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Jewish Education (Chapter 26 of The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts)

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The World of the New Testament
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Title: Jewish Education

The nature of Jewish education in the first century has clear relevance for a number of issues in NT interpretation. How did Jesus learn Torah—at home, at school? Could he even read and write? Were his disciples illiterates? Could Peter or John have written letters? What sort of rabbinic training did Paul have, and did he study Greek rhetoric and use it in his letters?

Methodology

The variety and contradictory nature of depictions of first century Jewish education in standard handbooks is bewildering. Some speak of elementary schools being widespread throughout Israel; subjects studied, hours of attendance and teacher pay are all clearly defined (Safrai, “Education,” 945-970). Others find such elementary schools present only in Jerusalem and only for the children of the most elite in society; elsewhere, illiteracy reigned (Hezser, “Education,” 39-109).

The difference lies in the sources used and in the interpretation of these sources. Most are agreed that the OT provides relevant, though scant, background information for Jewish praxis in the first century. Deuteronomy 6:7, “Recite [these commands] to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise,” points to the family- and Torah-centered nature of Jewish education. Equally relevant for nearly all writers on the subject are Second Temple writings such as Sirach, Philo, Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Sirach 51:23, “Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction,” has been particularly influential, since it seems to speak of early public education (“house of instruction,” *bet midrash*), but see the cautions below to this conclusion.

Most of the discrepancy between depictions can be traced, however, to the use of rabbinic sources. Since the written form of these texts is usually dated to the third century and later, scholars have become increasingly hesitant to use their statements as a reflection of first century praxis (so Hezser, Victor, et al.). Thus, when *m. Avot* 5.21 speaks of an age-graded curriculum (at

5 yrs. - Scripture; at 10 yrs. - Mishnah; at 15 yrs. - Talmud), some depictions will import this picture into the first century, whereas others will see it as an ideal of a later generation, not a description of first century reality.

Our sources provide scarce data for reconstructing the nature of Jewish education in the first century. This article adopts a minimalist approach, drawing conclusions only from sources that are generally accepted as illuminating first century praxis (see Victor for an example of this trend).

Family-centered rather than formal or institutional (or Where was education obtained?)

The home provided the primary source of education for children throughout the Greco-Roman world; this was also the case for Jews in the OT period and in the ANE at large. While elementary schools existed for the upper-classes in the cities of the Roman Empire, for the vast majority of the population, education was largely a private affair.

Fathers were the primary educators of sons in keeping with Torah (Exod. 13:8, 14; Deut. 6:20-21; Prov. 4:1, 10-11), but mothers and extended family were also involved (Prov. 1:8; 6:20; 31:1; Tob. 1:8; 2 Tim. 3:15). The education of daughters was largely in the hands of mothers, but, as with sons, both parents could be involved (Sus. 1:3).

In addition to the home, children will have received some education in public gatherings (synagogues), during pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-51), and from visiting scribes, priests and teachers (Deut. 33:10).

Were there “schools” in first-century Israel? On the one hand schools limited to scribal training probably existed in Jerusalem, and possibly in other urban centers. Some think John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, evidences such schooling when he writes “his name is John” (Luke 1:63), but the text, at best, points only to a minimal writing ability. Some upper-class Jewish families, especially in Jerusalem, sent their sons to private elementary and secondary schools for Greek education (Philo, *Spec. Laws* 2.228-230). However, such schools were private affairs, not publicly supported, and thus limited to the upper echelons of society (Townsend, *ABD* 2:312-317). The presence of such Hellenizing educational institutions was a point of major contention in Jewish society (1 Macc. 1:14; 2 Macc. 4:9, 12) and there is no firm evidence of their existence outside of major urban centers. The Qumran community appears to be an exception with its educational system for children and young adults (Victor, *Colonial Education*, 118-124).

Most of the Jewish populace in first-century Israel had no access to institutional education. Many have thought Sirach's "house of instruction" [*bet midrash*] (51:23; see full text above) suggested formal schools were present in Israel prior to the first-century. However, the text may simply be a proverb-like call to the foolish to learn wisdom's discipline (LXX: *paideia*). The Jerusalem Talmud speaks of "480 synagogues in Jerusalem and each had a *bet sefer* and a *bet talmud*, the former for the Scripture, the latter for the Mishnah" (y. *Meg.* 3.1). However, the late date of this tradition and the likelihood of an idealized presentation argue against accepting this at face value. Thus, Jesus and most of his followers will have received only an informal education through home, extended family, village and occasional visitors or pilgrimages. (On possible content, see below.)

The apostle Paul appears as a more highly educated person than most of the other followers of Jesus (Acts 26:24). Although he denies rhetorical skill or "human wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:4; 2 Cor. 11:6), his letters testify to some degree of learning and his opponents give a high estimate of his writing skills (2 Cor. 10:10). If born and raised in diaspora Tarsus (so Acts) and depending on the social status of his family, he may have received some formal Hellenistic schooling there. However, his use of the Koine rather than more polished Attic Greek makes any secondary or higher Greek education unlikely. In addition, he is reported to have received more advanced Jewish religious training in Jerusalem in connection with Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; Gal. 1:14).

While later rabbinic sources uniformly disparage the education of daughters, matters may not have been quite so restrictive in the first century, especially in areas with greater Hellenistic influence. Nevertheless, the interest shown by Jesus and the early Christian movement in the education of women will have stood out to contemporary observers.

Torah-centered (or What sort of education was obtained?)

If the venues for Jewish education are not unlike their Greco-Roman counterparts, the same cannot be said for the content of that education. For Jews, God's Torah was the controlling center of all education.

For looking upon their laws as oracles directly given to them by God himself, and having been instructed in this doctrine from their very earliest infancy they bear in their souls the images of the commandments contained in these laws as sacred. (Philo, *Legat.* 210)

Our principle care of all is this, to educate our children well; and we think it to be the most necessary business of our whole life to observe the laws that have been given us, and to keep those rules of piety that have been delivered down to us. (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.60; see also Deut. 6:7; 2 Tim. 3:15)

The aim of Jewish education also differed from the surrounding culture, in that it prized divine wisdom and virtue above knowledge. Thus, learning God's ways in Torah was foremost, and discipline was strict (as in all ancient education). Jewish education also differed through the inclusion of vocational training, whereas manual labor was disdained among the educated more widely in Greco-Roman society. Thus, Jesus learned wood-working, Paul the leather trade, and Peter fishing, and females learned household duties and other skills (e.g., Lydia skilled in working with dyes, Acts 16:14).

The precise content of such home-centered Jewish education is nowhere made explicit. Much, of course, will have depended on the educational level of the parents and other relatives. At a minimum, children will have learned the Shema ("The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" *Tanakh*), the Ten Commandments, the basics of Jewish tradition and common liturgical elements (including some Psalms). Oral repetition and memory, versus written lessons, were undoubtedly the primary medium of instruction. The ability to memorize was surely greater in such oral cultures than in modern literate societies, and a number of NT characters appear to have stored significant amounts of Scripture in their heads (e.g., Paul), but unsubstantiated claims of first-century rabbis (or, in some cases, children) memorizing the entire Hebrew Bible should be taken as later exaggeration.

The vast majority of the Jewish population was non-literate and without formal education. Even Josephus, who could read Greek literary works, needed assistance to compose in good Greek and acknowledged his deficiency in Greek diction (*Ag. Ap.* 1.9; *Ant.* 20.11.2). Jesus' early followers appear to others as unlearned (Acts 4:13). John 7:14-15 ("How does this man know letters?" NKJV) is sometimes taken as counterevidence for Jesus' literacy (see also Luke 4 where Jesus "reads" from Isaiah), but the text more likely refers to the crowd's surprise at Jesus' knowledge of Scripture without formal religious education.

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