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0521018811 - The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context
in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1

Loveday Alexander

Excerpt

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THE LUCAN PREFACE: QUESTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

One of the things that make research exciting – or dispiriting, depending on mood and temperament – is the way the questions keep changing. In particular, for a researcher with any sensitivity to the ancient world, the questions we pose as twentieth-century readers often seem to be the wrong tools for understanding first-century texts. Thus research becomes, as those engaged in it know only too well, not so much a quest for answers as a constant struggle to redefine the questions.

The thesis on which this book is based (Alexander, 1978) began with what appeared to be a question about literary genre. It took its starting-point from within a debate which has been going on since the beginning of the century: in what sense (if at all) is it proper to talk of the evangelists as ‘historians’? To many New Testament critics, this is really a theological question (Haenchen, 1971, pp. 94–103); but to a student coming to the New Testament from the classical world, it seemed a question worth reframing in terms of ancient literary genre, i.e. by setting up a comparison between the Gospel writers and the historians of the Greco-Roman world. Granted that ancient expectations of history-writing may have been rather different from our own, it seemed natural to ask how the evangelists and their contemporaries would have seen their work. Did the Gospels look like histories of the same kind as those of Thucydides or Polybius, Josephus or Livy? If so, this might tell us what expectations the similarity would arouse in their readers. And if not, the differences might tell us something important about the nature of the Gospel account of Jesus.

Thus the question with which we started out became more narrowly defined: is it proper to describe the Gospels as ‘histories’ in terms of *ancient* literary genre? For Luke’s Gospel at least, and by

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implication for Acts,¹ the question seems to have a clear answer. Here at least, critical orthodoxy maintains, is a New Testament writer who composes his work with an eye to the standards of contemporary literature; by his carefully chosen words, and even more by his deliberate choice of a formal preface-style, Luke² – or so it is claimed – announces unequivocally that his aim is to write up the story of Jesus and his followers in a manner worthy of the great tradition of classical historiography. The widespread assumption that we may justifiably set Luke's work alongside those of the great classical historians (Meyer, 1921; Toynbee, 1924; van Unnik, 1955; Barrett, 1961) is based to a surprisingly large degree on messages read off the preface, both direct and indirect. At the surface level, the vocabulary of the preface seems to speak the language of critical historiography: accuracy, research, investigation. Alone among the evangelists, Luke alludes to 'sources' and 'predecessors', those invisible entities so dear to the heart of the nineteenth-century critic. Despite its long-recognized linguistic ambiguities,³ the preface has been widely accepted as an indication that Luke's ideals at least approximated to those of ancient and modern historians alike.⁴

The almost complete critical consensus on this point is bolstered by the observation, made by a number of critics around the beginning of the twentieth century, that the style and construction of the preface, as well as its vocabulary, are reminiscent of prefaces found among the ancient historians. On this view, not only is Luke making an explicit claim to high standards of historical accuracy, but the

¹ I have worked throughout with the critical assumption that Luke's two works should be regarded as two parts of a single whole – although, as we shall find in due course, the preface itself suggests some reasons to doubt that assumption: cf. also Conzelmann, 1987, p. 4; Haenchen, 1971, p. 136 n. 3.

² I use the name 'Luke' throughout to refer to the author of *The Gospel according to Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles*, without implying necessarily any identification with the 'beloved physician' of Colossians 4.14. I have, however, made the assumption that the author of the two works is more likely to have been male than female, and have used the masculine pronoun throughout. If this assumption is wrong, I beg her pardon.

³ As early as 1863, Aberle could say that the only sure conclusion from research on the preface up to his time (already a considerable body) was 'die Mehrdeutigkeit aller entscheidener Worte und Wendungen in denselben' (F. Aberle, 'Exegetische Studien 2: Über den Prolog des Lucasevangeliums', *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 45 (1863), p. 99.) For a bibliography and summary of research up to 1870 see W. Grimm, 'Das Proömium des Lucas-evangeliums', *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*, 16 (1871), pp. 33–78; up to 1922, Cadbury, 1922a, p. 489 n. 2.

⁴ See W. M. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? A Study on the Credibility of St. Luke* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1898), pp. 10–19 for a good expression of this viewpoint.

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preface-convention itself makes an implicit claim to informed contemporary readers that the work which follows is 'history'.⁵ This widely held view reached its definitive expression in 1922, with the publication of Cadbury's detailed exegesis of the preface as an appendix to Jackson-Lake's *Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. II (pp. 489–510). This major study, to which all subsequent commentators have referred, has never been seriously challenged; it remains the cornerstone of twentieth-century interpretation of the preface,⁶ and formed the starting-point for my own investigation in 1971.

As the investigation progressed, however, it soon became clear that even within the terms of the genre question, a range of radically different issues was being addressed. For many scholars, to describe Luke as a 'historian' is to say something about the reliability of his work: a statement about literary genre is essentially taken as a statement about historicity.⁷ Thus if, for example, Luke altered Mark's account of an incident in the life of Jesus, this must be because he had superior information from his own researches or from another source. Against this others have emphasized the

⁵ E.g. Plummer, 1922, p. 1; Dibelius, 1956, pp. 123–37; van Unnik, 1955; Trocmé, 1957, pp. 41, 78; Klein, 1964, p. 193; Conzelmann, 1966, p. 218; 1987, p. 4; Plümacher, 1972. Most recently, Aune, 1987, has a chapter entitled 'Luke–Acts and Ancient Historiography' (pp. 120–210), and says of the preface: 'Conforming to the conventions of Hellenistic historiography, Luke begins his work with a primary preface describing the entire work (Luke 1: 1–4), and he prefixes a secondary preface to Acts ... Historical prefaces allowed an author to display his rhetorical skill, and this carefully crafted sentence does that for Luke. In fact, the phrase, 'the events completed among us' ... indicates a *historical* rather than biographical focus ... Prefaces had long been conventional features of Greco-Roman historiography with a distinctive constellation of traditional *topoi* or motifs ... The *topoi* which Luke uses include the dedication ...'

⁶ Cadbury's exegesis in this Appendix was scrupulously uncommitted; his own views on the positive interpretation of the preface are more clearly expressed in a series of articles (1921; 1922b; 1956), and his views on Luke as historian in 1922a, p. 15; 1927. The other major study of the literary affinities of the preface dates from around the same period: Klostermann, 1929. Bibliography on the preface up to 1962: Rengstorf, 1962, p. 12; to 1971, A. Vögtle, *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien: Beiträge zur Evangelienforschung* (Patmos, Düsseldorf, 1971), pp. 31–42. For later research, see J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–XI* (Anchor Bible Commentary, Doubleday, New York, 1981) pp. 287–302; R. J. Dillon, 'Previewing Luke's project from his prologue (Luke 1: 1–4)', *CBQ*, 43 (1981), pp. 205–27; V. K. Robbins, 'Prefaces in Greco-Roman biography and Luke-Acts', in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 6; SBL Seminar papers II, ed. P. J. Achtemeier (Scholars Press, Missoula, 1979) p. 193–207; J. Wijngaards, 'Saint Luke's prologue in the light of modern research I & II', *Clergy Monthly* 31 (1967) pp. 172–9, 251–8.

⁷ E.g. W. M. Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1895), pp. 1–10. Similarly Barrett (1961, p. 9) and Marshall (1970, p. 21) both focus on the ability to distinguish fact from fiction.

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literary preoccupations of Greek historiography. As far back as 1918, Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1918, p. 280) had pointed out that if Luke was writing 'history' on the Greek model we should be careful not to attach too much significance to his alterations of Mark, since his motive was likely to be purely stylistic; Cadbury (1927, chs. 12 and 13) pursued this insight into the essentially rhetorical nature of Greek historiography with an extended study of the attitudes to source material in Josephus and other Greek historians. Thus the assimilation of Luke's work to that of the major Greek and Roman historians could be a double-edged tool with regard to historicity. The problem is particularly acute in the reporting of speeches, which ancient historians regarded not so much as 'data' to be transmitted accurately (even where there was an exact record of the original), but as occasions for displaying their own rhetorical skills.⁸ Even the otherwise admirable Thucydides allowed himself quite a wide degree of latitude in the reporting of speeches made by his characters (I 22.1); and since Christian readers tend to attach particular importance to the recording of the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus and the apostles, the application of 'Thucydidean' standards to the dominical and apostolic speeches could have a devastating effect on Luke's reputation for accuracy in this central area of his work (Dibelius, 1956, pp. 70–3; 122–37; 138–85; Conzelmann, 1966, p. 218).

Moreover it had to be recognized that the very impressiveness of Thucydides' methodological claims poses problems for the student of historiographical convention. We cannot be certain whether Thucydides actually did achieve the accuracy and objectivity he claims, but it is clear that his preface itself created an atmosphere in which the making of such claims came to be expected in a historical preface: in other words, the claims themselves became 'conventional'. Thus the recognition that many later historians made similar claims has led, paradoxically, to the easy dismissal of just those elements in Luke's preface which had seemed most impressive to an earlier generation: 'convention' has become 'mere convention',⁹ at worst a way of casting doubt on the claim to eyewitness testimony or

⁸ Compare e.g. Tacitus' version of a speech by Claudius (*Ann* XI 24) with the official version which survives on an inscription (*CIL* XIII 1668): Tacitus would have had no difficulty in finding an accurate record of this speech. Further, Cadbury, 1927, ch. 12. In fact, as Cadbury demonstrates, Luke's practice with regard to the words of Jesus is precisely the opposite of the attitude of classical historiography (1927, p. 188).

⁹ 'Mere convention': cf. Cadbury, 1922a, pp. 489, 490; 1921, p. 439 n. 12; Dibelius, 1966, p. 11; Kümmel, 1966, p. 91; Aune, 1987, p. 121.

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the existence of 'many' predecessors,¹⁰ at best little more than a way of exonerating Luke from the charge of outright deception. Either way, the idea that the preface is 'conventional' appears to imply a damaging recognition that its pretensions do not match the reality of Luke's literary achievement.¹¹ Thus, far from answering the question of Luke's value as an historian, the parallel with Greco-Roman historiography suggested by Luke's preface actually raised another set of questions, which could only be answered by means of detailed investigation into the actual practice of the historians.¹²

Meanwhile, however, other commentators had been drawing a different set of inferences from the literary character of the preface. Right from the start it had been obvious to many that Luke's use of this culture-specific literary convention had social implications, so that what appeared to be a literary question was also (as we might put it today) a sociohistorical one. According to this line of reasoning, Luke's preface does not only imply that his work is 'history': it also implies that it is 'literature'.¹³ Haenchen's words (1971, p. 136) express well what many commentators have argued one way or another: 'Christianity is adopting the literary forms. It is therefore on the point of leaving the milieu of "ordinary folk" and entering the world of literature, the cultural world of antiquity. Thus its

¹⁰ E.g. Norden, 1913, p. 316, n. 1; Nineham, 1958a, p. 18; 1960, p. 254; Lightfoot, 1962, pp. 103–5; Kümmel, 1966, p. 91.

¹¹ Cf. Dibelius, 1956, *passim*, e.g. pp. 1–2; 123ff.; Schmidt, 1918, p. 291; van Unnik, 1955, p. 324; Trocmé, 1957, p. 78. Overbeck, 1919, p. 79 denies that there is any inner relationship between preface and text (cf. ch. 2 n. 3, below). In the case of Acts, the mismatch is observed, but differently assessed, by Haenchen, 1971, p. 103: 'The elegant exordium of the third gospel has left many scholars with the impression that Luke would have been capable of writing the history of the dawn of Christianity in the style of a Xenophon, if not a Thucydides. However, he lacked at least two requisites for such an undertaking: an adequate historical foundation – and the right readers.'

¹² Since van Unnik, 1955, there have been a number of attempts to define more closely what kind of 'history' Luke was writing. Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit*, 3rd edn, ET G. Buswell, *The Theology of St. Luke* (Faber & Faber, London, 1960), p. 7 n. 1 (cf. also 1987, p. 4) argues that the use of a preface marks a development from history to 'monograph', but he does not pursue this line of thought beyond the preface. Plümacher, 1972, attempts a detailed analysis of hellenistic, as opposed to classical, historiography, without questioning the standard view of the preface or considering the sociohistorical plausibility of his comparisons: Luke is far more likely to have read Thucydides than Livy.

¹³ Luke's claim to be writing 'Literature': Schmidt, 1918, p. 280; Meyer, 1921–3, pp. 1–8; van Unnik, 1955, p. 324; Schmid, 1955, p. 14; Trocmé, 1957, p. 41; Grundmann, 1961, p. 43; Rengstorf, 1962, p. 13; Schürmann, 1962, p. 48; Conzelmann, 1987, p. 5. Kümmel, 1966, p. 91 sums up this position: 'Luke claims, with this information, to create a work which can lay claim to literary quality, and he gives expression to this claim by means of the prologue and dedication.'

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aloofness from the "world" in which it grew up, expecting the end of this aeon, is diminishing.' Thus the literary claim implied by the preface leads inevitably to questions about the audience which Luke envisaged for his work. As far back as 1899, Corssen had argued that the 'refinement' of the preface was intended for 'a wider public': 'with the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel stepped out from the darkness of the conventicle and into the book-market' (Corssen, 1899, pp. 305ff.). In other words, the audience implied by Luke's preface was clearly different from, and wider than, that of the other Gospels. Dibelius made a similar point in his 1941 article, 'The text of Acts':

Luke wrote two books. He wrote them for a reading public which was not the public of Mark and Matthew. When an author writes a dedication like Luke 1.1-4 – a dedication whose style and choice of words are closely akin to the opening of many literary, secular writings – he has in mind readers who will appreciate such a prologue.

(Dibelius, 1956, p. 88)

Such readers, Dibelius goes on to argue, would not be found in the church, and thus Luke's literary pretensions mark a new and decisive step in the progress of the Gospel towards a wider public. Whether or not a non-Christian audience would actually have understood Luke's work,¹⁴ the very fact that Luke addresses such an audience has potentially enormous consequences for its theological content, as Haenchen has observed (1971, p. 136).

Both Corssen and Dibelius also made another suggestion which has had a long run in Lucan scholarship, the suggestion that the preface (and particularly the dedication) have specific implications for the means of production of Luke-Acts. Corssen had simply raised the possibility of Luke's work being intended for 'the book-market'; Dibelius linked this idea specifically with the textual problems of Acts, arguing that while the Gospel was preserved within the church because of its similarities with Matthew and Mark, Acts circulated for some time only 'in the book-trade', and thus lost both its author's name and its textual reliability (Dibelius, 1956, pp. 88-90; cf. also pp. 135-6). Nock's review (Nock, 1953) pointed out that Dibelius had been working with a mistaken conception of

¹⁴ Some have expressed doubt as to whether a non-Christian reader would actually understand Luke's work: Meyer, 1921, p. 9; Nock, 1953, p. 501 = Nock, 1972, II p. 825; Haenchen, 1971, p. 136 n. 4.

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the conditions of ancient book production, but the question of the production and dissemination of Luke's work has refused to go away. Goodspeed's 1954 article 'Was Theophilus Luke's publisher?' expressed in apparently naive form what has become an accepted *datum* of Lucan scholarship, the idea that the dedication presupposes some kind of obligation on the part of Theophilus to 'publish' Luke's work. At its simplest, this is little more than an extension of the widely recognized fact that a dedicated work is not a private letter, but Dibelius had assigned a more active role to Theophilus in the process of dissemination (Nock, 1953, 498): 'The author addressed himself to cultivated people in general (including pagans), and could depend on Theophilus to see to it that his two volumes found their way into circulation'. Haenchen's influential commentary is more specific: dedication 'honours [the dedicatee] as a patron (who in certain cases undertook to finance or disseminate the book)'; 'the person to whom the book was dedicated would give permission for copies to be made and see to its dissemination' (1971, p. 136 nn. 3, 4).

As Nock recognized, the question of 'publication' in the ancient world is a minefield, negotiable only for those equipped with a wide knowledge of ancient literature (further, ch. 9 below). But it would be too facile to dismiss the questions raised by Goodspeed and Dibelius as inappropriate to conditions in the ancient world. Both saw correctly that Luke's preface, and particularly the dedication to Theophilus, force us to think in specific and concrete terms about the social context in which the Gospels and Acts were written down and disseminated. How were Gospel writings copied and distributed? Does the preface make Luke's different from the other Gospels? What was the role of Theophilus? Did Christian texts ever circulate, commercially or otherwise, outside the churches? What means of distribution were used inside the churches? Did the Gospels or Acts ever have an existence as 'private' copies for personal reading? How many Christians could afford to own such a copy? And what effect did the conditions of writing, copying and dissemination have on the manuscript tradition? Was a text regarded as 'fixed' as soon as it was committed to paper? Were these Christian texts subjected to the same process of critical correction as literary texts of the period?¹⁵

¹⁵ The critical labour of establishing a correct text against which future copies could be checked was only undertaken for literary classics, not for new compositions or for those of a factual nature (including the critics' own *commentarii*): E. G. Turner,

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Whether or not we can easily find answers to them, these are all proper questions to ask: they direct our attention, rightly, to the social group in which our texts were produced, to the attitudes of that group toward texts, and to what Malherbe has called 'the sociological functions of the different types of literature with which we are concerned' (Malherbe, 1983, p. 16).

And finally, broader questions of social context are raised by the perception of the preface as literary convention. In Dibelius' words, the choice of such a convention presupposes the existence of readers who will appreciate it: and that in itself, as we now are increasingly aware, has social implications. Deissmann, propounding his thesis on the 'non-literary' (and therefore lower-class) nature of primitive Christianity 'was fully aware that Luke and the author of Hebrews were purposely edging 'toward producing literary works for higher circles' (Malherbe, 1983, pp. 32–3). The production of 'literature' and especially of 'history', implies a level of education and rhetorical culture which was never widely available in the Greco-Roman world. This is presumably why Dibelius assumed that the appreciative audience which Luke's work demanded could not be found within the confines of the church (1956, pp. 88, 146–8). Changes in our estimation of the social composition of the early church (further, below ch. 8), however, mean that more recent critics are happy to locate this educated audience within the church. Wengst (1987, p. 101) neatly summarizes this whole complex of sociohistorical assumptions based on the preface:

It is significant that each of Luke's two volumes has a preface and dedication. This means that they lay claim to be literature. The address 'most excellent Theophilus' characterizes the recipient of the dedication as a person in a high position. The function of the dedication is to ensure that the person whom it honours sees to the public circulation of the work. It follows from this that Luke 'intended his work for a wider public'. Beyond the church, he is addressing 'sympathizers and interested non-Christians'. He therefore seeks – as this course implies – an educated public, which in antiquity was also socially privileged. It is in keeping with this that he has in view as an audience above all well-to-do Christians in groups within the church.

1968, pp. 112–13, 119–20. Even for a literary text, an 'edition' could mean just one correct copy.

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Once again it should be noted that this observation, for Wengst, is not just a matter of historical detail but has an integral connection with the political message of Luke's work:

By 'seeking to achieve the heights of ancient historiography', Luke has to adapt to the norms of the great world from which he is not too far removed as a result of his social status. So he comes to occupy a standpoint which makes him consider reality more from a perspective 'from above'. This quite evidently leads him to suppress violence which originated from the centre and to see only the 'sunny side' of the reality of Rome. (1987, p. 102)

Thus the apparently straightforward question about literary genre with which we began is only the launching-pad for a whole series of more profound questions about Luke and his work: questions about the reliability of his narrative, his attitudes to sources and the preservation of reported speech; questions about the 'fit' between the preface and the work as a whole; questions about social context and the functions of the text within that context. But none of these questions can be answered until the primary question of genre is rightly understood, and it is there that we must begin. Even on a preliminary overview, there seem to be good reasons for a fresh examination of the evidence. Despite Cadbury's twenty-page exegesis (1922a), there has never been a concerted attempt to find the right context for Luke's preface within the whole range of Greek literature. At a formal level, the comparison with historical prefaces seems to ignore some obvious and substantial divergences from classical historiographical convention. Thus, for example, the classical historians avoid the use of the first person: Thucydides uses the third person when he names himself as author.¹⁶ Similarly, neither Thucydides nor any other classical historian prefaces his work with a second-person address.¹⁷ Only a thorough examination of historical prefaces in Greek literature will show whether the conventions Luke adopts can be convincingly located within that tradition. In fact, on examination many of the most frequently cited parallels to Luke's 'conventional' language prove not to be found among the historians at all: they come from a wide range of texts,

¹⁶ This point was observed by Schmid, 1955, p. 14.

¹⁷ These points will be developed at greater length below, ch. 3.

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many of them far from the rhetorical literature which Luke is assumed to be aping.¹⁸

If we are to have any chance of exploring the full implications of Luke's preface, then, we must first re-examine the foundations: that is, the literary judgement on which so much has been built. Is it true that Luke's preface follows Greek literary convention? If so, does he follow Greek *historiographical* convention? If not, what choices are there? This is the chief object of the study here presented. A preliminary survey of preface-writing in Greek and Jewish literature (chapter 2) enables us to narrow down the possibilities: apart from the historical prefaces, with which there is a *prima facie* case for comparison (chapter 3), the most likely candidates are the prefaces of the 'scientific tradition' (a term which will be explained in due course). Chapter 4 and 5 contain a detailed study of these prefaces, and in chapter 6 we shall present a detailed exegesis of Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1 as 'scientific' prefaces. In chapter 7 we shall look back briefly at the prefaces found in hellenistic Jewish literature in the light of this broader study of Greek prefaces. In the concluding chapters we shall come back to consider the sociohistorical and literary implications of our analysis of the preface. Chapter 8 considers afresh how Luke's preface, on this new reading, fits into the broader social matrix of the early church; and in chapter 9 we conclude by asking what we can learn from the preface about Luke's readers and the immediate social situation of his work.

¹⁸ Cadbury, 1922a, pp. 489ff. cites a wide variety of parallels without making a specific identification with historical convention; but the connection with history is made in 1922a, p. 15. For other parallels, cf. Lagarde, 1874, p. 165 (Dioscorides); Plummer, 1922, p. 5 (Josephus ('superficial'), Dioscorides, Hippocrates); Norden, 1913, p. 316 n. 1 (Ecclesiasticus, Dioscorides); J. Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, 3rd edn (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1918), p. 263 (medical treatises, e.g. Dioscorides, Galen); Cadbury, 1920b, p. 439 ('technical scientific treatises'; Vitruvius, Polybius); Klostermann, 1929, pp. 1-2 (Hippocrates, 'Aristeas', Dioscorides, Thessalos, Josephus, Polybius, Eusebius, Vettius Valens, Demosthenes, Galen, Philo); Schlatter, 1931, *passim* (Josephus); van Unnik, 1955, pp. 329f. (Josephus); Schmid, 1955, p. 28 (II Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus); Trocmé, 1957, p. 42 (Josephus, Galen); Rengstorff, 1962, p. 13 (Josephus). Cadbury, 1933, p. 57 quotes a late veterinary treatise, but treats the whole idea of parallels as a joke.