

The Lost Years

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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.

⁵¹ And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

(Luke 1:40-52)

“St Luke indicates that our Lord’s words baffled Mary and Joseph. They had watched over him in the manger at Bethlehem, saved him from the cruelty of Herod, and given him a happy home in which to grow up. Nevertheless, there were things about this child of theirs which seemed to go beyond their understanding. That reminds us that even to his kith and kin Jesus was a mystery, and that those who lived so close to him were often light years away from really grasping who he was. That teaches us that an authentic knowledge of the Christ is not imparted by things we can label and quantify in our limited human way. True knowledge of Christ Jesus is not imparted by some relationship we can see and possess in earthly terms such as the kinship of parenthood, or the privilege of family ties. Christ is ever only fully known as he makes himself known to us by the Spirit. Christ is ever only known to us in all his fullness as Lord and Saviour, as the Father reveals him to us through the Spirit. The key to the mystery of Jesus is the Spirit of God.”¹

The Lost Years

A **question** that has **perplexed** people for nearly **2,000 years** is what did Jesus do for the first 30 or so years of his life? Two of the Gospels (Mark and John) barely touch upon this subject, while the other two cover little more than

¹ **Samuel McC. Harris**, “My Father’s House,” *Expository Times* 94 (Dec 1982): 84-85.

simply his birth and dedication. But this has not stopped people from writing about it. The following is a subject that very few conservative Christians want to touch, but I think it is important that you at least know what is out there so that you can identify the origins and perhaps even be prepared to discuss the truth with people.

A Mormon scholar named [John Gee](#) has written a helpful piece called “The Apocryphal Acts of Jesus,”² where he collates and summarizes some of the early tales floating around in the early church beginning in the second century. He actually comes to some good conclusions about these stories, but it should not surprise you, if you know anything about Mormonism, that he would be interested in them, as Mormons have their own tales about Jesus appearing in America *after the resurrection* to the Indians (2Nephi 1-30). In some way, I believe he thinks that looking honestly at the lost years of Jesus in the early church can help Mormonism’s credibility of his supposed appearances across the ocean in America after his resurrection.

These stories about Jesus are found in so-called “[Infancy Gospels](#),” which are either to be found in NT Apocryphal

² [John Gee](#), “The Apocryphal Acts of Jesus,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 2 (2012): 145-87, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-apocryphal-acts-of-jesus/#rf93-1610>.

or Pseudepigraphal collections or which are now lost, having only quotations from the Fathers that give us an inkling into their content. These include books such as the *Proto-evangelium of James*, *Pseudo-Matthew*, *Gospel of the Birth of Mary*, and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (not to be confused with the *Gospel of Thomas*). So what kinds of things do they tell us about Jesus' early life?

We can begin with *Jesus in the crib*, sometime after the manger birth, where he miraculously speaks to his mother, “I am Jesus, the son of God, the Word whom you bore just as Gabriel, the angel, announced to you, and my Father sent me to save the world” (*Arabic Infancy Gospel* 1). Around the time that Matthew tells us that Jesus is somewhere *under two years of age* and that Joseph fled with his family to Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod, we read, “The little infant Jesus himself walked in front of them so that nothing would hurt them. But Mary and Joseph were intensely scared lest perchance the little infant would be injured by a serpent, to which Jesus said, “Don't worry! Do not even consider me your son, for I always was and am a perfect man. Besides, it is necessary as all the beasts of the forests become tame before me” (*Pseudo-Matthew* 18:2).

Sometime a few years later another story tells us,

Jesus was playing with some other children on the second story of a house and one of the children was pushed by another, and plummeting to the ground he died. And when his playmates saw they fled, and Jesus alone was left standing upon the roof whence the child had been flung headlong. And when the parents learned of their child's death, they ran weeping. And when they found the child lying dead on the ground, with Jesus standing above, they supposed that the child had been pitched down by him and glaring they blamed him. But Jesus seeing, immediately jumped down from the second story, and stood at the head of the deceased and said to him, "Zenon (the child was so called), did I throw you down? Stand and speak." And with that command the child arose, and worshiping Jesus said: Lord, you did not throw me down, but you made me alive, who was dead.

(Infancy Gospel of Thomas B 8:1-3)

Another story which Mohammad clearly knew about (Quran 5:110) tells us about a particular miracle Jesus did,

When this little child Jesus was five years old, he was playing at the ford of a rushing stream, and the flowing water gathered into pools, and with a single command he made them all clean. And after making some soft clay, he molded

twelve sparrows. But it was the Sabbath when he did this, though there were many other children playing with him. And when a certain Jew saw what Jesus did while playing on the Sabbath, he went immediately and told his father Joseph, “Hey, your kid is at the brook, and he has taken some clay and made twelve sparrows and broken the Sabbath.” And when Joseph came to the place and saw, he yelled at him, saying, “Why did you do what it isn’t right to do on the Sabbath?” But Jesus clapped his hands together and cried out to the sparrows and told them, “Go!” And the sparrows fluttered and went off chirping.

(Infancy Gospel of Thomas A 2:1-4)

In some of these accounts, the stories get more and more outrageous and even blasphemous. In one episode, a child disperses water that Jesus had collected, so Jesus kills him by cursing him and the boy’s body withers into a corpse. He does the same thing to another boy who throws a stone at him. A short while later, Jesus’ neighbors are struck blind by him for complaining about it to his parents. Eventually, Jesus revokes his cruelty and begins resurrecting and healing his friends. Gee rightly summarizes, “Raising the dead [is] comparatively rare in the gospels, [it] is common in the infancy gospels . . . In the canonical gospels, Jesus refused to do

miracles for his own convenience; yet in the infancy gospels no miracle is too trivial if it is for Jesus's convenience ... The Jesus of the canonical gospels is longsuffering, enduring torture and indignity in silence or with a dignified rebuke; the Jesus of the infancy gospels is a spoiled brat who calls down immediate and terrible curses for the slightest offense.”

It isn't just the early church that was obsessed with this. Apparently, sometime in the 12th century, Joseph of Arimathea ([Luke 23:50](#)) got connected to the legend of [king Arthur](#), where he becomes the first keeper of the Holy Grail—the cup of Christ. In some of these stories, Joseph, a tin maker by trade and Jesus' uncle by lineage, takes the child Jesus with him to Britain after his mother Mary is widowed. There he teaches the Lord how to extract the tin and purge it of its tungsten. In 1804, the poet [William Blake](#) put it this way,

And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon Englands mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On Englands pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?

And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?³

In much more recent versions, the tale grows even taller, with some claiming that Jesus really went to Britain to study with the Druids.⁴

This theme of **Jesus the pagan guru** is hardly unique. For example, in 1887, Nicolas Notovitch, a Russian war correspondent, told the world that he had learned of a document called the “*Life of Saint Issa, Best of the Sons of Men.*” In these scrolls, he said he learned that Jesus abandoned Jerusalem at age 13 and set out to Sindh, the southernmost province of Pakistan where he intended to “**perfect himself in the divine word and study the laws of the great Buddhas.**”⁵ Jesus eventually crossed the Punjab river and reached the eastern coast of India, where he studied the sacred Hindu Vedas under the tutelage of **Brahmin priests**. After six years, he made his way north to the Himalayas where he spent many years in **Tibetan monasteries**, studying Buddhism, finally returning to Jerusalem at age 29. Notovitch was almost immediately

³ **William Blake**, Preface to *Milton: A Poem in 2 Books* (1804), in *Milton: The Prophetic Books of William Blake*, ed. E. R. D. Maclagan and a. G. B. Russell (London: A. H. Bullen, 1907), 19.

⁴ “Jesus ‘may have visited England’, says Scottish academic,” *BBC* (Nov 26, 2009), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/8380511.stm>.

⁵ **Nicolas Notovitch**, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, trans. Alexina Loranger (Chicago: Indo-America Book Company, 1894), 107.

called a prankster and a liar, and to this date no one has ever seen any of these manuscripts that he claimed to have, ironically much like the post-resurrection appearance tablets that Joseph Smith claimed to have seen. The whole sorted tale reminds me of the beautiful but syncretistic song by ex-Beatle George Harrison called “[My Sweet Lord](#).” The song sounds like the first CCM record in history, complete with words “Lord” and “Hallelujah,” which he said was inspired by the Christian hymn “Oh Happy Day,” but he’s actually singing to Lord Krishna and celebrating Hinduism, as he deliberately mixes together Christianity and pagan religions into his song.

In opposition to these fairy-tales, [the biblical Gospels](#) give us [only one story](#) of the life of Jesus between his flight to Egypt around age 2 and his baptism around age 30. This is found in our text today, [Luke 2:40-52](#). As we will see, it is [a very different kind of story](#) from these, both in terms of its theology and its larger purpose in the book. As we investigate it, it will help to remember Luke’s own words at the beginning of his Gospel. “[Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us ... it seemed good to me ... to write](#)

an orderly account for you ... that you may certainly concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4). Luke looked into Jesus’ life with great detail, talking to eyewitnesses and reading their own reports, and as he is the only Gospel we have that tells any story of Jesus’ “lost years,” it would do us well to learn it and figure out the reason why he gave it to us.

Luke 2:40-52. Context and Structure

Luke 2:40-52 ends the second chapter and brings Luke’s infancy narrative of Jesus to a conclusion. It will be helpful for us to remember that Luke 1-2 is essentially a dual story of the births of John and Jesus. They are deliberately ordered to parallel one another at key places:

Synchrisis of John and Jesus in Luke 1:5–2:52 ⁶	
John	Jesus
A. Annunciation narrative	A'. Annunciation narrative
Parents/setting (1:5–10)	Parents/setting (1:26–27)
Miraculous annunciation of birth (1:11–20)	Miraculous annunciation of birth (1:28–38)
Setting transition (1:21–23)	Setting transition (1:30–40)

⁶ Modified from Marisa A. Plevak, “Savior, Messiah, and Lord: An Audience-Critical Study of Luke 1:5-2:52,” Master’s Thesis to the University of St. Thomas (2013), 19. https://ir.stthomas.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1002&context=sod_mat.

<p>B. Confirmation of pregnancy (1:24–25) Elizabeth hides for 5 months Elizabeth acknowledges the Lord’s beneficence</p>	<p>B’. Confirmation of pregnancy (1:41–55) John leaps in Elizabeth’s womb Elizabeth’s proclamation Mary’s canticle of praise/summary</p>
<p>C. Birth of John (1:57–58)</p>	<p>C’. Birth of Jesus (2:1-20) Setting Birth Miraculous annunciation of Birth Portents/prophecy/signs Angel Doxa of God appears Heavenly army appears Reaction of shepherds, Mary and “all who heard”</p>
<p>D. Circumcision/naming (1:59–79) Portents/prophecy/signs Naming of child controversy Zechariah’s tongue released Reaction of crowd Zechariah’s praise/prophecy</p>	<p>D’. Circumcision/naming (2:21)</p>
<p>E. None</p>	<p>E’. Presentation in the Temple (2:22–39) Setting Prophecy of Simeon Reaction of parents Prophecy of Anna</p>
<p>F. Growth (1:80) John grows, strong in Spirit, in the wilderness</p>	<p>F’. Growth (2:40) Jesus grows, strong, filled with wisdom, favored by God</p>
<p>G. None</p>	<p>G’. Childhood deeds/virtue (2:41–51) Jesus in the Temple at age 12</p>
<p>H. None</p>	<p>H’. Growth (2:52) – wisdom, stature, favor</p>

The stories run **basically parallel** until you get to the last couple of stories of Jesus, the first where he is presented at the temple and the second where he goes back to the temple, which we are looking at today. These do not have a parallel in John's life. However, there is one verse in the middle of these stories that does parallel John, which happens to be the last verse in Luke 1 that tells us all we need to know about John until we will meet him again. That verse said, "*And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel*" (Luke 1:80). The parallel in Jesus' life says, "*And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him*" (2:40).

This verse about **Jesus growing strong** serves as a hinge upon which the two stories of Jesus at the temple turn. It is the last verse of the first temple story and the first verse of the second temple story. This verse also happens to have a strong connection to the last verse of Luke 2, "*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man*" (2:52). There are three words that they have in common: **wisdom** (*sophia*), **favor** (*charis*), and **God** (*Theos*). Both verses also speak of him "**growing**" (*auxanō*) and "**increasing**" (*prokoptō*), as well as **being strong** (*krataioō*) and of **good stature** (*helikia*), so they are obviously meant to be read as bookends.

What comes in the middle is a **repeating structure**. His **parents** (41) go up to **Jerusalem** (42). As their trip winds down and they begin the trip home, they do not “**know**” that Jesus has stayed behind (43). They **search** for him (44-45), but he is in the temple listening to the doctors, asking them questions, and answering them (46-47). They find him and tell him they have been **searching** for him (48). He tells them that they should have **known** (49-50). Then he returns to **Nazareth** with **them** (51). The whole thing repeats in a neat inverse parallelism to prove to us that Jesus is indeed full of wisdom and the favor of God.

- A. Child grows strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God (40)
- B. Parents went up to Jerusalem (41-42)
- C. Parents do not know that Jesus stays behind (43)
- D. Parents search for him (44-45)
- E. He is in the temple, listening to the teachers and asking them questions (46)⁷**
- E'. All are amazed at his understanding and answers (47)**
- D'. Parents confront Jesus: We have been searching for you (48)
- C'. Did you not know I must be in my Father's house? (49-50)
- B'. He went down with them to Nazareth (51)
- A'. Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man (52)⁸

⁷ By pure mathematical count, the story has 170 words, and the central phrase is “among the teachers.” **Joel B. Green**, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 155.

⁸ See **Steve Jeffery**, “A Chiasm in Luke 2:40-52,” *Emmanuel North London Church* (Oct 11, 2011), <https://www.northlondonchurch.org/ministers-blog/post/a-chiasm-in-luke-2-40-52>. Very similar is the chiasm at the Biblical Chiasm Exchange (<https://www.chiasmusexchange.com/2015/09/10/luke-240-52/>). A published chiasm with the same center (but not as neat in terms of noticing the actual language) is **H. J. D. Jonge**, “Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy: Luke ii. 41-51 a,” *New Testament Studies* 24.3 (April 1978): 339.

Jesus of Nazareth: Fully Human

How does the early life of Jesus in the **apocryphal books compare** to the early life of Jesus as Luke explains it? This is a question you dare not misunderstand, lest you fall into a deep **pit of tall-tales** that end you up in Gnosticism or paganism. God gives you this *one early story* of Jesus so that you will see just enough of what Jesus was actually like to spot a counterfeit Christ a mile away.

As we have noticed already, it begins, “**And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him**” (**Luke 2:40**). From the very beginning, Luke is **forcing us to a conclusion**. Jesus of Nazareth, though he be the Eternal Word of God incarnate, became fully and **totally human**. He didn't become *part* human. He didn't become *kind of* human. He didn't *pretend* to be a human. Humanity was not some husk or shell that he put on to mask who he really was. Jesus was a human being, subject to the same and totally normal physical, biological, mental, emotional, rational, and relational changes and developments as any of us.

Physically, Jesus grew and became strong. He started off as an embryo, developed into a fetus, then was born as an

infant, moved the toddler stage, passed into childhood, and then matured into adulthood. Unlike the song, he *did cry* in the manger. That's what infants do. It's not a sin. He didn't come out of the womb walking and talking and giving theological dissertations. He grew and became strong meaning that he was small and weak just like us.

His strength was *not just physical, but spiritual*. He was *filled with wisdom*. Wisdom is not just being able to discern right from wrong; wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD (**Prov 1:7**). This kind of wisdom then helps a person turn away from evil (**Job 28:28**). It is interesting that the whole time he was growing and becoming strong, he will filled with wisdom. It does not seem to mean that he grew in wisdom, but that *he was always full of it*. He always feared the LORD and it was this that caused him to grow strong in *all* ways. Certainly **Psalm 22:9** is a prophecy of him here. *“You are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.”*

“Wisdom” is *not a common word in Luke*. It is found as the bookend to our story (**Luke 2:40, 52**), but then *only seven more times* in Luke-Acts.⁹ Of these, the only times it will refer to Jesus are **7:35** where he is the one who alone discloses

⁹ In my estimation, Luke probably also had at least a hand in the writing of Ephesians and Hebrews. Curiously, it is found no times in Hebrews and three times in Ephesians (**1:8, 17; 3:10**). In none of these do they refer specifically to Christ. This is true also of Acts.

the divine purposes of God to men, [11:31](#) where it compares Jesus as the greater Solomon, and [11:49](#) where Wisdom, that is Jesus (see the parallel in Matt 23:34) will send prophets and Apostles who will be persecuted and put to death. So given that 40% of all Luke's usage of the word pertaining to Jesus are found here in our passage, it is probably important. But we won't be able to fully comment on it until we come to the end of the story.

Finally, *the favor of God was upon him*. We will also come back to this idea later, when we look at Wisdom, for it is also found in the last verse of the chapter. But I want to comment here on the word *charis* (favor). This is the word that is often translated as “[grace](#).” In fact, many translations use that word here. Perhaps the ESV chose “favor” to prevent you from thinking that Jesus needed God's grace as if he was somehow fallen in sin. The ESV is correct. Rather, God was always favorably disposed to this boy. And this was needed, for he was, as we have already said, a human and God did not withhold from Jesus the favor that he shows to his people throughout the centuries. And with God's favor, Jesus was able to become the man we will all know and love. But what a monumental thought this is, to see [the dependence of Jesus upon his God in the Triune working of the Three](#)

Persons and One God together. They cannot exist without each other. Such a thought is impossible.

The Lost Boy

In **vs. 41**, Luke now tells us this remarkable story of Jesus' life between infancy and his baptism. It is the **only one of its kind** in the Gospels and I suspect he heard it from Mary herself, who thought about it for many years. Its purpose is to reinforce Jesus' humanity and wisdom, how he was growing strong and was filled with wisdom and the favor of God. But it does more than this.

It begins with the holy family taking **an annual trip down to Jerusalem for the Passover feast (Luke 2:41)**. Now, only Joseph would have been required to go, but it was an annual holiday that they all looked forward to. They most likely went with a huge entourage, a caravan of many families who were all going to Jerusalem together. Ryken has you imagine what it might have been like for Jesus:

Going to Passover must have been a great experience for a twelve-year-old boy. The streets of Jerusalem were crammed with as many as **two hundred thousand pilgrims and one hundred thousand sheep for sacrifices**. At that age

Jesus may well have had the run of the city, with all its sights and sounds. He would have feasted with friends. He would have gone up to the temple to pray and sing psalms. On the night of Passover he would have worshiped with his family. As his father prepared the sacrificial lamb, Jesus would have heard the story of salvation all over again. Joseph would have reminded his eldest son how God rescued his people from slavery and delivered them from death in Egypt.¹⁰

It is remarkable to think of Jesus, year after year, hearing this story, being the one who originally created it through the Exodus, for as his half-brother Jude says, “Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that *Jesus ... saved a people out of the land of Egypt*” (Jude 1:5). Yet, Jesus as a man heard the story and learned it through the teaching of others. Can you fully comprehend such thoughts? I can’t. That’s why we worship him.

But Luke focuses in on one particular year. “When he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom” (42). Many make a big deal of this being the year that he would have become a man. You’ve probably heard that this would have been the time of his *bar-mitzva*. Actually, the

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 1, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 107.

bar-mitzva doesn't take place until a boy is 13, and the tradition itself seems to post-date the New Testament.¹¹ Instead, a couple of other things are probably happening here.

First, 12 is a **symbolic number**¹² found in Luke's *twelve baskets* (9:17), the age of **Jairus' daughter** who was dying (8:42), a **woman with a discharge of blood** for twelve years (43), and of course the **number of the disciples** (6:13) and **twelve tribes of Israel** (22:30). Bullinger notes that it symbolizes **governmental perfection**,¹³ and that idea is interesting considering the context in which we will find Jesus is the temple around the scribes and the law. **Second**, 13 (Jews) or 14 (Greeks) was symbolically thought to mark a boy's transition into maturity.¹⁴ In other words, by saying he was twelve, Luke is saying that **Jesus is still a child**. We are going to see shortly why this is important and how it fits with the overall purpose of this story.

Finally, it appears as if Joseph and Mary are taking him to Jerusalem this time around **in order to help prepare** him for his covenantal obligations that will begin in a couple of

¹¹ **Mark Strauss**, "Luke," in Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 348.

¹² Cf. **Jonge**, 319.

¹³ **E. W. Bullinger**, *Number in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1967, 1921), 253.

¹⁴ Cf. **Jonge**, 319-24. There are some overlaps here with the study of ages I did back with Timothy.

years, when he comes of age to be fully considered under the law in terms of covenantal obligations. Children were not under such requirements until they reached a certain age, but they would have been preparing even earlier, as they learned the law and their history as a people with God.

This now makes sense of what begins to unfold next. “And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, 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, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him” (Luke 2:43-45). It's slightly ironic to me that people talk about the “lost years” of Jesus, when in fact the only story we have of him at this time ... he gets lost!

It seems strange to many that Mary and Joseph could possibly have lost their son, especially if he is their one and only son, as some have taught with the perpetual virginity of Mary. But Matthew tells us that Jesus actually had many brothers and sisters, and even names four of them for us, “James and Joseph and Simon and Judas [Jude]” (Matt 13:55). Besides, there was as we have seen a huge consortium

of people in a caravan that was traveling on so far of a journey. Many were related to each the family. A boy of twelve could obviously take care of himself. So it takes them over a day to figure out that he isn't in the group behind or in front playing with other children.¹⁵

There are **two key words** here. The first is that they did not “**know**” it. Jesus had stayed behind in Jerusalem, and his parents did not *know* it. We will see how Luke plays off this word that shows their lack of omniscience about this amazing boy who was in their midst. The second is that they began to “**search**” for him. The song says, “**I once was lost, but now I'm found.**” Well, Jesus is lost. He must be found.

Because they could not find him among the wagon train, they had to **return to Jerusalem** to search for him there. I can only imagine the mixed emotions of angst, anger, and guilt that the two parents were probably feeling. He's their responsibility. Indeed, God gave them this miracle child to

¹⁵ “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 traveled 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. In addition, it was a definite custom that in the evening, after the day's journey, the whole traveling company came together for the night at a place previously arranged.” **Norval Geldenhuys**, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 126.

take care of him and here they've gone and neglected their only true duty in life. They've lost the son of God!

Next, we come to **the center of the story**, both by word count and by writing style. It consists of **two parallel verses** which begin with, "**After three days**" (**Luke 2:46**). It took them **three days** to find him! Now, the old city of Jerusalem today is very large. I've been fortunate enough to walk its streets several times. Part of me can understand that it would take three days, but part of me thinks with a little bit of help, they could have tracked him down sooner, especially when it would have been much smaller back then. **Could there be something deeper** going on here?

I think the answer is that there are **a couple of things** behind this number. One is **more immediate**. The other is more related to **the totality** of the Gospel story. For the Gospel story, we must remember that **three days** plays a pivotal part at the **end of the story**. How many times does Jesus say, "**after three days I will rise**" (**Matt 27:63; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34**) or something like it (**Matt 12:40; 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 26:61; Mark 14:58; 15:29; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46; John 2:1**)? A lot! Here we are at the beginning of the story where after three days they found Jesus. At the end of the story, "**on the third day**," Jesus will rise from the dead.

But in both cases, *the reality is* that it is not actually Jesus who is lost. It is the people who have not been seeing clearly. As Jesus will soon say to Mary and Joseph, they should have known.

Of these many times that Jesus predicts his resurrection, in several of these he says that he will raise *the temple* in three days. Of these predictions, Luke is the only one who doesn't mention it (Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29; John 2:19). Instead, he is the only one who puts three and the temple into another context. "After three days they found him in the temple" (Luke 2:46). This leads us to the more immediate reason for three days here.

Jesus in his Father's House

The first of the two parallel verses begins with the literal center (by word count) of the passage, "... sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (46). The second then continues, "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (47). The first shows us a child of twelve doing what no child of twelve today will do. Jesus isn't playing games at the arcade, or flirt-

ing with the young girls, or shopping in the stores of Jerusalem. But in fact, these seem to be the places that Mary and Joseph must have been looking. Because they clearly had gone everywhere *but* the temple, otherwise, they would have found him.

But here is Jesus, twelve years after Simeon and Anna in the very same place made those prophecies about him, now sitting among the teachers of Israel, the very people who a couple of decades from now, will be trying to kill him. He is being taught by them. He is listening to them. He is asking them questions. He is a human. He is not depicted here as God. He learns like we do. He doesn't know everything.

But of course, just here, we enter into a mighty mystery, a mystery that the astute reader will have already wondered about. For Jesus at other times *does* appear to know all things. In fact, his disciples say as much (John 16:30). God is omniscient and Jesus is God. God is his nature. But Jesus is also human and humans are not omniscient, as we have just learned from his mother and father losing him! Humanity is Jesus' nature. Christian theology teaches this mystery that Jesus is fully God and fully man, two natures in one person. Utterly unique. Mind-blowing.

It becomes tricky to talk about this, because we do not want to enter into some kind of heresy where one nature or the other isn't real or full. People will often speak about how Jesus “*in his deity*” knew all things but “*in his humanity*” didn't. This is strange language that is trying to make sense of an even stranger situation. Here are a couple of the deeper thoughts that theologians have given this. [Cyril of Jerusalem](#) said,

Reflect upon the great skill with which we are initiated into his mystery. For the wise Evangelist did not introduce the Word in his abstract and incorporeal nature ... [*Only*] *after* having shown that he was born in the flesh of a woman and took our likeness, [does] he then assign to him these [human attributes](#). *Only then* does he call him a child and say that he grew in stature, as his body grew little by little ... God is perceived by the understanding to be entirely perfect in all things and altogether incapable of being destitute of any attribute suitable to the Godhead. So God the Word *gradually manifested his wisdom proportionally to the age which the body had attained*. The *body then advances* in stature, and the soul, in wisdom. The divine nature is capable of increase in neither one nor the other, seeing that the Word of God is all perfect. With good reason be connected the increase of wisdom with the growth of the bodily stature, because [the divine nature revealed its own wisdom in proportion to the measure of the bodily growth](#).

([Cyril of Jerusalem](#), *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 5)

What Cyril seems to be saying is that **the Word of God of course knows everything**, but because he became man, this was **revealed only in stages**, stages appropriate to the growth of a body. And that growth necessitated learning and increase.

Sometimes theologians talk about this as the difference between “**infused**” knowledge and “**acquired**” knowledge. **Aquinas** said, “*The acquired knowledge of Christ is caused by the active intellect which does not produce the whole at once, but successively; and hence by this knowledge Christ did not know everything from the beginning, but step by step, and after a time—i.e., in His perfect age.*”¹⁶

The mystery, and one of the things that the fairy-tale stories of Jesus fail to grasp, is that while he is fully divine, Jesus is also quite ordinarily human! This is a truth that I do not think we Christians have done a good enough job contemplating. Jesus really was one of us. Ryken puts it this way.

When Jesus was two, he was not able to perform the complex computations of differential calculus; he couldn't even

¹⁶ **Thomas Aquinas**, *The “Summa Theologica” of St Thomas Aquinas Literally Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1912), III q. 12 a. 2 resp. Cited in **John Charles Reed**, “Wisdom in the Synoptic Gospels,” Masters Thesis to Charles Sturt University (2017), 62. https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/19193357/Wisdom_in_the_Synoptic_Gospels.pdf.

“solve for x.” When he was six, he did not know the percentage of hydrogen in Jupiter’s atmosphere, or the distance from Earth to Alpha Centauri. When he was ten, he could not recite the capital cities of Africa or the presidents of the United States. With respect to his divine nature, these were things that he had always known, but with respect to his human nature, they were among the many things that he did not know during his time on earth. John Calvin went so far as to say that there would be “*no impropriety in saying that Christ, who knew all things, was ignorant of something in respect of his perception as a man.*” Apart from special revelation by the Spirit, Jesus did not know anything that was outside of his experience or beyond the capacity of a human mind at that age to know. These were the rules of engagement for his mission to save the world.¹⁷

The ancient hymn recited by Paul put it this way. “Though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself* [made himself of no reputation], by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Php 2:6-7). Truly, the thought staggers the imagination.

If the first half focuses our minds on Jesus’ humanity, the second starts to hint at his divinity! And this is why they

¹⁷ Ryken, 105.

need to be read and thought about *together*. “And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (47). Notice, Jesus is not merely asking questions like an inquisitive young man. He is showing deep understanding of things that only trained rabbis could begin to appreciate. Further, he *was answering them!* This caused all who heard him to be amazed.

Now, I think Luke is doing something here that many are not familiar with. In ancient literature, it was common to put a kind of *child-prodigy story* into your tale, especially if you are talking about a hero. Xenophon does it with Cyrus (who, curiously, is age 12),¹⁸ Plutarch does it with Alexander the Great. Josephus does it with ... *himself*.¹⁹ But he also does it with Samuel, importantly, telling us that when Samuel was *twelve*, he began to prophecy (*Antiquities Of the Jews* 5.10.4).²⁰ The LXX tells us that Solomon was *twelve* when he took the throne of David (2Kg 2:12 LXX). Tradition says that “The wise Solomon, when only in *the twelfth*

¹⁸ Jonge, 322.

¹⁹ “Moreover, when I was a child, and about fourteen years of age, I was commended by all for the love I had to learning; on which account the high priests and principal men of the city came then frequently to me together, in order to know my opinion about the accurate understanding of points of the law.” (Josephus, *Life of Josephus* 9). See Justin L. Daneshmand, “The Elusive Jesus of Luke-Acts in Its Ancient Mediterranean Literary Context,” Doctoral Thesis to the University of Manchester (2020), 22. https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/216118407/FULL_TEXT.PDF/. Also, Jonge.

²⁰ Cited in Jonge, 322.

year of his age, had wisdom to decide the important question concerning the children of the two women, when it was unknown to whom these respectively belonged; so that the whole people were astonished at such wisdom in a child, and venerated him as being not a mere youth, but a full-grown man” (*Epistle of Maria of Cassobola* 3).²¹ In putting the story just this way, it is clear that Luke is associating Jesus with these other ancient heroes.

It is at just this point though that Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph, seeing him doing these things in the temple “were astonished” (48). That’s a fascinating reaction, since they had known Jesus for twelve years! Had he shown no extraordinary propensity towards these things at all to them? Again, the language takes us down a notch, to consider the very real, human Jesus.

But then Mary interjects. I imagine her pulling the young boy up and taking him aside, she says, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress” (48b). Notice, Luke is returning to the word “search.” This verse does a couple of things to our notions of the holy family. First, we see Mary

²¹ In Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., “The Epistle of Maria the Proselyte to Ignatius,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 120.

beside herself with anxiety. This is the same word that Luke will use of the rich man in hell, being in “anguish” (Luke 16:24-25). But he also uses it of the Ephesian elders who are terribly “sorrowful” that they would not see Paul again (Acts 20:38). Has she been sinning in her distress? But it also gives us the impression that Mary believes that Jesus is not obeying the fifth commandment! Jesus is not honoring his father and mother! This is also fascinating to think about on many levels. Having been his mother for twelve years, did Mary not understand Jesus’ sinlessness? I believe this reaction is meant to illicit a response in us, to consider even more just how ordinary Jesus looked to others. Few of us are guilty of this, because we’ve taken Jesus so far to the other extreme, that we do not even consider that he could cry in a manger! This is meant to show you that you indeed have an advocate who is *like you*.

And yet, again, at just the right moment, Luke pulls a fast one on us. Lest we be lulled into thinking that Jesus was, alas, nothing more than us, we get the child’s amazing response. Jesus now brings back up the word “know.” “And he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not *know* that I must be in my Father's house?’” (49). They did not know where he was, because they had lost him. But

they shouldn't have lost him, **because they should have known** that he would be in his Father's house! Jesus is telling them that they were the ones with the problem, not him. *And he's twelve!* What twelve year old does this?

Now, lest we miss the impact of what Luke is doing, I do not think we should think about what Jesus is saying yet. Instead, let's go to the next verse. "**And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them**" (50). This verse gives us the impression that **they were still beside themselves**. Perhaps this reaction might have even elicited a bit of **anger**. I mean, Jesus gives them an excuse that they don't comprehend in the slightest. How would you react to your child that did something like that? This question isn't easy to answer, because I don't think any of us have had a child that gave such an excuse after causing all the temple rabbis to marvel at his knowledge. Nevertheless, I'm the parent; they are the child. There's an order to it all, and we've all heard and given lame excuses that didn't meet the satisfaction of our parents. And we all know how they reacted to such things. My guess is, at the very least, **the halos of Mary and Joseph probably got a little tarnished** in their reaction.

Now that we've appreciated their reaction, let's go back to think about what Jesus was saying. First, you might have

the translation “**my father’s business**” (KJV) rather than “**house.**” This is because the Greek doesn’t supply the noun. Since Jesus is in the temple, some have put “**house.**” Since Jesus is learning the law and being instructed and teaching others, others have put “**business.**” The fact is, **both are true.** The point is, Jesus is doing what he was sent by the Father to do. And, this is the only time he could do it, because he otherwise lived a three days journey from Jerusalem. He had to spend the time here while he was here.

But the real shocker is that Jesus is *talking to Joseph*, his father, about being in his Father’s house. Obviously, Joseph would have known the temple was not his. But he also would have known that sitting there in this setting with the teachers of Israel was not his business. Jesus was almost certainly being raised as a **carpenter**. So **whose father** is he talking about? Is Joseph starting to get nervous about that “other” father, since he knows that he is not the child’s father? Could such a thought have crept into his mind about how Mary really got pregnant, even after the angel came to him (**Matt 1:20**)? Have we even treated Joseph as wholly incapable of such thoughts?

But, **Joseph is a man of faith**. So whether it did or not, it is eventually clear who Jesus is talking about. Throughout

the OT, God is often called **Israel's father** (e.g. **Ex 4:22; Isa 63:16; Jer 3:4**; etc.). But, this title is only given in **the plural**. He is the Father of the nation, the peoples. This is the first time in history that anyone has ever called God his (singular) Father. As Ryken puts it, **“This intimate expression was totally new. No one had ever said anything like it before.”**²² This may be one reason why Luke has been so focused on Jesus' virgin birth. He wanted us to hear *this* story the way that only that previous story could illuminate.

This in turn points us directly at **Jesus' divinity**. He is the *Son* of God the Father. And no one else has ever had this relationship *this way*. This must therefore recall passages like **Psalm 2:7**, **“You are my Son; today I have begotten you.”** While we could spend the rest of our lives thinking about just the intra-trinitarian and dual natures of Christ from this one passage and never exhaust all that it means, the point that derives from this concerning Mary and Joseph must not be missed. If God is Jesus' Father, and he is doing his Father's business in his Father's house, then he is **not, in fact, violating the fifth commandment**. Jesus' response, even if they didn't understand it, vindicated the Perfect Child in a way that was so beyond their comprehension that they missed it.

²² **Ryken**, 110.

Now, in case anyone should think that Jesus was actually using this as an excuse to disobey Joseph and Mary, his parents, further, the story concludes with this important inclusion. “**And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart**” (51). However long it took for this lad to complete his business in the temple, he then **went back home to Nazareth with his parents** who had brought him to Jerusalem. He didn’t go to India or Britain! And he was *submissive* to them. Jesus never had any intent of dishonoring his parents. As a human who knew they should have known where he was, he was simply doing what he was supposed to be doing. The blame is not on Jesus, but on Mary and Joseph. For being dull of hearing and slow of understanding. After all these signs they have been given about who this boy is, after having twelve years of contemplation and living with him, after thinking so long about the hundreds of messianic prophecies, **they still didn’t understand** as they should have.

But the **Lord of Creation is merciful and righteous**. And the boy Jesus was submissive to his parents, patient with them, doing as they led—as his parents—until the time for his ministry came. And he is just as patient and good with us today. We, who are slow of hearing, sluggards to accept

how truly good the Gospel is for us—Jesus’ patience with us knows no bounds. He knows what we are like, because he knew what his own parents were like. And, he knows what we are like, because he knows what it is to be fully human.

Jesus. The Wisdom of God.

The chapter ends by returning what it said in **vs. 40**. “**And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man**” (**Luke 2:52**). We’ve mentioned **Samuel**, not just today, but in many previous places of Luke’s infancy narrative, especially as it relates to his mother, Hannah, and her prayer to God for a boy. As if Luke is thinking that we, like Mary and Joseph, might have needed just a bit more help to understand **why this was Jesus’ business**, in this last verse of his story of Jesus’ young life, he gives us a phrase that harkens directly to Samuel. The key here is the additional words, “***and also with man***” which are not found in **vs. 40**. “**Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man**” (**1Sam 2:26**; cf. **3:19**). They are virtually identical. In so echoing this verse, Jesus is being **likened to Samuel**, the great prophet, priest, and judge of Israel. Samuel needed to grow,

daily, in the temple and instruction in the ways of God. So too, Jesus.

But it isn't just Samuel. We've also mentioned **Solomon**. Solomon, who *built* the (First) Temple, became **king** of Israel, probably around age twelve. Later in Luke, Jesus will compare himself to Solomon, via *wisdom*. The Queen of Sheba “came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (**Luke 11:31**). It was by wisdom that Solomon built that house (**1Kg 10:4**). In fact, it is **Wisdom who builds houses** (**Prov 9:1; 24:3**). In linking us to these two figures, Luke is signaling that something greater than Samuel and Solomon is here. And in doing so, he is showing us just what and where his business needed to be done.

Proverbs 8 is especially interesting, for it tells us even more about Jesus. Wisdom says, “I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man” (**Prov 8:30-31**). What is Wisdom building? Creation itself. Who is Wisdom beside? **The LORD (22)**—God the Father. When did Wisdom come into being? Never, but rather, she was (metaphorically) pos-

sessed at the beginning of his work (22), before the beginning of the earth (23). Paul tells us something else. It was Christ who did this work of Creation (Col 1:15-18). He also tells us that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of *wisdom* and knowledge (Col 2:3). He holds the key to all wisdom.

Wisdom itself came down and was incarnate in the womb of the virgin in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus, now growing in wisdom and strength, in body and spirit, has had the favor of God for all eternity. He now has it *as a human*, so that he might be perfectly guided to do all things necessary for our salvation. That is indeed Christ's work that will unfold throughout this Gospel. It is the work of the prophet. It is the work of the priest in the temple. It is the work of the King.

Mary much later pondered these events, Luke says. *She treasured them up in her heart*. From the losing of her child, to the finding of him in the temple, to the astonishing things he said to the people and to her, to his returning home and being utterly obedient in all things. There is indeed much to ponder about the boy Jesus.

Treasuring them in her heart is language that recalls Jacob treasuring up the dream of Joseph. The language is almost identical.²³ Meaning, it is for each of us, mother and father, male and female, man and woman, boy and girl to treasure these things. Jesus is presented like this because he is human. Jesus is presented like this because he is God. I can't comprehend that any more than you can. But I can believe it and I can worship him for it.

Make sure that in your own pondering, your thoughts are guided by faith, that he is precisely whom you are told, so that you might know that God himself has come to you in human form, and has done all things necessary for your salvation. Otherwise, you will be lost, like so many others who make up stories about him to suit their own idolatrous passions. Remember, Jesus was not the one who was lost. We were. May the Word of God find you.

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²³ “And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying” (ὁ δὲ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ διετήρησεν τὸ ῥῆμα) (Gen 37:11 LXA). “And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart” (ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ διετήρει πάντα τὰ ῥήματα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς) (Luke 2:51). See A. W. Argyle, “A Parallel between Luke ii. 51 and Genesis xxxvii. 17.” *ExpTim* 65 (1953–54): 29. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/001452465306500107>.

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