

Elijah-Elisha discipleship as a type of Jesus and his disciples

Carlos E. Mora

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Filipinas

cmora@aiaas.edu

Abstract

The idea of discipleship is not a new one in the New Testament. We find this practice established in the Old Testament. Moses did it with Joshua. David also guided and prepared his son Solomon for being a king. But the experience of Elijah as mentor and Elisha as his disciple requires a special attention. Since there are many similarities between them and what we found in the Gospels and the book of Acts about discipleship, this research compares the experiences of both OT prophets with Jesus and his disciples following the principles of the biblical typology. The goal of this study is to highlight these connections and learn some principles about discipleship for our church today.

Keywords: Discipleship, mentorship, Elijah- Elisha, Jesus, disciples.

The word ‘disciple’ is rarely found in the Old Testament, but its Greek equivalent *mathetes* appears some 260 times in the Gospels and Acts, and nowhere else in the New Testament. The concept of discipleship, however, is profoundly a biblical one. Both the Old and the New Testaments loudly proclaim that one of God’s great purposes in His interaction with humanity is the calling of disciples not only to be part of His kingdom on earth but also to be proclaimers of His salvific message to a sin-sick world. Be it Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah or other numerous representatives of God in the Old Testament times or the calling of the Twelve by Jesus, or the anointing of the multitudes after the Pentecost, or the innumerable proclaimers and living testimonies of the gospel throughout history, God used “discipleship” not only

to mark the followers of and witnesses to His kingdom but also proclaimers of the divine initiative to establish His kingdom on earth. Hence to be a disciple, first and foremost, means to be an adherent and a follower of the One who calls a person to a close communion with Him and to be an active representative of His love and grace to those around. Thus discipleship, whether in the Old or New Testament, is rooted in the divine calling to follow the One who calls. Throughout the Bible, the examples of discipleship are many.

Since there are many similarities between Elijah and Elisha with what we found in the Gospels and the book of Acts about discipleship in connection with Jesus and his followers, it is useful to use the typology as a way to highlight these connections and learn some principles about discipleship.

We understand typology as “persons, events or actions are considered as being divinely ordained or designed types to foreshadow aspects of Christ and his ministry in the Gospels and the New Testament dispensation”.¹ The reality is the Antitype (in our study is Jesus and his disciples) and the shadow is called the type (in this research, the types are Elijah and Elisha).

Typology of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha

The next chart (chart 1) shows an overview of the strong parallelism between these two famous prophets of the Old Testament with the work of Jesus for his disciples.

Elijah and Elisha	Jesus and his disciples
1. Elijah met Elisha and invited him to be the next prophet of Israel, 1 Kgs 19:19	Jesus invited Philip (John 1:43), Simon, Andrew (Matt 4:18,19), the sons of Ze-bedee (Matt 4:21,22), Matthew (Matt 9:9)

¹ Friedbert Ninow, “Indicators of Typology within the Old Testament. The Exodus Motif” (PhD Dissertation. Andrews University, 1999), 10.

2. Elisha was busy plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, 1 Kgs 19:19 Simon and Andrew were casting a net into the sea (Matt 4:18), James and John were busy mending their nets (Matt 4:21), Matthew were working “sitting at the receipt of custom”, Matt 9:9
3. Elisha requested to go first and say fare-well to his parents, 1 Kgs 19:20 The disciples didn’t leave everything right away. Peter still lived with his family, Mark 1:29-31
4. Elisha celebrated and shared with his neighbors his called, 1 Kgs 19:21 Matthew has a feast with his friends at home, Matt 9:10
5. Elisha ministered unto Elijah, 1 Kgs 19:21 The disciples ministered with Jesus for three years
6. In his last moments, Elisha didn’t leave his master, 2 Kgs 2:4,6 The disciples stayed with Jesus all they could, Acts 1:1-9
7. Elisha knew Elijah will leave, 2 Kgs 2:5 The disciples knew Jesus would depart, Acts 1:6,7
8. Elisha requested a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, 2 Kgs 2:9 The disciples received the promise of the Holy Spirit, Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8
9. Elisha should see when Elijah was taken, 2 Kgs 2:10 They should wait in Jerusalem in order to receive the promise, Luke 24:49

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| 10. Elisha saw Elijah ascending to heaven, 2 Kgs 2:12 | The disciples saw Jesus when he was taken to heaven, Acts 1:10,11 |
| 11. Elisha got the authority of Elijah, 2 Kgs 2:14 | The disciples, now apostles, got the character and authority of Jesus, Acts 3:6; 4:33 |
| 12. The people acknowledged the spirit of Elijah was on Elisha, 2 Kgs 2:15 | The people acknowledged the spirit of Jesus was on the apostles, Acts 4:13 |
| 13. Elisha did the same miracles and more than Elijah did, 2 Kgs 2:15-13:21 | Jesus promised to his disciples they will do “greater works than these”, John 14:12 |

Chart 1. Typology of the discipleship of Elisha with Jesus’ disciples

We can divide this typology in three main areas: (a) the called to be a servant/disciple (items 1 to 4); (b) the training as servant/disciple (item 5); and, (c) the consequences to be trained as a disciple/servant (items 6 to 13).

The called to be a servant/disciple

Note in the first 4 items (Chart 1) the way Elijah called and worked with Elisha. “Elijah is the only prophet in Scripture who is recorded as having designated his successor”² and he did it in many ways as Jesus would do it more than eight centuries later. It is evident that, in both cases, (1) there was a directed called, that implies a selection; (2) the called is made to those who are busy and responsible in an honest work; (3) there was not a rejection of the family of the new disciple. The

² David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament. Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993), 222.

discipleship doesn't require put aside the beloved ones; and, (4) there is joy on those who are called to follow the Master. This is the kind of commitment Christian youth should share with his peers wherever they are.

The training as a servant/disciple

It is a pity we don't have more details about the training and teachings Elijah gave to Elisha. The Bible only says "and became his servant [*sharath*]" (1 Kgs 19:21). Actually, Elisha doesn't appear in the narratives of Elijah for the rest of Elijah's ministry (1 Kgs 20–2 Kgs 1), only when he is already leaving the earth (2 Kgs 2:1-19). We have many details about the teachings and preparation Jesus did for his disciples. This is not the case here.

Because the only description about Elisha's training under Elijah is described by the work *sharath* it is important to consider this expression. The Hebrew verb *sharath* means "minister to, attend to, serve someone".³ The experience of Moses with Joshua can help to understand this dynamic, because Joshua was the "assistant, attendant" of the great leader of Israel (the same Hebrew word is used in 1 Kgs 19:21) (Exod 24:13; 33:11; Num 11:28; Josh 1:1). We can learn that the "discipleship" of Joshua included: (1) military performance, Exod 17:9-14; (2) be near Moses, even when he met with the Lord, Exod 33:11; 32:17, or when he was leading Israel, Num 11:28; (3) Joshua should have a close connection with God himself, Exod 33:11; (4) he was preparing him for being the next leader of Israel, Num 27:18-23; (5) Moses trained

³ David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 568. The root שרת is attested 62 times in the Hebrew Bible (Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem, Israel: Kiryat Sepher, 1983), 1211. The root is also attested in the Aramaic (*sēmsē*) denoting service. It is also used in the DSS and Modern Hebrew and its meaning is "to serve" or "worship." In the Palestine, its root equivalent *msērt* means "list of duties, liturgy, service." However, the verb is not attested in the Ugarit. Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*, vols. 1-5 combined, trans. and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. Revised by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994-2000), s.v. "שרת."

Joshua while he was still on earth, Num 32:28-30; 34:17; Deut 1:37, 38; 3:28; (6) Moses taught and guide him, Deut 3:21; (7) Moses anointed and encouraged Joshua in the position he would receive, Deut 31:1-14; (8) Joshua was filled with the Spirit because he had been with Moses, Deut 34:9.⁴

To ‘serve’ carries the idea to learn from the mentor through a continuous contact in the daily life and through different activities. This is discipleship!

The outcomes to be trained as a servant/disciple

There are eight items related with the result of the work of Elijah and Jesus with their respective followers (Chart 1, numbers 6 to 13). The text is pointing out to the importance of the influence of the mentor on his disciples.

The most outstanding element in both narratives is the work of the Holy Spirit in both groups of disciples (2 Kgs 2:9-15, *cf.* Acts 1:8-11; 2:1-15). The Heavenly Ghost is an important person in the work of the discipleship and the main goal.⁵

Miracles of the Master and of the disciples

About the presence of the Holy Spirit, Elisha claimed to get a double portion of the spirit of his master Elijah. Let’s consider this request and its implication for us today. First, we will consider the miracles both prophets performed (charts 2, 3).

⁴ “Many scholars have noted the parallels between Moses and Elijah (and even Elisha). Elijah is presented as a second Moses in many ways, and both Elijah and Elisha were God’s representatives in a critical time of great opposition, just as Moses had been.” Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 220.

⁵ “In contradistinction to the judges, where the spirit rushes, seizes, comes upon the individual, implying an episodic and ephemeral coming of the spirit, the spirit ‘rests’ on Elisha (2:15), implying a permanent and enduring dynamic”. Hamilton, 444. Compare Num 11:25,26.

Miracles performed by Elijah	Miracles received by Elijah	Events predicted by Elijah
He multiplied the flour and the oil of the widow, 1 Kgs 17:13-16	He was fed by the ravens for long time at Kerith Ravine, 1 Kgs 17:2-7	He announced the drought for years, 1 Kgs 17:1
He resurrected the widow's son, 1 Kgs 17:17-24	Elijah was fed by angel and he could walk for 40 days, 1 Kgs 19:5-8	He announced a big storm after the drought, 1 Kgs 18:41-45
Elijah brought fire from heaven in Mt Carmel, 1 Kgs 18:36-39	He was taken to heaven alive, 2 Kgs 2:11	He prophesied the end of Ahab and Jezebel, 1 Kgs 21:21-24
Elijah run ahead of Ahab's chariot, 1 Kgs 18:46		He announced the death of king Ahaziah, 2 Kgs 1:16,17
He brought fire from heaven to destroy to a group of 50 soldiers, 2 Kgs 1:9-10		
He brought fire a second time from heaven to destroy a company of 50 soldiers, 2 Kgs 1:11-12		
Elijah dried and cross the Jordan, 2 Kgs 2:8		

Chart 2. The miracles of Elijah's ministry

Now we can check the miracles of Elisha (chart 3):

Miracles performed by Elisha	Miracles received by Elisha	Events predicted by Elisha
He dried the Jordan and cross through it, 2 Kgs 2:13,14		He announced the end of besiege of Samaria, 6:24-7:20
Elisha healed Jericho's water, 2 Kgs 2:19-22		He announced the death of an officer of the king of Samaria, 7:1,2
The bears attacked the boys, 2 Kgs 2:23,24		He predicts to Hazael he will be king of Syria and will desolate Israel, 2 Kgs 8:11-13
The perfect timing of the filling of a wadi in Edom with a torrent of water, 2 Kgs 3:16-18		He prophesied the defeat of Syria by Jehoash, 13:14-20
He multiplied the widow's oil, 2 Kgs 4:1-7		
He intercedes for the pregnancy of the Shunnamite, 2 Kgs 4:15-17		
He restored to life Shunnamite's son, 2 Kgs 4:18-37		

The miracle with the
food, 2 Kgs 4:38-41

Feeding of a hundred,
2 Kgs 4:42-44

He healed Naaman's
leprosy, 2 Kgs 5:1-19

He sent leprosy to his
servant Gehazi, 2
Kgs 5:20-27

Elisha floated an ax
head, 2 Kgs 6:1-7

He blinded the Ara-
mean army, 2 Kgs
6:8-23

The dead body of a
man came to life
when it touches Eli-
sha's bones, 2 Kgs
13:21,22

Chart 3. The miracles of Elisha's ministry

It calls the attention powerfully that Elijah performed seven miracles and Elisha performed fourteen miracles. The bottom of line is that when the true disciple has been faithful in his training and he is full by the spirit of his Master, the disciple will do great accomplishments like his teacher and even more.

We find out Elisha performed some miracles Elijah didn't performed: (a) Elisha healed Jericho's water, 2 Kgs 2:19-22; (b) he used bears to defend himself, 2 Kgs 2:23,24; (c) the perfect timing of the filling of a wadi in Edom with a torrent of water, 2 Kgs 3:16-18; (d) He intercedes for the pregnancy of the Shunnamite, 2 Kgs 4:15-17; (e) he

healed Naaman's leprosy, 2 Kgs 5:1-19; and, (f) sent leprosy to his servant Gehazi, 2 Kgs 5:20-27; (g) Elisha floated an ax head, 2 Kgs 6:1-7; (h) he blinded the Aramean army, 2 Kgs 6:8-23; and finally (i) the dead body of a man came to life when it touches Elisha's bones, 2 Kgs 13:21,22.

The same idea is found with the disciples' miracles in the book of Acts. The apostles did many miracles, and Jesus didn't perform some of them. These are some of them:

Apostles spoke in tongues, Acts 2:1-13.

The earth was shaken after the church prayed, Acts 4:31.

The death of Ananias and Sapphira his wife, Acts 5:1-11.

The sick passed under Peter's shadow and were healed; he cast out spirits, Acts 5:15-18.

An angel opened prison door freeing the apostles, Acts 5:19-24.

An evil spirit caused a man to leap on Jewish exorcists, Acts 19:13-17.

276 people saved by the shipwreck by the word of Paul, Acts 27:22-24, 39-44.

Paul was bitten by viper and lived, Acts 28:7-8.

We found this idea in Elijah-Elisha ministries. The disciple did more variety miracles than his master. It does not mean that the disciples were superior to Jesus but it highlights the concept the disciples will do the same and more than his mentor.

Achievements of the Master and of the disciple(s)

The achievements of Elisha were in other areas, not only miracles. [a] Political contacts- he worked and guided different kings: Jehoram of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah (2 Kgs 3:6-4), something Elijah didn't.⁶ He became friend of the captain of the Syrian army (2 Kgs 5:8-19). Elisha had a great influence on the king of Samaria (2 Kgs 6:21-23; 8:1-6). He was a great impact in the political changes in those days,

⁶Elisha asked to the Shunammite: "what is to be done for you? Would you be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host?" 2 Kgs 4:13. He had a connection with the political leaders that Elijah didn't have.

when he appointed Hazael as king of Damascus (2 Kgs 8:8-15) and Jehu as king of Samaria (2 Kgs 9:1-13) [b] He led a school for training prophets and new spiritual leaders, 2 Kgs 4:38-44; 6:1-7.

It doesn't mean Elijah was less than Elisha. Here the emphasis is that the work and influence of Elisha was wider than his master. The disciple can do a broader work than his teacher. The success of the disciple does not diminish the work of his predecessor but exalts his good leadership and foreseeing attitude preparing good leaders for the next generation.

The same way, the apostles' influence and work were wider than Jesus' earthly ministry. They could travel along the Roman Empire and impact it with the Gospel. They contacted different kind of people: governors, soldiers, merchants, and philosophers. They spread out the teaching of Jesus all around the world because the influence and impact of their Master in their lives. It does not mean that Jesus' work and goals were less important or impacting. The principle here is that the disciples could extend the work of his Lord because He prepared them better and motivated in the right way. This is the work of a mentor. Jesus himself stated: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do, because I go to My Father." (John 14:12).

Implications

First, the discipleship is a called. It's a sacred commitment and it's not a coincidence. Second, we should call people who are working and who demonstrate faithfulness in the small details. We can think that discipleship is for everyone, but for the future leaders should be wisely selected.

It's interesting the way the discipleship was done in those days. It was not taught in a classroom with an organized group of lessons. It was the same with Elisha, Joshua and the disciples. They should serve and work with their Master. It was a permanent practical work, although they had many moments for listening lessons, as we find in the case of Jesus and his disciples.

It's called the attention in both cases, Elisha and later on the disciples were tested to stay with the Master and wait for the Gift they would receive. They should wait for this graduation. It seems there should be some kind of test before the disciples become the new leaders of God's people.

Finally, the main idea we have found in this study is that the most important success of the instructor of the disciple is not his own merits and his own works but the development of his followers and they can do greater things than his predecessor. Discipleship is a coin with two faces: mentorship and discipleship itself. Mentorship is service to the disciples. We heard a lot about the disciples but not too much about the instructor. Mentor is someone working for something greater than himself and his work goes beyond his own life. The success of the discipleship is the outcomes of the second generation of the leaders, not the outcome of the mentor.

More than sermons and structured lessons, what our youth should do in their places of study and work is to be friendly, to gain the confidence of their peers and to start a work of discipleship for them, even they do not realize they are being prepared for being Christian leaders. The Lord needs mentors like Moses, Elijah and Jesus.