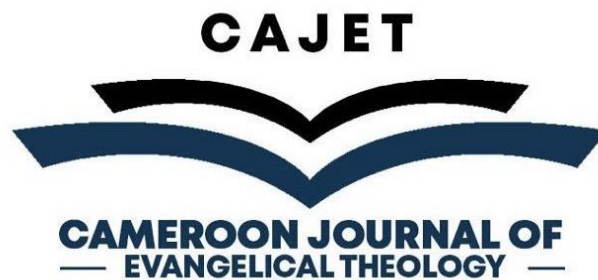


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A Semantic Exploration of *Akolouthein* (to Follow) in the New Testament and Background Literature: Implications for Contemporary Christ-Followership

Une exploration sémantique de akolouthein (suivre) dans le Nouveau Testament et sa littérature de fond : Implications pour la suivance¹ contemporaine du Christ

Emmanuel OUMAROU²

Abstract

Following Jesus is a key theme in the New Testament (NT). In several instances, the NT records that Jesus called people to follow him. While on earth, except in few occasions, wherever he went, people (especially the Twelve) followed. The theme of following was therefore crucial to the ministry of Jesus and his early followers. As such, it must remain central to contemporary disciples of Christ. Drawing upon historical analysis, this paper seeks to clarify the concept of following Jesus of Nazareth and to delineate its implications for Christ-followers today. To this end, it explores the meaning of the Greek *akolouthein* (to follow) both in the background literature of the NT and the NT itself. Results of the exploration show that, in the NT and literature that serves as its backdrop, *akolouthein* was a polysemic term whose meaning was contingent upon contexts and the motifs with which it was associated in texts.

Keywords: *akolouthein*, *akoloutheo*, following, Christ-followership, discipleship.

Résumé

Suivre Jésus est un thème clé du Nouveau Testament (NT). À plusieurs reprises, le NT rapporte que Jésus a appelé les gens à le suivre. Pendant son séjour sur terre, sauf en de rares occasions, partout où il allait, les gens (en particulier les Douze) le suivaient. Le thème de la suivance était donc crucial dans le ministère de Jésus et ses adeptes primitifs. En tant que tel, il doit rester central pour les adeptes contemporains du Christ. S'appuyant sur l'analyse diachronique, cet article cherche à clarifier le concept de la suivance de Jésus de Nazareth et à définir ses implications pour les disciples du Christ aujourd'hui. À cette fin, il explore la signification du grec akolouthein (suivre) à la fois dans la littérature d'arrière-plan du NT et

¹J'ai emprunté le terme « suivance » à son utilisation par les traducteurs français du théologien et pasteur luthérien allemand, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Pour traduire le vocable allemand « *nachfolge* » (intraduisible en français) qui revient régulièrement dans les écrits de Bonhoeffer et qui constitue le titre allemand du livre qu'il a publié en 1937 (titre français : *Le prix de la grâce*), ses traducteurs ont eu recours au néologisme « suivance ». J'opte pour ce terme pour deux raisons. Premièrement, il a été inventé spécifiquement pour exprimer la marche à la suite du Christ. En ceci, le terme est particulièrement adapté pour communiquer ma pensée dans cet article. Deuxièmement, j'ai choisi le terme pour éviter d'utiliser les substantifs *suivisme* et *discipulat* étant donné que le suivisme connote un suivi moutonnier, c'est-à-dire, non critique, et le discipulat intègre la notion de suivre mais la transcende. En d'autres termes, discipulat communique l'idée de suivre mais englobe d'autres significations. Pour plus d'explications sur le sens de la suivance, voir l'article intitulé *Suivance, mode d'emploi : méditation de Luc 5.1-11* à l'adresse : <https://www.epfb.net/suivance-mode-demploi-meditation-de-luc-5-1-11/> (Consulté le 2 octobre 2023).

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dans le NT lui-même. Les résultats de cette exploration montrent que, dans le NT et la littérature qui lui sert de toile de fond, akolouthein était un terme polysémique dont la signification dépendait des contextes et des thèmes auxquels il était associé dans les textes.

Mots-clés : *akolouthein, akoloutheo, suivre, suivance du Christ, discipulat.*

Introduction

The New Testament (NT) emphasizes the act of *following* Jesus as one of the most decisive responses to the gospel. In the Gospels especially, the Lord Jesus frequently invited people to respond to his call/message by following him. Severally, the evangelists portray him as using the Greek imperative expression “*akolouthei moi*” (follow me) to summon people to come after him. This is the case, for instance, with Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:18-19; Mark 1:16-18), James and John (Matthew 4:21-22; Mark 1:19-20), and Levi (Luke 5:27-28). It follows that, as Thomas Tarrant (2011) avers, “‘Follow me’ was a constant refrain in his [Jesus] message” (para. 1).

The motif of following permeates the NT. The verb *akolouthein* (to follow, to come after) occurs 90 times in the NT. Of these occurrences, 60 are found in the synoptic gospels, 19 in the gospel of John, and 11 in rest of the NT (Kim, 2016, p. 65). These data highlight the strong presence of the theme in the thinking of early Christ-followers. They equally indicate that NT writers accorded the theme a place of prime importance.

Akolouthein is polysemic in nature. This is true in both biblical and non-biblical literature. Therefore, to come to grips with the whole semantic profile of the term in the NT, it is best to approach it in relation to the literary contexts of its use and the motifs with which it is associated in texts. Sean Kim (2016) explains that *akolouthein* “does not convey a fixed meaning on its own but communicates various meanings and overtones by its association with other factors that control the logic of the context” such as “its association with other words and motifs in the sentence and the immediate and larger literary context” (pp. 3, 56).

This article investigates the polysemy of *akolouthein*. Its purpose is to elucidate the various contextual uses of the term in the NT and the background literature that informs it as well as outline its implication for contemporary followers of Christ. It answers the questions: “What is the meaning of *akolouthein* in the NT?” and “What are the semantic implications of the term for Christ-followership today?” (I use the locution Christ-followership to mean the act of following Christ). The article is written from the conviction that following Christ in a manner that he and his apostles intended is predicated upon a clear understanding of the use of term *akolouthein* in the NT and its practical inferences for coming after Christ. In other words, unless, Christ-followers clearly grasp the meaning of *akolouthein* as used in the NT and, as a result, see what the term, in concrete terms, implies for their lives, they may likely not follow Christ in a way that does justice to this most important requirement of discipleship to Christ.

To better capture the multiple semantic connotations and account for the variegated contextual nuances of *akolouthein* in the NT, I subdivide this article into three parts. The first part studies the background use of the term in the NT. To achieve this, it briefly explores how the term is portrayed in the ancient Greco-Roman literature, Hebrew Scriptures, and the Septuagint. The second part examines the use of *akolouthein* in the NT. It scrutinizes its meanings in the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John, and in other NT books. The final part drafts the

implications of *akolouthein* for contemporary Christ-followership.³ The method adopted in this study is historical analysis as used in the field of biblical theology.

***Akolouthein* in NT's Background Literature**

This section explores the meaning of *akolouthein* in the background literature of the NT. It examines the use of the term in the Greco-Roman literature, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Septuagint.

***Akolouthein* in the Greco-Roman Literature**

Akolouthein floods Greco-Roman writings. Prior to the Judeo-Christian use of the term, Greeks and Roman used it in a variety of ways. Depending on literary contexts, thematic associations and their objects, the verb conveyed a plurality of meanings, connotations, and implications. Merging studies of the verb from BDAG⁴ (2nd edition), BDAG (third edition), and William Barclay's exploration of NT words in his book, *New Testament Words*, published in 1974, Sean Kim (2016), summarizes the Greco-Roman usage of *akolouthein* in eight categories which include: (1) moving behind someone in the same direction (come after); (2) accompanying someone who takes the lead (to go along with); (3) following someone as disciple (following as an acolyte); (4) complying with someone's instructions or obeying someone; (5) following, serving, or attending to someone as a slave did to his master; (6) following the thread or argument of a discourse; (7) attaching oneself to someone in order to extract some desired benefits; and (8) to sequentially come after someone (pp. 57-60).

Central to these variegated usages of *akolouthein*, especially those associated with coming after a person, are the notions of following someone *directionally* (coming after someone from one place to another); *sequentially* (coming after someone in a systematic and chronological process); *relationally* (attaching oneself to someone); *pedagogically* (following to learn as an apprentice); *devotionally* (complying in obedience to someone's instructions and leadership); and following in *surrendered service* (following to serve as a slave did to his master). These characteristics of the Greco-Roman connotations of *akolouthein*, as shall be noted later in the study, have deep parallels with Jesus' call of followership.

***Akolouthein* in Hebrew Scriptures**

The Hebrew expression that corresponds to the Greek *akolouthein* is *yalak achar*. Constituted of *yalak* (to walk) and *achar* (after), the locution literally communicates the idea of walking after someone or something. It is used in the Hebrew Scriptures in two semantic directions. First, it describes Israel's apostasy that moves away from God to follow other gods (Judges 2:12; Deuteronomy 4:3; 6:14; 1 Kings 21:26; Jeremiah 11:10; Hosea 1:2; 2:7, 13). Second, it is used to convey the idea of following God in view of fearing Him alone, keeping His commands, obeying His voice, serving Him, and holding fast to Him (Deuteronomy 13:4). One of the clearest OT texts where *yalak achar* is used to highlight the notion that Israel literally walked after God is Jeremiah 2:2. It indicates that Israel followed God in the wilderness as He moved ahead of them in the pillar of cloud and fire leading them to the promise land (Exodus 13:21, 22). Although, the verse indicates a literal, sequential, and geographic following, it equally notes that Israel's following of God was characterized by their devotion and "bridal"

³For a deeper historical, literary, and theological study of *akolouthein*, see Sean Kim (2016) who has provided an excellent examination of the term in the contexts mentioned in the text and highlighted how its association with specific textual motifs gives the verb specific understandings.

⁴BDAG is another name for the book titled: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. It is called BDAG following the abbreviation of the last names of its German contributors Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. BDAG is thus an acronym for Bauer–Danker–Arndt–Gingrich.

love to Him (see NIV, NET).⁵ This shows that *yalak achar* is both a literal and devotional word.

Although, the idea of following God is less frequently conveyed through the locution *yalak achar*, as against its multiple uses that depict Israel's tendency to follow idols, there is in the Hebrew Scripture a great sense in which God's people are called to follow God. This is visible in the repeated use of the words *yalak derek* ("to walk in His ways [road or path]") in Deuteronomic, historical, and prophetic writings (Deuteronomy 10:12; 26:17; 28:9; Joshua 22:5; 1 Kings 8:58; Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2). The peculiarity of *yalak derek* is its devotional dimension. When God asked Israel to walk in His ways, He did not mean that the people follow Him literally. What He did mean is that Israel should obey Him by emulating His ways. As Rabbi Barry Leff (2013) notes, to walk in God's ways is to "walk after the attributes of the Holy One."

Akolouthein in the Septuagint

Akolouthein appears some thirteen times in the Septuagint. Seven of the occurrences are found in the canonical books and six in the Apocrypha (Kim, 2016, p. 62). Kim (2016) lists six uses of *akolouthein* in the Septuagint (pp. 62-64). The first, and the predominant use, associates *akolouthein* with "going somewhere with someone" or "going after someone" in the sense of a literal geographical movement. This sense is noticeable in Balaam's going with Balak's messengers (Numbers 22:20); Abigail following David's messengers (1 Sam 25:42), or Ruth's going after/with Naomi to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:14). Note however that, although this use of *akolouthein* accentuates a geographical move, an outward action, or physical following, it also connotes something spiritual that results in a commitment. It is in this sense that Abigail's going after David's servant leads her to becoming David's wife, thereby ushering her in the messianic lineage; or Ruth's following of Naomi gives her access to God's people. The Hebrew *dabaq*, the corresponding word for *akolouthein* in Ruth 1:14 meaning "to cleave" or "cling tightly" that describes Ruth's manner of following, shows evidence that *akolouthein* implies much more than a geographical displacement. As Kim (2016) argues, Ruth's following "reflects the decisive turning point that draws her whole life journey toward the people of God" and which results into her becoming the great grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:13-22) and, eventually, one of two female figures included in the Messiah's genealogy (Matthew 1:5) (p. 62). This attributes a spiritual significance to Ruth's following. It further contrasts her commitment to go after Naomi and join with her people (God's people) with Orpah's return to her own people who live outside the realm of God's emerging kingdom made visible in Israel.

The second use of *akolouthein* is in reference to Israel going after pagan gods as depicted in Hosea 2:7 and Judith 5:6-8. In these two passages, the term connotes more than physical following. Going after idols is following idols in love, giving one's heart to them, or serving and worshiping them (Kim, 2016, p. 63). The third use is found in Judith 2:4 and 2 Macc. 8:36 and conveys the idea of complying with, obeying, keeping commands (Kim, 2016, p. 63). The fourth use is recorded in Ezekiel 29:16 and has the sense of following or turning to someone (in this case the military power of Egypt) to get help (Kim, 2016, p. 63). The fifth sense, found in Judith 12:2, associates *akolouthein* with things that accompany or things someone may bring along. The final use of *akolouthein* communicates the spiritual notion of discipleship. In 1 Kings 19:19-20, where it occurs, the verb describes how Elisha responded to the ministry invitation that Elijah gave him.

I will summarize by noting that, as is the case with its use in the Greco-Roman context and Hebrew Scriptures, in the Septuagint, *akolouthein*, derives its meaning not from the use of the

⁵Except otherwise stated, all Bible citations are from the *New International Version* (NIV).

verb in isolation but in its semantic network, that is, the “associating words and motifs that surround the term” (Kim, 2016, p. 64). It is used to “express literal, philosophical, religious, and spiritual meanings – from a simple action of going after or together with someone to a geographical location to profound and decisive action of following that leads one into a whole new dimension of life in relation to God’s economy and his ministry” (Kim, 2016, pp. 64-65).

***Akolouthein* in the NT**

This rubric examines *akolouthein* in the NT. It investigates *akolouthein* in the Synoptic gospels, the gospel of John, and outside the gospels.

***Akolouthein* in the Synoptic Gospels**

Akolouthein occurs 60 times in the Synoptics, that is, 25 times in Matthew, 18 times in Mark and 17 times in Luke. According to Kim (2016), these authors frequently used the word in three ways: the literal sense, metaphorical (spiritual) sense, and ambiguous sense (p. 66). The literal sense is physical. It captures the various mundane ways by which people follow. The metaphorical sense is non-literal and integrates spiritual or theological connotations.⁶ The ambiguous sense involves both the literal and metaphorical use of *akolouthein*. In distinguishing between literal and metaphorical uses of the term, W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison explain that “metaphorical usage consistently involves at least two things: (1) Jesus is the speaker – he issues the summons to follow – and (2) cost is involved: discipleship entails sacrifice” (cited in Kim, 2016, p. 66).⁷ It follows that the metaphorical usage of *akolouthein* in the Synoptics includes discipleship overtones.

The discipleship overtones of *akolouthein* occur throughout the Synoptics and are used with specific accompanying words, verbal constructions, or motifs that highlight the significance of discipleship to Jesus in multiple ways. I will mention only seven in this study. First, *akolouthein* in the Synoptics occurs in conjunction with the aorist participle *aphentes*, translated “left” (Matthew 4:20, 22; Mark 1:18; Luke 5:11). Matthew indicates that Peter and his brother Andrew left their nets (4:20), their boat, and father (4:22); Mark notes that they left their nets (1:18) and their father (1:20); and Luke insists that they left everything (5:11). By associating, following and leaving in these verses, the Synoptic writers stress the all-important need to abandon a certain way of life, certain things however important, certain family ties, etc. This definite and decisive action of leaving builds on the premise that, once someone accepts to follow the Lord Jesus, Jesus must take precedence in the life, livelihood, and family of the follower (Kim, 2016, p. 68). For the Synoptics, following Jesus in discipleship always entails leaving something or someone.

Second, *akolouthein* is associated with the phrase “wherever you go” that appears in Matthew 8:19 and Luke 9:57. Although these words proceed from the mouth of an aspirant follower of Jesus, they reveal what people, in these days understood, following to be. Following everywhere meant not only following Jesus along a geographical itinerary, but also following him irrespective of cost. Wherever he went, even if he went to places where he would suffer, followers would have to come along. Following Jesus wherever he went, translated the willingness for followers to give up their wills for the sake of fulfilling the will of Jesus, their

⁶ According to Kim’s (2016, p. 66) taxonomy, metaphorical uses of *akolouthein* include texts such as Matthew 4:20, 22; 8:19, 22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21, 27-28; Mark 1:18; 2:14; 8:34; 9:38; 10:21, 28, 52; 15:41 and Luke 5:11, 27-28; 9:23, 49, 57, 59, 61; 18:22, 28, 43. Literal uses involve passages such as Matthew 4:25; 8:1, 10; 9:19, 27; 12:15; 14:13-14; 19:2; 20:29, 34; 21:9; 26:58; 27:55; Mark 2:15; 3:7; 5:24; 6:1; 10:32; 11:9; 14:13, 54 and Luke 7:9; 9:11; 22:10, 39, 54; 23:27. An example of an ambiguous use is Matthew 8:23.

⁷For Dean Kingsbury, the criteria for identifying the metaphorical understanding of *akolouthein* involve (1) “personal commitment” to Jesus, and (2) “cost” and “personal sacrifice” (cited in Kim, 2016, p. 66).

master, in the process of following. It is therefore not surprising that, when Jesus provided a response to these prospective followers, he hammered the cost of and commitment to discipleship that following him everywhere required. Precisely, he accentuated that, walking after him, called for abdicating some fundamental life comforts as the Son of man had “nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:57) and, when necessary, giving up some primary filial responsibilities such as burying one’s father (Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:57). Whatever Jesus meant by the dead burying the dead, the “focal point of the text is that following Jesus takes a matchless priority over any human responsibility and family tie” (Kim, 2016, p. 69). Or, to borrow Michael Wilkins’ (1992) words, following Jesus involves the “twin prerequisites of discipleship – *cost* and *commitment*” (p. 109, my emphasis).

Third, *akolouthein* is connected to taking up the cross (Matthew 10:38. Luke 14:27). The expression taking up the cross is a metaphor for death to self or self-renunciation. In previous associations of *akolouthein*, followers of Jesus have to renounce something outside of themselves such as their old ways, when necessary, family connections and responsibilities, and wellbeing in the world. With taking up the cross, there is a call to a “deeper level of renunciation: the renunciation of self” since taking up the cross stands for “utter abnegation” or “absolute self-denial” (Kim, 2016, p. 71). As a consequence, absolute self-renunciation is the absolute condition for becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. Without that, Jesus emphasizes that such a follower is not worthy of him (Matthew 10:38) and cannot be [his] disciple” (Luke 14:27).

Fourth, *akolouthein* is associated with denying oneself in Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23. In these associations which are only found in these texts, both the metaphor/symbol (cross) and its meaning/reality (death to self) are brought together. The verb *aparneomai*, translated deny in the above verses is used to express Peter’s denial (disowning) of Jesus in Matthew 26:34, 35, 75; Mark 14:30, 31, 72; and Luke 22:57. Accordingly, *aparneomai* communicates the idea of totally disowning someone/something or dissociating oneself completely from somebody/something. Applied to self, *aparneomai*, as a practical illustration of taking up the cross, conveys the thought of “losing sight of one’s self and interest and dying to self (that is, refusing to indulge in self-gratification or to be driven by carnal appetites) for the sake of Christ” (Oumarou, 2021, p. 192). Taking the cross and “denying self involves a complete surrender to Christ characterized by a refusal of self-promotion and self-affirmation” which entails “leading a life so centered on revealing and obeying Christ that, self (its desires and passions) is relegated into the back stage” (Oumarou, 2021, p. 192). In this light, *akolouthein*, employed with Jesus in view, is the journey of life with Jesus Christ that demands a “constant ‘breaking of every link which ties a man to himself’” ... and a dissociation of “oneself from one’s own concerns, wishes, and desires” (Kim, 2016, p. 73). This dissociation with self should extend to the point where followers of Jesus Christ are willing to lose their lives for the sake of Christ (Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24).

Fifth, in some passages of the Synoptics, *akolouthein* shows up in a continuous (imperfective) aspect. Such is the case with Mark 8:34. The Greek continuous aspect describes the action of the verb as an ongoing process, indicating continuous action. It is often contrasted with the undefined aspect in which the action of the verb is seen as a simple (completed) event which includes no hint as to whether or not the action is a process. In Mark 8:34, it is interesting to note that while the verbs “deny” and “take up” (the cross) are undefined, therefore not specifying the nature of these actions except the fact that they occur, *akolouthein* (precisely, *akoloutheito*) is continuous in aspect. This indicates that following Jesus is a long-term process that starts with initially coming after Christ and stretches throughout the life of a follower of Christ. Commenting on the aspect of *akolouthein* in this verse, William Mounce (2003) notes

that the “aspect of ‘follow’ emphasizes that the commitment to discipleship involves a continual action, which in this context is a day to day action” (p. 126).

Sixth, *akolouthein* occurs in connection with *zoen aionion* (the Greek for *eternal life*). This occurrence that cuts across the Synoptics is found in the following passages: Matthew 19:21, 27-28; Mark 10:21, 28; and Luke 18:22, 28. The significance of this association of *akolouthein* is to highlight that eternal life (a quality of life associated with God) is the result and culmination of following Jesus, the Christ.

Finally, *akolouthein* occurs in association with teaching or as a catalyst to teaching. This the case, for instance, with the Sermon on the Mount which is triggered by the presence of multitudes following Jesus. According to Matthew’s witness, upon realizing that “large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judaea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (Matthew 4:38), Jesus went up on a mountainside, sat down, and began teaching them (Matthew 5:1-2). These verses show that the Synoptics often employ following in a contextual relationship with teaching. This relationship accentuates the didactic nature of Christ-followership. Early disciples of Christ followed him to be taught by and learn from him. As they followed Christ, they listen keenly to his words, “taking mental notes” (Bjork, 2021, p. 58).

To summarize, in the Synoptics, when used metaphorically, *akolouthein* is inherently connected with wholehearted and committed discipleship. Following Jesus necessitates that followers leave or abandon their former way(s) of life; that they reconfigure their family ties and responsibilities in the light of their new-found allegiance to Christ which needs prioritization; that they constantly break ties with self through taking the cross and self-renunciation; that they follow him continually; that they come after him in a journey that culminates into inheriting eternal life; and that they open up to his teachings to learn of him. Hence, following Jesus entails a total overhaul and reorientation of followers’ lives. As NT scholar, Elisabeth Johnson (2015), aptly observes, following Jesus requires a “radical reversal of direction.” This reversal of direction involves (1) a recognition and acceptance of Jesus’ messianic identify, (2) prompt and active obedience to his summons, and (3) wholehearted commitment to following him that is undertaken after considering the cost of allegiance to Christ (Wilkins, 1992, p. 102).

***Akolouthein* in the Gospel of John**

Akolouthein permeates the gospel of John. With its nineteen occurrences, the verb is certainly a major theme of the fourth Gospel.⁸ Of the nineteen occurrences, fifteen are metaphorical/spiritual while four are literal. Of note also is the intense presence of *akolouthein* in the first chapter of John (it occurs four times) and its closing chapter (it occurs three times). Compared to other Gospels in terms of the frequency of occurrences of *akolouthein*, the fourth Gospel comes after Matthew but positions itself before Mark and Luke.

John uses *akolouthein* metaphorically/spiritually in a variety of contexts and motifs, therefore assigning a variety of meanings to the term. From my examination of the metaphorical Johannine passages of *akolouthein*, I have noted at least seven different associative and contextual relationships of the verb.

First, *akolouthein* occurs in a *locational/directional* association in that, in some passages, it is associated with location/place. In this usage, disciples follow Jesus to a place, to be, stay/dwell

⁸In John, *akolouthein* occurs in the following passages: John 1: 37, 38, 40, 43; 6:2; 8:12; 10: 4, 5, 27; 11:31; 12:26; 13:36-37; 18:15; 20:6; 21: 19, 20, 22.

with him. That is, Jesus demands that those who follow him, dwell with him in, or come with him to, a place. It is in this sense that the two disciples of John the Baptist followed Jesus to know where he stayed and spent the day with him (John 1:37-38, 39-40). It is equally with this meaning in view that Jesus affirms that “whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be” (John 12: 26). The same motif is highlighted when Simon Peter enquired of the Lord where he was going and, in response, Jesus affirmed: “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later” (John 13:36). This usage of *akolouthein* emphasizes the need for followers to dwell with Christ in an abiding relationship (a motif that pervades the gospel of John) and come with him in the direction he wants to lead them to (which, in John, is primarily the Father, where Jesus came from). As Kim (2016) observes, following Jesus Christ is a “journey toward a destination. The destination is the place to which Jesus leads his followers, that is, the place where Jesus is, where Jesus is going to and where Jesus will be” which is “ultimately to the Father” (p. 84).

Second, John uses *akolouthein* in association with *surrendered service*. In this usage, he makes clear that followers of Jesus must commit themselves to serve him. This emphasis appears in John 12:26, where the Lord Jesus affirms that “whoever *serves* me must follow me ... My Father will honor the one who *serves* me” (my emphasis). Accordingly, service to Jesus is both a mark of authentic followership of Jesus Christ and something his Father honors. Wholehearted service therefore, is central to being a follower of Jesus. This motif of service finds echo in several other passages of John’s gospel.

Third, *akolouthein* in John appears in connection to *cognition*, precisely, knowledge of Jesus Christ. In John 10:4-5, the Lord Jesus emphasizes that “his sheep follow him because they *know* his voice” and, as such, “they will never follow a stranger” (my emphasis). This passage highlights the necessity of knowing Christ in a proximity relationship (such that one can differentiate his voice from that of a stranger) as foundational to being his follower. As such, following Jesus occurs in the context of relational knowledge. This relational knowledge is bilateral because, not only do followers of Jesus have to know Jesus, but in reciprocation, Jesus also intimately knows them as stated in John 10:27, “My sheep listen to my voice; *I know them*, and they follow me” (my emphasis).

Fourth, *akolouthein* occurs in connection to *devotional obedience*. Following Jesus demands obedience. John is crystal clear about this in John 10:27: “My sheep *listen* to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (my emphasis). Those who follow Jesus listen to him. Listening in this verse (besides many other implications involved in the term) is an allusion to the Hebraic concept of right hearing, that is, hearing to obey. It is not hearing for the sake of hearing, but hearing to practice what is heard. It is “obedient attention” (Gotquestions.org, 2021). This entails that right followership of Jesus unfolds in a context of obedience.

Fifth, *akolouthein*, in John, is associated with having God’s light and, as a consequence, not walking in darkness. This is emphasized in John 8:12 where Jesus affirms that “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Because Jesus is ontologically light, those who follow him must naturally possess this light and live outside the sphere of darkness. As David Guzik (2018) comments, “Jesus, being the light of the world, brings light to those who follow Him. When we follow Him, we stay in the light and do not walk in darkness.” Therefore, followership of Jesus occurs in the context of light and entails a total separation from darkness and related works.

Sixth, *akolouthein* is associated to coming after Jesus *sequentially*. This use is obvious in John 1:43, where Jesus asked Philip to follow him. By calling Philip to follow him, the Lord Jesus Christ initiated the relational process that brought an apprentice/learner (*talmid*) together with a master (*rabbi*). Jiwan Moon (2019) explains that such a relationship began when a Rabbi

extended his “invitation to ‘come follow me!’ after testing his prospective *talmid* thoroughly.” The purpose of this following is multifaceted and embraces all that Jesus wanted to communicate to his disciples, namely, learning, imitation, obedience, loyalty, transformation into his image, and conversion into his missionary agents in the world.

Finally, *akolouthein*, in John, occurs in a context of denial of self and death (Greek, *thanatos*). In other words, following Jesus is a *thanatological* experience which involves self-renunciation at its basic level. In John 12:25, the Lord Jesus insists that those who follow him (John 12:26) must hate their lives in this world to obtain eternal life since loving one’s life, at the detriment of loving Christ, eventually leads to not obtaining that life. This, of necessity, demands self-renunciation. When the Lord Jesus, in John 13: 31-38, begins to speak of his death to his disciples, portraying it in terms of “Where I am going to” (John 13:33), Peter follows up to know the nature of that place (John 13:36). The Lord Jesus notes in response that, at that moment, Peter could not come along with him (that is, die with him), except later (John 13:36). Having understood the implication of the statement, Peter affirms that he was ready not only to follow Jesus Christ in death at that very moment but also to lay down his life for his master (John 13:37). This conversation between Peter and his Lord shows that following Jesus could stretch to the extent of dying with him or for him (for his sake). In the same vein, having announced how Peter would die, Jesus immediately encouraged Peter to follow him (John 21:19, 22). Again, *akolouthein* appears in the context of death in John. For John “death is the pathway through which Jesus is going to “where he will be” which is to the Father” and the “way Jesus is going to the Father is through the death of suffering and persecution” (Kim, 2016, p. 84). Consequently, it is the same path that his followers have to tread. This makes following Jesus a “journey toward the destination where Jesus is going via the passage of death” (Kim, 2016, p. 8), death to self especially through self-denial. This is reminiscent of the Synoptic tradition where, as noted already, following Jesus demands dying to self and denial of self. How could this be otherwise since the “way of Jesus is the way of the disciples, and discipleship consists in walking the way of Jesus”? (Nissen, 2002, para. 32).

To summarize, an analysis of the semantic and contextual network of the *akolouthein* in John shows that, in relation to Jesus Christ, the Evangelist uses the term locationally/directionally, as relational service, relational knowledge, devotional obedience, having or walking in the light, a call to sequentially come after Jesus, and as a thanatological experience that involves self-renunciation. This was required of Jesus’s followers of old. The same is required of his contemporary followers.

***Akolouthein* Outside the Gospels**

Of the eleven occurrences of *akolouthein* outside the gospels, Kim (2016) notes that, its only usage with a metaphorical/spiritual connotation is found in Revelation 14:4 (p. 79). In the text, *akolouthein* occurs in an eschatological context in connection with the 144000 who bear the name of Lamb and His father on their foreheads (Revelation 14:1). It is interesting to note that, in Revelation, the Christological title Lamb describes Jesus, not just as atoning sacrifice, but also a warrior who defeats his foes and a royal figure, who is King of kings. It follows that, those who recognized his kingship should show submission and allegiance to him and be willing to come after him in absolute obedience.

Such is the case with the 144000 in the verse above that John describes as those who follow the Lamb. *Akolouthein* in the verse is associated with a number of factors that highlight the implications of following Jesus, the Christ. First of all, they were purchased (redeemed) by the Lamb and offered to God as first fruits. This depiction highlights the origin of their walk after Christ in the sense that “being purchased is not only the starting point but the fountainhead from which their spiritual journey of ‘following’ originated” (Kim, 2016, p. 80). Second, they

follow the Lamb wherever he goes. This is reminiscent of the Synoptics where some seekers wanted to follow Jesus Christ wherever he went (Matthew 8:19 and Luke 9:57); the implication being that of following him irrespective of cost, suffering, and sacrifices, and, more importantly following to the point of death with him. As Kim (2016) writes, “following the Lamb implies joining the suffering and death of the Lamb” (p. 81). Finally, those who follow the Lamb, given their unreserved devotion to Christ, kept themselves pure/undefiled, that is, uncontaminated from the impurities of the world. Their purity is made evident by (1) their abstinence from sexual immorality since they remained virgins – their virginity symbolizing their spiritual purity and loyalty to Christ as those who refused to give in to the seduction of the beast (Guzik, 2019; Kim, 2016, p. 81); (2) their rejection of falsehood (no lie was found in their mouths) (Revelation 14:5), and (3) they lived blameless (Revelation 14:5). It follows that, as David Bjork (2021) holds, “followers of Jesus ... must recognize that we are his purchased possession and are [to be] wholly devoted to his person” (p. 58).

This text of Revelation shows that following Jesus is a lifelong activity since those standing with the Lamb at Zion had followed him while on earth. Their whole lives were characterized and summarized by following the Lamb. At the height of their earthly journey of following, in union with the Lamb, they had overcome the beast and stood triumphantly with the Lamb on mount Zion, singing a new song before the throne (Revelation 14:3). However, their journey of following Christ was one of total abnegation in which they followed him everywhere, lived a life of purity, rejected falsehood, and stayed blameless. Therefore, they are prototypical of all those who, throughout ages, have engaged in following the Lord Jesus Christ. Total surrender and loyalty to Christ, self-renunciation, sacrifice of basic comforts that life offers, prioritizing Christ over family ties, spiritual purity, etc., are the unavoidable ingredients of following the Lamb.

Implication of *Akolouthein* for Contemporary Christ-Followership

The above investigation of *akolouthein* shows its polysemy and the contingency of its meanings upon contexts and various semantic associations of the term with other terms. From the investigation, I draw several practical inferences from the metaphorical/spiritual use of the term in the NT (Gospels and Revelation) regarding the nature and exigencies of following Christ. This is done to enable a better understanding of the implications of coming after Jesus, the Christ, in a discipleship relationship for contemporary Christ-followers.

When *akolouthein* is used in the NT in association with Christ’s call to discipleship, it highlights several *discipulary* demands (requirements related to discipleship). I highlight some of the most salient of these requirements below:

1. *Akolouthein* requires a directional following of Jesus. A discipulary use of *akolouthein* as discussed earlier accentuates the need to come after Jesus directionally. This understanding corresponds to one of the uses of *akolouthein* in the Greco-Roman literature. Directional following may be both *peripatetic* and *locational*. By *peripatetic*, I mean following Jesus everywhere he goes. According to the Gospels and Revelation, *peripatetic* following entails following Christ wherever he goes and following him irrespective of cost. *Locational* following is following him to a place, a specific destination. In this sense, discipulary following of Christ is following to dwell with him in an abiding relationship and following him to the place where his Father is.
2. *Akolouthein* requires that followers of Jesus abandon their old ways of life and adopt Christ’s. Whatever values, interests, worldviews, material possessions, or human ties/relations they previously kept that conflict with their allegiance to Christ, they must

- give up. This is one of the pivotal and decisive expressions of committedly following Christ.
3. *Akolouthein* requires that Christ's followers take up their cross and come after him. Taking up the cross is metaphorical of death to self, utter self-abnegation, or utmost self-renunciation. It entails a dethroning of self and the enthronement of Christ in the life one who follows Christ.
 4. *Akolouthein* requires that Christ's followers deny themselves as they come after Christ. This notion is closely connected to that of taking up one's cross. Following Christ in self-denial necessitates a total disowning of, distancing from, or disassociation with self that allows Christ to have his ways in and rule the lives of his followers. This *self-distancing* (distancing from self) for the sake of letting Christ reign in his followers' lives may even result in them losing their physical lives, depending on circumstances.
 5. *Akolouthein* involves a continuity in following Christ. Coming after Christ is not punctiliar. It is not a one-time, snapshot, event. Rather, it is a process – a continual, incessant, day to day, action that engages followers of Christ throughout their lifetimes. This demands the sort of commitment to Christ that endures in the face of life vicissitudes and challenges.
 6. *Akolouthein* enables following Christ into *zoen aionion* (eternal life). Eternal life is the final destination of following Jesus. It starts from the moment an individual comes after Christ in allegiance and reaches its full consummation in the age to come.
 7. *Akolouthein* requires following Jesus to learn from his teachings. As with early Christians, the didactic dimension of Christ-followership remains valid today. Contemporary Christ-followers must open up to his teachings and learn of him. The ultimate aim of learning from his teachings is both to know his instructions and to be thereby transformed into his likeness. This facet of *akolouthein* is akin to the Greeks' understanding of the term as following pedagogically.
 8. *Akolouthein* requires following Christ to serve him in total devotion as slaves, in Christ's days, did for their master. Following Jesus is a call to serve Christ wholeheartedly and exclusively. Unreserved service to Christ authenticates true followership of Christ. This perspective of Christ's followership aligns with the vision of *akolouthein* in the Greco-Roman world.
 9. *Akolouthein* requires knowing Christ in a personal relationship. Those who follow Christ must know Christ. They must know him intimately and experientially as a sheep knows the voice of its shepherd. This practically means that no one can claim to be Christ's follower who does not know him personally.
 10. *Akolouthein* requires that those who follow Christ obey him unconditionally. It is those who listen to (obey) his voice that are truly his followers. This is a foundational demand of discipleship to Christ. The Lord Jesus makes it clear in John 8:31: "If you continue to obey my teaching, you are truly my followers" (New Century Version). Cultivating a mindset of total obedience to Christ's word is what enables the processual transformation of Christ's followers in increased measures into his likeness. It is worthy to indicate that this understanding of *akolouthein* is in sync with that of the Greco-Roman literature.
 11. *Akolouthein* requires that those who follow Christ walk in the light. Walking in the light entails rejecting darkness and all its manifestations. Darkness is symbolic of the devil, the world system that rejects God, and sin.
 12. *Akolouthein* requires following Jesus in death, if necessary. This thanatological dimension of following Jesus is especially emphasized in Johannine literature. This expression of Christ-followership shows that disciples of Christ must come to a place

of such profound renunciation to self that, out of complete allegiance to Christ, they would not mind to physically die for Christ if necessity was imposed on them.

13. *Akolouthein* requires that those who come after Christ are redeemed by Christ and keep themselves undefiled. This means keeping themselves uncontaminated by sin and the impurities of this world. Following Jesus demands radical sanctification. Those who follow Christ must detach themselves from the corruption of sin and the world. In as much as Christ allows them to initially come to him as they are (laden with their sins), he does not allow them to willfully remain in their sins as they continue following. It is for the purpose of saving them from the grip of sin as well as its devastating consequences and liberating them to lead a life set apart for him in uncompromising holiness that Christ calls them to follow him. Holiness unto Christ, that is, for the sake of total allegiance to Christ, is the hallmark of following Christ.

Conclusion

This article explored the meaning of *akolouthein* in the NT as well as its background literature and sketched out its implications for contemporary Christ-followers. The article was structured around three points. The first point examined the background use of *akolouthein* in the NT. The second point discussed the use of the term in the NT. The final point outlined the implications of the NT understandings of *akolouthein* for Christ-followers today.

Findings have shown that *akolouthein* has a vast semantic range. Accordingly, coming to grips with the term necessitates understanding it in conjunction with the contexts of its use and the motifs with which it is associated in the literature. In the framework of following Christ, *akolouthein* encompasses variegated meanings such as following him directionally, following him pedagogically, following him relationally, following him devotionally (coming after him to unconditionally obey him), following him in surrendered service (coming after him to unreservedly serve him), following him thanatologically, following him into *zoe* *aionion*, following him with the mind of abandoning one's old ways, picking up one's cross, denying self, walking in the light, following him as a continual process, and following as one who is redeemed and lives in Christ-like holiness.

From the above, it may be established that *akolouthein* as a response to the gospel engages Christ-followers holistically. This makes this motif one of critical importance. To follow Jesus necessitates that followers, in active obedience, commit themselves cognitively, emotionally, volitionally, ethically, and practically to Christ whom they follow. Following Christ mobilizes the whole person of the follower (body, soul, and spirit) in the process of Christ-followership. Given this attribute of *akolouthein* to engage followers holistically, the meaning, act, importance, and implications of following Jesus of Nazareth need to receive increase emphasis in missionary presentations of Christ, pastoral activities, discipleship communities, and Christian educational settings to enable a robust and loyal commitment of contemporary Christ-followers to Christ.

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