

Basic Impulses of Hebrew Pedagogy

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Abstract

The privileged place to learn about Hebrew pedagogy is the Bible and rabbinical literature and thus it is of primary interest especially to the religious systems that grew out of it. Nevertheless, from a formal point of view, it offers a priceless contribution to the reflection on educational values as such. The aim of this article is to put forward some basic impulses of Hebrew pedagogy that may be inspirational even today for both teachers and pupils.

Keywords

Hebrew pedagogy; teacher-student relationship; study and ethics; logic and sapiential approach

If inclusion and plurality belong to the popular notions of the current debate on educational reforms and policies in the Western world (Hodkinson 2010), it would be appropriate to take into consideration the Hebrew vision of education, expressed in the Bible and in the rabbinical literature, as well. This is not only because it has shaped and influenced the monotheistic religion of Judaism and Christianity, but also because its long tradition of teaching, its focus on both intellectual and ethical formation and above all its sapiential and argumentative dimensions can offer a unique model of tutoring for both teachers and students even regardless of their religious beliefs. We will therefore briefly examine its gradual development, some of its basic principles and its most commonly used methods.

1. Outline of the Development of the Hebrew Teaching System

A noteworthy position of education in the Hebrew tradition is already indicated by the fact that the Bible uses a variety of expressions to describe teaching activity. The most common word for “to teach” in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament is the verb *רָמַז*, which literally means “to beat” or “to chastise” (with a rod) and originally referred to the training of livestock. Subsequently, it came to signify the disciplining of soldiers and, figuratively, the actual education of pupils, since this was often accompanied by harsh discipline.¹ The most frequent Greek word is the verb *διδάσκω*: it occurs 100 times in the Septuagint and 95 times in the New Testament, with about two-thirds of the occurrences in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (Rengstorf 1935, 139–141).

¹ It is worth noting that from the verb *רָמַז* is derived also the term *Talmud*, which denotes the well-known collection of Jewish law and theology.

It is not without interest that the Mosaic Law itself is designated by the apostle Paul as a “pedagogue” (Gal 3:24–25): if on the one hand this terminology refers to the Roman custom according to which wealthier parents entrusted the education of their son to a tutor (usually a slave), on the other hand it has deep historical roots, since the Torah was transmitted principally by teaching. As God taught Moses (cf. Ex 4:12) who in turn taught the people (cf. Ex 18:20), so in one of the foundational texts of the Bible Moses gives the Israelites the task of teaching their sons all the precepts of the Law: “Teach them to your children. You shall talk of them when you are sitting in your home, and when you are walking along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Dt 6:7).

The ordinance makes it clear that in the Jewish home it was primarily the role of the parents, and especially of the father, to teach the children, as it is later highlighted also by the Talmud in the Tractate *Kiddushin*: “A father is obligated with regard to his son to circumcise him, and to redeem him if he is a firstborn son who must be redeemed by payment to a priest, and to teach him Torah” (*Kiddushin* 29a,10–19).

It seems that the first forms of public education appeared during the monarchy. 2 Chr 17:7–10 reports that King Jehoshaphat (873–848 B.C.) established a kind of peripatetic school when he commissioned princes, Levites, and priests to visit all the cities of Judah and teach the Law to the people. Another example is described by Nehemiah 8, where on the occasion of the renewal of the covenant, the priest Ezra orders the reading of the Book of the Law and at the same time appoints a group of Levites to interpret it to the people. It is clear, then, that the work of instruction was entrusted primarily to the priests, as Roland de Vaux notes (1994, 353–355), which can be traced back to Moses’ blessing to Levi in Dt 33:10: “He teaches your decrees to Jacob and your law to Israel. He offers incense before your altar and whole burnt offerings on it.”

Yet priests were not the only educators in Old Testament times. An analogous role was exercised by the prophets and their disciples (“sons of the prophets”: cf. 1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3; 6:1) who are not characterized only by giving oracles, but by their efforts of reforming and educating the Israelites. An important chapter in this development is the Wisdom Literature with a whole series of instructions on righteous living before God (Proverbs), on the transience of worldly things (Ecclesiastes) and on the importance of union with God (Song of Songs), which thus lays the foundation for the three classical stages of the spiritual life: *via purgativa*, *via illuminativa* and *via unitiva* (Bergsma and Pitre 2018, 661). Furthermore, during the Second Temple period the priests were progressively replaced by a new class of scribes and teachers who offered instructions on the Law in their homes and especially in the synagogues. This phenomenon gradually led to the rise of rabbinical schools, of which two in particular stood out: the school of Hillel the Elder (60 B.C.–20 A.D.) and the school of Shammai (50 B.C.–30 A.D.).

The title of “teacher” by which Jesus of Nazareth is repeatedly addressed in the Gospels and the circle of his disciples give the impression that his movement may have been initially looked upon as a form of rabbinical school, as well. It is generally estimated by scholars that also the

first Christian communities who gathered around some of the apostles were each constituted as a sort of school, complementary and yet clearly distinguished, such as those associated with John, James or Paul. In fact, in his pastoral letters Paul explains how the apostolic doctrine is passed on to the next generations through carefully chosen and appointed teachers: “And the things you learned from me in the presence of many witnesses you must pass on to trustworthy people who will be capable of teaching others” (2 Tim 2:2).

2. Basic Hallmarks of Hebrew Pedagogy

What are the major hallmarks of Hebrew pedagogy and how can they enrich our view of education today? Although a complete characterization of the subject is not possible due to space constraints, in this section I want to highlight at least some of its basic features.

2.1 *The Study of Torah: a Goal in Itself*

In antiquity as well as today, the financial provision of an education institution is certainly one of the serious problems that those responsible for its running and management have to deal with. Yet a major constant of Hebrew pedagogy points out that the acquisition and transmission of knowledge must always remain the central and ultimate priority of education and should be pursued in a highly disinterested manner. Just as Solomon in the Old Testament reminds us that he received all other material gifts after he prayed for Wisdom (cf. 1 Kgs 3:10–15), so Jesus as the new Solomon emphasizes the principle that all material things necessary for sustenance will be given to the one who first seeks the kingdom of God (cf. Mt 6:33).

It is thus understandable that in some biblical texts we find very strong statements against teachers who in their work are mainly motivated by profit. Particularly critical of this mind-set is the prophet Micah when he writes: “Her leaders accept bribes for favorable judgments, her priests render judgments for a fee, her prophets practice divination for money” (Mi 3:11). Similarly, Paul compares the bishop, who as God’s steward and teacher is not to be “avaricious”, with false teachers who are “teaching for dishonest gain what it is not right to teach” (Titus 1:7,11).

It is not surprising then that we encounter a similar attitude in rabbinical writings, according to which one of the basic conditions of study is “the absence of selfish intent. The Torah must be studied for its own sake (*Torah Lishma*)” (Sládek 2008, 201). Thus, according to Rabbi Meir, when one studies *Torah Lishma* the creation of the entire world is worthwhile for him alone, and he brings joy to God (*Pirkei Avot* 6,1). And the main motive for this is that God himself engages in Torah study for the first three hours of every day (*Avodah Zarah* 3b).

2.2 *Study or/and Practice of the Law*

There has long been a debate among rabbis about what is more important: studying Torah or practising the Law (*Kiddushin* 40b)?² If the Talmud on the one hand teaches that study

² The question was addressed in the 19th century by John Henry Newman in his now classic work *The Idea of a University*, where on the one hand he defended the so-called “liberal education” against intentions to reduce

of Torah is greater than all other commandments (*Shabbath* 127a), on the other hand Jewish scholars generally agree that both study and action are necessary. The first must lead to the second and manifest itself in concrete good deeds, for the simple reason that the goal of Judaism is the mission of “improving the world” (תִּיקוֹן עוֹלָם), i.e., the cooperation in the work of creation through acts of charity and kindness. It is understandable, then, that Jesus adopts the same principle and even elevates it to a beatitude when he declares: “Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Lk 11:28).

Closely related to this is the connection of scholarship with moral integrity, which is given great emphasis in Hebrew thought. Already in the Book of Sirach, for example, there appears the well-known appeal that the Lady Wisdom addresses to her devotees: “Whoever obeys me will never be put to shame; whoever follows my instructions will never sin” (Sir 24:22). There is an immense amount of material on this subject in rabbinical tradition, which flows from the fact that a Torah scholar well versed in Jewish law (תַּלְמִיד הַקָּמ) must be a righteous man (צַדִּיק). In one of the minor talmudic tractates, *Derekh 'Eres* (“The Way of the Land” or “Ethics”), which every scholar should learn before proceeding to the study of Torah, there are enlisted these moral principles, according to which the תַּלְמִיד הַקָּמ must live:

The characteristics of a scholar are that he is meek, humble, alert, filled [with a desire for learning], modest, beloved by all, humble to the members of his household and sin-fearing. He judges a man [fairly] according to his deeds, and says “I have no desire for all the things of this world because this world is not for me”. He sits and studies, soiling his cloak at the feet of the scholars. In him no one sees any evil. He questions according to the subject-matter and answers to the point (*Derekh Eretz Zuta* 1).

2.3 Teacher-Student Relationship

A typical feature of Western higher education is that it is usually a one-man job, namely the teacher's, whose task consists in delivering a lecture in the manner of a *Vorlesung*. This approach is not unknown even in the Bible. Just as Deuteronomy contains the three great speeches of Moses (Dt 1–4; 5–26; 29–31), so the Sermon on the Mount occupies three whole chapters in Matthew's Gospel (chapters 5–7), where Jesus teaches without interruption. Yet biblical and later rabbinical scholarship is also characterized by a more interactive relationship between the teacher and the students built mostly on posing questions and giving answers, which could certainly be given more space in our way of transmitting knowledge, as well. A typical example is the pericope of the twelve-year-old Jesus of whom Luke writes that “they found him in the temple, where he was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his intelligence and his answers” (Lk 2:46–47). The rationale of what we could term as a father-son relationship between the teacher and the students is explained in a beautiful way by Talmud Torah:

education to the level of mere utility, and at the same time he pointed out that separation of education from virtue only leads to the creation of a gentleman. Cf. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co.: 1889), 120–121.

A teacher should take care of his students and love them, because they are like sons who bring him pleasure in this world and in the world to come. Students increase their teacher's wisdom and broaden his horizons. Our Sages declared: "I learned much wisdom from my teachers and even more from my colleagues. However, from my students [I learned] most of all..." (Talmud *Torah* 5,12-13).

3. Methodology of Hebrew Education

In this final section a focus is given on some fundamental methodological elements which give the Hebrew way of thinking a remarkable originality and make its system of education particularly respected in the field of scholarly inquiry.

3.1 Logical Form of Argumentation

Just as Western philosophy is known for precise logical procedures of thought, so the Hebrew way of thinking is characterized, at least in part, by a specific form of logical argumentation. The Jewish scholar Hillel is associated with the so-called seven exegetical rules (מִדּוֹת), which form the basis of rabbinical hermeneutics. The first and most famous is the rule known as וְהוֹמֵר לְקַל, which indicates an inference from the easier to the more difficult, from the lesser to the greater or vice versa. In a sense, it is the equivalent of the Latin expression: *a fortiori*. It is noteworthy that we encounter it repeatedly both in the Bible and in rabbinical literature, as Eugenio Zolli points out in his classic work *Il Nazareno* (Zolli 2009, 119–136).

Several instances of the rule occur already in the Pentateuch, as in Ex 6:12, where Moses says to the Lord: "Behold, the children of Israel have not listened to me; how could Pharaoh listen to me, for I am a man of unskilled speech?" Similarly, in Dt 31:27, the following reasoning is found: "If you rebel against the LORD while I am still alive and with you, how much more so will you be after my death." Extensive use of the rule was made by rabbinical scholars, who for the purpose of instilling a sense of goodness and charity, first pointed out the qualities of the Lord to prompt men to follow the divine example. In the Talmud (*Shabbath* 133) we find this statement: "Stick to, that is, follow the attributes of the Lord. The Lord is clement and merciful. As He is clement and merciful so be you also" (Zolli 2009, 123).

Unsurprisingly, this method of deduction is used by New Testament authors as well and can be found even in some sayings of Jesus, as in Mt 7:11: "If you then, despite your evil nature, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" In particular, the Apostle Paul, as a former Pharisee, was familiar with the *instrumentarium* of rabbinical argumentation, as evidenced by this text from Rom 5:9: "And so, now that we have been justified by Christ's blood, how much more certainly will we be saved through him from divine retribution."

3.2 The Use of מְשֻׁלָּם and παραβολαι

Rigorous logic is certainly not the only weapon of Hebrew thought, which is much more imbued with the search for wisdom than with rationalistic reasoning, as the Old Testament wisdom literature demonstrates. A central place in it belongs to the Book of Proverbs which

comprises a collection of short sayings, מליצות, expressing basic principles for leading a wise and virtuous life. Teachings contained in מליצות were considered “the very foundation of education in ancient Israel and the preferred method of instruction by many teachers and prophets” (Bergsma and Pitre 2018, 597). Usually they are pithy, two-line sentences, but they can also expand to a longer story becoming a παραβολή. There is no doubt that the most famous narrator of parables in the whole Bible is Jesus of Nazareth, known for teaching in figures to the multitudes (Mt 13:34). His parables are stories based on ordinary life experiences, and although they are simple and easy to remember, their meaning is not immediately apparent. They illustrate an underlying ethical or theological principle that forces the listener to reflect, while the story itself is often unfinished and has an “open end”.

3.3 Memorization of Biblical Texts

In the last decades various studies by psychologists and neurologists have shown that cursory reading and fast acquaintance with information through easy access to internet networks often lead to superficial learning and even to alteration of our brain (Carr 2020). This alarming fact thus brings us to another significant feature of the Hebrew teaching method, which is the memorization of study material. One of the first biblical references to it can be found in Dt 6:7 (“Teach them to your children”), where the verb ינן does not simply mean “to teach”, but “to inculcate” or “to repeat”. The point is that the Israelites were supposed to memorize the Lord’s words and so it is comprehensible that the teaching of Jewish children started usually with loud recitation and repetition of key biblical texts.

However, there are other reasons for this teaching technique. First of all, it can be explained by the fact that the initial phase of the transmission of the biblical message took an oral form, which required its repetition in order to be able to retain it in memory and to transmit it faithfully. This was facilitated by mnemonic devices, particularly by parallelisms and alliterations, which were to make it easier to remember the information. A huge presence of these rhetoric figures in the biblical text suggests that a great part of the Old Testament was composed according to this “rhythmic pedagogy” (Daniel-Rops 1963, 265).³

The memorization of the biblical text has possibly a liturgical connotation as well, because the Hebrew term זכר refers as much to the process of committing something to memory as to a liturgical celebration. In this way, the whole study of the Bible culminates in cultic worship and in the “thank psalm” (תודה) for the “mercy” (חסד) that God has continually shown to his people throughout history.

³ For the Hebrew rhetoric cf. Roland Meynet, *L’Analyse rhétorique. Une nouvelle méthode pour comprendre la Bible. Textes fondateurs et exposé systématique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1989); Id., *Leggere la Bibbia* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1998), 77–97.

Conclusion

The study focused explicitly on the formal side of Hebrew education, identifying some aspects of “how” the Hebrews teach and not “what” they teach, which is rather the competence of various departments of theology and other sciences.

On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that the Hebrew educational model is necessarily limited and thus represents a reality open to improvement and even to eschatological fulfilment. It is noteworthy that the Talmud itself perceives it in this way when it presents the vision of a heavenly academy where God studies the Torah with deceased scholars and reveals to them the reasons for the various commandments that are hidden from mortals (Sládek 2008, 201). On the other hand, however, it should be noted that in this way a suitable space is created for all members of the community, and not only for teachers and pupils, to cooperate in improving the quality of education, which is particularly the case in the area of religious instruction. As A. Sacchi points out, this is indispensable primarily at the level of orthopraxis through personal example and witness, without which teaching would be reduced to the mere communication of doctrines (Sacchi 1988, 755).

It may be that the Hebrew pedagogy does not give easy solutions to all contemporary educational issues, but with its specific prioritization of spiritual, sapiential, moral ideals as well as of values promoting psychosomatic human well-being, it can offer many motivational ideas for teachers and students alike. A great proof of its efficacy is the enormous multitude of significant scholars, Hebrew and Christian, who have been shaped and guided by its principles.

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