

Spiritual Training of Children in OT and NT Times in Addition to Parents

Compiled by Pastor Phil Layton as supplement for Family Shepherds Study

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Spiritual training of children was especially the role of fathers in the OT (Genesis 18:19, Psalm 78:2-8, Deuteronomy 6, 32:45-46, Joshua 4:21-24, etc.), but not exclusively so. Others could and should also be enlisted to help, according to other passages, even though the father is most ultimately responsible.

Formal teaching to the entire family in the synagogue was one supplement, but there were also others:

- A. Older believers to the next generation (Ps 48:13, 71:18, 145:4, Dt 32:7)
- B. All believers to all generations (including youth, Ps 79:13, 89:13, but youth must beware youthful peer input: 1 Kings 12, Pr 7:7, 13:20)
- C. Teachers to youth (Pr 5:12-13 [as children in addition to their fatherly teaching in v. 7], Ps 119:99, Eccl 11:9-12:2, 1:1, a teacher of youth besides just his own).
- D. In Bible times groups of Jewish boys learned Torah at synagogue or at the feet of a rabbi teaching biblical truth (Acts 22:3 "*I am a Jew...brought up...educated at the feet of Gamaliel...to the law*" ESV).
- F. Joshua was mentored by Moses since his youth (Numbers 11:28 ESV)

The NT never overturns Israel's pattern, but seems to continue and command it:

- Paul disciplined Timothy in his teen years to maturity (1 Tim. 1:2, 4:12)
- Leaders are to give attention to teaching young men (Titus 2:6-8)
- Godly older women should disciple younger women (Titus 2:3-5, Lk 1:39-45)
- Believers equipped by pastors/teachers to minister to young in faith to maturity, so they'll grow up in the truth of Christ (Eph. 4:11-15)
- All followers of Jesus are to make disciples, teaching them (Mt 28:19, Col 1:28), and those commands do not exclude the young still under their parent's roof

Below summarizes some of the way God's People applied these Scriptures in OT times:

'The home was still the chief institution for the dispensation of elementary instruction, although synagogues, with attached schools for the young were to be found in every important Jewish community'¹

'We are not sure when synagogue schools were first established. Some believe the practice dates back to the Exile in Babylon ... Whenever it began, by New Testament times the synagogue school was a vital part of Jewish life. Each Sabbath, Jews faithfully gathered at the synagogue to hear their rabbi read the Scriptures and explain the Law. The synagogue sponsored special classes apart from the regular times of worship. During the week, boys came to these classes to study the Scriptures under qualified teachers. These classes supplemented the religious education the boys were receiving from their parents.'² 'The chazzan taught elementary children.'³

¹ James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, electronic ed.

² J.I. Packer, Merrill Chapin Tenney and William White, Jr., *Nelson's Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 455-56.

'The synagogue president had a paid assistant ... known as the *hazzan* or “attendant” (Luke 4:20) ... the schoolmaster for the young in the synagogue school.⁴ 'He was responsible for ... the elementary education of the children.⁵ 'it was sometimes his duty to teach the children the Law⁶

'synagogues were not only used for services on the Sabbath ... Children would be taught there by the *ḥazzān*.⁷ the *Chazzan*, or minister ... often acts also as schoolmaster. For this reason ... great care is taken in his selection. He must be not only irreproachable, but, if possible, his family also. Humility, modesty, knowledge of the Scriptures, distinctness and correctness in pronunciation, simplicity and neatness in dress, and an absence of self-assertion, are qualities sought for⁸

Perhaps the man who gave the roll to Jesus on that day [Luke 4:20] was the schoolmaster who, seated on that very floor, had taught Him to read the law! ⁹

'The synagogue was called "the house of learning" (Sirach 51:23) or “house of study” (*bet ha-midrash*; Levine, *Ancient*, 476–78).¹⁰

'The children gathered in the synagogue itself, or in the neighbouring building, for their lessons. ... In about the year 75 BC, a certain Simon ben Shetaḥ ordered that **all boys between six and sixteen should receive compulsory [synagogue] education.**¹¹

³ *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, R. K. Harrison and Thomas Nelson Publishers (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1995).

⁴ *Grace Theological Journal Volume 6* (Winona, IN: Grace Seminary, 1985), 320.

⁵ *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 30-31.

⁶ A.B. du Toit, "Life in Obedience to the Torah: Jewish Belief, Worship, and Everyday Religion in the First Century AD" In , in , vol. 2, *The New Testament Milieu*, ed. A.B. du Toit, Guide to the New Testament (Halfway House: Orion Publishers, 1998).

⁷ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 783.

⁸ Alfred Edersheim, vol. 1, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1896), 438.

⁹ Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *Traveling in the Holy Land Through the Stereoscope a Tour Personally Conducted by Jesse Lyman Hurlbut...* (New York; Ottawa, KN: Underwood & Underwood, 1900), 141.

¹⁰ Scott R. Moore, "Synagogue" In , in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry and Lazarus Wentz (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2012).

'When the boys were old enough to learn the sabbatical lessons, they met at the "house of the Book"—the synagogue. Here they entered the room where the Torah scrolls were kept and prepared their lessons under the supervision of the *Hazzan*, the keeper of the scrolls.

Later they were allowed to discuss questions of the Law with the Pharisaic teachers. These discussions constituted the "secondary" level of Jewish education ... [cf. Jesus in Luke 2:42, 45]

The classroom contained a small raised platform where the teacher sat cross-legged. Before him on a low rack were scrolls containing selected Old Testament passages. There were no textbooks. The students sat on the ground at the teacher's feet (Acts 22:3).¹²

'the children were gathered in the Synagogues, or in School-houses, where at first they either stood, teacher and pupils alike, or else sat on the ground in a semicircle, facing the teacher, as it were, literally to carry into practice the prophetic saying: 'Thine eyes shall see thy teachers.' [Isaiah 30:20] The introduction of benches or chairs was of later date; but the principle was always the same, that in respect of accommodation there was no distinction between teacher and taught. Thus, encircled by his pupils, as by a crown of glory (to use the language of Maimonides), the teacher—generally the *Chazzan*, or Officer of the Synagogue—should impart to them the precious knowledge of the Law, with constant adaptation to their capacity, with unwearied patience, intense earnestness, strictness tempered by kindness, but, above all, with the highest object of their training ever in view. To keep children from all contact with vice; to train them to gentleness, even when bitterest wrong had been received; to show sin in its repulsiveness, rather than to terrify by its consequences; to train to strict truthfulness; to avoid all that might lead to disagreeable or indelicate thoughts; and to do all this without showing partiality, without either undue severity, or laxity of discipline with judicious increase of study and work, with careful attention to thoroughness in acquiring knowledge—all this and more constituted the ideal set before the teacher, and made his office of such high esteem in Israel.

... The teaching in school would, of course, be greatly aided by the services of the Synagogue, and the deeper influences of home-life ... some portion or portions of the Word of God, in the original, would form the most cherished treasure of every pious household. Besides, a school for Bible-study was attached to every academy, in which copies of the Holy Scripture would be kept. From anxious care to preserve the integrity of the text, it was deemed unlawful to make copies of small portions of a book of Scripture. But exception was made of certain sections which were copied for the instruction of children. Among them, the history of the Creation to that of the Flood; Lev. 1–9; and Numb. 1–10:35, are specially mentioned.¹³

¹¹ I.J. du Plessis, "The Social and Economic Life of the Jewish People in Palestine in the Time of the New Testament." In , in , vol. 2, *The New Testament Milieu*, ed. A.B. du Toit, Guide to the New Testament (Halfway House: Orion Publishers, 1998).

¹² J.I. Packer, Merrill Chapin Tenney and William White, Jr., *Nelson's Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 456-57.

¹³ Alfred Edersheim, vol. 1, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1896), 231-33.

'schools for religious instruction were held in connection with Jewish synagogues in every city and important village of Palestine. These schools were part of an extended system of religious instruction ... according to the Talmud, synagogue schools were of earlier origin, and had then become common [in the 1st century] ... The Mishna says, "At five years of age let children begin the Scripture, at ten the Mishna, and at thirteen, let them be subjects of the law" [later called Bar Mitzpah, i.e., "son of the law" when they were considered adults]. In this period a synagogue presupposed a school, as with us a church implies a Sunday school. Hence the church and Sunday school, not the church and the district school, is a parallel to the Jewish system. The methods in these schools were not unlike those of the modern Sunday school. Questions were freely asked and answered, and opinions stated and discussed: any one entering them might ask or answer questions. Such a Jewish Bible school, no doubt, Jesus entered in the temple when twelve years old....

... in the apostolic period teachers were a recognized body of workers quite distinct from pastors, prophets, and evangelists (see 1 Cor. xii. 28, 29; Eph. iv. 11; Heb. v. 12, etc.). The best commentators hold that the peculiar work of teachers in the primitive church was to instruct the young and ignorant in religious truth, which is precisely the object of the Sunday school ... classes and schools were ... used to instruct the young and the ignorant in the knowledge of God and salvation. They were effective, aggressive missionary agencies in the early Christian churches, and have aptly been termed the 'Sunday schools of the first ages of Christianity.' The pupils were divided into two or three (some say four) classes, according to their proficiency. They memorized passages of Scripture, learned the doctrines of God, creation, providence, sacred history, the fall, the incarnation, resurrection, and future awards and punishments..."¹⁴

¹⁴ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Baker, 1977 reprint), Vol. 11, p. 151-52.