

Luke's Narrative about Jesus: Beginning the Story (Lk. 1.1-24.53)

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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.

Luke 24:48-53 ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 1:1-4 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father...

Introduction

We begin our study of the Gospel of Luke with a question, namely, "what is this Gospel?" It is one of four Gospels, so what is *this* one? It is a Gospel, so what is Luke *in relation to the gospel*, and what is peculiar about this Gospel *of Luke*? Before embarking on this expository journey through the book, paragraph by paragraph, we need a bird's eye view of it first. That is where these questions take us: to the birds' eye view. Having some idea about where you are going, helps you get there (it helps to look at the whole stairway before taking the first step). It helps at the beginning and it helps when you are half way there. So, today we will introduce the book in its entirety to get an idea of where we are going. Accordingly, the title for this message is "Luke's Narrative about Jesus: Beginning the Story in 1.1-24.53" (or the *beginning* of his gospel story in the 24 chapters).

We have a somewhat difficult goal in front of us. It is hard to get our arms around a book of the Bible as such, as a book. Furthermore, the idea of the book of Luke is initially problematic: we will see that it is not a single book or a whole in itself. So how are we going to attempt an answer to the questions posed above? What should our approach be for such a task? We need to find the writer's clues that point to his goal in writing and how he seeks to reach it. From his clues, we can discuss the following points: the written unit, the addressee, the author, the theme of Luke in relation to the Acts, and the contents of Luke. Then we will be in position to draw out some application. The outline gives us the hooks on the wall on which to hang our coats, hats, and umbrellas. Of course, we have to be selective: many things will become clearer when we get into the details text by text.

1A. The written unit

An interesting and important point for us to consider in doing this overview is that the whole story of Luke, that is, of what we call the Gospel of Luke, is not an independently conceived writing. That is, this Gospel in twenty-four chapters is one component of a single larger work, Luke-Acts. The whole story of Luke is a part. To overview Luke, we have to overview Luke-Acts.

Our point of entry and first clue is, so to speak, in the middle of the book. Keep your finger in Luke 1 and turn with me to Acts 1.1. Note the reference to the "first book," (In the first book, O Theophilus). This corresponds with his statement in the preface to Luke: it seemed good to me... to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you

have been taught (Lk. 1.3-4). Clearly, the “first book” is what we call Luke and the implied “second” book is what we call Acts. This does not mean that Luke and Acts are independent works by the same writer. Among other pieces of evidence, the “study of the prefaces of Luke and Acts in comparison with prefaces in literary works of that era” shows that they “constitute a single work” (Stonehouse, *Witness*, 11). However, it is not the case that we should think of chapter 1 of Acts as actually chapter 25 of Luke, Acts 2 as 26 and so forth. That is, we do not want to miss the distinctiveness of Luke and Acts.

So, our title for this message refers to Luke’s Gospel in 1.1-24.53 as the *beginning* of the story. Thus, when we come to the book of Acts, the title could appropriately be “Luke’s narrative about Christ in Acts 1-28: *the rest of the story.*” Both deal with the story of Jesus. Awareness of this unity and diversity in the narrative is an important asset to keep constantly in mind as we study the Gospel of Luke.

2A. The author

The author is not named in either volume, but Christian tradition “unanimously and confidently assigns the work to Luke” (Stonehouse 20). Various indications from the biblical material come together to confirm the identification we receive from the tradition of extra-biblical writings. We can summarize the argument regarding the author of the Gospel by beginning with the unity of authorship of both books. Because the same person wrote the third Gospel and Acts, we know from Acts that the author of Luke is a traveling companion of the apostle Paul. He is the one who sometimes includes himself in the events he reports in what is aptly called the “we” sections of the Acts (the “we” sections are 16.10-17; 20.5-21.26; 27.1-28.16, and possibly, 11.28, cf. Stonehouse 15.fn2). For example, the writer of Acts narrates in the typical way by referring to “they,” “them,” “the churches,” and so forth up to chapter 16 where, for the first time, he includes himself with Paul: **setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage** (16.11). If you back up a little in chapter 16, observe his statement that **Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him** (16.3) and, as they traveled, **they went down to Troas** (16.8). Then, abruptly and unobtrusively, the third person plural (they) gives way to the first person plural (we): leaving Troas **we made a direct voyage... to Philippi...** where, he says, **we remained** for some days (16.12).

Therefore, Luke joined Paul at Troas during the apostle’s second missionary journey and traveled with him to Philippi. At the close of the third missionary journey, when Paul returned to Philippi, Luke is there apparently having stayed at Philippi for a number of years. He then leaves Philippi and travels with Paul to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Rome (**it was decided that we should sail for Italy, 27.1**). Luke was on board during the famous shipwreck (**we were violently storm-tossed, 27.18**) that occurred on route to Rome. Luke was in the water with Paul and the soldiers.

An accumulation of references to Paul’s traveling companions and fellow-workers, the particular place of Luke among those who accompanied Paul, and the earliest Christian traditions regarding authorship combine to establish the conclusion that Luke the beloved physician (Col. 4.14), of Greek nationality (Col. 4.11-14 probably, at least, possibly distinguishes him from Jewish fellow-workers) is the author of this single work with two distinct but closely interrelated parts.

Evidently, Luke was not an eye-witness of the earliest beginnings of Christianity because in Luke 1.1 he distinguishes himself from **those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses**. Initially, he was better able to write the second volume of his work, but his travels with Paul brought him to Palestine for about two years. There he learned many things about the life of Jesus from these eyewitnesses. So, Luke’s Gospel is **a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us** (Lk. 1.1) that has its roots in eyewitness testimony that goes back to the beginning.

3A. The addressee

Theophilus is the addressee of these writings from Luke: **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** (Lk. 1.1). Because he is called “most excellent,” because of the nature of Luke’s Gospel that teaches the gospel, and because Theophilus has *learned* as one *subject to growth in his assurance* regarding the gospel (Lk. 1.4), we may reasonably conclude that the recipient of these books was a disciple of high rank of some kind in the social structure of the day (probably within the Roman government). The author’s goal, therefore, is to write something that is useful to the instruction and confirmation of a disciple. Without question, the implication is that this twofold work is useful for the instruction and confirmation of anyone who stands in the shoes of Theophilus as a disciple.

4A. The theme of Luke in relation to the larger whole (in relation to Acts)

For a direct clue to the theme of Luke, we must look again to the preface to Acts.

In the first book, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father...

The theme is Jesus (Acts 1.1). Luke is the gospel of Jesus, that is, about Him, but it is the gospel of Jesus in the additional sense that it is the gospel from Him. Thus, he tells us that in the Gospel (the first book), he dealt with **all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up**. The obvious implication here is that the second book (Acts) is concerned with what Jesus “continued” to do and teach after he was taken up to glory (cf. 1 Tim. 3.16 on the great mystery of godliness: He was **taken up in glory**). At the end of the Gospel of Luke, we have these words: **he parted from them and was carried up into heaven** (24.51). The resurrection-ascension of Jesus ends Luke and begins Acts. The writer reaches back in overlap to the ascension of our Lord as the reference point for what Jesus did in founding the church. Luke records what He accomplished for the church in His humiliation and Acts records what He accomplished for the church in His exaltation. At the end of Luke, we have record of Jesus telling the disciples to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit: **And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high** (Lk. 24.49). In Acts, we have record of Jesus bestowing the promise of the Spirit (**Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing**, Acts 2.33).

Therefore, as the record of what Jesus accomplished in the days of His humiliation, the theme of Luke’s Gospel is the proclamation of the gospel in the deeds and words of Jesus. Luke (in Lk.1.1) tells us that his presentation of the work of Christ is a narration or story. Accordingly, Luke’s narrative about Jesus in 24 chapters is the beginning of the story of what Jesus accomplished in humiliation and exaltation, by death and by resurrection, in laying the foundations of Christianity.

Moreover, Luke presents his theme with “literary beauty and charm” that is delightful to the humble reader and technical specialist alike. His Gospel has been called “the most beautiful book in the world” because Luke is a “master of language.” However, as Stonehouse puts it, “The fascination of this book is...more than that of a superficial beauty which tends to vanish as one lives with it and hears what it is concerned to say. Its contents also grip the reader. This is no doubt true because it tells so delightfully the incomparable story of Jesus the Christ...His theme is Jesus Christ” (Witness 9, 13). One of the marvelous ways that Luke focuses on the gripping wonder of our Lord and His work is by his mastery of the art of the unobtrusive narrator.

5A. The contents of Luke

This overview would not be complete if we failed to comment, at least briefly, on the contents of Luke that are distinctive in comparison with the other Gospels.

1B. The size of Luke

In general, we know that this Gentile writer who was not an apostle supplies us with one-fourth of the New Testament in Luke-Acts. In relation to the other Gospels, Luke is the longest. Although Matthew has more chapters (28 to Luke's 24), the Greek text of Luke is about eight pages longer than the text of Matthew (twenty five more than John and thirty-eight more than Mark, Stonehouse, 10).

2B. The outline of Luke

After the introduction (1-3), broadly speaking, the book subdivides into three main divisions: the work of Christ in Galilee (4-9), the work of Christ in journey to Jerusalem (10-19), and the work of Christ in Jerusalem (20-24). Later, we will say more about the outline in detail.

3B. The distinctiveness of Luke

1) The distinctiveness of Luke can be highlighted with the outline in mind.

The unique contribution of Luke to the Gospel story shows up in three places: the birth narratives in the introduction, the journey to Jerusalem, and the resurrection narratives. Remarkably, Luke's material on the journey to Jerusalem (not treated in John) is by far the most extensive: Mark has one chapter (10), Matthew has two chapters (19-20), and Luke has nearly ten chapters (9.51-19.27). Can you imagine the Gospel story without the parable of the lost sheep, coin, and son (the prodigal)? We would not have the parable of the prodigal son without this expansion of material on the journey to Jerusalem. We will do well to keep our eyes on these facts as we move forward in our exposition.

2) Per this overview of the contents of Luke, we can expand on the theme for a summary overview.

The theme of Luke is how Jesus, the son of Adam and son of God (from the introduction, Lk. 3.38), accomplishes the formation of the new humanity (the new race Adam) through the three stages of His ministry narrated in the book (in Galilee, in route to Jerusalem, and at Jerusalem) that culminate in His death and resurrection. Luke records the beginning that leads to what continues in His call of sinners to Himself by finding the lost sons of Adam, particularly as the case of Zaccheaus shows, from the lost sons of Abraham. When He finds the lost, they come to their senses like the prodigal son and return to the Father with claims of unworthiness on their lips (The book of Acts documents this continued work of the ascended Lord in building His church from lost sons of Adam in general and of Abraham in particular: Gentiles are included with the Jews in the church of the Messiah, the Christ).

Conclusion

We can make some application from this overview by connecting the dots between Hebrews 2, the place of Luke as a narrator, and Theophilus, the addressee.

1) Luke as narrator

One of the most important things about Luke is the fact that he is the master of the art of the unobtrusive narrator. He quickly vanishes to the margins of the text after the prologue. What does this accomplish? It accomplishes this significant point: it brings the reader into direct contact with Jesus Christ, to observe His actions and to hear His words. Luke confronts the reader with the proclamation of the gospel by Jesus in word and deed.

2) That is the point of the writer to the Hebrews

Hebrews 2:1-3, Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard...

Hebrews 2 is a call to give close attention, closer attention than ever before to what Jesus first declared. It is a call to dedicate ourselves to our Lord, to hear Him with close and careful attention. This is a call to be devoted disciples of Jesus, for one, in the study of Luke!

To the glory of the risen Lord, ascended, received into heaven, taken up in glory, amen

