

# Discipleship in the Context of Judaism in Jesus' Time

## Part I

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### Abstract

*The usage of the terms “disciple” and “discipleship” are very common among evangelical Christians and meanings of these terms seem self-evident. However, although these circles adopted such language, it was already present in the Jewish culture of Jesus' time. The purpose and the goal of this article is to analyze the concept of discipleship in its original context and see how much the meaning of this term is removed from the meaning that this term has today. This topic we will address in two parts. In the first chapter, we will study the Old Testament (OT) roots of discipleship, and in the second chapter, the Jewish educational system in Jesus' time. In the third chapter, we will analyze whether Jesus himself, and in what measure, passed through that Jewish educational system, and how and in what ways he used this model in the discipleship process of his disciples. In the second part of the article, we will address the practice of discipleship in the first Church, and after that offer some guidelines on how to apply Jesus' concept of discipleship in the Church today.*

*The key focus of this article is the problematic of applying principles of discipleship that were present in the context of Jewish culture, on the Church today, since our analysis reveals that understanding of discipleship today does not correspond entirely to the understanding of that concept in Jesus' time.*

*Although discipleship then and now contained passing on information, more importantly was to follow the rabbi and learn from him in a close relationship. It is concluded that a possible solution for this challenge must be sought first and foremost in the change of thinking about what discipleship truly is (change of focus), and then in the practice through mentoring or working in small groups purposefully expose both sides (both “teachers” and “students”) to the experience of teaching through example.*

Key words: *discipleship, rabbi, talmid, relationship, teaching by example, mentoring, small groups*

## Introduction

Among evangelical Christians, the topic of discipleship, if nothing else then declaratively, occupies an important place. There is a certain level of consciousness that those who are saved, are not saved only to be *believers*, but also *disciples*. Since the usage of terms “disciple” and “discipleship” is very common in evangelical circles, meaning of these terms seems self-evident. However, even though evangelical circles adopted these terms, they already existed in the Jewish culture of Jesus’ time. In other words, evangelical Christians did not invent discipleship – Jews did. Hence, if we truly want to understand what discipleship is, and what the content behind this word is, we need to study it in its original context.

The purpose of this article is not to give summary or survey of existing discipleship models among evangelicals, but, as it is already mentioned, analyze the concept of discipleship in its original context (both its form and content), and establish how that prescribed form and content of discipleship should impact discipleship in our Western context[s]. Namely, the thesis of this article is that when Jesus in Matt. 28:18-20 gave Great Commission about making disciples of people from all nations, he has in mind a certain model (form and content) of discipleship. In other words, Jesus did not say “Make disciples as best as you know and can”, but he prescribed certain content and form how to do that.<sup>1</sup>

1 In the background of this thesis is the idea that Church, in some aspects, had neglected its Jewish roots and replaced it with other “soils”. This resulted in redefinition of certain things, and one of them was discipleship. For more about reasons that brought division of abandonment of Jewish roots see: Craig A. Evans. *From Jesus to the Church. The First generation of Christians*, Appendix: Root Causes of the Jewish-Christian Rift “Westerners have often found themselves in the confusing situation of trying to understand a Jewish Book through the eyes of Greek culture.” Truly, not understand or being blind to Jesus’ model of discipleship is a result of such a rift, and so the paramount step for the Church is to return to its roots. Or, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel (1963, 1501-04): “The vital issue for the Church is to

Our task is therefore triple. First, we need to see whether Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) contains any model of discipleship, and in what capacity this model was developed within the Jewish culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. In other words, what discipleship meant in the context of Jesus' time, that is, Jewish culture of that time? Second, we want to see whether Jesus with his disciples utilizes something from that model of discipleship in the Hebrew Bible/Judaism, or at least builds on that foundation? In other words, we want to see whether in and what measure Jesus' model of discipleship reflects the model of discipleship that is present in Judaism. Third, we want to establish what kind of model of discipleship Jesus left to his disciples as part of his legacy? We can clearly see that Jesus practiced discipleship with his disciples while he was physically with them. But what happens when Jesus is no longer physically present with them? Does the form and the content of discipleship change? All that should help us to give an answer to a key question: how our clearer understanding of discipleship from Jewish perspective of the 1<sup>st</sup> century should impact discipleship in evangelical Christianity today?

For that purpose, in the first part of the article we will analyze discipleship models in the Hebrew Bible. In the second part, we will reconstruct Jewish model of discipleship in the context of Jesus' time so that we would be able in the third part to see whether and in what capacity Jesus implements the existing model of discipleship with his disciples. All that should enable us that in the second part of this article we see what kind of model of discipleship Jesus leaves to his disciples as inheritance and define how the result of our research should impact discipleship in the evangelical churches today.

## 1. Discipleship in the Hebrew Bible

Although the word “disciple” is rare in the Hebrew Bible, the idea of discipleship as a relationship between master and the disciple is nevertheless present. Wilkins (2013, 202) informs us that the Hebrew Bible uses two words for disciples: *talmid* and *limmûd*. The word *talmid* occurs in 1 Chr. 25:8 and refers to a student or apprentice in musical instruction. The word *limmûd* is used in Isa. 8:16 when Isaiah refers to the group gathered around him as “my disciples,” in Isa. 50:4 where discipleship is characterized by an educational process accentuating speaking and listening, and in Isa. 54:13 where it seems that such relationship can apply to disciples of both Yahweh and a human master. Despite of rare wording, Wilkins

decide whether to look for roots in Judaism and consider itself an extension of Judaism, or to look for roots in pagan Hellenism and consider itself as an antithesis to Judaism.” This article is part of that agenda that aims to return Christianity to its Jewish roots through the prism of understanding discipleship in the context of Judaism in Jesus' time.

(2013, 202) argues that the existence of master-disciple relationships within the social structure of Israel is well attested. Examples of such relationships Wilkins sees in the group of “prophets associated with Samuel (1 Sam. 19:20-24), the sons of the prophets associated with Elisha (2 Kings 4:1,38; 9:1), the writing prophets Jeremiah and Baruch (Jer. 36:32), Ezra and the scribal tradition (Ezra 7:6,11), and the wise counselors within the wisdom tradition (Prov. 22:17; 25:1; Jer. 18:18).” Based on this Wilkins (2013, 202) concludes: “Each of these institutions was involved in the process of the communication of the revelation of Yahweh (prophecy, law, wisdom), and the suggested intimacy of the relationship indicates mutual support of master and disciple in the task of revealing the word of God to the nation.”

From this we can conclude that although in the Hebrew Bible the term “disciple” occurs rarely, Hebrew Bible is the starting point for analysis of discipleship which existed in that period. Hirsch (1906) underlines how from the Hebrew Bible it is noticeable that Jews considered as one of the principal objects of life moral and religious training of the people from childhood up. So, God says about Abraham: “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (Gen. 18:19a, NIV). Additionally, festivals and ceremonies had for their object the infusion of religious and moral lessons in the children (Ex. 12:26; 13:8,14; Deut. 4:9; 6:20; 32:7,46). After parental instruction or if a child grew in a royal palace he was taught by tutors (2 King 10:1,5) the child passed into the hands of professional teachers (Prov. 5:13; Ps. 119:99) who were also called “the wise” (Prov. 13:20).

Demsky (1978, 163) points out three major periods in ancient Israel in the development of pedagogical institutions or methodology. The first period was the patriarchal period and the settlement. During that period, Jews were seminomadic, and the family who was the basic socioeconomic unity, had primary role in educational process. In the next period the Israelite tribal union was reshaped into a politically independent, centralized monarchy, and king David played a major role in that aspect. In this context, the need occurred for trained professionals and skilled artisans. Those professionals were recognized priesthood who transmitted to the people religious ideals of the covenant. The third period was the Babylonian exile and Hellenistic times when people like Ezra the Scribe and his colleagues were empowered to teach the Torah to the Jews (Ezra 7:25). Under his guidance, the Torah became the accepted basis of individual and community life. Also, beginnings of a program of mass education resulted in the development of new institutions (Deut. 31:12-13; 2 Chr. 17:7-9).

Therefore, we can say that Ezra the Scribe was a significant link in the chain of educators and the development of education in Jewish history. Changes that

occurred in education in the third period relate to his name and activity. If we go back to the Scripture, we will find one biblical book bearing his name. By reading this book, not until chapter 7, we will find the description of his task. Kinder (1979, 62) focuses our attention to the verse Ezra 7:5 pointing out to Ezra's genealogy as a priest that serves to introduce Ezra as a man of considerable importance. His name stands very high in Jewish tradition even to the point of considering him as a second Moses. Kinder concludes that due to his work, Ezra, more than any other man, stamped Israel with its lasting character as the people of a book.

Besides Ezra 7:5, for the biblical portrait of Ezra's educational characteristics an important text is also Ezra 7:10: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel" (NRSV). Based on this text we can see that the *teaching* of the Torah was on the third place. First and foremost, Ezra devoted himself to *study* the Torah, after that to *do* it, and only then to *teach* it. Kinder (1979, 62) points out this order as the secret of Ezra's lasting influence, since Ezra taught by example.

Besides Ezra, we can point out another earlier, particularly important example of discipleship in the Hebrew Bible: an example of Elijah and Elisha. Many prophets in the Hebrew Bible had their disciples. Elijah mostly worked alone but as his ministry approached the end, the time came to find a successor. In 1 Kings 19:16, we read how YHWH selected Elisha for Elijah's successor. Goldstein (2010, 62) observes how the relationship between Elijah and Elisha was that of a master and his apprentice. Elisha travels with Elijah to serve him (1 Kings 19:19-21) and in this way learn from him. Goldstein (2010, 129-30) also emphasizes Elijah's preparation of Elisha as an example how in discipleship process master is available for his disciples. Elijah provided Elisha the training he needed, in order to take up the mantle as chief prophet of Israel. This availability was a key ingredient in preparation and transition of ministry from Elijah to Elisha. We can say that *availability* created *relationship* which then enabled suitable *training* and the transfer of *leadership*. If Elijah was not available and close to Elisha, it is questionable what kind of relationship they would have and how Elisha's training and transfer of leadership would look like.

Since in the New Testament Jesus was called Elijah (Mk. 6:15; Lk. 9:19), we can assume that part of that label also reflects relationships and ways in which he trained his disciples. On that note, David R. Beck (1997, 24) points out the following:

The Elijah/Elisha cycle of 1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 13 has many aspects closely paralleling the Gospels. Both focus on the exploits of a man of God whose life is an example of obedience and service. Both narrate an itinerant ministry, a gathering of disciples, miraculous healings, the multiplication of food, and the raising of the dead. Both portray confrontations with leaders the reader

would expect to be faithful to Yahweh, but are not. Miraculous occurrences mark the end of the ministry of both Elijah and Elisha that parallel the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

If we combine elements of discipleship from Ezra (studying/teaching Scriptures) and Elijah (following a person/teaching by example), we will get something that will characterize discipleship in Jewish culture of Jesus' time: studying of the Scripture and following a Rabbi expressed in three layers or stages of education. So now we are turning that to being thematic.

## 2. Discipleship in the Jewish Culture of Jesus' Time

In the previous part we briefly analyzed the history of religious education (discipleship) in the Hebrew Bible and identified some examples in which a person was taught by being an example and available to others. These discipleship relationships but also specific characteristics provide an insight into the trajectory of discipleship that runs through the pages of the Bible. Master-disciple relationships are present throughout the Hebrew Bible, although specific terms for discipleship that describe those relationships are rare. However, before we analyze the way Jesus practiced discipleship as it is described on the pages of the New Testament, we need to observe discipleship within the cultural context of Jesus' time. The question is, did in Judaism of Jesus' time, and if yes in what way, exist a tradition of passing the teaching from one individual to a group of other people?

Wilkins (2013, 203) notices that the Gospels themselves recognize that within Judaism of the first century CE, several different types of individuals were called "disciples." Besides Jesus' disciples, we have the "disciples of the Pharisees" (e.g., Mt. 22:15-16; Mk. 2:18), who possibly belonged to one of the schools, as well as "disciples of John the Baptist" (Mk. 2:18) and the "disciples of Moses" (Jn. 9:24-29), that is, Jews who focused on their privileged position as those to whom God had revealed himself through Moses. So, how did the cultural context of rabbinic Judaism that Jesus lived in understand discipleship? Speaking about that subject, Neusner (2002, vii) says the following:

"Rabbinic Judaism represents itself as the record of revelation preserved and handed on by a chain of tradition of learning formed by men qualified by learning through discipleship. To underscore their subordination within the process of collective tradition—in our terms, book-making—sages always called themselves 'disciples of sages.'"

If Neusner is correct, that would mean that this idea of *receiving* and *passing on* teaching was well known and emphasized, which implies that something would change only if it was necessary. A tradition of teaching was formed and shaped by

passing on. Speaking about characteristics of that cultural context in which Jesus lived and the significance of learning from a rabbi within that culture, Tverberg (2004, 125) observes:

Jesus lived in a deeply religious culture that highly valued biblical understanding. Rabbis were greatly respected, and to be a disciple of a famous rabbi was an honor. Rabbis were expected not only to have a vast knowledge about the Bible, but to show through their exemplary lives how to live by the Scriptures. A disciple's goal was to gain the rabbi's knowledge, but even more importantly, to become like him in character. It was expected that when the disciple became mature, he would take his rabbi's teaching to the community, add his own understanding, and raise up disciples of his own.

People had high expectations from a rabbi because he taught them how to interpret, but also how to live the Torah. Disciples would willingly submit to rabbis' interpretations because it was an honor to follow a rabbi. To illustrate what honor was to have a rabbi in a community, Tverberg (2012a) says that Mishnah encourages people to open their homes and show hospitality to such itinerant teachers.<sup>2</sup> A statement that speaks about that, we can find in the *Pirke Aboth* which is one part of Mishnah.<sup>3</sup> In *Pirke Aboth* 1:4 (Traves 1945) we have the following encouragement in the form of sayings of Yossei the son of Yoezer: "Yossei the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah, and Yossei the son of Yochanan of Jerusalem, received the tradition from them. Yossei the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah would say: 'Let your home be a meeting place for the wise; dust yourself in the soil of their feet, and drink thirstily of their words.'" Tverberg (2012a) observes that the middle line "dust yourself in the soil of their feet," is sometimes translated as "sit amid the dust of their feet," and understood as an instruction to sit humbly at the feet of one's teacher to learn from him.

In this moment, we need to point out this speech about rabbis and disciples that does not imply arbitrary finding of "the wise" in whose "dust" ones walk. On the contrary, this speech reflects a very specific system of Jewish education which deve-

2 The Mishnah is Jewish document which came to closure at circa 200, and the Mishnah stands beyond Scripture as the only free-standing document of Judaism and, after Scripture, the authoritative one. It is the subject of commentaries (the Tosefta – a collection of complementary and supplementary rules, and the two Talmuds), but the Mishnah does not organize its ideas as a commentary to Scripture (Neusner 2002, 79).

3 *Pirke Aboth* or *Aboth* is a short, but within the Jewish culture, very important tractate of Mishnah (cf. Travers 1945). The Mishnah is divided into six large divisions. Each division is subdivided into topical expositions called tractates (cf. Neusner 2002, 79). *Pirke Aboth* is a tractate that contains sayings from various teachers (some are known, some are anonymous). Organization of these sayings contains no strict adherence to any method or any single point of view, and then leaves to the readers make their own impression (cf. Travers 1945).

loped in the course of history. A brief survey of that system can reveal to us a context within which Jesus invited and worked with his disciples. Hence, within the context of Judaism of Jesus' time, we can trace three stages of the educational system.

### **2.1. *Bet Sefer* and *Bet Talmud***

Three stages of education within Judaism of Jesus' time are: *Bet Sefer*, *Bet Talmud*, and *Bet Midrash*. Each stage included specific age-group of Jewish boys (girls participated in *Bet Sefer*, although among different authors there is a disagreement regarding at what age children participated in which stage of education) and selected content of education that participants should master. Also, each stage had its own specific methodology of learning.

Chronologically, first comes *Bet Sefer*. Oluikpe (2015, 119) says that the meaning of this term is the "House of the Book" and this stage of education usually took place in the synagogue. The focus there was on reading, writing, and memorization of the Torah, and from age five or six to ten, a child was enrolled in *Bet Sefer*. Jewish encyclopedia says that *Bet Sefer* was instituted at a later time than for example *Bet Midrash*, about 100 B.C. at Jerusalem, and later was introduced generally, for the benefit of all children (cf. Jastrow & Kohler 1906).

The next stage was *Bet Talmud*. Oluikpe furthermore (2015, 119) says that from ten to twelve, a child joined the *Bet Talmud*. The meaning of this term was "House of Learning," and in this stage the focus was on studying oral interpretations of the Torah and the rest of the Jewish Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Blomberg (1992, 247) claims that memorization was a basic learning tool for boys until the age of twelve. At twelve, a boy became an adult in the religious sense through the *bar mitzvah* ceremony (cf. Oluikpe 2015, 119).

### **2.2. *Bet Midrash* – the Content and the Goal of Study**

The last stage in Jewish educational system was *Bet Midrash*. About this stage of education, Oluikpe (2015, 119) says the following:

- 4 It is generally assumed that studying of the Mishna starts at *Bet Talmud*, a second stage of Jewish education. Horbury (1999, 85) expresses his doubts in that assumption saying that sources that we have are remarkably vague about the curriculum of the *Bet Talmud*. These sources basically state this stage of education was devoted to the study of the Oral Torah, which could have meant fuller and deeper commentary of the Bible. The rabbis may have possibly tried to turn the higher levels of elementary education as an introduction and preparation for *Bet Midrash*, but it is questionable whether serious study of Halakhah would start before *Bet Midrash* (cf. Horbury 1999, 85). The term comes from the verb *halach* ("to walk") and stand for observation of the Torah. This term is also used for stipulations from the system of Halakhah (cf. Da-Don 2018, 736).

After twelve or thirteen, 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... This continued until he became a full-fledged rabbi or scribe at the age of thirty. 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.

For this stage of education, Lancaster (2006, 52-53) points out four key tasks of each disciple claiming that these tasks describe the cultural context of the institution of discipleship that we read about in the Gospels. Hence, the first task was to memorize their teacher’s words, because the process of oral transmission was the only form of intergenerational communication. The great rabbis and Torah scholars of the first century did not write scrolls or books for their disciples. The reason was not that they were illiterate. There was a second reason why they did not do that, and it originates from their worldview. For them, simply, written form was reserved only for the Scriptures, and their own teachings were meant to be passed on orally. For this reason, their disciples studied by memorizing their words. The second task was to learn their teacher’s traditions and interpretations, because it was expected that disciple would follow their rabbi in this regard as well. So, a disciple would observe how his teacher kept the Sabbath, how he fasted, how he prayed, how he said the blessings over food, etc. The third task was to imitate their teacher’s actions: deeds, speech, conduct. Finally, the fourth task was to raise his own disciples.

### **2.3. Conclusion about Jewish Background of Discipleship**

In the conclusion of this part, we can say that discipleship as a model already existed within Judaism of Jesus’ time. Even though in the Hebrew Bible it is rarely mentioned explicitly, it is explicitly present throughout the history of the Hebrew Bible, if nothing else, then as an important custom. After that discipleship becomes more formalized under the patronage of professionals, and then under the leadership of Ezra, discipleship turns into a mass education in which center is knowledge and memorization of Scriptures. Later this emphasis would greatly impact and characterize first two stages of education *Bet Sefer* and *Bet Talmud*, which consequently reveal to us how Jesus acts within the context where the knowledge of the Scripture is at a high level (not only by “professionals” but

also from the common people). Furthermore, the close relationship between teacher and disciples (such as we saw in Elijah – Elisha example) also demonstrates nature of discipleship that we will later recognize in Jesus’ ministry with his disciples. Precisely this kind of discipleship within the context of close relationships in which the teacher teaches not only by words but also by his example, we can recognize as a feature of the third stage of education – *Bet Midrash*.

All that portrays a cultural background of discipleship in which Jesus is born into and which, in the moment when he appears on the scene, is well known and developed. Based on that, we can understand in what measure or to what extent Jesus uses that cultural background of discipleship in the work with his disciples. With that we do not want to say that in order to be Jesus’ disciples today, we must imitate Jewish culture. On the contrary, researching in what measure Jesus’ discipleship style reflects his cultural context, helps us understand *what* and *how* Jesus did, so that we could follow him more closely within our cultural context. To understand how Jesus’ disciples understood within that culture Jesus’ calling to discipleship and what all that implied, is a key element for us today. Because, unlike us today, they did not need contextual explanations what discipleship is, and how the process of discipleship looks like.

### **3. Jesus and the Jewish Model of Discipleship**

Since in this part of the article we discuss Jesus’ relationship toward the Jewish model of discipleship, it is important to hear these words of Ray Vander Laan (Tverberg 2012b, 10):

From the beginning, God chose to speak and act within the context of human culture, so it is no surprise that his Son would do the same. Jesus lived like a Jew, talked like a Jew, and worshiped like a Jew. His words, actions, and teaching methods were in keeping with the customs, traditions, and practices of the Semitic culture into which he was born.

And since, in Jesus’ time, certain models of discipleship were already ingrained into the culture, we can wonder whether Jesus followed these models in his ministry. If yes, in what measure or extent? But, since he was a Jewish boy, we can also wonder whether he himself went through this Jewish model of education which had three stages.

#### **3.1. Jesus as a Rabbi?**

As a starting point of this discussion, we must go from the end, that is, from the idea of Jesus as a rabbi. Namely, it is significant that he was called “rabbi” by

different groups of people: his disciples (Mk. 4:38; 9:38), common people who listened to him (Mk. 9:17), Torah teachers (Mt. 22:35-36), Pharisees (Lk. 19:39), Sadducees (Lk. 20:27-28), the rich man (Mt 19,16), etc. Hence, besides the fact that Jesus refers to himself in this manner, he is also called “rabbi” by his supporters, opponents, and nonpartisans (cf. Evans 2007, 48). But not only that, he was also a rabbi with authority (Mt. 7:29).

Besides labeling, Jesus also acts as a rabbi. Evans (2002, 27) points out the following: “Jesus emphasized Torah, indeed grounded his theology and lifestyle in it. He thought and taught in a framework of purity and Jewish piety (including folk wisdom) and looked for the restoration of Israel.” Woods (2005, 4) observes that Jesus, as it was common in rabbinic tradition, taught in open outdoor spaces (Mt. 5:1; Lk. 6:17; Mk. 2:13, 6:34-36; Lk. 5:3). He also points out to the example of a woman who was healed of her hemorrhages after she touched the tassels (Heb. *tsitsiyot*) on Jesus’ cloak, and there were many others who flocked to Jesus, hoping to be cured of illnesses by touching the tassels of his cloak (Mk. 6:56). For Woods, the fact that Jesus wore tassels is an indication of his observance of Torah, because people who came into contact with Jesus would have quickly been suspicious of his teaching if his wearing of tassels was not matched by his adherence to the Mosaic Law. Because God said to Moses: “Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner” (Num. 15:38, NRSV).

That which can lead us to the conclusion that Jesus was truly a rabbi are many ways in which Jesus acted in his ministry, such as wearing tassels, ways in which he taught, and even ways in which he discussed about the Torah. We should point out that throughout the New Testament people approach Jesus as a rabbi and they address him in this way whether they are his followers or not. The additional thing that could speak to that fact that Jesus was a rabbi is the teaching method that he used which corresponds to the *Bet Midrash* stage of education because he spent with them a few years teaching them by words and example by living his life before their eyes.

Regarding Jesus’ title “rabbi,” Evans (2007, 48) and Woods (2005, 2) provide a solution by arguing that before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. this title was informal and lacks the later connotations of formal training and ordination. Hence in Jesus’ time, rabbi was not a formal leader of religious community or synagogue as we think about them today. Then it was an honorary title for men who interpret and taught Hebrew Bible. From all that we can conclude that Jesus was indeed a rabbi.

That last claim opens then another question: in what measure did Jesus himself go through the Jewish educational system? Unfortunately, the Bible does not give us specific and clear answers on that question, so every discussion about it,

must be based on assumptions. But the fact that Jesus was recognized as a rabbi by others, assumes that in some capacity, he was a “product” of his time. Oluikpe (2015, 120) logically concludes that it was important that Jesus be taught the Torah, because he was a Jewish boy. That would imply that Jesus went through the educational system outlined above. Although we do not have much information about Jesus’ childhood, some points can be clearly inferred from the New Testament text. However, not all agree that Jesus went through three stages of Jewish education. So, Evans (2007, 54) deals with a question was Jesus even literate. Although Evans concludes that there is a great probability that he was, nevertheless, he argues that Jesus was literate in the professional or scribal sense.

What information does the New Testament give us about that subject? The only source about Jesus’ childhood is the gospel of Luke. Speaking about how the gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was raised as any other Jewish boy, Oluikpe (2015, 120) stresses that Jesus, with the help of his parents, grew up according to the Jewish cultural context. Accordingly, Jesus was circumcised and dedicated to God (Lk. 2:21-24), at the age of 12 he celebrated the Passover Feast (Lk. 2:41), and his parents did all these to Jesus as He grew “according to the Law” (Lk. 2:39, 40). Certainly, based on John 7:15 it is possible to claim how Jesus did not go through formal education in Judaism (all three stages), but Oluikpe (2015, 115) interestingly observes the following: “Jesus was identified as one who had no formal learning (John 7:15). Yet the Bible confirms that He manifested knowledge and teaching that was superior to those of formal rabbinical religious education of His time (Lk. 2:46,47).” It is in Luke 2:46 where we can see how Jesus’ parents found Jesus after three days in the Temple while he was “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions,” that very much remind us on the form of teaching called “rabbinic dialogue” which was another characteristic of Jewish education. Jesus, as a twelve-year boy would not be able to participate in it if he did not know Jewish Scriptures and a “technique” of such conversation.

So, what can we say as a response to the question in which capacity Jesus himself went through the existing educational system of his time? We assume that many Christians, starting from the idea that Jesus was God, believe how Jesus was “born” with this knowledge. He did not have to learn and work to gain this knowledge as they use argument of “supernaturality” to explain this idea of Jesus as a rabbi. But that line of argumentation opens other difficult questions. The other option is to say that Jesus at least went through the first stage of education, and as proof we can use Lk. 2:46. But going beyond, as we already pointed out, can be done based on assumptions. Oluikpe (2015, 121) allows, based on John 7:15, that Jesus might go through the first two stages of Jewish education of that time (*Bet Sefer* and *Bet Talmud*), but it is not clear that he went through the last and most important part of education (*Bet Midrash*) which could define

him as someone who “has been taught.” However, Vander Laan (2006) is open to the idea that Jesus was taught under some rabbi, although something like that is not mentioned in the Scriptures. His rationale is that Jesus spent some time with John the Baptist who was a rabbi (Jn. 3:22-26; 4:1-3) and also that Jesus and his disciples baptized people, which can suggest the possibility that Jesus and John taught together or with the same teacher.

In any case, we cannot be sure whether Jesus ever went through *Bet Midrash* and so officially became a rabbi. However, there is a great possibility that he went through *Bet Sefer* and *Bet Talmud*. The very fact that Jesus was well known and recognized as a rabbi which had disciples suggests that Jesus had to go through some educational process in order to be recognized and accepted as such in the eyes of the people.

### 3.2. Jesus' Teaching According to a Jewish Model *Rabbi - Talmidim*

Although Jesus was a different kind of a rabbi, he taught his disciples according to a Jewish model of discipleship. As it is described above, discipleship in Judaism had a specific *form* and *content* and was organized in three stages. Lancaster (2006, 50-51) interestingly connects third stage with Jesus' statement when he says: “In Judaism in the days of the apostles, the job of a disciple was well understood. A disciple's job was to become like his or her teacher. So it is written for us in the Gospel of Luke, ‘Every [disciple], after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher’ (6:40). At its simplest, discipleship is the art of imitation. It is the art of walking after a teacher.” As we already saw, this level of discipleship implied that *talmid* or disciple imitates his rabbi, honors him, and follows wherever he goes. But that relationship also implied master-disciple relationship, where *talmid* acted as a servant to his rabbi. Tverberg (2004, 126) clearly illustrated this when she writes:

A disciple was expected to leave his family and job to join the rabbi in his austere lifestyle. Disciples would live with the rabbi twenty-four hours a day, walking from town to town, teaching, working, eating, and studying. They would discuss the Scriptures and apply them to their lives. The disciples were also supposed to be the rabbi's servants, submitting to his authority while they served his needs. Indeed, the word ‘rabbi’ means ‘my master,’ and was a term of great respect.

For a *talmid*, the goal was, while traveling with his rabbi, to learn to understand but also apply the Torah. When this process would come to an end, a *talmid* would become a rabbi. Through this description we can observe unavoidable similarities between the way a rabbi would raise *talmidim* in *Bet Midrash* and Jesus' dealings with his *talmidim*.

If we go back to the relationship between teacher and students in the Hebrew Bible, we come across a relationship between Elijah and Elisha. We established that characteristic of that relationship of teaching and passing leadership was the availability of Elijah for Elisha. And that availability which enables the teacher to teach through following, observing and imitating, was a characteristic of the third stage of Jewish education. But it is important to stress out how that availability would not be so crucial if teaching would consist only of passing information. Goldstein (2010, 129) argues how crucial it was for Jesus to be available to his disciples:

Jesus demonstrated availability to his disciples by his continual presence with them for a three-year period. By living with the twelve apostles, he modeled faith in practice. The teachings he gave them were not merely lectures; instead, these lessons applied to the life experiences of the twelve. He walked with them, ate with them, and shared in their trials and struggles. Together they traveled until the bitter day at Calvary and the day of Jesus' ascension at the Mount of Olives.

If we analyze Mark 3:14, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach," we can observe Jesus' intention that disciples "might be with him." Also, we can observe his intention to send them into mission. This verse also demonstrates an idea of fellowship (heb. *chaverim*) among disciples, and Lancaster (2006, 54-55) explains how this idea originates from pharisaic schools. Bivin (2004) concludes that because of that familiar relationship in which a rabbi would become like a father to a disciple, the word *Abba* was used to address rabbi, which is a practice that Jesus opposes (Mt. 23:8-9).

However, Jesus' practice, in some respects, differs from the practices of his time. First, the way in which Jesus invites his disciples. The usual practice of that time was that gifted student seeks the rabbi he would like to follow (which would be possible only if rabbi would allow him to do so). Jesus went out to seek his disciples and, in this way, he broke this pattern (cf. Vander Laan 2019). In the Gospels, we can read how Jesus invites his disciples in the midst of their everyday work. Mark says in his gospel that Jesus' invitation to Simon and Andrew consisted of one sentence which Jesus said while they were throwing nets in the sea: "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people" (NIV). Their reaction was recorded in the next verse: "At once they left their nets and followed him." Although many sermons were given on these verses and we can think that their reaction was expected and self-explanatory, we can clearly understand their reaction only if we observe it within their cultural context. If Jesus was a rabbi and people asked a rabbi to allow to follow them, would it not be a great honor for these fishermen to hear a rabbi's invitation to follow him? Bivin (1988) focuses our attention to another fact which demonstrates that Jesus' disciples understand what he is saying to them when he calls them. They understand that to respond

to a rabbi's calling includes honor, but also great hardships. That what Jesus' disciples had to endure was not unlike what disciples of other first-century sages had to endure, and particularly that referred to hardships in separating from everyday life to follow a rabbi. In the light of what we just said we can see how cultural context of that time enlightens additional connotations of Jesus' calling of disciples – he calls them instead that they ask him to follow him. That context also helps us to understand that Jesus' disciples knew in advance what that invitation implies – what honor but also hardships.

Second, and perhaps even more importantly than the way of selection, is *whom* Jesus chose. Not one of Jesus' disciples had a prominent position in a synagogue or belonged to a priestly order. For the most part they were common workers who went through *Bet Sefer* and possibly *Bet Talmud*, but they certainly did not go through *Bet Midrash*. However, if we assume based on the cultural context that Jesus' disciples went at least through *Bet Sefer*, that would mean that they were not absolute beginners in the knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. That would prepare them for a more advanced level of discipleship that Jesus could practically practice with them – specifically – for *Bet Midrash*.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.3. Conclusion About Jesus and the Jewish Model of Discipleship

Thus far we could see how discipleship as a term, but also as a system, existed within the cultural context in which Jesus was born. That would not mean much to us if we would discover that Jesus' way of work was totally disconnected from the culture in which he lived. But, by analyzing Jesus' upbringing and possible education, we can see great similarities with education within the context of Jewish culture of that time. Although nowhere in the New Testament do we find in explicit terms that Jesus went through three stages of Jewish education, we can nevertheless notice great similarities.

It was crucial in this part of the article to see to what extension Jesus' way of teaching and dealing with his disciples was in accordance with the third stage of Jewish education which then existed. Jesus' disciples like any other disciples of Jewish rabbi's of that time, left their everyday lives in order to learn from a rabbi in a close relationship by walking with him, listening him, imitating him.

5 It is vital to mention how education in *Bet Sefer* and *Bet Talmud* (stages of education where primary emphasis is on the study the Scriptures) happens between age five and fifteen. Why is this important? Because, this is the stage in life where a person does not have the burden of work (job) and having and supporting his family. But this is precisely the key period in Judaism when education happens, and foundation is set for discipleship for those who will eventually go to *Bet Midrash*. This observation will be important when we will discuss about gentile believers and their need for education in the knowledge of the Scriptures.

Although in some aspects Jesus' way of discipleship differs from that time, what appears to be a constant in the biblical view of learning is the communion and the closeness of the disciple with the rabbi, which is something that Jesus specially nurtured.

All that we analyzed thus far helps us to see the importance of the fact that Jesus' last command, at least according to the gospel of Matthew, was to go and make disciples. Hence, it is justifiable to conclude that discipleship should be the main foundation for everything that apostles do, because they had an opportunity during three years of Jesus' ministry to learn from him. Goldstein (2010, 71) therefore claims that "Twelve diverse men could make such an impact on their world and ensure that the legacy and message of Jesus would endure, because they were properly prepared." This transition from the process of learning with Jesus to the creation of new disciples after Jesus' departure, will be the subject of the next part of the article.

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## Razumijevanje učenitstva u kontekstu židovstva Isusovog vremena

### I. dio

#### Sažetak

Upotreba pojmova *učenik* i *učenitstvo* vrlo je uobičajena u evanđeoskom kršćanstvu, i značenje tih pojmova smatra se samo po sebi razumljivim. Međutim, iako je u tim krugovima došlo do svojevrsnog posvajanja ovoj pojma, on je već ranije postojao i u židovskoj kulturi Isusovog vremena. Svrha i cilj ovog članka je proučiti značenje koncepta *učenitstva* u njegovom originalnom kontekstu, i vidjeti koliko to značenje odudara od značenja koje taj pojam ima danas. Ovu temu obradit ćemo u dva dijela. U prvome poglavlju proučavaju se starozavjetni korijeni koncepta učenitstva, a u drugom poglavlju sagledava se židovski sustav obrazovanja u Isusovom vremenu. U trećem poglavlju razmatra se je li i sam Isus, i u kojoj mjeri, prošao kroz taj židovski sustav obrazovanja, te kako i na koji je način Isus koristio taj model u poučavanju svojih učenika. U drugome dijelu članka prvo ćemo razmotriti praksu učenitstva u prvoj Crkvi, a nakon toga ponuditi smjernice za primjenu Isusovog koncepta učenitstva danas u Crkvi.

Ključni fokus ovog članka je na problematici prenošenja principa učenitstva shvaćenih unutar konteksta židovske kulture na Crkvu danas, budući da istraživanje otkriva kako razumijevanje tog pojma danas ne odgovara sasvim načinu na koji se shvaćalo učenitstvo u Isusovo doba. Naime, premda je učenitstvo i onda sadržavalo prenošenje informacija, važnije od toga je bilo slijediti učitelja (rabina), i učiti od njega u bliskom odnosu. U članku se zaključuje da moguće rješenje za ovaj izazov treba potražiti najprije u promjeni razmišljanja o tome što učenitstvo uistinu jest (promjena fokusa), a onda u praksi kroz mentorstvo i male grupe ciljano izložiti obje strane (i „učitelja“ i „učenika“) iskustvu poučavanja primjerom.