Lecture 13: Lukan Redactional Traits

Last session we began looking at the sources Luke used and how he redacted them for service in his gospel. We were exploring Luke’s redaction of Mark, in which we noted three tendencies: first, Luke characteristically economizes Mark’s narrative, not only by streamlining its frequently verbose style, but even omitting phrases or stories that duplicate material he has used elsewhere.

Secondly, we noted Luke’s tendency even to omit large portions of Mark’s narrative if they do not serve his purposes. And in that context we were looking at Luke’s Big Omission, his setting aside of most of the material found in Mark 6.45-8.26. His omission of Mark’s story of the feeding of the 4,000 is intelligible due to its similarity to the feeding of the 5,000, which he has already told, while he transfers some of this material to other places – although typically in abbreviated form. And yet, five other omissions are more perplexing, at least until we recognize a third Lukan tendency, namely: to plot his narrative geographically. For Luke, Jerusalem is the city where Jesus must die and the city where he will appear after his resurrection, in spite of the fact that Mark stipulates the disciples must meet him in Galilee, where he will appear. (And in that specification, Matthew follows Mark.)

The reason the plotting of the story around Jerusalem is so important to Luke, who is also the author of Acts, is that Jerusalem is the church’s base of operations in his story of its life and expansion. It is the ecclesial equivalent of Rome, making it important for Luke that it be the center of the movement’s life from the beginning. Indeed, Jesus’ final words to his disciples, according to Luke 24, are, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” -- And this idea is recapitulated in Acts 1, which begins with a more detailed statement of Jesus’ words before his ascension, including the following commissioning of the disciples: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jerusalem is the base from which they will carry the gospel message into Judea, Samaria and beyond. Thus for Luke, Jerusalem plays a pivotal role.

It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that Luke’s gospel, once it begins its account of Jesus’ ministry, is structured around where Jesus works. Chapters 1-2 are the infancy narrative, which we’ll begin exploring next time. That is followed by a period of preparation for Jesus’ ministry in 3.1-4.13, including John the Baptist’s work and imprisonment, Jesus’ baptism by John, a genealogy of Jesus, and the story of the temptation in the wilderness. The narration of Jesus’ work begins in 4.14 where Jesus visits his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. From there through chapter 9, v. 50 Jesus works entirely in Galilee. As you’ll recall, 9.51 is the
beginning of the Lukan travel narrative, in which Jesus winds his way through Samaria, into Judea, through Jericho, and finally to the outskirts of Jerusalem in 19.29, where he then makes preparations to enter Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. From that point on, the story is focused on Jerusalem, where the disciples remain after Jesus’ death and his appearances to them, and ultimately extend the gospel message from there throughout the world. So Lukan redaction makes a special point of focusing on the geography of Jesus’ ministry, with Jerusalem as the goal of his journeys and the place where the great crisis of his work plays out.

It is, accordingly, due to Luke’s insistence on moving Jesus towards Jerusalem that we find him cutting these other scenes. We’ve already seen Luke pass over Mark’s first story of Jesus healing a blind man in favor of his second, which is part of Jesus’ itinerary en route to Jerusalem. And as you’ll recall, Luke deliberately transfers the feeding of the 5,000 from the southern end of the sea of Galilee (where it is in Mark) to Bethsaida, the place to which Mark’s narrative has Jesus send the disciples after the feeding. But that decision by Luke entailed also dropping the story of Jesus walking on the water, which is part of Mark’s means of getting Jesus from the southern end of Galilee to Genessaret. And it consequently meant clipping out the story of Jesus healing the afflicted of Genessaret, which in Mark is where the disciples’ boat wound up, after setting out for Bethsaida.

Even though, as Ehrman tells you, Luke is interested in the issue of Gentile response to the Gospel, Mark’s strained itinerary that has Jesus going up the Mediterranean coast to the cities of Tyre and Sidon and then into the region of Decapolis, fall prey to Luke’s larger concern of focusing Jesus’ early work in Galilee and then getting him to Jerusalem as directly as possible. In fact, as you’ll recall, he will later delete the journey to Caesarea Philippi as the setting for Peter’s confession about Jesus – a journey that required Jesus to travel far north of Bethsaida. Luke’s evident interest in simplifying Jesus’ itinerary and getting him to Jerusalem appears to have spurred his omission of some Markan pericopes.

A fourth effect of Luke’s redaction of Mark is what are called “Lukan transpositions.” These are Markan pericopes that Luke relocates, typically for better narrative sequence. E.g. you’ll recall that an important scene in Mark’s first major section is the commissioning and dispatching of the twelve. You’ll also recall that this episode is part of an intercalation, with the initial pericope being the scene of commissioning and dispatching, while at the other end we find a report of the return of the twelve. The middle section – the intercalation – reports Herod’s fearful speculation that the reports about Jesus might evidence that John the Baptist has returned from the dead. But you’ll recall that there is one other piece to that intercalation, as Mark uses this occasion to tell the story of John’s imprisonment by Herod Antipas and his eventual execution in Herod’s prison.
If we place this intercalation within our comparison of Mark and Luke, and bring in also our outline of Luke’s arrangement, we find that Luke retains this intercalation towards the end of his report of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, with the commissioning and dispatching of the twelve reported in 9.1-6, Herod’s speculation in vv. 7-9, and the return of the twelve to report to Jesus in v. 10a. However, Luke omits the story of John’s arrest and eventual beheading. But rather than simply discarding it, Luke transfers it forward into his stories about the preparation for Jesus’ ministry, placing it in 3.19-20, just after his summary of John’s preaching, and just before his story of Jesus being baptized by John. Moreover, he condenses the report into this: “19 But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.” That’s where the story of John the Baptist ends for Luke. In chapter 7 Luke carries Matthew’s report of John sending messengers to Jesus. But never does Luke report the grizzly story of John’s execution because of the scheme’s of Herod’s wife. In fact, his only reference to John’s fate is in chapter 9, with Herod’s frank admission that he beheaded John.

Although, by the way, notice that Luke, writing for Roman ears, does not allow this Roman surrogate to fall prey to fearful speculation, as he does in Mark, where he echoes popular notions that Jesus is John risen from the dead. Luke’s Herod knows he beheaded John, so this cannot be him; he’s clear-headed about that.

The larger point here is that we’re faced with a Lukan transposition of the report of John’s imprisonment to the beginning of his gospel so as to tell the whole story of John at one time.

Another example of a Lukan transposition is related to Jesus’ visit to Nazareth in Mark 6.1-6, a narrative standing only after Jesus has been active for some time. Luke shifts this visit to the start of Jesus’ work, where it serves both to establish the pattern of rejection of Jesus and to define Jesus’ ministry through the words he reads from Isaiah 61.

So Luke is not at all shy about transposing material to serve his purposes.

Let’s turn from the way Luke abbreviates and manipulates Mark’s narrative – somewhat mechanical issues of redaction – to examine how he gives a distinctive texture to his Gospel. We already noted some of these traits in talking about the Jesus traditions. For example, you’ll recall Luke’s underscoring of the Holy Spirit’s role. We saw evidence of this in chapter 11, where Luke replaces Q’s statement that “the father will give good things to those who ask him” with “the father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”

Even more important for Luke (at least early on) is the role of the Spirit in Jesus’ ministry. E.g. after Jesus has been baptized and the Spirit has descended upon him, he heads into the wilderness. Mark narrates that scene as follows: “12 And the
Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.  

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”  --- Following Mark, Luke speaks of the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness for forty days.  However, he expands the introduction with a look back to the Spirit descending on Jesus:  “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.”

What’s more, Luke reasserts this theme at the end of the temptation pericope.  Mark, on the heels of the wilderness temptations, abruptly introduces a new scene:  “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”  --- Luke, on the other hand, not only provides a smoother link to the next story, but does so in a way that emphasizes the role of the Spirit:  “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.”  --- Luke portrays Jesus’ ministry as empowered by the Spirit.  And that is why, in the immediately following scene of Jesus in the synagogue of his hometown, Luke has him read these words from Isaiah 61:  “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”  

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Notable here, of course, is the initial statement, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” which is linked with the speaker’s claim to be anointed by the Lord for specific tasks.  As Tuckett tells you, Luke (curiously) does not infuse this theme throughout his account of Jesus’ ministry, but it does appear to be, for him, the backdrop to Jesus’ work.

Now, while the motif of “anointing” is the background for the concept of Messiah (derived from Hebrew, mashiach, meaning “anointed one”), it’s the motif of a prophet anointed by the Spirit in Isaiah 61 that Luke brings into play, because the image of a prophet is the key one Luke uses to define Jesus.

In fact, Luke signals that the image of Jesus as a prophet is key for him in that opening scene in Nazareth, via the interaction he reports as following Jesus’ assertion that the words from Isaiah have been fulfilled in the people’s hearing:  “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”  He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the
heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.”

Most important here is how Jesus defines himself by the implication of his words, “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” Jesus’ casts himself in the role of a prophet and sees himself sharing a fate common to prophets: rejection by their contemporaries.

Moreover, Jesus’ appeal to two prophets of the past, Elijah and Elisha, is instructive, for these prophets, as Jesus points out, had no success addressing Israel, but found an ear among Gentiles. This ties into a concern Luke articulates for the Gentile world, suggesting that the Gentiles will accept Jesus’ message, which Israel has begun to reject on first hearing. But more important, it establishes the pattern of Jesus’ treatment as a prophet, parallel to Israel’s prophets of antiquity.

And yet, some in Israel do recognize Jesus as a prophet, as in chapter 7, vv. 11-17, a pericope unique to Luke. Luke reports that after Jesus restored to life the only daughter of a widow, “Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” --- Moreover, after Jesus’ death, the two disciples walking the road to Emaus answer the question posed by their unrecognized traveling companion (who, of course, turns out to be the risen Jesus) with words that define Jesus as “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.”

In spite of these cases of people recognizing Jesus as a prophet, by-and-large, his prophetic status is under attack in Luke. Thus in chapter 7, when Jesus allows a sinful woman to wash his feet with her tears and pour costly oil on him as he dines in the home of a Pharisee, his host thinks to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.” In Matthew and Mark those observing this woman pouring expensive oil on Jesus simply bemoan what they consider an extravagant waste. Only in Luke does this scene evoke a challenge to Jesus’ status as a prophet: a prophet should know better.

In fact, Luke’s Jesus is keenly aware that his role as a prophet will ultimately prove fatal. Luke adopts from Q the following lament by Jesus: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

By itself, this is a chilling characterization: Jerusalem is known for killing its prophets. But Luke loads this statement even more by what he places before it. As
we’ve noted, Jesus’ response to news that Herod is out to get him includes, “Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” -- In that light, Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem as the city that kills the prophets takes on even deeper meaning. Jesus will die in Jerusalem like all that city’s prophets. For Luke, Jesus is, above all, a prophet.

In fact, for him – and this is another trait of Luke’s redactional work – Jesus’ death is not significant in-and-of-itself, but is described simply as the death of an innocent man, just like all the other prophets.

While Mark and (following him) Matthew report Jesus saying that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,” when we turn to the gospel of Luke, that statement is missing. Whether or not Mark meant to float the idea of atonement by this lone statement (and I’m not as sanguine about that conclusion as Ehrman), Luke appears to have taken exception to it.

Consistent with this, let’s notice how Peter characterizes Jesus’ death in his sermon to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, in the book of Acts:  “22 Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the Law.”

Even if Jesus’ execution was according to “the plan and foreknowledge of God,” responsibility is laid at the doorstep of the audience. But never in the two volume work of Luke-Acts is Jesus’ death described as anything other than the death of an innocent man at the hands of people opposed to God’s servant.

In fact, here I would modify what Tuckett says about Jesus’ death as a fulfillment of scripture. As I pointed out earlier (and as Tuckett acknowledges earlier in his chapter), the notion that Jesus’ fate is a must – it is something necessary – stresses the notion of a divine plan more than the fulfillment of scripture. Thus in 24.26-27, in speaking to the travelers on the road to Emaus, Jesus asks, “26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” -- The question of the necessity of his death precedes the exposition of the scriptures, which simply reveal the inevitability of Jesus’ death. For Luke, it is not specifically fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures that is important (that’s Matthew’s bailiwick), but that Jesus’ death and glorification can be shown to be part of a grand divine plan: what I’ve referred to as determinism.

But there is more to Luke’s portrayal of Jesus’ death than this. And here a change Luke introduces into the crucifixion narrative is significant.
You’ll recall that Mark 15 reports, “Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” In Luke, however, we find the following: “When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” -- The point Luke stress is Jesus’ innocence. And this makes sense, given the audience for whom Luke wrote.

One of the difficult issues for the early followers of Jesus was how to explain the fact that Jesus was executed by the Romans. Crucifixion was not just run-of-the mill capital punishment; it was the form of execution reserved for the most grievous crimes against the state, particularly fomenting of revolt. The problem the early church faced was summed up by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1.23: “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” The notion of a crucified Christ (= Messiah) would have proved a “stumbling block” to Jews, because Messiah was to reign, not die. Even more so, the notion that a criminal crucified by the state should be hailed as worthy of belief and worship would have seemed to everyday Romans nothing short of foolishness. Imagine a group in our day spreading a new religion whose hero was Timothy McVey.

Let’s recall again to whom Luke writes and why: 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

Whoever “Theophilus” was, Luke’s address of him as “most excellent” Theophilus” makes it likely that he was a member of the Roman upper class. Moreover, you might recall that in the book of Acts, Luke again addresses Theophilus. And much in Luke’s gospel bears out that he addresses a Roman audience.

E.g. Luke uniquely sets the circumstances of Jesus’ birth within the context of the Roman Empire with the note, “1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” -- The striking character of this heading is shown by comparing Matthew’s unceremonious introduction to his infancy narrative: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” -- Notable by contrast is Luke’s situating of Jesus’ birth in a particular period of Roman history –specifying not only the Emperor, but also the governor or (more precisely) the Legate of this region. And this isn’t the only time Luke does this.

He opens his account of the preparatory period for Jesus’ ministry, in chapter 3, with these words: “1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of
Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” -- Here Luke again specifies which emperor rules – marking the change from Augustus to Tiberius – as well as the governor of Judea (although this time he doesn’t specify who was regional Legate), who the rulers of the neighboring provinces were, and who was high priest in Jerusalem. So Luke writes with an eye to the political situation of not only Pales-tine, but of the larger Roman Empire. And again, this fits the audience he designates in chapter 1 by addressing his work to “most excellent Theophilus.”

As I have pointed out before, the Greek word translated “truth” in v. 4 takes on more the meaning of “certainty” or “assurance,” making it more accurate to translate this phrase something like, “so that you may be assured of the validity of the things about which you have been instructed.” -- Even though Luke earlier speaks of the “many [who] have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,” he takes it upon himself to write a gospel providing support for Theophilus’ new faith, apparently seeing his gospel as better suited for that purpose than others he knows.

With this prologue to Luke’s Gospel and Acts I want to compare a similar introduction in the tract, Against Apion, written by the Jewish historian Josephus. This tract, written to defend Jews against the slanderous assertions of a man named Apion, opens with the following address: “In the history of the Antiquities, most excellent Epaphroditus, I believe that I have made sufficiently clear to any who would come upon that work the antiquity of our Jewish race, the purity of its original stock, and the manner in which it established itself in the land that we occupy today. That history embraces a period of five thousand years and was written by me in Greek on the basis of our sacred books. But since I see that a number of persons, influenced by malicious slander from certain people, discredit statements in my history concerning our antiquity…I consider it my duty to write briefly about all these points, to convict our detractors of opprobrium and deliberate falsehood, to correct the ignorance of persons, influenced by malicious slander from certain people, discredit statements in my history concerning our antiquity…I consider it my duty to write briefly about all these points, to convict our detractors of opprobrium and deliberate falsehood, to correct the ignorance of others, and to instruct whoever desires to know the truth about the antiquity of our race.”

The similarities here are obvious, not least among them being Josephus’ address of someone bearing the title, “Most Excellent.” But equally apparent are some differences. Josephus writes to defend a work he had written about Israel’s history against detractors who countered with their own arguments that Israel’s roots didn’t go back as far as Josephus claimed. In the Greco-Roman world antiquity was everything. As the Greeks began to encounter other cultures through the
writings of Herodotus and others from the 5th century on, they came to realize that cultures did things differently, so that no culture could claim that its laws or traditions were more valid than the next. But they became fascinated with nations like Egypt, that had a culture more ancient than their own. Thus, antiquity became a standard for evaluating which cultures deserved respect. Josephus says he wrote his *Antiquities of the Jews* to establish their pedigree, and now he writes to rebut those seeking to dismiss it.

Accordingly, Josephus’ tract is more explicitly polemical than Luke, given his stated intention to refute his detractors and show them guilty of “opprobrium and deliberate falsehood.” But it is not just his detractors he addresses. He sets out “to correct the ignorance of others and to instruct whoever desires to know the truth about the antiquity of our race.”

We’ve already noted in Luke’s prologue the suggestion that he is interested in providing a sure footing for the faith of Theophilus. By contrast, in Josephus’ prologue the Greek words translated “the truth” are *to aleton*, which indicates much more explicitly getting the facts straight, although this intent is already clear in Josephus’ statement that he wants to inform those who are ignorant and set the record straight for whoever wishes to hear.

Josephus takes on more the role of the public apologist, whereas Luke takes up a pastoral role: he wants to provide reassurance for Theophilus that there is reason to trust the gospel message he has heard. Nevertheless, both Luke and Josephus write to validate a particular cause or set of ideas, and both write (ostensibly) to a well-placed Roman nobleman.

When we look at the way Luke uses his traditions, we find evidence of this attempt to portray the Christian message and faith as trustworthy – and this polemical portrayal of events having to do with Jesus is another trait of Lukan redaction.

Of course, we’ve already seen this in the way Luke nuances the image of Jesus as a noble prophet who dies innocently at the hands of Jerusalem’s leaders, just as prophets had always been killed. But there are other ways Luke’s portrayal of Jesus makes his character more noble than in Mark. Among those is the way he nuances the relationship between Jesus and his family.

You’ll recall that Mark 3 has Jesus’ family coming out to seize him, having heard of his activity: “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”

You might also recall that this is the beginning of one of Mark’s intercalations, the middle section of which has Jerusalem scribes arriving with the charge that Jesus executes his deeds by the power of Beelzebul, after which a debate ensues between Jesus and the scribes. Then comes the other bookend of this intercalation: “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him
and called him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” 33 And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

As I noted when we were studying Mark, in its Markan context this story implies Jesus’ rejection of his family that has, in effect, rejected him, parallel to the scribes who accuse him of being under the control of Beelzebul. Jesus replaces this family with one composed of those who do the will of God.

When we look to Luke, we find a parallel, though with some differences: “19 Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. 20 And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” 21 But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” -- Luke omits Jesus’ question, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” with its more explicit implication that his family is constituted by someone other than his family of origin. And (more importantly) he omits Mark’s report that Jesus’ family came out to restrain him, thinking that he had gone mad. Consequently, when his family arrives in Luke, there is no hint of malicious intent.

Those omissions give a different spin to Luke’s use of this tradition, inasmuch as Jesus’ family no longer seeks to restrain him, while Jesus’ assertion that his “mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” is no longer a rejection of his mother and brothers in favor of his disciples, but an extension of his family to include anyone who, like him, seeks to obey God’s will.

If Luke has to deal with the difficult question of why Jesus was executed by the Romans as a traitor and why he and his message were rejected by his native people, the last thing he needs is to portray Jesus as an outcast from even his own family. Luke’s concern in his portrayal of Jesus is very different from that of Mark, who needed his audience to understand how costly the road to discipleship was.

In fact, even Luke’s portrayal of Jesus’ disciples is more elevated than Mark’s. The disciples still do dumb things; but when they do, the effect is mitigated. E.g. recall Mark’s report of the discussion the disciples had on the road as Jesus tried to warn them of what lay ahead for him: “33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”

In the words that follow, Jesus instructs them about being first and last, and then illustrates humility by placing a child in their midst, admonishing them to become like children -- which seems to imply a demand that they drop their pretences.
Luke’s parallel to this scene reads as follows: “An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.”

Notice that in Luke Jesus does not need to ask them what their discussion was about, because he is “aware of their inner thoughts” -- certainly an elevation of Jesus’ abilities. But more than that, Luke drops the awkward silence of the disciples in the face of Jesus’ question. As a result, while this scene follows Jesus’ foretelling his passion, as in Mark, it is not directly related to it as something the disciples were doing instead of listening to Jesus’ words. It is simply a debate that arose subsequently. The disciples commit a faux pas, but not at Jesus’ expense.

Still more striking is the story of Peter’s confession of Jesus’ identity, which (as you’ll recall) is followed by Jesus instructing his disciples about his upcoming passion. Luke transmits a virtual word-for-word copy of this. Now, you’ll recall that in Mark Peter does not receive well Jesus’ instruction about his upcoming passion: “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” -- When we turn to the Gospel of Luke, however, we find this scene entirely missing. Peter is not a mortal opponent of Jesus who earns this harsh rebuke. Luke will carry the story of Peter in the courtyard, denying he knows Jesus while Jesus is on trial, but Luke’s Peter does not oppose Jesus’ stated mission the way he does in Mark.

Moreover, even the scene of Peter denying Jesus is mitigated some. Mark concludes the arrest of Jesus with the report, “All of them (the disciples) deserted him and fled. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.” -- Luke, on the other hand, omits this report, moving directly into Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin and Peter’s words of denial. There is no report of all the disciples fleeing.

Similarly, while Mark 10 reports the amazement and fear of those following Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, Luke drops that characterization, beginning this stage of his narrative with Jesus’ gathering the twelve. Jesus’ followers have no fear, and there is no sort of buffer separating Jesus’ disciples from him, such as awe that causes them to hold Jesus at arm’s length. For Luke, the disciples are Jesus’ supportive followers.

This is part of Luke’s portrayal of Jesus in noble shades so as to overcome the doubts raised by his Roman execution, but it is also part-and-parcel of his attempt to show the founders of the church in the best light. And, indeed, he continues that
effort in the book of Acts where he portrays the nascent church as the ideal social
group, holding all things in common.

This polemical portrayal extends to everything about Jesus and his followers. When he tells Theophilus that he wants to provide support for his faith, it is everything about it — not just Jesus — that he has in mind.

One final trait of Luke’s redaction I want to elucidate is his prominent stress on the reversal of status between the poor, who will be rewarded, and the rich, who will be debased. This is already intimated in words Mary speaks when she visits the home of her relative, Elizabeth: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

This theme runs as a leitmotif throughout Luke. Even in the infancy narrative the poor appear as the heroes. It is, after all, shepherds (who ranked among the poorest in the land) to whom the angels announce Jesus’ birth and who first visit him. Only Matthew tells the story of Magi who bring costly gifts. Not only that, but Jesus’ parents are portrayed as indigents upon their arrival in Bethlehem, with no place to stay and able to procure only a cove used to shelter animals. And it is in that impoverished situation Jesus is born.

Recall also the words Jesus reads on his visit to the synagogue at the onset of his ministry, words from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” — There again is the agenda: God’s concern is to deliver the poor and afflicted.

Time and again Luke injects this theme of the poor being rewarded and the rich suffering defeat. Probably the best known example is Jesus’ parable (found only in Luke [chapt 16]) of the poor man Lazarus, who in life used to lay at the gates of a rich man, but who (after life) rested in the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man suffered the torments of hell.

And at various points, Jesus uniquely rails against the rich, especially the wealthy religious leaders. E.g. in Luke 16.13 we find this Q saying: “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” — Obviously, given this is a Q saying, Matthew carries this aphorism as well. But Luke alone has the episode that follows: “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.”
Well, how does this theme – widely attributed to Luke’s redactional work – fit with a gospel that seeks to appeal to a Roman readership, and apparently an aristocratic reader addressed as “Most Excellent Theophilus”?

It needs to be noted that Luke is not anti-wealth, *per se*. What he objects to is the pomposity of those in society’s upper crust and the way the disadvantaged of society are disparaged and excluded. I.e. Luke’s aspiration is not simply the turning of tables, but the establishment of justice. And that’s certainly an ideal to which Rome aspired, in spite of the difficulties embodied in its landed aristocracy.

So these motifs and themes of the Lukan redaction are pieces of the landscape that we’ll encounter in surveying his gospel. And it will be worthwhile to keep in mind that these distinctive traits derive from the Gospel’s author and help give shape to his message.