

**Education in  
the Bible:**  
A starting point  
for discussion

(draft report)  
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**JUBILEE  
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## Introduction

The application of biblical principles to the theory and practice of education is beset with difficulties. One of the most obvious of these is the problem that occurs whenever we seek to understand how the Bible speaks into present-day issues; our respective cultures – and their educational requirements – are very different, and moving from one context to the other can be challenging. Secondly, ‘education’ is a huge subject, with corresponding scope. Education takes place in a wide variety of settings, whether formally and informally, and for a vast range of purposes. Beyond this there is the curious situation that the philosophy of education is only rarely applied by the practitioners; the division between theory and practice appears more marked than in most other professions.

All of these factors mean that articulating a model of education around distinctively biblical principles is a challenging proposition. This reality is suggested by the nature of the ‘Christian’ schools which already exist in the UK. Although these are all described by the same term, and hence there is an expectation of some uniformity, in practice there is such a breadth of ethos and focus that there can be more that divides than unites them.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this short treatment is, as with all of the Jubilee Centre’s material, to start with biblical first principles. Until we have a handle on how ‘education’ is understood in the Bible it is impossible to apply its insights to our own context – or even to know whether that is possible.

Given the volume of material and the scope of the subject, any treatment like this can only be partial. This

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paper therefore aims to give a brief overview of some of the major biblical themes, unpacking a handful of the more striking texts that deal with education. It is not intended to be exhaustive but a starting point for further work and discussion.

## The structure of Israelite society

Before unpacking some of the key texts that ostensibly deal with education in the Bible, it is worth looking at the overall context of Israelite life and the way that

society was organised.<sup>2</sup> The Bible does not provide us with a direct plan for the shape of government today, including the education system. Our societies are too different to make any direct transfer of specific measures. ‘Britain today is a densely populated, hypermobile, post-industrial, consumerist nation, supporting an ever growing communication network and an ever-splintering sense of national identity. The Torah, on the other hand, was given to a static, pre-modern, agricultural society, with no effective communication links but an intensely strong sense of identity. More specifically, the complexity of modern politics marks our political processes as qualitatively different from those of any pre-modern society.’<sup>3</sup> There are, however, overall principles that can inform our engagement and underpin the approach to education found in the Bible.

The events described in the Bible took place over a period of perhaps 2,000 years,<sup>4</sup> and its 66 books were written down over the course of more than 1,000 years by many different authors. In understanding ‘the politics of ancient Israel’, therefore, we have to be aware that more than one model is described, and from different points of view: the tribal federation of the pre-monarchic period, immediately after the Exodus; the increasing centralisation of power that was a feature of the monarchy; the loss of autonomy during the exile, and subjection to foreign rulers with varying degrees of freedom after the return from Babylon; and the Roman occupation that was the backdrop to the New Testament. ‘Nevertheless, there is good reason to view the period of the Exodus as normative, with the Torah acting as the blueprint for social and political structures and as the yardstick against which other periods are judged.’<sup>5</sup>

The history of Israel proper begins in Egypt, almost 500 years before their entrance into Canaan.<sup>6</sup> Egypt was a highly-centralised, bureaucratic and tyrannous state, ruled by a monarch who was worshipped as a god or demi-god. Canaan, the land the Hebrew slaves entered, was also a highly-organised, stratified society, this time

<sup>2</sup> This section draws heavily on Nick Spencer’s ‘*Apolitical Animal?*’ (Jubilee Centre, 2003. See online at [http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/apolitical\\_animal](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/apolitical_animal)), which explores biblical perspectives on engaging with politics today. This itself draws on the earlier ideas of Barry Logsdon in *Multi-polarity and Covenant: Towards a Biblical Framework for Constitutional Safeguards* (Jubilee Centre Research Paper, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> *Apolitical Animal*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Excluding Genesis 1-11, known as the ‘Primeval History’.

<sup>5</sup> *Apolitical Animal*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> See Exod. 12:40-41 and Num. 32:13.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Trevor Cooling and Beth Green, *Mapping the Field: a review of the current research evidence on the impact of schools with a Christian ethos* (Theos, 2009).

composed of numerous city-states, each ruled by a king and a small elite. These cities were typically situated in the lowlands; the hill country was only sparsely populated, though there is evidence for a surge in population towards the end of the second millennium BC (from the end of the Late Bronze Age). It is not easy to distinguish the pre-existing highland village population from the influx of newcomers; however, one distinguishing mark that *may* arguably support the 'Israelite' identity of the immigrants seems to be the absence of pig bones, which are found in earlier strata and in the lowland cities.<sup>7</sup>

The power structure of this new group in Canaan was radically different from that in Egypt or the lowland city-states. Initially, there was no central political authority. Instead, 'The power structure outlined in the Torah was multipolar, encompassing six independent sources of authority, each with its own geographic jurisdiction. These were the individual, the family, the community, the Levites, the tribe or region, and the nation, and between them they formed a network of concurrent authorities each instituted by God and protected, limited and empowered by the national constitution. Moreover, they each fostered a particular means for individuals to engage in the politics of the state.'<sup>8</sup>

**Individual.** At the lowest level, the Law was directed towards the individual, reflected in the singular 'Thou shalt...' formulation of many commandments. The Israelites were aware that the buck stopped with them, individually, rather than the state; morally and relationally they had specific obligations to their fellow countrymen.

**Family.** The biblical 'family' [beth-ab, 'house of the father'] meant the extended family, which would have comprised several nuclear families and included servants/slaves and their families too. This extended family unit, with its overall corporate identity, was often also the basic economic unit. The family as a whole therefore had economic and social responsibilities (many of which surrounded farming practices), as well as rights. Property and land, for example, were dealt with in the context of the family group. 'The family unit was, therefore, to a large degree a self-governing unit, owning and freeing servants, observing celebrations together, regulating and legitimising marriage and divorce, redeeming poor relatives, superseding military duties at times, and taking the responsibilities towards widowed in-laws extremely seriously.'<sup>9</sup>

**The Community.** Local courts dealt with disputes that went beyond the family unit, either geographically or in the family's ability to resolve them. 'Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly.' (Deut. 16:18) The arrangement took the form of courts of judges, or 'the elders of the town', who met at the town gate (see Deut. 21:19).

**The Levites.** The Levites were one of the twelve tribes but, unlike the other eleven, they had no allotment of land for themselves (Num. 18:21-24). Instead, they were scattered throughout the other 11 landed tribes and received a tithe from them. They also have owned limited amounts of common land around their Levitical towns (Num. 35:14). A small subset of Levites, descended from Aaron, served as priests, whilst the others held different religious roles in the tabernacle and served as teachers and judges in cases too difficult for the local courts (Deut. 17:8-11).

**The Tribe.** Each of the twelve tribes had been assigned a share of the land on entry into Canaan, and so each had a geographical identity. Israel was originally a federation of these tribes, united by common religious beliefs and practices, and around the sanctuary. Tribal identities were strong and lasted throughout the monarchy period and even the exile. Israel's army was organised along tribal lines. Representatives from each tribe were chosen on an ad hoc basis for certain tasks, presumably in the interests of fairness and maintaining joint identity. However, after Moses and Joshua, there was no lasting central organisation or authority until the monarchy period.

**The Nation.** Before the monarchy, there was a limited role for central government - mainly in terms of defence, which was organised on tribal lines anyway. Religious worship was also based outside of tribal geography and identity, adding to the national consciousness. Deut. 17 heavily restricts the king's power, unlike other ANE monarchs, whose wealth and power were almost unlimited.

In summary, 'The Israel of the Torah had a complex multipolar structure of political power in which different authorities were responsible for different areas. The system was akin to our modern separation of powers except that the divisions were along geographical lines rather than according to legislative, executive or judicial function.'<sup>10</sup> The separation of powers was also non-hierarchical, in that one jurisdiction did not necessarily take precedence over another (for example, the king was subject to the Law, not its author; military service was deferred during the first year of marriage).

<sup>7</sup> Finkelstein and Naaman, *From Nomadism to Monarchy* (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 106; this point is controversial, however.

<sup>8</sup> *Apolitical Animal*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Apolitical Animal*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Apolitical Animal*, p. 27.

## The reality of Israelite monarchy

In practice, the ideal model of government described by the Torah did not last long. At the end of the second millennium BC, the elders of Israel demanded a king. The reason was primarily that they wanted a strong and just leader; Samuel, Israel's most recent judge and leader, was about to die, and his sons 'did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.' (1 Sam. 8:3) Samuel told the elders that the desire for a king constituted a rejection of God, and warned them:

'This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.' (1 Sam. 8:11-18)

Nevertheless, the Israelites insisted on a king. 'Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.' (1 Sam. 8:20)

Deut. 17 describes the ideal characteristics and limitations on the power of the king:

'When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

'When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.' (Deut. 17:14-20)

God reluctantly agrees to the elders' request for a king (1 Sam. 8:21-22). The monarchy started promisingly enough but soon turned bad, with the reign of Saul at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC. With only a few notable exceptions it declined further until Manasseh in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, to whose wickedness was ultimately attributed the Fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile in 586 BC (2 Kgs. 21:10-15). The centralisation of power led to economic and religious injustices as the kings of Israel, and later Judah, made arbitrary or poor decisions, often for their own benefit.

### Local vs. central authority

Israelite Law was supposed to be accessible to all – not the preserve of only a few lawyers and other experts. Although the king was to read the scroll of the Law every day, this did not qualitatively set him apart from the rest of the population. To a large extent, everyone was expected to be familiar with the Law:

'These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.' (Deut. 6:6-8, and see further below)

In the ideal of the Torah, law and government were devolved to the smallest and most immediate level, and therefore the one offering most responsibility and direct engagement to those involved. This necessarily restricted the degree of centralised power that had been a feature of the Israelites' captivity in Egypt, and of the Canaanite city-states they would later occupy. The same is true of the allotment of land that occurred under Joshua. Each tribe, clan and family was given a carefully-delineated piece of land which was supposed to remain in the same family in perpetuity. In such a culture, land was the means of economic production and an assurance of continuing independence; the Jubilee laws in Lev. 25 meant that, even if people had to sell their land to cope with temporary hardship, it would

periodically revert back to the family. This ideal of universal property ownership is reflected in Micah 4:4.

In the monarchy period (c. 1020-587 BC), the prophets acted as independent auditors of the religious, social and political life of the nation, calling attention to transgressions on the part of the king and the people (with varying degrees of success). Called directly by God, they were entirely outside the establishment, though unfortunately for many of them, still subject to the considerable corruption they tried to curtail. As Lord Acton famously wrote: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or certainty of corruption by full authority. There is no worse heresy than the fact that the office sanctifies the holder of it.'<sup>11</sup>

For this reason – the danger of allowing a human unlimited power to reign – as far as Israel was concerned, the only absolute authority was YHWH. 'You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.' (Deut. 8:17-18)

### Subsidiarity

The Bible is consistently wary of power concentrated in human hands, recognising the injustice to which this almost inevitably leads. Instead, a model of decentralised power is the Torah's ideal. In the Torah, although there was some room for authority at the national level, it was carefully restricted. 'The decentralisation of power in Israelite society is reflected in the modern idea of subsidiarity: the principle that a central authority should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more local level.'<sup>12</sup> However, this distribution of power brought with it a distribution of accountability and responsibility. Israel as a whole was responsible for its corporate behaviour – it could not pass the buck up the chain of power to blame its government.

In the New Testament, the principle of subsidiarity is expressed to the church in the first letter to Timothy. 'Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.' (1 Tim. 5:3-4) In other words, the church – a

more central authority than the family – should only step in if the family is unable to discharge its responsibilities. Likewise, the Church is urged to settle its own disputes, without resorting to higher (secular) authorities (1 Cor. 6:1-6).

Today, this has a parallel in the tendency for the state to take on ever-greater levels of responsibility for social care (amongst other things), when actually these fall most naturally to smaller units of government, including the family. This example provides some clarification as to why subsidiarity is beneficial to citizens. 'So why entrust welfare to local communities? First, OT and NT teaching focuses responsibility at the levels of family and community, with only a very limited role for the state. Jesus insists on familial responsibility to provide for older parents. In the cities of the Roman Empire, Paul urges church communities not to take over tasks families could and should perform for themselves. A relational perspective makes it easy to understand why biblical writers wish to minimise the role of the state or outside bodies. State involvement diminishes personal responsibility, and all the relational benefits which flow from long-term commitment and interdependence.'<sup>13</sup> The biblical priority is to strengthen social bonds, and teach personal responsibility rather than achieve "equality" in some abstract sense through a rights-based culture.'<sup>14</sup>

In terms of education, the same principle holds. When power and initiative is removed to a centralised authority, those involved in the process and practicalities of teaching can feel remote from the decision-making process, with a resulting lack of interest and engagement, and sense of being valued.

With this sketch of pre-exilic Israel's society and structures of power in mind, we can now turn to some of the biblical texts that deal with teaching, and what kind of model of education they suggest.

### Abraham: before the Law

In the same way that the so-called 'Noahide laws' are considered binding (by Jews) on the whole of humanity – since they were given to Noah and his family, from whom in the biblical tradition all of modern humanity derive – the ethical injunctions to Abraham are also binding for all Jews, as well as being considered normative for a greater proportion of the world (since

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Mandell Creighton (5 April 1887), published in *Historical Essays and Studies* (1907).

<sup>12</sup> *Apolitical Animal*, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Reference importance of common purpose and shared values in building relationships, as well as directness, continuity and parity.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Schluter, *Beyond Capitalism: Towards a Relational economy* (Jubilee Centre 2010, Cambridge Papers vol. 19, no. 1). See <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=346>



Abraham was the father of not just the Jews). Any ‘Abrahamic’ commands presumably applied to both Isaac and Ishmael, his later children (Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah, by his second wife Keturah), and all of their respective descendents.

Moreover, God specifically chose Abraham to bless all the nations of the earth:

‘Abraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.’ (Gen. 18:18-19)

Before the Law was given to Moses and the Israelites, some 400 years later, there is – quite naturally – the expectation that it is normative for a father to ‘direct’ [yešaveh, the same root as the word ‘command(ment)’] his children and household – in Abraham’s case, for the wider good of society and the world. Of course, it can be argued that in the nomadic culture of the Patriarchs, there was no formal teacher or education system; nevertheless, moral instruction – the ‘way of the Lord’, for the purposes of doing what is ‘right and just’ – is to occur in the family unit. In any case, although the Patriarchs were nomadic, they did pitch their tents near cities and permanent settlements (Gen. 13:12). It also seems that Abraham’s ‘household’ comprised far more than even a large extended family, and included hundreds of family members, servants, herdsmen, fighting men and their families (Gen. 14:14).

### The language of education

This is the first time that the phrase ‘the way of the Lord’ [Hebrew derek YHWH] appears in the Hebrew Bible. It is elsewhere found in several places:

- ‘I will use [foreign nations] to test Israel and see whether they will keep **the way of the Lord** and walk in it as their ancestors did’ (Jud. 2:22)
- ‘[Amon] forsook the Lord, the God of his fathers, and he did not walk in **the way of the Lord**’ (2 Kgs 21:22)
- ‘**The way of the Lord** is a refuge for the blameless, but it is the ruin of those who do evil’ (Prov. 10:29)
- ‘I thought, “These are only the poor; they are foolish, for they do not know **the way of the Lord**, the requirements of their God.”’ (Jer. 5:4, also in 5:5)
- and four times in Ezekiel (all derek <sup>3</sup>dōnāy), each in the same context – e.g. 18:25 – ‘Yet you say, “**The way of the Lord** is not just.” Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?’

In each case, the phrase has the same sense of a ‘right and just’ way to live – one that is perhaps fully expressed by the Torah, but that is not necessarily synonymous with it. Proverbs is concerned with the idea of Wisdom – living a ‘good life’ (see below), and for Abraham the Torah has not yet been given.

The phrase ‘right and just’ [š<sup>c</sup>dāqāh ūmišpāt or mišpāt ūš<sup>c</sup>dāqāh] also appears in Gen. 18 for the first time, and also several times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Notably, it occurs three times in Proverbs. The first is in the introduction to the book, as the purpose of all the proverbs recorded thereafter.

- ‘For acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is **right and just** and fair’ (Prov. 1:3, šedeq ūmišpāt; similarly in 2:9)
- ‘To do what is **right and just** is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice’ (Prov. 21:3)
- Jer. 22:3 defines this phrase more clearly, ‘This is what the Lord says: Do what is **just and right**. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.’
- As with the ‘way of the Lord’, the phrase ‘right and just’ also features repeatedly in Ezek. 18.

Thus the *language* of moral instruction, so familiar throughout the rest of the Bible, is present at the earliest stages of Israel’s history. Presumably Hebrew readers of this passage would immediately make links with what God instructed Abraham to do, and the later events in the history of Israel in which these characteristic terms are also used – the giving of the Law, the words of the prophets and the critique of the monarchy, as well as the related but distinct emphasis of Proverbs on Wisdom. As an archetype for the life of Israel and their first and most important patriarch, Abraham serves as a model for how Israelite households are to treat and educate their members. This was, in Abraham’s case, integrally linked with his call to bless all nations.

*Abraham serves as a model for how Israelite households are to treat and educate their members*

### Torah

This idea is confirmed later in the Pentateuch, after the giving of the Law on Sinai. With Abraham, the information is sparse and the references to ‘instruction’ or ‘direction’ – primarily moral in nature – are chiefly understood only through their allusions to later texts and traditions. When we reach the historical-theological

record of Israel's birth, there is more detail. Much of this is found between the lines; although there is no formal education system described in the Torah, Deuteronomy makes assumptions about what is normative for Israelite life.

One of the most important texts in this area is Deut. 6:4-9 or the 'Shema' [š<sup>e</sup>ma'] – one of the foundational creeds of Israel:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.'

The *Shema* is a statement of monotheism – in its time, perhaps the most distinctive and radical creed of its kind. Observant Jews today repeat it twice daily, parents teach it to their children before bedtime, and it is traditional for Jews to say it at their time of death.

The *Shema* and its following verses are interesting for the biblical context of education, because they assume certain things. Firstly, they reinforce the principle that education – in this case, knowledge of the Torah's commandments<sup>15</sup> and perhaps even the elements of literacy (cf. 'write them on the doorframes of your houses...') – were to take place in the family. Parents were the ones with the ultimate responsibility to ensure that their children were familiar with the commandments, through regular repetition in the morning, at night, and 'when you walk along the road' – at opportune times throughout the day. This means that education was not confined to school – whatever form schools may or may not have taken – or professional teachers, but was supposed to be a constant, pervasive feature of life.

### The role of the Levites

In fact, there is no direct biblical evidence for the existence of schools in the Old Testament period.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> It is not immediately clear from these verses whether 'commandments' (v. 6) refers to the Ten Commandments, or all of the [613] 'commands, decrees and laws' in the Torah.

<sup>16</sup> By studying the epigraphic record, some scholars have deduced the existence of scribal schools due to the apparent standardisation of letter forms and suggested that such schools were widespread; others have concluded that there was little or no formal education available in the earlier stages of Israelite history.

Although schools of one sort or another almost certainly existed towards the end of the pre-exilic period, such as royal court scribal schools, the word 'school' is only mentioned once in the Bible, in the context of Greek education – the school or lecture hall (scholē) of Tyrannus in Ephesus, in Acts 19:9. This may partly be due to the way we understand the term 'school', as a building or organisation in which formal education is carried out by trained professionals.

The fact that experts did exist who had some kind of educational role,<sup>17</sup> argues that there was at least *some* kind of formal apparatus for education – even if it is not one we would instantly recognise today. In the Old Testament, one such group of professional educators were the Levites. This tribe broadly fulfilled what we would think of as public service today, across many areas fundamental to the life of Israel – education, health, temple service, regulating monetary policy and administering criminal and civil law. Rather than having land of their own, like the other eleven tribes, the Levites were scattered throughout the territories of their countrymen in order to be able to fulfil their various tasks on behalf of the nation (Num. 35:6-8). They were funded in significant part by the tithe and firstfruits, provided by their countrymen in exchange for their public service. They also owned their own houses and limited common land around the cities they lived in, which were also provided by the other tribes. In this respect they were educated and respected but dependent servants of Israel – unlike the landed and wealthy priestly/bureaucratic elite of Egypt and other nations.

Amongst their other functions, the Levites were given a 'lasting ordinance for days to come' to teach the Israelites 'all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses' (Lev. 10:11), indicating the educative role that professional instructors would have alongside parents to their families. Notably, this Torah education was not for children alone. Every parent was responsible for their children's basic education, and they were required to understand, keep and study the Law themselves both as a part of this duty and in its own right – as the constant reminders of *mezuzot* and *tefillin* or 'phylacteries' on door-posts and hands suggest.

Every seven years, the whole of Israel was to be re-taught the Law:

'Then Moses commanded them: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and

<sup>17</sup> In Luke 2:41-52, the young Jesus is found in the Temple discussing the Law with the 'teachers'.

children, and the aliens living in your towns – so that they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” (Deut. 31:10-13)

So both adults and children, Israelite and foreign-born, were to be educated in the Law as a condition of living in the land. Hosea 4:6 links the Israelites’ failure to understand and keep the Law with their destruction and exile.

At the very least, then, parents were expected to instruct their children on a day-to-day basis, but the Levites were there as a (presumably formally educated) body of teachers who acted as a kind of quality control to ensure that the ‘curriculum’ was accurately passed down from generation to generation. This is entirely in keeping with the ethos of Israelite political organisation, in which responsibility was characteristically given first to the smallest and most local elements, with higher and more centralised authorities only stepping in where necessary as a kind of failsafe.

### Between the extremes

These two passages, Deut. 6:4-9 and 31:10-13, describe the boundaries of teaching – informal, day-to-day instruction within the family, and a highly organised reading of the Law by the Levites every seven years as a form of accountability and quality control. Between these two extremes, what can be said of the ideals and practices of education?

Firstly, education was not limited to these two settings. Three times a year there were major week-long festivals:

*The Levites are instructed by God to teach, but this was a two-way contract: the Israelites are told to listen and carry out their instructions*

Passover, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles – as well as several other minor festivals (Deut. 16:1-17; Lev. 23), the weekly Sabbaths and monthly New Moons. These were corporate occasions in which the Israelites gathered and remembered their history. A sacred assembly [miqrâ qōdeš] was held for each of these. The term miqrâ is a

technical one usually found in the context of festivals. It derives from the root qārâ, meaning to call, proclaim or read. Reading may therefore have been one of the chief purposes of the miqrâ, as the term is used in Neh. 8:8 –

a public reading and interpretation<sup>18</sup> of the Law by the Levites.

Secondly, the Levites are instructed by God to teach, but this was a two-way contract: the Israelites are told to listen and carry out their instructions. For example, one of the Levites’ many roles was in the realm of public health; they were charged with diagnosing and treating skin diseases, amongst other things. Deut. 24:8 reads, ‘In cases of leprous diseases be very careful to do exactly as the priests, who are Levites, instruct you. You must follow carefully what I have commanded them.’

Another area was their role as judges in civil and criminal cases. Deut. 17:8-11 reads, ‘If cases come before your courts that are too difficult for you to judge – whether bloodshed, lawsuits or assaults – take them to the place the Lord your God will choose. Go to the priests, who are Levites, and to the judge who is in office at that time. Inquire of them and they will give you the verdict. You must act according to the decisions they give you at the place the Lord will choose. Be careful to do everything they instruct you to do. Act according to whatever they teach you and the decisions they give you. Do not turn aside from what they tell you, to the right or to the left.’

The Levites were not just specialists who gave a verdict when a problem was too great to be settled at a more local level. In the process of addressing various legal and medical cases, they were supposed to engage with the people who approached them and teach them the Law. The information they held was not proprietary; the Law was not the preserve of an elite but to be made accessible to all the people. In the example from Deut. 17, the inference is that it is a case that is too difficult to judge *this time*; if the Levite has done his job properly, then next time there will be no need for the local judges to go to a more central court. As teachers, the Levites’ role was to make themselves as unnecessary as possible. We can assume that the judgments the Israelites learned in these regular encounters with the Levites would be included in the material they passed on to their own households, as well as within intermediate organisations such as the local court envisaged in Deut. 17. ‘Education’ was a distributed, cross-cutting process that took place at all levels and settings of society.

In the Second Temple period, after the formative experiences of the Babylonian exile, the Levites gained a more important role. Without a Temple in which to make sacrifices during the exile, the Torah took on additional importance, which it retained after the return to Judah. Ezra was one such person: ‘For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the

<sup>18</sup> As in English, the Hebrew term can mean either translation (in this case from Hebrew to the *lingua franca*, Aramaic) or explanation.

Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.' (Ezra 7:10) This increased importance continued into the New Testament period, where scribes and Pharisees enjoyed a high status as teachers.

## Structures of accountability

Within the structure of the Israelite political system a number of checks and balances were established. One of the most surprising of these, from the point of view of neighbouring Ancient Near Eastern culture, was the set of restrictions placed on the king. Elsewhere in the ANE, kings were all-powerful and above the law; in Egypt, Pharaoh was a god-king with absolute authority. In Israel, the king was subject to the Law and forbidden from amassing wealth and military capabilities. Amongst the other regulations limiting the power of the king, Deut. 17:18-20 reads:

'When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.'

In other words, the king was subject to the Law and therefore, in a sense, to the Levites who transmitted, interpreted and applied it. The king was not the ultimate source of moral instruction, but its servant: his task was to learn and uphold the Law, not to write it. Of course, this did not always happen in practice.

The Levites were apart from the king – they were not implicitly instruments of the royal court, as in other cultures – but they were part of the established order. As such, there is evidence that at times they did not carry out their given tasks properly – just as the Israelite king and people did not always follow the Law themselves. 2 Chr. 26:16-20 describe how king Uzziah overstepped his authority in the Temple and was confronted by the priests. Micah 3:11 describes the corruption of the religious leaders of Israel: 'Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price...' 2 Chr. 15:3 reads, 'For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach and without the Law.' This doubtless happened as a result of the previous king, Rehoboam, publicly abandoning the Law of the Lord (2 Chr. 12:1).

## Prophets

Another strand of accountability took the form of the prophets. At times, it seemed that the lines between priesthood and royal court became unhelpfully blurred,

or the king assumed unwarranted power and overruled the priesthood, or the priesthood became corrupt under its own interests. Isaiah apparently describes a situation in which the priests had colluded with the people in adopting a superficial version of religion in which they went through the motions, applying the commandments literally but without any real insight or critical thought. The NASB translates Isa. 29:13, 'their reverence for me consists of tradition learned by rote.'

The 'schools of the prophets' (literally 'sons of the prophets') were a class of men who appear in the time of Samuel. Their exact origins are unknown, but it seems likely that such formalised prophesy arose out of the failure of the established Temple apparatus and the corruption of the priestly house of Eli (see 1 Sam. 2:12-36). The first mention of such a group occurs in 1 Sam 10 as a 'procession of prophets' in 1 Sam 10:10, and again in 19:20. The status continues into the monarchy period, through the time of Elijah and Elisha and beyond (cf. 1 Kings 20:35), and appears to grow. In 2 Kings 6:1, the prophets tell Elisha that 'the place where we meet with you is too small,' and ask to build a larger place to live. This suggests an organised group of prophets under the instruction of a leader like Elisha.

Samuel's own life is interesting as background to the formation of these 'schools' of prophets, although we otherwise have no details about how they were run or the official roles of the prophets in them – for example, were they involved in recording prophesy and/or copying sacred texts, in the way that the Levites would also have been? Might there at times have been an overlap between the categories of priest and prophet – something that seems likely from a number of narratives in the OT (e.g. 1 Sam. 3:20; Jer. 1:1; Ezek. 1:3; Ps. 99:6)?

Samuel was dedicated to the 'house of the Lord' immediately after he was weaned (1 Sam 1:21-28), and served there away from his parents' household – in contrast to Deuteronomy's emphasis on learning the commandments at home. However, he was notable for his young age ('young as he was', v. 24) and this is clearly an unusual case. He is not representative of how parents in general should educate their children, although it is interesting that the age of weaning (much later than it is in our culture) is the time at which he is judged ready to start serving the Lord. 2 Macc. 7:27 suggests that the time of weaning was around three years (supported by 2 Chr. 31:16, in which Hezekiah distributes food to every male of three years old and above who would serve in the Temple). The (rabbinic) *Shemot Rabbah* commentary on Exod. 2:9 suggests that Moses was weaned at two.

Although the 'sons of the prophets' originally appear to have been a response to the corruption in the official cult, in later times they (or possibly some of them) were

appropriated or closely connected to the royal court, leading to their own corruption and use by the state for propaganda purposes. In 1 Kings 22 the ‘prophets’ – a group of men now numbering some 400 – simply tell the king what he wants to hear. Micaiah ben Imlah is the only true prophet left. Jeremiah later complains about the same thing: ‘The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way’ (Jer. 5: 31).

In its earliest form, as Samuel intended it, the ‘school of the prophets’ challenged the existing, broken system of official cult worship. It was an organisation outside of the established state apparatus that lost its prophetic edge and impact when it became absorbed into the royal court. It was no longer able to challenge – due, presumably, to a fundamental conflict of interests. The same is true of the ‘Scribes and Pharisees’ in Jesus’ time who, although an important part of the official religious apparatus, were criticised for having too much interest invested in their own interpretation of Judaism, at the expense of the ‘spirit of the Law.’ Periodically a new prophet or group of prophets would arise as a reaction against the established order, delivering fresh prophesy and with the genuine aim of holding the structures of power to account – successfully or otherwise.

Whilst they were occasional figures in the life of Israel, rather than the significant proportion of the population that the Levites represented (perhaps 10 per cent), the prophets were another source of education to Israel as a whole. When there was no one left to provide an example and teach the people the right way to live, the prophets inspired, encouraged and warned the priesthood, state apparatus and ordinary people that they were straying from God’s Law.

### Parent, priest, prophet

The implication of Deut. 6 is that the buck stopped with the child’s parents: they are the ones given the task of teaching their children the Law on a day-to-day basis and giving them a sense of national identity and history:

‘In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent signs and wonders – great and terrible – on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our

God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.” (Deut. 6:20-25)

However, this does not mean that households were left to their own devices when it came to instructing their children – or that ‘education’ took place only in this setting. The Levites were the public servants of biblical Israel. As well as explicit times set aside to teach the Law to everyone, they were expected to engage and educate the people in their regular interactions with them across the spectrum of their public duties. The king – and, by extension, his officials – were supposed to be subject to the Law and to uphold it in their activities. As a final means of accountability, when the royal court and priesthood failed in their callings, the prophets provided some measure of critique. In this way, the *responsibility* for moral instruction was clear, but the actual *means* by which it was delivered was a far more holistic and wide-ranging practice.

On a related theme, it is the parents who are ultimately tasked with disciplining children. The most extreme case of this is seen in Deut. 21:18-21. ‘If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.’<sup>19</sup>

Note that these verses establish the *principle* of ultimate parental responsibility for behaviour, in the same way that parents are responsible for moral instruction; they do not give us guidelines for how to discipline children today, any more than the death penalty for adultery (cf. e.g. Lev. 20:10) gives us an appropriate modern-day punishment for adultery. Rather, the nature of the punishment establishes the seriousness of the offence, and the verses state those who are responsible for carrying out justice.<sup>20</sup> As a parallel to the question of education, the *means* of administering justice is not expected of the parents alone (although they are expected to take part), but the act of *bringing* him to justice is their responsibility.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Burnside, *Signs of Sin* (JSOTS, 2003), pp. 37ff.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Jonathan Burnside, *Consent vs Community* (Jubilee Centre, 2006), p. 40. See online at [http://www.jubilee-centre.org/uploaded/files/resource\\_75.pdf](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/uploaded/files/resource_75.pdf)

## Excursus: the meaning of wisdom

'Wisdom' (Hebrew *ḥokmāh*) is far broader in scope than its immediate English translation. It is like *šālôm*, the meaning of which is widely understood as 'peace', but which has far broader and richer connotations of active prosperity and wellbeing, rather than simply the absence of evil or conflict. The semantic range of 'wisdom' is likewise much wider and harder to define than it would at first appear. In the Bible, the verb *ḥākam* (to be wise), the adjective *ḥākām* (wise), and the noun *ḥokmāh* (wisdom) appear in a number of different contexts, suggesting that 'wisdom' means far more than knowledge or even good judgement, as we would often understand it. A survey of some of the uses of the term 'wisdom' in the Old Testament illustrates the breadth of the idea.<sup>21</sup> The root *ḥākam* is related to similar words in other Semitic languages; in Assyrian it means 'to know' and in Arabic it has the meaning of 'restrain from acting in an evil manner, judge, govern; make firm, sound, free from defect'. It is used in these and many other senses throughout the OT. It can mean technical skill (Exod. 28:3; Isa. 3:2-3, 40:20); administrative competence and discerning judgement (Gen. 41:33; Deut. 1:13); scheming or craftiness (2 Sam. 13:3; Jud. 5:29); learned in a specific (magical) art (Exod. 7:11; Isa. 44:25); and many other senses.

Proverbs gives the most recognisable and helpful definition of Wisdom, as a means of righteous living based in the fear of God. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge [*dā`at*], but fools despise wisdom [*ḥokmāh*] and discipline' (Prov. 1:7); Ps. 111:10 reads 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [*ḥokmāh*].' Prov. 9:10 parallels three key terms: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [*ḥokmāh*], and knowledge [*dā`at*] of the Holy One is understanding [*bināh*].' That clearly implies that it is correct relationship rather than information that brings Wisdom – a *state* of mind rather than the *content* of a mind.

This Wisdom is interested in ethical judgement, common sense, the 'right way to live' – hence repeated warnings against drunkenness, laziness, adultery, crime and injustice. It brings its own intrinsic benefits as well as God's blessing. In Prov. 8, Wisdom is personified as a woman (paralleling the 'simplicity' or lack of moral judgment of the adulteress, Proverbs' personification of foolishness or moral deficiency – 7:4-5).

## Types of wisdom, and 'Wisdom'

Wisdom, both more generally and in its specific sense as the goal of education in Proverbs, is therefore a difficult concept to pin down. As Katherine Dell writes, 'Many scholars have tried to find a phrase or sentence that sums up wisdom in a nutshell, but wisdom is so diverse as a phenomenon that to pin it down in this way leads to problems.'<sup>22</sup> There is a risk that such breadth of meaning devalues the currency of the term 'wisdom': taken in its entirety, the Hebrew Bible implies that 'wise' just means 'competent'. You can even be 'wise in doing evil' (Jer. 4:22).

It is not always easy to know when the term wisdom is used in a good sense ('Wisdom' rather than 'wisdom'), and when it is used ironically, or just as a figure of speech – essentially meaning 'good at'. There are some examples that are obvious, such as witchcraft; it is self-evident that God does not see spiritual manipulation as desirable. One way of 'using scripture to interpret scripture' is to look at what the Bible says wisdom is not. The wise are repeatedly contrasted with 'the simple' or 'foolish' (*vilim*) in Proverbs. The Hebrew word *vil* is related to the Arabic *'āla*, meaning 'to grow thick' (used of fluids), and is always used of those who are morally bad. Thus, unsurprisingly perhaps, we can say that those who are 'wise in doing evil' (Jer. 4:22) do not provide an attractive model of Wisdom.

Whybray<sup>23</sup> writes about the distinction: 'Elsewhere in the Old Testament *ḥokmā* means something like "skill": practical knowledge in any sphere, from that of the artisan to that of the politician. But in Proverbs *ḥokmā* is always *life-skill*: the ability of the individual to conduct his life in the best possible way and to the best possible effect.'" In addition, its paralleling with other terms such as *dā`at* and *bināh* give it an 'intellectual slant': 'wisdom is seen as "an intellectual quality that provides the key to happiness and success, to 'life' in its widest sense.'"<sup>24</sup>

Wisdom is mentioned in many other places in the OT, but perhaps one of the most notable is in the description of the Messiah in Isa. 11:1-3: 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding [*ḥokmāh* *ûḥināh*<sup>25</sup>], the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.'

<sup>21</sup> See BDB, pp. 314-15.

<sup>22</sup> Dell, *Get Wisdom, Get Insight*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (Marshall Pickering, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (BZAW 135, 1974), p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> These two, wisdom and understanding, are also paralleled in Prov. 4:7 – 'Wisdom is supreme, therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.'

## Wisdom: a ‘right and just’ way to live

The third division of material in the Hebrew Bible, the ‘Writings’, is a very broad category. It is really a kind of ‘everything else’ after the foundational Law and the authoritative Prophets (which includes the history books of Joshua to 2 Kings, as well as the three major and 12 minor Prophets).

The Wisdom literature is a helpful sub-category within the Writings – firstly as it is concerned with how to live a ‘good life’, and secondly because it is also concerned with how this ideal is to be passed on: it is the ‘most self-consciously educational [biblical literature] of any we have considered.’<sup>26</sup> Wisdom is the chief purpose of the book of Proverbs, intended for living ethically and honestly:

‘The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom [ḥokmāh] and instruction; for understanding words of insight [bināh]; for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour, doing what is right and just [šedeq ūmišpāṭ, cf. the discussion of Gen. 18 above] and fair.’ (Prov. 1:1-3)

This theme of living the right way returns to a question implicitly raised by the Abraham account mentioned above: ‘What is education *for*?’ Behind that question arguably lies another, more fundamental one: ‘What are *we* here for?’

**Wisdom literature and the Law: different views of the same landscape** The study of the wisdom tradition in the Bible is relatively recent – partly because it does not fit neatly into theologies based on the major tenets of salvation history. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘wisdom increasingly and rightfully has come to be recognized as having a vital place not only in OT theology, but also in the theology of the entire biblical canon.’<sup>27</sup>

Wisdom literature apparently derives from a different tradition to the more prominent salvation history themes of the OT found in the Law, Histories and Prophets. Rather than recounting or interpreting these mighty acts of God, wisdom deals with the down-to-earth, day-to-day practicalities of everyday life – hence its ready use as a lens for education. Due to this different approach, some critics have in the past underestimated it or discounted it altogether, believing it to be secular in origin or even borrowed from pagan Ancient Near Eastern traditions. Because it is based on observation,

inductive reasoning and common sense, it did not compare to the revealed truths of the Law and Prophets, and was not viewed as ‘theology’ as a result.

However, Wisdom discusses many of the same concerns as the Law and Prophets – though using different language – and its use as a signpost to the divine is clear. The links between the terms used in the Abraham account in Gen. 18:18-19 already point in this direction. A wide overlap of themes and language can be demonstrated, to the extent that the term ‘Wisdom influence’ is used to describe how these ideas pervade much of the Old Testament.

The overlap becomes clearer with the use of an example. One author draws attention to the similarities between Prov. 3:1-12 and the Shema – the founding statement of faith – of Deut. 6:[3]4-12 (see next page), going so far as to state that the wisdom text represents ‘a sapiential rendition of classic covenantal piety’. That is, it states the same realities using a different frame of reference – Wisdom, instead of Law.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of their respective content, then, both the salvation-historical books of the Old Testament, and the Wisdom tradition embodied in Proverbs, point in the same direction; there is no inherent tension. Again, Abraham’s instruction to direct his household in the ‘way of the Lord by doing what is right and just’ provides both thematic and specific textual links to the history books, prophets and wisdom literature.

These ideas are developed further in the intertestamental literature, which draws together more clearly some of the strands that are implicitly linked in the Hebrew Bible. For the author of Sirach, for example, ‘Jewish wisdom finds its ultimate expression in the Mosaic Torah, and it is by subscribing to this Torah that one can become wise.’<sup>29</sup> Notably, Sir. 44:20 expresses a theme that is absent from the Old Testament, that Abraham was the keeper of the Law:

‘Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory. He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful.’<sup>30</sup>

*Wisdom discusses many of the same concerns as the Law and Prophets*

<sup>26</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Fortress Press, 1982), p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (IVP, 2008), p. 853

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 855

<sup>29</sup> *Dictionary of the Old Testament II*, p. 720.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Gal. 3:15-22.

### Comparison of Prov. 3:1-12 (Wisdom) and Deut. 6:3-12 (Law)

Prov. 3:1-12	Deut. 6:3-12
<p><sup>1</sup>My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, <sup>2</sup>for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity.</p> <p><sup>3</sup>Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. <sup>4</sup>Then you will win favour and a good name in the sight of God and man.</p> <p><sup>5</sup>Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; <sup>6</sup>in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. <sup>7</sup>Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.</p> <p><sup>8</sup>This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. <sup>9</sup>Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; <sup>10</sup>then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. <sup>11</sup>My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, <sup>12</sup>because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.</p>	<p><sup>3</sup>Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.</p> <p><sup>6</sup>These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup>Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.</p> <p><sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>5</sup>Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.</p> <p><sup>10</sup>When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you – a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, <sup>11</sup>houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant – then when you eat and are satisfied, <sup>12</sup>be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.</p>

However, although Sirach correctly identifies the origin of Wisdom and its relationship with the Law, the New Testament authors (who share the same worldview rather than necessarily drawing on Sirach's ideas specifically) have come to a deeper understanding of wisdom. 'For them, traditional wisdom has a trajectory. Wisdom finds its fulfilment in Jesus, and the cross has become the ultimate expression of God's wisdom for human kind (1 Cor. 1:18-31).'<sup>31</sup> Jesus is also the fulfilment of the Mosaic Law (cf. Matt. 5:17-20).

#### The purpose of Law and Wisdom

Law is divinely revealed (by YHWH to Moses on Sinai), but limited because it cannot force right behaviour. The Law creates a baseline for human behaviour: a safety net or barrier beyond which the Israelites were not to sink. Torah begins as a system of simple rules, 'do' and 'do not', which do not need to be understood, only obeyed, to be effective in keeping order.

Wisdom, on the other hand, is based on an 'inductive approach' that starts with observation of the human and natural world and searches for themes, patterns and links, in order to apply this to other situations. It is experiential and internalised, rather than external and imposed. The Law is moral *instruction*; Wisdom is moral *character*. Knowledge of the Law might be a precondition of Wisdom, and it might underpin Wisdom, but Wisdom does not arise spontaneously from knowledge of the Law. The difference, perhaps, is similar to the one between a novice driver, who relies on rote knowledge of an authoritative text like the Highway code and basic 'mirror, signal, manoeuvre' type precepts for safety on the road, and the experienced driver of many years who has internalised and practised these principles in everyday life to the point where they become intuitive and instinctive.

#### Proverbs: parents' role in education

At first reading, Proverbs would appear to continue the theme of parental responsibility for education: many sections of the book are addressed to 'my son(s)', and seem to be a father passing on his collected experience

<sup>31</sup> *DotOT-II*, p. 727.



and wisdom (e.g. 1:8; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1, 10, 20, etc). Against this, there is the argument that Proverbs is a written collection, and therefore cannot be taken as normative practice for Israel as a whole – only that *this* author passed his wisdom on directly to his son in this way. There is also the idea that ‘son’ could be a figurative term for a pupil in a more formal school setting, as elsewhere in the OT and in other ANE parallels. Joseph calls himself Pharaoh’s ‘father’ (Gen. 45:8), and a Levite is termed ‘father’ to those for whom he is priest (cf. Jud. 17:10, 18:19). In Sumerian schools, the headmaster was known as ‘school-father’ and the pupil as ‘school-son’. The superscription to Solomon also argues for a more formal court setting for the transmission of wisdom.

However, ‘The home setting for education in ancient Israel... is put beyond reasonable doubt by references to the mother.’<sup>32</sup> Although the father is perhaps the more active educator in Proverbs, the mother also has an important role, which continues beyond childhood. ‘Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching’ (1:8, closely paralleled in 6:20). In Prov. 31, it is King Lemuel’s (the name means ‘[belonging] to God’) mother who teaches him the oracle in vv. 1-9. Elsewhere in Proverbs there are numerous references to respecting parents and honouring them by your wisdom (e.g. 10:1, cf. 15:20; 23:22; 29:15). Prov. 4:1-9 has a three-generational description of learning, as Wisdom is passed from one generation to the next. On this occasion it is the father who is the teacher; in Prov. 31:26 it is again the mother who ‘speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.’

This inclusion of the mother in Proverbs is supported by references in the Torah. Children are to honour father *and* mother (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; cf. also Lev. 19:3), who are ultimately responsible for their child’s education and discipline (Deut. 21:18-21, see above). As in Deuteronomy, there is an emphasis on family-based discipline in Proverbs. ‘Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it’ (22:6).

Lastly, there is a direct point of contact in Prov. 3:1-12 between the family-centred Wisdom teaching of Proverbs and the family-centred Righteousness teaching of the Torah. As discussed above, these verses appear to be ‘a sapiential rendition of classic covenantal piety’ – that is, they take the same themes of Deut. 6 and recast them in the language of Wisdom. It is interesting and presumably significant that this foundational statement of Israelite identity, repeated daily with children, should be reworked in such Wisdom terms. In Proverbs, the

declaration of monotheistic belief in Deut. 6:4-5 – ‘Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength’ – is stated not in terms of a rivalry for human allegiance between gods, but as a tension between trusting in divine Wisdom as opposed to human understanding (bīnāh, Prov. 3:5).

Although this could be a reflection of the different historical or cultural context of Deut. 6 and Prov. 3 – the latter being one in which the doctrine of monotheism was not in question, or at least not a focal topic – it seems more likely that the different emphasis reflects a wider theme of Proverbs. The book is clearly concerned with faith (against earlier assessments which see it as predominantly secular wisdom) but does not present the primary choice to its audience as one between YHWH and other gods (as Deuteronomy does). Instead, the choice is Wisdom vs. Folly (see Prov. 9). Thus, rephrasing the crucial choice of the *shema* as leaning on God’s understanding rather than human wisdom is entirely consistent with the book.

In conclusion, Proverbs appears to reinforce the home as the most important setting for teaching Wisdom – a ‘right and just’ way to live, paralleling Deuteronomy’s emphasis on parents’ instruction of their children in Torah and Abraham’s instruction to lead his household in the Way of the Lord.

*Proverbs appears to reinforce the home as the most important setting for teaching Wisdom*

## The New Testament

When seeking to understand how society should be organised – whether politically, economically or educationally – it is the Old Testament we first consult. Although Jesus’ coming and teaching are vital for understanding how its laws are to be interpreted and applied, it is the OT itself which contains first principles for establishing and maintaining the structures of the nation of God’s people; the New Testament is more concerned with relationships between believers and the witness of the Church in a pagan world. Consequently we might expect the New Testament to complement the Old by adding insights into the role of the Church and the character qualities of Christian educators, without altering the core principles gleaned from the OT.

Walter Brueggemann’s work *The Creative Word*<sup>33</sup> studies the contribution that each of the three divisions of the Old Testament – the Law, Prophets and Writings – bring to education. Brueggemann’s book is based on the idea that Jer. 18:18 identifies three sources of

<sup>32</sup> See Bruce. K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 61-63.

<sup>33</sup> Fortress Press, 1982.

knowledge and therefore education: the Torah of the priest, the counsel of the wise, the word of the prophet. He argues that these each had a distinct substance and mode in the life of Israel. They have different kinds (degrees) of authority and came to be authoritative at different times. Intriguingly, he also claims that one part of the canon may resonate more than another with educators in the community of faith today; different people are naturally drawn to emphasise certain elements of scripture. The Torah is most appealing to conservative people and church traditions as the most stable and authoritative article of faith, taught with 'certitude and urgency'. The prophetic canon draws the interest of 'social critics, radicals, and revolutionaries' – those inclined towards social change. The 'counsel of the wise' is attractive to 'humanistic psychologists, those who follow the more or less rational modes of John Dewey and those who care for human potential and actualization'. These are 'more attuned to experimental learning and authority.'<sup>34</sup>

Brueggemann argues that Torah is about *ethos*, a 'definitional statement of the character of the community which is a given and is not negotiable among the new generation', in the same way that in the Torah the community precedes the individual as the set of parameters within which the individual is required to live; the Prophets are about the *pathos* of God and Israel, the mismatch between what is promised and experienced; and the writings are impossible to characterise, but Proverbs at least is about *logos* – the conviction that there is order and meaning to life, and that this *logos* is hidden and revealed. 'Good education, like Israel's faith, must be a tense holding together of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*.'<sup>35</sup>

Brueggemann is more concerned about the application of these sources of teaching in their relative emphases and appeal than he is about their respective roles in the educational structures of the nation of Israel (as in the analysis above). However, his work provides one lens through which to approach the person of Jesus and the New Testament texts that are relevant to education. In *The Bible and the Task of Teaching*,<sup>36</sup> Smith and Short review *The Creative Word*, noting that a major gap in the work is the omission of the New Testament example. Nevertheless, 'In Jesus we find not only the rooting in the Torah and the prophetic shaking of accepted readings but all this... accompanied by the proverbs and riddles, the sayings of wisdom that called again and again for the discerning of experience. Jesus is the "model of the models" for in his teaching can be seen

the three emphases already discussed.'<sup>37</sup> The summary of his own development in Luke 2:52 provides an inspiring model for the education of our children: 'And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.'

### The (changing?) role of parents

A major theme in the Old Testament is parents' ultimate responsibility for children's education and discipline, even though the *means* by which was carried out was diverse and highly corporate. Jesus' own teaching is full of parent-child imagery, but this is often nuanced in a different way to that of the Torah. Whereas the Torah emphasises the didactic and disciplinary aspects of the relationship – focused as it is on the transmission of Israel's Law, history and national identity (cf. Deut. 11) – Jesus apparently places far more weight on the nurturing and protective side of parenthood in order to communicate another aspect of God's relationship with his people.

So, for example, there is the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), in which the father's unexpected reaction to his son's return is used to illustrate God's joy at a repenting sinner, as in the previous two parables. There is the expectation that parents would give children good things: 'Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (Luke 11:11-13)

There is Jesus' own metaphor of his desire to care for Jerusalem, this time in terms of motherhood. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!' And there is the unexpected regard he showed for the children brought to him, even if they were not sick. 'People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.' (Mark 10:13-16) Jesus' own relationship with God was expressed characteristically expressed in the word 'Abba' – something less formal and more intimate than 'father'

*Jesus is the "model of the models"*

<sup>34</sup> P. 11.

<sup>35</sup> P. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Stapleford Centre, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> P. 157.

(Mark 14:36, and taken up by Paul in Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6).

Jesus' adoption of parent imagery is a good example of the use and challenge of accepted readings. This provides a useful corrective to potential biases drawn from the Torah, in which parents are charged with ultimate responsibility for the education and discipline that are supposed to result in the next generation of morally-educated and historically-aware children. One effect of Jesus' teaching is to remind parents of their own status as God's children, and their responsibility to bestow the same kinds of privileges that they receive from God on their children. From the perspective of modern parenting theory,<sup>38</sup> there is a balance between authority and discipline, on the one hand, and compassion and leniency on the other.

One caveat to Jesus' recognition of the continuing importance of the Law (Matt. 5:17) and the significance of parents was the idea that allegiance to the Kingdom superseded any parental authority.<sup>39</sup> 'Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31-35) "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) In the same way, we owe the state our loyalty, but only to the extent that this does not conflict with our loyalty to God (Matt. 22:21).

### Pharisees and the synagogue

The Old Testament assumes a major place for parents in ensuring that the Israelites knew the Law, but it does not leave it at that. The Levites also had – amongst other duties – a teaching function, reading the Law in public every seven years (Deut. 31:9-13) and educating the Israelites in their everyday exchanges and periodic festivals. In the time of Ezra, the Levites grew in influence, teaching and translating/interpreting the Law for the people (Neh. 8:7-8). The prophets provided another strand of 'quality control', especially in times

when the established education apparatus failed. Jesus himself falls into this prophetic tradition, assuming responsibility for teaching 'the Way of the Lord', due to the corruption of the Scribes and Pharisees who inherited the Levites' public teaching role in New Testament times.

However, it appears that any man who could read and knew the scriptures could teach in the synagogue, as Jesus and Paul both did.<sup>40</sup> There was no dedicated teacher/minister (as in many churches today), although there were several figures of authority associated with the synagogue who are mentioned in the New Testament, such as the leaders or rulers (cf. Jairus in Mark 5:22; Luke 13:14; Acts 13:15) and the synagogue attendant (Luke 4:20).

This confirms the Old Testament picture: that teaching was not considered the sole task of parents, but that scriptural education was carried out on a wide scale through the substantial network of synagogues and in the Temple courts. There were supposedly 480 synagogues in Jerusalem in Jesus' time, each with a school attached;<sup>41</sup> however, the accuracy of this is doubtful due to the relative size of the city and the fact that 480 is otherwise a biblically significant number. All the same, the existence of a range of teachers shows that education was not solely considered a parental task, as was provided for in the OT with the work of the Levites and the prophets' periodic ministries.

### Some preliminary conclusions

From this brief and partial survey of some of the most important biblical texts dealing with education, a few preliminary observations can be made:

- The teaching that occurs in the early stages of Israel's history includes a strong element of moral instruction: the 'Way of the Lord', which is to enable people to do what is 'right and just.'
- Throughout the Bible this idea is phrased in different ways depending on the context (e.g. Deut. 10:12-13; Prov. 1:2-7), but the ultimate emphasis is on a choice between the right and wrong ways to live.
- This benefitted the individual but also had a corporate aspect; it was for the overall health of Israelite society, and to bless all nations by its example.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Diana Baumrind's 'authoritative' parenting style, in contrast to 'authoritarian' or 'permissive' parenting. See, e.g., Baumrind, D. (1967). 'Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior.' *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 75(1), pp. 43-88.

<sup>39</sup> Although allegiance to the Kingdom could supersede parental authority if necessary, this was not supposed to be the norm and Jesus makes it clear that obligations to parents are to be taken seriously (Mark 7:9-13).

<sup>40</sup> Though Paul was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Hoshaiiah, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century collector of tannaitic traditions

- Education was a distributed, lifelong, society-wide process – a cross-cutting activity that took place in a large variety of settings.
- Teaching was not something outsourced to schools, or for a defined period of time; it was woven through the regular exchanges and experiences of life.
- Parents had ultimate responsibility for educating their children (households), even if the means of doing so were diverse.
- The ‘syllabus’ that was taught (the ‘Law’ or the ‘Way of the Lord’) was freely and publicly available to all Israelites – indeed, knowing the right way to live was a condition of living in the land.
- The Levites were the public servants of Israel. As well as service in the Temple, they held roles in public health, the law courts and other areas. Each of these roles involved an element of teaching.
- In one sense, the Levites’ task was to educate the Israelites not to need them – for example in the case of the Levite who enables the local judge to do his job properly (Deut. 17).
- The king and state officials and apparatus were under the Law, and therefore answerable to the Levites, not vice versa.
- Similarly, educators (the Levites) were answerable to their own leadership, the Temple, rather than to a political master in the form of the king.
- Prophets periodically provided a ‘backstop’ when the leadership of the king and priesthood failed.
- This accountability was part of a wider system of checks and balances designed to restrict power at the highest levels and to pass it downwards towards local organisations, communities and families.
- Jesus falls into the prophetic tradition of correcting faulty or absent teaching by the ‘official’ educators – in this case the Scribes and Pharisees.
- Jesus also provides a corrective to potential distortions of the Torah’s message, emphasising the compassionate and nurturing side of God’s relationship with his people, and highlighting a quality of the ideal teacher.
- Parental authority is superseded only by allegiance to the Kingdom of God.

### Further questions

This brief overview raises a number of questions for further study in the future, including:

- How the model of education described in the Old Testament was reflected and developed in New Testament times and beyond, and the role of the Church
- How practical challenges brought about by the changing requirements for education were addressed, and the justification behind this
- How these insights might be applied in our own context, particularly with regards to the integration of education across different aspects of society. For example:
  - Creating links between schools and local businesses for purposes of teaching and ‘apprenticeship’ placements
  - Encouraging professionals to give occasional time to teach in their specialism
  - Involving parents more in school life
  - Bringing about a culture change that aims to prepare pupils for life after school beyond the requirements of the job market
  - Clarifying the respective roles and responsibilities of state, parents, schools/teachers, communities and pupils at different stages in the educational process.
  - For new initiatives, articulate what a fully-integrated model of school/education might look like when starting from scratch.

This is the picture presented by the Bible of the ‘education’ that was expected to take place in Israel’s early stages. It quickly becomes clear that a completely different kind of society is being depicted here. It is one in which ‘formal’ education in schools is a rarity at best (perhaps reserved for the Levites themselves and for state officials) but one in which a very high value is nevertheless placed on education. Rather than outsourcing education, teaching is integrated into the daily experiences of Israelite life, into its regular exchanges and its periodic festivals. Contact with the Levites – Israel’s public servants – frequently had an educative component.

In the New Testament:

- There is a broad continuity of approach, with a range of teachers and educational opportunities.

