

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF BIBLE STUDY.

BY THE EDITOR.

IN a former number Dr. Aaron P. Drucker surprised our readers by the boldness with which he, a rabbi, criticised the Old Testament, declaring it unfit to serve as a text-book in Sunday-schools.¹ The present number contains an article by him on the New Testament in which he applies the same standard and comes to the conclusion that it would be equally inadvisable to use the New Testament for educational purposes.

Rabbi Drucker is the author of a pamphlet, *The Trial of Jesus*, which he claims is negative and critical only in the beginning. He calls attention to the fact that the Jewish judges of Jesus under the leadership of Caiphas, the high priest, can not have been the Sanhedrin as is generally assumed, and he is unquestionably right on this point, because the Sanhedrin had been abolished by Herod in 40 B. C. and was only reinstalled by Agrippa I in 42 A. D. The rabbi also enumerates the several points which prove that the proceedings of the meeting stand in contradiction to all the rules of Jewish law so that if it ever took place it ought to be regarded as illegal, its decision ought to have been annulled and under no condition could the Jewish nation as such be held responsible for its verdict. According to Lev. x. 6 and xxl. 10 it was even forbidden that high priests (in the quoted passages, Aaron, Eleazar and Ithamar) should even rend their clothes.

In spite of the facts which militate against the tradition that the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus, Rabbi Drucker does not doubt that such a council took place. He accepts the statements in the gospels as reliable, he only points out the illegality of the proceedings from the Jewish point of view, and exonerates the Jewish nation from any guilt whatever. He assumes that Caiphas the high priest was in-

¹ *Open Court*, April, 1910.

censed at Jesus because the latter had driven the money changers from the temple, and he convened a council on his own account.

The rest of his pamphlet is rather a sketch for a novel and contains the materials for a drama in the style of Mary Magdalen, the tendency being to prove that Jesus was the victim of an intrigue which the villainous high priest-Caiphaz spun against the beloved leader of the common people of Israel. Rabbi Drucker makes out that Jesus was a well-known preacher who traveled from place to place and whose fame had spread to Jerusalem for healing the sick and preaching the gospel of non-resistance. The people became so weak that even Pilate gave up his plan of driving them into rebellion. He came to Jerusalem to meet this gentle leader and to come to an agreement with him as to his own policy in Judea, but Caiphaz, a treacherous Jew who had bought his office for money and served as a Roman spy, intrigued against Pilate as well as Jesus and by infamous cunning thwarted the plans of both Pilate and Jesus. Not Judas but Caiphaz is the villain of the play according to Rabbi Drucker. All blame is laid on him—even the presence of the money changers in the temple is due to his greed and to his greed alone.

Rabbi Drucker offers a peculiar motive for Jesus withdrawing from Jerusalem and hiding on the Mount of Olives. It is stated in the following passage (p. 49):

“In his heart, Caiphaz was harboring evil designs against the favorite and leader of the people. He strongly suspected that one of Jesus’s demands upon Pilate would be the removal of the High Priest. Accordingly, he felt himself called upon to act in his own defence and thwart the plans of Jesus, even if this course should bring misery upon the entire Jewish nation. He sent word to Pilate to come quickly to Jerusalem with a strong force and arrest Jesus in the temple. The people, he said, would not allow the soldiers to arrest their favorite, and a riot would ensue. This would give him the opportunity of reporting to the Emperor that the Jews were a rebellious people, and that their leader, Jesus, had caused a riot in the Temple. If this plan succeeded, Pilate would have no cause to fear a Jewish embassy, for the Emperor would refuse to receive complaints from a rebellious nation.

“Jesus learned of this dastardly plan and determined to avert riot and bloodshed at any cost. He, therefore, quietly left the Holy City late at night after the Paschal Supper, and went to the Mount of Olives, only his disciples accompanying him; and even they knew not the cause of this extraordinary measure.”

The burden of Rabbi Drucker’s *Trial of Jesus*, which could as

easily have been written by a Christian, is to point out the injustice of "the monstrous accusation of the crucifixion of their beloved leader" (p. 63).

It goes without saying that Rabbi Drucker's assumption that Pilate had heard of Jesus before the trial is pure invention and has no warrant in either the gospel story or in history, but it would serve well as a motive in fiction which would respect all the statements of the canon and be nowhere offensive to either Jews or Christians.

A story as outlined by Rabbi Drucker would certainly be so much in keeping with the traditional views that it would be impossible to tell whether or not the author was a believing Christian, in fact it would rather imply that he appears to be a Christian.

It is certainly interesting to read what the author of *The Trial of Jesus* has to say on the New Testament as a text-book.

It is worth while to listen to the advice of men who tell the truth as they see it and fear not to run counter to their own sacred traditions, as Rabbi Drucker has done in his criticism of the Old Testament as well as in *The Trial of Jesus*, and our readers will not fail to read his article on the New Testament with deep interest even though they may not agree with him.

Rabbi Drucker is not always consistent. In his pamphlet he blames Caiphas and him alone for the presence of the money changers in the Temple, while in this article he states that "these people were there in accordance with certain regulations of the Temple." Here he blames Jesus for his "highhanded impulsive way." He also in the heat of argument carries points to extremes. That the Mohammedan church should be "more tolerant than the Christian as recent events in Turkey prove" is far fetched when we consider that the statement is based only on the fact that the mosque aided the Young Turkish reform, while it is contradicted by the innumerable massacres of Jews and Christians in Armenia and other countries. His attempt to illustrate Christian intolerance by a conversation between an English and a Russian clergyman is not forcible because the question is whether his readers will agree with him in recognizing the Russian form of Christianity as the only genuine one.

The writer of these lines does not think that the Bible is absolutely unfit for educational purposes, and has himself read to his children books of both the Old and New Testament. He does not believe that children should grow up without a fair knowledge of the religious book which has influenced the civilization of mankind, and the very language of which pervades the atmosphere we

breathe in our intellectual life. For this reason we deem it necessary that the biblical books continue to be read, and what ought to be criticised is not so much that both Old and New Testaments are read in Sunday-schools as the method with which they are treated.

The main trouble in the reading of religious literature lies probably in the change that has come upon our standards of literary reliability. We ought openly to acknowledge that at the beginning of the Christian era the demands of truthfulness and critical exactness in the circles of primitive Christianity were different from those now commonly recognized. The biblical books were not written by scientific men, and we ought not to measure them by the requirements made of writers nowadays, or even of the scholars of the time in which they were written, as for instance, Josephus, Philo or other authors of the Augustan age. The gospel writers belonged to and wrote for a class of people without any scientific training. They are obviously uncritical, and the looseness of their very style, their solecisms, grammatical blunders and lack of logical coherence prove that it would be unfair to judge them according to the standards of the best profane literature of classical antiquity, still less of our own age.

Moreover, the purpose of these canonical writings is not scientific nor historical, but devotional, and only if we consider the religious awe which pervades their story, the zeal, the enthusiasm, the devotion and the piety of their authors can we understand how these books made such a deep impression upon the world in spite of their glaring shortcomings.

We must bear in mind that classical antiquity is a period of aristocratic predominance. The old republics were not democracies in our sense, for even in Athens the real citizens constituted a minority, and everywhere the strangers, the slaves and other disfranchised residents were without political rights, and yet their existence could not be absolutely ignored. The mass of slaves and freedmen grew in number and importance until they actually became a vast majority and the decisive factor in the Roman empire. They reached the height of their influence under Constantine, and it is historically well recognized that in these lower strata Christianity had taken a firm root.

At this juncture of history mankind turned over a new leaf. The old culture had favored the few with privileges and the masses had no voice, but their influence grew and had to be reckoned with. To be sure they were not organized, but the emperors needed their sympathy and sought it more and more until Constantine learned

to control them by making their faith the official religion of the empire. Thereby the literature of Christianity was at once assigned a rank above all other books. When having the Gospel story read in any Sunday-school, in order to correctly understand the situation we must bear in mind that, while recognizing the awe in which the canonical writings were held, we cannot measure them by the common standards of literary excellence.

During the last century, or even during the last decade, new standards have arisen, and our sense of religious honesty has decidedly changed. By the side of our old emotional conscience which is purely sentimental, there has arisen a new demand. We may call it the conscience of scientific truthfulness, and until a most recent time even this has mainly remained limited to the narrow circle of scholars for it has not as yet taken deep root among the broad masses of even the thoughtful religious people who otherwise are well-intentioned, honest and fair-minded.

The first result of this new conscience is a careful scrutiny of the scriptures which has become commonly known as biblical research or higher criticism, and biblical research has brought to the surface many facts which make it necessary for us not only to revise the traditional doctrine of inspiration, but also our trust in the reliability of many scriptural statements.

Rabbi Drucker presents us with a fairly well chosen summary of the most important of these results of the higher criticism, almost all of which have been commonly accepted by New Testament scholars. Sometimes Mr. Drucker might even have presented his case more strongly. The parallel of the lamb to Marduk's ram of ancient Babylonia is more close than might be judged from Mr. Drucker's statements because the original reads, *ἀρνίον*, "young ram," and not "lamb" as the English has it. That Jesus was a Jew whose horizon was limited to Judea, appears from the passages quoted by Mr. Drucker, and he might have added that according to Matt. v. 18, he believed in the literal inspiration of the Mosaic law including even the diacritical points of the script. It is well understood that by "dogs" and "swine" (Matt. vii. 6; xv. 21-29; Mark vii. 24-30) Jesus means the Gentiles, and only a very twisted interpretation can take out the sting of the contempt he shows for them in these passages.

The responsibility for the crucifixion should certainly not be laid at the door of the Jews, and all the passages which indicate that the Jews and not the Romans crucified Jesus bear quite obvious earmarks of additions incorporated after Christianity had long ceased to be confused with Judaism and had more and more found recog-

dition among the Gentiles. The Jewish mode of execution was stoning. Stephen (Acts vii) was executed by the Jews, but Jesus to all appearance by the Romans.

While we would not advocate the suppression of the New Testament from the education of our children, we would most decidedly propose not to have it read in the traditional spirit of devotion, but for the information of the growing generation.

In the brief editorial comment on Rabbi Drucker's former article we insisted on the fact that the Bible is and will after all remain the most important book not only of the past but of the present and future, for the simple reason that it has been incorporated into the history of mankind. The Bible is a collection of religious documents which mark the path of progress. It contains not one but several conceptions of God characterizing the various successive stages. Though it is wrong to look upon the Bible as dictated by the Holy Ghost it remains a truly sacred book because it is a record of our religious development. Our duty is to discriminate and study the historical origin and the philosophical significance back of the different conceptions. Not all passages in the Bible are of equal value, but even those that express morally low conceptions remain significant, if only for the purpose of teaching the historian and the student of the history of religion how often mankind erred while groping after truth.

The Bible has been taken out of the public schools but we would insist that it should be read and taught just as much as profane literature and secular history, or even more. A knowledge of the development of Christianity and of its sacred books is indispensable for general culture, and the difficulty in teaching it originates solely from the inveterate and, let us hope, soon antiquated conception of religion, that for the sake of dogma the facts of history should, whenever necessary, be twisted; that ecclesiastical doctrines are more sacred than truth; and that whatever the result of our search for truth might be, our first duty is allegiance to traditional dogma. The spread of a scientific spirit, however, which is taking place at the present time, will by and by render it possible to teach the facts with impartiality, and the time is coming when the Bible will be admitted again into our schools unopposed alike by Jew and Gentile.

While the Bible is sacred we must not forget that there are more religious books than those of our own tradition. They are the sacred books of the Parsis, of the Brahmans, of the Buddhists, of the Chinese, and all of them make the claim and possess the

character of sacredness; all of these books, each in its own way, are revelations which characterize the development of man's comprehension of the divinity that shapes our ends.

The New Testament writings are documents in the history of religion and our present religious views do not suffer when we recognize that they originated in circles of an absolutely uncritical character. There is a good deal of the poetical spirit in them, and therefore their statements partake of the nature of religious romance and need not be regarded as historical. Further we must bear in mind that the crude ideal of God as well as of Christ was naturally naive and had to be as faulty as the horizon of the gospel writers was narrow. For truth's sake we must recognize this, but in spite of it, these narratives contain the seed from which Christian civilization has developed.

The reader will perhaps ask how that was possible, and we answer because in a prescientific age poetry is more powerful than science.

While the picture of Jesus in the Gospels is of a temporary significance, the Christ ideal has grown and has changed with the ages according to the needs of mankind, and the duty of the present is not to become despondent because the scriptures deemed so perfect by former generations are sorely lacking in reliability and even in true spirituality, but to look ahead and work out the ideals that in the future shall serve us as our guides in life.

Every age has its needs, and while early Christianity could be satisfied with the formulation of the faith as it then existed we have new demands and new duties and it is best for us to build upon the past, and to respect the work done by our predecessors without allowing ourselves to be enslaved by the letter of the confessions of faith as formulated in former times. But with all conservatism, with all reverence for what was sacred to our ancestors, we must bear in mind that the highest and most indispensable duty of religion is allegiance to truth.