



THE NEW SHOFAR

The biblical Hebrew word for the verb “to follow” is the same as the word for disciple.

February 6th

What does it mean to follow Jesus?

The verb “to follow” (the verb found in today’s Gospel) is found only in the four Gospels in the New Testament and is used only of Jesus. It was a key word for the early Church and was only applied to those who were responding to the person and teachings of Jesus – to disciples. But what does “to follow” mean in practical terms?



In secular Greek the verb *to follow* had included in its usage a moral and religious sense. It included the expectation that a disciple would take to heart and embody the teachings of the wise instructor. The more they took these teachings and examples to heart and put them into practice, the more they would become like the teacher, the more they were following.

In the Old Testament

It may appear odd to us, but the Hebrew word equivalent to the Greek “to follow” is commonly associated with the sins of Israel, with idolatry. The people abandoned Yahweh their God and followed-after the ways of the pagan gods around them. They lived as pagans. The more they followed those gods, the more they became *like the other nations*. They did not abandon God altogether, but he faded into the distance.

In Hosea, the prophet uses the imagery of adultery when he describes this kind of deluded following. The more she (Israel) pursues these false gods, the more she forgets her One True God... *When Yahweh first spoke through Hosea, Yahweh said to Hosea, ‘Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking Yahweh’...1:2*. The more they allowed themselves to be seduced and distracted by the temptations of the nations, the more difficult it was to find space in their lives to be at one with God to find God.

In Deuteronomy, the writers use the image of **walking in the ways of God** rather than going after Yahweh. They could not imagine how a human would “follow” the Almighty One. Not even in the narrative of the Exodus is there a mention of following God through the wilderness. *You must follow exactly the path that Yahweh your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess...(5:33)*. The point he is making is that the people need to choose, and to continue to make choices for Yahweh and rejecting false gods and alternatives to faithful living under the covenant. There is a “way” through the wilderness, but

Discipleship is always a verb in the New Testament. We are never nouns – disciples. We are always “doing” disciple things. Acting in imitation of Jesus means by to follow

that “way” is a way of living and a way of being more than it being a road or a pathway. We do not need a “road” when we live under God, for God is the road.

“to follow” as later Judaism understood it

When the rabbis were commenting on the question of following God, they used the verb in a heightened religious sense: imitating the ways of God. The people should clothe the naked just as God clothed Adam and Eve. They should visit the sick as God visited Abraham. They should comfort the sorrowful as God comforted Isaac and bury the dead as God buried Moses. For them, to follow meant to imitate, reproduce.

Now we come to the invitation of Jesus: Come, follow me.

What does salvation mean?

Being invited to create space for God in our lives so that a place of peace and calm is created in the midst of life's storms.

This is how we are “saved” from all perils, storms and even death itself.

By the time we come to the New Testament understanding, we find that the verb “to follow” has been focussed to the point of being used only in the sense of abandoning all else in their lives but Jesus. The emphasis now hones in on self-commitment and self-sacrifice. The individual's life must be totally committed to growing in their relationship with Jesus. Everything else is to be flavoured by this relationship. It sustains and enriches everything else we do and who we are. *Following* demands a deep and intimate commitment to being “as Jesus would be” in every moment of their lives.

In so doing, the disciple commits himself/herself to taking up God's offer of salvation presented to them in Jesus. No other commitment is more important for them ... *Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’* ⁶² *Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God... Luke 9:61-62.*

But there is another aspect to the verb, one which caused great angst for the apostles. It implies a participation in the fate of Jesus. What is demanded of us is deeper than just following Jesus by undergoing our own “crucifixions” (take up your cross and follow). Rather, it has the sense of including a fellowship in the life and sufferings of the Messiah, in the good and the bad. It is a bit like the marriage vow – in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, in our living and in our dying. This is the only way to partake of the salvation God is offering. This is what happens when we truly are living “in Christ”. We do not have to have the Way spelled out for us, because the Way is nothing other than Jesus. When we are in Christ, we are following.

Thus, discipleship in the New Testament is always an action, a participle. It is never a static concept, never a description of a job, or an office or a level of authority. We are not disciples (a noun) but are men and women of faith “doing disciple things”, living in ways reflecting the way Jesus would be “doing” such things.

Today, then, we are being called to allow more of God and less of ourselves in the structuring and shaping our lives, either as parishes or as individuals. The only agenda bringing life and peace is the one set down by God.