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Semantic Analysis of *Mathetes* (Disciple) in the New Testament and Related Literature: Relevance for Contemporary Disciples of Christ

Analyse sémantique de mathetes (disciple) dans le Nouveau Testament et la littérature connexe : Pertinence pour les disciples contemporains du Christ

Emmanuel Oumarou, PhD.¹

Abstract

This article draws on diachronic analysis to investigate the meaning of *mathetes* in the New Testament (NT) and related literature. Its purpose is to elucidate the meaning the Lord Jesus, his apostles, and NT writers gave to *mathetes* and, from this elucidation, sketch theological implications of the term for contemporary disciples of Christ. Findings show that, in the NT and literature that serves as its canvas, the meaning of *mathetes* depends on persons and contexts with which it is associated. Used in relation to Christ, *mathetes*, emphasizes the need for disciples of Christ, as they follow him, to enroll in his school, learn of him to be transformed in his likeness, and show allegiant devotion to him.

Keywords: *mathetes*, disciples, discipleship, following, allegiance to Christ, Christ-likeness.

Résumé

Cet article s'appuie sur une analyse diachronique pour étudier la signification de mathetes dans le Nouveau Testament (NT) et la littérature y relative. Son but est d'élucider le sens que le Seigneur Jésus, ses apôtres et les auteurs du NT ont donné à mathetes et, à partir de cette élucidation, d'esquisser les implications théologiques du terme pour les disciples contemporains du Christ. Les résultats montrent que, dans le NT et la littérature qui lui sert de toile de fond, la signification de mathetes dépend des personnes et des contextes auxquels il est associé. Utilisé en relation avec le Christ, mathetes souligne la nécessité pour les disciples du Christ, lorsqu'ils le suivent, de s'inscrire à son école, d'apprendre de lui pour être transformés à sa ressemblance et faire preuve de dévotion allégeante à son égard.

Mots clés : *mathetes*, disciples, discipulat, suivre, allégeance au Christ, Christ-ressemblance.

Introduction

Discipleship to Christ is central to Christianity and its mission. The mission of Jesus Christ, from whom Christianity emerged, was chiefly focused on making disciples. He recruited, lived with, and trained disciples. He made disciples throughout his earthly ministry. After his resurrection, he sent his disciples to make other disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). This shows the centrality of discipleship in Christ's life, teachings, ministry, and his delineation of missions. His followers espoused their Master's view on discipleship and promoted it throughout the NT. Richard Longenecker (1996) correctly writes that discipleship is a "subject that lies at the heart of all Christian thought, life, and ministry" (Loc. 101).

The Greek word translated disciple in the NT is *mathetes* (its plural is *mathetai*). It shows up 261 times in the NT, exclusively in the Gospels and Acts. The fact that *mathetes* occurs these number of times against three occurrences for *christianos* (the Greek word for Christian) shows

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its importance for NT writers. According to Dallas Willard (2006), this reveals that the NT is “a book that talks about disciples, was written by disciples and for disciples” (p. 3).

Mathetes occurs in the NT in association with various persons and in a diversity of contexts. This variegated use makes the term polysemic, hence complexifying its understanding. Given its critical importance for Christ’s followers, it is crucial to decipher the term to enable a clearer understanding of both its nature and implications for Christian living. This article intends to do just that. It posits that becoming a devoted disciple of Jesus Christ is contingent upon a correct understanding of the nature of discipleship to Christ and its implications for Christ’s followers. Its purpose is to clarify the concept of *mathetes* when used in association with Christ in the NT and to outline its relevance for contemporary disciples of Christ.

The paper builds on three points. The first point explores the sociocultural and historical background to *mathetes*. The second point drafts a NT understanding of *mathetes* in association with the Lord Jesus. The final point outlines the implications of the significance of the term for present-day disciples of Christ.

Historical and Sociocultural Background to the NT Writers’ Use of *Mathetes*

This section investigates the historical and sociocultural background to the NT’s use of *mathetes*. The investigation is intended to shed light on how the Lord Jesus, early apostles, and NT writers understood the term. This is significant because, as Michael Wilkins (2015) argues, the “historical background of the term, the sociological context in which Jesus made disciples” as well as the way NT writers used the term “combine to give a more precise understanding of the concept of disciple” (p. 9).

Although the early usage of *mathetes* occurred in the fifth century B.C. in Herodotus (4.77), the term came to prominence in the Greek written literature in the classical period (Wilkins, 2015, p. 11). Ancient authors used *mathetes* in a variety of ways, therefore, assigning the term several meanings. These semantic variations depended on the historical period within which the term was used, its users, and the context of its use (Aplin, 2011, p. 26; Wilkins, 2015, p. 11). In what follows, I survey the various uses of *mathetes* in the OT (I investigate its Hebrew counterparts, *talmidh* and *limmudh*), the classical Greek period, the Hellenistic period, the intertestamental period, and the NT.

***Talmid* and *limmudh* in the OT**

Discipleship terminology is scarce in the OT (Adam & Adam, 2015, p. 1, Wilkins, 2015, p. 43). This scarcity, however, does not suggest the absence of terms or concepts denoting discipleship. Two Hebrew words *talmidh* and *limmudh* give expression to the language of discipleship in the OT.

Talmidh is the closest Hebrew equivalent to *mathetes*. *Talmidh* derives from the verb *lamadh*, meaning “to learn” and appears in the Hebrew OT once, precisely in 1 Chronicles 25:8. The passage reads: “They cast lots to determine their responsibilities – oldest as well as youngest, teacher as well as students [*talmidhim*]” (NET). *Talmidhim* (the plural of *talmidh*) in this text is used in relation to novice (student/pupil) temple musicians who were trained to minister to Yahweh in songs. This detail entails that the *talmidhim* underwent some sort of formal training. In this light, *talmidh* in 1 Chronicles 25:8 is “best understood in the most basic sense of the term [as] one engaged in the learning process, or an apprentice learning a trade” (Wilkins, 2015, p. 46). Or, to quote Lee (2013), the term “implies intentional training in a particular skill” (Lee, 2013, p. 887).

The adjective *limmudh* is the second Hebrew term that captures the concept of a disciple in the OT. The word occurs in the form of a passive participle and is often translated substantively as

“taught one” or “one who is taught.” It is used six times, solely in prophetic books, precisely, in Jeremiah 2:24 and 13:23; Isaiah 8:16; 50:4 (occurs two times); and 54:13. In Jeremiah 2:24 and 13:23, the prophet uses *limmudh* to mean “used to,” “familiar to,” “accustomed to” or “practiced in doing” something. This suggests that, in Jeremiah’s use of *limmudh*, “formal teaching/learning is not in view, but familiarity with and experience in a certain mode of life” (Lee, 2013, p. 887). Meanwhile, in all the occurrences of *limmudh* in Isaiah, the adjective functions substantively and has the meaning of “one who is instructed” or “one who is taught.” The fact that the NIV translates the term in Isaiah 8:16 as “followers” and the ASV renders the same as “disciples” shows the substantive force of *limmudh* in Isaiah.

The identity of the *limmudhim* (plural of *limmudh*) is often disputed in Isaianic texts. This is especially the case in Isaiah 8:16. The dispute revolves around whether the *limmudhim* are disciples of God or those of Isaiah. Whatever the case, whether the person (master/teacher) around whom the disciples gather to receive instructions is God or Isaiah does not negate the reality of discipleship itself. Moreover, that the master/teacher in the text refers to the *limudhim* as “my disciples” (intimate possessive), implies an ongoing master/teacher-disciple relationship (Wilkins, 2015, p. 47). In Isaiah 50:4, where *limmudhim* occurs twice, and Isaiah 54:13, the disciples are clearly depicted as those of Yahweh. It follows that *the limmudhim* in Isaiah could either refer to human disciples or God’s disciples.

Mathetes in the Classical Period

The Greek classical period describes the period between 500-323 B.C. (the year of Alexander the Great’s death). In this period, *mathetes* was employed in a general and technical sense. From a general standpoint, the term described a learner, that is, a committed student of a subject or one who learns from an expert. This meaning presents a morphological relationship with (or is morphologically motivated by) the verb *manthanein* (to learn) or *manthano* (I learn).

In the technical sense, *mathetes* was used to depict the direct dependence of one receiving instructions on an authority. It emphasized “dependency, life commitment and the ongoing nature of the relationship” between a *mathetes* and a master, teacher, or lord (Wilkins, 2015, p. 12). The technical use of *mathetes* could be understood in two ways: (1) *mathetes* as an adherent and a representative (non-specific technical use) and (2) *mathetes* as an institutional pupil (specialized technical use) (Wilkins, 2015, p. 13). As an adherent and representative, a *mathetes* was more than just a student seeking to develop skill, gain knowledge, or pursue some academic purposes from a superior authority in knowledge. A *mathetes*, in this sense, described a person who had adopted the way of life of a master or of a cultural milieu, was characterized by this way of life, and was willing to become its adherent and representative (Wilkins, 2015, p. 13). *Mathetes* as an institutional pupil simply referred to a student within an educational process or the student of a teacher (pupil of a tutor).

Mathetes in the Hellenistic Period

The Hellenistic period stretched from 323 BC (demise of Alexander the Great) to 31 B.C. (the year of the emergence of the Roman Empire). Similar to the classical period, *mathetes* was primarily employed in this period to describe three categories of people: learners, adherents, and pupils (Wilkins, 2015, p. 11). However, writers of this period also introduced subtle nuances in the meaning of the word. For instance, Diodorus of Sicily (60-30 B. C.), besides the three meanings above, associated to *mathetes* the idea of a master-follower relationship while Chrysostom (Dion of Prusa in Bithynia) (A. D. 40-120) added the notions of zealous followership of a master, intimate relationship with a master, and the imitation of the master’s words and acts/conduct (Wilkins, 2015, pp. 35-39).

Understanding how *mathetes* was used in the Hellenistic period is important for this study for at least two reasons. First, there is a semantic continuity between the Hellenistic

conceptualization of the term with that of the classical period. This means that the classical understanding of *mathetes* was adopted and, to some extent, expanded in the Hellenistic period. Second, by reason of its proximity with the NT era, the Hellenistic conceptualization of *mathetes* stands as an important background to understanding its usage in the NT. Wilkins (2015) observes that the Hellenistic use of *mathetes* is “significant because it is relatively contemporary to that found in the New Testament” (p. 33).

Of note is the fact that in the Hellenistic period, a *mathetes* did not necessarily need to physically meet a master/teacher. One could be the *mathetes* of a master/teacher even if the latter was far away or had long passed away. Although physical contact was important, it was the conformity of a *mathetes* to the thoughts and the way of life of the master/teacher that mattered. In this respect, Dio Chrysostom, in his 55th discourse on *Homer and Socrates*, contended that, although Socrates was far removed in time from Homer, nevertheless, Socrates, for being acquainted with Homer’s poetry and thought, was Homer’s *mathetes* (Foster, n. d., p. 1; Wilkins, 2015, pp. 38, 39). This same perspective was observable in the Jewish understanding of *mathetes* in NT times in that, for instance, the Pharisees in John 9:28 identified themselves as “disciples of Moses” although they lived generations apart from Moses. The fact that a few moments before his ascension, the Lord Jesus, in Matthew 28:18, asked his disciples to make other disciples of all nations (people who would never meet him physically) shows that he also subscribed to this vision of discipleship.

***Mathetes/Talmidh* in the Intertestamental Period**

The intertestamental period stretches from the ministry of Malachi (from 420 B.C. approximately) to the emergence of John the Baptist’s ministry early in the first century A.D. Like with the Hellenistic era, the intertestamental period (especially the late part of the period) is crucial for understanding NT writers given its temporal proximity with the ministry of the Lord Jesus and that of his apostles. Studying *mathetes* or its Jewish counterparts, *talmidh* and *limmudh* in this period will, therefore, enable an “understanding of these terms as they were used prior to, and, at the time of Jesus and the gospel writers” (Wilkins, 2015, p. 92). The extant literature of the period that illuminate NT studies, and in the framework of this study, discipleship, includes (although not limited to) the Septuagint, Qumran literature, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Philo, and, to some extent, the rabbinic literature.

There is a scanty appearance of *mathetes/talmidh* in the intertestamental literature prior to Philo. For instance, *mathetes* is absent in the accepted tradition of the Septuagint (c. 250-150 B.C.) (although it occurs in Jeremiah 13:21, 20:11, and 26:9 of the alternate Septuagintal readings); it has no direct reference in the apocryphal writings (c. 250-50 B.C.); no reference to the term has been found, as of now, in the variegated pseudigraphical literature (c. 250 B.C. - A.D. 150); and the term *talmidh* is notoriously absent in the Qumran literature (150 B.C. - A.D. 70) (Wilkins, 2015, pp. 95-98, also see Longenecker, 1996b, Loc. 167). This scarcity in the terminology of discipleship in the Jewish writings of the interdepartmental period, however, comes to an end with such writers as Judaeus Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 B.C. - A.D. 50).²

Philo’s uses *mathetes* 14 times in his writings (Wilkins, 2015, p. 100). The Philonic understanding of the term is significant for conceptualizing *mathetes* in the NT in that Philo was a contemporary of the Lord Jesus and all NT authors. Because, he shared the same background as the NT, Larry Hurtado (2017) considers him as “probably the single most important first-century Jewish writer for understanding the Jewish religious setting of earliest Christianity” (p. 1). When it comes to the “study of the New Testament and Christian origins,

²Philo was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who, from an allegorical approach to interpreting Scriptures, tried to create a symbiosis between Greek philosophy and the Jewish Torah. He lived in the Roman province of Egypt, precisely, in Alexandria, which was an important center of the Jewish diaspora.

he [Philo] is justifiably a figure of monumental importance *in his own right*" (Hurtado, 2017, p. 2; emphasis in original). This being the case, the environment, language, and culture of Philo's writings are in many ways similar to those of the NT, and his use of *mathetes* shows "how the term was used by Jewish authors contemporary to Jesus" (Wilkins, 2015, p. 100).

Wilkins (2015) indicates that Philo uses *mathetes* in five significant ways (pp. 100-102, 124). First, he uses *mathetes* with the meaning of a learner or a person engaged in learning. Second, Philo gives *mathetes* the meaning of an advanced learner who is above the masses and teaches them. Third, he depicts a *mathetes* as a person that God himself teaches directly. Fourth, he identifies a *mathetes* as a direct disciple of God. As a disciple of God, a *mathetes* is free from self-conceit and has developed the aptitude to learn from God by himself without recourse to external instructors. Finally, he describes a *mathetes* as a committed follower. Committed following, in this period, meant closely walking behind a master/teacher wherever he went, engaging with him in his daily activities to hear his teachings, observe his actions/reactions, and to imitate how he spoke God's word and put it in practice (Bjork, 2021, p. 57). According to David Bjork (2021), one of the greatest compliments that captured this close following was: "You are covered in the dust [of the feet] of the rabbi" (p. 57). This compliment that is attributed to second century B.C. rabbi Yosai ben Yoezer of Tziraidah, meant that a "person [the disciple] followed the rabbi so closely in his travels by foot from village to village [to avidly drink from his words] that the dust raised by his sandals clung to the clothes of the disciple" (Bjork, 2021, p. 57). It is worth noting that the first four Philonic usages of *mathetes* are general, conveying the most basic meaning of a learner, while the fifth one is technical as it emphasizes devoted followership. In this, Philo essentially re-echoes the classical, and, especially the Hellenistic use of the term.

Mathetes in the NT Period

By NT period, I mean the first century A.D. Viewed from the lenses of the Scriptures, the period captures, on the one hand, the events surrounding the birth ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and, on the other hand, the missionary activities of his apostles as well as other early Christ-followers as portrayed in the book of Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation. Following records from the NT, the period witnessed several discipleship activities. Besides those that followed the Lord Jesus and stuck with him throughout his life on earth, the NT mentions, at least, three other categories of disciples (*mathetai*): disciples of Moses, disciples of the Pharisees, and disciples of John the Baptist. Outside NT records, Flavius Josephus, in his writings, also discusses mathetic activities that unfolded within this period. I telegraphically examine the nature of these activities and writings below:

Moses' Mathetai

In John 9:28, some Jews described themselves as *mathetai* of Moses. This claim is akin to the Greeks' use of *mathetes* expressed in such phrases as "disciples of Socrates." By this appellation, they sought to identify themselves with and show devotion to Moses' teachings found in the Torah. As Wilkins (2015) explains, the Pharisees' use of the *mathetai* in this context indicates a "personal commitment to a type of teaching as represented in a person [in this case, Moses]" (p. 108). For the Pharisees, being a disciple of Moses, that is, following the teachings of Moses, was contradistinctive to being a disciple of Jesus (Doberenz, 2020, p. 84).

The Pharisees' Mathetai

Matthew 22:15-16 and Mark 2:18 allude to the Pharisee's disciples. It should be noted that these disciples did not surface at the time of Jesus. Josephus in *Antiquity* 13:289 points to John Hyrcanus (164-104 B. C), the Hasmonean (Maccabean) leader and Jewish high priest of the 2nd century BC, as being a *mathetes* of the Pharisees (Newport, 1990, p. 131; Wilkins, 2015, p. 106). The above NT passages show the concern of the Pharisees' disciples with issues

pertaining to fasting (Mark 2:18) and tax payment to Caesar (Matthew 22: 16-17). Besides these concerns, like their teachers, they studied the Law and the traditions and exhibited a legalistic commitment to both (Wilkins, 2015, p. 106). To sum up, discipleship among the Pharisees involved learning the *Torah* and a commitment to live accordingly.

John the Baptist's Mathetai

Besides being a prophet, the NT identifies John the Baptist (c. 5 B.C. - 30 B.C.) as a *didaskalos* (teacher) in Luke 3:12 and a *rabbi* (master/teacher) in John 3:26. As was the custom for a *didaskalos* and *rabbi* at this time, John had *mathetai*.³ They were individuals who followed him in a proximity relationship as their master and teacher (Aplin, 2011, pp. 27-28), adopted his ways/practices, and aligned to his teachings. Some aspects of John's teaching specifically intended for his disciples and explicitly highlighted in the NT were prayers and fasting (Luke 5:33; Luke 11:1; Matthew 2:28; Mark 3:18) and the production of fruit in keeping with repentance (this, together with water baptism, was a central component of his ministry). As a result, John focused his discipleship, not on intellectual enhancement as was the case with several other rabbis, but on developing pietistic practices in his followers through the spiritual disciplines of prayers, fasting, and righteous living. The fact that no NT text mentions John expounding the Scriptures to his disciples (Wilkins, 2015, p. 105) seems to corroborate this stance. Many adepts of John remained his disciples after his death, even beyond the frontiers of Israel. They were active in Alexandria (Acts 18:24-28) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1-3).

Mathetes/Mathetai in Josephus Writings

An important author within the NT era whose writings on *mathetes* can shed light on the understanding of the term as used by NT authors is Flavius Josephus (c. A.D. 37-110). He was a massive Jewish writer and historian. Although he was not a contemporary of Jesus, he nevertheless lived and wrote within the pioneering years of the early church. As such, his use of *mathetes*, which appeared 15 times in his writings, "reflects a common cultural and linguistic milieu of the time shortly after Jesus' earthly life, the growth of the church [with the writing of the epistles], the time during which the gospel writers wrote their gospels, and the rise of the rabbinical schools at Jamnia" (Wilkins, 2015, p. 112).⁴ Josephus' used *mathetes* in sundry ways to describe (1) a learner, (2) a master-teacher relationship, (3) a philosophical or intellectual follower, and (4) a member of a school, whether an individual school or a movement (Wilkins, 2015, pp. 112-13). It follows that Josephus' understanding of *mathetes* synchronizes with that of the classical, Hellenistic, and intertestamental period, especially that of Philo.

Outlining a NT Understanding of *Mathetes* in Association to the Lord Jesus

This section includes three subpoints. It first emphasizes the semantic proximity between the Hellenistic understanding of *mathetes* and that of NT writers. It then shows the multi-taxonomic use of the term in the NT. It concludes by a survey of *mathetes* in the NT.

Proximity of the Hellenistic Use of *Mathetes* with those of NT Authors

NT writings did not occur *ex-nihilo*. Although, they were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, these writings, nevertheless, are anchored in and reflect their contexts and times. A study of the background use of *mathetes* (as done above) is therefore essential as it sheds light on how NT authors understood and used the term. Even though the NT's use of *mathetes*,

³Mention of John's disciples occurs in passages such as Mark 2:18; Matthew 9:14; Luke 5:33; Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-22; Mark 6:29; Matthew 14:12; Luke 11:1; John 1:35-42; 3:25-28; 4:1.

⁴Around 90 A. D., the Jewish Rabbi, Yohan ben Zakkai, settled in the city of Yavne Jamnia. Having received authorization from Roman authorities, he founded a school of Jewish law in the locality. The school became instrumental for the development of the *Mishnah* in which the views of the rabbinic sages (*tannaim*) was recorded. The *Mishnah* was the first major text corpus of Jewish oral traditions (Oral Torah) as well as the pioneering and mainstay written document of the rabbinical literature.

to some degree, mirrors the use of the term in the OT and intertestamental periods, NT writers predominantly conceptualized the word in keeping with its Greek legacy, especially the Hellenistic heritage. Robert Foster (n. d) holds that “discipleship in the New Testament conforms to the vision of discipleship in ... [the] writings of the ancient Hellenistic world” (p. 3). Hence, in this study, I regard the Hellenistic understanding of *mathetes* as a basic substratum to the use of the term in the NT.

The rationale for this posture leans on at least three reasons. First, there is an undeniable contextual proximity between Hellenistic literature and NT writings. Second, the Hellenistic view of *mathetes* encapsulates and enlarges the classical understanding of the term. Three, the Hellenistic perspective of *mathetes* is all-encompassing in that it incorporates all the variant meanings of the term in the OT, the classical, intertestamental, and NT periods. In other words, the meanings of all other occurrences of the term in all the other historical periods studied so far fall, in one way or the other, within the general Hellenistic discipleship taxonomy. As a reminder, *mathetes* in the Hellenistic period integrated notions of (1) a learner, (2) an adherent, (3) a pupil, (4) an intimate master-follower relationship, (5) a zealous follower, and (6) a person who imitates his master’s words and conduct.

Multiple Taxonomies

In the NT, the term *mathetes* is used either *nonreferentially* (impersonal use) or *referentially* (referring to specific persons). The nonreferential use seeks to demarcate between disciples and teacher/master in a general sense. Examples of this use are found in Matthew 10:24–25 and Luke 6:40. When used referentially, *mathetes* “designate the followers of a great leader or movement” (Wilkins, 1992, p. 40). It is in this sense that NT authors, as discussed earlier, often allude Moses’ disciples, the Pharisees’ disciples, etc. Of these various referential uses, the association of *mathetes/mathetai* to the Lord Jesus is by far the most recurrent.

When understood in association to the Lord Jesus, the *mathetes/mathetai* of Jesus fall under several taxonomies. Individuals (anyone/whoever) were or could become his disciples. Ananias for example is recognized as a his *mathetes* (Acts 9:10). Tabitha is called a *mathetria* (the feminine equivalent of *mathetes*) of Jesus (Acts 9:33). In Mark 8:35, the Lord Jesus specifies that anyone could become his *mathetes*. The *dodeka* (twelve) were also, in a narrow sense, identified as Christ’s *mathetai*. Often, the *hoi oxloi* (the crowd) were acknowledged as his *mathetai* in a general sense (Luke 19:37). Local communities of Christ were equally described as Jesus’ *mathetai*. This usage is preponderant in Acts (see Acts 6:2, 7; 9:19, 26; 11:26, etc.). Worth mentioning is the fact that, in Acts 18:27, *mathetai* is used as a synonym of *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters) and *pepisteukosin* (those who had believed). This is an important detail pointing to the language of discipleship in the epistles where *mathetes* does not occur.

Panoramic Study of *Mathetes* in NT Writings

In this section, I review the use of *mathetes* in NT writings. Because an exhaustive study of the word in individual NT books is impossible in the limited space of this article, I briefly survey the term in the Synoptic Gospels, John’s gospel, the book of Acts, and mention a few things about *mathetes* beyond Acts. In the survey I explore passages that highlight the nature, character, expectations/requirements, activities of a *mathetes* of Christ.

Discipleship in the Synoptic Gospels

In the Synoptics, *mathetes* in its association to the Lord Jesus Christ is used in relation to several motifs and contexts. I discussed some of the most salient below:

Being a *mathetes* Involves Following Christ. Synoptic evangelists associate the life of a *mathetes* of Jesus to following Jesus Christ (Matthew 8:21-22, 23; Mark 8:34). Given the peripatetic nature of teaching in the ancient Mediterranean world which did not occur in a

classroom setting or via a curriculum but allowed teachers to move from one place to another with their disciples, following was a specially adapted method of learning at this time. It enabled a learning approach that was achieved in a relation of intimacy as a disciple walked behind or followed after a rabbi and pledged total allegiance to the rabbi (Moon, 2017, p. 45; Bjork, 2020, pp. 61-69). Disciples of Jesus did the same. They followed Jesus, stayed attached to him, learned from his teachings, and obeyed his instructions (Moon, 2017, p. 45) in view of being transformed (in their worldviews and character) into Christ's likeness. This perspective of *mathetes* is in sync with the Greek understanding of the Hellenistic period.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Becoming Christ's Student. In Luke 6:40, the Lord Jesus expresses this discipleship dimension as follows: "The student [*mathetes*] is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher" (NIV). One of the key notions that this verse highlights is Jesus' understanding of a disciple as a pupil, or a student as NIV translates. This is akin to the Hellenistic understanding of *mathetes*. Becoming a disciple of Christ is therefore an enrolling in Christ's school to learn of/from him and to pattern one's life after his. This is reminiscent of Christ's recommendation that his disciples take his yoke upon themselves and learn of him (Matthew 11:29). Luke 6:40 further emphasizes the necessity of being fully trained (*katartizo*) as a pupil of Christ to be his disciple. *Katartizo* communicates meanings such as rendering fit, equipping, making complete, preparing, repairing, training or mending. This entails that discipleship to Christ is a process of de-shaping, shaping, and reshaping of his disciples, a training process aiming at transforming them in the resemblance of their Master so that they are fit for making other disciples of Christ.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Becoming like Christ – a Christofornity. According to Synoptic writers, being a *mathetes* of Christ incorporates the need to become like Christ. According to Luke 6:40 (also see Matthew 10:25), becoming like Christ is the purpose of a disciples' enrolment and training in Christ's school. Discipleship to Christ therefore results in what I describe as Christofornity. By Christofornity, I mean a life that continually adopts the form of Christ, progressively conforms itself to the life of Christ, and seeks to model itself after Christ's way of living. Christofornity expresses the process of shaping and reshaping those who come under the lordship of Christ to the point where they develop, to a "substantial degree, the character of the inner dimension of Jesus himself" and become the kind of persons who, as a consequence of their wholehearted commitment to Christ, routinely obey Him (Willard, 2009, pp.1, 2). Christofornity portrays a *Christofornic or Christofornized life*. Other terms that may capture the reality of Christofornity are Christofornization or Christofornism. This view of the *mathetes* aligns with that of the Hellenistic period.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Carrying One's Cross and Following Christ. Synoptic authors connect the life of a *mathetes* to cross-bearing. In Luke 14:27, the Lord Jesus clarifies that anyone who does not carry his/her cross and follow him cannot be his *mathetes* while, in Matthew 16:24, he is unequivocal that carrying the cross is a *conditio sine qua non* for being/becoming his *mathetes*. For people of first century, this requirement was crystal clear. At the time of the Lord Jesus, under Roman occupation, anyone who carried his cross was surely heading towards death by crucifixion. He was to face the most painful form of execution (death on the cross) and, prior to that, endure humiliation and disgrace on his way to that execution. It follows that, by using the metaphor of cross-bearing and making it the condition for being/becoming his disciple, the Lord Jesus was calling his followers to utmost self-denial, absolute self-renunciation, total abnegation, or, specifically, death to self. As Sean Kim (2016) explains, cross-bearing demands a "deeper level of renunciation: the renunciation of self" (p. 71). This perspective of a *mathetes* diverges with that of the Hellenistic era.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Denying Self. Synoptic gospel writers associate *mathetes* with self-denial. In Mark 8:34-35, the Lord Jesus spells the requirements for becoming his disciple as follows: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must *deny themselves* and take up their cross and follow me. For, whoever wants to save their lives will lose it, but whoever loses their lives for me and for the gospel will save it” (my emphasis; also see Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:59-62; 14:26). The Greek term translated by “deny” is *aparneomai*. In the context of the above passage, it communicates the foundational notion of losing sight of one’s self, interests or dying to self. Denying self is dethroning self and enthroning Christ. It is refusing to comply with the injunctions of the “I” because this would, in most instances, be antagonistic to Christ’s requirements. It is refusing, out of subordination to Christ, to indulge in self-gratification or to be driven by carnal appetites. Denying self is death to self (this is connoted in the phrase “take up their cross”). It involves a complete surrender to Christ characterized by a rejection of self-affirmation, self-promotion and, in a nutshell, every form of self-centeredness. It is living a Christofocal life. This means leading a life so centered on obeying and revealing Christ, that self (its desires and passions) is relegated to the back stage. To achieve this, developing a strong unshakable allegiance to Christ is primordial.

Also note that salvation according to Mark 8:34-35 occurs in the context of death to self. Thus, whoever wants to save their lives by a refusal of self-denial will eventually lose it, but whoever loses their lives for Christ and for the gospel through acceptance of death to self will save it. In this sense, “Mark’s characteristic model of salvation is discipleship” (Wilkins, 2010, p. 53).

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Showing Absolute Allegiance to Christ. The Synoptics teach that absolute allegiance is required of a *mathetes* of Christ. This is evident in Luke 14:26 where the Lord Jesus states: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life - such a person cannot be my disciple” (NIV). It is important to indicate that Christ’s use of the term “hate” should not be taken literally (intense emotional dislike) but figuratively (to prefer something over something else or love something more than something else) since, in several other passages of Scriptures, he encourage his followers to love those who hate them in the literal sense (see, Luke 6:27-28). Also, worth noting is that this figurative use of the term “hate” functions on a relative scale and not on one that is absolute. This means that although a *mathetes* is to love self (one’s life) and family (father, mother, wife, children, brothers or sisters), Christ is to be loved more than or preferred over both. In concrete terms, if a *mathetes* of Christ is confronted with the painful loyalty test that consists in choosing between family and Christ, he/she must choose Christ, even if that choice would mean being misunderstood, persecuted, rejected, or, outrightly, disowned by family members. This also applies for self-choice over choosing Christ. This means that, to be Christ’s *mathetes* necessitates showing greater allegiance to Christ than to any other human allegiance, even allegiance to one’s own life. The *mathetai* of Christ must pay utmost allegiance to Christ such that their lives or closest social relations do not compromise or take precedence over that allegiance. Hence, Christ discipular emphasis in this text is that total devotion, utter self-denial, utmost loyalty, and absolute surrender to Christ constitute the cost of being/becoming his disciple. Therefore, embodying and total allegiance to Christ is a hallmark of discipleship in the Synoptics and the whole NT (Brown, 2013, p. 890).

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Renouncing All Possessions. Synoptic authors emphasize the need for a *mathetes* to develop the ability to renounce all (earthly goods) they possess for Christ’s sake. This requirement is succinctly articulated in Luke 14:32: “In the same way therefore, not one of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his own possessions” (NET). This verse does not mean that followers of Christ cannot own material possessions or should relinquish possession of whatever they have. Rather, the verse addresses issues pertaining to priority or the degree of attachment Christ’s disciples have towards earthly

possessions in comparison to the person of Christ. The verse's emphasis is that discipleship to Christ requires that Christ be given the first place in the lives of his disciples such that no earthly allegiance can take precedence over their allegiance to Christ. That is, if per adventure, conflict emerged between disciples' allegiance to Christ and their attachment to what they have, they would readily and willingly choose to comply with Christ's requirements, even if that meant losing everything. Renunciation to all in this passage, therefore, corresponds to Christ's disciples renouncing all earthly attachments that take precedence over their loyalty to Christ. This is central to Christian discipleship.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Obeying Christ's instructions. In several passages, Synoptic writers show that when Jesus instructed, his *mathetai* obeyed (see Matthew 21:6; 26:19). Obeying Christ's instructions was a critical feature of their lives. This highlights the vital place of obedience in the relationship between Christ and his *mathetes*. It is in tandem with this requirement of obedience that the Lord Jesus sent his disciples to make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything he had commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). This verse enjoins both Christ's initial disciples and those his disciples would make to obey his command. Given that these instructions constitute an important part of the *Great Commission*, it goes without saying that obedience to Christ is paramount to Christian living and Christian missions.

Mathetes in the Gospel of John

In the Gospel of John, *mathetes*, when associated with Christ, is employed in relation to sundry motifs and settings. Following are some uses of the term in this gospel:

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Believing in Jesus Christ. Evangelist John presents the *mathetai* of Christ as those who believe in him. John 2:11 records that, after Jesus' first sign in which he transformed water into wine at Cana, "his disciples [*mathetai*] believed in him" (NIV). This miraculous sign aimed at revealing Christ's glory. Early disciples of Jesus saw that glory and, as a result, believed in him, that is, they placed their faith (loyal confidence) in him and trusted him. The placement of this sign at the beginning of John's Gospel seems to be programmatic to the entire Gospel in that it portrays belief in Christ as a vital attitude that should characterize Christ's *mathetai* throughout this book.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Holding to Christ's Word. John's gospel highlights the need as a *mathetes* of Jesus to hold to Christ's word. The Lord made this plain to the Jews who had believed in him: "If you *hold to* my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32, my emphasis). The word *meno*, translated "hold to" has the sense of abiding, dwelling, remaining, and continuing in something or keeping oneself in something. This word for which John has a great predilection communicates, in this context, the idea, not only of obeying Christ's word but also of making that obedience an enduring process. True discipleship to Christ cannot be abstracted from the necessity of abiding obedience to Christ. In the absence of obedience, discipleship to Christ is utterly denatured, bereft of its essence, and critically compromised.

It is worth observing that John, in John 8:31-32, places salvation (being set free by the truth) in the context of discipleship. According to him, knowing the truth and being set free by the truth results from abiding in Christ's word in discipleship. Johannine salvation is therefore, at least in this text, connected to and a consequence of discipleship. The NIV's rendering of "*kai*" in verse 32 as "then" ("then you will know the truth...") crystalizes this understanding.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Loving Other Followers of Christ. A key feature of John's Gospel is love: love for God (vertical love) and love for fellow humans (horizontal love). John 13:34-35 specifies that love for one another is a distinctive mark of those who are truly Christ's *mathetai*. According to the Lord Jesus in this text, it is by loving one another (Christ's

followers) that people will know that his followers are indeed his disciples. This implies that love for fellow brothers in Christ is one the acid test for true discipleship to Christ.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Bearing Abundant Fruit for Christ. John uses *mathetes* in the context of fruit bearing for the sake of Christ. In John 15:8, the Lord Jesus states: “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (NIV). According to this verse, bearing fruit attests that Christ’s followers are truly his disciples. True disciples of Christ are not spiritually barren. They bear fruit for God’s kingdom. This fruit could either be internal or external. Internal fruit consist in manifesting characteristic dimensions of Christ’s life in one’s inner being resulting in an outward transformation in Christlikeness. External fruit consists in affecting others with one’s Christlike life and Christ’s gospel in a bid to cause them to follow Christ. These fruits that result from an abiding relationship with Christ (John 15:4-5) honor the Father and demonstrate that those who profess to be Christ’s are truly his disciples.

Mathetes in Acts

Luke outlines the character of a *mathetes* in Acts in several ways. I mention the most prominent below:

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Doing Good and Helping the Poor. In Acts 9:36, Luke alludes to Tabitha (Dorcas), a *mathetria* of Christ (the term only occurs here in the NT), who did good around her and assisted the poor. By this allusion, Luke showcases an important aspect of being a *mathetes* of Christ which consists in humanitarian work as a practical demonstration of Christlike living within one’s neighborhood. This entails living a selfless life that spreads Christ’s love among people through social action. It also shows that serving Christ as his disciple must result in serving humanity for the sake of Christ.

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Reflecting/Replicating Christ’s Life. Acts 11:26 records that the “disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (NIV). Although the appellation Christian most likely came from non-Christians as a derisive name, it however had the merit of showing the Christlikeness of Christ’s followers then. Given that they lived by Christ’s teachings, sought to pattern their lives after his and to imitate him in their daily living, they were nicknamed Christians. By naming them Christians, these non-Christians implicitly highlighted the truth that a *mathetes* of Christ is one who reflects, replicates, or reproduces Christ’s life. It follows that to be a true *mathetes* of Christ necessitates an *imitatio Christi* that results into Christoformity. The concept of *imitatio Christi* accentuates the need to follow Christ so closely, to pattern one’s life after his, and to obediently imitate his life and character to the point where one is transformed into his image and can exemplify his life to others. It is in this light that Bill Hull (2016) holds that: “Discipleship occurs when someone answers the call to learn from Jesus and others how to live his or her life as though Jesus were living it. As a result, the disciple becomes the kind of person who naturally does what Jesus did” (p. 19).

Being a *Mathetes* Involves Being Generous to Christ’s Communities. In Acts 11:29, Luke indicates that, besides being generous to everyone as Tabitha did, the *mathetai* of Christ also helped members of Christ’s communities. The verse reads as follows: “The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea” (NIV). The text describes how Christ’s disciples in Antioch brought financial assistance to their brothers in Judea who suffered the effects of a severe famine. It shows that disciples of Christ are characterized by brotherly love as well as their ability to look beyond themselves and bring assistance to those in need.

***Mathetes* Involves Being Filled with the Holy Spirit.** Acts 13:52 has it recorded that Christ’s *mathetai* were “were filled with ... the Holy Spirit” (NIV). In this passage, Luke shows

that being filled with the Holy Spirit was an important feature of the life of primitive followers of Christ. This is in keeping with Luke's overall charismatic theology that is programmatically set from Acts 1:8 and is transversal to the entire book. Accordingly, true and thriving disciples of Christ are those that are constantly filled with the Holy Spirit.

Mathetes beyond the Book of Acts

As indicated earlier, the word *mathetes/mathetai* does not occur beyond the book of Acts. However, this absence of discipleship vocabulary does not mean that the concept of discipleship is absent in the epistles and Revelation. Scholars such as Richard Longenecker (1996b) and others suggest that to find the language of discipleship beyond the book of Acts, it is important to discern patterns of discipleship in these writings. These patterns are themes/motifs in the epistles and Revelation that "either parallel or connect directly with the form of discipleship found in the Gospels" and Acts (Blomberg, n. d., para. 6) or, to quote Longenecker (1996b), they are "varied portraits, depictions, and presentations that speak directly to ... the theory and practice of Christian discipleship" (Loc. 234-239).

Exploring these patterns is beyond the scope of this research. However, I mention a few of them here for illustrative purposes. Among the numerous discipleship patterns found beyond the book of Acts that have a parallel in the Gospels and Acts, the following are worth mentioning: *imitatio Christi* (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thes. 1:6; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6); Christoformity (Rom. 8: 29; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 2:5); following Christ (Revelation 14:4); enrolling in Christ's school (Ephesians 4:20); obedience to Christ (Romans 1:5; 16-25-26; 1 Peter 1:2); and allegiance to Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9). There are several other such patterns that match the outlining of *mathetes* in the Gospel and Acts as done above. Further research may focus on unearthing them.

Theological Implications of the Significance of *Mathetes* for Contemporary Disciples of Christ

An integrative analysis of the significance of *mathetes* as done above highlights several semantic dimensions and implications for contemporary disciples of Christ. I telegraphically outline 13 of them below:

1. *Being a disciple of Christ requires following Christ.* This truth needs emphasis in today's Christianity that is more absorbed with making church members. Being Christ's disciples means following him from initial conversion to the time when they will join him in glory. The purpose of this following is to learn of/from him to become like him.
2. *Being a disciple of Christ requires becoming a student of Christ.* Just like early Christians enrolled in Christ's school to learn his values, worldviews, and *modus vivendi*, so should today's Christians. Coming to Christ is not about being enculturated into church systems. It is about knowing Christ by learning Christ to become like Christ.
3. *Being a disciple of Christ requires Christoformity.* The concept, as noted earlier, corresponds to the Christoformic shaping that is meant to transform disciples into Christ's image so that they look like him and viably represent him in the world. This, in my perspective, is the ultimate end of Christian missions. Christ came not primarily to make a people that will escape the vicissitudes of life on earth by being translated to heaven. He came to make a people in whom he has been formed and through whom he will establish kingdom (his reign) on earth.
4. *Being a disciple of Christ requires carrying one's cross.* Today's Christ-followers must realize that being a disciple is not a path of roses. It requires cross-bearing, a process of absolute self-renunciation and death to self for the sake of Christ that enables Christ's life to shine unhindered through their lives. To be a disciple of Christ is to die to self.

5. *Being a disciple of Christ requires denying self.* Christ's disciple is one who has purposely chosen to deny self and lose sight of self-interests and personal rights for Christ's sake. In an era of invigorated humanism with its near deification of humans; in an era where human prowess, genius and sagacity is enthroned above God; and in an era of thriving individualism where individual rights, whims and caprices are exalted above the sacred, this message needs to echo loud and clear among Christians. To follow Christ is to dethrone self with its desires and to enthrone Christ in one's life.
6. *Being a disciple of Christ requires showing absolute allegiance to Christ.* Contemporary Christ's followers need to understand that recognizing Christ as the absolute Lord or King and following him demands that they show him the allegiance due his kingly status. That is the essence of discipleship to Christ. It demands total obedience, utmost loyalty, and unrivaled devotion to Christ.
7. *Being a disciple of Christ requires renouncing all earthly possessions.* In a world colonized by unrestrained materialism and unbridled capitalism, this message, for many, resonates as a false note in a musical symphony. However, for Christ's followers, the message is a test of the degree to which they are ready to detach themselves from earthly assets for the sake of Christ. Admittedly, renouncing all possessions does not mean that disciples of Christ cannot have any earthly possession of their own. It means renouncing all earthly attachments that supersede their allegiance to Christ.
8. *Being a disciple of Christ requires obeying/holding on to Christ's word.* Obedience is critical in being a disciple of Christ. By definition, to be a disciple of Christ is to be obedient to him. Obedience to Christ entails giving up one's will for Christ's will in the process of following him. This cannot be otherwise given that one of the foundational requirements of effective following as a disciple is obedience.
9. *Being a disciple of Christ requires believing in him.* Believing in Christ, that is loyal confidence, unwavering trust, and faith in him are vital attitudes a disciple of Christ should develop. In a world of extreme skepticism, secularism, rejection of the supernatural as well as the post-modernist vilification of the sacred and relativization of truth, it takes robust faith to be a disciple of Christ today. Contemporary disciples of Christ are enjoined to develop it if they intend to stay loyal to their Lord Jesus.
10. *Being a mathetes of Christ requires loving other disciples of Christ.* Although genuine, altruistic, and uninterested love for other is becoming a rare commodity these days, today's disciples of Christ need to keep in mind that loving others is a hallmark of discipleship to Christ and they should strive to live accordingly. To be a true disciple of Christ is to truly love others, especially those of the household of faith. This entails caring for them when necessary, sharing with them material and material possessions when need arises, and being channels of Christ's love to them.
11. *Being a disciple of Christ requires bearing fruit for Christ's kingdom.* Being Christ's disciple results into productivity. Christ wants his disciples to bear fruits, the fruit of the Spirit that translates into a Christlike character and a harvest of non-Christians that come under the lordship of Christ through his disciples' verbal and behavioral witness. Fruit bearing was vital for Christ's disciple then. The same remains true today.
12. *Being a disciple of Christ requires doing good and helping the poor.* Becoming a disciple of Christ is not an escape into the other-worldly. Rather, it is showcasing Christ among humans through words (proclamation) and practical actions (presence). Often followers of Christ enclose themselves in a life of spirituality that is far remote from this world, does not meet the existential needs of humans, and does not impact life on earth in concrete ways. True disciples of Christ, besides their proclamation of Christ, should be involved in social action. They should care for the needy, help the poor, relieve human suffering and, within the limits of their possibility, bring about transformational

development around them. Contemporary Christians need to understand that Christian missions is not only about *saving souls* but also about *saving lives*.

13. *Being a disciple of Jesus requires being filled with the Spirit.* The active presence of the Spirit is vital in the lives and ministries of Christ's followers. Without this presence, Christ's disciples will struggle on their own and create little or no impact for Christ in the world. It is His presence that energized the witness of primitive disciples of Christ about Christ and caused them to stand unflinchingly tall in the face ruthless antagonism. Present-day disciples of Christ need Him as much today as did early Christians. To thrive in their mission of establishing Christ' lordship among nations, they need to keep in mind that Christian living and ministry in a secular, obdurate, and perverse world requires the divine supernatural empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

This article examined the meaning of *mathetes* in the NT and background literature. It aimed at clarifying the concept of *mathetes* as the Lord Jesus, his apostles, and early followers of Christ used in the NT and to outline its relevance for contemporary disciples of Christ. The article developed on three points. The first point investigated the sociocultural and historical settings of *mathetes*. The second point outlined a NT understanding of *mathetes* as used in association with the Lord Jesus. The final point sketched the implications of the significance of the term for present-day disciples of Christ.

Findings have shown that term *mathetes* predates Christianity. Its use in the Greco-Hebraic contexts predominantly highlights a variety of relationships between a master/teacher and his students/apprentices. When used in association to Christ, *mathetes*, together with its cognate discipleship patterns, cuts across the NT and integrates assorted themes that primarily emphasize allegiant devotion to Christ and accentuates concrete expressions of that devotion within communities of Christ and in the world.

The transversality as well as the abundance of the discipleship motifs associated with Christ in the NT shows its dominant and preponderant place in the teaching of the Lord Jesus, his apostles, and primitive Christians. Making disciples was central to the Lord Jesus' ministry. It was (and still is) the Lord's heartbeat. His followers should share the same heartbeat and pursue it, always keeping in view that their Master commissioned them to make disciples for him of all nations. Hence, more than anything else, discipleship to Christ, in every generation and cultures, needs accentuation. The contemporary fascination of the Christian folk with making church members at the detriment of making authentic disciples of Christ is therefore regrettable. It indicates that the church has either not understood the essence of its mission or it has sadly drifted from it. The first task of the church is not that of making members but that of making disciples of Christ. If church activities such as social action, transformational development, evangelism, church planting, assimilation of church visitors for church growth, and other such activities, do not result in making disciples for Jesus Christ, they are, to say the least, a waste of energy, time, and financial resources. A return to making disciples to Christ is thus urgent!

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