
Early Hebrew education and its significance for present-day educational theory and practice

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Abstract

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The history of education in antiquity is not without relevance to present-day educational theory and practice. The focus in this article is on the early Hebrews and their education. A study of early Hebrew education may in itself not provide solutions to current educational problems, but it may be useful in offering new perspectives, encouragement and suggestions for a future South African educational dispensation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Remote and irrelevant though the theme of this article may at first seem, the ways in which early societies educated their young form a truly significant theme which should inevitably prove fascinating and worthwhile. The history of education in antiquity is not without relevance to present-day educational theory and practice. Many philosophers and educationists have, throughout the ages, emphasised the importance of the past. Of all the peoples of antiquity, the focus in this article will be on the early Hebrews and their education. Although originally just another desert tribe, they placed their mark permanently on human civilisation, directly on its religious and moral aspects, but significantly also in salient contributions to education (Wilds & Lottich 1970:66). The Hebrews are an old people and the educational wisdom they have acquired through their long history ought not to be neglected or wasted.

The purpose of this article is threefold:

- * To trace the direct ancestry of our educational tradition as the educational theory and practice of the present are rooted in the past.

- * Early Hebrew education is generally, however, inadequately known because it frequently served merely as background for the rise of Christian education. A study of how the early Hebrews educated their young may therefore yield new ideas and perspectives of value for present-day educational theory and practice.

- * As issues of education reassert themselves from time to time, no present-day educational issues are altogether new. Knowledge of early Hebrew education may in itself not provide solutions to current educational problems, but it may be useful in offering new perspectives, encouragement and suggestions for a future South African educational dispensation.

In view of the preceding remarks, the method of procedure involved in this article is as follows: first, an overview of the genesis and evolution of early Hebrew education; second, an indication of the significance of early Hebrew education for present-day educational theory and practice; and finally, the expression of some concluding remarks.

Before proceeding with the above method of procedure, a few concepts should first be clarified in order to avoid confusion later.

1.1 Hebrew, Israelite and Jew

These concepts are often used interchangeably. There is nothing wrong in this use, but for the purposes of this article it is essential to understand what each means. The Hebrews were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the last also called Israel. His name was applied to the tribes who settled in Canaan and some nearby lands. Later some of the tribes became two kingdoms: Israel was the kingdom of northern Palestine, while Judah was the southern kingdom (named after one of the sons of Jacob) over which the family of David ruled. Both populations could rightly be called Hebrews and both could be referred to as the children of Israel. The northerners called themselves Israelites, and the southerners Judeans. Subsequently, both kingdoms were destroyed, but only the Judeans succeeded in reestablishing themselves in their old land. Only the Judeans, therefore, played a part in later history. The concept Jew is a modification of the concept Judean. The Jews are the later remnants of the Hebrews and the Israelites (Grayzel 1963:6). For the purposes of this article the concept Hebrew is used.

1.2 Promised land

The land promised by Yahweh to the patriarchs was referred to as Canaan (See Gn 12). In addition, yet other names are used for this area that will be the chief concern of this article. We also find the name 'land of Israel'. However, 'Palestine' is one of the best known names (Jagersma 1982:8). In this article when referring to the Promised land, the names will be used in the same manner as they are used in the consulted sources.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF EARLY HEBREW EDUCATION

As changes in education are always closely related to political and social changes, the periods in the history of early Hebrew education necessarily follow the periods of political history. Consequently, the following periods can be distinguished in the history of the genesis and evolution of early Hebrew education: the native or pre-exilic period (2300-586 BC) and the period after exile, the post-exilic period (586 BC-135 AD).

2.1 Education during the native or pre-exilic period

For the mass of people the native or pre-exilic period was a period without schools. The tribe and the family were the chief educational institutions. Educational activity in the native or pre-exilic period was, however, not limited exclusively to the home. Private training for the sons of well-to-do Hebrews appears to have been available and facilities must have existed for the training of specialists. The rise of orders of priests and of communities of prophets led to some sort of provision for giving special training to the members of these orders and communities (McCormick 1959:81-82).

2.1.1 Education in the tribe and family

With reference to education in the time of the patriarchs, nothing is very certain. Knowing, however, the extreme conservatism of the peoples of the Near East, it is safe to assume that the training of children from the days of Abraham to the time of Moses was much like that of Bedouin tribes in later eras (Eby & Arrowood 1947:11). All members of the tribe of the same sex received practically the same training. It may be that the eldest son of the prospective successor to the position of the tribe chief received some special training in religious rites, tribal ceremonies, institutions and laws (Swift 1919:22)

There were no formal schools; life itself served as the child's school. He learned by living in the group and participating in its activities. His parents instructed him in the skills they knew and wished him to master. When he was ready, the elders of his people gave that instruction necessary for assuming adult responsibilities and privileges. This entire programme of education must have included the crafts in which the people

were proficient, skills of tracking and obtaining food, magical procedures needed to deal effectively with the unseen forces and powers of his environment, and the folklore of his tradition. The education of this period was wholly practical and tied closely to survival in both the material and social environment.

Education during the captivity in Egypt was no different from that of the nomadic years. Undoubtedly, the Hebrews were tremendously influenced by the culture that they found in Egypt. Some may have even attended the schools and learned to read and write (Frost & Bailey 1973:36-37).

Once back in Canaan, the family was retained as chief educational institution. For a discussion of education in the family during the native or pre-exilic period see pp 6-7. As data regarding education in the family in the native or pre-exilic period belongs quite as much to the post-exilic period, discussion thereof has thus been reserved until the post-exilic period.

2.1.2 Education outside the family

2.1.2.1 Private training

There undoubtedly were men who taught children other than their own either as pupils or as apprentices. Bezaleel and Aholiab, the artists who built the tabernacle and all its vessels, were endowed by the Lord with the ability to teach others (See Ex 35). The children of the royal family most likely had their own private teachers. Moreover, members of the court apparently studied the dominant language of the age, as well as the Hebrew language.

2.1.2.2 Priest orders and prophet communities

Priests and prophets are spoken of most frequently as teachers of the people. The priests were essentially ministers at and guardians of the shrine of Yahweh, and the prophets were essentially preachers. It would be misleading as well as confusing to designate either the priests or the prophets as teachers. Yet in fulfilling the very work to which they had been consecrated, they were in a very real sense stimulating and guiding the religious and moral consciousness, furnishing it with content and with forms of expression and were educating it. It is therefore impossible to exclude from even a brief account of early Hebrew education some consideration of the educational services of the priests and prophets (Swift 1919:31-32).

(a) Priests

Throughout the greater part of the native or pre-exilic period a multitude of shrines and temples presided over by bodies of priests existed. Among the most important functions of the early priesthood were divination, guarding and ministering at the shrine of Yahweh, and teaching. They taught to the individual resorting to them in private and to the multitude publicly assembled in the temple or in the open forms of worship. They collected and transmitted (at first orally, later in writing) laws, rites, ceremonies, myths, legends and history. They put much of the above into forms easy to grasp and remember, and taught them to the people.

Their communities were the first organised groups in Palestine providing definite and special instruction for a class (the priesthood; Swift 1919:33-34). That the priests received some kind of systematic and formal instruction must be taken for granted. The priests had to be thoroughly acquainted not only with an elaborate and complicated sacrificial system but also with the intricate laws of purity and physical health. They could not possibly enter upon their duties without thorough previous instruction. The advanced age (30) at which they started to perform their duties in the temple probably reflects the extended period of training they had to undergo (Finkelstein 1960:1260).

(b) Prophets

The prophets or 'sons of the prophets' were not primarily nor chiefly foretellers of the future. Their importance is due to the part they played in public affairs and to their service as public teachers. They appear to have lived in communities, frequently in the vicinity of some famous sanctuary as Beth-El and Gilgal. In contrast to the priestly order the prophets were a lay order. But the early prophets appear also to have had schools or at least groups within which they trained the novitiates and developed their own spiritual powers (Finkelstein 1960:1260; Frost & Bailey 1973:38-39; Morris 1937:8-9).

The prophets were wandering teachers. In their own eyes and in the eyes of the people, they were Yahweh's divinely commissioned messengers. Wherever there was an opportunity to make known His will, wherever there was need of protest against evils or of encouragement in righteousness, there they took themselves. Often the temple court was the scene of the prophets' teaching. The prophets made extensive use of symbolism, the object lesson and the dramatic method. Through their spoken public addresses and writing they became creators of national religious and social ideals, critics and inspirers of public policies, denouncers of social wrongs, preachers of individual and social righteousness, and the source and channel of an ever-loftier conception of Yahweh and of the mission of the Hebrews. In fulfilling each of these capacities, they were acting as public teachers (Swift 1919:35-38; Heaton 1994:93-105).

2.2 Education during the post-exilic period

The effects of the exile upon the Hebrews were far-reaching. Babylon at that time was the most advanced centre of culture and learning in the world. There schools, libraries, and literature were already ancient. In contact with this environment the Hebrews came to understand the importance of the school and literature (Eby & Arrowood 1947: 137). The restoration of the Hebrew community in Palestine after the Babylonian exile thus brought a number of changes in the educational concepts of the Hebrew people. Schools were established to supplement the educational activities of the family.

2.2.1 Education in the family

The family was regarded as the fundamental educational institution (Cohen 1961:173). Many scriptures instructed the parents to teach their children (see Ex 12:26-28; Dt 4:9-10, 6:7-9; Jos 4:21-24; Pr 1:8; Carpenter 1958:22-25). Parental instruction thus was compulsory, with the father acting with complete power over his children as teacher, and with the mother sharing in the duty of instruction. The most important task of the parents was to teach their children religion (Verster et al 1989:25-26).

2.2.1.1 Fathers' responsibility

The father as the head of the family was charged with the responsibility of educating his sons and even grandsons in the Lord's Truth, the divine laws, particular rites, and the significance of sacred monuments or landmarks (Morris 1937:421). The family was also commanded to practise prescribed ceremonies for the express purpose of perpetuating the knowledge of great historic events and stimulating the inquisitive mind of the child. The latter's questions provide a natural setting for the father to explain and emphasise some precious traditions. While the parents were commanded to teach their children, the children were urged to take to heart the instruction of their parents (See Pr 4; Finkelstein 1960:1255; Rombouts 1962:20).

This instruction was to be done diligently, at every convenient time (Cohen 1961: 173). The father was given strong measures for disciplining his children to obedience (see Pr 22:15, 23:13-14, 29:15, 17). Although such strict discipline and corporal punishment were permitted and even commanded, the typical Hebrew father was not cruelly austere. The father's main method of teaching his children was oral instruction and example. Besides religious education, every father was also responsible for teaching his son a trade, morals, manners, using of weaponry and practical problems of daily living (Carpenter 1958:25-28; Cohen 1961:195). Brighter children were taught to read if their parents had any facility with this skill (Drazin 1940:245). The father

was not obligated to teach his daughters the Torah¹. This, however, does not mean that girls received no education or that instruction in the Torah was denied them. They must have been taught much of it, since many of the ordinances concerned them. Thus a father was free to teach his daughters (Cohen 1961:179; Box 1901:1201).

2.2.1.2 Mothers' responsibility

Many mothers became proficient in educating their children as they assisted their husbands in their responsibility of teaching the sons. All small children would receive primary moral instruction from their mothers. Although girls received informal education from their fathers in the family rites and rituals, and learned from the public services in the synagogues and at the temple during festival times, their main teacher was their mother. The education of girls was strongly domestic. They were taught to spin and weave, to prepare food and to superintend the work of the household, to care for children, and to sing and dance to simple musical instruments (Morris 1937:42; Rombouts 1962:20).

2.2.2 Education in school and society

2.2.2.1 School

Education by parents in the home was a leisurely arrangement with many interruptions owing to the father's preoccupation with the essential tasks of business and employment. At best this sporadic teaching failed to meet the educational needs of the children. It is also reasonable to assume that many parents had become lax in teaching their children owing to the Maccabean wars (167-163 BC), Roman oppression (64 BC-138 AD) and other national emergencies. In addition, as the earlier hope of ever becoming a great political power waned, a new hope arose, that of preserving the nation through preserving its religion. There was only one way of doing this, by education. This educational zeal resulted in a tendency to organise and institutionalise education. Although the family remained as it had in the native or pre-exilic period the fundamental educational institution, and the parents continued to be the child's first teachers, there gradually arose educational institutions (Swift 1919:76). Four stages can be distinguished in the institutional development of the Hebrew school system:

(a) Synagogue

The revolution introduced by Ezra² into the religious life of the post-exilic Hebrew community made the Torah at once the core and the foundation of the community's spiritual life. This development lent further emphasis to instruction in the Law (Laurie

1970:86). In this setting the synagogue rose to great prominence as an educational and devotional centre in post-exilic days. Synagogue services were held twice on the Sabbath, on all feast and fast-days, and on the two weekly market-days, Monday and Thursday. Although the services varied somewhat with the day and the hour, the general order was the same. An analysis of the Sabbath morning service shows that it consisted of two main divisions: one liturgical, the other instructional.

The liturgical portion consisted of the recitation by all adult males of the *shema*³, preceded and followed by a number of benedictions, prayers or eulogies recited by one individual especially deputed for the occasion, the congregation simply responding 'Amen'. The liturgical portion of the service thus offered definite systematic training in worship and acts of devotion. The instructional portion consisted of the reading of scripture. Reading scripture in itself, however, could not serve the educational purpose adequately. Hence, there was added a translation into the vernacular by the *meturgeman* or translator. The Torah was so divided so that its reading extended more than three and a half year. The section for the day was subdivided in such a manner that at least seven persons might be called upon to read a portion of not less than three verses each. Finally came the *derashah*, an address or exposition that consisted of the explanation and application of the day's lesson or some portion of it.

But the scripture readings and the sermons were not the only direct educational features of the synagogue service. The traditional prayer book itself contained many educational features. The prayers were modified for various occasions of the year, so that the festival celebrated, or the historic occasion remembered, was given its meaning and interpretation. The synagogue was thus the first school for adults. But even in its earliest form the synagogue supplied an important means of indirect education for the young. For they would accompany their elders on their visits to the religious gatherings and there they would listen to the discourses and learn to join in the prayers, thus being gradually initiated into the life of the community (Carpenter 1958:56-58; Finkelstein 1960:1258-1259; Eby & Arrowood 1947:14).

(b) Secondary schools

As indicated previously, the Hebrews in the days of Ezra became preeminently people of the Book. After the return from captivity the Hebrew people therefore took complete refuge in the Law as the guide of life (Drazin 1940:35-36). Basically, this legalism rested upon the assumption that the Torah plus its subsequent oral elaboration (the Mishna⁴) supplied a complete guide for the regulation of every detail of the Hebrews' life. Obviously, the Torah could function to this end only if the Hebrews knew its precepts (Cohen 1961:135). Hence, the Law, both Written and Oral, had to be interpreted and taught. This accounts for the emergence of a class — the scribes (Eby &

Arrowood 1947:139). The scribes were at first a combination of copyists, lawyers, and interpreters. However, they became the Hebrews' first great teachers (Spiers 1898:28-34).

From earliest times it was necessary for prospective scribes to receive special professional training. Those who were called upon daily to declare and administer the Law must possess not merely a superior knowledge of the Law itself, they must know all possible interpretations, methods of interpretation and the precedents created by former decisions and applications. The instruction of the youth thus formed one of the chief functions of the scribes. Prominent scribes, therefore, would draw to themselves groups of disciples or students who desired to be educated by them so as to become capable scribes. These schools mainly for the training of scribes were secondary schools called the *Bet ha-midrash* (House of Study).

The *Bet ha-midrash* was for boys only. Before the advent of elementary schools boys would enter the *Bet ha-midrash* only after they had completed the fundamentals of elementary education in the home. This would generally be when they were 16 or 17 years of age. When elementary schools were established, boys completed the fundamentals of their elementary education several years earlier. Thus they were able to enter the secondary schools at the age of ten to 13 years (Finkelstein 1960:1264). As conditions became more settled throughout Palestine, the scribes made their way to its remotest parts. The scribal schools were first established in the homes of wealthy individuals or of the most prominent scribes. However, they taught chiefly in the porches of the temple and in the synagogues.

Since the purpose of the secondary schools was largely the training of scribes, the content of education was advanced religious and theological study of both the Written and Oral Law, as well as the Hebrew language (Swift 1919:100). In some of the scribal schools, Greek learning may have had a place since Greek was recognised as a suitable language in which the Torah could be translated (Laurie 1970:92). Since the multifarious details of the Laws of the Torah involved many subjects, the students had to be made familiar with secular subjects, but always they were taught secondary to the study of the Torah. For instance, in learning the laws of permissible and prohibitive foods and those relating to blemishes that render animals unfit for sacrifices in the temple, the students learned some animal anatomy, physiology, zoology, and medicine. So, too, in learning to reckon the Hebrew calendar, the students were familiarised with certain elements of mathematics and astronomy. The students also obtained some knowledge of botany and agriculture when they studied the law applicable to mixing and planting seeds. Certain elements of architecture were presented to the students when they studied the laws relative to the building of the tabernacle and temple (Drazin 1940:92-93).

The accepted method was oral transmission, with the memorisation of subject matter through frequent repetition. At this stage in the development of the students they were involved in discussions and arguments (disputation), whilst the teacher explained much more. Students were encouraged to ask questions and these were aimed to broadening their insight into the particular doctrines of their religion. All teaching was dogmatic in nature. The explanation and interpretation of the Law and the Holy Scriptures by the teacher were never questioned. In order to assist their students to retain their words the teachers used metaphors, parables, idioms, epigrams, dictums, chanting, counter-questions, debates, allegories, riddles, stories, word association and mnemonic, whilst references to concrete things served to elucidate certain life principles to the students. At these schools public discussions between experts (scribes) were held and these discussions were attended by the students. During these discussions students were allowed to ask questions and to raise problems (Swift 1919:101). In their groups of select pupils as well as in public they thus made large use of the question and answer method, the students as well as the master asking questions (Drazin 1940:89; Frost & Bailey 1973:42).

Since education was not yet compulsory, comparatively few who started the *Bet ha-midrash* completed their studies. Several factors (see p 11) combined to prevent many from completing their studies at these schools (Carpenter 1958:74-76).

(c) Elementary schools

The elementary school arose because of several circumstances that became crucial after the return to Palestine:

- * The family was, owing to mixed marriages and heathen practices, inadequate as instrument for preserving the national culture and worship of Yahweh.
- * Contact with Babylonian culture convinced Hebrew leaders of the necessity of schools and learning.
- * The increase of general knowledge and culture, the expansion of Hebrew literature and the need of writing for commercial life created a demand for an institution to instruct the young in reading and writing.
- * The need for reading and writing was also infinitely increased by the demand for training in the Written Law. The conviction now arose that their great national

calamities were visited upon them because they had failed to obey the Law of God. In order to restore prosperity, the Law of God must be known and kept by every Hebrew (Cohen 1961:173; Eby & Arrowood 1947:141).

The family was not in a position to perform these new tasks of teaching reading, writing and the Law, though still retained in large measure its ancient functions, the training in practical religion, morals and vocational life.

Now that it was accepted that someone other than parents could properly teach children the Torah, many parents, individually or in groups, paid for instruction by individual teachers. Thus came into existence the *Tinokot Shel ben Rabban* (Children of the House of the Master) where classes of young boys studied the Torah (Carpenter 1958:84).

The exact origin of the Hebrew elementary school is uncertain. There can, however, be no question that the first step was taken by Simon ben Shetah (when he was president of the Great Sanhedrin). Around 75 BC he issued a set of educational reforms by a decree that boys more than seven years of age should go to school in order to spread elementary education more widely among the people (Cohen 1961:174). Simon ben Shetah also founded a central school in Jerusalem. This school was primarily for the orphans whose education had been neglected since they had no fathers to instruct them. Fathers who could not properly instruct their sons also brought them to Jerusalem (Carpenter 1958:78). This was the first elementary school in the history of Hebrew education. The Jerusalem school became overcrowded. Schools were then established in the larger cities, and the admission age raised to 16 or 17, since these boys could provide for themselves away from home. Although these schools were for adolescent boys, the instruction was on elementary level. These schools were called *Bet ha-sefer* (House of the Book) since the instruction was in the Torah. The success of Simon ben Shetah's reform was brief, since many adolescents had no-one to send them, or even preferred not to be instructed. Many married early and were busy in their vocations. Others, who were sent, rebelled when the discipline became harsh and simply walked away. Some of them were also not able to pay the required fees (Carpenter 1958:74-76, 79).

Joshua ben Gamala (high priest 63-65 AD) felt the only solution was free, compulsory education for all boys. By a decree, dated 64 AD, he ordained that teachers be appointed in every town and that children enter these schools at the age of six or seven years (Cohen 1961:174-175; Frost & Bailey 1973:4). The *Bet ha-sefer* was commonly housed in the synagogues (Carpenter 1958:85). Since the synagogues had separate rooms for women to hear instruction and share in the worship service, this second room

provided a natural place for the elementary class. When necessary, an additional room was built on the synagogue. All schools were for boys from six to ten years of age. The elementary education was completed in four years or less (Verster et al 1990:4-5; McCormick 1959:85).

In the beginning probably any scribe or officer of the synagogue who had the leisure taught the elementary class. In time, however, the master of the elementary school came to bear the distinct title of *hazzan*⁶. Unlike education at home where children were individually taught, teaching at the *Bet ha-sefer* occurred in groups. Only 25 or fewer students were assigned to one teacher. If the number became more than 25 but less than 50 an assistant had to be appointed at the expense of the town. If the number increased to 50, a second teacher had to be appointed (Cohen 1961:176). The class sat on the floor in a semicircle at the teacher's feet facing him while he was sitting on a raised bench (Frost & Bailey 1973:41). Wax tablets on which students were taught the art of writing with the stylus were sometimes used. When the students advanced they started writing on paper and parchment with a pen (Carpenter 1958:207).

The basic curriculum included religion, morals, manners, local history and law, as well as the three R's (Carpenter 1958:88). Secular subjects were learned only as they were necessary to the understanding of the Law or to the problems of daily living (Cohen 1961:191; Swift 1919:96). There was also some instruction in the trades, a matter on which the Talmud insisted (Cohen 1961:191).

In the elementary schools — where no books were available — the method of instruction was oral and the good example of the teacher was central. The sanctity attached to every word and every letter of the Law made it necessary that it be memorised exactly word for word and letter for letter. Absolute accuracy was imperative. To achieve this end, countless memorisation exercises and constant repetitions were employed. All subject matter that had to be memorised was repeated aloud — four times or until the pupils had learned it (Cohen 1961:176). The articulation of the teacher was exactly copied (Frost & Bailey 1973:41). The early Hebrews came to understand that there are individual differences in the ability of students to memorise. Four types of students are classified by the Talmud: a sponge that absorbs everything, a funnel that takes all in at one end and lets it out at the other end, a sieve that lets the wine pass through but keeps the lees, a winnow that removes the coarse meal but keeps the fine (Cohen 1961:179).

In the Talmud there are even fixed tips and instructions for teachers to make teaching pleasant to the students. These tips are especially connected with the clarity of explanations and the way in which repetition must be productively used so that students can understand well and can recite specific memorised matter fluently and exactly (Car-

penter 1958:209). The view was taken that students not only learn from their teachers, but also from their peers, whilst the teacher himself also learns much from his students (Swift 1919:99).

(d) Academies

The academies were actually the universities or colleges of the Hebrews and were called *Bet ha-Talmud* (House of Talmud) or *Bet ha-midrash* (House of Study), but were distinct from the secondary schools. Students could enter after completing the secondary schools or otherwise demonstrating the required knowledge. In these academies learned scribes congregated and gathered their disciples, differing in their view, often fighting one another but united in the great, austere love of Yahweh's Torah.

Although the academies were strong, comparatively few students ever completed this advanced study. The lack of compulsory education, and the fact of early marriages and the necessity for youth to enter a vocation early, made progress up the educational ladder very difficult.

Although the existence of academies was not continuous, one was founded in Babylon during the captivity. The first such academy in Jerusalem was founded about 50 BC. With the rise of the Jerusalem academies, the Babylonian academy began to take on a more subordinate position. In Palestine these academies were concentrated mostly in Jerusalem. As the academies came into prominence, higher education was democratised to the extent that masters of the Law instructed classes of many disciples instead of giving their sole attention to some gifted student (Drazin 1940:94).

The content of higher education was known by the word *Talmud* or *Midrash*⁸. The entire Torah was also expounded (Drazin 1940:100). Such training emphasised the virtues of charity, chastity, truthfulness, prudence, diligence, and temperance. Eventually instruction in mathematics, foreign languages, astronomy and geography was given in these academies (Wilds & Lottich 1970:79). Many students were instructed in gymnastics, military affairs, swimming, the craft of writing, singing and other unusual skills (Drazin 1940:101).

(e) Education for girls

The evidence seems to point to the fact that women occupied a relatively higher place in earlier than in later times. For the most part, however, in and outside the home, their place was subordinate to that of men (Peritz 1898:114). The home was the institution where girls received their education. The elementary and secondary schools and the academies were open to boys and men only. In some instances girls may have

received advanced instruction through private lessons given in the home but, if such cases occurred at all, they were undoubtedly rare. Festivals, the temple and the synagogue were the chief external institutions that exerted an educative influence upon girls and women (Swift 1919:115). Thus, women were not excluded from learning the Torah, only the 'higher studies' were considered out of a woman's sphere (Carpenter 1958:36-37).

2.2.2.2 Society

Although schools were developed in Palestine and what the community deemed worthwhile was taught, the child lived in an environment that was intentionally educative (Frost & Bailey 1973:37).

(a) Festivals

Through the great national festivals⁹ the Hebrews commemorated important happenings, renewed their dedication to their ideals and their God, and recognised their dependence upon God. From the standpoint of education, the significance of the festivals was manifold. Every festival was an opportunity for priests, scribes and parents to teach and review the origin and symbolic meaning of the occasion. No other activity in Hebrew life did more to educate and develop the national and religious consciousness of the Hebrew than these annual festivals. This was true for individuals, for the family and for the nation as a whole.

The typical Hebrew family participated whole-heartedly in the spirit of these festive occasions. Parents were directed to instruct their children in advance or during the celebration in the origin and meaning of the festival. In many of these festivals the children were given a distinctive role to play. At a point in the observances of the feast of the Passover or Unleavened Bread¹⁰, the youngest child arose and made inquiry as to the meaning of the feast. The father then explained its significance. The child was thus woven into family or group activity so that its meaning was brought to him most vividly. Through the national festivals each new generation thus was taught the story of the great religious and political experiences of the nation (Swift 1919:104).

(b) Temple

As long as the temple stood, it remained the national centre of religious education. However, a new institution, the synagogue, gradually arose in every community to become the people's prayer-house, assembly-hall and house of instruction. In spite of the multiplication of synagogues throughout the land, the temple remained the national shrine at which the Hebrews congregated to celebrate the great national festivals, and where they were trained in forms of worship (Carpenter 1958:108-109).

Public instruction and training were given in the courts of the temple. Carefully trained choirs of priests sang the national songs of praise and worship at the festivals and thereby taught them to the people. Not only was the temple service fraught throughout with symbolism, but the structure and organisation of the temple made it a monumental object lesson in teaching the holiness, majesty and omnipotence of God (Carpenter 1958:111).

The multitude of private sacrifices required of every Hebrew made the influence of the temple individual as well as national. To visit Jerusalem and worship in the temple became a lifetime desire of every Hebrew. Thousands of pilgrims journeyed there each year. Many returned home, inspired and strengthened in their faith, and better instructed in the approved methods of religious observances (Swift 1919:104-107).

Edersheim (1876:108) pictures the effect of a visit to the temple upon a Hebrew child as follows:

No one who had ever worshipped within the courts of Jehovah's house at Jerusalem could ever have forgotten the scenes he had witnessed or the words he had heard. Standing in that gorgeous, glorious building, and looking up its terraced vista, the child would watch with solemn awe, not unmingled with wonderment as the great throng of white-robed priests busily moved about, while the smoke of the sacrifice rose from the altar of burnt-offering. Then, amid the hushed silence of that vast multitude, they had all fallen down to worship at the time of incense. Again, on those steps that led up to the innermost sanctuary the priests had lifted their hands and spoken over the people the words of blessing; and then, while the drink-offerings were poured out, the Levites' chant of psalms had risen and swelled into a mighty volume; the exquisite treble of the children's voices being sustained by the rich round notes of the men, accompanied by instrumental music. The Jewish child knew many of these words. They had been the earliest songs he had heard — almost his first lesson when clinging as a 'taph' to his mother. But now, in those white-marbled, gold-adorned halls, under heaven's blue canopy, and with such surroundings, they would fall upon his ear like sounds from another world, to which the prolonged threefold blasts from the silver trumpets of the priests would seem to waken him. And they were sounds from another world; for, as his father would tell him, all that he saw was after the exact pattern of heavenly things which God had shown

to Moses on Mount Sinai; all that he heard was God-uttered, spoken by Jehovah Himself through the mouth of His servant David, and of the other sweet singers of Israel.

(c) Monuments

Monuments of stone and other material were set up in various places as memorials of the great events in the life of the Hebrews. This was done especially to impress the young (Eby & Arrowood 1947:120; Morris 1937:89-90).

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLY HEBREW EDUCATION FOR PRESENT-DAY EDUCATIONAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

On the whole the above exposition of early Hebrew education presents a picture of a practical and efficient educational system motivated by high ideals. It is clear that some of our present-day educational ideas and practices originated from those of the early Hebrews. Educational ideas and practices are thus not necessarily unusable if they are old, and we still have much to learn from the early Hebrews. Their system inevitably has to be adapted to present-day educational needs. Some of the lessons still to be learnt from the educational thoughts and practices of the early Hebrews are the following:

- * *Education as lifelong affair:* The early Hebrews stressed the idea of education as a continual process to be carried on literally from the cradle to the grave functioning at all times and in all places. For the Hebrews, education was definitely a lifelong affair and did not cease with graduation. Every Hebrew, be he rich or poor, young or old, was obligated to study the Torah every day. Of course, contemporary education expresses its hope that its graduates will continue their education, but only recently have organised efforts started to transform this hope into reality.

- * *Family as primary educational institution:* The early Hebrews regarded school education as highly important but they saw the family as the primary educational institution. For the early Hebrews the responsibility to educate and to care for the child was the parents'. For them the first need of a child was a close family life, where he could live according to the example of his parents, who were themselves living according to the demands of virtue and responsibility, and where discipline existed without tyranny, and security was vested in strong bonds of love. They thus stressed the need for an intimate family life in the education of children, for it

is here that the child first learns what is important and what is unimportant, what is eternal and what is transient. As nuclear families at present become increasingly unstable, family patterns are produced that are directly opposed to the above pattern that the Hebrews believed was desirable to adequately nurture growing children. Present-day education can therefore possibly consider implementing the early Hebrews' idea regarding the family and education.

- * *Ontologically grounded educational aim:* Another lesson to be learnt from the educational ideas of the early Hebrews deals with the educational aim. To educate implies to place the otherwise inconstant, unstable life of a child on a steady course. Such an educational aim does not surrender the child to the fickleness of secular values. It is anchored in eternal, transcendental, spiritual values that by their nature offer spiritual security, for which the child has a real need. The educational aim must, therefore, be ontologically grounded and justified. Furthermore, an educational aim must be worthwhile and a permanent source of inspiration (Gunter 1975:118). This was the case with the early Hebrew educational aim. If an educational aim is only concerned with the solution of immediate practical problems, such as the provision of linguists, technologists or atomic scientists the fact is denied that it is education that makes man, that makes him obedient to the moral law, that enables him to fix his eyes upon the good and the exalted at all times. The early Hebrew educational aim produced a morally good human being in a morally good society — and it is only by keeping our eyes fixed on this remote point that contemporary parents and teachers will be able to retain their direction in education.
- * *Religiously oriented content of education:* With regard to the content of education, we have much to learn from the early Hebrews. The content of early Hebrew education was religiously oriented with scripture as the main textbook. History has shown that this learning content stood the test of time. In addition, religiosity is one of the basic forms of being human and education, therefore, has to be religiously oriented (Van Rensburg et al 1979:42). Because of this reason scripture should also get a place of honour in schools and education nowadays, and special attention should be devoted to religious education.
- * *Protective environment:* The early Hebrews acknowledged the fact that the environment plays an important role in the educational process. They emphasised that the environment definitely influenced the child, whether for good or bad. A pro-

tective environment is essential as the child is only really free if he can voluntarily subject himself to moral law; any other freedom is synonymous with licentiousness. Current education must therefore constantly also endeavour to fix the child's eyes on that which is good in his environment, and to lead him away from that which is bad, so that he may grow up in accordance with that which is good and right.

- * *Well-educated persons of high morals as teachers:* Since the teacher is charged with the highly important task of interpreting new knowledge and inculcating a sense of values, it is only those with the loftiest attributes, intellectual as well as moral, who should be entrusted with the education of the young. The early Hebrews clearly indicated the need for well-educated persons of high moral calibre to undertake the education of their children. It is for this reason that contemporary training and education of future teachers are of such importance and the functions of universities and training colleges of such significance. Training in teaching techniques, important and imperative as it is, is only a small part of the good teacher's preparation. The trained teacher of the past was sometimes the untrained human being. The time for the mere training of teachers has passed — today we have to engage like the Hebrews in the education of the educator.
- * *Adult education:* The early Hebrews provided many forms of adult education for both men and women. These agencies, although perhaps not superior to or more numerous than the modern agencies, were utilised perhaps by a greater percentage of the community. More present-day agencies of adult education, such as the press, the television and the radio, of course are exempted from this comparison.
- * *Integration of learning and doing:* Another important lesson to be learnt from the early Hebrews is the integration of learning and doing. Training for work was regarded as both essential and honourable. Current educational programmes and curricula are often academically oriented and insufficient attention is given to students' practical skills. Present-day education thus has a lesson to learn from the early Hebrews in this regard.
- * *Training of efficient and industrious homemakers:* In giving equal consideration to the higher intellectual development of girls and boys, present-day education has neglected to provide all girls, as the early Hebrews did, with thorough knowledge of practical household duties. This input is necessary to train efficient and industrious homemakers.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The early Hebrews have many claims to a prominent place in the history of education. They bequeathed to education the following: the dominance accorded to morality, religion, the family and their role in education, as well as the appreciation of the individual. The early Hebrews, however, are commended more for the content than for the method of their education. While they held the most sublime of religious truths, and were directed by them in their education, they became too much attached to the form and letter. However, with all their shortcomings and narrowness, they have been the benefactor of all ages in demonstrating the marked influence on a people of religion, and in preserving and conveying to posterity the deposit of moral and spiritual truth which in the form of Christianity was to leaven the world.

End Notes

¹ The Torah or Pentateuch comprises the first five books of Moses and is also known as the Written Law (Morris 1937:XX).

² Ezra brought with him from Babylon (ca 428 BC) a copy of scripture that he read to the citizens of the rebuilt Jerusalem. They reformed their lives according to the laws in this book. From this time onwards, it was believed that God no longer spoke through the prophets but through His Book. It remained only for the followers of Yahweh to read this book and interpret it for their lives (Hopfe 1991:306).

³ The *shema* is commonly characterised as the national creed or confession, and is composed of three scriptural passages: Dt 6:4-9, 11:13-21; Nm 15:37-41 (Morris 1937:XIX).

⁴ The Mishna is an oral explanation of the Law, and is also known as the Oral Law (Morris 1937:XIX).

⁵ The term *scribe* originally referred to the school of teachers from the days of Ezra the Scribe to Simeon the Just (ca 270 BC). The teachers of the Hebrews were also called elders or *soferim*. In the Tannaitic period (10 to 220 AD) Hebrew teachers became known by Aramic terms, *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*. *Tanna*, meaning 'to teach', referred to teachers or sages of the Oral Law or Mishna. *Amora*, meaning 'to declare', referred to sages or teachers of the *Gamara*. In the first century AD the scribes were beginning to be called rabbis. The term *rabbi* literally means 'my master'. Originally it was applied to any leader of men (workmen or gladiators), but gradually became a term of courtesy or special honour and later became a title for teachers of the Law (Carpenter 1958:147-148).

⁶ The *hazzan* was a paid officer or attendant at the synagogue whose duties were a combination of a sexton, assistant during the service, and school teacher during the week (Carpenter 1958:323).

7 The Talmud comprises the Mishna plus the commentary on and exposition of the Mishna known as the Gemara (Morris 1937:XX).

8 The word *Midrash* refers to those extended literary works of the rabbis that contain mostly interpretations and expositions of the nonlegal sections of the Bible (Morris 1937:XVIII).

9 Passover or Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles, Day of Conclusion, Feast of Dedication, Purim (Morris 1937:XVIII).

10 Passover or the Feast of Unleavened Bread is the first of the three Pilgrim Feasts, and celebrates the miraculous deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage (Morris 1937:XVIII).

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