

## THE ADVANCE OF CHRIST IN ΣΟΦΙΑ.

Καὶ Ἰησοῦς προέκοπτεν τῇ σοφίᾳ καὶ ἡλικίᾳ, καὶ χάριτι παρὰ Θεῶ καὶ ἀνθρώποις.

“And Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.”

Comp. 1 Sam. ii. 26 :

Καὶ τὸ παιδάριον Σαμουὴλ ἐπορεύετο, καὶ ἐμεγαλύετο, καὶ ἦν ἀγαθὸν μετὰ Κυρίου καὶ μετὰ ἀνθρώπων.

“And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour with the Lord, and also with men.”

THOSE who propose to discuss the nature of the Redeemer need to tread warily and reverently, with full conviction at the outset that neither their individual ability and knowledge, nor the faculties which as men they possess, will be equal to the solution of the deep and mysterious questions which such a discussion of necessity will raise. This is therefore a matter in which dogmatism is singularly out of place, because certainty is so rarely attainable. Neither by the clear words of Scripture, nor by the unanimous decisions of His Church, has God revealed very much upon the subject; and it ill becomes us to assume that that other instrument which He has given us for arriving at truth, *viz.* our reason, will be sufficient for the discovery of things about which the other two great witnesses as to what we are to believe say little or nothing. Let us then above all things have *patience*; patience in investigation, and patience with the conclusions arrived at by others, however little we may like the substance of them. To condemn as “unsound” or “heretical” the opinions of other people respecting subjects in which certainty is per-

haps unattainable is consistent neither with scientific principle nor with Christian humility and charity. Uncertainty about important truths is part of our probation in this life, and is an intellectual and moral discipline very much needed in an age of great intellectual activity, but also of great intellectual haste. As S. Augustine said long ago, it is those "who know not with what toil truth is discovered, and how difficult it is to avoid errors," that are eager to condemn heretics. And patience in dealing with convictions which seem to do violence to some of our most cherished beliefs can never do harm either to ourselves, or to the holders of such convictions, or to the cause of truth; whereas precipitancy in condemning what shocks us cannot but be harmful to all three. That some of the views which are at present being urged respecting both the incarnate and the written Word, and which have startled many earnest Christians, will either never be proved, or will be proved to be untrue, we may hopefully trust. But it is also possible that some things which many of us at present do not at all like will be shown to be highly probable, if not absolutely certain; and we ought to be on our guard against taking any part in committing Christendom to a position which may be found to be untenable. It was perhaps in order to teach His Church how to "advance in wisdom and stature" that Christ Himself condescended to do the same; and His apostle has told us under what conditions advance is possible: "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good."

"Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man." In what precedes these words the growth of the Christ is very plainly marked stage by stage. First, "the babe," τὸ βρέφος: "They found . . . the babe lying in the manger" (ver. 16). Then "the child," τὸ παιδίον: "The child grew, and waxed strong, filled with wisdom"; where the present participle is very significant,

πληρούμενον σοφία, "becoming full" or "being made full of wisdom" (ver. 40). Next, "the boy," ὁ παῖς: "The boy Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem" (ver. 43). And, lastly, in the verse before us, simply "Jesus," without any word to indicate age, because the passage covers a period of many years from the age of twelve onwards.

That ἡλικία here may mean "age" rather than "stature" must of course be admitted; but "stature" is more probable, for to say of a boy that he advanced in age is rather an empty truism. In Luke xix. 3 ἡλικία certainly means "stature," and it possibly does so in xii. 25, the only other place in which St. Luke uses the word. And it is perhaps not altogether fanciful to believe that growth in stature would be the point of interest to the beloved physician. Nevertheless, for the question before us, it is not of very much moment whether we adopt the rendering "stature" or "age." There is quite enough in the words and in the context to show that ἡλικία and σοφία together cover the whole of the physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual development which was taking place in Jesus during the years which followed the visit to the Temple at Jerusalem. The statement contains two pairs of words, and on the whole the two pairs balance one another. "Wisdom and stature" balance "God and men." And not only so, but the separate members of each pair to a considerable extent correspond. We are probably to understand that in the main it was the advance in σοφία which caused Him to advance in favour with God, and the advance in ἡλικία which caused Him to advance in favour with men.

It is difficult to believe that *intellectual* progress is not included in St. Luke's statement. Σοφία, it has been said, is not knowledge; which is true, for σοφία may include a great deal more than knowledge, *viz.* moral and spiritual insight. But it would not be true to say that σοφία excludes knowledge. One of the things which σοφία in this

case included is told us in the preceding narrative. Those who heard the holy child asking and answering questions in the Temple were amazed at His *σύνεσις*, His "intelligence"; *i.e.* His power of putting things together and seeing their mutual relations. The *σοφία* with which from a still earlier stage in His childhood He was being filled day by day (ii. 40) here came to the front, and manifested itself in His conversation with His instructors. And it should not be overlooked that *σοφία* is the word which St. Luke uses to express "the wisdom of Solomon" (xi. 31; comp. Matt. xii. 42), which largely consisted of a knowledge of facts, and also "the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts vii. 22), which almost entirely consisted of such knowledge. We are expressly told that Moses was "instructed" in it—*ἐπαιδευθή*.<sup>1</sup>

Another point which confirms us in the belief that intellectual progress is plainly intimated in the statement before us is the fact, that in the conversation with the doctors He not only answered, but *asked* questions. Why did He ask? If He was prompted by a holy thirst for knowledge, especially about sacred things,—the Temple and its services, the law and its application,—all is explained. He desired information from those who were most competent to give it. But if He already possessed this and all other knowledge, and could instantly have given infallible information upon any subject that might have been laid before Him, why did He go through the form of asking for information? Was it to convince these professional teachers of their own ignorance? or to draw them out? or to instruct them? None of these suggestions seems to be quite in harmony with the character of the ideal child, who is to be a pattern for childlike conduct throughout all time. These doctors were lawfully appointed teachers, commissioned by proper authority to give public instruction

<sup>1</sup> See Lightfoot on Col. i. 9, ii. 3.

in religious matters to any who desired to receive it. Do we like to think of the holy child publicly correcting their teaching or showing them how to improve it? After He had Himself come forward as the Messiah, as the Divine Teacher of the nation and of mankind, it was right and necessary that He should correct and supplement the defective teaching of the rabbis; but there seems to be something worse than an anachronism in making the public ministry of Jesus begin when He was only twelve years old.

His attitude towards His parents on this occasion is another indication that He did not possess all knowledge, and that therefore intellectual progress was possible for Him. The whole narrative seems to imply that the child did not know that His parents were seeking for Him, and were in the deepest distress about His absence. The word which His mother uses is a very strong one,—*ὀδυνώμενοι*, “in anguish.” S. Luke uses the same word of the Ephesians when they parted from S. Paul with the conviction that they were to see his face no more (Acts xx. 38), and also twice of the agony of Dives in Hades (Luke xvi. 24, 25). Did the child know of this agony of anxiety, and yet continue to cause it? Does not His question show that He was ignorant of it, that He was not even aware that they were looking for Him? He is amazed that they did not know at once where to find Him. If He was not with them, there was only one place in which He could be. “How is it that ye sought Me? Wist ye not that I must be in My Father’s house?”

In biblical criticism there are few things more instructive than to compare the apocryphal gospels with the four which have come down to us stamped with the authority of Christendom. In the apocryphal gospels we see the very best that primitive Christians could do when they tried to invent incidents in the life of Christ, and to imagine things which He might have said or done. We see how

immeasurably these attempts fall short of the canonical gospels, although those who made them had the canonical gospels to draw from and to copy. What sort of gospels should we have if *all* of them had been inventions of the first three centuries? The additions made in the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy* to S. Luke's account of the visit to Jerusalem are of great interest in this respect. The writer tells us that to the doctors and elders the child Jesus "explained the books, and the law, and the precepts, and the statutes, and the mysteries which are contained in the books of the prophets—things which the understanding of no creature attains to. . . . And a philosopher who was there present, a skilful astronomer, asked the Lord Jesus whether He had studied astronomy. And the Lord Jesus answered him, and explained the number of the spheres, and of the heavenly bodies, their natures and operations; their aspect, triangular, square, and sextile; their course, direct and retrograde; the twenty-fourths, and sixtieths of twenty-fourths, and other things beyond the reach of reason. There was also among those philosophers one very skilled in treating of natural science, and he asked the Lord Jesus whether He had studied medicine. And He in reply explained to him physics and metaphysics. hyperphysics and hypophysics, the powers likewise and humours of the body, and the effects of the same, . . . , and other things beyond the reach of any created intellect" (chaps. 1.-lii.).

This imaginary conversation seems to us almost irreverent, not to say grotesque; but it is evidently meant to be far otherwise. It is an attempt to express in a graphic manner the conviction that from His earliest years Jesus was in possession of the whole range of knowledge in philosophy, science, and art; in short, that in omniscience He was equal to His heavenly Father. Many people have that conviction still, and it is useful to realize what it involves.

Let us with all reverence ask a single question respecting the boyhood of Jesus. In His early manhood we know that He was a carpenter, and that He was able to read the Scriptures. Did he *learn* carpentry in the ordinary way from Joseph? Did he *learn* to read in the ordinary way in the synagogue school? If not,—if He knew all this and much more without the process of learning,—then what becomes of the explicit statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews that “it behoved Him *in all things* to be made like unto His brethren”: ὄφειλεν κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ὁμοιωθῆναι (ii. 17)? He took upon Himself the whole burden of humanity, sin only excepted. He took on Him our capacity for bodily and mental suffering, and even our capacity for being tempted. He “hath been in all points tempted like as we are”: πεπειρασμένος κατὰ πάντα καθ’ ὁμοιότητα (iv. 15). But is not a great deal of human suffering, especially in childhood and youth, connected with the acquisition of knowledge? Do not many of our temptations throughout life spring from the same process? It is not easy to believe that Jesus fenced Himself off from all suffering and temptation of this kind, so as to leave us no example as to how to bear it. And those who do believe this have to show how their belief can be reconciled with the double κατὰ πάντα in Hebrews. They have to show how a humanity which knew nothing of the mingled trouble and delight and danger which attend the acquisition of knowledge was real.

In the first and second centuries there was a form of Gnosticism which endeavoured to circumvent the difficulty of believing that the Divine Logos became united with a human body, by supposing that the body was a mere phantom. To the Gnostic everything material was impure, and therefore it was incredible that Divine purity should contaminate itself by union with human flesh. The human frame must have been only apparent. It seemed to possess

all the qualities of a human body, but it was not material; it was not real. More than one plain statement in the New Testament seems to be aimed at this form of error, which amounts to nothing less than a denial of the Incarnation. We have to be on our guard against explaining away the reality of our Lord's human *intelligence*, just as the Docetic Gnostics explained away the reality of our Lord's human *frame*.

But let us leave for a moment the question of our Lord's intellectual advance as He grew in years, and look at another aspect of the statement before us. "Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men." He advanced in favour with *God*. Is not that a far more startling declaration than anything which has been urged respecting the possibility of His advancing in knowledge? It seems to imply *moral* and *spiritual* progress; in other words, advance in *holiness*. How could the perfect and sinless child advance in holiness? And if He was capable of *no* advance in this respect, how was it possible for Him to grow in favour with His heavenly Father? It is possible to explain *προέκοπτεν τῇ σοφίᾳ* in such a way as to exclude the acquisition of knowledge, but it is scarcely possible to explain *προέκοπτεν χάριτι παρὰ Θεοῦ* in such a way as to exclude moral and spiritual progress. How are we to understand such progress in the case of One who from His conception to His return to glory was absolutely free from all stain of sin?

I suppose we should all of us admit that the holiness of a man is a different thing from the innocence of a child. It is a nobler and a higher thing. The one is largely the result of the absence of temptations; the other is mainly the result of habitual victory over them. The one has the beauty of an unassailed and therefore unstained nature; the other has the beauty of a well formed and firmly established character. The one, with all its loveliness, lacks



strength and fulness; the other is firm and full grown. Even as regards beauty of person, the ideal type of manly figure and proportion would rank higher than the ideal type of childhood. The latter is the beauty of promise; the other is the beauty of fulfilment. Still more is this superiority manifest when we compare excellence of character in the saint of full years with excellence of character in a saintly child; and it is reasonable to believe that the more fully developed holiness is more pleasing to God than the less mature form.

Let us reverently apply this thought to the case of our blessed Lord. Scripture and reason warrant us in believing that at each stage in His life on earth Christ's moral and spiritual condition was *perfect*; perfect, that is to say, *for that stage*. In childhood He manifested to the world a child's character that was absolutely flawless; and in manhood He manifested a man's character that was equally flawless. As a child, as a youth, as a man, He could not possibly have been better than He was. No other being at that age could possibly have exhibited a character that was morally higher, stronger, or more beautiful. But the perfection of His character as a man was a more excellent thing than the perfection of His character as a child, and therefore more pleasing, not only to men, but to God. His character, we may without irreverence believe, developed in accordance with the laws which govern our own. Every virtuous thought and word and deed established still more firmly habits of virtue; and *all* His thoughts, words, and deeds were absolutely virtuous. Every temptation overcome strengthened the power of resisting temptation; and He *never failed* to overcome temptation. Increase in moral strength was therefore possible even for Him: because the moral strength of a human being who has withstood every assault of sin, and practised all possible virtue, during thirty years would seem of necessity to be greater

than that of one who has had only a few years of opportunity for the one or the other. Moreover, we know that He prayed, not only for others, but for Himself; and does not that imply that advance of some kind was possible for Him? Otherwise prayer for Himself would be almost meaningless. His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane was answered by an angel being sent to strengthen Him, and we can hardly limit the strengthening to physical support. But if this thought be considered too daring, we can at least see that the perfection of human character is to be found in the perfect man rather than in the perfect child; and that in this way advance in favour with God was possible for One who at no stage of His life on earth ever fell short of perfection.

If we are able to accept this view of a moral and spiritual progress, we shall probably find the thought of intellectual progress and of growth in knowledge less difficult, and shall be ready to meet with serenity, if not altogether without perplexity, the idea of a limitation in Christ's knowledge even after He became a full grown man. There are those who admit the growth in knowledge during childhood, who yet deny as intolerable the hypothesis of a limitation in His knowledge during His ministry; and it is not easy to reconcile the denial with the admission, or with the plain words of Scripture. Jesus Himself has told us of one limitation in His knowledge: He was ignorant of the time of the day of judgment (Mark xiii. 32). Therefore ignorance for Him was a possibility; and the question is not, Could He be ignorant of anything? but, To what things did His ignorance extend? That is a question to be handled very cautiously; but Scripture by no means leaves us without help. Knowledge of what was passing in men's minds was possible for Him; but we do not know that He always used it, any more than He made use of the legions of angels that He could have had to save Him from arrest. Knowledge

of what took place at a distance was possible for Him ; but it would seem as if the use of it was exceptional. He asks, "How many loaves have ye?" "Have ye any meat?" And when He approaches the home of the dead Lazarus He asks, "Where have ye laid him?" It was not until He had tasted the wine mingled with myrrh that He refused to drink it, as if He had previously been ignorant of what it was that was offered Him. We are told that "He marvelled"; and surprise is inconceivable in the case of omniscience. All these things seem to show that He sometimes, and perhaps generally, condescended to obtain knowledge as we do ; *viz.* by asking for information and by general experience. S. Luke places no limit to the statement that He increased in wisdom ; and it seems therefore to be allowable to believe that it continued until the great "It is finished" on the cross.

Lastly, there is the fact that Jesus Christ nowhere exhibits and nowhere claims omniscience. That miracles of knowledge were possible for Him, just as miracles of healing were possible, is shown plainly enough ; but that is a very different thing from affirming that at all times from His cradle upwards, or at any rate from His baptism, He possessed (with the one exception which He Himself makes) a knowledge of *everything*, past, present, and future. It is not easy to see how such knowledge would have aided His work, unless He communicated some of it ; and even then it would be possible to believe that more hindrance than help would come of it. But here we are raising questions which we are scarcely competent even to discuss. Let us abide by the fact that there is a remarkable silence in Scripture respecting the all but limitless knowledge which reverent minds often think it necessary to attribute to Jesus Christ. It would be rash to assert that He did not possess it ; still more rash to assert that He *could* not have possessed it. But such evidence as has been granted to us

seems to point to a limitation in His knowledge very much more considerable than many people are willing to admit.

It sounds like a paradox, but there is such a thing as presumptuous reverence. There is a presumptuous temper in sacred matters, which is born, not of profanity, but of misdirected devotion. There is a reverence for holy things, which, in its eagerness to honour them according to its own liking, hastily settles both the precise terms of the holiness and the precise terms of the honour, and will not tolerate any modification or restatement with regard to either. It is scarcely too much to say that misconceived reverence has been one of the chief impediments in the way of true ideas respecting both Scripture and the Christ, and therefore respecting the God whom both of them reveal. For centuries we have settled in our own minds, and (one might almost say) have dictated to the Almighty, what kind of a Bible He *must* have given us, what kind of a Christ He *must* have sent us, instead of carefully and patiently investigating the actual characteristics of the inspired writings which have come down to us, and of the incarnate Son whom they make known to us. We are wandering into a region in which human logic is no safe guide, when we say that the Bible is the word of God, and therefore *cannot* have this or that mark of imperfection. And still less can we trust to our reasoning powers when we affirm that Christ was God as well as man, and therefore *cannot* have been subject to this or that limitation. Our own nature is still a riddle to us, full of mysteries that are not likely to be solved by any of us on this side of the grave. And if we are thus ignorant of ourselves, how much more ignorant are we of the nature of the Deity! Is it not strange that those who cannot deny their inability to comprehend either their own being or the being of God should be so ready to make positive assertions as to what *must* be the result when humanity is united with Divinity, should be so ready

to brand with epithets of severe condemnation those who adopt solutions of the difficulties different from their own? Let us at least free ourselves from this uncharitable inconsistency. And if we think it more reverent to stand aside and decline to discuss questions which perhaps can never receive a final answer, let us not blame those who think that it is on subjects such as these that the faculties which God has given them can be used with most honour to Him. And perhaps it will be wise not to attempt to use the authority of Christ in deciding questions which, if they can be solved at all, are questions for historic investigation and criticism. It was when He was asked to settle a controversy which admitted of being decided by ordinary human processes, that He uttered the rebuke, "Man, who made Me a judge and a divider over you?" And it may be doubted whether we have the right to take His words and put them to uses for which they may never have been intended; *viz.* to save us the trouble of critically investigating the date and authorship of writings to which He has added His authority. Of one thing we may be sure: that if we consider such investigations closed for ourselves, we have neither the right nor the power to close them for others. In the whole history of human thought, it never has happened, and it never will happen, that a question once raised has been settled or silenced *by authority*. The only way in which questions can be set at rest, and discussion of them made to cease, is by finding the right answer and *proving* that it *is* right. It is at least *conceivable* that Jesus so emptied Himself of the attributes of His Divinity, as to be dependent for knowledge upon His earthly experience and the information which He obtained from others. In that case He would know no more about the authorship of the sacred writings than His Jewish instructors could tell Him, and He would share their ignorance as He shared their customs and climate. Let us reverently give this

supposition patient consideration, and not be in a hurry to decide that it is incredible that the Divine Word can have become flesh under such conditions. That decision may really mean this : that it does not please *us* that the Incarnation should have taken place in such a way ; and what has our pleasure to do with the matter ? If it be a fact that He came among us limited in knowledge and advancing in knowledge, and that He continued thus all His days upon the earth, are we going to find Him less adorable because of this humiliation ? Shall we join with Peter in rebuking Him and say, " Be it far from Thee, Lord ; this shall *never* be unto Thee " ? It will be a strange result of a most gracious revelation, if the fact, which S. Luke has preserved for us, that during His life on earth Jesus advanced in wisdom, should have caused Him then to advance in favour with God, and yet cause Him now to lose favour with men.<sup>1</sup>

ALFRED PLUMMER.

<sup>1</sup> The following may be recommended to those who desire to study the subject : Sanday, *Oracles of God* (Longmans, 1890), already in a second edition ; an article by Canon Travers Smith in *THE EXPOSITOR* for August, 1890 ; and a sermon by the Bishop of Manchester in the *Church of England Pulpit*, March 21st, 1891.

Since this was put in type I have seen *Our Lord's Knowledge as Man*, by W. S. Swayne (Longmans, 1891), which the Bishop of Salisbury, in the preface which he has written to it, rightly styles " a brave and modest attempt to illustrate the question."