

Lectures for St. Luke's 200th **Fall Series 2020**



Was Luke There? **Searching for Luke in the “We” Sections**

The third in a series of talks about the Acts of the Apostles
V.K. McCarty

“Was Luke there?” This question pulses through the Acts of the Apostles, whenever Luke suddenly steps forward and appears to refer to himself in first-person plural, particularly during passages of excitement and heightened missionary zeal in his text. The question offers us the opportunity to review what we have learned about Luke from this series. “Lectures for St. Luke’s 200th” has explored all sorts of themes; but our abiding quest throughout these programs has been to search for Saint Luke, Patron Saint of the parish, in celebration of its bicentennial anniversary. What can we know about the Evangelist? Beginning with the Gospel of Luke last Spring and now in the Acts of the Apostles—does he reveal himself as an Evangelist?—indeed, he does.



Even though the references to Luke in Paul's Letters are sparse,¹ we have his own magisterial Gospel story about Jesus Christ; and then, over and above any other Gospel offering, Luke has provided us with an additional volume outlining the Birth Narrative of the Early Church in the Acts of the Apostles, which we have been exploring this season. Only once in Acts does Luke refer to himself as "I," but there he claims first-hand knowledge, describing himself as "equipped with information not acquired belatedly, but available at the time of the occurrences themselves," and therefore Luke is "trustworthy in what he is recording."²

From hearing his words, we know Saint Luke to be a sophisticated and faithful raconteur capable of fashioning Canticles worthy of the Old Testament ("[Anglican Canticles](#) in the Gospel of Luke"). We know from exploring both volumes of his work that the Evangelist Luke envisions the Body of Christ—the faithful arrayed before the presence of God—arranged in a complex architecture of elaborate pairings and progressions which echoes the Beauty of Creation ("[Luke's Vision of Mankind](#) in Pairs"). We know that Luke views the story of God's salvation plan through Jesus Christ to be peopled by men and women alike, which is a rather courageous stance for a very Early Christian writer. Included in his Gospel and in Acts are several significant female characters known in the memory of the Early Church; these are people whom we would never have met if not for Luke's inclusive vision.

As a result, we also see the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God ("[St. Mary in the Gospel](#) of Luke & in Art") pictured as an pious and inquisitive teenager (Lk. 1:26-38), choosing by her own human will to follow the plan of God and agreeing to embody the Word-made-flesh by bearing the

¹ "The information which they provide is fragmentary in the extreme and offers next to no information about the earliest period of the rise of Christianity." A.J.M. Wedderburn, "The 'We'-Passages in Acts: On the Horns of a Dilemma," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche* 93 (2002), pg. 78.

² Henry J. Cadbury, "'We' and 'I' Passages in Luke-Acts," *New Testament Studies* 3 (1956-1957), pg. 130.

Christ Child. Then, Luke shows us St. Mary the anxious mother of a teenage son, found to be loose in the great City of Jerusalem (Lk. 2:41-52). Later, she appears praying in Acts alongside the other Apostles waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (1:14), after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of her son; so, she is present throughout the long arc of his story. Furthermore, we know that Luke the Evangelist crafted a story of growing faith among believers in the Risen Lord which was driven by the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (“The Acts of the Apostles: [Luke’s Gospel of the Holy Spirit](#)”). Isn’t Luke an amazing writer!



In addition, we know from Luke’s choice of early episodes in the life of the Church that we are witnessing in the Acts of the Apostles a series of remarkable Evangelism events which unfolded in homes of the faithful as they welcomed believers to gather for fellowship and prayer and breaking bread in the name of Jesus Christ. The Early Church was in fact operating in the basic unit of house churches for several generations in its early development (“The Spirit of Jesus Alive in the [House Church](#)”).

St. Paul speaks of Luke as well; he calls him one of his “co-workers (*syneroi*).” (Philemon 24) It is hard to know if it is the same man, and yet some of Paul’s observations about Luke have nevertheless become part of the fabric of our knowledge about Luke and our love for him. In the Epistle to the Colossians (4:14), Paul calls him “the Beloved Physician” (*ho iatros ho agapetos*); and in 2 Timothy, he cries out in lonely frustration toward the end of his life, praising Luke for being the only one faithfully remaining with him: “Only Luke is with me.” (4:11). It is quite a portfolio of insightful details we have about Luke, if you look for them.

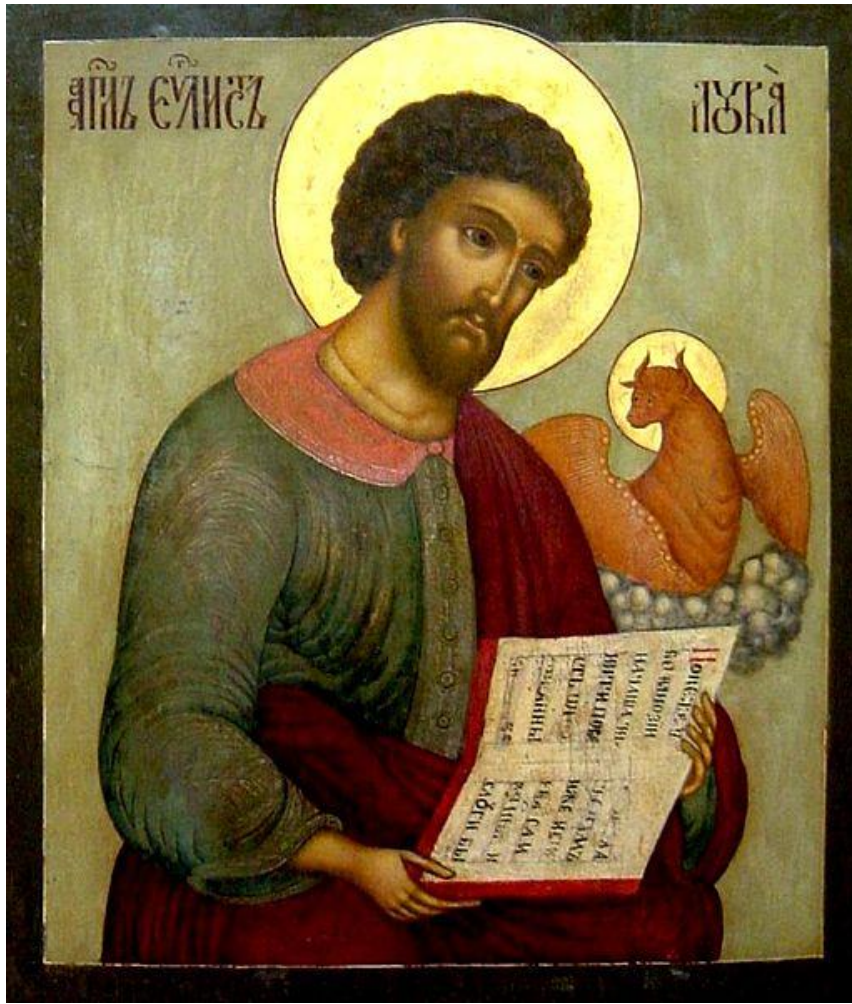
Added to that, four times in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke bursts into first-person, suddenly appearing to reveal himself in the picture among Paul’s missionary band, as it brings new believers to the Gospel of Christ. In his skillful hands, these “we” passages in Acts encourage you as a listener to heighten your experience of the Apostle Paul’s journeys by identifying personally with the narrator,³ so that you, too, become a traveling companion of Paul. They give you a sense of hearing directly from an insider,⁴ and therefore, they intensify the urgency of the spread of the Gospel.⁵ And of course, right from the beginning of both the Third Gospel and

³ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: The Fortress Press), 1990), vol. 2, pg. 247.

⁴ William Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts: Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), pg. 112.

⁵ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), pg. 230.

Acts, Luke endeavors to authenticate himself; for as “one of those among whom the events have been fulfilled, he is among those to whom the tradition has been handed down.”⁶



During the passages in the Acts of the Apostles which switch abruptly to first-person plural, we are able to experience with Paul and his missionaries (Acts 16:10-17) the startling evangelism scene of the purple fabric-dealer Lydia through the eyes of the “we” character. Indeed, Acts says Lydia is convinced by listening to “us,” although “the Lord opened her heart” as she was hearing the preaching of Paul himself. (16:14) We experience (20:5-15) scenes in Paul’s initial mission work in Greece, in details so intimate that we even glimpse someone fall asleep during one of his sermons and fall out of a window (20:9).

Ambitious travel plays a demanding role in the “we” sections, and we experience firsthand in Acts 21:1-18 much of the excitement and the delaying complications entailed in sailing toward Jerusalem. On the one hand, the sheer number of stopovers “we” endure trying to finally arrive at the Great City amplifies the “narrative urgency for Paul to reach his ultimate destination;”⁷ on the other hand, the farewell from the coast of Tyre is poignant to behold, since we are there, with entire families gathered on the beach, down on their knees praying for the safety of the missionaries on the rest of their dangerous voyage (Acts 21:5). And then, finally, “we” are heartily welcomed by the brethren of believers when finally arriving in Jerusalem (21:17).

⁶ William Sanger Campbell, *The “We” Passages in the Acts of the Apostles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), pg. 69.

⁷ Campbell, *“We” Passages*, pg. 76.



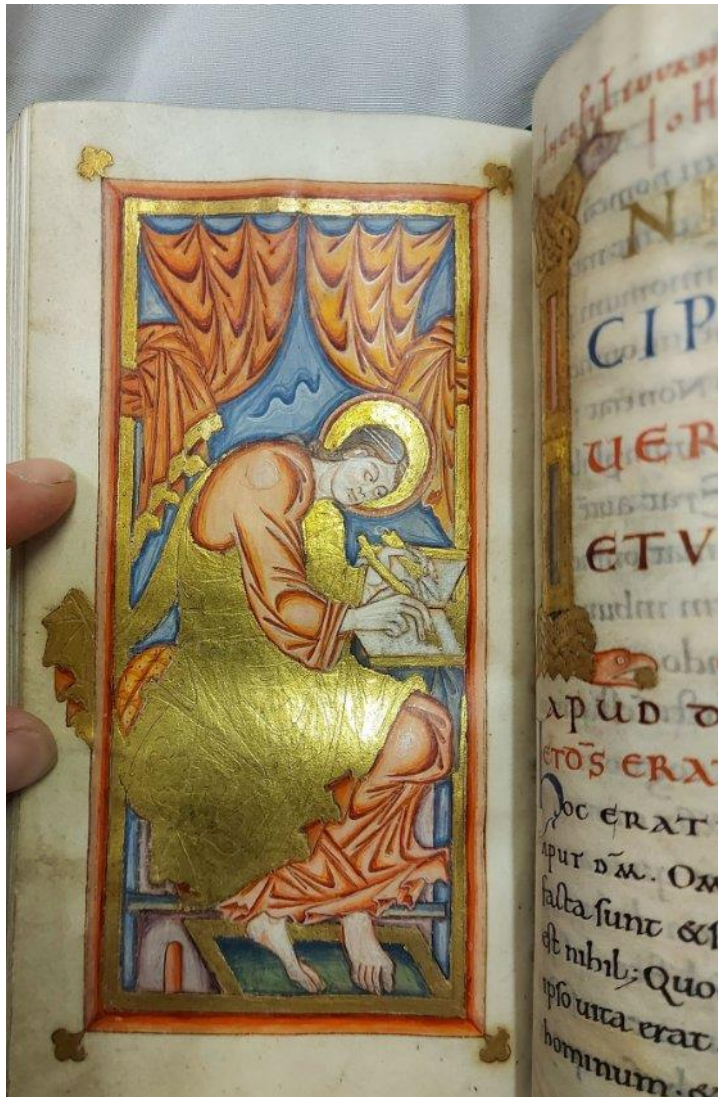
During Luke's last section using first-person, "we" are again at sea (Acts 27:1-28:16). "We" are there, part of the expedition unwisely endeavoring to sail for Rome. Luke writes with excellent maritime knowledge, but the passengers navigate dangerous winds under sail. "We" are forced off-course in an effort to avoid destruction, re-routing south again and again toward Crete in a helpless cat-and-mouse with the often-violent Winter weather in the Mediterranean.

In Luke's excellent writing, we are in the same boat with Paul, rhetorically, and Luke's story is so dramatically compelling that it is harrowing to even vicariously share the experience with him. Such high adventure abounds at sea that we are even onboard with the Apostle during the life-and-death struggle of a first-century shipwreck. The excitement and immediacy throughout this tumultuous scene "provide reassurance that Paul is carrying out God's directive as charged in spite of obstacles constructed by human characters or by nature."⁸

Like Luke's report of the assurance of the Lord at the Annunciation that "nothing will be impossible with God (Lk. 1:37), "we" are eventually saved by divine mercy working through St. Paul's nautical experience, and through his calm pastoral demeanor; and his prophetic and healing ability. In fact, Luke the Evangelist is such a master craftsman that the shipwreck of the Apostle and the near-shipwreck remembered from the stories of Jesus the Savior stilling the

⁸ Campbell, *"We" Passages*, pg. 90.

water (Lk. 8:22-25) back in the Gospel, begin to sound almost one and the same in his mighty portrait of Paul. And note that only in Luke among the Synoptics is Jesus named as the Savior (Lk. 2:11, Acts 5:31, 13:23). In the end, “we” make safe harbor in the Lord, with all the souls onboard were brought safely to land in the port of Malta (Acts 28:1). It is quite a saga, isn’t it?



So, was Luke there? Or are the “We” sections just a rhetorical device? Even with all the excitement, it is good to remember that there were literary conventions of writing at work in the Acts of the Apostles that the hearers of this book likely knew and easily discerned back then—but for us now, maybe not so much. Roman legal reports, for example, which were pieced together from submitted regional first-person accounts, often traditionally left in place the first-person. Furthermore, in Late Antiquity, there was a well-established genre of travel reportage, often about sea voyages, which was valued as a kind of adventure writing.⁹ It featured dangerous exploits of an exciting journey often highlighted by dangerous perils at sea.

This type of writing went back and forth between third and first person, rather in the same manner as news stories today, where we expect to

hear somebody authoritative quoted at the end of several paragraphs. So, did Luke include these sections incorporating first-person travel reports “because he himself believed that these passages actually stemmed from a companion of Paul?” Luke’s choice to include first-person plural elements certainly adds to the immediacy and the excellence of his writing, so that we as faithful readers become part of the action, even if it is difficult to know if Luke personally experienced the tumultuous episodes of shipwreck and startling conversion.¹⁰

⁹ See V.K. Robbins, “By Land and by Sea: The We-Passages and Ancient Sea Voyages,” in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, C.H. Talbot, ed. (Danville, VA: Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, 1978), pg. 224.

¹⁰ Wedderburn, “The ‘We’-Passages in Acts,” pg. 89.



Yet, it does appear, however, that “the use of ‘we’ is not random, but reflects the information handed down from one specific traveling companion of Paul’s,” and he might even have been, indeed, “a key figure in the author’s decision to write down this story.”¹¹ Whatever Luke is signifying by his sporadic use of first-person eyewitness source accounts, whether or not they were created by others, he was successful in captivating us with the excitement and intimacy of the moment each time he opened the window of personal participation in the scene. And the reliability of the Acts of the Apostles as a document is also enhanced each time one of its stories confirms Luke’s “eyewitness pedigree,”¹² adding to the integrity of the narration as a whole.

So, was Luke there? Yes. Yes, indeed. As the theologically educated

faithful of this community, Luke continues to exhort us—to exhort you.. We are charged by Luke to receive the Scripture he has provided in both documents, and to understand it with reverence for the expanding Gospel of Jesus Christ, and now with some depth of context. We cannot know with any certainty now what Luke meant by including sections in his mighty narrative of the Early Church with such life-and-death immediacy that they included him and us in the narrator’s point of view. But in fact, each time another reader shares the adventure of Paul’s missionary band with its death-defying excitement, they too come to embody again the life of the Early Church. Whether Luke was there remains a fascinating question and a continually dynamic element of his masterwork as an Evangelist.

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¹¹ Wedderburn, “The ‘We’-Passages in Acts,” pg. 97. See also Ernst Haenchen, “‘We’ in Acts and the Itinerary,” *Journal for Theology and the Church* 1 (1966), pp. 65-100.

¹² *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, pg. 753.

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V.K. McCarty teaches and writes on Ascetical Theology with special focus on Early Christian Women. She is a 2011 graduate *cum laude* of General Seminary, where she served as Acquisitions Librarian 2000-2015. Published work includes: "Encouragement from the Desert Mothers," *Public Orthodoxy* November 2020 (<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/12/04/encouragement-from-the-desert-mothers-in-troubling-times/>), "Admiring the Theotokos at her Dormition," *Public Orthodoxy* Aug 2020 (<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/08/14/admiring-the-theotokos/>), "Wisdom from the Desert for Spiritual Directors," *Presence: The Int'l Journal of Spiritual Direction* v.18, no.3; "Keeping His O's: The Great O Antiphons," in *Never Enough Singing: Essays in Honor of Seth Kasten* (Chicago: American Theological Library Association, 2011). For the Sophia Institute: "Beauty for the Rest of Us: Considering St. Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*," in *The Concept of Beauty in Patristic and Byzantine Theology* (2012). Her book, *Prominently Receptive to the Spirit: Lydia, Prisca, and Phoebe in the Ministry of Paul*, was serialized in *The Int'l Congregational Journal* 11:2 (2012), 13:1 (2014), 14:2 (2015). Her new book, *From Their Lips: Voices of Early Christian Women*, is forthcoming from Gorgias Press.

VKMcPax@gmail.com

<https://gts.academia.edu/VKMcCarty>