

PENRALLT BAPTIST CHURCH, NORTH WALES

NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS LUKE: THE ART OF CURING SOULS

I was catching up on my reading over the summer and tackled one of those greatest-books-I've-never-read volumes. Milan Kundera's classic, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* stands as great post-modern narrative, the author inviting us to join him in constructing and deconstructing characters who live their fictional lives against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, struggling with the pain of commitment or the emptiness of non-commitment. And then I came back to the sermon series I was preparing...

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.ⁱ

And I am wondering (as I sit typing this into my laptop in Starbucks) whether Luke was not there before Kundera. Is he not playing the same teasing games with me as Kundera? Supposedly writing for Theophilus, whoever he may or may not have been, while inviting me as his reading audience to join him in his thoughts and the world of his characters. Because Luke, and no one doubts this, is a great storyteller. A conscious one. "There's nothing wrong with Matthew and Mark," he is saying, "but there's just something else you need to know . . ." Of course, whereas Kundera was inventing his story and characters, Luke was telling about real people and real happenings, but he still constructing a story and portraying the events, consciously, through his own eyes.

If we fail to read Luke's Gospel as narrative, we fail to grasp it at all. He has an agenda, that stretches from his native Antioch (if we are to believe the tradition of his origins), to the ends of the earth (at this moment, an American owned coffee house in a Celtic capital city). And do you know what? It works. Luke and I walk the highways and byways of first century Galilee in the company of One whom neither of us ever met. We walk together in the redemptive reconstruction of the human condition known as The Way, which his characters will tell me, is the answer to the blues playing over the loudspeakers in my coffee shop. It proves to be the redemptive paradigm reflected in every great film and every great book you have ever read about redemptive love. It is the bearable heaviness of being (to borrow Kundera's terms), a life lived in redemptive history across the sprawling suburbs of philosophies and creeds which stretch from Jerusalem to, well, to wherever. This is The Story. Pull up a chair, order another mocha and read on.

I am pleased that in the last decades there has been a general trend away from a redaction criticism of Luke towards a narrative criticism.ⁱⁱ As a canonical theologian I believe that the Bible was inspired in the form we find it, so the level of narrative is exactly the level at which we should start examining Luke's Gospel. It is The Story, superficially aimed at "Theophilus" but adopted by the early church and thus passed on to us as Scripture for our instruction, our improvement and our inspiration.

What has motivated him to add his account to the others already in circulation? He has a few points of his own to make, and the introduction invites us to find them in the narrative that is to follow. One of the outstanding evangelical scholars of my student days, Donald Guthrie warns us against reading too much theological bias into the text. Rather than submitting the history to the theology, "it is truer to say that Luke brings out the theological significance of the history."ⁱⁱⁱ I have some sympathy with him because I still recall my annoyance at the time when a lecturer adopted the completely unjustifiable point of view that if a pericope was not to be found in Q or Matthew, then it had been invented by Luke. Neither can I completely agree with the opinion that Luke "chose to write history because this was the most serviceable vehicle for the expression of his theology, and this theology must be gathered from the overall way he handled his history."^{iv} Most ancient histories were not written to present a system of thought but to be profitable to the reader.^v So Guthrie does well to remind us that the author wrote what he did because it had happened in living memory. However, I never tire of stating that there is no transparent window to view Christ and His saving power. We all look through the stained glass of previous generations' viewpoints, and

Luke's accounts are as coloured as anyone's. Remember that ¼ of the New Testament was written by him, and Luke's Gospel is the longest book in the New Testament, so we do well to consider very carefully "where he is coming from." As theologians it is our job to analyse the light that streams through this work from antiquity and emphasise its main qualities.

Most discussion in the introductions and commentaries centres around the authorship, date and purpose of the Gospel, its relationship with Acts, its special emphases and the Synoptic question, so we will begin with the writer himself.^{vi}

Author

The author has not placed his name to the text, but the Early Church was unanimous in ascribing it to Luke. I believe that we must have very strong grounds for believing we know better than them at this distance, and there are no particularly strong grounds for doubting their judgement here. Eusebius wrote:

"Luke, being by birth one of the people of Antioch, by profession a physician, having been with Paul a good deal, and having associated intimately with the rest of the apostles, has left us examples of the art of curing souls that he obtained from them in two divinely inspired books, - the Gospel which he testifies that he wrote out even as they delivered to him who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and minister of the word, all of whom he says he had followed even from the beginning, and the Acts of the Apostles which he composed receiving his information with his own eyes, or longer by hearsay." HE 3:4

The Muratorian Canon, the anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Tertullian all cite Luke as author and this was not questioned before the 19th century. Irenaeus is the first we have in writing to associate the "we" passages of Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16) with Luke, but it is a fairly obvious assumption and it has been argued that the Early Church Fathers might have just deduced his authorship rather than hearing it from tradition.^{vii} Of course, this assumes that Luke-Acts is the product of the same author and although there have been some questionings on the grounds of vocabulary and style,^{viii} my own recollection of reading them both in Greek is of the similarity and beautiful quality of the language in the two books.

Whether Luke was a Greek physician is another matter. If Colossians 4:14 "Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings" refers to the author of the Gospel then he was, but we cannot know for certain. There was an ill-fated attempt by Hobart to "prove" that Luke's language was that of a medical man.^{ix} However Cadbury showed that such language was common among educated writers (I suspect everyone was a medical expert in those days!) and his students joked that Cadbury had gained his doctorate by taking Luke's away.^x Craig A. Evans concludes that he was Gentile but maybe not Greek, as he was familiar with the synagogue and the LXX (but the more prophetic parts rather than the Torah) and there is less emphasis on pharisaic issues than in Matthew.^{xi} The Colossians' reference comes after Paul has finished listing the Jews who are with him (Col 4:11). In conclusion, the general content of Luke-Acts and the Colossian reference give us no reason to doubt the tradition of the Greek physician and his book for the curing of souls.

Date

If you follow the sermon series through you will probably notice that I diverge from the mainstream of theologians on this point, and tend towards the opinion that Luke's Gospel was probably written before the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70). Luke draws on Mark and Matthew, but I hold to an early date for both of those also. The main argument for the post AD70 dating comes from his treatment of the prophecies concerning the fall of Jerusalem. It is argued that while Mark was not sure what Jesus was referring to, Luke clearly knows about the siege of Jerusalem and its subsequent fall. Compare Mark and Luke:

Mark 13:14

"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no-one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no-one in the field go back to get his cloak.(NIV)

Luke 21:20-21

"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.(NIV)

Luke 19:43

The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.(NIV)

There is also a similarity between Jesus' words and the account of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BC reinforcing the desolation=siege formula.^{xii} However, Luke is still vague on the details. Eusebius says that the Jerusalem Christians fled to Pella, so they had connected the prophecy with the advancing Roman army, why could Luke not have come to the same conclusion a few years before? ^{xiii}

I do not think that the date of Luke's Gospel is a hugely important topic, but I feel more comfortable with an earlier date rather than a later one because the deaths of Paul and James the Just are not mentioned, nor is there any allusion to Nero. I do not believe the evidence for a later date is hugely compelling.

Sources

Luke declares openly that he has used many sources, so what are they? Theologians cite Mark, and Q as the main ones. However, there is no hard evidence that Q existed, and some would question whether a "sayings" document would have circulated without the narrative of the crucifixion. Where the material is not in Mark, Matthew and Luke diverge the most, so that would tend to confirm the use of Mark. The Old Testament figures strongly in Luke, notably Deuteronomy, although I suspect that is because it was used hugely by Jesus himself. Craig A. Evans points out that "large sections of Luke (chaps 7-10, 22-24) and Acts (chaps 1-9) draw in various ways upon the Elijah/Elisha narratives of 1 Kings (chaps. 17-21) and 2 Kings (chaps. 1-8)." ^{xiv} He claims to have used many sources, and I think we should take him at his word. Tannehill is correct to state ". . . any material incorporated into Luke becomes Lukan, irrespective of its origin and the degree of editorial change, that is, it becomes part of the total communication experience that we call the Gospel of Luke."^{xv} That, in my belief, is how the Holy Spirit inspired this book.

Purpose

This is the most contentious aspect, but also the most important for an expositor of the Bible. In order to apply it to our lives, the preacher first has to "listen" to the book itself. It ties in with the "Luke-Acts" puzzle, and I say "puzzle" because at first reading it is hard to find a common purpose. The question is not helped by the fact that the books do not follow each in the New Testament as we have it, and there is no evidence that they ever circulated as one book. Maybe they were too long. Maybe they were written at different dates and no one ever saw the need to unite them. But they both tell of ministries beginning with the baptism in the Holy Spirit followed by a long journey to Jerusalem where arrest on false charges await. Jesus and the apostles use similar language in healing miracles (Luke 5:17-26, Acts 3:1-10). Both the Samaritan and the Philippian Jailer wash the wounds of the innocent victims. Jesus prophesies that he will be seen at the right hand of God (Luke 22:69) which is where Stephen sees him (Acts 7:56). The two books echo each other's language. Their narrative structures, too, are similar at the start, but not at the end. Acts seems to fizzle out somewhat, leaving Paul under house arrest awaiting trial. If, as has often been stated, Acts was written as a defense of Paul, where does that leave the Gospel? If the Gospel is evangelistic, why is Acts not also?

The narrative unity of these two books invites us to seek a common purpose in both. It is found, in my opinion, in the transition from a Jewish Messiah to a Universal Messiah, a transition in which He is rejected by His own people and even His own town, but increasingly accepted by the Gentiles. The Jewish authorities' unbelief goes back to their rejection of John the Baptist and continues in their persecution of the followers of Jesus. "The most unexpected believe, while the most religious reject . . . it is the sick, the blind, the poor, the prostitutes and the ostracized tax collectors who inherit the spiritual promises to Israel, not the religious leaders."^{xvi} When the Word is declared (a major Lucan theme), the young, pregnant, single girl (Mary) believes, the old devout priest (Zacharias) does not. And so the ripples spread out to embrace Samaritans, God-fearing Gentiles, Greeks with no first-hand

knowledge of Judasim, and even rulers of provinces. Luke is at pains to point out this was the intention all along. It is the natural growth from the root of Old Testament Judaism.

No one uses the strength of surprise like Luke. It is the poor, the dispossessed and vulnerable who receive God's blessing: children, women (thirteen of the women only appear in Luke), the thief on the cross, the tax collectors. Much has been made of Luke's theological purposes. The Tubingen school taught that his purpose was to reconcile opposing Petrine and Pauline groups, but that is too subtle. Luke wears his heart on his sleeve. The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost, but it has come at a cost. He has divided Israel into those who embrace the new Way and those who reject it, bringing the covenant curses on themselves and their city. It has launched the Way into a Gentile empire which has still (in Acts 28) to sit in judgement on it. Paul Borgman concludes that "the whole story, in a nutshell, is an unfolding of *God's Way*, a quite unnatural and counterintuitive way of living taught and demonstrated, in the gospel, by Jesus."^{xvii} That is true enough, but it is also a story about who comes to believe. Eric Franklin affirms that "Luke writes from faith to deepen faith, and his story is conceived in the light of this faith and of the situation which he deems to be in need of his message."^{xviii} That, also, is true enough, but it does not describe the passion and conviction which motivates Luke. Craig A. Evans is nearer the truth by asserting that Luke aims "to centre our thoughts on Jesus as ruler and saviour of the whole world at large. Not just another prophet. He is the hinge on which the whole of history is turning."^{xix} The task for a preacher is to maintain the element of surprise, the flow of narrative and the centrality of Jesus, while encouraging faith and risking rejection in one's hearers. Above all, it is to capture the tidal surge of narrative that roars through the Gospel and bring it washing onto the shores of Wales in the 21st century.

Peter James Cousins,
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ⁱ Luke 1:1-4, T.N.I.V. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004)

ⁱⁱ See, for example, William S. Kurz, S.J., *Reading Luke-Acts, Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993) (You can read his introduction on line at: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=yYZIXkCVWJwC&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=narrative+criticism++Luke+Gospel+bible&source=web&ots=S3BBc8j0eH&sig=a6QmCmCYJOr9aWA7z4xuQBKlKw&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result) . See also the very detailed, James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005)

ⁱⁱⁱ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (London: IVP, 1970), p. 94

^{iv} Eric Franklin, *Christ the Lord: a Study in the purpose and Theology of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) pp.3-4

^v Paul Borgman, *The Way according to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke -Acts* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006), p.5

^{vi} In our Bangor library, my preferred introduction to the general questions is to be found in C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM, 1990)

^{vii} H. J. Cadbury, "The Tradition", in Foakes Jackson-Lake *The Beginnings of Christianity, II*, pp209-264. Cited by Guthrie, p96

^{viii} Albert C. Clark, *The Acts of the Apostles: Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes on Selected Passages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933); See also Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Textual Connections in Acts*, SBLMS 31(Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987)

^{ix} Wiliam K Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke: A Proof from Internal Evidence that "The Gospel According to St. Luke" and "The Acts of the Apostles" Were Written by the Same Person, and that the Writer was a Medical Man* (1882; Repr. Grand Rapids: Baker,1954) , and by no less than Adolf Von Harnack *Luke, the Physician*, trans J.R. Wilkinson (New York, Putnam, 1909)

^x Henry J. Cadbury, *The style and Literary Method of Luke* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920) p 50. Cited by Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke, Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2007), p.6

^{xi} Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1990), p. 5

^{xii} 19:41; 21:20-24; Jer 6:6; Ez 4:4; 26:8 in LXX

^{xiii} HE 3.32. cited by Guthrie, p.111

^{xiv} *Op.cit.* p. 5

^{xv} Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 20

^{xvi} Craig A. Evans, *op.cit.* p.11

^{xvii} *Op.cit* p. x

^{xviii} *Op. cit.* p. 30

^{xix} *Op.cit.* p8