

What is a disciple?

The English term “disciple” comes from the Latin term “discipulus” which means “pupil.” However, to fully understand the biblical concept of “disciple, one needs to understand the four Greek word groups that are associated with discipleship: “akoloutheō,” “mathētēs,” “mimeomai” and the preposition “opisō.” While this article examines each word by itself, they are often found in combination with each other.

1. How are these terms used in the Old Testament (LXX)?

Akoloutheō

In the Old Testament, the corresponding Hebrew phrase means “go behind” with the sense of “pursue.” In the context of discipleship, it describes the relationship of a pupil to a teacher where the pupil willingly submits himself to a Rabbi and follows him everywhere to serve and learn from him. The pupil’s objective is to learn everything from the master and know how to apply it in his life. Yet the Old Testament prophet did not teach on his own authority and never saw himself as the master. Likewise the attendants of the prophet were never seen as “pupils” and instead were seen as “servants.”

1 Kings 19:20-21 is an example of how the Hebrew phrase is used where Elisha wants to follow Elijah as his servant.

Mathētēs

The noun “mathētēs” means “learner,” “pupil” or “disciple,” and its verb form “manthanō” means “learn.” With the noun rarely used, the Old Testament is predominantly of the verb, and the Hebrew form of the Greek verb means “learn,” “grow accustomed to” or “make oneself familiar with.” In most instances where this is used (i.e. 40 times), there is no significant theological emphasis.

Used in a corporate sense in reference to the nation of Israel (i.e. Deut 4:10; 14:23; 17:19; 31:12), the Hebrew form places an emphasis on “learning to fear God.” Here the focus is establishing the right attitude as the basis of understanding the covenant relationship with God and serving Him.

Used in an individual sense (i.e. Ps 119:7; Isa 1:17), the Hebrew form again places an emphasis on having the right attitude to learn and understand God’s precepts and direction for living.

Mimeomai

This word group means essentially “imitate;” however its use is not found in the Old Testament.

Opisō

This word group means “behind” or “after,” and in the Old Testament, the word group is linked with verbs of motion. With respect to discipleship, it is used in several instances to convey the idea that following someone or object is a sign of subservient subordination to a person or object of respect (1 Kings 19:20-21; Jud 2:12; Jer 2:23; Deut 13:4).

2. How are the terms used in the New Testament?

Akoloutheō

In the New Testament, “akoloutheō” appears almost exclusively in the Gospels. Its use does not always involve being a disciple, but when Jesus uses the term with individuals, it is often an imperative such as when He calls the disciples, “follow Me!” (Matt 9:9; 19:21; Mark 1:17; John 1:43; etc)

During this time, rabbinical Judaism had a tradition of teacher - student relationship. The Rabbi was the mediator between the pupil and the Torah. What the pupil learned was determined by the authority of the Rabbi, and the focus of study was the Rabbi's interpretation of the Torah. Because the personal and unbiased study of the Torah without the guidance of the Rabbi was discouraged, students sought out the best Rabbis to train under. The pupil would study and serve the Rabbi for an extensive period of time until he became an authority and could teach his own tradition in his own school.

When associated with Jesus, “akoloutheō” conveys the rabbinical Judaism's sense of a Rabbi - pupil relationship; however, there are distinct differences between the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of Jewish rabbis.

1. Jesus called men with divine authority as God called the Old Testament prophets (Ex 3:4-10); Jesus did not wait for voluntary followers.
2. The message for disciples is a unique, life changing and with eternal consequences. Jesus is the Light and anyone who follows Him will be saved (John 8:12).
3. In contrast to rabbinical emphasis on learning the Torah and traditional conduct, Jesus called upon men with a unique task: to serve the kingdom of God with a view towards the future (Luke 9:59-60).

Mathētēs

In the New Testament, the noun “mathētēs” occurs 264 times and exclusively in the Gospels and Acts. In contrast to the Greeks understanding of “mathētēs” as “one who binds himself to someone in order to acquire his practical and theoretical knowledge,” the New Testament understood “mathētēs” as indicating the total attachment of someone to another in discipleship. The New Testament concept was a commitment that went far beyond that of the Hellenistic concept of an apprentice or student.

By the time of the first century, some aspects of the Hellenistic concept can be seen with “mathētēs” used in reference to men not directly associated with Jesus. The New Testament records the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt 11:2; Mark 2:18; 6:29; Luke 5:33; 11:1; John 1:35-37), the disciples of Moses (John 9:28) and the disciples of the Pharisees (Matt 22:16; Mark 2:18). Yet these did not seem as adherents to a particular person as much as they were to a movement.

Some similarities to the master – pupil relationship can be seen in how Jesus was addressed. While He did not attend rabbinical school, Jesus was addressed as “Rabbi” by His disciples (Mark 9:5; 11:21; John 1:38; 4:31) and Jews (John 3:2).

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From the biblical perspective, a genuine “mathētēs” was one who had faith in Jesus Christ and His message (Mark 16:16; John 6:66-71). Disciples of Jesus Christ have moved from darkness to the Light (John 3:16-21). This understanding was in stark contrast to Rabbinical Judaism, and genuine discipleship offered both great promise and dangers (Luke 12:8-12).

The call of discipleship included the call to service (Mark 1:17; Luke 5:10).

Discipleship meant the unconditional sacrifice of one’s whole life (Matt 10:37-39; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 9:59-62; 14:26-33).

Suffering becomes a part of discipleship (Matt 10:38) and readiness for suffering is made possible through self denial (Mark 8:34).

Discipleship meant a wandering, transient and impoverished lifestyle (Matt 8:20; 19:16-24).

Discipleship meant being bound to Jesus and doing God’s will (Mark 3:32-35).

Those who were called by Jesus to be disciples were given His authority (Mark 3:13-15), and a new and future life (Matt 16:25; John 14:6-14). These particular disciples (except one) will also sit with Jesus on a throne to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:27-28; Luke 22:30).

In John 8:31, the concept of a disciple takes on a larger meaning and concept. Instead of being chosen by Jesus, the disciple is one who “continues in His word.” The disciple is not bound to the physical presence of Jesus but simply by His word! Later in the book of John, the eleven disciples are introduced to the idea of continuing their fellowship with Jesus “in the Spirit” after He departs from their physical presence (John 14:15-17; 15:26).

Mimeomai

This word group is found in the New Testament on nine occasions. The call to “imitate” sets forth an obligation to a specific kind of conduct. The word group is usually applied to a particular individual who is a living example for a life of faith (1 Cor 4:16).

When Paul uses himself as an example, he does not think of himself as the ideal.

When examining Philippians 3:12-17, imitating the apostle Paul means laying hold of Jesus Christ conscious of one’s imperfections and letting one’s life be continually remolded in obedience to Him.

Paul never intends to bind the invitation of imitation to his own person. It is always ultimately to the One whom he himself follows.

Ephesians 5:1 is the first place where the thought occurs to imitate God.

Opisō

In the New Testament, “opisō” takes on the meaning of “akoloutheō” as in to “follow someone” or “go behind someone.”

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The words of Jesus in Mark 1:17 provide an example of the use of “*opisō*” in the context of discipleship. “Come after Me (*deute opisō mou*) and I will make you fishers of men.”

The call is made by Jesus.

It includes a call to service which Jesus Himself creates the possibility of.

“*Opsiō*” in this context means sharing in the fellowship of Jesus’ life and suffering. This perspective requires a certain obedience to forsake past comforts and ties. Jesus in essence leads and prescribes the way.

In studying the four word groups associated with discipleship (“*akoloutheō*,” “*mathētēs*,” “*mimeomai*” and “*opisō*”), the term “disciple” can be better understood.

From the word group “*akoloutheō*,” there is the sense of serving the teacher or master.

From the word group “*mathētēs*,” the verb form provides the sense of what attitude one must have to learn as a biblical disciple. The noun form establishes that a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ is committed to the relationship beyond that of a traditional student or apprentice.

From the word group “*mimeomai*,” the call to imitate is an encouragement to continually improve and be more Christ like while acknowledging one’s own imperfections and letting one’s life be continually remolded in obedience to Him.

From the word group “*opisō*,” there is a sense that a genuine disciple doesn’t look back whether admirable or not.

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