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A DEFENCE OF THE USE OF THE BIBLE AS A SCHOOL BOOK.

ADDRESSED TO THE REV. JEREMY BELKNAP, OF BOSTON

Dear Sir,

It is now several months, since I promised to give you my reasons for preferring the [B]ible as a school book, to all other compositions. I shall not trouble you with an apology for my delaying so long to comply with my promise, but shall proceed immediately to the subject of my letter.

Before I state my arguments in favour of teaching children to read by means of the [B]ible, I shall assume the five following propositions.

I. That [C]hristianity 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.

II. That a better knowledge of this religion is to be acquired by reading the [B]ible, than in any other way.

III. That the [B]ible contains more knowledge necessary to man in his present state, than any other book in the world.

IV. That knowledge is most durable, and religious instruction most useful, when imparted in early life,

V. That the [B]ible, when not read in schools, is seldom read in any subsequent period of life.

My arguments in favor of the use of the [B]ible as a school book are founded, I. 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 [C]hristianity, before it is pre-occupied with less interesting subjects! As all the liquors, which are poured into a cup, generally taste of that which first filled it, so all the knowledge, which is added to that which is treasured up in the memory from the [B]ible, generally receives an agreeable and useful tincture [tint, shade or medicine] from it.

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 fit all his ends. There must of course be a fitness between the human mind, and the truths which are eternal to its happiness.

3. The influence of *prejudice* is derived from the impressions, which are made upon the mind in early life; prejudices are of two kinds, true and false. 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 prejudices derived from the [B]ible: but I believe no man ever did so, without having been made *wiser* or *better*, by the early operation of these prejudices 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, is, I believe, in most cases, the effect of habits, produced by early instruction in the principles of [C]hristianity.

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 lives, the sooner we begin to read them, the more we shall 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 [B]ible, is acquired in school by the aid of the *eyes* and *ears*; for children after getting their lessons, always say them to their masters 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 accomodated 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 found 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 epick poem, establishes the same law in our natures, by advising the "fictions in poetry to resemble truth." Now the [B]ible contains more truths 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 preeminence above things that are only simply 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 to that which is contained in the [B]ible. 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 of the [B]ible, it will acquire a discernment of truth in other books, and a preference of it in all the transactions of life.

VIII. There is a wonderful property in the *memory*, which enables it in old age, to *recover* the knowledge it had 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 foul under the infirmities of age, and smooth the avenues of approaching death? The [B]ible 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 attachment to the [B]ible, in the meridian of their lives, who have notwithstanding, spent the evening of them, 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 professer of divinity in Germany, for an explanation of a difficult text of scripture, a short time before his death.

IX. My second argument in favor of the use of the [B]ible 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 6th 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." *[Deuteronomy 6:5-7]*

It appears, moreover, from the history of the Jews, that the flourished as a nation, in proportion as they honoured and read the books of Moses, which contained, a written revelation of the will of God, to the

children of men. The law was not only neglected, but lost during the general profligacy [loss of, dissipation] of manners which accompanied the long and wicked reign of Manassah. 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 captivi[t]y in Babylon, had upon the Jews. They hung upon his lips with tears, and showed the sincerity of their repentance [turning back to God's ways], 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 that wandered from Judea into our 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 [O]ld Testament, that they procured a translation of it into the Greek language, after they lost the Hebrew tongue [language], by their long absence from their native country. The utility of this translation, commonly called the [S]eptuagint, in facilitating the progress of the gospel, is well known to all who are acquainted with the history of the first age of the [C]hristian church.

[Note: this account of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) conflicts with Irenaeus' account (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 5 Chapter 8), Anatolius' passing reference (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 7 Chapter 32), and Josephus' account (Antiquities, Book 12 Chapter 2). Each of these ancient sources place the translation of the Hebrew scriptures (at minimum the books of the law) into Greek in Egypt, by Jewish translators, and at the request - and for the use - of the Egyptian King. This statement from Dr. Rush appears to be in contrast to ancient accounts unless Dr. Rush is using information unknown to me - which is difficult to tell since he does not offer a source. In addition, although Greek Hellenization occurred after the return from the Babylonian exile, it is not likely that the Jewish people as a whole lost their mother tongue language during the exile. This is due to the fact, among others, that Jewish paraphrases of the Old Testament - the Targums - were produced in Babylon in a form of Hebrew, it appears that the practice of the Persians and Medes was not to restrict the mother tongue language (Esther 3:12), there is not an intimation that their own documents among themselves on return from the exile were written in a language other than Hebrew, and Hebrew and Aramaic (a form of Hebrew) were in use during and after (Acts 21:40) the time of Jesus' life on earth (hundreds of years after the return from the exile).]

But the benefits of an early and general acquaintance with the [B]ible, were not confined only 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 [C]hristianity, by means of the [B]ible. The moral and enlightened character of the inhabitants of Scotland, and of the New England States, appears to be derived from the same cause. If we descend from nations to sects, we shall find them wise and prosperous in proportion as they become early acquainted with the scriptures. The [B]ible is still used as a school book among the [Q]uakers. The morality of this sect of [C]hristians is universally acknowledged. Nor is this all, - their prudence in the management of their private affairs, is as much a mark of their society, as their sober manners.

I wish to be excused for repeating here, that if the [B]ible 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 publick temporal happiness.

We err not only in human affairs, but in religion likewise, *only* because “we do not know the scriptures.” *[Matthew 22:29 also Mark 12:24]* The opposite systems of the numerous sects of [C]hristians arise chiefly from their being more instructed in catechisms, creeds, and confessions of faith, than in the scriptures. 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 of the disciples of our Saviour, who [that is the disciples] knew nothing of the meaning of those plain passages in the [O]ld [T]estament which were daily fulfilling before their eyes. Whenever that time shall arrive, those truths which have escaped our notice, or if discovered, have been thought to be opposed to each other, or to be inconsistent with themselves, will then like the stones of Solomon's temple, be found so exactly to accord with each other, that they shall be cemented without noise or force, into one simple and sublime system of religion.

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 [B]ible 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 colour in the human species, and in Bruce's travels. It remains yet to be shown how many other events, related in the [B]ible, accord with some late important discoveries in the principles of medecine. The events, and the principles alluded to, mutually establish the truth of each other. From the discoveries of the [C]hristian philosophers, whose names have been last mentioned, I have been led to question whether most harm has been done to revelation, by those divines who have unduly multiplied the objects of faith, or by those deists who have unduly multiplied the objects of reason, in explaining the scriptures.

I shall now proceed to answer some of the objections which have been made to the use of the [B]ible as a school book.

I. We are told, that the familiar use of the [B]ible 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 [B]ible was not intended to represent a Jewish ark; and it is an antichristian idea, to suppose that it can be profaned, by being carried into a schoolhouse, or by being handled by children. But where will the [B]ible 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.

II. We are told, that there are many passages in the [O]ld [T]estament, that are improper to be read by children, and that the greatest part of it [that is the Old Testament] is no way interesting to mankind under the present dispensation of the gospel. There are I grant, several chapters, and many verses in the [O]ld [T]estament, which in their present unfortunate translation, should be passed over by children. But I deny that any of the books of the [O]ld [T]estament are not interesting to mankind, under the gospel dispensation. Most of the characters, events, and ceremonies, mentioned in them, are personal, providential, 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 [C]hristendom; for so irrefragably do they prove the truth of [C]hristianity, that I am sure a young man who had been regularly instructed in their meaning, could never doubt afterwards 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 bright*.

I know there is an objection among many People to teach 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 [O]ld [T]estament. The first is mentioned in the twelfth chapter of Exodus. “And it shall come when your *children* shall say unto you, '*What mean you by this service*?' that ye shall say, 'It is the sacrafice 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.” *[Exodus 12:26-28]* 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 Pharoah's bondmen in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.' “ *[Deuteronomy 6:20-21]* These enquiries 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 being [*second repetition of 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 not [*second repetition of 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 [inexpressible] doctrine delivers us from the absurd hypotheses 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.*” *[John 13:34]* By witholding 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 witholding 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 [N]ew [T]estament. The miraculous conception of the saviour 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.

III. It has been said, that the division of the [B]ible into chapters and verses, renders it more difficult to be read, by children than many other books.

By a little care in a master, 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 [B]ible 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 [B]ible, into our schools, instead of the [B]ible 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 expence of education. Besides, these extracts or abridgements of the [B]ible, often contain the tenets of particular sects or persons, and therefore, may be improper for schools composed of the children of different sects of [C]hristians. The [B]ible is a cheap book, and is to be had in every bookstore. It is, moreover, esteemed and prefered by all sects; because each finds its peculiar [characteristic] doctrines in it. It should therefore be used in preference to any abridgements of it, or histories extracted from it.

I have heard it proposed that a portion of the [B]ible 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 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.

In this defence of the use of the [B]ible as a school book, I beg you would not think that I suppose the Bible to contain the only revelation which God has made to man. I believe in an internal revelation, or a moral principle, which God has implanted in the heart of every man, as the precursor of his final dominion over the whole human race. How much this internal revelation accords with the external, remains yet to be explored by philosophers. I am disposed to believe,

that most of the doctrines of [C]hristianity revealed in the [B]ible might be discovered by a close examination of all the principles of action in man: But who is equal to such an enquiry? It certainly does not suit the natural indolence, or laborious employments of a great majority of mankind. The internal revelation of the gospel may be compared to the straight line which is made through a wilderness by the assistance of a compass, to a distant country, which few are able to discover, while the [B]ible resembles a public road to the same country, which is wide, plain, and easily found. “And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the way of holiness. The way faring men, though fools, shall not err therein.” *[Isaiah 35:8]*

Neither let me in this place exclude the Revelation which God has made of himself to man in the works of creation. I am far from wishing to lessen the influence of this species of Revelation upon mankind. But the knowledge of God obtained from this source, is obscure and feeble in its operation, compared with that which is derived from the [B]ible. The visible creation speaks of the Deity in hyeroglyphics, while the [B]ible describes all his attributes and perfections in such plain, and familiar language that “he who r... *[damaged]* may read.”

How kindly has our maker dealt with his creatures, in providing three different cords to draw them to himself! But how weakly do some men act, who suspend their faith, and hopes upon only one of them! By laying hold of them all, they would approach more speedily and certainly to the centre of all happiness.

To the arguments I have mentioned in favour of the use of the [B]ible as a school book, I shall add a few reflections.

The present fashionable practice of rejecting the [B]ible from our schools, I suspect has originated with the deists. They discover great ingenuity in this new mode of attacking [C]hristianity. If they proceed in it, they will do more in half a century, in extirpating our religion, than Bolingbroke or Voltaire could have effected in a thousand years. I am not writing to this class of people. I despair of changing the opinions of any of them. I wish only to alter the opinions and conduct of those lukewarm, or superstitious [C]hristians, who have been misled by the deists upon this subject. On the ground of the good old custom, of using the [B]ible as a school book, it becomes us to entrench our religion. It is the last bulwark the deists have left it; for they have rendered instruction in the principles of [C]hristianity by the pulpit and the press, so unfashionable, that little good form many years seems to have been done by either of them.

The effects of the disuse of the [B]ible, 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 [O]ld and [N]ew [T]estament worthies, that their names are exchanged for those of the modern kings of Europe, or the principal characters in novels and romances. I conceive there may be some advantage in the 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 namesakes. This remark first occurred to me, upon hearing a pious woman whose name was

Mary, say, that the first passage of the [B]ible, which made a serious impression on 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 *[condemners?]* 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 [B]ible to be the only book read in the Sunday schools in England. We have adopted the same practice in the Sunday schools, lately established in this city. 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 enquired into the cause of it, and have satisfied myself, that it is wholly to be ascribed to the general use of the [B]ible 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 grater, did schoolmasters take more pains to explain them to their scholars. Did they demonstrate the divine original of the [B]ible from the purity, consistency, and benevolence of its doctrines and precepts - did they explain the meaning of the [L]evitical institutions, and show their application to the numerous and sucessive gospel dispensations - 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 virtue and thereby to establish the necessity and perfection of the gospel system - and above all, did they often enforce the discourses of our Saviour, 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 [C]hristian religion, would convey knowledge into their *understandings*, and would therefore be preferable to teaching them creeds, and catechisms, 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 [C]hristianity, by means of the [B]ible; for this divine book, above all others, favours that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues, which constitute the soul of republicanism.

I have now only to apologize for havging *[having?]* addresled *[addressed?]* this letter to you, after having been assured by you, that your opinion, respecting the use of the [B]ible as a school book, coincided with mine. My excuse for what I have done is, that I knew you were qualified by your knowledge, and disposed by your zeal in the cause of truth, to correct all the errors you would discover in my letter. Perhaps a further 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 of other professions. With great respect, I am, dear sir, your sincere friend.

BENJAMIN RUSH.

Philadelphia, March 10, 1791.

[From: Rush, Benjamin, Essays Literary, Moral, Philosophical: *A Defence Of The Use Of The Bible As A School Book* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Thomas and William Bradford, 1806), 93-113.

Note: This text contains all the same older English spellings that were present in the original letter from Dr. Rush. Titles have been capitalized (where they were not already capitalized), but are shown by square brackets. Italics that are in the text, and not in square brackets, are Dr. Rush's. Any additions that were not in the original text are enclosed in square brackets.]

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