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Adrian Vasile *

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Article

God Educator of the Jewish People: Old Testament Aspects

Adrian Vasile

Ovidius University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology Constanța, Romania; preotadrian@yahoo.com

Abstract: Education is a fundamental theme in Jewish culture. In the Old Testament we find didactic and pedagogical ideas expressed in different ways, e.g. in the figurative language of parables, regarding wisdom texts, etc. The Holy Scripture reveals a creative God who transformed a tribe of nomads into an organized people through a long process of education. In order to contemplate God as the educator of the Jewish people, several perspectives can be followed, but we will limit ourselves to presenting a few ideas that are related to education in the biblical context of ancient Israel, God's Pedagogy in the Bible and Divine Pedagogy which is the foundation for the education of children and young people today. The perspectives of Old Testament concerning to religious education are as relevant today as they were then, in the time of the patriarchs, kings or Old Testament prophets.

Keywords: God educator; Jewish people; Old Testament; Holy Scripture; identity

Introducere

Holy Scripture is the main and most complex text or rather pedagogical tool for Judaism. It testifies more to a real life experience than to a systematic pedagogical theory. In fact, it presents a very pregnant, rich and polyvalent conception of education. It is based on man as the work of God, but at the same time as a builder of his own creativity. In an integral vision of the person, this education addresses both the intellect and the heart, both knowledge and action.¹ In Jewish culture, man is always seen together with the whole people of God, because the individual thinks of himself and is seen as a brick in the great edifice of the community, the social relationship with the other being an essential aspect of his formation and growth.

I. Education as a Tool for Preserving Jewish Identity

According to the approach of Rabbi Benedetto Caracci, education, for Judaism, is one of the fundamental and founding values.² In fact, education is fundamentally the instrument for the acquisition of an identity of belonging - in this sense the various precepts of parents towards their children can be interpreted.

Following Caracci, the first time the root (*chnkh*) from which the word education, in Hebrew *chinukh*, is derived, appears in the Bible is in the Book of Genesis and is at the origin of a proper name, *Chanokh*. In the Latin pronunciation Enoch, he who before time was lifted up to heaven by God (Gen 5:21-23). According to classical commentators on this passage, this assumption into life is a form of protection: God takes *Chanokh* while still young to prevent him from sinning; for other interpreters, it is the sign of a task accomplished.

¹ Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Education and Religion in Jerusalem and Babylon, Viewed through the Prism of the Book of Daniel", In *Proceedings of the 17th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, June 1-2, 2020, Johns Hopkins University, Montgomery, United States of America, pp. 154-160.

² Caracci Benedetto, *Acquisire un'identità*. IV Giornata Europea della Cultura Ebraica, momento di conoscenza e tolleranza «Ebraismo ed educazione», Edizione 5 settembre 2004, Laterza, 2004.

Based on these two lines of interpretation, it can be said that to educate means both to protect and to enable someone to complete a task, to reach the end of a journey. The root of *chinukh* then appears in the *Torah*, in connection with the tabernacle in the desert (Exodus 25), in the sense of to inaugurate.

In this sense, the most important medieval commentator on the *Torah*, Rashi, suggests that the main meaning of the root is precisely the beginning, the initiation of something, putting an object or a person in a condition to fulfill its specific function. Thus, it can be said that in the Hebrew context, education is a complex set of tasks such as: initiating another person - a child or a disciple - on a path; accompanying the educated person and protecting him or her so that he or she achieves a goal.

This is exactly what can be deduced from one of the two points in the Bible where the root *chnkh* refers specifically to the semantic sphere of education: the term appears in reference to Abraham and his family/disciples (Gen 17). Abraham, who takes upon himself the task of spreading the monotheistic idea among the peoples (not only among the members of his family), initiates them on a path, accompanies them, guides them. And he probably adopts a personalized perspective, as the Jewish tradition suggests when it recites "you educate a boy in his way; when he grows up he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22, 6).

These declensions of the concept of education are particularly evident in the complex example of Jewish pedagogy that is the *Pesach seder*³: the pedagogical tools used to recall the coming out of Egypt and to convey its significance to the children - the main protagonists of the event - are proof of the absolute attention that Jewish tradition pays to the forms of education, along with the care for their content⁴.

II. Education as a Teaching-Learning Process

Biblical commentator Michele Mazzeo summarizes in four words the most recurrent Hebrew expressions in the Bible related to the two basic acts of education, namely teaching and learning.⁵

Tóràh: means, as its primary meaning, "instruction, education," "direction given" (1 Sam 12:23; Job 22:22 related to the verb *yarah*, Isa 24:5; Ps 105:45; Amos 2:4). *Tóràh* points to the instruction of the wise and is the source of life (Proverbs 13:14) which must not be forgotten and must be guarded "as the light of the eyes" (Proverbs 7:2). It regulates existence and is synonymous with a decent life or standard of conduct, in social relations and with God: hence it is "the law" (Ps 40:9; 79:5).

At Mount Sinai, the Jews were given *Tóràh*, improperly translated law, but it should be translated teaching or instruction. If the root of the term is the verb *yarah* (to show, to instruct, to teach), it points the way to fulfill God's plan for man to become in His image. The verb *yarah* means to see, to enlighten, and *hifil* (causative form) is equivalent to indicate to show, to give direction, to teach, to instruct. Hence the noun *Tóràh*, from which it is derived, literally means instruction, teaching, direction. From them is derived the term *moreh*, one who instructs or one who teaches, the teacher.

According to J.H. Heschel, the translators of the Greek version of Scripture (*Septuagint*) made a mistake "when, in the absence of an equivalent word in Greek, they translated *tóràh* with *nomos*, meaning law"⁶. The fact that the Jewish people always considered the Holy Scriptures as the teaching of God as educator is demonstrated by the fact that in Aramaic the word *tóràh* is translated *oraita*, which can only mean teaching and never law.

The term *yàsar* (Instruction by correction) appears 92 times in the Hebrew Bible (40 in the verbal form and 52 in the nominal form *musàr*) and means "to mold, to train, to instruct, to correct, to

³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Passover Haggadah: A New Translation with Commentary*, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, 2022.

⁴ Aaron Goldscheider, *The Night That Unites Passover Haggadah: Teachings, Stories, and Questions from Rabbi Kook, Rabbi Soloveitchik, and Rabbi Carlebach*, Urim Publications, Jerusalem, 2015.

⁵ Michele Mazzeo, *Bibbia ed educazione. Per una nuova evangelizzazione*, Paoline, Milano, 2011, pp. 34-42.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in search of man*, Borla, Roma, 1983, p. 350.

punish". It expresses the idea of teaching combined with discipline, correction. The subjects of the verb 'to educate' are the parents, the wise men, the king; the recipients are the children, the pupils, the subjects. Discipline is exercised by authority, which implies a certain educational structure. It usually has a positive effect on those who are being corrected, as indicated by the parallel verbs 'to train/teach/learn' (*lāmad*), or to correct, unless it means punishment by law. Accordingly, it is often the case that God is the subject of education, especially in Deuteronomy (Deut 4:36; 85; 11:2), in the prophetic accusations (Jer 2:30; 31:18; or Ps 94:10). In Proverbs 3:11-12, from paternal education we move directly to divine education: 'My son, do not despise the repro reproof of the Lord, and do not be abhor his rebuke, for the Lord reproves the one he loves, and as a father chastens the son he loves'.

To build/construct, "to shape, to mold" (*labanot*, 2 Sam 7:27; Ps 89:5; Am 9:11), a verb which in half of the nearly 400 occurrences in the Old Testament refers to the building of a temple or a wall, but metaphorically to build a house means to establish a family, to create a nation, since in Hebrew *bayit* means both (house-family). And when Holy Scripture speaks of God as the subject of this building, it announces promises of future salvation to God's people (Deut 6:10; Is 58:12).

King David proposes to build God a house (i.e. a temple). God responds through the prophet Nathan, who will be the one to build, i.e. form/give a house, i.e. a family/descendant of David (2 Sam 7:11), of which Solomon will be the first, but not the only representative (2 Sam 7:12-16). In fact, the universal heir will be the Messiah, a teacher endowed with the Spirit of wisdom, later presented as David's Son and descendant (Is 9:7; 11:1; Lk 1:31).

Learning/teaching (*lamad*): learning by sight (Ps 106:35) as opposed to the verb *yarah* where verbal communication is always assumed. It means to instruct, to meditate, to learn, to study, or to cause to learn (Ps 119:71; 71:17; 94:10; Is 50:4), *al piel* (intensive form) means to instruct, to teach. The nominal derivative is scholar, disciple (*limmud*). The noun *melammed* is one who instructs, the teacher; *talmid*, one who is instructed, the pupil. Hence the more familiar term *talmud*, study.

God is often referred to as a teacher who instructs people, i.e. gives them educational experiences: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is good for you, who guides you in the way you should go' (Is 48:17). Therefore, the family of terms teach/teach recurs many times in the teaching/teaching of the *Torah*, of the teachings of the Lord, especially in Psalm 119.

These words are the bearers of key concepts in various fields of education⁷ from the concepts in which they are used and especially from the subjects of the verbs (parents, teachers, kings, God) and their addressees (children, pupils, kings, people) they make us understand the educational relationship at work and the various educational processes not only at their source but also in their progressive, individual-community development.

God as educator goes so far as to promise a new covenant, in which human teaching and learning are interpreted as transitory and no longer necessary: 'And they shall no more teach one another and brother brother, saying: 'Know the Lord,' for all by themselves shall know me, from small to great, says the Lord, for I will forgive their transgressions, and their sins I will remember no more" (Jer 31:34).

As for the place of learning, the Old Testament does not have words that correspond to our reality described by the term school; even in the New Testament we find "school, classroom, auditorium" (*scholè*) only once (Acts 19:9). This is due to the fact that what today, in most countries of the world, is taught and learned in school, in Old Testament times people began to learn in the family, from childhood (Deut 6:20-21). In the time of the kings it is probable that there were schools.

⁸ N. Lohfink assumes a three-tiered system of schools: "basic schools throughout the land, intermediate schools in the main cities for the training of officials (...); and in Jerusalem higher schools

⁷ Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Current Values of Education and Culture", In *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 87-92.

⁸ André Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'Ancien Israël*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht-Universitaires, Göttingen-Fribourg, 1981.

in the court and temple, where those destined for the central administration, the diplomatic career and the high priests were educated".⁹

Schools in a broader sense (although not explicitly mentioned by this term) are also found in the Old Testament¹⁰. They were set up in the king's court (1 Kings 12, 8.10); they were formed around the prophets (2 Kings 6), but it is true that there were no buildings set aside for this purpose, since teaching was public, an 'open' teaching, as modern pedagogy would say.

In fact, the Jewish tradition proposes the following educational itinerary: the Bible at five years of age, the Midrash at ten, the Law at thirteen, the fullness of vigor at thirty, prudence at forty, counsel at fifty, maturity at sixty, old age at seventy, old age at eighty, and leaning at ninety... almost out of the world" (Habit 5:21).¹¹

Learning through study is central to the Jewish tradition, so much so that there are texts that tell of how even God himself learns.¹² Learning through study was not limited to school, nor was liturgical service limited to devotion. Both (religious) formation and (professional) education were indispensable for life.¹³

III. God's Pedagogy in the Bible

With the conviction that biblical pedagogy is not a science but rather an art, following the reflection of Bishop Mauro Maria Morfino¹⁴, we will examine two texts from Deuteronomy (Deut 8:1-5; 32:10-12). Here is the second level of the research, in the sense that we will try to contemplate God as educator of his people.

The setting of the Deuteronomic texts evoked is the desert, which has multiple meanings. It is a place where you have to measure yourself, where there are no diversions, it is a place where you have to weigh everything, where the truth about yourself comes out in the end.

All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers.

And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what *was* in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every *word* that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.

Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.

⁹ Norbert Lohfink, *Das Jüdische am Christentum. Die verlorene Dimension*, Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1987, p. 147.

¹⁰ Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Câteva lecții spirituale dintr-o experiență a Școlii Profetilor din vremea Profetului Elisei" ("Some spiritual lessons from an experience of the School of the Prophets in the time of the Prophet Elisha"), *Timotheus – Incursiuni Teologice Tematice*, vol. 5, nr. 1, 2018, Editura Universitară, București, pp.25-34.

¹¹ Termenul midrash (plural: midrashim) provine din verbul ebraic „darash” („căută”) și în sensul său cel mai general denotă orice tip de căutare.

¹² *The Talmud. Avodah Zarah 3b*, ArtScroll, Rahway, 2010.

¹³ Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Valences of Education", In *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 190-196.

¹⁴ Mauro Maria Morfino, *Dio educatore del suo popolo con la Parola*, in „Note di Pastorale giovanile”, <https://www.notedipastoralegiovanile.it/index.php> (dicembre 2015); C.M. Martini, *Dio educa il suo popolo*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milano, 1987.

(Deuteronomy 8, 1-5).

He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.

As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings:

So the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him (Deuteronomy 32, 10-13)

In the text of Deuteronomy 8, 2-3, going into the wilderness has an exemplary feature: crises, hunger and thirst are described as educational aspects, that is, life, even the not easy, problematic and unsuccessful, brings out what we are; being in the wilderness to know what is in our heart, to make us realize that man does not live on bread alone, but on what comes from the mouth of the Lord. It is in this place of essentiality, of conflict, but also of joy and of life, that one can truly experience what is carried in the heart, that one can reach the heart. The heart, in Scripture, is not so much about feelings, but it is the place where choices are made and where this heart can be constantly restored by the saving gaze of the Lord, even when life's situations are difficult. In certain situations of difficulty, of stress, we discover certain truths, certain hidden folds of ourselves that we have not considered or have not surfaced.

The Lord alone guided him, there was no foreign god with him (Deut 32:10-12). From this very simple text God is presented as the great teacher. We can only be God's co-workers in the Church, in the service of faith and of man. God is the great educator of his people, so much so that in Scripture the most terrible thing that can happen to Israel is to be without divine guidance. In the book of Exodus, when the pillar of fire and the cloud, the divine presence, are missing, the disunity of the people occurs, because the element that enables Israel to walk the paths that Israel needs to walk is missing.

How does God educate his people? In Scripture we learn that God always educates in ways that respect man and, at the same time, lead to growth. The loving guidance of a God who educates his people can be identified from Scripture, i.e. by inviting them to obey the *Torah*. God educates his people by inviting them to obey the *Torah* (Deut 6:4).¹⁵

It is not without significance that the central liturgical formula of Judaism is not a prayer addressed to God, not even a psalm, but a descant of a sovereign commandment of the Almighty: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). This embraces the whole life of the individual and of the community. Those who follow God's will in this way are united in communion and form God's people. All the commandments are based on the oneness of God. "The Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6, 4) is the original, fundamental and normative confession that resonates in the life of the Jewish people as an affirmation of monotheism, which is the beginning of the prayer called *Sema* (Hear).¹⁶

What does it mean to listen? First and foremost, to be open, to receive, to let God into one's life and to respond with one's life: "We will do and we will obey" (Ex 24:7).

Torah is primarily obedience, which is why the Bible in Hebrew is called *Tanakh* (reading aloud, calling/convocation)¹⁷ - rarely "holy books" (*kitbé qodes*) and with the sound of the voice to draw one's attention to come into contact with God. The reaction of the one called is called "obedience" (*sema*). Moses says in Deut 4:12: "And JHWH spoke to you in the midst of the fire; you heard a sound of words and saw no figure but a voice". This voice wants to be heard, as numerous biblical texts proclaim and as summarized in the Hebrew prayer *sema*. The voice heard at Sinai proposes an

¹⁵ Michele Mazzeo, *Bibbia ed educazione. Per una nuova evangelizzazione*, Paoline, Milano, 2011, pp. 50-58

¹⁶ Norman Lamm, *The Shema*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2000.

¹⁷ Thomas W. Mann, *The Book of the Torah*, Cascade Books, Eugene, 2013.

obedience and a covenant which, in order to be fulfilled, reveals "laws and precepts, statutes and decrees".¹⁸ It is the revelation of God as will, so Israel's response must consist in obedience.¹⁹

Faced with an event like the gift of the Torah, the people declared, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey." (Ex 24:7). This is a crucial statement in Jewish interpretation, for we read in it the decision to carry out God's will even before we have "heard" it (i.e., known and analyzed its content). It is clear that in Judaism doing God's will and knowing God are identical.

Israel's educational program consists essentially of the Torah, the instruction, the teaching of the Lord. The deep conviction of having everything in Torah can be understood from a key text in Deut 4:6: "Therefore you shall keep them and do them, for in this is your wisdom and your quietness in the sight of the peoples who, hearing of all these laws, will say: Only this great people is a wise and understanding people."

Israel is called to obey a voice that commands, "Hear Israel" (Deut 6:4). An obedience in its broad semantic extension, that is, openness and letting God into one's life. The first condition for teaching to become fruitful is obedience, which becomes submission. And in the wisdom tradition this is often linked to a wise heart that allows understanding. With this fundamental disposition to listen, Judaism emphasizes not a system of doctrines but a system of actions. These actions are practiced not because they are sublime, but because they come from God. Because it is God's will, from simple obedience. The theological reason for every action is therefore that God is seen in Judaism as willing, willing in man's favor, but not always, indeed quite rarely, explaining why he wills it. The doing of the commandments in the Bible - and later in tradition - is understood as the right way to accomplish what Adam and Eve had deviantly attempted: to become like God. However, this does not change the intention/will of God, who created man and said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

The attributes with which God describes Himself become a proposition for man: you must be merciful, you must have compassion, you must be slow to anger, you must forgive.²⁰ These attributes are models for acting like God.

Therefore, the biblical God does not so much give information about himself, as he reveals his actions as ways of acting for man and according to which every human being becomes the image of God. This is the essence of the mystery of the creation of life and education. In fact, for many centuries, the origin of creation did not interest the Jews: God was not the Creator, but the One who, for the sake of the fathers, had brought the people out of Egypt, that is, the deliverer, and had given them the Torah at Sinai, within the covenant and with the promise of a land to dwell in.

Conclusions

The Old Testament, a vast collection of sacred texts, is not only a chronicle of the history of the chosen people, but also a witness to the dynamic relationship between God and his creation. This relationship, characterized by constant dialogue and careful guidance, can be understood as a form of divine pedagogy. God's pedagogy in the Old Testament is a complex and multifaceted journey, which aims to form and transform the chosen people, leading them into a deeper relationship with him and towards the fulfillment of his divine plan.

The Mosaic Law²¹, with its numerous commandments and provisions, serves as an essential tool in the divine education of the Jewish people. The Law is not only a code of conduct, but also a means

¹⁸ Blessing before the evening *sema*.

¹⁹ Emanuele Levinas, *La révélation dans la tradition juive*, in AA.VV., „La révélation”, Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, Bruxelles, 1977, p. 66 .

²⁰ Paolo De Benedetti, *Introduzione al Giudaismo*, Morcelliana, Brescia, 2009, pp. 125-126

²¹ Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, „Natura și scopul Legii Morale a celor sfinte Zece Porunci”, *Păstorul ortodox*, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Argeșului și Muscelului, Curtea de Argeș, 2015, pp. 318-322.

of teaching Jews about God's will and His moral and ethical standards. By obeying the Law, Jews demonstrate their love and faithfulness to God, and He in turn blesses and protects them.

Divine education in the Old Testament has a dual purpose:

Character formation: God desires that his people develop a character like his own, characterized by justice²², mercy and holiness. Through various pedagogical methods, God molds the Jews, helping them to grow in spiritual and moral maturity.

Preparation for the Messiah: The divine education of the Old Testament is also intended to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Through prophecies and historical events, God creates the expectation and longing for the promised Savior.

God, as educator of the Jewish people in the Old Testament, uses a variety of methods to form and transform them. Through covenant, law, prophets and historical events, he demonstrates his love, justice and faithfulness, guiding his people into a deeper relationship with him and preparing them for the coming of the Messiah. This image of God as educator remains relevant today, giving believers a valuable perspective on their relationship with the divine.

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²² Cristian-Vasile Petcu, „Pacea și dreptatea după cărțile profeților mari” ("Peace and justice according to the books of the great prophets"), In *Annales Universitatis Valachiae*, Facultatea de Teologie, Târgoviște, 2005, pp. 448-458.

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