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John Moles

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JOHN MOLES
School of Historical Studies, Newcastle University, Armstrong Building, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 7RU, UK.
email: j.l.moles@ncl.ac.uk

The single type of writing that Luke’s Preface resembles most is the Greek decree. Along with other indications, the structure situates Luke in the tradition of Classical historiography. It also creates important links to the narrative, helping to define: the relationships between Roman power and Christianity and between Classical and Lukan historiography; the character of the Christian politeia; the superiority of Lukan historiography both to Classical and to previous Christian historiography; the superiority of Lukan Christian doctrine; and the superiority of the ‘reward’ from Luke’s Christian ‘contract’ to the ‘rewards’ of the Classical historians Thucydides, Livy and Augustus and to those of the Roman politeia.

Keywords: Luke’s Preface, Greek decree, Classical historiography, Christian appropriations and redefinitions, truth, security, resurrection

Luke 1.1–4:

Ἐπειδήπερ πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν περὶ τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡμῖν πραγμάτων, ἓνόμισα καθὼς παρέδοσαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἅπερ ἀρχῆς αὐτότοι καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου, ἐδοξε καὶ παρηκολουθηκότι ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὁν ὀκτηθῆς λόγων τῶν ἀσφάλειων.

Since indeed many have set their hand to draw up a narrative guide about the things done which have been brought to fulfilment amongst us, (2) just as those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and servants of the word gave them on to us, (3) it seemed good to me also, having closely followed all of them accurately from the up, to write/inscribe them down for you in order, most powerful Theophilos, (4) so that you may additionally know/experience/recognise the truth/security/safety about the words in which you have been orally instructed.

1. Preliminary Questions

All agree that the Preface exhibits many formal features of Greek prose prefaces. Disagreement concerns generic claims, literary register and quality; many find the Preface over-compressed, over-allusive, ambiguous and obscure.¹

While the Preface has generally been read as historiographical,² much recent discussion has been driven by Loveday Alexander’s claims: there are strikingly close and numerous parallels, alike of thought, structure, rhetoric and vocabulary, with the prefaces of scientific, medical or technical works;³ Luke’s narrative exhibits similar ‘professional-man’ style⁴ indicative of his general culture and social status and those of his projected readership/audience;⁵ the Preface should accordingly be read as that of a technical/scientific work.

This last claim is critical—and counter-intuitive. As many observe and Alexander concedes,⁶ not only is Luke, or Luke–Acts,⁷ narrative but it is some sort of historical narrative (whether biography or Gospel does not affect the general point). Moreover, among numerous arguments (some given below) for

5 Alexander, Preface, 176–84.
7 I accept the general consensus that one writer wrote Luke and Acts, which constitute a two-book unity, and, more controversially, that Luke 1.1–4 is a Preface for that unity, Acts 1.1 introducing a ‘second preface’.
reading the Preface as historiographical, the first and decisive is that, while \( \delta \iota \gamma \iota \gamma \varsigma \iota \varsigma \varsigma \) (1) does not necessarily denote narrative, it must do so when it is a \( \delta \iota \gamma \iota \gamma \varsigma \iota \varsigma \varsigma \) of ‘the things done which have been brought to fulfilment amongst us’; that is, a series of past events, and a ‘narrative’ of past events, especially one ‘drawn up’/‘written up’ ‘accurately’ and ‘in order’, and with a beginning and an end, itself denotes historiography, history itself consisting of ‘things that happened or that were done’ (\( \tau \alpha \; \gamma \epsilon \nu \omicron \omicron \omicron \epsilon \omicron \alpha / \text{res gestae} \)). After this immediate generic ‘signal’, readers must read the rest of the Preface historiographically, as the narrative broadly confirms. This is to deny neither that Luke qua historiographical preface has original and unusual features (some discussed here) nor the existence of parallels with ‘professional’ works (but appropriation of ‘scientific’ terminology was a staple of Greek historiography from the beginning).

The secondary generic question of what kind of Greek historiography has also divided opinion, but I read the Preface as evoking primarily the ‘Classical’ historiography of Herodotus and Thucydides and their followers, including Polybius. Here I contest Alexander’s claim that ‘we should be looking for Luke’s generic models not among the great classical historians... Thucydides and Herodotus are probably the most difficult to square with the preface...’ and align myself with Eckhard Plümacher, who has highlighted the Preface’s Thucydidean quality. This does not deny other historiographical influences, including later ones, nor the suggestion of ‘local history’ in ‘amongst us’, for ‘local history’ can accommodate Herodotean and Thucydidean influences (cf. Josephus’s \textit{Jewish Antiquities}). It is another question whether, or how far, Luke ‘delivers’ ‘Classical’ historiography (itself, of course, of considerable diversity and developmental potential), or whether it may not be his strategy to announce a work of


9 This, rather than ‘most surely believed’: Cadbury, ‘Commentary’, 495–6; Alexander, \textit{Preface}, 111, though the latter may be a secondary implication.


12 ‘Stichwort: Lukas, Historiker’, \textit{ZNT} 18 (2006) 2–9; cf. p. 479, below. I use ‘Classical’ in the same way as Alexander, as: (1) Greek (and Roman) rather than Jewish; (2) considered normative, both by ourselves and by the ancients. While (2) is less true of Polybius than of Herodotus and Thucydides, he remains in the ‘great’ Thucydidean tradition.


Classical historiography, while in some ways, already in the Preface and more radically in the narrative, reshaping readers’ expectations. The adoption of similar strategies by Greek and Roman historians and biographers has been much discussed by Classicists. Consequently, while the ‘biography’ model for Luke is persuasive, biography can be subsumed within historiography. Similarly, Augustus’s Res Gestae subsumes autobiography within historiography. This does not deny that in Luke, as in Classical historians (including Augustus) and biographers, dexterous switching between historiography and biography itself creates meaning.

2. The Greek Decree and Lukan and Classical Historiography

My basic thesis is that, granted that Luke 1.1–4 is a formal preface of a common general type and that it announces a work of Greek historiography, the single type of writing that it resembles most is the Greek decree. Some existing treatments have noted relevant points, for example, that: the Preface’s grammatical construction is parallel to the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15.24, 25; ἡ παιδεία is inter alia decree language; ἔδοξε κῶμοι is inter alia decree language; and ἡ παιδεία paired with ἔδοξε is decree-like. But these observations remain few and undeveloped.

The thesis has considerable interpretative implications, which I shall explore. It also validates the Preface’s high literary quality. Such a judgment will seem implausible to some, but there are no a priori criteria for what Luke could or could not do in these areas, especially in a Preface, a context where ancient authors deploy all their skill to impress readers. The language of great writers

17 P. 473 below.
19 Alexander, Preface, 108.
21 Alexander, Preface, 127.
can be very polysemous. The fact that a word, phrase or image can be explained on one level does not exclude its operating on other levels; and in some contexts, the more levels the better, provided that each separate level retains sufficient definition, and the whole does not collapse into mess. Similarly, apart from the direct addressee, Theophilos, Luke’s target audience(s)/readership(s) can be (re-)constructed only from textual pointers (‘the implied readership’), and *multiple* target audiences/readerships cannot *a priori* be excluded. If the Preface exhibits detailed allusions to the great Classical writers and densely associative language and imagery, Luke’s target audience(s)/readership(s) should include ‘Classical’ readers, whether highly Hellenised Jews or highly educated Gentiles.

The Greek decree has a standard format, with variations. There are three key elements: a preambular ‘since’ (ἐπεί/ἐπειδή) clause, which gives the first justification for the decree, as relating to past or present circumstances; a main clause in which the decision is expressed by the impersonal ‘it seemed good’, plus dative of people or constitutional body; and a purpose (ἵνα) clause, which gives the secondary justification for the decree, as relating to the future. That Luke knows the format might be assumed but is proved by the Apostolic Decree, where an ἐπειδή clause is followed by a decision expressed by the impersonal ‘it seemed good’, plus a plural dative of person (Acts 15.25, 28). That the third standard element, the purpose clause, is there omitted shows that Luke need not echo the format slavishly: already, then, a sign of his literary sensitivity.

In the Preface, the first clause consists of an ἐπεί-clause, giving the first justification for Luke’s work, as relating to past and present circumstances; the third clause is a main clause stating a decision and based on the impersonal ‘it seemed good’, plus dative; and the fourth clause is a ἵνα clause, giving the secondary justification for Luke’s decision to write, as relating to the future. There are, then, objective parallels with the format and vocabulary of Greek decrees and no less than three quarters of the syntactical structure are closely parallel. Obviously, γράψαι (‘inscribe’) coheres with a decree allusion.

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23 Whoever or whatever Theophilos is (real person? patron? pseudonymous real person? ideal reader? etc.), qua ‘most powerful’, he seems (many note) to be conceived as of similar worldly status to the Roman governors Felix and Festus: Acts 23.26; 24.3; 26.25.


26 LSJ s.v. II.2.
This hypothesis does not deny other organising structures, nor that some of these overlap, and interweave, with that of the Greek decree, nor that there are other factors. Many formal prefaces begin with, or contain, ‘since’-clauses (or their equivalents);\(^{27}\) many make the move from ‘many people have written about this’ to ‘I also’;\(^{28}\) and many end with a purpose clause, explaining the benefit to the reader.\(^{29}\) But introductory ‘since’-clauses and final ‘so that’ clauses acquire an extra dimension if they are integrated into an overall pattern that recalls the Greek decree. It is also true that the movement from an ἐπεί- clause to a decision of the writer’s expressed by ἔδοξε is found in other formal prefaces, including ‘professional’ ones (for example, in Galen’s medical and philosophical works).\(^{30}\) But the fact that Luke’s Preface and other formal prefaces share features with Greek decrees does not exclude an active decree colouring in Luke. The other formal prefaces may also possess decree colouring, and the pattern is more fully exemplified in Luke.

Again, there are elements that complicate the decree pattern. Greek decrees’ preambular clauses do not properly begin with ἐπείδη περ: paradoxically, however, that highly emphatic form highlights ἐπείδη as the first element of the text, thus alerting readers to a parallel with the Greek decree’s preambular clause, especially as ‘bureaucratic’ -περ suffixes are common in Greek decrees. Within a Greek decree, it is also highly unusual for the impersonal ‘it seemed good’ to be followed by a singular person, as if of a people or a constitutional body, or by a first person, whether singular or plural, with similar implication. The usage, however, occurs. Thus a decree of Mausolus of Caria begins: ‘it seemed good to Mausolus and Artemisia’ (his sister/wife), and then switches to singulars of Mausolus alone,\(^{31}\) and one of Augustus to the Asian Jews begins: ‘it seemed good to me and my council’ (Josephus Ant. 16.163). The singular is evidently the usage of ‘lingly’ figures. The Apostolic Decree also uses the first person plural. In the Preface it is, naturally, also relevant that the decree format is being adapted to the characteristic first person singular of writers of prefaces. Similarly, Greek decrees do not say: ‘it seemed good to “x” also’, but ‘also’ is explained by the fact that the decree format is being combined with the ‘many have written, so I also’ literary format.

Another marked difference from the decree is the omission of author’s name, city or other identifying information. Partly, this is, doubtless, a ‘modest’ pose, shared with the other Evangelists, as well as with many ‘scientific’ writers,\(^{32}\) and it minimises distraction from the subject matter. But Luke’s work cannot

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29 Alexander, Preface, 75, 136.
31 Rhodes and Osborne, Inscriptions, 263–4 (no. 55).
32 Alexander, Preface, 106 and n. 5.
have been formally anonymous: the first persons would be left hanging; his name must have been inscribed on the \textit{titulus} attached to the physical book.\footnote{Pace A.J. Droge, ‘Did "Luke" Write Anonymously? Lingering at the Threshold’, \textit{Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie} (ed. J. Frey, C. K. Rothschild and J. Schröter; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2009) 495–518; arguments for original titles and names (M. Hengel, \textit{The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin} [London: SCM, 2000] 48–56; Bauckham, \textit{Eyewitnesses}, 300) are particularly strong for Luke, which does not initially claim to be a Gospel, though of course it is \textit{also} one.} The substitution of a first person for people or constitutional body is itself thoroughly ‘immodest’, and in other respects the Preface (as we shall see) makes strong claims for Luke \textit{qua} historiographer. Moreover, omission of one’s name within a Preface \textit{can} be paralleled in Classical historians (Xenophon, Sallust, Livy, Arrian, \textit{et al.}), even among those who evoke decree language.\footnote{Cf. e.g. Arrian \textit{Anabasis} 1.1.2.5, with J. Moles, ‘The Interpretation of the “Second Preface” in Arrian’s \textit{Anabasis}’, \textit{JHS} 105 (1985) 162–8 at 167; Livy \textit{Praef.} 1, with J. Moles, ‘Livy’s Preface’, \textit{PCPS} 39 (1993) 141–68 at 141, reprinted in J. D. Chaplin and C. S. Kraus, eds., \textit{Livy} (Oxford Readings in Classical Studies; Oxford/New York: Clarendon, 2009) 49–87 at 51; generally: J. Marincola, \textit{Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography} (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997) 271–5.} The effect is slightly more complex is the inserted clause, ‘just as those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and servants of the word gave them on to us’ (2). There are ‘scientific’ parallels for its form and content.\footnote{E.g. Thucydides \textit{History and Historicism} (ed. S. J. Harrison; Oxford: Clarendon, 2001) 195–219 at 208; on historiographical ‘tradition’ see Marincola, \textit{Authority}, 3–11, 103.} The notion of ‘giving on’ is also ‘school’ terminology,\footnote{E.g. Josephus \textit{Apion} 1.8; note also the insistent \textit{παρά-}compounds of Thucydides 1.21–22, with J. Moles, ‘A False Dilemma: Thucydides’ History and Historicism’, \textit{Texts, Ideas, and the Classics} (ed. S. J. Harrison; Oxford: Clarendon, 2001) 195–219 at 208; on historiographical ‘tradition’ see Marincola, \textit{Authority}, 3–11, 103.} suitable both for a ‘scientific’ claim and for the representation (relevant, as we shall see) of Christianity as being like a philosophical school. But, beyond the fact that ‘scientific’ colouring can be subsumed within historiography, ‘as’ clauses epexegetic of the basic historical theme, announced in the first clause as the direct object of an initial verb of writing, are well paralleled in historiographical prefaces,\footnote{E.g. Thucydides the Athenian \textit{Introduction} (relevant, as we shall see) of Christianity as being like a philosophical school. But, beyond the fact that ‘scientific’ colouring can be subsumed within historiography, ‘as’ clauses epexegetic of the basic historical theme, announced in the first clause as the direct object of an initial verb of writing, are well paralleled in historiographical prefaces.} as is the notion of ‘handing on’.\footnote{Alexander, \textit{Preface}, 117–18, 124.} Luke, \textit{qua} historian non-contemporary at least with the beginnings of his narrative,\footnote{Alexander, \textit{Preface}, 82–5, 118.}
needs to appeal both to original eyewitnesses and to reliable tradition. Alexander’s denial that ἀνυπότακτον is historiographical⁴⁰ is vulnerable both to simple logic—in so densely economical a passage, what single word could better convey historiographical emphasis on eyewitness testimony?⁴¹—and to the directly relevant examples of Herodotus (five times, both of himself and of figures within the text performing the historian’s role),⁴² Polybius (3.4.13: Polybius himself) and Josephus (C. Apion 1.55: Josephus himself, imitating Polybius).⁴³ But ‘just as’ phrases or clauses are also common in Greek decrees, for obvious illustrative or justificatory reasons,⁴⁴ so the clause is compatible with the decree format.

There are also positive parallels in the narrative. Acts 15.24–29, which imitates the Greek decree, objectively parallels Luke 1.1–4. Some early copyists evidently thought the parallel significant, because to Luke 1.3 ‘it seemed good to me’ they appended ‘and to the Holy Spirit’, following Acts 15.28 ‘it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’.

Another parallel comes at the beginning of the Jesus narrative (Luke 2.1), where the birth of Jesus is synchronised with a ‘decree (δογμα)’ of Caesar Augustus that all the inhabited world should be written out in a list (ἐπιγράφεσθαι τόπται). Both these parallels I discuss below.

There is another, very important, ‘external’, factor. ‘Decree’ language is intrinsic to the earliest Classical historiography: Hecataeus, Herodotus and Thucydides all image their Histories as ‘inscriptions’ or ‘monuments’. The tradition is maintained by Polybius, Dionysius, Arrian and Appian, by the Jewish Josephus, Luke’s contemporary,⁴⁵ and by the Roman Livy and Augustus.⁴⁶ Such historiographical ‘decrees’ can include the clause ‘it seemed good to me’.⁴⁷ Of course, the epigraphic pose is found in other genres,⁴⁸ and there is also the general comparison of literary works to various prestigious physical objects: Pindar’s odes a

⁴⁰ Alexander, Preface, 120–3.
⁴¹ Generally: Marincola, Authority, 63–86.
⁴² 2.29.1 (Herodotus himself); 3.11.5.2 (no eyewitness); 4.16.1 (no eyewitness); 8.79.4 (Aristides); 8.80.1 (Aristides).
⁴⁶ Respectively, pp. 478 and 472 below.
⁴⁷ E.g. Dionysius Ant. Rom. 1.6.3; note Thucydides’ elaborate ‘playing’ with the formula: 1.22.1–2.
'treasury' (*Pyth. 6.6*), Horace’s ‘a monument’ (*C. 3.30*). But the comparison of historiography to inscriptions or monuments seems to have begun independently and to retain independent value. The tradition comports a strong competitive element, with each successive historian implying: ‘my inscription supersedes my predecessors’ inscriptions’, or ‘this (my History) is the one possession you readers need’.

An allusion to the Greek decree is, therefore, supported by a combination of factors: the close parallels between the Preface and the decree; the close parallels between the Preface and decree contexts in the narrative; and the fact that Luke is writing Greek historiography, which characteristically exploits the analogy.

3. Implications of the Decree Format

Some of the implications are straightforward. Although Luke’s knowledge of the decree format could theoretically be book-derived, for example, from the many antiquarian collections of decrees, it seems likelier that in this, as generally, he is well informed about the Realien of Hellenistic cities. He knows too about the inscriptional inheritance of Greek historiography, and referencing it strengthens his own work’s historiographical character. Imitation of the Greek decree implies the same sort of general claims as in the Classical historians mentioned: concrete memorialisation; formal weightiness; the ‘authority’ of this ‘author’ (= ‘I am the authority here’); the public nature, availability, utility, durability and ‘monumentality’ of this work, parallel to, but exceeding, those of public decrees published on fixed and perishable media such as bronze or stone. Like those Classical historians, Luke hereby targets as wide a ‘public’ as possible. We should immediately applaud his skill in weaving the decree format into the many-stranded fabric of his Preface.

Other implications are more organic, though space restricts treatment.

4. The Christian politeia

Luke’s use of the decree format immediately implies that Christianity is a politeia (fruitful focus of recent Acts scholarship), in parallel and contrast both with the Jewish politeia and—through the address to ‘the most powerful

51 Josephus *Ant.* 1.2, etc.
Theophilos’—with the *politeia* of the Roman Empire. This suggestion becomes explicit in the Apostolic Decree sequence. When Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to defend their Gentile mission and Pharisee opponents speak for circumcision and the Mosaic law, ‘the apostles and the elders gathered together to “see about this speech”’ (Acts 15.6): the phraseology echoes the Roman judicial formula *videre de.*52 James, leader of the Jerusalem church, makes a formal ‘judgment’ (κρίνω, 19). Then (22), ‘it seemed good to the apostles and the elders’ to send messengers to Antioch, whereupon (24–29) they issue their δόγμα to the Gentile Christians. They are acting as an independent *politeia,* thereby giving concrete substance to the Preface’s implication.

This same sequence illuminates another aspect of Christianity qua *politeia.* The Pharisees are described as a σφεστις (~ ‘philosophical sect’),53 the debate about their ‘doctrine’ involves ‘enquiry’ (15.7, ζητήσεως);54 Paul and Barnabas are ‘our beloveds’ (15.25, ἄγαπητοις)—the notion of ‘beloved’ disciples, very common in the NT epistles,55 being one found in ‘school’ contexts;56 and the Apostolic Decree enjoins only ‘these necessary things’ (15.28).57 As elsewhere in Acts (and in Luke), Christianity is being strongly likened to a philosophical school. Thus the Preface qua decree again has an important proleptic function.58

Hence, too, another aspect of the ‘decree’ of Acts 15.24–29: *qua* the δόγμα of a *politeia* which corresponds to a philosophical *politeia,* it corresponds also to a philosophical δόγμα/’doctrine’ (which can, as here, regulate food and sex). Although the term in Greek and Roman philosophy is often colourless, δόγμα can mark a philosophical community as a *politeia.* Epicurus divides δόγμα into ‘one’s own’ (οικεία) and ‘other people’s’ (ἄλλοτρια), terms applicable to one’s ‘native’ country and ‘foreign’ countries,59 and characterises appropriation of ‘other people’s’ δόγμα as ‘colonisation’ (ἐποικίζειν).60 The philosophical biographer Diogenes Laertius (3.51) elucidates: ‘to dogmatise is precisely to lay down *dogmata* as to legislate is to lay down laws’.61 Again, then, the representation in Acts 15.22–29 of Christianity as a quasi-philosophical *politeia* which issues δόγμα is anticipated in the Preface.

54 LSJ s.v. 3.
56 Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses,* 397, 401.
57 LSJ s.v. ἄναγκας II.2.
58 Further p. 476 below.
59 LSJ s.v. οἰκείος s.v. ἄλλοτριος.
60 Epicurus, *Deperd. lib.* fr. 29.28.5–6, 11–12; fr. 29.30.16; fr. 30.31.1; fr. 31.2.4–6; fr. 36.10.3.
61 Similarly, Cicero *Ac. pr.* 2.27.
5. Luke himself as Legislator

If the status of Christianity as a politeia inevitably raises questions about its relationship to other politeiai, these are sharpened by Luke’s own role as legislator: what of the powers within his narrative that legislate literally? Large and topical question: are such analogies between Christianity and the Roman Empire and the latter’s representatives oppositional or accommodationist, sometimes one, sometimes the other, or—even—both (initial accommodation subserving an eschatological perspective that is necessarily oppositional)?


Strikingly, the Jesus narrative itself begins with a ‘decree’ of Caesar Augustus that ‘all the inhabited world should be written out in a list’: the thematic parallel between 1.1–4 (Preface) and 2.1–5 (narrative) is reinforced architecturally. In Augustus’s alleged decree, there is, undeniably, huge divergence from historical fact, whether this is analysed as simple error or (better) as creative rewriting (many Classicists so analyse similar cases in Classical historians and biographers).

Qua ‘legislators’, Augustus, Roman emperor, and Luke, historian, are implicitly in contrast (on which level, Luke’s ‘it seemed good to me’ is hugely assertive). Augustus’s decree represents the Roman claim to world power at its most extreme. Seemingly subject to that power is the holy family, which has to be ‘written out in a list’ (2.1–5). But the angel Gabriel has just proclaimed that Jesus’ ‘kingdom’ will be ‘without end’ (1.33), Mary’s Magnificat that God has ‘dragged dynasts down from their thrones and exalted the lowly’ (1.52). Jesus’ advent overturns worldly powers. Luke’s ‘writing’ of the holy family surely also betters Augustus’s ‘writing out’. The relationship between the two decrees carries a message that, for any reader, though especially for such as ‘the most powerful Theophilos’, is implicitly oppositional: the Christian decree trumps

64 Precise treatment: S. R. Llewelyn, New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, vol. 6 (Marrickville: Macquarie University, 1992) 123–32.
the Roman one, world-wide though the latter claimed to be. Or rather it does for the already Christian reader: for the non-Christian reader—whether Jewish or Gentile—yet to be persuaded of Christianity’s truth, the effect is proleptic, and the narrative proves the case.

Consideration of the inspirations of Luke’s unhistorical world-wide Augustan census raises interesting perspectives. One inspiration is certainly, the census in Judaea in 6 CE under the governor of Syria, Quirinius, after the Romans had removed Herod’s son Archelaus and created their own province, which was the catalyst of Jewish revolt. The (probably) non-Jewish Luke hardly knew of this census through oral tradition: better a written source, either Josephus or a common source. But might Luke also have been inspired by another written source, a massive inscription, published in the name of Augustus, written by him in the first person, and entitled: ‘Of the deeds of the divine Augustus, by which he set the whole world under the power of the Roman people, and of the expenses which he made for the Republic and for the Roman people, incised on two bronze pillars, which are placed in Rome, an exemplar has been set underneath’?

The original Res Gestae stood before Augustus’s Mausoleum, which Luke, if companion of Paul, could have seen. Copies were made round the Empire; the three surviving come from Galatia, including Pisidian Antioch, traditionally Luke’s home city—certainly one he knows about.

Now why does Luke refer to the ‘decree of Caesar Augustus’, using the transliteration rather than Σεβαστός? R. L. B. Morris suggests avoidance of the Greek’s quasi-divine associations. But the very common transliteration ‘Augoustos’ has similar associations, as Luke’s readers would have known. Nor are these associations inert: Christians must reject Augustus’s ‘divinity’ in favour of the true divinity of God and Jesus. Further, Luke emphasises the sheer Roman-ness of the decree, an effect enhanced by mention of Quirinius, a quintessentially Roman name (∼ ‘Quirites’). Might ‘Augustus’, then, recall Augustus’s own wording in the Res Gestae? Intriguingly, the Greek version of that inscription omits the clause ‘by which he set the whole world under the power of the Roman people’.

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66 Another, probably, Ps 87.6: Green, Luke, 125 n. 19.
67 Acts 5.37; Josephus BJ 2.117–118; Ant. 18.1–5; Mason, Josephus, 274.
70 Phil 24; Col 4.14; 2 Tim 4.11; Acts 28.16, etc.
71 Eusebius HE 3.4.7; Jerome De vir. ill. 7.
Further, the Res Gestae, as the title proclaims, is a work of historiography, and contains specific generic markers of Greek (and Roman) historiography.\(^\text{74}\)

Piquantly, then, whereas Luke presents his Greek historiographical work as an inscription, Augustus presents his inscription as a work of Greek historiography. Both, too, are ‘exemplary’ historiography. Luke–Acts’ ‘exemplary’ character is obvious,\(^\text{75}\) and the Latin ‘exemplar’ connotes both ‘copy’ and ‘moral exemplar’ (an important ‘internal’ theme). Another parallel intrigues. In his Preface Herodotus ‘equates’ his theme of ‘deeds demonstrated’ (Ἐργα ... ἀποδεξθέντα) with his work, which is a ‘demonstration’ (ἀποδεξία). Augustus’s Preface imitates this by the repeated ‘set under(neath)’ (‘subiecit’/‘subiectum’). Luke’s does too. Theophilos has already heard (oral) λόγοι about the λόγος: ‘words’\(^\text{76}\) about ‘the word’; now Luke’s written λόγος, his ‘first logos’ (Acts 1.1), gives a more authoritative version about/of the λόγος. Luke’s Herodotean imitation, missed by NT scholars, is triply pointed, λόγος itself being Herodotus’s own term for ‘historiographical account’ (e.g. 1.95.1).\(^\text{77}\) There are other possible parallels and contrasts between Luke and Augustus.\(^\text{78}\)

Given this series of objective parallels between Luke’s and Augustus’s historiographical works and given also that Luke 2.1–5 makes a parallel between Augustus’s decree and Luke’s prefatory ‘decree’, I suggest that Luke’s substantially invented ‘decree of Caesar Augustus that all the inhabited world should be written out in a list’ recalls ‘the deeds of the divine Augustus, by which he set the whole world under the power of the Roman people’, ‘recalls’ meaning both ‘Luke himself remembers’ and ‘he wants (some of) his readers to remember’. The very name ‘Luke’ is a Hellenisation of some Roman name,\(^\text{79}\) and indicates familial Romanitas. From a Christian perspective, however, the ‘examples’ of Luke–Acts (Jesus, Peter, John, Stephen, Paul, Barnabas, et al.) far surpass Augustus’s. And not only does Luke’s ‘decree’ surpass Augustus’s, but Luke’s inscriptional Greek historiography surpasses Augustus’s Greek historiographical inscription, and Luke’s Herodotean imitation also surpasses Augustus’s (by a


\(^\text{75}\) E.g. Acts 26.29 (Paul to Agrippa and company).

\(^\text{76}\) The point disappears in RSV’s ‘things’; κατηχέω — orality: LSJ s.v.; Alexander, Preface, 139, 141.

\(^\text{77}\) Even quadruply pointed, for Herodotus’s text is also a ‘road’, just as Luke–Acts is a ‘leading through’ the ‘road of Christianity’ (p. 476).

\(^\text{78}\) E.g. common imitation of/rivalry with Livy’s ‘exemplary’ History: for Augustus – Livy see especially T. J. Luce, ‘Livy, Augustus, and the Forum Augustum’, Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and his Principate (ed. K. A. Raaflaub and M. Toher; Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of Berkeley, 1990) 123–38; note also ‘placed’/‘exemplar’ (RG Praef.) — ‘placed’/‘example’ (Livy Praef. 10); for Luke – Livy see p. 479 below; for another possibility see p. 481 below.

factor of four to one!). Classical historians’ customary implication that their ‘inscriptional’ historiography surpasses physical inscriptions here acquires new dimensions that are both ingenious and packed with meaning. No alert ‘Classical’ reader could fail to be impressed—and challenged. Augustus’s narrative, even theological, role as (inadvertent) facilitator of God’s plan⁸⁰ cannot erase these systematic negatives.

7. Christian Appropriations and Redefinitions

Many commentators find the relationship between Preface and narrative problematic, on the ground that the Preface advertises a work of Classical or Hellenistic historiography, whereas the narrative is held to assume a distinctively Jewish tone and perspective.⁸¹ This ‘problem’ disappears if one thinks in terms of Christian appropriation and redefinition: what matters is not the Roman politeia but the Christian, not the Greek philosophical politeia but the Christian philosophical politeia, not Augustus’s decree, but Luke’s Christian decree. The process of redefinition is organic and thoroughgoing and it begins in the Preface itself. The Preface in many respects looks extremely Classical, and Classical historiography is characteristically concerned with what is ‘great’,⁸² a notion glossed by the phrase ‘the things brought to fulfilment’ (1) and consistent with the decree format, Greek decrees often being honorific. A Classical reader might recall Polybius’s concern with the ‘end’ of his work as co-terminous with the ‘completion’ of Roman power (3.1.5–3.4.1; cf. Polybius’s use of ἀὐτόπτης and his programmatic emphasis on ‘beginnings’ and ‘ endings’).⁸³

But already there are elements suggestive of other perspectives: the Jewish/Christian religious emphases implicit in that same phrase ‘the things brought to fulfilment’ and in ‘servants of the word’; the un-Attic form καθώς;⁸⁴ the address to the theophoric ‘Theophilos’; the Preface’s sheer ‘smallness’ by comparison with Classical historiographical prefaces, which are characteristically long and elaborate.⁸⁵ Then in the narrative, while elements congenial to Classical or Hellenistic taste continue all the way through,⁸⁶ the Classical reader (particularly the Gentile reader) progressively grasps that this Jewish-Christian perspective, which seems small and provincial, that of a mere

⁸¹ E.g. Cadbury, ‘Commentary’, 490.
⁸² Herodotus Praef.; Thucydides 1.1.1–2, etc.
⁸³ Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 121–2.
⁸⁴ So Phrynichus.
⁸⁵ Alexander, Preface, 103.
⁸⁶ Thus, of the immediate narrative, rightly, L. T. Johnson, The Gospel of Luke (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991) 38: ‘the prophecy of Jesus’ birth would have made excellent sense to any Hellenistic reader'.
'corner' of the world, actually extends both to the end of the earth and to the end of time (Acts 1.8), and is therefore the greatest of all possible historical themes, indeed, a very special, Christian, kind of universal history. It is not therefore accidental that the 'hero' of most of Acts is a 'Mr Little', nor that this 'Mr Little' ends up in Rome, nor that the whole text should be 'small'. Thus the Preface has a sort of proleptic bridging function, Luke’s physically ‘small’ ‘decree’ ‘pre-scribing’ the supreme greatness of the seemingly ‘small’ Jewish-Christian perspective on the world. This interpretation seems implicit in Chrysostom’s gloss on Acts 26.26 ‘not in a corner’ (Hom. 52.4): ‘the doctrine/decree [δόγμα] has been made everywhere in the inhabited world’. That gloss also connects Luke’s ‘decree’ and Augustus’s.

It is true that the move from ‘big’ to ‘small’ and the paradoxical revaluation of the latter can be found in Classical history-writing, both in historiography proper (especially Herodotus, but also Xenophon and Tacitus) and biography, and in the Socratic writings that influenced some of that history-writing (as indeed they influenced Luke himself). But Luke uses that move to delineate a shift from the very notion of ‘the Classical’ to the Jewish-Christian.

8. The Multiple Implications of the Final Clause

Cadbury and Alexander give useful analyses of the final clause (1.4): ἵνα ἐπιγνώς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγον τὴν ἀσφάλειαν. But its full complexities, which are greatly intensified by the decree format, have not generally been appreciated.

9. General Implications

Certainly, ‘know the truth’ is part of the meaning. There are good parallels in Acts and elsewhere, the sentiment is standard in historiography, as in


88 See my ‘Time and Space Travel’.


90 Herodotus 1.5.3–4; Xenophon Hell. 2.3.56; 7.2.1; Tacitus Ann. 4.32.1–2; J. Moles, ‘Cry Freedom: Tacitus Annals 4.32–35’, http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1998/moles.html; Nepos Praef., Pelop. 1.1; Plut. Alex. 1.1–2; Xenophon Sym. 1.1, etc.

91 Cadbury, ‘Commentary’, 508–10; Alexander, Preface, 137–41.

92 Acts 2.36; 25.26; 21.34; 22.30 (the latter two with the simple rather than the compound verb); P. Giss. 1.27 (cited by Cadbury, ‘Commentary’, 509).

93 Thucydides 1.22.4; Moles, ‘Truth’; Marincola, Authority, 160–2.
‘professional’ works. Here, however, there is a double implication, because ‘the truth’ is not merely ‘a true account of the events I have chosen to narrate’ (the usual historiographical claim) but ‘the Truth’: everything readers need to know about ‘life, death and the whole damn thing’. Grammatically, the περί phrase can function as a periphrasis for a genitive, and ‘I shall tell the truth of Christianity’ means both ‘I shall give a true account of Christianity’ and ‘I shall show that Christianity is true’ (genitive of definition).

Since κατηχέω is characteristically used of oral instruction, Luke is also contrasting oral and written teaching modes, and ἀσφάλεια can specify ‘truth validated by writing’. But ἀσφάλεια also falls within a vital image pattern ignored by commentators. The word literally means ‘security from falling’, can be applied to roads, and goes with διήγησιν (literally, ‘leading through’) and παρηκολουθήκοτι (‘having closely followed’) to create an organic ‘road imagery’ richly sustained in the narratives. Thus ἀσφάλεια conveys the ‘security’ or ‘safety’ that Theophilos or any reader derives from the truth both of the Christian narrative as related by Luke and of the True Christian Road which that narrative describes, prescribes and instantiates. Hence yet another vital link between Preface and narrative.

Furthermore, κατηχέω being a ‘school’ word, it is relevant both that ‘road imagery’ is common in Greek and Roman philosophical texts as well as Jewish/Christian ones and that various philosophical schools promised ἀσφάλεια. Hence ἀσφάλεια also fits the philosophical representation of Christianity. From this perspective, ‘know’ the ἀσφάλεια implies both ‘know as a fact’ and ‘experience as a reality’.

10. Looking at a Monument which Cannot Fall

I now consider how the decree imagery affects the final clause, which corresponds both to the secondary justification for the Greek decree and to

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94 Alexander, Preface, 137.
95 LSJ s.v. C.
96 See n. 76.
97 Cadbury, ‘Commentary’, 509; Alexander, Preface, 140.
98 E.g. Xenophon Hell. 5.4.51.
100 Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22. ‘Road’ better conveys the interaction with the organic ‘road’ imagery than the traditional translation ‘Way’.
101 LSJ s.v.
102 E.g. Plutarch De superst. 171e; Justin Martyr Dial. 8.1, cf. Lucian Men. 4; Mason, Josephus, 285; Dio Chrysostom Or. 4.8; M. Schofield, ‘Epicurean and Stoic Political Thought’, The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought (ed. C. Rowe and M. Schofield; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000) 435–56 at 437–42; for Stoics, cf. the Lat. constantia and Epictetus 2.13.7 (‘writing a security’ as an analogy for correct philosophical behaviour).
the ‘purpose’ element of Classical historiographical prefaces that imitate the decree.

Herodotus’s Preface begins:

Ἡροδότου Ἀλικαρνησσεύς ἱστορίης ἁπόδεξις ἢδε, ὡς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἔξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται μήτε ἑργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θαμαστὰ τὰ μὲν “Ελλησπ, τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἁποδεξθέντα ἀκλεα γένηται...

This is the demonstration of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, in order that neither should the things born from men become faded through time nor should great and wonderful deeds, some demonstrated by Greeks, some by barbarians, become without glory...

There is a strong visual directive (deictic ‘this’; ‘demonstration’; ‘not faded’) to a text imaged as an inscription or monument (deictic ‘this’; ‘not faded’; subsequent switch from third person to first 

Within his extended Preface (1.1.1–23.6), imitative of Herodotus’, Thucydides states his History’s purpose and function (22.4):

ὅσοι δὲ βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὕτης κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπων τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, ὥφελμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ ἁρκοῦντος ἔξειτι κτήμα τε ἐς ὁμαλλὸν ἤ ἀγάνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρήμα ἀκούειν ἕξυγκεῖται.

But it will be enough that as many as will wish to look at the clear truth both of the things that happened and of those which, in accordance with the human thing, are going to happen again sometime like these and near the present ones should judge it useful. It is set down together as a possession for always rather than as a competition piece for present hearing.

The phrase ‘will wish to look at’ echoes the Athenian inscriptiveal formula ‘for the person who wishes to look at’ [the inscription], and re-establishes the analogy, begun at 1.1.1, between History and inscriptions. The specificatory/restrictive ‘as many as’ recalls inscriptiveal terminology, as does the emphasis on perpetuity. Thucydides’ readers ‘look at’ his History as an imperishable inscription; their ‘looking’ involves a range of ‘sight’ processes, from quasi-literal ‘looking’ (as in ‘reading’, or in responding to Thucydides’ highly ‘visual’ narratives), to

104 Moles, ‘Inscriptional Inheritance’, 3–4, 8, 22 n. 5.
105 Examples in Harris, ‘Pheidippides’, 4.
106 Moles, ‘Inscriptional Inheritance’, 26 n. 32.
‘observation’, to (ideally) true ‘insight’.\textsuperscript{107} Thucydides’ ‘inscription’ variously supersedes Herodotus’s.

Livy states his History’s purpose and function, imitating Thucydides (\textit{inter multos alios}), but arguing a much more directly moralising—and implicitly, a superior—value for history (\textit{Praef. 10}):

\begin{quote}
hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in lustri posita monumento intueri: inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu, foedum exitu, quod vites.
\end{quote}

This is the thing that is most takingly healthy and fruitful in the getting to know of history: that you look upon the lessons of every kind of example placed on a conspicuous monument: from these you may take for yourself and for your own (e)state—the public state, what you should imitate; from these, disgusting in the undertaking, disgusting in the outcome, what you should avoid.

Livy figures Roman History in general and his History in particular as a great monument, with, as it were, moral inscriptions or prescriptions. This ‘monument’ will restore the Roman State, previously imaged (9) as a falling/slipping/collapsing building.\textsuperscript{108}

In the light, then, both of the general decree element of Luke’s Preface and of these passages, which incorporate a ‘decree element’, from the prefaces of three of the greatest of Luke’s historiographical predecessors and competitors, Luke’s phrase can also be understood as creating the image of looking at an imperishable inscription/monument/artefact which \textit{cannot fall}. \textit{ἐπιγιγνώσκω} often has a visual implication,\textsuperscript{109} and \textit{σφάλλω} and cognates, including passives and negative forms, can be applied to buildings or such, literally and metaphorically.\textsuperscript{110}

\section*{11. Direct Engagement with the Great Classical Historians?}

Might Luke even be \textit{intertexting} with Herodotus, Thucydides or Livy?

Luke’s Preface imitates Herodotus multiply in the ‘equation’ of theme and treatment. There are numerous other commonalities: use of \textit{λόγος} for ‘historical account’; characterisation of the theme as neuter ‘things’, followed by a middle/passive verb (Hdt. \textit{Praef.});\textsuperscript{111} concern with ‘beginnings’ (Herodotus 1.5.3); use of \textit{αὐτόπτωσι}; ‘road imagery’, including the idea of text as journey (Herodotus 1.5.3); claim to represent the Truth (Herodotus 1.5.4); and inversion of ‘big things’ and ‘small things’ (Herodotus 1.5.3–4). There is more than enough here to certify an

\begin{thebibliography}{11}
\item L. S. J. \textit{s.v.}, esp. II; similarly, the simplex: L. S. J. \textit{s.v.}.
\item E. G. L. (1966) \textit{σφάλλω} II; note Acts 5.23.
\item G. T. M. in Herodotus can effectively = ‘be done’: L. S. J. \textit{s.v.} L.2–3.
\end{thebibliography}
overall Herodotean colouring. But within the broad parallel of a visual inscription or monument there is no precise verbal parallel.

As for Thucydides, most discussions of Luke’s speeches adduce Thucydides 1.22; the Luke–Acts narrative contains a brilliant Thucydidean allusion;\(^{112}\) the Acts Preface plays (I believe) with Thucydidean categories, which favours a Thucydidean presence in the first Preface; and—beyond the broadly ‘inscriptional’ imagery—there are the following commonalities between Luke and Thucydides’ Preface: ‘equation’ of theme and treatment (Thucydides 1.1.1); epexegetic ὀς-clause (Thucydides 1.1.1); emphasis on eyewitness testimony (Thucydides 1.22.3); ‘it seemed to me’ formula (Thucydides 1.22.1–2); emphasis on completeness (Thucydides 1.22.1–2); emphasis on ἀκριβεῖα (Thucydides 1.22.2); emphasis on truth; claim to represent the Truth; notion that history consists of deeds and words (Thucydides 1.22.1–2); idea that the reader ‘looks’ at the historical work; visual element emphasised in two contexts: the testimony of the original eyewitnesses and the ‘visualness’ of the final text (Thucydides 1.22.3–4); contrast between the oral/aural and the written in favour of the latter; use of παρα-compounds; and concern with ‘beginnings’ (Thucydides 1.23.4). Also parallel, from Thucydides’ ‘second preface’ in Book 5, are: epexegetic ὀς-clause (5.26.1); ‘writing...in order’ (5.26.1); a series of events from beginning to end (5.26.4); and a direct relationship between ‘all’ of them and the historian, productive of ἀκριβεῖα (5.26.5). There is more than enough here to create a strong Thucydidean colour, which co-exists with, and enhances, the Herodotean. The double colouring immediately verifies Luke’s mastery of literary allusion. It also reinforces the agonistic character of the Preface.

With Livy, there are the following commonalities: ‘equation’ of theme and treatment (Livy Praef. 1); association of ‘knowing’ and ‘seeing’; cognate forms (ἐπιγνῶς ~ cognitio); commemoration of the Truth in its strongest form; direct second person singular addresses (a remarkable effect in Livy); and the notion of falling or not-falling. Imperial Greek writers’ use of Roman authors, formerly dismissed, is now topical in Classical scholarship. Luke himself dexterously ‘caps’ Virgil’s Aeneid.\(^{113}\)

Altogether, then, a ‘Classical’ reader would read ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περι ὧν καταχθῆς λόγον τὴν ἀκριβείᾳ as implying the superiority and greater importance of Luke’s ‘inscription’, theme, and ‘solution’ to those of the greatest Classical historians, especially Thucydides and Livy.

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The visual register immediately creates another implication: ‘recognise an obligation’, for, while Luke–Acts constantly proffers readers the choice of accepting or rejecting Jesus, there is never any doubt that acceptance is obligatory. As in Thucydides 1.22.4, readers must ‘want’—or be brought to want—the end product. Literary theorists regularly discuss the ‘contract’ between writers and readers. One such ‘contract’ is genre, characteristically pre-defined in prefaces, often thereafter re-negotiated (as is true of Luke’s Preface). But ‘contracts’ can be much simpler: ‘read this, get that’. Such ‘contracts’ are well conveyed in decree language, decrees characteristically commemorating agreements, alliances, etc. So, of our Classical historians, Thucydides 1.22.4, exploiting decree language, promises to those that ‘contract’ to read him with sufficient will contemplation and understanding of the Truth of human affairs: no mean reward. Livy’s Preface, also exploiting decree language, stresses that public-interested behaviour by his readers is also in their interest, and the common goal is the restoration of the collapsing Roman state: a noble and magnificent project and reward.

For his part, Luke promises proof of the truth of Christianity and of the consequent ‘safety’ of the Christian Road. What, precisely, is that ‘safety’? The security of the truth, of course, meaning, as we have seen, both that this truth is securely true and that it provides security. What, exactly, is that security? ἀσφάλεια can be used of physical safety; it is regular Greek for ‘safe conduct’, and in other contexts, including philosophical ones in Cynicism and Epicureanism, ‘road imagery’ implies this. But Luke–Acts scorns an apologetic alike so feeble and so implausible for contemporary Christians, reading Luke post-Pilate and post-Nero, and, on some datings, post-Domitian and post-Pliny. Rather, it glories in the deaths of Jesus, Stephen, Paul (proleptically) and others, and projects them as exemplary: precisely, examples that may have to be followed. But it repeatedly insists on the ‘proven’ Christian reward of ultimate resurrection. True, readers have to read the whole text through to understand this final claim of Christian ἀσφάλεια. But that only shows how the Preface’s decree imagery creates yet another organic link between Preface and narrative—and the most important link of all. In the last analysis, Christian ἀσφάλεια is underwritten by ἀνάστασις: the resurrection both of Jesus and of humankind: Christians cannot fall because they will stand up.

114 LSJ s.v. IV.2; note that this gives ἀσφάλειαν yet another image resonance (common in moral/theological contexts): a legal/financial one (LSJ s.v. 6), which makes a ‘ring’ with πεπληροϕορημένων, which can also be ‘legal/financial’ (LSJ s.v. I.2–3).
115 LSJ s.v. 2.
116 Luke 2.34; 14.14; 20.27, 33, 35, 36; 24.6–7, 34, 46; Acts 1.22; 2.31; 4.2, 33; 17.18, 32; 23.6, 8; 24.15, 21; 26.23, etc.
So also Luke’s Preface plays with the notions both of ‘up-ness’ (ἀνατάξασθαι / ἀνωθεν) and ‘down-ness’ (καθως / καθεξῆς / κατηχήθης); these concepts inform both time and space, and are worked through in the narratives. The ‘solution’, the transcendental signifier beyond both time and space, is again the ἀσφάλεια of ἀνάστασις.117

How would Classical readers contextualise this Christian ‘reward’? No Classical historiographical text, however great, and very few Gentile (or even Jewish) texts of any hue, can promise anything like as much. In particular, the Res Gestae is one of Luke’s historiographical competitors, and, by its very nature, its readers ‘look’ at it as an inscription. When they read its title, or Preface, they find that, like many Roman ‘inscriptions’ or ‘decrees’, the work celebrates the Romans’ ‘subjection’ (‘subiecit...subiectum’) of the whole world.118 But Luke’s readers learn that Luke is concerned both with down-ness and with ‘up-ness’, that his ‘decrees’ trumps Augustus’s, and that, while Augustus claims to have set the whole world under the power of the Roman people, with Jesus’ advent, God has ‘dragged dynasts down from their thrones and exalted the lowly’ (1.52). Whereas the Res Gestae celebrates the ‘subjection’ of the world, Luke–Acts celebrates the world’s ‘security from falling’ and its ‘up-standing’. No judgment of Roman imperialism could be more damning, no commendation of Christianity more liberating.

More admirably than Augustus, Livy seeks only to reverse the ‘fall’ of the Roman state. But Luke asserts the ἀσφάλεια of the Christian politeia as opposed to the Roman, thereby emphasising the latter’s fragility.119 And for a fifth-century Classical, by now Christian, reader, Luke anticipates Augustine’s De Civitate Dei by a good three hundred years.


Does the Preface imply that Luke’s History surpasses not only the great Classical Histories but also the works of Luke’s Christian predecessors? Christian anxiety from the Church Fathers onwards characteristically resists this

117 Further on these matters in my ‘Time and Space Travel’ and ‘Accommodation or Opposition?’.
118 Cf. the archetypal ‘Roman mission’ of Virgil Aen. 6.847–53: ‘you, Roman, remember to rule the peoples with power; your arts will be these: to impose the custom of peace, to spare the subjected and to war down the uppy’.
implication. True, Luke avoids the self-naming and bragging of many Classical historians, and ‘me also’ (3) formally implies equality with the ‘many’ (1). But competitiveness is intrinsic to the decree format; ‘many’ naturally implies Luke’s lateness in the sequence, which augments his competitiveness; ‘having closely followed all of them accurately from the top, to write them down for you in order’ (3) raises the bar within the Christian tradition; the ‘scientific’ patina (absent from other Gospels or—surely—from Q) reinforces the claim of objectivity and reliability; the unabashed decision-making is very rare in the Bible (though common in pagan writings) and explains the early copyists’ apologetic addition of ‘to the Holy Spirit’; and the massive, climactic assurance of ἀσφάλειαν (4) trumps the tentative, initial ἐπεχείρησαν (1). There is also a telling general factor: while previous Evangelists can certainly be regarded as writing in a broadly historical tradition, in formal terms they are writing Gospels or biographies. Luke’s Preface, however, co-opts them into ‘great’ Classical historiography, on which ground he is obviously their superior. Thus Luke’s self-presentation as a historian of Christianity poises perfectly between ‘I’m only one of many’ and ‘I’m the best’ (a characteristic scholarly stance, Christians not excepted). His ‘decree’ supersedes the ‘decrees’ of the other Christian narratives circulating, including Q (to the extent that it was narrative), Mark and other Gospels. So too does his superior ‘doctrine’: Luke would stoutly resist all modern depreciation of his theology.

14. Overall Qualities of the Preface

I have treated Luke’s Preface from only one aspect, although Luke’s writing is so intricate here that this one aspect intersects with many. But I hope to have said enough to establish this Preface as one of the greatest of all Classical historiographical prefaces: masterly in its brevity, compression, complexity, depth of implication and creative originality; in its aesthetic, literary, intellectual, political, philosophical and religious demands; and in its organic and multi-functional interactions with the narrative.