

# The Feast of the Holy Family



*Jesus among the Doctors | Heinrich Hoffman, 1884 | Hamburg Museum | PD-US*

## *History of the Feast*

There are major feast days dedicated to each member of the Holy Family - Jesus, Mary, and Joseph - but the Feast of the Holy Family commemorates their life together, and the celebration focuses on religious life within the family. It is a Feast that seeks to portray the Holy Family of Nazareth as the “true model of life” (cf. Opening Prayer of the Mass) from which our families can draw inspiration and know where to find help and comfort.

Because of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, a feast for the Holy Family has been observed by the Copts from early times. In Western Christianity, however, a veneration for the Holy Family as a group, rather than as individuals, did not arise until the 17th century and was not officially recognized until the feast day was formally instituted in 1921 under Pope Benedict XV. Originally celebrated on the Sunday after Epiphany (January 6), the Feast of the Holy Family was moved to the Sunday after Christmas in 1969, bringing it within the Christmas season.

## *The Gospel Reading*

*<sup>41</sup> Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, <sup>42</sup> and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom. <sup>43</sup> After they had completed its days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. <sup>44</sup> Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, <sup>45</sup> but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, <sup>47</sup> and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking*

*for you with great anxiety.”<sup>49</sup> And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”<sup>50</sup> But they did not understand what he said to them.<sup>51</sup> He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart.<sup>52</sup> And Jesus advanced (in) wisdom and age and favor before God and man. (Luke 2:41-52)*

## **Flow of the Lukan Narrative**

Immediately before our gospel text, Joseph and Mary went about the process of fulfilling the requirements of the Jewish Law regarding circumcision of the child and purification of the mother ([Luke 2:21-24](#)) They received God’s blessing through the interactions with Simeon and Anna. The circumcision marked the acceptance of and entry into the covenant community (Gen 17:9-14). “Both rites, circumcision and naming, gave the child an identity...” even as it was “an act of blessing, a dedication to God, and a declaration of the child’s heritage and character.” (Culpepper, 69)

In these scenes that precede our gospel text, the words spoken to Mary and Joseph are at the center, standing in a powerful context: obedience to the Law and recognition of their faith in the promises of God to his covenant people. Simeon and Anna, exemplars of devotion and worship, are the ones who speak the words of divine blessing, giving the ceremonies meaning beyond identity and promise. Their blessing also put us on notice that this child is the one about whom the prophets spoke would come as Messiah.

While the stories of Jesus as an infant in the Jerusalem Temple serve as testimony to the exemplary piety of Joseph and Mary, by this Luke assures his patron, Theophilis and the readers, that Jesus is being raised in a devout household aligned to the promises and purposes of God. A household that participates in the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for celebration of the Passover.

Jesus and his parents journey to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Luke places Jerusalem as central to the overall narrative. The next time Luke portrays Jesus on his way to Jerusalem it will be for the Passover again (Lk 19); it will be his final trip to Jerusalem, and the Jewish feast will coincide with his own Passover. Then, Jesus is also “lost” for three days before he reappears as the victorious risen Lord. Is that an interesting happenstance, or has Luke left us a hint of things to come?

## **More to Luke’s Placement of the Text**

First of all, it is important to remember that Luke’s narrative includes substantial materials on the annunciations of John the Baptist to Zechariah and the Annunciation to Mary of the conception of Jesus. During that encounter Gabriel announced to Mary that her child would be called Jesus, holy, and Son of God (1:31–32, 35). Just before the beginning of our gospel text, the child has indeed been named Jesus (2:21) and designated as holy (2:23), but only in our gospel does he appear as Son of God (2:48–49).

Second, with the report of Mary’s response in 2:51 (“his mother kept all these things in her heart.”) we have to consider that what we have just encountered offers more than meets the eye at first read. What is the full implication of “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” There are many questions still unanswered.

Finally, Luke has bracketed the account of Jesus’ visit to the temple with two summary statements:

*“The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” (2:40)*

*“And Jesus advanced (in) wisdom and age and favor before God and man.” (2:52)*

Each verse notes Jesus’ favor before God and both mention the boy’s “wisdom.” Importantly, these two matters serve as focal points in the account, for at issue here is Jesus’ remarkable understanding (2:47) and the implications of his particular relation to God (2:48–49).

As Green [Luke, 154] notes: “Luke brings to closure the narrative cycle initiated by the promise of a child to Mary. The child has been born, his coming repeatedly interpreted and celebrated. Now we see him grappling with his divine vocation, albeit provisionally, and we are informed of God’s continued favor on behalf of the child as he matures. With this news, we are prepared for the anticipated return to the story of John (cf. 1:80), who will pave the way for the public ministry of Jesus (1:76–77).”

It is also perhaps noteworthy that Luke, as a rhetorical historian, would have been likely to include a childhood account as a means of making an “orderly” transition to the public ministry of Jesus from the Nativity narrative.

Green’s comments continue: “Luke is fond of summary statements that allow both for the passage of time in the story with minimal representation and commentary, and for brief valuative comments on his part. His chief concern is Jesus as an adult, but as with contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, he relates that the child already possessed the qualities that will make him extraordinary in later life. Of special interest is Jesus’ wisdom and a certification of God’s valuative point of view vis-à-vis the child. [divine favor] Both qualities will come to the fore in the following story, which may be understood as an illustration of these features.”

## The Child Jesus in Jerusalem

The beginning of the passage simply reads: “*Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom.*” (vv. 41-42) It does not tell us that Jesus went with him, although as the story unfolds, that was the case. A young man was not required to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem until he had reached the age of thirteen. Perhaps Luke is noting that Jesus’ piety, reflective of the piety of his parents, was already evident before the required age. In any case we are given more assurance that the Holy Family is a household that serves God.

If the pilgrims covered approximately 15 miles per day, the journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem was a 4 to 5 day trek. We are told nothing about the Holy Family’s time in Jerusalem but may assume the well celebrated the holy days of Passover.

*<sup>43</sup> After they had completed its days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. <sup>44</sup> Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, <sup>45</sup> but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple...*

To our modern sensibilities we are perplexed and perhaps shocked that Joseph and Mary have traveled so far before they realize that Jesus is not in the caravan. Is the report of three days a literary flourish that will later echo in the three days in the grave? Or is a recounting of the events? In any case, what is key to the story is Jesus’ location: in the Temple.

*<sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, <sup>47</sup> and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.”*

Where the people are astounded (*existēmi*), Joseph and Mary are astonished (*ekplessomai*). The people are pondering how someone so young could possess such insight about the Law and Word of God. The parents are “besides themselves.” The parent’s reaction is one of shock, perhaps dismay? Theirs is the response of parents whose child has wandered off. They are joyful, upset and clearly they are confused

and don't know what to think. Consider Mary's question and response (*odynaomai*). Rather than "great anxiety" it is more literally translated as "experienced pain." Luke alone uses this particular Greek word - here and to describe the torment of the rich man in hell (Luke 16:24-25). Perhaps this is but the start of a fulfillment of Simeon's warning that a sword would pierce Mary's heart because of the mission of Jesus.

## In my Father's House

It should be noted that the "house" does not appear in the text; the text reads, "Not did you know that in the father my must be I." "*Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*" (v.49) is particularly difficult in biblical Greek and capable of being read several ways if one only relies on a literal translation. Options available to the translator include, "house," "affairs," "business," or the existential sense of "in the father." Culpepper [77] and others offers some insight into this conundrum:

- The translation "*in my Father's house*" emphasizes the place rather than Jesus' activity, but unlike John 2:16, Luke has never called Jesus the Temple, "*my Father's house*."
- The sense, "*about my Father's affairs/business*," could mean the activities that Jesus was involved in – that is discoursing with the Jewish teachers. "...*all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers*." One understanding is that Jesus is for all practical purposes teaching the elders and scribes. This is the activity that Luke emphasizes at the end of Jesus' public ministry (Chapter 20). We also return to those "*affairs*" during Holy Week when we again find Jesus "*teaching in the Temple*" (19:47, 20:1, 21:37, 22:53).

Whichever translation one chooses, the Greek word *dei* ("must," "it is necessary") is likely key to any decision. When Jesus later uses the expression "I must" (*dei*; it is necessary that) it is not being in a place that is necessary, but rather Jesus must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (Lk 4), must suffer and be raised (Lk 9, 13, 17,24), and must fulfill Scriptures (Lk 21, 28) – the concerns and affairs of God the Father.

Long tradition favors the translation "*in my Father's house*" as it matches the narrative of the parents searching for Jesus and finding him there. However, there are good reasons to favor Jesus' understanding of the divine imperative and an awareness of his mission.

## First Words

Up to this point in Luke's gospel, there are no recorded words from Jesus. At the Presentation in the Temple as an infant, as Jesus was unable to speak for himself, Simeon and Anna announced his identity and mission. Once again in the Temple, Jesus now proclaims his identity and mission and the priority of God's claim in his mission.

As the scene opens, Mary and Joseph are the primary actors, but as it unfolds Jesus takes on an active role—for the first time in the Gospel. Joel Green [156] notes: "Jesus' words, then, are pivotal, and contain within them both an affirmation of his particular relation to God and his commitment to God's purpose. The first is emphasized by the dramatic development of the story, wherein Luke repeatedly refers to Jesus' parents, Mary refers to Jesus as child and speaks of Jesus' father, and Jesus counters by naming the God of the temple as his Father. That is, Luke has staged this interchange so as to pinpoint as the primary issue, Who is Jesus' father? To whom does he owe primary allegiance?"

Not even familial claims take precedent over aligning oneself uncompromisingly on the side of God's purpose. Jesus' life has a meaning that transcends the relationships of his human family.

## The Aftermath

<sup>51</sup> *He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart.* <sup>52</sup> *And Jesus advanced (in) wisdom and age and favor before God and man.*

The events in the Temple did not mark a break from his earthly family. Jesus' public ministry is some 18 years in the future. In the meantime he remained the obedient son. As the years passed, the wisdom exemplified in the temple scene—manifest in Jesus' understanding of the Scriptures and discernment of God's purpose—also increased.

The return to Nazareth closes this pericope just as the earlier return to Nazareth signaled the conclusion of the birth narrative.

Jesus' parents “*did not understand what he said to them*” (v.50) but neither were they clearly aware of Jesus' own identity as the Son of God. The events of the Annunciation, the Nativity, the visit of the Magi, and more let them know that there was a divine purpose for their son. but they were not prepared for how that purpose would appear - not now nor in the future.

## **Closing Thoughts**

This pericope is unique among the canonical gospels. While apocryphal gospels (e.g. Gospel of Peter, Protoevangelium of James, others) purport to convey stories of the child Jesus, they are all late 2nd century and later manuscripts of doubtful provenance. One of the development processes of growing up is individuation in which one discovers their identity apart from that described as “child of...” It does not mean that one discards family ties, religious experiences, and what came before, but it inevitably means taking on a new dimension of being an individual. It is a process of coming to know who you are and “whose” you are.

An essential aspect of that individuation is the sense of purpose and the recognition that your purpose is not independent from God. It raises the questions for us about faith in God and religious piety in the modern world. Is God central to your identity and purpose in this life, or one of several peripheral beliefs? Does faith in God shape your life in a profound way or does it largely shape Sundays as a respite from the week?

Religion in the time of Jesus offered a structured piety: family prayers, Scripture in synagogue, pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the high holy days, and special rituals such as circumcision, the Presentation (Dedication) of the First Born, and the Purification of the Mother. The parallels with modern Christianity and especially within Catholic Christianity, are evident.

As R. Alan Culpepper notes, “The observance of religious requirements and rituals has fallen on hard times.” The pressure and flow of modern life and secularism has reduced the significance of ritual observances in the life of most Christians. In some cases, the very same observances have become a refuge against the pressure and flow. But in neither case, is the inner life of purity and sincerity of heart revealed - nor a recognition of God's claim upon one's life.

Such divine claims may well come into tension or open conflict with the human desire for social acceptance outside the family (or even within the family), economic prosperity, and other good ideals. As many wisdom figures have noted, the challenge is not always to decide between good and evil, but to choose between options that each present worthy claims on your time and energy. Following the Commandments that begin with “*thou shall not*” is good and to be followed without reservation, but if that is the limit of your religious piety, it is a piety devoid of purpose. It is like the servant who buried the gold coins rather than risk losing them: there is no purpose in one's actions.

The Gospel of Luke is replete with “*searching*” and “*finding*.” Moving one's religious piety to the search for God in your life inevitably leads to finding a divine purpose to the life you choose. The challenge to modern Christians is to rediscover the rituals of faith that lead you to God in the ordinary as well as the special and extraordinary. The required rituals offer meaning if you will accept it, reflect upon it and let it shape your life. Consider Simeon and Anna. Their mature “obedience” (*to listen through*) to the required piety of their faith made them sensitive to God's presence in the events of their time. When the Holy

Family first appeared in the Temple, the blessing of Simeon and Anna gave the ritual deeper meaning - a gift that comes from the community of faith in celebration with one another.

These are the gifts that shape our identity and understanding of our purpose, open our awareness to the presence of God in the ordinary, and help understand that because of who we are we must be about our Father's business.

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