Introduction

Religion and Education in Late Antiquity

Understanding the principles and methods of late antique education in religious contexts is crucial to the understanding of the knowledge produced and the realities created by religious communities and society more broadly. Education generates and authorizes canons of knowledge, establishes the moral framework of orientation within these canons, and organizes their transmission. Religious education was a driving force in the formation of religious identity in Late Antiquity, and its products affected – in enriching or destabilizing ways – culture more broadly.[1] It involved the study of language and text, ritual and worship, but also the divine rules imposed on the community.[2] For historical purposes, "education" is most fruitfully used heuristically as an umbrella term that subsumes modern distinctions such as "'informal' vs. 'formal' learning, 'implicit' or 'explicit' education, or 'andragogy' (. . .) vs. 'pedagogy'," as well as sharp distinctions between a formal instruction that necessitates literacy and one that does not.[3] The study of ancient education is generally always lopsided in the latter regard, since its remnants are only textual. What can be learned about oral instruction through teachers or about the absorption of intellectual habits through socialization within a religious community is mediated by texts written by those trained in the principles of grammar and rhetoric.[4] Since our knowledge of nonliterate forms of education is often mediated by literate knowledge producers, the focus here will be on the methods of literate education through which "religious education" is communicated and that informs nonliterate forms of education. Through the inclusion of decorative imagery, drama, and song, this Element will gesture towards performative and sensual modes of communicating knowledge as much as possible.

The developments in the religious landscape since the first century CE put their own spin on education. Rather than in public schools and for distinct administrative purposes or court-oriented rhetoric, learning in religious communities was encouraged. This development created new and more diverse opportunities for accessing knowledge.[5] Through various ways, grammatical and rhetorical principles and strategies came to permeate every branch of society. Thus, understanding these methods is vital to understanding the organization and intellectual production of late antique religious communities and why they often resemble each other in form, if not content. Because we lack

[1] I am using vocabulary from Chin's assessment of grammatical education, Chin 2008, pp. 1–6.
[2] Tanaseanu-Döbler/Döbler 2012, pp. 9–10. [3] Tanaseanu-Döbler/Döbler 2012, p. 8.
[4] On the social dynamics involved in the development of expertise, see Dalton 2025, pp. 1–34
[5] Gemeinhardt/Van Hoof/Van Nuffelen 2016, p. 4.

thorough accounts of the learning paths of ordinary people and how their knowledge was shaped through different stages and modes of learning, I have brought together some of the most telling examples from various Jewish and Christian communities (including the Manichaean one) in order to present a catalogue of methods that can serve to understand the rippling effects of their presence where they are not mentioned or acknowledged.[6]

A very concise account of an educational process in Late Antiquity is the legendary rapid literary formation of the already forty-year-old Jew Akiva, who was to become one of the most renowned rabbinic scholars:

> Rabbi Akiva took hold of one end of the tablet and his son of the other end of the tablet. [The teacher] wrote A and B for him, and he learned it. He wrote the [entire] alphabet, and he learned it. [He copied] Leviticus, and he learned it. He kept on learning [like this] until he had learned the entire [written] Torah. Then he went and sat before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua [to study the Oral Torah]. (Avot de Rabbi Natan A 6:2)[7]

The episode summarizes the stages of education that can be found across late antique religious communities: alphabetization, the copying of authoritative texts as an exercise for writing, but also for memorization and, finally, interpretation. It further highlights some of the main differences between the modern and ancient realities of education. The class is heterogenous in age (although the age gap is, in this case, purposefully exaggerated), with an adult sitting next to a child, both apparently writing on the same wooden tablet. Moreover, hierarchies are physically accentuated, with students sitting in front of their elevated teachers.[8]

The educational process outlined in this episode largely follows the structure of this Element. First, the introduction will contextualize the topic within the realities of Late Antiquity (the period from the fourth to seventh centuries CE). Then, we will "take hold of a tablet" and discuss the materials used in literate education, before following the students as they take their first steps into literacy. Arguably, discussing the material first is not an intuitive structure for modern readers because the method and content of education are usually considered more relevant than the material on which they take shape. However, foregrounding the material reality of reading and writing, as the

[6] On the advantages of considering Manichaeism part of Early Christianity, see Han 2024.
[7] Translation by Wollenberg 2023, p. 151, slightly revised. Although the composition *Avot de Rabbi Natan* may be medieval, some parts are certainly earlier, see Stemberger 2011, pp. 248–251. This story in particular illustrates the classical educational path very well, as Wollenberg has shown (150–157).
[8] Fogel 2020.

rabbinic story does, explains many of the pedagogical methods and the (literal) shape of the texts they ultimately produced.

From the tablet, we will move on to the methods of alphabetization and the first content to be copied and read. As Rebecca Wollenberg observed, modern educators might not consider the book of Leviticus an obvious choice for a first reading, but it aligns with the ancient curricula's preference for obscure names of people and objects.[9] At the same time, the story is initiated by Akiva's purported lack of knowledge of natural processes: he does not know who hollowed out a particular stone. He is told that if he would study the Bible, he would know that Job 14:19 states that *water wears away* stone. The story's reference to Leviticus is certainly meant to imply that the power of the divine law shapes the mind of men like water shapes stone, and is not necessarily a description of the actual curriculum.[10] Indeed, changing and expanding such short stories was a vital part of early education, training at the same time literacy and rhetorical skills.

The third section of this Element discusses how people learned as a religious community and how knowledge was transmitted through sermons, prayer, song, and fellowship. This aspect of education may have been deliberately omitted from the story of Rabbi Akiva's learning process in order to connect him to the lineage of rabbinic study circles and their exclusive teacher–student relationships that fostered a distinct type of knowledge. The final section will pick up on similar idiosyncratic and independent learning and discuss examples of individuals who excelled in their ability to apply or repurpose their skills to create new texts or text-based artifacts.

Religion

Various developments led to an increased need for literacy and a greater appreciation of literary texts in the Hellenistic period, culminating in the concept of canonical and God-given Scriptures in Late Antiquity. The need for literate staff arose from the increase in administration required to govern Alexander the Great's conquered territories and, subsequently, the Roman Empire. Literate communication notably increased during the Hellenistic period.[11] The quarreling heirs of Alexander defined their Greekness by amassing Greek literature and translations of "world literature" in large libraries, which elevated the status of writing and authorship.[12] The Romans adopted the Greek rhetorical curriculum to study the use of written and spoken language for purposes beyond the courthouse and the Senate. This development led to the so-called Second

[9] Wollenberg 2023, p. 152.
[10] For an analogy between water and Torah study, see *Sifre Deuteronomy* §48.
[11] Hopkins 2017, pp. 372–375. [12] Schironi 2019, pp. 1–29; Stroumsa 2016, pp. 10–28.

Sophistic, "the period c. 60–230 CE when declamation became the most prestigious literary activity in the Greek world."[13] Public schools and libraries were established throughout the empire. They were managed at the local level and reached their zenith in the fourth century.[14] In this environment, texts became instrumental in shaping religious identities: "a bookish discourse on Roman cult" can be observed since the late Roman Republic, and the Christian idea of a canon emerges fairly quickly around the middle of the second century.[15] The church founded by Mani formed around his textual legacy, and in post-temple (and hence post-sacrifice) Judaism, the Torah obtained the status of a ritual object, and liturgical lectionaries formed around the biblical text.[16] Texts, whether as ritual artifact or object of study, obtained a new significance in the monotheistic religions that formed in Late Antiquity.[17]

From early on, Christian leaders were challenged to consider which Greek or Latin texts members of their community should use to learn to read and write in order to engage meaningfully with the sacred text.[18] The established methods of alphabetization were thereby less of an issue than the initial texts used to practice reading that already served as rhetorical models.[19] Without model texts by a Christian or Jewish Homer or Hesiod, Horace or Virgil, it was difficult to teach proper oratory and other rhetorical strategies that were needed for serious and effective debate. Rhetorical model-texts first had to emerge and prove useful to a larger audience, an ongoing process throughout Late Antiquity that kept the great poets and orators of the pagan past in the curricular mix.[20] The absence of such models in Hebrew and Aramaic may explain the limited absorption of rhetoric into Jewish texts written in the respective languages, especially when compared to those written in Greek (e.g., by Philo and Josephus), the production of which declined drastically in Late Antiquity.[21]

It is my contention in this Element that, in Late Antiquity, religious communities formed around texts and their interpretation of these texts, and that religious education entailed by necessity a process of study and learning, aimed at acquiring the ability to understand and memorize (mostly small portions of) texts representing divine will and order. This included ritual practices that made the text accessible to functionally illiterate people, such as singing hymns, but also touching the text as a scroll or codex or displaying the artifact in processions.[22] Of course, it is true that all these religious communities

[13] Bowie 2016. [14] Lenski 2019, pp. 134–36; Vössing 2002, pp. 243–62.
[15] MacRae 2016, p. 3; Bremmer 2021, p. 243.
[16] Brand 2022, p. 10; Stökl Ben-Ezra 2017; Wollenberg 2023, pp. 193–220.
[17] Stroumsa 2016. [18] See Stenger 2022; Berglund 2018. [19] Cameron 1991, esp. pp. 15–46.
[20] Gemeinhardt/Van Hoof/Van Nuffelen, esp. 1–9. [21] Cohen 2018, pp. 4–12.
[22] Shoemaker 2024.

developed non-textualized ways of devotion. The cult of the saints is such an example, with its relics and other sacred objects that incorporated unscripted knowledge, and the ever more numerous, and increasingly alike oral stories that surrounded the saints and their shrines.[23] And yet, these shrines also participated in producing and disseminating texts and textual artifacts, such as oracular tickets, books of divination, spells, and martyrologies.[24] Similarly, the Manichaean picture books and Jewish synagogue imagery depicting and enhancing the Israelite past were not exactly without text insofar as, ultimately, both led the viewer to the text behind the images.[25]

Religious texts were considered beneficial for the body and soul, both in their physical nature and their content. The content of Mani's books, for example, is presented as a remedy for a range of ailments, while a book of psalms is literally sold as a "potion of life" in rabbinic literature.[26] The same efficacy was attributed to the mere physical presence of the sacred and canonized texts (see, e.g., the venerated codices held by the evangelists in Figure 1).[27] For Nicene Christians, this agency was particularly associated with the codex form. In 378, the emperor Gratian ordered a codex written by Bishop Ambrose of Milan, which was intended to serve as a talisman during his campaign against the Gothic tribes invading his territory.[28] Later, "At the Council of Ephesus in 431, the gospel codex was considered to stand in for Christ himself."[29] In Antioch, the priest John Chrysostom is unhappy with the women of his congregation wearing miniature gospel codices around their necks for protection.[30] Indeed, the amulets of this time generally teem with biblical verses.[31] The Christian evidence also shows that there was a growing market for small codices with sacred texts, which could be held in one hand while the other was used for a ritual act. These codices were especially convenient for traveling, whether on a pilgrimage or for general travel.[32]

The shift from literary education as a vocational training – roughly speaking alphabetization and grammar for scribes, rhetoric for future lawyers and politicians – to a religious identity marker (sometimes by way of a distinct script) left an imprint on the material evidence.[33] Objects that were plain or decorated with symbols in

[23] Fowden 1999, pp. 16–21; Morehouse 2016, pp. 150–151. On Jewish pilgrimage, see Hezser 2011, pp. 365–388, and Neis 2013.
[24] Frankfurter 2019, pp. 212–222.
[25] Gulácsi 2020b; Hachlili 2013. A notable exception to the biblical motives is the so-called elephant panel in the synagogue of Huqoq (Galilee), see Balty 2018.
[26] 2 Psalmbook 46.19–30; Brand 2022, p. 261, and Leviticus Rabbah 16:2; Berkovitz 2023, p. 53.
[27] Image described in Kruger 2025. [28] Letteney 2023, pp. 134–148.
[29] Letteney 2023, 136. [30] John Chrysostom, *On the statues* 19.14.
[31] De Bruyn 2017; Sanzo 2014. [32] Kruger 2025.
[33] Jews, even when writing in Aramaic, used the Hebrew square script; Egyptian Christians used Coptic; the Manichaeans used their variant of Estrangelo; the Syrian Jacobites and Nestorians had their own version of the Syriac script.

Figure 1 Encaustic on wood, seventh century. Luke (on the left) and Mark do not touch the covers of the books they are holding with their bare hands out of reverence. Codex Washingtonianus, Freer Gallery, Washington D.C., picture: Wikipedia, public domain.

Antiquity, like healing gems and amulets, now had inscriptions on them.[34] It becomes increasingly difficult to tell whether alphabets on walls are signs of devotion, a means of protection, an exercise or a mnemonic: Writing became an act of devotion, and the letters themselves and especially their order were seen as apotropaic.[35] While these were not entirely new phenomena, they became much more widespread in Late Antiquity, testifying to the importance of text, words, and letters as both signifier and signified.

Education

There is more to education than literacy, and yet, it is difficult to distinguish between literate and illiterate education, because literacy, once present, has an irreversible impact as a structuring element on a community. Literacy creates "new motives and formal modes of discursive verbal and logical thinking divorced from immediate practical experience."[36] Studies in human cognition

[34] Garipzanov 2015.
[35] Bucking 2012, pp. 230–235; Lougovaya 2020, p. 126; Bij de Vaate 1994, pp. 148–161.
[36] Ardila 2010, p. 698. On the moot attampt to distinguish between literacy, semi-literacy, and illiteracy, see Woolf 2015.

have demonstrated that literacy alters the way humans perceive language, including spoken language, and the ability to memorize. Literate people are attuned to the nuances of individual words and syllables, whereas for those lacking such skills, words tend to merge into one another.[37] In other words, a community that includes even some literate people will ask different questions than one that does not. This is all the more true if the community is led by literate people who are motivated to study an authoritative text in ways inspired by the type of Homeric grammar-focused commentary and exegesis that emerged in Alexandria in the Hellenistic period.[38] Literate education is the driving force behind efforts of knowledge production and transmission in late antique religious communities – efforts that are here lumped together heuristically under the umbrella term "education" – whether directly or indirectly.

A significant proportion of the historical data necessary to reconstruct educational processes in antiquity is missing. Scholars must therefore rely on a handful of programmatic preliminary rhetorical curricula (*progymnasmata*), treatises by rhetoricians, and sporadic references in letters and literary texts.[39] However, when the material remnants of schooling, such as exercises, classrooms, and textbooks, are added to the prescriptive and descriptive evidence, a fairly comprehensive picture of educational practices during the Imperial Period and Late Antiquity emerges.[40] For the present purpose, I will describe educational processes using the same range of materials, but also texts that are distinctly marked by rhetorical exercises and images that complement these processes. In order to depict education in religious contexts in all its facets, I will choose a telling example from a Christian, Jewish, or Manichaean community, and gesture to possible but less explicit cognates in others. This is not intended to obscure or simplify the doctrinal differences, diverse calendars, or varied liturgical practices between Jews and Christians or among Christians and Jews. Rather, my approach is intended to highlight the commonalities that are sometimes overlooked due to a focus on differences: didactic strategies, writing technology, the relatively simple and concise alphabets derived from Phoenician or Aramaic used in the Mediterranean area, or the effective rhetorical strategies devised and described by the Greeks. All these strategies and technologies are not inherently religious in nature. They are foremost fundamental to the larger economic and political organization of coexistence. Education, after all, lays the foundation of common logical tenets that enable the coexistence of individuals from disparate ideological and even linguistic backgrounds.[41] But there are also common religious practices, such as the exegesis of a sacred text, prayers, hymns, or the artistic interpretation of worship and tradition.

[37] Ardila 2010; Evans 2017, pp. 757–761. [38] Niehoff 2011; Paz 2022.
[39] For example, Bonner 1977. [40] For example, Morgan 1998; Cribiore 2001.
[41] Ardila 2010, p. 698.

This Element does not address the late antique political discourse on education, that is, the texts on which it should be based, the identity of the teachers, or how religious education should position itself vis-à-vis Romanized Greek *paideia* ("education") built around the classic texts such as the Homeric myth, Aesop's fables, and the sentences of Menander.[42] Instead, it is the products of education that are of interest here, specifically the books, letters, and poems that were written, performed, and sung; the clever exegesis and the compiled commentaries; the riddles and gnostic texts; the cosmologies and chorographies (descriptions of geographic regions); but also paintings and mosaics. In the end, every cultural product is to some extent marked by and in conversation with the time's literate education.[43] For example, the cognitive process of parsing a text to create a song or poem is very similar to parsing a story into images or an image into subunits to determine the necessary tesserae for a mosaic.

Late antique learning was somewhat stereotyped across religious traditions because they were all drawing from the same ancient set of methods. Yet, to the modern observer, ancient education appears rather messy. Christians, Manichaeans, and Jews learned through seasonal classes, from itinerant teachers, in their local churches and synagogues, from borrowing and lending books, from attending a certain school or study circle, and from staying with family and friends in other places. In lieu of diplomas, people could earn titles such as "rabbi," "elder," or "deacon." Nevertheless, depending on the context, many may have had more than one occupation and defined themselves (or were defined by others) through other vocational activities. The head of the School of the Persians in Edessa, Narsai, had to direct the choir and act as a translator in addition to leading the school – and this was only after he had successfully negotiated dropping his other roles as elementary and intermediate instructor ("reader").[44] Rabbinic teachers are sometimes "given cognomens which indicate their trades," such as "the perfumer," "the sandal-maker," or "the baker."[45] Since education took place in different settings, at different times and in various places, learning biographies were very idiosyncratic.

Literacy

I have asserted that religion in Late Antiquity had a distinct textual dimension, making a focus on literate religious education particularly important to understand religious communities, their reasoning and world-making. This emphasis

[42] For example, Stenger 2016a and 2022; Hezser 2023, pp. 19–22; Rappe 2001; on Christian teachers see Gemeinhardt/Lorgeoux/Munkholt Christensen (eds.) 2018. On teachers more generally, see Laes 2007, pp. 109–127.
[43] On the irreversible impact of literacy even on a semi-literate society, see Ardila 2010, p. 693.
[44] Becker 2006, pp. 88–89. [45] Hezser 1997, p. 261.

on literacy may come as a surprise to readers who assume that most people in Late Antiquity were illiterate and that literacy was confined mainly to a small, highly educated elite. Yet, various forms of literacy permeated all social and cultural levels. Judging from the material remains, people seem to have written or etched blessings, curses, and divine names on basically every support and in whatever way, style, and grammar.[46] It is precisely this evidence of literacy, however, that was not taken into account by William Harris, whose influential monograph painted a rather pessimistic picture of literacy in Late Antiquity compared to the High Empire.[47] Harris' monograph followed on a period of scholarship that had mapped more or less modern conditions onto ancient education. Confining literacy to the elites is also unhelpful from the point of view that being rich does not necessarily come with talent or the willpower to study. In Pompeii – admittedly not a late antique city, but the one with the best-preserved data – most of the graffiti were found in the vestibules and peristyles of the rich, where people of all social classes were made to wait or pass through for some business. Names of slaves and women have also been identified, with men outnumbering women.[48] As Sean Leatherbury observes, Harris did not take into account the many qualifications in sermons of the congregation's wrong or right reading habits, such as those expressed in what Harris called the "acute logorrhea which afflicted a number of Christian writers, most conspicuously John Chrysostom and Augustine."[49] Indeed, Chrysostom even announced the topic of his next homily "many days in advance" so that his congregation could borrow or "take up the book and review the passage."[50] Pessimistic accounts of ancient literacy usually also neglect the secretaries and slaves who put this "logorrhea" into writing, and terminology like the Greek adjective *agrammatos*, "ungrammared," is often interpreted as complete illiteracy, although it was used in a range of meanings, including the inability to articulate words (of animals) or the lack of culture.[51] In some cases, it has been shown that the adjective simply refers to the fact that a person could not write Greek simply because it was not their native language.[52]

[46] Stern 2018; Ward-Perkins and Felle 2021.

[47] For example, Harris 1989, pp. 285–322; Harris 2018, pp. 143–158; For critique of Harris' pessimistic view of ancient literacy, see Leatherbury 2020, p. 14; Heilmann 2021, pp. 61–70; or Hopkins 2017, p. 365n3: "the general impression which I gained from his book was that his minimalist drive led him sometimes to be over-strictly positivist. No surviving evidence for literacy, schools, popular reading, etc., becomes proxy for their non-existence."

[48] See Benefiel 2010.

[49] Harris 2018, pp. 305–306 (quote); and Leatherbury 2020, p. 17.

[50] *Lazarus* 3.1, cited from Leyerle 2024, p. 60.

[51] Pace Markschies 2020, pp. 197–201. See Liddell/Scott 1968, s.v. ἀγράμμᾰτος and Harris 2018, p. 6.

[52] Heilmann 2021, p. 64.