

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

CHRIST AND POPULARITY.

A STUDY OF ST. LUKE II. 52.

It has been often observed how silent the Gospel narrative is regarding the early years of our Lord's life. The silence is, strictly speaking, only broken by one incident, striking in itself, the more striking because it stands by itself. In contrast with this silence then is to be found, as every student knows, in the Apocryphal Gospels a mass of matter relating to the boyhood of Jesus. The most that can be said of these legends is that some of them are picturesque. He is presented in them as a youthful miracle-worker. The narrative is full of wonders and portents; it appears not only as utterly unworthy of His awful after life, but as wholly inappropriate in the delineation of the type of any good and gracious childhood. Who can doubt that the silence of the canonical Gospels is in correspondence with facts, and as such truly significant? Enough for devout students if the veil is only once lifted, so that they may see the Holy Child standing confessed in the tenderness of his filial loyalty and the sweetness of his willing subjection; better still for them if they may appropriate the eternal lessons so conveyed. That these lessons are neither easily nor generally learnt from the narrative may be gathered from the popular phrase which stands as descriptive of the incident. Christ "disputing with the doctors, Christ "disputing" in the Temple. Such a description is wholly beside the point of the narrative, and that it should have passed so long current argues a melancholy want of appreciation of this unique record. St. Luke speaks of the Holy Child as an apt and earnest scholar among teachers.¹ That He was so good a listener implied and justified his asking of questions. It was not that He and they exchanged places. Every competent teacher is delighted with that favourable

¹ St. Luke chap. ii. 46 : ἀκούοντα αὐτῶν, καὶ ἐπερωτῶντα αὐτοῦς.

sign in his pupils which prompts them to questioning. It is a welcome recognition that his teaching is beginning to interest, to inspire, to tell. Without this interchange of question and answer instruction is reduced to the level of a lecture. Answering, however, remains largely the scholar's part, and the youthful Jesus was mainly an answerer, for the wonder which his conduct called forth was not at his questions, which were an accident of the incident, but at His replies and their wisdom.¹

The narrative as it stands thus presents us with an incident in the regular equable development of Christ's life upon earth. And it is shown and described in two aspects, according to certain remarkable expressions of St. Luke. That evangelist declares that Jesus increased (or advanced) in wisdom and stature (or age) and in favour (or grace) with God and men.

Students of the Gospel do not need to be reminded how commentators have busied themselves with this text. Is it too much to say that they have occupied themselves so with word-studies as to lose the interpretation of its thought? And even in this lesser essay few of them appear to have discovered that the key to the phraseology is already to their hands. For this verse (ii. 52) has only to be duly compared with i. 80, and with ii. 40 for its language to become perfectly luminous. The verses severally run thus, for our comparison:—

i. 80: τὸ δὲ παιδίον ἠύξανε, καὶ ἐκρατιοῦτο πνεύματι—
said of the Baptist.

ii. 40: τὸ δὲ παιδίον ἠύξανε, καὶ ἐκρατιοῦτο πληρούμενον σοφία καὶ χάρις θεοῦ ἦν ἐπ' αὐτό—
said of Christ.

ii. 52: Καὶ Ἰησοῦς πρόεκοπτε τῇ σοφίᾳ, καὶ ἡλικίᾳ, καὶ χάριτι παρὰ θεῶ καὶ ἀνθρώποις—
said of Christ.

¹ St. Luke chap. ii. 47: ἐπὶ τῇ συνέσει καὶ ταῖς ἀποκρίσεσιν αὐτοῦ.

Passing by the suggestive consideration that the evangelist perceived so exact a parallel in the youthful development of Christ and His forerunner; passing by also the consideration that a like verdict had been pronounced upon the childhood of Samuel, a close comparison of these passages indicates the clue to the precise significance of the one last quoted. It will there be noted that *προέκοπτε τῇ ἡλικίᾳ* stands as equivalent to *ἠΰξανεν*, and thus it is clearly indifferent whether we render *ἡλικία* "age" or "stature." Again, *προέκοπτε τῇ σοφίᾳ* must stand as a shortened phrase for the combined expressions *ἐκρατιοῦτο πνεύματι πληρούμενον σοφία* used both of the Baptist and of Christ. Lastly, the collocation of *χάρις* in the two latter verses point to the conclusion that it is capable of a double rendering; with reference to God it signifies grace"; with reference to man it signifies "favour."

Thus taking the Evangelist as his own interpreter, the general meaning of the passage may be boldly inferred. There was noticeable in the Holy Child Jesus, as in a measure in the Baptist, an equal development both on the physical and spiritual side.

Let no one regard an emphasis upon the former as superfluous. It is an interesting and unexpected contribution to that group of after references which lays stress upon our Lord's perfect humanity. It helps to explain His "favour with men," with which perhaps it stands in parallel. No time of life has such a fascination about it for the student of mankind as youth. But given a childhood winning, gracious, and modest, and the attraction to all but dead natures is supreme. What tremendous possibilities lie within and before it! What fearful responsibilities await its culture and training! Yet the physical form, however fair, is but the casket which contains the rich spiritual endowments, and while the one may compel a passing admiration, the other, at once the secret and pledge of eternal capacities,

bids us pause and look beyond, while we look within to the source of all goodness—to God Himself.

The Holy Child Jesus thus not only waxed strong in spirit as being filled with the spirit of wisdom, not only did the grace of God continue to rest upon Him, but He grew in human favour. The statement is surprising. How does it tally with the ancient prediction—"He was despised and rejected of men"? How does it fit in with the record of all the bitter returns made to a life of sublime unselfishness? What was the nature of the favour of men shown to Christ at Capernaum or Nazareth, at Samaria or Jerusalem? What of the judgment hall and Calvary, where not only favour was absent but there was no man even to pity Him? How is the Evangelist's pronouncement reconcilable with the whole narrative to which he subsequently addresses himself?

An explanation must surely be forthcoming when it is so urgently needed by the devout student. So some would have it that St. Luke, when he speaks of Christ being in favour with "men," uses this general term in contrast with that dark, compact, sinister group who joined hands for once in dogging the Lord's footsteps—Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, united in hypocrisy, banded together by common hatred, misunderstanding His aims, catching at His words, misinterpreting His actions, finally contriving and compassing His death. This is indeed nearing an explanation, but it is not all. Can it be said that while Christ grew in favour with men He was only out of favour with these? Scarcely so. For clearly He is described¹ as in universal favour. He won all hearts. It was a triumph all along the line. He was, if one may use the expression in all reverence of His Person, generally popular. Moreover, throughout His life upon earth He largely retained His popularity with the masses. When the Pharisees were

¹ St. Luke iv. 15: *δοξαζόμενος ὑπὸ πάντων.*

on the point of attacking Him, it is more than once recorded that they stayed their hands; the moment was not so very opportune; "they feared the people."

After all, the gifts and graces which shone out in the manifestation of Christ's life are precisely those which within common experience tend to favour with men—tend to make a man popular. Christ went about doing good. Himself bare men's sicknesses and healed men's infirmities. Everything, everybody, was open to the General Hospital of His Divine compassion. The nobleman's servant, the daughter of Jairus, the trembling woman with her life-long infirmity, His own apostle's wife's mother, His intimate friend Lazarus,—all who sought Him, let their claims be strong or weak, were dealt with in mercy by Him. Nor did Christ deal, as we are apt to do, merely with cases in which He was interested. Such as He was to individuals, so He was to the crowds which followed, pressed, and distressed Him. We have but two records of His feeding of the people who waited upon Him. Yet these occasions did not surely exhaust His pity for man's necessity. "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have been with Me, and they have nothing to eat." This is language which is bound to do more than elicit sympathy; by the nature of the case it evokes enthusiasm. Humanity has hardly ever sunk quite so low as to hate a member of its race purely and simply for doing works of mercy and charity. If one thinks of the instances of men and of women in the pages of history who have spent themselves, their means, their time, their very hearts' affections, to live lives of devotion and self-sacrifice, they have not been hated quite on this account, or wholly from such causes. Now and again the strength and influence won by such unselfishness have filled baser spirits with jealousy; it was partly so in the Divine instance of the Redeemer, who knew that for envy they had delivered Him; but

something still remains to be accounted for before a favour which was universal can pass to the unnatural and illogical climax of distrust, odium, persecution, and the sentence of death. The "white-robed" army of the world's martyrs appears to offer no parallel here. Socrates, Hypatia, Jeanne d'Arc, Savonarola, Sir Thomas More, the English Reformers, were done to death, but their popularity was fitful, doubtful, temporary, and local. It was never universally conceded. Uplifted upon the crest of some wave of passing enthusiasm, they sank with the ebbing tide. Upon none of these could have been written the evangelist's record of the people's conception of Jesus. But as the death of Christ is not comparable with these martyrdoms, so neither is the tenor of His life upon earth. If He had appeared merely as a benefactor, or philanthropist, or the pioneer of some great movement, then a comparison might be instituted between Him and these heroes, who have ennobled their race. But the experiences of Christ, like His claims, stand unique, and refuse comparison for the awful reason that He is Divine. This claim is the secret of the tragedy of Calvary. It must not, of course, be imagined that the claim was not asserted from the moment of the birth of the Saviour. It was the burden of angelic messages, it was testified by His Father, it was observed by every open spiritual eye from the simple shepherds of Judæa to the shrewd seers of the East. But until the hour of supreme manifestation came the truth lay dormant in unthinking heart and unenthusiastic mind. The sword of division was not yet drawn. Men could not for the present look beyond the carpenter's Son, the embodiment of all that was most humble, and gracious, and winning in youth; their eyes were holden; they could not discern in Him the awful majesty of God. Had such a claim been recognised, then the truthful record of the evangelist could never have been penned.

“He advanced in favour with men.” The narrative of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem does not conflict with this conclusion. The welcome then given and the homage then paid to Jesus were frankly and simply offered by Galilean peasants. They could do no less, who had seen or heard of His mighty works. The jealousy of the Pharisees was too bitter to allow them to pause and reflect that this outburst of enthusiasm was, after all, not based upon a serious, thoughtful belief that this was truly the Son of God. Had the enthusiasm of the multitude sprung out of anything so solid, it would not have been so evanescent, nor out of the same lips could have passed within a few days the shout of Hosanna and the cry of “Crucify!”

“He advanced in favour with men.” Popularity is the most general object of human pursuit, it is the most universal passion. To enlist men’s regard, to win affection, to evoke enthusiasm—these are the sweetest triumphs in human experience. The happiest persons seem to be those to whom these triumphs come most easily. Such an ambition is indeed the last infirmity of noble minds. As an instinct it is doubtless implanted in men, who were not meant by God’s providence to live solitary lives, but to expand in the lives and interests of others. Hence it comes about as an indisputable fact that no man would willingly say or do a thing which would make him less regarded, less honoured, or less loved by his fellows.

Real dangers however to the spiritual life gather round this passionate quest, and beset the pursuit of popularity. Not to be conscious of such perils argues the lack of any fine religious instinct. In most instances the danger is plainly recognised and then ignored. The craving after the favour of men is so strong that every kind of subtle excuse is found for satisfying it. The most common apology is that popularity is necessary to the success of religious enterprise. As a matter of fact and experience it

is often fatal to it; the message becomes nothing, and the messenger everything. What shipwrecks have been made and are being made in the history of the Church of Christ upon this rock! Yet here the instance of the Son of man is vocal to hearts who will listen to it. Popularity may never be won at the cost of the betrayal of a trust. Its pursuit has constantly to be foregone as it is met by the challenge of some higher, holier claim upon the heart and mind. The good graces of an individual or a society are often purchased at the loss of some grave moral or religious principle. Nor is it given to every one to discern the issue with such plainness as St. Paul. Popularity was secure enough for him, long after he had broken with Judaism, if only he would consent to make compromise. With him sacrifice of principle was out of the question. We know his answer to the Galatians: "If I were bent on pleasing men, I should not be, I could not be, Christ's bond-servant."¹

Alas for the day when Christian teachers or preachers who have tasted the sweets of popularity betray for these their office, their trust, their life! It has been so; it need not be so if the Divine example of the Man Christ Jesus is here as elsewhere followed. For if His pattern be their guide, then every attractive grace and gift of body, soul, and spirit will first be laid at His feet, and then fearlessly used in His service, and they will be observed, though at an immeasurable distance from Him, to advance as He, in favour with God and men.

B. WHITEFOORD.

¹ Gal. i. 10.