History and Philosophy of Jewish Education:  
A Bibliographical Essay

Introduction

Study and learning are integral to the Jewish way of life. The search for knowledge is rooted first in the experience of God as teacher, and the appreciation of the treasure bequeathed in his Word. Thus, any review of the Jewish culture points to the relationship between the people and the Bible, its commentaries and numerous works deriving from the spirituality it offers.

Study must lead to action; imitation of God is the norm whereby those created in his image and likeness must live (Lev. 19:2). The conscience of the growing child is developed within the context of the response of Israel to God's Word down the ages. The adult is challenged to evaluate his or her activities in the light of divine gifts of wisdom and understanding, fostering attitudes that make Israel "the people of the Book," as they were designated by Moslems.

Study is an aspect of prayer, a situation wherein God reveals Himself. "When two sit together and exchange words of Torah (instruction, five books of Moses), the Shekhinah (divine presence) abides between them . . ." (Mishnah, Pirqe Aboth 3:3).¹

There have been several surveys of the contributions made by the Jewish people to western civilization.² Each of these testifies to the

importance of education for the Jews. The present essays will review recent studies relating to the various periods of Biblical and Jewish history and to the values that motivate Jewish educators.

A lengthy survey of Jewish education throughout the ages and in many countries has been published in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972) volume 6, column 381-466 with bibliographies for the various sections.

William W. Brickman has a survey of "religious influences in higher education" that reviews Judaism of all historical periods in *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977) volume 8, pp. 3537-3549, with a bibliography.

The stimulus to continue learning is a significant aspect of Jewish tradition, fostered in the synagogue and the home. Israel Goldman has made a valuable survey in *Lifelong Learning among the Jews: Adult Education in Judaism from Biblical Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1975).

I. The Ancient Near East


The cities of Mesopotamia excavated during the past century have produced evidence of the vast literature recorded in the areas through which Abram passed on his journey to the land of Canaan. Many of these compositions, and some from Egypt, have been gathered in James E. Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press, 1950). The parallels and differences have been investigated thoroughly, but the casual reader should be aware that scholarship matures only slowly. The debate between experts continues to be sharp, and new discoveries bring nuances that must be integrated into the general picture.

A. Theodorides and P. Naster have edited a volume, *L'Enfant dans les Civilisations Orientales* (Louvain: Peeters, 1980) and aspects of education are touched upon in studies concerning women, but the
bulk of the evidence quite naturally deals with the education of the scribe.3

The influence of Egypt on the descendants of Jacob must have been enormous. Just as the hand of providence is clear in the story of Joseph, so in the education of Moses in Pharaoh’s court is the great learning of Egypt placed at the service of God and His people. Glennon Bryce examines this in A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979).

The influence of Israel’s older neighbours undoubtedly touched most aspects of the people’s daily lives. The impact of scribal education forms part of the human background for the legal and wisdom traditions of Israel. Besides the articles in biblical dictionaries and similar tools, several recent books offer important surveys provide bibliographical references for special questions.4

In all probability, in the early period the children of ordinary citizens received both their moral instruction and formation toward home-


making or a trade in the family circle. Besides the general works on
the wisdom literature cited above, R.M. Whybray, Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament (Beiheft to Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 135 in 1974) studies the role of the sage as counsellor and teacher.

The prophetic guild and the priestly community were also contexts of formation for the next generation. Both the prophets and the priests and Levites exercised a great influence as educators of the ordinary people. Joseph Blenkinsopp, A History of Prophecy in Israel (Philadelphia: Westminster 1983) covers the sweep of history from the settlement in the land to the Hellenistic period, with a bibliography for each section. The study of Aelred Cody, A History of the Old Testament Priesthood (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) is excellent; one may also consult the work of Menahem Haran and others under "priests and priesthood" in Encyclopedia Judaica, volume 13 (1970). Both have extensive bibliographies.


II. The Second Temple Period

Two general works on the period from Alexander the Great until the Jewish revolts (66-70 and 132-135 A.D.) include long sections on education. Especially important are the revised edition of Emil Schurer's History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (editors, G. Vermes and F. Millar) (Edinburgh: Clark 1979 volume II) and the Jewish People in the First Century (editors, S. Safrai and M. Stern) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976 volume II.) In Judaism and Hellenism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1981; German original 1969) Martin Hengel discusses the interplay between the two traditions during this formative period. The role of Philo of Alexandria is studied by Alan Mendelson, Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1982).

The Testament literature has received considerable attention in recent years. E. Von Nordheim, *Die Lehre der Alten*. Das Testament als Literaturgattung im Judentum der Hellenistisch-römischen Zeit (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980) offers an insight into these writings as means of teaching ethical and spiritual attitudes.

The impact of the Pharisees as educators is invaluable. The works of Jacob Neusner and his students offer a scholarly approach to a number of the complex issues in the investigation of the Mishnah and related literature. Neusner's three volumes, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70 A.D.* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), should be read in the light of his more recent works, especially *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (University of Chicago Press, 1981). On the popular level, his *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) gives a good overview of the movements within Judaism before the destruction of Jerusalem, ending with a chapter on that catastrophe of 70 A.D.

III. Jesus the Teacher

Like any teacher, Jesus built upon the foundation that he knew his listeners possessed; also, he used principles similar to those of other intellectual leaders: parables with the ordinary country-folk, debate based on biblical texts with his peers."?

Recent studies on Jesus' role as teacher include R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus the Teacher: the ordinary country-folk," debate based on biblical texts with his peers."?


8. This thorough study covers the Jewish background of the New Testament period as well as the themes of the Gospels. The bibliography is excellent. See also Riesner's article "Der Ursprung der Jesus-Überlieferung" in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 38 (1982) pp. 493-513.
IV. The Early Church

Just as the Jewish community absorbed aspects of ancient wisdom from its neighbours, and interacted with the Greeks and Romans in developing educational practices, so the early Christian communities drew upon the philosophical and pedagogical insights of the age.

Vocabulary studies and bibliography are available in the articles "command," "discipline," "exhort," "rabbi," "scribe," "teach," etc. in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (editor Colin Brown) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) and in other such works.


Dependence on the Jewish heritage and continuing interchange with the Jewish community are aspects of the life of early Christians. Benedict Viviano, Study as Worship: Aboth and the New Testament (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979) offers a study of the background to the New Testament period, then deals with the pertinent tests of the Synoptic tradition and the Mishnah tractate Aboth (The Sayings of the Fathers).
V. The Rabbinic Period

The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. virtually caused the disappearance of the Sadducees and Essenes. The Pharisee movement became the vehicle of survival for the Jewish faith and way of life in the Roman Empire.

The history of education during this period is sketched in the general histories of the Jewish people. Essays from scholars of this century have been collected in *Exploring the Talmud - Volume 1 Education* (editor Haim Dimitrovsky) (New York: Ktav, 1976).


VI. The Middle Ages

Among the Jewish educators of the early medieval period, two were outstanding, Saadiah (ben Joseph) Gaon (882-942); in the Islamic
The latter, known by the acronym “Rashi”, has been the subject of a biography recently: Esra Shereshevsky, *Rashi: The Man and His World* (New York: Herman Press, 1982). His influence on students of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud continues to this day. Benjamin Gelles investigates the simple (literal) and midrashic (application to needs of the community) levels of Rashi’s work in *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981). Herman Hailperin discusses Rashi’s influence on medieval Christian exegetes in *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (University of Pittsburgh, 1963).

The wide-ranging studies of Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides to the western world, “RaMBaM” being the Hebrew acronym), who lived from 1135-1204, first in Spain and then in the Islamic world, occasioned great debates among Jews in the generation following his death (see “Maimonidean controversy” by H.H. BenSasson in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*). His genius and influence as an educator is presented brilliantly in Isadore Twersky’s *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). The extensive bibliography brings those of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* up-to-date.

Another luminary from Spain, Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270 known as Nahmanides or “RaMBaN”) introduced the methods of Northern European Jewish scholarship to Spain. The *RaMBaN’s Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1973) has been edited and annotated by Rabbi Charles B. Chavel, as well as his *Writings and Discourses* (two volumes, by the same publisher).

This brief sketch should be supplemented by consulting *Bibliographical Essays in Medieval Jewish Studies* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1976). especially the contribution of Lawrence V. Berman, “Medieval Jewish religious philosophy.”

The unique treasure of the Cairo Geniza (storeroom of a synagogue preserving a millennium of Jewish culture in medieval Egypt) has provided S.D. Goitein the raw material for five volumes on a Mediterranean Society: *The Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza*. Volumes II (The Community) and II (The Family) have materials on education. This series is published by the University of California Press in Berkeley from 1967 to 1983.

VII. Modern Times

Virtually every century produced Jewish educators who struggled with the poles of fidelity to the Torah and adaptation to the contemporary situation. Their writings include descriptions of the educational methods in use and those which they advocated.


An emphasis on the inner, moral dimension of Jewish learning seems to have been obscured for many because of the detailed atten-

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tion to casuistics. Israel (Lipkind) Salanter (1810-1883) founded the Musar (discipline, ethics) movement to recover this dimension of study.\(^{12}\)

These two movements represent the final flowering of Jewish learning in Eastern Europe before the Nazi period. Fortunately, members of these communities, as well as the more traditional academic centres of Orthodoxy, were able to found schools (yeshivot) in the New World and in Israel. Thus, the voice that Hitler tried to silence can still be heard and the traditional expressions of Jewish study continue to reach out to the Jewish community. The experience is evaluated by William B. Helmreich in *The World of the Yeshiva* (New York: Free Press, 1982).

Two scholars from Germany have exerted great influence upon modern Judaism, especially in the Diaspora, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) by the depth and Martin Buber (1878-1965) by the breadth of his learning. N.N. Glatzer edited a translation of Rosenzweig's treatises and letters under the title *On Jewish Learning: Franz Rosenzweig* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955). Maurice Friedman's three volume biography of Martin Buber provides a thorough discussion of every facet of his life as an educator.\(^{13}\) There are numerous


essays on aspects of Buber's pedagogy and his relation to other thinkers.14


In the United States during the 1960-s the Reconstructionist community initiated a return to the small-group approach to adult learning and sharing which has spread to Conservative and Reform synagogues.16 Bernard Reisman describes this development in *The Chavurah*:

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¹⁷. The Fall 1981 issue of *Tradition* is dedicated to education. *Religious Education* often has excellent essays on Jewish themes. Each major stream of the Jewish community has a journal for its teachers; the *American Jewish Year Book* often has surveys on the American and world scene.