

Discipleship in the New Testament

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The Greek word for “disciple” is *mathetes*, meaning “learner, pupil, or student.” The verb is *manthanein*, meaning “to learn.” In our contemporary context, these words conjure up images of classrooms filled with squirmy little (or not so little) children and a weary teacher trying to motivate them to accomplish particular learning objectives and meet certain competency levels. But first-century Greco-Roman societies did not have schools as we know them today. Among the wealthy aristocracy, fathers hired tutors for their male children to teach them the skills that would one day allow them to take positions in the government and the military: numbers and letters, Roman law, and Greek rhetoric and literature. Others contracted with a tutor to have their children join a group in the tutor’s home. A much smaller portion of aristocratic families also provided in-home tutors for their female children. However, the vast majority of children, families of peasants and craftsmen, were taught at home by their parents. Boys were trained to take up their fathers’ trade, and girls learned domestic skills that would make them good wives and mothers.

Thus, as you might already suspect, the Roman school is hardly an apt comparison for understanding discipleship in the New Testament. Instead we should look to the example of the sage or wise teacher of early Judaism and the Greco-Roman world. Whether he was a respected rabbi or a traveling philosopher, those around him recognized him as a wisdom figure who could provide people with guidance about how they ought to live their lives. For the sake of brevity, we will look to early Jewish rabbinic literature to give us a context for understanding discipleship in the New Testament. However, current scholarship suggests that that early Jewish and Christian notions of discipleship were not unlike those of the wider Greco-Roman world.

The Jewish Sage and His Disciples

Mishnah Pirke Aboth (translated “Principles of the Fathers” or “Ethics of the Fathers”) describes the source of the Jewish wisdom teacher’s authority as well as the weightiness of his responsibility toward his disciples:

Shemayah and Avtalyon received from the preceding [sic. Judah and Shimon]. Shemayah said: Love work; hate lordship; and seek no intimacy with the ruling power. Avtalyon said: Ye sages, be heedful of your words, lest ye incur the penalty of exile and be exiled to a place of evil waters and the disciples who come after you drink thereof and die, and the Heavenly Name be profaned. (1.10–11)¹

This brief excerpt suggests, first of all, that a teacher’s authority relied to a great extent on the credibility of his teachers. A person could not simply claim to be a rabbi or sage. Rather he had to be able to demonstrate the source of his teaching. Even the author of *Pirke Aboth* does this. By citing a wise saying of Avtalyon and tracing it back to Judah and Shimon and their teachers before them, he makes the claim

¹ Joseph H. Hertz, trans. *Sayings of the Fathers or Pirke Aboth, the Hebrew Text, with a New English Translation and a Commentary*. Behrman House, 1945, p. 21, 23. *Mishnah Pirke Aboth* contains Jewish rabbinic sayings that date from the second century BCE to the second century CE, making it roughly contemporaneous with the New Testament.



that the teaching contained in “Principles of the Fathers” is reliable. The disciple of this teacher would be wise to obey.

Consider, then, the significance of the evangelist John’s account of an interchange between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities during the feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem:

When the feast was already half over, Jesus went up into the temple area and began to teach. The Jews were amazed [i.e., offended] and said, “How does he know scripture [lit. letters] without having studied?” Jesus answered them and said, “My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me. Whoever chooses to do his will shall know whether my teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own.” (John 7:14–17)

On one level the Jewish religious authorities were correct. Jesus probably did not study with a rabbi. This is what John means when he uses the phrase “know letters.” By presenting himself as a teacher, Jesus was deceiving the crowds that were gathered for the feast of Tabernacles (or Booths)—or so the Jewish religious leaders thought. Not only is the feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) a harvest festival and a remembrance of the Israelite peoples’ Exodus sojourn in the wilderness, it is a celebration of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Of course, what the Jewish religious authorities did not know or understand was that Jesus did have a teacher and that teacher was God himself. However, the initial hearers of John’s Gospel would have understood clearly what the characters in the story did not—that Jesus’ authority as teacher exceeds all others.

The second important point made by this brief excerpt from *Mishnah Pirke Aboth* is that the wise teacher’s responsibility began with choosing his disciples well. If he chose badly and allowed his words to be taken up by disciples with malicious intent, he would also be held responsible for the misinformation they spread to the next generation of disciples. Moreover, he would be held responsible for the destruction of the next generation of disciples and even for the desecration of God’s honor that came about as a result of the malicious disciples’ teaching.

Consider, then, the problem that the early Christian Church had to face because of the tradition of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal and Peter’s denial of Jesus. Imagine some of the Church’s detractors saying, “Surely the fact that Jesus made such poor choices when he called his disciples testifies to his failure as God’s teacher!” This is how John’s Gospel addresses the dilemma. Jesus is the speaker:

Do you [disciples] realize what I have done for you? You call me “teacher” and “master,” and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master nor any messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it. I am not speaking of all of you. I know those whom I have chosen. But so that the scripture might be fulfilled, “The one who ate my food has raised his heel against me.” (13:12b–18)

The setting for Jesus’ words is the washing of the disciples’ feet before the start of their Last Supper together. Jesus is self-identifying as a teacher and a master / lord, even as he is performing the most menial tasks belonging to the slave of the household. John loves irony! But notice how Judas’ anticipated act of betrayal is described. John has Jesus saying that he *knowingly chose* Judas so that Sacred Scripture could be fulfilled. It was not a failure on Jesus’ part that he had a betrayer walking with him



through the years of his public ministry. Instead, Judas' act of betrayal was necessary for the fulfillment of God's revelatory word.

Similarly, John gives an alternative explanation for Peter's actions. The setting is Jesus' Last Supper with the disciples:

Simon Peter said to him, "Master, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, though you will follow later." Peter said to him, "Master, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Amen, amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times." (13:36–38)

Biblical scholars have given considerable attention to uncovering the role of Peter in John's Gospel, especially in light of the scene in the epilogue in which the risen Jesus confronts Peter with the threefold question, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15–19). Here it suffices to say that John recognized the problem that Peter's denial presented for Christian discipleship, and he addressed it by suggesting that Jesus knew ahead of time that Peter would stumble for lack of courage and that he would stumble very soon and without much provocation. He was questioned by a servant girl in a courtyard, after all! But John also reminds the hearers of the Gospel that eventually Peter would give his life for his teacher. He would even become a model of Christian discipleship that generations could look to for consolation when they themselves fail to answer the call. In other words, Jesus' choice of Peter to be one of his disciples was not a bad decision after all.

The Responsibilities of Discipleship

But what does Jewish rabbinic literature say about the duties and responsibilities of a sage's disciples? Again an excerpt from *Mishna Pirke Aboth* might prove informative:

Hillel and Shammai received the tradition from the preceding. Hillel said: Be the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving thy fellow-creatures and drawing them close to Torah. He used to say: A name made great is a name destroyed; he who does not increase his knowledge, decreases it; and he who does not study, deserves to die; and he who makes a worldly use of the crown (of the Torah), shall pass away. (1:12–13)²

Thus Rabbi Hillel teaches that disciples should conform themselves so thoroughly to their teacher that the descriptors that apply to the teacher—in this case, Aaron—also apply to his disciples. In essence, they become one with their teacher in all they say and do. He also issues a firm warning to would-be disciples. One who is not willing to "disciple," that is, to truly become a learner, will bring condemnation on himself. Likewise, a disciple who is motivated by personal gain will bring condemnation on herself.

Consider, then, what the narrator of Mark's Gospel says about the mission of Jesus' disciples, in particular, the ones who would be called Apostles:

² Hertz, trans. *Sayings of the Fathers or Pirke Aboth*, p. 23.



[Jesus] went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted and they came to him. He appointed twelve [whom he also named apostles] that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. (3:13–15)

First, the disciples are to be with Jesus. John's Gospel says it more elegantly. The disciples are called to abide with Jesus as he abides with the Father and the Father abides with him (see 6:54–57). The Greek word *menein*, here translated as “to abide,” can simply mean “to stay with” or “to remain.” However, in John's Gospel, it usually connotes something like “to dwell in.” Thus the Johannine Jesus tells the disciples that they are to “dwell in” him just as he dwells in the Father and the Father dwells in Jesus (cf. 14:23). Because Jesus is no ordinary sage, the call to discipleship is equally extraordinary. In essence, it is a call to participate in the divine life.

Second, the author of Mark's Gospel says that Jesus called his disciples to preach and to drive out demons. That is, they were called and sent out to do what Jesus did and to teach as he taught them. But in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is described as performing these two activities as testimony to the coming Reign of God. His first spoken words are “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15), and in a single day he performs numerous healings and exorcisms and teaches “with authority” (1:21–45). Such is the power of God's Reign! Mark's Gospel implies that if the disciples are to continue Jesus' ministry, they must also testify to the coming Reign of God. It is a calling that no would-be disciple should take lightly.

Early Jewish rabbinic literature gives us some insight into the extreme level of commitment that was expected of a disciple.

[If a man went to seek] his own lost property and that of his father, his own has first place; . . . if that of his father and that of his teacher, his teacher's has first place—for his father did but bring him into this world, but his teacher that taught him wisdom brings him into the world to come; but if his father was also a Sage, his father's has first place. If his father and his teacher each bore a burden, he must first relieve his teacher and afterward relieve his father. If his father and his teacher were each taken captive, he must first ransom his teacher and afterward ransom his father; but if his father was also a Sage he must first ransom his father and afterward ransom his teacher. (*Mishnah Bava Metzia* 2:11)³

In essence, the commitment of discipleship surpasses the commitment that a son owes his father, except if he is a disciple of his own father. In the honor-shame societies of the ancient Mediterranean world, this would have been a very weighty commitment. A man could not choose to enter into the father / son relationship; it was his by birth. But he could choose whether or not to respond to a teacher / disciple relationship. We can imagine, therefore, that disciples took the call of their teacher very seriously. This is also evident in Greco-Roman literature, where the Greek word *mathetes* is often better translated as “adherent.” The teacher's disciples, having carefully deliberated their calling, became devotees of the teacher and adherents to his cause.

³ Herbert Danby, trans. *The Mishnah*. Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 350.



The Problem of the Failed Disciples in Mark's Gospel

Christians who have not read the New Testament Gospels carefully assume that they will find in them stories about the disciples as exemplary followers of Jesus who listen to his every word and obey his every command. Instead they are most often presented as bumbling and stupid followers of Jesus who are being dragged along (metaphorically speaking) toward Jerusalem and the place of Jesus' death. Though this portrait of the disciples is somewhat moderated in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, it is especially true of Mark, which most biblical scholars believe is the first of the four New Testament Gospels.

Briefly, this is how Mark describes Jesus' disciples. In one of the opening scenes of the Gospel, Jesus calls the disciples and they follow *immediately* (see Mark 1:16–20). Traditionally this scene has been interpreted as an indication of their eagerness to follow Jesus, but, given the background of early Jewish and Greco-Roman literature on discipleship, it is at least as likely that Mark is saying that these so-called disciples naively entered into their relationship with Jesus without realizing the seriousness of their calling. Perhaps they so quickly left their families and fishing nets behind because they wanted an adventure? Like fools, they did not consider the cost of discipleship.

From the very beginning of the Gospel, the disciples were privileged to witness Jesus' power as he healed and exorcized demons, but clearly they did not understand the significance of his mighty deeds and his teachings (see Mark 4:40, 7:18, 8:16–21). Before long their ignorance turned to astonishment and disapproval and even hardness of heart (see 6:47–52, 8:14–21). Toward the end of the Gospel, when Jesus is arrested, we are told that they all abandon him and run away like sheep without a shepherd (see 14:50). To someone who knows anything about the behavior of sheep, the image is both tragic and darkly comical. Without a shepherd they run after whatever is ahead of them, even if it means smashing into a fence or careening off a cliff.

It is certainly possible, perhaps even probable, that Mark's Gospel preserves a historical memory of the disciples of Jesus as, at least for a time, failing to understand what Jesus' mission was all about. But if that was his only purpose, one could imagine that Mark would have done so in as few words as possible. After all, what an embarrassment they were! Perhaps Mark's intention in portraying Jesus' disciples in such a negative light was to invite the hearers of the Gospel to ponder the true meaning of discipleship.

How do these stories cohere with what the Markan Jesus has to say about discipleship? This is what he says after Peter naively declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the "anointed" of God, and Jesus scolded him for thinking not as God thinks but as humans think (see Mark 8:27–33):

Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? What could one give in exchange for his life? Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. (Mark 8:34–38)

In other words, true disciples must be willing to walk in Jesus' footsteps and stand without honor before the whole world. They must be willing to suffer as Jesus suffered and even give up their lives. No wonder Jesus' disciples had such a hard time accepting their call to discipleship!

This is the halfway mark of Mark's Gospel. From this point onward, things go from bad to worse for Jesus' disciples. However, as Mark continues to tell unglamorous stories about Jesus' disciples, the hearers of the Gospel get a good look at some of the stumbling blocks to being a good disciple—desire



for power, status, and money, and, perhaps most debilitating of all, fear. For example, he describes Jesus telling the disciples and the crowd that some among them will not taste death until they see God's Reign come in power (see Mark 9:1). Immediately following, he tells the story of Peter, James, and John witnessing Jesus' transfiguration but being so terrified they cannot respond in a meaningful way (see 9:2–8). And coming down from the mountain, they seem to have missed the significance of the event entirely and instead are wrapped up in pondering what "rising from the dead" means (see 9:11).

When they arrive at the foot of the mountain, Jesus discovers a commotion over a botched attempt by the rest of the disciples to perform an exorcism (see Mark 9:14–27). Jesus completes the exorcism, but imagine their shame when the disciples ask why they were not able to do it themselves. Jesus answers, "This kind can only come out through prayer" (9:29). Leaving that place and journeying through Galilee, Jesus tells the disciples for a second time that he will be killed, but the narrator of the story says that they did not understand and were afraid to ask (see 9:30–31; cf. 8:31). Sadly, the narrator goes on to relate that during the same journey, the disciples were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest (see 9:33–37). In the very next scene, we learn that the disciples are complaining to Jesus about someone who was performing exorcisms in his name. "We tried to stop him," they say, "because *he does not follow us*" (9:38). Clearly blinded by their pride, they are worried only about their own status among the healers of the area, and cannot see what the coming Reign of God is really all about.

After a third prediction of Jesus' death (see Mark 10:32–34), the narrator of Mark's Gospel relates the final story in this series of stories about the disciples that take place while Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. James and John approach Jesus with the request that they be granted positions as his commanders-in-chief when he comes into his Kingdom. Jesus asks them if they can "drink the cup" that he will drink, referring to his immanent fate, and they blithely answer, "Yes." Clearly they do not understand, perhaps thinking that Jesus is referring to triumph in battle and establishment of an earthly kingdom. In response, he promises that they will "drink the cup" he will drink, but he cannot grant them places of honor in God's Kingdom, because only God can do that. The story teaches that the way to true discipleship does not involve striving for power and status; rather, they must be servants of all just as Jesus lived as a servant of all and died as a ransom for many (see 10:35–45).

Finally, Mark's bleak portrait of the disciples reaches a new height with the story of Jesus' arrest and the narrator's brief statement: "And they all left him and fled" (Mark 14:50). However, if you look at other characters of Mark's Gospel, you will find that there are some who do believe in Jesus and who want to be with him. They are the "little people" of the Gospel, the marginalized of society, and the ones who risk their honor to seek Jesus out: the leper (see 1:40–45), the woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus, the father of a deceased young girl (see 5:21–43), the Syro-Phoenician woman (see 7:24–30), the blind Bartimaeus (see 10:46–52), the widow at the temple treasury (see 12:41–44), and the woman who anoints Jesus before his arrest (see 14:3–9). They are the true disciples of Mark's Gospel.

When Discipleship Becomes Apostleship

In addition to this very negative portrait of the disciples whom Jesus had chosen, the Gospel of Mark is unsettling because of its strange ending. The narrator describes Jesus' end with a statement as brief as the one describing his abandonment by the disciples: "And they crucified him" (Mark 15:24). Jesus' death and burial was witnessed by some women who had come with him to Jerusalem (see 15:41). May we call them disciples of Jesus? But when they came to anoint his body, they found an empty tomb and a young man who told them to go to the disciples and tell them that Jesus would meet them in Galilee (see 16:1–7). This is the opportune moment when the women could have gone from discipleship to apostleship—the



word *apostle* means “one who is sent”—and from listener to evangelizer. But what did they do? The narrator of Mark’s Gospel says: “Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

The Gospels are supposed to be proclamations of the Good News of Jesus as the Christ. But how can Mark’s Gospel be a proclamation of Good News if no one tells? In writing this odd conclusion to the Gospel, perhaps Mark’s intention was to invite his hearers to enter the story of Jesus and assume a role that his disciples and even the women who witnessed his death and burial could not—to be authentic disciples and apostles of Jesus. As hearers of Mark’s Gospel, how could you not respond when you hear that Jesus was left utterly alone to face his death? Perhaps Mark wanted to rally his hearers to take up their crosses, walk in Jesus’ footsteps, overcome their fear of suffering and death, and proclaim Jesus as the one who had risen from the dead.

Discipleship for Today’s Believers

Apart from the synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, which is the second volume of Luke’s two-volume story of Jesus and the early Church, the Greek word *mathetes* and related terms appear nowhere else in the New Testament. But discipleship is endemic to our faith. This is what we profess in our Baptism, which is our own call to discipleship. Paul describes Baptism in this way: “We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

The New Testament teaches that Christian believers, as disciples of Christ, should conform themselves to the Teacher with all the attributes of the one who, in obedience to God, became servant of all for the ransom the world. They must be willing to lose their lives for the sake of the Gospel and “dwell in” Jesus as he dwells in the Father and the Father dwells in him. Moreover, they cannot give in to temptations for power or wealth or status. They must overcome their fear, muster their commitment to Jesus, the Teacher, and proclaim with their lives the coming Reign of God. Will you answer the call to be Jesus’ disciple? Think about it. This is a weighty decision!

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