

Chapter 1

Teaching and Learning in Jesus' World

When we think of someone as a teacher, we usually think of that person as offering instruction in a school. Pupils are enrolled in the school and follow a system of education established by the school. There were some schools in Jesus' time that would fit this picture. Up until age twelve both boys and girls who lived in cities and towns spent their mornings in schools where they learned the basics of reading and writing. After that age, only boys of wealthier families continued their education. They were sent to teachers who drilled them in the classics, especially the epic poets Homer and Hesiod, and taught them how to speak like educated men. They would study and seek to imitate famous orators like Demosthenes. Rhetoric was the only training for government or public service. Young men learned the duties and behavior appropriate to various offices by imitating older men, especially natural or adoptive fathers and uncles. Sons of craftsmen learned their trade as apprentices. Schools did not train people for later life. Similarly the sons of priests learned what they needed to know for service in the Temple from their fathers.

Jesus, however, did not establish a school with a philosophical doctrine or special method of interpreting the Law. His followers learned by observing what he said and did in different situations. The Gospels refer to a group of Jesus' disciples as the twelve. Mark 3:14–19 pictures the twelve as having been selected from the larger number of followers. They are shown receiving special instruction from Jesus (Mk 4:10; 9:35; Mt 11:1). Jesus sends them to heal and to preach the Kingdom (Mk

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3:13, 6:7; Mt 10:1; Lk 9:1–2) and promises them a place as leaders of the renewed Israel at the judgment (Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30).

Jesus' message to the crowds and his instruction to the disciples do not differ in content. The gospel writers even disagree over whether a particular teaching was spoken privately to the disciples or publicly to the crowds. For example, Mark 10:10–12 has Jesus teaching the disciples that whoever divorces his wife commits adultery against her, whereas Matthew 19:9 and 5:31–2 have this saying as public teaching.

In order to understand what the people who heard Jesus expected from his teaching, we need to know about the different types of teachers in the first century. We want to know what Jesus shares with other teachers as well as what was different about his teaching.

Writings of the period speak of four types of teachers who had adult followers: philosophers; sages; interpreters of the Jewish Law, scribes, and Pharisees; and prophets or seers. Our evidence for philosophers includes the writings of individual philosophers as well as biographical summaries of the opinions of various philosophers such as Diogenes Laertius' *History of Philosophy; or, On the Lives, Opinions, and Apothegms of Famous Philosophers* (first half of third century C.E.). A sage from Jerusalem, Yeshua ben Sira (early second century B.C.E.), collected wisdom sayings in a book that his grandson translated into Greek ca. 132 B.C.E. His work is included in the Old Testament apocrypha as Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. We do not possess any writings of the scribes and Pharisees whom we meet in the pages of the New Testament. However, their interpretations of the Law may be represented in later rabbinic collections of Jewish Law such as the Mishnah (ca. 200 C.E.). We do possess some direct examples of "scribal" interpretations of the Law from the sectarian Essene communities. The Essene writings found near the Dead Sea included rules governing life in Essene

communities as well as other fragments of legal rulings. Prophets and seers generally did not leave written records. The New Testament preserves only a few words attributed to John the Baptist (Mk 1:7–8; Mt 3:7–10). The first-century Jewish historian Josephus (ca. 38–100 C.E.) describes a prophet, Joshua ben Ananiah, who predicted the destruction of Jerusalem from 62 C.E. until the city's destruction in the year 70 (*War* vi.300–9). He also reports that some Essenes studied the Hebrew prophets and were able to make accurate prophecies of their own (*War* ii.159). A Christian prophet, John (ca. 95 C.E.), cast his prophecies and visions in the form of a book, Revelation.

Philosopher-Teachers

Ancient philosophers were characterized as belonging to specific schools, that is, groups that held distinct doctrines and defended their positions against the views of the other schools. Most of the philosophers of Jesus' time traced their teaching to the founder of their particular school, who had lived as many as several centuries before. Sometimes the founder had created an institution with social or legal arrangements that gave it the appearance of a religious cult. Pythagoras (late sixth century B.C.E.) was said to have presided over a band of disciples who followed a way of life taught by the founder, including special dietary rules and sharing property in common. The original Pythagorean communities had disappeared by the fourth century B.C.E., but a Pythagorean revival began among Roman intellectuals in the first century B.C.E. A certain Nigidius Fugulus, who was praetor in 58 B.C.E., started an association in Rome.

Another Pythagorean, Apollonius of Tyana, a Greek city in Cappadocia, wandered about the empire teaching during the first century C.E. A biography of Apollonius was written for the empress Julia Domna in the early third century C.E. Its

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author, Philostratus, says that miraculous signs, especially a bolt of lightning suspended in the sky, accompanied Apollonius' birth (*Life* I.5). He pictured Apollonius preaching in Babylon, India, and Egypt as well as in Rome and cities of Asia Minor (e.g., Ephesus) and Greece. He confronted various rulers by refusing to worship them as divine, nor would he engage in their pursuits like hunting animals or indulge their demands to use his miraculous powers for material advantage. He might attempt to teach the king wisdom as when he refused to torture animals that the king kept in a royal park for hunting. The king then challenged Apollonius by asking how he could secure his power. The philosopher responded, "By honouring many and trusting few" (*Life* I.38). He cautioned the king of Syria not to resist Roman power over a few small villages. When the king became sick, Apollonius used philosophy to teach him to be indifferent even to death. This biography is often compared with the treatment of Jesus in the Gospels as well as with stories told about the apostles. Apollonius is said to have cured a young girl by touching her and whispering to her (*Life* IV.45).

A philosophical school that endured for hundreds of years, the Academy at Athens, passed down the teachings of its founder, the philosopher Plato (fourth century B.C.E.). The Academy, however, was legally constituted as a religious cult devoted to the Muses. Socrates, Plato's teacher (who was executed by the Athenians in 399 B.C.E. for leading the young astray and not venerating the traditional gods), and Plato were the "heroes" venerated by the cult. The Academy continued to be a school to which people came to learn philosophy until the Roman emperor Justinian closed it in 529 C.E. A woman teacher at the Academy, Hypatia from Alexandria, was lynched by a Christian mob in the year 415.

Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) may have been the first philosopher to found a school as an institution. Small groups of Epi-

cureans, who referred to themselves as “friends,” met on the twentieth of each month to dine in honor of Epicurus. They revered their founder as a “god” by celebrating his birthday and by putting up icons and crypts bearing his image. Because they insisted that everything in the universe – even the gods – was composed of atoms (which they pictured as tiny, indivisible particles of different shapes) and the void (i.e., the empty space in which atoms move), and that the gods did not concern themselves with humans, Epicureans were often considered atheists. Because they thought that in order to live as pleasantly as possible, a person should avoid the turmoil of a public life, Epicureans were felt to be outsiders and were even condemned for “hatred of humanity.”

The early Christians also formed small groups of “friends” who pursued a life of moral virtue taught by their founder and were encouraged to “live quietly” (1 Thes 4:11), not involving themselves in the affairs of their neighbors. As a result, they were sometimes thought to be like the Epicureans: atheists and haters of humanity.

The most influential philosophy among the educated classes of the Roman world was Stoicism. It was named for the colonnade or public porch, the painted Stoa in Athens, where its founder, Zeno (335–263 B.C.E.), taught. Stoics held that happiness could be achieved only through inner discipline. No one controls the things that happen to him or her in life. But if one overcomes human passions, then neither excessive evils nor excessive goods will upset one’s happiness or moral character. Stoics often encouraged people to resist evils done by the emperors. As a result, the emperor Domitian (51–96 C.E.) banned philosophers from Rome in 92–94.

The Stoic quest for self-sufficiency as the key to happiness took its most radical form in the Cynics. “Cynic” is derived from the Greek word for “dog” and was used as a general term of scorn (as in Phil 3:2). The Cynics turned the scorn directed at

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them to their own advantage by claiming that they did indeed live like dogs. They rejected all the cultural trappings of home and family. They hardened themselves to live outdoors with rough clothing, which included a philosopher's cloak and staff, eating with minimal utensils whatever food could be scavenged. Cynics wandered from place to place and preached to anyone who would listen about the foolishness of all the things that cause most people anxiety. People think that they have to have clothes, children, friends, possessions, good food, and other nonessentials and so they wear themselves out trying to attain them. As people become more dependent on the luxuries of society, they also become physically and mentally weaker. They are no longer able to live naturally like the animals.

Some of the sayings of Jesus fit the mood of Cynical preaching. The anxieties of human life are to be met by looking at the natural clothing and food that God provides for plants and animals (Mt 6:25–32). The instructions to go and preach without taking any provisions for the journey (Mt 10:7–11) would have suggested to some of Matthew's readers that Jesus' disciples had adopted the life-style of wandering Cynics.

All types of philosophy called for a "conversion." Without philosophy, people lived lives that were caught in vice or foolishness. They had to exchange that way of living for a philosophical life of virtue. Sometimes philosophers even spoke of themselves as doctors for the human soul. Instead of the fleeting pleasures on which most people build their happiness, the philosopher promised a happiness that could not be taken away.

Sometimes devotion to philosophy also led to conflict with the rulers of society. The greatest philosopher-martyr was Socrates (d. 399 B.C.E.), who had neglected his trade and his family to go about Athens questioning its citizens about virtue. The Athenians put the elderly Socrates on trial for denying the gods

worshiped by the city and for corrupting the youth with his teaching. His trial and heroic death – he engaged in philosophical conversation until the end – were immortalized in dialogues by one of those followers, Plato (see Plato's *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*). Other philosophers who challenged emperors and kings often looked back to the example of Socrates. The true philosopher had to demonstrate that his life matched his teaching even if it meant death.

Some scholars have even claimed to find influences from the Socrates story in Paul's defense of his apostolate in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Just as Socrates had condemned the Athenians for following teachers who demanded large fees, used impressive and flattering language, and had no real concern for making their pupils better, Paul claims that the "superapostles" who have turned the Corinthians against him because he does not demand money or use elaborate rhetoric are simply abusing the Corinthians for their own gain. The portrayal of Paul's imprisonment in 2 Timothy shows that the apostle was committed to the gospel even when some fellow Christians had abandoned him (cf. 2 Tm 1:8–18; 3:10–13; 4:9–18). Luke presents Jesus' death as a heroic example of his teaching. Jesus does not react to the hatred and scorn of his opponents but continues to offer God's forgiveness to those who repent (Lk 23:32–43). Such a death shows that Jesus is not the criminal he is accused of being, but is truly innocent (Lk 23:46–8).

Sages and Teachers of Wisdom

The philosopher-teachers originated in the Greek city-states. After Alexander's conquests in Asia Minor, the Middle East, and Egypt (336–23 B.C.E.), Greek cities and their culture were spread throughout the region. Some Jews translated their Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek. Others began to write books to demonstrate the superiority of Judaism as a source of wisdom.

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Some claimed that Moses and the prophets taught the Greek philosophers.

When a group of Jews hoping to turn Jerusalem into a city-state on the Greek model enlisted the aid of their Syrian ruler, Antiochus IV, a civil war broke out (166 B.C.E.). Resistance to such Hellenization, which included introducing pagan worship in the Temple, proved strong enough to expel the Syrians and their allies. For about a century – until it was conquered by Rome in 63 B.C.E. – Judea was an independent state.

Even though the Jews had defended their ancestral tradition from being collapsed into the general patterns of Hellenistic culture, they did not withdraw into a cultural ghetto. Jewish writers sought to show that their traditions were more ancient than the Greek traditions and consequently were better sources of wisdom and virtue. The Jewish community had its guide to a just way of life in the Law of Moses. Jews could also point to the wisdom attributed to wise men of the past. King Solomon was revered as a source of wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29–34). The Old Testament contains two books of wise sayings attributed to him, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Job is also a wisdom book. Other wisdom books were part of the Greek version of the Old Testament, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom of Solomon.

Following the advice of the sage is supposed to bring success and happiness. The audience is exhorted to act patiently, be guarded in their speech, be honest in dealing with others, work hard, choose friends carefully and be loyal to them, and avoid vices such as greed, drunkenness, and laziness. Some traditions, like those in Proverbs, are optimistic about human behavior. Others like Ecclesiastes and Job insist that even the righteous person can expect evils and misfortunes.

Wisdom is often communicated in the form of admonitions from father to son. If the son follows the sage's advice, he will prosper and become a respected member of the community,

perhaps even a counselor to kings. Many of the proverbs and sayings passed down in this way were probably part of the oral lore of the family or clan. Comparable examples can be found in Egyptian and Babylonian cultures. However, the special advice aimed at training courtiers probably stems from some form of school for scribes such as we find in Egypt and Babylon. Proverbs 22:17–24:22 contains close parallels to Egyptian wisdom teaching.

The young are often warned against the charms of women (Prv 2:16–19; 7:6–27; 8:13–18). If they are able to avoid the temptress and the foolish woman, they may be lucky enough to marry a woman of true virtue (Prv 31:10–31). Wisdom herself is pictured as a woman calling humanity. She provides those who hear her with understanding and virtue (Prv 8:1–21). Wisdom was the “first” of all creation and served as God’s assistant in shaping the universe (Prv 8:22–31). She lays out a rich banquet in her temple for those who come to her (Prv 9:1–6).

Ecclesiasticus is an example of how the wisdom tradition was passed on within a family and at the same time adapted to new circumstances. Written by Yeshua ben Sira (“Jesus, the son of Sira”) around 132 B.C.E., this wisdom book was translated into Greek by the author’s grandson, who had moved to Alexandria, an Egyptian city with a large, Greek-speaking Jewish population. In some instances his translation sharpened the focus of an admonition so that its message challenged the ethical presuppositions of the Hellenistic world. Where ben Sira had “Do not mock at the poor person’s life,” his grandson translated, “Do not cheat a poor man of his livelihood” (Ecclus 4:1–3; 34:20–1). In the Hellenistic city a poor person had no “rights” as we understand the term. Without a rich relative or patron such a poor person could be abused by the legal process. Cities felt no obligation to provide for the needy. But our translator wants his readers to have no doubt about the message of the biblical

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tradition. God requires special concern for the poor. God will not show favoritism to one person over another but hears the victim of injustice, orphan, and widow (35:13–14).

Jewish tradition considered the Law of Moses a source of wisdom. Wisdom came to those who studied it and lived by its precepts. For the philosopher-teachers the life of the philosopher served as the lived example of a school's teaching. We find a parallel in the wisdom tradition's picture of the sage (see Ecclus 39:1–11).

Special virtues were associated with the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph was often held up as a model (read Gn 37:1–47:27). He is a wise courtier who overcame the evils his brothers and others brought upon him. His judicious administration saved the kingdom of Egypt and his family. Joseph's willingness to forgive the brothers who sold him into slavery was used by Jewish writers as an example of love of neighbor. Here is a description of Joseph from the Testament of Benjamin, a second-century B.C.E. writing:

You also, therefore my children, love the Lord God of heaven and earth and keep his commandments, following the example of the good and holy man Joseph. And let your mind be unto good, even as you know me, for he that has his mind right sees all things rightly. Fear the Lord and love your neighbor, and even though the spirits of Beliar [i.e., Satan] afflict you with every evil, yet they will not rule over you even as they did not rule Joseph, my brother. How many men wished to kill him, and God shielded him! For whoever fears God and loves his neighbor, cannot be struck by the spirit of Beliar, since that person is shielded by the fear of God. Nor can such persons be ruled over by means of humans or beasts, for they are helped by the Lord through the love which they have for their neighbors. (3:1–5)

Teachers of the Law: Scribes, Pharisees, and Rabbis

The Gospels frequently mention Pharisees and scribes as Jewish teachers (e.g., Mk 2:6, 26; 3:22; 7:1, 5). "Rabbi," another