

## **Jesus in the Temple at the Age of Twelve (Lk 2:41-52): Epilogue or Prologue?**

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The episode of Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve is usually connected with the Lucan infancy narrative. The standard arrangement in chapters favours this classification which is usually followed in the translations. So do the majority of the commentaries (Lagrangé, Plummer, Arndt, Ernst, Grundmann, Nolland, etc.). Schuermann considers the episode as the 'finale to the infancy stories'<sup>1</sup> and Laurentin finds it a fitting 'conclusion'.<sup>2</sup> Still more explicit is Bovon who sees in the pericope an 'integral part of the infancy story'<sup>3</sup> which Marshall states that with the episode, 'the birth story comes to a climax'.<sup>4</sup>

### **I. Epilogue?**

Yet dissenters are not lacking to disagree with this general consensus. They go back to Marcion who clubbed Lk 1-2 with the following two chapters to see in them an apocryphal introduction to a Gospel that would have begun only in 4:31 with a sudden

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- 1 H. Schuermann, *Das Lukasevangelium I*, HKNT III/1, Freiburg: Herder, 1982, p. 132.
  - 2 R. Laurentin, *Jesus au Temple. Mystère de Pâques et Foi de Marie en Luc 2, 48-50*, EB, Paris: Gabalda, 1969, p. 173.
  - 3 F. Bovon, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc 1-9*, CNT IIIa, Genève: Labor et Fides, 1991, p.150.
  - 4 I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC, Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978, p.125.

appearance in Galilee. Sahlin also, at least indirectly, linked the end of ch. 2 with the beginning of ch. 3 in so far as he claimed to identify, in Lk 1:5-3:7a, a Hebrew source distinct from the Aramaic document that would underlie the rest of Luke's double work till Acts 15.<sup>5</sup> On sounder exegetical bases, recent authors have suggested that the Lucan 'pre-history' extended to Lk 3:1-4:13 or even to the end of ch. 4.<sup>6</sup> Indeed reasons are not lacking for questioning the common opinion that sees the Jerusalem episode as the 'climax' of the infancy story.

1. Firstly this 'climax' does not quite fit the context it is supposed to cap. Lk 2:39-40 had already provided a conclusion to the infancy story. These two verses had already brought Jesus back to Nazareth and described him as growing and waxing strong, filled with wisdom and the favour of God. This provided a good conclusion to the infancy story and sufficed to span the gap between the birth and beginning of the public ministry.
2. Thematically, in the third Gospel, the 'climax' is to be found in the Temple. But in the infancy narrative, this Temple culmination had already been reached with the episode of the presentation in 2:22-39. After this episode and the conclusion of vv. 39-40, the second Temple episode seems to be an expletive adjunct.
3. Another structural anomaly in 2:41-52 is that it has no parallel in the Baptist's infancy. Luke's infancy narrative sets in parallel the two annunciations (1:5-25 and 1:26-38), the two births (1:57-58 and 2:1-20), the two official ceremonies marking the births (name

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5 H. Sahlin, *Der Messias und das Gottesvolk: Studien zur ProtoLucanischen Theologie*, ASNU, Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1945, pp. 9, 56-61.

6 A. Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction*, Dublin: Herder & Herder, 1958, pp. 200f; J. Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, RNT, Regensburg: Pustet, 1960, pp. 33-105; J.H. Davies, "The Lucan Prologue (1-3): An Attempt at Objective Redaction Criticism" in *Studia Evangelica*, Vol. VI, ed. E.A. Livingstone, TU 112, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1973, pp. 78-85; J.M. Gibbs, "Mark 1,1-15, Matthew 1,1-4,16, Luke 1,1-4,30, John 1,1-51. The Gospel Prologues and their Function," *Studia Evangelica*, op.cit., pp. 154-188; W.G. Kuemmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1975, p. 125; C.H. Talbert, "Prophecies of Future Greatness: The Contribution of Greco-Roman Biographies to an Understanding of Luke 1:5-4:15" in *The Divine Helmsman*, ed. J.L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel, New York: KTAV, 1980, pp. 129-141; R. Meynet, *Avez-vous lu saint Luc?* (Lire la Bible 88), Paris: Cerf, 1990, pp. 141-154.

giving in 1:59-76 and presentation in the Temple in 2:21-38) to conclude with two parallel reports of the growth (1:80 and 2:40). After this fairly well balanced construction, the episode of Jesus at the age of twelve has no correspondence in the story of John the Baptist and seems to hang alone by itself.<sup>7</sup>

4. Another objection to making the episode a part of the infancy narrative is that it takes place when Jesus reaches the age of twelve. We should not transpose to those days the modern mentality that puts majority at the age of 21 or of 18. The young Israelite was considered to be a responsible adult much earlier. At the age of twelve, he becomes *bar mitzvah*, 'son of the commandment'. Though the present day Jewish ceremony ratifying access to adulthood did not exist in Jesus' days,<sup>8</sup> the age of twelve or of thirteen was deemed to be the end of childhood. Twelve was the age of legal responsibility (Bab Ket 50a); at that age the youth was able to make vows (Bab Nazir 21b; cf. Nid 5,6).<sup>9</sup> Josephus reports that "Samuel began to prophesy at the age of twelve" (*Ant. Jud. V, 348*). According to the LXX translation of 3 Kgs 2:12, it was at the age of twelve that Solomon had been enthroned,<sup>10</sup> and that Daniel rendered his famous judgment.<sup>11</sup> It follows that an episode showing Jesus' maturity at the age of twelve can hardly be considered as belonging to his infancy.

7 To fill the gap, A.S. Geysler has conjectured a 'Baptist Source' that would have contained a parallel episode describing young John undergoing a "bar mitzvah" ceremony in Qumran, surrounded by his Essenes masters. Luke would have suppressed the episode to lesson the role of John and of the Essenes ("The Youth of John the Baptist. A Deduction from the Break in the Parallel Account of the Lucan Infancy Story," NT 1 [1956], pp. 70-75). With such a hazardous hypothesis exegesis turns into fiction!

8 "The Bar Mitzvah rites, which accompanied the completion of a boy's thirteenth year, cannot be clearly traced earlier than the fourteenth century" (I. Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, New York: Atheneum, 1969, p. 32).

9 Cf. RE. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Chapman, 1977, p. 473.

10 According to a number of Mss and Didascalia II,1,4; Ps.-Ignatius, *Magn 3,4*; Chrysostom, Jerome, etc.; cf. J. Dupont, "Jésus retrouve au Temple", in *Assemblées du Seigneur*, 11, p. 45.

11 At least in the Syro-hexaplar text. The same tradition is reported by Ps.-Ignatius, *Magn 3,1*; Ps.-Chrysostom; cf. J. Dupont, "Jésus retrouvé au temple", *loc.cit.*

Luke uses his Greek carefully. In 2:40, Jesus was a *paidion*, a child, a baby. In v. 43, at the age of twelve, he has grown into a *pais* (v. 43), a youth. He has still to 'progress' (V.52); but the verb used (*proekopten*) is no longer that which indicates a 'growth' (*euxanen*) as in v. 40. His parents may still consider him as their *teknon*, their offspring (v.48). But he is going to claim autonomy, or rather another belonging (v.49). The main point of the pericope is precisely to show how Jesus, as a young adult, left father and mother to find at a deeper level the grounds of his identity and of his mission.<sup>12</sup>

## II. Prologue?

Are we therefore to consider the episode as the prologue to the public ministry? Several reasons preclude such a reconstruction.

1. In spite of the minor differences just mentioned, the refrain of the progress in 2:52 forms an inclusion with 2:40 and brackets the enclosed passage with the previous context. This refrain has another parallel in 1:80 where it is meant to conclude the Baptist's infancy.
2. As for the public ministry, it has its own solemn introduction in 3:1-2. The majestic evocation of the international setting forms a kind of unmistakable entrance porch that has no correspondence whatsoever in the previous pericope of Jesus in the Temple.
3. The New Testament in its totality considers the ministry of the Baptist as the introduction to the Gospel proper. It is so in Mark and in John. Acts also tells us that the Christian message "begins with John the Baptist" (1:5; 10:37). The *incipit* of Jesus' ministry cannot be situated in any other place than in the beginning of chapter 3.

## III. A Disconnected Pericope

Appended to the conclusion of the infancy narrative already given in 2:39-40, neatly separated from the public ministry by the

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<sup>12</sup> This is not the place to discuss whether Jesus sitting with the scribes in the Temple was in a teacher's or a learner's attitude. But the parallels mentioned above and the sitting position 'in the midst' (and not 'at the feet') of the doctors suggest that he was more than a listener. If not teaching, he was at least sharing in the exchange as an equal among his peers.

solemn introduction of 3:1-2, the episode of Jesus at the age of twelve hangs between two clearly defined sections to which it does not belong. Neither a part of the infancy story nor an opening section to the public ministry, the passage seems to be a loose pericope brought up as an afterthought.<sup>13</sup>

Was this addition to the infancy story a bit of information received by Luke from some form of tradition or was it Luke's own creation? The second hypothesis is proposed by J. Drury who imagines the evangelist carried away by "the spirit of story-telling (that) comes upon him and gives him his freedom" to fabricate his own rendering of the episode situated by Mk 3:31-35 in a totally different context.<sup>14</sup> But Jeremias' careful analysis of the vocabulary and style of the passage identifies both redactional and traditional elements.<sup>15</sup> It is more likely that, here as elsewhere in general, Luke depended on certain form of existing material which he redacted freely in his own style.

In fact, this pericope may have been the last addition made to the Lucan composition. The original edition of the third Gospel must have started, like Mark and John, with the ministry of the Baptist. The solemn opening of 3:1-2 still subsists as the original prologue to the entire composition. At a later stage - and possibly after the composition of the Acts of the Apostles<sup>16</sup> - Luke added the infancy narrative as a more elaborate christological prologue. It must have been only at a third stage of the composition that the episode of Jesus at the age of twelve would have been inserted.

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13 "The best solution is to recognize that Luke 2:41-52 was not part of the original diptych structure of the infancy narrative which came to an end with 2:40" (R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, op.cit., p. 479).

14 J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel. A Study in Early Christian Historiography*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976, p. 63.

15 For instance, the double question of 2:49 is non-Lucan: in general, Luke avoids the double questions found in his Markan source (8:11, 16,25; 9:25,41; 20:22; 22:46,71); cf. J. Jeremias, *Die Sprache des Lukasevangeliums*, KEK, Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980, p. 101 (for the entire section, see pp. 100-103). According to B. Van Iersel, the basic story would have consisted of vv. 41-43, 45-46 and 48-50 with additions in vv. 44 and 47 ("The Finding of Jesus in the Temple. Some Observations on the Original Form of Luke ii 41-51a," *NT 4* [1960], pp. 161-173).

16 Cf. L. Legrand, *L'Annonce à Marie* (Lc 1,26-38), LD 106, Paris: Cerf, 1981, pp. 312-319.

#### IV. The Function of the Pericope

Whichever may have been the stage at which Luke inserted the episode in his Gospel, the fact remains that it does belong to the finished form of his work and the question arises of its significance in the present final context of Luke-Acts. Why was it inserted and what is the function of the passage in the Lucan double work?

##### 1. A Bridge

A first reason is obvious enough and is generally mentioned in the commentaries that raise the question. The pericope functions as a "Bridge Passage" between the infancy story and the public ministry.<sup>17</sup>

This "bridge" can first be seen from the biographical point of view. Among the four evangelists, Luke is the one who comes closest to a biographical approach to the Gospels. His literary preface (1:1-4) imitates "the classical historical prologues of Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, . . . and Josephus."<sup>18</sup> "By writing in this fashion Luke was claiming a place for Christianity on the stage of world history."<sup>19</sup> As a professed historian, Luke had to fill the gap between the nativity stories and the adulthood. The episode at the age of twelve provided some form of biographical transition.

But the transition is also theological as it provides "both a meaningful conclusion to the infancy narrative and an important link with what will follow."<sup>20</sup> But the exact theological link is not easy to determine. Brown considers that the episode constitutes "a transition between revelation about Jesus by others (angels, Simeon) and revelation that Jesus himself will proclaim; for in 2:41-52 Jesus speaks for the first time."<sup>21</sup> For J. Dupont, the setting in Jerusalem and the reference to the three days points to the paschal event.<sup>22</sup> Bovon rejects

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17 The expression is used by J. Drury, *Luke, Phillipps' Commentaries*, London: Collins, 1973, p. 43 and R.J. Karris, "Luke," in *NJBC*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990, p. 684. Other authors speak of a 'transitional' episode (cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, *AncBib* 28a, New York: Doubleday, 1981, p.435).

18 J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

19 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

20 G.Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas 1-10*, *ÖTKNT* 3/1, Guetersloh-Wurzburg: Mohn-Echter, 1977, p. 74.

21 RE. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

22 J. Dupont, "Jésus retrouvé au Temple," *art. cit.*, p. 51.

the allusion to the Resurrection but puts the stress on the witness to the filial relationship with the Father and perceives a transition that moves "along a line that goes from the Annunciation (1,35) to the Baptism of Jesus (3,21-22)."<sup>23</sup>

Especially at the level of the final Lucan redaction, one can perceive also the significance of the theme of 'growth'. In the Acts of the Apostles, the 'growth' of the Church or of the Word stretches over a period of time through the apostolic ministry (6:7), in spite of or through persecutions (12:24) and across the Nations (19:20). In a parallel development, the child, bearer of the Word and of divine wisdom, must grow through childhood and youth. The time factor, typical of Luke's theology, is at work in Jesus as well as in the Church.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. A Triple Journey

A further point can be made that, by inserting a paschal journey at the end of the infancy narrative, Luke gave final shape to his overarching theme of the journey.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of the theme of the journey in the construction of the third Gospel is noted by all the commentators. After a first part reporting the Galilean ministry of Jesus (4:14-9:50), Luke, in highly solemn terms, announces the days of the *analempsis* (ascension, being taken up) when Jesus "hardened his face to go up to Jerusalem" (9:51). From then on till 19:29, the Lord's ministry will take place in the framework of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Through this literary device, Luke gives to his report of Jesus' words and deeds the dynamic thrust of an on-going ascension towards Jerusalem as its focal point.

This is well known. But it is worth noting that this major structural thrust is framed on both sides by two other parallel journeys, that of Jesus to Jerusalem at the age of twelve at the conclusion of the infancy story and that of the Emmaus disciples, after

23 F. Bovon, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc 1-9*, op. cit., p. 153.

24 Cf. P. Zingg, *Das Wachsen der Kirche*, OBO 3, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974, pp. 57-63.

25 We make ours the remark of Fitzmyer: though a story of Jesus' boyhood "has nothing to do with his 'infancy', ... we have, however, retained that designation for 1:5-2:52 because of its common use in English commentaries and because it is practically impossible to get a better term" (J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, op. cit., p. 434-435).

the Resurrection in conclusion of the entire Gospel. On both sides of the central pilgrimage of Jesus to Jerusalem, a proleptic journey takes him and his parents to and from Jerusalem while, by way of epilogue, another journey shows the disciples following a similar itinerary in the elusive company of the Master.

The parallelism between the journey of the infancy and the Emmaus journey cannot be overlooked: paschal setting, journey up and down Jerusalem, absence of Jesus, anguished attitude, finding him again but on another level of relationship. Moreover, on both sides, the chain of events, the loss and the finding again, is explained in terms of the suggestive *dei* ('it is necessary') expressing the mysterious divine designs (2:49; 24:26).

At the same time, differences are equally obvious. Whereas Jesus' parents find him at the end of a long search, the disciples of Emmanuel find him without seeking: it is rather Jesus who has gone in search of them. In the infancy story, they find Jesus in the Temple but, after the Resurrection, he is found along the road. In the Temple Jesus is found amidst the doctors of the Law; at Emmaus, he is recognised through the signs of his Word and of the fraction of the bread. Finally, the parents of Jesus fail to understand (2:50), whereas the eyes of the disciples are opened and their hearts are burning within them (24:31-32).

We have therefore three parallel journeys showing different structural characteristics. In Lk 2, Jesus is the object of the quest. As in the public ministry, his spiritual home is the house of his Father, the Temple, where he reveals himself and manifests his wisdom. But the time has not yet come for the full light to shine; at the end of their quest, the parents do find Jesus but they still do not understand fully.

In Lk 9-19, Jesus is the main actor: he goes to Jerusalem, manifests himself and enters finally the house of his Father (19:45-46) in a paschal context (22:1-13). As in the infancy story, the Temple is viewed as the abode of the Word and not primarily as a cultic place (cf. Lk 19:47; 21:37).

After the Resurrection, on the way from Jerusalem, the actors on the scene seem to be the disciples. But it is the hidden presence of the Risen One that is the real focus and moving factor. Hidden but effectively alive through his Word and in the breaking of the Bread, his elusive presence imposes itself even on those who do not seek him any longer.

This triple journey corresponds to the triple situation before, during and after the coming of Christ.

Mary and Joseph, searching for Christ in the Temple of Jerusalem represent the *time of the prophets* and of the kings, of those who were on the look out for the coming of the Messiah, who 'desired to see and to hear' (cf. Lk 10:24). They are now closer to the object of the secular quest of Israel; they do find him; they see and they hear. But it is in a yet incomplete way for they 'did not understand' (2:50). Nevertheless already, in an attitude of initial faith, Mary "kept all these things in her heart" (2:51). Jesus' parents stand on the threshold of the messianic times.

The journey of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem represents the *time of the fulfilment* of the prophetic expectations. He enters the house of his Father, cleanses it to make it a 'house of prayer' (19:46) and the dwelling of God's Word (19:47; 21:37). Fulfilling the words of the prophet, Jesus has gone up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways. With Jesus teaching in the Temple, the Law goes forth out of Zion and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem (cf. Isa 2:3).

The disciples of Emmaus represent the *time of the Church* on her journey from Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1:8) in the midst of threats and trials (cf. Acts 4:29). The disciples may feel forlorn and forsaken. But the Lord Jesus is with them in the elusive but effective presence of his Word and of the sacraments.

Thus did the episode of Jesus in the Temple serve as a chronological and theological transition between the infancy and the public ministry. By inserting this episode, Luke completed also his broad sweep of the three stages of salvation history, a vista which underlies his theology and the composition of his Gospel.

## Conclusion

To the triple journey that frames the Gospel of Luke, should be added the double journey underlying the composition of the Acts of the Apostles. The account of Peter's apostolate concludes with the journey to Caesarea to meet the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10-11) and the captivity 'during the days of Unleavened Bread', (12:3) that is at Passover time. In a parallel construction, Paul's ministry concludes with the captivity journey that takes him to Rome, the capital of the Nations (Acts 27-28). In both cases, the captivity ends with a liberation

of the Word. As Peter is freed from jail, "the Word of God grew and multiplied" (12:24); having reached Rome, Paul can preach "openly and unhindered" (28:31).

Thus is the theme of the journey a powerful metaphor of Luke's theology. Each stage of salvation history, the time of the prophets, the time of Jesus the time of the disciples whether in the apostolic (Peter) or post-apostolic (Paul) period is symbolised by a journey situated in a paschal setting,<sup>26</sup> leading to a kind of Epiphany of the Word. Luke summarised this global perspective by qualifying the Christian dispensation as the Way (*hodos*) (Acts 9:2; 18:25-26; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22). This designation, illustrated by the journeys of Jesus, of those who sought him and of those who followed him, has a rich significance.

On the one hand, in the light of the Acts of the Apostles, it evokes the outreach of the Christian witness till the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). On the other hand, in the light of the Gospel, it shows that the mission journey of Jesus' disciples and witnesses is also a spiritual journey. It has all the depth of a Paschal experience. Like the journey of the Master, it is 'exodus' (cf. Lk 9:31) and 'ascension' (9:51), *kenosis* and exaltation. It knows the threats, storms and dangers of life journeys; it shares in the anguish of the parents who have lost their child; it has experienced the despondency of the forlorn disciples of Emmaus. Yet the disciples on their journey can 'harden their face' as the Master did. They know that theirs is the way of the Lord, a pilgrimage to the house of the Father, an exodus leading to an exaltation. Like Mary, they carry these things in their heart; like the disciples of Emmaus their hearts are burning within them. Their eyes are opened and they recognise the hidden yet potent presence of the Lord. They live their exodus, in union with that of the Master, in its paschal setting, as a pilgrimage leading to true life in the Spirit.

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26 Except the final journey of Paul which has no specific reference to the Passover period. But the reopening of the sailing season 'three months later' (Acts 28:11) points to the paschal time: "Vegetius", *De re militari*, iv. 39, says that seas were closed from Nov. 11 to March 5" (Kirsopp Lake and H.J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Vol IV, Commentary, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965, p. 343).