

Introduction

Luke: History, but Not as We Know It

The very beginning of the Gospel according to Luke consists of a prologue of four verses from the author to the reader. Luke 1:1 says that πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν περὶ τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡμῖν πραγμάτων – ‘many have undertaken to set down a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us’. The author, whom we shall call Luke, undertakes to do likewise. He cites his sources as αὐτόπται – ‘eyewitnesses’ (Luke 1:2) – who have handed on the stories that he records. He then says that he has investigated these matters, noting ἔδοξε καί μοι ... καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι – ‘it seemed good to me ... to write an orderly account for you’ (Luke 1:3). Lastly, this book is written to one Theophilus, in order that this individual may know that what he has been taught is ‘reliable’ (Luke 1:4). Some translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), use the word ‘truth’ here, but ‘reliable account’ is a more literal translation of ἀσφάλειαν.

Those who wish to claim that everything in the Bible is historically accurate and who wish to reduce truth to historic and scientific fact sometimes latch onto these verses at the start of Luke and claim that they prove that Luke was an historian. Today we very often associate the idea of ‘reliability’ with ‘fact’ and assume that a reliable account is one that gets the facts right. The account must report speech as accurately as possible, must place the features of the story in the order in which they happened and so on. However, that is a very anachronistic way of understanding what the author writes. It assumes that the author was trying to write history as we understand that task to be today. The real question is what the author means by his attempt to construct a ‘reliable’ account. If the author were to prize fact above all else as we currently

understand ‘fact,’ or at least fact as it was understood in common parlance before the rise of ‘post-fact’ or ‘post-truth’ on the internet, then this would be the driving factor behind the construction of his reliable account. However, if there is something else that is prized above history, then this will govern how reliability is judged. By analysing the way in which ἀσφάλεια was used in other examples of Greek literature, Rick Strelan notes that it may well be that the author is hoping that the reader ‘will recognize the “safety” of the words that he has learned, a safety of words that will withstand any efforts to contradict them’.¹ He goes on to suggest that the original recipient of this text had indeed learned ‘words’ and that this may imply a learning by repetition from teacher to student.² There may be much in what Strelan suggests in that at least portions of this text (in some approximate form) would have been known to the original recipient before he read them in the text. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the Gospel as a whole existed in oral form before it was written down. This is at least in part because of the sense that the author gives of having selected stories to tell, which he has necessarily had to weave together. In part it is because of the close literary relationship that the text has to itself in various places, which I shall be exploring as the central theme that runs through this book.

We get a hint of what the author is aiming at in the name of the person to whom this text is addressed. Quickly reading this note from the author we may assume that it is written primarily to one person by the name of Theophilus. However, things are not quite that simple. The name Theophilus means ‘lover of God’ or ‘friend of God’. Arguments can be made either way for Luke being addressed either to a particular person known as ‘Theophilus’ or to anyone who hoped to be a friend of God. In her study of audiences for and within Luke’s gospel, Cornelia Cook suggests that ‘Luke poses Theophilus as an audience, representing Christian readers or listeners of Luke’s’, maybe implying that Theophilus is best understood as a representative figure, standing for any Christian who read this text.³ On the other hand, Halvor Moxnes suggests that the appellation ‘most excellent’ that the author of Luke addresses Theophilus with is an indication that Theophilus was a real individual who was of a higher station than the author, as this is how the term ‘most excellent’

1. Rick Strelan, ‘A Note on ἀσφάλεια (Luke 1:4)’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no. 2 (2007), pp. 163-71, p. 166.

2. Ibid., p. 170.

3. Cornelia Cook, ‘The Sense of Audience in Luke: A Literary Examination’, *New Blackfriars* 72, no. 845 (1991), pp. 19-30, p. 19.

was used in the Roman world.⁴ Yet again, on the other hand, this term is missing from the beginning of Acts, also by the author of the Gospel and also addressed to one Theophilus. The question surely arises whether, if it were necessary to use this title in writing the Gospel, it would not be bad manners to leave it out of Acts? In the end, it has to be said that most scholars lean towards the view that Theophilus was a particular individual. This is the view taken by James Scott, who probably gets the balance correct when he comments that, even though the Gospel is written to one person, ‘there is no reason to think that Luke’s intended audience, beyond Theophilus, was narrower than the church in general’.⁵ Even if written to just one person, the author would surely have known that others, at least others in that person’s household would read it. It is not too much of a stretch to say that to whomever the text was first sent, it is also written to anyone who reads it, intent on friendship with God. The aim of the text seems to be to assure the reader of their friendship with God and of God’s friendship with them. This is not designed first as a work of history in the modern understanding of that term, but as a spiritual work to draw the reader into a deeper friendship with God and into a deeper awareness of the friendship that he or she already has with God.

Although his work is focussed on Acts rather than Luke, Daniel Marguerat makes two particularly helpful observations for both parts of the Lucan corpus, which help to clarify some of the remarks above. On the reader of the text, Marguerat draws attention to the word ἡμῖν – ‘us’ – which occurs twice in the prologue.⁶ This is a way of wrapping together reader and author. The author is not simply telling the reader something they have never heard before, nor is the author expecting the reader to come to this text as a *tabula rasa*. There is something already shared by the reader and the author. Luke knew his audience, not in a generic way, but in a personal way. The thesis that I shall shortly expound and which will form the backbone of this book relies on Luke having at least a general knowledge of his audience, but is far more convincing if it is indeed the case that he knew Theophilus and his community personally. The second helpful clarification by Marguerat is around the concept

4. Halvor Moxnes, ‘The Social Context of Luke’s Community’, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 48, no. 4 (1994), pp. 379-89, p. 385.

5. James W. Scott, ‘Luke’s Preface and the Synoptic Problem’, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, 1985, p. 37.

6. Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the ‘Acts of the Apostles’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 23ff.

of history in the ancient world. The Graeco-Roman historian Lucian of Samosata wrote an influential pamphlet titled Πῶς δεῖ ἱστορίαν συγγράφειν – *How to Write History*. Marguerat notes how closely Luke follows the ten rules that Lucian sets out, but that he deviates from the one that demands ‘independence of mind and absence of partiality’ as well as the one demanding a ‘noble subject’ as Romans would have understood this.⁷ Luke writes not merely to tell facts, but to reassure and convince the reader of the truth as he has understood it. Clearly various other of Lucian’s rules have been followed, such as gathering enough preparatory material, the liveliness of narration and so on, but the text produced is in no way dispassionate, as Lucian would have history. The Gospel of Luke is, as we shall see, a work that uses words in very precise ways. It is a text which refers to many teachings and stories that would have already been well known by the reader. However, it is unlikely that the words in the text or even all of the stories are usually precisely the ones any original reader knew from oral traditions. The stories have been reworked to develop the spiritual awareness of those who read them and, indeed, who read the Gospel as a whole.

In thinking about what the text of Luke contains, it must be the case that there is a lot that we would recognise as history within it. Individual stories about Jesus, particular doings and teachings of Jesus, individual stories which Jesus told to illustrate his teaching and so on may well be based in historical happenings. Certainly, the author is keen to point out that he has spoken with eyewitnesses. However, historical reliability is not the point. Luke (if we may call the author by this name) has organised his text in such a way that the reader’s friendship with God may be shown to be reliable. To this end, he has written an ‘orderly account’, as the NRSV puts it in Luke 1:1 and 1:3, or a ‘narrative’ as I translated διήγησιν more literally in Luke 1:1, above. As we proceed, it should be remembered that the Christian who reads Luke today is Theophilus. The text is written to assist anyone who reads it both to realise and to deepen his or her friendship with God. The account may have history within it, but it is not ordered towards history either as we understand it today or even precisely as Lucian and those who followed him in Luke’s day would have understood it. Luke, the book, is ordered towards the faith which Luke, the author, held dear and hoped his readership would continue to hold dear and to grow within. In thinking about the way in which Luke is ‘ordered towards faith’ this present book makes a suggestion about how Luke, the book, was read

7. Ibid., pp. 13ff.

by that first community and how Luke, the author, has constructed his book to deepen the faith of his readers based on his knowledge of how the book would be used. We shall return to the prologue in Chapter One, where it will be suggested that for the first readers of Luke it had a purpose in tying the beginning and the end of the narrative together in a way which we have forgotten today.

On Reading the Bible Then and Now

Although to many people in secularised Europe or North America it seems an incredible thing to say, it is nevertheless true that the Bible is the best-seller of all time in the book trade. It has been translated into more languages than most people know exist. Indeed, it has had such an influence on linguistic culture – for good or for ill – that some languages were standardised only because of the introduction of the Bible.⁸ This is both for good and/or for ill depending on where one is coming from, as standardisation may well be useful, but it also necessarily means the loss of dialects. Nevertheless, love it or loathe it, find it inspiring or irritating, the Bible is a cultural fact of such great importance that its influence cannot be ignored.

However, it is not only secularists who benefit from standing back from the Bible and thinking about how it is read and used. Those who read the Bible and take it seriously usually assume that they know how to read it. Crudely, most people assume that the way it ‘should’ be read is to start at the beginning and work to the end, even if that’s not what they actually do. In practice, it is probably far more likely that Christians will read the New Testament more frequently than the Old Testament. Also, in practice, there are variations on starting at the beginning and reading to the end. Many churches use a lectionary, a series of readings that guide the church through a reading cycle which is rather more complex than just starting at the beginning and reading through. Lectionaries pick up on major Christian festivals and try to find readings to fit particular saints’ days and so on. What is more, there is one book of the Old Testament that is read far more than others and this is the book of Psalms. These poetic expressions of a huge range of human emotion and spiritual outpouring are read through with great frequency at morning and evening prayer in traditional churches, typically with all the psalms being read in a month. Some monastic communities read them all every

8. See, for example, J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 288ff.

week. Many other ways of reading exist too, from readings explicitly driven by the needs of particular communities to the use of the Bible as some sort of oracle, opened at random and assumed to be able to answer whatever question is put to it, to highly intellectualised readings. So, although those who read the Bible often assume they know how to read, it is worth remembering that however any one individual or group reads the Bible, there will be other ways that others use. It is not the purpose of this book to suggest how anyone should read the Bible, or any other religious text, come to that. However, a good starting point for the thesis that I shall be exploring is to realise that how we read today in general, or how any one Christian tradition reads, is not necessarily how everyone reads in the world today, let alone how others may have read in other periods of time.

Having said this, it will be helpful briefly to tackle a few common misconceptions. One of the motifs that anyone who spends any time around Christianity will quickly come to recognise is that some Christians overuse the term 'biblical'. Claims are made about 'biblical values' that are held by 'Bible-believing Christians' in churches that adhere to 'biblical Christianity'. At first glance, such claims may seem unproblematic. Take the case of an atheist looking in at Christianity. Such a person may disagree with what a 'Bible-believing Christian' is saying, but it will not seem strange to him that a Christian should describe himself in this way. Yet, it is profoundly strange. Terms such as 'Bible-believer' are sometimes used quite positively, as we shall see in a moment, but often they are used to make a number of simultaneous and problematic claims. First, there is often a claim that this particular group, unlike other groups of Christians not described in this way, has a deeper understanding of 'the Truth'. Those outside the group are often thought of as likely heretics, or as not quite fully converted. Second, there is an assumption that the values the group has derived by reading the Bible are the only possible, or at least the best, values that can be found in the text. Third, there tends to be an assumption made that, because they are 'Bible-believing,' they are believing in exactly the same way as the Early Church believed.

The first of these points is essentially a quasi-political point and is about the formation of an in-group and an out-group. We shall not concern ourselves with it here as this sort of group formation is a common feature of a certain type of religious phenomenon. The second and third points are more interesting for our purposes because they are to do with reading and understanding. The second point makes the assumption that it is possible to decide in some objective manner on the correct reading of a religious text and, indeed, that some way or ways of reading

it are better than others. It is the sort of claim that is not testable or verifiable. It only makes sense within a particular faith commitment and thus it is a sort of circular argument. Someone who holds to this believes that he has read the truth from the Scriptures and that, because he has read the truth, therefore how he reads and understands must be the best way of reading and understanding. In other words, the method of reading is stated as being logically prior to feelings and intuition, but the actual experience is the other way around. After the initial experience of finding the truth, such a believer can then bolster what he has found via this logical route, but it is easy to miss the point that the reading and understanding were a secondary matter. The last of these three points, that being 'biblical' is being like the early Christians, can quickly be dismissed as impossible. Modern Christians who suggest that they are 'Bible-believing' base what they believe on the Bible. The best of Christians who describe themselves in this way are deeply embedded in the text of the Bible and their faith and life are breathed from its pages. However, the first Christians had no Bible, at least not in any sense that we have it today, and so it was not the Bible that mediated any form of faith for them. The early Christians were emphatically not 'biblical' as they had no Bible with which to be biblical.

However, although the early Christians cannot be described as 'biblical,' that is not to say that they were without any texts at all. Indeed, they had a whole range of texts available to them, but different communities would have had access to different collections. Many of these texts are now part of the Bible, but others did not make it into the final version, approved in various councils of the Church in the fourth century. Very importantly, these texts were not a single collection. Each text would have been an individual scroll. Some would have been used more than others and gradually, over time, many communities ended up with approximately the same core texts and, hence, the collection known as the Bible. However, before the fourth century, before the Bible was delineated and (effectively and often actually) had covers put on the front and the back, before all of this, reading as we often assume it occurs could not take place. There was no fixed beginning or ending to the collection that different communities had. There was certainly no absolute order for how the different texts should be arranged. So, there was no possibility of starting at the beginning and working through to the end. Quite simply, the concept of a fixed and agreed beginning and end of the collection of material did not exist.

Into this mix, we should also add the fact that, although the new religious movement that became known as Christianity began within

one ethno-religious group, it quickly spread. The books that make up what Christians now refer to as the Old Testament were composed in Hebrew, with a few small sections of Aramaic, which had become the everyday language of the Jews of Jesus' day. If Christianity had remained purely an offshoot of Judaism, then it is likely that new texts, if produced at all, would have been created in Aramaic. However, Christianity quickly spread to non-Jews and Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Roman world, came to be used as the language of many early Christian texts. We have no way of knowing how much Greek Jesus himself would have known. However, when talking with his first disciples, he would have been teaching them in Aramaic. Thus, even in many of the earliest Christian documents, teachings given in Aramaic had already been translated into Greek. Today, we have little or no idea about how this translation came about. Presumably, in the very earliest times, Jesus' teachings and stories about Jesus circulated by word of mouth, in Aramaic but quickly also in Greek and maybe in other languages too. Paul's letters are the earliest parts of what we now know as the New Testament to be written, and the earliest of these (generally held to be 1 Thessalonians) was written around 20 years after Jesus' life. Other texts that feature in the New Testament were written anything up to around 90 years after Jesus' life. All this means that for around two decades the earliest Christians had no texts of their own as such, only the scriptures inherited from Judaism. Nonetheless, their meetings must have been awash with oral traditions about Jesus and with reflections on what that meant for them and for the world. At least some of this came to be written down in the form of letters and the accounts of Jesus' life known as 'Gospels' as well as other texts.

The history of the construction of the Bible is helpful to bear in mind throughout this book, but it is especially important at certain moments. In Chapter Three, we shall see that a book known as 1 Enoch was almost certainly known to Jesus and to his early followers and treated as scripture by them, even though it does not feature in the Bible today. This is likely because the teachings about the title 'the Son of Man' that are given by Jesus in the Gospels appear to build on the teachings in 1 Enoch. Similarly, in Chapter One, when considering the use of the phrase 'from on high' at the beginning and end of Luke, although an Old Testament connection is noted, other sources also seem to play a role. In particular, the philosophical re-workings of 'dawn' into a heavenly, pre-existent figure, seem to be important and to originate essentially beyond the bounds of what might be recognised as Scripture today. These, as well as other instances, show how the bounds of Scripture can flex over

time and how Scripture is not read in isolation, but in conjunction with a whole range of other sources and philosophical ideas. This is relevant for the composition of the Gospel according to Luke. Luke was not writing in a twenty-first-century context. His context was radically different.

When Christians read the Bible today, and maybe especially when they read the New Testament, they are reading texts of those traditions which have survived a process of filtering carried out by the Early Church, which eventually included some traditions about Jesus within particular texts and which eventually decided to keep or discard certain theological reflections from its principal collection of written material. However, there is more than this, too. When Christians read the Bible today, they do not read those traditions as the Christians who wrote them down would have read them, because today those traditions are read in the context of being a part of the collection known as the Bible. It is not only that certain traditions have survived whereas others have perished and are lost for all time, it is also the case that even what has survived is changed by its dislocation from its original context.

There are many examples of this dislocation. Maybe the most obvious is the decontextualisation of Paul's letters. Most of his letters were written in very specific situations, mostly to Christians he knew personally. For the most part, he wrote to Christian communities that he had founded. As he wrote he was having to think through the implications of the new idea that Jesus had been from God and yet had been killed and then resurrected. He wrote very directly about certain questions that had been asked of him or because certain situations had arisen that he wanted to address. It is obvious to state that had different questions been asked or had different situations arisen, he would have written different things. Much has sometimes been made of Paul's writings down the years and a great deal of theology has been built upon them. However, Paul did not realise he was writing something that would last for such a long time. He had no intention of his letters being used by anyone other than those to whom he wrote or specifically mentions in the letters. It seems inconceivable that he even thought that one letter would be put with another letter in a collection that would be a form of lasting testament. He probably imagined that local churches might well keep the letters he had sent to them and, once, in his letter to the Colossians he instructed them to have the Laodiceans also read the letter, and that they were to read the letter sent to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). There is no letter to the Laodiceans in the New Testament – although at least two of Paul's other letters have been suggested as candidates for this lost letter on the basis that, in either case, they would assist with the

teaching given in Colossians.⁹ However, all of his letters were sent to communities that understood the context of the letters, and the answers to questions or issues they contained. In short, Paul was not writing ‘scripture’, he was writing letters. Because of a particular veneration of Paul, his letters became highly prized and were widely shared, copied, collected together and kept, eventually becoming part of the New Testament. Nevertheless, Paul did not intend his letters to be used in this way and, what is more, neither did the original recipients. Books and articles on Paul and his letters proliferate today, in part, because some of that original context is now unknown or uncertain and, in part, because of a debate around how much weight to give Paul’s ideas, which were written in very particular situations. However, books are written on Paul, as on other aspects of the Bible, partly precisely because the material that makes up the Bible is no longer used as it was originally intended; it has transcended its origins and so in some way has become different material. Although Paul did not intend to write ‘scripture’, that is what it has become.

The late, great, Canadian academic and Baptist minister, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, thought and wrote at some length about what it means for a community to possess a scripture. To summarise Smith’s ideas about what scripture is, we might say that a text that is ‘scripture’ is a text that mediates that which is transcendent. Smith suggests that a text is not scripture just because one or several people had great, inspiring thoughts or even that a text is scripture because it is believed to be revealed in some way. Rather, a text is scripture because ‘ordinary people’ with an ‘average perception of reality’ and of what they may or may not call ‘God’ have taken the text in question and have recognised ‘the wisdom, the profundity, the value’ contained in it.¹⁰ Such a text is then used to reach beyond the mundane world, towards the Transcendent Other, howsoever this is conceptualised.

9. Charles P. Anderson outlines the main options for the letter to Laodicea as being either that it is lost, or that it is Philemon or Ephesians, before outlining a novel possibility, that Paul did not write such a letter at all, but that it was by another hand. Anderson suggests that the Greek of Colossians 4:16 can be taken to mean that the letter originated from the Church in Laodicea, not from Paul. Charles P. Anderson, ‘Who Wrote “The Epistle from Laodicea”?’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85, no. 4 (1966), pp. 436-40.

10. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 207.

By taking on the mediation of the transcendent, texts that become scripture may acquire a new range of meanings. This is very different from suggesting that believers just read whatever they want to into and out of the pages of scripture. Rather they know that they must find a truth within the pages that is beyond, higher, than anything in the mundane world. Smith puts it like this:

I do not mean you can concoct [the reading] cunningly or contrive it irresponsibly. On the contrary: you are constrained by the very fact of your esteeming this as the word of God to recognize as the most cogent among all possible alternatives that interpretation that in your judgement is the closest to universal truth and to universal goodness. You choose not what is best for you, but what in your judgement is the closest to what is good and true absolutely, cosmically. (Your sense of what it signifies may inhibit acting on what you would prefer, or are strongly impelled, to do.)¹¹

This idea of striving, via scripture, for what is ‘cosmically’ true gets to the essence of what it means to use a text as scripture. It is miles away from slavishly finding the supposed literal meaning of a text. It involves real work and commitment and is a process of reflection rather than a straight reading. Thinking back to Paul’s letters, there is very little in them that we might suppose Paul intended for use in the discovery of cosmic, transcendent truth and reality. However, because they are treated as scripture, this is indeed what they are often used for. Nonetheless, Paul need not fear too much because, although a few Christians have always had a go at using the Bible literally, in practice very few do so. Almost always, it is used reflectively to work towards an answer that will remain incomplete because, ultimately, it is transcendent. In Chapter Two, it will be noted that texts can take on different meanings in different ages, and that the way in which certain parts of the book of Leviticus might have been understood when it was written was not necessarily the understanding at the time that Luke wrote his gospel. Philosophical ideas external to a text shape how that text is understood as those who read it search for the highest possible meaning.

Although these ideas might be new to some people, in many ways, so far, so ordinary. All of this has been said before in one way or another. However, what is true of Paul’s letters (that they were not written as

11. Ibid., pp. 72ff.

scripture but have become so) is often assumed to apply to the entire New Testament, and maybe to the entire Bible, but it is not necessarily entirely true. Paul's letters and the other letters in the New Testament are one type, one genre, of literature. There are others, however, and it could be that some of these were written to be used in a way that approximates to a scriptural use. First, there is the attempt at a history of the Early Church that we know as the Acts of the Apostles. This is one of several early histories and is the only one to make it into the Bible. Insofar as it is history, maybe it was not written to be used scripturally, but it is not 'history' in the way that we would use the term. It is 'sacred history' in that it is a sequence of events from the life of the Early Church set down to inspire the faithful. To say it was deliberately written to be included in a collection of 'scripture' (the New Testament) is incorrect as that collection was not even thought about then, but it is written in such a way as to be generally applicable rather than being written with the specificity of the letters, even if it was originally sent to a particular audience. Alongside Acts, we must include both Revelation and Hebrews. Both are specific to the situation in which they were written, but both are also written to be more generally applicable to a wider group than just one small community of Christians. (Hebrews is often called a 'letter' but really it is a theological treatise, written from a particular point of view, but not only applicable to one small, local congregation.) Again, these were not written to be included in a collection of scripture that did not exist at the time, but neither do they only address immediate problems, which could be solved with one reading of a letter. There is almost certainly an expectation that those for whom these texts were written would use them often and would derive meaning from them in a way that approaches a scriptural use.

Lastly, there are the four Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke (as they usually appear in New Testaments today) are heavily related to one another and are thus known as the 'Synoptic Gospels'; 'synoptic' meaning that they can be 'seen together', that they relate to one another and share at least some common sources. John is different, with almost no material shared with other Gospels, and is sometimes referred to as the 'spiritual Gospel'.¹² Not much is known with certainty about the origin of the gospel genre of Christian literature. We do not even know where the texts were first composed, nor the contexts of those who

12. See, for instance, Maurice F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretations of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

composed them, although educated guesses can be made. However, in general, we could say that they are an attempt to capture the oral tradition before it was lost. This may well have been the direct impetus for the composition of Mark. Many New Testament scholars think that Mark was probably written in the context of one of the early persecutions of Christians. The theory goes that in the chaos that would have ensued for the community, it became important to write down the stories so that they were not lost. The author of Mark (who may or may not have been called Mark – this is not something that the text makes explicit) wrote the Gospel to act as the witness to the traditions about Jesus when he could see that the community might not be able to continue to witness as it once had.¹³ Once written, it is easy to see how this text became, for any Christian community who possessed a copy, a deeply important text and one to be read and reread many times. Again, as with other texts, the author almost certainly did not sit down to write ‘scripture’ as such, but it is easy to see how this material would have quickly become used in this way. Rather than just recalling the traditions about Jesus from memory, now this community also had textual references to read and reread and to chew over. It is often said that what goes for Mark also goes for Matthew and Luke. More on this in a moment, but first we turn to the Gospel according to John.

The text of John reads very differently from the text of Mark. For one thing, anyone familiar with the stories in Mark will find few of them present in John. Even where the story is the same it is often strangely changed. For example, the story of the Last Supper in Mark features in John but, in the story in John, Jesus never takes the bread and wine and declares them to be his body and his blood. This seems a strange omission as the Eucharist is such a central part of the liturgies of Churches around the world today, and as a ritualised sharing of bread and wine is a very early Christian practice, recorded by Paul in his letters. However, what is often taken as the key moment for this rite

13. Most scholars identify Mark as being written in Rome during an early persecution of Christians, see, for instance, Frank J. Matera, *What Are They Saying about Mark?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 15ff. Others argue for a location of composition somewhere in the Roman province of Syria, around the time of the Jewish revolt against Roman rule, including Joel Marcus in his article, ‘The Jewish War and the *Sitz im Leben* of Mark’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 3 (1992), pp. 441–62. Other possible locations exist, but the suggestion of a community under serious stress is a common factor in most analyses of Mark’s composition.

is not there in John. However, this is not quite the same as saying that 'the Eucharist', or at least a ritualised sharing of a meal, is absent from the Gospel of John. It is (probably) present in chapter six, where it is associated with John's version of the feeding of the five thousand and the miracle of Jesus walking on the water. This is not the place to go into detail on John, but this is an example of how the text of John differs from that of the Synoptics. The author of the Gospel of John (again, it is unclear if anyone called John was really the author, although it is possible) wrote a text that was not merely a recollection of traditions, but which was in fact a deep reflection on what the traditions mean. The text develops theological themes and can be endlessly chewed over and savoured. The Gospel was not written to be part of any collection, but it is probably the most easily identifiable individual piece of the New Testament deliberately written to be used as something at least approximating to scripture.

Once it is realised that John is more than just an attempt at biography, it is also easier to see that the same applies to Mark. In fact, much has been written about the themes that run through Mark and a compelling case can be made to say that, although Mark was probably written to preserve traditions about Jesus, it was indeed written through the particular lens of the individual (and/or community) that composed it.¹⁴ The same is true of Matthew and Luke, and we shall look in detail at how this operates in the case of Luke as we proceed. Before we do so, it is worth returning to the point that reading is not carried out in a vacuum. The Gospels were not composed to give a neutral view on the happenings around the life of Jesus of Nazareth. They were composed for a purpose and that purpose was to declare certain things to be true about Jesus and, more generally, about God. They point not towards the academy, and a careful weighing of the evidence, but towards a truth claim. Certainly, they contain history, but history is not the reason they were written. History is not the point. If you read them purely as history, much is missed. There is a theological and spiritual dimension to these texts which is their *raison d'être*. From this point of view, a literalist reading of the text is insufficient for that reading merely treats the text as a list of facts, historical and otherwise. However, what can be missed is that neither is the academic, literary critical approach often taken to

14. David E. Aune provides a good account of the way in which the Gospel texts were written to preserve traditions for the new Christian community. See his *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987).

the text sufficient to understand it. There are a variety of methods, and I shall not go into them here, but, in general, these approaches focus heavily on understanding what the text was as originally written, editions the text has gone through in its composition, the historical context of the text, genre and so on. All of this is interesting and valuable. However, if that is all that is done with the text, it is merely an ancient document to be studied, much as any other ancient document. It is only when one engages with the theological and spiritual underpinnings of the text that the text is truly allowed to speak. This can be done by academics and the findings of analysis of scriptural texts are of great use, but these texts originated in Christian communities and they are still used by Christian communities today, as Scripture.

Given the origins of the four Gospels, a question therefore arises about the extent to which the authors were deliberately writing a text that would be used by their communities to mediate the divine and to reach out to the transcendent. In other words, what is the extent to which these texts are deliberately written as ‘scripture’, even though they cannot have been deliberately written to be part of the New Testament? A pervasive assumption within academia is that, because the New Testament did not exist when these texts were written, they cannot have been written to be used as scripture. However, although it is true that some of the texts that eventually made it into the New Testament were not written to be scripture (e.g. the letters of Paul, as mentioned above), some texts were, nevertheless, written to be used in what might be described as a scriptural way. They were not written to be part of a defined collection of such texts, but at least some were written to be a resource for faith and spirituality, used by the communities in which they originated. The Gospels do seem to have a high degree of composition behind them, suggesting that these are texts specifically designed to mediate the Transcendent Other for the early Christian communities within which they originated.

Returning to the point that the collections of texts available to the early Christian communities were disparate rather than defined, it is important to remember that there was no fixed order in which to read. It is also important to remember that, because no other material came before a text and none came after it, this meant that each and every text was a stand-alone document. This in turn means that, if there were few choices of explicitly Christian texts in a community’s possession, those that the community had would be read proportionally more often than most Christians would read most of the Bible today. Indeed, the really important texts may well have been read in a continuous cycle.

Especially for those Christians who had not met Jesus (which was all of them within a few decades), an account of his life, his doings and his teachings would be hard to beat.

We cannot go back and observe how these early communities used their texts and so it is speculative, but it seems likely that those who had access to accounts of Jesus' life would have read and reread those accounts in a fairly continuous process, such that they were far more familiar with their few texts than Christians are today with their many texts. Today, we read in a linear fashion, or at least conceptualise this as the 'standard' way of reading. We begin at the start of a book or other text and work our way to the end. Then we usually read another text. Alternatively, if using the Gospels in connection with Church services or the Christian year, we may instead pick passages that are particularly appropriate. It seems unlikely that either of these ways of reading was how the Gospels were originally read. No liturgical round of the Christian year had been developed and very few other texts were available to be read after finishing one. The central proposal of this book is that early Christian communities read their few texts again and again and again. In particular, it seems likely that communities who had just one account of Jesus' life, or one that was especially prized, would read that account in a more or less continuous cycle. It may not be the case with the Gospel of Mark, as this is widely held to be the first Gospel to have been composed, but, by the time the other texts were composed, the authors of those texts may well have been aware that this is how communities used these sorts of texts. Indeed, it may well be how the authors of the other Gospels used the Gospel of Mark prior to writing their own accounts. If this is correct, then, consciously or unconsciously, the authors of the other texts may have written their texts with such a cyclical reading framework in mind. If this is correct, then it is likely that this suggestion will help today's readers to gain a deeper understanding of the texts of the Gospels. If the texts were written with a cyclical reading pattern in mind, then it is at least likely that the authors will have made one part of the text refer to other parts of the text, knowing that these links would be made as the readers became more familiar with the text. It may be that by close reading in cyclical fashion, it is possible to draw out new meanings. I first started thinking about this possibility when I noticed a connection between the story of the Road to Emmaus and the story of Jesus as a boy in the Temple in the Gospel of Luke.¹⁵ Since then,

15. Rob James, 'Intratextuality in Luke: Connecting the Emmaus Road with the Boy in the Temple', *The Expository Times* 132, no. 2 (2020), pp. 63-70.

I have worked on this idea as it applies to the rest of Luke and this book is the result of that work, at least so far.

On Q and on Luke as Author: The Chicken or the Egg?

There is a proverbial question: which came first, the chicken or the egg? Of course, the answer is that the question is wrong. Neither came first. There was a gradual process of evolution from chemicals to single-celled creatures and, yes, eventually to chickens and their eggs, as well as other things. If one were forced to give an answer to the question strictly in the terms set out by the question, one would always be wrong. It may be that biblical studies sometimes ask the wrong question. The question that I have in mind is one that is often not asked explicitly, but which is simply assumed. It is: 'From whom did the authors of the Gospels copy their stories?' Even suggesting that this may be the wrong question is considered heresy in some academic circles. I have sometimes been astonished at the vehemence with which otherwise sober and reasoned academics seek to defend the question. Yet, it is a question that can be challenged and which the work undertaken in this book does indeed challenge, albeit not directly, but sideways on, so to speak.

In one sense, the question is perfectly fine. Any synoptic presentation of Matthew, Mark and Luke, will instantly demonstrate close literary relationships between these texts. Indeed, the name by which we know them collectively – the Synoptic Gospels – gives the game away for these three texts can indeed be 'seen together'. It is generally accepted that Mark was used as a source by the authors of the other two texts. There must have been other sources as well. There is a literary connection, for example, between the words of the institution of the Eucharist used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 and those of the Synoptic Gospels.¹⁶ However, other sources may have been oral tradition or lost written material. Notwithstanding other minor sources, what passes for the 'standard' interpretation of the history of the writing of the gospels is that Mark was written, mainly or entirely from oral material. At the same time as Mark was being composed, other collections of the 'sayings' of Jesus were collected together and written down. It is postulated that Matthew and Luke had access to both Mark and one particular collection of 'sayings', now lost, but generally known as Q, from the German *Quelle*, meaning

16. E.g. Andrew Brian McGowan, "Is There a Liturgical Text in This Gospel?": The Institution Narratives and Their Early Interpretative Communities', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 1 (1999), pp. 73-87.

‘source’. In other words, the proposal is that both Matthew and Luke have two main sources, Mark and the lost Q. Such a scenario is sufficient to account for the ways in which sometimes all three gospels ‘agree’ with one another and how, at other times, either Matthew or Luke will ‘agree’ with Mark, and how sometimes either Matthew or Luke show a more highly developed idea than the other text, when the text is not present in Mark. An example will help. Take the famous occasion of Jesus’ teaching that is usually known as ‘the Beatitudes’. This is present in both Luke and Matthew, but not in Mark. However, the texts of Luke and Matthew differ from one another. Clearly, the authors have acquired the text from somewhere other than Mark and either one or both have somewhat altered their source material. (A slightly more complex scenario would be that the authors were recipients of slightly different versions of the source material.) At Matthew 5:3 we find ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’, whereas at Luke 6:20 we find simply ‘blessed are the poor’. These are texts used by Robert A. Derrenbacker and John S. Kloppenborg in an excellent explanation and defence of the Q proposals.¹⁷ Proponents of Q would categorise the Luke text as more ‘primitive’ than the text from Matthew, because Matthew adds the words ‘in spirit’. There are other instances where Matthew’s text is more ‘primitive’ than Luke’s, which would imply that they were both using a source, sometimes as it was and sometimes elaborating upon it. So, the standard proposal is that there was Mark and Q and a few other minor sources and that Matthew and Luke both used at least Mark and Q but used them in slightly different ways. By analysing the Synoptic Gospels, it is, at least in principle, possible to extract Q – or at least a reasonable guess at it. Kloppenborg has produced a highly acclaimed critical edition, and there are other excellent introductions that also contain a text of Q, such as that by Burton L. Mack.¹⁸ The Q theory is certainly a strong contender to explain the literary relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke – but it is not the only show in town.

This is not the place to go into the detail of the debate around whether or not Q ever existed as a text. To carry out this debate properly would take the rest of this book. However, it is worth keeping an open mind on the question of Q. It may be that the need to find the sources of Luke and

17. Robert A. Derrenbacker and John S. Kloppenborg, ‘Self-Contradiction in the IQP? A Reply to Michael Goulder’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 1 (2001), pp. 57-76.

18. Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Matthew has led to an important alternative being overlooked. It may be a case of ‘neither the chicken nor the egg’. Michael Goulder and Mark Goodacre have led the charge against the need for Q.¹⁹ In essence, they propose that Matthew used Mark and that Luke then used both Mark and Matthew, with Goodacre being rather more explicit in allowing other sources as well. Goulder concludes one of his early works on this question: ‘I do not see how we are to avoid the conclusion that Luke knew Matthew: and that conclusion entails the end of Q.’²⁰ Goulder’s conclusion alone hardly proves the end of Q, but it underlines the fact that there is an alternative perspective. Briefly, in terms of the texts of the Beatitudes, Goodacre points out that it is possible that an author may alter a text by intentionally shortening it. Luke may have deliberately removed ‘in spirit’ because of his overriding concern for those who were actually poor.²¹ Although still a contentious matter, a growing body of biblical scholars, beyond the ‘usual suspects’ of Goulder and Goodacre, accept that Luke had access to Matthew’s text and that editorial decisions on the part of Luke seem to have been made to adjust the text to represent and encourage the poor, possibly among other editorial concerns. Thomas J. Mosbø, for example, has undertaken a detailed study of how Luke used Matthew’s text.²² It is certainly noticeable that Luke has a particular interest in the poor, as compared with Matthew’s interest. This is not to say that care for the poor is absent from Matthew’s text, rather that it is even more present within Luke’s. Where Matthew has the Magi, Luke has shepherds. Where Matthew records Jesus as

19. E.g. Michael Goulder, ‘On Putting Q to the Test’, *New Testament Studies* 24, no. 2 (1978), pp. 218-34; Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 2002), and Goodacre’s *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (Sheffield: Continuum, 2001). Both have also contributed various detailed articles on specific words and phrases that show the likelihood of Luke having known Matthew, such as Michael Goulder, ‘Two Significant Minor Agreements (Mat. 4:13 Par.; Mat. 26:67-68 Par.)’, *Novum Testamentum* 45, no. 4 (2003), pp. 365-73, and Mark Goodacre, ‘A Flaw in McIver and Carroll’s Experiments to Determine Written Sources in the Gospels’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 4 (2014), pp. 793-800.

20. Goulder, ‘On Putting Q to the Test’, p. 234.

21. Goodacre, *The Case Against Q*, pp. 133-51.

22. Thomas J. Mosbø, *Luke the Composer: Exploring the Evangelist’s Use of Matthew* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007).

promising a blessing to 'the poor in spirit', Luke's Jesus promises this blessing simply to 'the poor'.²³ Jesus' first statement at the start of his public ministry in Luke 4:18 is a quotation from Isaiah promising good news to the poor.

This is where eggs and chickens really come in. Biblical scholars who are chasing down the source of Matthew and Luke may have forgotten to step back and try another question. The drive towards the discovery of source material may well obscure the real authorship that those who wrote the Gospels engaged in. In following Goodacre's line of thought, it may well be that Luke has written his text with great care and with overriding themes in mind that lead him to reshape source material, sometimes to rewrite it entirely and maybe even sometimes to create entirely new stories in order to get a point across, either with or without some grain of oral tradition to back it up. Unless we want to be entirely doctrinaire by simply denying the possibility that Luke read Matthew (or, conceivably, though unlikely, that Matthew read Luke) or unless we find it just somehow too distasteful to imagine this, then we must allow it as a possibility. Indeed, it seems a very real possibility.

I have been told before, by a professor whom I very much like and admire, that, without the existence of Q, we have no guarantee that we can work out what Jesus actually said. The logic of this is that, as Matthew and Luke disagree, it is only by untangling this and being able to reconstruct Q that we have any hope of getting to Jesus' actual words. However, this is to presuppose that the answer has to be 'chicken' or 'egg.' It is to deny the possibility that Luke (and/or Matthew) was far more of a creative author than he is usually given credit for. The suggestions made in this book all point towards just one underlying point: Luke was a careful author who controlled his material and put huge structure in place across his text. This present work is fairly narrow in its focus. It does not attempt to show all of the facets of Luke's care with his material, focussing instead on elements of the text that are intratextual. This book also makes no claim to provide a knock-down argument for why Q never existed. It is quite possible to read this book and to hang on to the idea that Q was important and can be reconstructed. However, in showing the depth of Luke's authorial hand, this book demonstrates

23. For instances of Luke's use of parables to present his view of wealth and possessions, see Matthew S. Rindge, 'Luke's Artistic Parables: Narratives of Subversion, Imagination and Transformation', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 68, no. 4 (2014), pp. 403-15.

that the quest for ‘sources’ can be overstated. It demonstrates that Luke is a real author rather than a mere copyist who tinkered at the edges of his material. The text he has composed is designed with great care and involves a high level of meticulous planning. If we are to talk about the sources of the text, then Luke’s own mind, creativity and imagination must surely be listed among them.

The Material to Be Explored

As we proceed through this book, a key discovery is that the intratextual connections are present within material that is unique to Luke, either in its entirety or in the particular form which it takes. It appears likely that Luke created or rewrote this material, at least in part, to make it intratextual. I shall explore this in four chapters, starting with an examination of the beginning and end of the text. In Chapter One, we shall see how the Lucan material links the end back to the beginning, providing a bridge for the reader as he or she turns back to Luke chapter one to begin reading the text again. It is very clever writing that enhances the experience for the reader engaged in cyclical reading. We shall see that there is material present in the opening of Luke’s text that directly explains and expands some of the material at the end of the Gospel. This means that for anyone rereading the text, chapter 24 is naturally followed by chapter one.

Having demonstrated that the Gospel can legitimately be viewed as a cyclical document, I then examine some attributes of Jesus in Chapter Two before examining the titles that Jesus is given in Luke’s text in Chapter Three. Again, the intratextuality is revealed in the unique elements of these texts, even though many of them are in fact rewritten versions of stories found in Mark and in Matthew (or Q, at least on many occasions, if this is preferred). Of particular interest, we shall see how Luke deliberately changes some intratextuality that already existed in Mark in order to make a new point. Chapter Four then takes a wider perspective, exploring three sets of intratextual linkages that flow through the text.

Throughout this exploration I shall occasionally note variants to the text, that is to say, places in the text where ancient sources disagree with one another about what the text says. Unless stated otherwise, the source of these comments is the critical apparatus of the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*. Where New Testament texts are quoted in Greek, these are also taken from this work. Translations are

my own unless specified otherwise; especially in Chapter Three, where, in comparing a large number of verses, the Greek is given with the NRSV translation and, in order to illuminate specific features of certain verses, an alternative translation has also been supplied.

Overall, it seems likely that Luke deliberately wove intratextuality into his text. It is not necessary to see it in order to make use of the text, but it adds depth to the reader's experience. As a side issue, this study also demonstrates the acuity of Luke as an author, which points towards the suggestion that Q is not as necessary as it might have seemed as a tool to explain the composition of Luke *vis-à-vis* Matthew. This exploration of intratextuality is titled *The Spiral Gospel* because it is not the case that readers simply read in a cyclical manner. As they circle the text, they dive in deeper, below the surface of what has been read before. Luke, as a text to be read and reread, is not about simply rereading; it is about the reader spiralling deeper into his understanding and his own explorations of the stories and meanings of Jesus.