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The Word Behind You—Following God in the Old Testament

Introduction

We think in terms of discipleship because of Jesus. As Christians today it is impossible to approach the concept of discipleship in the Old Testament without already having the ministry of Jesus in mind.

This is true also because the terminology at first seems absent from the Hebrew Bible. The typical Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *mathetes* is *talmid*, a word occurring only once in the OT, namely in 1 Chr 25:8 about a novice in contrast to a skilled musician. So, in searching for an Old Testament background for the nature of the discipleship established by Christ, we cannot primarily look for verbal connections. Important concepts of a similar nature may, however, be present. Also in the Old Testament people are trained to become followers. Isaiah envisions the ideal future time when all children are taught or instructed by the Lord (Isa 54:13). Though reality and ideal hardly ever met, the Old Testament implies that there were sons and students in homes and/or schools, like the sons of the prophets. What those schools exactly looked like, we may not know, but I believe it would be wrong to limit the references to “sons” in a wisdom book like Proverbs only to the school in the homes. The term sons had in the culture of the day a broader sense, and it is only natural to read Proverbs also as a book used for maybe royal wisdom schools close to the court. Also, there were people who like the boy Samuel would hear and answer God’s calling with “Speak, Lord, your servant listens” (1 Sam 3:9-10). It could also be argued that Daniel and his friends faced a counter education by the indoctrination at the Babylonian court school, which then assumes that God has a goal and a plan for the proper teaching of his people.

While the situations and the concepts behind such teaching may not be completely identical with the discipling of the followers of Jesus, the

textual world of the Old Testament nevertheless provides a framework for New Testament discipleship, based on some common biblical premises in both theology and anthropology.

The Hebrew Bible was essential to the thought world of Jesus. What he said and did when calling his disciples to follow, at times had deliberate Old Testament references. The demands and responses in Luke 9:59-62, for instance, in my view obviously reflect Elisha's dialogue with Elijah when called to follow (1 Kgs 19:19-21). So, there is good reason at a conference like this to ask the question, "and what about discipleship in the Old Testament?"

But accepting the challenge, where do we then, in lack of explicit discipleship terminology, find core statements, which can help us see how the Old Testament may prepare for the particular discipling ministry of Jesus?

The Shema

One singular text most succinctly presents us with a contour of a discipleship philosophy, namely the Shema (Deut 6:4-9). This is a foundational text for the Torah, but it incorporates a number of themes and perspectives which permeate the Old Testament as a whole. Speaking about "the heart of the matter around which everything else" in the Torah revolves, Patrick Miller states that "what Deuteronomy identifies as that center seems to me to be confirmed both by the rest of the Old Testament and by Jesus when he identifies what is the *great commandment*. It is the Shema" (Miller 1987:20).

It can be argued that other texts explicitly linked to the concept and practice of teaching, such as Proverbs, in particular 3:1-12 (Overlad 2000:424-40), are written in the shadow of this core text, which is also reflected in the narrative about the narratives about Samuel (Yoo 2011: 119-21). Several other scholars have noted intertextual links between the Shema and other sections of the Old Testament, in general (Robert 1935), to Isa 51:1-3 (Janzen 1989:69-82), as well as to the New Testament (Gerhardsson 1996). It is therefore a natural place to look for and deduce concepts of discipleship in the Old Testament.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9 ESV)

A number of themes relevant for discipling are easily detected in the text. Among them are the total, radical commitment which springs out of the oneness of God; the principle of active learning, or learning by doing, related to the wholeness of human nature implied by a biblical anthropology; and the continuing combination of both individual and corporate perspective as exemplified in “heart” and the succession of generations, respectively. In the following, I will reflect on the theology embedded in the Shema with a view to its significance for the nature of discipleship in the Old Testament and its links to the New Testament.

The Calling

The Shema opens with the voice of God, “Hear, O Israel!” This imperative from *shama’*, to listen, from which the text is named, is theologically rich. It presupposes a God who speaks, and who has revealed himself and his will for the people of Israel. Humankind has not reached out for God, he comes near to us, and his word is no longer far away, it “is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Deut 30:14 ESV), it is quoted by Paul in Rom 10:8 in a context which climaxes with the reference to faith arising from listening to the Word of Christ (v. 17). Similarly, in the gospels Jesus was the one who approached the disciples with his words of invitation, “Follow me!” (Matt 4:19). To God belongs the initiative of love and grace (cf. Deut 7:7). He is the one seeking.

The proper response to God’s appeal is the humility of the one who fears the Lord and thus has begun walking in the way of wisdom and learning (Prov 1:7), expressed by the voice of a child, like whom we should all be, “Speak, Lord, your servant listens!”

To hear implies more than accidental or superficial listening. Just as the Word of God is powerful and creates what it names, the process of genuine hearing leads to new life and obedience, for this sense is embedded in the word itself. When Samuel as a grown up prophet responds to and severely rebukes Saul, he speaks about God’s delight when his people listens to/obeys (*shama’*) the voice of God, and he claims that “obedience (to listen/*shama’*) is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). And when the Old Testament disciple is about to depart to the right or the left of the road, the promise is that the Word of God will sound from behind, “Here is the Way, follow it” (Isa 30:21).

The Theology: The Oneness of the God Calling

The Shema presents the nature of God, “the Lord Our God, The Lord is *One*.” The sentence has been translated in different ways (Moberly

1990:209-215; McBride 1973:291-297), but my emphasis here is on the theme of oneness on which there is general agreement.

This oneness of God demands total loyalty. There is no other god (Deut 4:35, 39; 1 Kgs 8:60; Isa 45:5, 22), and you cannot worship any other (Exod 34:14; cf. Matt 4:10). Yahweh is God alone. In one other world religion, the radical nature of this commitment is named *islam*, from the Arabic word *salema*, a word etymology related to the well known Hebrew *shalom*, peace, total welfare. Monotheistic religions tend of course by definition to be ethically uncompromising, while polytheistic religions, just like modern pluralistic societies, often seem more liberal and morally permissive.

Also Christians are expected to submit, and evangelicals gladly sing, "All to Jesus I surrender." Yet herein lies the unique Christian perspective, exemplified in the gospels by Jesus' radical invitation, "Follow me!" (emphasis added). His disciples are to deny themselves and take up the cross (Matt 10:38; 16:24) and must be willing to suffer loss of all personal property, face public shame, humiliation, and death. Tax collectors are to leave their gains and benefits behind (Matt 9:9). If a person clings to their riches, they cannot enter the kingdom, so they must sell all and follow (Luke 18:22).

Luke's report of the dialogue between Jesus and two potential disciples in Luke 9:59-62 contains in my view a deliberate play on the narrative about the calling of Elisha in 1 Kgs 19:19-21, a connection also noted by Parsons (2015:170). Contrary to Elisha, Jesus does not allow the potential disciple, who is called to follow, to return to bury his father, or another one simply to say goodbye (Matt 8:21-22; Luke 9:59-62). If you, like Elisha, leave your oxen behind and put your hand on the plow of the gospel, there is no looking back. Several scholars have tried to soften the seemingly harsh nature of the calling. The first disciple's father may not yet be dead, "probably an idiom meaning my father is ill and frail; when he is dead, I will come" (Jefferey 2012:144). Or, the reference may be to the custom of a secondary burial which could only be completed after a wait of one year (Cane 1990:31-43). But the main point still is the radical nature of being a disciple. Elisha is not Elijah's disciple in the same sense that the twelve are disciples of Jesus.

What is striking is that in the Old Testament, the demand to worship God alone leads to an evident hesitation in accepting any other master than God himself. This perspective is strongly emphasized by Rengstorff (1967:426-41) who discusses the terms against the background of the Hellenistic world with its masters and followers and concludes for instance that "the Old Testament prophets had no disciples" (427), or that there is an "absence also of the Master-Disciple relationship from the Old Testament" (426). Wilkins (2015:51-53) argues strongly against Rengstorff,

claiming that he confuses terminology with concept. To a certain degree, this discussion depends on semantics. If you call students of ordinary human teachers, whether at home or school, disciples, you find them in the Old Testament. Yet, in the absolute, radical sense of “disciple” used by Jesus, the Old Testament accepts only God as the Master.

This may lie behind the lack of discipleship terminology in the Old Testament, and it should caution Christians today who may speak about mentorship and discipleship within the believing community. As a teacher/pastor in any authority position, my pedagogical aim should always be to help students/parishioners to come to depend on God alone—never on me. But of course, also in the Old Testament, those who follow the voice of God, are impacted by their cultural environment, including their human teachers—for example the sons of Samuel followed the evil ways of the sons of Eli (cf. 1 Sam 8:1-5).

The main point here is that when Jesus in the gospels demands that people follow him, he is requiring what is a prerogative of God alone. The Son of Man becomes the object of such worship (cf. Dan 7:13-14), “all peoples will worship him,” in New Testament perspective implying his divine nature. Satan, the pretender to that position, appeals during the wilderness temptations to Jesus to acknowledge him as worthy of worship. In his refusal (Luke 4:8, the link to Dan 4 and 7 is more explicit in Luke’s gospel than in Matthew’s), Jesus may implicitly accept the divine role of the Son of Man.

Consequently, Jesus, for his disciples and for the early church becomes an object of worship, and to explain how Christians can be monotheists and still worship Christ as the Lord/Yahweh, Jesus was incorporated into the *Shema* in, for instance, John 17:2-3 and 1 Cor 8:5-6 (Waalder 2008), leading, of course, over time to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Anthropology: The Wholeness of the Community Called

The *Shema* addresses both Israel and the individuals in second person singular. The call is to the people, to Israel. At the same time it speaks to each of the children of God, who are to place the commands of God on the heart and teach each subsequent generation. The binding on forehead and hand likewise implies an individual appropriation. But the followers always live in community. The identity of the individual and the identity of the people are bound together. And while addressed to the people as a whole—“Hear, O Israel!”—the community consists of families, and the “discipling” or teaching to hear the Word of God and follow is entrusted to the families in their succession of generations.

In describing those called, totality is emphasized: You shall love the

LORD your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your might. This cannot be separated from the previous line; it is the response to God's calling and to his oneness. As expressed by Miller, "Here is that radically monotheistic insistence that the Lord Yahweh alone is God, and the oneness of this God merits the oneness of our devotion" (1987:20).

The mentioning of heart (*leb*), "soul" (*nephesh*), and might (*me'od*) should not be the cause for distinguishing between different parts of human nature; they are named together to indicate the *complete* person. And the emphasis of the sentence is in Hebrew on the initial verb, the action, in this case: You shall *love* the LORD your God with all that you are.

The wholeness is conditioned by loving. Where love is not present, human life is broken, both individually and corporately (Petersen 2015:235-48). Love is motivation and prerequisite for law and life. Miller points out that "law as torah means that we cannot think about or understand what law is except as part of a larger story" (1987:18). The wider context of the Shema is articulated at the end of Deut 6. When future generations ask for the purpose and content of the law and statutes given by the Lord, the answer is the story of redemption from the slavery in Egypt (Deut 6:20-25). This story introduces the Ten Commandments in both its Scriptural versions (Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6), and God's redemptive love, thus becomes the explicit motivation for and "encouragement to obedience" (cf. Deut 7:7; 10:12-13, and in NT, 1 John 4:19). This love, however, "is never nebulous or ill defined. Its specificity is identified in the Ten Commandments" (Miller 1987:19), the immediate reference for the "words" (*debarim*) of the Shema in Deut 6:6 being the Ten Commandments, spoken in 5:6-21, cf. 4:13.

Love moves with the Ten Commandments into the wider set of God's statutes for a harmonic communal life, where care is taken for the needy and the weak, for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut 10:17, note how God's love explicitly is presented as the context; 14:29; 16:11). The wholeness of the follower is defined also by social responsibility and intertwined with the harmony of the community. Discipleship covers all of life, both individual and corporate. The calling of the Shema thus governs my present life, but it also speaks to my future. My responsibilities as a follower extend to the generations to come. The wholeness intended by God covers not only social space, but also time.

The emphasis on wholeness or totality also comes to the fore in the reference to the exercises of daily life, to the teaching of the law when you sit or walk, when you lie down and rise up, through leisure time and work, by night and by day. Learning takes place when and by living. It includes both hand and forehead (just as, by the way, the counter law in

Rev 13:16). The dualistic tendency of Western anthropology to separate mind from matter, thinking from body, reflection from activity does not align well with the Shema. When following Jesus, you set out on a journey, a pilgrimage—you walk, exemplified in Paul’s exhortations, “Let us, therefore, walk” (Eph 4:1; 5:1).

The Choice—The Relationship between the Caller and the Called

The elements of hearing, acknowledging God’s oneness, and listening to his love story of redemption, all imply that in order to follow, the disciple has a choice to make. Miller speaks wisely about the fact that the law of God, the law of the Shema, persuades and gives reasons. It does not simply require blind, impersonal obedience (1987:19-20).

The discipleship envisioned by God is not a relationship of force, but trust. The follower is made free, is a disciple in close personal relationship with the Master, not as a copy, but as a new creation. Followers are encouraged to think, to study, to reflect and make decisions, and if they in that process are about to turn to the right or the left, their ears will hear the word from behind: “This is the Way, walk in it” (Isa 30:21).

Such freedom only exists in Christ. Genuine biblical discipleship, also in the Old Testament, springs from the reality of the presence of the Word of God among us, not far away, but in our mouth and in our hearts and thoughts (Deut 30:14) as we walk our pilgrim journey. In contrast to the transcendental ontology or ontological transcendence of God in Islam, the biblical God is also immanent. He is Immanuel—he is with us in a personal relationship created by redemptive love through which he has revealed himself. He is my kinsman and closest family, my friend (Isa 41:8; John 15:15), walking with me on my discipleship journey. Freely submitting, when following, we will hear his voice behind us and in humility respond, “Speak, Lord, your servant listens.”

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