

WHAT IF LUKE HAD NEVER MET THEOPHILUS?

LOVEDAY C.A. ALEXANDER

University of Sheffield

Asking the ‘what if?’ questions of virtual history is a way of rubbing our noses in history’s essential contingency—in the fact that things could have been different, that human choices (among other contingencies) actually matter. That is as true within a theological framework as any other. Personhood means the possibility of refusal as well as the possibility of assent; and one of the mysteries of revelation (theologically speaking) is that it takes place in a medium as profoundly conditioned as human language, in particular languages belonging to particular cultures and societies. And of all history’s contingencies, those of authorship seem—at least to those of us who are authors—the most precarious imaginable. So many things conspire against the writing of any given text: there are an infinite number of ways in which it might *not* happen, an infinite number of other combinations of words than the one that finally goes to press, an infinitude of tasks more urgent, more insistent (or simply less demanding) than sitting down to write.

With Luke we are dealing with an author who seems particularly sensitive to the delicate combinations of forces, both communal and individual, that hedge about the articulation of the word. Luke’s Jesus story is swaddled in successive layers of discourse: much of it is ‘un discours qui porte sur un discours’, to borrow Genette’s phrase.¹ The whole of his second volume (beyond the first eleven verses) is a discourse not about Jesus but about people talking about Jesus, Jesus in quotation marks. The lavish use of direct speech in Acts ensures that we have plenty of dramatic opportunities to see this secondary discourse in action: the text foregrounds the activity of speaking the gospel story and shows how it changes and adapts to different cultural contexts.

¹ G. Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: du Seuil, 1987), pp. 376-77. See further L.C.A. Alexander, ‘Reading Luke-Acts From Back To Front’, in J. Verheyden (ed.), *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (BETL; Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming).

The opening chapters of the Gospel foreshadow this by focussing on the Baptist and the circle of 'prophets' (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna) who all in their different ways talk about Jesus: the real subject of the Gospel does not come on stage as a speaking character until chapter 4. This framework of second-order discourse (people talking about Jesus) appears in the Gospel preface (Luke 1:1-4) in the form of 'the tradition handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and ministers of the word' (Luke 1:2). But now the tradition itself has already become part of the past, receding behind the third-order discourse of the 'we' who have received the tradition and the 'many' who have attempted to put it into narrative form (Luke 1:1).² 'Attempted' sounds rather pejorative, but perhaps it only indicates that Luke is aware of the difficulties inherent in the enterprise; at any rate, he cannot be entirely disapproving of their efforts, because he has decided to have a go at doing the same thing, writing up an orderly and accurate account for Theophilus of the 'business that has been fulfilled in our midst' (Luke 1:3).

Unlike John's eternally pre-existent Logos, then, Luke's Gospel is presented as the product of a particular time and place, a tradition whose survival and progress could not (humanly speaking) have been predicted. The long dramatic narrative of Paul's shipwreck en route to Rome (Acts 27-28) emphasizes the precariousness of the process, the physical vulnerability of the bearer of the word. If the narrative of Acts could be entitled 'How We Brought the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome', the shipwreck evokes the subtitle 'By the Skin of Our Teeth' (though the effect is somewhat dissipated by the discovery at 28:15 that there are already 'brethren' in Rome). The Gospel preface, however, seems to allow for a greater element of precariousness in the production of this particular performance of the Jesus story. True, there is a tradition, and there are by now 'many' other accounts of it in existence: the word is on the street, and all attempts to suppress it have been in vain (Acts 28:31). But the existence of Luke's own written version is the result of an entirely personal decision: τῷ ἐμὲν καὶ δοκίμησον μοι καὶ ἔσται ἡ ἀποκρίσις σου ὡς ἀληθὴς ἐστίν· ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ πάντων ὑμῶν. Amen. (Luke 1:3), the standard classical formula for a decision made by the normal rational processes

² For a detailed commentary on these verses, cf. L.C.A. Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS, 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 102-42.

of the human mind. The Muratorian Canon seems to underline this humanistic aspect of the composition of Scripture (*Lucas iste medicus ... nomine suo ex opinione conscripsit*), but other early readers clearly found it more problematic: some Old Latin manuscripts of Luke 1:3 add *et spiritui sancto*, echoing the doubly-determined decision of Acts 15.28, where the human processes of decision-making in council, by discussion and debate, are supplemented by direct divine guidance.³ But although Luke is very ready to identify the intervention of the Spirit in the decisions taken by his characters (e.g. Acts 13:1-4; 16:6-10), he does not claim such direct inspiration for his own writing. The decision to write Luke-Acts is taken on his own responsibility. The only motivation he gives (apart from an implied desire to emulate and perhaps better the efforts of the 'many') is that provided by Theophilus. This is a communication dependent on the conscious choice of its writer and written for the needs of a particular reader: 'it seemed good to me to write it all up for you, most excellent Theophilus, in order that you might recognize the reliability of the instruction you have received' (Luke 1:3-4).

Here, as Joel Green observes, 'Luke is apparently recognizing the role of Theophilus in providing inspiration or at least impetus for his writing',⁴ making explicit the social embeddedness implicit in every act of speech. But is this element of contingency real, or only apparent? It may be objected that the role of the dedicatee is not to be taken seriously in a literary production of this kind. Luke's substantial two-volume work is not by any stretch of the imagination a private letter: the address to Theophilus is a convention, part of the recognized literary etiquette of the Graeco-Roman world.⁵ Some authors using this convention clearly do not expect their addressee actually to go to the lengths of *reading* the work presented to them. Pliny the Elder explicitly dissuades Titus from reading one of his more technical works: 'It was written for the common crowd, for the mob of farmers and craftsmen, and

³ Muratorian Canon cited in K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Bible Society, 5th edn, 1968), p. 538. The guidance invoked in Acts 15:28 probably refers to the events of ch. 10, which the assembly has taken into account in making its decision (cf. 11:18; 15:8).

⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 44.

⁵ I have tried to analyse some of the ways this convention worked in *The Preface*, pp. 56-63.

then for those with leisure for study'.⁶ In this sense literary dedication is a social fiction: the author and the addressee are both real people, but the implied one-to-one relationship ('I am writing this for you') uses simple language to mask a much more complex social situation. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to rule out of court the possibility that some dedicatees did in some ways act as a catalyst for the production of the book dedicated to them. Precisely how we see this relationship working in Luke's case depends to a large extent on who we think Theophilus was.

Christian tradition has never, so far as I can tell, taken Theophilus seriously at all, even as a reader: there is no Saint Theophilus, no attempt to discover sanctified bones or to find him a place (like Onesimus) in the hierarchies of church history. Scholars have speculated since the eighteenth century that he might have been a Roman magistrate, perhaps the very one detailed to examine the legal case for Paul's appeal.⁷ There is however, no real evidence for this romantic view, and most New Testament scholars now would echo Barrett's wry comment: 'No Roman official would have filtered out so much of what to him would be theological and ecclesiastical rubbish in order to reach so tiny a grain of relevant apology'.⁸ But the vocabulary Luke uses of Theophilus is well paralleled in the dedications of a wide range of technical literature: it belongs not so much to a particular literary genre as to a particular social context, part of the courtesy of intellectual exchange between authors and their friends or patrons in the wider society.⁹ Theophilus, on this view (as I have suggested elsewhere), parallels figures like Galen's friends and patrons Bassus and Boethus, amateur aficionados of medical theory who encouraged Galen to write up his lecture notes into something more substantial.¹⁰ He could well have been the patron of a house church, providing a social location for the performance of Luke's narrative at Christian meetings not unlike the *symposia* of pagan

⁶ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* pref. 6; Alexander, *The Preface*, pp. 57-58; H.J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London: SPCK, 1927), pp. 202-204.

⁷ Cf. H.J. Cadbury, 'The Purpose Expressed in Luke's Preface' (*The Expositor* XXI [1921], pp. 431-41 [437]), citing C.A. Heumann in *Bibliotheca Bremensis* [Class. iv., fasc. 3 (1721)]. See further Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts*, p. 315.

⁸ C.K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), p. 63.

⁹ Alexander, *The Preface*, pp. 187-200. Cf. Barbara Gold, *Literary Patronage in Greece and Rome* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Alexander, *The Preface*, pp. 192-93.

society. Gerald Downing has provided an engaging and persuasive picture of such a performance.¹¹

I would be inclined now to suggest a second possibility. Theophilus' name is not Latin but Greek, and it is one which (while not exclusively Jewish) seems to have been popular among hellenized Jews. Greek intellectuals in Rome, as Bowersock observed long ago, tended to congregate around patrons from their own part of the empire.¹² We might take seriously the possibility that Theophilus is being used by Luke not so much as a back-door introduction to the Roman corridors of power but for what he is in his own right—that is (let us hypothesize), as a prominent and amenable representative of the same Jewish community in Rome to which Luke has Paul make his last impassioned plea for hearing in Acts 28. If this scene is a window into the real intended audience of Luke's work (as I am increasingly inclined to think it may be), then we might see Luke's relation to Theophilus as a humbler parallel to Josephus' relations with the Herodian family in Rome in the 80s and 90s.¹³ Like Josephus, desperate to establish his credibility in the wake of his disastrous war record, so Luke's Paul, at the end of Acts, makes his final *apologia* not to any Roman magistrate but to the leaders of the Roman Jewish community, who know little of Paul or his gospel except that it is a 'sect' (ἡ ἑταῖρα)—that is, a sect of Judaism—that is 'everywhere spoken against'.¹⁴ This could well be a dramatic representation of the situation Luke is trying to address a decade or so later.

Our estimate of Theophilus' role in the genesis of Luke-Acts

¹¹ Gerald Downing, 'Theophilus's First Reading of Luke-Acts', in C.M. Tuckett (ed.), *Luke's Literary Achievement* (JSNTSS, 116; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 91-109.

¹² G.W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 88; Alexander, *The Preface*, p. 61.

¹³ Cf. Jos., *Vit.* 359, 362-67. Cf. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts*, pp. 240-41, on Luke's interest in Herodian matters, to which should be added the remarkable scene in Acts 26 where Paul, though ostensibly on trial before the Roman governor, addresses his entire speech to Agrippa. For a writer of Luke's sophistication, it is surely not without intent that Agrippa comes at the end to exclaim, 'Almost you would persuade me to become a Christian' (26:28). Arguably, that is exactly the kind of endorsement that Luke is looking for. Note that Cadbury also toys with the idea of a western (Italian) location for Theophilus (*The Making of Luke-Acts*, pp. 241-42).

¹⁴ Acts 28:22. Cf. L.C.A. Alexander, 'The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text', in M.J. Edwards, M. Goodman, C. Rowland (eds.), *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 15-44.

will vary according to which of these pictures we find more plausible. The key to Theophilus' role in the first case lies in the words $\delta\alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\ \epsilon\acute{\alpha}\delta\epsilon\div\beta\epsilon\varsigma\delta\ \epsilon\ddot{\upsilon}\alpha\upsilon\ \acute{\iota}$ (Luke 1:4), 'the words in which you have been instructed'. Like the auditors addressed by Galen and Quintilian, this addressee is someone who has already heard the substance of the story Luke is about to tell: in this sense (*pace* Downing), he cannot be quite like the Roman host who invites his guests to dinner to hear a *new* poem or history being performed. He has already been part, on this model, of an audience listening to Luke's story ($\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\delta\epsilon\div\beta\epsilon\varsigma\delta$ carries an implication of orality). But that story might never have been committed to paper if Theophilus (perhaps a more literate member of the group, perhaps a man with space to house a library) had not asked Luke for clarification, for the $\sim\ \acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}\ \ddot{\Upsilon}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$ of seeing the material in a written form. Stories like this are told, in tradition, of the genesis of other Gospels: Clement has Mark writing down Peter's preaching at the request of 'certain Caesarean *equites*'.¹⁵ We are often reluctant to believe them: it seems too convenient a way to link the non-apostolic Gospel of Mark with the preaching of an apostle. But, whether or not we accept the apostolic connection, the mechanism itself is well attested: we know that such requests were made, and that they did have an effect on the production of written texts, that is not on the composition of the work but on its transition from the oral to the written medium.¹⁶ The essential contingency of the process is well brought out in Galen's fascinating little monograph *On His Own Books* (*De Libris Propriis*):

[3] As for the reason why many read my books as their own, this you know yourself, most excellent Bassus; for they were given to friends or pupils without an inscription (*choris epigraphes*), simply because they were not for publication (*pros ekdosin*) but were made for individuals as they requested memoranda of what they had heard. Then when some died, anyone who got hold of the books and liked them took to reading them as their own . . . [while others shared them with friends, who then] went home to their own country and after some delay, one in one place, one in another, started to perform their own demonstrations [or: lectures] from them. In time they were all detected and a number of people inscribed my name on the texts which had once again been recovered; but when they discovered

¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Adumbrationes ad I Petr.* 5.13, cited in Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, p. 539 (Alexander, *The Preface*, p. 199 n. 18).

¹⁶ For examples, cf. L.C.A. Alexander, 'Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels', in R.J. Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 71-112, esp. pp. 94-97.

that they were different from the texts held by others they brought them to me and begged me to correct them.¹⁷

Sometimes it is travel that provides the catalyst. People request written forms of teaching material if they are about to move away, or if the lecturer is about to leave town; but as long as the teacher is with you, who needs a book? Given the peregrinatory character of much early Christian teaching, this makes another very plausible motive for a request to have gospel teaching in written form. But whatever the motive, the role of the dedicatee is a real one: without it, Luke's particular version of the gospel story (together with his unrivalled collection of missionary anecdotes: did you ever hear the one about the night Peter got out of jail, and the maid didn't have the wit to let him in, she was so excited?) might never have achieved the status of a written text.

This is all hypothetical, of course; but it is one way to en flesh the very real possibility that Luke-Acts might never have existed as a written text. But Theophilus' connection with the content of that text is still on this model very tangential. If we follow the second hypothesis, Theophilus (or at least the community he represents) could have had a much more substantial impact on the particular form adopted by Luke's Gospel. The pronounced Jewish flavour of Luke's retelling of the gospel, with its strong emphasis on the roots of the Jesus story in biblical history, does not necessarily rule out a predominantly Gentile audience: certainly we need to think carefully about the impact of that distinctive cultural colouring on subsequent generations of Christian readers lacking any kind of pre-education in the Bible. But the most obvious target for such a presentation is a Jewish one, and if we think of Theophilus as a representative of a diaspora Jewish community (perhaps in Rome), he could well have been the catalyst for this and other distinctively Jewish features of Luke's work. Here we are considering not just the contingency of the transition from orality to literacy, but the many ways in which the distinctive shape of a literary text may be shaped by the particular social situation (on this hypothesis, an apologetic situation) to which it was originally addressed.¹⁸ In this sense, thinking about Theophilus means

¹⁷ Galen, *De libris propriis* proem (Kühn XIX.8-11 = *Scripta Minora* II.91-93), my translation.

¹⁸ Of the numerous attempts to link Luke's distinctive features with the character of his audience, cf. especially Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-*

thinking about the possibility that Luke's distinctive form of the gospel story (with the sequel that only Luke adds) might never have existed.

So asking 'What if Luke had never met Theophilus?' is in the end an invitation to consider the possibility of the non-existence of Luke's Gospel and Acts. Once a text exists, it is very difficult to resist the temptation to regard it as inevitable—especially when it becomes part of a canon of sacred texts. Imagining a New Testament without these two books (which make up a quarter of its bulk) is difficult, but interesting. The most obvious loss would be the unique narrative of Acts, the only hinge we have to link the Gospels and the Epistles. Luke's narrative may be suspect, but it is very hard to disregard it altogether, even for the most sceptical scholarship; it provides a plausible historical framework for the Pauline epistles in which details can be questioned but the overall framework remains. Yet the possibility of having no narrative at all is one that we experience without a qualm when dealing with the letters of Peter or the Johannine community. What might the New Testament look like if James, or Peter (or even Jude) had had a faithful disciple with the literary talents of Luke? What if we had a narrative of the founding and development of the Johannine churches rather than the Pauline churches? Certainly the popular image of the development of Christianity would look very different without Luke's concentration on the Pauline networks.

But Luke's contribution to the shaping of the Christian past (or at least to the popular perception of that past) is only a fraction of his contribution to the grand narrative of Christendom. I have been teaching a course on Luke this year with a focus on that grand narrative, especially as it is embodied in the artistic and liturgical traditions of the Christian world, and encouraging students to reflect on Luke's distinctive contribution to it. Without Luke's Gospel, there would be no Good Samaritan, no Lost Sheep or Prodigal Son—all of them now deeply embedded in the symbolic grammar of Western culture. Can we envisage Christmas without the manger or the shepherds? Somehow the Matthean nativity, for all its narrative vigour, comes across as a fiercer, grim-

Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology (SNTSMS, 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and G.E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (NovTSup, LXIV; Leiden: Brill, 1992).

mer story without the Lucan elements. The effect is all the more dramatic if we try to isolate the Lucan elements of the grand narrative within its primary performance location, the liturgical cycles of the Christian churches. Without Luke, there is no Christmas, only Epiphany; no feast of Stephen the Deacon, only the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents; no Benedictus or Magnificat, and indeed virtually no New Testament basis for Marian devotion worth talking about (Matthew subordinates her to Joseph). Without Luke, we have no penitent thief at the crucifixion, no Easter walk to Emmaus—and, perhaps most important, no Ascension and no Pentecost. The motif of Jesus' exaltation is well embedded in the New Testament, but it tends elsewhere to be associated with the resurrection (cf. Rom. 1:4; Phil. 1:9; Rev. 1:12-18). Only Luke provides the narrative link between the post-Easter appearances and the heavenly Christ of Christian belief. John's Jesus promises the Paraclete to his disciples after his 'departure', and breathes 'holy spirit' into them (all except Thomas) on the evening of the resurrection Sunday (John 14:26; 16:7-15; 20:22).¹⁹ Within the developing Christian tradition, however, the dominant paradigm is that of the Spirit poured out from heaven by the ascended Christ, and this is derived from Luke. It is not that this paradigm cannot be found elsewhere in the New Testament: cf. Eph. 4:7-12, which uses a christological exegesis of Ps. 68:18 to root it in Scripture. But it is Luke who supplies the narrative structure which makes it possible for the faithful to picture and celebrate this event.

When Irenaeus of Lyons wanted an image for the Lucan element in the four-Gospel tradition, he chose the bull (what images would he have picked to justify a three-Gospel canon?).²⁰ Though later tradition sought to lend this ascription some theological and even psychological plausibility, it remains an artificial connection, validated by long tradition rather than by any obvious intrinsic 'fit'.²¹ Much more apposite is the eastern tradition that Luke was the first icon painter: in numerous paintings, he is pictured with his easel and paintbrushes, painting a portrait of

¹⁹ Eastern Orthodox theology retains a distinction between the Johannine and Lucan Pentecosts: Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991), pp. 167-68.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.11.7-9.

²¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (trans. W.G. Ryan; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), vol. II pp. 247-54.

Mary and her child (anticipating the child's public significance by a good thirty years).²² The image is naive, but it identifies something of Luke's distinctive contribution to the development of the Christian tradition. Luke is the supreme narrator of the New Testament (indeed his work is in many ways the first attempt to put together an overarching 'grand narrative' within early Christianity). His vision was one that lent itself to liturgical performance: it became embodied in the daily and yearly cycles of Catholic and Orthodox Christian devotion.²³ And these cycles in their turn form the underwater reef which gives their distinctive shape to the iconographic traditions of Eastern and Western religious art. Emile Mâle's classic study of the iconography of the mediaeval cathedrals of France makes this point clearly:

L'Église n'a pas voulu présenter aux chrétiens toute la vie de Jésus-Christ, pas plus qu'elle n'a mis entre leurs mains les quatre Évangiles, mais elle a choisi quelques faits de sens profond, significatifs entre tous, pour les proposer à la méditation des fidèles. Ces faits sont précisément ceux que l'Église célèbre chaque année dans le cycle des fêtes. Les sculpteurs, les verriers, les miniaturistes n'ont donc fait qu'illustrer le calendrier liturgique.²⁴

It is not wholly inappropriate that Luke should have come to be claimed as the patron saint of artists, given the intrinsic connection between the artistic tradition and the liturgical tradition. And in the world of virtual history, we may fairly claim that both might have looked very different if Luke had not met Theophilus.

ABSTRACT

Asking the 'what if?' questions of virtual history is a way of rubbing our noses in history's essential contingency—in the fact that things could have been different, that human choices (among other contingencies) actually matter. And of all history's contingencies, those of authorship seem—at least to those of us who are authors—the most precarious imaginable. With Luke we are dealing with an author who seems particularly sensitive to the delicate combinations of forces, both communal and individual, that hedge about the articulation of the word. Asking 'What if Luke had never met Theophilus?' is in the end an invitation to consider the possibility of the non-existence of Luke's Gospel and Acts. Can we imagine the New Testament without these two texts (which together make up 25% of its bulk)?

²² Robin Cormack, *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp. 44-64.

²³ And correspondingly less interesting to Protestant devotion: Bach composed no 'St. Luke Passion'.

²⁴ Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1925), p. 182.