The New Testament Gospels present Jesus as a great Rabbi known for His exceptional wisdom and revolutionary teachings. Though not obvious, the same Gospels hint at Jesus’ lack of “formal” education in rabbinic schools of His time. The study highlights the contrasts between Jesus’ education and teachings and that of the religious teachers and leaders of His time. It stresses that Jesus stood out as a great Teacher because He drew directly from the fountain of Scripture, lived out its principles practically in His life and served relationally to people around Him. Adventist teachers and educators should recognize and emphasize these key principles as they make disciples for the kingdom of God in the 21st century.

Keywords: Jesus, Rabbinic education, rabbi, disciples, Scriptures, tradition, Adventist Education
The history of the rabbinic movement can be generally divided into two broad periods revolving around the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70. These periods include rabbinism before AD 70 and after AD 70. However, the focus of the paper will be the former, rabbinism before AD 70, because this is the time Jesus lived.

The earliest phase of the rabbinic movement is identified with Pharisaism (Chilton, 1992). The Pharisees were a prominent group that emerged from a pious Jewish sect (the Hasidim) that opposed Greek pagan influences on the Jews (Burton, 2014; Niswonger, 1992). Pharisees were known for emphasizing the need of learning, studying, interpreting, teaching and applying the Law (Torah) to all aspects of daily life in order to realize God’s vision for the Jews in Exodus 19:5-6 - to live as a “kingdom of priests” (DeSilva, 2004, p. 82) among the Gentile people of the world. Their goal was the achievement and maintenance of purity of offerings, people and priests for the cult of the Temple (Chilton, 1992) through the teaching and practice of Jewish religious law. Consequently, they made it their duty to ensure that every Jewish male was taught the law by a rabbi, a Hebrew title meaning “my great one,” “my master,” or “my teacher” (Burton, 2014, p. 196; Chilton, 1992, p. 652; Niswonger, 1992, p. 146).

Closely related to the Pharisees was another group known as the scribes. They were trained interpreters of the Law who dedicated themselves to learn its content, principles and application to daily life (DeSilva, 2004; Nichol, 1980). They were also teachers of the law (rabbis), mostly based in Jewish synagogues and schools to teach Jewish male children (Nichol, 1980), to give instruction in the Torah (Niswonger, 1992) and to make decisions on what actions were lawful or unlawful based on a body of legislation (DeSilva, 2004).

Related Literature

Rabbinic Literature

Over the years, the legal decisions and rabbinic interpretations of the Law (Torah) of the scribes and Pharisees became known as the tradition of the elders (Mark 7:3-5). These rabbinic laws first circulated orally but were later published as the Mishnah in the late 2nd and early 3rd century AD (Burton, 2014; Nichol, 1980). The Mishnah contained rules, regulations, prohibitions and conclusions made by a great number of rabbis over a period of about four centuries (Burton, 2014; Nichol, 1980). It eventually became the main source of Jewish religious studies and the norm of life (Nichol, 1980). The Tosefta is another compilation of rabbinic traditions contemporary with the Mishnah. Comments on the Mishnah (Gemara) were also eventually collected and together with the Mishnah made up the Talmud which became the basis for Jewish civil and religious law (Nichol, 1980; Niswonger, 1992). These major works, among others (such as the Targums and Midrash Rabbah), have been identified as rabbinic literature in the history of Judaism (Chilton, 1992).

Rabbinic interpretations can be divided into two major types: haggadah and halakah. The first is a Hebrew word meaning “expression” and refers to rabbinic tradition related to non-legal portions of Jewish Scripture, usually shared in synagogues similar to sermon presentations. The second is a Hebrew word meaning “walk” and refers to rabbinic tradition related to the legal portions of Jewish Scripture and how they should be obeyed in daily life. It was usually presented in schools in form of a debate (Brewer, 2005; Nichol, 1980). It appears that most rabbinic laws were concerned with the halakah. The rabbis identified 613 major laws from the Torah (the five books of Moses) and supplemented these laws with the halakah. They felt that if the Jewish people would keep the minor laws...
of the *halakoth* (plural of *halakah*), they would walk in the way of the 613 major laws (Burton, 2014).

The Mishnah contains *halakoth* which are arranged in six orders (*sedarim*) containing 63 tractates, each with a Hebrew name describing its content (Nichols, 1980). The orders are as follows:

1. **Zera 'im** ("Seeds"), containing 11 tractates dealing mainly with agriculture and its products.

2. **Mo 'ed** ("Set Feasts"), containing 12 tractates presenting regulations about the Sabbath and the feasts.

3. **Nashim** ("Women"), containing seven tractates dealing mainly with rules of marriage and married life.

4. **Neziqin** ("Damages"), containing 10 tractates concerned with civil and criminal laws.

5. **Qodashim** ("Hallowed Things") containing 11 tractates dealing with offerings.


Since the rabbis were concerned about applying the whole law to everyday Jewish life in order to ensure purity, in their schools they emphasized the learning and practice of the *halakoth* in the Mishnah. They despised anyone who did not take these laws seriously and separated themselves from them, referring to them as ‘*amme ha’ aretz’, which means "people of the land" (Nichols, 1980, p. 55; Niswonger, 1992, p. 65). To avoid such ignorance among the Jewish people, the Mishnah became the basis of religious education in rabbinical schools.

### Rabbinic Schools

After the Babylonian Exile of the Jews in 586 BC, the synagogue was gradually introduced as a replacement for the Jerusalem Temple (Niswonger, 1992). In addition, Jewish schools were later integrated into synagogues to help keep the minds and lives of Jewish children true to their religion (Nichols, 1980). There is a good amount of literary evidence for the great emphasis that Jews placed on the importance of religious education for their children (Evans, 2007; Nichols 1980). It was pointed out to every Jewish parent that their children must be trained in the Torah and the basic tenets of Judaism (Nichols, 1980; Evans, 2007). This educational foundation provided a basis for a strong Jewish identity, future learning, personal relationships and communal belonging (Choi, 2009).

Jewish education included both formal and informal types. While both boys and girls enjoyed informal education (teaching and training at home and in daily life), it appears that only the boys were offered formal education. The stages of formal education were as follows:

1. From age five or six to 10, a child was enrolled in **Beth Sefer** ("House of the Book") where the focus was reading, writing and memorization of the Torah. This usually took place in the synagogue (Barnett, 1999).

2. From 10-12, a child joined the **Beth Talmud** ("House of Learning") where the focus was memorizing and studying oral interpretations of the Torah and the rest of the Jewish Scripture in question and answer sessions. At 12, a boy became an adult in the religious sense through the **bar mitzvah** ("son of the commandment/law") ceremony.

3. After 12 or 13, gifted students joined the **Beth Midrash** ("House of Study") where the focus was
understanding and applying the Torah and oral tradition to daily life in a more intense way. Study was conducted under a famous rabbi. The student, usually called a talmid (disciple), would attach himself to and travel with the rabbi as part of his education. His goal was to become like his rabbi and learn his halakoth until he internalized it (Choi, 2009; Chilton, 1992; FOCUS Equip, 2011). This continued until he became a full-fledged rabbi or scribe at the age of 30. Without training at the Beth Midrash, a man could not be recognized as formally educated.

Though the first two stages (elementary schools) seemed to have been affordable and accessible to the average Jewish boy, the third stage (higher schools/rabbinic academies) seemed to be for boys who were intelligent, talented and from well-to-do homes. These schools existed in Jerusalem and in other larger cities abroad where there were enough financial means (wealthy Jewish families) and manpower (learned, influential teachers) to sustain them. A Bible example of such a school is that of Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 5:34-40) of which Paul was a student (Acts 22:3) (Nichols, 1980).

Two of the greatest known rabbinic schools that existed in the first century AD were those of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. Hillel and Shammai lived and taught in Jerusalem just before the turn of the era and their followers formed separate schools after them (Edersheim, 1997; Nichols, 1980). These schools were often opposed to each other in their application of halakah. While Hillel’s school was more liberal and flexible, Shammai’s tended to be conservative and strict (Chilton, 1992; Nichols, 1980; Niswonger, 1992). The school of Hillel became more famous and influential because of its moderate and gentle principles which appealed to people (Chilton, 1992; Nichols, 1980). Other rabbinical schools followed after Hillel such as the school of Gamaliel, who was a grandson of Hillel and Paul’s teacher (Burton, 2014; Burton, 2013).

It is important to point out again that the core emphasis of these rabbinical schools was the halakah, the rabbinic interpretations and application to daily life. Each student was to intensely and earnestly learn from his rabbi “all the halakic rules pertaining to the religious and secular life of a conscientious Jew” (Nichols, 1980, p. 97).

**Jesus and Rabbinism: A New Testament Survey**

As a Jewish boy, it was important that Jesus be taught the Torah. This implies that Jesus seemed to have gone through the educational system outlined above. Though information about the childhood of Jesus is scarce, some points can be clearly inferred from the New Testament text.

**Jesus’ education.** The only Gospel that directly deals with the childhood of Jesus is the Gospel of Luke. In his introductory narrative of the life of Jesus, Luke’s summary statement points out that Jesus went through every stage of human growth like any other normal child before he became a full grown man and began His ministry (Luke 2:52). In addition, he also shows that Jesus grew up according to the Jewish cultural context with the help of his parents. He was circumcised and dedicated as the first born baby of Mary (Luke 2:21-24) and was taken to the Temple at the age of 12 to celebrate the Passover Feast (Luke 2:41). His parents did all these to Jesus as He grew “according to the Law” (Luke 2:39, 40).

However, there is a hint at Jesus’ lack of formal rabbinic education in the Gospel of John. Jesus was identified later in His ministry, as one who had not learned (John 7:15). Though some scholars state that this text implies that Jesus could not read or write and had no education, the passage can be understood differently. The Gospels indicate that Jesus could read (Luke 4:16-21), write (John 8:6b,
and expound the Scriptures in the common language of religious discussion (Barnett, 1999; Choi, 2009; Evans, 2007; Niswonger, 1992). A careful study of John 7:15 refers to the fact that Jesus never attended the higher rabbinical academies in Jerusalem, was not formally trained as a scribe and had not sat at the feet of a trained or recognized rabbi or sage (Barnett, 1999; Beasley-Murray, 1999; Evans, 2007; Woods, 2005).

The above point seems to suggest that Jesus may have gone through the first two stages of Jewish formal education of the time (Beth Sefer and Beth Talmud) but He clearly was not involved in the last and most significant part (Beth Midrash) that could have confirmed/recognition Him as “having learned or studied” (John 7:15). While it seems clear that Jesus never participated formally in Beth Midrash, there are apparently two major views about Jesus’ formal childhood education. Some scholars argue that Jesus was educated by the traditional Jewish school system and was taught the oral traditions of Judaism in the synagogues at the early stages of His life (Barnett, 1999; FOCUS Equip, 2011; Niswonger, 1992; Wilson, 1975, 23 as cited in Choi, 2009, 108). Others assert that Jesus never participated in the synagogue school system but was educated directly by God the Father through divinely appointed sources/agents such as the Holy Spirit, His parents, the Scripture, nature, life experiences through observation and interaction with people (Choi, 2009; Nichol, 1980; White, 1940).

If Jesus did not attend synagogue schools, how then did He learn to read and understand Scripture from His parents. Though He attended the synagogue services with them weekly, He did not attend the synagogue schools (Beth Sefer and Beth Talmud). Since the synagogue services were “powerfully educational in character” (Barnett, 1999, p. 103), they played a very important role in establishing Jesus’ education in Scripture for future ministry. In addition to the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit and His parents, these weekly services must have helped give Jesus the necessary Scriptural foundations which excluded the unnecessary burdensome countless regulations (halakah) taught in the synagogue schools (White, 1940). This would also explain the origins of the record that He went to the synagogue every Sabbath “as His custom was” (Luke 4:16, KJV).

Since the Torah and its interpretation based on rabbinic tradition (halakah) was the emphasis of instruction in the synagogue schools, Joseph and Mary must have sought to avoid such education by teaching Jesus at home (Nichol, 1980). While Mary taught Him the Scriptures, Joseph taught Him the carpenter’s trade and other practical things of life (Nichol, 1980). Such an education produced a boy whose knowledge of Scripture greatly amazed and far exceeded that of the rabbis and doctors of the law at Jerusalem (Luke 2: 46, 47).

Though Luke’s account shows that Jesus grew like other boys, he also points out the divine element/actor of Jesus’ identity and growth: He is God’s Son doing His Father’s business in His Father’s House (Luke 2:49). As He grew, He was taught by His divine Father through Heaven-appointed and Holy Spirit directed sources/agencies: His parents at home, the Holy Scriptures, nature, useful carpentry work and experiences from everyday life (Choi, 2009; Edersheim, 1997).

Luke also records that after Jesus’ Jerusalem Temple-Passover experience, He followed them home to Nazareth.
where He continued to grow until manhood (Luke 2: 51, 52). Though He could have enrolled in a Beth Midrash at Jerusalem under the rabbis of the time, He refused the opportunity and instead learned daily from the divine agencies of education as He advanced from childhood to youth while living in Nazareth. It must have been during this period that Jesus became more aware of and familiar with the prevailing ideas among His people. The beliefs and teachings of the different Jewish sects of the first century (e.g. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots) and their relation to the coming Messiah and kingdom of God were prevalently discussed in the daily life of Nazareth. Through His observations, interaction and relations with people, He compared these beliefs with the standard of the Holy Scriptures. From His meditation and reflections on these comparisons emerged what is read from the Gospels as His teachings as Rabbi.

**Jesus as rabbi.** It is important to point out here that the title “Rabbi” was very informal during Jesus’ time before AD 70. After AD 70, it referred to anyone who had received formal rabbinic education from Beth Midrash and its subsequent stages (Burton, 2013; Evans, 2007; Woods, 2005).

The Gospels strongly confirm that Jesus was recognized as a rabbi during His life and ministry. Numerous texts in the Gospel accounts testify of Jesus being called ‘rabbi’, ‘Rabbouni’, by His faithful followers (Mark 4:38; 9:5,38; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:38, 49; 4:31; 9:2; 11:8; 20:16), by common folk people (Mark 9:17; 10:51; John 6:25), by His enemies and the learned scribes of His day (Mark 12:14, 32; John 3:2) (Burton, 2013; Chilton, 1992; Evans, 2007; Woods, 2005). This is an evidence that Jesus was regarded as literate in the interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture and was respected for His ability, identity and authority (Evans, 2007).

The testimony of the Gospels also shows that Jesus had similar characteristics and practices to other rabbis of His day (Barnett, 1999; Evans, 2007; FOCUS Equip, 2011; Goldstein, 2014) — taught from a sitting position (Matthew 5:1; 13:1-3; 23:1, 2; 26:55; Mark 12:41; Luke 4:20; 5:3; John 8:1, 2), taught in synagogues and the Temple (Matthew 4:25; 9:35; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6; 13:10; John 6:59; 18:20), had disciples who listened to Him, followed and served them (Matthew 4:19; 9:9; John 1:43). When a disciple decided to follow a rabbi and his way of interpreting and teaching Scripture, he was taking the rabbi’s “yoke,” reminiscent of Jesus’ statements in Matthew 11:29-30, “Take my yoke for it is easy and light” (FOCUS Equip 2011, 2).

In summary, Jesus displayed an expertise in reading and explaining the Scriptures, debating with other rabbis and scribes and surrounding Himself with disciples (Barnett, 1999; Evans, 2007). Consequently, the Gospels record that He was recognized as a rabbi by friend and foe.

**Jesus and the rabbi.** How did Jesus differ from the religious teachers of His time? As already stated, He did not go through formal rabbinic education (Beth Midrash). As a result of the training in formal rabbinic schools, the teachings of the scribes emphasized faithfulness to rabbinic tradition to the point of exalting it above Scripture (Burton, 2014; Choi, 2009). Rabbis of Jesus’ time were known to teach by quoting the interpretations and teachings of other rabbis as their authority. For example, ‘it has been said that Rabbi Isaac ben Joseph said in R. Johanan’s name that the tradition to follow is that which R. Juda ben Ahad, son of R. Huna said in R. Shesheth’s name . . .’ (Badenas, 1995, 27, endnote 3). It was customary when rabbis taught, they were to base their authority on the teachings of the previous rabbis before them. Any teacher who taught the Torah in a different way from the tradition (halakah) or who took any credit to himself without quoting...
Holy Scripture (White, 1942). This was one of the major points of disagreement between the teachings of Jesus and the rabbis (DeSilva, 2004). Though the interpretations of the rabbis were written to complement the Scripture, they soon gained canonical status until people thought they were as binding as He did (Burton, 2014). Jesus clearly rebuked this invalidation and violation of God's Word in the insistence on the tradition of the elders (men) (Matthew 15:3-6; Mark 7:1-5, 8-13) (Burton, 2013; DeSilva, 2004). Hence, Jesus taught with authority because it came not from the traditions of humans but directly from the Word of God.

Another difference between Jesus and the rabbis of His day is also highlighted in the Synoptic Gospels. The rabbis did not practice what they preached. Jesus severely rebuked them for this hypocritical inconsistency (Matthew 15:7-9; 23:1-7; Mark 7:6, 7) (Woods, 2005). “They wanted others to keep the law of Moses but they themselves were not keeping it... they said one thing, but did another- and even when they did the right thing, they did it for wrong reasons” (Burton, 2014, p. 196).

On the other hand, Jesus practiced what He preached (Goldstein, 2014; Woods, 2005). He is recorded to have kept the Jewish laws and feasts such as Passover, the Sabbath, attending synagogue and referring the lepers to the priest (Woods, 2005). In addition, He lived by what He taught. He taught mercy (Matthew 5:7; 12:7) and He showed mercy (Mark 10:47-52). He taught humility (Matthew 20:25-28) and He showed humility (John 13:1-15). He taught men to keep their words simple and true (Matthew 5:33-37) and He did the same (Mark 15:1-5). He taught nonviolence and love, not vengeance and retaliation (Matthew 5:38-48) and He demonstrated it when He prayed for His enemies (Luke 23:34). This implies that Jesus first understood what He taught and took time to internalize and apply what other rabbis was cursed and was not a true teacher (Badenas, 1995).

However, the Synoptic Gospels clearly state that Jesus did not teach like the scribes (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22) because He never appealed to rabbinic authorities (“Rabbi A. B. said in the name of Rabbi C. D. . . .”) (Beasley-Murray, 1993, p. 108). He spoke and taught based on the authority of God directly from the Hebrew Scriptures.

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus quotes or alludes to 23 of the 36 books of the Hebrew Bible (counting the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles as three books, not six). Jesus alludes to or quotes all five books of Moses, the three Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), eight of the Twelve Minor Prophets [Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi] and five of the “Writings” [Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel and Chronicles] (Evans, 2007, p. 50).

The Synoptic Gospels record that whenever Jesus was engaged by the scribes and Pharisees of His time, His distinctive style of response was “Have you not read?” (Mark 2:25; cf. Matt 12:3, 5; 21:16; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 10:26) — a clear trademark that His teachings were based on the authority of God in the Holy Scriptures (Evans, 2007; White, 1942).

Contrary to the formal traditions of His time, Jesus was never taught by a rabbi and had not served as a disciple of an acknowledged rabbinic master. He claimed that the source of His knowledge and teaching was “the One who sent Him” (John 7:16) (Barnett, 1999; Beasley-Murray, 1993). “The reply of Jesus [in John 7:16-17] to the criticism of the Jewish teachers [in John 7:15] is simple: If others drew their teaching from a rabbinic lecture room, he brought his from his Father” (Beasley-Murray, 1993, 108).

It is evident that the scribes of Jesus’ time elevated their traditions to the same level as the authority and standards of the Holy Scripture (White, 1942). This was one of the major points of disagreement between the teachings of Jesus and the rabbis (DeSilva, 2004). Though the interpretations of the rabbis were written to complement the Scripture, they soon gained canonical status until people thought they were as binding as the Scripture (Burton, 2014). Jesus clearly rebuked this invalidation and violation of God’s Word in the insistence on the tradition of the elders [men] (Matthew 15:3-6; Mark 7:1-5, 8-13) (Burton, 2013; DeSilva, 2004). Hence, Jesus taught with authority because it came not from the traditions of humans but directly from the Word of God.
He taught to His own life by the power of the Holy Spirit. His exemplary life differentiated Him from the scribes and Pharisees. His authority came not from rhetorical hypocrisy but from personal authentic integrity.

Jesus’ attitude to the common people of His day differentiated Him from the scribes and the Pharisees. As mentioned earlier, the learned men of the rabbinic schools emphasized the *halakah* when they taught the people. They attached so much importance to it that anyone who did not know it or take it seriously was despised as ignorant and classified as one of the “people of the land,” a term of abuse (John 7:49). To most of the learned rabbis of Jesus’ time, the masses of ordinary people especially those who lived in Galilee, were regarded as uneducated and cursed because they were not concerned to pursue and observe the expanded set of rules regulating ritual cleanliness (*halakah*) in the manner and to the extent that the Pharisees advocated (Beasley-Murray, 1993; Witherington, 1997). As a result, the Pharisee’s emphasis on *halakah* erected “social boundaries and distinctions between themselves and other Jews . . . If they were to maintain ritual purity, they could not eat in a house whose members did not observe the same purity rules for handling foods and dishes. They had table fellowship only with those of like mind, regarding the “people of the land” (the masses) as sinners (cf. John 7:49)” (DeSilva, 2004, p. 83).

While the rabbis of the time despised the common people of the land, Jesus interacted with them and established the center of His ministry among them. The Synoptic Gospels show that Jesus spent a considerable amount of time ministering in Galilee of the Gentiles. It is important to note here that while Judea was known as the home for rabbinism, Galilee stood out for neglecting it (Edersheim, 1997). “Galilee was despised as an area that did not keep the Law with the scrupulousness of Judea (John 7:52)” (Beasley-Murray, 1993, p. 121). Unlike Judea where the knowledge and study of the law was prevalent, Galilee was noted for agriculture, trade and industry where day laborers, small farmers and artisans strove to make a living (Witherington, 1997). It was commonly implied that to be rich, go north to Galilee but to be wise, go south to Judea (Edersheim, 1997). Consequently, “there was a general contempt in rabbinic circles for all that was Galilean” (Edersheim, 1997, p. 640).

However, Jesus related and ministered to these despised people and His fresh mode of teaching delighted the crowds. Since Jesus interacted with the common people and had not followed the formal rabbinic system, He was also, by implication, indirectly regarded as one of “the people of the land.” A rabbinic source states that ‘if anyone has learned the Scripture and the Mishna but has not served as a student of the Learned he is one of the people of the land. If he has learned the Scripture but not the Mishna he is an uneducated man. If he has learned neither the Scripture nor the Mishna, . . . he is reckoned as an animal!’” (Beasley-Murray, 1993, 108). This study shows that Jesus fell into the first two categories and this qualified Him to be described and despised as one of the common people. Jesus did not follow the rabbinic trend of dissociating Himself from the people in the name of ritual purity. Refusing to take a place of honor among the religious leaders and teachers of His time, He preferred to teach the poor and despised wherever they were such as in the highways and byways, on the streets, mountain top or sea side (White, 1942). By so doing, Jesus exemplified an essential part of His teaching: relationship with God and others is of greater importance than rules and hallowed customs (Woods, 2005).

In addition, Jesus presented His teachings in a simple, practical, meaningful and relevant way. He used parables using scenarios that people were familiar with in daily Jewish life
to present points about the gospel of the kingdom of God (Niswonger, 1992). This presentation of haggaddah (which the common people were familiar with as taught in the synagogues) instead of halakah (which was uniquely emphasized by the rabbis and taught only in rabbinic schools) appealed to the people and drew them in great number to listen to Him (Matthew 4:23-25; 13:2; 19:1, 2). These presentations “not only made sense to those who listened but were filling a great need in the lives of ordinary Jewish people” (Woods, 2005, p.4). In contrast to the “yoke” of the rabbis of His time, Jesus’ teachings were true-to-life, easy to understand and relevant to the needs of the people. They reflected the true spirit of the Torah as contained in the Scripture and called its hearers to a true and deeper righteousness than that of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees.

In conclusion, though the study is clear that Jesus did not attend rabbinic schools, He was recognized as an exceptional Rabbi. Craig Evans (2007) summarizes it well: “Jesus was regarded as a teacher by friend and foe alike. He argued points of Scripture with the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and ruling priests. He specifically challenged their readings of Scripture. He taught disciples ... who in turn preserved His teaching ... [and] founded a movement that produced a body of literature that comes to be called the New Testament.” (pp. 53-54). He was indeed a Rabbi of the “people of the land.”

Jesus and Rabbinical Schools:
Implications for Adventist Education

Seventh-day Adventist education stands as the second largest denominational educational system in the world (Oluikpe, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2013). Its basic philosophy emphasizes the redemption and restoration of fallen humanity to the original image of God (Wa-Mbaleka, 2013) through guidelines from the Scriptures. The main goal of this educational system is primarily mission: to reach people with the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ in preparation for His soon return (Oluikpe, 2013). Through the branch of education, Adventists strive to fulfill this uniquely Christian worldwide mission to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them all the commands of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19).

The parting words of Jesus in the above text, also known as the Great Commission, provide one of the foundations and goals for Christian education: teaching people to become disciples of Jesus Christ. This teaching takes place either formally by being enrolled in Christian schools or informally through Christian teaching at home or during church programs like Bible studies, youth programs among others. Adventist Education, whether formal or informal, is an essential part of the discipleship command of the Great Commission. By implication, Adventist education should produce disciples for the kingdom of God, not just converts for the church. Consequently, there is a lot to learn from Jesus about how disciples are made through Adventist education. In the subsequent sections, the study will highlight three key implications drawn from the education and teachings of Jesus as opposed to those of the rabbinical schools.

Studying Primary Sources

It has been observed that the rabbinical schools emphasized halakah, the tradition of the elders, even in place of the Scriptures. However, Jesus did not seek these schools but followed the divine plan by learning directly from the heaven-appointed sources of the Scripture, nature, useful work and life’s experiences (White, 1952). While the Gospels show that Jesus was educated by His heavenly Father as the Son of God, these sources of divine blueprint are still available and needed in contemporary education.

In regard to the Scriptures as a source, there is a common tendency to study more of and depend more on the words of
humans in form of Bible commentaries and study guides in place of the direct reading, study, memorization and meditation on God’s word. This is still a manifestation of the trend of the rabbinical schools of Jesus’ time. Adventist educators will do well to learn from Jesus’ education and teaching as He read and taught directly from the Scriptures itself. The following quotes from White (1956) emphasize the above mentioned points:

We should not take the testimony of any man as to what the Scriptures teach, but should study the words of God for ourselves. If we allow others to do our thinking, we shall have crippled energies and contracted abilities. The noble powers of the mind may be so dwarfed by lack of exercise on themes worthy of their concentration as to lose their ability to grasp the deep meaning of the word of God. The mind will enlarge if it is employed in tracing out the relation of the subjects of the Bible, comparing scripture with scripture. (p. 89)

There is nothing more calculated to strengthen the intellect than the study of Scriptures. No other book is so potent to elevate the thoughts, to give vigor to the faculties, as the broad ennobling truths of the Bible. If God’s word were studied as it should be, men would have a breadth of mind, a nobility of character, and a stability of purpose rarely seen in these times. (p. 90)

Just like the days of Jesus, many today give greater respect to the words of scholars, professors and pastors than those of God as found in the Bible. Teachers and administrators in the Adventist educational institutions are to point to the direct reading of the word of God, showing and explaining subject areas, courses and life’s issues to students and staff from God’s point of view (Akers, 1993). Consequently, every topic will be understood from the philosophic perspective of the Scriptures (Knight, 2005) which will provide “the framework for everything that takes place on campus, whether it be academics, extracurricular activities, chapels and Sabbath services, or work-study programs” (Knight, 2005, p. 7).

Nature is another important source of divine education for education in the 21st century. In a world full of digital gadgets and electronic media, most children and youth have no time to learn from the natural world which are full of lessons for life pointed out by Jesus in His teachings (Matthew 6:25-34; 13:1-52). Like Jesus, Adventist educators need to structure educational programs to balance the over-stimulating indoor effects of media saturation which is rampant in the society. This will also help students to learn to appreciate nature, enjoy health from it and be good stewards of it (Choi, 2009).

As mentioned above, Jesus also learned from useful labor through the carpentry trade taught Him by His human father, Joseph. It is important to point out that it was an indispensable part of Jewish education to teach every child (son or daughter) a useful trade, so that, “should adverse circumstances arise, they would not be dependent on others, but would be able to provide for their own necessities. They might be instructed in literary lines, but they must also be trained to some craft” (Choi, 2009, p. 114). This is also evident in the life of Paul, who was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3) and the disciples of Jesus who were fishermen.

In contemporary education, there is so much focus on the mental or “head knowledge” that the learning of skills for life or “hand knowledge” is overlooked. There is a need to consistently emphasize the work program (which is gradually fading out in many of our schools) where students can learn from different areas of work such as agriculture, textile, culinary arts, music, book keeping, and secretarial studies among others. Through working in these areas, students will learn valuable
Practicing Character Virtues

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As earlier stated, Jesus was brought up at home by His human parents as a very intricate aspect of Jewish life. There is also a very important lesson to learn here for contemporary education. Most parents today are very busy making money that they have no time to teach their children. Consequently, they leave their responsibilities to others by enrolling their children in day care and other early childhood schools, thereby institutionalizing their children at an early age. Adventist educators need to work with 21st century parents, stressing the importance of making personal time with their children a priority. This will drive home the essential foundation of the “home school.” Just like Joseph and Mary took time out of their daily busy schedules to teach Jesus the lessons for life from the Scripture and daily experience, modern day parents are encouraged to do the same for quality education. Through life experiences at home and abroad, the lessons of Scripture, nature and useful labour are played out to enrich the personal character which becomes a reflection of God’s image in the society.

Just as Jesus learned from the primary sources of the divine plan, Adventist educators need to stress their importance in contemporary education. Rather than highlighting the secondary sources, students of Adventist education need to be pointed to the primary sources. The following quote makes this clear:

It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought. Instead of confining their study to that which men have said or written, let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields opened to research in nature and revelation. Let them contemplate the great facts of duty and destiny, and the mind will expand and strengthen. Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men strong to think and to act, men who are masters and not slaves of circumstances, men who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions. (White, 1952, 17, 18)

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As earlier stated, Jesus first applied His teaching to His own life before He taught and demonstrated it in action. This is an essential point for Adventist educators to take note of.

Beyond just teaching facts in class, there is a need to lead the students to ask, “What does this mean for my life in the world today?” Providing realistic true-to-life answers to this question spells the difference between wisdom and mere knowledge of facts. It is important for Adventist teachers to see how the courses being studied are relevant for life and especially how all these relate to positive character development (Akers, 1993). “The true teacher ... cannot be content with imparting ... only technical knowledge, with making them [students] merely clever accountants, skillful artisans, successful tradesmen. It is his [or her] ambition to inspire them to principles of truth, obedience, honor, integrity, and purity.” (White, 1952, 29). It is said of Jesus that “He did not deal in abstract theories but in that which is essential to
the development of character; that which will enlarge man’s capacity for knowing God, and increase his power to do good. He spoke of those truths that relate to the conduct of life” (White, 1952, p. 81). Adventist educators must follow the pattern of the Master Teacher.

More important than just teaching students about character, teachers in the Adventist educational system must themselves be examples of good character like Jesus was. In order to obey and fulfill the Great Commission command to make disciples of all nations, there is a need to understand how disciples are made. As mentioned earlier, a disciple is known for following the rabbi and learning everything (e.g., teachings, gestures, character) possible from him by spending time relating, associating and emulating him. This shows that discipleship is done in the context of relationship.

Adventist teachers and administrators are to provide mentoring for students as role models by living out their faith in very real practical ways, serving as guides and examples to emulate. George Akers (1993) says it well in the following quote:

“Serving Community Needs
The rabbis and religious leaders of Jesus’ time distanced themselves from “the people of the land.” Contrary to this rabbinical contempt of the common people as uneducated, Jesus “mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’” (White, 1942, p. 143). This is also a needed component to be stressed in contemporary Adventist education.

In present times, there is a tendency for the educated to look down on and cut themselves off from the poor and the “have-nots” of society. This is because, for most students, the aim of getting an education is selfish ambition. However, “a major function of Adventist education is to help naturally selfish human beings gain a vision of service for others” (Knight, 2005, 8). This important goal of the Adventist educational system, which can be summarized as “education for selfless service, not selfishness,” focuses on giving not getting (Akers, 1993). This philosophy
aims at training students not just “for self-service through the acquisition of a ‘good job’ and a comfortable income” (Knight, 2010, 55) but for service to God and others. “Without this component, Adventist education is incomplete” (Wambauleka, 2013, 7).

Consequently, there is a need to emphasize the importance of relationship with people in community. This is essential in training Adventist students to become disciples in order to fulfill the Great Gospel Commission by reaching out to others in various communities. Adventist educators need to stress the importance of learning social skills for relating to people and assisting their needs as much as possible. Skills for serving the community and meeting pressing needs should be taught and practiced in Adventist schools. Doing this will bring relief and help to the neglected of society and open avenues to fulfill the unique worldwide mission of the Adventist movement. As students follow this divine pattern exemplified by Jesus in His life and teachings, they will be prepared for “the joy of service in this world and the higher joy of wider service in the world to come” (White, 1952, p.13).

In summary, Adventist educators and administrators need to sieve through the curriculum and policies to find out if there are some unnecessary halakah found there and eliminate them so as to focus on the essential distinctions of Adventist education that are foundational for forming and producing disciples with authentic Christian spirituality and competencies that fit them for life and mission for God in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Jesus was an exceptional Rabbi without “formal” rabbinic education. He was radical and revolutionary because He drew directly from the fountain of the Scripture, lived out its principles in

His life and served relationally to people around Him. Adventist educators and administrators should recognize and emphasize these key principles as they make disciples for the kingdom of God in the 21st century.

References


