

The Hodder Bible Commentary

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Edited by Lee Gatiss

LUKE

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Series Preface

The unfolding of your words gives light
(Psalm 119:130)

The Hodder Bible Commentary aims to proclaim afresh in our generation the unchanging and unerring word of God, for the glory of God and the good of his people. This fifty-volume commentary on the whole Bible seeks to provide the contemporary church with fresh and readable expositions of Scripture which are doctrinally sensitive and globally aware, accessible for all adult readers but particularly useful to those who preach, teach and lead Bible studies in churches and small groups.

Building on the success of Hodder's NIV Proclamation Bible, we have assembled as contributors a remarkable team of men and women from around the world. Alongside a diverse panel of trusted Consultant Editors, they have a tremendous variety of denominational backgrounds and ministries. Each has great experience in unfolding the gospel of Jesus Christ and all are united in our aim of faithfully expounding the Bible in a way that takes account of the original text, biblical theology, the history of interpretation and the needs of the contemporary global church.

These volumes are serious expositions – not overly technical, scholarly works of reference but not simply sermons either. As well as carefully unpacking what the Bible says, they are sensitive to how it has been used in doctrinal discussions over the centuries and in our own day, though not dominated by such concerns at the expense of the text's own agenda. They also try to speak not only into a white, middle-class, Western context (for example), as some might, but to be aware of ways in which other cultures hear and need to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

As you tuck into his word, with the help of this book, may the glorious Father 'give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better' (Ephesians 1:17).

Lee Gatiss, Series Editor

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I

Preface

LUKE 1:1–4

A brief opening statement in the style of some ancient Greek literary prologues begins this work and is briefly recalled in Acts 1:1–2. Although the author’s name is not revealed, several early Christian witnesses testify that Luke the physician and companion of the apostle Paul was responsible for both volumes (see my Introduction, pages 1–2). With this sort of preface, John Nolland contends that Luke is ‘evidently claiming some relationship between his own work and published literary, and especially, historical works of his day’.¹ However, several expressions point to the distinctly Christian nature of his subject matter. Many of the claims made in this prologue could apply to Acts as well, although some have a more direct reference to the Gospel.

Introduction

I Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled^a among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the word.

³With this in mind, since I myself have

carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

—————
^a ¹ Or *been surely believed*

I. Luke first mentions the achievement of his many predecessors, who ‘have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us’. The term *diēgēsis* (‘account’) suggests that they wrote narratives to explain the significance of events, rather than a loose collection of sayings or stories. Mark’s Gospel is likely to have been one of Luke’s sources, although he regularly incorporates material from elsewhere. Broadly speaking, his predecessors were concerned with ‘the things that

¹ Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 5. See also Peterson, *Acts*, 101–2. Nolland provides a helpful guide to the scholarly literature and the issues involved in this debate.

have been fulfilled among us'. Parallel terms show a significant interest in this theme in Luke–Acts.² 'Among us' refers to the community of believers formed by God's extraordinary actions in the life and ministry of Jesus and the subsequent proclamation of the message about him. Luke himself was present for some of the events recorded in his second volume and could have consulted many of the earliest disciples about these matters in his travels with Paul (note the 'we sections' in Acts 16:10–17; 20:4–5; 21:15–19; 27:1–28:16).

2. Both Luke and his literary predecessors were dependent on 'those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the word'.³ The Greek syntax indicates that one group is being identified here, rather than two. It is unlikely that 'the word' should be taken as a reference to the person of Jesus (as in John 1:14), since the gospel of Jesus is regularly described in Luke–Acts as 'the word'.⁴ So the expression combines two aspects of their role: those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus and his ministry 'from the first' – that is, from the time of his baptism by John (3:21–3; Acts 1:21–2; 10:37) – soon became devoted agents of the message Jesus preached (Luke 6:12–16; 9:1–6; 24:25–49). Their task was to explain and proclaim the significance of the things they had seen and heard. Such people 'handed down' or delivered their testimony to the Christian community in both oral and written forms (see 1 Corinthians 15:1–8; Hebrews 2:1–4; 1 John 1:1–4; Jude 3).

3. Luke links his own activity with that of his immediate predecessors (ESV, 'it seemed good to me also') and implies no criticism of their work when he claims to have 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning'. This could refer both to his personal engagement with the witnesses and his close examination of the various sources that were

² The NIV alternative translation ('been surely believed') is less appropriate here. The passive verb *peplērophorēmenōn* suggests God's actions to completely 'fulfil' his purpose (BDAG). More commonly, Luke uses *plēroō* and related terms in relation to the fulfilment of divine revelation (Luke 1:20; 4:21; 24:44; Acts 1:16; 3:18; 13:27, 33). The verb *teleō* ('accomplish, perform, fulfil') and related terms are similarly used in Luke 1:45; 18:31; 22:37; Acts 13:29. See also *pimplēmi* ('fill, fulfil') in Luke 21:22.

³ This is the only use of the word *autoptēs* ('seeing with one's own eyes') in the Greek Bible, though it was common in secular histories. Luke's preferred term is *martys* ('witness'), as in Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15, 20; 26:16.

⁴ See Luke 5:1; 8:11, 12, 13, 15, 21; 11:28; Acts 4:31; 6:2, 7; 8:14, 25; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5, 7, 26, 44, 46, 48, 49; 14:3; 15:35, 36; 16:32; 17:13; 18:11; 19:10, 20.

available to him.⁵ Luke asserts his trustworthiness as a historian who has investigated the evidence extensively ('from the beginning'), comprehensively ('everything') and according to the expected standards of his era ('carefully'). 'From the beginning' (*anōthen*) most likely means from the beginning of the gospel story (as in verse 2, *ap' archēs*). When he talks about writing 'an orderly account' (*kathexēs*, 'in order'), he could mean chronological, geographical, logical or thematic order. The same term is used in Acts 11:4, where Peter describes his encounter with Cornelius from his own perspective (NIV 'the whole story'; ESV, 'in order').⁶ Both the Gospel and Acts are concerned with chronological and geographical order, but Luke also arranges his material thematically. He includes editorial comments and material from different sources to give his narrative its own distinctive character.

Luke's personal address to Theophilus without mentioning a wider audience is unusual. Most likely, he hoped that Theophilus would recommend his work to others and help to publish it.⁷ He may have been a God-fearing Gentile who had embraced Judaism and then Christianity. Although 'most excellent' is an honorific title for Roman officials in Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25,⁸ applied to Theophilus it may simply mean that he was a socially respected individual.

4. Luke's goal was that Theophilus and those he represented might know 'the certainty' (*asphaleia*, 'security, truth' (BDAG)) of the things they had been taught. The verb *katechō* ('inform, teach, instruct') could imply that Theophilus was an outsider who had merely received reports about Christians and their beliefs and needed assurance about their truthfulness (see Acts 21:21, 24). However, it is more likely that he was an insider who had been formally instructed in the Christian faith (see the use of this verb in Acts 18:25; 1 Corinthians 14:19; Galatians 6:6) and needed assurance about certain issues.⁹ The contents of Luke and Acts, their

⁵ The verb *parakolouthēō* can mean 'follow, accompany, attend' or 'pay careful attention to' (BDAG). See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 296-97.

⁶ The same Greek word is used for chronological order in Acts 3:24 and geographical order in 18:23. See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1-9:51* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 62-3.

⁷ Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 299-300, disputes this, but argues that the dedication means that 'Theophilus stands for the Christian readers of Luke's day and thereafter'.

⁸ Compare Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.273; 20.12; *Life* 430.

⁹ Patrick Schreiner, *The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 23, argues that the uncertainty of Luke's first readers 'seems to have stemmed from ethnic, gender, supernatural, social, economic, and political realities'.

emphases and their style of argument suggest that the documents were written for those already reasonably well informed about Christianity, who would be interested in all the details and be able to comprehend the use of Scripture to explain the events. Luke's unique contribution is to provide his readers with a fresh presentation of the gospel story in a salvation–historical framework, from the announcement of John the Baptist's birth to the establishment of Christianity in Rome.

Luke's pastoral aim

As readers of Luke's Gospel, we are challenged to take seriously the author's claim to have researched thoroughly and written thoughtfully about his subject. His reference to 'the things that have been fulfilled among us' expresses his intention to focus particularly on the actions of God to accomplish his plan of salvation for Israel and the nations. To this end, he regularly points to the fulfilment of Scripture and prophecies given within the context of his narrative. In Robert Tannehill's words, Luke establishes an order in his narrative that 'nourishes faith because it discloses a saving purpose behind events'.¹⁰ Luke is interested in people, not just events. He addresses his work to Theophilus and others like him, who have some belief in Jesus but still have questions and doubts about important issues. Set within the context of first-century Judaism and the wider world of the Greco–Roman Empire, Luke's narrative indicates the historical, theological and practical importance of the unique events and teaching he records. At the same time, it introduces us to many characters who bear witness to the impact that Jesus and the gospel had on their lives. Paul John Isaak argues that Luke's Gospel is 'simultaneously the most universal of the four gospels and the most personal', enabling the author to 'embrace diverse groups – the rich, the poor, children, women, men, the powerful and the powerless, the elite and the marginalized'.¹¹ Luke–Acts as a whole is designed to motivate and equip believers to persevere in the face of doubts and opposition, and to give them resources to communicate and live out their faith in an unbelieving world.¹²

¹⁰ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 1, 12.

¹¹ Isaak, 'Luke', 1232.

¹² Green, *Luke*, 21–2.