

Rabbinical Schools

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Rabbinical Schools in the First Century

From *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, Eerdmans

Until the formation of the later Rabbinical colleges, which flourished after the Jews were driven from Jerusalem, the instruction in the divinity schools seems to have been chiefly oral. There was a prejudice against the use of any books except the Sacred Writings. The system was one of Scriptural Exegesis. Josephus remarks at the close of his Antiquities that the one thing most prized by his countrymen was power in the exposition of Scripture. "They give to that man," he says, "the testimony of being a wise man, who is fully acquainted with our laws and is able to interpret their meaning." So far as we are able to learn from our sources of information, the method of instruction was something of this kind.

At the meetings of learned men some passage of the Old Testament was taken as a text, or some topic for discussion propounded in Hebrew, translated into the vernacular tongue by means of a Chaldee paraphrase, and made the subject of commentary. Various interpretations were given, aphorisms were propounded, allegories suggested, and the opinions of ancient doctors quoted and discussed. At these discussions the younger students were present, to listen or to inquire; or, in the words of St. Luke, "both hearing them and asking them questions:" for it was a peculiarity of the Jewish schools that the pupil was encouraged to catechize the teacher. Contradictory opinions were expressed with the utmost freedom.

This is evident from a cursory examination of the Talmud which gives us the best notions of the

scholastic disputes of the Jews. This remarkable body of Rabbinical jurisprudence has been compared to the Roman body of civil law; but in one respect it might suggest a better comparison with our own English common law, in that it is a vast accumulation of various and often inconsistent precedents. The arguments and opinions which it contains show very plainly that the Jewish doctors must often have been occupied with the most frivolous questions; that the "mint, anise, and cummin" were eagerly discussed, while the "weightier matters of the law" were neglected. But we should not be justified in passing a hasty judgment on ancient volumes, which are full of acknowledged difficulties.

What we read of the system of the Cabala has often the appearance of an unintelligible jargon; but in all ages it has been true that "the words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies." (Eccl. 12:11) If we could look back upon the assemblies of the Rabbis of Jerusalem, with Gamaliel in the midst, and Saul among the younger speakers, it is possible that the scene would be as strange and as different from a place of modern education as the schools now seen by travelers in the East differ from contemporary schools in England. But the same might be said of the walks of Plato in the Academy, or the lectures of Aristotle in the Lyceum. It is certain that these free and public discussions of the Jews tended to create a high degree of general intelligence among the people; that the students were trained there in a system of excellent dialectics; that they learned to express themselves in a rapid and sententious style, often with much poetic feeling; and acquired an admirable acquaintance with the words of the ancient Scriptures.

These “Assemblies of the Wise” were possibly a continuation of the “Schools of the Prophets” which are mentioned in the historical books of the Old Testament. Wherever the earlier meetings were held, whether at the gate of the city or in some more secluded place, we read of no buildings for purpose of worship or instruction before the Captivity. During that melancholy period, when the Jews mourned over their separation from the Temple, the necessity of assemblies must have been deeply felt, for united prayer and mutual exhortation, for the singing of the Songs of Zion, and for remembering the “Word of the Lord.” When they returned, the public reading of the law became a practice of universal interest; and from this period we must date the erection of synagogues in the different towns of Palestine. So that St. James could say, in the council of Jerusalem, “Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day (Acts 15:21). To this later period the 74th Psalm may be referred, which laments over “the burning of all the synagogues of God in the land.” (Psalm 74:8)

These buildings are not mentioned by Josephus in any of the earlier passages of his history. But in the time of the apostles we have the fullest evidence that they existed in all the small towns in Judea and in all the principal cities where Jews were dispersed abroad. It seems that the synagogues often consisted of two apartments, one for prayer, preaching, and the office of public worship; the other for the meetings of learned men, for discussions concerning questions of religion and discipline, and for the purposes of education. Thus the synagogues and the schools cannot be considered as two separate subjects.

No doubt a distinction must be drawn between the smaller schools of the country villages, and the great divinity schools of Jerusalem. The synagogue which was built by the Centurion at Capernaum (Luke 7:5) was unquestionably a far less important place than those synagogues in the Holy City, where “the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, with those of Asia and Cilicia,” rose up as one man and disputed against St. Stephen. We have here five groups of foreign Jews, two from Africa, two from Western Asia, and one from Europe; and there is no doubt that the Israelites of Syria, Babylonia, and the East were similarly represented. The Rabbinical writers say that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem; and though this must be an exaggeration, yet no doubt all shades

of Hellenistic and Aramaic opinions found a home in the common metropolis. It is easy to see that an eager and enthusiastic student could have had no lack of excitements to stimulate his religious and intellectual activity, if he spent the years of his youth in that city “at the feet of Gamaliel.”

Mode of Teaching

It has been contended that when St. Paul said he was “brought up” in Jerusalem “at the feet of Gamaliel,” he meant that he had lived at the Rabban’s house and eaten at his table. But the words evidently point to the customary posture of Jewish students at a school. There is a curious passage in the Talmud where it is said that “from the days of Moses to Rabban Gamaliel, they stood up to learn the Law; but when Rabban Gamaliel died, sickness came into the world and they sat down to learn the Law.” We need not stop to criticize this sentence, and it is not easy to reconcile it with other authorities on the same subject. “To sit at the feet Old Testament a teacher’ was a proverbial expression; as when Mary is said to have “sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word.” (Luke 10:39; cf 8:35) But the proverbial expression must have arisen from a well known custom. The teacher was seated on an elevated platform, or on the ground, and the pupils around him on low seats or on the floor. Maimonides says, “How do the masters teach? The doctor sits at the head, and the disciples surround him like a crown, that they may all see the doctor and hear his words. Nor is the doctor seated on a seat, and the disciples on the ground, but all are in seats or all on the floor.”

St. Ambrose says, in his commentary of the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians (14) that “it is the tradition of the synagogue that they sit while they dispute; the elders in dignity on high chairs, those beneath them on low seats, and the last of all on mats upon the pavement.” And again Philo says, that the children of the Essenes sat at the feet of the masters who interpreted the Law and explained its figurative sense. And the same thing is expressed in that maxim of the Jews, “Place thyself in the dust at the feet of the wise.”

In this posture the Apostle of the Gentiles spent his schoolboy days, an eager and indefatigable student. “He that giveth his mind to the law of the Most High, and is occupied in the meditation thereof; will seek out the wisdom of all the ancient, and be occupied in prophecies. He will keep the sayings of

the renowned men; and where subtle parables are, he will be there also. He will seek out the secrets of grave sentences, and be conversant in dark parables. He shall serve among great men and appear among princes; he will travel through strange countries; for he hath tried the good and the evil among men." (Ecclesiasticus 39:1-4)

Such was the pattern proposed to himself by an ardent follower of the Rabbis; and we cannot wonder that Saul, with such a standard before him, and with so ardent a temperament, "outran in Judaism many of his own age and nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of the Fathers." (Gal. 1:14) Intellectually his mind was trained to logical acuteness, his memory become well stores with "hard sentences of old," and he acquired the facility of quick and apt quotation of Scripture. Morally, he was a strict observer of the requirements of the Law; and, while he led a conscientious life, after the example of his ancestors, he gradually imbibed the spirit of a fervent persecuting zeal.

Among his fellow students, who flocked to Jerusalem from Egypt and Babylonia, from the coasts of Greece and his native Cilicia, he was known and held in his estimation as a rising light in Israel. And if we may draw a natural inference from another sentence of the letter which has just been quoted, he was far from indifferent to the praise of men. Students of the Law were called "the holy people;" and we know one occasion when it was said, "The people who know not the Law are cursed." (John 7:49) And we can imagine him saying to himself, with all the rising pride of a successful Pharisee, in the language of the Book of Wisdom: "I shall have estimation among the multitude, and honor with the elders, though I be young. I shall be found of a quick conceit in judgment, and shall be admired in the sight of great men. When I hold my tongue, they shall bide my leisure; and when I speak, they shall give good ear unto me." (Wisdom 8:10-12)