

THE RETURN TO NAZARETH AND THE VISIT TO THE TEMPLE

THE RETURN TO NAZARETH (Mt. 2:19-23)

Herod died in 4 BC, and his death prepared the way for Joseph to leave Egypt. Yet once more in a dream, Joseph was told that it was time to return to Galilee (cf. 2:13b). Initially, Joseph had considered settling in Judea, but when he heard that Archelaus reigned there, he was fearful.

JESUS, THE NAZARENE

Matthew's allusion to the statement, "He shall be called a Nazarene," is unusual in two respects. First, unlike his previous fulfillment statements, here he refers to the OT prophets in the plural, a fact that seems to infer that he is not thinking of one particular OT passage but a general reference to several such passages. Second, there is no single OT quotation that corresponds to the statement in Mt. 2:23b. Matthew's meaning in this fulfillment passage is far from clear, but there are two significant approaches worth considering.

*One is that the term "Nazarene" is a pejorative name, used as an insult (cf. Jn. 1:46; of. 7:42, 52). Christians would later be called Nazarenes in this same pejorative fashion (Ac. 24:5), and in fact, Christians are still known as "Nazarenes" in the Jewish Talmud. The earliest known usage of the term in a pejorative sense in Hebrew occurs in the *birkat ha-minim* (the curse upon heretics) which was adopted in Jewish synagogue liturgies in the late 1st century. As such, then, Matthew may be saying that Jesus' residence in Nazareth would climax in rejection, a rejection that is indeed predicted in several OT passages (cf. Ps. 22: 6-8, 13, 16-18; 69:8, 20-21; Is. 49:7; 53:2-3, 7-8; Da. 9:26).*

*Another possibility is that the fulfillment involves a type of word-play between the Greek form *Nazoraïos* (= Nazarene) in Mt. 2:23 and the Hebrew term *netser* (= branch) in Is. 11:1. The passage in Isaiah is clearly messianic, and some regard it as a double entendre, referring both to the "branch" who would become the Messiah as well as to the one who would come from Nazareth. If this interpretation is adopted, the fulfillment would fall under the category of clarifying an OT ambiguity. On the whole, however, this solution seems less satisfactory than the previous one.*

Herod's jurisdiction had been divided among his three sons, Archelaus receiving Judea, Samaria and Idumea, Herod Antipas receiving Galilee and Perea, and Herod Phillip receiving Gaulanitis, Auranitis, Batanea, Trachonitis, Paneas and Ituraea, the regions north and east of Galilee. Afraid to stay in Judea, Joseph continued northward, being directed in yet another dream, until he eventually reached Galilee. He settled in his previous home town of Nazareth (Lk. 1:26-27). The settlement in Nazareth became yet another OT fulfillment (Mt. 2:23).

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE AT THE AGE OF TWELVE (Lk. 2:41-52)

The story of Jesus in the temple as a boy of twelve is the only such account in the canonical gospels that seeks to give information concerning the years between Jesus' birth and the beginning of his ministry at about the age of thirty (cf. Lk. 3:23). Various efforts, both ancient¹ and

¹ The most striking ancient account is the mid to late 2nd century Gnostic work, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which seems to be heavily influenced by Hellenistic *theioi andres* (= divine men) concepts. It depicts Jesus as an adolescent wonder-worker who caused clay pigeons to fly, called down fatal curses upon people he did not like, performed healings, and raised the dead. These stories allegedly happened when Jesus was five (2:1), six (11:1), eight (12:2) and twelve (19:1). Interestingly enough, Luke's account is also reproduced in this document, and the two accounts agree very closely, though it appears that the apocryphal account is probably derived from Luke's Gospel. In any case, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, unlike the canonical gospels, was composed long after any living witnesses could validate

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modern,² have been made to fill in the gaps of these hidden years. However, the four evangelists did not seem to think this necessary, and in any case, they are not intended as biographies, at least in the modern sense of the word. Rather, but for this one exception, they ignored these early years, and even in Luke's Gospel, the one story which is given is not so much in order to satisfy curiosity about Jesus' childhood as it is to provide a transition between the birth stories and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The Lukan adolescent story seems intended to indicate that as a boy Jesus was gradually growing into a self-awareness of his messianic identity.

LIFE STATIONS OF JEWISH MALES

The Mishnah gives careful attention to the life stages of the Jewish male under the following rubric.

*At five, reading Scripture
At ten, learning Mishnah
At thirteen, bound to the
commandments
At fifteen, study of Talmud
At eighteen, marriage
At twenty, pursuit of vocation
At thirty, full vigor
At forty, maturity of reason
At fifty, able to counsel
At sixty, beginning of old age
At seventy, grey age
At eighty, advanced old age
At ninety, bowed down
At one hundred, dead*

The Torah prescribed that Jewish males should celebrate three festivals each year by traveling to the central sanctuary, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which included Passover, the Feast of Weeks, also called Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths, also called Tabernacles (Dt. 16:16). By the era in which Jesus lived, however, it had become customary for those who lived some distance away to come to Jerusalem only at Passover. By Jewish standards, Jesus would have been on the threshold of adult life when he reached the age of 12, for at 13 he entered into the full responsibilities of adulthood. Although at 13 a Jewish boy became a "son of the law" (the equivalent to the modern *bar mitzvah*), rabbinic law also instructed that a year or two before he was 13 he should be brought to the temple to begin his participation in the annual festivals. It is in accord with this custom that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to Jerusalem during Passover when he was 12. It is a popular idea that this was Jesus' first visit to the temple, though the text does not say so directly, and Jewish tradition does not restrict younger boys from the annual festivals.

The normal route from Galilee to Jerusalem, about a three-day trip, avoided Samaria. Pilgrims crossed the Jordan in the north and traveled southward through the Transjordan area of Perea to the fords near Jericho. Here, they would once more cross the Jordan, and from thence they climbed the ascent to Jerusalem, passing through a desolate and dangerous wasteland on their way to the ancient capital. Hence, they usually traveled in crowds for safety.

Although the Festival of Unleavened Bread lasted a full week, pilgrims were only required to stay through the first two days. Apparently, Joseph and Mary began the return trip to Galilee with other pilgrims after fulfilling this requirement, only to discover at the end of the first day's travel that Jesus was not with any of their relatives or friends in the caravan as they had assumed. It took yet another

its claims, and like all Gnostic literature, it must be rejected as a completely valid testimony about Jesus.

² A highly speculative and almost laughable modern effort attempts to prove that Jesus was a student at the Essene community in Qumran, cf. C. Potter, *The Lost Years of Jesus Revealed*, rev. ed. (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1962).

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day to return to Jerusalem, and they discovered Jesus on the third day in the temple court. It was customary during the final days of Unleavened Bread for Sanhedrin members to sit in the temple terrace to teach and field questions from the pilgrims. It was likely in the midst of this dialogue that Joseph and Mary found Jesus, posing questions and listening intently to the sages.

Jesus' intelligence and insightful familiarity with the Torah was apparent in the discussion group in the temple terrace. When his parents arrived, they were equally amazed. Mary, with some asperity, offered a rebuke to her son, but Jesus responded with the well-known words, "Did you not know I had to be about the affairs of my Father?"³ It is obvious that this question is the point of the whole story. Some stories in the gospels, such as this one, are called apothegms, which is to say, pronouncement stories precisely because the whole story revolves around an important saying. The



The "Steps of the Rabbis" below the south wall of the temple mount was where Sanhedrin members fielded questions from pilgrims. Possibly this is where Jesus was discovered by Mary and Joseph in dialogue with the Jewish teachers.

narrative functions as a vehicle for the saying, and the saying is the climax of the narrative itself. Luke seems to be telling the reader that even at this early age Jesus had begun to realize who he was and to discern the unique relationship he had with God, even though Mary and Joseph did not fully comprehend. Mary, though she was perplexed, did not forget this saying, and she reflected deeply upon it. To be sure, she also knew the unusual circumstances surrounding the birth 12 years earlier, but the full impact of what it all meant was not yet fully clear. In Mary's perplexity, the reader of Luke's gospel once more finds a paradigm for the threshold of faith. Mary's quiet perplexity would someday blossom into a full and vibrant faith (cf. Ac. 1:14), and if readers will likewise hear the entire testimony about Jesus, they, too, will be able to respond in kind.

After this incident, all we know of Jesus' early life is that he went home with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth in Galilee and was an obedient son. The concluding fourfold description of Jesus' development reflects an intellectual, physical, spiritual and social growth (cf. 1 Sa. 2:26).

³ The older KJV rendering is "about my Father's business." However, the Greek text literally reads, "Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be in the [?] of my Father?" As such, the implied object of the preposition must be supplied by the translator, and since the definite article is plural (τοῖς), most modern versions read "things" or "affairs" or something comparable.

THE 18 YEARS IN NAZARETH

While there are no narratives in the canonical gospels about the 18 intervening years of Jesus' life prior to his ministry, at least a few things may be considered. In the first place, the story of Jesus in the temple at age 12 suggests that already he had experienced an initial awakening of self-identity and mission. We also know that by the end of the 18 years, when he traveled to the Jordan to be baptized by John, his identity was confirmed by the heavenly voice and descent of the Holy Spirit like a dove (Mt. 3:13-17//Mk. 1:9-11//Lk. 3:21-22//Jn. 1:32-34). One is left to wonder how this self-consciousness came about. Was it gradual? Did it happen at some particular point? Perhaps it is best to follow the lead of the gospels in leaving such questions unanswered in a holy silence.

Jesus, of course, grew up in a family with brothers and sisters (Mt. 13:55-56//Mk. 6:3). All mentions of Joseph disappear after the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12, and it is to be presumed that he died at some point, though he was known locally as "the carpenter" (Mt. 13:55//Mk. 6:3). Presumably, Jesus would have worked with Joseph alongside his brothers in the trade. The "brothers of the Lord" are a distinct and identifiable group (Ac. 1:14; cf. Mk. 3:31//Mt. 12:46//Lk. 8:19; Mk. 6:3//Mt. 13:55; Jn. 2:12). Initially, they found it hard to believe in the messiahship of their brother (Jn. 7:5), but after Easter they emerged as important leaders in the early church (1 Co. 9:5). The most natural reading of the word "brothers" is that they were sons of Mary and Joseph, living in the family home at Nazareth and accompanying Mary when she went to the wedding at Cana (Jn. 2:12). This view, the so-called Helvidian view (after Helvidius), is commonly accepted among evangelical Protestants.

There are other views, of course, that the "brothers" of Jesus were either older sons of Joseph from a former marriage or else cousins from another branch of the family. The Epiphonian view (after Epiphanius) is that Joseph was married previously and had children by that union, a view dating in the mid-2nd century and followed in Eastern Orthodoxy. The Hieronymian View (after Jerome) is that Jesus' "brothers" were cousins, a view upheld in the Roman Catholic community. Here, the term "brothers" is understood in the broader sense of kinsman, and they are reckoned as children of Clopas (Jn. 19:25), the husband of Mary's sister. It is likely that the two theories in which the "brothers" were not sons of Mary owes more to the attempt to protect the idea of her perpetual virginity than anything else. In the end, the conclusion that Jesus' "brothers" were sons of Joseph and Mary after the birth of Jesus seems the most tenable, and Matthew infers that they had normal conjugal relations after the birth of Jesus (Mt. 1:25).

As to Jesus' education, presumably he attended classes in the local synagogue. Mark's Gospel shows him speaking Aramaic as his conversational language (Mk. 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:34), and Luke shows him reading Hebrew (Lk. 4:16-21). Whether or not he knew Greek is unknown, but it is likely that he did, given the proximity of Greek-speaking cities near Nazareth.

So, Jesus grew up in a Torah-observant family until he was about thirty, when his public ministry began (Lk. 3:23).