

Introduction



Many years ago, we, Ben and Amy-Jill, agreed to write a commentary on the Gospel of Luke for the New Cambridge Bible Commentary series. At the time, we did not realize we were attempting something unprecedented – a Jew and a Christian writing an exegetical and theological commentary together on a Gospel. This project has been many years in the gestation stage, and this is probably a good thing, because we have both become better New Testament scholars, more seasoned and experienced, than we were a decade ago. We had already been friends for many years. Many deeply invested in the Bible can agree, and also disagree, without being disagreeable.

We knew from the outset that there would be some strong disagreements along the way. Ben is a Methodist evangelical New Testament scholar; Amy-Jill is a Jewish feminist agnostic New Testament scholar. But there were also many things we agreed on as well. There was some serendipity and several nice surprises in writing this commentary and letting it age slowly like a good wine. One could say that we learned the lesson Jesus taught: you don't put new wine into old wineskins, or the converse (Amy-Jill proposes that this point was not original to Jesus; Jews already knew something about wine-making). Both the wine and wineskins needed to be aged properly. In writing this commentary, we've aged, but we've aged well. In fact, we can both say that we've been stretched in differing ways by the exercise of writing this commentary together, and not merely each of us contributing our separate chapter portions.

From the first century to the twenty-first, Luke's Gospel has informed, instructed, and inspired readers. It has also prompted a never-ending set of questions: Who is "Luke": Jew or gentile, man or woman, slave or free? How and why does Luke's portrait of Jesus differ from those painted by Mark, Matthew, and John? What sources did Luke use, and where is Luke's own voice to be found? Where did Luke write, and is the Gospel addressed

to any specific community? What is Luke's view of the Roman state, the social roles of men and women, economics and politics, physical ability and demonic possession, Christology, Scripture, the Jerusalem Temple, and the Church?

The authors of this volume have no delusions about being able to answer *definitively* all – or perhaps even any – of the questions Luke's Gospel poses to historians, literary critics, theologians, and people who read the Bible for spiritual direction and inspiration. Indeed, definitive answers elude us, and they always will. We simply do not have the information we require. Further, as scholars approach Luke's Gospel with different questions and through different methodological lenses, they will see different things and find different meanings. Readers in their late teens will see the text with different eyes than when they reread it in their late sixties. Even if we could answer these questions today, they would only lead us to more questions tomorrow. With Gospel studies, there is no closure of meaning. If there were, pastors and priests could pack up their sermon notes, and biblical studies professors would need to find new jobs.

Unlike most commentaries, this one does not seek the “one right reading”; nor are we looking only to exegesis “in front of the text” to determine what the Gospel means to each of us as individuals. We are looking rather for a conversation, one between history and literature, the past and the present, a Christian and a Jew. We seek to show how studies of Roman and Jewish history, rhetoric, and hermeneutics inform our understanding of the Third Gospel.

Next, our goal is to show how and why we as students of the Bible come to disagree over questions of history and interpretation and how our own experiences impinge on our exegetical work. For example, Ben finds Luke to be advocate for women; Amy-Jill finds Luke to be an advocate for women's *ancillary* roles.¹ When the text calls for commentary on such matters, there *in situ* we'll offer the discussion. The style is the inelegant “Ben argues” or “Amy-Jill suggests.” We realize that speaking of ourselves in the third person is awkward, but it is also more efficient than “I (Ben) suggest” or “I (Amy-Jill) argue.” When we agree, we'll just say “we ...” In

¹ See Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (SNTSMS 51; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), *Women in the Earliest Churches* (SNTSMS 59; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (FCNTECW 3; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press/New York: Continuum, 2002).

this process, our approach is one based on friendship and commitment to mutual respect. Biblical studies should not be a contact sport, with its own sections of cheerleaders; nor should it be parochial, with the “liberal camp” (however defined) reading works by Amy-Jill and the conservative camp (again, however defined) reading only books and blogs by Ben. Such selective approaches create an infinite feedback loop, where readers primarily have their presuppositions confirmed rather than challenged.

We are committed to both academic integrity and personal friendship. We have been invited to do numerous public talks, ranging from “The Bible and Homosexuality” to “The Resurrection of Jesus” to “The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith.” The intent of the organizers has been often a point/counterpoint agenda, where we two will spar on stage and then the audience, which is usually a partisan group, remains convinced of the truths they had when they walked in the door. We are reminded, each time, of the old *Saturday Night Live* Weekend Update sketch, where Dan Akroyd would turn to Jane Curtain and say, “Jane, you ignorant slut ...” We are not going there. We also realize that half the readers of this volume are too young to remember the sketch.

We find old and tired the debate format when it comes to theology. In every case, we have refused the format of point/counterpoint. Instead, we have had conversations addressing the deeper issues: why do you say that, and, more important, what import does your claim have on the way you live your life? At times, we have surprised each other. At times, we have surprised the audiences. Knowing a person’s theological starting point does not necessarily mean we know how a person reads a particular text.

Third, we seek to show our appreciation for this text: why it fascinates and inspires us, and how this ancient Gospel, so long a source of tension between Jews and Christians, can be approached in a critical as well as sensitive way by scholars from very different backgrounds: a woman who belongs to an Orthodox synagogue and a man who worships in a Methodist church. Each chapter has a “Bridging the Horizons” section that looks at how the text speak to the present-day context. Here we sometimes choose to tell personal stories. Several chapters also contain “A Closer Look,” where we explore historical and redactional questions.

Despite our profound differences in theological as well as exegetical views, we do agree, in almost all cases, that these subjects bear discussing and that conflicting views need to be surfaced rather than suppressed. Were we only to introduce in the classroom what we, personally, think to be the case, then we would be providing a disservice to our students. Our role as

teachers is to help our students understand the discipline of biblical studies as well as the various reading strategies and major hypotheses that help us in the act of interpretation. Once students have both the critical tools and examples of their application, they can then do their own assessment of the-ories offered as well as make their own contributions.

Despite the impossibility of surety in matters exegetical, we do think we have something to say today about both what the text meant in its own time period and what it might mean to our readers. We'll mark throughout where we disagree on matters of historicity, the meaning of a saying or parable, and the more productive ways of analyzing a passage. We shall not, however, repeat all the arguments and conclusions that can be found in any major commentary on Luke or any decent Study Bible's introductory paragraphs: the manuscript tradition and text-critical problems; the various arguments about date, authorship, and so on. The conclusions usually do not make much difference for assessing individual passages.

We shall keep footnotes to a minimum; there are plenty of other commentaries devoted to the Greek text, to Luke's reception history, and to Luke's theology to which readers can turn. Readers wanting more of Ben's views on the details on Luke the author and on the relationship of the Gospel to Acts can look at his commentary on Acts;² for Amy-Jill's views, see her notes and annotations to Luke in the *Jewish Annotation New Testament*.³ Rather, we shall concentrate, idiosyncratically, on the material will think will be useful for readers – academic, church-based, anyone curious about the Gospel – of this commentary. We shall also include what we, as authors, find of interest.

Here's how we proceeded. In the first place, we divided up the book equally, with Ben doing the even number chapters and Amy-Jill doing the odd numbered ones. To prevent this process from leading to an uneven commentary, we also commented extensively on each other's chapters. At times, we make clear where there is a strong disagreement on matters historical, exegetical, social, literary, and so on. Underlying the willingness to proceed in this way is a willingness to be open and honest enough to say, "I could be wrong on this; what is your take on the matter?" Sometimes, commentators in their zeal to defend this truth or that truth cannot recognize that they may well be wrong.

² Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), which has a 102-page introduction.

³ Amy-Jill Levine, "The Gospel of Luke," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 107–67.

As Ben puts it, “We tried in this commentary to avoid putting the ‘dog’ back in ‘dogma.’” Ben’s mentor C. K. Barrett once said,

When people are troubled, there is always hope. I will tell you how I have seen that happen. I have seen people begin their theological studies in a severe self-confidence, a far greater confidence that they have settled the problems of theology than I dare admit. And I have no hope of their learning anything worth learning until they begin to be troubled, to see that the ocean of truth is a bigger thing than the parish pool they thought of. Bishop Westcott was once asked why there is in the Prayer Book no prayer for theological students. “Oh, but,” he said, “there is.” “Which is it then?” “Why the one headed ‘for those at sea.’” Well, let me have the person that is at sea, rather than the one who is roped up to his homeport, and has never ventured out. Whenever a person is troubled in mind, in spirit, or in conscience, there is hope.⁴

Amy-Jill, whose family was in the scallop business and therefore who knows something about seafaring and fishing, finds the comparison apt. She also notes the traditional Jewish communal blessing for the student of Torah, the *Kaddish d’rabbanan*:

Exalted and hallowed be His great Name. (*Congregation responds: “Amen.”*)

Throughout the world which He has created according to His will. May He establish His kingship, bring forth His redemption and hasten the coming of His Meshiach [Messiah]. (*Cong: “Amen.”*)

In your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the entire House of Israel, sword, famine and death shall cease from us and from the entire Jewish nation, speedily and soon, and say, Amen. (*Cong: “Amen. May His great Name be blessed forever and to all eternity, blessed.”*)

May His great Name be blessed forever and to all eternity. Blessed and praised, glorified, exalted and extolled, honored, adored and lauded be the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He. (*Cong: “Amen.”*)

Beyond all the blessings, hymns, praises and consolations that are uttered in the world; and say, Amen. (*Cong: “Amen.”*)

Upon Israel, and upon our sages, and upon their disciples, and upon all the disciples of their disciples, and upon all those who occupy themselves with the Torah, here or in any other place, upon them and upon you, may there be abundant peace, grace, kindness, compassion, long life, ample sustenance and deliverance, from their Father in heaven; and say, Amen. (*Cong: “Amen.”*)

⁴ This quote is taken from one of C. K. Barrett’s sermons that Ben is transcribing for publication with Wipf and Stock Publishers in *Luminescence Vol. One* (2017), 48–50.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and a good life for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen. (*Cong: "Amen."*)

He Who makes peace (*Between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur substitute: "the peace"*) in His heavens, may He make peace for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen. (*Cong: "Amen."*)

Peace-making marks our commentary. One of the more fascinating aspects of the process was that even when we agreed on a particular exegetical point, we sometimes disagreed on the applicability, or the way to apply the material today, to this or that faith community. The "Bridging the Horizons" section of each chapter includes applications from both of us. We wanted this commentary to be as fair and as balanced as we could produce; neither of us pulled punches, and neither of us compromised our convictions. As Amy-Jill wrote years ago, "there is no reason for Jews and Christians to sacrifice their particular beliefs on the altar of inter-faith sensitivity."⁵ Ours is not a debating commentary; ours is a "come let us reason together and talk" commentary. The rabbis teach, "Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will in the end yield results, and any which is not for the sake of Heaven will in the end not yield results. What is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? This is the sort of dispute between Hillel and Shammai. And what is one which is not for the sake of Heaven? It is the dispute of Korach and all his party" (*Pirke Avot* 5.17). Our arguments, we believe, are for the sake of seeing the meanings in the text; they are designed to show how the same text can lead to different readings and, more, why those readings matter. Our commentary is not just an academic exercise, although it is that. It is also a pastoral one. We believe that anyone writing about sacred Scripture must have respect both for the text and for the people who consider it holy.

We also agree that scholarship should be written for the sake of clarity. We have written this commentary in order to be read and not simply consulted. We go verse by verse to point out what we find to be of interest; where we disagree, we disagree in the context of that conversation with Luke.

Here's where we are on the basics. Regarding authorship, Ben finds no reason to question and every reason to accept that the author is Luke, the sometime companion of Paul (cf. Col 4.14; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4.11). Here he is consistent with ancient sources, as Ben delineated in his commentary on

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 6.

Acts.⁶ As to whether Luke was a physician, Ben thinks “yes” and Amy-Jill remains unconvinced. H. J. Cadbury (yes, of the chocolate family) showed that the various medical terms in Luke/Acts appeared in the works of non-medical writers such as Plutarch, Lucian, and others.⁷ For the sake of convenience, and because Lucan authorship is by no means impossible, we refer to the author as “Luke.” However, we will not refer to the author as “he,” because we do not know, for certainty, the author’s identity, and because we recognize that women sometimes wrote under pseudonyms. We agree, following the distinction in the prologue (1.1–4) between the author and the “eyewitnesses and ministers,” that Luke is writing in the second or perhaps third generation of the followers of Jesus.

The preface, and indeed the Greek in the two volumes, suggests a native speaker of Greek who knows the conventions of Greco-Roman rhetoric and historiography. The author may have read other Greek historians such as Polybius, Thucydides, or Ephorus. The Gospel’s stress on the relation of history to the plan or providential counsel of God may also suggest a familiarity with the work of Diodorus Siculus.⁸ In regard to the prefaces of Luke and Acts, Loveday Alexander proposes that the author was familiar with the conventions for prefaces found in scientific writings.⁹

Luke does not, however, appear to know either Hebrew or Aramaic, save the term *amen*, which was surely common in Christian and Jewish assemblies throughout the Empire. Although the author shows little familiarity with the geography of the land of Israel, the text does indicate extensive familiarity with the LXX, the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, Luke could be a Diaspora Jew, or perhaps a non-Jew who had been a synagogue adherent (i.e., a “God-fearer”) before becoming a Christian. Nevertheless, we agree that Luke depicts an increasing distance between the followers of Jesus and other Jews.

In terms of the author’s own social location, given the time required and leisure to write a two-volume work, Luke was either a person of independent means or, more likely, a retainer of a well-to-do person. “It surely is informative that the inscribed author of Luke-Acts has used the same

⁶ Witherington, *Acts*, 56–57.

⁷ H. J. Cadbury, *Style and Literary Method of Luke*, Part I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920). The older argument for Luke’s medical knowledge appears in W. K. Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (London: Longmans Green, 1882).

⁸ See J. T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 15ff.

⁹ Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

address in the prologues that subordinates use of their Roman superiors in the stories of Acts [cf. Acts 23.26; 24.2; 24.24]. These data suggest that our inscribed author addresses Theophilus in a mode associated with a person who is willingly or unwillingly in a subordinate position to a person of rank in Roman society.”¹⁰ This subject position may account for Luke’s extensive interest in, and critique of, people with wealth and resources. The favorable attitude Luke displays toward artisans (e.g., textile workers) is not typical of the Roman (gentile) elite, but it is typical of how artisans and retainers viewed themselves. It is also the case that Jewish sources, especially rabbinic ones, have a positive view of artisans. As David Fiensy documents, “rabbinic sources extol both manual labor ... and teaching one’s son a craft ... Artisans often receive special recognition.”¹¹ At least in terms of class issues, Luke is closer to Jewish than to Roman gentile sources.

Ben finds convincing the argument by J. Nolland that Theophilus had been a synagogue adherent and therefore required instruction on why so many Jews had rejected claims made for Jesus and why “the Way” should be seen as the true expression of God’s people, Jews and gentiles both.¹² He further suggests that Luke’s emphasis on a continual return to the synagogue and to Jews, despite rejection, would have encouraged Theophilus not to sever all social ties he may have had with Jews. Amy-Jill finds this an extremely generous reading. She sees the major thrust of Luke-Acts to show that synagogues are places to be avoided and Jews are people who generally will not listen to Christian teaching. Here we have a major disagreement. Ben, like most commentators, sees an openness to Jews and Judaism in the Gospel; Amy-Jill is much less optimistic. We do agree that Luke had had great love for many of the traditions of Judaism, especially the Scriptures. However, love of a particular history does not necessarily translate into love for rival guardians of that tradition.

We agree that the intended or ideal audience of the Gospel and Acts is represented by Theophilus, the man to whom both the Third Gospel and Acts are dedicated. Ben regards Theophilus as a real person, and perhaps the patron who paid Luke to prepare the two volumes. Amy-Jill thinks it plausible that Luke has invented this ideal reader, whose name means

¹⁰ Vernon K. Robbins, “The Social Location of the Implied Author of Luke-Acts,” in J. H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 305–32 (321–22).

¹¹ David A. Fiensy, *Christian Origins and the Ancient Economy* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 19, citing *Pirke Avot* 1.10; *Abot deRabbi Natan B. XXI*, 23a; *m. Bik.* 3.3; *b. Qidd.* 33a, etc.

¹² J. L. Nolland, *Luke’s Reader’s: A Study of Luke 4.22–28; Acts 13.46; 18.6; 28.28 and Luke 21.5–36* (D.Phil. dissertation; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

“lover of God.” In either case, the ideal audience is what Theophilus would represent to any contemporary reader of the Gospel. Theophilus is an “insider,”¹³ someone who already knows something about Jesus and his followers. He is positioned as an upper-class gentile with some familiarity with Jewish Scripture and practice as well as a person with some sympathy for the Roman system with its military presence. We agree that the name does not move us to construct a Lucan community; a text is not a “community.”

Ben dates the Gospel to the 70s or early 80s, during the earlier part of the reigns of the Flavian emperors (69–96, including Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian), when books were burned (Tacitus reminds us concerning the victims of Nero and the Flavians that “cruel punishment fell not only on the authors but even on their books. The public executioners had the task of burning in the Forum those tributes to our noblest philosophers” [*Agricola* 2]). Therefore, Ben sees Luke as writing at the time when books claiming some human being *other* than the Emperor to be Lord, God, or the like would be designed for the flames. Perhaps, Ben suggests, Luke is so cautious in presenting Roman authorities in both of the volumes because of the dangers that Tacitus recounts. Ben’s relatively early dating also makes it more likely that the author of the “we” passages in Acts was Luke, the companion of Paul. Amy-Jill thinks the Gospel dates to the end of the first century, and she notes that until the Decian campaign in 250, persecution of Jesus’ followers was both sporadic and localized. She also finds it unlikely that Romans are reading Gospels (indeed, most are unlikely to be literate). The opening of the Gospel starting in 1.5, with its stress on the Jewish context, would be of little interest to Rome. She also grants that nothing prohibits an earlier dating.¹⁴ As far as our exegesis is concerned, the date does not matter much.

As for the question of “history” – put in crass terms, “did it happen?” – we have some strong disagreements. As demonstrated through this commentary, Ben is more likely to regard Luke as recording “what happened” and “what Jesus said” (there is nothing he finds that could not have happened or that he could not have said; it’s very hard to prove a negative), whereas

¹³ David Peterson, “The Motif of Fulfilment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts,” in Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke (eds.), *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Vol. 1, The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), 83–104, esp. 103.

¹⁴ See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 2.

Amy-Jill remains skeptical of the historicity of certain accounts. Ben accepts as historical the account of a Sanhedrin trial of sorts that binds Jesus over to Pilate for execution. Amy-Jill finds the idea that the entire Jerusalem political infrastructure would meet, on the first night of Passover, to address a Galilean teacher, only to send him to Pilate, strains the imagination. Instead, she finds the Johannine account, which depicts only a hearing before Annas, the high priest's father-in-law and former high priest, to have a higher degree of credibility. Of greater import, Ben the Christian accepts the literal incarnation of the God of Israel and the literal resurrection of the body of Jesus. Such theological claims have no hold on Amy-Jill, although she is very interested in how belief in divine action influences people's behavior. Here we agree that the "so what" question matters: if one believes in the Gospel's supernatural claims, what difference do those beliefs make in one's attitude and action?

On the matter of Luke's agenda, we recognize that the Gospel and Acts provide Christianity what it needed toward the end of the first century. It needed theological coherence, since various groups of Jesus followers had different Christologies, ecclesiologies, and understanding of their relationship to the Scriptures of Israel in their various forms and languages as well as varying relations to Jews who did not accept their claims. It needed a secure tradition: the story to be told, and those who had the authority to tell it. Luke's Gospel answers these needs. Therefore, Luke, like all authors, has an agenda. Having an agenda or a bias *does not mean* that the material one produces did not happen; nevertheless, knowledge of this agenda helps us to determine why and how certain stories are told.

To produce the Gospel, Luke had sources, as the prologue indicates ("having investigated everything carefully from the very first" [1.3] the materials presented by the eyewitnesses). Yet the historicity of the sources themselves cannot be securely confirmed. Luke may have taken received tradition as historical, although that is no guarantee that the events "really happened." For example, Luke may even have been familiar with the writings of Josephus. But citing Josephus just pushes the question of history back one step: Luke may think that Josephus records, accurately and in order, with objectivity and neutrality, what happened, but what Josephus records and what actually happened are not necessarily the same.

We agree that Luke is not an historian in the modern sense of the term, for the Gospel is neither comprehensive nor objective. The Gospel's focus is on providing guidelines for the nascent, Greek-speaking Church, sometime