HOW TO INTEREST YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE BIBLE

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The young person is an unceasing problem to those of us who are no longer young. Our interest in young people is almost pathetic. If only we could get them to use the experience that has cost us so much, and so begin somewhere near where we have left off! Especially is this true in religion, and therefore we feel the great value of developing the interest of young people in the things which their elders have come to feel are of vital importance to life.

Miss Beard makes suggestions which are sure to be found helpful.

The Bible is so mystical a book to many young people and seemingly so vague in its background, so peculiar in its authorship, so ancient in its development, that, with an interest in everything modern and undeniable, they often turn from this old book, thinking it naturally fitted to their grandparents.

This condition of thought is a result of a transitional and critical period, in which men's belief in the Bible has largely changed. But today light is dawning out of the darkness of ignorance. Through the Bible-study courses offered in college and through other mediums there are many instances of awakened and renewed interest in the Bible, and large numbers of young people are discovering it as a volume of whose interest they have never dreamed.

This interest needs to be intensified and extensified. It will be accomplished by—if told of in one word—the *humanizing* of the Bible. By this expression we do not mean to lower it to a common level, to take away its divine import, or to attempt to remove it from its high place as the Book of all books. Instead,

with this new vision of the Bible there will come a keener appreciation and consequently a truer reverence than have, of late years, often been held for it by young people.

A young woman who was a student in a training class for teachers was asked at one time to study the different kinds of stories in the Bible, and as she found myths, legends, parables, allegories, together with historical stories, she exclaimed, "Why! I never knew the Bible before as a book of stories; it has been always a book of precepts to me." Such a literary study proved a revelation, and interest was increased because the study was made in the light of human need through the question, What is the value of these stories to young people of eight, twelve, and sixteen years of age? Only the other day a teacher addressing a company of people asked, "What is the worth of Abraham in your life? I do not say, what do you *know* of Abraham, but what is he *to you*? What is Moses, or any other of the Bible characters?" Their historical certainty is of little importance compared to their

realistic value. Young people need to recognize in these stories the human element, to see that the reason that this book has lived through the ages is because it is true to life. The characters pictured in it must be divested of the halo that has been thrown around them, they must not be mystical personages, but men and women—either of history or of fiction—having moral struggles similar to our own. Through a literary study many of the stories will prove far more interesting and enlightening than before. A wider appreciation and a stronger faith often come as it is perceived that a myth or a legend may have more spiritual truth than has a story of fact; that a romance may intensify some moral teaching that is true to life and yet cannot be so easily discerned in history. For instance, to accept the account of Abraham's offering of Isaac as a statement of an exact occurrence often proves a hindrance to faith in a God of love, but to see in it a concrete picture of a transition in the development of man's belief in sacrifice and a revelation of the value of human life in the sight of God strengthens faith and gives an insight of man's progressive understanding of truth as he became more enlightened. Just as the Hindoo mother of a recent day has thought that the gods demanded of her to throw her babe into the Ganges, so Abraham, as a representative man of his time, is pictured as first thinking that God requires such sacrifice, and then a great spiritual light brings to him a vision of a very different God. This light is spoken of in childlike form as "the Voice of God," telling him one thing at

one time, and staying his hand at another. Abraham is passing through a great experience, and it is described by means of a story that people of the early days might understand. The story has lived through the centuries because it infolds essential and universal truth, e.g., the outcome of man's faith and obedience is an enlarged vision. Here is pictured also the fatherly sympathy of the Almighty. In the thought of some teachers of young people the term "legend" lessens the value of a writing because it signifies an untrue element. But it needs to be remembered that a legend has become such because of some truth in it believed to be important, and so at first handed down orally from father to son; this very fact suggests a value and should lead one to give heed to it.

Again, to think of Daniel in the den of lions has sometimes caused a smile of ridicule from the young man of today and has added emphasis to a doubting tendency. But when one notes, as did the writer, the interest and satisfaction of a group of young people as they listened to the following interpretation,[†] one sees that faith may find a resting-place. The Book of Daniel was pointed out to be, not history, but romance, with a literary character extraordinary in its force, vividness, and imagination; its purpose, to show the religion of Israel as the greatest power on earth to make heroes. After an outline of the story as given in the sixth chapter, the question came, What is to be seen through it all? Man made a hero by his religion; man honored by his fidelity to his God; man triumphing over brute forces.

[†] Given in an unpublished sermon by Dr. George A. Gordon.

Every generation renews the struggle that is pictured here; the contest goes on between humanity and brute passion and brute power. "Young people need to be made aware of this dualism. It is a magnificent struggle. What a glory there is in the victory over brute passion and brute irresponsibility, while nothing is more sad to see than the triumph of brute force! The prophet met the lion, and he met his conspirators. For a while the conspirators were successful, and wrong triumphed over right, falsehood over truth. But defeat was only temporary; good is invincible in the long run—if not, what is left for hope?"

Such illustrations as the foregoing show how the old-time stories may be "humanized"—*made to live in our own experience*—and the Bible become a living book. A comparative study of some of the stories of the Old Testament with those of the nations contemporary with, or preceding, the Hebrews, will show that the framework of certain of their legends was probably made use of sometimes by a biblical writer, and a greater truth, given to him by God, was inserted into the old form. To make such a comparison in a clear-sighted way is not likely to lessen faith. It simply shows that by one means or another a progressive revelation and a larger truth has come from God to men.

The vague and uncertain notions of young people as to how the Bible came into being need to be supplanted by definite ideas of its development. They need to see that the Bible was, and is, a revelation of God recorded by a number of his servants. These servants were as human as we are. They were simply men cast in a different mold

because living in an environment and age differing widely from our own. A knowledge of this environment and of this age proves often a key to the interpretation of these writings. With such knowledge we judge them in a new light, and things strange and questionable before become obvious and realistic.

The Bible must not be considered as one book, but rather as a compilation of books, the writers of which—some forty to fifty in number at least—were men of strikingly different temperament and outlook. Each had a special purpose in the fulfilment of his writing. We have said that the Bible is a revelation of God, "because"—to use Dr. Lyman Abbott's words—"these writings are a revealing, that is, an unveiling, of God in human life." He says also: "The Bible was formerly regarded as a personal introduction to God. But it is not a letter, it is a Person, that humanity wants, not an infallible message about a God, but God himself." This personal element and the fact that this personality is made manifest through human life make the Bible very humanistic.

Young people need to see that while each book has its own independent characteristics, its "unveiling" along special lines, there is a remarkable unit in the dominating purpose of all these writers, and in the progressive revelation from the beginning to the end, dependent on the development of man and his capacity to know God's truth. Will not the humanizing fact that the growth of the entire Bible continued through twelve hundred years give to young people the reason for much that is therein, and a keener appreciation of the whole? Truth never changes, but

even today it is not altogether revealed. "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now," said He who was himself the Truth. From the beginning, however, we find fundamental principles of life that will stand the test of human experience in any age. It is this fact that gives to the Bible its supremacy, and its power to have lived through the centuries. And it is this that makes valuable the study of the Old Testament.

With this idea of progressive revelation young people should know that the books of the Bible are not placed in chronological order. Deuteronomy, e.g., was probably not in being till long after the time of the judges of Israel. Mark, the shortest of the Gospels, was the first written, and others were enlargements, each with its own peculiar character and emphasis. Hence, naturally, we find similarities and differences and we see how some things made a greater impression on one individual mind than on another. The realization of this human touch is again the key needed for interpretation and appreciation.

An insight into the social life of the times will add interest and reality to Bible scenes, incidents, and sayings. Many of the expressions used, whether they be of a devotional nature or of a descriptive form, in the songs and stories of the Hebrew people or in the word-pictures of the prophets or in the teachings of Jesus himself, are founded on some oriental belief, custom, or coloring of that day. For example, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains" really suggests the old Hebrew idea, "I will lift up mine eyes to the place where Jehovah dwells." The hills or

mountains were from the earliest days looked to as the abode of the gods. Our faith would lead us to ask, in the words of another psalm, "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?" But in a symbolic sense this old thought has in it a beautiful suggestion for today—the mountains speak of strength, stability, and rest. In an actual sense the words of the other Hebrew song may be contrasted with the older belief and illustrate a larger truth:

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me
And thy right hand shall hold me.

When one knows that the people of early days believed that a mountain was the place where there might be connection with the Unseen, one realizes at once why it was recorded that Moses received the law from God on *Mount Sinai*. Whether or not Moses believed the mountain to be necessary for his communion with Jehovah, the faith of the people would require it if they were to accept the law as given from God.

"Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I" is a poetical expression growing very naturally from the idea of sacred stones or cairns set up to mark the places where man might meet with the divine spirit. "God is a refuge for us" has a striking significance as one remembers how, by the old Israelitish scheme of justice, man was saved from the avenger when he fled to a "city of refuge."

The words "They shall sit, every man, under his vine and under his fig-tree," are very suggestive when the land

of Palestine and the custom of the native are well known. And there could be no truer picture of failure for that country and time than—

The fig-tree shall not flourish,
Neither shall fruit be in the vines:
The labor of the olive shall fail,
And the fields shall yield no food,
The flock shall be cut off from the fold.
And there shall be no herd in the stalls.

An appreciation of the prophecies requires a similar understanding; for instance, if one knows that Micah was a man who loved country life and hated the evils he had seen in cities, and also that in his time superstitions of all kinds abounded, and that horses were used only for war or by the luxurious rich, he will see the force of this prophet's picture: "It shall come to pass in that day, saith Jehovah, that I will cut off thy horses out of the midst of thee, and will destroy thy chariots; and I will cut off the cities of thy land and will throw down all thy strongholds, And I will cut off thy witchcrafts out of thy hand; and thou shalt have no more soothsayers; and I will cut off thy graven images and thy pillars out of the midst of thee, and thou shalt no more worship the work of thy hands."

Such expressions and explanations as these show that an insight into oriental customs and beliefs is essential for a vital appreciation of the Bible. Much that otherwise might seem strange and meaningless becomes thus an interesting study and makes strong our faith in other and more important statements in the Bible.

The grand and beautiful pieces of biblical literature need to be used to the best advantage in the religious education of children and young people.

There is a danger of letting them slip and of having them go to waste when they might be utilized as a means of intellectual and spiritual growth. Certain passages stand out pre-eminently and are deservedly classical because of their composition and their age. Many of these should be memorized before the period of adolescence, but some are peculiarly fitted for this age. It is then that young people have their times of feeling very strong and again of being discouraged; they are also full of enthusiasm and sentiment, and such passages as the following should become familiar; Isa. 40:1-8, beginning, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith our God." and John 14:1-6, 14, 25-27, with its "Let not your heart be troubled." The strength and beauty of expression in Isa. 40:25-31; 51:9-16; 52:10; 53; 55; 63:7-9 will be appreciated by young people if these great writings of the olden time are rightly presented. That which is poetic in character will appeal more than the prosaic, unpicturesque writing.

Girls of fifteen to eighteen years of age are especially interested in poetry, and the poetry of the Bible offers an opportunity that has been largely unused. Few young people know those poems that are most commonly spoken of as the songs of the Bible, and few realize that the psalms are the songs of the Israelites. If as children they have not been made familiar with the five songs associated with the birth of Jesus, these may be made interesting and should be known under the names of "The Beauty-tude," "The Magnificat," "The Benedictus," "The Nunc Dimitis," and "the Chorus of Angels." An arrangement has been made, as given below, of the

songs of the creation, the incarnation, and the redemption that may well be made familiar with these others:

In the beginning God created the heaven
and the earth;

And the morning stars sang together and
all the sons of God shouted for joy.

In the fulness of time God sent forth his
Son into the world;

And the Angels sang, Glory to God in the
highest; on earth peace; good-will
toward men.

Around the throne of God in heaven stand
a great multitude whom no man can
number;

And they sing a new song, saying: Thou
art worthy for Thou hast redeemed
us to God, out of every kindred and
tongue and people and nation.

The songs of Revelation may be selected from the other parts of the book that are harder to understand, e.g., "Worthy is the lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." Most interesting work can be done with some of the psalms in relation to the stories of the Old Testament, e.g., Pss. 77:14-20; 105; 106. Some may be also associated with particular experiences of time and place; a family of children spending their summer in the mountains last year was led by an older sister to memorize and say at family worship the Forty-sixth Psalm; its references to nature, to nations at war, and to God's care made it most fitting. The "mountains" and the "river" were in sight as they sat at the breakfast table on the porch, and the children knew that "the nations raged, the kingdoms were moved," and with satisfaction they said, "Be still and know that I am God; I will be

exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge."

At Thanksgiving time the Israelites' songs of praise, sung as they often sang them, with a story of their feast of Tabernacles will be of interest. Suppose a group at home or in school is divided into two parts, and one-half says or sings,

O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is
good;

and the other half takes the refrain,

For his lovingkindness endureth forever,

just as the people did in the old days. A story something like this would be helpful: One day the families of the Israelites, fathers and mothers and children, came from their homes for one of their great religious festivals; they gathered in the shade of the olive trees and talked of their victories and of "the land flowing with milk and honey" which God had given them. The young girls danced and their mothers played the timbrels. The boys carried the clanging cymbals and the fathers joined in the music with their pipes and flutes. When the feast was ended, the trumpet call was given, and the people listened to the priest as he chanted:

Praise ye Jehovah,
Praise him with trumpet sound:
Praise him with psaltery and harp.
Praise him with stringed instruments
and the pipes.
Praise him with loud cymbals;
Praise him with high sounding cymbals.
Let everything that hath breath praise
Jehovah,
Praise ye Jehovah.

Then a chorus of women sang:

O sing unto Jehovah a new song.

And a choir of men took up the words:

For he hath done marvelous things.

So alternately they would sing their hymns of praise.

Other songs will find an interesting place as a part of the Old Testament studies. Boys even so young as ten years of age enter with zest into singing a part of the fine old song of Moses and Miriam when it is set to music, and the following lines may well be memorized:

The Lord is my strength and song
And he is become my salvation;
This is my God and I will praise him;
My father's God and I will exalt him.

Parts of Deborah's song of victory will give dramatic force to the whole story of the struggles of that time. They are not of value for memorizing, but may be woven into the telling or the reading of the story. In the use of both these songs emphasis should be placed on the fact that the people's thought of God and of what was right at that time was very different from ours.

In this article it is impossible to consider in detail the drama of Job or the Song of Songs, and how they may be

used with young people. To get right ideas of these two books it is necessary to view them from the standpoints of drama and poetry respectively. For this purpose Moulton's *Literature of the Bible* is enlightening. Another opportunity is open for wise use in relation to the great oratorios. How many young people associate these clearly with the Bible? It would be an interesting study for a home group to find the exact quotations and to analyze the parts at a time when interest is awakened, perhaps, by an oratorio concert.

Many of the church hymns will be better appreciated by the boys and girls if the origin of these from certain Bible incidents is shown. If, for instance, "Nearer My God to Thee" is associated with the story of Jacob and his dreams, a new meaning and interest may be given to both story and hymn; when young people are familiar with the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness, "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah," will be significant, if connection is rightly made. Hymns that in their beauty and force have grown out of the Bible should be thus learned, and thereby a deeper impression be made of its spiritual truth.