Schools in the world of Jesus: Analysing the evidence

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ABSTRACT
There is considerable agreement in studies on education in first-century Palestine that there was widespread, organised and compulsory elementary schooling in the Jewish communities with very high levels of literacy. This article questions such a depiction. The major literary references usually employed in such portrayals are analysed; reference to the lack of archaeological evidence is made and the simplified and naive understanding of ancient education is questioned. The conclusions are that most studies misrepresent first-century Jewish education. In such studies literary evidence is used fundamentalistically; the diversity and complexity of early Judaism(s) are ignored and anachronistic and ethnocentric concepts are used to serve apologetic and ideological needs.

1 INTRODUCTION
Representative of many, Du Plessis (1998:317) writes:

In about the year 75 BC, a certain Simon ben Shetah ordered that all boys between six and sixteen should receive compulsory elementary education. This probably means that elementary education already existed officially, and that Simon merely authorized something that already existed.

This impression of a sophisticated system of widespread elementary education, supplemented by forms of intermediate and higher levels of education in the first-century Jewish world is quite popular among scholars.1 Probably the clearest expression of this romantic depiction can be found in the study of Drazin, who claims that by the latter half of the first century 'we find an institution of universal and compulsory elementary education established' in the Jewish world (1940:46).

Clearly, a vast array of problems and issues are involved in how we should picture the 'education of the young' in the world of Jesus. In this article I consider some

1 Safrai 1971; 1976 are recent examples. Moore (1927:308–322) and Schürer (1979:415–422) are the (older) standard reference works. These—and in fact most studies of or introductions to the 'environment' of the New Testament or the first-century Palestinian 'world'—provide similar anachronistic and unhistorical depictions of education. In addition to the studies discussed below see Ginzberg 1976 and Ze'ev Safrai 1995:185–187 (who delineates his discussion as limited to the typical Jewish town of rabbinic times). Townsend (1992:315–317) emphasises the relationship of Jewish education with Hellenistic schools, and mentions that Hebrew primary schools became widespread by the middle of the 2nd century CE.
aspects of the discussion relating to the evidence usually referred to when ‘schools’ and ‘education’ in the first century Palestinian context are depicted.

To anticipate: the purpose of my study is to query the unproblematic way in which concepts such as ‘school’, ‘education’ and ‘literacy’ are used with regard to the first-century Palestinian world. In a sense, this study is a contribution to the philosophy of history—why some histories are more sound and are ‘better’ at providing insight and understanding. I want to emphasise the importance of a critical historiography which does not deal naively and fundamentalistically with our sources.

Although Du Plessis (1998, referred to above on page 225) gives no references, I suspect that he thinks his opinion can be based upon the Palestinian Talmud, tractate *Ketubbot* (‘marriage contracts’) chapter 8, section 11:

> Simeon ben Šētah made three decrees:
> that a man may do business with the marriage contract of his wife;
> that children should go to the house of the scribe;
> that glassware is susceptible to becoming unclean (cf Neusner 1985b:264).

The argument implied by Du Plessis seems to be that, as Simeon (probably) was the brother of queen Alexandra Salome who ruled Judea 76–67 BCE, such an ‘order’ must have been issued at that time. Of course, the document containing this particular Gemara, was finalised about five centuries later...

It is also very obvious that extremely little can be made of such a general, vague aside ascribed to Simeon. The Babylonian Talmud, not unexpectedly, claims a different author for the decree that young children should go to school.

> ... [A] father would take his child up to Jerusalem and have him taught there, and if not, he would not go up to learn there. They therefore ordained that teachers should be appointed in each prefecture, and that boys should enter school at the age of sixteen or seventeen. If the teacher punished them they [the young men] used to rebel and leave the school. At length Joshua b. Gamala ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven (b Baba Bathra 21a).

This contains at least some detail, but moves the ‘institution’ of elementary schools forward by almost 140 years, as the reference is (presumably) to Jesus ben Gamala, appointed high priest by Agrippa for 63–64 (Josephus AJ 20.9.213, 223; BJ 4.3.160, 4.4.238–5.325). Drazin (1940:37–49) deftly harmonises these rabbinic sayings into a three-stage development: advanced schools (colleges) originated during the ‘period of the scribes’ (preceding Hasmonean times), Simon ben Šētah instituted secondary schools and Jesus ben Gamala free, compulsory primary schools.

2 **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HISTORY OF FIRST-CENTURY JEWISH EDUCATION**

Every single attempt at historiography is, let us not be mistaken, suffused by the interests and biases of the historian. We write history for ourselves. But precisely
because of this truth we need to be very careful how we go about with our sources and be responsible about what our histories are for. 'Improper' histories 'fail to call into question the conditions of their own making, which forget to indicate their subservience to unrevealed interests, which mis-recognise their own historical moment, and which mask those epistemological and ideological pre-suppositions that... everywhere and everytime mediate the past into history' (Jenkins 1991:68).

When we turn to studies of ancient Jewish education an astounding naivety (about the sources) and an incredibly apologetic mode are the dominant impressions. We find the kind of history that does not respect the past, nor really care to understand.

A good illustration of the complexities and the wide range of subtle misrepresentation involved, is Riesner (1980; 1984:119–245) who emphasises the importance of the 'elementary school' in first-century Jewish life. Note, however, that Riesner is concerned about the reliability of the gospel traditions, specifically to counteract the picture painted by the 'formgeschichtliche Schule' of 'invented' Jesus traditions. He argues that one can place more trust in the reliability of the synoptic tradition as allowed for by the form critics ('grösseres Vertrauen in die Zuverlässigkeit der synoptische Tradition setzen', 1980:220). This is possible because 'die drei zeitgenössischen Volksbildungsinstitutionen' namely home, synagogue and primary school, gave Jesus and his followers 'ein Mass von Traditionsbewusstsein und Traditionsmethodik' (:211), specifically rote learning ('das Auswendiglernen'). To Riesner's way of thinking, in short, such awareness of tradition is a given, because of the widespread existence of schools in Judea and Galilee.

I must emphasise that I do not want to (1) show the form critics to be right, (2) deny that primary schools existed in first-century Palestine or (3) deny the role of rote learning in antiquity. All learning in the Greco-Roman world consisted by-and-large of repetitive memorising—one is hard pressed to imagine an alternative in a pre-industrial culture with almost no books in any case. Obviously young children were taught by adults in one way or another, and I am not denying this basic fact. Finally, and as most gospel critics can easily do, I fully acknowledge the many (unresolvable) problems and problematic assumptions of the form-critical enterprise.

The point of critique is a more profound one: what is the content or 'meaning' of the concept 'primary school' in the first-century Jewish world? The evidence, common sense and historical realities show, I argue, that very few primary schools existed, that those few had a negligible impact on society, that household education was focused on daily skills and apprenticeships and that the synagogue 'as school' is very much an anachronistic depiction.

2.1 Studies
The thrust of my argument is best explained by placing Riesner's study in a context of a history of research. To show that 'Jewish popular education' (populäre Pädagogik),
which had its roots in Old Testament times, remained basically the same right until rabbinic times, Riesner in a footnote refers to the following studies: Morris (1937), Drazin (1940), Ebner (1956), Carpenter (1958), Hengel (1974a:78–83; 1974b: 143–152) and Safrai (1976).

These studies, of considerable variety in quality, do share a number of distinct traits. They all refer to the same literary evidence. They quote the same paragraphs from the rabbinic corpora almost to the letter, supplemented with some quotations from Josephus and Philo. Secondly, by-and-large their approach to rabbinic literature is analogous to handling a collection of photo slides. One can simply pick up a slide (=quote an anecdote) and peer through it to see 'history as it was' (the words uttered by a 'rabbi' reflects precise events). The only challenge is to arrange the slides 'historically' (i.e., place the 'authorities' chronologically). Thirdly, the content of the concept 'school' is left undefined, and in fact turns out to be imagined as something analogous to modern schools. Fourthly, the cultural and social gap between past times and peoples and twentieth century times and peoples is left unexplored.

Unsurprisingly, these studies present more-or-less a picture of extensive schooling, that is, an abundance of schools and teachers, in the first century.

Morris's (1937) is in many ways a remarkable study. Though rather dated, it is still among the best in the group. Carefully distinguishing between 'literary instruction' —which, according to Morris, in the main post-dates Biblical times—and the transmitting of tradition from generation to generation, he argues that literary education did not form part of the upbringing of Jewish children (1937:5). 'Compulsory' and 'universal' education never existed among the Jewish people, at least not before the fourth century CE (14–23). The 'generally accepted view'

that a system of popular education, compulsory and "universal", whatever this latter term may be intended to express, was introduced among Jews by some authority before the destruction of the second temple shows a curious lack of historic perspective; it is the

2 Riesner (1980:221 n 23). In his dissertation Riesner (1984:153–206) actually surveys the evidence for the supposed development of Jewish schools from pre-monarchic Israel right up to talmudic times. In his survey he discusses an immense range of texts and 'groups' (such as the Chasidim, the priests, scribes, hellenists, Ben Sira, the Essenes, Protorabbinnen and many others). His conclusions are, however, no different than the 'conventional', romantic picture of an efficient, widespread, and uniform elementary school system dominating Jewish education: 'Knabenschulen' were already 'in das Zeitalter Christi ... eine allgemeine fest organisierte Institution' (:199, quoting Schürer). The only bone of contention among first-century Jews, according to Riesner, was whether 'höhere Bildung' should remain limited or not. The similarity of his results to those discussed below extend to methods of research: his method is basically to take any and all ancient references where a word can be translated by Schule and then to simply string them all together. It does not even occur to him, for instance, that temple based priestly 'schools', or Ezra's 'reformers' (which drew support from only a small part of the Jewish world) could have been distinct phenomena which played no role in any trend toward 'general' education.
projection of a modern idea into a time and a set of conditions where it could not fit. (:19–20)

Morris suggests that the situation was probably similar to that of pre-war Russia (he refers to World War 1), with facilities provided for in towns and some villages which were ‘lamentably inadequate’ and ‘large numbers of people, in fact the great majority, either would not or could not avail themselves of them’ (:20). Here, at least, there is some attempt to interpret the sources and not just repeat them (cf :xxv).

Morris criticises approaching the history of Jewish education ‘as if it were an isolated incident, completely cut off from the general stream of the history of education’ (:170). To Morris, the interest in and movement toward widespread elementary education for boys gathered momentum only after the destruction of the second temple, particularly in the second century CE, when ‘the centre of gravity of Jewish communal life...shifted from the political to the spiritual plane’ (:41). Education was basically a family affair, with practical concerns; ‘advice, guidance, and direction’ were provided as required by ‘immediate needs’ (:7).

The school in its earliest stage was a private and independent institution. There were certain restrictions imposed upon it by custom or public opinion, such, for instance, as that no woman or unmarried person was allowed to teach in it. Beyond such general control the community did not interfere. Anyone who considered himself qualified to do so would set up “school” in his own house in the same manner as other people would set up as tailors or tanners. (:42–43)

The synagogue only became a fully functional educational institution ‘from the fourth to the eighth century CE’ (:xxvi).

Drazin writes a sort of counterpart to Morris (cf Drazin 1940:146). He explicitly criticises Morris’s idea of a developing educational system, and claims that ‘universal’ primary education existed since the first century. Drazin identifies ‘education’, ‘school’ and ‘Torah’ and consequently, in his view, all Jews have always been perfect students and then later in life, teachers. He describes Morris’s work as ‘ultra-scientific’ and feels that much can be learned from ‘Jewish education of old’ when it comes to modern day psychological approaches which emphasise methodology apart from content (cf Drazin 1940:145).

Drazin is guilty in particular of mixing Josephus, Mishnah, Philo, Talmud, Old Testament and medieval texts together, treating all these texts as if on one plane, directly reflecting exact historical realities. His use of rabbinic literature borders on the foolish. ‘The high regard with which the masses of the people looked upon education and the educated’ is proven by the ‘incident related in the Talmud’ (he refers to b Yoma 71b) when ‘all the people’ who were giving an ovation to the high priest deserted the priest to follow the two sages Shemaiah and Abtalion, who happened to pass by (:28–29).

It is well-known that discipline of the young was severe in antiquity. Note how Drazin reads these offensive texts: the ‘strictness’ of the ‘Rabbis’ was actually the
application of 'another wise psychological principle': the rabbi must be 'outwardly' strict whilst 'in reality... their friend and counsellor' (:109).

To Drazin ancient Jewish education was of an incomparably high standard. Just how impressive is shown by the 'fact' that 'Hebrew mothers need[ed] no midwives for their delivery' (he quotes Philo’s De Fuga et Inventione 30.168 and Ex 1.19)—because of the astonishingly complete and excellent education given to Jewish girls (Drazin 1940:147). Jewish boys, as even Drazin admits, were even better educated.

Like Drazin, Ebner is also of the opinion that the reason why 'the principles...and conditions of elementary Jewish education in Palestine during the first two centuries' is so important, is because 'it was then that the foundations of organized elementary education on a democratic basis were laid' (1956:5).

Ebner, too, employs a three-stage development in the history of Jewish education, but not a development from general higher education to general primary education. The 'evidence'

...unmistakably presents an outline of the course which organized elementary school education took at its early stages, a course that led from the establishment of a central school in the capital city of Jerusalem to a network of schools spread all over Jewish Palestine. (:39)

In his view, the first-century 'Jews' needed to solve the three-fold problem of (i) Gentile schools, (ii) the growing complexity of teaching the Torah (especially in the light of the oral law interpretation) and (iii) the 'reorganization' of Jewish life under Pharisaic leadership. Consequently, an elementary school was instituted in Jerusalem quite early (Ebner 1956:43–45). The three phases in the development of democratic schooling he envisages are: a first primary school in Jerusalem, which worked fairly well for the 'metropolis' but which proved 'soon' to be inadequate for the rest of the country (:46). So the 'favorable experience with the elementary school in Jerusalem' led to 'decentralization', that is, the establishing of schools in the 'main city of each district' with the 'emergency' measure of 16–17 years as age of admission (:46). The final phase is for Ebner something between Drazin’s and Morris’s: general education was not immediately implemented but not so slowly that it took three centuries. The elementary school ‘had become widely accepted by the time of the Bar Cochba revolt’ (:48).

Ebner also reads the rabbinic anecdotes literally. In particular he makes the popular mistake of confusing prescripts and ideals with reality. To Ebner, if a rabbi instructs someone to study Torah day and night, it means that ‘Jews’ actually studied the Torah day in and night out. He also likes to refer to the ‘un- or ill-supported’ conclusions of ‘others’—usually signifying statements of scholars which might suggest that ancient ‘Jews’ did not perform historically in the manner depicted by the rabbinic literature (e.g, 1956:51, 47, 64, 71, 73).

According to Ebner, primary schools were housed, for the most, in the
synagogues (:64–65). The curriculum for the elementary school was simply memorising the Old Testament, covering the whole Bible in ± 5 years (:69–71). The curriculum also included reading skills and proficiency in the synagogue liturgy. ‘Although the night was a favorite time for studying the Torah, children were not required to study at school in the evening hours. Only on Friday nights do we find school boys studying in an organized fashion’ (:73, citing m Shabbat 1.3).

At times Ebner seems to be sensitive to historical realities. He denies that there was a development from a harsh attitude towards children to a more humane one in later times:

… the evidence presented is far too insufficient to prove either a stern parental attitude in earlier periods or a milder and more indulgent one in later times. The error made is, that some isolated references, strewn over the many pages of the Bible and Talmud, are used to show the attitude and pattern of innumerable people who lived during many centuries. Using this method the very opposite may be demonstrated with equal ease. (Ebner 1956:35–36)

His own literalistic approach to rabbinic ‘evidence’ makes his conclusions, however, quite unbelievable. Ebner is quite comfortable with the idea that ‘the city of Betar’ had 250,000 school boys attending 500 schools at the beginning of the second century CE (he cites y Tdanit 4.8, Ebner 1956:107 n 38). That the Babylonian Talmud (Gittin 58a)⁴ puts the figure even higher—400 schools with 160,000 teachers teaching 640,000 boys—elicits the following comment: ‘The obvious exaggeration of the cited numbers does not invalidate the usefulness of the reference for our purpose’ (Ebner 1956:110 n 6). The best illustration of how unhistorical Ebner’s study is, to my mind, his view of the education of ancient Jewish girls. ‘The Jews shared with other peoples of antiquity the belief, that the woman was inferior to the man…. However it is a mistake to assume, that this inferiority implied a social stigma and a contemptuous attitude towards her’ (:34). The exacting rules for segregation and the various many discriminatory prescripts present in rabbinic literature are, actually

³ The discussion in Mishnah deals with what is appropriate to do on Friday afternoons, and what is appropriate on sabbath. The specific text reads: ‘A teacher may look where the children are reading [by the light of a lamp] but he does not read’. This is not a reference to studying techniques, nor even an indication of ‘typical’ schoolboy behaviour.

⁴ The small hill-top town of Betar, now known as Khirbet el-Yahuddi, is about 11 km southwest of Jerusalem. The outline of the walls and towers of the town can still be seen, though the site has not been excavated. It dates from the Roman-Byzantine period and had a population, at best, probably of a few thousand. The texts which Ebner refers to actually deals with the heroic defence of the ‘Jews’ against the Romans during the Bar Kochba war. That is, the rabbis boast of 200,000 defenders alongside the thousands of children: clearly exaggerations with other purposes than to inform about primary schools... The reference in b Gittin talks about the ‘enemy’ who pierced the (640,000) children with their staves, and when ‘the enemy’ prevailed, the children were wrapped in their scrolls and burned.
simply 'due to the strict standards of womanly modesty that the Rabbis imposed' (:34, my italics).

Carpenter's (1958) dissertation 'seeks to picture the educational framework of Judaism into which Christianity was born' (:iv). Like the other scholars writing about ancient Jewish education, Carpenter believes that history to be of direct relevance to us today: 'The supreme lesson which Jewish education has to teach us is that the most important element in all education is moral discipline' (:21). That is how Judaism maintained its distinctiveness despite incredible odds.

To Carpenter, private schools existed alongside synagogue schools. Since Simon ben Šetâh instituted an elementary school for orphan boys, the movement grew so that by the time of Jesus primary schools were for all practical purposes 'universal'. The synagogues, in particular, had education 'as their main function. All schools were organised by the 'Scribes'.

Though Carpenter accurately characterises aspects of 'Jewish education'—for example, during the time of Jesus, it was 'authoritarian and traditional' (:245), he paints the world of Jesus as one dominated by 'teaching Scribes' who had greater prestige and status than the priests. In Carpenter's narrative, the Pharisees (the 'teaching Scribes') are the heroes and the Sadducees the opponents of the people. His depiction of the 'leading sects' among the 'Jews' (:125–143) is one-dimensional and a literal re-writing of Josephus (ignoring the inconsistencies in Josephus' reports; on which see Mason 1992:131–147; Botha 1997). According to Carpenter, Jewish boys were taught a complex and comprehensive curriculum in the elementary schools, although the emphasis was on 'religious matters'. Among other things, this religious emphasis meant an education with a messianic foundation (:172). Most telling, to my mind, is Carpenter's understanding of 'Jewish education' as 'distinctly child-centered' (:173–174). Such a reading is only possible by superficially stringing together rabbinic statements.

As is well-known, Hengel's (1974a) famous study deals with the relationship and interaction between 'Judaism' and 'Hellenism'. To Hengel, the two 'cultures' have distinct characteristics, and the parallels, differences and conflicts between them are the engine which drives the history of early Judaism and early Christianity.

The 'considerable number of Jewish elementary schools' from the first century and later have their roots in the 'pre-exilic' 'scribal schools in the temple and probably elsewhere in the country' (:82). By the third and second centuries BCE, these scribal schools of the temple, which trained selected priests, Levites and a few aristocrats, were faced with a dilemma in their confrontation with Hellenism, and could develop in two ways. Obviously they could accept Hellenism, or they could reject it, that is, 'they could be conservative and preserve the old tradition' (:78). Consequently it was precisely this 'intellectual struggle'—the 'influences of Hellenism in Jerusalem which are breaking up traditional custom' (:79)—which accelerated the school system. The (so-called) office of the sôper came more and more out of the
exclusiveness of the privileged scribe, associated with the temple, and became acces-
sible to wider circles of the laity. 'Priests and Levites, even those who were at least
partly infected [sic] with Hellenistic ideas, were no longer up to the new tasks on
their own.' (:79). In this atmosphere 'Pharaisam' took strong roots.

To Hengel, the development of popular and widespread elementary schools hangs
together with other developments: the extension of the 'Pharisaic movement' as a
mass movement, the synagogue liturgy of reading and preaching, the aim of the
Pharisees to teach the 'whole people in the Law' and so on. Consequently the Jewish
school gave the people unique support as a bulwark against alien rule and alien
civilization' (:83).5

Hengel admits that the historicity of the anecdote about the high priest Jesus son
of Gamaliel instituting national elementary education should be considered doubtful
(on good grounds), :82; cf 1974b:55 n 182); he conjectures that 'Joshua ben Perahya...was responsible for it in the time of Hyrcanus I, about 130 BC'. Consequently, 'Simeon b. Šetah [sic] would then have put his ordinance into force once
again' (:82).

Safrai's (1976) overview of general education is based, in part, on an earlier study
focusing on 'elementary education' (Safrai 1971). Safrai is deeply impressed by the
great 'contrasts' between Hellenistic-Roman culture and the Jewish culture. Whereas
the Hellenistic schools, 'as their other cultural institutions' were 'essentially' urban
and discriminating and designed to serve only a narrow stratum of their population,
'and were never intended to encompass all of the residents of the Greek cities'
(1971:148), the 'Jewish school' was intended 'for all the children' (:148). Where the
'overwhelming majority of the rural community, born in Egypt or in some other Hel-
enized land, never attained any educational framework at all', every Jewish
'settlement' and village had schools where 'each child'—whether son of a pauper or
rich man, of a notable or of ignorant or of 'low descent' or even of 'various evil
doers'—were educated, with the 'city' defraying the costs of scribes and 'repetitors'
(:148–151). This 'widespread' education of children and the founding of schools go
back to the last generations of the Second Commonwealth or even slightly earlier.
That is, at least since before Simon ben Šetah's time, though the process was not yet
completed in his day (1971:149).

5 Despite Hengel's erudition and many sound arguments his overall thesis is not without
criticisms should be added the idea of a normative 'pharaisam' which supposedly had
widespread mass support. There is much truth in Meyer's (1974:31) conclusion: '...apart from
the few years of Salome Alexandra and a more or less insignificant minority in the council
between 67 BC and 70 AD Pharaisam did not shape Palestinian Judaism at any time during
this period'. Pharisees were influential in first-century Palestinian Judaism, for sure, but they
were not the leaders of a mass movement, much less the dominant force in society. See fur-
ther Neusner 1988:41–65, Goodblatt 1989 and Cohen 1987:162–164 as well as the conclu-
This picture is based, basically, on the instructions that we find in rabbinic literature. That is, Safrai deduces from the various obligations which are encouraged by some of the rabbis that things were actually so. But Safrai also engages some specious reasoning with regard to historical ‘evidence’. About the ‘tradition’ concerning Jesus ben Gamala—‘a more clearly stated tradition’ (than the one about Simon, :149)—Safrai notes, correctly, that ‘the tradition as it is before us has undergone a literary stylization’, but adds ‘therefore one should not regard as historical fact each detail or stage which it describes; however, its core is certainly historical’ (:149, my italics). No explanation is given about which detail or why, nor why the core (how would we identify that?) happens to be ‘real’ and the others not. Safrai argues that this tradition was ‘related by Rav, a Babylonian Amora who dwelt many years in Palestine and brought back with him many reliable traditions’ (my italics). He conveniently leaves out that it is the editors of the Talmud who say that ‘rabbi Judah’ said that ‘Rav’ said that… Not only does he display a poor understanding of the dynamics of oral tradition, but his reference to ‘reliable traditions’ is completely irrelevant as argument for historicity.6

Rab here stands for Abba Arikha, who died in 247 CE (more than a century and a half later than the high priest about whom the anecdote speaks). Rab undoubtedly had a great impact on the development of the characteristic literary style and interests of the Babylonian and he had numerous disciples, but we still have no grounds to simply take the story as historical fact, even if limited to its supposed ‘core’.7

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6 Rabbinic tradition cannot be its own source of authority as to its reliability. More to the point, informal oral tradition is usually more reliable than formal ones: ‘an official tradition is less trustworthy as a historical source...in so far as it is official, but more trustworthy in so far as it is much more carefully transmitted’ (Vansina 1965:85). That is, formal oral tradition is more trustworthy as regards care in transmission, less so as to historical reliability (Vansina 1985:29–32, 107, 172, 190–193). In oral tradition ‘stories and sayings are authenticated not by virtue of their historical reliability, but on the authority of the speaker and by the reception of hearers’ (Kelber 1983:71). Safrai, like many other scholars working in this field, does not want to acknowledge any bias in these stories. All oral traditions ‘have political or social functions’ (Vansina 1965:170). The reliability of oral tradition is an extremely complex issue; see the brief discussions by Amsbury (1995) and Burch (1996). On rabbinic oral tradition: Neusner 1972 and 1983. There is an extensive debate raging about the reliability/historicity of rabbinic sayings and anecdotes (e.g. Kraemer 1999, Feldman 1999, Kalmin 1999, Neusner 1999 and Z. Safrai’s response 1999). Stemberger (1999) provides probably the best balance, acknowledging that arbitrariness cannot be excluded (as with all interpretation/historiography), emphasizing that the history of tradition (of rabbinic materials) is not yet history of the reported events as well as the importance of external controls.

7 Riesner (1984:200–201) discusses some of the contradictions and inconsistencies among the traditions ascribed to Abba Arikha, and concludes: ‘Bei der historischen Bewertung der Tradition müssen deshalb innere Gründe Ausschlag geben’. Which he also attempts; in order to achieve this he takes most of the other rabbinic traditions quoted at face value, including legends supposedly about Joshua’s wife. He argues that although Joshua was a Sadducee (Sadducees, for Riesner, were not really interested in the education of the young), his educational
Safrai is also guilty of sloppy reasoning. The 'educational framework' that the Greco-Romans lacked is, in his article, 'reading and understanding of Scripture' and 'knowledge of the traditions of the Oral Law' which of course was of no use and no interest to Greeks and Romans.

All scholars who emphasise a picture of widespread Torah education and study, and the existence of elementary schools in the first century, must deal with the obvious problem of the 'am ha'arets. To Safrai, the 'am ha'arets present a 'kind of social current', those who are careless in the laws of purity and who withdrew from Torah education (166–167). They are a 'faction' who, initially in tension with the 'scholars', turned out to be a 'diminishing' factor, particularly after the destruction of the temple—after which it was no longer possible anyway to maintain strict purity. With the exception of Morris, all of these scholars do not see the real implication of the references to the 'ammi ha'arets: that the rabbis were but one among many contributing to the diversity of early Judaism. The prescripts and decrees of the rabbis were not followed by all nor the majority or even great numbers of first-century Jews.

Note that the 'am ha'arets appears in the rabbinic context of visitations to towns and villages for the purpose of instruction in various observances (cf Vale 1987:215). We are left completely in the dark by the rabbis about the daily setting in which these persons may have functioned/lived when the rabbis were absent. The term 'ammi ha'arets is simply a sweeping indication of those who do not accept rabbinic perspectives. Consequently, there were significant groups of Jewish people who very definitely did not consider rabbinic concepts and ideals relevant to their way of life.

2.2 Implications

This review of studies about first-century Jewish education is important for the simple reason of elucidating the foundations on which almost every discussion of first-century Jewish schools rest. These depictions of 'Jewish education' are rather romantic and should be recognised as such. They build on unhistorical concepts of

*Mittnahmen were attempts to entice moderate Pharisees (who were, of course, very interested in the education of the young) not to support the Zealots. Also, the fact that an initial Pharisaic reform (Simeon ben Setah) is supposed to have been a Pharisee) is claimed to be completed by a Sadducee 'bedeudet ... einen internen Hinweis auf die Glaubwürdigkeit der Tradition' (:204). Riesner's argument is sheer fantasy; what is disturbing is the total disregard of the principle to read the texts for what they want to convey.

8 Specifically, balakot concerned with the subject of ritual purity and impurity. The 'ammi ha'arets participated in synagogue life, came from all walks of life, did not constitute a single 'sect' or closed association and had no organisational framework. See Oppenheimer 1977:18–22.

9 And, conversely, 'the talmudic discussion, then, is not concerned so much with the behavior of a population in a particular geographical space, but rather how they were not behaving in relation to the (rabbinic) laws of tithing and purity' (Vale 1987:215).
Pharisaic/rabbinic normativeness in the first century, denying the diversity of life and practice present in Judea and Galilee. Most of all, one must emphasise that these descriptions reflect a very problematic use of literary evidence. Such depictions (1) assume that repeating a statement from an ancient source is presenting historical evidence; (2) suggest that the events and activities are clear, distinct, well-known and properly understood and the only task of the historian is to assign dates and heroes; and (3) fail to ask important (or serious) questions.

Not only must we note the highly dubious use of the source material (circumventing the proper interpretation of data), but also that (4) a confused philosophy of history is at work here. There is a pronounced neglect of an appropriate conceptual apparatus needed to discuss ancient Jewish education. Such a repression of the conceptual apparatus—'without which atomic facts cannot be aggregated into complex macrostructures and constituted as objects of discursive representation in a historical narrative' (White 1978:126)—places the histories discussed above in the realm of propaganda.

3 LITERARY EVIDENCE

Clearly, we need to determine what the evidence actually says? To do that, we need to understand our sources. It must already be clear that a simply quoting of rabbinic statements must force one into hundreds of contradictions, logical inconsistencies and specious harmonisations.

3.1 Rabbinic evidence

Given the widespread popularity of the two talmudic anecdotes mentioned above in ‘studies’ of schools in the first century, a more detailed analysis of them is in order.

Dealing with rabbinic literature is to enter a very difficult terrain—it is indeed to ‘begibt sich in einen dunklen Raum’ (Hengel 1984:11). Jacob Neusner has often emphasised that without a systematic account of the evidence and a theory of how the evidence may and may not be utilised, no one can proceed with rabbinic literature (e.g. 1994b:9–17, 21–40).

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10 It is true that before the critical work of Neusner rabbinic literature was used in a fundamentalist fashion for historical study, as if writings of the Amoraic period (about 200–500 CE) could be used to find out what was happening during earlier periods. There was no concept of historical development, of the religious bias of the tradents (those who pass down the tradition), and of the fact that the rabbis were not generally interested in historical matters. It was assumed that the late talmudic literature could be cited to prove arguments about the Second Temple period many centuries earlier.' (Grabbe 1992:14). What is truly astounding is that not only is there a ‘before Neusner’ in the use of rabbinic literature with regard to first-century historical interpretation, but that there is a ‘despite Neusner’—as the volume to which Du Plessis (1998) contributed his chapter, illustrates.
The case against the problems inherent in the 'traditional' way of utilising rabbinic anecdotes will be illustrated by briefly discussing two arguments. The conventional way approaches rabbinic literature as 'authorities', as 'authoritative testimonies'. Collingwood (1946:33, 36, 257–266, 274–281) calls this 'scissors-and-paste history'. It is 'not really history at all, but we have no other name for it' (:257). It is not history because it is a hodgepodge of excerpts.

The method by which it proceeds is first to decide what we want to know about, and then to go in search of statements about it, oral or written, purporting to be made by actors in the events concerned, or by eyewitnesses of them, or by persons repeating what actors or eyewitnesses have told them... Having found in such a statement something relevant to [one's] purpose, the historian excerpts it and incorporates it... in [one's] own history. (Collingwood 1946:257).

History is not copying out the 'testimonies' of 'sources' but an attempt at understanding. The important question 'about any statement contained in a source is not whether it is true or false, but what it means' (Collingwood 1946:260).

My second argument relates to the history of New Testament scholarship. If this discipline has accomplished anything, it must be that it has strived, for the past 150 years or so, to achieve 'literary competence' and 'genre-recognition' with regard to the ancient texts studied. That is, irrespective of whether an individual scholar is interested in historical-critical questions or literary-critical (text-immanent) concerns, the principle at stake is to identify recognisable genres in biblical texts in order to read them competently (whether that be oral traditions, redactional elements, kerygmatic narratives, and so on).11 Despite its varied manifestations, the academic study of biblical and early Christian texts is united in its logical evolution: the identification/recognition of the texts (or its constituent parts) and an appropriate, competent reading thereof.

Reading these rabbinic anecdotes as disparate statements, as historical 'testimonies', flies in the face of everything that Biblical Studies has achieved in the academic study of ancient texts over a period of almost two centuries.

We must insist upon reading each source within its own context before proceeding to historical analysis; this means understanding the aims, shape, composition history and rhetorical features of that literature. A historical source is an entire world of discourse, an author's/editor's (or editors') interpretation of traditions and events that is both conscious and unconscious, and marked by various levels of themes and characteristic language.

Quoting a rabbinic reference to either Simeon or Josua does not provide us with a datum, a disembodied fact; only an appropriation of popular rabbinic stories. There

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11 There are many competent discussions of the historical development of the academic study of the Bible illustrating this point. See especially Barton 1994, 1984 and Egger 1996.
is no alchemy that can turn such a formulation into raw data about the origins of Jewish schools' (Mason 1992:25; Mason is discussing how scholars make use of Josephus' portrayals of the so-called Jewish sects).

3.1.1 It is embarrassing that so much has been read into the very basic little sentence included in the Palestinian Talmud which refers to Simeon ben Šetah's 'decree'.

*Ketubbot* has as its theme the marriage contract, and the discussion of this theme is structured according to the temporal logic of a marriage: the formation of the marriage and the claims of the husband and the father (the marital settlement on the eve of marriage; how to deal with conflicting claims with regard to virginity; issues of rape and seduction, etc), the duration of marriage (the reciprocal responsibilities and duties of husband and wife) and the cessation of marriage (the collection of the marriage contract).

The reference to Simeon ben Šetah occurs in the part of the tractate that deals with the period when the marriage is in effect. Part of the material rights and duties in a marriage are determined by the rules of dowry. That is, for instance, if the woman got property before she was betrothed, she controls her property; if after betrothal there should be a family dispute, but if after marriage, all concur that the husband controls the property (8.1–3). The rabbis then discuss what if money, with which land is purchased, comes to her (8.4–5); if she inherits old slaves (8.6–8); what happens if she is a woman awaiting levirate marriage to whom property came (8.9–11) and what happens if a man does not claim his wife's property (9.1). Throughout this section we find the dialectic structure (of statement, challenge and response, proposal and counterproposal) so typical of talmudic literature. Thus, rather than 'reporting' supposed historical facts, what this part of rabbinic literature does is inviting the reader/hearer to enter into those same thought processes.

By following dialectical arguments, we ourselves enter into those same thought processes, and our minds then are formed in the model of rigorous and sustained, systematic argument. ... When we follow a proposal and its refutation, the consequence thereof, and the result of that, we ourselves form partners to the logical tensions and their resolutions; we are given an opening into the discourse that lies before us. ... The author of a dialectical composite presents a problem with its internal tensions in logic and offers a solution to the problem and a resolution of the logical conflicts (Neusner 1994a:93).

Precisely. The recalling of Simeon's 'decrees' is part of the exploration of the principle that the marriage contract is a first lien on the estate of a husband, and the

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12 Even if one disagrees with the thesis that the Jerusalem Talmud is 'a single, stunningly cogent document ... in the bulk of its units of discourse' (Neusner 1983:70), the various sections and extended units do have a clear and coherent unity. At least a 'real and systematic redaction' characterises these talmudic tractates (Stemberger 1996:173). Others consider this
levir may only deal with his brother's estate after either marriage to or divorce from the woman. The whole section develops the Mishnah: 'This is in line with that which we have learned: He may not say to her, 'There is [the repayment for] your marriage contract, lying on the table'. But all of his property is subject to lien for the payment of her marriage contract (m Ketubbot 8.11).

The 'decree' that children should go to school is, probably, part of the mnemonic device\(^{13}\) to invoke Simeon's contribution to the debate on the levir's responsibility to the wife's marriage contract. Even when read for maximal historical potential, the most we can conclude is that some debate concerning children attending the 'house of the scribe' (ﻳﺐ ﺣﺮ) probably involved Simeon. Incidentally, note that Drazin (1940:44) has to take ﺭﺎﻄﻴﻨ as 'young adults' in order to harmonise the text with his speculations about the development of the elementary school. The term tinoqot does actually often mean 'students' (as in "children" of the house of the master), but age can mostly not be deduced from such rabbinic references.

3.1.2 The story about Joshua ben Gamala in \textit{b Baba Batra} is included in commentary on Mishnah \textit{Baba Batra} 2.3. The Mishnaic section deals with the issue of whether one may object to a neighbour putting up a shop in his courtyard. According to the Mishnah, one may indeed: by protesting on grounds of the people making noise. But one cannot deny one's neighbour setting up a workshop, even if one cannot sleep because of the noise of the tools or millstones or 'of the children'. The context relates to problems arising among jointholders of a courtyard, such as the position of partitions, fencing a shared garden, contributing to gates and doors for a shared courtyard, where a ladder may be set up and so forth. The Mishnah has no awareness of any 'compulsory' education of children.

The \textit{Bavot} of the Tosefta and both Talmuds expand on these issues: the restrictions laid upon owners of various kinds of property in the use of their property so as to prevent them from causing loss, injury or inconvenience to their immediate neighbours or to the public. The distances which actual or potential nuisances have to be kept away from the border line are specified; the limits of free competition between the persons following the same occupation are discussed; claims of right to do or possess something, or to prevent another from doing or possessing something.

The Jerusalem Talmud interprets the 'noise of the children' as the noise resulting from those\(^{14}\) teaching children, and adds that when two teachers have a quarrel about something easily settled, those sharing the courtyard with them may prevent them from practising their trade (y B Batra 13b.63-67). Note that 'teaching' is a trade

\footnotesize{Talmud to be far more fragmentary (as docs, e.g., Wewers 1984:311).}

\footnotesize{\(^{13}\) Note the very typical three-part statement. On mnemonic devices in rabbinic literature see Neusner 1994a:38-45.}

\footnotesize{\(^{14}\) Note the text-critical discussion in Wewers 1982:352 n 40.}
among trades, and clearly not always very welcome. There is no mention of accepting or even dealing with any generally authorised 'decree'.

The Babylonian Talmud, however, contains a digression. By emphasising an apparent contradiction in the Mishnaic tradition, namely that noise from people coming and going is ground for objecting to a shop in the courtyard but noise from children coming to the workshop is not, the editors of the Bavli take the opportunity to discuss the teaching of the Torah to boys (b B Batra 21a). The whole section, as the text is preserved, presents us with comments about the significance of Torah-study and the importance of supporting Torah-study. The text claims, (in an obvious exaggeration) that was it not for Joshua ben Gamala 'the Torah would have been forgotten in Israel'.

The argument of the anecdote is as follows. Teaching of the Torah was done by (all) fathers. However, some children did not have fathers, so the Torah was taught to children in Jerusalem by teachers. However, not everyone could go to Jerusalem so 'they' ordained the appointment of teachers in each 'district' that boys should attend from the age of sixteen. But the pupils rebelled against the punishments meted out to them and they consequently left school. In response Ben Gamala 'ordained' that teachers should be in 'every' town as well and boys should start at the age of six—that is, at an age when they are too small and powerless to rebel against teachers.15

The discussion continues by emphasising that pupils should not be accepted before the age of six, but once accepted, 'stuff them with Torah like an ox'. Many practical notes follow. Pupils should not be hurt too much when disciplined, boys should not be exposed to dangers when going to school (e g, crossing a river on a mere plank), classes should not be too large, an inefficient teacher may be dismissed immediately, and so on. All salient points are guided by Scripture ('can be shown from the Scripture'), and appropriate verses are quoted.

The context is very much about what neighbours sharing courtyards and alleys may and may not do. They may not be unfair competition to one another ( e g, a teacher may not entice children with parched com and nuts away from another—b B Batra 21b) by interfering with another's livelihood. Among others, it is noted that when a teacher of non-Jewish children is involved, the teacher is then to be deemed the same as a circumcisor, a blood-letter or a tanner and he can therefore be denied a room (to practise his trade) in the courtyard. This, obviously, also refers to a non-Jewish teacher, or when he is the 'head teacher of the town' even should he be

15 Common sense tells us that this brief narrative cannot possibly be—even in the remotest sense—a reflection of the history of the Jewish school system. Note, for instance, the schematic role of 'Jerusalem' in the discussion. The passage makes sense once we see the rhetorical situation: can everyone know Torah? Yes, because orphan boys are not neglected and even the resistance of headstrong young men are dealt with.
Jewish (the exception being made because of the heavy flow of persons attending the room of the head teacher).

Once more, it is noticeable that teaching is but a trade among many others, and the discussion and examples are about how the rabbis would like to see that trade being practised ideally. *Very little*, if anything, is relevant to constructing a picture of first-century education. What we have, reflect the concerns of the talmudic editors; the digression must be understood within the context of the interests of the Babylonian Talmud, and not the first century when the real Joshua of Gamala lived.

What can we deduce from this section in Babylonian *Baba Bathra* 21a? Teaching classes were sometimes provided for in courtyards, and the noise sometimes caused problems. What the rabbis want to do, is to impress us with the extent and quality of Torah teaching in their ideal world. The text shows us a setting wherein boys are taught the Torah in an orderly, structured way, from very young. The rabbis are inviting an audience to admire their way of living, where *everything* is done in accordance with Scripture, right down to things such as the establishment of teaching facilities, the rules for teachers and the movements of the boys; they even show how the ‘rabbinic way’ solves the many practical problems that will arise when these ideals are implemented.

It is possible to apply certain criteria to verify the attribution of traditions in the Babylonian Talmud (Neusner 1985a:233–235)—that is, to show that a tradition is ‘older’ than its current literary context. However, even such ‘verified’ traditions will still only allow us to write (parts of) the history of *third-to-fifth century* CE Jews in Babylonia (Kraemer 1989).16

The upshot is that it is to be doubted whether the ‘decrees’ quoted above can actually be attributed to Simeon ben Šetah or Jesus ben Gamala respectively. The mentioning of both seems, rather, to be instances of ‘disembodied names’, to use Cohen’s (1987:156–157) apt phrase.17 Quite correctly Cohen mentions ‘it is not likely that either tradition has historical value’ (:120).

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16 Kraemer argues that it is only *biography* (of a sage) that is impossible with a ‘critical’ reading of the Talmud; considerable ‘data’ can still be ‘confidently employed’ to write ‘history’ (1989:287). It does seem that Kraemer’s application of Neusner’s criteria are problematic. There are no external authorities for rabbinic literature and the use of ‘literary style’ in order to do historical criticism is suspect. It is not unlike the (often criticised) practice of redaction criticism by New Testament scholars which separates ‘history’ and ‘additions’ in the gospel traditions by means of supposed ‘internal’ criteria; on this see, e.g., Vorster 1982 and 1989; for critique specifically dealing with ‘style’: Hymes 1967 and Botha 1991.

17 There is a theological reason why the rabbinic literature is itself hesitant to represent real *individual* opinion. ‘In their intrinsic traits of uniform discourse all documents speak out of a single, undifferentiated voice of Sinai, and each makes a statement of the Torah of Sinai and within that Torah. That anonymity, indicative for theological reasons, comes to expression in the highly formalized rhetoric of the canonical writings, which denies the possibility of individuation not only of the writings themselves, but also of the sayings attributed to authorities in those writings’ (Neusner 1995:110).
3.1.3 The Mishnah often mentions the 'teacher'. For instance: 'A teacher may see [by the light of a lamp] where children are reading but he himself may not read' (m Shabbat 1.3). 'An unmarried man may not be a teacher of children, nor may a woman be a teacher of children' (m Kiddushin 4.13). If one goes to recover something his father lost and something his teacher lost, he is first to recover what the teacher lost; only thereafter does he go to recover what his father lost, because 'his father brought him [only] into this world, but his teacher that taught him wisdom brings him into the world to come' (m Baba Me'il'a 2.11). Also, one should first ransom one's teacher before one's father, if they were taken captive. 'At five years old a boy is [fit] for scripture. At ten for [the study of] Mishnah, at thirteen for fulfilling the commandments, at fifteen for the study of Talmud …' (m Aboth 5.21).

Many more such notes, asides, comments and advice referring to the teaching of children can be quoted. Indeed, should we turn to the talmudic literature, an almost endless list of such hints and 'counsel' could be compiled. Or various 'facts', such as that there were 394 schools in Jerusalem before 70 CE (b Kilah 105a). It is, however, only possible to construct a 'history' of elementary education by means of these statements when all these remarks are considered to be on one and the same level, namely as direct historical reports. And they are not, as the many contradictions alone should warn anyone.

In general it is very clear these texts are deeply concerned with the importance of the rabbinic study of the Torah. The many references and anecdotes does not tell us if the children were taught mathematics, or astronomy or aspects of human physiology (surely important and practical subjects: to understand the calendar, or bodily matters with regard to purity and blemishes) and so on. The 'teaching' motives are first and foremost rhetoric in praise of the Torah and Torah study.

Even if we could string these references together into a coherent narrative about elementary education, we will end up with a highly distorted picture for the simple

18 This particular sentence, fondly quoted by proponents of a structured, formal school system among Jews, continues: '...at eighteen for marriage, at twenty for pursuing [a career?/righteousness?], at thirty for authority, at forty for discernment, at fifty for counsel, at sixty for being an elder, at seventy for grey hairs, at eighty for labour and sorrow, at ninety for decrepitude, at hundred for being like one that has already passed away.' (The manuscript tradition ascribes the saying to either rabbi Judah b. Tema or Samuel the Younger, among several other text critical problems associated with this paragraph; cf Taylor 1969:97–98; Danby 1933:458 n 9). The 'stages of life' is a well-known literary and folkloric motif.

19 Though y Megillah 3.1–73d puts the number at 480. Ebner (1956:97 n 5) feels that the 'not "round" number' deserves greater credence. The talmudic contexts are tales about the severity of the destruction wrought by the 'enemy' during the war. Riesner (1984:198) notes that these numbers 'sind ins Phantastische gesteigert' but accepts the core idea of many schools. He considers the indication of 13 schools in second century Tiberias fully trustworthy—once again based on a saying in the seventh century b Haggah 15b ascribed to rabbi Me'ir, the famous second century tanna to whom many other wonderful tales are attached.
reason that the rabbis did not represent the only way of doing things, nor was their way necessarily accepted as an authoritative way of doing things.

The static interpretation of rabbinic tales reduces the many levels of their rhetoric to a single plane, namely that of simple historical realities and thereby ends with a reconstruction of antique Judaism with rabbinic Judaism as its normative, orthodox and authoritative centre. That is of course precisely what the rabbis wanted to convey and they did their best to create the impression of a single ‘traditional’ orthodoxy with themselves as its most legitimate and dependable exponents. Such an authoritative, central and single Judaism did not exist in antiquity. What the rabbis were actually doing, was negotiating for authority. We need to see through their construct and recognise their illusion of a stable and coherent social and theological order.

The rabbinic perspective is but one among many and the activities of the rabbis should be distinguished from the activities of ‘Jewish’ people. Notice the following rabbinic ‘decrees’ (randomly selected examples):

‘Rab said, “a man who wilfully causes an erection is to be placed under the ban”’ (b Niddah 13a).

‘Samuel said, “The domestic and wild goose are forbidden copulation”’ (b Berakhot 8a).

‘Rab said, “It is forbidden to sleep by day more than a horse’s sleep”’ (b Sukkah 20b).

If the rabbis really had their way, someone who interprets Scripture wrongly will willingly commit suicide. They very obviously did not have their way.

The Talmud portrays the rabbi as an effective authority over Israel. Yet details of the portrait time and again contradict its main lines. The rabbi was part of the administration of a man who stood at the margins of the rabbinical estate, one foot in, the other out. The sage was further limited in his power by popular will and consensus, by established custom, and by other sorts of Jewish Big Men. Furthermore, the rabbi as clerk and bureaucrat dealt with matters of surprising triviality, a fair portion of them of no interest to anyone but a rabbi, I should imagine. He might decide which dog a flea might bite. But would the fleas listen to him? Accordingly, the Talmud’s voluminous evidence of rabbis’ quest for authority over the Jewish nation ... turns out to present ambiguities about inconsequentialities. On the one side, the rabbi could make some practical decisions. On the other, he competed for authority over Israel with the patriarch and with local village heads. And, in general, no Jew decided much (Neusner 1983:196).

It must be clear that claims about ‘decrees’ for ‘universal elementary education’ borders on the foolish. When Dimitrovsky (1976:xxii) writes that ‘a great deal is

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20 In b Hullin 87a we read of a certain opponent (יִדְו) of rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, who threw himself down from the roof and died because the rabbi proved himself the superior exegete of Amos 4.13. Rabbi Yehudah’s fasting (while the opponent was preparing a retort) also contributed to the poor man’s demise. Though the tradition pretends this to be an eyewitness account, it is simply a humorous depiction of a formidable rabbi in action. The tradition’s context deals with rewards for good deeds (as defined by the rabbis). On this anecdote see Segal 1977:117.
known about the nature and structure of the elementary schools of ancient Israel' one has to strongly disagree. The detail discussed by Ginzberg (1976) and Riesner (1984:182–199) can at best be related to talmudic schools, and is simply irrelevant for understanding general or popular elementary education in first-century Palestine. However, even as detail of talmudic (i.e., fifth–sixth century Babylonian Jewry) schools these portrayals are problematic. To the rabbis, everything else, when compared to the study of Torah, is mere idleness (cf Goldin 1988:203–204). The intense, relentless and all-of-life-encompassing study/practice of the Torah is one of the principal and indicative traits of rabbinic Judaism; it is one of its central myths and symbols, a fundamental institution and generative idea of this particular form of Judaism. The many wonderful tales about the extent and intensity and success of 'teaching' relates to the defining of ancient rabbinic Judaism and not to the history of the democratisation of schools.

In sum, a rabbinic picture (based on ancient rabbinic literature) cannot be a primary source to understand basic, elementary education in the first-century Palestinian world (though it might be useful for various other historical purposes).

From the viewpoint of the Roman empire ... the rabbi was apt to have been one among many sorts of invisible men, self-important entities, treating as consequential things that concerned no one but themselves, doing little, changing nothing.... So we discern a certain disproportion between the insistence of the Talmud that rabbis really decided things and established important precedents, and the Talmud's context—both the actual condition of Israel, whom rabbis ruled, and the waning authority of the government of Israel, by whom rabbis were employed (Neusner 1983:196).

3.1.4 Another relevant issue, not to be underestimated when it comes to understanding ancient formal education, is the disdain for the masses by the rabbis. This is evident in the Mishnah and Tosefta, and culminates in outright hatred in the Babylonian Talmud.

A rabbinic Jew supposedly thanked God every day for not creating him 'a gentile, an outsider or a woman', clearly categories of persons who could not participate in rabbinic piety (t Berakah 6.18). What exactly made one an 'outsider' is nowhere discussed. The 'outsider' is clearly a Jew, so probably representative of the 'ammi ha'aretz, the majority of Jews 'who...merited from the sages [this] uncomplimentary epithet' (Freyne 1980:287). Contempt towards these people pervades the earlier rabbinic literature.21 Conversely, the masses apparently were often not much impressed by the rabbis. For instance, Rabbi 'Aqiba is reported to have said that when he was an 'am ha'aretz he could imagine no greater pleasure than sinking his teeth into the neck of rabbi (b Pesahim 49a–b; this whole section, incidentally, documents considerable

hatred towards the 'commoners' by the Babylonian rabbis by means of hyperbolic anecdotes). The implication of these attitudes are summarised by Cohen (1992:167):

Rabbinic disdain for the masses is evidenced also in the failure of the rabbis to mount any sort of outreach program to them. Perhaps the school of the patriarch was a real "academy", a perpetual institution with a corporate identity and a hierarchical structure, but the schools of other rabbis were nothing more than disciple circles. A single master was surrounded at all times by a handful of apprentices who attended their master like servants in order to learn from his every action. ... Needless to say, a limited number of masters teaching a limited number of disciples in a limited number of disciple circles was not the vehicle for mass education. Furthermore, there is no indication that the tannaim ever attempted to propagate their teachings among the masses. On the contrary, Judah the Patriarch, in whose time the rabbinic establishment entered the cities and broadened its social base, decreed that Torah was not to be taught in the marketplace. Like the thighs of a woman, Torah was to be kept covered in public. Presumably he was afraid of casting pearls before swine. [Cohen is referring here to b Moed Qatan 16a–b]

3.2 Other literary references

3.2.1 Two favourite quotations to prove that widespread, formally organised and sophisticated elementary education existed during first-century times are from Philo and Josephus.

... although all men are eager to preserve their own customs and laws, the Jews are so above all others, because they look upon their laws as oracles directly given to them by God himself. They are instructed in them [God's laws] from their earliest youth and bear in their souls the images of the commandments... (Philo Legatio ad Gaium 31.210)

Above all, we pride ourselves on the education of our children [παιδ naming], and consider the observance of our laws and of the pious practices that follow therefrom, as traditionally taught, as the most essential task in life. (Josephus Contra Apionem 1:60)

Before I proceed to analysis, it can already be noted that, once more, scholars employing these statements for a description of general elementary education must (1) ignore the apologetic intent of both authors, (2) misconstrue family-based religious instruction as organised public education and (3) assume the existence of widespread elementary schools which supposedly gives context to these statements.

Philo's Legatio ad Gaium is a lively but quite severe invective against emperor Gaius. Among other deprivations, Philo declares Gaius' crowning wickedness, his claim to divinity. When he starts describing Gaius' assumption of godship, Philo's treatise deals further on mainly with the emperor's hostility to the Jewish people and their sufferings as a consequence thereof. Among other events, the emperor planned to violate the temple in Jerusalem by introducing his statue therein. Petronius, the governor of Syria, was the official caught in the middle: on the one hand, the 'enraged' emperor demanding immediate execution of his orders (to have his statue placed in the temple); on the other hand, the Jewish people who will take up arms on behalf of their laws and consequently cause a major rebellion/conflict (Legat
31.207–208). Philo argues, basically, that no one can possibly be ignorant of Jewish sentiments, that they 'would willingly, if it were possible, endure a thousand deaths instead of one, rather than submit to see any action forbidden by their religion be committed' (Legat 31.209). Philo then proceeds by claiming that Jewish people are most eager to guard their customs, because they believe them to have been given by God himself, and this 'teaching' (μάθημα) is imbued from childhood so that the likenesses of those 'orders' (τὰς τῶν διαταγμάτων εικόνας) are engraved on their souls. The Jewish people, Philo continues, hate those who either break these divine commandments or mock them as their bitterest enemies (Legat 31.211). The high point of their zeal is for the temple, where death without appeal is the sentence against any one not a Jew who enters the inner precinct (although the outer is open to people from all countries).

Philo has earlier in his denunciation of Gaius referred to the core of Jewish 'teaching', namely that there is but one God, 'the Father and the Creator of the world' (Legat 16.115). Here he is 'explaining' Gaius' disregard for the Jews: Gaius, who wants to be likened to a god (16.114) is suspicious of the Jewish people, who have been taught 'from their swaddling-clothes' by their 'parents, teachers and instructors', and even before that by their holy laws and by their unwritten traditions, that there is but one God (Legat 16.115).

Not much about general and universal education can be found in the Philonic argument. We know that first-century Jews differed among themselves—sometimes vehemently—about what 'God's commandments' mean, and it is obvious that Philo's picture of universal and uniform Jewish custom serves his invective. Philo himself presents a rather leftist fringe in the variety of second temple Judaism (see, e g, Borgen 1984:257–264 and Sandmel 1979:127–134). But Philo's point is not really about education and even less about elementary education. To be a Jew is to believe in the one God—and this belief is very important to Jews. Philo paints unanimity and universal custom in this regard: many Jews did feel strongly about images, and about sabbath and so on, and many also agreed on several things. That simply proves that they were Jews, and grew up as Jews in Jewish homes and not that they were highly educated or that elementary schools were widespread.

Josephus' remark seems to be more relevant to the history of Jewish elementary schools. In fact, a number of Josephean remarks are often quoted in this regard (see, e g, Schürer 1979:417–418). According to Josephus, Moses in a lengthy speech (AJ 4.197–301) presented the Jewish 'constitution' (πολιτεία) to Israel. In this speech, among many, many other instructions (ranging from what could be done with money collected for the mating of a dog to the clothes women should wear in battle), Moses commanded that the boys (in his audience) should begin to learn these laws, 'the most beautiful of lessons and a source of great happiness' (AJ 4.211). Note that Josephus emphasises that 'all is here written as he [Moses] left it' and that he, Josephus, has added nothing for the sake of embellishment, nothing which has not been bequeathed by Moses (AJ 4.196).
What this text does tell us is that Jewish parents should teach their children Jewish ways—as indeed instructed by Scripture (Dt 9.19) and as practised by most Jews for centuries anyway. Also, Josephus wants to emphasise—his narrative in Antiquities has an overall 'apologetic' motif—the laws by which Jews live have been practised unchanged since the beginning of time.

Two other phrases used by Josephus in his Contra Apionem are beloved proofs of elementary schools. (1) 'The result of our thorough grounding in the laws from the first dawn of intelligence is that we have them, so to speak, engraved on our souls' (Ap 2.178). This follows from the Law which orders that children 'be taught the letters (γράμματα παιδεύειν) and about the laws and the deeds of their forefathers' (Ap 2.204). In this section Josephus is developing an extensive argument about the 'admirable harmony of the Jewish people'. 'Unity and identity of religious belief, perfect uniformity in habits and customs, produce a very beautiful concord in human character' (Ap 2.179). Of all the nations of the world, claims Josephus, only the Jews speak no contradictory statements about God (Ap 2.179). 'Among us alone will be seen no difference in the conduct of our lives' (Ap 2.180). This remarkable unity flows from their remarkable theocratic constitution:

For us, with our conviction that the original institution of the law was in accordance with the will of God, it would be vulgar impiety not to observe it. What could one alter in it? What more beautiful one could be discovered? What improvement imported from elsewhere? ... Could there be a finer or more equitable polity than one which sets God at the head of the universe, which assigns the administration of its highest affairs to the whole body of priests, and entrusts to the supreme high-priest the direction of the other priests? (Ap 2.184–186).

Josephus (himself a priest, one of those men 'pre-eminently gifted with persuasive eloquence and discretion'—2.186), must then claim that there are almost no transgressors among them ('a transgressor is a rarity; evasion of punishment by excuses an impossibility' is his words, Ap 2.178). And, it follows necessarily, that the children of such wonderful people, be educated in these laws since childhood.

We know that Jews were not unanimous, even spectacularly not so. We know that 'engraved on our souls' is a hollow claim. We can see that Josephus is just painting a very attractive illusion about a theocratic 'constitution' about which he had very strong feelings. We cannot possibly deduce the existence of 'widespread elementary schools' once we understand what Josephus is saying.

(2) A related theme in the work Contra Apionem is the accusation that the Jewish constitution is of late origin, and cannot be very impressive because it goes unmentioned in the great historical works of Greece and Rome. Josephus points out, in response, that theirs is an inland, secluded country, and it is perfectly normal that little mention be made about the Jews in ancient Greek literature. Moreover, Jews traditionally do not strive for outward contact because, 'above all, we pride ourselves on the education of our children, and regard as the most essential task in life the observ-
ance of our laws and of the pious practices, based thereupon, which we have inherited' (Ap 1.60). So, not only is there a good explanation why little mention of Jews in ancient Greek literature should be expected (but this is a false accusation anyway, according to Josephus, as he promptly proves in successive passages), but a powerful indication why the Jewish constitution should be admired: it has been kept intact for centuries.

About his own education Josephus tells us that he was educated at home, together with his brother Mattathias, by his parents (Vita 8). This is an important remark, especially because scholars cite Josephus as proof for compulsory, widespread Jewish elementary schools. When he was sixteen years old—Josephus also claims that at age fourteen he had won 'universal acclaim' (πάντων ἐπηνοούμεν) for his love of books and the chief priests and leaders constantly consulted him for references and in matters of exegesis (Vita 9)—he decided to examine in depth the three schools into which the Jewish people were divided and consequently passed all the courses of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes (Vita 10). Hereafter, still not satisfied, he became the devoted disciple of the ascetic called Bannus for three years. During his nineteenth year he returned to the city and started to establish his public life, mainly according to the rules of the Pharisees, a school with some resemblances to 'that which the Greeks call the Stoic school' (Vita 12). Josephus is persuading his audience that he is of eminent priestly and royal descent; he is a gifted prophet with immaculate knowledge of the Jewish scriptures. A discerning audience will immediately recognise the picture of those talented and inspired savants who not only surpassed their peers but their superiors too. What we have is the story of the young aristocrat who attends the various academies and chooses a life philosophy.

3.3 Outcome

'What we cannot show, we do not know' emphasises Neusner (1994b:ix-x, 85–105). We cannot show that the rabbinic stories or sayings about 'schools' provide facts about the first-century, hence the rabbinic literature cannot guide us to what really happened, to the opinions really held, to the thoughts really put forth in the first half of the first century in the two 'provinces', Judea and Galilee, of the Roman empire.

22 Josephus probably did not become a Pharisee. Vita 12 says simply that Josephus began to involve himself in public affairs, generally following the Pharisaic perspective (see Mason 1991:325–356).
25 On 'shopping around' for the best philosophy of life as a topos: Rajak 1983:35–37. "This is normal Hellenistic procedure and seems to bear little relevance to Jewish realia' and Josephus' tour of the academies is imaginary (Cohen 1979:106–107).
The comments made by Philo and Josephus, similarly, do not show the existence of elementary schools in first-century Palestine; to the contrary, these authors reveal the role of family based education and the role of the household in the maintenance of Jewishness.

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

As part of his argument that the synagogues provided 'even in small Galilean villages such as Nazareth a kind of popular education system', Riesner (1991:191) refers to a 'very revealing illustration from archaeology'. 'Encircled by a Roman legion and confronted with certain death, the zealots of Masada built or rebuilt a synagogue and opened a school room' (Riesner 1991:191). Although he claims support for this claim from Yadin (1978) it must be said that we do not have any archaeological evidence for any school in first-century Palestine.

One of the reasons why we have no archaeological evidence for schools, among others, is the fact that teaching mostly took place outside, in the open as evidenced by ancient literature\textsuperscript{26} and as is typical of pre-industrial agrarian societies, or in poorly equipped places practically devoid of furniture (Aberbach 1976:347-355). Riesner assumes synagogues were schools, hence evidence of synagogues seems to him to be evidence of schools. That one of the structures on Masada, in the northwestern corner attached to the wall, was a synagogue seems beyond doubt. Yadin (1978:181-191; cf the nuanced evaluation by Strange 1999:39-41) carefully indicates the reasons why the uncovered structure probably was used as a synagogue—mentioning along the way that it was built and used as synagogue already by Herod the Great.

What Riesner has in mind, is the part of the palace built in the southwestern quarter of Masada,\textsuperscript{27} which was converted into a hall by the rebels and which could have been used as a public meeting place, due to the benches in the hall.

Palace XIII housed a large number of families during the revolt. Many huts were built into it, to form a kind of self-contained block. In the northern part of this block was an elongated hall with a bench extending around three of its walls. A bench or narrow table stood lengthwise in the center of the room. This hall (built in a north-south direction) was clearly public in character and may very likely have been a beth midrash (Netzer 1993:981).

One may wonder about the 'clearly public in character' (given the little evidence), and one can readily imagine a besieged group making use of a 'public room' in a number of ways, but even if this room was a 'house of study' (note that beth midrash is a talmudic concept) it was where a rabbi and his disciples met. These archaeologi-

\textsuperscript{26} Extensive discussions by Krauss 1976 and Büchler 1914.

\textsuperscript{27} I.e., the most southern of what Yadin (1977:803) describes as 'small palaces'.
cal remains can hardly be seen as proof of widespread schools in first-century Palestine.

In his earlier work, Riesner writes about the finds on Masada: 'Diese Bänke erinnern an das Scriptorium von Qumran...' (183). This is quite misleading. The single narrow table and the low 'bench' found among the Masada remains (in the room in question) can only vaguely be associated with those found at Qumran. Most important is that the famous 'scriptorium' of Qumran is itself a highly problematic interpretation of very little evidence. At issue is what Roland de Vaux called 'locus 30' in which, among the debris, two inkwells and the remains of 'furniture' were found. De Vaux thought these to have been tables and benches for scribes—hence the popular interpretation of scriptorium. Long ago, Metzger (1959) pointed out that no one could ever sit on these benches at such tables, as the shapes and heights were all wrong. An alternative was suggested by Poole and Reed (1961), that the tables were used for the preparation of skins (by adapting their argument somewhat, I consider that the tables were probably used for the preparation of parchment, which is a much less messy business) which also fits with the slightly concave shape of the surfaces of the two tables. The whole point is, however, even if the Qumran room was a scribal workshop, and if the Masada room is a similar one, we can only say that scribes worked on Masada. We still do not have evidence of elementary schools. What we cannot show, we cannot know.

Riesner's concern is simply to prove that the 'first life-setting of the Jesus tradition was not popular folklore and romance but a teach-and-learn situation' (1991: 191) and to that end he interprets any possible vague allusion as proving widespread schools.

One other piece of archaeological evidence can be discussed in this context. Excavation of the city wall of Gamala, at the eastern end of the synagogue, revealed several rooms which had been filled in order to strengthen the wall (obviously by the inhabitants during the Roman siege). When the excavators cleared the (southernmost) room, benches were found around it (which is suggestive of a public function).

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28 Number 6 on the map provided by Broshi 1993:1237; a clear indication is also available in Bimson & Kane 1986:62.
29 'The reconstructed writing table in the Rockefeller Museum is, as most people probably know, unlike anything resembling a writing table from the period' (Davies 1988:204).
30 This synagogue is a first-century structure, as Gamala was destroyed by the legions of Vespasian in the autumn of 67. The remains found in the city are mainly from the Jewish revolt; the latest coins found there are of Antonius Felix, procurator in Judea, which were struck between 41-59 CE. Discussion: Gutman 1981, 1993 and Ma'oz 1981. See also the reconstruction provided by Ma'oz 1992:332 (a detailed drawing of the possible synagogue 'complex' at Gamala).
In the western wall, which abuts the synagogue, there apparently was a window through to the hall of the synagogue. This was probably a study room attached to the synagogue. The synagogue, adjoined by a study room, a ritual bath, and a courtyard, thereby constituted a community center of sorts for study and prayer, while the Temple in Jerusalem was still in existence (Gutman 1993:461-462).

As a critical caution it must be pointed out that the identification of the Gamala 'synagogue', in contrast to the Masada structure, is disputable (Strange 1999:35-39) and that the casemate room is interpreted quite differently by others (as a room for the 'segregation of women' by Ma'oz 1992:158*, for instance).

What no one can deny, is that adult Jews did discuss and take their traditions and scriptures seriously. So, (some) Jews did 'study.' They met regularly. Much more is not said by the archaeological evidence.

The next question must now be, to what extent the synagogue functioned as a 'school'.

5 WAS THE SYNAGOGUE A SCHOOL?

Riesner (1984:222–223, 232) argues that whether a Jewish child from the lower social strata of Palestine received an elementary education depended on two conditions: the piety of the father and the existence of a local synagogue. This is part of his larger argument that Jesus was literate: Joseph was a pious father and Nazareth had a synagogue with some educational programme for Jewish boys.

Meier agrees with Riesner, and taking Nazareth as a village of close to 2 000 people, argues that 'the existence of a synagogue with some educational program for Jewish boys is a likely hypothesis' (Meier 1991:277). So the question arises: did first-century synagogues provide 'schooling'?

'Was the synagogue a school?' is not a proper question, of course. What would 'school' refer to? 'The English word “school” conjures up the image of a corporate, perpetual institution housed in a large building filled with teachers, students, and offices. The ancient world did not know any schools of this type' (Cohen 1987:120). But also 'synagogue' should not be used

as if the word described a single, consistent, and well-defined phenomenon. ...in reality there were many kinds of synagogues, during both the second temple and rabbinic periods, with varying functions, architecture, religious rituals, and social settings. ...The word “synagogue” covers a wide variety of phenomena, and a definition that fits one place and time may not be appropriate for another (Cohen 1987:114).

Synagogues, particularly during the second temple period, functioned as community centres (see Z Safrai 1995 for a maximalist interpretation of the possible

31 Which, incidentally, is quite an over-estimation. Until the fourth century CE, Nazareth was a village with less than 500 inhabitants (cf Horsley 1995:193).
The famous Théodotus inscription does not carry the interpretive weight that is conventionally placed upon it. The inscription is a dedicatory notice in which Théodotus, son of Vетtēnos, is honoured for building 'this synagogue for the reading of the law [δύναμιν νόμου] and the teaching of the commandments [διδαχὴν ἐντολῶν]'. That teaching—in the form of homilies, discussions, rulings by elders and such—took place in synagogues are beyond doubt. Whether schools, and then elementary schools in particular, were provided for in first-century synagogues is a completely different matter, and not so easily answered.

Meier (1991:308 n 135, referring to Riesner) notes that the synagogue of Jesus' day would have been a very modest affair, and could have been situated in the house of one of the more 'well-to-do' citizens of Nazareth. One and the same person might have served as servant of the synagogue, scribe and elementary school teacher. This is a useful and probably correct characterisation; however such education is haphazard and of little consequence.

Furthermore, what we know about supposedly Jewish 'elementary schools' (the bet sefer) and about places of study (bet midrash) comes from rabbinic perspectives. The rabbis, especially the earlier ones, were apparently not impressed with common activities. It is relevant to return to an aspect of rabbinic attitudes discussed above. The rabbis maintained the 'house of study' and not the community. Various traditions make it quite clear, in fact rabbinic literature has it as a feature, that the bet midrash was something alongside the 'community house' (or synagogue), and an important reason was because the 'people' participated in the synagogue. 'R. Ishmael ben Eleazar said, "For sinning in two matters the common folk perish: for calling the Holy Ark 'the chest', and for calling the synagogue 'the people's house'"—that is, to name the בתי קנסות (the 'house of gathering') a בתי אמונה (a 'common place', b Sabbath 32a).

As institution, the so-called houses of study actually points away from widespread elementary education, and shows the role of rabbinic disciple circles. 'Many Sages of that time [late second temple period, early amoraic], as a social and religious “elite”, absented themselves from the batei ha-knesset in which ‘ammei ha-aretz la-Torah ("the common folk as to the Torah," i.e. those ignorant of the Torah) congregated' (Urman 1995:239). The rabbis and their disciples set up 'schools of study'

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32 There is considerable literature about this limestone plaque discovered in a cistern in the City of David by Raymond Weill in 1913. An illustration and the text are conveniently available in Deissmann 1927:440. See also Shanks 1979:17-21 and Schürer 1979:425. Note that the dating of this inscription to the 1st century CE is questioned (Kee 1999). As can be expected, Riesner (1995:194–195) argues that the inscription is early (pre-70), as its letters show some similarities to an inscription that can be dated to the reign of Herod the Great. That inscription can be seen on Plate 9b of Israel Exploration Journal 33 (1983) and is discussed by Isaac (1983). The supposed similarities (in view of the differences) of these two sets of raised capital letters on limestone is a moot point. Relevant to the issue of schools is, in any case, not the dating of the Théodotus inscription but the meaning of the word διδαχὴν.
for themselves to serve their different needs (i.e., not necessarily communal), and that is where they studied, prayed and preached.

The rabbis did not play a big role in the synagogues. That is, though the rabbis trained disciples, they did this outside the synagogal context.

The Babylonian rabbis played no special role in the life of the synagogue... Many of these [rabbinic liturgies]...probably were initially recited in the school house alone, even there posing some complex difficulties for the students... (Neusner 1968:438).

While these rabbis quite naturally praise synagogue activities (such as prayer), they held that their studies were more important. A number of anecdotes clearly express the distinction: 'We with our business and they with theirs' (e.g., b Berakhot 8a;). ‘At the same time, it is quite likely that the rabbis in this period disapproved of aspects of synagogue affairs, but, possessing no power to change things to suit themselves, merely tolerated the status quo’ (Neusner 1968:439–440). The same held for rabbis in Galilee: synagogues were not subject to rabbinical control. They did not play a special role in the life of the synagogue, and they were unable even to effect their wishes in the ornamentation of synagogue buildings.

To really involve the development of Galilean synagogues in the growth of Jewish educational systems a different tack is needed. What did ‘reading’, ‘teaching’ and ‘discussing’ actually involve? Everyone just simply assumes we know what these activities must have involved. Who actually taught what to whom? To refer to a well-known instance, Jesus teaching in synagogues: surely this activity cannot be construed as practising the trade of elementary school teacher, nor as training of synagogue teachers. Yet, what Jesus was doing was probably exactly what ‘synagogue’ as ‘place of teaching’ refers to. Delivering homilies is not the same as widespread, organised and structured elementary schools. Too much is simply projected onto these ancient texts in order to make them speak about things moderns want to see and hear.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS


(2) Biblical scholars pride themselves in their skill and ability to critically analyse and interpret biblical traditions, and have worked very hard to develop a proud history of scholarship in this regard. Ironically, when it comes to other literary materials, such as the rabbinic literature or Josephus, an astounding fundamentalism and literalism is evident in their readings.

In other words, if there is any value, any contribution to the humanistic and critical appraisal of ancient texts to be made by academic Biblical Studies it is (at least)
that genre-recognition and literary competence have something to offer to the intuitive and circular process of reading.

(3) Our commitment to a critical, interpretive historiography should entail more than a (naive) ordering of sources. More than ever before it is imperative that we move beyond a 'scissors-and-paste' history. Simply repeating a statement from an ancient source is not yet presenting historical evidence. The real task of the historian is to interpret and to critically understand. And this means taking serious the various levels (or rhetoricity) of communication, which ancient texts surely are.

(4) During the first few centuries of our era, including the first, a rich and complex diversity characterised the 'Jewish' world. Far too many historical studies either implicitly or more explicitly operate with notions of normative Judaism, and/or with images of dominating Pharisees or central rabbincic control. If there was something such as an 'orthodox' Judaism 'it must have been that which is now almost unknown to us, the religion of the average "people of the land"' (Smith 1956:81; cf Cohen 1986:47).

It is simply unhistorical to use the idealistic propaganda of a small section of a society to describe the typical behaviour of that society.

(5) By extension, we should rid ourselves of the notion that first-century peoples were enamoured with religion. Scholars tend to approach the life-worlds of first-century persons as if the only real thing in their lives was their faith and religious traditions, and if all else is mere backdrop. At issue is the prominence given to religion as a factor in description and explanation. Conservative and even not-so-conservative biblical scholars have tended to subscribe to a view of early Judaism and early Christianity as imparted by the canonical texts—for instance, that their communities made up a society whose origins, structure, and history were determined by a distinct religious ideology; a world in which prayer, confessions, and synagogue services were what mattered all the time. A proper approach denies that such views explain history to any large extent. It concentrates instead on themes like daily life, population, economy, social institutions, cultural values, gender and such (including worship). In a way the conventional study of first-century Jewish education is a microcosm of 'theological exegesis' in that, by and large, it has been interpreted as a religious structure and activity.

I can see no reason why the relevance of the study of ancient education should be confined to the religious disposition of its participants, if indeed we really understand exactly what that was.

(6) Were there any primary schools in first-century Palestine? No. 'We must reckon at all periods with considerable variety in pedagogical practice: there was in antiquity nothing remotely approaching a school system or an accredited primary school teacher. Even the word "school" is a misnomer for informally-housed, parentally-funded group tutorials, very small business run by self-declared teachers' (Henderson 1996:104; cf Cohen 1987:120).
Most importantly, there is, with regard to understanding first-century education, need for an appropriate conceptual framework. A way of seeing is always a way of not seeing. The implicit socio-cultural conceptions with which much of educational practices of the first-century world are described are a major problem. We must be aware of the immense historical gap between us and them. Concepts natural in an industrialised, modern context cannot be used without extreme care for historical analysis. For instance, it probably is quite misleading that words like bet sefer and bet midrash are mostly translated with the word ‘school’.

Preconceptions should be, as far as possible, carefully considered and substantiated. Writing, reading and teaching are culturally embedded phenomena, similar to other social conventions. We need to avoid anachronistic terminology and conceptualisations and uncritical ethnocentrism when it comes to literacy, tradition, ‘reading’/reciting and other aspects of ancient education. Lack of cross-cultural controls and connections with social history leads to overinterpretation, which is much worse than underinterpretation.

The simplistic identification of schooling and literacy should be avoided. We fervently identify literacy and education. Writing exists as what a society presumes it to be, and there are many literacies. We need to describe first-century literate sensibilities first, before we can truly say something meaningful about ancient ‘schools’. In antiquity a lot of magic was associated with writing, and learning to read was simply repetitive recitation of familiar texts. Ancient (Jewish) literacy was at its best superficial literacy: rote recitation and the ability to sign one’s name.

What we call reading is ‘reading with comprehension’. The sages, we need to be honest, rarely (if ever?) uses ‘to write’; they place emphasis on discourse (disputation) and not on reading texts and learning from them. The rabbis did not read (in our sense of the word) and did not teach to ‘read’— they raided writings and taught others to raid the writings.

The development of widespread, organised, compulsory and public schooling relates to developments in a society’s economy, political environment and, most importantly, a redefinition of the family (which includes significant shifts in the status of children and youth). In other words, ‘decrees’ about compulsory schooling will only be formulated and can have only effect as part of an elaborate and massive transformation in the legal and social rules governing children in the context of distinct political developments (cf, e.g., Katz 1976, Tyack 1976 and Eklof 1981).

To prove the existence of widespread and compulsory schooling in first-century Palestine, one needs to prove that family and workplace became divorced, that new concepts about childhood and different values concerning production came about, that there was an effective central authority interested in cultivating and sponsoring such developments and so on, and not to quote a few vague, propagandistic statements from disparate sources.
(10) Better questions about first-century education can be asked. It is not so much that some ‘contents’ were taught but what was taught, that matters; the impact, so to speak, of teaching: submission, quietness, order, response to orders, respect for authority; tolerance of monotony, boredom and punishment; acceptance of lack of reward, the strengthening of gender discrimination and other such habits.

Some questions do not seem to occur in conventional scholarship. Why the fierce discipline portrayed in the sources? What kind of resistance did the young ones offer? Why is the learner’s voice never heard? What we do hear is the teacher/father/sage, and they speak in endless imperatives, exhortations and vicious threats. Teachers responded to any resistance from learners with harsh punishment and with idealised glorification of the sage.

(11) At stake, really, is the respect we have for the ancients. Many conclusions about or depictions of first-century ‘schools’ reflect more the interests and ideals of modern scholars than ancient realities. Let them be them.

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