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Luke 1:1–4



MANY HAVE UNDERTAKEN to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.



THE OPENING SECTION of this Gospel (Luke 1:1–2:52) introduces the ministry of Jesus against the backdrop of his superiority to John the Baptist.

Since John is a great prophet, Jesus as his superior must be even greater. The narrative also points to the promised regal deliverer of the house of David (1:31–35, 67–69). Since he comes according to God's promise and word, Luke's readers can be assured that God keeps his promises. This major theme dominates the entire unit. What God says, he will do. But before turning to this infancy period and one event of Jesus' preadolescent childhood, Luke introduces his entire work with a short preface of why he wrote his Gospel.

Whether one read the great ancient Jewish works like 2 Maccabees, the Jewish historian Josephus, or the Greek historian Lucian, ancient histories usually opened with a short explanation for the work.¹ Luke's pastoral history is an "account" (v. 1) or narrative about Jesus, like others that have preceded his. It treats events of fulfillment, where God has been at work in a fresh and spectacular way to deal with the needs of humanity. He calls the previous accounts *diegesis*, which simply describes a narrative that can be oral or written. Since Luke uses the word *epecheiresan* in verse 1 (lit., "set one's hand to"), he may have written accounts in mind, while the report of the tradition in verse 2 may be oral. The oral tradition itself is rooted in those who saw and experienced what is reported.

1. See Lucian's, *How to Write History*, 47–48. L. Alexander, "Luke's Preface in the Context of Greek Preface Writing," *NovT* 28 (1986): 48–74. On the genre of Luke, G. E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography* (NovTSup 64; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

The Greek in verse 2 makes it clear that the people referred to had two roles: They were “eyewitnesses” and “servants of the word.” The combination of the single article (“those”) and the trailing participle (“were”) suggest this identification.² Part of the certainty one gains from Luke’s account comes from these roots. The fact that this material has been “handed down” highlights its being part of a stream of tradition, something the Jews knew how to handle with care.³ In the same way as the previous accounts came from eyewitnesses who were servants of the Word, so Luke’s account has been constructed with care. He wants to join this tradition of rendering the Jesus story, adding new material and eventually providing a sequel, the book of Acts (v. 3: “therefore” is more literally “it seemed good also to me” and shows that Luke sees himself following in the line of these earlier precedents).

Luke tells us four things about his work before he tells us why he writes. (1) He has “investigated” the story. That is, he has followed it closely. He has taken a long and careful look at what he is about to tell us. (2) He went back to “the beginning.” This is why he starts his story with John the Baptist, the forerunner, who points to Jesus. (3) Luke was thorough, having studied “everything.” This is undoubtedly why there is so much fresh material in his account. About thirty percent of this Gospel is not found elsewhere, including several of Jesus’ parables. (4) Luke worked “carefully,” taking great care to develop his orderly account in a way that told the story clearly.

When Luke calls his account “orderly,” he probably is not referring to temporal order. By examining the account and comparing it to other accounts, it seems clear that chronological order of events is not what he meant (cf. the relocating of the synagogue incident of Luke 4:16–30 much earlier than Mark 6:1–6). Rather, Luke is concerned to relate the account of Jesus’ ministry in a logical way, including some topical arrangement.

Luke wants to reassure Theophilus, in order that he “may know the certainty of the things [he has] been taught” (v. 4). Theophilus was probably a new believer, who as a Gentile found himself in what had started out as a Jewish movement. He may have come to Christ as a God-fearer—that is, a Gentile who first came to Judaism and then to Christ. (This may explain why Luke loves God-fearers as he tells his story in Acts.) Theophilus may not be entirely at home in his new, racially mixed community, especially if he previously had allied himself to the older Jewish community. Does he really belong here? Luke is trying to show him that he does fit in and that

2. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, I–IX* (AB 28a, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 294.

3. R. Riesner, “Jesus as Teacher and Preacher,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. H. Wansbrough (JSNTMS 64, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 185–210.

God had brought him in by design, along with others who share the path of his journey.

*Bridging
Contexts*

INTRODUCTIONS ARE LIKE road maps—they tell us where we are headed. Even in the first century, the author of a major work often explained briefly what he was doing. For example, the author of 2 Maccabees wrote this about his work (2 Macc. 2:29–31):

Just as the architect of a new house is responsible for the construction as a whole, while the man undertaking the ceramic painting is responsible for estimating the decorative requirements, so, I think, it is with us. To make the subject his own, to explore its by-ways, to be meticulous about details, is the business of the original historian, but the man making the adaptation must be allowed to aim at conciseness of expression and to forgo any exhaustive treatment of his subject.

So now let us begin our narrative, without adding any more to what has been said above; there would be no sense in expanding the preface to the history and curtailing the history itself.

An ancient preface like this one informs the reader of the author's intentions. Histories in the ancient world had three functions: to entertain, to instruct, and to set forth in a concise, often summarized, form the case the historian wished to make. Usually the topic was about the people to whom he belonged. For example, in *Jewish War*, Josephus defended the Jews before Rome by explaining that only a fringe group, the Zealots, was responsible for the chaos of the war that led to Jerusalem's fall in A.D. 70. Thus, Luke explains the roots of a new movement, which he calls "the Way," by detailing the story of its founder and the tie he has to God's long-promised redemption. This is a story with a long heritage and an open ending, since the story of the Way is still being written.

Luke's preface tells us that his story is rooted in sources and his careful work. His goal, to reassure, means that he wants to solidify the understanding of those inside the movement that God is at work. Such solidification in a multicultural context like ours today is still necessary, even though we are no longer dealing with a new movement but one rich in history and heritage. The issue now is not, "Does the Way have a right to exist and should Gentiles be included?" but, "Is its claim of exclusivity for Jesus something that can be sustained in a world of instant communication and of multiple religious presence?" We sometimes forget that pluralism was also present in the ancient world. So Luke's address of Jesus' uniqueness comes from a context not unlike

our own. Our multicultural awareness might be greater today because of satellites and television, but our need for God and for a true revelation of him is just as necessary today. In that sense, Luke's claims are as timely now as they were in his day.

One other key point is raised by this introduction. Luke makes clear his qualifications to present the story by stressing his carefulness and thoroughness. He underscores the credibility of what he has done, so that his work can be trusted. We may not write a gospel about Jesus, but we too must be sensitive to the fact that telling the gospel story means we must have credibility. Integrity is what produces authority, because all other authority is short-lived and temporary. Our strength comes when our message and our lives match. From the moment we meet people and they come to know we are committed to Jesus, until we actually share our message with them, the trustworthiness and ability to assure rests on the conjunction that exists between what we claim and what we do. To state it negatively, if there is no walk to match the talk, then all we will do is sow seed that will bear thorns of rejection. Part of the power in Jesus' story was the coherent mix he brought to his story. Everyone did not accept it, but they did recognize that something was different about him.

There are two additional points of contact between the original story and our world. (1) When we read any written document, we need to know what type of an account it is. Is it a mystery novel, a comedy, fiction, non-fiction?⁴ Knowing the type helps us to understand what is being said. This preface indicates both what we are reading and why it was written. The ancients, just like us moderns, knew the difference between history and fiction.⁵ A check of historians like Lucian, Josephus, and Thucydides⁶ indicate how well they knew their task (e.g., Lucian, *How to Write History*, 39–40). The Gospel of Luke is narrative history. Although the author chooses, summarizes, and arranges how to present the events recorded, the account is an attempt to chronicle what happened nonetheless. Just as a horror film will have eerie music in the background to identify the nature of the scene, so this preface tells us what kind of story we are reading—an authentic portrait of Jesus. We cannot ask this book to do more than it intends. In other words, we cannot expect it to reveal questions about the exact order of events or what precisely was said. Some arrangement is topical, and some of the dia-

4. On hermeneutics and genre, R. Stein, *Playing by the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). To know the genre is to know how to read the text. Luke is writing theological narrative history.

5. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, I-IX*, 16.

6. C. W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983).

logue is condensed in summarized presentation. When this occurs, we will try to note and explain how one can see that this might be the case. But, be assured, Luke wrote history, not fiction or myth.

(2) The background of Theophilus illumines our Gospel. Many people entering the church walk into a new world. The “church” society often has its own theological language, its initially strange customs, and its traditions of worship and interaction. At the start, the fit may seem awkward. To become a Christian in Bible times required a cultural shift, just as it does now. People today need to be reassured that the change in their life is for the best. They live in a world that often regards Christianity as a man-made religion, as a perversion of Judaism, as one of many ways to God, or as one cultural expression of religion. Luke argues that Christianity is unique, in that God worked in Christ for those who trust him. Luke reassures his Christian readers that they belong in relationship with God in this new community, the church. What God did in Jesus, he did for those who have come into this community, as well as for others like them who recognize they must come to God on his terms, not their own.



THE THREE POINTS of application from the preface are linked to the two strands of contact we already noted. (1) Luke tells us of God’s acts in history *through Jesus*. This main character is not a

Savior made up in the image of a person’s imagination. After all, who on his or her own would create a Savior who makes us all responsible for our sin and then chooses to pay the penalty for that sin by offering himself? Who would design a regal Messiah who is born in a stable and never wears a crown or sits in a palace? Who would make a hero out of a figure who was rejected by his own? This history cannot be concocted fiction. It is grounded in real events of an extraordinary figure with an extraordinary story. The unusual nature of the story is a testimony to its authenticity. Its reality is the basis for the assurance Luke wishes to give his readers. God has been working through the One he has sent to show us the way (Luke 1:78–79). In doing so, he has shown himself to be a God who cares about our character and our honesty before him. He also cares enough to be sure that provision was made for us.

(2) God wants us to sense that we fit into his community. He wants us to see that the Jesus story is not only about him, but about us—God reaching out with both power and humility to lift us up and bring us into his presence. God takes people who are “outside” his care and makes them “insiders,” involved and related to the God of the universe. This is good news indeed. The entire story reassures us that God does what he promises.

Thus the preface not only indicates we are dealing with history and his story, but also with our own. We can rest in the comfort of knowing that what God plans and reveals will come to pass. His promise to save us is a commitment to deliver us completely from sin and its devastation, a process that begins when we trust Christ and is completed when we share in glory forever in a sinless new heaven and new earth.

(3) We can trust the Gospel as we read it. Unlike some, even in the scholarly community, who argue that the Gospels are filled with much fabrication, Luke, as a solid ancient historian, records the real Jesus for us and reveals the heart of God in doing so.⁷ He may not have used footnotes as we do today, nor did he have a tape recorder to record Jesus' speeches, but he lived in a community that passed on tradition with care and was sensitive to telling the story accurately in a summarized form. He worked under God's direction, carefully passing on a tradition from those who saw what they preached (v. 2). We can read Luke with full confidence that God is introducing us to Jesus. God reveals himself in the Word so that we may know our real need and story. As John Calvin says,

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those weak with vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens up his own most hallowed lips.

Later in the same section he adds, "God, the Artificer of the Universe, is made manifest to us in Scripture, and that what we ought to think of him is set forth there, lest we see some uncertain deity by devious paths."⁸ Calvin is able to say this to us, because Luke has made clear that he did his work carefully and that God's promises are true.

7. For example, the recent work by the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (ed. R. Funk and R. W. Hoover [New York: Macmillan, 1993]) argues that over fifty percent of the teaching attributed to Jesus has no historical contact with him at all! The fifth gospel is the extra-biblical *Gospel of Thomas*. They received much attention in late 1993 with their color coding of the sayings of Jesus: red = from Jesus, pink = a paraphrase of Jesus, gray = not Jesus' words but may go back to him, and black = not from Jesus at all. For an incisive evaluation of this excessively skeptical approach to the Gospels, see *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. J. P. Moreland and M. Wilkens (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

8. Both citations are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.4.1.

Luke 1:5–25



IN THE TIME of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had

seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Original
Meaning

LUKE BEGINS HIS story by placing it in an established historical setting—the reign of Herod the Great (37–4 B.C.). The NIV's language "in the time" is a smooth rendering for the Greek "in those days," which is adapted from the scriptural language of the Greek Old Testament, the LXX (Judg. 13:2; Judith 1:1; Tobit 1:2).¹ Herod had done much building up of the nation, receiving his commission from Mark Antony in 40 B.C. and returning to Judea to rule in 37 B.C. When the angel appears to Zechariah (Luke 1:11), we are near the end of his reign (5–4 B.C.).

The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist has three aspects to it: the revelation that God has a plan to direct the affairs of humanity and restore his relationship to it, the outline of the career of John himself, and the interplay of the living drama of disappointment in the lives of righteous people, as these "blameless" servants of God had lived with the reality and frustration of being childless. All three themes are central to the original message.

In his goodness, God picks an important moment in the career of Zechariah to make his divine move. As a priest he served at the temple for two one-week periods a year.² He was a member of one of twenty-four divisions in the first-century priesthood (Josephus, *Life* 1 § 2; *Antiquities* 7.14.7 §§ 363–67), one of approximately 18,000 priests.³ More specifically, he was a member of the eighth order, Abijah (1 Chron. 24:10). A priest only officiated at the sacrifice once in his life, having been selected by lot (*m. Tamid* 5:2–6:3). The setting is one of two times for daily prayer set aside at the temple (9 A.M. or 3 P.M.); it is the time of the "perpetual offering" (Ex. 29:38–42). The angel appears as Zechariah places the incense on the altar (Luke 1:11).

1. The more detailed story of this Jewish surrogate ruler is told in the ancient works of Tacitus (*Histories*, 5.9.3) and Josephus (*Antiquities*, 14.14.4–5 §§ 383–86; 14.15.1 §469; 17.8.1–3 §§ 191–99).

2. I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 52.

3. H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (München: C. H. Beck, 1926), 2:71–75.