

**Jewish Education of Children in the 1st Century CE:
Exploration and Comparison with the Greco-Roman World**

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Above all we pride ourselves on the education of our children, and regard as the most essential task in life the observance of our laws and of the pious practices, based thereupon, which we have inherited.

- Josephus, *Ag. Ap. 1.60, Thackeray, LCL*)¹

The view of children in the ancient Greco-Roman world was vastly different from that in the contemporary western world. Regarding the value of children as members of society, scholars have presented various arguments that seem to convey in sum that while children might not have been as undervalued as some believe, they also were not recipients of any specialized attention or investment associated with the primary years of life in modern times, in part due to a more systematic understanding of childhood as a foundational life stage. While we may not be able to ascertain societal appreciation or neglect for all children in the first century, we must remember that the life circumstances for children in antiquity nevertheless were harsher than our imagination and consisted of greater exposure to war, poverty, illness and high mortality rate. Betsworth explains that as many as 30 percent of children may have died in their first year, only 49 percent reached their fifth birthday and 40 percent “of the population survived to age 20” in the Roman Empire.² Such volatility of life and saturated exposure to death marked the social environment for children in the 1st century Roman Empire. So what were the expectations of parents given such precarious life conditions of their young? Against misconceptions construed by the ideology of the *paterfamilias* that young children’s lives were not highly valued or their loss grieved, and that children were only seen as incomplete members of society, Betsworth notes that there was an imperial ideology in which children were an essential part: “an important attribute of the emperor was to be concerned with the welfare of children and the well-being of

¹ Yinger, “Jewish Education,” 328.

² Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 36.

their parents.”³ Therefore, one can surmise that children were seen as the future of the empire and thus worthy of care, nurture and education even though they might have looked very different from what we are accustomed to in the modern Western world. As my focus for this research is on Jewish children’s education within the context of the Greco-Roman world, it can be surmised that the value of children was similarly, if not more, important in Jewish communities since there was an understanding of *Imago Dei* in children, and also the preservation of Jewish identity throughout generations as God’s covenant people was of special importance amidst the harsh gentile rule. Although Jewish education of children in the first century shared some similarity with the rest of the Greco-Roman world, including how it mostly operated in the private domain of family and home rather than public, formal institutions, the goal and praxis were fundamentally different from its Greco-Roman counterpart because of its theological foundation of Torah being the prized divine wisdom above all other virtues, and its monotheistic adherences which were at odds with the polytheistic rituals of the gentile world and visibly fostered a distinguishing sense of Jewish identity.

For the very humble scope of this research, I focus on the education of Jewish children between ages 4 and 7. The former age is because “in the Hebrew tradition a child was exempt from religious duties during the first three years of life (Sherrill 1944, 6)... After that each family or household was to teach the child the *Shema* and the *Torah*.”⁴ And the latter age is due to the explanation that even “ancient writers recognized stages in the growth and development of children” and defined the first stage of life “as birth to age seven” when the baby teeth were lost.⁵ I first discuss how the Jewish education did not differ from its Greco-Roman context in the role of home as the primary place of learning and the expectation of parents as the first and best

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Proctor, “Teaching Faith in the Family,” 42.

⁵ Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 17-18.

teachers. Beyond this initial similarity, I explore how Jewish education differed from the Greco-Roman counterpart in content and method of learning.

In the Greco-Roman world, home rather than formal institution was the place of children's first learning, and parents were expected to be their first teachers. Aasgaard notes some variations among the elite but affirms the norm:

The professional formation of children was usually the task of teachers. Sometimes, a pedagogue (Greek), often a slave, was responsible for following children to school or for themselves giving them their basic education. On a more advanced level, guidance of the soul was the task of the educated person, in particular the philosopher. Usually, however, education was the responsibility of parents, particularly as far as character formation was concerned. Fathers and mothers were viewed as role models for boys and girls respectively, but with a special focus on the role of the father.⁶

And the role of the father included “[teaching] their sons the skills of an artisan, builder, or other trade. Mothers also had a significant role in the education of both sons and daughters. They influenced not only the curriculum but also the youngsters’ ‘progress in speech and rhetorical style and in the development of character.’”⁷ Similarly for Jewish families, home-based, family-centered instruction was primary rather than any institutional education, and beyond that, children “received some education in public gatherings (synagogues), during pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and from visiting scribes, priests, and teachers.”⁸ Despite the similarity of the domestic setting of education, however, Jewish education at home had a vastly different aim from the Greco-Roman counterpart; “for the ancient Hebrews, ‘... the elemental facts of family life constitute the channel through which the will of God should first be made known to a child and be put into effect in his [sic] living’ (Sherrill 1944, 17).”⁹

⁶ Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child,” 151.

⁷ Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 29-30.

⁸ Yinger, “Jewish Education,” 326.r

⁹ Proctor, “Teaching Faith in the Family,” 43.

In contrast to the Romans who “valued education highly, especially for their sons” and as parents “hoped that their son’s education would bring him- and subsequently them- increased wealth, social status, and influence,” Jewish parents prized piety and wisdom rooted in Torah, God’s Law, as their educational aim. Collins explains that “the word *torah* means simply ‘instruction’” and that “by the late Second Temple period, the association of torah with Moses was practically universal.”¹⁰ Betsworth observes Judaism’s distinctiveness from other ancient religions by “being a religion founded upon the sacred texts and the teachings of Torah. Torah explicitly commands the Israelites to keep the words of the tradition and to teach them to their children (Deut. 6.4-7).”¹¹ Consequently, “the memorization of Torah was one of the educational activities centered in the home” and since most of the education was oral, which was the primary modality of learning of the day rather than training in letter writing, children likely learned as much as the parents who passed on their understanding.¹² Yinger explains that “at minimum, children would have learned the Shema (‘The LORD is our God, the LORD alone’; Deut. 6:4 NJPS), the Ten Commandments, the basics of Jewish tradition, and common liturgical elements (including some psalms).¹³ Kugel provides an interesting glimpse into how learning about wisdom from such sources as the Book of Proverbs might have looked for children:

[This] collection, or collection of collections, was probably not so much intended to be read as to be *inculcated*... The same themes appear again and again: wisdom is good, folly is bad; listen to the teachings of your elders and take them to heart... If they were indeed imparted time and again, in fact, repeated here and there with only slight variation or even none at all, it seems probable that the author/editor’s purpose was not merely to impart information, but to pound it in. These texts may have been intended for the education of others or for self-inculcation, a kind of litany of wisdom’s truths.¹⁴

10 Collins, “Wisdom and Torah,” 59.

11 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 26.

12 *Ibid.*, 31.

13 Yinger, “Jewish Education,” 328.

14 Kugel, “Ancient Israelite Pedagogy and Its Survival in Second Temple Interpretations of Scripture,” 19-20.

It is worth noting that the Second Temple period established a shift in understanding wisdom as Torah, especially through the writings of Ben Sira and Baruch which communicate that “wisdom came to dwell on earth in the form of the Torah, ‘the law that Moses commanded us,’ ‘the law that endures forever.’”¹⁵ This identification of wisdom as Torah for understanding God’s created order since the beginning likely became an iconic marker for Jewish education.

In addition to promoting learning within the home, Jewish parents modeled observance of rituals for the Sabbath and special festivals with family visits to the Jerusalem Temple.

Observance of rituals itself was not unique to Jewish families, as gentile families throughout the Roman Empire worshipped household gods at home, involving children in the daily rituals.

Betsworth also notes that in polytheistic Rome, the “participation in the public rituals gave children a ‘powerful sense of belonging to the community,’” and that it was a “means of socialization into that community, introducing them to the values of their society through the enactment of their religious duties.”¹⁶ A Jewish child, however, did not participate in the state religious rituals, but rather observed Jewish rituals as modeled by their parents: “Some Mishnah texts indicate that boys old enough to ‘ride upon their father’s shoulders or hold his hand’ as they ascended the Temple Mount were required to attend the three great festivals.”¹⁷ And the importance of “these celebrations taught by repetition and by ritual reenactments” was that “they taught by recalling and repeating the religious history of the people of Israel... and also formalized a way to ask questions or to start discussions about God’s action within that history.”¹⁸ Sanders paints a further vivid picture of what a family going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and giving animal sacrifice might have looked like:

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶ Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 26.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Proctor, “Teaching Faith in the Family,” 43.

The infant and the couple's toddlers would have been left with a friend or relative, but the other children could come along, the boys going with the husband and the girls with the wife. The children, awed, would be silent and obedient, though naturally curious... Slaughter of a quadruped was significant from this point of view alone. The event was a special occasion: it was anticipated, the senses were sharpened, and the quick flood of blood evoked an emotional response... Actions, setting and physical contact helped create the worshippers' interior response... It is reasonable to assume that people felt it to be such, and also that they felt joy and thanksgiving when they were able to afford a thank offering and saw it sacrificed.¹⁹

Through these shared family experiences in travel in addition to the Torah-centered education at home, children from an early age were trained to remember God in their history as covenant people, and parents took the responsibility of centering their worldview on divine wisdom in the greater world of gentile influence with often opposing priorities.

In this brief exploration of Jewish education of young children in the first century CE, we discover that parents were actively training their children in piety and wisdom which was recognized as Torah and modeling faithful adherence to the law by observing rituals both in and outside of home. This is not to generalize Jewish education as a monolithic entity, just as Jewish people of the Second Temple period were not a uniform group. Perhaps sectarianism caused variations in the content and method of education each family partook at home even as the centrality of Torah might have been unanimous. As Christianity emerged as a religion in the later part of the Second Temple period, the New Testament writers would identify the prized divine wisdom as Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's wisdom and fulfillment of Torah. It is interesting that as Christianity developed throughout the first century, and not only were new adult believers being added to the number but also children newly being born into Christian families, faith education of children became necessary and would grow into a discipline of its own by the 2nd and 3rd century. The influence of Judaism out of which Christianity stemmed, is evident in the development of Christian education: prioritization of Scriptural learning which

¹⁹ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE - 66CE*, 188-191.

would eventually include the New Testament, and faithful observance of Christian worship by meeting together diligently as a new covenantal family and continuing the use of home as a powerful hub of ministry. Furthermore, piety continued to be pursued as the goal of teaching children for Christian parents as for Jewish parents; reminiscent of Deuteronomy 6:7, the *Didache* Chapter 4 instructs, “Do not remove your hand from your son or daughter; rather, teach them the fear of God from their youth.” Perhaps we can imitate the timeless practices of our ancestors in faith who imparted divine wisdom onto the next generation by teaching the Scripture and diligently observing worship. For a novice parent like myself who may have felt a strong responsibility for imparting the fear of the Lord to children but lacked confidence in approach, the simple yet enduring practices of Jewish and Christian ancestors whose instruction of children was an intimate, inseparable part of their life together with the children comes as a liberating and empowering guidance.

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