

A Contextual Reflection from Preserving Bible Times

“Follow Me”

A Contextual Reflection on Jesus’ Call

Embarking on the Quest

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

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

Educating Jewish Boys

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

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

Choosing Your Rabbi Carefully

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

Being Very Particular

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

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

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

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

Inviting a Candidate to “Follow Me”

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

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

Willing Submission to Authority

By becoming a rabbi’s disciple, the young Jewish lad readily agreed (no coercion needed) to totally surrender to the rabbi’s authority in all areas of interpreting the Scriptures for his life. In fact that submission was something the new disciple truly wanted to do. Using a computer analogy as regards his understanding of God’s Word, the new disciple willingly deleted everything in his own “hard drive” of what he previously thought was “right” and “true,” and started uploading whatever his rabbi held to be right and true, i.e. the yoke of his rabbi. Parenthetically, we might ask, “Is this the way that disciples of Jesus today have embraced His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount?” In this discipling posture, the rabbi was given special honor and esteem above the disciple’s biological father (who gave him physical life) because his rabbi would be the one to give the disciple spiritual life - the wisdom of God’s Word.⁴

Inverting Rabbinic Protocol

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