



# Sinfully Stereotyped: Jesus's Desire to Correct Ancient Physiognomic Assumptions in the Gospel according to Luke

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Now it is possible to infer character from [one's] physical features, if it is granted that the body and the soul are changed together by natural affections: I say "natural," for though perhaps by learning music a man has made some change in his soul, but this is not one of those affections natural to us; rather I refer to passions and desires when I speak of natural emotions. If then this were granted and also that for each change there is a corresponding sign, and we could state the affection and sign proper to each kind of animal, we shall be able to infer character from [one's] physical features.

— Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* 2.27<sup>1</sup>

**S**tereotyping based on one's physical appearance has been a pervasive, pernicious practice for millennia. This is evinced in the ancient pseudoscience known as "physiognomy" (derived from the Greek terms *physis* "nature" and *gnomon* "judge" or "interpreter") and elucidated in the ancient works by Aristotle, Polemo of Laodicea, and others.<sup>2</sup> Such stereotypical, physiognomic assumptions

<sup>1</sup> Author's translation from the Greek text of Aristotle, *Analytica Priora et Posteriora*, Oxford Classical Texts, ed. William David Ross and L. Minio-Paluello (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> The term *physiognomonía* first appears in the fifth-century BC Hippocratic treatise *Epidemics* (II.5.1). Aris-

*One feature of ministry is dealing with the needs and capacities of those with physical limitations. This article considers such an aspect of ministry by examining the approach taken by Jesus in several stories from the Gospel of Luke.*

included unfair moral assessments regarding one's facial features, physical infirmities, and abnormalities, which often resulted in the denigration and defamation of the character and social standing of those possessing such "undesirable" physical traits. Thus there developed a pervasive "physiognomic consciousness" that permeated the ancient Greco-Roman worldview.<sup>3</sup> Despite American culture's unfamiliarity with the term "physiognomy," contemporary Americans are not immune to its effects, as can be seen in the need for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

As one might suspect, the Bible is not silent on this matter, and it appears that biblical writers were sensitive to this problematic issue as is explicitly revealed in the Old Testament through the stereotypical accusations made by Job's "friends," and in the New Testament by Jesus's disciples in John 9:2.<sup>4</sup> Physiognomic assumptions are seemingly implied elsewhere within the canonical gospels (especially within Luke's Gospel) in depicting characters who possess a myriad of physical traits that would have likely made them susceptible to the stereotypical physiognomic assumptions prevalent in first-century Greco-Roman culture. Moreover, it seems as if Luke intentionally highlights these ancient physiognomic assumptions in his vivid descriptions (i.e., *ekphrasis*) of these characters for rhetorical effect.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the questions arise: How does the author of Luke's Gospel depict the moral qualities of those possessing such "undesirable" physical traits? Does Jesus's attitude toward those with physical challenges coalesce with or stand in contradiction to the attitudes of the status quo? How do such stereotypical assumptions

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tole also seems more than a bit interested in the possibility of physiognomics as witnessed in the quote above from his fourth-century BC work, *Prior Analytics*. The oldest extant physiognomic handbook, dating back to the third century BC, is *Physiognomonica* by Ps.-Aristotle. This is not the first handbook on physiognomy, for in the opening section of his work Ps.-Aristotle refers to "previous physiognomists" (805a), and proceeds to critique their work. The second extant physiognomic handbook was written by Polemo of Laodicea, a highly influential rhetorician contemporaneous with Hadrian. His work, *De Physiognomonica*, was composed in the second century AD, thus showing the pervasiveness of this "physiognomic consciousness." See Chad Hartsock, "Sight and Blindness as an Index for Character in Luke-Acts and Its Cultural Milieu" (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2007) 3–4, 9; Polemo, "Polemonis: De Physiognomonica Liber Arabice et Latine," in *Scriptores Physiognomonici Graeci et Latini*, 2 vols, ed. Richardus Foerster (Leipzig: Teubner, 1893) 93–294.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth C. Evans, *Physiognomics in the Ancient World* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1969) 6.

<sup>4</sup>Job's three "friends"—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite—"saw him [Job] from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads" due to the marred visage of Job (Job 2:11–12, NRSV). Furthermore, they repeatedly made character judgments about Job based on his physical appearance (e.g., Job 4:7–8; 8:1–6; 15:1–16; 18:1–21; 20; 22:5–8). In the New Testament, Jesus's disciples made explicit physiognomic assumptions regarding a man born blind (John 9:1–2): "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:2–3, NRSV). This passage clarifies Jesus's intention in the canonical gospels to reverse the physiognomic assumptions of his own disciples towards those with physical infirmities such as blindness.

<sup>5</sup>Theon authors the *Progymnasmata* containing the earliest extant usage of the term *ekphrasis* (ἐκφράσις). Theon defines *ekphrasis* as "descriptive language, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight" (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 7.118). See Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2009) 39.

affect the contemporary church, and what changes must be made to include these precious saints, who possess physical challenges, in the life, worship, and service of the church? In Luke's Gospel, the biblical writer explores the relationship between one's outer physical appearance and inner moral character to reveal a great reversal in human stereotypical assumptions stemming from the ancient practice of physiognomy. Since Jesus fails to comport with the first-century opinions of the status quo regarding the physically challenged of his day, and intentionally strives to correct these sinful stereotypes toward these disabled, deformed, and disenfranchised characters, we too, as pastors and church leaders, should strive to eschew such stereotypes in the contemporary church. In other words, we should strive to *reach* all peoples inside and outside of our church buildings with the life-changing message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and therefore, *include* all saints in an every-member ministry regardless of their physical challenges or abilities. This argument shall be made through a brief exploration of Luke's characterization of a bent woman (Luke 13:10–17) and a diminutive man named Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10).

#### THE BENT WOMAN (LUKE 13:10–17)

The immediate context of the pericope of Luke 13:10–17 includes a warning of eschatological judgment (12:35–59), call to repentance (13:1–9), and Jesus's teachings on the kingdom of God (13:18–21). Luke 13:10 begins with Jesus teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. Luke 13:11 describes a woman, apparently off in the distance, who was “having a spirit of infirmity” (πνεῦμα ἔχουσα ἀσθενείας)<sup>6</sup> for eighteen years. Some commentators see this woman's condition as *ankylosing spondylitis* (i.e., Bechterew's disease).<sup>7</sup> However, Luke's point appears to be the spiritual source of her illness, and not the type of illness. This concept is implied by the interesting choice of terms Luke invokes in 13:12: “you have been freed from your infirmity” (ἀπολέλυσαι τῆσ ἀσθενείας σου). The source of the woman's infirmity is later explicated by Jesus to be Satan himself (13:16). Luke's use of the perfect tense in 13:12 seems to emphatically underscore the freedom this woman now enjoys in Christ from prolonged physical “imprisonment.” Thus the woman is now free to rest peacefully and worship YHWH on the Sabbath.

The woman's infirmity is doubly underscored by Luke in 13:11 as she “was continuously bent over” (ἦν συγκύπτουσα) and “unable to stand erect” (μὴ δυναμένη ἀνακῶψαι). Luke appears to be employing the rhetorical device known as *ekphrasis* through his description of the woman's deplorable condition. Such a vivid description echoes ancient physiognomic assumptions regarding those having twisted or crooked backs. Pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomics* associates large, strong backs with those of strong character, and those possessing narrow, weak

<sup>6</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references are author's original translations of the Greek text taken from Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>John Wilkinson, *Health and Healing: Studies in New Testament Principles and Practice* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980) 74.

backs as having a feeble moral character.<sup>8</sup> Thus according to ancient physiognomic assumptions, the bent woman's outer appearance stems from an inner moral defect. In other words, her outer, physical "crookedness" is the result of an inner, spiritual "crookedness"—an evil disposition.<sup>9</sup>

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Contrary to ancient physiognomic expectations, Jesus saw this bent woman, called her to himself—thus drawing her near—laid his hands on her, and “immediately she was restored” (παράκλημα ἄνωρθώθη; 13:12–13). Her response was immediate, “she glorified God,” (ἔδοξαζεν τὸν θεόν; 13:13). However, the synagogue leader (ἀρχισυνάγωγος) witnessing these events was “continuously angry” (ἀγανακτῶν) because Jesus had “healed” (ἔθεράπευσεν) the woman on the Sabbath. Jesus again reverses the ancient physiognomic assumptions by showing the hypocrisy contained in this so-called “religious leader’s” inner moral fabric—he loved his tradition and livestock more than people made in God’s image (13:14–15). This “great reversal” of assumptions is further underscored in the shocking title Jesus then gives to this formerly bent woman, “daughter of Abraham” (θυγατέρα Ἀβραάμ; 13:16). This is a special, covenantal title found nowhere else in Scripture that recalls YHWH’s promises to Abram in Gen 12:3, firmly establishes this formerly bent woman within the family of God, and further underscores Jesus’s reversal of the seemingly sinful stereotype attributed to her by this synagogue leader.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, in Luke 13:16 Jesus clarifies the source of the woman’s prolonged physical suffering—it was not the woman’s sinfulness that caused her crookedness, but Satan himself—reversing ancient physiognomic assumptions regarding her moral character, and making an explicit connection between the physical and spiritual realms in physiognomic terms.<sup>11</sup> Thus Jesus turns the synagogue leader’s logic on its head as, given the satanic source of the bent woman’s suffering, the Sabbath seems a superb time for this daughter of Abraham to be freed from this evil “im-

<sup>8</sup>Ps.-Aristotle, *Physiognomics* 810b.10–12, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1936); cf. 810b.25–32; Polemo, *De Physiognomica* 11.

<sup>9</sup>Ps.-Aristotle, *Physiognomics* 809a; cf. Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015) 217.

<sup>10</sup>While not appearing elsewhere in Scripture or in any earlier or contemporaneous literature to Luke, Parsons notes an important allusion to this phrase in a Hellenistic Jewish document dated between first century BC–first century AD, 4 Maccabees 15:28: “The woman in 4 Maccabees is ‘the daughter of Abraham’s strength’.... She recalls the strength of Abraham, both in her role as a mother willing to sacrifice her sons and ultimately also in her role as martyr willing to lay down her own life in order that both she and her sons remain faithful to their religious faith. According to physiognomic tradition, the contrast between the apparent ‘moral weakness’ of the bent woman and the ‘moral strength’ of the Maccabean mother [i.e., “the daughter of Abraham’s strength”] could not be starker.” Parsons, *Luke*, 219.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.

prisonment” (τοῦ δεσμοῦ; 13:16).<sup>12</sup> As a result of Jesus's reversal of sinful stereotypical assumptions regarding this woman, his opponents were humiliated and “the entire crowd” (πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος) was rejoicing. Let us now turn to Luke 19:1–10 to see how Luke portrays the interactions between a man named Zacchaeus, Jesus, and the crowd.

#### THE DIMINUTIVE ZACCHAEUS (LUKE 19:1–10)

Similar to the pericope in Luke 13:10–17 above, the surrounding context of Zacchaeus's story includes the themes of repentance (18:9–14, 38–39), the kingdom of God (19:11), and eschatological judgment (19:11–27). The story begins with Jesus entering Jericho and Luke's description of a man named Zacchaeus (19:1–2). Unlike the anonymous bent woman, Zacchaeus is named specifically, and his name is thought by some to be the diminutive form of Zechariah (Ζακχαῖος from זַכַּי) which means “pure” or “innocent,” thus adding irony to Luke's description and proceeding storyline.<sup>13</sup>

Like the pericope of Luke 13:10–17, Luke appears to be using the rhetorical device of *ekphrasis* to vividly describe not only Zacchaeus's physical description as “small in stature” (τῆ ἡλικίᾳ μικρὸς),<sup>14</sup> but to also show the denigration and humiliation afforded Zacchaeus by the status quo in having to run ahead of them and climb a tree in order to see Jesus as he was passing through. Thus despite Zacchaeus's privileged economic position in being rich, the physiognomic assumptions of the status quo relegated him to the bottom rung on the Jewish sociocultural ladder. Why does Luke go out of his way to vividly describe Zacchaeus's physical stature? The Roman elite of Luke's day were intrigued by human oddities—much like contemporary spectators of sideshow attractions and television programs such as *The Freakshow*—which especially centered on the humorous movements of the physically diminutive.<sup>15</sup> Luke's depiction of Zacchaeus running and climbing a tree would have painted Zacchaeus “as a laughable, perhaps despicable character” and “suggested, at the least, another cruel joke deriding the deformed.”<sup>16</sup> Luke's vivid description of Zacchaeus's physical appearance is for the purpose of pointing

<sup>12</sup>Bock comments on Luke 13:16: “Jesus argues that his act does not violate the Sabbath, but fits the very spirit of the day [rest and worship of YHWH]. What better way to celebrate the Sabbath!” See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996) 1219.

<sup>13</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 696. The name זַכַּי is also mentioned in Ezra 2:9 and Neh 7:14; and its Greek equivalent in the LXX is Ζακχαῖος.

<sup>14</sup>While some (so Green) may suggest that Luke is not focusing on the diminutive stature of Zacchaeus, but rather his young age, such a translation is rejected by every English version surveyed for this essay as well as by the earliest commentators on this passage including Cyril of Alexandria, who explicitly identified the physiognomic assumptions inherent within this pericope when he stated: “He [Zacchaeus] was short of stature, not merely in a bodily point of view, but also spiritually.” *Comm. Luke*, homily 127, trans. R. Payne Smith, 1983. See also Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 669–670.

<sup>15</sup>Lucian vividly describes a clown named Satyrion, an “ugly fellow” who “danced, doubling himself up and twisting himself about to cut a more ridiculous figure” (*Symposium* 18, trans. Harmon 1913).

<sup>16</sup>Parsons, *Luke*, 279.

out the physical defects or limitations so common in ancient physiognomic tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Luke describes Zacchaeus in at least four negative ways: (1) Zacchaeus was not only a tax collector (a term synonymous with “sinner” in Luke’s Gospel),<sup>18</sup> but, indeed, a “chief tax collector” (ἀρχιτελώνης); (2) Zacchaeus was rich as a result, and in terms of ancient agrarian societies for one to become rich meant that others would have to become poor as goods and supplies were limited; (3) Zacchaeus was short in stature; and lastly, (4) Zacchaeus was explicitly called a “sinful man” (ἄμαρτωλῷ ἀνδρὶ) by the crowds (19:7). Ancient physiognomic tradition stated that those who were short in stature were also “small in spirit” (*mikropsychia*).<sup>19</sup> Pseudo-Aristotle explains: “These are the marks of a small-minded person. He is small-limbed, small and round, dry, with small eyes and a small face, like a Corinthian or Leucadian.”<sup>20</sup>

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Despite these physiognomic traditions, Jesus reverses these sinful stereotypes by: (1) approaching Zacchaeus; (2) seeing/engaging Zacchaeus; and ultimately, (3) healing Zacchaeus spiritually when Jesus remarks, “Today, salvation came into this house” (σήμερον σωτηρία τῷ οἴκῳ τούτῳ ἐγένετο; 19:9). Jesus bridges the gap and reverses the stereotypes regarding Zacchaeus despite the hateful attitude of the crowd, who grumble at Jesus’s actions, and readily affix the label “sinner” to Zacchaeus (19:7). Luke vindicates Zacchaeus through Zacchaeus’s offering of a fourfold recompense to those whom he had defrauded (19:8), thus recalling the sincere repentance of the distant tax collector in Luke 18:13. As a result of this great reversal of the crowd’s sinful stereotyping, Jesus ascribes a technical title to Zacchaeus proffered elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel only to Jesus, himself—“son of Abraham” (υἱὸς Ἀβραάμ; 3:23, 34; 19:9). So like the bent woman, Zacchaeus is portrayed by Luke to be a part of God’s family despite ancient physiognomic traditions that distanced him from the life and worship of the Jewish community. Furthermore, it appears that the technical terminology Luke employs by referring to Zacchaeus as a “son of Abraham” appears to form an *inclusio* (a literary bracketing device) with the prior description of the bent woman as a “daughter of Abra-

<sup>17</sup>François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, vol. 2, trans. Donald S. Deer, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 597.

<sup>18</sup>David E. Garland, *Luke*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 747.

<sup>19</sup>Parsons, *Luke*, 278.

<sup>20</sup>Ps.-Aristotle, *Physiognomics* 808a.30, trans. Hett, 1936.

ham”—thus linking these two pericopes together through these familial, covenantal titles within the macrostructure of Luke’s Gospel.

#### COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF THE PERICOPES AND CHARACTERS

Numerous similarities exist between these two pericopes and characters. First, the immediate context is similar as both pericopes are preceded by the theme of repentance (12:35–59; 13:1–9; 18:9–14, 38–39), and followed by the theme of the kingdom of God (13:18–21; 19:11–27). The settings are also similar in that both have characters who are distanced from their communities due to their physical appearance and need healing (whether physical, spiritual, or both). In each case, there is opposition from the status quo in Jesus’s engagement of these characters (13:14–17; 19:7). Both characters are presented as distant, unseen, unengaged, unloved, and ultimately, unimportant. However, Jesus stands in stark contrast to the status quo in approaching these characters, taking time to both see and engage them, loving them enough to heal them, and showing their importance as image bearers of God through the familial, covenantal titles as a daughter and son of Abraham.

These two pericopes address ancient physiognomic assumptions on at least two main levels: infirmity and abnormality. In other words, the family of God consists of saints with all sorts of infirmities and abnormalities. The theme of infirmity comes to the fore in Luke 13:10–17. The woman’s infirmity is doubly underscored by Luke in 13:11 as she “was continuously bent over” and “unable to stand erect.” The theme of abnormality is seen in Zacchaeus who is physically able to see, run, and climb a tree, but is nevertheless seen as “abnormal” by the status quo due to his diminutive appearance. There is also some overlap between these two themes as both the bent woman and Zacchaeus were seen as morally defective and excluded from active participation within the first-century Jewish socioreligious structures.<sup>21</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH?

The implications for the church are legion. We as pastors and church leaders must ask ourselves the hard questions: Are those with infirmities (those with special needs physically and/or mentally) allowed to play a vital part in the life, worship, and service of our congregations? Are saints with “abnormalities” welcomed in our congregations and allowed to participate in an active, meaningful role?

We all have our own “infirmities” and “abnormalities.” We have all fallen short of the glory of God in our own sundry spiritual sicknesses (Rom 3:10, 23). We all have abnormalities (for better or worse) in comparison to those different from us. All we need to do to confirm this is ask our spouses! A key, biblical truth revealed in the pericopes above is that we should not make sinful, stereotypical

<sup>21</sup>Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007) 154–155.

assumptions about someone’s character based upon their outward appearance, but rather we should look inwardly to their hearts, and see people through the lens of the image of God (Gen 1:26–27; 1 Sam 16:7).

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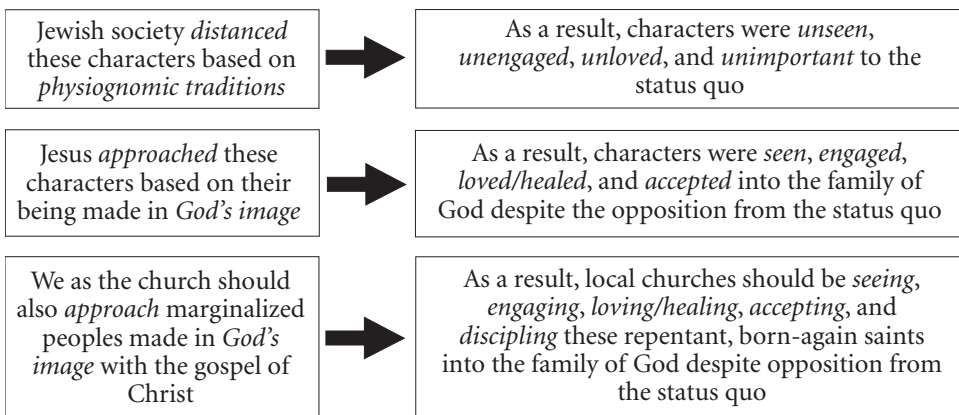
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Rather than merely creating “mercy ministries” centered on a person’s “disabilities” we must recognize the *abilities* that all people possess. Such “mercy ministries,” while perhaps effective outreach tools, do not seem effective in bridging the gap as Jesus did in including all saints into the family of God. Scripture explains that the church should be an every-member ministry that includes, disciples, and equips every saint for the mission of God (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12). What of those with autism or similar challenges? Pastors could form “Timothy-Barnabas” type ministries where parents or friends partner together with them in greeting guests, serving children, ministering to shut-ins, or a myriad of other vibrant ministries. These special saints are God’s gift to us. As New Testament scholar William Lane eloquently stated: “When God gives a gift, He wraps it in a person.”<sup>22</sup>

So where do we go from here? We should follow the model Jesus left us in Luke’s Gospel: (1) Jesus approached the need; (2) Jesus saw/engaged the need; (3) Jesus healed the need; (4) and the response was that God was glorified—despite some trying to keep the physically challenged person from being noticed and healed. This can be illustrated as follows:

FIG. 1. FIRST-CENTURY JEWISH SOCIETY, JESUS, AND THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH



<sup>22</sup>As quoted in Michael Card, *The Walk: The Life-Changing Journey of Two Friends* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2006) 4.

We must remember the clarion call repeated by Job to his unhelpful “friends”: “I, myself, am not inferior to you” (לֹא-נִפְּלָא אֲנִי מֵכֶם; Job 12:3; 13:2). Indeed, passages such as Gen 1:26–27, Rom 12:3, and Gal 3:28 make abundantly clear the equality of all humanity in the eyes of God. Furthermore, qualifications for “up front” ministries (e.g., pastors, music leaders, greeters, and ushers) should not be outwardly based, but inwardly based, as 1 Sam 16:7, in reversing ancient stereotypical, physiognomic assumptions, clarifies: “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” ⊕

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