

DEFENCE
OF THE
USE OF THE BIBLE
IN SCHOOLS.

A LETTER FROM DR. BENJAMIN RUSH.



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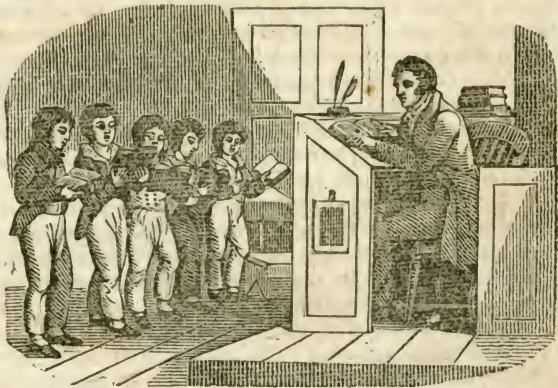


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A LETTER FROM DR. BENJAMIN RUSH.



DEAR SIR—It is now several months since I promised to give you my reasons for preferring the Bible, as a school-book, to all other compositions. Before I state my arguments, I shall assume the five following propositions :

1. That Christianity is the only true and perfect religion ; and that, in proportion as mankind adopt its principles, and obey its precepts, they will be wise and happy.
2. That a better knowledge of this religion is to be acquired by reading the Bible, than in any other way.
3. That the Bible contains more knowledge necessary to man in his present state, than any other book in the world.
4. That knowledge is most durable, and religious instruction most useful, when imparted in early life.

5. That the Bible, when not read in schools, is seldom read in any subsequent period of life.

My arguments in favor of the use of the Bible as a school-book are founded,

1. *In the constitution of the human mind.*

1. The *memory* is the first faculty which opens in the minds of children. Of how much consequence, then, must it be, to impress it with the great truths of Christianity, before it is pre-occupied with less interesting subjects!

2. There is a peculiar aptitude in the minds of children for *religious knowledge*. I have constantly found them, in the first six or seven years of their lives, more inquisitive upon religious subjects than upon any others. And an ingenious instructor of youth has informed me, that he has found young children more capable of receiving just ideas upon the most difficult tenets of religion, than upon the most simple branches of human knowledge. It would be strange if it were otherwise; for God creates all his means to suit all his ends. There must, of course, be a fitness between the human mind and the truths which are essential to its happiness.

3. The influence of *early impressions* is very great upon subsequent life; and in a world where *false* prejudices do so much mischief, it would discover great weakness not to oppose them by such as are *true*. I grant that many men have rejected the impressions derived from the Bible; but, how much soever these impressions may have been despised, I believe no man was ever early instructed in the truths of the Bible, without having been made *wiser* or *better* by the early operation of these impressions upon his mind. Every just principle that is to be found in the writings of Voltaire, is borrowed from the Bible; and the morality of the Deists, which has been so much admired and praised where it has existed, has been, I believe, in most cases, the effect of habits produced by early instruction in the principles of Christianity.

4. We are subject, by a general law in our natures, to what is called *habit*. Now if the study of the Scriptures be necessary to our happiness at any time of our life, the sooner we begin to read them, the more we shall probably be attached to them; for it is peculiar to all the acts of habit, to become easy, strong, and agreeable by repetition.

5. It is a law in our natures, that we remember longest

the knowledge we acquire by the *greatest number of our senses*. Now a knowledge of the contents of the Bible is acquired in school by the aid of the *eye* and the *ear*; for children, after getting their lessons, read or repeat them to their instructors in an audible voice; of course there is a presumption that this knowledge will be retained much longer than if it had been acquired in any other way.

6. The interesting events and characters recorded and described in the Old and New Testaments, are calculated, above all others, to seize upon all the faculties of the minds of children. The understanding, the memory, the imagination, the passions, and the moral powers, are all occasionally addressed by the various incidents which are contained in those divine books, insomuch, that not to be delighted with them, is to be devoid of every principle of pleasure that exists in a sound mind.

7. There is a native love of *truth* in the human mind. Lord Shaftesbury says, that "truth is so congenial to our minds, that we love even the *shadow* of it;" and Horace, in his rules for composing an epic poem, establishes the same law in our natures, by advising that "fictions in poetry should resemble truth." Now the Bible contains more truth than any other book in the world: so true is the testimony that it bears of God in his works of creation, providence, and redemption, that it is called *truth itself*, by way of pre-eminence above other things that are acknowledged to be true. How forcibly are we struck with the evidences of truth, in the history of the Jews, above what we discover in the history of other nations! Where do we find a hero or an historian record his own faults or vices, except in the Old Testament? Indeed, my friend, from some accounts which I have read of the American Revolution, I begin to grow sceptical to all history except that which is contained in the Bible. Now if this book be known to contain nothing but what is materially true, the mind will naturally acquire a love for it from this circumstance; and from this affection for the truths of the Bible, it will acquire a discernment of truth in other books, and a preference of it in all the transactions of life.

8. There is a wonderful property in the *memory*, which enables it *in old age to recover* the knowledge acquired in early life, after it had been apparently forgotten for forty or

fifty years. Of how much consequence, then, must it be to fill the mind with that species of knowledge in childhood and youth, which, when *recalled* in the decline of life, will support the soul under the infirmities of age, and smooth the avenues of approaching death? The Bible is the only book which is capable of affording this support to old age; and it is for this reason that we find it resorted to with so much diligence and pleasure by such old people as have read it in early life. I can recollect many instances of this kind in persons who discovered no special attachment to the Bible in the meridian of their days, who have, notwithstanding, spent the evening of life in reading no other book. The late Sir John Pringle, physician to the Queen of Great Britain, after passing a long life in camps and at court, closed it by studying the Scriptures. So anxious was he to increase his knowledge in them, that he wrote to Dr. Michaelis, a learned professor of divinity in Germany, for an explanation of a difficult text of Scripture, a short time before his death.

II. My second argument in favor of the use of the Bible in schools is founded upon an *implied command of God, and upon the practice of several of the wisest nations of the world*. In the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy we find the following words, which are directly to my purpose: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. And thou *shalt teach them diligently unto thy children*, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."

It appears, moreover, from the history of the Jews, that they flourished as a nation in proportion as they honored and read the books of Moses, which contained the only revelation that God had made to the world. The law was not only neglected, but lost, during the general profligacy of manners which accompanied the long and wicked reign of Manasseh. But the discovery of it in the rubbish of the temple, by Josiah, and its subsequent general use, were followed by a return of national virtue and prosperity. We read further of the wonderful effects which the reading of the law by Ezra, after his return from his captivity in Babylon, had upon the Jews. They hung upon his lips with tears, and

showed the sincerity of their repentance by their general reformation.

The learning of the Jews, for many years, consisted in nothing but a knowledge of the Scriptures. These were the text-books of all the instruction that was given in the schools of their Prophets. It was by means of this general knowledge of their law, that those Jews who wandered from Judea into other countries, carried with them, and propagated certain ideas of the true God among all the civilized nations upon the face of the earth. And it was from the attachment they retained to the Old Testament, that they procured a translation of it into the Greek language, after they had lost the Hebrew tongue by their long absence from their native country. The utility of this translation, commonly called the Septuagint, in facilitating the progress of the Gospel, is well known to all who are acquainted with the history of the first age of the Christian church.

But the benefits of an early and general acquaintance with the Bible were not confined to the Jewish nations: they have appeared in many countries in Europe since the reformation. The industry and habits of order which distinguish many of the German nations, are derived from their early instruction in the principles of Christianity by means of the Bible. In Scotland, and in parts of New-England, where the Bible has been long used as a school-book, the inhabitants are among the most enlightened in religion and science, the most strict in morals, and the most intelligent in human affairs, of any people whose history has come to my knowledge upon the surface of the globe.

I wish to be excused for repeating here, that if the Bible did not convey a single direction for the attainment of future happiness, it should be read in our schools in preference to all other books, from its containing the greatest portion of that kind of knowledge which is calculated to produce private and public temporal happiness.

We err, not only in human affairs, but in religion likewise, *only* because we do not "know the Scriptures" and obey their instructions. Immense truths, I believe, are concealed in them. The time, I have no doubt, will come, when posterity will view and pity our ignorance of these truths, as much as we do the ignorance sometimes manifested by the disciples of our Savior, who knew nothing of the meaning of those

plain passages in the Old Testament which were daily fulfilling before their eyes.

But further, we err, not only in religion but in philosophy likewise, because we "do not know or believe the Scriptures." The sciences have been compared to a circle, of which religion composes a part. To understand any one of them perfectly, it is necessary to have some knowledge of them all. Bacon, Boyle, and Newton, included the Scriptures in the inquiries to which their universal geniuses disposed them, and their philosophy was aided by their knowledge in them. A striking agreement has been lately discovered between the history of certain events recorded in the Bible, and some of the operations and productions of nature, particularly those which are related in Whitehurst's observations on the deluge, in Smith's account of the origin of the variety of color in the human species, and in Bruce's travels. It remains yet to be shown how many other events related in the Bible, accord with some late important discoveries in the principles of medicine. The events and the principles alluded to, mutually establish the truth of each other.

I shall now proceed to ANSWER SOME OF THE OBJECTIONS which have been made to the use of the Bible as a school-book.

1. We are told that the familiar use of the Bible in our schools has a tendency to *lessen a due reverence for it*. This objection, by proving too much, proves nothing at all. If familiarity lessens respect for divine things, then all those precepts of our religion which enjoin the daily or weekly worship of the Deity, are improper. The Bible was not intended to represent a Jewish ark; and it is an anti-Christian idea, to suppose that it can be profaned by being carried into a school-house, or by being handled by children. But where will the Bible be read by young people with more reverence than in a school? Not in most private families; for I believe there are few parents who preserve so much order in their houses as is kept up in our common English schools.

2. We are told that the greatest part of the Old Testament is no way interesting to mankind under the present dispensation of the Gospel. But I deny that any of the books of the Old Testament are not interesting to mankind under the Gospel dispensation. Most of the characters, events, and ceremonies mentioned in them, are personal, providen-

tial, or instituted types of the Messiah; all of which have been, or remain yet to be fulfilled by him. It is from an ignorance or neglect of these types that we have so many Deists in Christendom; for so irrefragably do they prove the truth of Christianity, that I am sure a young man who had been regularly instructed in their meaning, could never doubt afterward of the truth of any of its principles. If any obscurity appears in these principles, it is only (to use the words of the poet) because *they are dark with excessive brightness.*

I know there is an objection among many people to teaching children doctrines of any kind, because they are liable to be controverted. But where will this objection lead us? The being of a God, and the obligations of morality, have both been controverted; and yet, who has objected to our teaching these doctrines to our children?

The curiosity and capacities of young people for the mysteries of religion, awaken much sooner than is generally supposed. Of this, we have two remarkable proofs in the Old Testament. The first is mentioned in the twelfth chapter of Exodus: "And it shall come to pass when your *children* shall say unto you, *What mean ye by this service?* that ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians and delivered our houses. And the children of Israel went away, and did as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron." A second proof of the desire of children to be instructed in the mysteries of religion, is to be found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy: "And when thy son *asketh* thee in the time to come, saying, *What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments which the Lord our God hath commanded you?* Then thou shalt say unto thy son, *We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.*" These inquiries from the mouths of children are perfectly natural; for where is the parent who has not had similar questions proposed to him by his children, upon their being first conducted to a place of worship, or upon their beholding, for the first time, either of the sacraments of our religion?

Let us not be wiser than our Maker. If moral precepts alone could have reformed mankind, the mission of the Son

of God into our world would have been unnecessary. He came to promulgate a system of *doctrines*, as well as a system of morals. The perfect morality of the Gospel rests upon a *doctrine* which, though often controverted, has never been refuted, I mean the vicarious life and death of the Son of God. This sublime and ineffable doctrine delivers us from the absurd hypothesis of modern philosophers, concerning the foundation of moral obligation, and fixes it upon the eternal and self-moving principle of LOVE. It concentrates a whole system of ethics in a single text of Scripture, "*A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another, even as I have loved you.*" By withholding the knowledge of this doctrine from children, we deprive ourselves of the best means of awakening moral sensibility in their minds. We do more; we furnish an argument for withholding from them a knowledge of the morality of the Gospel likewise; for this, in many instances, is as supernatural, and therefore as liable to be controverted, as any of the doctrines or miracles which are mentioned in the New Testament. The miraculous conception of the Savior of the world by a virgin, is not more opposed to the ordinary course of natural events, nor is the doctrine of the atonement more above human reason, than those moral precepts which command us to love our enemies, or to die for our friends.

3. It has been said, that the *division of the Bible into chapters and verses* renders it more difficult to be read by children than many other books.

By a little care in the instructor this difficulty may be obviated, and even an advantage derived from it. It may serve to transfer the attention of the scholar to the *sense* of a subject; and no person will ever read well, who is guided by any thing else in his stops, emphasis, or accents. The division of the Bible into chapters and verses, is not a greater obstacle to its being read with ease, than the bad punctuation of most other books. I deliver this stricture upon other books from the authority of Mr. Rice, the celebrated author of the art of speaking, whom I heard declare, in a large company in London, that he had never seen a book properly pointed in the English language. He exemplified, notwithstanding, by reading to the same company a passage from Milton, his perfect knowledge of the art of reading.

Some people, I know, have proposed to introduce extracts

from the Bible into our schools, instead of the Bible itself. Many excellent works of this kind are in print, but if we admit any one of them, we shall have the same inundation of them that we have had of grammars, spelling-books, and lessons for children, many of which are published for the benefit of the authors only, and all of them have tended greatly to increase the expense of education. Besides, these extracts or abridgments of the Bible often contain the tenets of particular sects or persons, and, therefore, may be improper for schools composed of the children of different sects of Christians. The Bible is a cheap book, and is to be had in every book-store. It is, moreover, esteemed and preferred by all sects; because, all acknowledge it contains their own peculiar doctrines. It should therefore be used in preference to any abridgments of it, or histories extracted from it.

I have heard it proposed that a portion of the Bible should be read every day by the master, as a means of instructing children in it; but this is a poor substitute for obliging children to read it as a school-book; for, by this means we insensibly engrave, as it were, its contents upon their minds; and it has been remarked that children instructed in this way in the Scriptures, seldom forget any part of them. They have the same advantage over those persons who have only heard the Scriptures read by a master, that a man who has worked with the tools of a mechanical employment for several years, has over the man who has only stood a few hours in a work-shop and seen the same business carried on by other people.

To the arguments I have mentioned in favor of the use of the Bible as a school-book, I shall add a few reflections.

The present fashionable practice of rejecting the Bible from our schools, I suspect, has originated with the Deists. They discover great ingenuity in this new mode of attacking Christianity. If they proceed in it, they will do more in half a century in extirpating our religion, than Bollingbroke or Voltaire could have effected in a thousand years. I am not writing to this class of people. My object is to change the opinions and conduct of those lukewarm or superstitious Christians, who have been misled by the Deists upon this subject.

The effects of the disuse of the Bible as a school-book, have appeared of late in the neglect and even contempt with which Scripture names are treated by many people. It is

because parents have not been early taught to know or respect the characters and exploits of the Old and New Testament worthies, that their names are exchanged for those of the modern kings of Europe, or of the principal characters in novels and romances. I conceive there may be some advantage in bearing Scripture names. It may lead the persons who bear them, to study that part of the Scriptures in which their names are mentioned, with uncommon attention, and perhaps it may excite a desire in them to possess the talents or virtues of their ancient name-sakes. This remark first occurred to me upon hearing a pious woman, whose name was Mary, say, that the first passages of the Bible which made a serious impression upon her mind, were those interesting chapters and verses in which the name of Mary is mentioned in the New Testament.

It is a singular fact, that while the names of the kings and emperors of Rome are now given chiefly to *horses* and *dogs*, Scripture names have hitherto been confined only to the human species. Let the enemies and contemners of those names take care, lest the names of more modern kings be given hereafter only to the same animals, and lest the names of the modern heroines of romances be given to animals of an inferior species.

It is with great pleasure, that I have observed the Bible so extensively used in the Sunday schools in England, and that the same practice is adopted in the Sunday schools lately established in the United States. This will give our religion (humanly speaking) the chance of a longer life in our country. We hear much of the persons educated in free schools in England, turning out well in the various walks of life. I have inquired into the cause of it, and have satisfied myself, that it is in no small degree to be ascribed to the general use of the Bible in those schools; for, it seems, the children of poor people are of too little consequence to be guarded from the supposed evils of reading the Scriptures in early life, or in an unconsecrated school-house.

However great the benefits of reading the Scriptures in schools have been, I cannot help remarking that these benefits might be much greater, did school-teachers take more pains to explain them to their scholars. Did they demonstrate the divine original of the Bible, from the purity, consistency, and benevolence of its doctrines and precepts; did

they inform their pupils, that the gross and abominable vices of the Jews were recorded *only* as proofs of the depravity of human nature, and of the insufficiency of the law to produce moral virtues, and thereby to establish the necessity and perfection of the Gospel system; and above all, did they often enforce the discourses of our Savior as the best rule of life and the surest guide to happiness, how great would be the influence of our schools upon the order and prosperity of our country! Such a mode of instructing children in the Christian religion would convey knowledge into their *understandings*, and would therefore be preferable to teaching them to repeat selected passages, which too often convey, not knowledge, but *words* only, into their *memories*. I think I am not too sanguine in believing, that education, conducted in this manner, would, in the course of two generations, eradicate infidelity from among us, and render civil government scarcely necessary in our country.

In contemplating the political institutions of the United States, I lament that we waste so much time and money in *punishing crimes*, and take so little pains to *prevent them*. We profess to be Republicans, and yet we neglect the only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government; that is, the universal education of our youth in the principles of Christianity by means of the Bible; for this Divine Book, above all others, favors that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues which constitute the soul of republicanism.

Perhaps an apology may be necessary, for my having presumed to write upon a subject so much above my ordinary studies. My excuse for it is, that I thought a single mite from a member of a profession which has been frequently charged with scepticism in religion, might attract the notice of persons who had often overlooked the more ample contributions, upon this subject, of gentlemen in other professions.

With great respect, I am, &c.

BENJAMIN RUSH.

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

GREAT God! with wonder and with praise
On all thy works I look ;
But still thy wisdom, power, and grace,
Shine brightest in thy book.

The stars, that in their courses roll,
Have much instruction given ;
But thy good word informs my soul
How I may soar to heaven.

The fields provide me food, and show
The goodness of the Lord ;
But fruits of life and glory grow
In thy most holy word.

Here are my choicest treasures hid ;
Here my best comfort lies ;
Here my desires are satisfied,
And here my hopes arise.

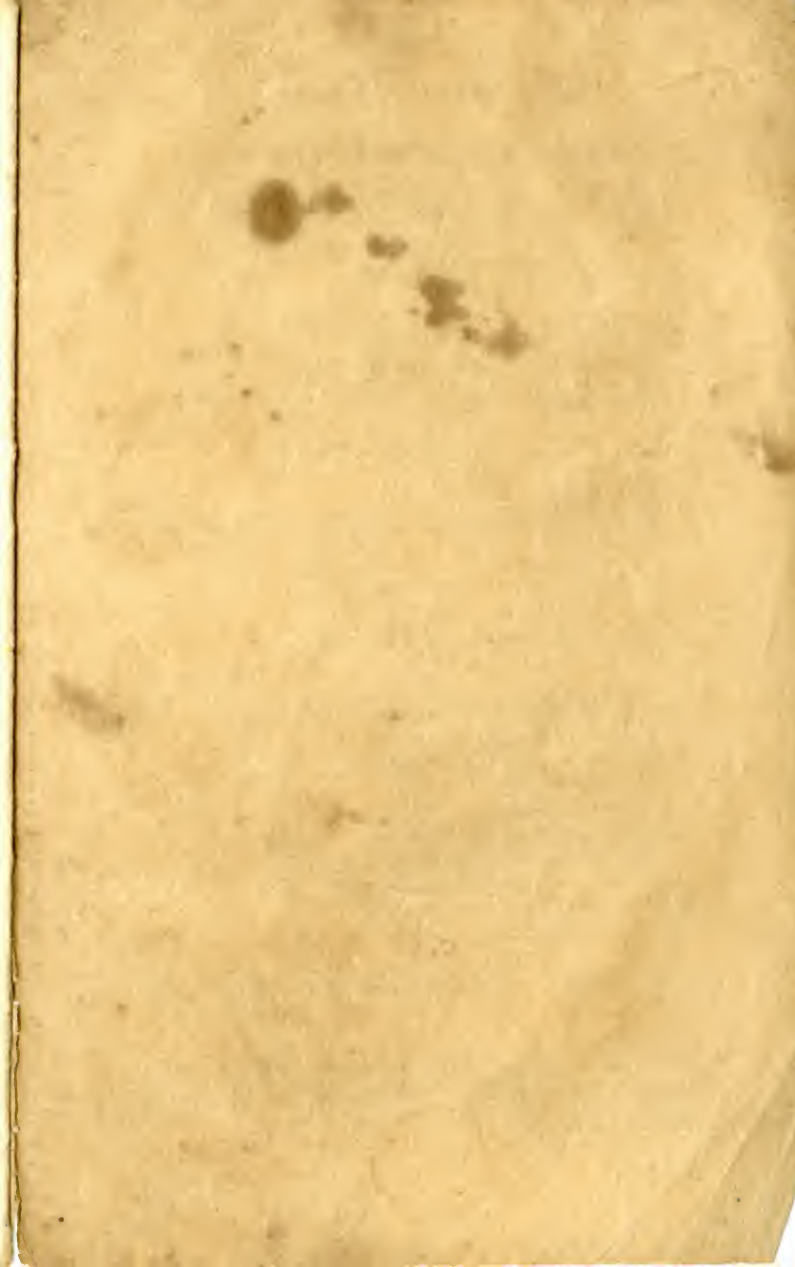
Lord, make me understand thy law,
Show what my faults have been,
And from thy Gospel let me draw
Pardon for all my sin.

Here would I learn how Christ has died,
To save my soul from hell ;
Not all the books on earth beside,
Such heavenly wonders tell.

Then let me love my Bible more,
And take a fresh delight,
By day to read these wonders o'er,
And meditate by night.

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Search the Scriptures.—John, 5 : 39.

Come, search the Scriptures," saith the Lord,
 "They testify of me :"
 'Tis truth's eternal great record,
 From ev'ry error free.

Here the eternal Godhead shines,
 With bright refulgent rays ;
 Here beam Jehovah's great designs,
 From everlasting days.

Here the great Gospel-scheme behold,
 Chief of the works of God ;
 Replete with grace, and love untold,
 And pardon bought with blood.

[Here's balm to heal the wounds of sin,
 On life's fair tree it grows ;
 Here's blood to wash your garments in,
 From Jesus' side it flows.]

O may the Spirit's influence sweet
 Shine on the glorious whole ;
 Its precepts guide my roving feet,
 Its promise feast my soul.

Wide may this revelation shine,
 And spread from sea to sea ;
 Till reason stoops to faith divine,
 And owns her sovereign sway.

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