

A Contextual Reflection from Preserving Bible Times

“Follow Me”

A Contextual Reflection on Jesus’ Call

Embarking on the Quest

The quest is a familiar one. A determined high school student sets his or her aim high on a very prestigious, hard-to-get-into university for a college experience. As part of the plan, many high school Advanced Placement (AP) courses are taken, the best grades are obtained, and impressive (hopefully) extracurricular activities are intentionally added to the mix. Then great care is taken in composing the essay questions on the college application form. When the requisite campus visits and interviews are complete, a prolonged waiting period commences. Will the long-awaited letter announce an acceptance, or a rejection? Only time will tell.

From a first-century Middle Eastern context, there were those engaged in a similar quest, that of gaining acceptance to be a disciple of a rabbi and joining his *yeshiva* (“learning community.”)

Educating Jewish Boys

Childhood education started early in first-century, observant Judaism. At age five, young boys went to the local synagogue school to learn Hebrew and memorize the Torah. By the time of his bar mitzvah at age 13, a typical Jewish young man was very conversant with God’s Word having memorized the *Torah* (Pentateuch), the *Neviim* (The Prophets) and the *Kituvim* (The Writings), which comprised all of the Hebrew Scripture (*Tanach*) of that day.¹

Those young men who showed great promise in this initial phase of learning were encouraged to continue their education following their bar mitzvahs. This would entail studying the wisdom and authoritative interpretation of the Torah by the sages known as “The Yoke of Torah.” After that next multi-year phase, the young men who continued to show great promise were further encouraged to extend their training by spending time (typically from ages 17-20) with a rabbi in a multi-year *yeshiva* experience. There they would hone their ability to interpret God’s Word as it relates to all the practical issues of daily life.

Choosing Your Rabbi Carefully

Because of the great interpretive diversity and emphasis amongst the rabbis, the decision to ask to be a rabbi’s disciple and receive religious training from him was not made lightly. Some rabbis, like Schammai, interpreted the Scriptures from a literal approach. Others such as Hillel embraced an interpretive view that emphasized the spirit of the Torah, while still other rabbis taught interpretative approaches that focused on different areas of emphasis, e.g. ritual purity laws. Obviously, these diverse approaches often led to very different interpretive outcomes pertaining to issues of daily life. Since a rabbi’s interpretation of God’s Word was forever binding on his disciples,² great care had to be taken by the disciple accepting “the yoke of the rabbi” to make sure it was an interpretive approach that he could identify with and live out.

Being Very Particular

A rabbi in the First Century would only choose a very elect few, highly promising young men from all the wannabes who asked to be his disciples. He selected only those who he thought could fully measure up to his standard and eventually become just like him. A rabbi did not want to invest in anyone who did not have this

emulation potential. Jesus underscores this objective when He observed that *a student is not above his teacher (rabbi), but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher (rabbi)* Luke 6:40 (added).

As part of the selection process, a rabbi would intensively test, examine, grill, and interrogate any may-I-become-your-disciple applicant in his understanding of the *Tanach*. What the rabbi was looking for was not just a detailed knowledge of the *Tanach* and the oral tradition, but the ability of this candidate to ask good questions in order to better understand the interpretive issues resident in that body of knowledge. Remember, the issue to an observant Jew in the First Century was never what God's Word says. They all knew what it said. They had memorized it. Rather, the issue was: what does it mean – an interpretation question? Thus, the rabbi was most interested in choosing disciples who exhibited the mettle, intelligence, commitment, and persistence to become an interpreter of God's Word just like him.

With this rabbinic “testing” as a contextual backdrop, revisit Jesus in the Temple when He was twelve years old where He *astonished* the scribes and esteemed teachers (rabbis) of His day *with his understanding and his answers*.³ During this three-day interaction with some of the best religious minds of His day, Jesus dramatically established Himself at an early age as having rabbinic DNA!

Inviting a Candidate to “Follow Me”

If a rabbi judged a potential disciple to have the capability to become just like him, i.e., to emulate him, then the rabbi would utter those cherished words of acceptance every potential disciple longed to hear: “Follow me.” With that inviting phrase, the disciple-to-be knew he had survived the rabbi's demanding “pass – fail” admission process!

Throughout the Gospels, the phrase “follow me” is a Jewish idiom used by the rabbis to mean, “Come and be with me as my disciple and submit to my authoritative teaching. Hearing that meant you had made the last “cut.” You are now on the varsity. You are good enough to be my disciple!” We in the West tend to focus mostly on the appealing “come and be with Me” front-end part of that invitation. But contextually, you can't have one without the other. Absolute submission to Rabbi Yeshua's authoritative teaching is a Siamese twin with the “come and be with me” portion of that invitation.

Willing Submission to Authority

By becoming a rabbi's disciple, the young Jewish lad readily agreed (no coercion needed) to totally surrender to the rabbi's authority in all areas of interpreting the Scriptures for his life. In fact that submission was something the new disciple truly wanted to do. Using a computer analogy as regards his understanding of God's Word, the new disciple willingly deleted everything in his own “hard drive” of what he previously thought was “right” and “true,” and started uploading whatever his rabbi held to be right and true, i.e. the yoke of his rabbi.

Parenthetically, we might ask, “Is this the way that disciples of Jesus today have embraced His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount?” In this discipling posture, the rabbi was given special honor and esteem above the disciple's biological father (who gave him physical life) because his rabbi would be the one to give the disciple spiritual life - the wisdom of God's Word.⁴

Inverting Rabbinic Protocol

Without understanding the contextual backdrop of this rabbinic selection process, we miss understanding just how much Rabbi Jesus (*Yeshua*) was a rabbi unlike any other. In that first-century Semitic culture, rabbis did not take the initiative to approach young men with the invitation to “follow me.” But Jesus did. That must have added to the shocking impact on those Jesus called in that paradigm-breaking way.

Think back to Simon in Luke 5 after the great catch of fish or Levi (Matthew) in Luke 6, the despised port tax collector (port tax collectors were deemed by the rabbis to be the worst of the worst⁵). One day Jesus looked at each of them and said (implicitly to one and explicitly to the other), “Follow me.” It is an understatement to say that Simon and Levi were not expecting to be called as Rabbi *Yeshua*’s disciples. They would never have envisioned themselves as being worthy to be His disciple. Since Simon was a fisherman, he obviously had washed out of the disciple-making rabbinic process somewhere along the way and as a result had devoted himself to a profession. Levi was the ultimate outcast. He was a person that the religious system not only rejected, but scorned as never able to be forgiven.⁶ Both Simon and Levi knew they had absolutely no ability to emulate Rabbi *Yeshua* – neither His interpretive authority, nor the miracles He performed. Both were convinced they were not “good enough” to be considered disciple material for his *yeshiva*. They knew they could never measure up to His emulating standard and become little Rabbi *Yeshuas*. And from both of their perspectives, that was a sound and sober assessment. So when Jesus called them to “follow me,” both of them had to be completely incredulous (now there’s an understatement!). “You mean this Rabbi *Yeshua* sees in me the potential to become like Him? He thinks I am good enough to be His disciple! Not only can I not believe that, I cannot even fathom that ever being possible!”

We tend to lose sight of the reality that Jesus has a much higher view of us as His disciples and of what we can become in Him than we could ever dream about ourselves in our wildest expectations. Why? Because Jesus always starts with the eternal end in view. As part of that, He gave Simon a vision of what his future would be like as a disciple of Jesus when He told Simon there would come a day when he would be a “fisher of men.”⁷ That had to be more of a shock to Simon than the great catch of fish!

Calling His Disciples

Now we have some context to understand why Jesus deliberately broke rabbinic protocol by calling His own disciples. It would seem He had no choice but to do it that way. Remember, no observant Jewish young man would ever have had the audacity to ask Jesus if he could become His disciple. We also need to remember that Jesus knew what no one else yet knew. Shortly after His crucifixion and ascension, He was going to send His Spirit (at Pentecost) to indwell each one of His disciples so they would be empowered to do similar things and manifest similar traits, attitudes and values as He, e.g., *anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing*.⁸ This empowerment was going to include external imitation as well as internal transformation. It would empower not only their behavior, but their hearts and minds as well. Since only He knew that planned outcome at the beginning of His ministry, He therefore also knew that He would have to take the initiative in calling disciples into His *yeshiva* band. And He is still doing that today! Have you responded to both parts of His call to “follow me?”

Some Things to Reflect On...

- Have you ever considered praying to discern God’s view of you and your potential in Him rather than your own limited view of yourself? Jesus specializes in taking those people who know they are not worthy, those that others reject and scorn, and invites them to become empowered, emulating disciples of His. Is that Amazing Grace or what!
- If Jesus has such a high view of what we can become in Him, why do we consistently keep selling ourselves short?
- Is there a meaningful difference today between what it means to be a (cognitive) believer in Jesus Christ and what it means to be a (submitted) “follow me” disciple of Jesus? To help in answering that question, consider how you have embraced, or not embraced Jesus’ authoritative teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
- We live in a narcissistic culture that chafes against almost any concept of authority. “Do your own thing” is the mantra of the day. How might this cultural malaise impact our understanding and

willingness to put ourselves under biblical authority? To what extent do we even have a desire to surrender to the authority of Jesus' teaching today in the same manner that first-century disciples had a willingness to completely surrender to their rabbi's interpretive authority?

- Contrast total surrender to the authority of Jesus with a partial surrender, an occasional surrender, a convenient surrender, or even a token surrender to Him. How would you assess your willingness factor in regards to surrendering to the authority of God's Word in all areas of your life? When you *do* surrender, is it a willing surrender or a surrender that arises mostly from some form of resentful, obligatory obedience?
- Are there any areas of your life that are either off limits, or have not be submitted (surrendered) to the Lordship authority of Jesus Christ? What are they, and why are they off limits?
- What thought(s) challenged you in this Reflection? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. John 14:12

Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say? Luke 6:46

*To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said,
"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.
Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* John 8:31

Prayer⁹

Lord, I do want to have a deep desire for You, Your Will and Your Ways.
Yet, I confess I often find little or no desire to want to do so.
In the power of Your Holy Spirit, remind me to pray for that desire when I find it missing;
To pray for a desire to want to submit to You as a loving act of devotion and worship,
And to have a passion to want to emulate You in all that I think, feel, and do.
Lord, work in your Sovereign ways to empower me to want to be Your emulating disciple.
Tear down all my bastions of self-centeredness and self-sufficiency.
Make me into Your person, Your disciple, Your ambassador, and the leaven in Your loaf - a
person who loves You and willingly shares that love with others.
And free me from any sense of obligatory obedience, for Your glory and Your praise. Amen.

Shalom Doug Greenwold, PBT Teaching Fellow Reflection #908 © Doug Greenwold 2008

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Notes and Sources

¹ David Bivins, *Jesus' Education*, www.jerusalemerspective.com, under "Articles."

² For more on this subject, see Doug Greenwold, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* (Bible-In-Context Ministries: Columbia, Maryland, 2nd ed., 2007), Chapter Two, "Rabbis and Disciples," p. 25-35.

³ Luke 2:47

⁴ David Bivins, *First-Century Discipleship*, www.jerusalemerspective.com, under "Articles."

⁵ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (MacDonald Publishing: undated), p. 237.

⁶ Ibid. For more on Levi's incredible story, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories* (Bible-In-Context Ministries: Columbia, Maryland, 2008), Chapter Seven, "He Chose Me!," p. 59-68.

⁷ Luke 5:10

⁸ Luke 6:46

⁹ Taken from Doug Greenwold, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* (Bible-In-Context Ministries: Columbia, Maryland, 2nd ed., 2007), p. 35.