

# LUKE 3

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## **Luke 3:1–6. John the Baptist Appears**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 185–188.*

These six verses (Luke 3:1–6) bring at least five significant matters to the fore. First, in accord with Luke’s interest in tying his story to historical events in the wider world (1:5; 2:1–2), Luke links the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry, not Jesus’s, to “the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (3:1). We cannot determine the beginning point of Luke’s time frame, whether it is Tiberius’s coregency with Augustus, which begins, according to Velleius Paterculus, in AD 11, or whether it is Tiberius’s accession to sole power soon after the death of Augustus on the 19th of August, AD 14. This dilemma permits us to date the beginning of John’s ministry within the years AD 27–29.

A second matter links to Luke’s efforts to connect important events to dates. It has to do with doctrinal principles arising from concrete historical events. Luke has already begun to rehearse events that carry such principles. As an example, Latter-day Saints believe that Adam and Eve are real persons who lived in a real time and place. Their fall was also real, bringing serious spiritual consequences to them and their descendants. Thus, the need arises for their rescue, for an atonement. In response to this need, Jesus is born into this world as a real person who undergoes experiences that He shares with all of us. His Atonement occurs at a real time and in a real place. His Atonement is not mythical or ethereal. It releases genuine, tangible powers to us—powers that become effective both in the Resurrection and during our repenting.

Third, by again introducing John the Baptist, whose birth appears earlier, Luke now opens an independent epoch that consists mainly of the Baptist’s preaching and baptizing. For many readers, John’s

activities seemingly point to the final objective of Luke's Gospel: the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. However, Luke carefully frames John's ministry not only as a prelude to Jesus's ministry, as we shall see in the content of his preaching and in Jesus's appeals to John's activities (Luke 7:24–28, 33; 16:16; 20:4), but particularly as an ending of the Old Testament era (see the note on 3:21–22).

Fourth, the rejection of the religious establishment in Jerusalem is almost complete. Because the Divine contacts a preacher in the wilderness rather than the constituted authority at the temple, the Lord shows His displeasure with the centuries-long serpentine events that have led to the coming to power of Annas, Caiaphas, and their associates. Long gone is the rightful line of priests who return from exile and who can document their descent through Zadok, the high priest of Solomon's day. In their place have come odd lots of ambitious priests who buy or manipulate their way into sacred offices. In one stunning moment, the old, which has served ancient Israel for centuries, collapses as a guide.

Next, the work of Joseph Smith intensifies a fleeting yet very bright light on these verses by widening the prophetic connection to the Old Testament in Luke 3:5, which in the Greek text binds Isaiah's words with John the Baptist's ministry. Significantly, Joseph Smith's additions in the Joseph Smith Translation of Luke 3:5–10 pull up a series of summarizing, sweeping statements about the ministry of the Messiah, not of John, as it impacts "the heathen nations" and "the Gentiles" as well as "those who are lost . . . of the sheepfold of Israel" until "the keys of the kingdom shall be delivered up again unto the Father." Speaking of the one for whom the path is made straight, the addition reads:

For behold, and lo, he shall come, as it is written in the book of the prophets, to take away the sins of the world, and to bring salvation unto the heathen nations, to gather together those who are lost, who are of the sheepfold of Israel; Yea, even the dispersed and afflicted; and also to prepare the way, and make possible the preaching of the gospel unto the Gentiles; And to be a light unto all who sit in darkness, unto the uttermost parts of the earth; to bring to pass the resurrection from the dead, and to ascend up on high, to dwell on the right hand of the Father, Until the fulness of time, and the law and the testimony shall be sealed, and the keys of the kingdom shall be delivered up again unto the Father; To administer justice unto all; to come down in judgment upon all, and to convince all the ungodly of their ungodly deeds, which they have committed; and all this in the day that he shall come; For it is a day of power. (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 3:5–10)

Through an inspired Joseph Smith, the prophesied ministry of the Messiah, who "shall come, as it is written in the book of the prophets," becomes breathtaking in its endless reach. In this view, the key moment that Isaiah 40:3–5 envisions finds fulfillment not only in John the Baptist's heralding ministry but also in "a day of power" wherein the Messiah Himself comes.

In this connection, in an intriguing revelation received by Joseph Smith that partially concerns the end-time, the Lord utters a standard warning, “Be not deceived” (Luke 21:8), and later urges His people to “continue in steadfastness, looking . . . for the valleys to be exalted, and for the mountains to be made low, and for the rough places to become smooth—and all this when the angel shall sound his trumpet” (Doctrine and Covenants 49:23). Moreover, in a prayer from Joseph Smith, we read that the divine work of the latter days, which shall end with the “supper of the Lamb” and the coming of “the Bridegroom,” begins with the imperatives “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Doctrine and Covenants 65:1, 3). With a flick of a celestial switch, the prophecy from Isaiah 40:4 is applied not only to the ministries of the Baptist and of the Messiah but also to conditions at the end of days, clearly demonstrating that prophecy can point to more than one future event or circumstance.

This discussion would not be complete without a word about the origins of baptism as an ordinance. It began with Adam and Eve. Once the couple were banished from the Garden of Eden, their story is one of undeviating obedience to the Lord. After offering “the firstlings of their flocks” in response to the Lord’s command to do so (Moses 5:5), they reach a point at which the Lord can reveal more. At a time soon thereafter, “an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam” (Moses 5:6), and Adam receives a sweeping revelation on repentance and baptism (see Moses 6:51–68). In the midst of this experience, Adam “was caught away by the Spirit of the Lord, and was carried down into the water, and was laid under the water, and was brought forth out of the water. And thus he was baptized.” Immediately, “the Spirit of God descended upon him, and thus he was born of the Spirit” (Moses 6:64–65). From this moment of moments, baptism by water and baptism by the Spirit are inextricably entwined.

### **Luke 3:7–20. John the Baptist’s Ministry**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 201–205.*

The appearance and then disappearance of John the Baptist from Luke’s narrative marks an important moment in the march of events toward the Savior’s ministry. Beginning with Hans Conzelmann, some commentators see this moment in Luke’s presentation as bringing the era of the old prophets to an end and introducing the new age of the Messiah, marking a distinct break between the epochs of John and Jesus. But the matter is more complex because both Jesus and His closest followers regularly draw connections back to the ministry of the Baptist, tying the two men together. For example, when disciples of John come to Jesus with questions and then leave, Jesus turns to His audience and declares that the Baptist “is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee,” plainly weaving John the Baptist’s activities into His own and linking the two ministries to the same prophecy.<sup>1</sup> Peter, when recounting his interaction with the Gentile Cornelius and the spontaneous

coming of the Holy Ghost into that man's home, cites the linkage between the baptisms of John and Jesus as the key element that brings him to baptize Cornelius (see Acts 11:15–17; also Paul's words in Acts 13:24–25).

All New Testament sources consistently fold John the Baptist and Jesus together. In the case before us, Luke does so by linking their births through angelic announcements and by pointing to a biological relation through their mothers. Moreover, Luke, Matthew, and John preserve an ancient memory that connects the two men through the Baptist's preaching. According to Luke 3:16, the Baptist first declares, "I indeed baptize you with water." Second, he mentions that "one mightier than I cometh." Third, in a humble affirmation of his utter unworthiness, he intones that "the latchet of [His] shoes I am not worthy to unloose." Not surprisingly, this same order of the three—baptism, one who comes, and unworthiness to untie sandals—appears in Matthew's Gospel, which shares basic features with Luke's (Matthew 3:11). But more compelling are the following words of the Baptist as quoted in John's account, which shares little with Luke and Matthew: "I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you . . . who [is] coming after me . . . whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose" (John 1:26–27). Notably, the three elements stand in the same order as in Luke and Matthew, plainly hinting at a strong memory among Jesus's disciples—it is they who preserve the memory, not John's disciples—that the Baptist's preaching sets the activities of the two men side by side, intertwining them. That this memory persists long beyond Jesus's ministry is shown by Paul's preaching recorded in the book of Acts, which was also written by Luke. After noting that John actively baptizes "before [Jesus'] coming," Paul quotes the Baptist's words: "There cometh one after me, whose shoes of his feet I am not worthy to loose" (Acts 13:24–25). Here, embedded in the memory of second-generation followers, in this case Paul, we find the same order of the three elements from John's preaching—baptism, one who comes, and unworthiness to untie sandals.

In Luke's Gospel, prominent passages exist wherein Jesus openly links Himself to John the Baptist (Luke 7:24–28; 20:1–8). Even in popular lore, people draw connections between the two—as in Herod Antipas's musings about John the Baptist and Jesus because "it was said of some, that John was risen from the dead," leading Herod to say that "John have I beheaded: but who is this [Jesus], of whom I hear such things?" (Luke 9:7, 9). Incidentally, Herod is plainly confident that John cannot return from the dead, showing that he does not believe in the Resurrection.

Other statements in Acts make the same connection. According to Acts 1:5, the risen Savior promises the eleven Apostles that they will "be baptized with the Holy Ghost" in a manner much as John the Baptist "baptized with water." Moreover, when choosing a successor to Judas Iscariot, Peter, the spokesman of the eleven, asks that the new Apostle be one who has followed Jesus "beginning from the baptism of John," illustrating that John's ministry is a clear marker for that of Jesus (Acts 1:22).

A further coloration may be the brightest and most enticing. Luke writes that John "came into all the country about Jordan," repeating the past tense of the Greek verb *erchomai*, "came" (Luke 3:3). Then he quotes the Baptist speaking about "one mightier than I [who] cometh," again repeating the verb *erchomai*,

“come” (Luke 3:16). The “coming one,” as He is called, arrives as the long-awaited messenger of God, as the expected king of old prophecy, and as the bearer of both God’s blessings and judgment.<sup>2</sup> Hence, John comes and Jesus comes, both bringing divine powers; thus, the cords between the Baptist and the Savior, in Luke’s hands, are thick and richly painted.

We also come upon a link forged in modern scripture. From a revelation received by Joseph Smith in early May 1833, we learn that during John the Baptist’s mortal ministry he produced a record, now lost, that describes Jesus in words akin to the prologue in the fourth Gospel (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:6–17; John 1:1–18). In sweeping language, John discloses the content of a vision wherein he “beheld [Jesus’] glory, as the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, . . . which came and dwelt in the flesh.” Moreover, the Baptist “saw that [Jesus] received not of the fulness at the first, but received grace for grace.” Then, looking to the future, John bore record that Jesus eventually “received all power, both in heaven and on earth” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:11–12, 17).

We should not step away from John the Baptist without reviewing the sketch by Josephus (born ca. AD 37), the only roughly contemporary author who wrote about him. In his most comprehensive work about his people and their history, *The Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus briefly took up John the Baptist as a subject, calling him “the Baptist.” Josephus’ treatment of John the Baptist carries the feeling of authenticity because it does not exhibit any overtly Christian interests that might go back to a Christian editor. Rather, Josephus introduced John the Baptist by saying that “some of the Jews” saw Herod’s execution of him as the reason for “divine vengeance” in a later, severe defeat of his army, thus elevating the Baptist to a high status before God. Josephus described John the Baptist’s teachings thus: “He . . . exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism.” We notice immediately the lack of John the Baptist’s stern warning about the end of time that the Gospel writers record. We also miss the Baptist’s central message about the Messiah, though Josephus noted that Herod Antipas feared John as a possible insurrectionist, which draws up messianic connections, for “the crowds about him . . . were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons.” Moreover, Josephus mistakenly held that John the Baptist’s well-known baptism was not “to gain pardon for whatever sins [people] committed, but as a consecration of the body.” Such views lead us to conclude that Josephus did not possess fully accurate information about the Baptist.

### **Luke 3:21–22. Jesus’s Baptism**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 209–211.*

In these verses (Luke 3:21–22), the focus moves entirely onto the Savior, shifting decisively away from the Baptist. In fact, Luke does not even mention that John performs Jesus’s baptism, though he implies

it. Joseph Smith saw the difficulty and added six words to help clarify: “Jesus also *came unto John; and being baptized of him*” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 3:28). Instead, Luke’s chronology leads him first to highlight John the Baptist’s imprisonment (see verse 20) and only then to bring forward Jesus’s baptism, thus making it difficult to speak of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus after being imprisoned.

But baptism is not the chief focus here. Rather, Luke subtly removes the emphasis from baptism to two other important facts: revelation and the Son of the Father. He achieves the first by the way he writes verse 21, placing his notices of John’s baptisms in subordinate clauses and underscoring the opening of heaven in the main clause. Because “the word of God came unto John in the wilderness,” we know that John carries the gift of revelation (verse 2). Now that the Baptist is in prison, the gift unfolds to Jesus through the opening of heaven to Him. The second emphasis lies in the heavenly voice that sounds over Jesus as Son of the Father in Luke 3:22. This voice mirrors and extends the “voice of one crying in the wilderness,” a prophetic expression that points to John the Baptist (verse 4). In this context, the voice forms a firm connector between John the Baptist and Jesus (but see 9:35–36, where the voice bears no link to the Baptist but only to Jesus).

Luke casts light on another important tie—the one between “all the people” and Jesus (3:21). Just as “the multitude . . . came forth to be baptized” (verse 7), so Jesus comes to receive baptism at John’s hands. In Luke’s retelling, Jesus and the crowd stand on the same continuum. Like the crowd, He has to come to where John the Baptist is ministering. As they, He needs to submit Himself to baptism. As in their case, this baptism will come to Him only through John the Baptist. This continuum gains more prominence through the ensuing genealogy, wherein Jesus is said to be a descendant of Adam (see verse 38). Luke seeks to make plain that Jesus stands fully within the human family, operates in their space of activity, and is not a person of myth or legend.

A number of commentators have wondered whether the descent of the Holy Ghost onto Jesus constitutes a messianic anointing. Such a commissioning of Jesus at His baptism may indeed have occurred. But Luke adds one further piece—that Jesus receives His commissioning directly from His Father. In quoting Jesus’s response to the successful mission of the seventy disciples, Luke writes that “Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said . . . All things are delivered to me of my Father” (10:21–22). Of course, one might suggest, what is “delivered” comes via the Holy Ghost. But Jesus’s naming of His Father points to a direct empowering by the Father, much as John records in quoting Jesus: “The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand,” an act reminiscent of filling the hands of priests during their consecration.<sup>3</sup> Further, “the Father . . . gave me [Jesus] of his fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:4), and this language points to the Father’s direct involvement in authorizing His Son. Hence, one may reasonably see steps in the commissioning of the Savior, one of which is the coming of the Holy Ghost promptly after Jesus’s baptism and another of which is a personal consecration by the Father, whose timing remains unknown—“I am sent,” said Jesus (Luke 4:43; see the note on 4:18).

## Luke 3:23–38. Genealogy of Jesus

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 215–217.*

The appearance of a genealogical table in Luke has naturally led to comparisons with the genealogy in Matthew 1:1–16. The first, clear impression, of course, is that the two records differ notably. Whereas Matthew's is a descending genealogy, tracing Jesus's ancestry down from Abraham and through David, Luke's is ascending, tracing Jesus's ancestry up all the way to Adam. Matthew records the names of forty-two male ancestors between Abraham and Jesus, while Luke sets down fifty-five between the two. Matthew follows Jesus's descent from David through the kingly line, beginning with Solomon, but Luke traces the Savior's progenitors through Nathan, another son of David. Matthew's table rests on the number fourteen, multiplied three times; Luke's list rests on the number seven, multiplied eleven times. Matthew's genealogy aims to demonstrate that Jesus is the king of Israel, descended from David through the line of kings. In fact, Matthew enhances this objective by the repetition of the number fourteen, which represents David, whose name, when reduced to numerical equivalencies in Hebrew, adds up to fourteen ( $D + V + D$  [*daleth + waw + daleth*] = 4 + 6 + 4). In contrast, Luke's genealogy seeks not only to tie Jesus to Adam, and thus to all humankind, but also to further establish His place as God's Son, a concept already revealed in Luke 1–2.

The most compelling question here has to do with the father of Joseph, Mary's husband. In Matthew's list, Jacob is Jesus's grandfather (Matthew 1:15–16); in Luke's list, it is Heli (Luke 3:23). Many theories have arisen about this difference, three of which are worth reviewing. According to one, Matthew preserves the legal lineage of Jesus through Joseph, whereas Luke conserves the biological descent of Jesus through His mother, Mary. This view understands the expression "Joseph, which was the son of Heli" (Luke 3:23) to mean "Joseph, which was the son of Heli by marriage to Mary," though no hint exists in Luke's words that would expressly lead to this conclusion because the Greek word for "son" (*huios*) is never attested as meaning "son-in-law." Although this theory is attractive because it emphasizes how Jesus is literally a descendant of David (known to be accurate from such sources as Romans 1:3), the first securely attributed reference to this theory is not until Annius of Viterbo in AD 1490.

The second theory goes back to a third-century church leader, Julius Africanus (ca. AD 170–245), who in a surviving letter to a certain Aristides holds that a levirate marriage explains the appearance of Jacob in Matthew's list and Heli in Luke's. In Africanus's view, Heli died childless and thereafter his half-brother, Jacob, married his widow and became the biological father of Joseph, making Heli the legal father. A third hypothesis holds that Matthew repeats the legal descent from David—that is, those who would have been kings if the monarchy had continued—and Luke preserves the biological line from which Jesus actually descends. According to this viewpoint, Jacob, the legal heir of David, died childless and the right of royal succession passed to his brother Heli, the actual father of Joseph.

The Joseph Smith Translation may or may not help with these theories. In his inspired review of the New Testament Gospels, Joseph Smith allows Matthew’s language to stand: “Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary” (Matthew 1:16; Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 1:4). However, he adjusts Luke’s expression from “Joseph, which was the son of Heli” to “Joseph, who was from the loins of Heli,” tying Joseph biologically to Heli (Luke 3:23; Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 3:30). Of the three theories, the Joseph Smith Translation would match only the third, chiefly because it holds that Heli was the biological father of Joseph. Other elements are open to question because it is not fully clear how deeply Joseph Smith thought about the matter concerning Jesus’s legal and biological ancestry.

In any study of Luke’s genealogy, one of the challenges facing a student arises from names unattested by any known source. We also have to be aware that the spelling of names may have become corrupted through the centuries. For instance, the name Esli is unattested as a Jewish name (see Luke 3:25). The name translated as Joseph in 3:26 is *Iōsēkh* in its Greek spelling, an otherwise unidentified name. A name that appears in some Greek texts but does not appear in the King James Translation and may represent a textual corruption is Admin in 3:33, standing between Aminadab and Aram (the Greek of this last name is spelled *Arni*). Whether Luke enjoys access to sources for his list that remain unknown to modern scholars persists as an open question.

## Notes

- 1 Luke 7:27, quoting Malachi 3:1; see also Acts 1:5
- 2 See Psalm 118:26; Zechariah 9:9; Malachi 3:1; note on Luke 19:38.
- 3 John 3:35; see Exodus 28:41; 29:9, 35; Leviticus 8:33; Numbers 3:3; Judges 17:5; 1 Kings 13:33; Ezekiel 43:26.

## Credits

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