

Disciple

Gary K. Halbrook

The Hebrew word for "disciple," *talmid* (tahl-MEED), meant "one who is taught" (1 Chron. 25:8). The word came from the root, *lamed* (lah-MAHD), which meant "to discipline." Its meaning ranged from training cattle to obey to preparing recruits for war.

In the classical Greek and Hellenistic worlds, "disciple," *mathetes* (mah-thaa-TAAS), was the word for an apprentice, such as one learning to play a flute and even a physician in training. A disciple was one learning a new body of knowledge and/or new skills and patterns of behavior.



Dating from the 5th century AD, this limestone carving depicts the story of Theda, a 1st century Christian who underwent torture for her faith.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/WILLIAM NELSON GALLERY OF ART, KANSAS CITY, MO.

Lesson reference:
BBS: Luke 14:26-27

Disciples were committed to a master, such as Pythagoras or Aristotle. This commitment brought disciples together into schools or fellowships to continue the tradition. The whole life of the disciple was controlled by his effort to cultivate carefully the intentions of his master, preserve his sayings, and transmit them to others.

At first thought, one might expect to find a similar master-disciple relation in the Old Testament. Was not Joshua the disciple of Moses and Elisha of Elijah? Actually, upon closer observation, one finds a quite different level of relationships. Joshua was portrayed always as the servant of Moses, not his disciple. He did not gradually grow into Moses' office as a disciple. Quite the contrary. Joshua was appointed Moses' successor by the express command of God (Num. 27:15-18).

In fact, none of the Old Testament prophets had disciples in the Greek sense. Elisha did not grow into the prophetic office vacated by Elijah, even though he received Elijah's mantle. Rather, he exercised his office solely through the call and in the name of God. Even as important as Moses was to the religion of Israel, he was not looked upon as a hero in the Greek sense, although what he accomplished was cherished. This attitude stands in bold contrast to the meaning of "disciple" in the Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) world. The very nature of Israel's religion provides the explanation for this contrast. Its religion was one of revelation in which God used the speech of people to make known himself and his will.

After the Old Testament era, the word "disciple" came to be used exclusively for one who committed himself as a learner to Scripture and to the religious tradition of Judaism. The disciple listened to what his rabbi master said and appropriated it. Schools of disciples arose to continue the traditions of rabbis such as Hillel and Shammai. The rabbis considered themselves responsible for continuing the tradition of Moses. They and their disciples appear more akin to the pattern of the Hellenistic schools of philosophy, with their static traditions, than to the dynamic religion of the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, "disciple" occurs only in the Gospels and Acts, but it is found there 250 times. Paul referred to Christians not as disciples but as "saints."

In the Gospels, the word is used a few times for the "disciples of John the Baptist," the "disciples of the Pharisees" (Matt. 22:16), and the "disciples of Moses" (John 9:28). In Acts 9:25 we find "disciples of Paul."

In contrast to the rabbi's mode of operation, where a prospective learner had to exert himself to link up with a teacher, Jesus himself took the initiative in selecting his disciples. Another decisive difference is the kind of disciples Jesus chose. The tax-collector, Levi, for example, did not possess the qualifications for learning from a rabbi

(Matt. 9:9-10; Luke 15:1).

Apparently different levels were implied by the word "disciple." Some people in the larger group of Jesus' followers—people who attached themselves to Jesus without his individual calling—are referred to as disciples (Matt. 10:24; John 7:3; 19:38). At an early point in Jesus' ministry, two groups of disciples appear, a wider group which believed in him and a narrower circle which always accompanied him.

The rabbi's disciple learned to repeat exactly, word-for-word, the teaching of his rabbi and other rabbis through his own. A familiar pattern in the Talmud is "Rabbi Hillel said . . . but Rabbi Akiba said. . . ." This exactness has similarities and differences in Jesus' work. His disciples apparently repeated Jesus' teachings verbatim, but his disciples were given freedom to proclaim the gospel very soon after they became disciples.

First, some differences can be noted between Jesus' practice and that of the rabbis. While disciples respected their rabbi, Jesus' disciples went further. No disciple was obliged to perform menial services for his rabbi, yet Jesus' disciples saw themselves as servants of their master (Mark 11:1; 14:12). Second, the two groups differed in their self-understanding. The rabbi's disciple saw his role as a temporary stage. His goal was to become like, or even superior to, his rabbi. For the disciple of Jesus, discipleship was the fulfillment of his destiny; his goal was to be molded by Jesus.

The word "disciple" acquired a different use in the early Christian movement. In the Book of Acts, except for 9:25 and 19:1, "disciple" refers to Christians in general. This was the way Palestinian Christians described themselves. These disciples included many who had never seen Jesus yet believed in him.

Ignatius, a Christian leader in the second century, wrote that only the martyr is the true disciple of Christ. His view reflects both the high price of being a believer in his day and the view that Jesus' example should be exactly copied. ○

Dr. Halbrook is a counselor, Samaritan Center, Lufkin, Texas.