

## LUKE'S JOURNEYING-UP-TO-JERUSALEM MOTIF AND XENOPHON'S *ANABASIS*

BEN WITHERINGTON III\*

In other contexts, I have written at length on why Luke-Acts should be seen as a single two-part work, two volumes of a historical monograph, as is shown by many features in both volumes (chronological synchronisms, the preface in Luke 1:1–4, and much more).<sup>1</sup> Especially noteworthy is how Luke models a good bit of what he does on previous works of Hellenistic historiography, such as those by Thucydides and Polybius. For example, he handles his speech material following the principles that Thucydides laid out for his own account of the Peloponnesian Wars.<sup>2</sup> This is not in any way to deny the influence of Jewish history writing or the LXX (upon which he draws again and again) on Luke's work, but this brief essay explores a particular possible influence on Luke—Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

For those unfamiliar with Xenophon's work, a few points and a precis are in order. The title *Ἀνάβασις* means “expedition up from” or “ascent,” in this case up from the coastal regions of Asia Minor to the capital city of the Persian Empire, and the work involves Cyrus the Younger,<sup>3</sup> who has recruited Greek mercenaries and is marching from the coast to take the throne from his brother Artaxerxes. Xenophon is the commander of the Greek mercenaries.

This march from the coast of Asia Minor across Mesopotamia provided Xenophon with an opportunity to write one of the most famous military march accounts ever. It focuses on Cyrus's efforts to gain the throne in 401 BC, and it was written not long thereafter in 371 BC by Xenophon, who was an eyewitness and participant in the entire journey. Xenophon himself was not merely a historian. As already noted, he was a military man, and he was credited with some of the success that Cyrus had in fighting his way east towards the head-on collision with his brother. Not only so, but Xenophon was a friend and student of Socrates. He was a man of many parts.

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\* Ben Witherington III is Jean R. Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, 204 N. Lexington Ave., Wilmore, KY 40390. He may be contacted at [ben.witherington@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:ben.witherington@asburyseminary.edu).

<sup>1</sup> On which see my *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) and more recently the commentary on Luke that I wrote with Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Luke*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See the relevant essays in the volume I edited entitled *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially the essay by Jim McCoy, my Greek history teacher at UNC.

<sup>3</sup> He is not to be confused with his namesake Cyrus the Great from the previous century, mentioned in Isaiah as “anointed” by God. That earlier Cyrus is the one who let Jews return home from Babylonian exile.

Like the most famous of all Greek works, Homer's *Odyssey*, which seems to have influenced the way Luke tells the story of Paul's sea journey to Rome, the *Anabasis* was also a widely known and greatly praised work, recording one of the great human adventures of that whole age. It was this work by Xenophon that later inspired Philip of Macedon and Alexander to think that a Hellenic army could actually conquer the known world. If indeed Theophilus was a literate Greek, it is very likely he knew Xenophon's work. And it should be noted that Luke himself shows he has a personal knowledge of the philosophical scene in Athens of his own day (see Acts 17:21). There is evidence he knew far more than just the LXX written in Greek. He also knew Greek philosophy, Greek rhetoric (again, see my commentaries on Luke and Acts), and likely some Greek classics as well. And Luke believed that he was part of a divine movement that was turning the Empire upside down with the Good News, not of the Emperor (see the Good News inscription at Priene<sup>4</sup>), but of King Jesus, and was positively changing the hearts and minds of the world for the sake of the Kingdom of God, in ways that Cyrus the Younger or even Alexander the Great could hardly have imagined.

In the *Anabasis*, Cyrus is killed early on in the *account* of the journey as recorded in Book 1, where Xenophon provides a eulogy for him. Cyrus had made it all the way to Cunaxa, on the Euphrates only about 43 miles north of Babylon, near modern-day Baghdad, and died there from battle wounds.<sup>5</sup> It is important, however, to note that the story Xenophon is telling in Book 1 is punctuated in almost every subsection with the same sort of journeying, or "going up" language we find in Luke's Gospel. Importantly, the language of "going up" has to do with going to the capital city where Artaxerxes reigns. It is not *literal* language like one would use about climbing a mountain. Indeed, the journey involves many ups and downs, for example in Cyrus's case marching up through the Cilician gates and then down the other side to a fertile plain. No, the language is meant to convey the notion of going to the capital city, the politically highest place in the realm.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is going up and down geographically until he gets to Jericho, where the journey to Jerusalem is well and truly geographically uphill. But all along, as in

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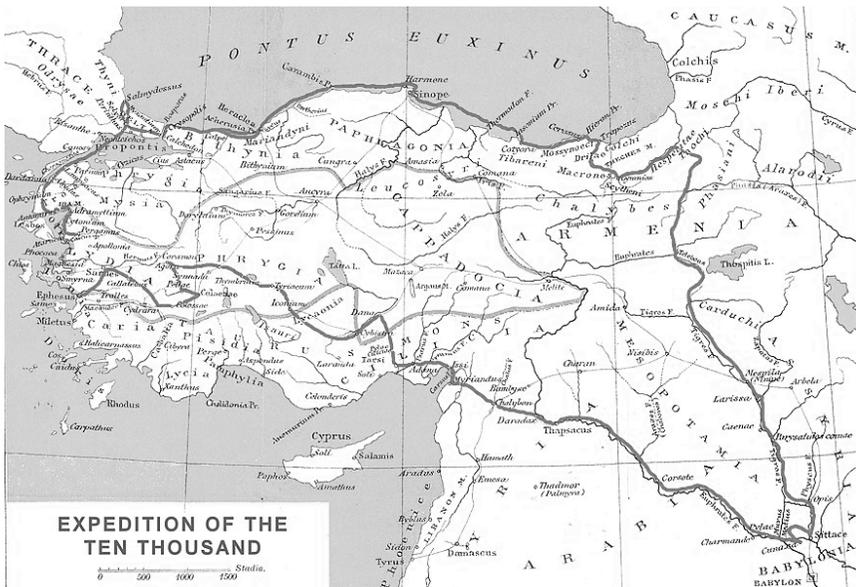
<sup>4</sup> The pertinent excerpt reads thus: "Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance [excelled even our anticipations], surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings [εὐαγγέλιον] for the world that came by reason of him." This English translation may be found in Craig A. Evans, "Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel," *JGRChJ* 1 (2000): 69.

<sup>5</sup> It needs to be borne in mind that the Persian Empire had several capitals, and Persepolis was not the main one; indeed, it seems to have been more of a ceremonial site. There was in addition Babylon, Susa, and Ecbatana.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Book 1.3, para. 3, line 1, where we hear that Cyrus's soldiers "when they heard what Cyrus said, and how he had scouted the idea of *going up* to the great king's palace, expressed their approval" (ταῦτα εἶπεν· οἱ δὲ στρατιῶται οἱ τε αὐτοῦ ἐκεῖνου καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι ταῦτα ἀκούσαντες ὅτι οὐ φαίη παρὰ βασιλεία πορεύεσθαι ἐπήνεσαν).

the *Anabasis*, Luke characterizes the journey as a “going up to Jerusalem.” So, in the *Anabasis*, we have a story about a man who would be king, who is marching up to the Persian capital and is killed by the ruler at the time (the henchmen of his brother Artaxerxes doing the deed), and Cyrus is eulogized by Xenophon.

However—and here is one of the most interesting things about the *Anabasis*—even after the death of Cyrus, the journey continues, for *six more books*, the journey back east. And where, you might ask, does almost all of this transpire? In the very same region that Luke records early Christianity first blossomed and spread—from Antioch to Ephesus and beyond, as can be seen in a map of Xenophon’s journey. On the following map, that journey is traced with the dark, heavy line that encompasses most of Asia Minor.<sup>7</sup>



How is this relevant for our reading of Luke-Acts? In this essay I am concentrating on its relevance for the reading of the Gospel of Luke, but it needs to be noted that the Gospel has a journeying up “to Jerusalem” orientation, and the book of Acts has a journeying from Jerusalem through the Empire to Rome. As has often been pointed out by Lukan scholars, about *forty percent* of Luke’s Gospel focuses on Jesus’s journey up to Jerusalem and what happened along the way (Luke 9:51–19:44). So much does Luke’s Gospel have a “to Jerusalem” orientation and thus a journeying motif, that he tells us already in Luke 9 that Jesus is determined—in fact has set his face like a flint—to go up to Jerusalem, and for the next ten chapters we are reminded again and again that Jesus is on this journey to Jerusalem (9:51). Acts

<sup>7</sup> The map is in the public domain and may be found at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Expedition\\_of\\_the\\_Ten\\_Thousand.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Expedition_of_the_Ten_Thousand.jpg).

devotes an amazing *one third* of its content to Paul's final journey from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 19:21–28:31). Obviously, the journeying motif is major for Luke in both volumes, and for both of his major protagonists—Jesus and Paul. And in both cases, the end result is judicial murder.

If we ask where Luke could have gotten the idea of making two long journeys that lead to the death of the major protagonists in the stories such a major feature in his two-volume historical work, Xenophon's *Anabasis* very readily comes to mind. The narrative parallels, including this journeying motif, between Luke and Acts have been well noted and explored by Robert Tannehill in his excellent and influential two-volume work *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*.<sup>8</sup> Here, however, we need to focus on the pattern in Luke's Gospel.

Here is the repeated theme about Jesus's journeying to Jerusalem:

- As the days drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, he set his face to go up (πορεύεσθαι) to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).<sup>9</sup>
- [The Samaritans] would not give him hospitality because his face was set towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:53).
- He went on his way through towns and villages, imparting his teaching while travelling to Jerusalem (Luke 13:22).
- "I must be on my way.... No prophet can die away from Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33).
- On the way to Jerusalem he passed through the border country between Samaria and Galilee (Luke 17:11).
- He said: "Behold, we are going up (ἀναβαίνομεν) to Jerusalem" (Luke 18:31).
- He went on to tell a parable, as he was near to Jerusalem (Luke 19:11).
- After saying this, he went on ahead, going up (ἀναβαίνων)<sup>10</sup> to Jerusalem (Luke 19:28).
- And when he drew near and saw the city of Jerusalem, he wept (Luke 19:41).

This regular drumbeat in the narrative is hard to miss and it is almost completely missing in the other Gospels. And the question is—why? Why all this emphasis on going up to Jerusalem? Is it just because that's where prophets go to die? This hardly seems a sufficient explanation. Were there precedents in earlier historical narratives about a man who would be king who tragically dies not far outside the capital city where he planned to be king and bring in his kingdom? Well, yes, the story of Cyrus the Younger immediately comes to mind. Scholars have long known that Luke is not just a slavish copier of his sources. One can easily compare his use of Mark (only about 52% of Mark appears in some form in Luke, compared to 95% in Matthew) and realize he is editing and adding things *with a purpose* not just to save space on the scroll, and one of the main things he is adding is this journey-

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<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. note 6 above.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Luke 18:31 and 19:28 to the title of Xenophon's work.

ing motif. If one compares this with Mark or Matthew, the former spends about one chapter on the final journey, the latter about two chapters. These pale in comparison to what Luke does. But there is more.

In fact, the journeying up to Jerusalem motif is already in evidence in Luke's mostly unique birth narratives in Luke 1–2. The Gospel actually begins with the story of Zechariah going up to Jerusalem from somewhere in Judea to take his turn serving in the temple. This in turn is followed by the story of Mary and Joseph not merely going up to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus, but carrying on to Jerusalem in Luke 2:22–38. The holy family does not go to Egypt but rather up to Jerusalem for rites of purification and the dedication of Jesus to God. This story is found only in Luke and it includes the unique story of the encounters with Simeon and Anna in the temple precincts. Were this not enough, we have yet another journeying up to Jerusalem story in Luke 2:41–52, a story only in Luke, about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph going up to Jerusalem for the festival and Jesus teaching in the temple precincts. In short, we have three separate “journeying up to Jerusalem” stories in the space of the first two chapters of this Gospel, a very different start to the Gospel than we find in Matthew. In short, the motif has been well established even before we hear about Jesus's ministry. This “to Jerusalem” orientation based on the precedent in earlier history writing of a journey up to the political and religious center can also explain why Luke flips the order of Jesus's temptations in Luke 4, so that the last of the three temptations is in Jerusalem, whereas in Matthew we have the more logical order of temptations where the Devil shows and offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world, *after* the temptation in Jerusalem. But there is yet more.

Scholars have often pondered why Luke doesn't include any of the resurrection appearances in Galilee. Did he just not know about them? I doubt this is the case, especially if, as Luke 1:1–4 says, he had consulted the eyewitnesses, among others, in composing his account. And he knows perfectly well from Mark 14:28 that Jesus promised to meet the disciples again in Galilee. Why does he *leave this out entirely*?

My answer is that it does not suit the historical superstructure he is creating for his two-volume historical work, with journeying to Jerusalem being the guiding theme in the Gospel, and in Acts journeying from Jerusalem west in the Empire to Rome, *featuring* the various regions of what we would call Turkey. So fixated is Luke on preserving this motif that not only does he omit the references to appearances in Galilee (and says almost nothing about the evangelism of Galilee, though cf. Acts 10:37) he even records Jesus's saying: “Stay in Jerusalem until you receive power from on high” (Luke 24:49). If Theophilus had only Luke's Gospel, he would never have known about the conclusions to Matthew's telling of the Gospel in Matthew 28 and John's in John 21, which focus on last appearances in Galilee.

One more thing. Apart from passing references in John 14–17 where Jesus speaks of the need to return to his Father, not least so he can send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the *only* Gospel writer that tells us about Jesus's own “going up” or “ascent” (i.e., the Ascension) is Luke, not once but twice at the end of Luke 24 and at the beginning of Acts 1. “Going up” in this case into heaven is critical. After the resurrection, Jesus has one more journey to take—to heaven when he becomes

King indeed, Lord over all. There could hardly be a higher place from which to reign than “the Jerusalem which is above,” as Paul calls it—namely, heaven. Why so much interest in and emphasis on these journeys?

Luke is concerned that Theophilus understand “the things that have happened among us” by giving him an orderly account that will have at least some familiar motifs from Greek literature that Theophilus would already know. The good historian takes into account what his audience does and doesn’t know, and since Theophilus was probably Luke’s patron, a high-status person deserving the title “noble,” all the more reason for Luke to write his two-volume work in a way that would be a word on target for Theophilus, a Greek. The Good News would be that Jesus, unlike Cyrus the Younger, had not failed in his quest not merely to reach the capital city, but to become the king his people needed. Like Cyrus he tragically died young. Unlike Cyrus, he cheated death, and in due course reigned from heaven and empowered his followers to continue the journeying, all the way to the Eternal City, where the Good News about this crucified and risen king was to be safely ensconced from then until this very day.