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Teacher in the New Testament

Jesus' Teaching Ministry

The Gospels portray Jesus as the teacher *par excellence*. People repeatedly address Jesus as “teacher” and speak about Him in ways reflecting that role (e.g., Matt 8:19; 9:11; 19:16; 22:16; 26:18; Mark 4:38; 5:35; 10:17; 13:1; 14:14; Luke 3:12; 8:49; 9:38; 18:18; 21:7; 22:11; John 1:38; 8:4). In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to Himself as a teacher (John 13:13, 14; 20:16).

Teaching was a key part of Jesus' ministry (Matt 4:23; 5:2; 9:35; 11:1; 13:54; 21:23; Mark 4:1–2; 8:31; 12:14, 38; Luke 4:31; 5:17; 7:1; 13:22; 20:21; 23:5). Jesus' role as a teacher is particularly prominent in the Gospel of Matthew, which contains five blocks of teaching (Matt 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 23–25). The Sermon on the Mount is the first and longest of these blocks of material. The connection between Jesus' ministry and teaching also is apparent in Acts 1:1, where Luke refers to his Gospel as “the former account ... about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (NET).

The Gospels record that Jesus taught in synagogues (e.g., Matt 4:23; 13:54; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:15; 6:6; John 6:59) and in the temple courts (Matt 21:23; 26:55; Mark 12:35; 14:49; Luke 19:47; 20:1; John 7:14; 10:23–30). Several passages indicate that Jesus sat down when He was teaching, reflecting the style of a rabbi (Matt 5:1; 26:55; Mark 4:1; John 8:2). After Jesus' ascension, the apostles also taught in the temple courts (Acts 5:20–21, 25, 42).

When Jesus taught, the crowds marveled at His teaching and considered it different from that of the scribes (Matt 7:28; 22:33; Mark 1:22, 27; 11:18; Luke 4:32). Luz argues that the “authority” (ἐξουσία, *exousia*) with which Jesus taught made His teaching unique (Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 389–90; see Matt 7:28–29). According to Mark 11:18, Jesus' teaching was so powerful that the “chief priests and the experts in the law ... considered how they could assassinate him” (NET). When Paul and Barnabas speak in Acts 13:12, their teaching seems to make an impression similar to Jesus' teaching.

Jesus as the Only Teacher

In Matthew 23:8–10, Jesus says, “you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher ... neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ” (ESV). Luz argues that this is not a polemic against “the existence of Christian scribes but their preference for titles and the accompanying claims to honor and power” (Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 106). Luz also points to the triple use of the term “one” (εἷς, *heis*), which emphasizes that there is one teacher of significance and brings to mind the confession of God as “one” in Deut 6:4 (Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 107). The exhortation to “call no one your father on earth” (Matt 23:9 NET) is positioned between the commands not to call oneself “rabbi” (Matt 23:8) or “teacher” (Matt 23:10).

Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Alexandria picked up the concept of Jesus as the only teacher. Recently, Gerhardsson and Riesner also have emphasized Jesus' role as the only teacher (Byrskog, *Jesus*, 13–14, 17–18).

The Teacher-Disciple Relationship

Jesus emphasizes the continuity in relationship between the teacher and his disciple, stating that a “disciple (μαθητής, *mathētēs*) is not greater than his teacher” and saying “It is enough for the disciple to become like his teacher” (Matt 10:24–25 NET, see also Luke 6:40). Wilkins suggests

that the term “disciple” (*mathētēs*) marks teaching units where Jesus communicates with His disciples. He notes that Jesus frequently delivers teaching in response to a question or to something the disciples say or do (Wilkins, *Concept*, 165).

The centrality of discipleship in Matthew’s Gospel is evident from its frequent use of several terms, including “follow” (ἀκολουθέω, *akoloutheō*) “teach” or “make a disciple of” (μαθητεύω, *mathēteuō*), and “learn” (μανθάνω, *manthanō*; Byrskog, *Jesus*, 221–22). The teacher-disciple relationship is particularly evident in Matt 5—the opening chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. Hagner argues that Matt 5:1 signals Jesus’ authority as a teacher by depicting Jesus in the fashion of a rabbi sitting down and teaching His disciples, who approach Him to listen to His words (Hagner, *Matthew*, 85–86). In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus states that all “authority” (*exousia*) in heaven and earth is given to Him and passes the task of teaching to His followers.

The Office of Teacher in the Church

The book of Acts and the New Testament Letters include explicit references to the office and role of teacher:

- Acts 13:1 provides a list of the “prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch” (NET).
- Ephesians 4:11 includes the office of teacher in its list of official and public roles in the church.
- In Romans 12:7, Paul includes teaching in his list of gifts, stating, “if it [the gift] is teaching, he must teach” (NET).
- In 1 Corinthians 12:28–29, Paul states that God has assigned some to be teachers in the church.

Paul considered his teaching and lifestyle as inseparable entities, as expressed in 1 Cor 4:17: “[Timothy] will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church” (1 Cor 4:17 NET). In Colossians 1:28 Paul states the overall purpose of the teaching: “We proclaim him by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ” (NET). Both Paul and Peter warn against insincere and false teachers (2 Tim 4:3; 2 Pet 2:1–2, 19).

The New Testament writings expect teachers to demonstrate increased responsibility and maturity. For example, in Heb 5:12, the author connects the role of teacher with maturity, stating, “though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles” (ESV). In Matthew 5:19, Jesus states that “whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven” (ESV). Jesus also criticizes the Pharisees for “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt 15:9 NET; see also Mark 7:6–7) and for not practicing what they teach (Matt 23:3). James 3:1 warns, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly” (NET).

Paul the Teacher

According to Acts 22:3, Paul was taught by one of the most famous teachers of his time, the rabbi Gamaliel (see also Acts 5:34; Bauer et al., “Γαμαλιήλ, *Gamaliēl*”). Paul also became a teacher and refers to himself as “teacher of the Gentiles” in 1 Tim 2:7 (see also 2 Tim 1:11). The book of Acts portrays Paul as teaching wherever he goes:

- In Acts 15:35, Paul and Barnabas “teach and proclaim (along with many others) the word of the Lord” in Antioch (NET).
- Acts 18:11 records that Paul stayed in Corinth for “a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (NET).

- Acts 19:8–10 records that Paul lectured for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus.

Acts concludes with the statement that Paul was “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete boldness and without restriction” (Acts 28:31 NET).

The Holy Spirit as Teacher

Both the Gospels and the New Testament Letters portray the Holy Spirit as a teacher. For example, in Luke 12:11–12 Jesus tells His followers, “when they bring you before ... the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (ESV). Jesus also states that the Father will send the Holy Spirit, who “will teach you everything, and will cause you to remember everything I said to you” (John 14:26 NET). The reference in 1 John 2:27 to the anointing that “teaches you about everything” most likely refers to the Holy Spirit (see Smaley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 125).

“Teacher” in Sirach, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Rabbinic Literature

The second-century BC book of Sirach presents Ben Sira as a pious scholar and a teacher. In Sirach 24:32–34 Ben Sira states, “I will yet make doctrine to shine as the morning, and will send forth her light afar off. I will yet pour out doctrine as prophecy, and leave it to all ages forever. Behold that I have not labored for myself only, but for all them that seek wisdom.” In Sirach 51:23 Ben Sira offers the invitation, “Draw near unto me, ye unlearned, and dwell in the house of learning.” Ben Sira also refers to his pupils as “sons” (בְּנֵי, *bnyim*, τέκνα, *tekna*; e.g., Sirach 2:1; 3:1, 17; 4:1, 20; 6:18; Byrskog, *Teacher*, 46–47).

The Dead Sea Scrolls use various forms of the Hebrew term “teacher” (*moreh*). For example, in the Damascus Scroll (CD) the term is used in reference to God or the so-called Righteous Teacher, who is also referred to as a wise scribe (Byrskog, *Jesus*, 48–49). Orton notes that 1QH describes the teacher as a “discerning interpreter of wonderful mysteries” (1QH 2:13) and a teacher to whom God has granted “teaching and understanding, that he might open a fountain of knowledge to all men of insight” (1QH 2:18; Orton, *Understanding Scribe*, 124). Byrskog argues that the members of the Qumran community should be considered pupils of the Righteous Teacher (Byrskog, *Jesus*, 51).

Rabbinic literature depicts rabbis as scholars who have committed themselves to the study of Torah. Rabbinic texts frequently describe the rabbi’s role of teaching and transmitting Torah to his pupils (Byrskog, *Jesus*, 52–53). According to Rengstorf, the term *tlmyd* “is used exclusively for the one who gives himself (as a learner) to Scripture and to the religious tradition of Judaism” (Rengstorf, “μανθάνω, *manthanō*”, *TDOT* 4:431). Students of Torah learn under the supervision of a teacher and in close cooperation with fellow students (Byrskog, *Teacher*, 53; Aberbach, “Relations”, 7).

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