Luke's Prologue to His Gospel and the Study of History

by Mark Sidwell[1]

One purpose of constructing a biblical worldview is to enable Christians to follow Scripture in shaping their approach to every human endeavor. This is as true of high culture and academic disciplines as in other spheres of life. A Christian artist should strive to form and follow a Christian philosophy of art. Christian readers and writers should consider how the Bible directs a proper approach to literature. Students of history ought to follow the same path. Christianity is a historical religion, revealed in God's actions in human affairs, and Scripture provides guidance about how to view history.

Because so much of the Bible is historical, it is daunting to survey the historical sections of Scripture in order to formulate a biblical approach to history. Think about how massive Augustine's *City of God* turned out to be when that writer wrestled with writing a Christian philosophy of history. A more manageable and focused topic to tackle is the prologue of Luke's Gospel (1:1–4). In a single Greek sentence Luke outlines issues and principles that the Christian historian should weigh. Although the inspiration of Scripture precludes historians from aspiring to the level of Luke's work, his prologue nevertheless suggests the value that other works of history can provide.[2]

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[1] Mark Sidwell (PhD, Church History) is a retired professor in the Division of History, Government, and Social Science at Bob Jones University, where he still serves as adjunct faculty. In addition, he is adjunct professor of church history at Geneva Reformed Seminary. His books include *Free Indeed: Heroes of Black Christian History* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth, 2002) and *Set Apart: The Nature and Importance of Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2016). The author would like to thank Charles Barrett, John Matzko, and Randy Leedy for reading this article and providing helpful comments and suggestions.

[2] There is a large literature on Luke as a historian. For an excellent overview of interpretations of Luke the historian that also offers careful analysis of related issues, see Scott McKnight and Matthew C. Williams, "Luke," in *Historians of the Christian Tradition,* ed. Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 39–57. Among the numerous helpful full-length works are I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), and for an older but still useful study, A. T. Robertson, *Luke the Historian, in the Light of Research* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936). Despite some critical views, Justo González, *The Story Luke Tells: Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) offers thought-provoking observations about Luke's work. Also of interest is Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles,"* trans. Ken McKinney, Gregory J. Laughery, and Richard Bauckham, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 121 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). This work covers more recent literature and provides pertinent discussion of issues relating to Luke's historical work from the perspective of narrative criticism; however, the author is open to critical views and, in postmodern fashion, unduly inserts the author between the history and the reader. Among the numerous shorter studies, see Earl E. Cairns, "Luke as a Historian," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122, no. 487 (1965): 220–26, which is surprisingly thorough considering its short length, and F. F. Bruce, "The First Church Historian," in *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley,* ed. James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1–14. On the prologue in particular, an older but highly influential contribution is Henry J. Cadbury's extremely technical "Commentary on the Preface of Luke," Appendix C in *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I The Acts of the Apostles,* ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, vol. 2 *Prolegomena II Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 489–510.

Luke the Historian

Writers commonly call Eusebius of Caesarea "the father of church history" because of his influential *Ecclesiastical History* written in the fourth century. Certainly his work was important, a key precedent in recording the church's history. Yet Luke, writer of the Book of Acts, could also bear that title. Even those scholars who question the inspiration of Luke's writings have difficulty denying that he was as much a historian as Eusebius (although some do). How much more should those who believe in the inerrancy of Luke's work through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit regard Luke as a pioneer—indeed *the* pioneer—church historian.[3]

We know few biographical details about Luke. Paul calls him "the beloved physician" (Col 4:14), indicating that he was a doctor. Paul also apparently identifies him as a Gentile (not among those "who are of the circumcision," Col 4:11).[4] The only certain fact we have about his life is that he was a companion of Paul, as indicated by the "we" passages in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–8; 27:1–28:16) and brief references in Paul's epistles. Luke was one of Paul's few companions with him just before the apostle's execution (2 Tim 4:11). Schaff calls later traditional stories about Luke "far below the healthy and certain tone of the New Testament, mostly vague and often contradictory, never reliable."[5] Schaff mentions the traditions that Luke was a painter, that he suffered crucifixion in Greece, and that his remains were ultimately buried in the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople—none of which is demonstrably more than legend.

Anyone approaching the study of history must face the basic question: What is history? People generally understand the term *history* differently in different contexts. Walter Kaiser captures something of this diversity in his use of the terms "history-as-event" and "history-as-account."[6] Sometimes we think of "history" as all the events that have ever occurred in the past—"history-as-event." Such history is real but unknowable in its totality, except in the mind of God. "History-as-account" is what we read or study. Someone has researched sources from the past to construct a narrative that attempts to reflect "history-as-event," doing so well or poorly according to the ability of

[3] There is little surviving evidence of organized Christian historical writing between Luke and Eusebius. One of the few possible historians in this period is Hegesippus (second century), whose work is lost but fragments of which are preserved by Eusebius. Judging from these fragments, however, Hegesippus's work does not appear to be a systematic history of Christianity as much as a collection of anecdotes. See Mark Sidwell, "Hegesippus: 'Grandfather of Church History,'" *Biblical Viewpoint* 23, no. 2 (1989): 73–81. Robert Wilken credits Hegesippus with perhaps the earliest appearance of a common idea in Christian views of history, that the apostolic age is a unique and indeed model historical era, "the standard by which all other ages are judged." Robert L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (1971; reprint, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 44–45. For the relevant passage in Hegesippus that Wilken discusses, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.19.

[4] William Kirk Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, and Company, 1882) argues that the medical language used by the author of the Gospel and Acts proves his identity as a doctor. Later writers have generally scouted this idea, but Hobart does show that the author demonstrated a familiarity with medical language.

[5] Philip Schaff, *Apostolic Christianity,* vol. 1 of *History of the Christian Church* (1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 652. See Schaff's brief sketch of Luke's life, 649–52.

[6] Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 2.

the historian and the sources available. Even inspired scriptural histories remain only accounts that present a part of the past selected according to the purpose of the writer and the divine intention.

Luke's Terminology

With this understanding of "history-as-account" in mind, we can look more closely at how Luke wrote an "account," starting with the terminology used to describe his work. One important term, which Luke did not use of his book, is *Gospel*.[7] A "Gospel" is a uniquely Christian form of literature, the Gospel of Luke being of the same genre as Matthew, Mark, and John. Each of these works presents the "good news" of Jesus Christ with the "news" implying that something is true, that something has happened.[8] Luke helps define a Gospel when he describes his particular Gospel as an account of "all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). A Gospel, then, is a historical record but also a portrait of the person and work of Jesus Christ. That later "Gospels" such as collections of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas or the ludicrous infancy narratives such as the Gospel of James are non-historical or legendary does not affect the historical validity of the canonical Gospels.

In Acts 1:1 Luke uses the term *treatise* to describe his Gospel, though the Greek word *logos* has a wide semantic range of meaning that limits its usefulness in understanding precisely how Luke defines his work. More narrowly, in Luke 1 the author uses "declaration" (v. 1), also rendered "account" or "narrative" (Gk. *diégēsin*). Joseph Fitzmyer pulls together these shades of meaning, translating the word as "a narrative account" and calls it Luke's "quasi-title" for his Gospel.[9] Some translations imply another term in verse 3 as "orderly account" (ESV and NIV), but there is no noun in the Greek. Rather these words are adverbs for "accurately" and "successively," as reflected in the KJV, "write unto thee in order," emphasizing the manner of writing rather than a term for the kind of writing. In brief, Luke writes an "account," a report or description, of the life and work of Jesus Christ although, as we shall see, it has a theological purpose.[10]

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[7] Luke uses forms of the word *gospel* in quoting Jesus (e.g., 4:18) and in describing Christ preaching the gospel (e.g., 9:6) but does not use the word to describe his own work as Mark does in Mark 1:1. Luke also uses the word several times in Acts, normally of preaching the gospel (cf. Acts 8:25; 14:7; 16:10).

[8] As F. F. Bruce notes, "Christianity as a way of life depends upon the acceptance of Christianity as good news. And this good news is intimately bound up with the historical order." F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?,* 5th rev. ed. (1960; reprint, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 7–8.

[9] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX),* AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1981), 174. Fitzmyer offers a good discussion of usage of the word, describing the numerous ways *diégēsin* was used in Greek literature, noting particularly how writers used it of historical accounts but not exclusively in historical writing. Among the several examples of how the word is used of historical works, he includes some from Josephus, which might prove an interesting parallel to his contemporary Luke (292).

[10] Edwards suggests Luke's use of the singular for "account" in v. 1 implies that there is "but *one* gospel narrative, of which there are various versions." James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 24, italics in original.

Luke's Accuracy

The idea of a historical account brings us to the next question: How true is Luke's account? Scholarly questions about the historical value of Luke's writings trace back largely to Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) and the Tübingen school of interpretation, which dramatically reduced the historical value of Luke's work. Dating Acts to the second century, Baur and his followers viewed the book as an apologetic for Christian unity written long after the events it supposedly describes. This approach understandably provoked considerable controversy, and its ideas echo through Lukan studies down to the present.[11] One response was a spate of efforts to defend the historical value of Luke's Gospel and Acts. Among these was that of Sir William Ramsay (1851–1939). Schooled in the Tübingen approach, Ramsay began his career as an archeologist with a low opinion of Acts as a historical source, but his research changed his mind. He concluded that the accuracy of Luke in many factual details pointed to his overall dependability.[12] Other scholars have followed this approach even before Ramsay, such as J. B. Lightfoot, and more modern writers such as F. F. Bruce.[13]

It has sometimes been assumed that Luke's accuracy could not have been greater than that of the ancient Greek historians. The implication of such arguments is that we cannot expect Luke to be any more accurate than Greek historians in general. Yet, for the moment leaving aside the question of inspiration, Greek historians theoretically had a high respect for historical accuracy, even if many fell short in practice. Lucian, whose *How to Write History* was perhaps the only essay on the theory of history in ancient Greek literature, says that "history cannot admit a lie, even a tiny one, any more than the windpipe . . . can tolerate anything entering it in swallowing" and that "history has one task and one end—what is useful—and that comes from truth alone."[14]

A particular focus in comparing Luke to other Greek historians has been the speeches in Acts.[15] Greek historians commonly composed fictionalized speeches that they inserted in the mouths of their subjects, with no listeners or readers believing such speeches to be *ipsissima verba.* In his history of the

[11] For an excellent review of the history of the interpretation of Acts, see W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). See also a concise summary of Gasque's conclusions in his article "The Historical Value of the Book of Acts: An Essay in the History of New Testament Criticism," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1969): 68–88. As a typical example of how Tübingen still affects evaluation of Luke's work, see the introduction to Luke in Michael Grant, ed., *Readings in the Classical Historians* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 395–97.

[12] For a summary of Ramsay's approach to and attitude toward Luke's work, see W. M. Ramsay, *Luke the Physician and Other Studies in the History of Religion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 3–68. In *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1911; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 35–52, Ramsay describes his change of attitude toward the historicity of Acts because of its accuracy in details.

[13] Noting that Luke "affords his critical readers so many opportunities for testing his accuracy," Bruce compactly reviews many specific historical references that Luke records correctly in the Gospel and Acts. *The New Testament Documents,* 80–92.

[14] Lucian, *How to Write History* 7, 9. Marguerat, 13–21, discusses Luke's work in light of the ideas Lucian sets forth about Greek historiography.

[15] For a brief overview of the issue, see F. F. Bruce, *The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles,* The Tyndale New Testament Lecture, 1942 (London: Tyndale, 1942), 5–8; available at https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tp/speeches_bruce.pdf, accessed October 22, 2025.

Peloponnesian War, Thucydides frankly admitted composing speeches that were not transcriptions of the originals. Critics then suggest that the same is true of Luke, as in the sermons recorded in Acts. Thucydides also describes, however, how he sought to use his own recollections and the recollections of others to preserve the essence of such speeches, "the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible."[16] If Greek historians in general sought the highest degree of accuracy that they could, there is little reason on that basis to question how Luke, with even greater resources, could achieve accuracy.[17]

Certainly Luke displays a great sense of history in his Gospel and Acts, demonstrated by his attention to historical detail. Luke is deeply aware of contemporary events, placing both the Gospel account and the rise of the church within their historical milieu. A good example of this awareness is Luke's introduction to the ministry of John the Baptist: "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother, Philip, tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness" (Luke 3:1–2). Even then we cannot miss Luke's ironic underscoring about what is important in history. Despite the presence of notable Roman and Jewish leaders, "the *word of God* came unto *John* in the *wilderness.*" Elsewhere, Luke carefully records contemporary events and personages. Bruce notes, for example, that Luke is the only NT writer to name a Roman emperor, in fact naming three (Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius).[18]

Luke and the Historian's Method

Charles Erdman succinctly observes, "The fact of inspiration should not blind us to the human means by which the Spirit of God secured accuracy in the communication of truth and in the composition of the Holy Scriptures."[19] In the prologue to his Gospel (1:1–4), Luke not only offers a summary of his own method of research and writing but also provides guidelines for the Christian historian:

> Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent

[16] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.22. In general historians do not regard Thucydides's speeches as fiction, even though they do not think that they are precise recreations of the original speech. Barker observes, "Modern opinion on the whole agrees that these speeches [in Thucydides] do not violate credibility." John Barker, *The Superhistorians: Makers of Our Past* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1982), 24.

[17] McKnight and Williams observe, "The question that needs to be addressed is this: did Luke summarize the actual speeches accurately, or did Luke invent the speeches according to his own needs?" They appeal to both the pattern of historical writing and theological content of the sermons to indicate the dependability of Luke's accounts (47–48).

[18] Bruce, *The New Testament Documents,* 81. He goes on to note other examples of Luke referring to specific Roman officials, Jewish political leaders, and Jewish religious leaders, 81–82.

[19] Charles Erdman, *The Gospel of Luke: An Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1931), 17.

> Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

Although various authors have found different schema for history in this prologue,[20] I suggest four concepts discernible in Luke's history: the use of sources in writing history, history's basis in real events, the importance of orderly presentation in history, and the reliability of history—the latter a point in which the question of biblical inspiration plays a large role.

Investigating Sources in History

First, all good history is based on careful research of sources. Luke acknowledges his dependence on sources, citing "eyewitnesses" who helped in preparing his account and admitting that he was not always among the witnesses. Robertson summarizes Luke's sources as personal observation (for Acts), interviews with eyewitnesses, and documents.[21] More specific suggestions for sources are Mary (Luke 2), Philip (Acts 21:8–10), Mnason (Acts 21:16), and James (Acts 21:18), as well as the "we" sections of Acts.[22]

The sources in Luke's work confront us with the whole synoptic question. Luke describes those who "have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration," indicating they were "eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word." Do these witnesses include the other Gospel writers? How much did Luke use (or was even aware of) the other canonical Gospels, particularly Matthew and Mark, with whom he shares so much content? This subject is too large for such a brief study as this, but it is at least possible that Luke used Matthew or Mark (or both) in drawing up his account.

Of course writers must use caution in identifying Luke's sources. J. C. Ryle warns,

> It would be mere waste of time to inquire from what source Luke obtained the information which he has given us in his Gospel. We have no good reason for supposing that he saw our Lord work miracles, or heard Him teach. To say that he obtained his information from the Virgin Mary, or any of the apostles, is mere conjecture and speculation. Enough for us to know that Luke wrote by inspiration of God. Unquestionably he did not neglect the ordinary means of getting knowledge. But the Holy Spirit guided him, no less than all other writers of the Bible, in his choice of matter. The Holy Spirit supplied him with thoughts, arrangement, sentences, and even words. And the result is, that what Luke wrote is not to be read as the "word of man," but the "word of God." (1 Thess. ii. 13.)[23]

[20] Earl Cairns, e.g., discusses Luke's method under consideration of the words *investigate, from the beginning, accurately,* and *orderly* (or *systematic*). Cairns, 224–25.

[21] Robertson, 46–50.

[22] Taken from Cairns, 223, and Bruce, "The First Church Historian," 5.

[23] J. C. Ryle, *St. Luke. Vol. I.,* vol. 3 of *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (1858; reprint, Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1969), 3–4.

Nevertheless we must not go to the opposite extreme of insisting—against what Luke himself says—that an inspired writer would use no sources or do no research.[24] We might note in contrast to Ryle's position the plausible arguments F. F. Bruce makes for identifying some of Luke's sources in his Gospel and in Acts.[25]

Using sources to write good history necessitates skill in handling them. Luke indicates his facility in verse 3, where his words can be taken in one of two ways. In one sense his description of method might refer to a personal grasp of the subject as in "having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first" (KJV) or "having followed all things closely for some time past" (ESV). Because Luke uses *parakoloutheō,* which has the sense of "investigate," others render it "having investigated everything carefully from the beginning" (NASB). The first rendering speaks to Luke's mastery of the material, that Luke's expertise gives him credibility in evaluating his sources. The second points to his diligence in researching relevant material. Either rendering establishes his credentials to write on the subject, particularly because other Gospel writers had some firsthand experience of Christ.[26] Earl Cairns notes how the Greek physician Galen uses *parakoloutheō* for the investigation of symptoms.[27] Such a usage recalls the common description of Thucydides as a historian, that he "diagnosed" events by searching out their underlying causes like a physician diagnosing a disease.[28] We may well picture "Doctor Luke" seeking out historical truth in the same way he approached illness in his patients.

History's Basis in Real Events

Second, although sources are important, it is vital that those sources be true. History is grounded in real events. It has a genuinely objective character in that it relates something that really happened. The English word *Gospel* is the rendering of the Greek *euaggelion* or "good news." Unlike collections of "sayings" of Christ as in the Gospel of Thomas or the hypothetical Q document, the canonical Gospels provide an account of historical events that are key to the narrative. A genuine Gospel requires correlation with real events. If the Christian faith is based on truth, then history must relate that truth accurately. J. Gresham Machen wrote, "It is true that the Christian gospel is an account, not of something that happened yesterday, but of something that happened long ago; but the important

[24] John R. Rice, who held a very mechanical dictation view of inspiration, labeled the idea that Luke interviewed other people such as Mary or the apostles and "wrote it down like any other historian" as "a lie from Hell." John R. Rice, "Christianity a Miracle Religion," *Sword of the Lord,* 16 November 1936, 2, quoted in Howard Edgar Moore, "The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and 'The Sword of the Lord'" (PhD diss., George Washington University), 373.

[25] Bruce, *The New Testament Documents,* 41–43.

[26] Matthew and John were of course disciples who witnessed Christ's life firsthand. Mark, as far as we know, was not an eyewitness, but there is in his case the early tradition that Mark used Peter as his main source.

[27] Cairns, 224.

[28] "Refusing to compromise by emulating more seductively romantic writers, he [Thucydides] modelled his own approach on the medical pioneers of the Hippocratic school. These emphasized the need for careful observation, and for the maintenance of regular records which would then facilitate accurate prognoses, or predictions, about the future: by building up a reliable set of data, one could hope to establish patterns in the course of diseases, and the effects of various prescriptions; and such knowledge of past processes could then serve to inform decisions in the future." Beverly Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 19–20.

thing is that it really happened. If it really happened, then it makes little difference when it happened. No matter when it happened, whether yesterday or in the first century, it remains a real gospel, a real piece of news."[29]

We may see this factuality in Luke's use of *peplērophorēmenōn* in verse 1. Some translations render this word as "things which are most surely believed" (KJV, MEV) or "matters fully believed" (Darby). Other translations render it as things "accomplished" (NASB, ESV), "fulfilled" (NIV, NKJV), "taken place" (GNT) or "which have happened" (Phillips). The former renderings imply the dependability of the content of the faith, that the content is trustworthy because it is historically true. The latter translations stress the objective reality of the events that underlie the Gospel account.[30] Either way, Luke affirms that these are events that surely happened.

History as an Orderly Presentation

Third, real events need to be effectively organized in good history. Lucian writes, "As to the facts themselves, he [the historian] should not assemble them at random."[31] A good history provides orderly presentation following a theme, not random stories and anecdotes. Here Luke's manner or method is foremost. Luke focuses on "all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order" (v. 3). "The very first" or "the beginning" asserts a starting point for Luke's account, although interpreters debate the meaning. For some it is Luke's own acquaintance with the gospel message and its spread, but more tend to see it as going back to the beginning of the gospel story, as shown by Luke's narrative of Christ's birth.[32] Likewise "in order" or "orderly" (*kathexēs*) speaks of a pattern and structure, which is indeed evident to any reader of Luke's Gospel. It may even be, as Marshall believes, that the term implies a chronological approach.[33]

Curiously, the emphasis on Luke's design and purpose has led to additional questions about his accuracy, the supposed contrast between "Luke the historian" and "Luke the theologian." Without question, Luke was both, as reflected in the title of I. Howard Marshall's work *Luke: Historian and Theologian.* Some scholars who see conflict between these two roles argue that Luke's emphasis on theology shapes his Gospel to the detriment of his history, that communicating a distinct theology

[29] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 122.

[30] Fitzmyer discusses three interpretations of *peplērophorēmenōn* "things that come to fulfillment" as meaning (1) things completed or accomplished, (2) things fully assured, and (3) things that "have been fulfilled." He argues for the third. Fitzmyer, 293.

[31] Lucian, *How to Write History,* 47.

[32] Garland offers the attractive suggestion that "from the beginning" could refer to Luke's purpose of looking back to the OT foundation, as in how Christ addressed his disciples "beginning at Moses," on the road to Emmaus (24:27), linking the gospel narrative to the whole of scriptural history. David E. Garland, *Luke,* ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 54. Perhaps relevant to this idea is the fact that Luke traces Christ's genealogy back to Adam (Luke 3:38).

[33] Marshall, 40. Luke's approach is clearly generally chronological, although we should not press this point to details. Matthew and Luke, for instance, differ on the order of events in Christ's temptation (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), and Matthew's use of "then" in v. 5 indicates a stricter chronological order than Luke's.

leads him to distort (however unintentionally) the historical account.[34] Theories associated with source criticism and especially redaction criticism, which stresses the role of the "redactor" or editor in shaping his material, have particularly fed this tendency.[35] Yet there is no reason to fall into an either/or dichotomy. In fact, the accuracy of Luke's account only confirms the theology he teaches. McKnight and Williams ask, "If one does not think that Luke was an accurate historian, can one really formulate a theology of Luke that is of any value?" They argue that if Luke is not historically accurate, then any "theology" derived from his writings is simply an invention.[36] Because Christianity is a historical religion, genuine theology must be based on historical truth.

Reliability: The Question of Certainty or Likelihood in History

Finally, good history is reliable. In one sense this point is just an extension of accuracy in history—that which is accurate is reliable. Luke's language, however, highlights a key distinction between his work (and all other historical accounts in Scripture) and other works of history. Luke says he writes to Theophilus so that he might know the "certainty" of what he has been taught. The fact of divine inspiration provides Luke's Gospel with a dependability that nonscriptural accounts cannot achieve. Scripture conveys certainty whereas human works of history can provide only likelihood. Sometimes the degree of that likelihood can be high, as in stating that the Battle of Gettysburg occurred in Pennsylvania in July of 1863. At other times, as in debating the causation of events such as the outbreak of World War I, those causes may be subject to considerable dispute. Regardless, never is human historical writing as certain as that of the Bible.[37]

Another support for the reliability of Luke's work is the implication of divine activity asserted in the prologue. The phrase "those things which are most surely believed among us" in verse 1 is often rendered as "things accomplished among us" (NASB, cf. ESV), which points back to our previous discussion of the factuality of events. But the phrase can also be rendered "things that have been fulfilled among us" (NIV), the idea being that these events realized a divine purpose. Garland argues

[34] The fountainhead for much of this modern discussion of "theology vs. history" in Luke is Hans Conzelmann and his work published in English as *The Theology of St. Luke,* trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper, 1960), followed and developed by writers such as Ernst Haenchen. See Gasque, "The Historical Value of the Book of Acts," 69–72. Gasque also discusses those he believes are precursors to this approach.

[35] For a close analysis of the question of Luke's sources and the place of form criticism and redaction criticism in Lukan studies, see Marshall, 57–68.

[36] McKnight and Williams, 49.

[37] In regard to divine inspiration, some authors have appealed to the use of *anōthen* in v. 3, rendered "from the very first" in the KJV. The fact that *anōthen* can mean "from above" in some contexts (cf. John 3:31, James 1:17) has led a few interpreters to hold that such is the meaning in Luke 1:3, arguing that Luke is claiming divine inspiration in his work by use of this term. Popular commentator John R. Rice, for example, argues vigorously for this rendering and cites several other writers in support, including Erasmus, C. H. Spurgeon, and C. I. Scofield. John R. Rice, *The Son of Man: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1971), 22–23. However, the large majority of interpreters and virtually all English translations render it "from the beginning" or "from the very first," based on the temporal usage of *anōthen* in other contexts such as Acts 26:5. On the various meanings of *anōthen* and related terms, see *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis,* 2nd ed., ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 1:337–39.

that something is "fulfilled" in the sense that God brought it to pass.[38] In this way Luke contrasts with other Greek historians. The pattern of Greek historical writing, going back to the "father of history," Herodotus, was to shift from overemphasizing the intervention of the gods in human affairs to focusing on human autonomy and responsibility. As Du Plessis notes, Luke's "purpose was not to draw important lessons from history, as it was the case with other Greek historians, but to serve Christianity with a true report of *God acting in history.* For Luke, historical facts are only meaningful when they are interpreted and ordered within the framework of this central truth."[39]

While stressing the reliability of inspired history, however, we must emphasize that reliability should be the goal of all history. Histories by definition are not works of fiction. The more accurate—the more *true*—a work is, the greater its value in reflecting the past and providing use to the present. Luke presents a model of historical perfection. To borrow from football coach Vince Lombardi, historians will not reach perfection, but in striving after it they may achieve excellence.

Conclusion: Luke as the Historian's Model

John Calvin observed, "That history is the teacher of what life ought to be, is what heathens have with truth said; but as it is handed down by them, no one can derive from it sound instruction. Scripture alone justly claims to itself an office of this kind. For in the first place it prescribes general rules, by which we may test every other history."[40] Luke's prologue provides us with this sort of "test" by outlining qualities of good history, and historians may learn from this model.

Although human histories are not inspired, there is still value in studying Luke's pattern. Fitzmyer, who himself questions the historicity of Luke, nonetheless observes that Luke's description of his work as "thorough (*pasin*), traced from the beginning (*anōthen*), orderly (*kathexēs*), and accurate (*akribōs*)" provides "four qualities that any historian would be proud of."[41] The four qualities enumerated in this article do not define all the qualities of good history but they are all necessary components.

First of all, an emphasis on truth is a helpful antidote to this postmodern age in which a highly perspectival view of history can reduce historical writing to an opinion of the historian. Although history may grant only likelihood rather than certainty, likelihood does not translate to total uncertainty. With care in writing and guided by Scripture, history can capture something of the genuine "history-as-event." The hermeneutic of suspicion so prevalent in postmodern scholarship may teach us caution in exploring our sources, but it does not completely negate the results of historical research.

Second, the emphasis on dependable sources provides some reason for believing the results of historical work to be dependable. History by definition is not fiction but an avenue for pursuing truth,

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[38] Garland, 53.

[39] I. I. Du Plessis, "Once More: The Purpose of Luke's Prologue (Lk 1:1–4)," *Novum Testamentum* 16, no. 4 (1974): 271 (emphasis original).

[40] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans,* trans. and ed. by John Owen (1849; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 182–83.

[41] Fitzmyer, 15.

if based on trustworthy evidence. Historians should not accept or reject evidence on the basis of how it matches their preconceptions. Luke spoke of relying on "eyewitnesses," surely the first line of dependable sources, and implied the use of other materials in his work. Such sources are not infallible, and modern historians do not have Luke's advantage of divine guidance. Yet modern historians must, like Luke, seek out the best first-hand information that they can find.

Third, the concept of order is definitely a virtue in historical writing. Logical organization makes any sort of writing clearer. Furthermore, a sense of purpose focuses the argument of a work. Having a purpose for a historical writing does not detract from accuracy any more than Luke's conscious effort to lay out a definite theology should call his veracity into question. Historians may distort the picture by letting their purpose override evidence, but the result is no longer good history. Order serves to communicate better to the reader what the historian intends.

Finally, reliability should be by definition characteristic of history. Histories may be unreliable to some degree because of the failures of the historian, but the ideal is to relate a true story, just as Luke related the "good news" in his writing. Even the unattainable bar of inspiration, with the reliability it conveys, holds its lessons. Inspiration teaches historians humility. They should temper expectations for their work, realizing their limitations while seeking to communicate the truth.

Luke not only modeled history in his Gospel and in Acts, but he also set a patten for other historians in his prologue. Due consideration of Luke 1:1–4 should help Christian historians produce superior works of history.