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A Working Outline for Luke

[The commentary does not religiously follow this outline; it is provided as a 'reader's map' for Luke's gospel]

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Always Read the Preface

(Luke 1:1-4)

Let's pretend that my four older brothers decided to compile a cookbook of their favorite recipes and dishes. Let's say it's about 200 pages and organized into the customary gastronomical categories (desserts, meats, casseroles, appetizers, etc.). If you simply browsed through, you might be struck with the absence of any recipes using or dealing with chicken. You may find this frustrating and even maddening after a while. However, had you taken time to read the preface, you would not be perplexed. In the preface my brothers would have explained all. They don't eat chicken; they don't care for chicken. It goes back to their childhood. Our father, a pastor, would periodically come home from making a pastoral call on one of his farming parishioners. The farmer had given my father a live chicken; it was placed in a burlap bag and imprisoned in the trunk (boot) of his car for transit. When he arrived home, he would take his axe to the chicken's neck and then my brothers were enlisted in the nauseating job of defeathering the creature and preparing it for its skillet debut. This smelly process served to bring about a certain alienation from all things 'chicken'. Today one would say they suffer from 'chicken intolerance'. Now if they compiled a cookbook, I am sure they would have included a chicken-absence-explanation in the preface—but you would need to read the preface or you would be baffled and irritated by the chicken omission.

It's the same with a gospel—like Luke's. Don't skip the preface. It's there you find some clue of *what* the gospel is about, *why* he wanted to write it, and *how* he went about the task. It may save you some frustration and help you to know what to expect. I know it's usual even in a shorter commentary like this to include a few pages on author, date, background, and so on. But that's been done so often that I tend to think it unnecessary.¹ We can touch on some of those things as needed. But Luke has written his own introduction to his gospel and I'd much rather pay attention to that.

Perhaps most importantly Luke tells us there is a **fascination** at the heart of his 'gospel project'. He says that 'many have taken in hand to compile a narrative of the events that have reached fulfillment among us' (v. 1). Part of the fascination comes from expectancy—these matters did not merely occur, happen, or get accomplished (cf. NASB, ESV); rather they have 'reached fulfillment'.² Such matters, he implies, were the grist of (what we call) 'Old Testament' prophecies—promises and predictions—and they have now come to pass. To see that generates a certain excitement. Nor is this fascination peculiar to Luke. *Many*, he says, have attempted to write up accounts of these things. Does the 'many' include other 'gospel' writers, like, for example, Mark? Perhaps. But it must include quite a number of folks who wrote accounts of one sort or another. Can we envision a Christian writing up a 'gospel tract' rehearsing three or four of Jesus' miracles in order to explain Jesus to non-Christian neighbors? Perhaps. 'Many' were drawn into this task apparently by sheer interest and preoccupation with Jesus' story.

Then Luke tells us that he himself was bitten by this bug: 'it seemed good to me also to write' (v. 3). There were the 'many'; there was Luke himself—such an *eagerness* all around to pass on the gospel record. I think we can easily miss this

1. See the treatment in D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 198-224, who argue for authorship by Luke the physician, a Gentile, and propose a date in the mid-to-late 60s (A.D.). Robert J. Cara prefers to date Luke in the A.D. 50s or early 60s! See his discussion in Michael J. Kruger, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), pp. 93-113, especially pp. 94-96.

2. For discussion, see J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 293.

note of fascination in Luke's preface. The whole story gave early believers itchy pens. And it wasn't simply that ancient prophecy was being fulfilled; it was, above all, *Jesus Himself* who so attracted them. He whetted their appetite, He stirred their interest; they somehow couldn't get over Him, couldn't get enough of Him!

Barbara Tuchman tells of once speaking with a young member of a college history department. He was bogged down in his doctoral thesis; it was about an early missionary in the Congo who had never been 'done' before. 'I just don't like him,' he said. Sad when one can't muster enthusiasm for the task of obtaining one's academic union card. All of which led Tuchman to say, '[I]t is this quality of *being in love with your subject* that is indispensable for writing good history.'³ Luke's gospel then should be 'good,' for he's clearly in love with his subject, along with many others at the time. They were captivated by Jesus; they simply couldn't leave His story alone. And where is our fascination?

Secondly, Luke says there's a **passion** that marks this gospel story (vv. 2-3a). It's a passion for accuracy—and not merely on Luke's part but on the part of the 'many' others who had sketched accounts. They passed on their story 'just as' the original eyewitnesses of the gospel events had 'handed them on'.⁴ There was a concern for exactness; they refused to fudge or pad or exaggerate what came to them from the eyewitnesses. And Luke himself followed suit. His work was characterized by the most painstaking and thorough research: 'it seemed (good) to me also, having followed all things carefully from the beginning...' (v. 3a). One can imagine, among other things, that when Luke was with Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 21:15), and perhaps in Israel during Paul's two-year confinement in Caesarea (Acts 24:27), that he could well have interviewed any number of original eyewitnesses and confirmed their testimonies.

Sometimes we don't always appreciate the care artists and others take in producing their work. Norman Rockwell

3. Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 14 (emphasis mine).

4. The eyewitnesses were those who 'became servants of the word'. I identify these primarily with the apostles.

produced a cover, called *The Shiner*, for 'The Saturday Evening Post.' It shows a girl about ten with red braids and a black eye, sitting outside the school principal's office. She's perhaps had a fight with a boy? Rockwell's model was Mary Whalen, the daughter of his lawyer. But how to paint a 'black eye,' which can sometimes show a variety of colors. He checked a local hospital for eye-injured patients—there were none. He told a newspaper reporter he would accept a black eye in any of its advanced stages of discoloration. Several hundred people, including many prisoners, responded. He finally used as his model a two-and-a-half-year-old boy who had fallen down a flight of stairs and come up with two shiners. Rockwell painted the bruise on little Tommy Forsberg's eye on to 'Mary Whalen's' face.⁵ All that trouble and care just to get it right. And Luke is saying that he and his predecessors took the utmost care to be exact and accurate in their writing.⁶ It was a passion.

Some might object that since Luke and others had an *agenda* (to win people to Jesus) they obviously must have 'souped up' the truth in order to make their account more convincing. But they dared not do that. There were gobs of eyewitnesses around in the first century and not all eyewitnesses were pro-Jesus. In the first century there were many eyewitnesses who were hostile to Jesus and opposed to the apostles. If the early Christians, whether in written accounts or in oral witness, had exaggerated or twisted the truth, they would've been exposed by the 'anti-Jesus' coalition. They *had* to be careful with their claims. So, it is simply not true that evangelism compromises historicity; rather, evangelism demands accuracy. And since such care was taken for truth, you need to face its claims.

Finally, Luke tells us his **intention** in writing his gospel: 'to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, in order that you can know the certainty of the matters of which you've been instructed' (vv. 3b-4).

I take Theophilus to be the real name of an individual, who was likely already a Christian but needed additional

5. Deborah Solomon, *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 280.

6. I am not denying the God-breathed or 'inspired' character of Luke's gospel; but inspiration does not negate perspiration.