

§ 018

**THE VISIT OF THE BOY JESUS TO JERUSALEM
WHEN TWELVE YEARS OLD**

⁴¹ Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³ And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴ but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵ and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." ⁴⁹ And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them.¹

Luke 2:41-50

Introduction

1. With this account Luke ended the infancy narrative (1:5–2:52) in the temple where it began (1:5–23).
 - Just as the previous account portrayed Jesus as having fulfilled the Jewish law by his circumcision and redemption (2:21–40), so here he is portrayed as trained in the law (2:46–47).
2. There has been a great deal of speculation about whether 2:40 may have been the original conclusion to the infancy narrative and whether this passage was a later insertion into the account by Luke.²
 - As it now stands, however, the account concludes the infancy narrative, and in it Luke portrayed Jesus' awareness of his unique relationship to the Father.
 - Because of that relationship, Jesus must be in his Father's house.
 - Later in Luke 9:51–19:28 Jesus would again go to Jerusalem, and again it would be at a Passover.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Lk 2:41-50). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² See Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 479–84.

- The form of this account is that of a pronouncement story in that its goal and culmination come in the concluding statement or pronouncement by Jesus in 2:49.
 - This is the first such story in the Gospel.³
3. The setting of our story is Jewish and the history-like quality of the account becomes immediately apparent when one compares it to the stories found in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas or the Protevangelium of James.⁴
- The present account foreshadows Jesus' future greatness as well as his future teaching mission and reveals an awareness of his unique relationship with God. It forms a fitting transition to Jesus' ministry in 3:1ff.⁵

Commentary

1. The birth story comes to a climax with an account of an incident which took place when (by Jewish standards) Jesus was on the threshold of adult life.⁶

³ The existence of other stories concerning the unusual abilities of great men in their youth says nothing about the historicity of such stories but only of the fact that there exists a natural interest in information concerning the childhood and youth of famous people. Today historians are often interested in the early years of famous people in order to understand how and why they developed into the people they became. What were the childhood experiences that caused them to become the kind of people they were? Luke had no such purpose in mind. He sought rather to show that Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, was already aware of his being Christ and Lord, or better yet the Son of God, when he was twelve.

⁴ See W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 1:370–401.

⁵ Stein, R.H. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 24: Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (120). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁶ A story which tells of the unusual ability of a boy destined for a great future, or of the early insight of a future religious teacher, inevitably finds parallels in various cultures, even down to the detail of the boy being twelve years old. Bultmann, 327f., lists: Moses (Jos. Ant. 2:230; Philo, Mos. 1:21); Josephus (Jos. Vita 2); Cyrus (Herodotus 1:114f.); Alexander (Plutarch, Alex. 5); Apollonius (Philostratus, Vita Apoll. 1:7); Si Osiris; and Buddha. There is nothing surprising about such parallels; even today accounts of great men will devote attention to their precociousness (or lack of it!). Hence these parallels cannot be used to show that the story in Lk. is legendary, but only that the motif is a common one. Dibelius, 103-106, who is particularly insistent on the 'legendary' form of the narrative, emphasises that the form does not necessarily determine the historicity of the story. B. van Iersel argues that vs. 44 and 47, which contain the most 'legendary' elements, are secondary features in a story of paradigmatic form whose chief point is the dissociation of Jesus from his earthly parents and his attachment to his heavenly Father; whether or not these verses are secondary (*contra* Schürmann, I, 134f.), van Iersel rightly sees that the story is not basically about a precocious Jesus. [Marshall, I.H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (125). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.]

- It illustrates the _____⁷ which he displayed in religious discussions even at this early age (2:40), and links his interest in the temple with his consciousness of a filial relationship to God, so that ultimately the story serves to throw light on the character of Jesus as the Son of God.
 - Hence a clear contrast is drawn between Jesus' earthly parents and his heavenly Father.
 - The story concludes with a general note of his further growth until it was time for his adult ministry.
2. In itself the story is a natural one, and does not include any supernatural features which might lead to skeptical estimates of its historicity.
- It portrays a growth in religious understanding such as might be expected in Jesus in view of his later life, and this understanding is complemented by his obedience to his parents.
 - Both setting and contents are thoroughly Jewish.
3. It has been argued that the story betrays no knowledge of the virgin birth, and that the failure of Mary and Joseph to understand Jesus accords ill with the earlier narratives (2:19, 33).
- But this difficulty was not present to the mind of Luke, who has included verse 50.
 - The surprise is a conventional feature, and is adequately explained by the way in which Jesus left them to stay behind in the temple; the picture is one of awe and fear as they wonder what their unusual child will do next.
 - It is perhaps surprising that the parents should have travelled so far from Jerusalem without discovering their child was missing, and details about how Jesus fended for himself in Jerusalem are missing; but these features are due to concentration on the religious point of the story.⁸
4. *Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.* *Went* is an example of the iterative imperfect which indicates that Jesus' family habitually went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.
- *Every year* further emphasizes this.
 - Passover was one of the three annual festivals Jewish men were required to celebrate in Jerusalem (Deut 16:16).

⁷ *wisdom*

⁸ Marshall, I.H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (125). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.

- Passover itself was the opening feast of the seven-day (or eight-day by another reckoning) festival called the Feast of Unleavened Bread and was celebrated on the fifteenth day of Nisan.
- The entire feast, however, was popularly called the Feast of Passover (cf. Luke 22:1; John 13:1).

5. Passover commemorates God's deliverance or exodus of his people out of Egypt and the death angel's passing over Israel's firstborn.
 - In this last plague the death angel visited Egypt's firstborn.
 - However, when he came upon the households of Israel, he observed the blood of the Passover lamb smeared on the door lintels and "passed over" those homes.
 - Passover could not be observed annually by Jews living in the Diaspora since it had to be observed in Jerusalem.
 - This verse and the next indicate that Joseph and Mary, as devout Jews, sought to celebrate the festival yearly in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Sam 1:3, 7, 21; 2:19).⁹
6. *And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom.* Whether Jesus had already gone with His parents to Jerusalem at an earlier date we do not know.
 - In any case, Luke relates that He did go when He was twelve years old.
 - That was probably in order to be prepared for the ceremony of the following year, when He would be permitted as a young Jewish boy to join the religious community as a responsible member—i.e. as "son of the commandment" (*Bar Mitzvah*).
 - This important event takes place when the Jewish boy is thirteen.¹⁰
7. *When the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem.* After the seven festival days (Exod. 13:6) were over, Joseph and Mary left Jerusalem, together with others attending the festival from Nazareth and its environs, and were on their way back to their homes.
 - It is possible that it was the custom in those days that when a company of festival pilgrims went on their return-journey the women went on ahead with the younger children and the men followed them.
 - The bigger boys then travelled either along with the fathers or with the mothers.
 - Joseph, therefore, may have thought, when he did not notice Jesus, that He was with Mary, and Mary probably thought that He was with Joseph.

⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 121.

¹⁰ Geldenhuys, N. (1977). *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (126). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

- In addition, it was a definite custom that in the evening, after the day's journey, the whole of the travelling company came together for the night at a place previously arranged.
- At the end of the day's journey Joseph and Mary then noticed to their consternation that Jesus was not with the company and must thus have remained behind in Jerusalem.^{11 12}

8. *Supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey.* An ordinary day's journey varied from eighteen to thirty miles.
- But when a party started on a journey, the first day's journey was invariably shorter.
 - When everything was ready for the caravan, the travelers slowly marched on, but halted for the first night at a distance some three to eight miles from the place of their departure.
 - Thus if anything was found to be left behind, someone could easily return and retrieve it and rejoin the caravan the next day.
9. In our text-verse, they made the short journey of the first day, and then halted for the night.
- So instead of traveling all day without missing Jesus, they only traveled a few hours.
 - Traditionally, the first stopping place of all traveling parties who left Jerusalem for the north was the ancient Beer, or Beeroth, now supposed to be the site of el-Bireh on the way to Nablus, ten miles north of Jerusalem, or, in ancient days, a three-hours' journey.¹³

¹¹ From all this it appears that they had a great deal of confidence in the young child. They knew that He would be where He ought to be, so that, when they left Jerusalem, they had not definitely ascertained whether He was with the party of travellers. Only in the evening, when they necessarily had to seek Him as the family groups came together for the night, did they discover that He was not there. Accordingly there can be no question of their having neglected Him. The whole occurrence may be explained, on the one hand, from the fact that they had the fullest confidence in Him and knew that He would be where He ought to be, and on the other hand from the fact that they did not realize that on His first definite attendance at the festival in the temple and acquaintance with the doctors He would naturally tarry in the temple as long as possible. While knowing that He would be where He ought to be, they nevertheless did not realize that in those circumstances He would inevitably be in His "Father's house", the temple.

[Geldenhuy's, *Gospel of Luke*]

¹² Geldenhuy's, *Gospel of Luke*, 126.

¹³ Freeman, J.M., & Chadwick, H.J. (1998). *Manners & customs of the Bible*. "Rewritten and updated by Harold J. Chadwick"--Cover.; Includes index. (Rev. ed.) (502). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers.

10. *After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.* The questions Jesus put to the teachers were probably not merely boyish inquiries but the kind of probing questions used in ancient academies and similar discussions.

- He also gave answers (verse 47).
- J.W. Doeve suggests that Jesus engaged in a midrashic discussion of biblical texts: “Their amazement must relate to his deducing things from Scripture which they had never found before” (*Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 4], 105).¹⁴

11. *And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.* Jesus’ wisdom (cf. 2:52) caused Israel’s leading teachers to be amazed.

- No doubt Luke wanted his readers to see in this incident the unique wisdom of God’s Son.
- This amazement is caused by the wisdom of his understanding as revealed by both his questions (2:46) and answers (2:47).
- We have already seen the response of “amazement” in 2:18, 33, and this was a favorite word of Luke’s.
- Since this amazement is frequently the result of an encounter with the supernatural (cf. 8:56; 24:22; Acts 2:7, 12), Luke may have intended his readers to see in this incident a supernatural display of wisdom. (Cf. Acts 9:21 for the same reaction to the witness of Saul of Tarsus.)¹⁵

12. *And his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.”*

13. *“Why were you looking for me?”* This can be understood in two ways:¹⁶

¹⁴ Leifeld, W.L. (1984). Luke. In F.E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (F.E. Gaebelin, Ed.) (852). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁵ Stein, *Luke*, 122.

¹⁶ Some have sought to see in these words an accusation by Jesus’ parents of deception or betrayal on the basis of such passages as Gen 12:18; 20:9; 26:10, but this seems too subtle and would not have been perceived by Luke’s readers. Why were Joseph and Mary surprised by this incident in light of the miraculous announcement of Jesus’ birth (1:26–38), the angelic message (2:1–20), and the prophetic pronouncements (2:21–40)? Mary, despite all these indicators, seems to have been uncomprehending of just who her son really was. Such a failure to understand is also found in the disciples (cf. 9:44–45; 18:31–34; 24:25–26). We should remember, however, that some twelve years had transpired between this event and what had preceded. In the meantime the lack of other stories like this suggests that Jesus’ “silent years” were quite normal. After over a decade of normalcy the supernatural nature of their son and his destiny broke in on them again. As a result they were surprised and once more needed to reflect on these things (2:19, 51). Also possible is that the confusion of Jesus’ parents here involved not so much the

- (1) Why were you searching all over for me? Didn't you know I would be in the temple?
- (2) Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?

14. The latter (which focuses on the why) is more probable than the first (which focuses on the where), since it better fits the thought of the rest of this verse.

- It is unnecessary to see in this a rebuke or accusation on Jesus' part.¹⁷
- Rather it is better to see this as an expression of surprise.
- It assumes that Joseph and Mary, due to their previous experiences as recorded in chaps. 1–2, had a basis for understanding Jesus' unique behavior and relationship to God.
- The "me" and the "I" in the next phrase are emphatic.

14. *I must be.* There is a strong sense of divine causality present here in this verb (*dei*).

15. *In my Father's house.* Literally *in the of my Father*.

- This can also refer to the "things/affairs" or "people" of my Father, but it is best understood as "house of my Father" due to the parallels in 6:4 and 19:46, where the temple is referred to as God's house. (Cf. also John 2:16, where in the temple cleansing Jesus called the temple "my Father's house.")
- The fact that Jesus was found in the temple (Luke 2:46) also supports this interpretation.

identity of their son, i.e., his divine sonship, but rather how his sonship was manifesting itself. [Stein, *Luke*, 122]

¹⁷ Jesus' reply is no reproof, but an utterance of amazement. From this it may be deduced that He was not uneasy when He had not seen His parents for some days and that His human consciousness had no suspicion that they were anxious about Him. Completely devoted as He was to His earthly parents, He was, nevertheless, especially since He began to grow older, exceptionally self-reliant and strong in personality. In His answer He especially expresses surprise that they had not known where to find Him and had sought Him so anxiously. How was it—that was what His question really amounted to—that when they missed Him they had not at once realised that He had to be busy in the temple about the concerns of His Father, about the revelation, knowledge and service of God? Reverting to Mary's words "*thy father and I*", Jesus here in a special sense calls God His Father because He, and not Joseph, is His real Father.

It is remarkable that the first words of Jesus quoted in the Gospel narrative are these words in which He so clearly refers to His divine Sonship, and in which He points to His life's vocation to be about His Father's business—to serve and glorify Him in all things and at all times. The words indicate a divine inevitability: Jesus *must* be busy with the interests of His Father. With Him it is, however, not a case of external compulsion—His whole nature yearns to serve and obey His Father voluntarily. This divine calling of His is to such a degree of the very first importance that even His most intimate earthly relations must be subordinated to it. To the Child Jesus all this is quite natural and obvious, and so He is amazed that Joseph and Mary did not realize it. [Geldenhuys, *Gospel of Luke*, 128.]

- Compare 10:22; 22:29; 24:49, where Jesus referred to God as “my Father.”¹⁸

16. *And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them.* In the past attempts have been made to preserve Mary, the mother of God’s Son, from this lack of understanding; but such attempts do violence to the text and lose sight of the contrast between Jesus’ wisdom and understanding as God’s Son (2:40, 47, 52) and his parents’ lack of understanding.

- Similar misunderstandings occurred throughout Jesus’ ministry (cf. 4:22; 9:45; 18:34; 24:5–7, 25–26, 45) and would only be remedied by the resurrection.¹⁹

Conclusion

IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE

Jesus’ words are pivotal, and contain within them both an affirmation of his particular relation to God and his commitment to God’s purpose. The first is emphasized by the dramatic development of the story, wherein Luke repeatedly refers to Jesus’ *parents*, Mary refers to Jesus as *child* and speaks of Jesus’ *father*, and Jesus counters by naming the God of the temple as his *Father*. That is, Luke has staged this interchange so as to pinpoint as the primary issue, Who is Jesus’ father? To whom does he owe primary allegiance?¹⁴ Jesus’ aligning himself first with God’s aim comes to the fore especially through his use of the expression “it is necessary”¹⁵—employed regularly throughout Luke-Acts as an indicator of salvation-historical necessity.¹⁶

This dramatic unfolding in the narrative has important repercussions for our understanding of the problematic phrase in 2:49b, translated variously as “in my Father’s house” (so the NRSV), “about my Father’s business,” or “with those belonging to my Father.”¹⁷ The emphasis on *place* (where Jesus was; where they found him; why would anyone look elsewhere?) encourages a rendering that is spatial: “in my Father’s house.” However, the issue is not simply a matter of location. Recalling that the notion of

¹⁸ Stein, *Luke*, 123.

¹⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 123.

¹⁴ Note that Mary’s statement, ἰδοὺ ὁ πατήρ σου κἀγώ, places “your father” in the initial position, not as a requirement of courteous style but as a point of emphasis. See H. J. de Jonge, “Sonship,” 330.

¹⁵ δεῖ; NRSV: “must.”

¹⁶ See in the Gospel: 4:43; 9:22; 13:14, 16, 33; 15:32; 17:25; 19:5; 21:9; 22:7, 37; 24:7, 26, 44. Cf. Cosgrove, “Divine Δεῖ”; Green, *Gospel of Luke*, ch. 2.

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

¹⁷ ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου. See the survey in Sylva, “Cryptic Clause,” 133–34. Weinert (“Multiple Meanings”) rightly draws back from too narrow a specification of the meaning of this phrase, but his recommending reading, “... in my Father’s [company],” is obtuse.

“household” in the Greco-Roman milieu was not only a designation of place but also of authority, we may gain a more helpful view of what this scene portends. Jesus is in the temple, the locus of God’s presence, but he is there under divine compulsion engaged in teaching. The point is that he must align himself with God’s purpose, even if this appears to compromise his relationship with his parents.

As this scene draws to a close, the public ministry of Jesus remains future; the occasion of his remarkable interchange in the temple provides us with a foreshadowing of what is to come, but for the present he will return with his parents to Nazareth. He returns under different circumstances than before. Now he is an active agent in the story, set on working within the contours of God’s aim irrespective of the consequences.²⁰

FURTHER EXPLANATION

Already before his birth John had actively anticipated his later role (1:39–56). Now the preadolescent Jesus will unconsciously reflect the unique relatedness to God that is his. The depths implicit in Jesus’ identity as Son of God (1:32, 35) are more than his human parents are yet able to fathom, and they are left puzzled (v 50). Only the unfolding events of the Gospel to follow will bring Mary clarity (cf. Acts 1:14) about the things she ponders now in her heart (v 51). And those events must wait on Jesus’ full development to maturity (v 52).

The action of the episode takes place in relation to a family habit of making the annual trip to Jerusalem for Passover, just as had been the habit of Samuel’s parents (1 Sam 1:3, 7, 21; 2:19). Passover was one of the three annual pilgrim feasts that involved a trip to Jerusalem (Exod 23:14–17; Deut 16:16). Presumably each year Jesus was taken, but this year something quite different happened. At twelve Jesus would be in terms of the culture of the day beginning to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. In the case of a male child this transition would continue by degrees for several years beyond the twelfth birthday. Girls moved into adulthood more quickly. Quite a number of stories of ancient heroes have them manifesting dramatically at the age of twelve something of their future greatness.

Having seen the festival through its eight days, the parents set off as prearranged with their traveling-party. Such travel-parties or caravans were convenient in that they reduced the demands on the individual for planning and executing such a trip and also provided security. The travel-party would be large and probably chaotic, so that it was not until camp was struck at the end of the first day of traveling that the parents could be sure that Jesus was not somewhere in the travel-party.

²⁰ Green, J.B. (1997). *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (154). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
cf. *confer*, compare

While the parents searched, Jesus spent his time at the temple. He was eager to learn and ready to ask questions as he listened to the learned dialogue between the teachers of the law. Those present could not but notice that his understanding was already prodigious, and they were amazed at the acuteness of his observations.

When his parents discovered Jesus there, their amazement was of quite another sort. Apprehension about the child's safety gave way to shock that their child could have treated them so. Mary expressed to Jesus the parents' sense of betrayal: she accused Jesus of having betrayed the calling that was his as son of Joseph.

Jesus was genuinely surprised, and no doubt grieved that his parents had experienced such distress. He had thought that they would have realized that if he was not with them (in Joseph's house, so to speak) he would be in the temple (in the house of God, his Father). For Jesus that seemed to follow naturally from the unique relationship with God which in his case superimposed itself upon his membership in a human family. Jesus had not betrayed his sonship. In fact he had had no intention of dishonoring either of his sonships (v 48: "your father"; v 49: "my Father"). The human parents thought in terms of filial insubordination only because they had failed to reckon adequately with Jesus' unique identity (cf. 1:32, 35). Nevertheless, this unexpected turn of events set before this maturing child something of the complexity of the relationship between his identity as Son of God and as son in the family of Joseph.

The parents could not comprehend all that was implied about the identity of their child in the words of explanation that he spoke to them. But if not immediately, certainly in the days that followed (cf. v 51) they must have been reassured that Jesus' behavior in Jerusalem had not flowed from an insubordinate spirit. Mary stored it all up and sought to puzzle it all through. As prophecy receives its definitive exposition in fulfillment, so all Mary's experiences in this infancy gospel period will attain their full significance only when the events reaching to Pentecost run their course. Mary's involvement will bridge these early beginnings, the ministry of Jesus (8:19–21), and the early life of the postresurrection church (Act 1:14).

Jesus' unique identity will later be given full expression in his adult ministry. In between, however, there is to be growth in wisdom and in stature and in the capacity to execute that which is pleasing both to God and on the human level.²¹

²¹ Nolland, J. (2002). *Vol. 35A: Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (133). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.