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## *THE BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS* *LUKE 2:1-52*

### **A Joyless, Restless World**

“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). When the time was right God dispatched His Son to earth on the mission of rescuing man from sin. Luke and other New Testament writers assert that God entered history at a particular time and place in Jesus.

Greek and Roman influences contributed to the conditions in the New Testament world which helped it to be the time for Jesus to come.

For centuries the Jews of Palestine had been dominated by foreign powers. They had the misfortune of being a buffer zone between Egypt and Syria for many years. After a short-lived period of independence, Palestine in the era of the New Testament was under Roman rule. Some of the Jews were happy with Roman rule but most deeply resented it and longed for a political Messiah to free them.

Greek philosophers tended to destroy the popular confidence in the pagan gods. Some of the Greek religions stressed mystical experience — indicating the hunger for spiritual reality. The worldliness

and widespread immorality of pagan culture cried for cleansing from the Holy One of God. Greek was an almost universal language; and Rome brought relative peace and justice to many lands. Both of these factors facilitated evangelizing the world.

Jewish leaders seemed more interested in financial gain or legalistic hair-splitting than in ministering to the needs of people. In spite of the wrong emphases in first-century Judaism, Christianity has its roots in the faith, Scriptures, ethics, and hope of Judaism.

To this joyless, restless world Jesus came.

### **The Birth of Jesus — Luke 2:1-7**

**2** In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. <sup>2</sup>This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. <sup>4</sup>And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup>to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup>And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

**2:1-3.** In his appeal to the Gentile mind Luke connects his story with Roman history. Augustus, as emperor, ruled the Roman Empire from 30 B.C. to 14 A.D. His wise administration brought peace to the empire during his forty-four year rule. He gave an official order that a census be taken of the Roman Empire (“all the world”). This order was given probably about 8 B.C. No direct evidence of this census decree is available outside this statement by Luke. It contradicts no known fact and harmonizes with Augustus’ reorganization plans for the empire. The purpose of the enrollment was for taxation. Such enrollments continued after this every fourteen years, for about two centuries.

Quirinius was the Syrian official’s Latin name. Historical evidence indicates he was governor of Syria during A.D. 6-9. A census mentioned in Acts 5:37 was taken at that time. Critics have accused Luke of error in this verse. Archaeological evidence has shown that Quirinius was an official in the Syrian government about 8-4 B.C. The word translated “was governor” was not limited to governors but indicated supervision and a place of authority. Luke said this is the first

or former census Quirinius conducted to distinguish from the second one about A.D. 6.

In Palestine the method of the census was that they went to their ancestral home to be registered. Evidence shows that this method of census-taking was followed in Egypt as well.

**2:4-5.** Bethlehem is located about eighty miles south of Nazareth and six miles south of Jerusalem. Even though they traveled south Luke said they went "up" because of Bethlehem's higher elevation. Joseph could trace his ancestry back to David who was born in Bethlehem. In I Samuel 20:6 Bethlehem is called "David's city." Apparently the angel's announcement to Joseph had already occurred (Matt. 1:18-24).

The Messiah's birth in Bethlehem was foretold in the eighth century B.C. by the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). The scholars in Jerusalem directed the wise men to Bethlehem when they asked, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matt. 2:1-2).

Mary also was of the house of David (Luke 1:32, 69). Some have contended that by law she was not required to go to Bethlehem for the registration. Evidence from the census in Egypt suggests that both husband and wife presented themselves. Even if Mary were not required by law to go with Joseph, he did not want to leave her alone in Nazareth at that time to face the probable insults.

After Mary returned from visiting Elizabeth she and Joseph were married. Luke's use of the term *betrothed* or *espoused* (a legal engagement without sexual relations) pointed to Mary's continued virginity until after the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:24-25).

This long ride (or walk) would have been a strenuous trip on Mary in the final days of her pregnancy.

**2:6-7.** No indication is given of how long they were in Bethlehem before the baby was born. Luke made it clear that the birth did occur in Bethlehem. Mary's conception was miraculous but the birth followed the term pregnancy in a normal fashion.

The New Testament does not give the exact date of the birth of Jesus. We know it was before March, 4 B.C., the date of the death of Herod the Great. It is ironic that Jesus was born a few years B.C. A mistake was made when the calendar was established. Perhaps He was born in 5 or 6 B.C. The date of December 25 was mentioned by Hippolytus after 200 A.D. December 25 as the birthdate can neither be proved nor disproved. However, if God had wanted us to know the date of Jesus' birth, He would have revealed the exact date.

Luke used simple words to describe this stupendous event.

*Firstborn son* indicated that more children followed in the family. Both Matthew and Luke used this expression. Mark 6:3 named four brothers of Jesus and also mentioned sisters. (See also Matt. 12:46-47; 13:55,56.) The doctrine that Mary remained ever a virgin is refuted by these passages.

The *swaddling clothes* refers to a square cloth folded around the baby and held in place by bands of cloth wound round and round him. No mention is made of anyone to assist Mary in the birth or in caring for the baby. The *manger* was a feeding trough for the animals. We conclude that Jesus was born in a place where animals were usually quartered because of the word manger. The *inn* could refer to a lodging place for travelers or even to a family's guest chamber.

What a contrast with modern well-equipped and staffed antiseptic delivery rooms! We may idealize the birth of Jesus but in reality He was born under very harsh and uncomfortable conditions. A fiction writer would not have thus portrayed the birth of a divine king.

### **The Visit of the Shepherds — Luke 2:8-20**

<sup>8</sup>And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. <sup>10</sup>And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; <sup>11</sup>for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup>And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup>And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

**2:8-9.** Ordinary shepherds were despised by the orthodox because the shepherds did not strictly observe the regulations of the ceremonial law. A passage in the Jewish *Mishnah* indicated that special shepherds kept flocks of sheep near Bethlehem year-round for use in the temple sacrifices. It is an intriguing thought that perhaps those who looked after the sacrificial lambs were the first outside of Mary and Joseph to see the Lamb of God.

The angel came from God into their presence. The glory and majesty of the Lord was manifested in a radiating, brilliant splendor, perhaps as a bright light. Fear is the usual response when a supernatural being manifests himself to men.

**2:10-12.** The angel instructed them to stop being frightened. He announced joyful news that would dispel their fears. The hope of the centuries has now been fulfilled. This happy news would be available to all people without regard to social or national distinctions.

For the benefit of the shepherds and all men Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The shepherds were informed the very night of His birth. The angel emphasized His work as Savior, His role as Messiah, and His nature as Lord. *Savior* points to His work of seeking to save the lost (Matt. 1:21; 4:15-16; 12:21; 20:28; Luke 1:78-79; 19:10; 22:19-20; John 3:16-17; 4:10,14; 5:25; 6:50-51; 7:37-38). *Christ*, the Greek word for the Hebrew word *Messiah*, shows His office of being the promised anointed Prophet, Priest and King (Matt. 16:16; Luke 2:26; 3:15; 4:41; 9:20; 20:41; 22:67; 23:2,35,39; 24:26,46). *Lord* was an Old Testament title for God. It designates Jesus' divine nature (John 20:28).

The sign was to convince the shepherds that the word of the angel was true. It also assisted them in finding the babe. It was usual that a babe would be in swaddling clothes but the unusual part was that he would be in a manger.

**2:13-14.** Other angels joined the announcing angel and all joined in an out-pouring of praise to God. Whether they sang, chanted or merely spoke is difficult to establish.

Honor and praise is given to God in heaven because He has sent the Peacemaker to earth. The idea of the text speaks not of a general good will to all people but rather of that deep, spiritual peace that comes when the guilt of one's sins has been forgiven by God. This peace comes to those who are in God's favor and submit to His will.

The famous Roman peace did not bring peace to the hearts of men. Augustus brought peace to the empire; but only the Prince of Peace could bring peace to man's heart. Tension and strife characterize our age because men live outside His will. What a great

opportunity we have to tell them there is “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

**2:15-20.** After the angels had returned to heaven the shepherds repeatedly said to one another, “Let us at once go across to Bethlehem.” The original language expressed their urgency. “Go over to” or “go across” indicates that they were some distance from town. They fully realized that God had declared this truth to them and they hurried on their search. Whether they left the sheep unattended or under the care of someone we do not know.

The shepherds told Mary and Joseph as well as others in Bethlehem that the angels had informed them about this special child. People were astonished or amazed at the report given by the shepherds. Mary treasured these things, thoughtfully considering them in her mind. She kept pondering them in her mind meditating on them in the light of the angel’s announcements to Zachariah, herself and Joseph.

The shepherds returned as changed men. They gave glory and praise to God for what He had told them and what they had seen. They had seen the “Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11).

### **The Circumcision and the Presentation in the Temple Luke 2:21-38**

Mary and Joseph were God-fearing Jews who took seriously obedience to the Law of Moses. The baby Jesus was circumcised and named when eight days old. He was presented in the temple when forty days of age.

<sup>21</sup>And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

<sup>22</sup>And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup>(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) <sup>24</sup>and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” <sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup>And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. <sup>27</sup>And in-

spired by the Spirit he came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, <sup>28</sup>he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, <sup>29</sup>“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; <sup>30</sup>for mine eyes have seen thy salvation <sup>31</sup>which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup>And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him; <sup>34</sup>and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against

<sup>35</sup>(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.”

<sup>36</sup>And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, <sup>37</sup>and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup>And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

**2:21.** The account of the institution of the practice of circumcision is given in Genesis 17:10-14 and Leviticus 12:3 specified the eighth day (Luke 1:59; Phil. 3:5). Jesus was born “under the law” (Gal. 4:4) and circumcised according to the law. The Old Testament does not require the naming on the eighth day but it was apparently Jewish custom in the time of Christ.

Joseph and Mary were far from home. There were no rejoicing relatives and friends at this event as there were at the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:58-66).

The name Jesus means “Jehovah saves.” The angel Gabriel told Mary, “You shall call his name Jesus” (1:31). The angel told Joseph in a dream, “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

**2:22-24.** Because the law of Moses (Lev. 12) did not include the child in the purification and since the sinless Son of God did not need purification apparently some scribe substituted “his” for “their” in verse 22. This reading was followed by the *King James Version*. The manuscript evidence almost unanimously has the reading “their.”

To whom does “their” refer? Some hold that it refers to the purification of the Jews, others believe it refers to Mary and Joseph. Upon the birth of a son a woman was unclean for seven days. After remaining home for thirty-three more days, she made special offerings. The son was presented to the Lord, and the mother was purified. Since Luke described both events he may have referred to both by the phrase “their purification.”

No doubt this event in the temple occurred before the visit of the wise men and the trip to Egypt (Matt. 2:1-14). Jerusalem is six miles north of Bethlehem.

Verse 23 concerns the offering for the redemption of the first born son (Ex. 13:2,12; 22:29; 34:19; Num. 3:12; 18:15ff). The quotation is a combination of Exodus 13:2 and 12. Every first-born son had to be redeemed from service in the sanctuary by an offering (Num. 18:15,16).

Luke 2:24 deals with the offering for Mary’s purification. The law instructed the mother to bring for her purification “a lamb a year old for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or turtle dove for a sin offering . . . . And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtle doves or two young pigeons”(Lev. 12:6,8). Since Joseph and Mary were not well-to-do they did not offer an expensive lamb.

**2:25-28.** Even though many Jews of Jesus’ day did not walk close with the Lord, Simeon and Anna are examples of true godliness. They had longed for the coming Messiah and were eager to accept Him. The phrase “consolation of Israel” points to the comfort for the troubled in the Messianic age (Isa. 40:1; 49:13; 52:9).

The Holy Spirit specifically revealed to Simeon that before he died he would personally see the Messiah. Mary and Joseph brought the child into the court of the temple for the presentation. Simeon was there being responsive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The parents handed the child to Simeon. Holding the child in his arms, he praised God for this wonderful occasion and expressed himself in a beautiful hymn. Luke’s reference to ‘parents’ in no way denies the virgin birth. Joseph and Mary were His legal parents. See also 2:48.

**2:29-32.** Plummer notes the emphasis on *now*. “*Now* that I have at last seen the long-looked for Messiah” (p. 63). Now that Simeon had seen the Messiah, as was promised by the Spirit, he was ready to be dismissed from his long vigil. God promised Abraham, “You shall go to your fathers in peace” (Gen. 15:15). Simeon asked that he might depart in peace.

Simeon had seen God’s salvation because he had seen the Savior.



This salvation would soon be made available to all people, both Jews and Gentiles (Isa. 42:6,7; 52:10; Matt. 28:19; John 3:16; Eph. 2:13,14).

The revelation of God in Christ brought light to the darkness of paganism. They could have a true knowledge of God and experience holiness, love and joy as never before. *Glory of Israel* commonly referred to God's presence over the ark of the covenant. As God became a man and lived among His people God's glory was manifested to Israel. From Israel had come the Redeemer of the world — Jesus, the glory of Israel.

**2:33-35.** While the announcements of the angels, the fact of the virgin's conception, the words of the shepherds all pointed to Jesus' role as the supernatural Savior, Joseph and Mary were still awed by it all. They were beginning to grasp the significance of it all.

Simeon prayed for God's blessings on them and then addressed Mary directly. He wanted to check any unwarranted expectations by predicting the opposition He would face and the sorrow Mary would experience.

Not everyone would be blessed by His coming. Some will accept Him and build their lives on Him. Others will reject Jesus as Savior and Lord and they will be broken by that rejection and suffer eternal loss. Isaiah had predicted, "And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble thereon; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken" (Isa. 8:14-15). The downfall of Israel came when they misused the privileges God had provided. See Matthew 21:44; Acts 4:11; Romans 9:33; I Peter 2:6. Christ's purpose and desire in coming to earth was not that men fall but that they rise to new life in Him. Many in Israel found new life through His name.

Christ faced much opposition, climaxing with His crucifixion (Mark 6:3; Luke 4:28; Acts 28:22, I Cor. 2:16; Heb. 12:3). Simeon told Mary a large, broad sword will pierce her soul, bringing deep anguish. The fulfillment of this prediction is described in John 19:25-27 as Mary stood near the cross.

One's response to Jesus reveals his or her true nature. Everyone is either for Him or against Him. "Neutral you cannot be." Love and faith in God is shown by accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord. Rejection of Christ reveals that one does not love and trust God.

**2:36-38.** An aged, godly prophetess named Anna (Hannah) also praised God for his redemption. Like Deborah (Jdgs. 4:4) and Huldah

(II Kgs. 22:14) and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9), she was divinely inspired to declare God's will to others. She was of the tribe of Asher, one of the so-called ten lost tribes of Israel.

She was very old, literally "advanced in many days." She had been married seven years when her husband died. The wording of the text is hard to understand. It may mean that she had been a widow for 84 years making her about 105 years old, or it may mean that she was an 84-year-old widow.

It is possible that she lived in the area of the temple but more likely she was faithful in attendance for the public and private services. She spent much time in fasting and prayer.

Anna came up and stood by as Simeon spoke. She then took her turn and gave thanks to God because she recognized the child as the Messiah. It became her habit to speak about Jesus to others who also looked for the redemption of Jerusalem by the Messiah.

### **Childhood in Nazareth and the Visit to the Temple at Age Twelve — Luke 2:39-52**

After the requirements of the law were met, Mary and Joseph and Jesus returned to Nazareth where Jesus spent His childhood. Luke records a visit to the temple when Jesus was twelve years old.

<sup>39</sup>And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

<sup>41</sup>Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. <sup>42</sup>And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom; <sup>43</sup>and when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, <sup>44</sup>but supposing him to be in the company they went a day's journey, and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances; <sup>45</sup>and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him. <sup>46</sup>After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; <sup>47</sup>and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup>And when they 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 looking for you anxiously." <sup>49</sup>And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's

house?"<sup>50</sup> And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them. <sup>51</sup> And 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 increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.

**2:39-40.** Luke stressed the fact that Mary and Joseph had obeyed the law of God (2:22,23,24,27). Luke does not record the visit of the wise men, nor the trip to Egypt (Matt. 2:1-21). We do not know why Luke omitted this material. Apparently it did not suit his purpose.

Jesus developed physically and intellectually in a normal fashion. He was human, but He was also divine and sinless, "In every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Human wisdom can not adequately explain in detail His human development and His divine nature but in faith we affirm it.

**2:41-42.** Jewish men were required by the law to attend the three great feasts each year — Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, Exodus 23:14-17; 34:22-23; Deuteronomy 16:16. In the time of Christ most Jews who lived a distance from Jerusalem attended only one feast, usually Passover. The law did not require women to attend the feasts. The feasts functioned somewhat as modern conventions providing an occasion for renewal and recommitment. The Passover festival was a week-long celebration of God's deliverance of the Jews from Egyptian bondage.

Jewish sources do not agree on the exact age a Jewish boy became a *bar mitzvah* (son of the law) with responsibility for keeping the commandments. Nevertheless, it is certain that Jesus at age twelve accompanied his parents on their annual trip to the Passover.

**2:43-45.** Many pilgrims stayed only one or two days, leaving after the main sacrifices were over. Apparently Joseph and Mary stayed for the entire seven days.

When Joseph and Mary started home, Jesus stayed in Jerusalem, perhaps because He was attracted by His Father's house. His parents had confidence in Him. In a group of Jewish travelers the women and smaller children went on ahead and the older boys and the men followed behind. Joseph may have thought Jesus was with Mary and Mary may have thought He was with Joseph. When the family units came together that evening they learned Jesus was missing.

**2:46-47.** "After three days" would include the day of travel going away from Jerusalem, the day returning to Jerusalem, and on the third day they found Him visiting with the teachers in the temple.

Jesus was listening to the teachers and asking questions. He also answered questions because those who heard Him were greatly amazed at his wisdom.

**2:48-50.** When Joseph and Mary saw Him they were astounded, shocked. Mary spoke out of her anxious concern. Her question indicated her perplexity and some reproach. It was a very typical mother's question. Her question informs Him of the great anxiety He has caused them.

The response Jesus gave indicated He was aware of His unique relationship with His Father in heaven. Jesus seemed to be surprised that they did not know where to find him. The reading in the *King James Version*, "about my Father's business," is possible but not likely. "In my Father's house" is more likely because the issue concerned where He was. "I must be" indicated His priority and sense of obligation and allegiance to the will of God (see Luke 4:43; 9:22; 13:33, 24:7,26; 24:44).

The lack of understanding on the part of Joseph and Mary is not too surprising if one considers how difficult it would be to understand many things if one's own child were the divine Messiah.

**2:51-52.** Even though Mary and Joseph did not understand His unique relationship with God, still Jesus was subject to His parents and obeyed them. Thoughtful Mary carefully and continually kept all these things in her heart. Luke tells these first two chapters from Mary's point of view. It is hard to avoid the idea that Luke may have interviewed Mary personally about these events.

Jesus made progress in wisdom and in physical growth. He increasingly experienced the loving favor of God and the good will and friendliness of man. (See I Sam. 2:21-26.) Luke makes no further reference to Joseph except in the genealogy. He likely had died before Jesus began His ministry.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Describe the political and cultural conditions of the world of the New Testament.
2. Who was Augustus?
3. What evidence has helped explain 2:3?
4. What does *betrothed* mean?
5. What do we know about the date of the birth of Jesus?
6. Why do we infer that Jesus was born where animals were quartered?

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7. Identify the shepherds who kept flocks year-around near Bethlehem.
8. What does the title Christ mean?
9. What was the response of the shepherds after they saw the child?
10. When was the name Jesus originally given and at what age was the child named?
11. What does the name Jesus mean?
12. What does "their purification" designate? (2:22)
13. The offering of turtledoves or pigeons indicated what about the economic status of Joseph and Mary?
14. What had the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon about the Christ?
15. How old was Anna?
16. Briefly describe the Passover feast.
17. What did Jesus mean, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

