

# 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 Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

THE  
CHURCHMAN

---

DECEMBER, 1892.

---

ART. I.—LESSONS FROM THE CHARACTER OF THE  
MOTHER OF OUR LORD.

A QUIET DAY ADDRESS.

*Part I.—Meekness.*

WE would fain have a fuller record of the early home of our Lord. We should like to read of the incidents of that wondrous childhood. But those years are passed over in almost silence by the Evangelists. The Apocryphal Gospels attempt to supply what is lacking; but they lead us into scenes which are grotesque, undignified, unworthy, and completely out of harmony with the conception of our Lord's life and character, as set forth in the Gospels. We must be content not to know. But we may restore the general aspect of that home, and draw out somewhat the picture of what must have been its leading features.

The town of Nazareth possessed a population of not less than 10,000. It had its synagogue. The surroundings of the town are pleasant. It is situated on the north-west spur of a hill, which rises some 300 or 400 feet above the level of the Plain of Jezreel. The descent from the town is steep, but there are fairly open roads in Cana and Capernaum. The houses are often shadowed with trees. The sombre hue of the cypress mingles with the brighter foliage of the palm, the fig, the olive and the vine. The fields around are fertile, and the hedges are sometimes formed of cactus. The climate is healthy; the winter, however, is cold, though a writer of the sixth century speaks of the district as a kind of paradise. Coming from the more desolate neighbouring districts, the town, with its rich and pleasing surroundings, smiles with welcome fruitfulness. "If," says Klein, "the traveller, coming

up from the south out of the Plain of Jezreel, across the bleak mountain ridges, is surprised by a lovely oasis, when he suddenly beholds beneath him the green tranquillity of Nazara's dale, it is as if the gates of the world were opened on his view when he has climbed above that dreamy solitude to the summit of the rocky hill, sparsely covered with grass and thorny undergrowth." What can be seen through these open gates? In the nearer distance, at the edge of a green plain, Sepphoris, with its mountain fortress. To the north, Cana. Behind, rising high above its fellows, Hermon, with its coronal of snow. Eastward, Tabor, with its rounded cone. Further distant, the hills which flank the Lake of Gennesaret. To the south, the Plain of Jezreel, rich in produce, and not the less fertile for the blood which it has drunk—the battlefield of Israel's history, destined to see yet mightier wars ere the peace of the world is reached. The mountains of Gilboa, the hills of Samaria, the giant head of Carmel. And beyond this the sea.

The traffic of the world passed the gates of Nazareth; the great high road from Ptolemais to Damascus passed through the town. The inhabitants are restless and courageous; fierce faction fights have disturbed the whole of Galilee. Their intelligence is quick. In form and face they claim to be comelier than the men and women of other districts. Yet there are drawbacks. There is much misery; and pain, disease, deformity, which would startle our modern eyes, are frequent. They love novelty; they wake up into an eager enthusiasm, which dies out as quickly as it rose. "Metal and dross lay close together in the character of the people; a store of geniality, and fresh gushing vivacity of mind, along with a lack of serious persistence whether in thought, in sentiment, or in action."

The home of the Mother was a modest home, equally removed from anything approaching to even slender affluence on the one side, or mean and pinching poverty on the other. But the sound of active work and honourable toil were familiar in the home. In later life, when He ministered to men, our Lord shows His knowledge of the lot of the poor and the labouring folk. He knows the dark, windowless houses, where a candle must be lighted in the day time to search for what is lost. He knows the work of the builder, the gardener and the baker. He marks the patchwork of the peasant, the withered and worn-out wine skin, and the full or scant measure given in the corn-chandler's shop. The industry of the little home reflects the calm and upright characters of those who guide it. They are careful in their religious duties. Joseph is a just and considerate and strictly faithful guardian of his house; Mary is simple, pure, thoughtful, self-restrained.

The bond between parents and children was sacred among the Jews, as it was not among any other people. Among the Greeks and Romans no such tender and reverent feeling was to be found. In the home at Nazareth the sacred tie was one which was sweetened by true and tender love. "A youth made happy by parental leading, the lowly child still following, was," says Klein, "the bright horizon that bounded the background of His conscious reminiscence" (p. 148). The early teaching of the child was probably in the mother's hands, for school education in the town of Nazareth was at that time unlikely. The great effort in behalf of education was made later, under the auspices of the son of Gamaliel, who secured the provision of schools in every town and province open to children of six or seven years. In the home, therefore, and from Joseph and his mother, the child Christ probably learned the first elements of human knowledge. With them He learned to read the Scriptures; a MS. copy of the Law was often the possession of lowly households among the Jews. We can picture the care and conscientiousness, the self-forgetfulness and loving observance with which Mary instructed this wondrous child. The tie between them would not be lessened when (if we may follow probable tradition) Joseph died, and new responsibility devolved on our Lord, then nineteen years of age. Then the bond of affection became a bond of mutual responsibility; thus in many ways the tie between the mother and her Divine Son became strengthened. Outward circumstances drew closer a tie of blood which the tender, truthful and reverent care of a mother's love had cherished.

There is no teaching better than teaching by example. Illustration makes clear what argument often labours vainly to explain and enforce. But more, such teaching lays hold upon us in a way which the ablest reasoning about truth fails to do. Truth revealed in life and conduct has to use the words of the Laureate's breath. He is thinking of the great exemplar life when he sings:

And so the truth had breath,  
And wrought with human hands.

When we meet to-day for quiet thought and prayer, let us teach ourselves by example. "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning"; and what is chronicled for us of her who was highly favoured among women may reveal to us how the Lord was with her, and in the blessedness wherewith she was blessed we in a sort may be partakers.

Our subject, then, is the example of the mother of our Lord.

It is a pain to think how the sweetness of her example and life has been lost sight of in the controversies which have wrangled round her name. Too often the truth has been lost sight of in controversy; and still more frequently the bloom of the truth, the sweet *ἡθος*, without which truth is but opinion and the minister of pride, has been brushed off by eager and irreverent hands. It has been so in the case of the Virgin Mary. Exaggerated claims have been met by fierce denials, and have provoked hard and irreverent rejoinders. She has been lifted, on the one hand, so high that she has ceased to be human, and so the lesson of her true human life has been rendered impossible. The ill-omened phrase, the Queen of Heaven, has been applied to her, and the tender womanliness of her simple life has been obscured. On the other hand, it has been forgotten that she was the chosen vessel to bring the choicest and richest gift of God's love to man. To give to the world those who are great in earthly greatness is to win the world's gratitude; and hence the noblest honour of womanhood has been so earned by those who have become mothers of the great. The most impressive statue in the great collection of sculpture at Chatsworth is, to my mind, the figure of a woman seated in calm and dignified repose. She is unnamed, but we know enough when we read the simple inscription on the pedestal, "*Mater Napoleonis.*" What man would not step aside and bare his head when a woman such as this appeared? There is a tender and sacred honour which belongs to those who bore the pain and care, who sought no glory, but found it in the glory of another. It is an instinct, and a noble instinct, which bids us render homage to such women. This instinct can only take a higher and more reverent attitude when she whom we contemplate is not mother of this human genius or that, but of Him who was a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel—the mother of the Christ, the mother of our Lord.

And can we imagine that the life of one who brought forth Christ to the world has no lesson? It is true that the materials are few; a few verses comprise all we know. I say all we know, for we shall not, even under the temptation of scant material, go to doubtful traditions to enrich our story. We may feel sure that what the sacred story itself tells us it tells in sufficiently suggestive form to leave us in possession of all needful teaching. Indeed, the very slender character of the information carries its own lesson. It emphasizes the quiet tranquillity of that life which found its own sufficient work in doing in a humble and earnest way the work which God's

providence entrusted to her. There was no seeking for fame, no restless desire of overpassing the bounds of the decent and noble obscurity of her lot. It is enough for her that she does the apportioned task, and bestows a mother's care and love upon the child which God had wondrously given. To tend those infant years was work enough and good enough for her. A sweet content with work is a great gift; but a greater gift still is a distinct and reverent joy in all the work entrusted to us. We may live in this work, and find our life replenished in the doing it. Our word should be the sacred one, "I delight to do it," or that more sacred one still, "My meat and drink is to do the will of Him that sent Me." So quietly and so contentedly the life of the mother of our Lord passed in the Galilean home; so little is recorded; but just so much may the peace and quiet of that life be inferred.

And here may I note that there are reasons why we may find this life and its lessons specially helpful to us clergy. For is it too presumptuous to say that our function in the world is as hers, and our glory is as hers? If the blessed Virgin brought forth Christ to the world, is not our function to set forth for others Christ our Lord as He is, in the loveliness and beauty of that life and love of His? Nay, it is ours to reveal Christ to men in the power of that living work of His in our hearts and characters, that men may see Him in us. And yet, further, is not our function towards men this chiefest and this mainly, that we should labour to make them also revealers of Christ to the world? Was it not so that the Apostle understood his work when he viewed his flock as children over whom he travailed in birth till Christ be formed in them? And if our function thus resembles that of the mother of our Lord, our glory is as hers. For only as He becomes glorious do we touch any glory worthy of the name; it is only as He is exalted that His joy can be fulfilled in us. Our glory is as hers; our function is as hers; and therefore from her life and character may we learn some lessons, and understand somewhat better how to fulfil our ministry towards the children of God and the Church and bride of Christ.

Let us, then, seek the lessons of her life. How is her character hinted at in the sacred story?

Out of the hints which are given us let me take four features which seem to frame the portrait of the highly favoured among women.

Meekness, Intellectual Integrity, Regard or Reverence for the right of others, Self-suppression. Each of these gives a certain beauty to character. All of these combined set before us a character of unusually high, noble, and dignified quality,

since each of these features supplements and supports the other, and lends a charm of sweetness conjoined with strength to the whole picture.

*Meekness.*

It is the first, or nearly the first, feature which strikes us. We feel its presence in the words the Virgin uses, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to Thy word." Here is the acquiescence of the truest meekness. There are two ways in which the acquiescence of meekness may show itself.

There is acquiescence in the lowest and humblest task to which we may be called. There is the meekness which takes uncomplainingly the lowest room. But there is an acquiescence in the call to the highest destiny and function which may exhibit no less meekness, and sometimes even more grace, than the former. For the meekness which accepts and acquiesces in the call to high and responsible destiny needs a higher virtue and a wider range in order that it may submit and yet retain its unaffected character. And this is a quality nobler and firmer than the affectation of reluctance which is often only conventional and unreal. The spirit which can frankly accept what comes to it in the way of God's providence, which can so trust God as to believe that His providence never calls any man to a work which His grace will not sustain him in the discharge of, is a fairer thing than the vexatious hesitations of egotistic ostentation. Saul may appear to fly the crown and hide himself in the stuff; but yet his flight seems to me to be less sincere and less trustful, more indicative of an egotistic basis of character, than the sweet unquestioning readiness of Mary. It is God's will: it is therefore mine also. Behold whereto He calls me I am ready. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to Thy word."

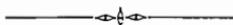
This meekness has a completeness about it. It goes beyond a virtue; it becomes a grace, for it is quality which has its anchorage in the Divine will. "According to Thy word," says the Virgin, meaning according to the Divine will which Thy word has revealed. And here we reach (do we not?) the distinction between a virtue and a grace. A virtue roots itself in human nature; it relates to the man himself, and you seek no other root. A grace relates us with God. A virtue may be from beneath; a grace is from above. And thus a grace and a virtue may be the same in form, but different in regard to origin. A man, therefore, may have a virtue of meekness which belongs to his nature; but a grace is a virtue with a background, and the background is God. It is here as with the visions of the Apocalypse. They pass

before our eye, splendid and bewildering and changeful scenes, but in the rear of the stage upon which these wonderful and terrible scenes are enacted is the unmoved and immovable throne of God, with the sea of glass before it and the rainbow round about it. We can endure the vision of these terrible things because throughout we are bidden to see Him who is invisible. Thus the virtue of the patience of the saints becomes a grace, because it is a patience in the presence and remembrance of God. All is according to His will, and His will is wisdom and love.

And thus with the meekness of the Virgin, it is a meekness which is in the presence of God. It is the grace which recognises His will in all that befalls her. It is, therefore, endured with a quality which can last. Saul's meekness soon disappeared; the frets and cares of office, the enjoyed consciousness of power, the carefully-ignored ethical weakness of his nature, the jealousy and dread which springs from the consciousness of moral inferiority, came in like a flood upon the soul, and the feeble supports of virtue gave way—the soil in which it grew was too shallow. The testing-time found him wanting. But the meekness of the Virgin, being rooted not in self but in God's will, endured. The quiet trust which made her so sweetly and modestly acquiescent in the will of God calling her to high things did not fail her when the same Will called her to the pain and the loneliness. She possessed her soul in peace, neither elated nor depressed; her meekness and reverence lived on unagitated when the Magi made their splendid offerings, and intensified when the sword pierced through her heart. Hers was the meekness of faith, and in unostentatious quietude of spirit she passes through all the splendid and stormy scenes of life. And here we feel the truthfulness of nature in the sacred story. The Gospel narrative records no scene of excited hysteria or painful farewells. Such scenes belong to legend or imagination, and they lend no dignity and impart no lesson to the story. In the Oberammergau Play there is delineated a pathetic scene in which the Divine Son on His way to the cross bids farewell to His mother. Mediæval art has pictured the Virgin sinking back in a fainting agony at the sight of the cross. These things may have been or they may not. But while they may appeal to a certain sentiment, and in their delineation call forth tears, they do not add to the dignity or nobility of the Gospel story, which, keeping out of sight the expressions of pain or heart-sorrow, leaves the figure of the Virgin before us as the same all through, the woman of meek and noble-hearted trust, whose own personal emotions are seldom thrust into view, and whose sturdy faith shows itself in the unselfish tenderness of serene sympathy and

unshaken calm. Hers is that tranquil heroism which never forgot God, which perceived that there was a lofty though not fully-disclosed purpose in her Son's life and mission, and who was devoted enough to be content that He should fulfil it, and trustful enough to believe that what was not known now should be made plain hereafter. So did faith illumine her meekness that the great Divine will and purpose was foremost in her mind. It is the Lord. It is well. In triumph and in failure, in joy and in sorrow. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to Thy word."

*(To be continued.)*



## ART. II.—THE COMPOSITION OF THE GOSPELS.

### PART II.

WE have seen that what is wanted is to get firm hold of certain broad principles in studying the Gospels, and to decline to give them up. And among these principles the first is to give the evangelists full credit for meaning exactly what they say, and not to assume that they have gratuitously disregarded the sequence of events. And these are principles which we do not hesitate to observe when reading Thucydides or Cæsar. But if the subject matter of the Gospels was of one-half the importance it would seem to be it must far outweigh that of the Peloponnesian or the Gallic war, and consequently if its writers believed their own story and had faith in their own mission, they must surely have written with as scrupulous and accurate a regard to truth as Cæsar or Thucydides. It does as little credit to our own ingenuousness as it does to the intelligence of the Gospel writers to suppose that they carelessly threw together such events and discourses in their narrative as they happened to remember, without any regard to order, and only with the intention of producing the vague and general effect of a splash or a daub. This would surely be utterly unworthy of them, and infinitely more unworthy of Him to whom they bore their testimony. The fact is, that in thus reading the Gospels there is the unacknowledged and concealed reserve of a half faith. The lot has not been cast in with Christ and His disciples for evil or for good and for life and for death. There is a semi-deferential attitude maintained, but there is all the latent scepticism of a half-resolved belief. But the kind of study that is really wanted is an unhesitating