

Assisting the Word by Making (Up) History *Luke's Project and Ours*

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The project of the first Christian historian stands as a parable of the successes and failures of all subsequent attempts to provide a reliable basis for faith by constructing a history right down to our own postmodern struggles. Though we lack Luke's confidence, we cannot escape the necessity of making up the best history we can in order to "assist the Logos of God."

My early theological position was shaped largely by that ecumenical family of interpretive strategies that came to be known as the Biblical Theology Movement, and at its center was the conviction that history was the primary medium through which God spoke. To be a biblical scholar, one had to learn to do history, and if one did that well, one could be in the catbird seat of the academic theological hierarchy. That was the assumption that led me to begin doctoral studies forty-one years ago. Alas, how the mighty have fallen! The Biblical Theology Movement was even then "in crisis," as Brevard Childs sadly reported a few years later.¹ The crisis has only deepened in the decades since, as successive waves of postmodern criticism have shaken all the assumptions of modernist historicism, upon which our historical-critical method was founded.

In truth, the question of faith and history is nearly as old as the Christian movement itself. I propose to look at the very first history of that movement, to inquire how that anonymous but very self-conscious author whom we, following tradition, call "Luke" used the tools of literary history of his own day to serve faith. Although we cannot simply imitate his kind of history or his kind of theology, his project nevertheless offers interesting lessons for us.

¹B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

THE AUTHOR AND THE EYEWITNESSES

I begin by translating the remarkable preface by which the author signalled to the competent auditor of the first century what kind of work these two volumes constituted and what the writer's aims were. Unfortunately, it is difficult to render the passage into English without awkwardness, although it is anything but awkward in Greek. Here's a rough approximation of Luke 1: 1-4:

Inasmuch as many people have tried to compose a narrative about the things that have come to fulfillment among us, according to the tradition that those who from the beginning of the matter were its eyewitnesses and assistants have handed down to us, it occurred to me, too, your Excellency, that because I had made an accurate investigation of everything from its outset, I was in a position to write for you, Theophilus, a sequential account, so that you may know what is absolutely reliable in the reports about which you have been informed (Luke 1:1-4).²

The author's prose, at least in this preface, is self-consciously "literary." It has a deliberate academic flavor.³ Though there is plenty in it for popular consumption, the narrative is so constructed that someone of the status of Theophilus can take it seriously. The author knows that "the sect" whose history he presents is "everywhere spoken against" (Acts 28:22); his witness will have, in part, to be defensive—an "apology" in the ancient sense of the word. Apologies tend to be read chiefly by insiders. Whether Theophilus himself was an insider or an outsider is a question that continues to be debated. Nevertheless, the insiders who hear Luke's work read are encouraged to see themselves on the world stage. The things related here "did not happen in a corner" (26:26).⁴

One word here is ambiguous but important. Luke writes of "eyewitnesses and assistants of the *logos*," a term that New Testament translators habitually render "the word." I have translated it above quite innocuously as "the matter," because I think that is the way an innocent auditor would have heard it on first listening to this gospel read aloud. Only by hearing the two-volume work in its entirety do you realize that the author has developed a peculiar theme about a "message of God" or a "story of God" sent to God's people and about the variety of human responses to it. I will come back to that theme. First, the notion of eyewitnesses.

It is no surprise to find mention of eyewitnesses here. In the preface to a Hellenistic history, it was almost *de rigueur* for the author to boast of access to firsthand information.

²All translations in this essay are my own unless otherwise indicated.

³In the past century, appreciation of the literary qualities of Luke-Acts has grown steadily, and attempts to locate more precisely the register of its style have multiplied. Still important is the pioneering work of H. J. Cadbury, as in *The Making of Luke-Acts* in 1927 (reprint, London: SPCK, 1958), and M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. H. Greeven (London: SCM, 1956). Similarities of Luke's style with medical and other technical handbooks were explored by, among others, L. Rydbeck, *Fachprosa, vermeintliche Volkssprache und Neues Testament: Zur Beurteilung der sprachlichen Niveauunterschiede im nachklassischen Griechischen*, *Studia Graeca Upsaliensia* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1967), and refined by L. Alexander, "Luke's Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing," *NovT* 28 (1986) 48-74, and idem, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1*, SNTSMS (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁴A. J. Malherbe, "Not in a Corner": Early Christian Apologetic in Acts 26:26, *The Second Century* 5 (1985-86) 193-209.

Josephus, for example, speaks with disdain of others who pretend to write about the Jewish revolt of 66–72 C.E. without having been there. By contrast, Josephus was one of the rebel generals in the early days of the war and later a Roman prisoner of war. Thus, he writes as an eyewitness.⁵ Our author cannot make that claim. He admits he is not an eyewitness. He lives some time after the events, and his information is second- or third-hand. He depends on tradition. His claim to superiority over those “many” who have tried to do the job before him can only rest on the thoroughness and accuracy of his investigation and the rhetorical prowess of his composition. He is aware of having had to *construct* this history. His situation is thus in some sense paradigmatic of all subsequent biblical scholarship, including our own. He is already in the plight of Kierkegaard’s “disciple at second hand”⁶—like all Christians since.

Luke knows he cannot claim to be an eyewitness, so he does the next best thing. If he is not an eyewitness, at least he has the reports of eyewitnesses and has investigated them for accuracy and coherence. The chain of tradition is very important to him, but he privileges the beginning, the *archē*. He has a specific notion of what that *archē* is. This becomes clear in the story, which Luke alone tells,

of the apostles’ meeting to select a replacement for Judas. The qualification for the candidates is simple: they must be “men [sic] who have been traveling with us during the whole time that the Lord Jesus went

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in and out with us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us” (Acts 1:21–22). Only from this group can a twelfth apostle be chosen, “to be with us a witness [*martyrs*] of his resurrection.” So, in his Pentecost speech in the next chapter, Peter declares that “all of us” (i.e., apostles), are witnesses (*martyres*) of the resurrection (2:32). In his speech to Cornelius and friends, he again calls the apostles “witnesses (*martyres*) of everything that [Jesus] did in the country of the Judeans and in Jerusalem” (10:39).

Nevertheless, the aim of Luke’s project is not to describe that formative beginning as some golden age to be enshrined in pious nostalgia, but to continue the witness. Matthias, solemnly installed as the twelfth apostle, immediately disappears from the narrative. Instead, a figure not yet on the scene will dominate the story from Acts 9 on. Paul, like the author, is *not* one of the eyewitnesses of the *archē*, but nevertheless an “assistant” and “witness” of a very special kind. In Acts 13:31–32, Paul distinguishes himself from the eyewitnesses, who are defined identically in 1:21–22. Jesus, he says, “appeared over many days to those who had come up with him from the Galilee to Jerusalem, *who are his witnesses to the*

⁵Josephus, *JW* 1.1–3.

⁶S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 59.

people. We are *also* preaching that the promise that was made to the fathers God has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus . . .” The distinction contrasts sharply with Paul’s own words in 1 Cor 9:1—“Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen our Lord Jesus?” The contrast is important, but it should not blind us to the central role that Paul plays in the narrative of Acts. If Luke typically withholds the title “apostle” from Paul, he by no means begrudges him the status of “witness”—indeed an eyewitness of a different but special sort. Thus when Paul retells the story of his Damascus experience in his defense before King Agrippa (the third time the story is told in Acts), he reports that the Jesus of his vision commissioned him to be “an assistant and witness [*hypēretēs kai martys*] of both the visions you have seen of me and of my future appearances to you” (26:16). This is not very far from language Paul uses of himself in 1 Cor 4:1—“This is the way one ought to think of us [Paul and Apollos], as Christ’s assistants [*hypēretai*] and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Paul, then, represents an intermediate category for Luke. He does not belong to the apostolic eyewitnesses, who had a foundational position determined by their belonging to that temporal and geographical *archē*, the beginning of the whole story. Yet he is both *hypēretēs* and *martys*. For Luke’s own project, Paul is a bridge figure, between the *archē* of the eyewitnesses in Galilee and Judaea and the author’s own “belated” generation, who can be witnesses only by investigation, reconstruction, and rhetorical force.

This anonymous writer we call “Luke” was, as far as we know, the first self-conscious *historian* of the Christian movement. With his emphasis on the *archē* of Jesus’ story, he invented the notion of “Christian beginnings,” which has so obsessed biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment. He drew a clear line between the *autoptai* (“eyewitnesses”) and those who follow, but he was certain that the Spirit, using such transitional figures as Paul, had assured continuity of God’s peculiarly historical message across the divide. He was confident that his own investigation of the tradition could discern “what is absolutely reliable.” Too bad we lack his confidence.

ASSISTANTS OF THE LOGOS

Luke’s preface echoes several conventions of the history-writing of his day. His words imply that he, like other Hellenistic historians, had confidence in his own ability and in the common methods of historical investigation. We have considerably less confidence in the competence of the old methods to produce reliable history, and in recent years our confidence, even in our modern methods, has been rather badly shaken. There is, however, another kind of confidence that this author expresses more subtly in his narrative. It is his confidence that what he calls the *logos tou theou*, the “word,” “speech,” or “message” of God, could not be stopped from carrying out its ordained purpose.

The first hint of this theme is found in the phrase featured in the title of this essay, what Luke calls the eyewitnesses, *hypēretai tou logou*. English versions commonly translate this rather blandly “servants of the word”; the REV paraphrases “servants of the gospel.” It is a decidedly odd phrase. To begin with, *hypēretēs* is not the word usually used in the New

Testament for “servant”; more often we find *doulos* or *diakonos*. *Hypēretēs* usually refers to an assistant of any sort—the “bailiff” of a court, as in Matt 5:25, or the *hazzan* of the synagogue, to whom Jesus hands the scroll of the prophet after reading the lesson (Luke 4:20). John Mark is the *hypēretēs* of Paul and Barnabas, though not a very satisfactory one as it turned out (Acts 13:5). Paul could call himself and Apollos *hypēretai* of Christ, paralleling the expression with “stewards” or “household managers.” But what is an “assistant of the Logos?” Occurrences of similar phrases elsewhere in Greek literature do not seem to help. Using the cognate verb, Lucian’s parody of a vulgar professor of rhetoric says, “Let your tongue assist (*hypēretein*) you in your speeches (*logoi*) and also in every other way it can” (*Rhet. praec.* 23). In Plato’s *Theaetetus* (173c), Theodore agrees to Socrates’s proposal to interrupt the discussion, “For we who belong to this company are not lackeys (*hypēretai*) of our arguments (*logoi*), but our arguments are, as it were, our servants (*oiketai*).” Arrian describes a plot against Antipater initiated by spreading slanders, with the scribe Asklepiodoros assisting the *logos*, that is, the campaign of demagoguery launched by Euridice (*Hist. succ. Alex.* 1.33.5 = Jacoby, *FGrH* 2b, 156, F.9, 107). In Euripides’s *Medea*, Jason says sarcastically to Medea, “Oh, yes, I’m sure you would have supported the plan [*hypēreteis logoi*] if I had told you of the marriage” (588). These examples suggest that Theophilus or any other ordinary speaker of Greek, on first hearing Luke’s preface, would have thought this phrase fairly colorless: “the eyewitnesses and assistants [supporters or seconders] of the matter.” That is, they would have heard *logos* as referring to the substance of the narrative that Luke’s “many” predecessors and now he, too, have undertaken to write.

If Theophilus was an insider, on the other hand, he may have known that for a long time Christians had been using the phrase “the Logos of God” or simply “the Logos” as shorthand for the missionary proclamation, the basic story that Christians had to tell. We find this usage already in Paul’s letters and in Mark, and Luke has adopted it as part of the common Christian jargon. That is why the REV’s paraphrase, “servants of the gospel,” is justified, if we have in mind the initiated reader.

However, Luke is purposeful in taking up this language. He uses interchangeably the phrases “the Logos of God,” “the Logos of the Lord,” or simply “the Logos” more than any other early Christian writer. He inserts “Logos” where the tradition uses another word, as in Luke 8:21 (cf. Mark 3:35). He uses it to sum up key parts of his story, particularly in the second volume: “The word of God grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:24); “The Gentiles, when they heard this [the announcement by Paul and Barnabas that they are ‘turning to the Gentiles’], rejoiced and glorified the word of the Lord, and those who were ordained for eternal life began to believe” (13:48); “The word of the Lord spread through the whole countryside” (13:49); “Powerfully thus the word of the Lord grew and increased its strength” (19:20). Note that these metaphors speak of the Logos as if it were a tangible

thing or substance or even a person.⁷

That personification is a biblical trope, as "Luke" knew very well. Our author invests the phrase with biblical echoes that would have conveyed to a knowing audience a rich and cumulative resonance as the story progresses. The first of those biblical echoes sounds in one of the verses quoted above: "The word of God grew and multiplied" (Acts 12:24). What can that possibly mean? The same pair of verbs appears, but with different subjects, a bit earlier in the narrative: "And the word of God grew, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly" (6:7). The idea of the number of disciples multiplying is straightforward. But is the "growth of the word" merely a metaphorical way of saying the same thing? That seems to be the implication of the more prosaic formulation in 13:48–49, where the happy response of the Gentiles to "the word of the Lord" leads to the "spreading" of the word throughout the whole country. Late in Acts, however, the personification of the "word of the Lord" returns. Paul's two-year preaching stint in Ephesus is so successful that "all the residents of [the Roman province] Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord" (19:10). After relating Paul's "extraordinary miracles" in the same place, and the ignominious failure of some Jewish exorcists to imitate them, Luke sums up, "So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (19:20, NRSV).

Like so much of the special tone of this author's prose, the language of these passages echoes the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible.⁸ The pair of verbs translated here "to grow and to multiply" is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew formula of blessing or command, *ṣḥrû ûrēbû*, "be fruitful and multiply" (e.g., Gen 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7). In the indicative, the formula is applied to the growth of Israel in Egypt in Gen 47:27 and Exod 1:7. The latter verse reads, "The children of Israel grew and multiplied and became numerous and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them." These verses are paraphrased in the speech of Stephen (Acts 7:17). The paraphrase suggests that the echo just before in the narrative, about the multiplication of the disciples in Jerusalem, is deliberate. The author expects the competent listener to hear that the expansion of the Christian movement, the multiplication of those who "hear and do the word of God," is the result of God's direct blessing. And, of course, the notion of "hearing and doing the word of God" is

⁷The first modern scholar to treat seriously the theme "the growth of the word" in Acts seems to have been N. A. Dahl, "Ordets Vekst ['the Word Grows']," *NTT* 67 (1966) 32–46 (originally written in 1940). Among the more recent treatments of the theme, the most exhaustive is W. Reinhardt, *Das Wachstum des Gottesvolkes: Untersuchungen zum Gemeindegewachstum im lukanischen Doppelwerk auf dem Hintergrund des Alten Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

⁸See especially the detailed analysis by Reinhardt, *Wachstum*. Studies of the language and style of Luke–Acts over the past century have revealed how deeply this work is shaped by quotations, allusions, and echoes from the LXX. Among the many pertinent works, see W. K. Lowther Clarke, "The Use of the Septuagint in Acts," in *The Beginnings of Christianity Part 1: The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [orig. pub. 1922]) 2.66–106; A. Wifstrand, "Lukas och Septuaginta," *STK* 16 (1940) 243–62, and "Lukas och den Grekiska Klassicismen," *SEÅ* 5 (1940) 139–51; D. Tabachovitz, *Die Septuaginta und das Neue Testament: Stilstudien*, Skrifter utg. av Svenska Institutet i Athen (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1956). I am grateful to Lars Rydbeck for making available an English translation of Wifstrand's essays. In assessing the way a reader in antiquity might have heard the biblical quotations in Luke–Acts, we should pay special attention to François Bovon's remarks about "the art of quotation" in F. Bovon, "How Well the Holy Spirit Spoke Through the Prophet Isaiah to Your Ancestors!" (Acts 28:25), in *New Testament Traditions and Apocryphal Narratives*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1995) 43–50.

itself distinctly biblical: "Keep and hear and do all these words that I command you, that it may be well for you and your children forever" (Deut 12:28; cf. Exod 19:8; 24:3; Deut 31:12; Ps 102:20; Jer 11:6). In these passages, especially the Deuteronomic and prophetic texts, the "word of God" is usually equated with the Torah or with some specific command. The people's response is decisive for their fate. See, for example, the strong ultimatum in Jer 22:4–5. Something of this same force is conveyed by the biblical allusions in Luke–Acts, and this subtext is reinforced by other features of the narrative.

A key passage is Acts 4:24–30, which is a prayer of the disciples after Peter and John have returned from their imprisonment, miraculous release, and confrontation with the authorities in Jerusalem. The prayer, like the speeches in Luke–Acts, provides for the audience a kind of internal, theological commentary on the narrated events. Here it shows the response of the community to its first persecution, a theme that occupies Luke all through the book of Acts. They pray for power "to speak [God's] word with boldness (*parrhēsia*)," and immediately the sign is given that their prayer is answered. *Parrhēsia* is an important virtue in the rhetoric, political thought, and moral philosophy of the Greco–Roman world.⁹ It refers to the political autonomy of citizens in a free city, but especially, in imperial times, to the forthrightness of the morally free and virtuous person who speaks the truth in the face of opposition, tyranny, or danger. It is that kind of boldness that Peter and John demonstrate to the Sanhedrin: "When they saw the *parrhēsia* of Peter and John and perceived that they were illiterate and common people, they were amazed and realized that they had been with Jesus" (4:13). What is novel here, in comparison with contemporary philosophical and rhetorical treatments of confident speech, is that Peter and John exhibit *parrhēsia* because they have been "filled with [the] Holy Spirit" (4:8)—like the prophets of old and the new prophets who herald the births of Jesus and John in the early chapters of Luke. That is what all the disciples now pray for and immediately receive (4:31). That Spirit-given *parrhēsia* is a leitmotif of the rest of the story. The very last words of the book sum up this theme by describing Paul's activity in Rome: "He remained [under a sort of house arrest] and received everyone who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the account of Jesus Christ with all *parrhēsia*, unhindered" (28:31).

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Each of the places where Luke has summarized his narrative by speaking of the

⁹See Malherbe, "Not in a Corner," and, among recent discussions of the term, J. T. Fitzgerald, ed., *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World*, NovTSup (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); D. Konstan et al., *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); also the evidence collected by D. E. Fredrickson, "Paul's Bold Speech in the Argument of 2 Cor 2:14–7:16" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990) ch. 2.

“growth” of the word of the Lord comes just after some crisis, either a persecution from without or some dissension within. The author has arranged his material to show that, according to the overruling “plan” of God, persecution and even internal difficulty actually serve to advance the mission (see Acts 6:7; 8:4; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20).

In the disciples’ prayer in Acts, this motif is connected with the paradox of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Just as when Jesus’ enemies in their “ignorance” (3:17) “gathered together against” God’s servant Jesus, they accomplished only “what [God’s] hand and [God’s] plan had predestined to take place” (4:27–8), so now the enemies of the apostles and of the word unwittingly serve the predestined spread of the word. It is not so much the fate of the apostles that is paralleled with that of Jesus, but the fate of the *word*. The subtitle of Luke’s two-volume work could almost be “Nothing Can Stop the Word of God.”

This peculiar but quite biblical trope personifies the word of God as a kind of emissary or agent, response to whom is decisive for the people to whom the emissary is sent. It is amplified in Luke–Acts in several ways. A key text is Peter’s speech to Cornelius, the second—and paradigmatic—Gentile converted in the story of Acts:

In truth I now get the point that God is not one who favors the privileged, but in every community the person who fears God and acts justly is acceptable to God. The word that God sent to the children of Israel, announcing peace through Jesus Christ, you know: the word that happened all over Judaea, beginning from the Galilee with the baptism that John proclaimed, Jesus from Nazareth—how God anointed him with holy spirit and power, who went about doing good and healing all who were overpowered by the devil, because God was with him (10:34–38).

At least three things are noteworthy about this text. First, we have again a strong echo of a biblical text, Ps 106:20 LXX (Heb 107:20): “[God] sent forth his word and healed them and rescued them from destruction.” The verse also echoes in Acts 13:26, Paul’s first major speech in Acts, “Brothers, children of the family of Abraham and those among you who fear God, to us the word of this salvation has been sent forth.” And again at the close of the book, Paul solemnly declares to the resistant Jews of the city of Rome: “Be it then known to you that to the Gentiles this salvation of God is sent; they will listen” (28:28).

Second, the word that is sent for Israel’s healing is at the same time a crisis for the Jewish communities, precisely because it is a word sent also to the Gentiles. Writing probably at the end of the first century, Luke addresses a church that comprises both Jews and Gentiles, but is becoming predominantly Gentile. He wants to explain and justify that shift, which for him is the decisive, even eschatological, transformation of the people of God. At the same time, he wants to claim the scriptures, traditions, and heritage of Israel as the church’s own.

Third, Peter’s speech makes “the word [*rhēma*] that happened all over Judaea” grammatically parallel to “Jesus from Nazareth.” Moreover, this part of the speech is nothing other than a concise summary of Luke’s Gospel—“the first *logos*” that the author presented to Theophilus (Acts 1:1).

THE WORD IS THE STORY

Can we say more exactly, then, what Luke would have conveyed to his implied audience by this metaphor “the word of God,” with all its biblical resonances? What is “the word of God” sent to Israel for healing but also judgment, sent to the Gentiles to add them to “a people for God’s name?” What is “the word of God” that “grew and multiplied,” that no adversity could block, that was announced with “boldness” by “assistants and eyewitnesses” and “testifiers?”

The observation that the author can put “the word” in apposition with “Jesus from Nazareth” may tempt some to jump to a hasty comparison with the Gospel of John. It is well known that the Fourth Gospel begins with a poem celebrating the Logos that was “in the beginning” with God and even “was God.” But Luke is far from the kind of thinking that led the fourth evangelist to write “the Logos became flesh.” Instead, we could almost sum up Luke’s theme with the words, “The Logos became *story*”—the story of Jesus as told in Luke’s Gospel.

The project announced in Luke’s preface could stand as at least a parable, if not a foreshadowing, of the successes and failures of all attempts to ground Christianity’s beginnings in history, right down to modern critical historiography. As we saw, Luke enshrined the *archē*, the beginning, as somehow normative. He made a clear distinction between the *autoptai*, the eyewitnesses, and those who follow, whose “witness” is always derivative and dependent. And he believed that by analyzing the tradition he had received he could construct—using the best techniques of his own high culture—an “orderly” narrative that would afford to the informed reader the *asphaleia*: “what is absolutely reliable.”

The *intentions* of modern historical criticism in its heyday were still recognizably similar to Luke’s, despite the very different fashions and tools of modern historiography. Our own postmodern mood is considerably less self-confident. On the one hand, we do not trust Luke’s reconstruction; we have found too many reasons to doubt the adequacy of his sources and the solidity of his fictions. After many centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, the evil of which finally became transparent in the Holocaust, we are most uncomfortable with the way Luke’s story has lent itself to the church’s supersessionist dismissal of Judaism.¹⁰

Yet while we easily criticize writers like “Luke,” we can only offer alternative reconstructions, knowing full well that they are infected by our own worldview, prejudices, and interests. We do not provide “what is absolutely reliable.” The dissolving acid of the deconstructionists, the radical pragmatism of twentieth-century philosophers, the suspicions raised by the ideological critics—all leave us with the awareness that, if there is an eternal truth lurk-

¹⁰It is, of course, unfair to hold “Luke” responsible for the anti-Jewish twist subsequent readers have given his narrative. On the roles of Gentiles and Jews in Acts, see, for example, the contrasting views of J. T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), on the one hand, and, on the other, N. A. Dahl, “The Purpose of Luke-Acts,” in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church: Essays by Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 87–98, and J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972).

ing behind or beneath the text, we have no *method* for discovering it.

These qualms and failures, however, do not relieve us of the duty—no less complicated than the duty “Luke” felt he owed Theophilus and his other readers—to follow all we can know of the matter “from the beginning,” as accurately as possible, and to tell the story to our generation in a “sequential account.” As we seek to fulfill that duty, we could do worse than to follow some of the lessons that emerge from our reading of the first Christian historian.

1. We are all disciples “at second hand.” We are not eyewitnesses, and there is no method that can place us in the position of eyewitnesses or enable us to attain von Rancke’s ideal and say “how things really were.”

2. The role of the historian is therefore not to be the arbiter of the way the Logos is to be understood, but only to be its *assistant*.

3. The way we assist the Logos is, like Luke, to construct a narrative. The task begins with investigation, and our investigation depends upon all those who have gone before, from the “eyewitnesses” on. It requires critical analysis of the tradition upon which it inescapably depends. There is no avoiding the task of *construction*. The narrative is not given; it is made up. It is always incomplete and imperfect, shaped by the structures of plausibility that are part of our mentality, dependent upon our time, place, and culture. Nevertheless, although history is always fictive, it does not make up its story whole. It interprets *something* that, however dimly we may perceive it, really happened.

4. The construction of the narrative is an essentially interpretive task. The mode of interpretation we see employed by “Luke” shares a number of features that can be seen in earlier Jewish and Christian interpretation and which recur later in Jewish and Christian traditions.

5. A particularly important dimension of Luke’s interpretive strategy is his use of “biblical” language. Both in overt, large-scale determinants of the narrative—for example, direct quotations from scripture—and in unobtrusive patterns of prose, this writer’s idiom resonates with echoes of the Septuagint. Whether these echoes are deliberate and whether they were heard by Theophilus or any of the other members of the gospel’s original audience are questions we cannot finally answer. Clearly, the implied audience of the work, that is, an audience competent to hear the whole of the Logos as Luke constructed it, would have to be as familiar with the Greek Jewish Bible as the author was. Perhaps Luke was hopelessly optimistic, as we would be if we assumed we could emulate him. Unless the students I have taught for four decades are quite anomalous, the language and stories of the Bible are *terra incognita* for most of the population. There are myriad causes for this ignorance and lots of blame to pass around. Despite appearances, evangelicals and liberals are equally responsible, though they have narrowed the range of biblical features they think worth attending to in different ways. Whoever is to blame, the richness of possibility inherent in scripture’s manifold nature and of its interpretive traditions has been lost for most of us. There is an obvious educational task confronting the church here.

6. The interpreted story must make sense to outsiders as well as insiders. Luke writes as a biblicist, but he also writes with some degree of literary sophistication. He writes so that his "excellency," Theophilus will understand and pay attention. Although Christianity appears as an insignificant sect, Luke places it on a world stage. "These things were not done in a corner." H. Richard Niebuhr's words about the relevance of "external history" as well as "internal history" for the theologian are as pertinent today as they were sixty years ago.¹¹ The sectarian beginnings of Christianity may still have important lessons for us in a time of cultural confusion, as such different voices as George Lindbeck, John Howard Yoder, David Rensberger, and Stanley Hauerwas have insistently reminded us.¹² Nevertheless, the Logos that Luke and the catholic tradition ever since have tried to expound will not rest within the sectarian walls.

7. The aim of the historian is not certainty but reliability. Luke imagines that he can provide for Theophilus and other excellent readers the *asphaleia*: what is secure and what can be counted on in the story of God. That is not the same as saying that this telling of the story is flawless, or that there are not other reliable ways it could be told, or that this telling may not have negative consequences that only become apparent in the passage of time. Luke's voice is only one among others in the canonical texts, and our way of hearing those voices is only one of the ways they have been heard and may yet be heard. We are nevertheless responsible for making a reliable narrative.

8. Although we strive for a construction that can be true for our own time and place, the basis for our confidence is not finally our method or our expertise. The reason for the *parrhēsia*, the boldness that Luke's characters exemplify and that Luke himself wants to exhibit, is his conviction that nothing can stop the word of God. And it is only the Spirit of God, Luke believed, who enables that confidence.

9. We therefore write history in the ironic mode. For some that is the sad result of our disillusionment, our loss of the Enlightenment's confidence in rationality and objectivity, the failure of the "grand narratives" of Western culture. Hayden White, for example, laments the turn in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to irony as the domi-

¹¹H. R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1962 [1941]) ch. 2, esp. 81–89.

¹²G. A. Lindbeck, "The Sectarian Future of the Church," in *The God Experience*, ed. J. P. Whelan (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1971) 226–43; idem, "Ecumenism and the Future of Belief," *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. J. J. Buckley (Minneapolis: Eerdmans, 2003) 91–105; J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); idem, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); D. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); S. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); idem, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

nant style for the writing of history.¹³ If, however, what we are after is not certainty (which no historian can ever achieve) but the construction of narratives one can count on, then we need not fear irony. Luke, to be sure, is not the great ironist of the New Testament—that honor belongs to the writer of the Fourth Gospel, followed closely by the Apostle Paul. Yet the narrative of Luke–Acts is dominated by a very special form of the classical dramatic strategy, *peripeteia*. That is, events turn out suddenly and astonishingly to be quite different from what, in the ordinary world, we (or the characters in the story) would have expected. *Peripeteia* is an “irony of action.”¹⁴ The irony of action is the appropriate mode for writing about things that come about through “the plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). Luke had learned that from his immersion in the stories of his own, older Bible.

Armed with a sense of irony, we may be able to cope with the dismay we naturally feel as those constructed histories that have served us in the past are disconfirmed by new facts or new questions. The temptation is strong, to be sure, to embrace a cynicism that, denied the possibility of historical certainty, substitutes expediency. Equally strong is the temptation simply to dig in our heels and refuse to confess that we were wrong. What follows is that we will inevitably use whatever power we have to suppress the truth or to suppress those persons who see the truth differently. An ironic sense of life permits a different response. We may see in the painful disconfirmation of our cherished schemes a sign of grace that is both judgment and redemption, that requires us to walk by faith and not by sight. The ironic mode is precisely the way we may express in narrative the human side of grace.¹⁵

¹³H. V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). See his summation on pp. 433–34, where White states the underlying thesis of his brilliant tour de force: “When it is a matter of choosing among these alternative visions of history, the only grounds for preferring one over another are *moral or aesthetic ones*” (433). “The aged Kant was right, in short; we are free to conceive ‘history’ as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will” (433). By talking about the dominance of irony ironically, White thinks he can liberate historiography from irony: “realism” can be whatever your personal preferences require. “Historians and philosophers of history will then be freed to conceptualize history, to perceive its contents, and to construct narrative accounts of its processes in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with their own moral and aesthetic aspirations” (434). The great vacuum in White’s own exposition is the absence of any hint as to how those “moral and aesthetic aspirations” might be formed—or have a history. The implication of his style is that they are “intuitive” in the ill-fated sense of that word in mid-twentieth-century English moral philosophy.

¹⁴W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and C. Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957) 44, quoting W. Lock, “The Use of Peripeteia in Aristotle’s Poetics,” *Classical Review* 9 (1895) 251–53. F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 18, makes a similar point.

¹⁵See W. A. Meeks, “The Irony of Grace,” in *The Shaping of a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology*, ed. D. C. Marks (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2002) 45–57. I am grateful to Luke Timothy Johnson and Dean Bécharé for reading a draft of this essay and making important suggestions for improving it.