

WHY I OWE LUKE AN APOLOGY

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Many people who have read the Gospel of Luke have noticed its strange outline. The infancy story in the first two chapters makes sense, as does the narrative of the Galilean ministry in chapters three through ten. Yet, the active ministry does not resume until chapter eighteen. There are eight chapters that describe no action. These chapters are full of teaching material; indeed some of the most familiar of Jesus' parables are in this section. But there is no activity; there is no movement from place to place.

There even seems to be a definite break in the narrative. Luke 9:51 is that familiar passage that reads, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." It is not until Luke 18:31 that the reader finds, "Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.'" Why is there such a large break in the activity? What's going on here?

I once taught a class on Luke's gospel in which I said, "It's as if Luke was writing away and recorded all of the travel material that he learned from Mark's Gospel. He found at the end of the Galilean period, however, that he had all of this teaching material left over. Not knowing what to do with it, he simply clumped it all between the Galilean ministry and the Judean ministry." I have since decided that I was quite wrong and do, in fact, owe the gospel writer an apology.

The answer came from the Gospel of John¹. The tenth chapter of John describes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication, the Jewish festival often known as Hanukkah. During an encounter in the Temple, the Judean Jews tried to arrest Jesus but He escaped out of the city. Jesus was now in a dilemma. He had been rejected and threatened in Jerusalem, so that city was too dangerous for him, but neither could he return to Galilee. Luke 13:31 reads, "At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'" Herod Antipas was as efficiently brutal as had been his father, Herod the Great, when it came to stamping out the slightest hint of dissent. Jesus could not continue his ministry in either Jerusalem or Galilee. Where could he go?

Fortunately, there was a perfect place. John 10:40 reads: "He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there." To what place is the gospel writer referring? The first clue comes from John 3:23. "John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were baptized." Aenon and Salim are in the Jordan River valley about five miles south of Sycapolis or the Old Testament city of Bet Shean. Yet, the passage in John Chapter 10 could not refer to Aenon or Salim because they are both on the west bank of the Jordan River. The phrase "across the Jordan" can only mean the east bank of the river.

However, directly across from Aenon and Salim is a well-known geographic feature. Coming into the Jordan River from the east is the Wadi Cherith. A wadi is a dry riverbed that becomes a flowing, often flooding, river during the rainy season. The Wadi Cherith had several interesting advantages. First of all, it was the border between the Gentile area of the Decapolis and Perea, which was ruled by Herod Antipas. It was as safe an area – politically – that existed in first century Israel. Should any threat develop from the Romans in the west or from Herod Antipas in the south, Jesus could simply step over into the semi-independent region of the Decapolis.

The second advantage is extremely visible when looking at a relief map of the Holy Land. There were two routes used by people traveling to and from Galilee and Judea. If one was coming from the area around the Sea of Galilee, such as Capernaum or Bethsaida, then one would travel due south through the Jordan River Valley. If one were traveling from the central part of the region, such as Cana or Nazareth, then it was easier to travel down the Jezreel Valley that runs at an angle from northwest to southeast and comes into the Jordan River Valley almost directly across from the Wadi Cherith. If Jesus was staying where the Wadi Cherith entered the Jordan River, any traveler going between Judea and Galilee would have the opportunity to see and hear him. This is seen in John 10:41-42: “Many came to him and they were saying, ‘John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.’ And many believed in him there.”

Finally, there was an Old Testament connection to this place. 1 Kings 17 tells of the prophet Elijah’s flight from King Ahab, who wanted to kill him. “*Now Elijah the Tishbe in Gilead said to Ahab, ‘As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.’ The word of the Lord came to him saying, ‘Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself in the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.’ So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.*”

The New Testament has ample evidence that Jesus was intimately familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. He would have known every detail of the story of Elijah. Surely, a teacher and prophet hiding from a king who wished him dead would have found the appeal of the Wadi Cherith irresistible. Just as Elijah had gone to the wadi to hide from Ahab, now Jesus had found refuge from Herod Antipas in the same location.

John’s Gospel is not clear as to how long Jesus stayed at the Wadi Cherith. He arrived shortly after the Feast of Dedication and remained until called to Bethany by the illness of Lazarus. He was, therefore, in this very favorable location for as many as three or four months. It was an interesting role reversal for Jesus. Instead of being a wandering rabbi who went from place to place, he now remained in one location while the traveling crowds came to him. Is it possible that the reason Luke has this large block of teaching material after the Galilean ministry is that it was during this time that these parables and other elements were taught?

There is no definite answer. However, the level of possibility is high enough that I feel that I do owe an apology to Luke. My off-hand comment was in ignorance. Perhaps Luke didn't know that Jesus had gone to the Wadi Cherith, but he knew that Jesus had taught many things after leaving the Galilee and before going to Jerusalem for the first Holy Week. He then recorded his facts in his Gospel to the best of his ability.

After the raising of Lazarus, Jesus did not return to the Wadi Cherith. Neither did he go directly to Jerusalem because the Jewish Council had already condemned him to death. (John 11:45-53) Instead, he “*went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the Wilderness; and he remained there with his disciples*”. (John 11:54) The next verse describes the final journey to Jerusalem. The end was near.

ⁱ James Tabor of the University of North Carolina first noticed this time of Jesus' ministry. His description can be found in *A Jesus Hideout in Jordan? Mapping Ancient Textual Traditions* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999)