

Discovering Jesus Course

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The Rabbinic Method

In medieval times, paintings of biblical scenes often portrayed the people dressed in medieval fashion. In modern times, we often do the same when we imagine Jesus teaching the crowds or his disciples, transplanting our familiar twenty-first century images of a teacher and his pupils into a first century setting. But Jesus didn't teach like a university lecturer, or like a modern pastor, or even like a home group teacher. He taught as a rabbi, and his methods were quintessentially rabbinic.

As we have already seen, Jesus generally didn't stand up to teach, lecturing from behind a pulpit, but instead he sat down to teach. In **Matthew 5:1-2**, we read:

“Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and *sat down*. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them...”

Likewise, **Luke 5:3** tells us:

“He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then *he sat down* and taught the people from the boat.”

Later, in **Matthew 26:55**, Jesus would say:

“Every day *I sat* in the temple courts teaching...”

Even in the synagogue, rabbinical teaching was traditionally conducted from a sitting position. In **Luke 4:20-21**, we read:

“Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and *sat down*. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he *began* by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.””

This rabbinic teaching posture was also reflected in the posture of his students. They sat at his feet to hear his teaching. In **Luke 10:39**, we find a description of this rabbinic practice when Mary of Bethany joined the male disciples and “sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.”

The early second-century rabbi Yose ben Yoezer had this to say about the practice of learning at the feet of a rabbi. He wrote:

“Let your house be a meeting place for the rabbis, and cover yourself in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.”¹

One possible translation of this rabbinic injunction puts it this way:

“...sit amid the dust of [the rabbis’] feet, and drink in their words thirstily.”

If you take one more look at Yose ben Yoezer’s exhortation, however, you will see another dimension to rabbinic teaching. Rabbis taught in many places – more formally in the synagogue and in the *yeshiva**, and less formally in the open air or under a shady tree (it is probably under the shade of a tree that Jesus taught his disciples what we now know as the Sermon on the Mount). Even a simple act like walking along a road could be transformed into a learning experience.

But Ben Yoezer points to the *home* as the preferred “meeting place” for rabbinical teaching. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Gospel narrative frequently records Jesus teaching in people’s homes.

Read Matthew 9:10-12

Read Mark 3:20-24

Read Mark 7:17-23

Read Mark 9:33-37

Read Luke 5:17-19

The traditional rendering of Yose ben Yoezer’s saying, however, points to another aspect of rabbinical teaching.

“To this day the unpaved roads of Israel are covered with a fine dust. As a result, when people walk along these roads they invariably raise a considerable cloud of dust. Any group of disciples following a rabbi would be covered with dust at the end of a journey, and if one wanted to travel with a rabbi one literally had to cover oneself with the dust of his feet.”²

From this we can see that the rabbi’s method of teaching was “teaching on the move,” training his students out “in the real world.” But the rabbinic method involved much more than just the rabbi’s *posture* or his *location*. The rabbinic method was primarily about a *strategy*. For a rabbi’s primary method of teaching was to make *talmudim* (translated as “disciples” or, more literally, “ones who study”).

“Make many disciples”³ is one of the first sayings of the *Mishnah*. Rabbis would carefully chose their followers, sometimes training large numbers of *talmudim*. Gamaliel, who trained Paul, is recorded as having one thousand disciples.⁴

We can thus more fully appreciate the priority that Jesus placed on the training of disciples. For using the rabbinic method of selecting, training and commissioning *talmudim*, Jesus was setting into play a multiplication effect that would ultimately transform the world.

* A *yeshiva* is the Jewish equivalent of a bible college.

¹ Pirke Avot 1:4.

² David Bivin, “At the Feet of a Rabbi,” <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1506>.

³ Pirke Avot 1:1.

⁴ Sotah 49b.

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