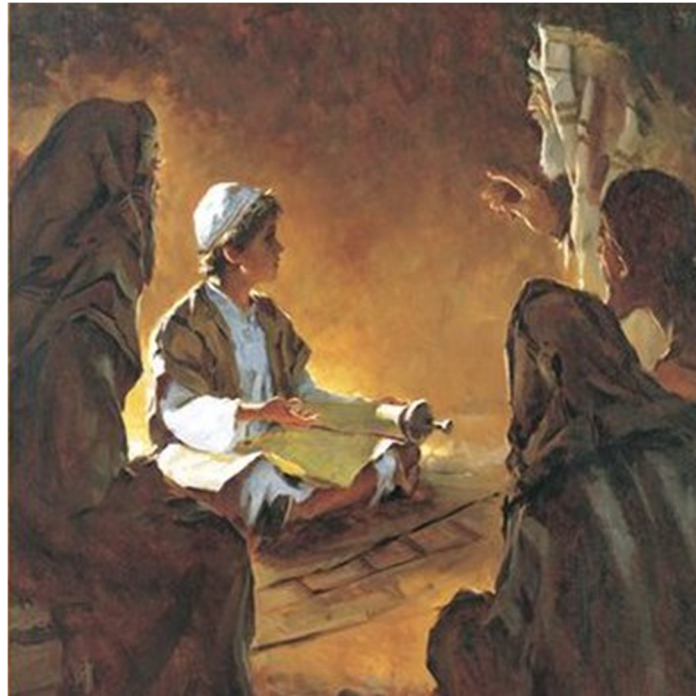


THE BOY JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

~ Luke 2: 41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.



Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52)

As Luke's infancy narrative comes to a close, he makes a transition to John and Jesus' ministry through a single incident from Jesus' adolescence (L. T. Johnson 1991:60). This is the only such incident in the Gospels. The narrative of Jesus in the temple consists of the three elements common to all narratives: orientation, complication and resolution.

The Orientation: Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

The events leading to Jesus' exchange with his parents begin with their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The parents of Jesus were devout Jews. The Old Testament commanded such a trip for three festivals a year (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles; Ex 23:14-17; 34:22-23; Deut 16:16). But by the first century, God-fearing Jews made only one journey a year because of the distances involved. The Passover was the major feast celebrated at the beginning of the Jewish year. Only men were required to make the journey, so Mary's presence shows her commitment (Preisker 1964:373). Jerusalem was 129km from Nazareth, so the trip would take three or four days. Though some have argued that women and children travelled separately from the men as a way to explain how Jesus got lost, there is no ancient text that describes this practice.

Jesus is twelve years old. If the Mishna (the first written recording of the Oral Torah of the Jewish people) is relevant to the first-century Jewish practice, which is likely in this case, then religious instruction would have become more intense for Jesus upon his reaching twelve. The custom of bar mitzvah for a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy was not in place at this time (Fitzmyer 1981:440).

The Complication: Jesus goes missing

After the seven days of celebration, Jesus' family returns home. Luke records an incident that may give the impression of parental irresponsibility on the part of Joseph and Mary. For the whole first day of their return journey, they apparently failed to notice that Jesus had been left behind in Jerusalem; they assumed that he was somewhere among the group of pilgrims (friends and relatives) with whom they were "coming down" from Jerusalem. Rabbinic tradition may help to resolve this difficulty and show Jesus' parents in a more positive light. We learn from rabbinic literature that at the start of each pilgrimage pilgrims gathered in their towns and villages. Whole households would set out, leaving very few people at home. Along the way, the pilgrims joined other bands of pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem. After arriving in Jerusalem, members of these expanded groups tended to remain together, worshiping, studying and walking about the city in the company of those with whom they had journeyed to Jerusalem. By the time pilgrims began their journey home, they had spent more than a week with the members of their group. A self-confident child could easily have spent the first day of the return journey away from his parents, among the large number of new and old acquaintances, without his parents becoming concerned or being thought irresponsible.

The Resolution: Jesus is found in the Temple

The next part of this story is also unusual. When Jesus is finally found, he is in the temple court, almost holding court himself, sitting and discussing issues of Torah with his elders (Lk. 2:46-47). How far should we believe this of a twelve-year-old boy? Two aspects of the episode should be taken into consideration.

In the rabbinic world, a special effort was made to give everyone an opportunity to participate in discussion. When a question was raised, the first to answer was not the greatest scholar, but rather the youngest. Quiet was not considered of major importance. Neither was there a

demand for uniformity of opinion. Students were encouraged to voice their opinions and argue their case. Therefore, it is quite possible that the boy was given a hearing and an opportunity to show his ability, even in the very exalted company of teachers found in the temple courts.

Apparently after one day's journey back to Jerusalem and a day looking for Jesus, it is on the third day that Joseph and Mary discover him at the temple, listening to and asking questions of the teachers. When the parents finally find him, Mary steps forward to address the young Jesus in a way that both parents and children can appreciate. She expresses concern about the anxiety Jesus has caused by remaining at the temple.

The mild parental complaint leads to Jesus' self-declaration of his mission. Jesus' parents and Luke's readers need to appreciate that Jesus understood his mission. From the very beginning he is reflecting on the will of God. He starts revealing himself right in the centre of Judaism's religious capital.

But there is a second key detail. Jesus refers to God as his *Father*. This alludes to the sense of family relationship and intimacy Jesus has with his heavenly Father (10:21-22). Such closeness to God not only is something Jesus' parents need to appreciate but also is a point the disciples will struggle to grasp (9:59-62; 14:26; Mk 10:29-30). In fact, Luke makes this the first note in a series of revelations that will build the case for who Jesus is. The infancy material stresses Jesus as Messiah, but this text is one of two hints early in Luke's Gospel that he is also much more. Luke reveals Jesus' identity gradually, bringing the reader along in an understanding of who Jesus is. So this first clue comes from Jesus himself. The other major clue comes in the infancy section, where Jesus' divine origin is tied to the Spirit (1:31-35). Jesus is breaking new ground with his parents here and they need to understand who he is, just as Luke's readers do. The text makes it clear that at the time they still *did not understand what he was saying to them*. But Mary *treasured* (or pondered) *all these things in her heart*, an appropriate response to Jesus' somewhat enigmatic remarks. Mary does what Luke wants his readers to do as well. It is good to pause and contemplate who Jesus is and the mission he performs. Even two thousand years of history does not do away with the need for such reflection.

Obedient to his parents, Jesus goes home with them to Nazareth. While there he grows *in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men* (Lk 1:80; 2:40).

