TEACH THE TEXT
COMMENTARY SERIES

Luke

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BakerBooks
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516–6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Paperback edition published 2018
ISBN 978-0-8010-7599-5

Printed in the United States of America

The Library of Congress has cataloged the previous edition as follows:
France, R. T.
Luke / R. T. France.
pages cm. — (Teach the text commentary series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8010-9235-0 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Bible. Luke—Commentaries. I. Title.
BS2595.53.L86 2013
226.407—dc23 2013012205

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; this commentary is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary is divided into carefully selected preaching units (with carefully regulated word counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and

teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or "Big Idea," of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the "Understanding the Text" section, each six-page unit contains a "Teaching the Text" section and an "Illustrating the Text" section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today's audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God's dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, "alive and active" and "sharper than any double-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors

Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea*. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or "Big Idea," that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes*. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text*. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
   a. The Text in Context. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit's contribution to the purpose of the book.

b. Outline/Structure. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.
c. Historical and Cultural Background. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
d. Interpretive Insights. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
e. Theological Insights. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.

4. *Teaching the Text*. Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
5. *Illustrating the Text*. Here the commentary provides suggestions of where useful illustrations may be found in fields such as literature, entertainment, history, or biography. They are intended to provide general ideas for illustrating the passage's key themes and so serve as a catalyst for effectively illustrating the text.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Dan.	Daniel
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra	Hosea	Hosea
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah	Joel	Joel
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther	Amos	Amos
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job	Obad.	Obadiah
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalm(s)	Jon.	Jonah
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs	Mic.	Micah
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Nah.	Nahum
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab.	Habakkuk
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1 Kings	1 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah	Hag.	Haggai
2 Kings	2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col.	Colossians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom.	Romans	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	Revelation

General

ca.	circa	e.g.	*exempli gratia*, for example
cf.	*confer*, compare	lit.	literally
chap(s).	chapter(s)	v(v).	verse(s)

Ancient Text Types and Versions

LXX	Septuagint

Modern Versions

KJV	King James Version	REB	Revised English Bible
NIV	New International Version	RSV	Revised Standard Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version		

Apocrypha and Septuagint

Sir.	Sirach	Tob.	Tobit

Dead Sea Scrolls

CD	*Damascus Document*	11Q19	*Temple*[a]
1Q28a (1QSa)	*Rule of the Congregation*		

Mishnah and Talmud

b.	Babylonian Talmud	*Mak.*	*Makkot*
m.	Mishnah	*Pesah.*	*Pesahim*
'Abot	*'Abot*	*Sanh.*	*Sanhedrin*
Ber.	*Berakot*	*Shabb.*	*Shabbat*
Ketub.	*Ketubbot*	*Yoma*	*Yoma (= Kippurim)*

Apostolic Fathers

Did.	*Didache*

Greek and Latin Works

Eusebius

Hist. eccl.	*Ecclesiastical History (Historia ecclesiastica)*

Josephus

Ag. Ap.	*Against Apion (Contra Apionem)*
Ant.	*Jewish Antiquities (Antiquitates judaicae)*
Life	*The Life (Vita)*
J.W.	*Jewish War (Bellum judaicum)*

Philo

Embassy	*On the Embassy to Gaius (Legatio ad Gaium)*

Pliny the Younger

Ep.	*Epistles (Epistulae)*

Tacitus

Ann.	*Annals (Annales)*

Introduction to Luke

Luke-Acts: A Two-Volume Work

The traditional canonical order of the New Testament books divides Luke's work into two separate sections, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. But Acts 1:1–2 makes the continuity clear, and the latter part of Luke 24 reads as if Luke's mind is already as much on his second volume as on completing his first. Luke 1:1–4 does not specify what he includes in "the things that have been fulfilled among us," but it seems likely that when Luke began his Gospel, he was already intending to cover the whole story up to his own time. Certainly by the time he got to the end of the Gospel, he was clearly planning to provide the mysterious Theophilus with a comprehensive account of the origins of Christianity. The division of this ambitious project into two books reflects the practical limits of a single scroll (Luke alone is already the longest "book" in the New Testament, with Acts a close second), though of course there is also a clear and convenient division into two periods: the period of Jesus's presence on earth and the period of his disciples' mission after his ascension.

Theophilus, to whom both volumes are explicitly addressed, is otherwise unknown. The title "most excellent" (Luke 1:3) suggests a person of high social standing (it is so used in Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25), and the verb translated "taught" in Luke 1:4 became in Christian usage a designation of the "catechesis," formal instruction in the faith, which often preceded baptism. So Theophilus may have been a high-ranking convert to Christianity. His Greek name may suggest a non-Jew, though the same name was borne also by Jews in the multilingual culture of Palestine. He is normally understood

to be Luke's literary patron; such an address to a prominent figure was a recognized mode of launching a literary work, with no intention that the work was for his use alone.

Who Was Luke?

The only "Luke" we know from the New Testament was an associate of Paul, described as one of his "fellow workers" (Philem. 24; cf. 2 Tim. 4:11), and as "our dear friend Luke, the doctor" (Col. 4:14). It is unlikely that such a relatively obscure person would be credited with the authorship of these two important books unless his name was already firmly associated with them in Christian tradition, and no other name was ever proposed as author; most scholars accept the attribution.

A curious feature of Acts is that the narrative, normally in the third person, switches abruptly to the first person at several points, suggesting that the author himself was present during those parts of the story. These "we passages" cover Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–16; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16, which would mean that the author joined Paul's group at Troas on the second missionary journey and accompanied them as far as Philippi, then rejoined the group for the latter part of the third journey, traveling with them from Philippi to Jerusalem, and finally went with Paul from Caesarea to Rome, on the journey with which Acts concludes. This would indicate that he spent a substantial time in Palestine during Paul's imprisonment, a period that he may well have used to research material for his history. If he then remained with Paul in Rome, this would fit the references to Luke's presence in Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy.

None of this amounts to proof of Luke's authorship, but that seems the most adequate explanation of such data as we have. If, then, Luke was the author of Luke-Acts, these would probably be the only books of the New Testament written by a non-Jew, since Luke appears in the list of Paul's non-Jewish associates following Colossians 4:11. The "we passages" indicate a member who joined the group in the Greek rather than the Jewish world. The excellent Greek style and literary presentation of the work would suit a native Greek speaker, even though the author is clearly well informed about Jewish affairs and makes frequent and enthusiastic use of the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint, abbreviated "LXX").

The Origin of the Work

We will look in more detail later at Luke's statement of intent in Luke 1:1–4, but it is clear that he did not write in a vacuum, at least as far as the first volume of his work was concerned. Others had already been drawing up accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, and Luke is self-consciously adding

to their number and aiming to improve on what they have been able to offer. He does not tell us who they were, but most scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was one of them and was a major source of Luke's story. We will consider below the possibility that there were other, less substantial accounts in circulation in either written or oral form that have not survived but were available as sources for Luke.

The three Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke share the same essential narrative structure (the more strikingly similar when it is compared with the very different outline of John's Gospel) of an extensive ministry in Galilee, followed by a decisive journey south to Jerusalem, after which the climactic events take place in that city. If, as most scholars believe, Mark is the earliest of the three, it seems likely that this scheme originated with him. At times Luke follows Mark's story quite closely, but he also has a lot of material (considerably more than Matthew) that is independent of Mark. In particular, the story of the journey to Jerusalem, which in Mark takes up just over two chapters, and in Matthew a little over four, accounts for nearly half of Luke's Gospel (Luke 9:51–19:44). Into this section of the story he has packed a great deal of material unknown to Mark and (to a lesser extent) Matthew.

That there is a close literary relationship between Mark, Matthew, and Luke is obvious, but attempts to define the nature of that relationship continue to vary widely. At least it is clear that Luke's Gospel is very much more than simply a revised version of Mark, and that Luke has both a great deal of independent source material and his own distinctive approach to how the story of Jesus should be told. We will explore these issues further when we look at Luke 1:1–4 below.

The date at which Luke's Gospel was written is an intriguing puzzle. On the one hand, it is natural to assume that Acts was written after Luke, and the story of Acts finishes in AD 62 with Paul triumphantly spreading the gospel from his house arrest in Rome. It is almost certain that this period of relative freedom did not last, and that Paul was executed during the persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero in AD 64–65, yet Acts gives no hint of this drastic change or of the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. An obvious explanation of this startling silence ("the dog that did not bark") is that Acts was written before the Neronian persecution and the death of Paul. That would place the origin of Acts in the early 60s, and the Gospel therefore presumably a few years earlier.

On the other hand, it has long been traditional among scholars to speak of the 60s as the very earliest possible date for Mark, and, since Matthew and Luke are assumed to have had access to a completed version of Mark, to place both Matthew and Luke some time later; a date around AD 80 is widely favored. In particular, it is often taken for granted that passages such

as Luke 19:43–44; 21:20–24, though ostensibly Jesus's words of prediction, reflect Luke's own knowledge of the Roman siege and capture of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The arguments are too complex to pursue here, but the reader should be aware that although the later date remains the most widely supported, there is a growing minority of scholars who argue that a date for at least the first draft, and possibly the finished version, of Luke's Gospel before AD 64/65 best fits the evidence, however inconvenient that may be for the conventional view of the relative dating of the Gospels. Such a proposal is particularly plausible if it is combined with a less rigidly "X copied Y" understanding of the nature of the literary relationship between Mark, Matthew, and Luke than mainstream scholarship has often been prepared to envisage.

Luke the Historian: Luke 1:1–4

Luke has provided a clear statement of intent at the beginning of his work, and a study of this preface tells us much about his purpose and method.

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

Other ancient historians and authors of literary works of nonfiction made similar statements of intent, assuring their readers that their works could be trusted, and the formal style of Luke's opening words conforms to that Greco-Roman literary convention. But not all ancient historians seem to have delivered quite what they promised, and there has been much debate as to how far Luke was able to fulfill his stated ideal.

On the one hand, there are specific problems such as the Roman census referred to in 2:1–3 (see commentary there), or the fact that Luke's account of Jewish insurrections in Acts 5:36–37 differs in sequence from Josephus's account of the same events. Against this must be set the accuracy with which Acts reflects the changing political situations in different Roman provinces, as well as Luke's extraordinary ability to use the right technical terms for the various local officials.

On the other hand, some scholars emphasize Luke's lack of "objectivity," in that he writes as a Christian believer with the aim of commending the faith and its founder, and that he has no hesitation in presenting as factual history supernatural events that defy scientific explanation. On that basis, of course,

none of the biblical writers can be allowed to be "objective" historians. But that is a question of philosophical presupposition rather than of historical method. That Luke writes as a committed believer in the risen Jesus is hardly likely to jeopardize his historical reliability for those whose worldview can accommodate God and miracle![1]

If we take Luke's opening words at face value, several clauses throw important light on his aims and methods as a historian.

1:1 *Many have undertaken to draw up an account.* Most scholars assume that early collections of Jesus's words and deeds were circulating orally among the Christian congregations for some time before our written Gospels appeared, but since Luke presents his work as in the same category as that of the "many," it appears that at least some of those earlier accounts already existed in written form. As mentioned above, Mark's Gospel should probably be understood to be one of these predecessors, and many scholars believe that Luke also used a written source or sources for much of the additional material that he shares with Matthew (the "Q" material), but "many" suggests that Luke had a larger pool of written as well as oral material to draw on, most of which did not survive except as incorporated into his own and the other Gospels.

1:2 *those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.* Clearly, Luke does not include himself in this category, but he has had good firsthand material available. Note the requirement in Acts 1:21–22 that a member of the Twelve must have been part of the disciple group from the time of John's baptism until Jesus's ascension. They had seen and heard it all, and so now here was a rich fund of (presumably largely) oral tradition for Luke to draw on in addition to the written records compiled by the "many."[2]

1:3 *I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning.* Luke's work presents itself as a serious research project rather than a random collection of reminiscences. If Luke was in Palestine during the two years or so that Paul was in prison before his transfer to Rome (see above on the "we passages"), he had plenty of opportunity to pursue this research by contacting the eyewitnesses both in Jerusalem and in Galilee. The remarkable insights into the private world of Mary and her family in chapters 1–2 suggest that Mary herself may have been among those he interviewed (see on 2:19).

In speaking of "an orderly account," is there perhaps here a hint of criticism of some of Luke's predecessors' work as lacking in "order"? The early Christian writer Papias (early second century) indicates a similar criticism with regard to the Gospel of Mark, which, based as it was on Peter's ad hoc reminiscences and teaching, could not be blamed for being "not in order"; Papias also speaks by contrast of Matthew as having "put in order" the Gospel

material available to him (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15–16). "Draw up" (*anatassomai*) in 1:1 also more literally means "put in order." The word that Luke uses in 1:3 is different (*kathexēs*, "in sequence"), but it suggests a similar concern that everything be properly organized. Readers often assume that he is referring especially to putting events in the right *chronological* order, but there are other types of "order"—thematic order, a satisfying literary structure, and so on. Luke is a sophisticated writer who knows how to tell a good story, and putting the elements of the story in chronological sequence may not always be the most effective way of presenting it. For instance, the dramatic scene in the synagogue at Nazareth with which he opens his account of Jesus's Galilean ministry (4:16–30) occurs later in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and it includes a reference to Jesus's previous activity in Capernaum (4:23) before Luke has recorded Jesus's first visit there. Luke has placed the incident in chapter 4 not necessarily because it happened first, but because it provides a vivid programmatic account of what Jesus's mission was to be all about. That is a more satisfying literary "order" than mere chronology.

1:4 ***that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*** Perhaps all that Luke means is that he wants Theophilus to have the firm evidence to back up the teaching that he has received. But some have again detected here a note of criticism of Luke's predecessors. "Certainty" translates *asphaleia*, denoting that which is firmly founded and cannot be moved. Whatever weaknesses other accounts of Jesus may have had, Luke's record will not let the reader down. It is to be utterly reliable.

If, then, we take Luke at his word, he tells us that his aim is to write reliable, accurate history, set out in an acceptable literary form, and he went to considerable pains to ensure that he was as well informed as he could be.

Luke the Evangelist

But Luke is not just a chronicler of events. He is a man with a message. Much of what he wants his books to convey is, naturally, shared with the other Gospel writers and with his associate Paul. But in some ways his work stands out as distinctive from theirs.

Perhaps the best term to sum up Luke's essential message is "salvation."[3] In both the Gospel and Acts we meet many people whose lives are transformed by the grace of God, such as Zacchaeus, to whose house "salvation" has come, prompting Jesus to make his programmatic declaration "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:9–10).

Zacchaeus was a successful financier, but a social outcast. Others were "lost" in many different ways, and Luke's story is famous for its broad sympathy with the marginalized and the disadvantaged—the poor and the sick, the harassed and the demon-possessed, widows and bereaved parents, women and children,

the social underworld of tax collectors and sinners, the Gentiles and even the Samaritans. To all, in their different needs, salvation and wholeness came through the ministry of Jesus, who came to proclaim "good news to the poor" (4:18), and Luke took delight in using their stories to illustrate the revolutionary ideals of the Magnificat (see 1:51–53), the dawning kingdom of God, in which the last will be first and the first last (13:30).

All this is, of course, in fulfillment (note the use of "fulfilled" in 1:1) of what God has promised, and Luke, no less than the other (Jewish) evangelists, delights to trace the fulfillment of Scripture in the events that he records, beginning with the remarkable concentration of scriptural material in Luke 1–2, and concluding with Jesus's definitive expositions of Scripture in Luke 24:25–27, 44–48.

Teaching the Text: Luke 1:1–4

Luke 1:1–4 can be taught as part of a message introducing a study of the Gospel of Luke. Since this is the only place in the four Gospels where an author explicitly refers to himself in the first person ("I") and identifies his purpose in writing (but see also the purpose statement in John 20:30–31), it serves as a natural introduction to the Gospel. The passage allows you to introduce (1) Luke the physician as the author, (2) Theophilus (and the community with which he is associated) as the recipient, (3) the likely occasion and situation to which Luke wrote, and (4) his purpose in writing. The passage also illustrates Luke's role as a storyteller, historian, and theologian. He is writing a "narrative" (= story), with features like characters, setting, and plot, so that it is important to read and follow the story through introduction, conflict, climax, and resolution. But it is also *history*. Luke has carefully researched and sought out eyewitnesses in order to produce an accurate and trustworthy historical narrative. It is not, however, just "bare history." It is theologically driven history, the account of the salvation *God* has accomplished through Jesus the Messiah, and what he continues to accomplish through his church (in Acts). All these important points—critical to an introduction to the Gospel of Luke—can be teased out in a sermon or lesson on 1:1–4. Be sure to stress Luke's emphasis on tracking the course of "salvation history"—that is, that Luke sees the events of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and the expansion of the church in Acts, as the climax of God's worldwide plan of redemption and the fulfillment of his promises made to the nation Israel.

Luke 1:5–25*

A Special Child Promised

Big Idea

The promise of the birth of a special child shows that a new age is dawning: John the Baptist will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

Key Themes

- John the Baptist is to fulfill the role of Elijah, preparing for the "day of the Lord."
- He is to be born into a pious, priestly family.
- His birth to aged parents, beyond normal expectation, is by God's special power.

Understanding the Text

The Text in Context

We have considered Luke's introductory statement of intent (1:1–4) in the introduction ("Luke the Historian: Luke 1:1–4"), and I will not comment further on it here. The story then begins, to the reader's surprise, not with Jesus but with the promise of the birth of John the Baptist. The reader will be invited to compare the origins of the two men, both born by the special power of God, both heralded by the same angelic messenger, both named by the angel, and both called to fulfill a key role in the working out of God's purpose of deliverance for his people.

Chapters 1–2 (Luke's "infancy narrative") stand apart from the rest of the Gospel in that they do not derive from the same sources used by Matthew and Mark, and indeed they overlap with Matthew's opening chapters only in the minimal data of Jesus's birth to a virgin mother in Bethlehem in the time of King Herod, his parents' names, Joseph's Davidic descent, the angelic announcement of the name "Jesus," and the location of Jesus's childhood in Nazareth. The focus on Mary and her family in these chapters (as opposed to the focus on Joseph in Matt. 1–2) suggests that they may originate in Mary's own reminiscences. They are full of the atmosphere of traditional Jewish piety and are notable for the sequence of psalm-like declarations by Mary,

*Luke 1:1–4 is discussed in the introduction.

Zechariah, and Simeon (1:46–55, 68–79; 2:29–32), which, together with the angels' song in 2:14, locate the events of the Gospel firmly in the trajectory of prophetic fulfillment.

The prominence of John the Baptist in this introductory section (as indeed in the rest of the Gospel [3:1–20; 7:18–35; 9:7–9, 19; 16:16; 20:1–8]) warns us against the common tendency to treat him merely as a "warm-up act" before the main character comes on the stage. John himself is the fulfillment of prophecy, and his ministry begins the work of deliverance that Jesus will continue.

Historical and Cultural Background

Herod the Great (1:5) died probably in 4 BC; the births of John and Jesus are thus dated several years before the traditional beginning of the "Christian era."

By the first century there were several thousand priests, organized in twenty-four "divisions," each of which was allocated two weeks of temple duties in the year. Since there was only one temple and only two daily sacrifices, the privilege of offering incense was a rare one. As Luke points out (1:9), priests were chosen by lot (a practice similar to casting dice) to offer incense; according to Jewish tradition, only those who had not offered incense before were eligible to cast lots (*m. Tamid* 5:2). So this was Zechariah's big day, perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Interpretive Insights

1:6 ***Both of them were righteous.*** Readers of the Gospels sometimes gain the impression that Jewish religion at the time of Jesus was corrupt and superficial. But Luke introduces us to ordinary, pious people, faithfully following God's call to holy living. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth there was the added dimension that both came from priestly families. There is thus a direct continuity between Old Testament piety and the dawning age of salvation.

1:7 ***Elizabeth was not able to conceive.*** Throughout this chapter we are reminded of Hannah (1 Sam. 1) and her son Samuel, also born against natural expectation. A special birth presages a special life in God's service. For God's preparation of his special servant even before birth, see Jeremiah 1:5.

1:9 ***to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.*** Incense was offered with both the morning and evening sacrifices each day, on the incense altar inside the sanctuary (the holy place behind the first curtain, not the most holy place, or holy of holies). Worshipers could watch the animal sacrifices on the great altar in the courtyard, but they could only wait while the chosen priest went into the sanctuary to burn incense and then came out to pronounce the priestly blessing (see 1:21).

1:11 *an angel of the Lord appeared to him.* The angel identifies himself in 1:19 as Gabriel, one of only two angels who are named in the Old Testament (Dan. 8:16; 9:21), the other being Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1). These two are regularly included in later Jewish accounts of the four "archangels." Whereas Michael appears in Daniel as a warrior, Gabriel comes to reveal secret knowledge to the prophet. Gabriel will also declare God's purpose to Mary (1:26–27). He is not mentioned by name again in the New Testament, but in Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19 an unnamed "angel of the Lord" guides Joseph in his dreams. Here Zechariah apparently is awake.

1:13 *you are to call him John.* Jesus's name likewise will be supernaturally revealed (1:31). This is a further indication that God has a special role for this child, and the name is symbolic. The name Jesus, a common Jewish name (the Greek form of Joshua), is explained in Matthew 1:21 as declaring his saving role. John, also a common name, is not explicitly interpreted in that way, but it represents the Hebrew Yohanan, meaning "God has been gracious," and 1:14–17 (and still more 1:68–79) will spell out how God's grace ("the tender mercy of our God" [1:78]) is to be exercised through John's ministry.

1:15 *He is never to take wine or other fermented drink.* John's ascetic lifestyle, which is described in Mark 1:6, is based on what looks like a lifelong Nazirite vow. Abstinence from alcohol was a key feature of the Nazirite life (Num. 6:1–21), but whereas this was normally understood to be a voluntary and temporary adult commitment, for John it was to be from birth and for life. In this he conforms to the image of Samson, another special child born to a supposedly barren mother (Judg. 13:2–7); compare also Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11). John's adherence to this ascetic model was to mark him out in distinction from Jesus, who, as Luke will later note, was known to enjoy eating and drinking wine (7:33–34).

1:17 *in the spirit and power of Elijah.* The return of Elijah was widely expected in Jewish circles as the prelude to God's coming to judgment. The angel's words closely echo the prophecy of Malachi 4:5–6 (cf. Mal. 3:1–5), but whereas Malachi places the primary emphasis on Elijah's role of family reconciliation in preparation for the "day of the Lord," the angel here speaks more broadly of John as "bringing people back to God," "turning the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous," and "a people prepared for the Lord." John's mission was to bring about a comprehensive religious revival. His appearance signals the dawn of the new era that the prophets foretold.

1:20 *you will be silent and not able to speak.* For Zechariah's understandable "disbelief" in the face of such an extraordinary promise, compare the reaction of both Abraham and Sarah to God's similar promise in Genesis 17:17–18; 18:10–15. Zechariah's skepticism stands in contrast with Mary's acceptance of Gabriel's word (1:38), and it is severely punished. God expects his people

to take him at his word. But as well as punishment, Zechariah's loss of speech serves as the "sign" of God's miraculous power that he has requested (1:18). From a literary point of view, Zechariah's loss of speech provides the basis for the striking scenes of the people's recognition of his "vision" (1:21–22), of his dramatic intervention in the naming of his son (1:59–63), and of the fluent outpouring of praise as soon as his speech is restored (1:67–79).

1:25 *The Lord has done this for me.* Elizabeth's reaction reminds us of Hannah's great prayer of thanksgiving in 1 Samuel 2:1–10, which also expresses the relief of one who has been rescued from the social stigma of barrenness. A much fuller echo of that prayer will he heard in 1:46–55. Compare Sarah (Gen. 21:1–7), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), and Rachel (Gen. 30:22–23). God overturns situations of human helplessness and despair.

Theological Insights

The main theme is the dawning of the age of fulfillment. Echoes of the Old Testament throughout this passage combine with the angelic pronouncement to inform us that when Elizabeth's child has grown up and begins his mission of spiritual restoration, the long-promised "day of the Lord" will have arrived. Christians naturally think of John the Baptist as the forerunner of *Jesus*, but nothing has been said so far about a human messiah. Malachi's prophecy was that Elijah would come before *God himself* came to visit his people; the same implication will be found in Isaiah 40:3–5, quoted by Luke in 3:4–6. From this prophetic perspective, the coming of Jesus will be in effect the coming of God himself.

John will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb (1:15). This is remarkable in view of the fact that Jesus's endowment with the Spirit will be mentioned only from the time of his baptism (3:22; 4:1). This is the first instance of a major emphasis in Luke's Gospel: the role of the Holy Spirit in effecting the work of salvation. In these opening chapters note 1:35, 41, 67; 2:25–27.

Teaching the Text

John the Baptist is often undervalued in Christian thinking. It is true that in the Gospel accounts he consistently points away from himself to Jesus, but Jesus himself declares that "among those born of women there is no one greater than John" (7:28); he is "more than a prophet" (7:26). In chapters 1–2 Luke invites us to consider the promise and birth of John and of Jesus side by side, and so to recognize John as an essential part of the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. A message on this passage should focus *both* on John's

subordinate position with reference to Jesus and on his critically important role in God's plan of salvation. Like John, every believer is uniquely gifted and has a unique role. Yet, ultimately, the role of *every* believer is to point to *Jesus,* and, like John, to say, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

In this opening scene Luke's concern is to get us to recognize that John brings the end of the period of preparation and the dawn of the age of salvation. In doing this, John fulfills several strands of Old Testament prophecy, and in particular the prophecy of Malachi that Elijah would return to prepare people for the "day of the Lord." The promise of his birth by God's special power conforms to the pattern of other great figures in the story of salvation, especially Isaac, Samson, and Samuel.

The critical moment for which John is to prepare people is the "day of the Lord," the long-standing promise that God himself would come among his people to judge and to deliver. Many such prophecies in the Old Testament speak of God's coming and acting without mentioning a separate messiah figure, and the teacher should draw attention to the fact that no mention has been made so far of a human messiah and invite the hearer to consider the implications of this for our understanding of Jesus as "God with us."

A subsidiary message may also be derived from the experiences of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth, in the "disgrace" of her inability to bear children, represents human helplessness, which is to be joyfully overcome by the power of God; despair gives way to praise. Zechariah, whose big day is suddenly turned upside down by the appearance of the angel, represents human slowness to accept God's power to change things (even though he apparently had been praying for precisely this outcome [1:13]) and contrasts with Mary's ready acceptance of a similar challenge to faith in 1:38. Compare Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17:17–18; 18:10–15.

Illustrating the Text

God is able to overcome human helplessness and turn despair to joy.

Film: *The Nativity Story*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke. This somewhat overlooked movie (2006) includes strong acting and cinematography, a beautiful and subtle musical score, and many of the other sophisticated nuances that contribute to an exceptional film. It also uses a great deal of biblical text, providing a natural resource to illustrate many of the passages leading up to and including the birth of Christ. The film chronicles compellingly the actual events reported while filling in believably the human dynamics that make us see the story more fully. A very early scene shows Zechariah's unbelief in the face of the declaration that Elizabeth would become pregnant

and Elizabeth's response, which, as Scripture notes implicitly, stands in contrast to her husband's.

God's intervention changes routine to drama.

Quote: *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, by Frederick Buechner. In these words Buechner (b. 1926) underlines the drama of the Gospel—God's intervention through Christ in human affairs:

> It is a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It is a world where terrible things happen and wonderful things too. It is a world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos. . . . That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, the one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still.[1]

Social Commentary: *Christ and the Media*, by Malcolm Muggeridge. Muggeridge expresses beautifully the drama Jesus's intervention in history would bring, "the great drama of the Incarnation, the Passion and the Resurrection." He adds,

> All the greatest artists, poets and musicians dedicated their genius to celebrating it, and . . . majestic cathedrals were built to enshrine it, and religious orders were founded to serve it. . . . Mystics spent their lives exploring it, and . . . for centuries it was the driving force behind all of the greatest human endeavour, the source of the brightest and most far-reaching hopes ever to be understood by the human will.[2]

Even a very pious person may experience incredulity in the face of mind-blowing data.

Poetry: "Zacharias in Advent," by Francisco R. Albano. This poem, which speaks of Zacharias (Zechariah) being "dumbfounded" by the prospect of "life flowing from impossibility," explores his dilemma upon the announcement of John the Baptist's impending birth to him and his wife as a conflict between his rational thought and his faith.[3]