
§1 *Luke's Preface (Luke 1:1-4)*

The first four verses of Luke's Gospel make up what is sometimes called a "prologue" or "preface." Since these verses, which are only one sentence in the Greek, actually function as a literary preface, it is probably best to regard them as Luke's preface introducing his Gospel. Since Luke 3:1-2, however, also functions as an introduction to the Gospel and since some of the components found in the infancy narratives of chaps. 1-2 appear to be loosely connected, it has been suggested that Luke added chaps. 1-2 after having earlier written chaps. 3-24. This could very well have been the case. As it now stands the preface introduces the entire two-volume work (which Luke himself calls a "narrative" [*diēgēsis*]), although it chiefly has in view the first volume, the Gospel. The briefer preface of Acts 1:1-2 ("In my former book [i.e., the Gospel], Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach . . .") harks back to the Gospel preface and thus provides an important link between the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

Luke's preface is unique among the canonical Gospels. Mark's Gospel begins abruptly, "The beginning of the gospel [or Good News] about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1), cites portions of Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3 (1:2-3), and then immediately moves into a description of the appearance and preaching of John the Baptist (1:4-8). We derive the literary designation "Gospel" from this first verse of Mark. Matthew calls his Gospel a "record [lit. "book"] of the genealogy of Jesus Christ" (Matt. 1:1) and then lists a genealogy from Abraham to Joseph (1:2-18). John's Gospel begins with a poetic, hymnic prologue (1:1-18) that is, like Luke's preface, somewhat detached from the narrative that follows.

Luke's preface is also unique among the Gospels (indeed, among all of the writings of the NT) in that it is written in a very sophisticated literary style that is reminiscent of the prefaces of some of the classical historians of antiquity, such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius (see Talbert, pp. 7-11). The most in-

structive parallel, however, may be the prefaces with which the first-century Jewish historian Josephus introduces his two-volume work, *Against Apion*. Portions of the preface to the first volume read: "In my history of our Antiquities, most excellent Epaphroditus, I have, I think, made sufficiently clear . . . the extreme antiquity of our Jewish race. . . . Since, however, I observe that a considerable number of persons . . . discredit the statements in my history . . . I consider it my duty to devote a brief treatise to all these points . . . to instruct all who desire to know the truth concerning the antiquity of our race. As witnesses to my statements I propose to call the writers who, in the estimation of the Greeks, are the most trustworthy authorities on antiquity as a whole" (1.1-4, from Marshall, p. 39, citing LCL). Portions of the preface to his second volume read: "In the first volume of this work, my esteemed Epaphroditus, I demonstrated the antiquity of our race . . . I shall now proceed to refute the rest of the authors who have attacked us" (1.1-2, from Marshall, p. 39, citing LCL). The parallels between the prefaces of Josephus and those of Luke are significant and instructive. Many of the words and phrases that are commented on in the notes parallel various items in Josephus. That Luke's prefaces really do point to a single author of Luke-Acts receives support from the prefaces found in *Against Apion*.

Luke states in v. 1 that **many have undertaken to draw up an account**. How many people Luke has in mind is uncertain. Probably he is referring to Mark and Q and perhaps to another source or two from which he may have obtained some of the material that is special to his Gospel (sometimes called the "L" source). The reference to **the things that have been fulfilled among us** anticipates the accomplishments mostly recorded in the second volume, the Book of Acts. **Among us**, by which phrase Luke includes himself as a participant, also anticipates Acts, particularly the "we sections" (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16), where Luke is himself an eyewitness.

In v. 2 Luke tells us that his information comes from what has been handed down from **eyewitnesses and servants of the word** (of God), which probably refers to the particulars of the Gospel story. Luke assures us that he has **carefully investigated** the information that he has obtained from eyewitnesses and various other sources, and now feels that he is in a position **to write an orderly account** for his friend **Theophilus** (v. 3). His purpose in

writing is so that his friend **may know the certainty of the things** that he has been **taught** (v. 4). It is possible that Theophilus, who was probably a new Christian, had become unsettled by some teaching that was not in keeping with apostolic tradition. In any case, Luke intends for his reader(s) to receive an accurate account of **everything**, that is, of every essential aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus and the founding and growth of the church.

Additional Notes §1

Hans Conzelmann's argument (*The Theology of St. Luke* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961], pp. 16 n. 3, 172) that Luke was not the author of chaps. 1-2 is unconvincing when it is realized that important theological themes found in these chapters receive further and fuller treatment later in the Gospel and in Acts. For a better assessment see Tiede, pp. 38-40.

1:1-4 / The preface to the *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates* (1:1-12) also parallels Luke's preface: "Inasmuch as the account of our deputation to Eleazar, the High Priest of the Jews, is worth narrating, Philocrates, and because you set a high value, as you constantly remind me, on hearing the motives and purposes of our mission, I have endeavored to set the matter forth clearly. I appreciate your characteristic love of learning, for it is indeed men's highest function 'ever to add knowledge, ever to acquire it,' either through researches or by actual experience of affairs" (from M. Hadas, ed., *Aristeas to Philocrates* [New York: Harper & Row, 1951], p. 57).

The historical emphasis of Luke's preface may have been designed as polemic against an incipient gnosticizing tendency to minimize the importance of Jesus' real, historical, earthly life. For more on this general theme see Charles H. Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics: An Examination of the Lucan Purpose* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966).

1:1 / **Account** literally may be translated, "narrative," a word possibly suggested to Luke by its verbal form in LXX Hab. 1:5, which the evangelist will later record Paul quoting in Acts 13:41 as an OT text that is vital to the Christian explanation of Jewish unbelief (see Introduction above). LXX Hab. 1:5, as quoted in Acts, reads in part: "I am going to do something in your days [cf. Acts 2:17] . . . that you would never believe, even if someone [like Luke] told [or narrated it to] you."

1:2 / The expression, **they were handed down**, comes from the same word from which we derive our word "tradition" (i.e., "that which is handed down"). See Paul's references to the tradition which he has

received in 1 Cor. 11:2 (order in the family), 1 Cor. 11:23 (Lord's Supper), and 1 Cor. 15:3 (death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus). What Luke is saying is that the eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and ministry have "handed down" the apostolic gospel tradition from which he will attempt to compose his own account.

Those who from the first were eyewitnesses refers to the original disciples who became Jesus' apostles and were eyewitnesses of his life and ministry. This is illustrated in Acts 1:21-22, where Judas' replacement must have been an eyewitness from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, commencing with the baptism of John. Luke, however, may also intend to refer to the eyewitnesses of the various episodes involved in the infancy narratives of chaps. 1-2.

1:3 / I myself have carefully investigated everything: Luke claims to have done his homework and so now is in a position to write a reliable account.

Whereas **from the first** in v. 2 referred to the beginning of Jesus' ministry (and possibly to his and John's birth narratives), the similar phrase, **from the beginning**, in v. 3 translates a different word and refers to the proper starting place for the account (i.e., "from the top").

Theophilus: Because of his Gentile name and because he is addressed **most excellent**, some commentators have suggested that Theophilus was a Roman official to whom Luke addressed his Gospel in an effort to defend Christianity against misinformation and slander. Although it is true that Luke takes pains to show, especially in Acts, that the first Christians were law-abiding citizens, it is much more likely that Theophilus was a new convert, and perhaps an influential one, too, who was in need, as v. 4 suggests, of an exact and authoritative account (see Schweizer, pp. 13-14). Another suggestion has been made that since the name Theophilus means "friend of God," the name is meant to refer symbolically to anyone who is open to God's truth. This idea is unlikely, however, when it is recognized that Theophilus was a name common to Jews, Greeks, and Romans in the first century. Moreover, had Luke meant to address his Gospel to "friends of God" and not to a person named Theophilus, he could (and I think would) have done so in plain speech.