



BY ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER



JESUS ON DISCIPLESHIP

PHOTO BY JEHYUN SUNG ON UNSPLASH



Jewish boy receiving instruction at his bar mitzvah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

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STRIKINGLY, JESUS' contemporaries addressed Him primarily as a rabbi, a Jewish religious teacher. Conversely, the Gospel writers regularly identify His followers as "disciples" (Greek, *mathetes*, from the verb "to learn"), that is, students or learners. Individuals in first-century Jewish life frequently identified a teacher whom they trusted, respected, and chose to attach themselves to in order to learn from him and follow his example. The common maxim was this: "Provide yourself with a teacher and get yourself a fellow disciple" (*Mishnah, Avot 1:6*).

Becoming a disciple of Jesus, though, began differently. Jesus took the initiative to call disciples to follow Him (John 15:16). Additionally, He appointed twelve apostles, special emissaries to proclaim the message of God's kingdom (Matt. 10:1-4). What was required for being a disciple of Jesus?

A Supreme Calling

Rather than minimize the commitment required in order to maximize His number of followers, Jesus set the bar high and demanded supreme loyalty. To the crowds, He articulated the requirements for being His disciple:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

—Luke 14:26-27; see 9:59-62¹

He illustrated His point by asking:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock

him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish."

—Luke 14:28-30

He then added a second illustration:

Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

—Luke 14:31-33

Jesus called on potential followers to count the cost before attaching themselves to Him, knowing that many would be martyred for their faith. Thus the teacher-student relationship encompassed more than mere academic learning; it entailed living

out one's calling in keeping with the teacher's calling, even when doing so would ensue in persecution, suffering, or death: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (v. 27).

A Preeminent Relationship

Following Jesus must even take precedence over one's family relationships:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

—Luke 14:26

Matthew recorded a parallel to this teaching and added Jesus also saying, "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:38).

Jesus is eminently worthy to follow. Yet a prospective disciple is worthy of Jesus only if he is willing to put Jesus first. Jesus'

requirement to "hate" one's

family (in the sense of loving Him more than one's family members) apparently posed no conflict with the commandment to honor one's father and mother. Thus Jesus could tell a wealthy would-be follower to honor his parents and still require him to love Jesus more than his many possessions (19:19–22). The Twelve, for their part, had left their families in order to follow Jesus during His earthly ministry (v. 27). As a result, they would reap an exceedingly rich reward:

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

—Matthew 19:28–29

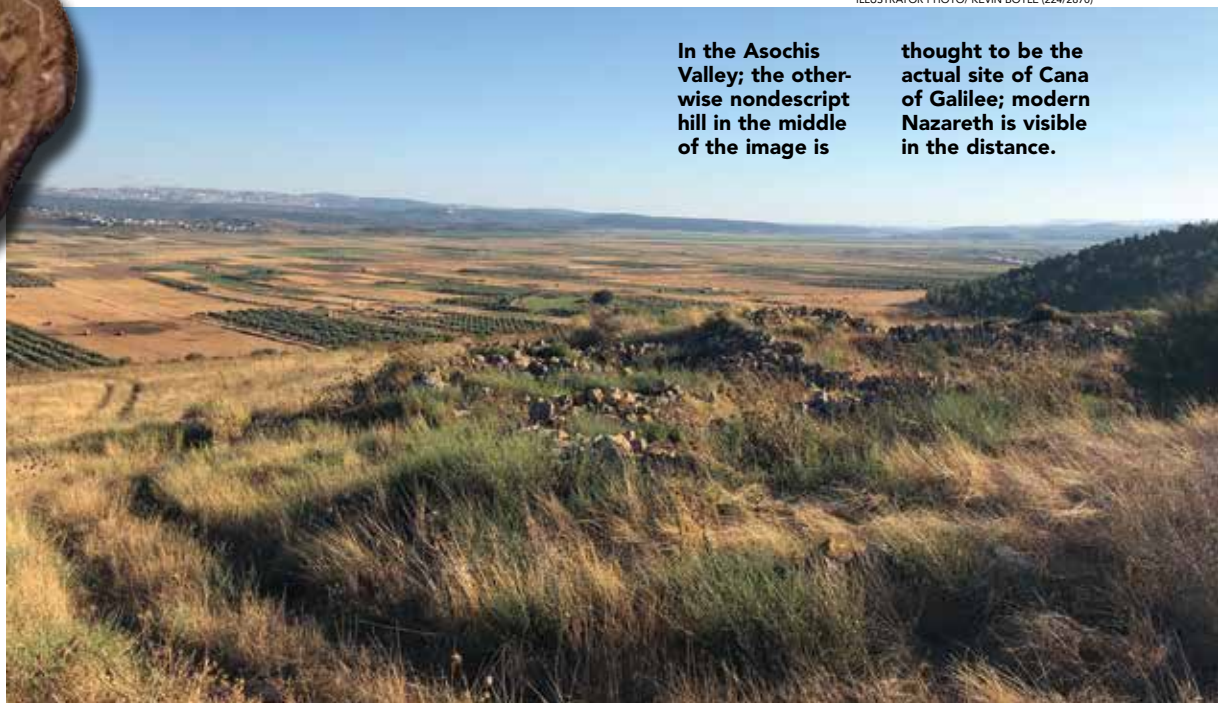
Jesus' demand for supreme commitment, allegiance, and loyalty

from His followers tolerated no rivals: "any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). This included one's family relationships, earthly possessions, and any other attachments a person may have. Nothing was off limits. Jesus' demand was not so much that people love their family or possessions less as that they love Jesus more.

Supreme love for Jesus would inexorably realign a person's commitments, priorities, and goals. Following Jesus therefore meant giving up whatever ambitions, attachments, and affections one had previously cherished. Jesus' demands were categorical, radical, and comprehensive. Just as Scripture depicts God as a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29), so Jesus wanted His followers to resolutely set aside all secondary pursuits and desired that their love for Him reduce all rival pursuits to ashes. In this vein, He compared the demands of God's kingdom to selling all of



Above: Dated to the Byzantine era, a eulogia token from Beth-shan depicts Jesus walking with two men on the road to Emmaus. Eulogia tokens, which were especially popular in the Byzantine era, were fired clay medallions that pilgrims collected when visiting sacred sites.



In the Asochis Valley; the otherwise nondescript hill in the middle of the image is

thought to be the actual site of Cana of Galilee; modern Nazareth is visible in the distance.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEVIN BOYLE (224/2870)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ISRAEL MUSEUM (139/9/2404)

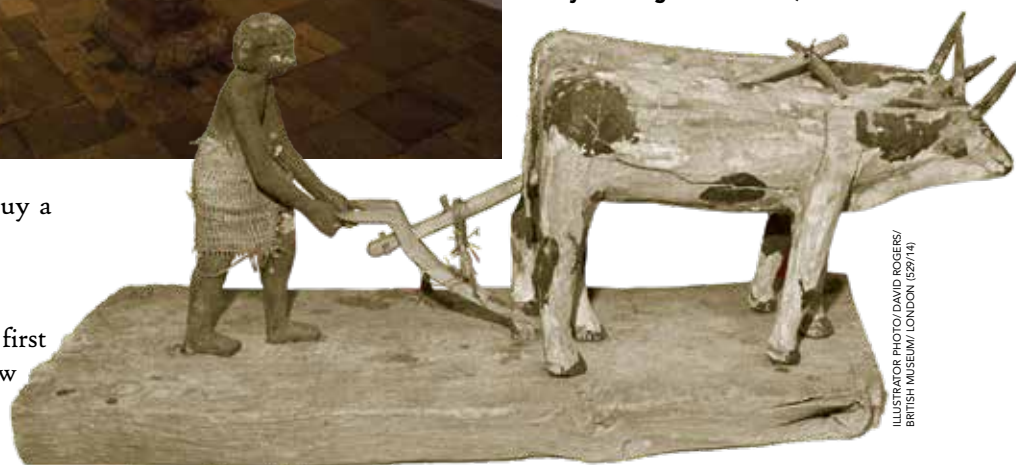


ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / JUSTIN VENEKMAN (05/68/39)

Left: In Jerusalem, the Upper Room was restored in the 14th cent. using the upper parts of antique column shafts and capitals and adding a ogival vaulted ceiling from the Gothic period. The stone flooring is possibly, for the most part, from the original building. This is, according to tradition, the site of Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples.

Jesus told His disciples, "Take up my yoke and learn from me." When a disciple made a commitment to follow a particular rabbi, to obey him, learn from him, and be bound to him, the term was "to be yoked" to his teacher. Rather than being cumbersome and complicated as were other religious leaders in their teaching, Jesus' teachings were understandable and yet intensely profound. He explained, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:29,30, CSB).

Below: Wooden model of a man plowing with a pair of oxen; from Egypt's Middle Kingdom, about 2000 BC. The oxen are yoked together.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / DAVID ROGERS / BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (529/14)

one's possessions in order to buy a precious pearl (Matt. 13:45-46).

A Lifelong Commitment

Once a person had put Jesus first in his life and chosen to follow Him, the only requirement was to be with Him, to "follow" Him wherever He went. This sustained close relationship enabled Jesus both to teach His followers and to model for them the life God called them to live in company with other disciples. The disciples stayed with Jesus (John 1:39; 3:22), accompanied Him to weddings and funerals (2:1-12; 11:1-44), observed His messianic demonstrations of power (Mark 5:21-43), and were gradually trained to continue Jesus' mission following His earthly departure (Matt. 10). Jesus devoted much of His time to preparing His followers for their mission, and subsequent to His resurrection, He commissioned them to "make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe

all that I have commanded you," as He would continue to be present with them in the Spirit (28:18-20).

As part of their learning relationship with Jesus, His disciples frequently asked questions, especially on the night before the crucifixion (John 13:36-38; 14:5,8,22). At times, Jesus even provoked such inquiries, such as when He washed His disciples' feet at the last supper (13:6-10). In addition, Jesus' disciples engaged in various acts of service, such as buying food (4:8) or assisting Jesus in His work (Matt. 14:16; Luke 9:14-16; John 6:12). Later, they buried Jesus when He died (Matt. 27:57-61),

testified to His identity and mighty works (John 15:26-27; Acts 1:8), and honored His memory (John 21:24-25). In all these ways, Jesus' followers acted in keeping with first-century Jewish expectations for teacher-student relationships. 🔥

1. All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

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