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Moving into the Unknown: the Bible, History and Postmodernity – ancient reflections on a contemporary task¹

1. Introduction – the setting of Luke’s preface

The four verses which comprise the preface to Luke’s gospel are the only discussion of historiographical methodology and purpose in the New Testament. In this paper I want to carry out a clearly focussed investigation into that preface, in the course of which I hope that we shall see themes emerge which impinge directly on the debate about history-writing in the postmodern situation. In that debate, doubt is often cast over whether we can know anything about the past. ‘Moving into the unknown’ is an appropriate phrase for doubts cast over the accessibility of the past, both in the first and twenty-first centuries AD. This is the question which Luke addresses in the preface to his gospel.

The opening of Luke’s gospel goes like this (my own translation):

(1) Since (*epeideper*) many have undertaken to draw up a narrative (*diegesis*) of the things which have come to fruition amongst us, (2) as handed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and those who became servants (*hyperetai*) of the message, (3) it seemed good to me also, having carefully investigated all things from long ago, to write to you a well-ordered account, most excellent Theophilus, (4) so that you should know that the things which you have heard are a sound basis (*asphaleian*).

Luke is writing an opening which is quite different from the other three gospels. There is a ‘deliberately secular style [which] invites comparison of his work with that of the historians of his day.’² Luke is deeply conscious that what he is doing both shares characteristics with the normal pattern of Hellenistic historiography, yet also forms a critique of it.

When were these words written, and by whom? There is not space to give the detailed thinking behind the answer to these questions, simply to say that I shall work on the assumption that this is the introduction to a late gospel, written in its final form perhaps around 90-95AD by Luke, who had been a companion of Paul in the 50s AD. Luke was an educated man (referred to as a physician in Col 4:14) and a Gentile Christian. These facts could be debated at length: the significance of them for the argument of this paper lies in the identification of

¹ Revised version of a paper given to the Christianity and History Forum, Offa House, 20 April 2001.

² J.Nolland *Luke 1-9:20* (Word, Dallas, Texas 1989) p.11.

Luke with the apostolic circle, and the situating of his literary activity in the second half of the first century AD.³

The function of the dedication of Luke's book to Theophilus was to signal a final and definitive form of the material presented, moving from the fluid situation of notes and oral reminiscences, to a text deposited in the library of an aristocratic patron, from which it might be borrowed in order for copies of it to be made.⁴ In distinction from the other three canonical gospels, Luke's work has a continuation in the Acts of the Apostles. This gives Luke a different perspective from the other gospel-writers, and his second volume includes the suggestive statement that the gospel merely showed what Jesus 'began to do and teach' (Acts 1:1), implying that Acts will tell the rest of what he has done. In terms of breadth and ambition his gospel outstrips the others: his aim is nothing less than to tell how the new nation of Christians came into being in the Roman Empire, and claims that this is no myth or fanciful re-telling, but a genuine work of historical investigation. In this breadth and ambition, Luke was bridging two genres: that of (Christian) gospel and (secular) universal history.

In itself this may not have been so unusual an undertaking. Hellenistic historiography (that is, historical narratives of the period 200BC-200AD, written in Greek) did not have the same rigorous standards as other ancient genres: it was not part of the normal educational syllabus, and there were no established classic works to be used as exemplars, which is why Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon were still the acknowledged masters in the first and second centuries AD. Frequent reference back to the classical masters should not obscure the fact that Hellenistic historiography was nevertheless a fertile branch of literature. Tantalisingly brief fragments from works by almost a thousand historians have survived. Boundaries between history and other prose genres were blurred, and the creation of hybrid forms probably quite common.

As a Christian writer, Luke was continuing the work which Mark had done in creating the gospel genre, but at the same time outlining his method and implicitly setting standards by which a historian might provide an account in which the reader might have confidence. This faith in history (understood as the relation of past events) as a path to truth was rare in the ancient world: it was a radically new departure made by the early church. Martin Hengel writes:

One effort brings together all four evangelists: there is a concern to report a real past event which is the foundation for present (and future)

³ Convenient summaries of the present state of scholarly debate may be found in the companion volumes of: J.B.Green et. al (eds) *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, Leicester, 1992), R.P.Martin & P.Davids (eds) *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (IVP, Leicester 1997)

⁴ See L.Alexander 'Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels' in R.Bauckham (ed.) *The Gospels for All Christians* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1998) pp.71-112, especially pp.102-3.

salvation, and this is done by relating 'stories' which together refer to a unique 'history'. For this purpose Mark created a new 'kerygmatic-biographical' genre *sui generis*, which deliberately set out to proclaim the story/stories, understood as real event, as a saving message.⁵

If history-writing is understood as a 'reflexive activity', however, then Luke can claim to be the first Christian historian. Mark had created the 'gospel' genre intuitively, but Luke figured out why he had done so.

In distinction from the other three gospels, which seem to have been written for internal consumption within the community of the early church, Luke's preface consciously signals to a wider audience. In this, Luke situates his work within the secular stream of 'universal history', an established genre in Hellenistic historiography. Such a history of the *oikumene* (the whole inhabited world) was attempted by Polybius in the second century BC, taking the world as being coterminous with the Roman empire, rather as Luke seems to do. Florus, in the second century AD wrote (in his commentary on Livy): 'So widely have (the Romans) extended their arms throughout the world, that those who read their affairs are learning history not of a single people, but of the human race.'⁶ A recent study suggests that Luke was writing a 'foundation-epic' on the model of Virgil's *Aeneid*.⁷ We do not need to be convinced by the overall argument to accept that there are similarities between the aim of the late first century BC Roman epic that recounts the journey of Aeneas from Troy to Rome, and Luke's late first century AD narrative of how 'we brought the good news from Jerusalem to Rome.' A translation of the *Aeneid* into Greek prose seems to have been widely disseminated across the Roman empire by the mid first-century AD.⁸ Similarly, a recent biographer of Nero points out how reminiscent of each other the stories of Jesus and the Emperor could be, when told in a certain way: Luke's story of a saviour and the community gathered around him echoes the way stories of Nero were told, especially the legend that he was not killed but wounded and would return again to save the world.⁹ The works of Luke's Jewish near-contemporary Josephus tackle the same kind of problematic, in seeking to explain how the once-proud Jewish nation was now rightly under Roman domination.

Clearly Luke's focus in his book is the story of Jesus (though you would not know that from the preface: Jesus is not mentioned until 1:31). Nevertheless, the setting is a universal one: his claim is that the particular life of a Galilean prophet

⁵ M.Hengel *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (SCM Press, London, 2000) p.111.

⁶ Quoted in M.Hengel op.cit. p.108.

⁷ M.P.Bonz *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and ancient epic* (Fortress, Minneapolis, 2000).

⁸ Ibid. pp.25-6. The oldest fragment of the Latin text, dated to 73/74 AD, has been recovered from Masada: see H.M.Cotton & J.Geiger (eds) *Masada II: the Latin and Greek Documents* (Jerusalem 1989) pp.31-4.

⁹ R.Holland *Nero* (Sutton, Stroud, 2000) pp.v-vii. The *Nero redivivus* legend figures in Rev 13:3, 17:8: many scholars identify the 'wounded head' with Nero.

provides the key to understanding. A first century book-seller's stall might be host to a conflicting number of interpretations of history, all of which made a claim to derive universal meaning from particular stories. The market-place was a Babel in which competing interpretations vied for hearing. Luke's work exists with this setting in view, and his book jostled for attention on the stall with others such as those of Polybius, Virgil and Josephus.

How did Luke address this situation? Why might the ancient book-browser have chosen his story, rather than those of Polybius, Virgil or Josephus? In the rest of this paper I shall argue that four themes emerge from Luke's preface, coincidentally but conveniently reflecting the four verses:

- A situation of plurality - v.1
- The role of a community of memory - v.2
- The historian's role in investigating and shaping the material - v.3
- Finally, a basis for future belief and action - v.4

These four themes are enduring ones which also feature in the contemporary discussion of history-writing in postmodern times.

2. A situation of plurality

(1) Since (*epeideper*) many (*polloi*) have undertaken to draw up a narrative (*diegesis*) of the things which have come to fruition amongst us...

Luke's opening statement, that he is following in the steps of many others, sets his work in a plural context: the obvious sense of the text shows this, and is commonly taken to mean that he knew at least Mark's gospel and probably a source of sayings about Jesus, as well as material he alone seems to have had access to regarding the trial of Jesus. However, in the light of the foregoing discussion about first-century AD history-writing, there may be more to this opening verse than is at first obvious to us.

The clue to Luke's meaning lies in the two technical historiographical terms used in this verse: *epeideper* (since) and *diegesis* (narrative). Neither are used anywhere else in the New Testament, but both underline the literary nature of Luke's work. Both also occur in the pseudepigraphical Jewish historical work of the mid-second century BC, the *Letter of Aristeas*, an apology for Judaism which drew on a wide variety of sources. This letter begins:

Since (*epeide*) I have collected material for a memorable history (*diegesis*) of my visit to Eleazar the High priest of the Jews, and because you, Philocrates, as you lose no opportunity of reminding me, have set great store upon receiving an account of the motives and object of my mission, I have attempted to draw up a clear exposition of the matter for you.¹⁰

¹⁰ R.H.Charles (ed.) *The Letter of Aristeas* (Clarendon, Oxford 1913) 1

The comparison with Luke's preface is obvious, and gives a pattern for Luke to follow. The *Letter of Aristeas* was quoted also by Luke's contemporary, Josephus. Josephus began the preface to his narrative of the *Jewish War* (completed around 79) with the same word: *epeide* (since):

Since the war which the Jews made with the Romans hath been the greatest of all those, not only that have been in our times, but, in a manner, of those that ever were heard of; both of those wherein cities have fought against cities, or nations against nations; while some men who were not concerned in the affairs themselves have gotten together vain and contradictory stories by hearsay, and have written them down after a sophistical manner; and while those that were there present have given false accounts of things, and this either out of a humor of flattery to the Romans, or of hatred towards the Jews; and while their writings contain sometimes accusations, and sometimes encomiums, but no where the accurate truth of the facts; I have proposed to myself, for the sake of such as live under the government of the Romans, to translate those books into the Greek tongue, which I formerly composed in the language of our country.¹¹

Both Josephus and Aristeas, like Luke, are at pains to emphasise that out of a wealth of material they have put together an account that is clear in presentation and accurate in what it reports. Note, however, that unlike Josephus, Luke casts no doubt on the motives of his sources. His claim to do something different from them is that he has a greater scale to his work: he makes a distinction between those accounts from eyewitnesses from the 'beginning' (*arche*, v.2) taken usually to mean the beginning of Jesus' ministry with his baptism by John (the place where Mark's *diegesis* began), and his own which includes research from 'long ago' (*anochen*, v.3), that is, further back in time. His story is set in a new key.

The situation of plurality in which Luke finds himself, then, is not simply one of a variety of accounts of the gospel story. Rather, his work is situated in the first-century market place. The very nature of his preface suggests this; as Morna Hooker comments:

In the days before dust-jackets and publishers' catalogues, it was necessary to tell potential readers very quickly what kind of book it was you were writing, and explain to them why it was worth reading further.¹²

Luke's is a work which, on the bookseller's stall, or in Theophilus' library, stood comparison with Josephus, whose works also formed 'a narrative of the things which have come to fruition amongst us.' The story which Josephus told may be briefly paraphrased like this:

Yahweh is Israel's God; he has watched over Israel through her history, but now, because of her people's sinfulness, he has abandoned her, and

¹¹ Josephus *The Wars of the Jews* (ed. W. Whiston) Preface 1.

¹² M.D. Hooker *Beginnings: Keys that open the Gospels* (SCM, London, 1997) p.44.

his temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. Yahweh has chosen the Romans to take on the position of world rule which was promised to Israel. The prophet Daniel had foreseen a world ruler who would come from Judaea; he is here, and his name is Vespasian, the Emperor, conqueror of the Jews, whose troops acclaimed him Emperor during his campaign in Judaea from which he went in triumphant progress to Rome.¹³

Comparison with Luke's story is obvious, and the point is that, whether or not either Luke and Josephus knew of the others' work, they were speaking to the same audience. Both provided different interpretations of 'the things which have come to fruition amongst us'.¹⁴

It is important for us to recognise in the first-century Babel of competing book sellers the role of Hellenistic culture in unifying the world in which Christianity spread. The first century had its own limited version of globalisation, as new markets opened up in the wake of the Roman pacification of the Mediterranean. This in turn opened up a free market in ideas right across the Greek-speaking, Roman-dominated world.¹⁵ Luke's apologetic history in the Gospel and Acts took its place in a wider debate about the meaning of universal history and the purpose of the world which was a feature of the first-century Mediterranean market-place. In his own way, Luke was continuing the pattern he reports of Paul debating with the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:16-21), or in the Hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10).

Today the philosopher Gianni Vattimo can celebrate 'a new emancipatory Babel' created by the demise of colonialism and the flourishing of communications technology. For him the dominance of the writing of history by those in power has been fragmented to produce no longer a 'single history, [but] only images from the past projected from different points of view.'¹⁶ This process results in disorientation, but disorientation is healthy in reminding us to attend to others and listen to their stories.

While such a view challenges writers like Josephus, who aim to give a definitive 'right' view at the expense of other, incompetent, 'wrong' ones, it sits comfortably with Luke, who does not impugn the motives of others who have written before him, but emphasises his recasting of their material, building upon it rather than rejecting it. Luke's situating of his gospel amongst the many accounts of Jesus was logically outworked in the church's rejection of Marcion's

¹³ cf. N.T.Wright *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK, London, 1992) p.374.

¹⁴ cf. S.Mason *Josephus and the New Testament* (Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass. 1992) pp.185-229.

¹⁵ For a stimulating examination of the first-century Mediterranean's role in disseminating ideas, see Michael B.Thompson 'The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the first Christian generations' in Bauckham (ed.) *The Gospels for All Christians?* Pp.49-70.

¹⁶ Quoted in D.Lyon *Jesus in Disneyland* (Polity, Cambridge, 2000) p.64.

mid second-century claim to boil down the gospel accounts into a single narrative (based in fact on Luke's), and to adopt as canonical (literally 'standard') the four gospels we know today. This implies plurality within limits. The four were chosen for their reliability and known connection with four major streams of apostolic tradition: Matthew and James (Jerusalem), Mark and Peter (Rome), Luke and Paul (Greece and the Asian provinces), and John (Ephesus). Irenaeus in the late second century emphasised the 'quadrilateral' nature of the gospel tradition by appeal to the four corners of the world, the four winds, four cherubim and four covenants. While this seems esoteric to us, to Irenaeus the point was that four gospels provided a stimulus to varied interpretation, but also boundaries for the variety. As Richard Burridge comments:

Interestingly enough, four is also the number of sides for a playing field or ball park. Whether the game is soccer or American football, rugby or baseball, the ball must stay within the field to be in play; beyond the limits is out of bounds and a 'line-out' or 'throw-in' is needed to put the ball back in play. To hit the boundary may score a 'six' in cricket or 'home run' in baseball – and everybody stands up and applauds; but the ball must still be retrieved and returned to the field of play for the game to continue....By opting for *four* pictures, rather than one, in the Christian tradition, the early Fathers provided a spur to the production of new images of this person in every generation. By selecting *only* four, they mapped out the ball park where those who wish to remain in the tradition must play.¹⁷

Truth lies in the middle, between all four gospels. The implication is that if we define the authentic perspectives on truth, ultimate truth lies between, waiting to be revealed eschatologically: as Luke's mentor Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, 'for now we see through a glass darkly, then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know even as I have been fully known.' But how shall we determine the authentic perspectives on truth? This leads us into verse 2.

3. The role of a community of memory

(2) as handed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and became servants (*hyperetai*) of the message, A historian is only as good as his or her sources, as Polybius emphasised, especially eyewitnesses (anything else was 'hearsay at one remove' in his view). In this verse Luke shows himself to be following Polybius' lead. In recent years there has been a growing confidence amongst New Testament scholars that the memories of the early church were 'handed on' intact. The American scholar Jim Charlesworth recently concluded that 'I think we should assume a tradition is

¹⁷ R.Burridge *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (SPCK, London 1994) pp.176-7.

authentic until evidence appears that undermines its authenticity. I take this position because of the intentionality of the texts; that is, within a few decades of Jesus' death his followers (some of whom may have been eyewitnesses) attributed the saying to him.¹⁸ There was a community of memory at work here, which Luke could draw upon. This is Luke's claim to have good information: eyewitness sources and also the work of those who were appointed guardians of the tradition, whom he calls 'servants of the message'.

Implicit in this verse is a challenge to Josephus and others. Luke has a very good source of information for his story, he claims, in the community of the church. Narratives of Israel or Rome do not have the same kind of controlled transmission of guarded tradition to boast of. The 'servants of the word' (*hyperetai*) which Luke speaks of, seem to have been a group specifically assigned to keep the stories about Jesus. The word is used to refer to the synagogue official who looked after the scrolls of scripture (Luke 4:20), and Luke uses it in Acts as a description of John Mark (Acts 13:5), the same person identified with the composition of the gospel. This suggests that there was a group, from early in the church's history, which took responsibility for the traditions of the church, and even possibly whatever writings were being built up and preserved (Mark is also mentioned in connection with Paul's 'notebooks' (*membranae*) in 2 Tim 4:11-13).¹⁹

This aspect of Luke's preface challenges postmodern assumptions of collage-like and arbitrary historical reminiscence. Only well-mediated and trustworthy sources will do. Any community which fails to guard its past will be in trouble. Accuracy matters and a 'chain of memory' is crucial here. Following Polybius's strictures on eyewitness testimony, Luke emphasises his use of primary sources, once again in distinction from the prevailing ethos of Hellenistic historiography which at its worst degenerated into the quotation of authorities who might or might not have had any direct access to the real event. Luke implies here a check on unfettered imagination. While the positivistic distinction between fact and interpretation would have made no sense to him (a reason, perhaps, why positivistic New Testament historians spent much of the twentieth century picking holes in Luke's scholarship), nevertheless he does emphasise the importance of good sources and well-guarded tradition. This too forms a standard of history-writing proposed by Luke. Ironically the general unreliability of much Hellenistic historiography has led to Luke being tarred with the same brush. He is greatly concerned that the accuracy of his sources be perceived, in order to uphold his claim to an account which will form a 'sound basis' for

¹⁸ J.H.Charlesworth 'The Historical Jesus' in J.H.Charlesworth & W.P.Weaver *Jesus two thousand years later* (Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, Pa. 2000) p.101.

¹⁹ On *hyperetai* see K.E.Bailey 'Informal controlled oral tradition and the Synoptic Gospels' *Themelios* 20/2 (1995) pp.4-11, and N.T.Wright *Jesus and the victory of God* (SPCK, London, 1996) pp.134-5.

Theophilus. Where it is possible to assess Luke's sources, his handling of them seems careful and accurate. What he does do, however, is to 'streamline' them: his claim to have shaped his material in order to serve his overall purpose surfaces in verse 3.

4. The historian's role in investigating and shaping the material

(3) it seemed good to me also, having carefully investigated all things from long ago, to write to you a well-ordered account, most excellent Theophilus

Luke claims to have done his research in this verse. We do not know how, though particularly his infancy and passion material derives from his own sources and is not shared with Mark or Matthew. For these sections of the gospel he seems to have had personal knowledge, on the Polybian model.

But how does Luke reorder the account he has had handed on to him? He begins at Jerusalem with Zechariah, includes material from Nazareth and Bethlehem and also tells of Jesus in Jerusalem at 12. Luke includes Nazareth material He often introduces things 'once, when Jesus was...'. Luke describes a kind of triumphal procession from Galilee to Jerusalem. He has simplified and ordered the account so you don't need to know the geography: it's generally tidier than in his sources, just as he has tidied up their Greek!²⁰ Luke has imposed this structure. According to the commentator John Nolland, the force of 'orderly' account is that 'the word can denote the use of an ordering principle that sets the parts in logical relation to a coherently understood whole (i.e. an ordering according to the sense of the whole) and this seems to suit best Luke's use here (cf. esp. Acts 11:4...).' ²¹

Here Luke accepts that all history-writing has a purpose, even an ideology behind it. Yet where post-modern writers claim that historiography serves the needs of a power-elite, Luke's is the story of an insignificant band of people who introduce the kingdom of God to Rome (the final scene of Acts). In particular, he re-orders his material in such a way as to bring out the participation of those on the margins in the kingdom of God: the poor, dispossessed, unclean and, of course, women. In this his account exhibits the triumph not of a powerful elite, but a weak and insubstantial minority: a subversive narrative which celebrates God's choice of what is foolish and weak to shame those who are wise and strong (see 1 Cor 12:22-28). There seems to be here an ideological commitment in history-writing to precisely those 'hidden' histories which are emerging today. The question of ideology for Luke would become not *whether* an account is ideological: he clearly accepted that it would be (as the comparison with

²⁰ See I.H.Marshall *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Paternoster, Exeter 1970) pp.65-6.

²¹ J.Nolland *Luke 1-9:20* p.10.

Josephus makes clear). Rather the question was *what* ideology, and Luke shows a preference for an ideology of the oppressed in his work, representing a divine 'bias to the poor' and their stories.

5. Conclusion - a basis for future belief and action

(4) so that you should know that the things which you have heard are a sound basis (*asphaleian*).

Asphaleia was a word used by historians to state the reliability of their case, a sound basis for their knowledge. But for Luke simple historical knowledge is not enough. Like his fellow-evangelist John, his work is designed 'that you may believe' and is intended to provide a basis for belief and therefore action. This implies a utility for history: true knowledge of the past should lead to transformed lives. As Paul notes in Romans 12:1-2, bodies presented as living sacrifices should be balanced by minds that are renewed to understand the will of God. History for Luke is not an armchair antiquarian pursuit. Like Polybius, his secular exemplar, his is a 'pragmatic history' and he is an apologist as well as a historian. If Theophilus is to continue in the faith, he needs to know that what he believes can provide a basis for the future direction of his life. By emphasising this, Luke sets himself a high standard. History-writing is a high calling, if it aspires to change the world or uphold perceptions.

In the course of this examination of Luke's preface, I hope that we have established how Luke might have answered the question, Can we know anything about the past? He would affirm, I believe, that we can, and that the means by which it may be done is this: The past can be known through plural perspectives, authenticated by their mediation through a trustworthy community of memory, and shaped for ideological purposes by a writer seeking to provide a sound basis for action. Though Luke's story is one of salvation, I think that in principle his affirmation about knowledge of the past can apply to all historical knowledge. This is the debate about appropriate historiographical standards into which his preface briefly but self-consciously enters, in all its studied secularity. As such his preface stands today, almost twenty centuries later, as both affirmation and critique of some of the tendencies of historical thought as we move from the modern into the post-modern era. Perhaps Luke's preface may serve for the contemporary historian as it did for Theophilus, as a basis for confidence and future action.