

## THE BIBLE IN THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL.

BY JOSEPH S. KORNFELD.

PROFESSOR Moulton says: "The Bible is the worst-printed book in the world." With equal, if not greater, justification can it be said that the Bible is the worst-taught book in the world. This is especially true of the Bible as taught in our Sunday-schools. Over the entrance of our Sunday-school might well be placed the words that adorned the façade of a certain carpenter-shop: All sorts of twisting and turning done in this place.

This criticism, of course, does not affect those whose first article of faith is *Credo quia absurdum est*. He who can believe anything because it is absurd will find nothing in the Bible that might not be taught just as it is. And though we may pity him for his blindness to the truth, we cannot charge him with deliberate distortion thereof. It is doubtful, however, whether in our age many would care to avail themselves of this exemption. The vast majority of thinking men and women would indignantly refuse to teach their children things they regarded absurd, even though contained in the Bible. That with our changed attitude toward the Bible we should expect a corresponding change in our system of Bible teaching, goes without saying. Yet such is hardly the case.

The method of tropical exegesis, though generally discredited, has not yet been displaced in our Bible-schools. Speaking of this method, Robertson Smith says: "The ancient fathers laid down the principle that everything in Scripture which, taken in its natural sense, appears unedifying, must be made edifying by some method of typical or figurative application." Substituting the word "unreasonable" for "unedifying," this statement will hold good of the modern teacher as well.

Our Bible teachers seem to fear lest by deviating from the course followed in the age of faith they grieve the holy spirit—and as a result they make the Bible tell tales which would harrow up the

souls of a more sensitive generation. But we have already passed the stage of being shocked. We are simply amused. Take, for instance, the story of the Tower of Babel. There was a time when no one doubted that what is recorded in Gen. xi. 1-9 actually took place. Then there was sufficient reason for teaching this story without any alteration. But since science has entirely discredited this account, the only justification for teaching it must lie in its ethical or religious value. Unfortunately, however, the writer of this story was not a prophet, and therefore did not foresee the time when his scientific discovery would not be fit for anything better than a Sunday-school lesson, and consequently he failed to put a moral into it. Thus it devolves upon the devout teacher to invent one. How dismally he failed is shown in the manuals of Scripture history used in our Sunday-school. Nor are we surprised at this failure.

The story of the Tower of Babel is a myth of the Promethean type. That the child should sympathize with the human victims of the tyrannical Deity is both natural and moral, though hardly religious. But in his desire to vindicate the ways of God to man, the teacher becomes a false plasterer and an ignorant physician, determined to "doctor up" this story *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. And all this because it is a part of the Bible! Now one may ask, what is its object in the Bible? Surely not to teach irreverence. Most positively not. Philosophy has been defined as mythology grown old and wise. Then conversely, mythology is philosophy not yet grown old and wise. The myth of the Tower of Babel was used as a philosophical explanation of the diversity of language and race, which must have presented a difficulty to one who had been taught to believe that mankind sprang from one common parent. That the Bible writer should have availed himself of this account of the division of the human race before he entered upon the history of one particular people may not say much for him as a philosopher, but it does show that he knew how to write history. Thus, the story of the Tower of Babel is far from being out of place in the Bible. But in the religious school, where the moral and religious upbuilding of the child is aimed at, its presence is hardly justifiable. Nor is this story unique. It is rather one of many, whose *raison d'être* in our text-books is difficult to discover.

The principal objection, however, is not so much to the matter taught as to the manner in which it is taught. We teach our children in our religious schools in a manner which would hardly be tolerated in our secular schools. What would we think of a teacher of mathematics who would teach his pupils fractions before they

had mastered the elementary principles of arithmetic? Should we not have at least equal regard for the child's mental capacity in the instruction of things valuable in proportion not as they are remembered, but assimilated? Yet without a doubt the radical defect in our Bible teaching lies in our total indifference to the power of the child's apperception. Thus, at the time when the sensuous feelings are predominant in the child and therefore especially in need of being directed—which might be successfully done by means of appropriate Bible lessons—he is taught things that concern the esthetic, intellectual, prudential or religious feelings. We thereby not merely burden the mind with things it cannot comprehend—a great mistake, indeed!—but we miss an opportunity to curb a desire which may render all subsequent teaching ineffective.

Stanley G. Hall says, "The Bible is man's great text-book in psychology." Whether that is true or not, is beside our present purpose. One thing, however, is certain, and that is that, if the Bible is to be a great text-book, it must be taught psychologically. Unless we coordinate the Biblical lessons with the mental perception of the child, they can be of little or no value in the development of the child's moral and spiritual nature. That in spite of centuries of experience in Bible teaching we have just barely begun to realize this fact is due, in a measure, to our hitherto inadequate conception of what the Bible is—but chiefly, to our utter neglect of the child.

The Bible in the Sunday-school has a distinctive function to perform, and that is, to supply information, not as an end, but for the inspiration it will give. It is to serve as a guide for moral conduct. As such, the Bible must be regarded as the story of the ascent of man. It is the record of Israel's education—the best ever vouchsafed to man—an education under divine direction. It is in very sooth a book of Revelation, revealing as it does the spiritual growth of a people in whom the ideas of conduct and the regulation of conduct attained their highest expression. That the Bible thus conceived should and would make a splendid guide for the child, if, as is claimed by the Recapitulation theory, the child lived over again the stages in the evolution of the species to which he belongs, is perfectly evident. If the child of to-day were but a miniature edition of the race, each paragraph and chapter of the latter having its counterpart in the life story of the former, then the Bible, being the autobiography of a people taught of God, could be most profitably imparted to the child, without any change or omission whatsoever. But just as physically the individual does not, consciously at least, pass through all the stages in the evolution

of the species to which he belongs, even so does he not recapitulate all the stages in the psychical development of the people whose history is to be his "training book" in morals and religion.

The child of to-day does not culturally begin where the people of Israel began; nor do all the experiences in his life coincide with those of a people who lived in an entirely different age and environment. For that reason much that the Bible contains, presupposing a mental status primitive even when compared to that of the untutored child of to-day, will be of no ethical value to the child whatsoever, while a great deal that might find sympathetic response will have to be rearranged to accord with his natural development. Unless, therefore, we first study the child in the successive stage of his development and then adapt our Bible teaching to his progressive needs, our method of instruction is not natural, even though we do eliminate from our teaching whatever is supernatural. Just as in art the "perfect fit" marks the highest achievement, even so in Bible teaching everything must be subordinated to the one consideration—Does the lesson fit into the life of the child? To quote Robertson Smith: "God never spoke a word to any soul that was not exactly fitted to the occasion and the man." And all great teachers have followed the example set for them in this respect by the Divine Educator. It was undoubtedly the one Jesus followed. It is very unlikely that his telling parables were spoken without any relation to some actual need. The parable of Dives and Lazarus was no doubt called forth by the arrogance of some rich men whom Jesus knew personally, and whose pride he wished to humble. Similarly the parable of the Talents was in all probability evoked by the sight of the army of idlers and loungers in the City of Jerusalem, whom he would stimulate to a more useful and serviceable life. Nor will any one imagine that the Proverbs were originally spoken in the order, or rather disorder, in which they are found in the Bible. It was ever out of the fullness of the heart that the mouth spoke. The vitality of the word depends on its being spoken at the psychological moment. Let our teachers first learn the psychological moment in the life of the child, and then speak the Word.

It might perhaps be well to illustrate, by means of examples, the simplicity and effectiveness of this method in our Bible-teaching. Take, for instance, the feeling of appetite. Even the physically normal child will often show an excessive craving for certain articles of food, notably sweets. That an undue indulgence in this respect may prove injurious to the child's physical well-being, is beyond question. Nor, if allowed to run riot, is it less certain to become

harmful to the child's morals. Hence, its restriction is imperative. What Bible verse will be more in season at this time than Prov. xxv. 27—so much like mother's own admonition—"It is not good to eat much honey." But the teacher need not stop at this point. He can enlarge upon the danger of gluttony in general, and caution the child in the words of Prov. xxiii. 20,

"Be not among wine-bibbers,  
Among gluttonous eaters of flesh."

To impress the child with the grave danger that lurks in this apparently innocent desire, he can point to the two sons of Eli, whose lack of self-restraint disqualified them for the high office of leadership, *vide* 1 Samuel ii. 12-18. But it was Samuel, a man of the very opposite type—one who could say "No" to himself—who was to fill that high place and to stamp his personality upon Israel's history.

Now what have you accomplished? In a ten-minute talk you have taught the child two Bible verses, acquainted it with an important event in Israel's history and enshrined a true hero in his heart—one who, by virtue of his dedicated life is eminently fitted to be the child's first hero. But, above all, you have supplied him with a strong moral restraint upon his animal desires. And all this, because you have allowed the little child to lead you.

As another example of the practical applicability of the psychological method of Bible-teaching, let us consider one of the intellectual feelings in their primary range, *viz.*, desire for wealth. There is a very short interval between the child's strong desire for "good things to eat" and his desire for "nice things to wear." The child realizes very soon the advantage of wealth, and betrays a longing for it which, if permitted to go unrestrained, may in after years cause him much pain and lead even to crime. This, then, is the psychological moment when "Thou shalt not covet" will perform its soul-saving function. This verse may be supplemented with Luke xii. 15, "Take heed and keep yourselves from all covetousness, for a man's life consisteth not in abundance of the things which he possesseth."

Now is the time when, the child being plastic and impressionable, his desire for material wealth can be transformed into a desire for spiritual wealth. To compass this end, the teacher should hold up for the child's contemplation some of the noblest, though materially the poorest, figures in the Bible, such as Moses preferring to share the lot of fugitive slaves to the gorgeous splendor of the Egyptian court; Jesus, so poor that he had no place where to lay his head; Amos,

merely an acorn-gatherer; and the rest of the world's poor, whose names are nevertheless inscribed in golden letters on the scroll of immortality. You have now fired the imagination of the child. He has begun to dream of some day having his name linked with the world's good and great. He casts no more longing glances at the beautiful clothes of his wealthy class-mate, for he now feels a strong desire for things more precious than silver and rather to be sought than gold—greatness and goodness. Nor does the lesson end at this point. Covetousness being the cause of theft and frequently murder, this is the time when two other Biblical imperatives, "Thou shalt not steal" and "Thou shalt not kill," can be most profitably brought home to the child. What the disastrous consequences of covetousness may be can be shown by picturing the downfall of Achan, who coveted and secretly kept a portion of the spoils of Jericho; and the doom of King Ahab, who coveted and by foul means secured the vineyard of Naboth.

Here again we have a number of Bible verses and an array of historical facts which the child will learn with ease and always remember, because there is an association between the things to be remembered and some particular sensation or some idea in the child. And as for their beneficent influence upon the future conduct of the child, who can overestimate their value? Who can doubt that, at the critical moment in the life of the coming man, when he will stand face to face with some great temptation, he will hear the solemn warning, "Thou shalt not covet," "Thou shalt not steal" and "Thou shalt not kill," and recall the fate of Achan, Ahab and all those who did not keep themselves from covetousness, and then manfully resist? Similarly, there is no impulse in the child that cannot be directed, no desire that cannot be chastened, no emotion that cannot be purified, by means of some Biblical verse or story, provided they be psychologically related.

It is unquestionable that if the Bible lessons were so arranged as to accord with the progressive unfolding of the physical, intellectual and religious feelings of the child, they would be indelibly engraved upon his mind and heart. Nor is there any doubt as to the attitude of advanced thinkers toward this method of Bible teaching. The Religious Education Association, comprising the leading educators and Bible teachers in the country, makes it one of its tasks to bring about in the Sunday-school an "adaptation of the material and method of instruction to the several stages of the mental, moral and spiritual growth of the individual." But how far even the most ardent advocates of this method are from consistently applying it,

is shown by the following statement of Prof. Stanley G. Hall. He says, "For young children the main stress should be laid on the Old Testament, and the most vigorous teaching of the New should be during the teens." And while it is true that in the very next sentence he cautions the teacher against a too rigid insistence on this order of instruction, his declaration in favor of teaching the Old Testament at one age and the New at another must be a source of regret to those who have regarded his views as of the highest authority. There are things in the Old Testament that completely transcend the understanding of the young child, while the New Testament abounds in lessons that will strongly appeal to the child in its more tender age. There is no reason why we should allow years to intervene between the teaching of the Old and the New, when each contains lessons that imply the same age and need. One fails to understand why Psalm xxiii (the Shepherd Psalm) should be taught the *young* child, while the Parable of the Sheepfold, John x. 1 ff., be reserved for the *teens*, in spite of its containing all the characteristics of a good story for children under ten years of age. Equally difficult is it to discover the reasonableness of teaching a young child the story of the faithless wife in Hosea, and keeping the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke xv. 11 ff.) for a more advanced age. Nor will a young child understand the command "Thou shalt not commit adultery" in Exodus any better than the same command in Matthew, simply because the former is from the Old Testament, while the latter is found in the New. The New Testament being essentially a Midrash, a homily on the Old, such a separation as is advocated by Professor Hall is psychologically inadmissible. There is only one order in which the Bible should be taught in the Sunday-school, be the teaching limited to the Old Testament or extended to the New, and that is the order of the child's physical, mental and moral development.

The strongest opposition to this method will naturally come from Bible students. They will urge that, while the child thus taught may learn many Biblical lessons, it will never know the Bible as a whole. And it must be admitted that if a systematic and scholarly knowledge of the Bible were the object of Bible teaching in the Sunday school, then this criticism were unanswerable. But since primarily the aim of the Sunday-school is to build up character by means of the Bible, it is sufficient if the instruction be not fragmentary from the standpoint of its constructive value. Regret though we may to take these gems of truth out of their original setting, we are more than compensated by the thought of having found for them

an appropriate setting in the life of the child, and thereby given them a truly organic unity.

Whatever else, therefore, may be desired in the Bible-teaching in our Sunday-school, the one thing of supreme importance is that it be done psychologically with reference to the child. Then only will the Bible's true ethical worth be realized, and we shall feel assured, concerning the child, that "The Lord will give you bread (bread of life) in adversity, and water (water of salvation) in affliction, and thy teacher (the Word) shall not be hidden any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teacher, and thine ears hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way; walk ye in it." (Is. xxx. 20-21.)