

“ISRAEL WILDERNESS SCHOOL” – PATTERN FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (GOD’S CONTINUAL REVELATION OF HIMSELF TO MAN, FOR PEDAGOGICAL AND RESTORATIVE PURPOSES)

Abstract

The study explores the concept of discipleship in the Old Testament, highlighting how divine revelation continues to be a pedagogical and therapeutic process. At the centre of this process is the relationship between God and man, beginning with Adam and continuing with the patriarchs, prophets, and the people of Israel, culminating in the Christ disciple’s model. It is emphasised that the whole of revelation provides a complete model for discipleship, to guide humanity towards divine communion. The study also analyses the educational structures in Jewish society, in which the family, the royal court and scribal schools play essential roles. It discusses the biblical terminology specific to discipleship and the relationship between learning and the divine will, concluding that true religious education is about accumulating knowledge and living by God’s will so that man can re-enter into a relationship with the supreme Teacher.



Keywords

Discipleship, Divine pedagogy, Spiritual education, Restoration, Tradition

Introduction

The discovery of God realised and transmitted to us through Holy Scripture is an act springing from the perfect communion/ *koinonia*, the Holy Trinity, and meant to teach us our entrance into this kind of being. “Without the Revelation of the

true and living God, there would be neither theology, nor Christian spirituality, for Christian theology, as a speech about God, is based on the revelation made in God the Word Who made Himself known to the world on many occasions and in many ways, and finally shared Himself with the world in the fullest form, becoming Himself man (cf. Heb 1:1)" (Daniel 2009, 85). Revelation, in its entirety, offers us the most extensive/comprehensive pattern for discipleship because it is a continual revelation of God to man for pedagogical and therapeutic purposes. Its development to the culmination of Christ puts before us the stages of the progression of this pattern beginning with the God – Adam relationship, moving on to God – Patriarchs, God – Prophets, God – His people, and then culminating in Christ – His disciples; Church – the new people, the new Israel; but also in the unfolding of eternity through which, as the Fathers say, we grow from grace to grace, "the most godly" being called "to introduce the lowest to the mysteries and to be guides to draw near to God in illumination and communion" (St. Dionysius the Areopagite 1996, 21).

Even the Trinity itself can be seen as an educational pattern: "The monarchy of the Father (the only source of the Godhead) and the oneness of being are the ontological support of love as the unifying force, and the Trinity of Persons is the irreducible ontological support of diversity and mutual self-giving, of love as self-giving to another" (Daniel 2009, 85-6). The Son "can do nothing of Himself unless He sees the Father doing it; for whatever He does, the Son does in like manner" (Jn 5:19), and the Holy Spirit works so that Christ may be incarnate in us (Gal 4:19), or these are sufficient arguments for understanding the Trinity as an educational pattern. The teacher-disciple relationship presupposes dedication and the fulfilment of the will, according to the Trinitarian pattern in which "The being, life, and work of the three divine Persons are common, but each of them possesses the one being in its way and participates in or performs the common work according to its irreducible specificity, according to His 'personality'" (Daniel 2009, 88).

In what follows, we will try to capture some Old Testament educational models and highlight their pedagogical function for today.

The meaning and terminology of discipleship in the Old Testament

The vocabulary specific to educational and discipleship issues is varied in the Old Testament (Crenshaw 1998, 205-19), with the verb *lamad* (Kohlenberger, Swanson 1998, 883-4) holding a central position among these terms, with the following

meanings: *to teach* (Dt 4:1; 4:10; 6:1; 20:18; Jdg 3:2; 2 Chron 17:7; Job 21:22; Jer 9:20), *to learn* (Dt 5:1; Prv 30:3; Jer 12:16), *to prepare for battle/ war* (2 Sam 22:35; 1 Chron 5:18). From this verb is derived the form *lammud* (Kohlenberger, Swanson 1998, 884), translated once as *disciple* (Is 8:16), and once as *one who is taught* (Is 50:4). Also, from the verb *lamad* derives the noun *talmid* – *disciple*, used only in 1 Chron 25:8, even though we can identify several persons in the Old Testament who fit this profile. Nor is the Greek equivalent *μαθητής* used in the LXX. Another important concept in the proposed thematic context is *yasar* (Kohlenberger, Swanson 1998, 713) which means *to instruct* (Dt 4:36; 8:5; Prv 19:8; Jer 46:28), *to strike/ punish* (Lv 26:18; Dt 22:18; Hos 10:10), *to punish* (Ps 117), the Greek equivalent being *paideia* (Kittel 1964-1976, 415-60), which Philo and Josephus Flavius use when referring to Israel's time in the wilderness. The use of the verb *lamad* and its derivatives always expresses an awareness of the relationship between learning and the revealed will of God (Kittel 1964-1976, 450) which must be translated into action.

In Jewish society, the first educational environment was the family (Lv 19:3; Dt 4:9-10; 6:7; 11:18-19; Prv 1:8-9; 6:20-23; 22:15; 29:17), as in the Christian environment (Abrudan, Cornițescu 2002, 116), and which preceded any experience in the school or synagogue. Within the family, children were initiated in writing and reading to have early access to the content of the Law and the holy writings. Every home was a veritable school in which parents also held a teaching function or responsibility (Jacobs, Grossman 1906-1910, 570; Hachohen 2005, 11). The *parent-child* model of learning was based on the fifth commandment (Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16) – which introduces parental authority as the pattern of all human authority – religious, educational, civil (Durham 1987, 290) –, a model expressed in a developed form in Dt 6:4-7. In this way, the family was the model for all educational structures in the two Testaments, but also in the later Jewish tradition, and one can think, for example, of the title of the tractate in the Mishna entitled *Pirke Avot* – *The Teachings of the Parents*, from which one can intuit the importance of the parent-child model in rabbinic training. This model inspires trust, authority and respect. After the family, the Old Testament mentions two other structures with an educational function: the royal court (Prv 1:1; Eccl 1:1) and the scribal schools (Jer 8:8-9; Prv 25:1).

The attention which the Old Testament gives to the condition of the disciple or apprentice, the child, denotes consideration for this initial stage of life experience before which innumerable possibilities of development and fruitfulness open (Jacobs,

Grossman, 1906-1910, 570). The necessity for the realization of a religious education appears explicitly formulated in Deuteronomy: "Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.'" (Dt 4:9-10 – ESV; cf. 6:4-7).

Education in the Jewish tradition

Jewish thought on religious education starts from the fundamental principle that the laws and all religious knowledge are not to be learned merely mechanically but are to be appropriated in such a way that the young person or disciple realizes the imperiousness of harmonizing his whole existence with them (Dt 4:9; 6:7; 31:12-13) (Jacobs, Grossman, 1906-1910, 570). The laws are not merely to be assimilated into memory, but fulfilled (Hacohen 2005, 162-78), made to become deeds pleasing to God: "Be careful to obey all these words that I command you..." (Dt 12:28). The title of disciple implies, in this sense, the rational acceptance and assumption in one's personal life of the ideas and practices of the teacher (Douglas, Tenney 1987, 273). Subsequently, in the context of synagogal educational structures, where the true teacher was not the rabbi but the Torah (Weder 1996, 205), the apprentice was called upon to receive its content both rationally and to put it into action. And this from the conviction of the presence of the Lawgiver in his Law, an idea that is also characteristic of patristic literature: "The Lord is hidden in his commandments. And those who seek him find him according to the measure of their fulfilment." (St. Mark the Ascetic 2005, 232); "The Word of God, hidden in his ten commandments, becomes bodily in us, descending with us in our moral activity, then again raising us through knowledge, exalting us until we ascend to the highest of all the commandments, which says: The Lord your God is one Lord" (St. Maximus the Confessor 2005, 290).

Thus, in the time of Johanan ben Zakkai, in the academy at Jamnia and similar educational structures in Caesarea and elsewhere, religious education involved the teaching of a Bible verse each day, the text is subsequently explained to the disciples concerning their daily life experience (Jacobs, Grossman, 1906-1910, 570), so that the teaching always had immediate applicability.

According to rabbinic tradition, there are four types of disciples (Crenshaw 1998, 8): 1) those who learn quickly and forget quickly; 2) those who learn slowly and forget slowly; 3) those who learn quickly and forget slowly; 4) those who learn slowly and forget quickly (*Pirke Avot* 5,13). There are also four typologies into which those who sit around the sages fit: 1) a sponge, which absorbs everything; 2) a bellows/ trough, which lets out everything that goes in; 3) a strainer, which lets out wine and retains the yeast; and 4) a sieve, which lets out what is of poor quality and retains what is good (*Pirke Avot* 5,18). The proper age for learning is youth, for then the words of the Torah are assimilated and become part of the blood, thus becoming the very life of man (*Avot of Rabbi Natan* 24). Divergences between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel also existed concerning learning: Shammai limited access to learning only to the gifted, from chosen families, or the wealthy, whereas Hillel taught that all boys should benefit from learning (Crenshaw 1998, 9).

Elementary training included *Shema* (Dt 6:4-9), *Tefillah*, the Scriptures and the most important prayers (*Amidah*, *Shemone Esre*). The first five years of study were reserved for the Scriptures, then at the age of 10 years the study of the Mishnah, and at the age of 15 years the study of the teachings that form the basis of the Talmud (*Pirke Avot* 5,21). The study was exclusively oral, consisting of Midrash, Halakhot and Haggadot, i.e. exegetical interpretation of the Scriptures, legislative and homiletical texts. The stated purpose was to preserve and transmit the teachings of the past, not to discover new elements (Crenshaw 1998,10).

In Alexandrian Judaism, education was not only religiously specific but also included other cultural levels in the learning process. Philo regarded secular education as important and encouraged its practice, but it is particularly noteworthy that for the Sabbath he insisted on the necessity of Torah study. The highest level of knowledge for him was philosophy and wisdom, above actual knowledge. He recognized the dynamic interaction between God and man, and that learning came in response to a natural urge of the human being, in close connection with spiritual progress. In this sense, Philo also held that ultimate truth remained inaccessible to the human intellect, to be known only through the discovery of God (Crenshaw 1998, 11-3), for true knowledge is realized only in God, and this *in* is attained by faith and humility. For him, the model par excellence was the patriarch Abraham.

A Failed Lesson (Gen 2:16-17) and a Quest with Victory (Gen 6:8)

The first element or didactic principle appears at the very beginning of the Creation, by receiving the commandment that prevented access to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so-called, says St. John Chrysostom, "because it was to be the occasion of breaking or keeping the commandment" (St. John Chrysostom 1987, 185). The commandment appears to us as the first counsel to which Adam shows himself disobedient, receiving rather "the pernicious counsel, breaking the law given by God and making the commandment a reproach" (St. John Chrysostom 1987, 181) and, thus, leaving the pattern of education-faith with God, leaving the personal level of his discipleship to God. Consuming the fruit of the tree of knowledge did not bring Adam knowledge, but it is darkening, because the act of education was accomplished in his communion with God, who had already endowed him with wisdom and prophetic grace (St. John Chrysostom 1987, 184-5), seen in the naming of all living creatures (Gen 2:19-20) and the expression of the prophecy concerning the woman (Gen 2:23-24). To learn, then, is a necessity generated by the fall, it is to seek discipleship.

The answer to this failed lesson is provided by the model of Noah, an episode that records a continuous quest for victory, concisely expressed by the biblical text: "But Noah found grace in the sight of the Lord God" (Gen 6:8), and at the end of the cleansing through the flood, Noah will receive the first laws after the fall (Gen 9:1-7), and with him God will make the first covenant (Gen 9:9-11). These two lessons allow us to conclude that the act of education is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about reconnecting one's existence with the true Teacher (*Menahoth* 99a) who, in the Old Testament, is God Himself, while in the New Testament the model of the teacher will be Christ.

The teacher-disciple model in the Old Testament

We can fix the beginnings of the concept of *discipleship* in the sphere of the divine call that constantly follows the same pattern: the *initiative of God – the response of man*, a paradigm that constitutes the core of the biblical concept of covenant (Wilkins, 1996, "Disciple, Discipleship") manifested in the repeated promise: *I will be your God, and you shall be my people...* (Gen 17:7; Jer 7:23; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1; Ezk 36:28; 37:23). The first call of this type can be identified immediately after the moment of the fall

(St. John Chrysostom 1987, 191-2): "Adam, where are you?" (Gen 3:9), as God's initiative that awaits to this day the response of each one.

Through steadfast faith and obedience to God's will (culminating in Gen 12:1-3 and Gen 22:2-3), Abraham is a striking example of the Old Testament concept of *discipleship*: obedience and hearing, followed by doing God's will. Another example is Solomon whom we read of as having an obedient heart (*lev shomea*, 1 Kgs 3:9), described as a wise and discerning heart (*lev hakham venavon*, 1 Kgs 3:12). Incidentally, in the Old Testament, all *discipleship-type* relationships followed a pattern in which teachers and disciples alike listened to God's word and trusted God. Three main criteria or implications of the concept of discipleship are commonly identified, namely: first, a *call* is necessary, and following it to become a disciple; second, the beginning of this discipleship involves a *total break with the past*; finally, third, discipleship involves a lifelong relationship (Weder 1996, 207).

We distinguish two levels of the concept of *discipleship* in the Old Testament: the *national* level, which concerns the relationship between God and His people, and the *personal* level, either between God and each Israelite (e.g. Joshua, Caleb, David, Hezekiah, Josiah) or in an inter-human relationship of the *teacher-disciple* relationship that we can see in the case of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Jeremiah and Baruch.

The people of Israel are the subjects of divine education, whom God has chosen to fulfil his will. To some extent, if this responsibility belongs to everyone, it derives from the collective responsibility as a member of the chosen people (Kittel 1964-1976, 455). The national level of discipleship is more important because, in the discourse of the prophets, the horizon of divine pedagogy broadens, embracing all the nations of the earth. But whatever the breadth of addressability, the pattern remains the same.

From the register of inter-human relations, we would invoke, first of all, the case of Moses who entered the Tabernacle, at first in the tent of meeting outside the camp (Ex 33:7), and of his young servant, Joshua, who "did not leave the Tabernacle" (Ex 33:11) even after Moses had gone, remaining, after the model of the teacher (Ex 34:28), in the place of the dwelling-place of the glory of God (cf. Dt 31:14-15) (Jacob 1955, 63-6). Joshua lingered in the Tabernacle, and this may be seen as a sign of the trust he enjoyed, being left to guard it (Stuart 2007, 698). He even seems to be given a mediatorial role between God and the people, though not to the same extent as Moses, whom he served (Ashby 1997, 134).

For Josephus Flavius, Joshua is indeed the *μαθητής* of Moses (Josephus Flavius 2002, 134), Elijah has a *θεράπων* ("servant, servant") but later Elisha is the *μαθητής και διάκονος* for Elijah (Josephus Flavius 2002, 508, 569), and Baruh is called the *μαθητής* of Jeremiah (Josephus Flavius 2002, 569). The term *μαθητής* is the same term used in the New Testament to designate the Savior's disciples. Moses prepared Joshua to take over the leadership of the people of Israel (Dt 31:7-8), Elijah called Elisha as a disciple to anoint him a prophet in his place (1 Kgs 19:16), and Jeremiah had Baruch as his scribe, who, learning from him, can be considered his disciple (Jer 36:2-8). The disciple was to be inseparable from his teacher (Sir 6:34), and even to live in the same house with him (Sir 6:36). The condition of the apprentice, even in ancient Greek culture, went beyond that of a scholar in that it was not limited to the accumulation of a certain amount of information, but envisaged a close relationship between the apprentice and his teacher involving the assumption of the latter's principles and way of life (Kittel 1964-1976, 433).

Starting from the fact that the actual term "disciple" (*talmid*) can be found only once in the Old Testament, some specialists believe that the concept it expresses is also absent from the Old Testament rescript (Kittel 1964-1976, 434). From this perspective, the relationship between Moses and Joshua is not understood as one of discipleship because Joshua is called a *mesareth*, i.e. Moses' servant (Ex 24:13). In the same way, the prophets are said not to have had disciples, but Elisha, Gehazi and Baruh would have been only the three prophets' closest servants. Elijah's servant is not named at the beginning, but only designated as *naar* (1 Kg 18:43; LXX: *paidarion*), and from 2 Kgs 3:11 (Plutarch 1970a, 284-304; Plutarch 1970b: 70-97) one might infer that Elisha was performing for Elijah services specific to the status of a servant (Kittel 1964-1976, 415-60). But this approach does not consider the fact that *discipleship also includes a dimension of service*, whereby the disciple can express his gratitude for the dedication with which the teacher offers his knowledge.

"Wilderness School" – Pattern for Discipleship

After leaving Egypt, the Old Testament record records several moments of evident discontent with the harsh conditions of life in the wilderness (Ex 15:22-26; 16:2-30; 17:1-7; Nm 11:1-35). Preoccupied with constantly comparing their material well-being in Egypt with the hardships of the present, they were not thankful for the gift of freedom and the divine protection of the promise. Quarrelling, discontent and

idolatrous acts (e.g. Ex 32) can be identified throughout their post-exodus journey. Israel's recalcitrant attitude of Israel towards God and his elect is a constant throughout the Old Testament rescript, the corpus of historical writings bearing witness to the fact that the chosen people did not fulfil their duties towards God, their life and existence being marked by sin and rebellion (Brueggemann 2009, 39) against which prophetic preaching was vehemently pronounced. We will, however, write about the pattern of the prophetic school in another study. In the Pentateuch, this lack of gratitude will reach its climax in Numbers 13-14, where the moment that prompted the forty-year wandering in the wilderness is recorded as a "fitting punishment [of Israel] for the great sacrilege" (Philo of Alexandria 2003, 104). The episode is integrated into the thematic whole of the "wilderness training" (Chirilă 2002, 46), marked by the promise of the land (Budd 1984, 164): Israel will not now enter the rest of Canaan (Clement the Alexandrian 1982, 138), but God will raise up a new generation (Ex 32:10; Nm 14:12), raised in faith. Thus, God's mercy and justice will be manifested simultaneously: sinners will be left alive but will not be received into the promised land (Spence-Jones 2004, 173).

This time in the wilderness can also be seen, however, as not necessarily punitive, but educative (Sanders 1955), in the Jewish tradition as a time of *paideia* (Thiessen 2009: 369). This divine pedagogy is folded into the *parent-child* educational model: "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines (*yasar/ παιδεύω*) his son, the Lord your God disciplines (*yasar/ παιδεύω*) you." (Dt 8:5). Once we corroborate this text with Dt 32:10: "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him (LXX: *naibevrn*), he kept him as the apple of his eye", it becomes clear that Deuteronomy portrays the time in the wilderness as a time necessary for the education, for the growth of the people in the faith (Thiessen 2009: 370). The idea is also found in Philo: God has devised a new way for the Israelites to build up their souls, by being taught (*παιδεύω*), through signs and tokens of his power, to fear him and in the future to cease to be impatient when things do not go according to their will, but to endure suffering and evil with fortitude, in expectation of future blessings (*De VitaMosis* 1,199 – *The Works of Philo* 1993, 477-8). He interprets Solomon's words in the same sense (Thiessen 2009: 373): "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof (*παιδεύω*), for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." (Prv 3:11-12), concluding that this sometimes-severe discipleship brings man closer to God because there is no closer relationship than that between father and son (Thiessen 2009: 372-3).

Josephus Flavius agrees with this understanding of wandering in the wilderness in the light of the paternal attitude that God manifests towards his people (Josephus Flavius 2002: 311). All the marvellous acts performed by God in the wilderness have a profound educative aspect, they are credible signs to emphasize the reality and efficacy of the divine providence (Chirilă 2002, 46).

The period of wandering in the wilderness is marked by several essential elements in the religious experience of Israel, beginning with the giving of the Law (Ex 20), then continuing with the revelation of the ordinances for the making of the Holy Tent (Ex 25-40), which delimit the sacred space amid the people, and then all the legislative-cultic prescriptions concerning priests, sacrifices, feasts, constantly emphasizing the need for their incarnation. Thus, the pattern of the central act of guidance in the Old Testament remains this *wilderness school*, a necessary path to enter the promised land, but also, from an eschatological perspective, a re-entry into the Canaan of saving counsel with God.

In our contemporary world, there are obvious signs of wandering. To get out of this state we must look into the treasury of the patristic educational pattern and learn the edifying teachings, as St. John Carpathian, for example, expresses: "The righteous of Scripture, proclaimed more for one of the other virtues, are not commended by those for lacking in the other parts of virtue – as, for example, Joseph for meekness, Job for patience and manhood, Daniel for prudence, and the parents of the blessed Susanna for righteousness – but as some who distinguished themselves in that part of virtue by which they opposed the wickedness of the enemies of the adversaries. For with the weapon of temperance, Joseph stopped the arrow which the demons of fornication threw against him through the Egyptian woman, but by the strength of manhood he also by the fortitude of his manhood showed his brothers also in a perfect manner the unmindfulness of evil, and again by the virtue of his wisdom he interpreted [Pharaoh's] dreams, and by righteousness he governed Egypt, working always what was required at the proper time by every virtue." (St. John Carpathian 2007, 28)

This model of reading, this type of communion has been constantly presented to us by Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in his writings, but especially in promoting the memory of his teacher Dumitru Stăniloae. He also shows us that the incarnation of the commandment begins with the reading/meditation of the Scriptures, with "a profound reading and understanding of the Holy Scriptures" (Daniel 2009, 89), a fact also emphasized by St. John Carpathian: "Whoever is

obstinate in meditating on the divine Scriptures for the sake of mere literary teaching (*logomatheias*), is giving occasion for the thought of vain glory to enter himself. But whoever diligently practices the teaching of the words of God, that he may know and do the will of God, draws within himself the power of the Holy Spirit, who gives him strength, transforms words into deeds, and makes him a knower of the unwritten words and of the most divine mysteries of God" (John the Carpathian 2007, 41-2), an act by which we truly live in the sphere of the "school of the Resurrection", the school of the desert being perfected by Christ through the overcoming of temptation: "After forty days of fasting, Jesus was hungry, but material food cannot be more important for him than the will of God, for his food is first and foremost the Father's will and the fulfilment of his work. Jesus' fasting signifies His freedom from the sensible, the mastery of the person over the necessity or automatism of nature, and the priority He gives to personal communion with God" (Daniel 2009, 163).

The *wilderness school* teaches us how to feed on the Word, to return "to the founding Word that arises from the depths of silence", to "the Word that is the beginning of the world" (Alves 2007, 23-4), and how to come to the true gratitude of the Word.

Conclusion

The conclusions of the study emphasize that *wilderness school* [1] represents a profound pattern of discipleship and spiritual formation in the Old Testament, playing a central role in divine pedagogy. The relationship between God and man manifested in calling, obedience and the fulfilment of the divine will, is a repetitive pattern that begins with Adam and develops through figures such as Abraham, Moses and the prophets. These relationships not only exemplify discipleship but also serve as the foundation for subsequent religious and moral education, culminating in Christ and the Church. Biblical education is thus seen as a process of spiritual restoration, involving the return of man to his original communion with God. The study area reaffirms the importance of these ancient witness models for the formation of faith and contemporary Christian life, emphasizing the value of continuity and the transmission of tradition within the family and community.

Note

[1] In the international biblical literature our concept of „wilderness school” is referred to as „wilderness training”. We believe that our option is more appropriate to the historical context in which the wilderness wandering of the chosen people took place.

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