



PART 1: SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW

By David Fields

Luke 1:1-25

I. Weighty Words

“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,³ I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” – Luke 1:1-4 (NRSV)

A. Initial Observations

1. In the Greek text, this is just a single, unbroken sentence – and I like that the NRSV preserves it as a single sentence.
2. Luke is following the tradition of the Greek, ancient history writers. He’s showing that he wants us to read this document like any serious, well-researched history.
3. This sentence is widely recognized by scholars to be one of the most polished, carefully crafted, literary, and elevated sentences in all Hellenistic literature.

Luke is not being pretentious. He moves back into the more common, accessible writing form as soon as he begins telling the story.

More than any other Gospel, Luke focuses on the lowly, those who can easily be pushed to the margins of society. He shows how Jesus flips our value system – the one that honours the winners, the powerful, the smart, the charismatic – to emphasize the value of all people. He shows Jesus’ care for the young, the sick, honouring and elevating women who were often not acknowledged in that culture; Jesus’ compassion for those with diseases that had strong stigmas attached.

The Christian faith is for everyone – regardless of intellectual ability, socio-economic status, gender, background. Luke is showing us that Jesus – his life and ministry, and his death and resurrection – this is for the salvation of the whole world.

So, why such elevated language off the start?

B. Luke is a Trustworthy Source

“...I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” – Luke 1:3-4 (NRSV).

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Luke is doing the work of a faithful researcher, an historian, collecting information from eyewitness, and compiling the story in a way that will help Theophilus and his community, and all subsequent readers – including us – to know that we can trust that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are really real, and truly true.

But is he worth listening to? Even someone skeptical about the Christian message would have to admit, as they read the opening, this writer is very capable – probably brilliant. He’s giving you confidence as a reader that, “oh yah, this guy is no hack.”

In some Christian communities, people may come to feel that their doubts, their questions, and the hard work of thinking things through and considering other angles, it just isn’t welcome. But Luke’s claim to be doing eyewitness journalism, well, that alone demonstrates a commitment to evidence and, therefore, investigation.

Just this first sentence of Luke’s Gospel is reason enough to see that the Biblical authors, and the whole Christian faith, is intended to be very thoughtful. That careful research, looking for what’s really real and actually true, and presenting it in a compelling and helpful way; that matters deeply to the early Christians.

And if it mattered to them, it has to matter to us as well.

C. Luke as a “Faithful Witness” to Jesus

Luke uses the best of his God-given talents to make the news of Jesus as clear and compelling as possible. And he becomes an example for us.

“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”

– Acts 1:1-3 (NIV)

Luke himself is one of Paul’s partners in ministry, joining him on several of his mission journeys. This is almost certainly the same Luke as the doctor Paul speaks of in Colossians 4:14: “Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.”

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Luke is educated in medicine – and clearly, has some incredible literary skills. And he’s using his life to make Jesus known.

Luke as Our Example of Faithful Witness

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will **be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

– Acts 1:8

D. The “Gentile-ness” of Luke’s Gospel

Luke is almost certainly not Jewish. Which would make him the only Gentile author of any Biblical book. When we add up the total word count of Luke and Acts, he writes over 27% of the entire New Testament – more than any other author, including the apostle, Paul.

The name “Theophilus” is a Greek name and reflects that Luke is primarily writing to a Gentile audience.

Theophilus means “lover of God” and was a common name in ancient Greek. Some scholars suggest that Luke is using the name “Theophilus,” not to address an actual man with that name, but every person who is seeking to ‘love God’ and wants more information.

That could be. I certainly think that Luke has a wider audience than one person in mind – this kind of introduction is how history books, meant for a wide audience, were written. But because he uses that honorific title “Most Excellent”, I’m quite sure there was a real person Luke knows and is writing to, expecting Theophilus to share this document much more widely.

E. “Luke” Among Other Gospels

Luke knows he’s not the only one writing down the Jesus-Story. There are other documents describing Jesus’ life and ministry. I think it’s mostly likely that Luke is writing this somewhere in the mid-60 to early 70’s AD. Persecution is breaking out against Christians, and some of the eyewitnesses are being killed for their faith, so it’s becoming more important than ever for the story to be written.

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There are four “Gospels”, which are like “biographies” of Jesus’ life. Each writer has a particular audience in mind, with particular questions, and they are writing for particular purposes. There is a lot of ‘shared’ material, especially between Matthew, Mark, and Luke – often called the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of John only overlaps with 8% of the info shared in the other three. Again, he’s writing to discuss some very specific topics in very specific ways.

The Gospel writers are not just trying to “put down the facts” in a dry, sort of point-by-point way. That’s just not how biographies, or histories, were written in the ancient world. For example, the chronology of events is far less important than we often think in our ‘modernist’ desire for ‘play-by-play’ thinking. They are carefully crafted literary works that tell the story in a way that pulls out certain realities for their particular audience.

“By providing a more complete accounting of Jesus in his significance, Luke hopes to encourage active faith.”

– Joel Green, *Luke*

You may be exploring Christian faith, and your question isn’t so much a “did it happen?” – we will talk about that too – but more, “So what exactly *did* happen?” – like you want to know the whole story of Jesus. And “What would that mean? For me? For the world I live in?”

II. Wrestling With Faith

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are the first people introduced in Luke’s telling. They are faithful God-followers. He’s a priest. They are old, and childless, and disappointed that they are.

Zechariah is serving on rotation in the Temple, and while on duty an angel comes to him and says the Lord has heard their prayers and promises that he and Elizabeth will have a son in their old age.

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

– Luke 1:18

Zechariah struggles to believe him – looking for a sign. The angel does give him a sign – but probably not what he was hoping for.

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¹⁹The angel said to him, “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 appointed time.” – Luke 1:19-20

We can appreciate the sheer humanness of the story. Here’s a man faithful to God and his ways – but when he’s actually faced with this incredible promise of God, he still finds himself struggling to believe it. He’s not just skeptical. I think he’s full on cynical. Month after painful month he and his wife have lived their whole married life in disappointment, even a sense of shame. Of “What did we do wrong to deserve this being barren, God?”

He’s got plenty of evidence. He’s got the story of Abraham and Sarah, and other miraculous births in the scriptures, for one. He’s also hearing this from the angel of the Lord! But his heart is maybe too bruised to get his hopes up.

Some things are hard to believe. Some things are *painful* to believe, because we don’t want to get our hopes up. But Luke is recording this story because:

- It’s what happened – and he wants us to know it. This detail connects us to the much larger story of Israel and offers more detail than any of the other Gospels on the birth story of Jesus.
- And because it reminds us that God’s wonderful plans include very ordinary people, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, and you and me.
- And Luke knows that there are parts of the Jesus-story that are so far out of our ordinary experience, that are “miraculous”, they can be hard to believe. They *should be* hard to believe.

³⁷“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸He [Jesus] said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.”

– Luke 24:37-39

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Jesus expects them to look at the evidence he gives. So, yes, Luke knows he's telling a story that might be hard to believe. It should be. You don't believe everything you read online, I hope. You need to look into it. And Luke is setting us up to do just that.

The question of God's existence is not something you can prove or disprove using the scientific method.

On the God question, what you can do is look at the evidence and weight the possibilities. But to be intellectually honest, you have to at least be open to the possibility of God.

And if you are open to the possibility of God, you have to be open to the possibility of God doing miracles. And Luke is reminding us, if God is real, we have to be open to how God has acted.

And we have to look at the kind of evidence there is. For Christian faith is not blind faith. It's reasoned faith. It is faith rooted in real history.

And Luke's purpose, remember, is to say:

"Well, let's look at what Jesus did. I talked with eyewitness, and took my time to carefully investigate this, and I want you to know you can trust Jesus with your life. Because if it happened, you can't just be a mild observer of it. This story changes everything. And you need to respond."

Conclusion

Like Luke, each of us has been given good gifts from God. For Dr. Luke, it was a keen mind, a soft heart, and a calling to research and record this story in a way that reflects the truthfulness of what happened and what it all means.

What is it for you? God has gifted and called you. What has he gifted you with? What would it look like to use those things for God's glory, and for the good, the "blessing" of others? Who is your "Theophilus"? How can you pass on the truth of Jesus in a way that gives others confidence to follow him?



Open Up

How are you at writing exciting narrative?

- a) I'm another Ernest Hemmingway or Jane Austin;
- b) As good as your average reporter;
- c) I'd starve as a writer?

Luke's writing credentials stand out as exceptional, and as we'll see in this study of his Gospel, we are invited to behold the beauty of Jesus life and ministry with stunning clarity.

Dig In

1. Read **Luke 1:1-4**. What do you learn about Luke from this opening? What do you learn about his purpose for writing and his approach?
2. Why might it matter for you or for people you know that Luke takes this approach?
3. Though Luke addresses Theophilus in this introduction, this story was meant to be read more widely as well. Luke provides an example of using his gifts and calling to make the news of Jesus clear to his friend Theo, and to others who overhear this story.
 - a. What about you? How can you follow Luke's example here?
 - b. Who is the "Theophilus" in your life – that you are called to strengthen their faith, or help address their questions, doubts, concerns?
 - c. How might Luke's approach encourage you as you do that?
4. Read **Luke 1:5-25**. Zechariah has his own doubts – even cynicism perhaps. This story makes clear that God can and does work with those who might struggle to believe what they are promised.
 - a. How does that comfort you?
 - b. How might that fact help you to be gracious to others when they face doubts?

Pray

Take some time to share your requests with each other, then pray for those. Give thanks that God inspired Luke to put down this story in just this way. Pray for God's help to grow your confidence in the news of Jesus, and that you might follow Luke's example of faithful witness to Jesus.