

THE TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE IN THE PARENTS' UNION SCHOOL.¹

By R. A. PENNETHORNE.

THE teaching of scripture is often spoken of as if it were the teaching of religion—it is only one of the handmaids of religion which cannot be taught, as it is a matter of faith, practice and experience. Scripture in the words of Mr. Wells gives man a cosmogony—places him in relation to God to the world and himself. We have been so obsessed with the difficulty of acknowledging that the Bible presents a progressive revelation of God that we have far too much obscured the Bible as a gallery of characters and a book which describes the whole gamut of human experience. Private interpretation is a fruitful source of private difficulty—it is better that our scripture *reading* should be combined with scripture *teaching*—not the dogmatic dictation of opinion but the explanation of times, and seasons, the world history and the interpretation that the body of faithful people whom we call the church has put upon the symbolic and philosophic portions whether in the Jewish or in the Christian dispensations. A progressive revelation is best for children because they are progressing themselves. They do not feel our difficulties because they themselves are in the same stage of development as the writers—we can and do point them forward and give them the simplicity of the Gospels at the same time as they read of the simple early patriarchal life. A child beginning at its own beginning does not feel our difficulties over the Genesis of all things and if we teach children from the very first that the true creative force is thought, and that God's thought fashioned all matter from force to form gradually, as the child himself first

[p 815]

thinks of a cup and saucer and then gradually models it out of the clay—evolution and the difference between perfection and the present level of attainment become clearer and the discrepancy leaves faith and hope untouched, rather increased as the child realises that by effort he too takes part in the 'far off divine event'—moulds the future and helps or hinders the work of the great Master-builder. We create difficulties in our methods of approach to scripture by expecting an attitude of 'reverence' not as the outcome of the effect of the thing read but as an artificial barrier between the reader and the subject matter. In the seven great *gifts* of the spirit 'Holy fear' is put last as the outcome of all the others—not first, as the entrance to their portals. Shocked 'grown ups,' to whom things holy have become hallowed by experience and associations, too often insist upon that attitude from the first. A child loves what it feels we truly love, but it does not see why it should not question the ways and works of Cain and Abel when it is encouraged to question the doings of Romulus and Remus. We have too often segregated the work of God in the world and not shewn that all learning and information came through the operation of the Holy Spirit and that reverence belongs to the great works of God in nature, shewn in science, and the miracles of grace, shewn in any story of the lives of men whether real or fictitious, and that we only live by 'admiration, hope and love.'

How much of the Bible is 'suitable' for children is of course a very vexed question, but with the guiding principles of the P.N.E.U. to aid us we can find an answer, [sic] Children are 'persons' and have the full heritage and powers of humanity, and they can and do frequently understand the spirit when the latter might appear to be beyond them, then, knowledge of life even in its sadder and more painful aspects never hurt anyone when that knowledge did not

confuse the issues of right and wrong, or imply that man's lower nature was stronger than the grace of God. It is surely better to face facts where they are never condoned or invested with a false glamour than to learn them through hints, sniggers and excuses. For example, a child hearing the tremendous story of David's sin learns something of the dangers of his merely human nature and the only means of rising above it: the same child turning over an illustrated paper full of the lives and divorces of cinema stars and such folk receives no such guidance; and yet we are more inclined to keep the Bible from our children than to guard them from these chance encounters; surely armed and fortified by the first the almost unpreventable contact with the modern world's point of view will do less harm? The scheme followed in the eight to twelve years

[p 816]

which a child may hope to spend in the Parents' Union School is therefore a considered and comprehensive whole, which aims at following the progressive revelation of God in the story of his people and in the gospels, in the order of the child's own advance.

First then in the first classes 'Genesis' the thought unfolding which shall ultimately be performance, as given in Dr. Paterson Smyth's Church of Ireland Sunday School lessons. The suggestions for teaching wisely prevent the creation of future difficulties by showing that 'day' is a relative term, that 'the whole earth' is limited by the human experience of the recorder and that we have two immensely old versions of the primitive story edited by those who explained and taught it in the threefold manner of the rabbis—first the story, then the allegory, then the esoteric depths of meaning only grasped by those deeply initiate in the knowledge of God. We may be content to give our children only the first, or the first and second, but they will often marvellously and surely divine the third for themselves.

The children go on to study the lives and characters of the Great Patriarchs, for now is the time when family life fills the horizon and when character is developing from personality and the child appreciates the struggles and failures of a Jacob or a Joseph. Then when the children are generally living the regular school life comes the age of rule and law (attended by failures in character, and of revolt) then the story of Moses and of the law as the regulation of community and private life, and the story of Israel's self-imposed wanderings appeal to the children. When later the age of romance claims them, then we have the stories of the Imperfect Heroes—Gideon, Samson and Saul, and see the tragedy of lawlessness when "everyone did that which was right in their own eyes." Again Dr. Paterson Smyth's commentaries are used and a way indicated by which to prevent difficulties arising out of those two apparent stumbling blocks—the sun "standing still" for Joshua or the "slaughter of the Amalakites." There are thoughtful people who would avoid bringing these instances to the children's notice, but one wonders why—the whole point of the first story lies not in the very varied explanations of the means, but in the fact that particular circumstances minister to the needs of God's people in particular crises; and in the second to the fact that 'humanity' is a gradual growth arising from our Christian conception of the divine in human life and that other peoples in other days had no conception of the sacredness of the individual—and there are survivals all too many of that point of view even to the present day. Such ideas are by no means 'beyond' our children, as their thoughtful appreciative answers in the term's

[p 817]

examinations always show. The next stage comes when the children have 'long, long thoughts,'

and can look forward with intelligent anticipation, and backwards to the days 'when thou wert little in thine own sight.' Then we take the story of the Kings with the contemporary comments of the prophets and use, besides the words of the Bible, Miss Rose Self's book, 'The Work of the Prophets' and 'Prophets and Kings' of P.S., and 'the Old Testament History' of Hardwick and Costley White. All these help the children to get a true view of the story and to see the finger of God in the events of their own day and to realise that we too have prophets who 'forth-tell' if they do not all fore-tell. In the final stage of reflection, when boys and girls are perhaps more thoughtful than they will ever be as men and women in the ful [sic] tide of affairs, they read the great prophets and the great poetry of the bygone ages—helped by such books as "The Psalms in Human Life" and Dummelow's wise and sane 'One Volume Bible Commentary.' Thus by the time they are ready to leave school they have studied practically all the great books of the Old Testament.

The children have scripture lessons in the Parents' Union School *first* every morning as a recognition of the subject's paramount importance—alternate Old and New Testament Studies being followed. The New Testament scheme would practically cover the ground twice in the same number of years. We begin with the narrative gospels—St. Matthew and St. Mark—then comes the humanistic St. Luke with his first book of Church history—the Acts of the Apostles. Just as we read the Prophets and the Kings together, so do we read the Acts with the contemporary epistles of St. Paul, which the older children study not so much for their theology as for the stages they mark in the development of the church and the religious life of the people. As a general commentary we use the 'Saviour of the World,' by Miss Mason herself, that storehouse of ideas and thoughts in the safe impersonal medium of verse, which cannot arouse the antagonistic feeling that oral teaching sometimes does, apt as talk is to degenerate into 'pi-jaw' or too personal an application to the sins of very sensitive youth. Finally the great dream of the Revelation and the great exposition of the Inner Teaching of the Fourth Gospel may be studied together, for often at the very same time the children would be reading those great and far too little known chapters of Ezekiel which find in the later writing, not perhaps their final fulfilment, but their triumphant progression.

The actual methods of our teaching are simple—the children have *the actual words of the Bible* read to them when they are

[p 818]

small and read by themselves when older—all explanations or extraneous matter being given first or last, but never so as to break the narrative. Not every verse perhaps is taken in a chapter, but all those relevant to the story. Then the child narrates this matter back to the teacher showing how he has made the matter his very own by the 'act of knowing' and often acquiring the very diction of the writer. A great many books are given as optional Sunday reading which throw sidelights on the Bible, and help in its study. Mrs. Brightwen's 'Sidelights' with their valuable help to understanding the households and surroundings, of the great actors in these scenes, The Historical Geography of the Holy Land, which increases our familiarity with the sacred scenes, and Dean Stanley's 'Sinai and Palestine,' which the elder children find very enlightening. There are besides graduated books on the Prayer Book, on Church History and Teaching, shewing the progressive revelation of Christ to the world from the Age of the monks to the Age of the Philanthropists. And for the little children those delightful books "When I was a boy," in Serbia or Japan, as the case may be, shewing how the Christian church shapes our life

or how we can help to improve the lot of others in other lands. Lives of great and good men are also included that we may not cease to study character, but may realise that Livingstone and Elisha both served their God amidst difficulties and discouragement. Children so trained grow naturally in the knowledge and fear of God—recognising his inspiring power in all their work, as in that wonderful picture of the Great Recognition described in Ruskin's 'Mornings in Florence' where all arts and sciences are traced to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; thus the children learn that by patience in the study of the scriptures we may always have hope and comfort.

One last aid to Scripture Teaching will also prove a great delight—the Books of the Centuries in which the children record and illustrate on the "space for Time" principle the entire history of the world with the Christian era on the central page. With the date of Abraham and his contemporary, King Hammurabi, fixed for us by the scholarship of Professor Driver we can add wonderfully to our understanding of the Old Testament History by recording and illustrating in their proper places the rise, zenith and decline of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Rome, and all the great peoples who have played their part in the preparation of the world for the greater civilisations yet to come. The Teachers' Illustrated Bible, Professor Sayce's books 'Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments,' or the wonderful volumes of Maspero will all furnish material for illustrations which the

[p 819]

older children can copy or the little ones can trace. Some of these books already completed show wonderful pictures of the arrival of the Semnites in Egypt—of the building of the Treasure Cities, of Sennaherib's record of Hezekiah's siege—of a scripture 'roll' and of other aids to understanding. The later pages deal of course with what we mistakenly call 'secular' history, but the whole gives just that cosmogony with which we began as the ideal which scripture study realises. So our children "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the scriptures, and learn that respect for books and the great ideas they embody which will help them to prosper in 'good life' through that greatest of all libraries—The Bible.

¹ Sunday School teachers can receive the programme of work and examination questions by paying for postage and signing enclosed form, and sending to 26, Victoria Street, S.W.1.