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# Resurrecting Certainty in the Gospel of Luke

DEBORAH PRINCE

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Resurrection of the body can be described, by Christians and non-Christians alike, as an amazing and astounding concept. The claim that a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, was bodily resurrected two thousand years ago, has led many to wonder at the amazing activity of a loving God. But this claim has also led many beyond amazement and wonder to incredulity. As with any astounding event, skepticism and scrutiny will arise, at times resulting in attempts to disprove the event's authenticity by means of logical argumentation and the search for proof to the contrary. Prime examples can be found in the writing of Gerd Lüdemann and Discovery Channel's presentation of the uncovering of Jesus' tomb.<sup>1</sup> In the face of astounding accounts of Jesus' resurrection, even those disposed to believe are often eager for the security that proof and logical support offer for their perspective.

Heightened scrutiny surrounding Jesus's resurrection is not new to our postmodern world. Jesus' resurrection has been the center of intense debate since the story was first told. The report of securing the tomb with guards in Matthew 27.62–66 may likely be a narrative response to early accusations of deceit leveled at Jesus' followers. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he clearly acknowledges that the proclamation that one who was crucified has been raised and is alive is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1.23). Luke's story, in the gospel attributed to him and the Acts of the Apostles, explicitly narrates conflicts that arose within the Jewish community over the question of resurrection generally (Luke 20.27; Acts 23.6–10) and the question of Jesus' resurrection specifically (Acts 4.1–3).<sup>2</sup> Luke's narrative also suggests that controversy over the resurrection was alive in the Hellenistic world more broadly. After Paul addresses a Gentile crowd in Athens, the narrator reports that the listeners were divided in their opinions. "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this'" (Acts 17.32). The reason for the negative reaction to Paul's speech is not identified in this passage. We do have access, however, to an ancient debate that spanned the turn of the third century CE in Origen's *Against Celsus*. In this treatise we hear the voice of the pagan philosopher Celsus, as he insists that the fact of the resurrection cannot be sustained due, in part, to the lack of credible witnesses to it.<sup>3</sup> Celsus does not mince words when he accuses the Christians of inventing the story:

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1. Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004); James Cameron, executive producer and Simcha Jacobvici, producer/director, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* (Discovery Channel, 2007).

2. For ease of communication I will call the author "Luke," although the author's identity is generally agreed to be unknown. Scholars widely date the Gospel of Luke between 80–130 CE. For helpful introductions to the authorship and date of the Gospel of Luke see C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM, 1990); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Anchor Bible 28 A & B (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

3. See Jeffrey W. Hargis, *Against the Christians: The Rise of Early Anti-Christian Polemic* (Patristic Studies 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 94–126

But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt it in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion...or, which is more likely, wanted to impress the others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.<sup>4</sup>

The accusations regarding the unreliable nature of the witnesses was only one of the many criticisms leveled against the Christian tradition of Jesus' resurrection. And Origen was only one of many early Christians who were called upon to assert the authenticity of the testimony and the truth of the resurrection. Many Lukan scholars have concluded that Luke's gospel, in a similar way, was concerned with defending the Christian story, a concern often termed "apologetic" (from the Greek work *apologia*, which means defense).<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that Luke's passion narrative, more so than any of the other Gospels, displays a particular concern for providing assurance of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>6</sup> Although the precise definition of the genre of apologetic literature and its relationship to Luke-Acts is still highly debated, it cannot be denied that in some way and to some extent Luke is concerned with asserting the truth of his narrative to his audience. Luke's preface clearly states the author's intent to critically examine and to retell the stories of Jesus in a way that would provide the reader certainty regarding the events they relate:

I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1.3–4)

Considering Luke's concern to assure his readers of the reliability of his story, what can we contemporary Christians gain from his resurrection narrative that can encourage us in the face of our own wonder and skepticism? Luke's desire was to provide his readers with certainty regarding the truth of Jesus' resurrection. Might his emphasis on the diverse and ever widening testimony of those who experienced Jesus alive provide assurance for Christian communities today? In this essay I will explore these questions by examining how Luke employed ancient methods for asserting the credibility of witnesses in the telling of the astounding event of Jesus' resurrection. I will begin by identifying the issue of the credibility of testimony as one that affected many narratives of wondrous events in the ancient world. Next I will survey ancient standards for determining reliable testimony and the guidelines set forth for how to present witness testimony in the most persuasive manner. I will then turn to Luke's resurrection accounts and examine what and how witnesses are presented and the way in which their reliability is enhanced. Finally, I will suggest that Luke has provided later readers with a certainty that is not solely dependent on the reliability of the first century witnesses, but also on their own contemporary witness.

### **Credibility in Ancient Storytelling**

In the ancient world, wondrous events of all sorts incited scrutiny. Many ancient narratives tell stories of the apparitions of those who had died, or who were translated.<sup>7</sup> As an educated writer, Luke was most likely

4. Origen, *Contra Celsum*. 2.55; cf. 2.26. Throughout this article, translations of Origen's *Contra Celsum* are taken from Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

5. For a classic and more recent perspective on Luke-Acts and apologetics see Loveday Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, Simon Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15–44; Henry J. Cadbury, "The Purpose Expressed in Luke's Preface," *The Expositor* (1921): 431–441.

6. Charles Talbert, "The Place of the Resurrection in the Theology of Luke" in *Reading Luke-Acts in its Mediterranean Millieu* (NovTSup 107; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 121–133; Jerome H. Neyrey, *Resurrection Stories* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1988), 51; Paul Schubert, "The Structure and Significance of Luke 24," in *Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. W. Eltester (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1957), 173, 176.

7. Translation, or apotheosis, stories tell of a human being who is "removed from the human sphere of ordinary humanity and made immortal." In some of these stories the ones translated return to the mortal world to announce to another their new status. See Adela Yarbro Collins, "Apotheosis and Resurrection," in *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism*, ed. Peder Borgen and Soren Giversen (Oxford: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 90–91.

aware of such traditions and the skepticism that they provoked. For example, a story often repeated in the ancient world was the mysterious disappearance of Rome's founder, Romulus, during a sudden storm or eclipse.<sup>8</sup> It was reported that Romulus was taken up to heaven where he was added to the gods. Although there was an alternate story circulating that Romulus was murdered by either Roman senators or patricians, the reliability of his deification was supported by the testimony of a man named Julius Proculus, to whom Romulus appeared and announced his new divine identity. Concerns regarding the credibility of this story, in particular the eyewitness testimony of Julius Proculus, were raised by many who heard and told the story. In a quite different story, the truth of the tale of Philinnion, a young woman who secretly met with a young man at night, after she had died and been buried, is asserted most strongly by means of the multiplication of witnesses in increasingly larger numbers.<sup>9</sup> Luke's gospel reflects an educated knowledge of the ancient literary world, which set the standards for determining credibility. For this reason I wish to delineate below the way in which the narrative of Jesus' resurrection appearances in Luke 24 employs techniques established within the ancient world to assert the credibility of witnesses.

### Testimony as Proof in the Ancient World

A summary of ancient perspectives on what constitutes reliable testimony must depend first on the descriptions of reliable proof found in rhetorical treatises.<sup>10</sup> These works, which form the foundation for much of ancient Greco-Roman literature, offer both theoretical descriptions of how a speaker can use proof to persuade an audience as well as practical advice.<sup>11</sup> Ancient speakers shared with Luke the primary goal of providing their audience with a convincing picture of an event or person in order to provide moral, religious, or political guidance.

Proof in its broadest sense is the object of argumentation, the determination of certainty where there was doubt.<sup>12</sup> But this term also carries very particular references, ranging from the means by which certainty is obtained to that section of the rhetorical speech that displays these means. There are many various means of persuasion that are referred to as "proofs." These are divided into two major categories by most rhetoricians.<sup>13</sup> Our focus will be the category of proofs known as "inartistic proofs," which includes laws, witnesses, documents, testimony given under torture and oaths. Luke 24 also employs other forms of proof, but our purpose here is to focus on the place of witnesses in the author's persuasive program.<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle identified two kinds of witnesses: ancient and recent. Ancient witnesses include the poets, proverbs and the judgments of those who are well-known. The testimony of ancient witnesses is the most

8. This story is found in five major authors, both Greek and Roman, whose writings span from the beginning of the first century BCE to the end of the first century CE: Cicero, *On the Republic* 2.17–20; Livy, *History of Rome* 1.16; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.56.1–7 and 2.63.3–4; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.805–828, *Fasti* 2.503; Plutarch, *Life of Romulus* 27.3–28.8

9. Phlegon of Tralles, *Book of Marvels*. For more information on this ancient text see William Hansen, *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels* (Exeter, England: University of Exeter, 1996).

10. Ancient histories also provide critical insight into Luke's use of witnesses. Limitations of space have required that I engage the topic from the perspective of the rhetorical treatises alone. Of course, the views of ancient historians on the proper use of witnesses were strongly influenced by the rhetorical treatises.

11. The limited summary that follows does not intend to imply that there existed one generally accepted theory or system of rhetoric within the ancient Greco-Roman world. This discussion will focus on areas of agreement between three major classical rhetoricians: Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian. For more complete discussions see M. L. Clarke, *Rhetoric at Rome: A Historical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1996) and George A. Kenney, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

12. Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.10.11–12

13. The first are artistic proofs, which are "invented" by the speaker and are based upon either the argument presented (*logos*), the character of the speaker or defendant (*ethos*) or the emotions of the audience (*pathos*) (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.2.3–6; Cicero *De or.* 2.115–116). The second group are inartistic proofs, which are not created by the orator, but are inherent in the circumstances of the case under debate (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.2.2; Cicero, *De or.* 2.116; Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.1.1–3). It is in this latter group that witnesses fall.

14. I have provided a detailed discussion of the rhetorical and literary elements employed in the Lukan resurrection narratives in my dissertation, "Visions of the Risen Jesus: The Rhetoric of Certainty in Luke 24 and Acts 1" (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2005).

trustworthy for it cannot be corrupted.<sup>15</sup> Cicero proclaimed that “precedents, drawn from age-old tradition and from literary records, rich in grandeur, rich in antiquity...afford the weightiest proof to the mind, the sweetest sound to the ear.”<sup>16</sup> As we will see below, the constant reminder in each of the post-resurrection appearances in Luke 24 that Jesus’ resurrection is a fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures establishes the presence of an ancient witness. Recent witnesses are those who are contemporaries of the case. They may be either persons who share the risk of the trial, or those who are unconnected to the case. The testimony of the former is reliable only on the matter of the facts themselves, while one who stands at a distance from the matter may testify to the meaning of the facts. The status, character and situation of any witness, ancient or recent, must be considered when determining reliability. Is the witness a friend or enemy, of good, bad, or indifferent reputation? What are their motives and personalities?<sup>17</sup> According to one rhetorician, the voluntary testimony of a witness who is a friend of the accused or connected to the matter at issue is suspect, for such a witness may be guided by motives of favor or self-interest.<sup>18</sup> Both Greek and Roman courts considered the testimony of women, children and slaves to be unreliable, although slaves could testify under torture. This suspicion can be exploited by the prosecution or relieved by the defense. There is an argument for any situation.

These standards regarding witnesses are particularly important for understanding Luke 24. The Christian traditions of Jesus’ resurrection depend upon unreliable witnesses: women and friends, both of whom testify voluntarily. Their social status would not assist their credibility, nor would their character, which is never explicitly described in any positive way up to this point in the narrative. If the author of Luke is to provide his audience with the certainty he has promised, he must employ other rhetorical techniques to bolster their testimony. This is accomplished by emphasizing the testimony of the ancient witnesses of the Jewish scriptures, and by accumulating witnesses and arranging the presentation of the witnesses in such a way as to heighten their credibility.

### **The Accumulation of Witnesses in Luke 24**

Luke 24 consists of a sequence of visions. First is the women’s vision of the two men in dazzling clothes (vv. 1–12). Second is the vision of the resurrected Jesus to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (vv. 13–35). In the third vision, Jesus appears to all the disciples in Jerusalem (vv. 36–53). These visions incorporate various types of testimony of various strengths. These are carefully collected into a presentation that works to gradually strengthen the credibility of the witnesses as the sequence progresses.

Beginning at the beginning, the first vision is experienced by the women who have come to Jesus’ tomb to care for Jesus’ body. But when they arrive the stone is rolled away and the body is not there (24.2–3). Instead they see two men in dazzling clothes standing beside them (24.4). These angelic figures question the women as to why they are seeking the living among the dead and remind them of what Jesus had told them before his death, “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (24.5–7). Here Jesus’ words are not identified as scripture, but when they are repeated in each of the two subsequent visions (24.25–27, 44–49) its connection to the written scriptures becomes clear.

This vision is reported in the other synoptic Gospels, Mark and Matthew, and in the Gospel of John, the first witness to the empty tomb is a woman. Each gospel account of the empty tomb, however, concludes differently. In Mark, the women are afraid and do not tell anyone what they have seen and heard (Mark 16.1–8). In Matthew, the women tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee as they are told, and the disciples follow their directions (Matt 28.1–20). In John, it is Mary Magdalene alone who finds the empty tomb. After she tells Peter and the “other disciple” about her discovery they both run to the tomb to see what has happened (John 20.1–10). This corroboration of a women’s account of the empty tomb by male disciples is quite similar to the account found in Luke 24.12. But only in Luke is it made explicitly clear that the women’s testimony is not believed. “These words seemed to them like delirium, and they did not believe

15. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.15.13–17.

16. Cicero, *Verrine* 3.209.

17. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.15.19; Quintilian *Inst.* 5.7.10–25.

18. *Rhetorica Ad Alexandrum* 1431b.



them.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps due to their lack of credibility, Peter ran to the tomb to see for himself. But even after finding the empty tomb, just as the women had reported, he still is not fully convinced. He returns to his home “amazed” at the situation.<sup>20</sup> In only two verses, Luke is able to acknowledge the unreliable status of the women witnesses and at the same time offer the first corroboration of the women’s testimony, while continuing to leave the disciples and the readers unsure of the truth.

In the next two visions the witnesses continue to multiply. First, in a story found only in Luke, Jesus appears to two of his followers while they are on the road to Emmaus. They do not immediately recognize Jesus, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24.16). They converse with Jesus while they are walking, filling him in on his own story up to this point (24.17–24). Just as Peter was “amazed,” these two men are “astounded” by the events that have just taken place. Jesus chides the two disciples as he reminds them of all that the prophets have said concerning the Messiah’s death and resurrection (24.25–26). And “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (v. 27). Here it becomes clear that the ancient Jewish scriptures themselves testify about the events of Jesus’ passion. Although it is not until Jesus sits at table with them and blesses and breaks the bread that they recognize him, it is when Jesus opens the scriptures to them and reveals its testimony that their hearts begin to burn within them (vv. 30–32). The disciples in Luke’s story are not easily convinced of the truth of something as astounding as the resurrection of one who was crucified. The testimony of women alone will not convince them. It is not until two more witnesses are produced, as well as the ancient witness of the Jewish scriptures, that light begins to dawn.

But full assurance is still withheld until (Simon) Peter himself receives a vision of the risen Jesus (v. 34). Then the disciples as a group can say with certainty that “the Lord has risen indeed.” Luke, however, is still not satisfied that the burden of proof has been met. The empty tomb has been found and the absence of Jesus’ body corroborated by Peter, Jesus has been seen by a number of witnesses on two separate occasions and his identity has been established by the two disciples who broke bread with him in Emmaus. Nevertheless, Luke’s narrative continues with a report of Jesus’ appearance to all his disciples (the eleven and their companions and the two disciples who returned from Emmaus; v. 33, 36). Luke’s emphasis on establishing who and what this apparition is continues. Whereas Jesus’ identity is established in the Emmaus narrative, when he is recognized by those he knew before his death by means of a significant action that marked his last hours, when he appears to his entire cadre of followers, proof that his presence is more than spiritual is required (24.36–49). Their first reaction is that they are seeing a ghost (24.37). Here Jesus offers those present the opportunity to touch him and see for themselves that he is flesh and bones (24.39). And while they are still wondering, Jesus asks for some food and eats the piece of fish they offer him (24.41–43). In these verses the ancient expectations that the spirits of the dead cannot be touched and cannot eat are employed to prove that the Jesus before them is not merely an image of his living presence.<sup>21</sup>

Even this final appearance, which offers evidence of Jesus’ physical presence, does not succeed in providing the disciples full assurance. In a strange description of their mixed feelings, the disciples are joyful and amazed, but are still in a state of disbelief (v. 41). The number of witnesses is mounting. Their testimony is confirmed by each succeeding vision. One final boost is needed to complete their growing certainty. Jesus provides it by sharing with them again the testimony of scripture (vv. 46–47). This time Jesus expands his description of the scriptures to include the Psalms along with Moses and the Prophets. The addition of a third division of the scriptures promotes a sense of completion that increases the force of the testimony. Likewise, the testimony of scripture itself is expanded in this vision, relating not only to the role of Jesus the Christ, that he “must suffer and be raised on the third day,” but also to the role of those who preach in his name, “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is

19. This is my translation. The NRSV translates the Greek word *leros* as “idle tale.” But this does not fully express the “hysterical” and out of control connotation of the Greek, which is used in medical texts to refer to the speech of the sick in delirium.

20. Although Luke 24.12 is omitted by many reliable manuscripts, I have chosen to discuss the text in the form in which we have received it.

21. Many commentators conclude that these verses serve to prove that Jesus has been “bodily” resurrected. I have argued elsewhere that the function of these verses is more complex than this and must be interpreted in conjunction with the resurrection appearances that precede it. See “The ‘Ghost’ of Jesus: Luke 24 in Light of Ancient Narratives of Post-Mortem Apparitions,” *JSNT* 29.3 (March 2007): 287–301.

to be proclaimed...to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” With certainty finally attained through the presentation of multiple witnesses, both contemporary and ancient, the disciples are now prepared to act as witnesses to the world, which they have in fact been doing throughout Luke’s narrative.

### **Witnesses Then and Now**

This essay has shown how the Gospel of Luke fits within the expected pattern of other ancient narratives written and disseminated in the Hellenistic world. Like the many narratives of Romulus’ apotheosis and the ghost story of Philinnion, the assertion, or denial, of credibility is an expected element of telling the story. Although many types of proof are employed in these narratives, it is often the case, as it is in the Gospel of Luke, that witnesses are the primary means of asserting credibility. The problem that faced Luke was the fact that the witnesses at hand were women and friends of Jesus, the weakest sort of witness according to ancient standards.

Luke recognizes and responds to the incredulous and wondering nature of his readers, ancient and modern, and composes a narrative of Jesus’ resurrection that works at many levels. The multiple appearances of Jesus, as well as the appearance of two angelic figures, provide the opportunity for a growing number of witnesses to testify to the facts of Jesus’ resurrection. His corpse is not in its tomb, he has been seen alive, his identity has been established and his presence proven to be more than that of a spirit. And the significance of these facts has been established through the more reliable ancient witness of scripture. The accumulating testimony has led Jesus’ disciples to certainty in Jesus’ resurrection. As the Gospel concludes, they are in the temple continually blessing God (v. 53). But the overwhelming testimony of the women, the disciples and scripture also encouraged and supported later Christians in Luke’s audience who wondered how such an amazing event could be true, especially considering the many doubts that were raised by their non-Christian neighbors

The heavy emphasis of the entire chapter on the confusion and lack of certainty, shown repeatedly by those who meet the resurrected Jesus, echoes the lack of certainty claimed for Luke’s audience (1.4) and perhaps even for many of us today. The deliberative and cautious reactions of the disciples reassure all of us that these first witnesses were not too easily convinced of Jesus’ resurrection. When we are faced with skepticism within ourselves, in our congregations, or in our communities, we can be encouraged that we are not the first to face such questions about the wondrous reality of the resurrection. As educated readers, like Luke and his audience, we do not need to be content with easy and pat assertions that gloss over real concerns of reliability. Rather, we can be assured by Luke’s narrative that the truth of Jesus’ resurrection has been deemed credible by the ever widening and diverse testimony of those who experienced Jesus alive. But the testimony of those first witnesses is not the end of the story. Luke’s story anticipates his readers’ continuing experiences of the resurrected Jesus, and their witness to Jesus’ living presence throughout the centuries. Just as the first disciples slowly grew in their conviction that Jesus was alive and recognized the reality of his presence with them through the opening of the scriptures and the breaking of bread together, so Luke insists that those to whom he writes, both then and now, are likewise presented with multiple opportunities to witness for themselves the reality of Jesus’ living presence through our lives in Christian community. The first witnesses to the resurrection give us encouragement in the face of our own uncertainty and skepticism, but it is not their reliability alone on which we can depend. Our assurance is based also on the numerous witnesses that have testified throughout the centuries and on the truth of our own experiences of Jesus’ living presence.

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