

# **Disciples in the First Century**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

JA	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> by Josephus
JW	<i>The Jewish War</i> by Josephus
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (see Sources)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

## ABSTRACT

First century Jewish society was a vibrant mix of teachers and groups to which people were attached. *Disciple* was a Greek word and concept used for these attachments. Since it was common and well-understood, *disciple* was a useful term and relationship for Jesus to use in his ministry. At this time, *disciple* was used in a broad and generic, rather than specific and technical, manner. It referred to a personal relationship to a teacher/leader and a commitment to his work or cause. In Scripture, the Hebrew word for *disciple* and its concept are absent from the Old Testament, while the Greek word is limited to the Gospels and Acts. Jesus' interaction with his disciples had similarities to the common practices of the day, but the differences are striking. While the Gospel writers include the selection of the twelve disciples, and their appointment as apostles, they give little attention to the distinction between the Twelve and other disciples. The vast majority of the time, the narratives do not tell us precisely who is included in the term *the disciples*. The writers do, however, make a great distinction between those who follow Jesus, and those who reject him. The Gospel writers' interesting manner of naming other groups follows what must have been a common stylistic usage of the day for naming groups and their leaders. For today's church, the term *disciple* is rich in meaning, encompassing both the grace by which we are called and the sanctified life we are to live.

## INTRODUCTION

The words *disciple* and *discipleship* are in common use today. At least one congregation has intentionally replaced the term *member* with the term *disciple*.<sup>1</sup> Another church uses “the marks of discipleship” as a primary focus of their teaching on living as a Christian.<sup>2</sup> A popular DVD draws lessons for today from the way it describes disciples being selected at Jesus’ time.<sup>3</sup> The term is especially prominent in other Protestant denominations, and, therefore, it is among those words with which our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) sometimes wrestles as it compares language and practices of other churches with scriptural faithfulness. In the LCMS, the distinction between the twelve disciples/apostles and the larger group of disciples is tied to the distinction between the Office of the Pastoral Ministry and the laity,<sup>4</sup> a topic of current discussion in various church circles.

All these facts are good reasons for examining the meaning of *disciple* in the first century. But a better reason is to more fully understand what Jesus was doing when he called individuals to be his disciples, when he related to the larger groups identified as his disciples, and when he talked about what it meant to be his disciple. Since “we believe that God’s Word for us today is first of all precisely what his Word was to [the original

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<sup>1</sup> Cross of Christ, Yorkville, Illinois, per Mary Pat Bretthauer, Director of Connect Ministries on their staff, and friend of the author

<sup>2</sup> Christ the King Lutheran, Southgate, Michigan, where the author served on staff 1993-2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Nooma: Dust*, Rob Bell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005) DVD.

<sup>4</sup> “Walther and the Missouri Synod said that the Office of the Ministry has its origin in its divine institution by Jesus Christ with the call of the apostles.” Dr. A. L. Barry, keynote address published in *Church and Ministry, The Collected Papers of The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Theological Convocation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, ed. Jerald C. Joerz and Paul T. McCain (St. Louis: The Office of the President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1998), 3. But note also “. . . the divine institution of the holy ministry is evident from the call of the holy apostles into the ministry of the Word . . . as well as from the call of the 70 disciples . . .” by C.F.W. Walther, Thesis II Concerning the Holy Ministry, *Church and Ministry*, tr. J.T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998), 177.

audience],”<sup>5</sup> we must explore what *disciple* meant in the first century before we can draw meaning from it for today.

Disciple activity and disciple talk are prominent in the Gospels. After Jesus Himself, the disciples as a group, and particularly Peter, James and John, are the most prominent individuals. At times Jesus had “large crowds of disciples” (Luke 6:17).<sup>6</sup> He gave significant teachings on being a disciple, and He was interested in future disciples. Intriguingly, although *disciple/disciples* is prominent in the Gospels and is used in Acts, it is absent from the rest of the New Testament.

Jesus was not the only one in the Gospels to have disciples. John the Baptist and the Pharisees had disciples (Mark 2:18) and Jesus’ opponents at one point called themselves “disciples of Moses” (John 9:28). Jesus’ ministry takes place in the context of well-known organized groups, particularly the Pharisees, scribes (usually translated “teachers of the law” in the *New International Version*) and Sadducees, all represented in the Sanhedrin. The Gospels present these organized groups, rather than specific individuals, as the primary people who investigate and oppose Jesus, and eventually arrest Him and demand his crucifixion.

God chose a particular time for the incarnation (“When the time was fulfilled . . .” Galatians 4:4). That first century is similar in some ways to our twenty-first century—sweeping cultural changes, a noisy clamor of ideas in public discourse, and competing allegiances. At that time, Judaism was undergoing significant changes which resulted in rabbinic Judaism, the form of Judaism that has continued to this day. The Greco Roman culture that aided the spread of the gospel through a common language, relative political

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 15.

<sup>6</sup> All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.



peace and good roads was also the birthplace of the term *disciple*, which we apply to ourselves today. Understanding this time when “the word become flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) and the role of disciples in this time, will aid us in understanding more fully God’s call that makes us his own, and His call to live a life of obedience. “The more precisely we determine . . . how [those who first heard the message] understood and related the gospel to their lives, the better we will succeed in translating the content of this message from the manner of speech and the conceptions of the ancient world into the language of our own time.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*, trans. John F. Steely from *Umwelt des Neuen Testaments*, revised edition copyright 1974 by Fandenhoeck & Ruprecht (Nashville, Abingdon, 1976), 12.

## CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF FIRST CENTURY JUDAISM

First century sources on Jewish disciple groups or sects are limited in quantity. They are also limited in the light they shed on these groups. One of the primary sources for the study of first century Jewish groups is the New Testament (NT) itself, a fact which further limits sources that reveal the background of the NT. More specifically, knowledge of such groups as the Pharisees and Sadducees is limited. “Scholars are generally agreed that the origins of the Pharisees and other Jewish sects are shrouded in obscurity.”<sup>8</sup> While modern scholars agree on the major changes which took place in Judaism between 300 B.C. and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, opinions vary widely on the timing of these changes, and on details of the various Jewish groups at the time. Scholars also disagree on what is known for sure, and what is conjecture. After a brief review of the strengths and weaknesses of the sources used to understand first century Judaism, this chapter will present an overview of the historical, cultural and sociological background affecting first century disciple groups.

### Sources

Josephus is “absolutely indispensable for understanding the whole political, topographical, social, intellectual and religious background of the New Testament era.”<sup>9</sup> A Jewish scholar also notes that “the writings of Flavius Josephus and the New

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<sup>8</sup> Raymond F. Surburg, *Introduction to the Intertestamental Period* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 53.

<sup>9</sup> Paul L. Maier, tr. and ed., *Josephus: The Essential Works. An Illustrated Condensation of Jewish Antiquities and The Jewish War* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1994), 8.

Testament represent our main Greek sources on Second Temple Jewish sectarianism.”<sup>10</sup> For an understanding of Jewish disciple groups, however, Josephus’ helpfulness is limited. His voluminous writings contain relatively little detail on specific Jewish religious sects. Their political involvement is his main focus, and he gives only one short section comparing their beliefs and practices. His text is shaped by his Greek and Roman audience. “Josephus was writing for a cultured, pagan audience, so he tended to reformulate in the conceptual terminology of the Greeks the views and doctrines of the groups he discussed.”<sup>11</sup> His goal was to explain and defend Judaism, so he presented it in a favorable light.

But these facts which limit the usefulness of Josephus are balanced by the value of his first hand knowledge. He personally experienced the conflict between those groups and the turmoil within Judaism as a whole that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Born into a priestly family, Josephus explains that as a young man he tried the way of life of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, the latter when he lived with a hermit named Bannus, before deciding to join the Pharisees.<sup>12</sup> Some people maintain that Josephus remained a Pharisee throughout his life, though Anthony Saldarini is less sure, noting that “no Pharisaic tendency can be found in his interpretation of Judaism.”<sup>13</sup>

Jewish rabbinic literature is another primary source for first century Judaism, and by far the most abundant resource. The Talmud (“teachings”), the collection of Jewish

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<sup>10</sup> Alexei M. Sivertsev, *Households, Sects and the Origins of Rabbinic Judaism. Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins, volume 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 145.

<sup>11</sup> George W.E. Nickelsburg and Michael E. Stone. *Faith and Piety in Early Judaism: Texts and Documents* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Maier, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: a sociological approach* (Published jointly by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Dove Booksellers, Livonia, Michigan, 2001. First published by Michael Glazier, Inc., Wilmington, Delaware, 1988), 81.

law and tradition, is still in use today. First produced in Palestine around A.D. 400, a larger, more important edition of the Talmud was produced in Babylon around A.D 500. The Talmud has two parts. The first, the Mishnah (“repetition”), is a collection of oral laws compiled about A.D 200. The second part, the Gemara, is commentary on the Mishnah. Much of the material in the Mishnah comes from the time of Christ. “Both Jewish and Christian scholars are convinced that a study of the Talmud . . . could provide great assistance in the understanding of the NT.”<sup>14</sup>

But rabbinic literature must also be used with care as a source for first century Judaism. The material from the first century was transmitted orally for hundreds of years before it was preserved in written form. The period of oral transmission included the cataclysmic destruction of Jerusalem, center of Jewish identity and religious practice. It should also be noted that the Talmud was written for religious, not historical, purposes. If taken as history, these writings “produce an illegitimate and unhistorical retrojection of second through seventh century rabbinic Judaism on the first century.”<sup>15</sup>

The Dead Sea scrolls are also a very useful source, containing a wealth of detail. The first century group called the Essenes was almost unknown until the relatively recent discovery of these scrolls. Scholars, however, do not agree about how much of the information in these scrolls applies to the Essenes. The scrolls also cover a long period of time during which there were significant changes in the practices of the group being described. These facts make it difficult to pin down where the many helpful and interesting details related in the scrolls are to be applied.

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<sup>14</sup> Surburg, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Saldarini, 8-9.

## Historical and Political Background

At the close of the Old Testament (OT), about 400 B.C., the Jews in Palestine are a small but determined band of returned exiles, struggling to rebuild their homeland, and living under Persian rule. When the New Testament opens 400 years later, the scene is vastly different. Jerusalem is a large and vibrant city in a land under Roman rule with many signs of Hellenism. The historical events and the cultural changes over these 400 years were major factors in the appearance and development of the various groups that were on the scene during Jesus' ministry. This brief historical review will note characteristics that influenced the development of groups prominent at the time of Christ.

Raymond Surburg notes two tendencies that developed when the Jews returned from their 70-year exile in Babylonia around the year 500 B.C. First, the rebuilding of the temple, coupled with a concern for worship, increased the importance of the high priest. "Even the political interests of the Jews became centered in him."<sup>16</sup> In addition, the importance of scribes grew. Ezra himself was "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6). "At first both these interests coincided; the cleavage between them developed later."<sup>17</sup>

Alexander the Great conquered Palestine in 332 B.C. Here, as in every land he conquered, Alexander intentionally introduced Greek language and culture. He was so successful in his conquests and his spread of Greek culture that in an amazingly short period of time Hellenistic culture was carried throughout the known world. The result of Hellenization endured long after Alexander's death in 322. Political stability did not last as long. After Alexander's death, Palestine was subjected to 300 years of rule by the

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<sup>16</sup> Surburg, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Ptolemies and the Seleucids, descendants of the generals among whom Alexander's kingdom was divided. During periods of peace, the Jews were allowed to freely practice their religion. But the times of peace were bracketed by years of devastating warfare. When various Seleucids and Ptolemies fought among themselves, Jewish leaders courted the various warring sides for political protection and favor. Leading families as well as religious groups looked to advance their personal, political and religious causes by their alliances. Politics and religion were closely bound.

The Seleucid Antiochus IV was a particularly brutal ruler. About 167 B.C., in an attempt to force greater Hellenization, he outlawed the Jewish practices of Sabbath observances, circumcision and dietary restrictions, and he tortured and killed those who continued these practices of their faith. The people revolted, led by the Maccabee family. The revolt was successful and, for 30 years, several Maccabee siblings succeeded each other and ruled as high priest. During this period of Maccabean rule "the small city-state of Jerusalem, harassed by its enemies, . . . had grown into a united nation. . . . The Jews once again had a high priest and a hereditary prince and were enjoying religious liberty and almost complete political independence."<sup>18</sup> The origins of both the Pharisees and Sadducees are thought to have come from this period.

Descendants of the Maccabee sons, known as the Hasmonean dynasty, continued to rule for another 70 years. Several Hasmoneans prompt Josephus' early mentions of the groups under consideration. John Hyrcanus, who led from 135 to 106 B.C., switched his allegiance from the Pharisees to the Sadducees. Another Hasmonean, Alexandra, 76-67, was the "first woman to rule over the Jews in her own right."<sup>19</sup> On his deathbed,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 42.

Alexandra's husband, a follower of the Sadducees, advised his wife to work with the Pharisees. She followed that advice, a fact thought to be relevant to her successful rule.

A power struggle between two Hasmonean brothers resulted in civil war. Rome was growing in power, and both brothers appealed to Rome for support. The end result was that Rome intervened in 63 B.C. and placed Antipater of Idumea (Edom), the father of Herod the Great, as ruler. This initiated the Idumean dynasty which continued until A.D. 6. Rome experienced political upheaval during these years as, first, Caesar and Pompey struggled for power, and then, after Caesar's assassination, Brutus and Cassius fought Mark Anthony and Octavian. The Idumeans were experts at following the political wind and switching sides to end up with the winner. Although the Idumeans considered themselves Jewish, they were not of pure descent and were therefore despised by most of the Jews they ruled.

### Hellenism

Greek culture, which entered Palestine in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when it was conquered by Alexander the Great, grew to have a vast impact. New Greek cities were built in Palestine, and many Greeks made their home in these new cities as well as in existing cities. The Greeks built theatres, baths, and *gymnasias* for sports. The Greek language became common for commercial transactions, and thus was learned by most people. Elements of Greek civil law were adopted, and Greek customs, such as reclining at table for meals, were widely practiced. Greek styles of learning were also adopted. "As the Greeks sought to develop a train of thought in conversation, and through the interplay of question and answer to find the solution to a problem, so now the Jews also learned to

debate and, in didactic conversation, to inquire about and to attempt to clarify the truth of the divine will.”<sup>20</sup> Jesus used this question/answer style of teaching (e.g., Luke 10:25-37).

Even as they accepted the Greek language, customs, and debate style, the Jews vigorously fought other aspects of Hellenism, particularly in the area of religion. Greeks, accepting of a variety of religious expression, were uncomfortable with the strict monotheism of Judaism. “The Hellenistic period in general was an age of great religious experimentation and variety. Under the impact of the Oriental cultures and religions that they encountered, the Greeks formulated and developed many and varied forms of religious expression.”<sup>21</sup> The Maccabean revolt resulted from one Greek ruler’s attempt to ban the Jewish religious practices he did not like. Throughout these centuries, Jews would riot if pagans would enter forbidden areas of the temple, or if “carved images” were brought into the temple in violation of Exodus 20:4. The degree to which people did or did not accommodate to Hellenistic culture and their Greek (and later, Roman) rulers was a major factor in the formation of many disciple groups.

Private voluntary associations were introduced by the Greeks and Romans to many areas, including Palestine. These voluntary associations were varied. Found in both city and country, and in both upper and lower classes, they were formed for many purposes, such as trade protection, socialization, to connect people in a neighborhood, or for the worship of a particular deity. All these functions had once been entirely the realm of families. Although many scholars see the existence of first century Jewish disciple groups as a result of these Greek groups, others feel there is a lesser connection. Speaking of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Saldarini concludes, “No generalizations about Greek

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<sup>20</sup> Lohse, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Nickelsburg, 12.



associations can be used confidently to describe or define a group.”<sup>22</sup> But Jews, ironically, did adopt Greco-Roman voluntary associations as a tool in the battle against Hellenistic influences that threatened their religion. “The rise of associations helps to explain the variety of movements and positions which developed in the intellectual, religious and political life of the Hellenistic and Roman Empires. It is in this context that the rise of the Pharisees, Sadducees and other Jewish groups is to be sought.”<sup>23</sup>

Greek is the language of the NT. The history of the Greek word *mathētēs* (pronounced “mah-thay-TAYCE”), translated as disciple in English, gives important insight into the thoughts of the NT writers who chose that word. The basic definition of *mathētēs* is “learner,” but the history of this word reveals depths of meaning. From its earliest use, “There is no *mathētēs* without a *didaskalos* [teacher]. The process involves a corresponding personal relation.”<sup>24</sup> This meaning is demonstrated by the fact that *mathētēs* was used for an apprentice.

The word was also more broadly used for the relationship of a person to someone not living at the same time. Karl Rengstorf, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), notes a “widespread view that Socrates is the true *mathētēs* of Homer because he is his *zōlōtēs* [zealot/enthusiast] and imitates him.” This use of the word moves away from a formal teacher/student relationship “to the inner fellowship between the two and its practical effects, and this to such a degree that the latter is basic to the whole relationship.” This emphasis on practical effects of the disciple relationship “is not

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<sup>22</sup> Saldarini, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “*mathētēs*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, ed. and tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 416. This source hereafter referred to as TDNT.

without considerable significance in relation to the development of the Christian use of *mathētēs*.”<sup>25</sup>

A conflict in the use of this word between Socrates and the Sophists reveals the tension between its use to describe an inner fellowship and its use for a technical, formal relationship. The Sophists used the word *mathētēs* for their pupils, who were charged fees for the knowledge they obtained from their teacher. Socrates, and those who followed him, deliberately avoided using the word *mathētēs*, because they wished to emphasize their differences from the Sophists. Socrates refused compensation from his students and desired to create an inner fellowship, not a formal school. “The basis of the relation is Socrates himself rather than the knowledge at his disposal. . . . Young and old become his disciples because he grants to them his fellowship, allowing them a share in his intellectual life.”<sup>26</sup> Ironically, Socrates’ rejection of the word *mathētēs* resulted, in the long run, in *mathētēs* being tied more securely to his way of thinking rather than that of the Sophists..

Greek disciple groups were characterized not only by an inner fellowship with the teacher/master, but also a life-long devotion to his cause.

The groups which assembled around the great philosophical teachers of antiquity were much too solidly established to disintegrate when the teachers died. This was not just because of the personal regard which the masters enjoyed and which gave them influence even after their death. The true presupposition for the continuation of groups of disciples is to be found, not merely at the personal level, but in the cause advocated and presented by the teachers. In the last resort these groups were formed by common acknowledgement of insights peculiar to the masters concerned. The groups regarded these as truth which they could not give up but had to propagate with all their power. The death of the teachers could not alter

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<sup>25</sup> All quotes in this paragraph, TDNT, 417.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 420.

this. On the contrary, it increased responsibility for the work and strengthened commitment to it.<sup>27</sup>

A “principal of tradition” is operative in these Greek disciple groups, and, as will be seen later, is also operative in other first century disciple groups. This principle, “which controlled the whole life and work of these Greek fellowships,” is that “the intentions of the master should be cultivated, and his sayings carefully preserved and transmitted.” Such transmission was not necessarily carried out in a mechanical way, however, but “in a process of constant movement which enables us to see that we have here the opposite of schematism and rigidity, namely, a living appropriation in both freedom and movement.”<sup>28</sup>

### Sociological Background

Other cultural and sociological aspects of Jewish society in first century Palestine relate to disciple groups. Racial purity was a key societal issue. “From a social point of view the whole community of Judaism at the time of Jesus was dominated by the fundamental idea of the maintenance of racial purity.”<sup>29</sup> Genealogical records proving racial purity were important, especially for priestly families, and social classes were based on racial purity. “All families in which some racial impurity could be established were excluded from the pure seed of the community.”<sup>30</sup> Various factors made it more challenging to maintain racial purity: the many Greeks who lived in Palestine, the Roman soldiers, and the upheaval caused by the prevalence of war in the preceding centuries. Yet

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>28</sup> All quotes in this paragraph, TDNT, pg. 424.

<sup>29</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 270.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

these difficulties made the maintenance of racial purity even more important to the Jews.

“The reason for this was a religious one: the nation was considered God-given and its purity was God’s will; the promises of the age to come were valid for the pure seed.”<sup>31</sup>

The family was foundational in Jewish society. From the time of Abraham, Judaism was a patriarchal society. Even during the time of independent nationhood, people were still organized by tribes, clans and families. The family was the primary means by which the Law was transmitted and the means by which God-pleasing living was taught and enforced. The role of women was similar to that of women in other Eastern cultures of the time. They had few rights, did not take part in public life, and wore veils that covered their faces in public. Women spent most of their time at home. “It was considered preferable for a woman, and especially an unmarried girl, in general not to go out at all.”<sup>32</sup> “Betrothal . . . signified the ‘acquisition’ of the woman by the man.”<sup>33</sup>

Society itself was to a great degree organized by clans and families. Just as the position of priest was reserved for the descendents of Aaron, within the tribe of Levi, and other Levites worked as temple assistants, so also other societal roles were family-based, but in a less regulated way, such as the musicians in 1 Chronicles 25:1-8.

Families were the means by which professional knowledge was transmitted. Jesus likely learned carpentry from Joseph. “Transmission of professional skills within particular families is repeatedly attested during the Second Temple period.”<sup>34</sup> During the centuries before Christ there likely were “official (state-sponsored?) scribal schools that trained professional bureaucrats for royal service (just as existed in other Near Eastern

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>34</sup> Sivertsev, 5.

monarchies of the time). . . [however] . . . they probably operated on a limited scale, and a good deal of education took place within informal and often family-based circles, including those of scribes and priests.”<sup>35</sup>

The term *elder* is common in the NT, both during Jesus’ ministry and also in the early Christian church. Families were ruled by an older, respected male, and these elders of the leading families were then the leaders of a community. Such elders probably were leaders/judges during the Exile, and at the return.<sup>36</sup> The Sanhedrin grew out of the union of these non-priestly heads of the leading families, itself not a large group, plus the priestly aristocracy. In Luke 7:3-4, Capernaum’s elders represented the centurion with a sick servant. Elders are frequently listed among the official authorities opposing Jesus (Matthew 16:21; Matthew 27:1; Mark 14:43; Luke 22:66).

Scholars agree that Hellenism was the major influence which led to disciple groups taking on some of the roles of the extended family, particularly the roles of teaching knowledge, skills and proper religious living. Most scholars tie these changes to early Hellenism, concluding that the changes were well established by 100 B.C. Alexei Sivertsev differs. He suggests Hellenization was not a strong influence on Judaism as early as was previously thought.<sup>37</sup> He feels the family was the primary influence until the time of Herod the Great, the time when Palestinian society became more urbanized and more Hellenized. Disciple circles began to replace family alliance and clans as the source and transmitter of knowledge during Herod’s time, Sivertsev feels. Sivertsev’s view that disciple groups became prominent only in the decades before Christ, and not 100-200

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Jeremias, 223.

<sup>37</sup> This is the main premise of his book, *Household, Sects . . .*, referenced earlier.

years prior, as earlier scholars concluded, gives even more emphasis to the prominent role of disciples in this time that God chose for Jesus' earthly ministry.

The city of Jerusalem, at the time the exiles returned, was a battered ruin. By the time of Christ, it was a thriving city, benefiting from the recent building projects of Herod the Great. It was "the citadel of theological and juridical knowledge of Judaism."<sup>38</sup> Jerusalem was also central to the Jews of the Diaspora. A large and thriving community of Jews remained in Babylonia, and Jewish communities existed throughout the known world, a factor in Josephus' desire to explain his people to the Greeks and Romans. Josephus notes, "One can hardly find a place anywhere in the world that has not sheltered this people and is not in their possession."<sup>39</sup> At the time of Christ, "more Jews lived in the Diaspora than in the land of Israel."<sup>40</sup> But Jerusalem remained central to the faith even of these dispersed Jews

Apocalyptic literature was popular at this time (second century B.C. to second century A.D.).<sup>41</sup> Its popularity reflects the turmoil, upheaval, and anxiety felt by the Jewish people and their desire for rescue and relief. They believed that God would soon fix things through judgment and the initiation of a new age.

Into this world, Christ was born.

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<sup>38</sup> Jeremias, 242.

<sup>39</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 114:15, quoted by Lohse, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Lohse, 120.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 55ff.

## CHAPTER 2. FIRST CENTURY JEWISH GROUPS

Many teaching and affiliation groups existed at the time of Christ's three-year ministry. Scripture refers to the disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35; Matthew 11:2) and of the Pharisees (Luke 5:33). Jesus' opponents referred to themselves once as "disciples of Moses" (John 9:28). During his ministry and in the years after the resurrection, Scripture relates that people saw Jesus and his followers as another sect or group (Acts 5:34-39). Those who saw and heard Jesus, then, were doing so in the context of the other groups of the time. This chapter will examine what is known (and conjectured) about those first century Jewish groups. The priests and scribes will be discussed first. Priests were central to Judaism, although they did not have disciples in any sense of the word. The "chief priests" are mentioned with the Pharisees and elders as groups in opposition to Jesus (Matthew 21:23). Scribes were influential in Judaism, also. As forerunners of Jewish rabbis, the scribal/rabbinical educational models are often connected with and compared to Jesus' actions with his disciples. The Pharisees, Jesus' primary opponents, and the Sadducees will then receive detailed treatment, and other groups will be mentioned.

The first century was a complex time. "Josephus bears witness to the complex social organization and strife" of this era.<sup>1</sup> Within the single faith of Judaism, "complex religious organizations and specialized religious roles developed and were institutionalized among the leaders."<sup>2</sup> The strife and conflict of the time led to constant and significant change within most of these groups. And, as noted earlier, sources from

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<sup>1</sup> Saldarini, 277.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5.

this period are neither as plentiful nor as detailed as we would wish, resulting in a variety of scholarly conclusions. Anthony Saldarini illustrates the variety of views: “Scholars have pictured the Pharisees as a sect within Judaism, a powerful religious leadership group, a political leadership group, a learned scholarly group, a lay movement in competition with the priesthood, a group of middle-class urban artisans or some combination of these.”<sup>3</sup> Also worth noting is that while membership in some groups was mutually exclusive, it was not so in others. A man could not be both a Pharisee and a Sadducee, as they held differing beliefs, but he could be a priest, a scribe and a Sadducee at the same time.

The power of each group was reflected both in their influence among the people in general, and also in their role within the Sanhedrin. This 70-member ruling council was initially composed of the elders of leading families. By the time of Christ, it consisted of the chief priests, scribes and elders. As the Pharisees and Sadducees increased their presence in the Sanhedrin, they increased their power and influence. The Sanhedrin is frequently mentioned in scripture, but at least one scholar sees references to certain groups as additional references to the Sanhedrin itself. “When occasionally only two groups are named--chief priests and scribes (Mark 11:18 par.; 14:1 par.; *et passim*), or the chief priests and elders (Matt. 21:45; 26:3, 47; *et passim*)--or when only the chief priests are cited as representatives of the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:55 par. *et passim*), what is meant is always the supreme Jewish authority which came together under the leadership of the high priest, to regulate all secular and spiritual matters which affected the Jewish population.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>4</sup> Lohse, 22.



## Priests

Priests are unique among the groups studied here because one did not become a priest simply by choice. Not only must a man be born into a priestly family, a descendant of Aaron in the clan of Levi, but it was necessary to prove the purity of that descent to become a priest. Priests followed strict rules of marriage; written genealogical records were necessary and highly valued. A questioning of the purity of descent was involved when John Hyrcanus broke with the Pharisees, as Josephus tells the story. Eleazar, a Pharisee, suggested that John Hyrcanus “lay down the high priesthood” and be content with being the head of the civil government, because “we have heard it from old men that thy mother had been a captive under the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes.”<sup>5</sup> Hyrcanus and the other Pharisees were upset with Eleazar, not due to the slander on the virtue of Hyrcanus’ mother, but because the story of the captivity was false. If the story were believed, the consequences would be dire for Hyrcanus. Hyrcanus broke with the Pharisees because the punishment recommended by the other Pharisees for Eleazar, “stripes and bonds,” was not sufficient to Hyrcanus for the enormity of the crime of telling a false story.<sup>6</sup> Purity of descent was taken so seriously that when a woman, even one of known virtue, had spent time in a town occupied by foreign forces, she was no longer considered pure and her descendants were ineligible for the priesthood. The seriousness with which purity of descent was taken helps explain the degree to which women were protected, even contained, at home.

All priests living in or near Jerusalem, including Galilee, shared in the temple activities, particularly the sacrifices. Joachim Jeremias explains that these priests were

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<sup>5</sup> William Whiston, tr., *The Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1981), 281.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

divided into twenty-four clans.<sup>7</sup> Each clan served in Jerusalem for one week at a time, called a weekly course. Clans were divided into four to nine family groups, and these groups worked together in daily courses during their assigned week. During the three major festivals each year, all twenty-four clans of priests were in Jerusalem. Jeremias estimates there were about 50 priests in a daily (non-festival) course, and therefore about 300 priests in the clan that served for the week, with a total of perhaps 7200 priests serving over a year's time.

Priests who lived outside of Jerusalem were therefore in Jerusalem one to two months a year and at home the other eleven to twelve months, supporting themselves through a trade, mostly manual work. Some priests were not educated, but others likely served in local courts of justice, and read and expounded on the Law during synagogue worship. There was a wide gulf between the priests who lived in the countryside and the priests of the aristocracy in Jerusalem, who were generally wealthier and more educated. "The number of Jerusalem priests who had an education as scribes was quite large."<sup>8</sup>

Levites, descended from Levi but not from Aaron, were "inferior clergy."<sup>9</sup> About half of them, considered the upper stratum, were temple musicians. The others were more like servants. They prepared certain items for temple rites, they cleaned the temple (except the court of priests which they could not enter), and they served as the temple police. Jeremias estimates the number of Levites at this time to be only 25 percent more than the number of priests, because not as many Levites as priests returned from Babylon.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremias, 198ff.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 104

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 207

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 198.

The high priest was the most important individual in Judaism. In addition to entering the Holy of Holies once a year, he led the Sanhedrin and represented the people to the Roman rulers. The “captain of the temple” was a priest who served as assistant to the high priest and often succeeded him. The “chief priests,” who are also mentioned frequently as a group in scripture (Matthew 16:21; Mark 11:27; Luke 20:19; John 18:3), included the high priest and the captain of the temple plus the temple overseer, the treasurer, and those who served as directors of the weekly and daily courses.

### Scribes

At the time of Ezra, “the title of scribe was given to someone who was able to practice the art of writing and who served as a royal official.”<sup>11</sup> By the time of Christ, scribal schools are developing, and scribes hold a highly respected position in society. Their influence on Judaism continues to grow in future years. They are the rabbis of rabbinical Judaism, the form of Judaism that was formalized in the centuries after Christ and which prevailed over centuries down to the present day. The time of Christ falls during the era often identified as the origin of rabbinic Judaism, a time that began with the rise of Hellenism and continued to about A.D. 200. The title “rabbi” itself was undergoing change in this period. It began as a general title of honor but at the end was reserved exclusively for scribes.<sup>12</sup> Therefore Jesus was often called “Rabbi” (John 20:16; Mark 9:5; Mark 10:51) even though he had not been educated as a scribe (John 7:15).

Like priests, scribes, too, are unique among groups at this time. “Scribes do not seem to be a coherent social group with a set membership, but rather a class of literate

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<sup>11</sup> Lohse, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremias, 236.

individuals drawn from many parts of society who filled many social roles and were attached to all parts of society from the village to the palace and Temple.”<sup>13</sup> Scribes were held in very high esteem. People rose when a scribe passed by; crowds of people came to the lectures of the popular ones. Scribes were invited to feasts and given seats of honor; their tombs were venerated. They were greeted respectfully as “Rabbi,” “Father” or “Master.”

Their knowledge, the result of their education, was the reason scribes were honored. A scribe’s education was long and thorough. Students applied to study with a particular scribe as their teacher. “If accepted, the pupil entered into a lifetime association with the teacher.”<sup>14</sup> “They learned from their master in daily life as well as in the lecture room; their master’s actions, even his gestures, were closely watched, and they drew from them guidance on ritual questions.”<sup>15</sup> When the teacher decided the student had completed the study, he was considered a scholar. But it was only when he reached a certain age that his teacher laid his hands on him and ordained him. He then was “received into the company of scribes as a member with full rights, an ‘ordained scholar.’”<sup>16</sup>

The scribes adopted the teaching techniques of the Greeks, based on questions and answers, to expound the Hebrew scripture. Eduard Lohse points out that Jesus used this same method in Luke 10:25-37 to counter a lawyer’s question.<sup>17</sup> To the lawyer’s question, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds with another question, “What is written in the Law?” and agrees with the lawyer’s answer. The

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<sup>13</sup> Saldarini, 275.

<sup>14</sup> Lohse, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremias, 242-3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 235-6.

<sup>17</sup> Lohse, 117.

“student” pursues the topic with a further question. Jesus answers by relating the story of the Good Samaritan and concludes it with a final question, “Which one of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” Jesus’ question forces the lawyer to acknowledge the obvious conclusion.

Jeremias describes the type of knowledge transmitted from rabbi to student in the scribal schools in a way not mentioned by other scholars consulted. To Jeremias, “the decisive reason for [the scribes’] dominant influence” was “the fact, far too little recognized, that they were the guardians of a secret knowledge, of an esoteric tradition.”<sup>18</sup> This esoteric knowledge is found in the apocalyptic writings of later Judaism, and is not of minor quantity. “Esoteric teachings were not isolated theological writings, but great theological systems, great doctrinal constructions, whose content was attributed to divine inspiration.”<sup>19</sup> Jeremias also notes as “a still more important fact” that the oral tradition, although taught in places of instruction and synagogue, could only be transmitted orally and not propagated by the written word since it was the “secret of God” and “it was forbidden to mingle Scripture with tradition.”<sup>20</sup> It was not written down until the second century AD, and it was written then only because Jewish leaders saw it as a necessary counter to the NT canon. “In this way, most of the doctrine was stripped of its character of esoteric tradition.”<sup>21</sup> Whether or not Jeremias’s conclusions are valid in this matter, they add an interesting layer of speculation to the public/private nature of Jesus’ teachings, a topic addressed later in this paper (beginning on page 53)

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<sup>18</sup> Jeremias, 237.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Anyone could become a scribe. Some scribes, such as Josephus, were from the priestly aristocracy, but these were outnumbered by scribes from all classes of society, including merchants and craftsmen. Hillel, one of the most famous rabbis of the time, had been a day laborer.<sup>22</sup> Proselytes could become scribes, as could people not of pure Jewish descent. Scholars disagree on how most scribes supported themselves. There is evidence that they were required to support themselves through a craft or trade, such as tent-making. They also may have been paid by their students, or supported by subsidies from the Temple treasury. Another scholar sees scribes being primarily dependent on the wealthy governing class for their employment.<sup>23</sup>

The knowledge for which the scribes were honored was not simply factual knowledge of the Torah, the Law given by God to Moses. They also transmitted the oral traditions. The viewpoint of the Pharisees, that the oral tradition was equal to the scripture, was accepted by the people. These traditions regulated all aspects of life, giving the scribes powerful authority. “Their decision had the power to ‘bind’ or to ‘loose’ (cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18) for all time the Jews of the entire world.”<sup>24</sup> Scribes gave decisions on theological as well as legal and practical issues. Throughout the land, they were preferred as elders, community leaders, judges and synagogue officials. “A large number of important posts hitherto held by priests and laymen of high rank had, in the first century A.D., passed entirely, or predominantly, into the hands of scribes.”<sup>25</sup> Scribes had also joined the elders of patrician families and the chief priests in the Sanhedrin. All the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin were scribes.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>23</sup> Saldarini, 274.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremias, 236.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 237.

Because this era is the origin of rabbinic Judaism, it is worthwhile to look at how rabbinic Judaism used the Hebrew word *talmyd* (learner or pupil, pronounced “tahl-MEED”), the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *mathētēs* (disciple). The word *talmyd* only appears once in the OT (Old Testament). The Chronicler is explaining how King David is organizing Levites, priests, and other tabernacle workers, and at the end of a list of musicians he notes, “they cast lots for their duties, small and great, teacher and pupil [*talmyd*] alike” (1 Chronicles 25:8). The rarity of this word in the OT will be addressed in chapter three, but here it is appropriate to look ahead and note how common its use was in rabbinic Judaism, where it is used solely for “the one who gives himself (as a learner) to Scripture and to the religious tradition of Judaism.”<sup>26</sup> It is only used of men. There is no *talmyd* without a rabbi, and the teacher carries great significance, but “the real center of concern is the matter advocated by the teacher, not the teacher himself.”<sup>27</sup> Moses is the ultimate teacher because he was the one to whom God gave the Torah. One of the greatest responsibilities of each teacher and student is to pass on the understanding of the Torah and the tradition.

In addition to adopting Greek question/answer teaching style, the Jews also adopted the Greek pattern of using *mathētēs* to denote someone who has an intellectual fellowship with another person, even when there is no direct link. Therefore, Josephus describes Joshua and Elisha, respectively, as the *mathētēs* of Moses and Elijah.<sup>28</sup> But although rabbinic Judaism adopts this term from Hellenism “it is integrated into the central concern of Judaism, i.e., concern for the Torah. Hence the Rabbinic *talmyd* is never an individualist. If so, he would place himself outside the fellowship. He stands

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<sup>26</sup> TDNT, 431-2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 439.

always within the Jewish community, seeking to help it to a right orientation of the service which it renders to God.”<sup>29</sup>

### Pharisees

There is no definitive evidence for the origin of the Pharisees, but most scholars connect their beginnings to the Hasideans (also transliterated as Hasidim and Chasidim) who were active in the revolt against Antiochus IV around 170 B.C. Although we first hear of the Hasideans at this time, “Probably this group had not suddenly sprung up at the time of the revolt, but developed from pietistic tendencies that grew within Judaism during the Hellenization of the Ptolemaic age.”<sup>30</sup> The Hasideans were scribes, or were led by scribes, and their name means the “separate” or “holy” ones. They were “orthodox, legalistic, and strict,”<sup>31</sup> opposed to everything Gentile, and they felt all Jews should follow the more strict rules of daily life that the priests followed.

For more than a generation they had opposed the activity of the priestly aristocracy that had aided and abetted the Hellenizing ways of the Seleucid kings. They were not strictly a political party, although when the Jews decided to revolt, they joined them to fight for freedom of religion from oppression and tyranny. When, however, religious freedom had been won, the Chasidim refused to continue to fight for political freedom.<sup>32</sup>

The philosophical disagreement between the Hasideans and priestly aristocracy carried through into the philosophical disagreements between Pharisees and Sadducees.

The beliefs of the Pharisees are well established by the time of Jesus’ ministry. To them, oral traditions and rules carried the same authority as the written Torah. The legalistic way in which they carried out every regulation, and their belief that all Jews should do the same, is their most distinguishing characteristic in scripture. Living

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>30</sup> Nickelsburg, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Surburg, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 32-33.



according to the law and traditions was more important to them than theological beliefs; the external more important than the internal. They also believed in a continuing existence after death, in which there would be rewards or punishment. Their goals were social, “A new, communal commitment to a strict Jewish way of life based on adherence to the covenant,”<sup>33</sup> and they engaged in politics to achieve these goals.

The Pharisees were popular with the people for their devout living, and for the way in which they reduced class distinctions. People from all classes of society, rich and poor, were welcomed as fellow Pharisees.<sup>34</sup> “The Pharisaic societies included some priests, but were composed primarily of laymen, craftsmen, farmers, and merchants, who lived not only in the city but also in the country, in Judea and in Galilee.”<sup>35</sup> Josephus notes, “The Pharisees are affectionate to each other and cultivate harmonious relations with the community.”<sup>36</sup> He also comments that their popularity affected the Sadducees: “For whenever they [Sadducees] assume some office, though they submit unwillingly and perforce, yet submit they do to the formulas of the Pharisees, since otherwise the masses would not tolerate them.”<sup>37</sup>

Although the Pharisees allowed any and all to join them, they rigorously separated themselves from non-Pharisees, the masses of people who did not follow the oral tradition as carefully as they did. “This opposition grew to the dimensions of a caste distinction on the part of the Pharisees.”<sup>38</sup> Their broad phylacteries and the distinctive borders on their clothes distinguished them in public.<sup>39</sup> Not only did Pharisees eat meals

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<sup>33</sup> Saldaraini, 282.

<sup>34</sup> Surburg, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Lohse, 79.

<sup>36</sup> JW 2:166, quoted by Nickelsburg, 31.

<sup>37</sup> JA 18:16, quoted by Nickelsburg, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Jeremias, 267.

<sup>39</sup> Surburg, 55.

together, but they also tried to do all their purchasing from other Pharisees, to ensure that the goods purchased had been properly tithed. Their preference was to avoid all contact with non-Pharisees.

Because sources are slim, there is disagreement on what type of societies the Pharisees formed in order to practice their pure way of life. Some scholars see well-defined communities. “The Pharisees combined to form distinct societies in which they could follow the commandments of the Law exactly.”<sup>40</sup> Jeremias presents them as closed communities, concentrated in Jerusalem, with strict rules of admission and a probationary period for new members.<sup>41</sup> Saldarini sees more fluidity in Pharisaic membership.

Concretely, a person was not primarily a Pharisee. A member of the Pharisees retained his family and territorial allegiances, his roles in society and occupation, his friends and network of associates. In some way not revealed in the sources he committed himself to be a Pharisee and this commitment with its particular understanding of the Jewish covenant and Jewish life guided many of his endeavors and claimed a part of his time, energy and resources.<sup>42</sup>

He also minimizes their impact on the nation as a whole:

Because the Pharisees are prominent among Jewish groups mentioned in the NT, Biblical scholars tend to inflate their importance. From the viewpoint of the whole culture, and especially that of the ruling classes, the Pharisees were of minor importance. Josephus reflects this larger perspective by mentioning the Pharisees on less than twenty occasions in his many volumes.<sup>43</sup>

Pharisees and scribes are closely linked. Scripture often connects them (Matthew 12:38; 23:2; Luke 11:53; John 8:3). Leaders of the Pharisees had scribal training, and “the chief men among the Pharisees were the scribes . . . A majority of the scribes belonged to the Pharisees, and it was through the scribes that the party exercised strong

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<sup>40</sup> Lohse, 78.

<sup>41</sup> Jeremias, 251.

<sup>42</sup> Saldarini, 284.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 79.

influence among the people and in the Sanhedrin.”<sup>44</sup> Although Pharisees, as a named group, disappear from Judaism after A.D. 70, their influence continued and, through the scribes/rabbis, shaped rabbinic Judaism.

### Sadducees and Other Groups

The Sadducees are the counterpart of the Pharisees. Opposite in virtually every respect, they mostly appear alongside the Pharisees in the NT, Josephus, and rabbinic literature.<sup>45</sup> Their origin is disputed, although some see them arising in the same tumultuous period as the Hasideans/Pharisees. The meaning of their name is unknown, with some<sup>46</sup> feeling that it is related to the Hebrew word *zaddukim* (righteous) and others<sup>47</sup> connecting it to Zadok, high priest under Solomon (I Kings 2:35). The task of understanding this group is made more difficult by that fact that “we possess not one word assuredly written by a Sadducee, only things written about them by their opponents.”<sup>48</sup>

While the Pharisees represented and were popular among the masses of the people, the Sadducees were of the upper classes, the wealthy families whose members provided most of the Jewish leadership, both priestly and lay. “The patrician families stood in the same relationship to the priestly nobility as the Pharisees to the scribes. In both cases the laity formed the mass of supporters; the ‘men of religion’—Sadducean clergy, Pharisaic theologians—were the leaders.”<sup>49</sup> Little is recorded about the Sadducee

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<sup>44</sup> Surburg, 55.

<sup>45</sup> Saldarini, 298.

<sup>46</sup> Surburg, 55.

<sup>47</sup> Lohse, 74.

<sup>48</sup> Nickelsburg, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremias, 230.

way of life, but it was not admired, unless Josephus is biased when he says, “The Sadducees . . . are, even among themselves, rather boorish in their behavior, and in their intercourse with their peers are as rude as to aliens.”<sup>50</sup>

Sadducees followed only the written Law (Torah). They did not give the rest of the OT, or the oral traditions, the same status as the Torah. They also did not believe in a resurrection, an afterlife, angels or spirits. Paul uses that fact to his advantage when he appears before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:8). Saldarini minimizes the difference of beliefs between Pharisees and Sadducees, saying that both groups simply had different interpretations of Torah and its application.<sup>51</sup>

Nothing is known of how a person became a Sadducee, although Jeremias argues, unconvincingly, that they must have been similar to the Pharisees. “We know definitely that the Pharisees and the Essenes were clearly defined communities, with conditions of admission and definite principles; it follows then that the same must be true of the Sadducees. Not everyone could gain admission to this tight circle of Sadducees.”<sup>52</sup> The fact that they were of the upper classes does lead to the conclusion that their numbers were likely smaller than those of the Pharisees. Their close ties to the Temple in Jerusalem resulted in the end of the Sadducees when the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.

The Essenes were another Jewish group of this period. Very little was known about them until the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls about 50 years ago, a discovery which ignited much interest in them. The scrolls contained very detailed facts on the beliefs and way of life of this community by the Dead Sea. However, it cannot be proved

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<sup>50</sup> JW 2:166, quoted by Nickelsburg, 31.

<sup>51</sup> Saldarini, 303.

<sup>52</sup> Jeremias, 231.

that the group described in the scrolls was an Essene group, and, if it was, to what degree their community reflected the entirety of the Essene sect or how the way of life of the group evolved over the years of its existence. The Essenes are thought to have originated with the Pharisees from the Hasideans, but their strong desire to remain separate and pure, “to be the pure community of Israel,” led them to move themselves further from normal society.<sup>53</sup>

The overall picture that has emerged of the Essenes is that some groups lived in Jerusalem, others in villages, and still others in separate communities.<sup>54</sup> Although some documents describe family life, others describe a celibate community of men. The community was tightly closed; it took three years to become a member. They were also secretive. “The members were not allowed to tell outsiders about the life, the regulations, and the books of the community.”<sup>55</sup> They were farmers, who held everything in common. Each group had a supervisor, a scribe, who expounded on the law, admitted new members, punished those who broke the rules, and was the father of the community.<sup>56</sup>

Josephus praises the morals of the Essenes and numbers them as having 4000 men.<sup>57</sup> Although they sent gifts to the temple, they did not participate in temple religious ceremonies.<sup>58</sup> Their almost complete separation from, and lack of involvement in, the larger Jewish community meant they had little effect on religious or political life of the Jewish people as a whole in the first century.

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<sup>53</sup> Lohse, 87.

<sup>54</sup> Surburg, 58.

<sup>55</sup> Lohse, 87.

<sup>56</sup> Jeremias, 259-60.

<sup>57</sup> Whiston, *JA* 18:5.

<sup>58</sup> Surburg, 58.

Some scholars associate John the Baptist, who “was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (Luke 1:80), and his disciples with the Essenes. John’s disciples are active in the Gospels. They relayed John’s question to Jesus (Matthew 11:2) and buried John’s body after his death (Matthew 14:12). They fasted (Matthew 9:14) and had a distinctive prayer or prayers (Luke 11:1). John’s influence continued after his death and beyond Judea, most likely by his disciples. Apollos, a Jewish Christian in Ephesus, “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25). John’s entire life and message focused on Christ. Two of John’s disciples, Andrew and one other, perhaps John the brother of James, left John the Baptist to become Jesus’ disciples (John 1:35-40).

The Herodians and Zealots were also active at this time. The Herodians (Matthew 22:16; Mark 3:6) were, as their name indicates, supporters of the Herodian rulers. Josephus connects the Zealots to the revolt of Judas the Galilean in A.D. 6.<sup>59</sup> The Zealots opposed Roman rule with the zeal of those in the earlier Maccabean revolt, and “were the driving force” in the Jewish war of A.D. 70.<sup>60</sup> Josephus, because he favored peaceful groups who supported law and order, was strongly opposed to the Zealots. In matters of doctrine, the Zealots agreed with the Pharisees.<sup>61</sup> Jesus included a member of this group, Simon the Zealot, among his disciples (Luke 6:15).

### Summary of Background and Conclusions

The people who saw Jesus and his disciples and who heard Jesus talk about being his disciple, along with the four men who wrote the Gospels and the people who first read

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>60</sup> Lohse, 84.

<sup>61</sup> Nickelsburg, 29.

and heard the Gospel narratives -- all these people lived in a complex and formative time. George Nickelsburg notes that the religion of this era is often oversimplified, and viewed only as a forerunner of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.<sup>62</sup> But from 200 B.C. to A.D. 100 “Judaism . . . saw a rich, variegated development of groups, sects, and parties, and tendencies, points of view, and concepts.”<sup>63</sup> This rich and vibrant mix provided the setting for the biblical picture of discipleship.

Social changes were underway at this time. Many of them, such as the growth of voluntary groups, resulted from Hellenization. “The presence of such groups [Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Christians, Zealots, Sicarii] bespeaks the Hellenistic milieu of Judaism and Christianity, in which private, voluntary associations for worship, socialization and other pursuits were common.”<sup>64</sup> The political and theological conflict between the Sadducees and Pharisees was also social. The Sadducees’ conservative nature was also reflected in their conservative social base: the aristocratic priests and the patrician families. The destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 marked the end not only of the Sadducees, but also these aristocratic and priestly classes. After A.D. 70, “the new and powerful ruling class of the scribes had everywhere overtaken the ancient class of priestly and lay nobility, founded on the privileges of birth.”<sup>65</sup>

The political and social changes taking place at this time were very significant, but they are of less impact than the religious formation that took place in Judaism, and the resulting birth of Christianity. Those religious changes primarily had to do with the view of the Law, the Torah.

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<sup>62</sup> Nickelsburg, 1ff.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>64</sup> Saldarini, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Jeremias, 232.

Every code of law engenders a tradition of interpretation as it responds to the challenges of social, economic, political and intellectual change and development. The Torah was no different. By the last centuries before the Common Era a number of different traditions of interpretation of the Torah were cultivated by various groups and sects, such as the Sadducees and Essenes. But it was the Pharisees' exposition of the Torah that was to have the most enduring and significant implications.<sup>66</sup>

The Pharisaic view that was still in contention at the time of Christ, but eventually triumphed in Judaism some decades later, included two important aspects regarding the Law: that the unwritten traditions carried the same weight as the written Law, and that these laws were not just for the priests, but were for all the people. In the latter fact, Jeremias sees a connection to an aspect of Christian theology. The Pharisees, he notes, "Voluntarily submitted themselves to priestly rules and thus prepared the way for a universal priesthood."<sup>67</sup>

In a complex and changing time such as this, the two or three decades between Christ's ministry and the writing of the Gospels are significant. As the apostles and disciples spread the good news in the earliest years after Pentecost, they had no idea of starting a new sect or religion. Jesus was the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of all that their faith had anticipated and taught. The book of Acts records their surprise as they saw the Spirit working so mightily among the Gentiles also, and it records the way they dealt with the controversies that arose as a result. And these apostles certainly also saw and sorrowed over, as Paul so eloquently expresses in Romans 9:1-5, the rejection of the Savior by Jewish leaders.

Jesus loved the Law, too. But his conflict with the Pharisees and the other groups, as recorded in the Gospels, often centered on this rising Pharisaic view of the Law. By

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<sup>66</sup> Nickelsburg, 89.

<sup>67</sup> Jeremias, 266.



adding the traditions, and their interpretations of the laws and traditions, as necessary to purity, it was almost inevitable that legalism and hypocrisy would result. For the Pharisees, the Law of God had, in their hearts, replaced the God who gave the Law, and thus they were unable to recognize him in their midst.

### CHAPTER 3. DISCIPLE NARRATIVES AND TEACHINGS IN SCRIPTURE

The study of the background of first century Judaism, particularly the various groups to which people were attached, leads to a detailed examination of Scriptural teachings involving disciples and discipleship. A look at the OT precedes the look at the NT. Three main areas in the Gospels/Acts are examined: the calling of disciples; Jesus as teacher of disciples; and the disciples' involvement in the work of Jesus. This chapter concludes by looking at the use of the word *disciple* in the NT beyond the Gospels.

#### Old Testament

As mentioned earlier (page 25), the Greek word for disciple, *mathētēs*, does not appear in the Septuagint, and its Hebrew counterpart, *talmiyd*, appears only once in the OT. The fact that *talmiyd* is used extensively in Rabbinic Judaism for “disciple” is therefore very unusual and worth a careful examination. The following discussion is based on the work by Karl Rengstorf in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT).<sup>1</sup>

The use of the Hebrew word for “learn” (*lmd*) in the OT helps explain the virtual absence of the word “pupil.” “Learn” is always related to the will of God. “It denotes the process in course of which man makes this will his own.”<sup>2</sup> But in the OT, it is the whole community of God’s people that does the learning, except in the few cases, such as that of a king (as in Deuteronomy 17:19), where someone has tasks unique to his position. Since the community is divinely-chosen, “It is quite impossible for [the Jewish

<sup>1</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. *mathētēs*, 426ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

community] to use a noun formed from [learn] to denote the individual who gives himself specially to [learning] and thereby to differentiate him from the other members of the chosen people.”<sup>3</sup>

Even more striking than the fact that the word *pupil/disciple* only appears once in the OT, is the total absence of the concept of disciple. The formal teacher/pupil relationship does exist, but “the OT, unlike the classical Greek world and Hellenism, has no master-disciple relation. Whether among the prophets or the scribes we seek in vain for anything corresponding to it.”<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned earlier in this paper (page 25), Josephus refers to Joshua and Elisha as the *mathētai* of, respectively, Moses and Elijah. Although Josephus thus uses a term familiar and comfortable to his Greek and Roman audience, in neither these two nor other relationships does the OT actually describe a master/disciple relationship. Joshua is described as the assistant of Moses (Exodus 24:13; 33:11; Numbers 11:28). When Joshua is appointed as successor to Moses (Numbers 27:15-23), Moses asks God to appoint “a man”; he does not specifically request that Joshua be appointed. The scriptural account “does not touch on the personal relation between the two.”<sup>5</sup> Although Moses lays hands on Joshua and is told to “invest him with some of your authority” (Numbers 27:20), “Joshua does not discharge his office in the shadow of his predecessor but in terms of the full authority with which he is vested by God.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the OT prophets had assistants, but not disciples. Although Elijah is told, “You shall anoint [Elisha] to be prophet in your place” (1 Kings 19:16), when Elijah casts his cloak on Elisha, Elisha

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

follows as Elijah's assistant (19:21). Elisha does not grow into his office, but he "receives it the moment Elijah leaves the scene (2 K. 2:9ff), and he exercises it, not in Elijah's name, but, like Elijah (2:15), solely in the name of God (3:11ff.)."<sup>7</sup>

Another striking absence in the OT is that of a principle of tradition. Although Moses, who received the Law from God, is foundational to the point that "the very existence of the people is rooted in the lifework of Moses,"<sup>8</sup> and all of the prophets continue his work, there is no veneration of his person. The absence of a principal of tradition, and the absence of the master/disciple relationship, demonstrate the chasm between the OT and rabbinic Judaism. This chasm, evident already at the time of Christ, was part of the reason groups such as the Pharisees and scribes opposed Jesus.

"The religion of Israel is a religion of revelation."<sup>9</sup> God reveals himself, and the primary relationship is always with God himself. God's representatives do not speak their own words or promote or defend themselves. Their commitment is to God, not to other men.

In the sphere of revelation there is no place for the establishment of a master-disciple relation, nor is there the possibility of setting up a human word alongside the Word of God which is proclaimed, nor of trying to ensure the force of the divine address by basing it on the authority of a great personality. . . . If in the OT there is no place whatever for the veneration of the religious leader as master, or for the cultivation of his memory as an almost religious duty, the final reason for this is that in the OT the disclosure of God is regarded as continuous and dynamic.<sup>10</sup>

The master/disciple relationship and the principal of tradition are Hellenistic concepts adopted first by certain groups within Judaism as tools to preserve and protect Judaism

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 430

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 431

from Hellenistic religions and culture. These tools later became characteristic of all of rabbinic Judaism.

## New Testament

### ***Follow as Discipleship Term***

When studying NT texts pertaining to disciples, texts with the word “follow” must be included. Jesus made that connection clear when he called individuals to discipleship with the succinct invitation/command, “Follow Me” (Mathew 4:9; Mark 2:14). He also tied the two together when he said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross [daily, Luke] and follow me” (Mark 8:34; Matthew 16:24; parallel, Luke 9:23). To follow, or “‘to come after someone’ is technical terminology for discipleship among the scribes and rabbis of the first century.”<sup>11</sup> In the NT, the word *follow* “appears almost exclusively in the Gospels . . . In other words, it occurs in the writings that are nearest to the Rab[binical] World.”<sup>12</sup> The corresponding Hebrew OT phrase is *halak ahre*. Its dominant use was a negative one, “as a fixed phrase for backsliding into paganism by going after other gods (cf. Judges 2:12; Deuteronomy 4:3; Jeremiah 2:5).”<sup>13</sup> The ESV often translates this as “go after.”

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<sup>11</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 51.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Blending, “akolouthēō” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 481.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

## Calling of Disciples

All four Gospel writers include, and give prominence to, a detailed account of the calling of disciples early in their Gospels. The three Synoptics include the calling of the two sets of fishermen brothers, Peter (Simon) and Andrew, and James and John, while John's Gospel includes the calling of Andrew and Peter, Phillip and Nathanael, and an unnamed disciple.

The accounts of Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20 are very similar. The men are at their daily work: Peter and Andrew are casting their nets into the sea; James and John are a bit further up the shore, mending their nets. Jesus calls them. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men," are the words used to Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17); for James and John, it is simply related that "he called them" (Matthew 4:21; Mark 1:20). The "follow" term for becoming a disciple is used both in Jesus' call and in the response, "They . . . followed him" (Matthew 4:20, 22; Mark 1:18, 20). Their response was both "immediate" (Matthew 4:22; Mark 1:20) and complete. The writers detail what these men left—their nets, the boat, father Zebedee, and the hired servants.

Luke's account (5:1-11) might or might not be of the same event. The basics are the same: Peter, James and John are named; they are at their daily work; Jesus says, "You will be catching men" (v. 10), and the response is the same: "They left everything and followed him" (v. 11). Andrew is not named, and Luke situates the calling as a response to Peter's declaration of sinfulness and unworthiness following a miraculous catch of fish. Peter already seems to have a relationship with Jesus, as he calls him "Master" and is willing, at Jesus' word, to fish at an illogical time (v. 5). For all three Gospel writers, the main points are Jesus' direct and personal call, its impact, and the totality of response

from these men who became leading disciples of Jesus. All three accounts connect the call of these disciples with the work Jesus is calling them to do, that of being fishers of men.

John relates two different incidents (1:35-42). The day after Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist is standing with two of his own disciples. John sees Jesus passing by, points him out as the "Lamb of God" (v. 36), and, as a result, the two disciples follow Jesus. It is impossible to tell how "follow" is being used here, but "it may be used in both senses. They walked down the path after Jesus and thus followed. But they also symbolically committed themselves to Him."<sup>14</sup> Jesus initiates a conversation and invites them to stay with him. One of the two is Andrew, who then tells his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah" (v. 41). Andrew brings Simon to Jesus, and Simon receives his new name "Peter." (Some see the unnamed second disciple here as a reference by the author John to himself.<sup>15</sup>) The next day, Jesus "found Philip" and says, "Follow me" (v. 43). Philip finds and brings to Jesus a skeptical Nathanael, who becomes convinced, and calls Jesus "Son of God" and "King of Israel" (v. 49), because Jesus saw him under the fig tree. Other than the words to Phillip in v. 43, no explicit disciple language is used here, but the emphasis again is on the impact that Jesus and his words have on others.

The writer John also emphasizes the connection between John the Baptist and Jesus, as well as the identification of Jesus as Messiah. John's disciples leave him to join Jesus, fulfilling John's purpose of pointing to Christ; Jesus' group of disciples grows, and Jesus is identified as "the Lamb of God" (v.36), Messiah (v.41), "him of whom Moses . .

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<sup>14</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 156.

<sup>15</sup> Robert G. Hoerber, *Concordia Self-study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 1605. Commentary on John 1:35.

. and the prophets wrote” (v.45), and “Son of God . . . King of Israel” (v. 49). While John does not include statements about how these five men (Andrew, the unnamed disciple, Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael) left everything to follow Jesus, he does specifically relate how two of them immediately told someone else about Jesus, being unwitting but natural “fishers of men.”

All three Synoptics also include the calling of Matthew (Levi), the tax collector (Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:13-14, Luke 5:27-28). The parallels to the calling of the fishermen are notable. Matthew is at his daily work; Jesus says, “Follow me;” Matthew immediately leaves everything (only noted in Luke) and follows Jesus. The “great feast” that Matthew throws for Jesus, to which he invited “a large company of tax collectors,” echoes an aspect of John’s account, above, since Matthew immediately wants his friends to meet Jesus.

The context of the calling of Matthew, though, is different than the other disciple-calling events. Rather than at the immediate beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Matthew’s call is in the context of conflict with religious leaders (Matthew 9:1-17; Mark 2:1-28 and Luke 5:17-6:11). The setting is Jesus’ own city of Capernaum, as friends bring a paralytic to him. Because Jesus first tells the paralytic that his sins are forgiven, religious leaders (identified as “scribes” in Matthew 9:3 and Mark 2:6; and in Luke 5:17 as “Pharisees and teachers of the law . . . who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem”<sup>16</sup>) conclude Jesus is blaspheming. Jesus demonstrates his authority to forgive sins by healing the paralytic and the people are amazed. Matthew’s call immediately follows this incident, and the events that follow Matthew’s call continue the conflict with

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that the writers use variety when naming the religious leaders in these accounts will be addressed in a later portion of this paper (page 81).



religious leaders. At the feast Matthew gives for his Lord, the leaders (Pharisees in Matthew, “scribes of the Pharisees” in Mark; “Pharisees and their scribes” in Luke) complain that Jesus eats with sinners. A question is asked (by “disciples of John” in Matthew, by “people” in Mark, and by “they” [the Pharisees and their scribes?] in Luke) about why the Pharisees and John’s disciples fast, while Jesus’ disciples do not. Jesus responds that his disciples will fast when he, “the bridegroom,” is no longer with them, and adds his comments on new wine going into new wineskins. Mark (2:23-28) includes an additional conflict with the Pharisees, over Jesus’ disciples getting food from a grainfield on the Sabbath; Luke does the same (6:1-5) and then adds another conflict (6:6-11) with the Pharisees when Jesus healed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on a Sabbath. Therefore all three synoptic writers, as they relate the call of Matthew, are emphasizing that Jesus called such a notorious “sinner” as Matthew in the same way he called more respectable fishermen, and with the same result. They are also contrasting Jesus’ actions with Matthew with the religious leaders’ concern about ritual purity.

The Gospels, then, record the calling of seven of the twelve disciples who were appointed as apostles: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael (called Bartholomew in Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:14, and Acts 1:13) and Matthew. We are given no information on the calling of the others: Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus (Judas son of James in Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13), Simon the Zealot/Cananaen, and Judas Iscariot.

The Gospel writers include accounts of five people who came to Jesus, asking to be his disciple. These accounts expand our view of the calling of disciples. Matthew

(8:18-21) and Luke (9:57-62) both record two instances, and Luke includes a third. The similarities and differences in these parallel passages (see table 1) reveal what the Gospel writers see as important in what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. These three incidents are not included in the Gospel accounts to inform us about the specific individuals who did or did not become disciples, or to demonstrate the procedure for becoming a disciple. They are here to illustrate the high cost of being a disciple of Jesus. We are not even told how these individuals responded ultimately to Jesus, whether or not they put following Jesus above their own comfort or their family responsibilities. But we are left with no doubt as to the fact that being a disciple of Jesus means putting him ahead of every other relationship and consideration.

Table 1: Would-be Disciples

	<b>Matthew 8:18-21</b>	<b>Luke 9:57-62</b>
<b>Individual #1</b>	a scribe	"someone"
how the encounter is initiated	announces "I will follow you wherever you go"	
Jesus' response	"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."	
<b>Individual #2</b>	"Another of the disciples..."	"another"
how the encounter is initiated	individual says, "First let me go bury my father."	Jesus says, "Follow Me." The man replies, "Let me first bury my father."
Jesus' response	"Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."	"Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."
<b>Individual #3</b>		"another"
how the encounter is initiated		He says, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."
Jesus' response		"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus' conversation with the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-30; Luke 18:18-30) focuses, again, on the cost of being a disciple of Jesus, specifically on the barrier that wealth can be. The man's initial question is not one of discipleship. He asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man is sincere. He kneels (Mark 10:17) and calls Jesus "Good Teacher."<sup>17</sup> He has kept the commandments "from his youth," but he still seeks an answer to his question. Jesus loves him (noted especially by Mark in v.21) and gives him the answer, "You lack one thing. Sell all you have and give to the poor, . . . and come, follow me." That was too much for the young man, who went away sadly. Jesus comments on the difficulty for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. When his disciples comment that they have left everything and followed Jesus, Jesus states that they, and all others who experience loss for his sake, will receive many times more in this age, and also eternal life. The central role of the family in Jewish life at this time (see page 14) makes it even more emphatic that Jesus itemizes home and family members among the things that people leave for his sake. This same emphasis on putting himself above family also appears in the Matthew/Luke accounts above, where responsibility to an elderly father, or even a desire to say good-bye to family, is not reason to delay becoming a disciple of Jesus.

The fifth account of a person who wanted to be a disciple is unique in that it is the only account in the Gospels of Jesus refusing to allow someone to be with him. When Jesus heals a man living among the tombs because he was possessed by demons (Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39), the man "begged that he might be with him." Jesus did not permit the man to come with him, but told him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how

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<sup>17</sup> "In the OT and subsequent Judaism only God is characteristically called 'good'" . . . The designation of Jesus as 'good teacher' . . . is virtually without parallel in Jewish sources." Lane, 364.

much the Lord has done for you,” which he did. No actual disciple language is used with this narrative, but being with Jesus, and being devoted to him, certainly were aspects of discipleship. We are not told why Jesus refused this man; it might have been that the man would be more useful for the kingdom in his home region, or that it would be better for the man to be with his friends and family after his period of living among the tombs. But this episode, like the other events discussed, includes the impact of a personal encounter with Jesus on an individual.

### Disciples other than the Twelve

When present day believers read “the disciples” in the Gospels, they probably picture the twelve disciples/apostles. But while the twelve disciples were a distinct group, the Gospel writers also apply the term *disciple* to others. Joseph of Arimathea is called a disciple in Matthew 27:57 and also in John 19:38, where John includes the note that he was a disciple “secretly, for fear of the Jews.” In John 7:45-52, in an episode of arguing among the chief priests and Pharisees, John identifies Nicodemus by saying “Nicodemus, who had gone to him [Jesus] before and was one of them [NIV: one of their own number]. . .” Such a phrase can only apply to the group of people with Jesus, namely, his disciples. Interestingly, it is Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who fulfill an important role of disciples, burying the body of their master, at a time when the remaining eleven disciples are in hiding (John 19:38-42).

The Gospel writers also refer to groups of disciples. In introducing Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, Luke describes (6:17) “. . . a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people . . .” While describing the feast Matthew gave for Jesus, Mark says,

“... many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him” (Mark 2:15). John reports that Jesus “was making and baptizing more disciples than John” while adding that it was the disciples who actually did the baptizing (John 4:1-2). Since John the Baptist had been very popular, this group must number quite a few. Jesus not only sent out the Twelve on a missionary journey (Luke 9:1-6), he also sent out seventy-two (Luke 10:1-20). In John 7:3, Jesus’ brothers advise him to “go to Judea that your disciples also may see the works you are doing,” a comment that must refer to a larger group than the Twelve. In his Palm Sunday account, Luke says (19:37) “the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God.” The Pharisees in the crowd are upset at what they are hearing and say to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” Once again, these references must include a larger group than the Twelve. Not all the disciples remained faithful. “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (John 6:66). In John 8:31, Jesus spoke to “the Jews who had believed in him” while also speaking of disciples in general when he said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.”

Perhaps the most descriptive and helpful reference is early in Acts. To fill Judas’ place among the Twelve, Peter asks the post-resurrection/pre-Pentecost believers, a group of about 120 people (Acts 1:15) to help select “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us” (1:21-22). Two men are nominated from an unknown number of men in that group of 120 who fit the criteria—people who were with Jesus and the Twelve for the entire three years of Jesus’ ministry. It is noteworthy that a sufficient number of men qualified to merit a nomination process.

Women are also among those in that group of 120 in Acts. The title *disciple* is never applied to women in the Gospels, but two passages describe the relationship of a group of women to Jesus during his ministry. As Jesus is traveling through cities and villages, Luke reports, “And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means” (Luke 8:1-2). Mark tells us, “There were also women looking on [at the crucifixion] from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem” (Mark 15:40-41). Mark’s use of “they followed him” is the only formal disciple language in these two passages, and it could be argued that “followed” is used here simply in the sense of walking with him. But there is evidence that Mark and Luke are describing these women as disciples. They are certainly making the point that these women demonstrated their devotion to Jesus by their presence and their financial support. Luke uses the same phrase, “with him,” to describe both the Twelve and women on this preaching tour. Both writers note there were “many others” in addition to those named, a very striking fact in a culture that normally protected their women almost to point of seclusion. Perhaps the simplest and most obvious conclusion is that being with Jesus, and being devoted to him, certainly is a description of a disciple. When Mark says “they followed him and ministered to him,” there is no textual reason to combine the two verbs into one action, i.e., they accompanied him so that they could minister to him, rather than reading it as

two actions: they were disciples, and they ministered to him. Jesus “knowingly overthrew custom when he allowed women to follow him.”<sup>18</sup>

The picture, then, is of a core group of twelve specially-appointed disciples/apostles, some of whom, Peter, James and John in particular, are frequently mentioned in the Gospel narratives and others who are rarely mentioned. Beyond these twelve is a group of disciples that varied in size. At times, such as when Jesus sent out the seventy-two, it must have been near or more than a hundred people. As opposition from the authorities increased, the group likely decreased in size. Jesus issued a “Follow me” invitation to an unknown number of people, not only the well-known Peter, James and John, but also to the rich young man, who did not accept it, and the man who wanted to bury his father (Luke 9:59), whose response is not given. Other people declared their own desire and intention to follow. At least some of these disciples beyond the Twelve, perhaps another dozen or two, were a faithful part of the group of disciples from the time of Jesus’ baptism until the ascension. Since it seems unlikely that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus spent much time physically following Jesus, the title “disciple” is also at times applied to people who believed in him, and put that faith into action, but who were not physically with him over long periods. All of the accounts of people becoming Jesus’ disciples clearly emphasize that the cost of discipleship was high, and was clearly made known. They also stress that Jesus drew people to himself and that he had a powerful and life-changing impact on their lives.

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<sup>18</sup> Jeremias, 376.

### Comparison: becoming a disciple

First century Jews knew the meaning and usual practices of disciples. Although there were varying types and levels of discipleship, and people were coming and going as disciples, there was a common understanding of “following” someone and being someone’s disciple as involving a public commitment to them and their teaching. How did becoming a disciple of Jesus compare to becoming a disciple of other first century groups?

Like Greek learning groups that followed Socrates, and like groups that developed on this model (scribes, Pharisees and Essenes), the basis was a personal relationship with the master and a commitment to be with him and learn from him. It was not primarily a commitment to knowledge or beliefs. It included a lifelong commitment to his cause. The basic difference is illustrated by the fact that the church universally uses the word “called” to describe the process. Jesus called individuals to be his disciple. Although they had the freedom to reject the call, the choice to become a disciple was not entirely their own, as it was in other groups. Jesus made that plain when he told his disciples, “You did not choose me but I chose you.” (John 15:16). A man who wanted to be a scribe would select a master under whom he wanted to study; he would then be either accepted or rejected by the master. Becoming a Pharisee, Sadducee or Essene was a matter of accepting the teachings and way of life of the group. Becoming a priest was limited to men of certain families, but the individuals in those families likely had some choice as to whether or not to serve as priests.

Jesus’ call was powerful. The power and authority in Jesus himself, and the impact of his call, is shown in that all four Gospel writers, early in their narrative of



Jesus' ministry, include stories of that call and of the way it changed the lives of those who were called. The response is immediate and total.

Jesus extended his call to an unusual assortment of people. Unlike priests, there was no requirement of racial purity. Unlike the Pharisees, he did not fellowship only with ritually pure people. Unlike the Sadducees, he did not favor a certain social class. It is likely that the call of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13) is included in the Gospels not simply to show how Matthew became one of the Twelve, but to show that Jesus called a tax collector in the same way and with the same response as he called Peter, Andrew, James and John, and to show the negative response of the Pharisees and scribes to Jesus' association, and feasting, with sinners. Women are specifically mentioned as following him, while they are virtually unmentioned in contemporary sources describing other groups. Jesus' group of disciples spent a great deal of time together, and their adjustment to each other must have been interesting and challenging at times.

The call to be a disciple of Jesus carried a commitment greater than that of any other group. An individual's connection and commitment to their family was foundational in Jewish society, yet Jesus repeatedly stated (Matthew 8:22; 10:37) that his disciples' commitment to him far outweighed their commitment to their family. He even heightened the emphasis by itemizing the relationships--father, mother, sister, brother, etc.--that came second to a relationship with him.

Lane, commenting on the account of the rich young man in Mark 10:17-22, summarizes well what it means to become a disciple of Jesus. "The deepest answer to the question [What must I do to inherit eternal life?], however, lies not in the command to sell all but in the call to follow Jesus. Jesus separated persons from their normal historical

existence in order to introduce them to a new quality of existence based upon fellowship with himself.”<sup>19</sup> The call to follow Jesus is a call to a new existence.

### **Jesus as Teacher of His Disciples**

In Jesus’ group of disciples, as in all first century disciple groups, a disciple is one who learns. Jesus’ knowledge and wisdom were acknowledged from an early age. In the sole incident we have of his youth, Mary and Joseph find him in the temple, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:46-47). Growing up, he “increased in wisdom” (Luke 2:52).

During his three year ministry, crowds of people were attracted to him, not only due to the miracles he did, but also to hear him teach, as they would gather to hear other interesting or respected rabbis. But people recognized his teaching as unique. Early in his ministry, he taught in the synagogue at Capernaum and Mark records that those who heard “were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes” (1:22). His teaching was also special because he did not have the traditional higher education that the teachers of the law received. As he taught in the temple, “the Jews therefore marveled, saying, ‘How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?’” (John 7:15). Even some scribes acknowledged Jesus’ teaching ability (Luke 20:39).

Jesus used a variety of teaching methods. He used parables, overstatement (Matthew 5:29-30), proverbs (Matthew 6:21; Mark 3:24), similes and metaphors (Matthew 10:16, 5:13), poetry (Matthew 7:6-8; Luke 6:27-28), questions (Matthew

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<sup>19</sup> Lane, 368.

17:25), and irony (Matthew 16:2-3).<sup>20</sup> He put a young child in the middle of the disciples to teach humility as true greatness (Matthew 18:2). He taught by personal example. After washing the feet of his disciples, he said, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:15). He used experience to teach. When the disciples suggested he send the crowd away so they could eat, Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” (Matthew 14:16). He brought Peter, James and John to view the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-9) for their benefit.

The authorities recognized Jesus primarily as a teacher. They tried to trap him in saying something improper so they could arrest him (Luke 20:20). On the night of his arrest, Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest, “questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching” (John 18:19).

Jesus was often addressed as “rabbi.” Examples include Mary Magdalene at the tomb (John 20:16); Peter at the Transfiguration (Mark 9:5) and regarding the withered fig tree (Mark 11:21); blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:51); and Judas in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:49). The title “rabbi” is used for Jesus both as identification of him as a teacher and also as a title of respect.

In addition to his public teaching, Jesus also taught his disciples away from the crowds (Luke 10:23), sometimes unsuccessfully (Mark 3:7, Luke 9:10-11). The disciples at times saved their questions for a private time (Matthew 24:3, Mark 9:28). After teaching a parable to the crowds, he occasionally explained it to his disciples (Matthew 13:18-23 and 36-43). The extensive teaching of John 13-17 is directed to his disciples. Jeremias sees a correlation of this teaching recorded in John 13-17, and also in the secret visit of Nicodemus to Jesus (John 3:1ff), to the practice of scribes sharing secret esoteric

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<sup>20</sup> Fee and Stuart, 131.

knowledge with their disciples.<sup>21</sup> But despite his private teaching time with his disciples, Jesus did not communicate certain, secret knowledge only to his disciples. To Annas's question about his teaching he replied, "I have spoken openly to the world . . . I have said nothing in secret" (John 18:20). In Jesus' teaching, the contrast was not between those with whom secrets were shared and those with whom they were not shared, but between those who were open to receiving what the Father revealed, and those, most often the more educated, who were not. ("I thank you, Father, . . . that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children" [Matthew 11:25]; Jesus to Nicodemus: "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" [John 3:10]).

Jesus specifically instructed his disciples to share all his teachings with others. When sending the Twelve out to preach and warning them of persecution, he says, "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the daylight, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops" (Matthew 10:26-27). The commission given them at his ascension specifically includes "teaching them [all nations] to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). Regarding Jesus' private teaching, "what He [Jesus] said to the disciples did but unfold the implications of His words to men at large. The essence of His teaching was public property."<sup>22</sup>

It is the records of these disciples themselves we read in the Gospels, either directly (Matthew and John) or as recorded by others.<sup>23</sup> Part of what they record are their

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<sup>21</sup> Jeremias, 240.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, 756.

<sup>23</sup> Mark likely recorded Peter's words and Luke got his information from "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:2).

own experiences as disciples. They asked a lot of questions (Mark 10:10; Matthew 15:12; Matthew 13:36) and, while sometimes the question is asked by an individual (Mark 13:3), most often it is recorded as coming from the group. They often had questions but did not ask them (Luke 9:45). They freely record their many failures, such as arguing about who is the greatest (Luke 9:46), shooing the children away (Matthew 19:13-15), failing to trust Jesus (Matthew 14:30), and, most appallingly, denying him (Mark 14:66-72) and running away when he was arrested (Mark 14:50). They also record when they got it right: Peter's confession (John 6:68) and Thomas' declaration (John 11:16). Although some details slip out here and there, they record little or nothing of routine or everyday details: where they slept when traveling from village to village; the number of disciples in their group; whether or not they stayed together during the rainy winter season; how adequately donations fed them; whether disciples went home at times to help their families. The words and actions of their Rabbi/Lord/Master were all-consuming. He overshadowed everything else.

### Jesus' teachings about discipleship

Jesus became human in order to die and, as he said, "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Since his death is to draw all people to him as disciples, his life and all his teachings apply to discipleship. For practical purposes, this paper will limit its look to three major teachings by Jesus that use the terms "disciple" and "follow," while keeping in mind that these three are intimately tied to the whole of his teaching. The three are "take up your cross," "know the truth" (John 8:30-32), and "love one another" (John 13:35).

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross [daily, Luke] and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it.” This saying of Jesus in Mark 8:34-35 is paralleled in Matthew 16:24-25 and Luke 9:23-24, where Luke adds the extra word “daily.” Matthew includes this saying also in 10:38-39: “And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Luke records it also in 14:27: “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” In all these accounts, this teaching is tied to the high cost of being a disciple. In Matthew 10, it follows Jesus’ words that he brings a sword rather than peace, and that he will cause divisions between people in the same household. Luke 14 includes it with sayings about counting the cost before building a tower or engaging in war and concludes that section with another emphasis of the same point, “So therefore any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (14:33).

In all these passages, Jesus is speaking to people who wish to “come after him.” Those who wish to be with must do three things, things which are so closely related as to be virtually synonymous: deny oneself, take up your cross, and follow him. The context reinforces the connection between these requirements for discipleship and Jesus’ own death. In Mark 8, Matthew 16 and Luke 9, the saying immediately follows Jesus telling his disciples, in no uncertain terms, of his upcoming suffering, death and resurrection. In Matthew and Mark, Peter rebukes Jesus for his talk of death. Jesus then makes the point that all disciples must be willing to die. For it is only in dying to ourselves, that we can accept the gift of life that only Jesus gives. Mark makes the point that this condition of

discipleship applies to all by noting that Jesus was speaking to the crowd here as well as his disciples (Mark 8:34). Although both the crowd and the disciples who first heard this saying were almost certainly perplexed by it, those who first read or heard Mark's narrative certainly understood it. "Bearing the cross was not a Jewish metaphor, and Jesus' statement must have sounded repugnant to the crowd and the disciples alike. . . . [B]y the time Mark prepared his gospel this had become cruel reality, both for Jesus and the Church."<sup>24</sup>

Jesus made two other comments about being his disciple which do not pertain to its cost but rather to its results. In the first instance, Jesus says that disciples abide in his word and know the truth, and that truth sets them free (John 8:31-32). The comment is made to "Jews who had believed in him" (John 8:31) and comes in the middle of a long discourse (8:12-59), a serious argument, with the Pharisees (v.13) and "the Jews" (v.22, 48) in which Jesus is direct about his relationship with the Father and his coming death, and is harsh in his condemnation of them, challenging their self image as pure and free children of Abraham by calling them children of the devil (v.44). The discussion is "concluded" as they try to stone him. As Jesus spoke, "many believed in him" (v. 30), but in v. 31ff he is apparently speaking to some who once believed but did so no longer, making the point that true disciples "abide in my word;" they do not come and go. Such "abiding" reveals the truth. "Truth is closely connected with the Person of Christ (1:17; 14:6), so that knowledge of the truth is naturally associated with being His disciple."<sup>25</sup> Disciples, ones who abide in Christ and his truth, are set free from sin (v.34), a freedom

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<sup>24</sup> Lane, 307.

<sup>25</sup> Morris, 456.

which does not come from racial purity or our own efforts at righteous living. Here discipleship, and its accompanying truth and freedom, is presented as a gift of grace.

In his discourse to the Twelve disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus ties being his disciple to the resulting relationship with other disciples: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). A relationship of love with other disciples is part of the package of being Jesus’ disciple. The context for this statement is the fact that Jesus will be leaving them. They are perplexed and sad, but Jesus reassures them of his love, and his continuing presence and gifts. The love that disciples have for each other is a result of the love Jesus has for his disciples. “Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (v. 33). Jesus’ love will be demonstrated in his willingness to suffer and give his life for his disciples. Such love ties this statement back to the earlier teaching, “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34 and parallels). The gift is free, but it comes with great responsibilities as well as great joys.

#### Comparison with other groups: Jesus as teacher

The title *rabbi*, although used both as a title of respect and as a title for a trained scholar, is one factor that connects Jesus to the scribes. Although Jesus was not a scribe, he was a teacher, as they were, teaching in the synagogue (Luke 4:15; 4:16-22), as well as teaching the crowds in the countryside. He was the honored guest at feasts (Luke 11:37; 14:1). He often taught by asking questions, as scribes did (Luke 14:3, 5; 10:25-37).



But there were striking differences between Jesus and the scribes. Jesus called disciples to him; he did not wait for people to apply to study under him. Jesus was not training disciples in order that they might eventually become rabbis with disciples of their own, and they were not to seek their own honor. The scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said, love the honors and privileges that come with their positions and they love “being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers” (Matthew 23:7b-8). Jesus remains master of all his disciples. He did not teach secret knowledge (John 18:20). Jesus also had his disciples do tasks, such as bringing him a donkey (Luke 19:30), and preparing the Passover meal (Luke 22:8) that were servant tasks. A scribe would not have asked his students/disciples to do such a task.<sup>26</sup> “The fact that *mathētēs* can be parallel to *douloi* [slaves] (Matthew 10:24 f; John 13:16; 15:20) is quite alien to later Judaism.”<sup>27</sup>

Jesus was similar to the Pharisees in his love and reverence for God’s law (Luke 16:17), but the way in which he broke the laws based on oral tradition (Luke 6:1-5) and his harsh criticism of the attitudes and hearts of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-36) resulted in their bitter animosity. His teaching was in opposition to their teaching; the way He lived conflicted with the way they lived. Jesus put himself ahead of religious traditions and even religious laws (Matthew 12:8). He not only ate with “sinners” (Matthew 9:10), he included one, Matthew the tax collector, among his commissioned apostles. He repeatedly healed on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11), which they interpreted as work. He foiled their attempts to trap him (Matthew 22:21). The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees was not based on trivialities, but on fundamental differences. The Pharisaic

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<sup>26</sup> TDNT, 448.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

approach to God's Law, based on technicalities rather than its heart, prevented them from recognizing God himself when he walked among them. Although the name of the Pharisees was soon (A.D. 70) to disappear, their attitude was adopted by Judaism as a whole.

Leaders of all the various groups of the time are mentioned as joining in the opposition to Jesus, including Sadducees (Matthew 16:1), and Herodians (Mark 3:6), although there were exceptions, such as Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler (John 3:1), and Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43). Despite the differences of teachings, goals, and style among these various groups, they were united in opposition to Jesus. In addition to their opposition to his teachings, they might also have viewed him as a threat to their power and to their position as leaders of the people.

### **Sending: Disciples and the Work of Jesus**

As described above (page 12), the disciple relationship included a commitment to both the master and his cause. Jesus followed this pattern. His "cause" was implemented in the sending of the disciples with the message of his life, death and resurrection.

#### **Sending as part of calling**

The "sending" was made clear immediately upon their calling. "I will make you fishers of men" comes immediately after "Follow me," when Jesus speaks to Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17). When Peter is astonished at the miraculous catch of fish, and fearfully recognizes that he is in the presence of God himself, Jesus both comforts and calls in the words, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching

men” (Luke 5:10). In both accounts, it is made clear that Jesus is in control. The individuals are not going to choose this work on their own. Jesus is doing the “making;” they “will be” catching men by his power.

There are OT connections to the phrase “fishers of men.” “In the OT prophetic tradition it is God who is the fisher of men. The passages in which the image is developed [Jer. 16:16, Ezek. 29:4f; 38:4; Amos 4:2; Hab. 1:14-17] are distinctly ominous in tone, stressing the divine judgment.”<sup>28</sup> Mark introduces Jesus’ ministry with the words, “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:15). These words immediately precede the calling of the fishermen. “The summons to be fishers of men is a call to the eschatological task of gathering men in view of the forthcoming judgment of God. . . . Precisely because Jesus has come fishing becomes necessary.”<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the Law, which brings judgment, Jesus proclaims Gospel, good news. He gathers fishermen to himself, to make them fishermen, ones who will gather people by proclaiming that same good news.

Some scholars see both a general, and also a limited, application of this calling/sending. “Matthew’s narration suggests that the four fishermen possess both a generic, ‘believer’ quality as well as a more narrowly focused ‘apostle’ quality.”<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Gibbs notes that the word “call” (4:21) is used elsewhere (such as Matthew 9:13) for the calling of all believers, and the invitation to “come” (4:19) is used similarly in a general

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<sup>28</sup> Lane, 67. In the Habakkuk reference, God is using the Babylonians as his tool.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1 – 11:1, Concordia Commentary*, ed. Dean O. Wenthe, (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 218.

invitation elsewhere (such as Matthew 11:28).<sup>31</sup> However, he sees Jesus' statement to "make you fishers of men" (4:19) as applicable only to the apostles.

Not all of Jesus' disciples will function in his service in the same way. The future tense, in addition, should also be taken seriously. Jesus will not make them into fishers of men until he gives them authority and sends them out in chapter 10. . . . If one could expand the metaphor a bit, some Christians will steady the boat, some will repair the nets, and others will actually cast the nets and gather the precious catch of human lives of Christ. Sermons today should not apply this text to Christians generally as if to imply that all participate in Christ's mission to the world in the same way.<sup>32</sup>

The manner in which the taking up of Jesus' cause applies to all his disciples, or to a portion of those disciples, is important to consider as we examine this aspect of the concept of *disciple*.

When John relates how five individuals became disciples of Jesus, two of them, Andrew and Philip, illustrate the cause of Jesus in action. Andrew finds his brother Simon and tells him, "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41). Philip finds Nathanael and tells him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote" (John 1:45). The parallelisms here show John's intent to record both these early recognitions of Jesus as the long-expected Messiah, and also the way in which people shared their excitement at his arrival.

Commissioning/sending of the Twelve; sending of the seventy-two

The Synoptic Gospel writers tie the naming of the Twelve to their appointment as apostles and to their sending. All three include two points about this naming/appointment/sending. First, Jesus gives them authority. Second, when sent, they are to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 218.

proclaim/preach. Matthew alludes to their appointment as apostles by using *disciples* in 10:1 (“He called to him his twelve disciples”) and calling them apostles in the next reference to them, 10:2 (“The names of the twelve apostles are these:”). Matthew explains that Jesus “gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction” (Matthew 10:1) and told them to “proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 10:5). Mark describes the selection of the Twelve from among his disciples and their appointment as apostles for a specific purpose: “that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14-15). Mark describes the sending in more detail in 6:7-13. Luke’s narrative also separates the selection of the Twelve and their appointment as apostles (6:12-16) from their sending (9:1-6). At their sending, Luke says, “[Jesus] gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1-2).

Mark adds an intriguing word when he says, “And [Jesus] called the twelve and *began* to send them out two by two” (6:7; emphasis added), implying that the “sending” may have continued throughout Jesus’ three-year ministry. The idea of sending official representatives would have been familiar to these first century Jews.

The commissioning of the Twelve has a rich background in the juridical practice of Judaism, which recognized the official character of actions performed by authorized individuals. . . . This formulation [“the sent one is as the man who commissioned him”] lies behind the mission of the Twelve, who are sent forth as ‘appointed representatives’ of Jesus in the legal sense of the term. . . . There is in the context no thought of the creation at this time of a permanent office, but rather the fulfillment of a specific commission. . . . The specific terms of the commission demanded of the disciples a rigorous commitment to total dependence upon God for food and shelter.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lane, 206-7.

The ability to cast out demons and to heal is the visible sign of the authority that he gives these Twelve, an authority that comes from Jesus' person. Thus, the work that these disciples/apostles do for their master is also tied to the person of the master, and not simply a set of beliefs. They are to proclaim the kingdom of heaven/God, which has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

Luke tells us that disciples other than the Twelve apostles were sent. In 10:1-20 Luke relates the sending of the seventy-two as similar to the sending of the Twelve in 9:1-6. The seventy-two were appointed (v. 1); they were to heal and speak of the kingdom of God (v. 9); they were to take no provisions (v. 4) and to be content with hospitality offered (v. 7). Jesus tied their mission, and even their person, to his own ("The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me" v.16). This time, distinct from the accounts of the sending of the Twelve, at their return the disciples are reported as full of joy (v.17), as is Jesus (v. 21), perhaps in connection with Jesus' expressed desire in v. 2 for laborers for the harvest.

#### Post-resurrection sending

During the brief forty days that Jesus is with his disciples after his resurrection, he makes clear to them that he is alive and that they are to carry on his work. His instructions during this time are clear, but they are only part of what the disciples need. It is only when they receive the power and presence of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost that they are fully prepared for their continuing work as disciples.

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20 is the most frequently quoted sending command of Jesus today. Matthew records almost no post-resurrection events

other than this. He does include the fact that among the eleven disciples, even at this point, “some doubted” (v. 17). The commands to go and make disciples, by baptizing and teaching, are again tied to Jesus’ authority. All authority has been given to Jesus (v. 18) and he promises his presence, and thus his authority, to be with these men always (v. 20). This all-encompassing language, including the command to go to “all nations,” might well indicate Matthew’s understanding that these words are for all who follow Jesus, rather than solely to the eleven people to whom they appear to be specifically addressed. *Disciple* is a verb in v. 19, so that the sense is “as you go, make disciples ” or even “Going, disciple all nations.” The disciples will be doing what Jesus did: discipling people. But they will be making disciples of their Lord, not disciples of themselves. The phrase “teaching them to *observe* all I have commanded you” (v. 20; emphasis added) focuses the attention on the behavior, rather than the knowledge, of a disciple. Mark has a similar Great Commission, including miraculous signs as evidence of Jesus’ presence and authority, but this account is part of the disputed ending of Mark.

Luke gives more details of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, both at the end of Luke’s first volume, the gospel, and at the beginning of his second, the book of Acts. Easter evening “the eleven and those who were with them” (24:33) are excitedly sharing news of Jesus’ appearance to the women at the tomb, to Simon, and to the Emmaus disciples when Jesus appears among them. He first convinces them that he is real, with “flesh and bones” (24:39), then “opened their minds” (v. 45) to Scripture, where it is written not only that the Messiah would suffer, die and rise, but also that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (v.47-48). He concludes with a promise of

“power from on high” (v. 49). Here, too, then, the sending is explained as proclamation and is accompanied by a promise connected to his person. The text gives nothing to indicate the words are addressed to the eleven apart from the others who are with them in the room.

In the account of the ascension (Acts 1:6-11), despite all Jesus has said to them, some show their lack of understanding (as some doubted, in Matthew 28: 17) by asking if Jesus is now going to restore the kingdom to Israel (v. 6). Jesus says that is not for them to know, but in his last words to them, repeats “you will receive power” and “you will be my witnesses” (v. 8). When Jesus calls them “my” witnesses, he again ties them and their future work to his person. As witnesses, the disciples are more than simply people who have seen something, but people who are to share what they have seen and experienced with others. This ascension account is part of Luke’s bridge between his gospel and his history of the church in Acts. When Luke, in Acts 1:1, states that his first book was of “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach” (emphasis added), he is clearly stating that Jesus continues to act and teach. This continuing action is tied to the disciples/apostles “whom he had chosen” (1:2) and whose work is the subject of this second book by Luke. This book also describes what Jesus did through the acts of people other than the apostles, such as Stephen (Acts 6:8ff) and Philip (8:28-40), and new disciples who also were “sent,” often by persecution (Acts 11:19-21). Luke clearly takes Jesus’ words in 1:8, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” as the theme of Acts.

John provides more details of Jesus’ post-resurrection words and actions. On Easter evening, in the upper room, Jesus reassures them by showing them his hands and



side (20:20), and says, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (v. 21). Again this is tied to his person and to continuing power: he “breathed on them” and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (v. 22). Here, too, scholars differ as to whether these words are spoken just to the eleven apostles or to other disciples also. Leon Morris quotes J.H. Bernard<sup>34</sup> as saying that the words here “apply to the apostles alone and not to any others who may have been present.” Morris disagrees, noting that Bernard provides no evidence, and says, “The indications are that in this chapter these words are addressed to others than apostles.”<sup>35</sup> Morris also ties Jesus’ words here to John’s overall theme.

The thought that the Father has sent the Son is one of the master thoughts of this Gospel. . . . Now, as Jesus has brought to its consummation the task that He came to accomplish, the task that the Father laid upon Him, He sends His followers into the world. . . . Their mission proceeds from His. It is only because He has accomplished His mission, and indeed precisely because He has accomplished it, that they are sent into the world.<sup>36</sup>

John’s second and final narrative of the resurrected Christ is closely tied to Luke’s account of the calling of the first disciples (Luke 5:1-11). Both times, the men fish all night but catch nothing. At Jesus’ word, they try again and are overwhelmed with a miraculous catch. In the event that occurs at the end of Jesus’ time with his disciples, he fully restores Peter by confirming Peter’s love for him, and by commanding him to feed and tend his sheep (21:15-7). Since Jesus has also predicted the type of death Peter will die (v. 18-19), Jesus repeats the words with which he first called Peter: “Follow Me” (v. 19). Curious, Peter wants to know what will happen to John in future years. Jesus refocuses Peter on the one thing he needs to know and do by repeating, “You follow me”

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<sup>34</sup> Morris, 845. Morris is quoting J.H. Bernard: *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, The International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. Edinburgh, 1928. Morris does not give a page number for the Bernard quote.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 845-46.

(v. 22). Even though Jesus will soon physically leave them, the command is still to follow him. For his disciples, following Jesus is both the beginning and all that is needed for the future. John then concludes his gospel with an affirmation that he is “bearing witness about these things” (21:24), an act that itself supports the official carrying out of his appointment as a witness.

Comparison: carrying on the work of the master

Jesus’ disciple group was similar to other groups of the time in that carrying on the work of the master was an integral part of being a disciple of that group. It is not optional. It was made plain in the calling (“I will make you fishers of men;” Matthew 4:19). It is lifelong. Jesus never talked about a limited term of service.

Especially for the Pharisees, and, to a lesser extent, for the Sadducees, the “work” of the group involved a way of life. The essence of being a Pharisee was the manner in which laws and traditions were followed in daily life. Sadducees had a different interpretation of the law, resulting in a less demanding way of life, but, for them, as for all Jews, following the law involved a certain way of life. Being a disciple of Jesus involved a certain way of life, too: the way of love. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Jesus demonstrated his love for his disciples in all his actions toward them. His love and compassion for people, especially the poor and hurting, were equally evident. His crucifixion and death were, of course, the ultimate evidence of his love. And he made it plain that his disciples were to have the same love, even to the point of giving their life if needed. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever

would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

But these similarities are outweighed by the differences between the way a disciple of Jesus carries on his master’s work and the way a member of any of the other groups did the same. The “work” was not political, as it was for the Zealots and the Herodians, and it was not primarily a way of life. It was primarily a message. The Twelve were sent out to “proclaim” (Matthew 10:5; Luke 9:2) and to “preach” (Mark 3:15). The topic of their message was the kingdom of God, as it was also for the seventy-two who were sent (Luke 9:9). After the resurrection, Jesus told his disciples that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed” (Luke 24:47). The message—the work itself—is personally tied to Jesus. Jesus told the disciples they will be “my witnesses” (Luke 24:48, Acts 1:8). A witness speaks of what they have seen and heard; what they know to be true. Since the disciples were witnesses of Jesus, they were to speak of what they knew of him. The personal nature of the work is reinforced when “Follow me” is repeated to Peter after the resurrection (John 21:19).

The church frequently uses the word “sent” to describe how Jesus gave his disciples the work they were to do, since Jesus frequently used it (John 20:21, for example) and this paper follows that practice. “Sent” usually implies a move from one physical location to another. During his three-year ministry, the disciples were physically following Jesus as he traveled, and Jesus sent them away from his physical presence to preach and proclaim in other locations. During the 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus again was physically present when he spoke to his disciples, but he needed to make them aware that they would not continue to be in his physical presence.

He again was sending them away from where he was. But the actions of the apostles in the early church indicate they did not interpret Jesus' work to necessarily require movement from one geographical location to another. They remained in Jerusalem after Pentecost, courageously doing so even when persecution arose and other believers were "scattered" (Acts 8:1). Those who traveled to another place to proclaim, such as Philip (Acts 8:26-40), Peter (Acts 9:36-43 and 10:1-48) and even the great traveler Paul (Acts 13:1-3), did so either at the Lord's direct intervention, or as a result of specific circumstances. Therefore, although there certainly are times where being sent from one location to another is part of doing the work of Jesus, it is not at all essential. The essential part is, first and foremost, speaking the message of the kingdom of God, being a witness to Jesus Christ, and living a life of love as his disciples.

Jesus' disciples carried on his work with Jesus' personal authority, to a degree and in a manner impossible for any other group. Scribes carried on their rabbi's work after the rabbi's death specifically because the rabbi was gone and they believed in the work, even though the rabbi's authority over them ended at his death. When Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim, both before and after his resurrection, he gave evidence of his authority by enabling them to do miracles. He also promised them his personal presence (Matthew 28:20) and that of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). The fact that the apostles and other disciples felt that presence and authority keenly is evident both in what they say and do, as related in the book of Acts, and also in what is not said. Luke 10:17 is the only recorded comment on what disciples experienced or felt during the times they were sent out to proclaim and preach. And the Gospels themselves, for which the apostles were either direct writers or primary sources, do not focus at all, and in fact hardly even

mention, the experiences and feelings of the disciples themselves. The focus is entirely on Jesus. Although it would be very helpful, as well as extremely interesting, to know more about what it was like to be a disciple of Christ, only a small percentage of content in the Gospels pertains to the disciples' thoughts and actions, and the content that does focus on them primarily puts them in a less than flattering light. The near-exclusive focus on Jesus is strong testimony that even when they were preaching and healing on their own, physically away from their rabbi, the apostles/disciples continually and strongly felt Jesus' presence and authority working through them.

Was there a difference between the Twelve and the others in the way Jesus gave them his work to carry on? Scholars disagree. The question is difficult to answer because the Gospel writers most often do not make clear whether "the disciples" refers to the Twelve or to the Twelve plus other disciples who were following Jesus (page 46). But there is no conclusive evidence that the Twelve were given commands regarding carrying on their master's work in a way from which all other disciples were excluded. What, then, was the distinct role of the Twelve? It seems to be that of official witnesses. Jesus definitely appointed them to an office, that of apostle. The number twelve was sufficiently significant that Peter felt it necessary to fill Judas' place (Acts 1:15-26). This office confirmed them as leaders of the young church. Later, the term "apostle" was also applied to others (Acts 14:14), so there may have been more than one type of apostle. As the church grew among the Gentiles and in cities far away from Jerusalem, there likely was variety and fluidity in offices, but the work of the master was carried on as all his followers were witnesses and proclaimed the gospel.

### NT *Disciple* Terminology Outside the Gospels

In the NT, *mathētēs* is a common word, appearing about 250 times, but it is found only in the Gospels and Acts.<sup>37</sup> It does not occur in any other NT book. Luke's use of *mathētēs* is particularly interesting, and it might give clues as to its concentrated use in one part of the NT, and its absence in the rest.

In his gospel, Luke's last use of *disciple* is in the Garden of Gethsemane: "And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow" (22:45). The rest of Luke's gospel uses other terms for the group of people who followed Jesus: "those who were around him" (22:49); "And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance" (23:49); "they told all these things to the eleven and all the rest" (24:9); "told these things to the apostles" (24:10); "the eleven and those who were with them" (24:33). In contrast, Matthew and Mark use *mathētēs* throughout their narratives. "The avoidance of *mathētēs*, which seems to be peculiar to the special source used by Luke, may be seen also early in Acts. The only possible explanation is that the behavior of the disciples of Jesus during the passion is equivalent to a breach of the relationship by them, and that it is the task of Jesus to gather disciples afresh after His resurrection."<sup>38</sup>

In Acts, *mathētēs* is first used in 6:1. Luke uses other terms for people who had faith in Jesus throughout his book, including "those who believed" (2:44; 4:32), and "the brothers" (1:15; 11:1, 29; 14:2, etc.). His use or avoidance of *mathētēs* in Acts does not appear to be random. It is absent for significant stretches, including all of the "we" sections. Analysis of this usage in Acts has led at least one scholar, Karl Rengstorff, to

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<sup>37</sup> TDNT, 441.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 446-7.

conclude, “When Acts has the word [*mathētēs*] for Christians it is following a special usage which for its part derives from the way Palestinian Christians described themselves.”<sup>39</sup> The term no longer denotes just those who knew and followed Jesus during his three-year ministry, but also those who have come to faith since then, including Timothy (16:1), and those who believed through the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas (13:52; 14:20, etc.)

One particularly interesting use of *disciple* in Acts is in the narrative of Paul in Damascus, soon after his conversion. Paul is preaching Jesus as the Christ, confounding the Jews, who plot to kill him. “But his [Paul’s] disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall” (9:25). The text could be referring to people who followed Paul “since Paul as a recognized rabbi might well have had *mathētai*.”<sup>40</sup> But since Acts does not refer to rabbinic disciples in any other instance, it could also be that “his disciples” refers to “those who went with Paul to Damascus, who through his leadership and witness themselves came to faith, and who then rescued him from mortal peril.”<sup>41</sup>

When John wrote his gospel, he might have been thinking of this extended view of disciples, one which includes those who came to faith after Jesus’ ascension. John records Jesus’ sayings that his disciples “abide in [Jesus’] word” (8:31) and love each other (John 13:35). “Here *talmiyd* [the Hebrew equivalent of *mathētēs* at the time] can establish spiritual fellowship, even across the generations, quite apart from personal fellowship. This usage was taken over by the primitive community.”<sup>42</sup> So believers in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Jesus in Palestine continued to use the word *disciple* to describe themselves. But as Rengstorf continues, “It was not so easy for the Greek communities to take over *mathētēs* in this sense because this might give rise to the idea that Christianity was simply a philosophical movement.” In their culture, use of the term *disciple* might well lead people away from a commitment to Jesus himself, and toward a commitment to a way of thinking. This theory would explain why *mathētēs* is not used in the NT beyond Acts, and why Luke generally avoids the term in the “we” passages of Acts, when he is traveling with Paul away from Palestine. Jewish opposition in Palestine, as well as the devastation experienced by both Jews and Christians in Palestine in A.D. 70, contributed to the center of Christianity moving from Palestine to lands more fully Greek, and, therefore, also to the almost total lack of the use of *disciple* as a term for believers in the post-NT church, and for many centuries thereafter.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

### Present Day Use of *Disciple*

From an anecdotal, purely unscientific perspective, it appears the use of the term *disciple* for present day Christians in the United States has become more common in recent decades. Perhaps its use can be tied to the transition in America from a society and culture that is at least nominally and externally Christian, to one that is overtly non-Christian. As commitments to the organizational church have declined, some churches have responded by an increased emphasis on the individual's relationship with the person of Jesus Christ.

The term *disciple* serves this emphasis well. It encompasses a personal attachment to the teacher/master, a commitment both to learn what he teaches and to do what he does. The term also covers the relationship of a believer to their society and culture since a disciple, although interacting with the normal, everyday culture, is first and foremost following their master. This action of following distinguishes them from everyone who is not a disciple of this master.

Although *disciple* is usually used in the above way to describe and encourage the sanctified daily life of a Christian, the term *disciple* also works well to describe the justification we receive by grace alone. Distinct from every other rabbi or sect leader, Jesus *calls* people to be his disciples. Even as the gospel accounts describe people who make a decision whether or not to follow Jesus (Matthew 8:21; Mark 10:17-22), or who declare their own intention to follow him (Matthew 8:19; Luke 9:61-62), the Gospel writers make it clear that it is Jesus himself who establishes the relationship. He draws

people to himself. Individuals can refuse the gift Jesus offers when he calls, but they cannot establish the relationship by themselves or on their own merits. “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). After his resurrection and ascension, early believers were clearly tied to the person of Jesus Christ and not simply to his teaching.

Frequently, those who write or teach on the meaning of *disciple* oversimplify first century Judaism when they compare the relationship of Jesus and his disciples to that of a Jewish rabbi and his disciples. Most commonly, they speak as though rabbinic Judaism was fully developed in the first century A.D., whereas it wasn’t fully in place until the third century. Such is the case with the Nooma DVD *Dust*<sup>1</sup>. This DVD presumes we know more about education at the time than we do; it also presents Jesus as a trained rabbi. While presumptions and errors diminish any scholarly value of such resources, they can still be helpful to churches as they focus on the key points of the concept of *disciple*:

1. the personal relationship of the disciple and teacher
2. the unique fact that Jesus called his disciples rather than waiting for them to chose to follow him
3. on the total commitment involved in the rabbi/disciple relationship

Additional useful teachings are part of the benefit when modern day Christians intentionally call themselves *disciples*:

- It is a reminder of the high cost of discipleship, and its connection to the cross and suffering.
- The learning that we do as students of the master goes well beyond head knowledge to carrying out all he has commanded us (Matthew 28:20).
- “Sending” is not optional. It is a part of discipleship from the initial call.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dust*, from the *Nooma* series, speaker Rob Bell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), DVD.

- We do not choose our fellow disciples. Jesus chose them. We may find ourselves with an interesting assortment of fellow disciples. Our relationship to our Lord defines our relationship to the disciples around us.

Today's twenty-first century society has some similarities to first century Judaism. Our culture contains many viewpoints and philosophies, from conservative to liberal, from Amish to New Age. Groups calling themselves "Christian" cover wide-ranging, and sometimes bizarre, beliefs. The contemporary marketplace is a noisy clamoring of all these groups promoting their ideas. Everyone "follows" someone or some viewpoint. For this reason, too, *disciple* can be a useful term for the church.

#### Distinctions between the Twelve and Other Disciples

When people read or hear "the disciples" in a gospel reading, most picture the twelve disciples, although, as discussed above (page 46), Jesus had disciples other than the Twelve. The distinction between the Twelve and the other disciples arises today in churches, such as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, that connect the pastoral office with the appointment of the Twelve as apostles. Many aspects of this connection are outside the scope of this paper, but it is appropriate here to look at the distinction made by the Gospel writers between the Twelve and other disciples, as well as the practice of the Gospel writers as they named other groups.

#### **Gospel Writers' Use of *the Disciples* and *the Twelve***

When Matthew, Mark, Luke and John use the term *the disciples*, they are sometimes referring to the Twelve, sometimes to a portion of the Twelve, and sometimes to the larger group. There are about two dozen texts in the four Gospels that specify the

twelve disciples. Table 2 shows that the majority of these occurrences are in three contexts: the commissioning and sending of the apostles; times when Jesus predicted his death; and during Holy Week, particularly the Last Supper. Luke does not use the term *disciples*, but he refers to the apostles at the Last Supper (Luke 22:14). Another likely reference to the Twelve is Matthew 19:28-29 in which Jesus says that “you who have followed me” will sit on “twelve thrones;” while “everyone” who has left family and possessions for Jesus’ sake will receive other rewards. Although not conclusive, it is logical that the “you” is the twelve disciples. A similar saying, “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials [and you will] sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes” (Luke 22:28-30) is spoken to “the apostles” (Luke 22:14) at the Last Supper.

Table 2: “The Twelve”

Context	Commissioning	Predictions of his death	Last Supper or Holy Week	Other
Gospel				
Matthew	10:1,2,5; 11:1	20:17	26:20	
Mark	3:14, 16; 6:7	10:32	11:11; 14:17	4:10; 9:35;
Luke	6:13; 9:1	18:13		8:1; 9:12
John				6:67, 71

*The Twelve* also appears in the Gospels when an individual is identified as “one of the Twelve.” The primary use is as a description of Judas, regarding his betrayal (Matthew 26:14, 47; Mark 14:10, 20, 43; Luke 22:3, 47; John 6:71). It is also used of Thomas (John 20:24), when noting that he was not present at Jesus’ Easter evening appearance in the locked room. The betrayal of Judas and the disbelief of Thomas are particularly worthy of condemnation due to their position among the Twelve.

In a handful of texts, *the disciples* refers to some, but not all, of the Twelve. The two disciples sent to get a donkey in Matthew 21:1 are called “the disciples” in 21:6. When Peter, James and John return with Jesus from the Mount of Transfiguration, they are met by “the disciples” (Mark 9:14) who were unable to heal a man’s epileptic son. In John 20:10 (“Then the disciples returned to their home”) the term refers to Peter and John, who had just visited the empty tomb on Sunday morning. That evening, Thomas is not with “the disciples” (John 20:20) who saw the Lord. Seven are named as present when Jesus later revealed himself to “the disciples” (John 21:1-2) by the Sea of Tiberias.

The section of this paper titled “Disciples other than the 12” (page 46 and following) lists about a dozen texts that refer to additional disciples: individuals and large groups who followed Jesus. When we combine all the times when the text tells us that the Gospel writers are using *the disciples* to refer to the Twelve, or to some of the Twelve, or to larger groups of disciples, we are covering only fifteen to twenty percent of the approximately 200 times that *the disciples* is used for followers of Jesus in the Gospels.

The vast majority of the time, we cannot tell from the text whether the Twelve or a smaller or larger group is meant. Although most people, this writer included, picture twelve disciples rebuking parents who brought their children to Jesus (Luke 18:15), or asking for an explanation of a parable (Matthew 13:36), or in the boat while Jesus sleeps through a storm (Mark 4:35-41), we do not know how many were there at these occasions. It apparently was not important to the Gospel writers, on most occasions, to specify the number of disciples present. Rather, as they tell the story of their Lord through the inspiration of the Spirit, their intent seems to be to distinguish between two groups: those who put their faith and trust in Jesus, following him, and who thus were his

disciples; and the second group, those who rejected Jesus. The emphasis on the cost of discipleship, the listing of the leaders who opposed Jesus, and the description of Jesus' impact on people all contribute to that sharp line between those who followed and those who rejected Jesus.

### **Gospel Writers' Naming of Other Groups**

The conclusion that the two groups of those who followed Christ and those who rejected him are the focus of the Gospel writers is supported also by the manner in which the Gospel writers refer to the other groups of their time. Most often, these groups are named in a generalized, non-specific way. The differences between them are not emphasized; their unity in opposition to Jesus is emphasized.

In general, the name of an entire group is used for individuals from that group. "The Pharisees" is used when what is meant is obviously not the entire group but leaders or representatives of it (Mark 2:24; John 7:47). The same is true for the scribes, Sadducees and other groups (Matthew 12:38; Luke 5:21). This is the practice of all the Gospel writers even when they note individuals who are exceptions to the rule, such as Nicodemus (John 3:1). John regularly uses "the Jews" for leaders of the Jews (John 1:19; 5:10; 9:22; 18:28). This usage is especially notable as the individuals that the Jewish leaders are opposing, Jesus and the disciples, are also Jews. When John writes that the disciples were in a locked room "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19), it would be as if I wrote that I and my friends, all of whom are Americans, were hiding in a locked room "for fear of the Americans." The fact that John also uses this term in a more typical way, to refer to the whole Jewish race (John 4:9), supports the conjecture that using "the Jews"

to refer to leaders must have been a recognized manner of expression in his day. He trusts his audience to understand his meaning from the context.

The Gospel writers also, and very often, name several groups together, such as “scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 12:38; Luke 6:7), “the elders and chief priests and scribes” (Mark 8:31). These groupings occur primarily in the context of opposition to Jesus. The grouping of “scribes and Pharisees” is perhaps the most common. These two groups are not exclusive. Scribes were men trained in understanding and teaching the law; Pharisees were people with a particular approach to following the law in daily life. In first century Judaism, the most influential scribes were also Pharisees, and the Pharisees in leadership positions in Jerusalem were most often trained scribes. So the phrase “scribes and Pharisees” was likely a shorthand manner of speaking that indicated leaders who were both scribes and Pharisees.

Comparing parallel passages shows us that the Gospel writers are flexible in their listing of groups. In the context of the calling of Matthew (detailed on page 42), which includes the healing of the paralytic, eating with “sinners” at Matthew’s feast, and questions about fasting, the synoptic writers use different terms to describe the leaders who were questioning and opposing Jesus. When Judas arrives in the Garden of Gethsemane, the crowd sent to arrest Jesus is sent by “the chief priests and the elders of the people” according to Matthew (26:47) and by “the chief priests and the scribes and the elders” according to Mark (14:43) and “the chief priests and Pharisees” according to John (18:3). Matthew seems to refer to the same group in two different ways in one of his narratives. In 21:23, the “chief priests and the elders of the people” come to Jesus as he is teaching in the temple and question the sources of his authority. Jesus responds by

stumping them with a question about the source of John the Baptist's authority, then continues with the Parable of the Two Sons and the Parable of the Tenants. Matthew concludes by noting that "the chief priests and the Pharisees" recognized these parables were about them (21:45). These differences in naming the groups do not indicate a lack of care on the part of the Gospel writers. Rather, they indicate that it was accepted to refer generally and loosely, rather than literally, to people in overlapping groups, or leaders of allied groups.

Many of the other groupings in the Gospels, particularly those near or during Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion, are likely shorthand references to leaders of the Sanhedrin, or to the Sanhedrin as a whole. The Sanhedrin consisted of the chief priests, the elders (heads of aristocratic families), and some scribes (see page 18). The Pharisees and Sadducees were also represented in the Sanhedrin since many of the priests were Sadducees while many scribes were Pharisees. So in Matthew we read of "the scribes and the elders" (26:57) who had gathered before Caiaphas and that in the morning "all the chief priests and the elders of the people" (27:1) decided Jesus would die. Mark seems to be inclusive when he reports that "the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole Council" (15:1) when they delivered Jesus to Pilate. Luke reports that it was "the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders" (22:52) who were present at Jesus' arrest in the garden and that in the morning, "the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led [Jesus] away to their council" (22:66). These groups seem to be a stylistic way of referring to the governing authorities in general, or to people with the highest authority, even though at



times the Gospel writers do use the term “ruler” (Luke 23:13) or “authorities” (John 7:48).

### **Conclusions and Applications Regarding Naming of Groups**

The Gospel writers were very familiar with the groups of their day. They recognized the unity of purpose in these groups. They saw that when a person was part of a group, it was part of their identity. They also recognized the power and influence of these groups in their society. Despite unique backgrounds and perspectives, and their different audiences, the four Gospel writers use very similar styles in their treatment of the disciples of Jesus and the manner in which they name the sects and groups of their day. Their uniformity of usage would indicate it was a familiar way of speaking or writing:

- to refer generally to a group rather than specifically to individual leaders of the group
- to use the name of the group to refer to representatives or leaders of the group
- to use the names of two or three groups to refer to an alliance, formal or informal, of groups.

Other than emphasizing the selection and appointment of the twelve disciples as apostles, the Gospel writers give little emphasis to distinguishing between this group of disciples and other disciples. As to the other groups present in their narratives, such as the Pharisees, scribes, chief priest, and elders, they barely mention differences among these groups but focus on their unity in opposition to Jesus. For these writers, the distinction is between those who accepted Jesus as Lord and followed him, and those who opposed

him, which were all the groups with power and authority. The lines between these two are sharply drawn and are present throughout the narratives.

This treatment of groups emphasizes that Jesus is far and away the main focus of the Gospels. His presence, his identity, his teachings and, especially, his actions, culminating in his death and resurrection -- these are the essence of the story. There is only one main character in this drama. All other individuals and groups are 'bit players,' whose primary function may well be to demonstrate either acceptance or rejection of Jesus.

How, then, does the Gospel writers' treatment of disciples as a group carry over into our use of the term *disciples* today? Jesus' disciples in the church today, like the first century disciples, vary widely in background, spiritual maturity, perspective, training and office. Yet all differences among disciples pale into insignificance compared to the distinction between those who follow Christ and those who do not. We need to know and understand our differences within the church, but also keep them in perspective.

All Christians are disciples of Jesus Christ. All have the characteristics of disciples described above: all are called and all are sent, a fact which is crucial in the church doing our Master's work in western post-Christian culture. As churches, on both a denominational and congregational level, call, train, place, support and affirm professional church workers, they also need to confirm the laity's call to be disciples, and train, support and affirm them in that call. All disciples should experience the challenges and blessings of being a disciple.

Is it appropriate to identify certain groups today with the Twelve? The Twelve were closest to Jesus. They were official because they were appointed as apostles, a

recognized position of that time and culture. They were leaders among the disciples during Jesus' ministry and leaders of the early church. But the only commands and experiences unique to them are their appointment as apostles and their presence at the supper and in the garden. Although at times Jesus predicted his death to the Twelve (Matthew 20:17), he also foretold his death to unspecified disciples (Matthew 16:21; 17:22). Although Jesus sent the Twelve on missionary journeys (Luke 9:1-2), he also sent the seventy-two (Luke 10:1).

The creation of the Office of the Pastoral Ministry is tied to the appointment of the Twelve as apostles. The connection is valid because Jesus did establish an office when he appointed the Twelve, and the "preaching of the Word" (Acts 6:2) was the chief duty of these apostles. But scripture is clear that all disciples carry out the work of their Master all the time. If the sharing of God's word and the service of the laity are seen as a lesser type or of lesser value, or if professional church workers are presented as the only believers in "full time" service to their Lord, we are making a distinction that is difficult to support textually.

We are disciples in community. We do not follow our Lord as individuals, but as people connected to each other. Our churches do well in emphasizing that we worship together and that we study God's word together. Our communities are also strong in caring for each other through times of sickness, grief and distress. But we could better emphasize the community aspect of our "following," our carrying on of our Master's work, in our daily lives and in the way we serve together in his church. Organizationally, we could recruit on the basis of gifts rather than need. We could give as much emphasis to training, supporting and affirming each other when we serve as we do to recruitment.

We could be more intentional about affirming each other's gifts and service, do more talking about the challenges and blessings of serving, and help each other keep our Master always in front of us.

At the time of Christ, the concept of disciples, and the existence of disciple groups, was new, a cultural importation from Greek society. Previously, their society had been organized almost exclusively on the family. Research by Sivertsev dates this change to the time of Herod the Great, immediately before Christ rather than the 200 or so years earlier as previously thought.<sup>2</sup> The window of appearance of the concept of Christians as *disciples* was small in Palestine. Soon after the writing of the Gospels, Jerusalem is destroyed and the growth of Christianity shifts to the Greek world. Paradoxically, Greek Christians are not comfortable describing themselves as disciples, for fear their faith would be seen as commitment to a philosophy rather than a Person. Today the richness of the scriptural picture of *disciples*, as a radical and complete commitment to a Master who calls us and whose work we carry on, can bless our growth in God's grace and in our Christian life.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the premise of his book *Household, Sects . . .*, referenced earlier (page 5)

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