

HOW TO TEACH THE BIBLE IN SCHOOLS.

BY THE EDITOR.

RABBI Joseph Kornfeld, an orthodox representative of the Mosaic faith, offers his suggestions in the current number, and he demands that the Bible, in order to be made of ethical value to children, should be taught psychologically. This is true enough, and we recommend his article for a careful perusal to the religious educators of all denominations, but we wish to add a few comments of our own, partly for the benefit of those who have broken away from religious association entirely and deem it best to cut out religion from their educational system and with it the Bible.

We do not countenance the demand that the Bible should be dispensed with in education. We believe that the teaching of the Bible is one of the most urgent needs not only in the Church but also in our schools. A knowledge of the Bible is necessary for religious instruction; and I say purposely for instruction, not for edification alone, for a knowledge of the Bible is absolutely indispensable for general culture, for a knowledge of history, anthropology, the development of human thought, and so in general for philosophy and finally also for art.

Art, it is true, does not belong exactly to the daily bread of our intellectual needs, but it is after all an indication of general culture, and a man ignorant of the Bible can no more judge correctly of general history, even profane history, than he can walk through any of the famous art galleries and understandingly view the many pictures there exhibited.

The fact we have to insist on is this, that the Bible is a record of one of the most important factors of the history of mankind and a knowledge of it is indispensable for any educated man, for any one who wishes to have a fair insight into the nature and character of the development of the race, of its thoughts and its aspirations.

I speak here for the general public, not for Christians or Jews

alone. Even to the profane historian a fair knowledge of the Bible is absolutely indispensable. The Bible has entered into the spirit of all our literatures, German, French, English, Russian, Italian, Spanish, etc., and the leading thoughts of the Bible have been factors in the history of all European nations. I claim most positively that no one can form an accurate opinion of European culture without having studied the Bible as a whole, and in most of its details. To exclude the Bible from our schools is a serious mistake which is excusable only through the sectarian attitude of our churches, and the opposition to teaching the Bible in schools should disappear with the disappearance of the sectarian spirit, which happily is clearly in evidence. I hope to see the day when the Bible will be taught in schools, not from any sectarian standpoint but scientifically.

The objection may be made that it is impossible to cut out sectarianism from Bible instruction, but I venture to disagree. Science in its very nature is unsectarian. Science teaches the truth, and the only difficulty would be to make the statements of facts with discretion so as not to offend sectarianism. The difficulty is obviously of a negative kind, not positive. Results of scientific inquiry should be stated in an inoffensive way, not in a tone of provocation, or in contrast to old-fashioned, antiquated, sectarian views, and this can be done. How much the sectarian spirit is dying out can be seen from the article of Rabbi Kornfeld who, though a leader in an orthodox religious congregation, insists on a scientific treatment of the Bible, and would do away with all the antiquated, sentimental and pious methods which, with the best intention of increasing the glory of God, distort both the text and the sense of Biblical stories. At the same time it is remarkable how impartially and how appreciatively Rabbi Kornfeld speaks of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus.

But how should the Bible be taught scientifically?

First of all the Bible should be treated as a record and not as absolute truth. It is here indifferent whether we speak of it as a record of God's revelation or whether for unbelievers we call it a record of the religious development of the human race. When we apply the scientific interpretation of religion, such terms as revelation, inspiration, etc., become questions of mere definition. We may look upon all truth as revealed, in which sense we admit the term from the standpoint of the most radical thinker, that the Bible is the record of the history of religious revelation, which practically means the same as the development of religious thought and of religious truth.

Though the Bible is merely a fragment of the religious development of mankind, we must grant that it is that fragment which leads up to the laying of the foundation of our present civilization. Whether or not we believe in Christianity we must understand how it developed and through what stage it passed before it became what it was in the beginning of the Christian era, and the documents of this history are laid down in the Old and New Testaments.

When we understand what the Bible is (i. e., a collection of records or of historical documents) we shall treat it in the right way. The time is coming when the general results of text-critical and historical research will be accepted by Biblical scholars of all denominations and we shall be able to state with objective impartiality, at least in broad outlines, how, when, and why, the several books of the Old and the New Testament were written.

When we trace the successive advances made by the people of Israel we shall understand that the God-conception of the Semitic bondsmen in Egypt was comparatively low. Yahveh who ordered the children of Israel to take away with them the gold and silver vessels of the Egyptians was a tribal deity who wanted to enrich his people at the cost of others. Further the God of Jephthah, who sacrificed his daughter, was still a God of savages. The God of Samson who came over him like a magic spell belongs to mythological deities. None of these views can be regarded as the God of matured Christianity, or, let us add also, of present-day Judaism. We ought to know, however, that from such crude notions has sprung the noblest and most philosophical God-conception of to-day, and we can trace the historical connection. We know that the comprehension of children is not the comprehension of man, and so we must learn that older beliefs of mankind exhibit a lower conception of the deity than in more advanced times, and there is no harm in telling the truth, or setting forth the facts in Sunday schools. To conceal the truth through interpretations of the Bible which are scientifically untenable is a grievous mistake, and we are glad that Rabbi Kornfeld points it out.

Some time ago a very serious Christian clergyman of orthodox faith wrote a pamphlet in which he demanded an expurgated Bible. He pointed out the many improprieties and indecencies which are contained in the Bible, and no one can deny that in this he is right. Nevertheless his appeal was ignored. He was like a voice crying in the wilderness and for good reasons. The subject was very unwelcome to religious teachers because they know how to avoid the difficulties rising from this source by passing over those passages

which are symptoms of an antiquated morality. From the scientific standpoint we can understand that in olden times the sense for decency was different than it is at present, and accordingly, without being untrue to facts, we can dispose of passages of an equivocal nature by simply branding them as exhibiting a lower view of propriety. No harm is done by telling the truth, but if Bible readers afterwards discover these passages by themselves, they will naturally turn away from the Bible and condemn the use of it altogether.

For a long time in the development of religion the Bible was used as a text-book for edification. We ought to bear in mind that it was not originally written for that purpose. Not until the time when the canon received its final shape, did its redactors begin to introduce this factor which is much in evidence in their additions and comments. Afterwards it became and still continues to be the sole purpose for which the Bible was taught. I do not deny that innumerable passages in the Bible can fittingly serve this purpose. There are the Psalms and Proverbs of the Old Testament and many parables, and a great many passages in the Epistles which are very useful for purposes of edification. But upon the whole the Bible is, we must repeat, a record of religious documents. It is historical, and we must never leave its historical significance out of sight. We must understand the Bible, and all edificational lessons which can be drawn from it are and ought to be secondary. At any rate it is not advisable to distort the text or the stories or the meaning of any Biblical quotations for the purpose of edification.

We will add one further comment on the supernatural in the Bible. The religious books of all nations contain miracle stories; and this does not prove that miracles are true, but that at a certain stage of development the belief in miracles is common. The miraculous and mystical features of religious books are indications of the religious awe of the generation in which they were written. They belong to the atmosphere of that age and add a peculiar charm to its setting. There is no need of being offended at them. To omit the miracle or to eliminate the supernatural from the text of the Bible in teaching its contents would be as false as to rationalize fairytales. This method (the method of the rationalist) has been repeatedly applied, but it distorts the Bible just as much, if not more, than the method of adapting it to the ends of a pious edification.

Think of it, what would become of Greek myth if we would treat it in the same way? Should we let the labors of Heracles come within the range of plausibility and explain his deeds in a similar

way as rationalists do when cutting out the supernatural element from the Bible?

When we relate miracles such as described in either the Old or New Testament we need as little request a child to believe them in all their details, as we expect him to believe that the fight of Zeus with the Titans actually took place or that Achilles was really the son of Thetis, the goddess of the sea. We simply tell the stories as they are recorded so that the scholar may know that this was the view of the people so many thousand years ago. The stories, even the miracle stories and fairy tales, retain their moral, artistic and otherwise educational value in the one way as much as in the other, and if they are deprived of the supernatural element, they become trite and prosaic.

How far we ought to explain the origin and the significance of the belief in the supernatural depends entirely on the age and maturity of the pupil whom the teacher addresses. At any rate I would not join that large portion of reformers who would cut out the Bible entirely from our education, for I do insist most vigorously on the necessity of teaching it.

I do not deem the Bible indispensable for the purpose of edification or for the development of religious feelings, but I believe that a knowledge of it is absolutely needed for our general culture, and for this purpose it is as indispensable as the knowledge of the outlines of the world's history, for the Bible contains the key to a comprehension of the development of the European races.