

## For the Lover of God

### Our approach to the Gospel of Luke

**Method** – normally we ask, “What is God trying to say to me?” when we read the Bible. In this class we are going to look at what the Gospels, particularly Luke, say about themselves and the people who wrote them. Remember that they are humans, not typewriters that God used. All Gospel writers have certain peculiarities and we need to know the people who wrote: John – why did you write your Gospel the way you did? Why did you put this in and leave that out? On what basis did you make your choices? Why were you so interested in certain things?

We will be focusing on the handle of the sword of the Spirit, rather than the blade. Learn how to hold the sword properly. Even though you may feel that we’re sometimes excluding the blade, remember we are training – learning how to use this.

#### **Some basic aims**

- 1) A familiarity with the Bible. You can approach it from different angles and sometimes gain a better perspective.
- 2) Handle individual passages better by looking at a different angle. It will underpin and support our exegesis.

Define:

EXegesis – out of (reading out of the text), which is our goal rather than

EISegesis – in to, (reading in to the text)

EISegesis is taking what you think and finding it in the text. (We should become fishers of men, we need bait and a hook (sermon outline for “we should evangelize, we need to have something attractive to the person questioning, and we need a hook, something to catch their attention). Fine as a sermon, except it misunderstands fishing in the NT which was done with nets, not with a hook. (9 bones in the dove’s wing standing for the 9 gifts of the Spirit etc.) We need to take the text and find out what it means, by first finding out what it meant, before we try and understand what it means for us now.

### The Gospels and History

1. *History defined*
  - what actually happened
  - what was written about what happened (an account)
2. *The interest of the historian lies in three areas:*
  - a) what actually happened. They separate fact from fiction
  - b) events that affect the life of humankind (i.e. don’t write about small meteor hitting Pluto, or the tides, unless it affects humankind)
  - c) that which they consider significant

### 3. *The issue of significance*

- significant from what point of view? What is the criterion? Significant politically? Religiously? Emotionally?
- how do we decide what is truly significant?

*Historical example* – The Roman historian, Tacitus, never knew how significant his casual mention of who founded the sect known as Christians, whom Nero tortured, would be to Christians in later centuries, looking for non-biblical proof of the existence of Jesus.

### 4. *Evidence.*

Usually the historian will not have direct contact with the historical events he/she wishes to record, but they rely upon evidence:

- documents
- archeological finds
- writings of other historians

therefore – all historical reconstructions have an element of uncertainty about them.

Knowledge is available; absolute certainty may be elusive. However, an overwhelming amount of knowledge can bring us close to certainty. The historian's job is to amass the evidence to as great a level as possible, and thus produce a 'model' or reconstruction which he/she can claim is valid.

## **History and Objectivity**

The big question: is it possible, when writing for/from a particular viewpoint to write objective history?

- contemporary examples – resumés, newspaper articles? Blogs? Biased new sources? If the Gospels are written to serve the interests of the promotion of Christianity, how reliable are they?

Consider the standards of other ancient writing though:

- written for literary effect rather than purely as an account of what happened

“The principal historians of the Hellenistic age, disregarding documentary evidence and technique of historical writing, aimed, as a general rule, not at being accurate and learned, but readable.”<sup>1</sup>

- but consider – there are very unflattering portrayals of the disciples the gospels and Acts. For example, Peter:

- called Satan by Jesus:

Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! (Matt. 16:23)

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<sup>1</sup> P. Treves, “Historiography, Greek,” *OCD*, p.433 as cited by Marshall, I.H. *Luke, Historian and Theologian*, p.26

• cut off High Priest's servant's ear

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.)

Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:10-11)

• denied Jesus three times:

A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.

A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. (Luke 22:56-60)

Now, if you were the leader of the first-century church, wouldn't you want these sort of stories suppressed? They don't exactly show Peter at his best. The fact that such unflattering stories are preserved indicates the authenticity of the material.

**There's more to history than the facts**

"We have already noted how the positivistic understanding of history as consisting of brute facts gave way to an understanding of history centering in the profound intentions, stances, and concepts of existence held by persons in the past, as the well-springs of their outward actions."<sup>2</sup>

Considering the inside of events as well as the outside.

**Influences on Interpretation**

1. *Your own worldview.* Do you have room for the supernatural or not? Can magical and demonic forces exist? If not, your interpretation of historical events will be informed (skewed perhaps?) by your worldview, so that, for example, a demonic possession where a person is thrown to the ground will be interpreted as an epileptic fit.

2. *Your idea of truth.* Is truth what actually happened, or can it also be how people felt about what actually happened, or the motives behind what happened?

3. *Chronological snobbery.* Do we believe that the most recent data (carbon dating for example) is the most reliable? Why do we place greater importance on tests farthest away in time from the actual events themselves?

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<sup>2</sup> J.M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p.39 as cited by Marshall, I.H. *Luke, Historian and Theologian*, p.26,27

Modern historians aim for objectivity and tend to rate evidence as follows:

- a) written material, documents, books (solid evidence)
- b) speaking to someone who was there (but be aware of unreliable bias)
- c) anecdotes, biased observers, hearsay

Ancient historians rated it exactly the opposite way, said that the eyewitness was the best source and that the written source was unreliable, since it could be counterfeited.

*4. Our own presuppositions.* The good historian will be aware of his/her own presuppositions and make allowances for them. But we need to work at being aware: e.g. The Openness of God debate. Can God change his mind? Does God know everything from the beginning to the end?, Our presupposition forces us to interpret verses like:

Jer. 7:31 They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire —something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.

as anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics to something/one other than a human) rather than allowing us to understand the simple reading to mean that God hadn't thought of something.

or, Gen 18:20-33 when Abraham "bargains" with God to allow Sodom to be spared if there are 50, no 40, no 30...10 righteous people who can be found there.

Either we conclude that:

- a) God did change his mind or
- b) he didn't change his mind (he just had a "range" of potential answers within which he would agree with Abraham's plea)

Just as our presuppositions cause us to interpret bible verses a certain way, so also we can interpret history a certain way, other than completely objectively. But bias does not always mean inaccuracy (Jewish-funded Holocaust museums for example).

## **Faith and History**

History is important. We must avoid the division between the "Christ of faith" and the "Christ of history".

We base our beliefs on a Christ who lived, who did certain things on a particular day in history, who died in a particular way one a certain day in history, who rose from the dead. As Paul said:

1Cor. 15:14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Our faith is in Jesus Christ, of Nazareth, born AD 0, died AD 33. There are time and geographical references there, which can technically be proved or disproved. It does matter.

It is not enough that Christianity produced certain “ideas” or “ethical values” – these ideas and values come from a man that sweated and defecated like you and I. This is not some ethereal philosophy, this is a business of flesh and blood, time and place. But, the most important thing is not chronological detail, but that these things actually happened.

## The Gospel Writers and History

Are the gospel writers the faithful reporters of actual events, or are they writing history to justify certain theological positions that are hot issues for the early church?

e.g. if the early church needs to rally the troops and get them out evangelizing, wouldn't it have been convenient to have Jesus say something like:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matt. 28:18-20

Do the gospels tell us more about the actual life of Jesus, or more about the concerns of the early church?

### **Tests for Historicity (Historical Accuracy) of the Sayings of Jesus**

Certain criteria for assessing how likely it is that Jesus actually said this:

1. *Dissimilarity*. Is the saying enough unlike Judaism, and enough unlike the language of the early church, that it can be fairly attributed to Jesus? It is was just like Judaism, it probably wouldn't have been recorded (nothing new here!), and if it was just like the early church's language, one could argue that they had put these words into the mouth of Jesus to address their own concerns.

2. *Consistency*. Does this material match up with other material deemed to be authentic? .. in the Gospel of Thomas, the attitude towards women is generally thought to be unlike that which Jesus normally showed, so the gospel (mostly) is viewed as inauthentic (except by the Jesus Seminar, who love it – more on that later).

3. *Multiple attestation*. Does the material appear in more than one place? In other gospels? In the preaching of the early church?

4. *Linguistic/cultural tests*. Does the material fit with what was known about the culture of Palestinian Judaism, and use of language at the time? (problem though – NT is in Greek, Jesus spoke mostly in Aramaic, and sometimes Hebrew)

The tests can have a tension with each other.

## Can we find the actual words of Jesus?

Definitions:

*ipsissima verba* – the actual words of Jesus

*ipsissima vox* – the very voice of Jesus – sayings which give the sense but not the exact linguistic form of his utterances

## What do we know?

- he spoke in Aramaic (but knew Hebrew [was able to read from the scroll of Isaiah], and probably knew some Greek). The New Testament is written in Greek, so his words have already been translated. We are reading, probably, in English. So our “exact words” are two times translated already. Although Jesus may have known Greek, and may occasionally have spoken it, he would not have used it for his utterances in the Galilean countryside.
- there are no documents available which record Jesus speaking in Aramaic, except for brief quotations in the Gospels “Talitha koum”, “Ephaphthra”. Even if they ever existed, which is doubtful, we have no records. Our earliest and most reliable records are in Greek. That is as close as we are going to get.
- is it important to record/write down details of events in a story-telling culture?
- there was a tradition of accurate transmission of the oral teachings of a rabbi (see Kenneth Bailey’s article). Students took pride in remembering, pretty much word for word, the sayings of their teacher. There might be a certain amount of flexibility, but there would also be some fixed points

## Exercise – write out briefly the story of Little Red Riding Hood

For example, you could tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood with some variations (descriptions of her clothing, of the house etc.) but the story would have to have some fixed points e.g.

- the color of her hood ☺
- the presence of the wolf in her grandmother’s bed
- the elements of that conversation “What big eyes you have?”
- her eventual rescue by the woodcutter

With these fixed points, you could still call this an accurate account of what happened in the story, even if it wasn’t word for word what was originally written.

- the role of summaries

Exercise: e.g. Acts 17:22-31 Read this speech out loud. Someone time it. Do we really think that Paul only spoke for...? Could it be that this is a summary? If we admit that it’s a summary, could it be that some of the words have been changed, but that the true “gist”

and meaning has been preserved? Are we worse off because of this? If this is true of some speeches in Acts which were summarized by Luke, or his sources, could it be true that some of the stories/speeches in the Gospel are also summaries?

**What we believe:**

- that the gospels are an accurate history (understood in first-century terms) of the life, words and actions of Jesus
- that these authors were inspired (the writing was God-breathed, (2 Tim 3:16,17) not “divine dictation.” The authors did not necessarily know they were being inspired at the time. Did Paul think, as he was writing Galatians, that he was writing “canonical Scripture” or was he just dashing off a quick letter to a church with problems?
- this inspiration is shaped and molded by the writers according to their personality, thought-forms, literary methods, stylistic conventions, vocabulary and intentions in writing.
- that the Holy Spirit somehow enabled the writers to remember and preserve these traditions accurately. That what is preserved is what God intended to be preserved and that it is entirely trustworthy. But note: this is a position of faith.

So, it might be more accurate for us to speak of the “authentic sayings of Jesus” knowing that it is very close to either what he said, or what he meant.

**Our confidence in the Scriptures is therefore a partnership between the known, and that which we believe by faith.**

**HOMEWORK:**

- 1) Read Section 1 of the introduction to the gospel of Luke from Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, pp.495-500
- 2) For the especially keen, read Kenneth Bailey’s article on Oral Transmission of the Gospels – don’t worry about what you don’t understand; just get the gist.