

# Discipling Joshua

Comments by Dave DeWitt

The Old Testament did not have a concept of discipleship. There are some hints of it with Elijah and Elisha. Solomon said David and Bathsheba instructed him (Proverbs 4:3; Song 8:2). Isaiah speaks briefly about disciples (Isaiah 8:16; 50:4). But there was no concept of intending to disciple someone as a focus of ministry. Although the ministry of John the Baptist yielded some disciples (Acts 19:3), Jesus was the first one to emphasize the preparation of disciples as a focal point of His ministry. That concept then penetrated the ministry of the apostles. Even though discipleship was not the center of Old Testament ministry, we can observe some principles that apply to discipleship, especially the teaching/learning which was accomplished between Moses and Joshua.

## Definition

A disciple is student who learns from a particular teacher with the objective of reproducing what he or she has learned.

The basic definition of the New Testament word for discipleship [μαθητής (*math-ay-tās*)] is a “learner,” or “pupil” of a particular teacher. The key synonym is “learner.” [Strong’s Greek New Testament] Did that happen in the Old Testament? Well, certain aspects of it did, especially in the case of Moses and Joshua. Joshua was certainly a student who learned from Moses. But discipleship is also a unique kind of learning. Here are eight observations about Moses and Joshua that can be lessons for discipleship.

## Lesson #1, Discipleship Is When the Teacher Initiates the Learning

*Exodus 17:8-10, 13-14, Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek. ... So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”*

After crossing the Red Sea on dry land and receiving water from a rock, the Israelites camped at a place called Rephidim, between the Red Sea Gulf of Acaba and Mount Sinai, where they were attacked by Amalekites.

The Amalekites were descendants of Esau’s grandson Amelek (Genesis 36:12). Their hatred for Israel may go back to Jacob’s deception to take the inheritance from their forefather, Esau. At any rate, the Amalekites did not want the descendants of Jacob in their land.

Moses came to Joshua, asking him to *choose men and fight against Amalek*. Since Moses came directly to Joshua and told him to choose the men for the battle, it seems like Moses already knew Joshua, and knew he had military experience, probably in Pharaoh’s army. Even though the relationship between Moses and Joshua was not New Testament discipleship, there are some things they both had in common.

One thing that distinguishes discipleship from other kinds of learning is that the one doing discipleship initiates the instruction to the one being disciplined. If you want to disciple someone, ask them if they are interested in learning, say, studying the Bible, with you. Do not wait for them to ask. When the student initiates the learning, as in going to hear a sermon or lecture, in a church or a school, that is not discipleship. The student may initiate the contact with the teacher, but discipleship is when the teacher invites the student to learn from him or her personally.

## **Lesson # 2, Discipleship Is Not the Same as Mentoring**

After Joshua defeated the Amalekites, God said to Moses,

**Exodus 17:14**, *Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua.*

This is the first mention of Moses recording events in a book.

Writing down the revelation of God was something Moses continued to do.

**Exodus 24:4**, *Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.*

**Numbers 33:2**, *Moses recorded their starting places according to their journeys by the command of the LORD...*

**Deuteronomy 31:9**, *So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.*

**Deuteronomy 31:22**, *So Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the sons of Israel.*

One uniqueness of Moses' first written record was that God told him to *recite it to Joshua*. Discipleship is different from mentoring, in that with mentoring the teacher teaches the student what he or she knows about a certain subject. With discipleship, the teacher points the student to an authority beyond himself. In the case of Christian discipleship, that is the Word of God.

## **Lesson # 3, Discipleship Is about a Person, Not a Congregation**

**Exodus 24:12-14**, *Now the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to Me on the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction." So Moses arose with Joshua his servant, and Moses went up to the mountain of God. But to the elders he said, "Wait here for us until we return to you."*

**Exodus 32:4**, *He [Aaron] took this [gold] from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."*

**Exodus 32:17**, *Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a sound of war in the camp."*

When God called Moses up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone (which Moses was given orally before – Exodus 20), God told the elders and the congregation they could not come up on the mountain, but Joshua was allowed to follow Moses to a point, part way up the mountain, where he heard noise from the congregation, while not being a part of that congregation.

A disciple is not like an elder. Elders are part of the congregation. A disciple, although part of a congregation, also stands apart from the congregation. Disciples are closer to the one discipling them than they are to a congregation.

## **Lesson # 4, Discipleship Recognizes Different Ministries**

**Numbers 11:25-29**, *...two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. So a young man ran and told Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!"*

The Israelites complained to Moses that they had no meat. God answered with a wind that blew in quail for them to eat. But between their complaint and God's answer He instructed Moses to *gather seventy men of the elders of the people* (Numbers 11:24) from out of the camp to Moses' tent. Then the Lord came down in a cloud and gave a portion of the Spirit who was upon Moses to these elders, who prophesied, but only one time. However, there were two registered as part of the 70 elders who remained in the camp but kept on giving prophecy. Joshua thought only those surrounding Moses should be

allowed to prophesy. Moses reminded Joshua it was God's prophecy, not His servant Moses who was of paramount importance.

The one doing the discipleship shows his or her student that God has different ministries. Teachers can have tunnel vision, seeing only one ministry. In discipleship, the teacher encourages the student to recognize other godly ministries. For us, that would be other ministries centered in the Bible.

### **Lesson # 5 Discipleship Focuses on the Glory of God**

**Numbers 14:4-10**, *So they [the Israelites] said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt." Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in the presence of all the assembly of the congregation of the sons of Israel. Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, "The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. **If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us**" ... But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Then the glory of the LORD appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel.*

After 12 spies were sent in to check out the land, 10 of them said, *"We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us"* (Numbers 13:30). Because of that report, *All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!"* (Numbers 14:2).

The suggestion of the congregation was to appoint a leader to replace Moses and return to Egypt. Then Joshua and Caleb pointed out the real issue, the one that Joshua had learned from Moses. The issue was not the people of the land of Canaan. Joshua said the issue was whether *the LORD is pleased with us*. Joshua sided with his leader Moses against the congregation, who wanted to replace Moses and go back to Egypt. But Joshua's position was not because Moses was his leader, but because Moses was right. The real issue was, could they please God? What Joshua learned from Moses was that pleasing God was paramount over anything else. Going into the land was the right thing to do, not because Moses said so, but because it pleased God.

The one discipling should teach, and the disciple should learn, to only glorify God. Discipleship is not about pleasing or bringing glory to a congregation or a ministry or a teacher. Discipleship should only be used over other means of teaching and learning, if it brings more glory to God than other forms of teaching and learning.

### **Lesson #6, Discipleship Focuses on Following the Lord Fully**

**Numbers 32:11-12**, *'None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob; for they did not follow Me fully, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have followed the LORD fully.'*

Discipleship is not about attending a class, getting a degree, being ordained, or being part of a team. The purpose of discipleship is that the one being disciplined follow God fully in whatever life situation he or she is in (1 Corinthians 7:17-24).

### **Lesson # 7, Discipleship Focuses on Encouragement**

**Deuteronomy 1:38**, *Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter there; encourage him, for he will cause Israel to inherit it.*

**Deuteronomy 3:21**, *"I commanded Joshua at that time, saying, 'Your eyes have seen all that the LORD your God has done to these two kings; so the LORD shall do to all the kingdoms into which you are about to cross.'"*

**Deuteronomy 3:28**, *‘But charge Joshua and encourage him and strengthen him, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he will give them as an inheritance the land which you will see.’*

Whether it is instruction or correction, discipleship should always be an encouragement to the student.

## **Lesson # 8, Discipleship Should Continue into Old Age**

**Deuteronomy 31:14**, *Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, the time for you to die is near; call Joshua, and present yourselves at the tent of meeting, that I may commission him.” So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the tent of meeting.*

**Deuteronomy 34:9**, *Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses.*

**Deuteronomy 34:6-7**, *And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day. Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated.*

When Moses was 120 years old and about to die, Joshua was about 80 years old. So when Moses was 120, he was still discipling Joshua at age 80. After the death of Moses, someone, possibly Joshua, wrote the epitaph of Deuteronomy 34:6-7. The one discipling should not stop discipling, even a mature disciple, as long as he is physically alive and able.

## **Conclusion**

Looking for discipleship principles in the Old Testament is a bit of a force fit, since what Jesus did with His disciples was not the focus of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets. Nonetheless, there is some overlap, especially between the influence of Moses on Joshua. The ministry of Moses with Joshua includes some aspects of discipleship. Moses:

1. Initiated the contact with Joshua
2. Taught him about God, rather than mentoring him to do a job
3. Taught Joshua individually, apart from the congregation
4. Taught Joshua to recognize other ministries
5. Taught Joshua to focus on the glory of God
6. Encouraged him to follow God fully
7. Focused on encouragement
8. Did all these things with Joshua even into their old age