

Christmas One

The Wisdom of God In the Face of Christ (Luke 2:40-52)

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Introduction

Today, I am going to tell you five things about Luke's understanding of Christ:

1. Jesus was nurtured by devout Jewish parents
2. Jesus was committed to keeping the Mosaic Law
3. Jesus learned about and taught the Torah
4. Jesus grew in wisdom, because he submitted to God and, when appropriate, to fellow human beings
5. Jesus is elusive; he is beyond full grasp, so we must not leave him behind and we must diligently seek the path he walks

Chiastic Structure

- A** Jesus grew in wisdom (40)
- B** Going to Jerusalem (41-42)
- C** Jesus is elusive: Not found (43)
- D** Parents seek and find Jesus (44-46a)
- E** *Jesus in the Temple among the teachers* (46b-47)
- D'** Parents reproach Jesus (48)
- C'** Jesus is elusive: Not understood (49-50)
- B'** Going to Nazareth (51)
- A'** Jesus advanced in wisdom (52)

The unit is:

- Chiastic¹
- Repetitive because it was orally performed
- Framed by mentioning Jesus grew in wisdom
- Centered on Jesus being in the Temple
- Not from Luke, but appropriated by him²

¹ Adopted and modified from Henk J. de Jonge, "Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy: Luke 2:41-51a," *NTS* 24 (1977-78) 337-39; see also Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 37.

² John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Vol. 35a, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989) 127.

Luke suggests that the story originated from Mary herself:

- "His mother treasured all these things (*ta hrēmata*) in her heart" (2:51)
- "Mary treasured all these words (*ta hrēmata*) and pondered them in her heart" (19)

A. Jesus grew in wisdom (40)

⁴⁰ And the child [Jesus] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (NRSV)

⁴⁰ Τὸ δὲ παιδίον ἠύξανεν καὶ ἐκραταιοῦτο πληρούμενον σοφίας, καὶ χάρις θεοῦ ἦν ἐπ' αὐτό.

1. Links Jesus with Torah-observant parents

This statement is a transition statement linking the previous episode of Jesus' life as an infant with the passage we read today (2:41-52).

In the previous episode (2:21-40), Mary and Joseph, are depicted as Torah-observant Jews (2:39):

- v. 21 - they circumcise Jesus on the 8th day in accord with the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:11)
- v. 22 - they dedicate Jesus to God in accord with Mosaic Law (Exod. 13:2)³
- v. 24 - they purify themselves after childbirth according to Mosaic Law (Lev. 12:2-5)⁴

So, Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews. Jesus was dedicated as God's baby. Jesus was brought up in a devout, Torah-observant family.

The previous episode ends by saying that Jesus grew and became strong. How did he become strong? By "being filled with wisdom" (*plēroumenon sophia*). Now the story will show *how* Jesus was filled with wisdom.

2. Links Jesus with Moses

This transition statement about Jesus parallels what is said about Moses:

Luke 2:40. And the child [Jesus] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Acts 7:22. Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.

³ Like Hannah giving her son Samuel to God as long as he lived (1 Sam. 1-2).

⁴ Although Luke has "their" purification (Lk. 2:22), only Mary needed to be purified (Lev. 12:22-5).

Luke is making a very important point that has often been lost over the past 2000 years: *There is continuity between Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity.*

B. Going to Jerusalem (41-42)

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. (NRSV)

⁴¹ Καὶ ἐπορεύοντο οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ κατ' ἔτος εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ τῇ ἑορτῇ τοῦ πάσχα. ⁴² Καὶ ὅτε ἐγένετο ἑτῶν δώδεκα, ἀναβαινόντων αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς ἑορτῆς

Here we are told two important things.

1. Devout Jewish family

First, Jesus' parents were devout Jews. They went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover Festival (*Pesach*). All Jewish males (and women were encouraged) were to go to Jerusalem three times a year for the three great religious festivals:

- Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*)
- Feast of Pentecost (*Shavu'ot*)
- Feast of Passover (*Pesach*)

Not all Jews obeyed the commandment. Nevertheless, Jesus and his family walked the three or four day journey to Jerusalem for Passover.

2. The time of Jesus' *bar-mitzvah*

Second, we are told that Jesus is twelve years old. Mentioning that Jesus was twelve is a clue about what this passage is about.

It marks the time when Jesus "came of age," when a Jewish boy undergoes his *bar-mitzvah* and becomes a "son of the commandment" (*bat-mitzvah* for girls).

Today, the age for *bar-mitzvah* is thirteen, not twelve.⁵ However, it could have been different during Jesus' time.

The point is, Luke gives us an account when Jesus accepted adult responsibility for observing commandments incumbent upon Jews.

⁵ *M. Pirke Aboth* 5.21 says that a child is fit for Scripture at five, the Mishnah at ten, fulfilling the commandments at thirteen, the Talmud at fifteen, the bride-chamber at eighteen, pursuing a calling at twenty, authority at thirty, discernment at forty, counsel at fifty, an elder at sixty, grey hairs at seventy, special strength at eighty, a bowed back at ninety, and as one who has died at a hundred. *M. Niddah* 5.6 says that a boy twelve years and one day can make vows that are examined; if thirteen and one day, they are valid. In contrast, a girl eleven years old and one day can make vows that are examined; if twelve and one, they are valid. See Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford University, 1933).

C. Jesus is elusive: Not found (43-44a)

<p>⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. (NRSV)</p>	<p>⁴³ καὶ τελειωσάντων τὰς ἡμέρας, ἐν τῷ ὑποστρέφειν αὐτοὺς ὑπέμεινε Ἰησοῦς ὁ παῖς ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ, καὶ οὐκ ἔγνωσαν οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ. ⁴⁴ νομίσαντες δὲ αὐτὸν εἶναι ἐν τῇ συνοδίᾳ ἦλθον ἡμέρας ὁδὸν</p>
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How was it possible for Jesus’ parents to overlook that Jesus was not with them when left Jerusalem?

Mary, Joseph, and their other children (Mark 6:3) traveled in a caravan (*sunodia*) with relatives and friends from Nazareth. His parents might have thought that Jesus was with relatives or friends in the caravan.

However, on a metaphorical level, we are invited to see that *Jesus is elusive*.

- Jesus eludes his parents.
- He eludes us.
- He escapes full understanding.
- He is beyond complete comprehension.
- He does not fit our expectations, let alone expectations of any particular culture.
- Jesus has his own agenda.
- Our agenda is to understand his.

D. Parents seek and find Jesus (44-46a)

<p>Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him ... (NRSV)</p>	<p>καὶ ἀνεζήτησαν αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν καὶ τοῖς γνωστοῖς, ⁴⁵ καὶ μὴ εὐρόντες ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἀναζητοῦντες αὐτόν. ⁴⁶ καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ ἡμέρας τρεῖς εὗρον αὐτόν ...</p>
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When they could not find Jesus, they discovered Jesus “after three days.” That is, they traveled for one day; then travel back to Jerusalem the second day; then they found him on the third day.

On a metaphorical level, we are invited to search for Jesus.

- Are we traveling with Jesus? Or have we left him behind?
- Have we become so acquainted with Jesus that we think no matter what we do or where we go, Jesus is with us?
- If so, we have become presumptuous and complacent.
- We need to search ourselves.
- Are we on the narrow path?
- Are we walking with Jesus?

- Or do we need to turn around (*metanoia*) and search again for Jesus?

E. Jesus in the Temple among teachers (46b-47)

⁴⁶ ... 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. (NRSV)

⁴⁶ ... εὗρον αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ καθεζόμενον ἐν μέσῳ τῶν διδασκάλων καὶ ἀκούοντα αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπερωτῶντα αὐτοῦς· ⁴⁷ ἐξίσταντο δὲ πάντες οἱ ἀκούοντες αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῇ συνέσει καὶ ταῖς ἀποκρίσεσιν αὐτοῦ.

1. Jesus learns and teaches

This is the center piece. "The center piece and the frame agree: Jesus is the wise one."⁶

Here we see Jesus taking the initiative to learn Torah and fulfill his responsibility as a "son of the commandment."

Jesus is with rabbis teaching the Torah.⁷ Jesus is listening, questioning, and teaching. Rabbinic pedagogy is dialogical. It is a give-and-take style of teaching.⁸ So Jesus is not only listening, but also expressing his opinion.

2. Jesus amazes (*existēmi*) people

Jesus amazes people. Luke presents Jesus as the wise interpreter of scripture. This is especially true in Luke 24 where the Risen Christ interprets scripture for his disciples and opens their minds (24:45ff).

So here is Jesus in the Temple and everyone who hears him is "amazed".

The word for "amazed" is *existēmi* (ἐξίστημι). It literally means "to stand" (*histēmi*) "outside [of oneself]" (*ex*). Sometimes *existēmi* is translated "to amaze," "to confuse," "to astound," and "to be out of one's senses." This is where we get the word *ecstasy*—being overwhelmed by emotion.

The implication is: If we dialogue with Jesus, if we allow Jesus to open our minds, we will be astonished, surprised, and perhaps moved to ecstasy.

⁶ Talbert, *Luke* (1992) 37).

⁷ Cf. Lk. 19:47; 21:37-38; Acts 4:2; 5:25.

⁸ "Rabbinic teaching made considerable use of questions on the part of the pupils, out of which discussion could arise." I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke, A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 127

D'. Parents accuse Jesus (48)

<p>⁴⁸ 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." (NRSV)</p>	<p>⁴⁸ καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐξεπλάγησαν, καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ· τέκνον, τί ἐποίησας ἡμῖν οὕτως; ἰδοὺ ὁ πατήρ σου καὶ γὰρ ὀδυνώμενοι ἐζητοῦμέν σε.</p>
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1. Parents astonished

Mary and Joseph are astonished by Jesus. They have been anxious about his safety and well-being caused by three days of separation.

2. Parent misunderstand

Jesus parents also misunderstand. They think Jesus is a disloyal son. From their point-of-view, Jesus betrayed them. He broke the Fifth Commandment by failing to honor his parents. How can Jesus be a "son of the commandment"?

Basically, Mary says to Jesus, "Your father and I" are very upset at you. She talks about an earthly father, but Jesus responds by talking about his heavenly Father. They are talking past each other. Mary is on one level, Jesus is on another.

Mary is devout, fearless, and obedient—an ideal disciple—but at this point in the story, Jesus is incomprehensible to her.

The author is using the literary device of "misunderstanding" to coach the reader. The reader is invited to see Jesus—and life itself—from two levels simultaneously. There is human understanding and there is divine wisdom. To understand Jesus, to gain wisdom, one must see from above, jump to a higher level.

Unable to make the leap at this time, Mary ironically accuses Jesus of being a disloyal son, when, in fact, he is the most loyal son of One True Father.

C'. Jesus is elusive: Not understood (49-50)

<p>⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what [to <i>hrēma</i>] he said to them. (NRSV)</p>	<p>⁴⁹ καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· τί ὅτι ἐζητεῖτέ με; οὐκ ᾔδειτε ὅτι ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου δεῖ εἶναί με; ⁵⁰ καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐ συνήκαν τὸ ῥῆμα ὃ ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς.</p>
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1. Jesus is astonished

Jesus is astonished that Mary and Joseph don't understand. The text says, they did not understand "the word" (*to hrēma*) that Jesus spoke to them. But what "word" did they not understand? Look at verse 49.

2. "I must be in the _____ of my father" (v. 49)

The phrase, "I must be in my Father's house" (NRSV), is literally, "I must be in the _____ of my Father." What is in the blank space? There are two possibilities:

1. I must be (*dei*) in the things/affairs of my Father
 - Jesus has taken up "some part of the task God has ordained for him."⁹
 - Could it be teaching in the Temple (19:47; 20:1; 21:37; 22:53)
2. I must be (*dei*) in the house/temple of my Father
 - Calls attention to the Temple, but why must Jesus be in the Temple?
 - Cleanse it? Restore it? Or be betrayed by Temple authorities?

The phrase is ambiguous. We don't need to choose. Either way, Jesus perceives he has a unique relationship with God, who he identifies as "my father" (*patros mou*).¹⁰

B'. Going to Nazareth (51)

⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. (NRSV)

⁵¹ καὶ κατέβη μετ' αὐτῶν καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς Ναζαρέθ καὶ ἦν ὑποτασσόμενος αὐτοῖς. καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ διετήρει πάντα τὰ ῥήματα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς.

Here we discover that duty to God and duty to others can be congruent. Jesus has already submitted to God and now Jesus is shown to be obedient to his parents by keeping the Fifth Commandment of honoring his parents (Exod. 21:12).

Thus, Jesus is shown fulfilling his *bar-mitzvah* commitment. He obeys his Divine Father and he obeys his human parents, Mary and Joseph. From both the divine and human perspective, Yeshua is a loyal son.

A'. Jesus grew in wisdom (52)

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. (NRSV)

⁵² Καὶ Ἰησοῦς προέκοπτεν [ἐν τῇ] σοφίᾳ καὶ ἡλικίᾳ καὶ χάριτι παρὰ θεῶ καὶ ἀνθρώπων.

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina Series*, Vol. 3 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1991) 61.

¹⁰ See Ps. 2:7; Lk. 1:32, 35; 10:22; 22:29; 24:49.

1. Jesus increased (*prokoptō*) in wisdom

Just as this episode began, the text concludes by saying, "Jesus increased in wisdom."

The word "increased" is from the Greek, *prokoptō*. Originally, *prokoptō* meant "to make one's way forward by chopping away obstacles."

Jesus—like other human beings—"went forward," "made progress," and "advanced" in wisdom and in age or physical stature (*hēlikia*).

2. Jesus learned obedience

"Religious understanding, insight into God's will, develops in the context of religious submission and obedience."¹¹ Luke has shown that Jesus is an obedience son, both to God and to his parents. Divine wisdom comes through submission to God.

Heb. 5:8. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered (NRSV).

Heb. 2:17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. (NRSV)

Reflections

1. Jesus was nurtured by devout Jewish parents
2. Jesus was committed to keeping the Mosaic Law
3. Jesus learned about and taught the Torah
4. Jesus grew in wisdom, because he submitted to God and, when appropriate, to fellow human beings
5. Jesus is elusive; he is beyond full grasp, so we must not leave him behind and we must diligently seek the path he walks

¹¹ Talbert, *Luke* (1992) 37.