

# **JESUS' STENOGRAPHERS**

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# **JESUS' STENOGRAPHERS**

The Story of the Red Letters

**B.J.E. VAN NOORT**

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THE NETHERLANDS

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## PREFACE

I want to express my gratitude to the members of the high school governing board where I taught. They allowed me to speak freely about writing in Jesus' ministry and to incorporate instruction of the documentation theory into the curriculum for the higher grades. Because of that I was able to develop this approach of the gospels into a full theoretical concept.

With similar thanks am I indebted to the thousands of students who have followed my classes in the course of the years. Their attention to the issue, their questions and their natural acceptance of the documentation theory were real joys to experience as a teacher. In particular it convinced me of the relevance of the subject.

The fellows of the SEON - Society of Evangelical Old- and Newtestamentici in the Netherlands and Belgium - deserve especial thanks. Their penetrating questions and remarks were extremely valuable to consider the subject thoroughly and to develop the documentation theory in all its aspects.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Dean Baerwald whose enthusiasm, expertise and wise advice were extremely helpful in the preparation of the English translation and revision for the American language area.

In preparing this work I had in mind not only those who in some way made Christian work their profession: theologians, theological students, teachers in Christian communities, pastors and youth workers. I am convinced that many other mature Christians also feel the need for sound knowledge regarding the gospels. To make the documentation theory accessible to many people, I have thus tried to present a text that is readable by everyone. I have tried to express

theological ideas and complicated grammatical issues in everyday language where possible. On those occasions where I may have not succeeded sufficiently in meeting that goal, I apologize in advance. With the wish that many may be strengthened in their faith in the reliability of the Biblical words of Jesus Christ, and in the reliability of the New Testament as a whole, I dedicate this book to the readers.

The author

## INTRODUCTION

Once, as a child, I got a picture postcard showing the Eiffel Tower. With full attention I looked at the elegant lines of the construction and I was astonished that the entire building was set up with only metal elements. The photograph had been taken in a way that part of a tree was also visible in full flowering, pink blossoms. The entire picture, the tower, the blue sky and the pink tree made an unforgettable impression on me as a child. The splendid image on the postcard made me happy and it gave me the desire to go and see the Eiffel Tower myself at some time. Now, many years later I am thinking back to the experience I had as a child looking at the image on the postcard and all sorts of considerations are entering my mind.

Why did I believe that the Eiffel Tower really existed, just as represented on the picture postcard? On the back I saw a French postage stamp and a French postmark. It was clearly sent from Paris by my aunt; I recognized her handwriting. Why did I believe that the Eiffel Tower was real? I simply believed the people in my acquaintance who confirmed its existence. When I was grown-up, I could go to it. If I would make some effort, I could go and look for myself. That was sufficient. I believed it.

But imagine if, as an adult, I would arrive in Paris and not find the Eiffel Tower there. Yet nevertheless in shops all over the city I could see how postcards were sold with the picture of the tower to send to family and friends far away. What would be my reaction? In the beginning, I would be confused, but then I would become angry and shout: 'What a fake country, what a fake city and what a fake people! It's all fraud. They give their support to a myth concerning a

non-existing Eiffel Tower to make money and to deceive people young and old around the world. Bah! I hate this!

How would I react when a Parisian addressed me saying: ‘What is your problem? The Eiffel Tower doesn’t exist anymore. It is not necessary to have one for sending nice cards with pictures of it for people all around the world to enjoy, showing them the fine and elegant construction of it. In former days the tower did exist, but now it has passed. Why should it be necessary to have a really existing tower? Isn’t it a miracle that so many people enjoy the picture of it even though it is absent? It would be a mistake to not send those nice postcards all over the world and to withhold the beauty of it from the people, wouldn’t it? Isn’t it most interesting how human beings are able to enjoy such a beautiful construction that doesn’t any longer exist?’ I wonder how I would react to hearing a philosophy like that. Would I start to admire the Parisians as really creative people? Or would I, being furious, give him a slap in the face? Or would I shout desperately: ‘Are you mad, or am I?’

Fortunately my reverie is just a fairy tale. Normal people don’t act in that way ...; however, Christians do ...

Recently I bought a new English language Bible. It gave me a rich feeling to keep it in my hands: the soft leather cover, the gilt-edged pages and of course the red characters in the gospels, referring by their color to the sayings of Jesus Christ. A similar feeling came over me as when I, being a child, looked at the picture postcard of the Eiffel Tower and again many thoughts passed through my mind.

The Eiffel Tower does exist; you can go to it and look at it. But how is it with the red characters, the sayings of Jesus? Can I go somewhere to find the original sayings of Jesus? Okay, in my English Bible they have been translated into English from Greek. But when I open the Greek New Testament, am I then facing the original words of Jesus Christ? Can I find them by making some effort, as is possible with the Eiffel Tower for someone who wants to admire it? Everyone who visits Paris wants to see the tower and will not be disappointed, as the tower is there indeed.

But someone who makes the effort to enter theological science to come closer to the words of Jesus, will be very disappointed. Without a blush he/she will be told that the original words of Jesus don't exist anymore. That the gospel writers only wrote down what they thought he said; at best one will add to this that the Holy Spirit has ensured a correct *impression* of their description of Jesus and what he said. Strictly speaking, it is unacceptable in theology to quote sayings of Jesus as his own words. You are not allowed to think that Jesus' original words are still somewhere and can be found by making some effort. That goes too far.

But what about the red letter text, then? It refers to the words of Jesus, doesn't it? Okay, it is translated into English from the original Greek in the New Testament. The authors of the gospels constantly write: 'And Jesus said ...'. Didn't they quote him in all these instances? That is hardly understandable, isn't it? 'No', we hear theologians reply, 'there were no tape recorders or shorthand writers then'. And there the matter ends?

Usually one adds: 'When we are talking together we don't reproduce past dialogues exactly and still we don't accuse each other of lies, do we? E.g. somebody says: Yesterday I saw William and I said to him "Don't run on, William, you know that will bring misfortune." He doesn't pretend that he is reproducing exactly what he said to William yesterday and yet he is not lying, is he?' It sounds okay, but I get the funny feeling that something is wrong, but I don't know what. Why do they print those characters in red, if the real words of the Lord don't exist somewhere? I get the miserable feeling that something is happening as in the fairy tale of the Eiffel Tower: Thousands of picture postcards but no real Eiffel Tower.

In the year 1975 I started to work as a high school teacher in the field of Christian Religion, but at the end of the year I was disappointed and I wondered whether this should be my vocation. I had too little experience, I felt, to work with the youngsters. As a student I had worked hard, and right from behind the books I went in front of the classroom: a great change-over. In fact I had lack of everything. Materials were out-of-date and I lacked social skills. Moreover I had developed more questions concerning the Christian religion during my study time than an-

swers. What did I actually have that I could teach? Having reconsidered my situation, I nevertheless decided to make a fresh start in the year 1976 and I resolved to enter again into the books to seek for the answers I lacked. I had the feeling that my students were entitled to correct answers, especially concerning the authenticity of Jesus' words. In the same year (1976) that I had made up my mind, the book 'History, Criticism and Faith'<sup>1</sup> appeared from an evangelical point of view, with an article by R.T. France about the subject: *The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus*. Just recently I took note of the contents. The problems concerning the not existing words of Jesus Christ are exhaustively discussed in it. I quote:

*'What were the evangelists trying to do? Too often the conservative student of the Gospels assumes that the answer is that they were trying to reproduce verbatim exactly what Jesus said, a correct transcription of the ipsissima verba [his own words], a sort of first-century Hansard.*

*It does not take much thought to see that this cannot be right. To begin with, our Gospels are in Greek, and most scholars agree that Jesus normally spoke Aramaic. What we have, therefore, is a translation, and no translation can be exact. This is perhaps too obvious to be mentioned, but it is not always remembered in discussions about authenticity. Whatever we have in the Gospels, it cannot be the ipsissima verba Jesu [Jesus' own words], unless Jesus spoke in Greek.*

*But this is only the beginning. Where one evangelist draws his material from another, he is clearly not aiming to reproduce it exactly. In the majority of cases the wording is altered, sometimes slightly, often quite considerably. The order and grouping of the sayings also undergoes quite large-scale modification. And if the evangelists were prepared to treat sayings derived from one another with this degree of freedom, presumably they were no more literalistic in their treatment of material derived from other sources, oral or written. In short, and again the point is old and obvious, there is every sign of a considerable fluidity in the order and wording of the sayings of Jesus*

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1. Brown C. (ed.), 1976, p. 126-27.

*in the synoptic tradition. We seem further from the ipsissima verba [his own words] than the mere fact of translation demands.'*

This view can still be seen as the main one in evangelical theology. Other quotations are possible, but I don't know any author in the evangelical world who has so properly and honestly exposed the problems concerning the subject. For the sake of completeness it should be mentioned that the author stood up bravely in the essay for the substantive authenticity of Jesus' sayings in the gospels. His position is that *the intentions* of Jesus' teachings have remained entirely.<sup>2</sup> The question must be of course: Is that sufficient? One who sees a picture postcard of the Eiffel Tower knows that he has the possibility of observing the building by making the necessary effort, but according to the quoted theory it is impossible for the Christian to observe the real words of the Lord, whatever efforts he makes. What he will find is only a look-a-like, nothing more.

The quotation suggests that it is already an old problem, i. e. that we do not possess the authentic sayings of Jesus Christ. When I decided in 1976 to continue to teach the Christian religion to adolescents, I determined to reconsider this old and central problem in theology. I started with the first verses of the Gospel of Luke (1:1-4) which contain the basic ideas about the oldest Christian transmission.

At that time I got a catalogue in which older theological books were offered. I did not have much money and therefore I satisfied myself with the purchase of old but qualitatively good theological works. In the list I found a grammar by professor De Zwaan (1906) who had taught in Leiden long ago. I had heard the

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2. I.H. Marshall wrote in the same way about the work of the gospel writers: '... it must be recognized that the gospel writers told the story in such a way as to make clear its continuing relevance for their readers, and therefore they were not bound to reproduce what Jesus said absolutely word-by-word. It was the faithful reproduction of the meanings, not necessarily of the actual words, that mattered.' D.A. Carson a.o., 1994, p. 979.

anecdote that he had written the book when he was still a theology student; it was in fact a translation and revision of the English grammar *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* by E. De Witt Burton (1898). So my interest in the book of De Zwaan had been awakened. And indeed, by that I started to understand Greek verb forms for the first time in my life.

As my attention was focussed on the introduction of the Gospel of Luke, I applied my new grammatical knowledge on the verb forms of it, but the text became only more incomprehensible to me. How often I have turned the words of this Bible passage over in my mind, I don't know. To make it easier, I learned the Greek text by heart so that I could meditate on it at every moment. Slowly an entirely new reality started to unfold. This text spoke of writers, who followed Jesus. With the new insight into the meanings of the Greek verb forms the bits of the puzzle began to fall into the right places.

Having only one text with this content, and knowing: 'One witness is no witness,' I therefore went on searching for a second text with a similar message. That brought me to Hebrews 2:3-4. But two testimonies for an important theological subject are still insufficient. Finally I found a third text: 1 John 1:3-4. These three texts form together the scriptural basis for the documentation theory which says that writers followed Jesus to preserve his teachings in writing.

For my work with high school students, my discoveries had immediate impact. Instead of a weak and hesitating sound, conviction entered into my lessons. The words of the Lord do really exist. For human beings they form the point of contact with the higher (invisible) world as well as with the ordinary (visible) world. I could show my students what the Christian belief really is: Love God (invisible aspect) and your neighbour as yourself (visible aspect). This was no more information concerning Christian confessing or concerning spiritual thinking that asks for approval. With these tools the Christian is placed in society with the authority of Jesus himself. Moreover they can be practised and experienced immediately.

Gradually much research had to be done. My search required a deep breath

because of the mass of problems that arose. After some articles in Dutch theological periodicals, my first book about the subject appeared in 2004 (Dutch). The present book is a revised and enlarged version of it. Remarkably enough, the contents of it correspond very well to the essential subjects which are enumerated by R.T. France in the quotations:

1. '... a sort of first-century Hansard.' Was it usual in the Greco-Roman world to fix the spoken word? If so, how? (Chapter 1, 3 and 4)
2. '... unless Jesus spoke in Greek.' What was Jesus' language in which he taught the people? What are the facts about it? (Chapter 2)
3. '...the wording is altered, sometimes slightly, often quite considerably.' How is it to be explained that the gospel writers so often present differences in the spoken word in the same situations? (Chapter 5 and 7)
4. '...grouping of the sayings also undergoes quite large-scale modification.' How is it possible that so many sayings are scattered all over the gospels instead on corresponding places? (Chapter 8 and 9)
5. '...other sources, oral or written.' What were the sources of the gospel writers and how did they use them? (Chapter 5 and 6)
6. 'We seem further from the *ipsissima verba* [his own words] than the mere fact of translation demands.' It is impossible to reduce the questions concerning the gospels to only translation issues (to Greek - Chapter 7). The gospels form a central role in the entire New Testament, which can hardly be understood without a sound view on the gospels. (Chapter 10)

Many authors have written concerning the question of the transmission of Jesus' word. However valuable their contributions may be, in general they miss the essential aspect that Jesus' words still exist. For that reason I present the documentation theory, as described in this book, offering a proper place to every detail connected with this point of view. This theory makes clear that not only in faith, but also without intellectual concessions, the Biblical words of Jesus can be accepted without any hesitation.

May He who said: 'I am the Bread of Life,' connect his blessing unto it.

# 1

## **DARE TO READ YOUR BIBLE!**

In the history of Christianity there has always been the need to go back to the sources of the faith: Jesus and his words. Already in the earliest centuries of the church the question arose concerning how reliable the books about Jesus, the gospels, really are. To answer this question another one must be answered first, i.e.: How did the gospels come into being? The resolution of this major question has appeared to be difficult in the past. At the moment several theories exist about the origins of these books. But how decisive are they? Since all theories give different answers, many scholars are not convinced of the trustworthiness of the gospels.

In a modern transparent society it is necessary that Christians develop a clear vision of their origin. It is no longer appropriate to come up with obscure theories concerning the center of the Christian faith: Jesus and his words. We not only want to believe in him and his sayings, we also want an adequate theology to fully justify that faith. That means a journey to find the right answers; an expedition through texts which sometimes don't want to yield up their secrets spontaneously and sometimes also through refractory traditions of opinion; but always an exciting journey.

*1.1 Spectators of Jesus, the first generation*

Luke informs us specifically how he wrote his book 'The gospel of Luke'. He speaks clearly about that in the first sentences of his gospel; not somewhere at the back or in some mysterious (cryptic) way:

1. Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us,
2. just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,
3. it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,
4. that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

RSV<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:1-4

The explanation of the prologue is dominated by the term 'eyewitnesses and ministers of the word'. Since old times one has supposed that this referred to the apostles. Before Jesus' departure they were the eyewitnesses as his disciples and after Jesus' departure, as his apostles, they became the ministers of the word, preachers of the gospel. And so it is generally assumed that the prologue is in fact an introduction to two books: the history Luke–Acts. But this is less obvious than it seems.

A classical author writing a history in two books, would normally have used one title for the entire work, calling the two parts: Book 1 and Book 2 respectively. Moreover the books were always brought out together: Book 2 immediately followed Book 1. Comparing this with the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts,

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3. All scripture quotations are from the RSV, unless mentioned differently. The reason for choosing this translation is the literalness especially with regard to the double introductions of direct speech. (See chapter 7.1.)

we immediately see the differences. It is clear that the Gospel and Acts have two different titles, 'According to Luke' and, 'The Acts of the Apostles' respectively. There is no indication in the well-documented history of the New Testament books, that they ever had different names. In addition, these books were never delivered together as one historical work. We have to do here with two different works.

It is true that Acts was written as a sequel to the Gospel, (Luke refers to it in the introduction of Acts 1:1-2), but in writing the Gospel Luke did not intend from the outset to bring out two books. Consequently the prologue of Luke is to be taken as referring to the Gospel and not additionally to Acts. This insight makes it possible to determine some specific expressions of the prologue.

Luke says that many made 'narratives about the things which have been accomplished among us' and further that he did the same: he followed the example of the many (it seemed good to me also). As Luke is giving an introduction to his gospel, a story about the life of Jesus Christ, the meaning of this expression 'the things which have been accomplished among us' is limited to 'the events concerning Jesus from birth to resurrection and appearances'. Consequently the meaning of the word 'us' in 'the things which have been accomplished among us' is strictly limited to the bystanders of the events, the spectators of Jesus, the first generation. And Luke was certainly among them.

The expression 'the things which have been accomplished among us' contains more secrets. The word 'things' is too colorless as the deeds of Jesus are involved. The Greek uses the normal word 'pragma' that is: (a) that which has been done, a deed, an accomplished fact, event; b) what is doing or being accomplished (and so business, matter, affair)<sup>4</sup>.

Even more important is that the Greek perfect is used: 'events which *have been*

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4. J.H. Thayer, 1991. TDNT, 1993, VI p. 639 about pragma: 'Luke 1:1 calls the "events" that have taken place among us ...' And with references to Hebr.. 6:18 and 6:13,17 for: '... "things", more precisely "events", "happenings"...

*accomplished*. The Greek perfect refers to a so called 'resulting state'.<sup>5</sup> The events were of great impact and they were followed by moments of 'being accomplished' (resulting state): often a gathering of people who were surprised about what they had seen and heard; often with people among them being healed. There was joy, and of course they took time to talk together about what happened. That is the picture we get from the gospels when we think about a resulting state after the events described in them.

When a perfect participle is used the rule is: 'The time of the resulting state is usually that of the principal verb.'<sup>6</sup> The principal verb is here: 'have *undertaken to compile* a narrative'. So Luke states that in the situations after the events 'many had undertaken to compile (write) a narrative'.<sup>7</sup> The use of this perfect shows that documents were made during Jesus' ministry and that is very special information. Certainly Luke didn't make a flippant remark in the first sentence of his gospel.

There are more examples of this use of the Greek perfect participle plural<sup>8</sup>: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!' (Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34) The perfect participle plural is: 'those who

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5. B.M. Fanning, 1990, p. 291 (about the resulting state): 'This is the normal use and it is the most direct application of the threefold meaning of the perfect ...'. Quite late in history (from the third century onwards) the perfect tense suffered confusion with the aorist tense. 'But the question remains whether this aorist use of the perfect appears in the NT.' (p. 300) We think it is correct to take the 'normal use' of the perfect tense as starting point in our discussions.

6. E. De Witt Burton, 1955, p. 71.

7. 'To compile' is here 'to write' as can be seen from verse 3, where Luke says that with his writing activity he did, what the many had done before.

8. In most grammars the Greek perfect participle plural seems to be forgotten, but the rule seems to be that all members of the group (all components) have their own resulting state (distributive aspect). Whether it is about people or about things; each member or part of the group has the resulting state of being sent (Acts 11:11), sanctified (Acts 20:32), believing (Acts 21:20), each heaven (Acts 7:56) or door (Acts 16:27) is open.

are sent to you'. It is obvious that a series of prophets is not meant with a collective stoning of them all together at the end. No, everyone was stoned in his own state of being sent. That happened at several moments, one after another, because they had not been sent out at the same moment. In this case the verb 'to send' refers to several actions of sending and of course to several resulting states of being sent.<sup>9</sup>

### *1.2 Eyewitnesses and servants of the word*

Some people did not write after the events, but *many* did. Many made narratives about the wonderful works of Jesus. Having an insatiable appetite for news and hungry to hear about the great things that God was doing among them, they were used to copying reports. During the events, sometimes only a few people were present, but sometimes crowds surrounded Jesus. Often they felt as if time had come to a standstill and in that situation they took time to add a new report to the narrative they already possessed. And in this manner, many could compile a continuous account of the occurrences. This is the picture Luke shows in the first sentence of his gospel. But there is more.

The second part of the sentence is even more astonishing: '...just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word ...' (RSV). Let us first put this into the active form as it is in the original: '...just as they delivered to us, those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word ...' The term 'eyewitnesses' means: eyewitnesses of the events.<sup>10</sup> From the beginning of the events, eyewitnesses were present. It

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9. This grammatical construction is also found in Matthew 5:10: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted [perfect] for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' There are several actions of persecuting, (not at the same time) with several resulting states in which the blessing of the kingdom of heaven will be experienced. 'The kingdom of heaven' does not mean a final transition to heaven as is clear from the verses 11-12. See also Acts 5:41.

is said that the eyewitnesses delivered something unto 'us'. This 'us' is of course the same as in verse 1: the spectators of Jesus. This *us* is not in general 'the Christians', as is often suggested, but clearly the real hearers of Jesus Christ: the first generation.<sup>11</sup> So the eyewitnesses delivered a certain transmission to the spectators and many of them made use of it in the accomplished state of the events. Now the question is: What sort of transmission did the eyewitnesses exactly deliver to the bystanders? Was it an oral or a written transmission, or even a mix of them? Of course it was a written transmission, as it is untenable to suppose that the eyewitnesses were in the habit of telling afterwards what had happened to those who were also present. The spectators had already seen and heard that, as they had come to Jesus with no other purpose than to experience that with their own eyes and ears. No, the eyewitnesses provided a written transmission for those who were present at the events. We may speak therefore of *public records* made by the eyewitnesses. Many people made use of the public records as many had undertaken to compile a narrative (verse 1). They made accurate copies 'just as the eyewitnesses delivered' (verse 2). Sometimes there were a few copyists, sometimes there were a lot of them, altogether Luke speaks of 'many' (verse 1).

Luke tells us more about the eyewitnesses. They were also 'ministers of the word', or more accurately: ministers of the spoken word.<sup>12</sup> That is they were also ministers (servants) of the spoken word during the events. The eyewitnesses not

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10. It has been suggested often that Luke refers with 'ministers of the word' to the apostles who preached the word later on. However this 'ministry' of the apostles is not called *hupèretèma tou logou* (according to *hupèretès*, servant, Luke 1:2), but *diakonia tou logou* (according *diakonos*, servant, Acts 6:4).

11. We take for the beginning of the second generation the hearers of Peter, from Acts 2 and so on; for the beginning of the third generation the hearers of Paul, from Acts 13 and so on.

12. The Greek *logos* is in its first meaning 'spoken word' (*viva vox*): speech, saying, discourse etc. The second meaning in relation to 'mind': reason, ratio, cause etc. The first meaning is used in Luke 1:2.

only delivered what they had seen in their public records, *but also what they had heard*. That is the astonishing meaning of the first verses of Luke's gospel. The eyewitnesses were active as writers during the events in order to be able to deliver the spoken word. And after an event they had the task of composing a public record containing what they had seen and heard.

Later on Luke also made use of the public records in writing his gospel. He says in the third and fourth verse of his prologue that he followed the example of the many: 'it seemed good to me also ... to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus'. Luke dedicated his book to Theophilus and in doing so he followed accepted practice. Usually the person of dedication was a rich person who had financed the composing of the book. Theophilus and Luke had the same vision of collecting public records about Jesus and putting them together into a book. Of course Luke chose from the records that were appropriate for the purpose he had in mind, and copied them in his gospel 'just as' the eyewitnesses had delivered them. Luke's purpose was 'that you may know the truth of which you have been informed' (verse 4). The Greek is: *asphaleia*, that is: the trustworthiness, the firmness of which you have been informed.

The prologue of Luke tells us how documents were made during Jesus' ministry and that they were used later on as the materials for writing the gospels. Luke explains clearly that eyewitnesses not only recorded what happened but also what was said during the events. Many followers of Jesus already compiled narratives out of the public records that were also used by Luke later on. Let's give a question and answer summary.

Q. What things are meant in verse 1 of Luke's prologue?

A. The events concerning the public Life of Jesus Christ, from birth to resurrection.

Q. Who are meant by 'us' in 'the things which have been accomplished among us'?

A. The spectators of Jesus; the bystanders. This is the first generation.

Q. To whom did the eyewitnesses deliver public reports?

A. To 'us', the first generation.

## JESUS' STENOGRAPHERS

Q. When did they deliver them?

A. During the first generation; after Jesus' departure they could not possibly distinguish between Christians from the first and the latter generations. So they worked during the first generation itself.

Q. How did they deliver the public reports?

A. After an event, when it was accomplished; and the transmission was in writing.

Q. What was the content of the public reports?

A. What they had seen, as they were eyewitnesses of the events; and what they had heard, as they were also ministers of the spoken word of the events.

Q. Why did they deliver them?

A. To enable many people of the first generation to write accurate stories about Jesus, the Rabbi of Nazareth, while they were following him.

Q. Why does Luke refer to this?

A. He also used the public reports of the first generation when writing his gospel.

A thorough investigation of Luke's prologue offers us a totally new picture of the work of Jesus and the apostles. It is really astonishing that the New Testament gives us this information and it is also astonishing that we have never seen this earlier. How is that possible?

### *1.3 On the wrong foot*

It is strange that the first sentences of the gospel of Luke have been understood so poorly throughout history. Serious exegetical questions are raised by the traditional translation. The phrase 'things which have been accomplished among us' is traditionally explained as: there was a series of events with Jesus as the central person and after the events the apostles started to preach the gospel and even later they wrote down what they had preached for years.

The first problem related to this explanation is the question: What was the end of these events that was also the starting point for the many (Luke 1:1) to

begin their writing? The first possible answer may be: Many started to write after the last described event in the gospel of Luke: the resurrection of Christ. The problem that arises from this is that if true, then this writing had to be finished before Pentecost, because this was a major event in the history of the church, but it is absent in Luke's gospel. This view is of course impossible. There were not many people who wrote narratives about the life of Jesus in the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost. This was a silent period in which the apostles did not inform others about what had happened.

The quest for the end of the events can also take a different direction. Generally the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are often considered as one history, because Luke wrote the Acts as a sequel to his gospel. (Acts 1:1) Many exegetes reckon the occurrences that are described in Acts to the 'things which have been accomplished among us'. But in this case we have to face the question: How is it then possible that many started to write narratives at the time that Paul in Rome had been released from prison? (Acts 28:39) Why at that moment did that passion for writing rise among the Christians? Why at that late time, about the year 63 A.D.? Why did they not start writing decades earlier? Thirty years had passed since Jesus' resurrection and Christianity had gone through an exceptional growth, and suddenly 'many' started to write narratives? It is obvious that this view cannot be taken seriously and again we cannot find the answer to the question: What was the end of the 'things which have been accomplished among us' according to the traditional view? In this view it is easy to speak generally about 'later on when the apostles threatened to die out' or in other vague terms. But the moment one asks concrete questions about the supposed ending of the events, we are confronted with the continued absence of any serious reply.

Another unanswered question related to the traditional view is: How is it possible that Luke started to write a narrative just as many others had done already? He says that he worked like the many and therefore he did not mean that his predecessors produced inferior works. Usually commentators say that just as the many had the right to make a book about the revelation of Jesus Christ,

Luke also used that right. But that is not the point. It is strange that an author such as Luke started his gospel with the rather impossible statement that he wanted to write down what others had written earlier. What then could be the reason for Luke writing a new book instead of copying one of the many? Again, the answer is lacking.

The third unanswered question is: Why haven't we found copies of the many that have been written long ago? Of course there are all sorts of apocryphal gospels and those who take note of them have to admit that these books differ enormously in style and contents from the canonical gospels. If in the first century there were many narratives like our gospels, at least some, maybe partially, should have been kept, and remain today. But that is not the case.

These three unanswered questions show that the traditional translation of the prologue of Luke is not as logical as it seems. The earlier proposed translation does not wrestle with these mysterious problems. We translate in a general sense the phrase 'the events while being in accomplished state among us'. A working method is meant: again and again it happened that in the accomplished state of an event a report had been made by using notes that had been made during the event. The focus is on the situation after an event and there is no suggestion of a series of events with writing activities only at the end. This also makes clear that Luke did not repeat the work of the many, he *referred to their working method* saying that he followed them. Luke introduced himself as one of the many without any attempt to make the impression that he was equal to the apostles, the authoritative eyewitnesses.

### *1.4 Clerical or grammatical*

The traditional explanation of Luke 1:1 is based on a mistranslation of the verse that has stood for ages. What does one say about this? The Greek perfect not only refers to a completed action but also to an existing state after that. Well, of course the situation after the revelation of Jesus was the foundation of

the Church. In the Church many started to write and eventually Luke did the same. Ultimately a clerical translation became accepted. The ‘ministers of the word’ were, according to this clerical explanation, the apostles who preached about Jesus in the growing Church. What they told the people was written by ‘the many’, as one supposed and later on by Luke.<sup>13</sup> The possibility that Luke made use of documents in writing his gospel, has always been kept open by the investigators. Nowadays the theory is widely accepted among them that Luke used the gospel of Mark and an unknown gospel called Q (German: Quelle is source), the so called two-source theory. The fact has always been stressed that Luke worked as a serious historian who accurately collected his information from eyewitnesses, who became preachers later on.<sup>14</sup> And according to this view, one can not deny that Luke also made use of the so called oral tradition, the preaching of the apostles.<sup>15</sup>

How can it be that the clerical explanation could stand for so many ages? The first translation of the New Testament, in the first centuries of Christianity, was the Old Latin. And in this translation the Greek perfect had already been misunderstood, thus a wrong translation of Luke 1:1-4 entered into Latin, the dominant language of the Roman Empire. Later translations of the New Testament often became dependant on the Vulgate which was a revision of the Old Latin. The ancient Bible translators dealt with a serious problem. From the third century onwards the classical Greek perfect started to disappear; only a few fixed forms survived. From that time on there was not much chance that the first sentence of the gospel of Luke would be properly understood.

Origen (about 250 AD) tried to come to a better translation; he supposed the

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13. It is forgotten in this view that Matthew and John were also gospel writers. They did not belong to the many. They were according to this view eyewitnesses themselves, who became preachers later on. A serious contradiction of the traditional explanation of Luke 1:1-4.

14. I.H. Marshall, 1989, p. 40-42.

15. L. Morris, 1988, p. 32-33, 73.

existing state to be a conviction in the hearts of the believers.<sup>16</sup> William Tyndale followed Origen with: 'things which are surely known among us' and so did the King James Version: 'things which are most surely believed among us'. But this translation is too far from the simple word meaning 'accomplished events' and therefore Hieronymus (about 400 AD) in providing the Vulgate, had already rejected the solution of Origen.<sup>17</sup> The Vulgate became the standard of the Church for many centuries. It was generally seen as the inspired word of God and nobody dared to cast doubt upon it. And so a wrong translation of Luke 1:1 stood fixed in the hearts and minds of the people for more than a thousand years during the middle ages. In the time of the Reformation the Greek New Testament was rediscovered, nevertheless explanation and translation of the texts remained often fixed on the concepts of the Vulgate. Only in the nineteenth century did new insights into the character of the Greek verb and especially in the use of the Greek perfect come up.<sup>18</sup> And so a new interpretation of Luke 1:1 became possible.

There are other reasons that the clerical translation of Luke 1:1 had such an enduring history. The first sentence of Luke's gospel immediately starts with a very unusual perfect (peplèroforèménōn: while they were being in accomplished state) without any context. Certainly the first Christians did not have problems with the first sentence of Luke's gospel. As contemporaries of Luke, they were familiar with the living context of the first century in which Luke wrote. They knew how pupils learned to read and write in the Jewish land, and they knew about the writing activities of the apostles. Apostolic letters were often written down from their speech as we can learn from the content.<sup>19</sup> Also, from the book

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16. Origen, *Homilies* 1.

17. Vulgate: 'quae in nobis completae sunt rerum' (Luke 1:1)

18. J.H. Moulton, 1908, p. 140; speaking about the Greek perfect: '... the most important, exegetically, of all the Greek Tenses.'

19. Rom. 16:2 (Tertius); Paul remarks in some letters that he signed in his own handwriting: 1 Cor. 15:21, Gal. 6:11, Col. 4:18, 2 Thess. 3:17, 1 Peter 5:12 (Silvanus)

of Acts we may deduce that the apostles themselves made use of writers for their letters to spread their decisions.<sup>20</sup>

Later on in history, everything changed in the Jewish land. After the destruction of the Jewish land by the Romans during the wars against the Jews, (first in the years 66-70 and later in 132-135), nothing remained the same; Judea even became a province of Syria. The living context in which Jesus and the apostles had worked, was gone. The church fathers in later centuries no longer had knowledge about the circumstances of that period in Judea. They could not even imagine the high standards of knowledge and culture of that period through the prosperity of the Jews at that time. In later centuries, Jews were often abused in the Roman Empire whereas they were held in great respect in the time before the wars. The absence of the living context in which Jesus had worked and the disappearing of the Greek perfect from the third century onwards were no doubt the causes of the first sentence of the gospel of Luke being misunderstood by the church fathers. They were no longer able to recognize the few instances in the New Testament documents that deal with the writing of the spoken word during the events. Maybe they did not even take account of this possibility in consequence of the general contempt of the Jews in which they took part not infrequently.

From the above, we conclude: The clerical interpretation of Luke 1:1-4 has to wrestle with serious unanswered questions, while the grammatical interpretation leads to a totally different concept of gospel interpretation and the question is whether or not we are able to cope with that new insight? Let's look at the first letter of the apostle John; he has also spoken about the subject.

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20. E.g. Acts 15:23-29.