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

Teacher Background

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). 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 (Josephus on Passover, Life 345-54; Antiquities 17.9.3 213-14; Jewish Wars 2.1.3 10-12; 2.14.3 280; Brown 1977:472). 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 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 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).