

1901

The unfolding self-consciousness of Jesus

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/47667>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

The
Unfolding Self-consciousness of
Jesus.

How shall we regard the self-consciousness of Jesus? Did he have from childhood a luminous knowledge of himself and his destiny that neither time nor varied experience could increase? Or, to state the other extreme, did his consciousness correspond in it's initial stages and in it's development with that of the ordinary human being? The choice is between Scylla and Charybdis. In either case the result is wreckage of the ideal union of true humanity which the Scriptures distinctly assign to Jesus Christ.

Since he was born into the circle of human life, the rational presupposition would be that he came gradually to a knowledge of himself and his mission though unique circumstances may have cooperated to secure an unprecedented rapidity in the process.

The gospel narratives decidedly favor this view. Luke, who professes to give us a ground for certainty in our beliefs (1:4) says twice in one chapter that Jesus experienced both mental and ~~physical~~ growth.

"The child grew, and waxed strong (in spirit), filled with wisdom". (2:40). "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature" (2:52). It is to be noted that the words of 2:40 are practically identical with those applied to John the Baptist in 1:80. There seems to be no reason to deny

them the same meaning in both instances. Again, the Greek imperfect is used both in 2:40 and 2:52. If the writer intended to express the conviction that Jesus gradually developed this is the verbal form he would have used.

Attempts have been made to escape the evident conclusion by claiming that Jesus simply concealed his wisdom as an economic accommodation." The Word" says Cyril (Thesaurus, Assertiones 22) became flesh ---and was perfect, being the wisdom and power of God. But, seeing it was in a sense necessary that he should adapt himself to the customs of our nature, (lest he should be reckoned as something strange by those who saw him), while his body gradually advanced in growth he concealed himself, and appeared daily wiser to those who saw and heard him." Cyril and his followers admit that infinite wisdom in a child would have been regarded as an "incongruous" monstrosity. Hence, to retain their theory and, at the same time do no offence to Luke's account, or to the common view of childhood, they are driven to this desperate device which, to say nothing of the wilful deception implied in such a course, reduces the infancy, youth, and preparatory training of Jesus to phantasmic unreality. What kind of a child would he be from whom no thoughts were hid, to whom all mysteries were known? On the supposition that he was fully equipped mentally and spiritually for his mission the ordinary amusements suitable to children would have been little less than intolerable mockery. ~~Even~~ ordinary men cannot

stay for trivial things when a great work summons them to action. Could the Saviour of the world be contented with childish sports or work at the carpenter's bench when the redemption of men called him to action? Besides, if mental and spiritual equipment were complete in Jesus there seems to be no occasion for him to wait; at least, there is no assignable reason for delay after the maturity of his physical system, which would not be later than his twentieth year. These difficulties do not arise if we take the words of Luke in their natural meaning, viz: that Jesus gradually developed in knowledge.

This is the significance of Jesus Christ's denial of omniscience in Mk. 13:32. He distinctly says that he does not know the day and hour when the dispensation will close. This ought to be sufficient refutation of the claim that all things were known to him from the beginning. Nevertheless, an effort has been made to set it aside. Cyril argues that Christ acts economically in saying that he does not know that hour, and is not really ignorant, (Thesaurus, Assertio, 22). "He had no bounds to his knowledge, but was with the Father, omniscient." (Apologeticus contra Theodoretum 2). But "since he clothed himself with our flesh, he affected to have our ignorance", Thesaurus Assertiones 22. "When his disciples wished to learn things above them he usefully pretended not to know, and said that not even the angels in heaven knew, that they might not be grieved because they were not admitted to the know-

ledge"Adversus Anthropomorphites14). In numerous other passages he speaks to the same effect. Jesus is saved from the charge of falsity by the claim that he did not know as man, though he did know as God. Strangely enough, John Wesley also states that he did not know as man though he did know as God. (Notes, Mk. 13:32.) Underlying the claim is the doctrine of a double consciousness, a human and a divine, flowing parallel, but never mingling. At will he spoke from either the human or divine. This view presents insoluble difficulty, especially with the outcome to the human consciousness when the divine finally assumes complete ascendancy. The Scriptures give no hint of such a double life, and the hypothesis is especially difficult in this connection. Here he professed to be instructing the disciples as to the closing of the dispensation. He revealed the signs which must precede the final event. It would have been unworthy of him to trifle with his own disciples by taking advantage of a double consciousness to reply "I do not know" (with mental reservation "as man") to their eager question, "When shall these things be?" Mk. 13:4. He could have said frankly and tenderly as he did in another instance "Ye cannot bear them now". The natural conclusion is that he did not know. Since some things were yet to be revealed, even to him, he was the subject of development. This view is strengthened by the change in

his teaching regarding the kingdom (at first he expected it to come speedily by direct act of God, but later as a slow growth, an inner process) Mk. 1:14, Matt. 4:17, 13:24ff, Lu. 18:20, 21; by the surprise he exhibited on various occasions, Mt 8:10, Mk 6:6; and by the questions he asked, apparently for the information Mk, 8:29, and parallels, Mk, 6:38.

The claim that all this was an accommodation to the human mode of subsistence has little force. As well say that he ate and slept in order to appear human; that he pretended to be weary, Jn, 4:6, and simulated suffering as an economic measure suited to his human surroundings. This reduces his life upon earth to a pithless sham. Shifting scenery would have entered as much into our lot as this Christ who pretends to be human, but knows nothing of human experiences. Moreover, such double dealing on the part of him who is the truth presents even greater difficulty than the double consciousness. We escape both by taking his words and actions in their natural significance. His knowledge was limited and he spoke with certainty only as God supplied the fulness of his Spirit. Jn, 3:34. As the subject of development, he came gradually to a consciousness of his nature and mission. PP. This is the implication of the temptation and the prayer in Gethsemane. The possibility of temptation to a sinless man has been denied. If temptation must always proceed from a vicious nature the

denial would be conclusive, and we should be compelled to reject either the sinlessness of Jesus or the account of his temptation. But constitutional needs and affections, various desires and sensibilities, innocent in themselves, may afford a basis for temptation. The normal longing for happiness coupled with the aversion to pain might urge a recoil from the course that involved hardship and suffering. Such a conflict between the will of the Spirit and the will of the flesh would be temptation.

It is necessary to insist that Jesus was free from one source of temptation which figures prominently in our lives. He was not, and could not be "drawn away by his own lust and enticed" Jas. 1:14. Nevertheless his tempta-

tion was real. The popular idea of the Messiah presented a way of ease and great promise. To adopt any other course involved hatred, and bitter persecution. The purest soul might readily shrink from one and turn to the other. If we are to accept the scriptural record this was the case with Jesus. The battle was not a sham. He fought "substantial and formidable foes". That he always conquered, was due, not to the weakness of the temptation, but to the operation of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him in measureless fulness, and bringing to his aid the forces of the heavens. Account also is to be taken of the

perfect union of the human and divine. If it had been imperfect, surrender to temptation would have been probable as well as possible, but with it perfect the theoretical possibility reduces to practical impossibility. The painful sense of temptation remains, however, rather increased than diminished by the presence of the divine factor.

"IT may be easy for the lamb to be led as a lamb to the slaughter, but how should it be easy for the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (H.C. Sheldon). Now this susceptibility to temptation vouches for limited insight and the need of development. It is possible only in connection with a growing subject. God cannot be tempted. ^{Jas. 1:12} Any being occupying the standpoint of omniscience could not be even nominally tempted. The unlimited vision to which all consequences would be luminously apparent would absolutely forbid the possibility of defection. Holding then to the reality of Jesus Christ's temptation we conclude that he did not have full knowledge, and, hence, was subject to the law of growth in his mental life.

The same conclusion is reached from a consideration of the tragic scene in Gethsemane. According to the gospel account he prayed in great agony that if

possible the cup might pass from him. The prayer would have no meaning at all if he were omniscient. For then all possibilities would have been known to him, and to pray for the removal of the cup which he knew he was destined to drink would have been absurd. The matter does not seem to have been clear to him until he had prayed three times. Then he said to his weary disciples "Sleep on now and take your rest, it is enough". Mk. 14:41. The only way to give this scene any reality is to suppose that Jesus was uncertain as to the necessity of the awful end which loomed upon his vision. Otherwise, we have but a spectacular display. There is no real agony combined with entreaty and submission, but only skillful simulation for no assignable purpose; no impassioned prayer that wrung the great drops of blood from the prostrate Savior, but only clever acting for the benefit of a sleeping audience; no angel from heaven to strengthen him in his deadly exhaustion from sickening grief and agonized petitions, but only an illusion which was foisted upon the careful discriminating Luke and recorded in his gospel. In brief, we have a God playing a part, not a suffering Saviour wrestling "lone

with fears"and weeping"in blood". But, on the supposition that Jesus had to grow in knowledge and here was passing through one of the final stages, the scene becomes intensely real and significant.

Closely connected with the above is the representation in the Epistle to the Hebrews

that Jesus was made perfect by suffering, Heb. 2:10, 5:9, 7:28, 12:2. As already indicated it is sometimes urged

that he only appeared to suffer, but this again makes his life a dramatic spectacle, and does violence to the clear teaching of the writer in question. He manifestly intended

to picture the temptation as real, the suffering as bitterly intense, and the consequent perfection as inclusive of a moral completeness founded upon enlarged vision.

(Note especially 5:7-9). Now it may freely be granted,

rather it must be insisted, that Jesus was sinless in the formal sense from earliest childhood because he always

had the will to do right. But perfect moral existence

is possible only to a mature state. It involves not only

the good will but also that knowledge of consequences

necessary to give conduct the right direction. There

must be both formal and material rightness. The former may be constitutional, the latter, in the absence of omniscience, arises in connection with experience. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews experience supplied Jesus with just this element. He had to "learn obedience" by the things which he suffered. No immediate insight taught him to repel the popular notions of the Messiah. No limitless vision showed him from the beginning that the cross was inevitable. He learned obedience, partially at least, in the school of bitter experience, and thus became "the captain of our salvation", "perfected forevermore". This leads us again to the conclusion that Jesus came but gradually to a knowledge of himself and his mission.

Rational considerations can add but little evidence although they favor such a view. If Jesus is to be regarded as truly human it seems necessary to hold that his self-consciousness had a progressive unfoldment such as belongs to the normal human life. How the Eternal Logos, incarnated in Jesus Christ, could be shorn even to a degree of self-consciousness we do not pretend to know. Yet, supposing a subordination of the

Son to the Father, it becomes at least conceivable that the Logos should enter a condition where he would temporarily fail to exercise his powers. He did not depotentiate himself. But his powers were largely dormant during the incarnation as indicated by his prayers for divine help. Lu. 22:42. Jn. 12:27. We can find no rational warrant for supposing that he, as a divine being, could empty himself of his divine attributes in the sense of casting them off. They still were his possession, but were denied manifestation by the condition he had voluntarily assumed. Hints of such a possibility are found in two facts. First, as H. C. Sheldon remarks, "being and consciousness never are commensurate in us, and least of all are they so at the beginning of our career. We are born into relations which are far above the plane of our cognizance in early childhood. The analogy suggests that in the Christ-child and the Christ-youth consciousness may not have been by any means commensurate with being and essential relations". Second, mental pathology presents many examples in which essential being with all its normal powers abides across long lapses in self-consciousness. The persons are themselves, yet not themselves. Even physical conditions such as weariness and disease frequently prevent not only the manifestation to others of one's normal powers but also the personal use of those powers. Knowledge, once clear and certain is vague, hazy, or totally obscured. But when the abnormal conditions pass away the lost powers are restored. Now Jesus seemed to be conscious in Mk. 13. 32

of such a limitation. Though essentially divine, as the Eternal Logos, he was not able to fully exercise all divine attributes. These had passed into temporary eclipse by the abnormal union of the divine with the human in its physical aspects. This view presents no serious difficulty if we reject all spatial notions from the union and regard it as organic and coincident with the inception of the historic Christ. The divine is there in its essential attributes, but unable to manifest itself through the thick veils of sense. The human is there in its essential nature, imperfect and susceptible of growth. The advance of this divine-human self-consciousness, indissolubly united, must be limited to the unfolding of the human nature under the extraordinary stimulus of perfect sinlessness and intimate organic union with the divine. Jesus did not, and probably could not speak as the naked Logos, or as a purely human being. He spoke both as Son of God and Son of Man from a divine-human consciousness. At first the human factor was predominant, but gradually, through this organic union, the divine assumed prominence and the contents which belonged to the consciousness of the Eternal Logos appeared. Absolute omniscience probably would not become manifest in the consciousness of Jesus Christ until his glorification and then only on the supposition that human nature stripped of its physical aspects may rise to such practical omniscience as to be no appreciable hindrance to the divine attributes. ~~57~~ I. Jn. 3. 2. To this extent, then, rational considerations favor the view that the Logos was in fact

humiliated by entrance into the circle of human life, and became subject to the laws of growth there regnant.

While insisting that the self-consciousness of Jesus Christ progressively unfolded it does not follow that we can indicate the stages of the process with any degree of certainty. As early as his twelfth year he expressed the sense of an unusual relation to the Father. Lu. 2. 49 What convictions came from experience and meditation upon this fact we are unable to say, but the full consciousness of his Messiahship seems first to have come upon him at his baptism. This consciousness no doubt was clarified and guarded against a mistaken course by the temptation. The assertion, however, that "By the time Christ entered on his public career his education was complete, so far as theoretic knowledge was concerned" (Bruce, The humiliation of Christ, P. 288) we cannot accept. It seems more probable that the entire course of his ministry contributed to his knowledge of himself and his mission. As already stated, it does not seem credible that his tragic fate, though long a matter of conviction, was seen in its inevitable necessity until the third prayer in Gethsemene. These experiences together with many others served to develop his self-consciousness. Reflection also must be assigned an important part. From the prophets he knew the Messianic hopes of Israel. He felt that God was his Father in a unique sense. Reflection upon these facts during the quiet years from twelve to thirty could scarcely fail to produce the presentiment that he was the Redeemer of Israel. When that presentiment had

passed into clear knowledge it was easy and natural to reach the conclusion that he was the eternal thought of God for man, -and this would make him the Eternal Logos in an ideal sense. But he was the Eternal Logos in reality. To This element of his self-consciousness he came by direct communion with the Father. He lived in a close personal relation to God which furnished the means of increasing knowledge. No clouds of willfulness or sin ever interrupted the messages from above. "The singular openness of his spirit toward heaven is rationally emphasized as being the medium of 'extraordinary illumination'", (H.C. Sheldon). Its final expression is found in the words "I and my Father are one". Jn. 10:30.

In conclusion, we affirm that Jesus Christ, as the historic personality, was not omniscient. He increased in wisdom according to the laws, though beyond the measure of ordinary human development. This by no means solves all the mysteries. It does not tell how the union of the human and divine could be accomplished. On many questions it leaves us in great obscurity, notably as to the relations of the incarnate Logos to the Trinity. We have maintained that the personal Eternal Logos was really made flesh and given personal form in the historic Christ, according to the unmistakable teaching of the Scriptures. Of course the Logos could not exist with full possession of himself in Trinitarian relations, and at the same time without full possession of himself in human relations (incarnated). This would be evident contradiction.

How then can we hold to the real humiliation of the Saviour and yet avoid a rupture in the Trinity? The line of least resistance is to suppose that the Eternal Logos loses, to some extent, both the conscious possession and the exercise of his divine attributes during the incarnation though essential relationships are unchanged. The chief rational consideration for maintaining the Trinity is to provide within the Eternal being a ground for love and fellowship. This could ~~not~~ ^{be} met, even with the incarnate Logos unable to exercise his normal attributes, much as love and essential relations in a family are maintained during the unconsciousness of one member. The Father and the Spirit were in full possession of themselves, and of the Logos as incarnated and subject temporarily to the laws of human nature. Thus sufficient provision is made both for the humiliation of the Master and the requirements of the Trinity. This view is possible only on the theory of an economic subordination of the Son,--which both the Scriptures and reason demand. ^{PP} However dark the problem, we must hold that the Eternal Logos was made flesh, and, as such, became subject to development; He came gradually to a knowledge of himself and his mission; still more gradually to a knowledge of the methods and agencies to be used in the establishment of his kingdom. While we may believe that he coupled a marvelous insight into the thoughts of men with an unparalleled introspective vision we must insist on the principle of development as indicated by the Gospel record.

in order to save his ~~real~~ humanity, which gives to the life of the Saviour the better part of its beauty, pathos and moral power. We have little reason to require in him perfect knowledge, and still less to require, according to popular views, a perfect model in human form, absolutely sound and proof against disease. What we need as an object of faith is not a type of beauty, but a man of sorrows acquainted with griefs, a being like unto us, participating in our infirmities yet without sin. We cannot afford to sacrifice Christ's divinity to his humanity, nor can we afford to sacrifice his humanity to his divinity. Faith, and the Scriptures demand both. We must hold to both, even if the combination of the two views forces us into inscrutable mystery. But to maintain his real humanity we must maintain that his self-consciousness progressively unfolded.