How is it (in passing) that although the Saviour is not yet born, Mary’s song can declare that the salvation has already come? Perhaps she means two things. One is that in a manner of speaking the old order has indeed been overturned, by the very fact that God’s choice has passed over the proud, the mighty, and the rich, and has lighted instead, upon her as the future mother of his Son. The other is that with sudden insight she realizes what the end of it all will be, and rejoices that since God has set his saving work in motion, it is already as good as done.

To revert to the previous point, it cannot be denied that this saving work is one of total renewal, and indeed it looks very like social and political revolution. In the last days of British India, Jack Winslow’s Christian community there was sometimes visited by CID men because of its known sympathies with Indian nationalism; William Temple accordingly warned him not to include the *Magnificat* in his services—‘it’s a most revolutionary canticle!’ [10] Now Temple spoke more truly maybe, than he knew. For in our own day, in many parts of the world, the *Magnificat* and similar scriptures [11] are indeed the ‘revolutionary canticles’ which inspire, and are held to justify, Christian participation in political liberation movements. This is very upsetting for Christians in those nations which are old enough, or rich enough, to want only to be left in peace to enjoy their accustomed standard of living, and they are tempted therefore to spiritualize the *Magnificat* and say that it must not be used like this. But that is unfair to those of our brothers in the Third World who feel there is no answer to their problems without the overthrow of the political system. The renewal promised in the *Magnificat* really will involve the downfall of the rulers of this world. The question is when, and in what sense, and by

what means, this will happen. We had better go on to Luke's next narrative and see how this total salvation is to be brought about.

c. *The heart of salvation (1:57–80)*

The fourth incident takes place at the same village, a few months later, when the child of the aged couple has eventually come to birth. Like Mary, Zechariah is now inspired to utter a hymn of thanksgiving, the *Benedictus*, in which he praises God for having 'raised up a horn of salvation' (or 'mighty Saviour') [12] 'for us' (1:69). Salvation 'from our enemies' (1:71, 74) is how it may be described; but, as Godet says, 'the very notion of salvation was falsified in Israel, and had to be corrected before salvation could be realized.' [13] The true enemies were not as most Jews thought foreign invaders, but spiritual foes, and it was to be the work of Zechariah's son John 'to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins' (1:77). That is where the revolution has to begin. Before there can be a right relationship between man and man, there must be a right relationship between man and God, and the sin which spoils that must be repented of and removed. Thus in due course Luke will quote the apostles' preaching that Jesus is the one whom God has made 'Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins' (Acts 5:31).

We must believe, as clear-thinking Christians in every age have believed, that it is the will and plan of God for all wrong relationships, political as well as spirituals eventually to be put right. We include therefore in our preaching of salvation the need for the righting of wrong social structures and physical conditions. [14] But we keep at its centre the need for the cleansing of sinful human hearts. That is the primary concern of the people of God.

Here at the outset, therefore, Luke establishes the chief matter of his Gospel, this tremendous project: the saving of the human race. Chapter 1 is 'not so much a prelude to what follows but rather ... the theme which is to be elaborated in the ensuing "symphony of salvation".' [15] It is the matter which Luke aims to bring to the attention of his readers. He wants to leave them in no doubt that the great need of humanity is that it should, in the fullest sense, be saved.

3. The style explained

The message of salvation surely needs to be made as clear as possible, to as many as possible Luke doubtless knew, and endorsed, the principles of his great friend Paul, whose aim was always 'the open statement of the truth', and who was prepared to 'become all things to all men' so that he might 'by all means save some.' [16] Yet, as we noted earlier, the four stories with which this Gospel introduces his universal message seem to have a quite unsuitably exotic colouring. It is as though one were to arrive at a great international airport, to find all its directions signs posted up in Hebrew only. For notice again the curiosities on which Luke insists.

a. *Supernatural beliefs*

The passage 1:5–10 simply establishes a background for the statement of 1:11. In that verse is described the first great event of the gospel story: that to Zechariah the priest, serving in the Temple, there appeared 'an angel of the Lord'. In each of the first two incidents this angel appears; in each he appears in order to bring a prediction of the future; in each the prediction concerns a miraculous event. Angels, predictions, miracles—? Luke both claims in his introduction, and will subsequently prove, to be a painstaking sober historian. Yet he makes no apology for thus conjuring up supernatural visions at the very start of his narrative.

Indeed, in all four incidents there is an even more far-reaching acknowledgment of the supernatural, in that Zechariah's son is to be filled with the Holy Spirit (1:15). Mary's Son is to be born by the power of the Holy Spirit (1:35), Elizabeth greets Mary with a cry inspired by the Holy Spirit (1:41f.), and Zechariah celebrates John's birth with a prophecy in the Holy Spirit (1:67). Here, unmistakably, is another world breaking into this one.

b. *Alien culture*

The commentators tell us that Luke's language from 1:5 onwards has a very Jewish flavour about it, quite different from the civilized Greek of 1:1–4. Having thus plunged into what for his Gentile readers will have seemed a quaintly foreign idiom, he states at once that his story belongs to the 'far away' of the Judaean kingdom of Herod, and the 'long ago' of the religious history of Israel (1:5). His characters are clad in the religion and priesthood of Judaism (1:6, 8), and his scene is set in its temple, before an altar, at a service (1:9–11). [17] The opening speech takes us straight into the world of the Old Testament (1:13–17). And he continues in the same vein throughout the rest of the chapter, and indeed into chapter 2 also.

Luke has created this 'world-of-the-Bible' atmosphere quite deliberately. The title suggested for our present section ('His People's Hope') is to be understood first in this narrow sense. It does not refer to people generally, nor to any ordinary expectations. Luke's first chapter is showing us the faithful few in *Israel*, who were looking forward to the coming of their nation's Saviour, and for whom the promise was about to come true. The 'hope' is of a miraculous breaking-in from heaven; and 'his people', whose hope this is, are strictly God's people the Jews.

And these are two great stumbling-blocks to the acceptance of the gospel of salvation: it involves supernatural beliefs, and it seems to be anchored to a remote and alien culture. On the one hand, it is incredible; and on the other, it is in any case irrelevant. Surely, we might say, Luke is writing for Theophilus, the typical Gentile; and no doubt he is writing similarly for the majority of twentieth-century men—people who may hold a variety of materialistic beliefs, but at any rate are not superstitious and gullible; and who may belong to any one of half a dozen different cultures, but at any rate are not orthodox Jews. Why then does he not play down these unacceptable elements in the story, and stress what will be

more palatable to his readers?

The answer is this: Because the apparent ‘trappings’ are in fact at the heart of the thing, and are not to be evaded. Luke is rather in the position of the United Nations ambassador of some small nation which is the flash-point of a major crisis. What he has to say to the assembled delegates concerns a subject of worldwide importance. But to understand it, they must first understand the local conditions which have given rise to the crisis. In all other respects they may ridicule and ignore his country; but in this respect it is central to the question, and must be taken into account.

If I am concerned about the vital matter of salvation, then whether I like it or not, there is no evading what seem to be the exotic surroundings in which it is brought to my notice. Angels, predictions, miracles, are an intrinsic part of the gospel, because it concerns a supernatural break-in to our world, as unexpected as the message to Zechariah and as staggering as the one to Mary. For such supernaturalism we must be prepared: Christianity is meaningless without it. The Jewishness of the tale is likewise intrinsic to it, because at no other place or time has God ever broken into our world with the full message of salvation, but in these events in first-century Palestine.

Once accepted, however, these principles will form a proper Christian attitude towards two major challenges of our own day. Within the church we find many whose rejection of this or that in the Bible or in biblical theology is based on nothing more objective than an unwillingness to accept the supernatural; but we know that without the supernatural there is no gospel. Surrounding the church we find many who profess religions other than our own—ancient religions, world-religions—and we listen to them courteously, and learn from them humbly; but we know that until they come to Bethlehem and Calvary, they are strangers to the good news of God.

It is the cross of Christ which Thomas Kelly describes in the famous hymn 18 as

his people’s hope, his people’s wealth,
Their everlasting theme.

His words could equally well be applied to the whole scheme of salvation. But if there is to be a salvation for mankind at all, it can be brought about only by the almighty, supernatural, miracle-working God. And he will offer it to men only through the medium of a first-century Jew—Jesus of Nazareth. This man alone, the central figure of Luke’s Gospel, is to be the Saviour of the world.

The child of good omen (2:1–52)

As Luke explained in his introduction, he has ‘traced the course of all things from the first’ (1:3, rv), and in chapter 2 he sets down the remainder of the stories he has selected concerning the beginning of the gospel.

We remind ourselves of these stories, well-known as they are. One comes from Jesus’s earliest days, when he was but a new-born ‘babe’ (2:12, 16). In the next, he is a ‘child’ (2:40) six weeks old. In the last, he is a ‘boy’ (2:43) approaching his teens. The first is the story of his birth, and of the angel who announced it to the shepherds on the Bethlehem hillside, so that they ‘went with haste’ to see the baby in the stable. The second tells how he was brought to the temple at Jerusalem for the customary religious service of Purification, and how the aged Simeon there met the holy family and uttered the beautiful words we know as the *Nunc Dimittis*: ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace’. The third describes how when Jesus was twelve he stayed on in Jerusalem, unknown to his parents, after another religious festival; their mild rebuke when they found him was met by a mysterious answer which his mother never forgot, though it was long before she understood it.

We can be fairly certain of the circumstances in which Luke learned of these events. Having come to Jerusalem with Paul just before the latter was arrested, 1 and being on hand to accompany him again when he was eventually sent away from Caesarea on the voyage to Rome, 2 Luke presumably stayed in Palestine for the two-year period of his friend’s imprisonment, and without doubt used the opportunity to gather material for his Gospel. Behind chapters 1 and 2 in particular there must surely lie long conversations between him and Mary.

Of all her countless memories of her first-born Son, some were obviously more memorable than others, so that what she kept and pondered (2:19) can only have been a selection. Of the incidents she recounted to Luke, he in turn had to select those which were most suitable for his Gospel. Why, we ask ourselves, should he have chosen these, and not others? And why should he relate them in the way he did? How does this chapter fit into the general scheme of his story, and what does he intend his readers to understand from it? 3

1. Three stories

For reasons which will become clear, we shall take the angel of the Lord (2:9), the old man Simeon (2:25), and the child Jesus himself (2:43), to be the central figures in the three sections of chapter 2.

a. The angel (2:1–21)

For many people, the story of Jesus’s birth is practically all they know of Christianity. For Luke, however, a mere paragraph of seven verses (his Gospel contains well over 1,000!) is enough to deal with the nativity itself.

This is not to say that his treatment of the great event is in any way skimped. 2:1–7 is a little jewel of economical story-