

# COMMENTARY

## I. THE BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE OF JESUS: LUKE 1:1—2:52

LUKE

1:1-4

### **A. The Prologue (1:1-4)**

#### BEHIND THE TEXT

The first four sentences of Luke are a literary prologue. This technical opening has precedent in the literature of that day. The purpose of the prologue is to shape the expectations of readers and apprise them of the nature of the document. Luke's introduction invites readers to consider the history of his narrative, the authenticity of his sources, and the purpose of his writing.

In their introductions, all the Gospel writers shape their readers' expectations in various ways. Mark uses a single simple sentence to introduce his Gospel: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). Matthew opens his account with a genealogy of Jesus, emphasizing the importance of Jewish lineage and history for the coming story. John's famous prologue opens with a sophisticated theological statement about the nature of Christ's being.

Luke opens by appealing to seekers of historical truth. In this sense, Luke's avowed method is particularly "modern." Many readers today will resonate with his historical frame of reference, even if they are not entirely convinced of his historical accuracy.

The generally objective tone of vv 1-4, however, is quickly replaced beginning with v 5 by a more Jewish style of history, one characterized by epiphanies and numerous allusions to the OT. This is especially the case throughout the birth narratives (chs 1—3). Although these chapters have historical information about rulers and dates, this concern gives way in ch 4 to the more imprecise chronological style characteristic of the Bible in general and synoptic material in particular.

"The body of the Gospel itself abandons any pretense of secularity and is as much proclamation as any of the others" (Nolland 1989, 11). More like Josephus than Thucydides in this regard, Luke sees God's hand in everything that transpires and is never reticent to invoke divine involvement in human affairs.

## IN THE TEXT

■ | The first words in a book are important; and Luke has chosen his carefully. In his first sentence he identifies three issues about how his narrative is to be understood. First, he acknowledges that others have already written on this subject and that their work informs his. Second, he appeals to eyewitnesses instrumental in the process of preservation. Third, his own historically considered account is for Theophilus, either his patron or his broader audience symbolized as "friends of God" (see Luke and His Community in the Introduction).

First among these issues is the recognition of others who have written on Jesus' life. **Many have already written a narrative about the things that have been fulfilled among us** (v 1). In saying this he indicates that, as a narrative (*diēgēsin*), his story has substantial textual and oral precursors. We cannot be sure whether he intends to supplant these others or simply recast and enhance their story for his audience. Regardless, his motivation drives him to undertake the task of writing a Gospel.

The subject of Luke's narrative is **the things that have been fulfilled among us** (v 1). The Greek phrase emphasizes the divine origin of these fulfilled (*peplērophorēmēnōn*, passive voice) events. That is, they were brought to pass by God, not just by human action. Luke sees these events through the lens of his reading of the OT, the deep structure on which his story rests. This fulfillment language does not so much indicate a promise/fulfillment motif as an intertextual exegesis. The OT story is central to all **these things** that have occurred.

Luke the historian has already tipped his hand on his views about divine causation. Unlike the historical style of Thucydides, he readily finds a divine cause at work in these events. Thus, Luke continually refers to the OT as a way to explain *why* these events occurred. As subsequent chapters reveal, the

OT is the foundation of Luke's theology; and the God who acts in history is its center.

■2 Luke's second concern is that the accounts created by his predecessors are attested by eyewitnesses. He hands on these sacred traditions—**just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word** (v 2). To “hand down” a tradition (*paredosan*), in biblical parlance, is to convey it faithfully to others (see 10:22). In Acts, Luke refers to the traditions “handed down” by Moses (6:14), and the apostles as they “delivered” the decrees of the Jerusalem Council (16:4). *Paradidōmi* in the Pauline letters refers to the faithful transmission of sacred tradition, especially in 1 Cor 11:2, 23; and 15:3. Luke uses this idea more than the other Synoptic Evangelist (see only Matt 11:27), perhaps under the influence of Paul (assuming with tradition that Luke was Paul's unnamed traveling companion in the “we” sections of Acts; see Acts 16:11 and Col 4:14).

It is particularly important for Luke that those who attested to the tradition were **eyewitnesses and servants of the word** (v 2). The term “eyewitness” (*autoptai*) occurs only here in the Bible. It refers to a beginning point for ancient historiography, which anchors an event in time and space (Green 1997, 41; Evans 1990, 126-27; see 2 Pet 1:16). Josephus and Thucydides also use the term for this very reason. The proximity of these eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life, in Luke's view, gives their testimony particular weight. He is eager to preserve it, perhaps aware that these original members of the community are passing away. For Luke, they are more than sterile witnesses, as in a courtroom. They are **servants of the word** (v 2) who gave their lives in service to this testimony.

Ironically, the witnesses in the Lukan narrative are hardly above reproach. They are terrified by what they see (1:12; 9:34), disbelieve what they are told (1:18; 8:53), and misunderstand apparently plain talk (9:45). In this sense, Luke's eyewitnesses are an unreliable lot. But from a postresurrection perspective, a true witness is someone who has “been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us” (Acts 1:21-22). These witnesses are to be heard not because they are a reliable source of historical information, but because they exemplify faithful endurance. Luke views the *autoptēs* as both a witness to history and one who has proven loyal to Jesus. This makes Luke more an evangelist than a dispassionate historian. His soulful bond to this band of witnesses is essential to his understanding of his narrative.

■3-4 Verse 3 begins with *edoxe, it seemed good . . . to me*. This is one of the most “familiar idioms of the Greek language” (Evans 1990, 128). Early commentators on Luke, such as Origen, criticized him for the intellectual presumption inherent in this phrase. His was “the Greek humanist confidence in human reason and judgment” (Evans 1990, 128). Luke differs from the other Evangelists in this respect: he boldly projects his presence into the nar-

rative from these first lines. He is present not only as narrator but also as an investigator who announces his dependence on reason and historical enquiry as adjudicating factors within the narrative.

The boldness of Luke's authorial presence moderates in subsequent chapters as he relies more heavily on synoptic sources to structure his narrative. Throughout most of his Gospel, in fact, his presence as narrator is subdued. He subtly shapes his sources and quietly supplements existing traditional material with his own additions and themes. Ultimately, Luke shows himself to be a traditional evangelist, one whose presence is hidden behind the message, rather than the confident rationalist of vv 1-4.

Luke describes his method as having **carefully investigated everything from the beginning** (v 3). The adverb *akribōs* (**carefully**) is best taken as a modifier of the participle *parēkolouthēkoti* (investigating). That is, he performed his research "accurately."

His research starts at the historical **beginning** (v 3, *anōthen*) of the Jesus story, the birth narratives, not the cosmic inception of the Word, as in John. He writes an **orderly** (v 3, *kathexēs*) account, "in consecutive order" (NASB). This is similar to Peter's "step by step" (NRSV) explanation of his activities in Caesarea (Acts 11:4, *kathexēs*). These phrases indicate a bold and engaged narrator.

The **most excellent Theophilus** (v 3) was Luke's patron, friend, or simply a "catechumen or neophyte" (Fitzmyer 1981, 1:301). Theophilus was under instruction: **the things you have been taught** (v 4). The name Theophilus means literally "friend of God." It was a common name of the time, so most commentators assume this was a real individual, not a symbolic reference to an implied reader (Evans 1990, 132; Marshall 1978, 43; contra Nolland 1989, 10). Perhaps he was an important figure in a Christian community who commissioned the work to advance the cause of the gospel for a broader audience. Or, he may have been a person Luke was attempting to win to the faith. We cannot be sure.

The purpose of Luke's narrative is stated in v 4. He writes so that Theophilus can **know the certainty of the things you have been taught** (v 4). The verb *asphaleian*, **certainty**, has a connotation of "reliability, assurance, guarantee" in a cognitive sense (Fitzmyer 1981, 1:300). This is the "language of history" and "part of the studied secularity of the preface" (Nolland 1989, 11). Despite the historicist nature of the prologue, Luke's purpose is ultimately that of a Christian partisan: to create confidence in "the truth of everything you were taught" (NLT).

## FROM THE TEXT

For Luke, the gospel is a living tradition, passed on from witness to witness. Through his story, these "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (1:1) enter the present to testify to a new audience. In spite of his confessed interest in historical certainty, Luke is not so much a judge of this sacred history as a