The precise relationship between μαθητής and μιμητής has been the source of scholarly debate for some time. The two major proposals of how to understand their relationship do not offer decisive evidence for their positions. In order to get beyond this impasse, this article looks at two sets of texts from the Common Era: texts where μιμητής occurs alone and texts in which both μαθητής and μιμητής occur. The contexts of both sets of texts are examined to discern if they reveal anything about the relationship between these terms in order to see which of these proposals (if any) are supported. Based on this data, preliminary conclusions about how to understand the relationship between these terms are offered.

Key Words: μαθητής, μιμητής, imitation, disciple

The curious phenomenon that μαθητής and cognates only occur in the Gospels and Acts, whereas μιμητής and cognates only occur in the Epistles provokes the question of the relationship between them. When we look at the usage of these terms in the first centuries of the Common Era, some texts seem to indicate that the term μιμητής may have obtained a technical edge to it, making it an apparent parallel to μαθητής. Then again, other texts of the Common Era seem to maintain clear distinctions between them. What is the explanation for this? Does the term μιμητής, in fact, become the substitute expression for μαθητής, or does it maintain its identity? If it does maintain its own identity, what then is the relationship between these two concepts? It is the purpose of this article to explore these questions. However, before we do so, we shall first review the two major proposals put forward regarding the relationship between discipleship and imitation.

Proposal 1:
BLENDING OF DISCIPLESHIP AND IMITATION

The foundational article on μιμώματι (“to imitate”) by Michaelis in the TWNT concluded that μιμητής and μαθητής were synonymous. He claims that the concept of imitation reduces down to simple obedience—a conclusion that has been soundly refuted. Nevertheless, his thesis that discipleship and imitation blended into each other seems to have convinced many, including Dibelius and Lohse. De Boer, in another foundational study on the concept of imitation, also holds that the two notions virtually blend into each other: “The following of Jesus, which continued to have particular import after his earthly life was the following of his way of humiliation, suffering, self-denial, and cross-bearing. . . . In regard to this same living in the way of humiliation, suffering, self-denial, and cross-bearing, we find Paul speaking in terms of imitation.”

Hengel has another perspective on how these two concepts merged. He argues that the prophetic-charismatic movement Jesus founded eventually led to an institutionalization of that movement, which then naturally led to the merging of the notions of discipleship and imitation.

Proposal 2:
CLEAR DISTINCTION MAINTAINED BETWEEN DISCIPLESHIP AND IMITATION

Other scholars, however, claim that a distinction is maintained between the two terms. Schulz categorically denies any coalescing of these con-

3. Michaelis claims, “Paul knows of no actual imitation of Christ (and God), rather he knows only of an obedient discipleship” (ibid., 676). Heinrich Schlier speculates as to the probable reason Michaelis reduces imitation to obedience: “That Michaelis reduces the term to ‘obedience’ . . . has to do less with the text and more with an idiosyncratic disinclination against the concept of a model (Vorbild). This, however, is based on a misunderstanding of what τύπος actually is” (Heinrich Schlier, Der Brief an die Epheser [KEK; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1962], 231 n. 1). (Note: all translations from German are my own.) Fiore comes to the same conclusion as I do that the understanding “imitation = obedience” is not supported by its usage in antiquity or in Paul. He writes: “[O]n the basis of his own evidence . . . Michaelis’ interpretation of ‘imitating the example’ in terms of obedience to authority is tendentious. Indeed, it is a usage which does not appear in the rhetorical treatises which treat example” (Benjamin Fiore, The Function of Personal Example in the Socratic and Pastoral Epistles [AnBib 105; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1986]. 166).
5. Willis P De Boer, The Imitation of Paul: An Exegetical Study (Kampen: Kok, 1962), 125–26. Though he puzzles over the question why discipleship is transformed into imitation, he does not offer a clear answer.
6. “The free, prophetic εξουσία becomes increasingly petrified . . ., and in this way the living process of following the master becomes the formally defined imitation” (Martin Hengel, Nachfolge und Charisma: Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Studie zu Mt 8,21ff und Jesu Ruf in die Nachfolge [BZNW 34; Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1968], 62).
cepts. He concludes that the NT term μαθητής indicates an official title that is linked to religious practice, whereas the concept of imitation orients itself around the ethical example of another. Yet Schulz’s strong disjunction between religious practice and the ethical dimension is hard to maintain, because there was a clear ethical dimension in Jesus’ call to discipleship, and because, conversely, Paul’s ethical teaching was rooted in his religious commitment to Christ.

Further, Schulz discerns from the NT clear, progressive stages in the development of discipleship that are exclusively associated with the historical Jesus. In contrast, the Pauline conception of imitation indicates no such temporal limitation and is not only associated with Christ but also with God or other humans.

Others have come to similar conclusions. Niederwimmer holds that the NT clearly differentiates between discipleship and imitation. He observes, however, that a blending of the two notions occurs following the close of the canon. Ong notes the intentional avoidance by Paul of the term μαθητής, because it was closely associated with the earthly Jesus. For this reason, argues Ong, Paul opts instead for the term μυητής. Ong, along with Betz, sees the concept of imitation arising from the Greek tradition but the concept of discipleship as originating in the Jewish rabbinic tradition. Both Ong and Betz conclude that there must, therefore, be a clear distinction between the two.

Betz argues, further, that the concept of discipleship in the Gospels denotes the twelve disciples’ literal accompaniment of Jesus. It was only after the death of Jesus that the concept was broadened to all those who expressed faith in Christ. Betz argues that Paul modified the understanding of imitation, which he drew from the mystery cults, in two significant ways: (1) the imitator does not become one with his god, as the mystery cults envisage; (2) imitation in Paul is oriented toward the historic and

7. “From the perspective of how they are used, it is impossible that one can designate ‘the imitation of Christ’ in 1 Cor 11:1 or ‘the imitation of the Lord’ in 1 Thess 1:6 as a factual substitute of Paul’s for an historical hold-over of the discipleship of Christ—much less speak of the identification of both terms with each other” (Schulz, Nachfolgen, 289).
8. Ibid., 334, 197.
10. Schulz, Nachfolgen, 334–35. Schulz notes that the blending of the concept of discipleship with imitation may have begun, but it is not fully present.
11. “But discipleship and imitation must be clearly distinguished from each other. It is only in subsequent history (Wirkungsgeschichte) that they became confounded” (Kurt Niederwimmer, “Nachfolge Jesu nach dem Neuen Testament,” in Quaestiones Theologicae [ed. Wilhelm Pratscher and Markus Ohler; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998], 176).
14. Betz, ibid., 42.
15. “[T]he imitator on the one hand re-presents the history of his god, but on the other hand, he does not become one with that god” (Ibid., 187).
unique person of Christ and not toward the “eternally repeated fate (Ge-
schick) of a mythical divine being.”

Martin Hengel is among the sharpest critics of Betz’s proposal. He re-
jects Betz’s attempt to narrow the roots of discipleship and imitation to one
specific source or institution as misguided. Regarding discipleship, Hengel
writes that “‘following’ and ‘discipleship’ and the radical demands and
sacrifices connected with it are hardly to be found in the area of firmly es-

tablished institutions. Rather, these ideas occur in contexts where the tra-
ditional order and its standards are repeatedly broken down, or indeed
rejected outright.”17 In addition, Hengel correctly rejects the attempt by
Betz and Schulz to make Jesus into a formal rabbi, arguing that Jesus’ pri-
mary role was not to teach but to proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom.18
He also considers Betz’s endeavor to root Pauline imitation in the mystery
cults to be unconvincing and one-sided.19 Hengel follows Montefiore at
this point, who observes that “[d]iscipleship such as Jesus demanded and
inspired . . . was apparently a new thing, in any case, something which did
not fit in . . . with usual Rabbinic customs or with customary Rabbinic
phenomena.”20

Schnackenburg also criticizes Schulz’s proposal that the concept of im-
itation arose from Greek popular philosophy, arguing that the theological
framework of the OT could have easily produced it.21 He, however, is con-
vinced of Schulz’s analysis that the concepts of imitation and discipleship
remain distinct in the Pauline texts but sees them as blending in the later
NT canon and in early Christian writings.22

Larsson also views imitation and discipleship as being distinct, claim-
ing that imitation should be subsumed under discipleship. He writes:

When we use the term “discipleship” (Nachfolge), we mean all forms
of fellowship with Christ, in which Christ, or that which is occurring
around him, is an example (Vorbild). When we use the term “ima-
tion,” we take it that this imitation occurs in order to characterize the
following of Christ as something which is conscious, wilful, and ac-
tive. The conscious imitation becomes thereby a part of the following
(Nachfolge) of Christ, not something that competes with it.23

16. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 57.
19. Ibid., 84 n. 2.
218.
8 (1964): 127.
22. For example, 1 Pet 2:21. See ibid., 128.
23. Edvin Larsson, Christus als Vorbild: Eine Untersuchung zu den paulinischen Tauf- und
Common Era Texts: “Imitator of . . .” —
Imitation as a Technical Term?

When one weighs the arguments of both proposals, it seems that neither side offers decisive proof of its position. Is there a means by which we can more conclusively determine the relationship between these two concepts? I suggest a two-pronged strategy. The first is to examine texts in the Christian era with the grammatical construction “imitator of . . .” that formally parallel the construction “disciple of . . .” to see what light these shed on its usage. The second strategy is to look at the contexts in which both discipleship language and imitation language occur to see how their relationship is configured.

It is beyond dispute that the phrase “disciple of . . .” was often the technical designation for one who has attached himself formally to a teacher. There are also a number of references with the parallel grammatical construction “imitator of . . .,” which may indicate that this too may have been—or may have become—a technical designation that either was a substitute for the designation “disciple” or at least was used as a parallel designation.

Secular Texts

There are some secular texts that, on the surface, read as if a technical usage were intended. Note the following examples: Dio Chrysostom writes that “Stechochorus and Pindar were imitators of Homer.” This is grammatically identical to another text in Dio Chrysostomus, which states that “Socrates had become a disciple of Homer.” Himerius also uses the phrase to refer to two individuals, one being an “imitator of Plato,” the other an “imitator of Achilles.” In addition, Gregory Nyssa makes reference to “Eunomios, the imitator of Manichaeos and Bardesanos.”

Again, on a surface level, these texts read as if “imitator of . . .” is a technical designation for a student/follower of a teacher. But a closer

24. We are looking specifically at the construction “μαθητής + proper name [genitive case]” or (much less common) “μαθητής τοῦ + proper name [genitive case].”
25. See the foundational study on μαθητής by Michael J. Wilkins, Concept of Disciple in Matthew’s Gospel as Reflected in the Use of the Term μαθητής (NovTSup 59; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 11–42.
26. Similarly, either “μυθητής + anarthrous noun [genitive case]” or (also much less common) “μυθητής + τοῦ + proper name [genitive case].”
27. Wilkins, Concept of Disciple, 24.
28. τοῦ μὲν ὁι μυθητής Ὀμήρου γέγονεν (Dio Chrysostom, 2 Regn. 33).
29. Compare with ὁι Σωκράτης τὸ γε ἀλήθε Ὀμήρου μυθητής γέγονεν (Dio Chrysostom, Hom. Socr. 3).
31. ὤς φιλον ὁ Εὐνόμως ὁ μυθητής Μανιχαῖου καὶ Βαρδαραγοῦ (Gregory Nyssa, Eunom. 11.1).
examination of these texts reveals that this simply cannot be. Socrates was not alive at the time of Homer. Pindar and Stechochorus also lived centuries after Homer. The same holds true for the rest of the examples cited. The historical removes between exemplar and imitator are simply too wide to claim that these expressions are equal in meaning and are both technical designations. Based on our searches of the TLG, there is not one secular text in the Common Era that can be used to argue that “imitator of” indicates a technical designation for a formal relationship with a teacher in the way that “disciple of” does.

Christian Texts

This is also the same pattern we find in Christian writings in the Common Era. Christian texts in the first centuries often use the phrase “imitator of . . .” with reference to Paul, Jesus Christ, or God. None of the references indicate that the phrase “imitator of . . .” replaces the phrase “disciple of . . .”

 Especially common is the title “Paul, the imitator of Christ.” Based on grammatical form alone, it might be possible to argue for a technical meaning for this phrase, but the argument clearly cannot be sustained for the following reasons: (1) Paul did not have the earthly Christ as his teacher in a technical sense; (2) the early Christian authors who use this phrase are specifically using it for motivational purposes—encouraging the readers to become imitators of Christ in a similar way that Paul was an imitator of Christ—indicating that the focus was on the act of imitation and not on the status of the imitator; and (3) this phrase occurs in numerous contexts where the focus is clearly highlighting specific character qualities or virtues of Christ or Paul that readers should imitate, thus indicating that the intent of the author was to highlight the practice of emulation and not the status of the individual.

These observations are further strengthened by a search in the TLG of texts in the Christian Era for all references to the construction “μυητής (nominative, singular) + proper name in the genitive singular.” Excluding references to Paul, Christ, and God, there are 22 references listed. There are no appearances of this construction referring to living teachers. All of them refer to famous historical exemplars, some of whom had been dead for centuries: Homer, Thucydides, Alexander, Plato, the biblical Job, Peter,

32. Παυλός . . . ὁ μυητής τοῦ Χριστοῦ (Basil Theol., Spir. 15.35), ὁ μυητής τοῦ Χριστοῦ Παύλος (Gregory Nyssa, Eunom. 1.1.546). See also Ephraem Syrus, Inter. 224; Origen, Comm. Jo. 28.4.5; John Chrysostom, Comm. Act. 51.103). The text goes on to describe the ways in which he imitated Christ, indicating that the focus is not on imitation as a technical term but as an act. Similarly, John Chrysostom, Fr. Prov. 64.729.
This gives strong indication that the term does not become a technical term parallel to or replacing μαθητής. In each of these cases, what we find is the use of this construction to indicate that these “imitators” were known for intentionally patterning themselves (that is, their teachings, writings, character qualities, and/or lifestyle) after a recognized, authoritative, historical individual who possessed desirable skills, character qualities, or virtues that were—yes, exemplary!

**Common Era Texts:**
**References to Μιμητής and Μαθητής Stems in the Same Context**

When we look at the interplay of the terms μιμητής and μαθητής and their cognates as they arise in the same context, we see that the pattern we have observed is further strengthened. A search in the TLG canon of texts beginning in the first century C.E. for the roots μιμητ- and μαθητ- within 300 characters of each other generated 74 hits. Many of the references are irrelevant. A number of texts, however, do provide insight into how these terms are understood to relate to each other. We shall look at a few of them, proceeding in order of historical appearance.

But before we do, it is initially surprising that our search generated no hits in the writings of Philo. Although Philo does not use the term μαθητής in conjunction with μιμητής, he does use a parallel term, φοιτητής (“pupil”), in association with it. Philo writes: “For when his disciple (φοιτητής), Joshua, who was also the imitator (μιμητής) of [his teacher’s] worthy virtues (τῶν ἀξιώματος ἣδον). . . .” In this text, Philo uses imitation language to elucidate how Joshua acted as a disciple—that is, his discipleship was evident through the way he imitated his master’s virtues.

**Second Century**

Galenus, in a text on medical practice, matter-of-factly observes that “the disciples imitate the teacher,” and “when we imitate the works of the teachers, we are learning their skill.” These comments indicate that the

35. In order of mention: Dio Chrysostom, 2 Regn. 33; Cassius Dio, Hist. Rom. 29; Flavius Claudius Julianus, Ep. 82; Himerius, Decl. 48; Gregory Nyssa, Melet. 9.446; idem, Greg. 46.941.

36. Irrelevant for the following reasons: (1) the terms apply to different referents; (2) they are contextually unrelated to each other (i.e., the topic shifts and/or the terms are found in adjacent unrelated paragraphs/pas-sages yet are unrelated); and/or (3) they are ambiguous; that is, one cannot determine from the context the relationship between the terms.

37. It is at this point that the limitations of an exclusively lexical study of a single term, as we are here undertaking, can clearly be seen if it is not placed within its broader conceptual landscape. In order for any solid conclusions to be drawn on the relationship between these terms and the concepts they point toward, a comprehensive lexical and conceptual study would be required—which then would turn a journal article into a full-length monograph! Nevertheless, I offer this analysis as one building block on the way to a complete study.


39. οἱ μαθηταὶ μιμήσαμεν τῶν διδάσκαλων καὶ τῇ τῶν διδασκάλων ἔργα μιμούμενοι μνήμην τὴν τέχνην (Galenus Med., Advers. 18A.250).
context of a teacher-student relationship is a natural context of imitation, and imitation is simply expected to occur within that framework. Further, the focus of imitation is on the students’ careful observation of the concrete skills of the medical practitioner.

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria, also in a second-century text, notes that “the noblest of the disciples are imitators of the teacher.” 40 It is evident that the term “disciple” refers to the status of an individual—that is, a clearly defined and recognized relationship with a teacher. In contrast, “imitator” refers to the action of the disciple within that clearly defined relationship.

Late Second—Early Third Century

Origen has multiple texts where these terms are found together. One text clearly elucidates how these two concepts relate to each other: “until the disciple becomes as his teacher by means of imitating first the imitator of Christ.”41 Once again, “disciple” is the term that defines the relationship between student and teacher, and “imitator” describes the means by which his discipleship is evidenced.

Fourth Century

In a tantalizing text by Ephraem Syrus, we read:

Whoever wishes to be imitators (μιμηταὶ) of the holy apostles, let him put off these idolatrous things. Do not be deceived, brothers, these things are not proper for disciples (μαθηταὶ) of Christ. Whoever wishes to be an imitator of Paul should be convinced in himself. Whoever is a disciple of Christ should by all means listen [to us]. . . .

Come, finally those imitators (μιμηταὶ) of Paul and disciples (μαθηταὶ) of Christ, hear what Paul proclaims. For behold, he commands (παρακαλεῖ), saying: “Be imitators of me, brothers, just as I am of Christ.” Tell us, blessed Paul, in which way is anyone able to be an imitator of you?42

In this text we see, on the one hand, that Ephraem Syrus clearly distinguishes between disciple and imitator, yet, on the other, that they are closely associated. Here, Ephraem Syrus associates imitation with Paul and discipleship with Christ, most likely following the shape of the scriptural texts. The logic of the context of this text indicates that Ephraem sees Paul as not wishing to amass followers for himself in the way that religious teachers did but, rather, wishing that the disciples of Christ would see him

40. τοῖς ἄρστοις τῶν μαθητῶν μιμητὰς γενόσθαι τοῦ διδάσκαλου (Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 6.6:45.5).
41. Εἰς ὧν μιμητής ἔχειν ὡς ὁ διδάσκαλος, μιμούμενος πρῶτον τὸν μιμητὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ (Origen, Comm. Matt. 10:15 [my italics]). The context drives us to understand the participle μιμούμενος as a participle of means.
42. Ephraem Syrus, Interr. 226.
as an exemplar of how he lived out his discipleship of Christ. Thus, the term “disciple” functions here as a technical term for one who confesses exclusively to follow Christ. In contrast, the term “imitator” functions as a way to describe how the disciple lives out his discipleship—by patterning his life-style on an exemplar.

This reading is further corroborated at the end of the passage when Ephraem asks the rhetorical question of Paul: “Tell us, blessed Paul, in what way were you an imitator of Christ?” Ephraem then proceeds with an elaborate description of the concrete ways Paul had imitated Christ. Thus, again, imitation is seen to occur within the context of discipleship and is subsumed under it.

Asterius Sophista, also in the fourth century, uses the terms together, apparently seeing David as both a disciple and an imitator of Christ. This indicates again a close association between the terms but with a distinction in meaning between them—the meaning of which is not elucidated in this context.

Late Fourth–Early Fifth Century

The connection between imitation and discipleship occurs relatively often in the writings of Chrysostom. It is clear in all the contexts where Chrysostom uses both terms that the concepts are closely related yet still retain their distinctiveness. In one of Chrysostom’s homilies, he calls his listeners to imitate Christ in the way that Christ dealt with his enemies—by returning good for evil. He claims that this way of acting is “the honor of the disciples of Christ.” This context shows that “disciple” is a designation for a follower of Christ and that “imitator” does not focus on status but on the actions performed as a result of one’s commitment to Christ—thus indicating that imitation is subsumed under discipleship.

Fifth Century

Basil of Seleucia writes “the imitator of the divine goodness . . . being a disciple.” This construction indicates that “disciple” indicates the formal relationship, whereas imitation of the divine goodness occurs within the context of that formal relationship.

Sixth Century

In a text by Romanus Melodus, we also have a reference that indicates the nature of the relationship between discipleship and imitation: “the disciple
and your friend and imitator of your suffering.”47 In this text, discipleship is seen as following someone, and imitation is narrowed down to “your suffering.” Thus, it seems that the term “disciple” again defines the relationship, and imitation focuses on a specific aspect that is to be emulated within the framework of the disciple-master relationship.

Late Eighth–Early Ninth Century

A text by Georgius Syncellus reads: “not as a disciple of Christ, but as a forerunner and imitator of the Antichrist.”48 The context goes on to indicate the specific acts that were imitated. It seems clear from the context that the term “disciple” denotes the formal commitment to Christ as religious master, and “imitator” denotes the actions of individuals that are associated with the Antichrist.

Ninth Century

Photius writes: “Be an imitator of Lysius, who is also known as a disciple.”49 This text goes on to specify in what way the individual should be an imitator of Lysius. The term “imitator” is therefore not a technical term but is, rather, descriptive of what a disciple does. Further on in the same text, we read of an individual named Isaiah, “whom Demosthenes, being his disciple, imitated.” In this text we see how Photius understands the relationship between imitation and discipleship: a disciple is one who imitates. Imitation occurs within the sphere of discipleship and is a component of it but is not coterminous with it. Discipleship thus implies imitation, but imitation does not necessarily imply being a disciple.

Conclusions

We are now at the point that we can posit some conclusions to the question of the relationship between μαθητής and μιμητής. I suggest six findings from our analysis.50 (1) It is clear that the term μαθητής in many contexts is a technical designation for a pupil of a teacher or a designation for someone who has declared loyalty to a religious figure. (2) From the analyzed texts, there is no case in which μιμητής was used in a parallel sense to μαθητής. The term is never understood either as an equivalent to or a replacement for the term μαθητής. (3) Whenever the term μιμητής is elaborated upon, it is descriptive of (a) how one person has modeled or should model himself/herself on the pattern established by the exemplar, or (b) of specific virtues or characteristics that one should emulate. (4) The many

47. Ο μαθητής και φίλος σου και μιμητής τού πάθους σου (Romanus Melodia Hymnographer, Cant. dub. 64.1).
49. Photius, Bibl. 263.490b.
50. Excluded from our conclusions are the ambiguous references to discipleship and imitation in which the relationship between the two is unclear.
references where μαθητής and μιμητής (and cognates) occur together in the texts from the second to the ninth centuries C.E. reveal that the term “imitator” continues to stand in disjunction from the term “disciple,” never fusing with it or becoming a substitute for it. (5) Imitation is understood to be subsumed under discipleship but not in an exclusive way; that is, imitation is not restricted to discipleship, because it occurs in many different relational contexts. Thus, of the positions of the various scholars we have surveyed above on the relationship between these terms, the position for which we are arguing is closest to that of Edvin Larsson. (6) It would be incorrect to say that imitation is subordinate to discipleship. This would be a confusion of categories. The relationship is not understood in terms of the position between the terms. Rather, the relationship between the terms is seen as the one concept (imitation) occurring within, though not limited to, the sphere of the other (discipleship).