



Following In the Dust of the Rabbi

Becoming Disciples of Rabbi Yeshua

Have you ever considered how it came to be that you became aware of the Biblical knowledge you have today – the knowledge of the God, Yeshua, Sabbath, the Festivals – all the things that make up the walk of the Hebrew people? How many people crossed your path in such a way to bring you to where you are today?

For many of you it may have been something a preacher said that just ‘didn’t seem right’ so you decided to check it out in your Bible to see if it was so, which led to you checking something else, then before long your entire view of God’s word changed as you began to study it for yourself. Others, including my father, heard an evangelist on late-night radio; an evangelist who seemed to make much more sense than what he had previously been taught. Then there are those of us who were fortunate to be raised in this walk, and have chosen to study deeper into the things we’ve been taught.

No matter what your circumstance, one thing is for sure – we are here because we chose to follow the teachings of someone else. In fact, there is a common denominator amongst all of us. We have all chosen to follow the teachings and testimony of 15 Jewish men – the 12 disciples¹ along with James, Luke, and Paul.

Of course, all of these men taught the words that came out of the mouth of a traveling rabbi named Yeshua, and we believe them because their accounts are pretty much the same, and because they were all willing to die testifying to the accuracy of their account.

How was it that just 15 men - without the aid of a printing press, radio, television, or the Internet - were able to turn the world of their day “upside-down”², raising up thousands of followers of the Messiah. What system could be so effective in taking the words of one man and spreading them so quickly throughout the known world of 1900 years ago?

I believe that system was the Jewish ‘follow me’ system of the rabbi and his disciples in 1st century Israel. A common rabbinic system of the day, it was used by John the Baptist, by Yeshua, by Paul, and by Yeshua’s disciples to teach us the true understanding of our Messiah and His message of restoration. What’s more, if we are truly a part of the “great commission”, the rabbi – disciple system is what we’ve been called to as well, after all we are to –

^{NKJ} **Matthew 28:19-20** ¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. . ."

What does that mean for us? Is it just words or is it a specific calling with specific responsibilities? If it is a calling, then it is important that we understand the system to which we’ve been called.

This morning I hope to show you what it means to truly be a disciple of Messiah Yeshua. We will see what the word ‘disciple’ really means, how one becomes a disciple, how one trains to be a disciple, and the responsibilities of a disciple. We are also going to take a look at one very misunderstood passage regarding discipleship. With that insight, I hope to tie this all together and show that we can all benefit when we understand what it truly means to “follow me”.

Much of the information I’m sharing in regards to the rabbi-disciple relationship is from a 4-part teaching called “In the Dust of the Rabbi” by Ray Vander Laan, an instructor in biblical cultural

¹ Matthias – Judas’ replacement – was of the 120 other disciples and was an eye-witness to the death and resurrection of Yeshua (Acts 1:21-26)

² Acts 17:6

studies at Holland Christian School in Holland, Michigan and founder of 'That the World May Know' Ministry.

Discipleship –

What is 'discipleship'? When you Google that question, the first response comes from the biblical Q&A web site 'gotquestions.org'. It says –

“By definition, a disciple is a follower, one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another. A Christian disciple is a person who accepts and assists in the spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ.”

In many ways, this is a true statement, and as we'll see, Yeshua's disciples were indeed “followers”, and their ultimate goal was to spread the 'good news' of the coming Kingdom of God to the Jewish and non-Jewish people of God.

Another prominent web site - - adds that being a disciple implies responsibility -

Discipleship is teaching biblical precepts, while modeling and guiding others toward living righteously as followers of Jesus Christ. This should be a cyclical process—meaning once we are discipled, we are to disciple others, and so on. One of the most important characteristics of being a disciple (a student or pupil), is to develop an intimate relationship with God through Christ rather than just learning about Him.

So according to this site, becoming a disciple of Yeshua means that you are to make disciples yourself. We'll get more into that a little later, but for now it's important for us to see that discipleship is more than just calling yourself a 'believer'.

Many are unaware of the fact that discipleship began in the Old Testament and is not a New Testament concept. It appears that Samuel had a school of sorts where prophets learned from him (1 Samuel 19:18-24) and likely followed him from place to place. The same is true for Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-15) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:38). The Talmud shows that during the intertestamental period there were two very popular Jewish sages named Hillel and Shammai, both of whom had schools and followers who studied their particular view of the Torah³.

the Rabbi -

Before we can begin to understand the role of the disciple, we must first understand the rabbis.

The term 'rabbi' means 'my great one' and comes from the Hebrew word 'rav' (רַב – 7227) which means 'great'. The Greeks had no word comparable to it, so in the New Testament, the translators transliterate the Greek as if it were a name instead of translating it. Though 'rabbi' literally means 'my great one', the understanding behind the word is that he is your 'teacher' and that your 'teacher' is your 'master' – a concept that was prominent in early American culture where students would call their male teachers 'schoolmasters'. Thus we find Yeshua's disciples often referring to Him as 'Master'.

In Yeshua's day there were rabbis, and then there were RABBIS. Most rabbis taught in the synagogue or in the local schools and only taught what they had been taught. On the other hand, there were other rabbis – though few in number - who were considered to have “s'michah”. S'michah (סְמִיכָה) – though not used in the Bible - is a noun that means “authority”. It comes from the root word 'samak' (סָמַךְ – Strong's 5564) which means 'to place or lay something on something else', and when used in conjunction

³ <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Shammai>

with the word 'yad' or 'hands' (יָד – 3027), it means “to lay hands on”. A good example of s'michah is when Moses laid hands on Joshua, transferring his authority – his s'michah – to Joshua.

Numbers 27:18-20 ¹⁸ And the LORD said to Moses: "Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom *is* the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; ¹⁹ "set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and inaugurate him in their sight. ²⁰ "And you shall give *some* of your authority to him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient..

In this case, authority was passed from a greater (Moses) to a subordinate (Joshua) by the laying on of hands. According to the Jewish Encyclopedia, rabbinic authority in the first century was transferred the same way. In an article about baptism and the conversion of proselytes in the first century it says⁴ –

“ The next ceremony, adopted shortly after the others, was the imposition of hands, which, it is known, was the usage of the Jews at the ordination of a rabbi.”

The rabbis teach that there was an unbroken chain of s'michah from Moses, to Joshua, and continuing through the first century that continues even today.

It is believed that Hashem taught the Torah to Moshe Rabbeinu on Mt. Sinai in 1312 BCE and that since that time, the knowledge of Torah has been passed from generation to generation by the conferment of semikhah, rabbinic ordination, or the unbroken transmission of authority dating back to the time of Moshe. This unbroken chain of tradition is believed by many to have continued for over 3,300 years and continues to this day⁵

A rabbi with authority was one who would be able to interpret the intent of the Torah, for example - Hillel and Shammai. Though a rabbi with s'michah would not necessarily attempt to change the Torah, his views in regards to various commandments would be taken as authoritative. Take for example, the ritual washing of hands before a meal - a tradition derived from Torah, but not clearly seen in the Torah -

^{NKJ} **Matthew 15:1-2** Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ²"Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread."

Notice that, even though the scribes admitted that their tradition was indeed a tradition, they still imposed it on others, and the masses apparently obeyed.

We will be discussing s'michah a little bit later, but for now, the important point to remember is that if you were a rabbi with s'michah, you would be much sought after by potential disciples since you would have been presumed to have received s'michah through a line that went back to Moses.

the Disciple -

In the New Testament, the word 'disciple' comes from the Greek word 'mathetes' (Strong's 3101) which according to Strong's means 'a learner, a pupil'. It comes from the verbal root 'manthano' (Strong's 3129) which means 'to learn' or 'to increase one's knowledge'. So a disciple is always striving to learn more about the one he follows, and that's probably the basis behind Peter's statement that, as disciples, if we want to avoid being deceived, we should -

“. . . grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (^{NKJ} **2 Peter 3:18**)

The Greek word 'mathetes' is roughly equivalent to the Hebrew term 'talmid' which comes from the verbal root 'lamad' (לָמַד – 3925) - 'to learn, be taught, be trained'. Neither the Greek word 'mathetes' nor the

⁴ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2456-baptism>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semikhah#The_unbroken_chain_of_Torah

Hebrew word 'talmid' give us a clear picture of what it means to be a disciple. To grasp that picture, we must first understand the typical educational process of a 1st century Jewish child living in the area of the Sea of Galilee.

Becoming a Disciple -

According to Ray Vander Laan⁶, Jewish children – both boys and girls - begin their formal study of the Bible at age 5 by attending a Beit Sefer (house of the Book) that was associated with the local synagogue and taught by a 'rabbi' - the respectful way of addressing the teacher.

The teaching focused on the Torah, emphasizing reading, writing, and memorization. Large portions of the text were memorized, and some students memorized the entire Torah by the time he or she reached the conclusion of their primary education at age 12 or 13.

At this point, a male child was allowed to go to the Temple and participate in the sacrifice of his family's Passover lamb. Though he was now expected to learn the family trade, boys who showed exceptional study skills were also allowed to continue their biblical studies in what was called "Beit Midrash". In the Beit Midrash they would continue to memorize scripture while studying the prophets and the writings. This would continue until about age 18 which is the age when young men were encouraged to begin a family.

Though 18 was the age for marriage, some gifted students were allowed to postpone marriage and continue their studies under a rabbi. Most students sought to learn under rabbis with an exceptional reputation and whom they believed had a good understanding of the scripture. Once they found that particular rabbi, they would ask if they could 'follow' him. If the rabbi believed the student would be successful in learning and understanding what would be taught, he agreed to let that student 'follow' him and the student would become his disciple.

Though in most cases a student sought out his rabbi, there were rare cases where the rabbi sought his students and asked them to 'follow' him.

The Life of a Disciple -

What did it mean when a student asked the rabbi if he could be the rabbi's disciple? Was he simply wanting to study the Bible under his tutelage. Did he think it would make him more righteous than his friends? The answer is "no" and "no". For you to be a disciple meant much more. It meant that you stood in awe of the rabbi, that you were totally committed to him, and most importantly, you were totally committed to becoming just like him.

When he taught, you would contemplate his every word, study his facial expressions, mimic his hand gestures. When he ate, you would note whether he ate the soup first or the bread, and you would do the same. You learned to pray like he prayed, dance like he danced, sing like he sang.

If your rabbi was an itinerant (travelling) rabbi, you would travel with him – oftentimes in the company of his other disciples. You slept where he slept, and ate what he ate. If it was his practice to walk fast, you would walk fast, if he walked with a skip in his gait, you would do the same. It is said that the disciples stuck so close to their rabbi that they became covered with the dust kicked up by his sandals.

Your personal life took second place to that of the rabbi, after all, it was your goal to be just like the rabbi, and it was the rabbi's goal for you to become just like him. In fact, being a first century Jewish disciple meant that you not only wanted to be like your rabbi, you wanted to be what your rabbi is – able to do everything he could do. Yeshua hinted at this when he said –

⁶ <https://www.thatttheworldmayknow.com/rabbi-and-talmidim>

A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.
(^{ESV} **Luke 6:40**)

Raising up Disciples -

It typically took about 12 years for a disciple to be like his rabbi, thus if he started his rabbi at the typical age of 18, at the age of 30, the disciple would become a rabbi himself. At that point, he would take what he had been taught, add his own understanding to it, and begin to teach his understanding of scripture. At some point, he would have to decide if he wanted to take on disciples himself. If in the unlikely case it was determined that the new rabbi had “s’michah”, aspiring students would seek to be taken on as his disciples. This was the case with Yeshua, who after only 3 years had become a notable rabbi and was asked by a young lawyer if he too could become one of Yeshua’s disciple –

And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."
(^{ESV} **Matthew 8:19**)

Yeshua’s Disciples –

Now that we understand the 1st century discipleship process, we should see that being a disciple was much more than just believing in the rabbi. One was not a disciple simply because he believed, but it was because he believed that he strove to become a disciple.

This was the case with Yeshua and the 12 young men who would ultimately become His disciples. Somehow these men came to learn about Yeshua, and what they learned made them believers, and because they were believers, they were willing to drop everything in order to follow Him.

I’ve put together a little drash that might illustrate how this took place -

Yeshua’s disciples were Galileans⁷ who lived in one of the most biblically literate and nationally zealous parts of the Promised Land.. Though most of them were younger than Yeshua by about 15⁸ years. the oldest - Peter was married and in his early 20s. It is quite likely that they and Yeshua all followed the typical Jewish educational path – learning and memorizing the Torah at the Beit Sefer then learning their father’s trade at about age 12 or 13. Some of them probably continued their studies at the Beit Midrash and learned the prophecies of the return of the exiles and the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel.

Though those in Galilee may have not known each other, they had all heard about Yeshua of Nazareth, the carpenter that seemed to excel in everything he touched. They were familiar with the rumors that had spread about Him, especially the story of his exceptional study skills as a youth in the Beit Sefer (primary school) and the fact that – at the age of 12 – he was able to quiz and even stump some of the leading sages in Jerusalem. These stories would have been easily verifiable because some of His own teachers were with Him at the Temple as they presented this amazing child who had – of course - been taught by them!

They heard the account of how after returning from Jerusalem that spring, Yeshua joined His father Joseph as an apprentice in his building trade, and shortly thereafter the business flourished. Though the other builders did not understand what was happening, it appeared

⁷ except for Judas who was a Judean

⁸ Matt. 10:42

that Yeshua added a fair amount of wisdom⁹ to the trade – much like the wisdom of an earlier builder – King Solomon – making His father’s business quite successful.

And if that were not enough, it was rumored that Yeshua could perform miracles! No one knew how many, or even what they were because He really did not want anyone to know. So he told those who did know to keep it a secret, but you know how that goes – who can keep a miracle secret? But as he grew older, his family – especially his mother - became somewhat accustomed to Him performing miracles even to the point of expecting Him to solve a shortage of wine problem at a wedding in Cana.

To these young men, Yeshua – the builder who lived just a couple of day’s walk down the road - seemed bigger than life . . . and how they longed to be like Him, after all – everything He touched turned to gold - so to speak . . . and what’s more – the talk about town was the He claimed to be the King of Israel; and why wouldn’t he be? That’s all He seemed to talk about - the Kingdom, the Kingdom, the Kingdom. Boy did He have a zeal for the Kingdom!

Then one day their lives changed. Peter had gone to Jericho to visit his brother Andrew, who had become a disciple of Judean rabbi named John. While there, much to his surprise, He met Yeshua – the builder from Galilee. Though it was a short meeting, Peter remembered Yeshua’s face and was quite surprised to learn that He had moved to Capernaum and had begun to proclaim his favorite message - the Kingdom of God, indicating that it was quickly approaching.

“I knew Yeshua was a builder, but a Rabbi?” Peter thought. “I never heard about Him following any of the great rabbis, Maybe we were correct . . . maybe He is the Messiah!”

Then one morning, Peter and his brother Andrew were fishing in the Sea of Galilee, and along came Rabbi Yeshua saying –

^{ESV} **Matthew 4:19** . . . "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Though Peter may not have excelled in his scriptural studies to become a part of the Beit Midrash, he did remember Jeremiah’s prophecy of the gathering of the exiles which would precede the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel; and so those words coming out of Yeshua’s mouth meant just one thing; “I’m being offered an opportunity to be a part of the restoration of all things”. So he and his brother dropped their nets and followed Him . . . and you know the rest of the story.

If my scenario is correct, we see that the disciples knew enough about Yeshua to want to be like Him . . . and if they could - even be Him. But as much as they would want to be His disciples, Yeshua was not accepting applications. Instead, He knew who He wanted to follow Him, and when the time came, he chose men who believed in Him and then began to teach them how to be like Him.

Is there a difference in choosing to be a disciple and being chosen to be a disciple? Absolutely! When you consider that the purpose of having a disciple is to make that disciple an image of yourself, then choosing a person to be a disciple implies that you – as the rabbi – are confident that the disciple has a high likelihood of succeeding.. Yeshua said as much during his last meal with his disciples –

^{ESV} **John 15:16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide . . .

⁹ Luke 2:40 – literally ‘filled up’ with wisdom

If we answer the calling to be His disciples and are diligent, not letting ourselves be offended by others, Yeshua says that we will be successful in bearing fruit – new disciples, and those disciples will follow the pattern and do the same.

Raising Disciples to Yeshua -

The Matthew 28:19 'Great Commission' states that Yeshua's 12 disciples are supposed make more disciples - new disciples. But to make new disciples, one has to cease being a disciple and become the teacher, and it is at that point that many fall into the trap of self-exaltation that must avoided. Self-exaltation oftentimes manifests itself when we begin to interpret the scripture and try to bind our interpretation on others. This – I believe – was a lot of the problem in the 1st century.

To understand what I mean, let's revisit the concept of s'michah, the transfer of authority by the laying on of hands. You'll recall that "S'michah" means "authority" and comes from the Hebrew word 'samak' (סָמַךְ – Strong's 5564) which means to lay something on something else, as in "laying hands on someone".

I mentioned Joshua as a good example of someone who had received s'michah when – before he died - Moses handed his authority over to Joshua. I used Joshua as an example because he is the ONLY person in the Tnach to have received s'michah in the sense of the transfer of authority¹⁰. No one else, not even King David, King Solomon, or any of the prophets had hands laid on them for that purpose. This is an important point when it comes to understanding what Yeshua meant when He described the relationship His disciples should have with the rabbinic order of the day.

The 1st century rabbis taught, and the people accepted the notion that those rabbis who excelled in their understanding of scripture (such as Hillel and Shammai) had s'michah and thus their interpretation of scripture should be accepted as truth. Even though these notable rabbis argued back and forth over the understanding of various points of scripture (as evidenced by the Talmud), both sides were considered to be correct. And if – for instance - a particular rabbi (with s'michah) came to understand that a person should wash his hands before eating because the Levitical priests washed their hands before performing services in the Temple, the people should then wash their hands as well.

History shows that when a person is given authority, the likelihood that he will eventually abuse that authority is quite high, and so it would be with the rabbis who were said to have s'michah. If he made one interpretation here and made it binding on the people, he could also make other interpretations and make them binding as well . . . it's just the nature of the beast. So before long, you have this litany of requirements and regulations that end up choking the people. 'sounds like the bureaucracy in Washington, D.C..

What's more, these interpretations were self-perpetuating since once a rabbi taught it to his disciple, that disciple – when he became a rabbi – would teach it to his disciples, and so on.

But that was not to be the case with Yeshua's disciples . . .they were to be different.

In Matthew 22, Yeshua and His disciple are in Jerusalem preparing to observe Passover. He and His disciples spent much of their time at the temple while Yeshua answered numerous questions asked by the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees who were obviously attempting to 'trip Him up' over some, or should we say "any" matter of the law. When they determined that their attempts were fruitless, they stopped asking questions and Yeshua began to speak to His disciples and the multitudes that had gathered. He said -

¹⁰ In Numbers 8 we see the Levites having hands laid on them, but that was not a transfer of authority, but a recognition of consecration.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 23:2-7** . . . "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. ⁵ "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶ "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ "greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'

We need to understand this passage so that we can understand the difference between Yeshua's disciples and the disciples of the other rabbis of the day. Let's begin noticing that Yeshua made a difference between what the scribes and Pharisees SAY ('epo' – 2036) and what they TEACH¹¹ ('lego' – 3004). So what's the difference. The difference is from where they say it.

The Torah states in Exodus 18:3 that Moses sat down when he judged the people. Because of that, it is assumed that he also sat down when he taught the people. In the first century synagogue, it was the custom to stand at a podium when you read the Torah or the Prophets, and when you were finished, you would sit down to expound on them. The place where you sat was called the "seat of Moses" and it represented the authority of the Jewish sages to interpret Moses. Because the scribes (lawyers) and the Pharisees were usually the most educated of the people, they were usually – but not always - the ones who would do the reading and the commentary.

Yeshua was asked to read one Sabbath, and when He did, He followed that custom as you can see in Luke's account of the gospel. He stood to read from the Isaiah scroll, handed it back to the attendant when He was through, and **sat down** before giving his famous commentary –

^{NKJ} **Luke 4:21** "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

What was said when you were **standing up is what written in the Law** and the Prophets. What you taught when you **sat down were your own words**.

Yeshua said to heed what they said while standing because it was truth strait out of the book, but not what they said while sitting in 'Moses' seat' because it was all commentary.

Yeshua went on to explain that their commentary followed after their works . They may have just read a portion straight out of the Torah, and their commentary afterward may have filled with flowery words, but it was slanted to make them look important, put them above everyone else, and ultimately burden the people down and bind them – and because it was said by a Rabbi with authority while sitting in "Moses' Seat", the people had better heed their words.

What Yeshua had just described was unfortunately what had become all too common in His day. A disciple would cling to an important rabbi with the hope of becoming just like him, i.e. – becoming an important rabbi. As an important rabbi, one had easy access to "Moses' Seat" and the ability to sway the people and impose his views on them.

Yeshua would have none of that, nor would He allow His disciples to participate in it as well. He told them –

^{NKJ} **Matthew 23:8-10** ⁸ "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹ "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ "And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.

¹¹ the Greek verb combination implies an opinion is being stated as in Matt. 2:17, 8:17, 12:17. Thus ESV translates as "preach". See Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon pg 3004, top-right.

What Yeshua is saying is that His disciples were not to follow what was commonly considered the ultimate goal of a disciple – to become a great rabbi, because becoming a rabbi in His day brought with it the temptations that He had just described. Instead, the disciples were to remain disciples – disciples of Messiah Yeshua. They would teach, but they would only teach the Torah based on Yeshua’s understanding, never adding their own interpretation. They would not have rabbinic schools, or reference another rabbi except their own Rabbi – Yeshua. And when they did make disciples, those disciples would become disciple of Rabbi Yeshua, not Rabbi Peter, James, or John.

Instead of becoming a great rabbi, Yeshua said –

^{NIV} **Matthew 23:11** The greatest among you will be your servant.

And so it was, just a few days later at Yeshua’s last supper, the greatest among them – their rabbi – was fulfilling the role of a servant, and washing their feet.

Conclusion –

So are we truly being disciples of our rabbi – Rabbi Yeshua? Are we observing all that He did and striving to understand everything that He said? Are we listening when He speaks to us, and teaching what He has shown us to teach? Are we striving to be so close to Him that we are covered by the dust that is kicked up off His sandals? If we are, then we can truly say that we answered “yes Rabbi - I will” when He called out to us and said “You – FOLLOW ME”.