

# A Brief Look at the Twelve Apostles

**Simon Peter.** The first man called by Jesus as his disciple (Mk 1:16–18) was Simon and his brother Andrew. The name “Simon” (Heb. *Šim’ôn*) was the most popular male name among Palestinian Jews. The name of the father was “Jonah” (Mt 16:17) or “John” (Jn 1:42; 21:15–17). The family came from Bethsaida (Jn 1:44) and owned a house in Capernaum (cf. Mt 8:14; Mk 1:21, 29; Lk 4:38). The family business was fishing on the Sea of Galilee (Mk 1:16). Peter was married (Mk 1:29–31; 1 Cor 9:5). Jesus called Simon “Peter” (Gk. *Petros* [Lk 6:14]), the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic surname “Cephas” (*Kêph’ā*, transliterated in Greek as *Kēphas*), which means “rock” and thus constitutes a play on words: both the Aramaic term *kêph’ā* and the Greek term *petra* mean “rock,” and *petros* means “stone.” This change of name highlights Simon’s task and responsibility: he was appointed as the leader and spokesman of the Twelve and thus the “rock” or foundation of the new “house” of the messianic community, a role that he is portrayed as fulfilling in Acts, where he is described as the spokesperson of the Twelve (Acts 2:14; 5:1–11, 17–39) and the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:15–25; 9:32–43; 11:2–13; 15:7) and its mission in Jerusalem (Acts 3:12), Judea (Acts 9:32, 35), Samaria (Acts 8:14, 25) and Caesarea (Acts 10:5–48), who preaches at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–40), on the Temple Mount (Acts 3:11–26) and before the Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8–12; 5:29–32). The Gospel writers portray Peter as the first disciple to confess Jesus as the Messiah (Mt 16:13–20 // Mk 8:27–30 // Lk 9:18–21; cf. Jn 6:69), an acknowledgment marred by a lack of understanding of the necessity of Jesus’ death (Mt 16:21–23 // Mk 8:31–33; cf. Lk 9:22). He is afraid to acknowledge his association with Jesus during Jesus’ trial when confronted by a slave girl (Mt 26:69–75 // Mk 14:66–72 // Jn 18:25–27). After Pentecost, Peter is bold enough to defy the orders of the high priest and the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:29).

In A.D. 41, Peter was arrested in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa I, who wanted to execute him (Acts 12:3). After a miraculous escape from prison, Peter left Jerusalem and went to “another place” (Acts 12:17) that Luke does not specify; he could have gone to Rome, to northern Asia Minor (cf. the regions mentioned in 1 Pet 1:1) or to other cities with large Jewish communities. Some suggest that the major disturbances in Rome that evidently were connected with the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, prompting the emperor Claudius to issue an edict evicting the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49 (Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.3–4), can most plausibly be explained with the presence and activity of a major Christian figure such as Peter. There is no direct evidence that can support this suggestion, however. We know that after leaving Jerusalem, Peter was active as a missionary, traveling with his wife (1 Cor 9:5); he was active in Antioch probably in A.D. 48 (Gal 2:11–14), and he participated in the apostles’ council in Jerusalem in A.D. 48 (Acts 15:7), where he reminded the believers that God had used him in the early days of the church to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles without requiring them to become Jews (Acts 15:7). Early traditions place Peter in Rome, at least by the time of Nero, during whose reign he is said to have died as martyr, being crucified upside down (*Acts Pet.* 38). If this information is reliable, Peter’s death is best dated during the Neronian persecution in A.D. 64.

The apocryphal *Gospel of Peter*, written in the second century A.D., is dependent on the canonical Gospels. The main aim of the author seems to have been to blame the Jews for Jesus’ death and to exonerate Pilate, and the text adds nothing to our knowledge about the historical Peter. The same holds true for the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, written at the end of the second century A.D., which relates stories about Peter’s ministry in Rome.

**Andrew.** Andrew (Gk. *Andreas*) was Simon’s brother (Mk 1:16) and thus also a fisherman from Bethsaida and Capernaum. He was a disciple of John the Baptist (Jn 1:35, 40) before he met Jesus. According to the Fourth Gospel, Andrew was the first follower of Jesus, identified by name when he brought Simon Peter to Jesus, and the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah (Jn 1:35–42). Mark relates Andrew’s call by Jesus in connection with Peter’s (Mk 1:16–18). He is present when Jesus cures Peter’s mother-in-law (Mk 1:29–31), and he is among the four disciples who hears Jesus predict the destruction of the \*temple (Mk 13:3–4). John relates that Andrew brought the boy with the bread and the fishes to Jesus on the occasion of the feeding miracle (Jn 6:8); still later, he and Philip took the Greeks to Jesus who wanted to see his master (Jn 12:22). Matthew and Luke mention

Andrew only in connection with his call (Mt 4:18) and the list of the Twelve (Mt 10:2 // Lk 6:14), which should not be taken to mean that they regarded Andrew as less important.

The apocryphal *Acts of Andrew*, written in the late second century A.D., contains only minimal historical information; the original author claims to know that the apostle Andrew preached the gospel in northern Asia Minor in the cities of Amaseia and Sinope in the region of Pontus, that he traveled from Pontus to Nicea (freeing the city from dangerous demons), that he visited Nicomedia and Byzantium and then traveled through Thrace and via Perinth, Philippi and Thessalonica in Macedonia to Patras, Corinth and Megara in Achaia, where he converted the proconsul and his family to the Christian faith, and eventually died as martyr in Patras. Origen claims to know that the apostle Andrew went to Scythia, the Bosporan kingdom on the north coast of the Black Sea (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.1.1), which agrees with the apocryphal *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, written in the fourth century A.D., whose author asserts that the apostle Andrew engaged in missionary work among the “man-eaters” (the Greeks localized the cannibals on the north coast of the Black Sea [see Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.106]). *Acts of Andrew* does not mention a mission of Andrew to Scythia. It is impossible to verify these pieces of information in terms of their historical accuracy.

**James the Son of Zebedee.** James (Heb. *Ya'āqōb*, transliterated in Greek as *Iakōbos*) is always among the first three disciples in the four lists of the Twelve, indicating that he belonged to the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Since he is always mentioned before his brother John, presumably he was the elder of the two. His father's name was “Zebedee,” the family business was fishing on the Sea of Galilee (Mt 4:21 // Mk 1:19); Luke reports that the Zebedee family was a partner with Peter and Andrew (Lk 5:10). The mother of the Zebedee brothers was one of the women at the cross (Mt 27:55–56); if her name was “Salome,” as the reference in Mark 15:40 suggests, she was the sister of Jesus' mother, which makes James and his brother John Jesus' cousins. James was among the first men to be called to follow Jesus; when he and his brother John accepted Jesus' call, their father, Zebedee, was left behind in the boat together with the hired men (Mk 1:20).

Jesus gave James and his brother John the nickname “Boanerges,” meaning “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17), evidently because of their sometimes impetuous personalities: when Samaritan villagers refused entry to Jesus, the brothers asked Jesus for permission to command fire to come down from heaven and consume the villagers (Lk 9:51–56), and as they approached Jerusalem, they asked Jesus for places of honor in the kingdom to be established (Mk 10:35–45 [according to Mt 20:20–28, it was their mother who made the request]). Jesus prophesies that James and his brother will “drink the cup” that he has to drink—that is, that they will suffer (Mt 20:23 // Mk 10:39). James was the first of the Twelve to die on account of his allegiance to Jesus; he was executed by Herod Agrippa I in A.D. 41 (Acts 12:2).

**John the Son of Zebedee.** John (Gk. *Iōannēs*, Heb. *Yōhānān*), the brother of James, was the younger son of Zebedee, also a fisherman from Bethsaida. He was called from his fishing boat along with his brother to follow Jesus (Mk 1:19–20). In Mark, John is one of the three disciples closest to Jesus (with his brother James and with Simon Peter): at the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mk 5:37), at Jesus' \*transfiguration (Mk 9:2) and in \*Gethsemane (Mk 14:33). In the Synoptic Gospels, John is once mentioned alone: he reports that the disciples stopped someone who was not a follower of Jesus from casting out \*demons in Jesus' name (Mk 9:38 // Lk 9:49). John was chosen by Jesus alongside Peter to prepare the Passover meal (Lk 22:8 [anonymous in Mk 14:13]). In the Gospel of John, he is mentioned once explicitly in the reference to the “sons of Zebedee” in the list of some disciples who encountered the risen Jesus in Galilee (Jn 21:2). Traditionally, since the latter part of the second century A.D., John has been identified with “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the so-called Beloved Disciple in John's Gospel, mentioned for the first time when he is reclining beside Jesus at the \*Last Supper (Jn 13:23); he was the only disciple among the Twelve who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion (Jn 19:25–26), and he was the first disciple to see the empty tomb (Jn 20:2–5); he perhaps was the disciple with Peter in the courtyard at Jesus' trial, described as being known to the high priest (Jn 18:15). According to John 21:24–25, the writing of the Fourth Gospel is attributed to the Beloved Disciple.

In Acts, John appears in association with Peter, praying in the temple and healing a crippled man (Acts 3:1–10), forced to justify their activities before the \*Sanhedrin (Acts 4:7, 13), whose leaders describe him as uneducated (in the law). When Samaritans are converted through the ministry of Philip, John accompanies Peter to confirm, consolidate and expand the work in Samaria (Acts 8:14–17, 25). Paul describes John, together with James and Cephas (Simon Peter), as one of the “pillar apostles” (Gal 2:9), confirming John’s leading role in the Jerusalem church. The suggestion that John the son of Zebedee was arrested when Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and was executed on Paul’s vote in Jerusalem (Witherington, who argues from the absence of John from Acts 9–28 and from alleged clues in Acts 8:1–3; 22:4; Gal 1:13, 23; 1 Tim 1:13, 15) is entirely hypothetical. Irenaeus (A.D. 130–200) defended the view that the apostle John wrote the Johannine Epistles and Gospel in Ephesus, the latter to answer the errors of Cerinthus and the Nicolaitans (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4). Justin Martyr, who lived in Ephesus ca. A.D. 150, asserted that the John who wrote Revelation (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8) was the apostle John (Justin, *Dial.* 81). Polycrates of Ephesus (A.D. 189–198) claims to know that John was buried at Ephesus (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.31.3; 5.24.1–3). Various apocryphal texts, including *Acts of John*, written in the second century A.D., emphasize John’s triumph over pagan worship (e.g., *Acts John* 37–55 relates that he destroyed the temple of Artemis in Ephesus) but do not provide reliable historical information about the ministry of John.

**Philip.** Philip (Gk. *Philippos*, a name popular among Greeks as the name of Alexander the Great’s father) came from Bethsaida, as did Peter and Andrew, and John and James (Jn 1:44). In the Synoptic Gospels, Philip is mentioned only in the lists of the Twelve. According to John’s Gospel, he was one of the first disciples of Jesus (Jn 1:43–44). When he recognized Jesus to be the Messiah, he shared his conviction with his friend Nathaniel and invited him to come and see Jesus (Jn 1:45–46). When challenged by Jesus to feed five thousand people, Philip acknowledged that even six months’ wages could not buy enough food for so many people (Jn 6:5–7). In Jerusalem he introduced Greeks to Jesus who wanted to see him (Jn 12:21–22), and he participated in the dialogue about the meaning of Jesus’ announcement that he would go to the Father (Jn 14:8–9). He was with the other disciples in the upper room waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:13). Philip the apostle must not be confused with the Philip who was one of the seven men appointed to distribute food (Acts 6:5) and who preached the gospel in Samaria (Acts 8:4–24).

The apocryphal *Acts of Philip*, written in the fourth century A.D., claims to know that the apostle Philip preached the gospel in Parthia and also traveled to Ethiopia and from there to Azotus (Ashdod) on the Mediterranean coast, presupposing a journey from Palestine via the Sinai to Nubia. It is impossible to verify these claims.

**Bartholomew.** The name “Bartholomew” (Gk. *Bartholomaios*) is the transliteration of the Aramaic patronymic “bar Talmai” (“son of Talmai” [cf. Num 13:22; 2 Sam 3:3]). Traditions from the ninth century A.D. onward identify him with the Nathanael mentioned in John 1:43–46; 21:2, which, however, has no basis in the text. Bartholomew is mentioned only in the four lists of the Twelve. Eusebius claims to know that Bartholomew, who was in India before Pantaenus, left the people a copy of the Gospel of Matthew written “in Hebrew letters” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.10); since multiple traditions place the apostle Thomas in India, this seems to be a confused piece of information that could be due to a misunderstanding: Pantaenus might have understood “Bar Thoma” (Bartholomew) instead of “Mar Thoma” (Thomas, with “Mar” being an oriental honorific title).

**Thomas.** The Greek name “Thomas” (*Thōmas*) is translated in John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2 with the Greek equivalent *Didymos*, which means “twin” and was used by the Greeks as a personal name, which was not the case for the Hebrew and Aramaic terms meaning “twin” (*tě’ôm* and *tě’ômā*); John never tells his readers who was Thomas’s twin. In the Synoptic Gospels, Thomas is mentioned only in the lists of the Twelve. In the Gospel of John, he is mentioned as a courageous disciple who is willing to die with Jesus (Jn 11:16; cf. Jn 14:5). He doubted the reports concerning Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (note that the other disciples had refused to believe the women’s reports about having encountered Jesus as risen from the dead); after he encountered Jesus, he confessed him

as the divine Messiah (“My Lord and my God!” [Jn 20:28]). According to later tradition, both written (the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*) and oral (the so-called Thomas Christians in India), Thomas went to India as a missionary (see Schnabel, 1:880–95). The apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, composed in the second century A.D. and consisting of 114 sayings (logia) mainly by Jesus, is linked by many scholars with the oral Jesus traditions (which have to be reconstructed by translating the Coptic text of the document back into Greek and eventually into Aramaic); the gnosticizing tendency of the document, its world-denying outlook and the emphasis on an esoteric and ascetic faith for which the words of Jesus are important (they give eternal life to those who discover their esoteric truth) but not his works or his cross and resurrection account for the fact that we learn nothing about the historical Thomas.

**Matthew.** The name “Matthew” (Gk. *Maththaios*, Heb. *Matityâ* or *Matityâhû*) appears in the lists of the Twelve. Since the First Gospel describes Matthew in the list of the Twelve as a tax collector (Mt 10:3) and replaces the name of Levi the tax collector, whom Jesus called (Mk 2:13–17 // Lk 5:27–32), with “Matthew” (Mt 9:9), Matthew and Levi are regarded as identical (though this is implausible to some [see, e.g., Meier, 201; Bauckham, 108–11]). Early tradition credits Matthew/Levi with the authorship of the First Gospel. Rufinus claims to know that the apostle Matthew went to Ethiopia (Rufinus, *Hist.* 1.9–10).

**James the Son of Alphaeus.** The patronymic “son of Alphaeus” (Gk. *Alphaios* is the transcription of the Hebrew name *Ḥalph’ây*) distinguishes this James (Heb. *Ya’ăqōb* [“Jacob”]) from James the son of Zebedee. If he is identical with “James the younger,” his mother was called “Mary,” and he had a brother with the name “Joses” (Mk 15:40), but this cannot be confirmed. Since Levi is also described as “son of Alphaeus” (Mk 2:14), it is possible that this James and Levi were brothers; however, because the disciple lists mention the other brothers in pairs, but not James and Levi, this is uncertain.

**Thaddaeus.** A disciple with the name “Thaddaeus” (Gk. *Thaddaios*, Heb. *Taddai*) is mentioned in the last group of four names in the list of the Twelve in Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18, while Luke lists a Judas (Heb. *Yêhûdâ* [“Judah”]) son of James (Lk 6:16; Acts 1:13). It is possible that this is the same individual bearing both a Greek and a Hebrew name, which was not uncommon among the Jews of the time. John mentions Judas son of James in connection with the Last Supper, relating that “Judas, not Iscariot” asks Jesus how he will reveal himself to the disciples and not to the world (Jn 14:22). According to the apocryphal *Acts of Thaddaeus*, a disciple with the name “Thaddaeus” engaged in missionary work in Edessa in the region of Osrhoene, a vassal state of the Parthians east of the Euphrates River; this tradition is known to Eusebius, who identifies Thaddaeus as one of the seventy disciples sent to proclaim Christ (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.13.4; 2.1.6). Scholars identify this Thaddaeus with the Jewish Christian missionary Addai, who engaged in missionary work in Edessa and in Adiabene (*1 Apoc. Jas.* 36:15–24; *Doctrina Addai*), dating this mission to around A.D. 100. Some scholars are prepared to reckon with a mission of Thaddaeus to Edessa around A.D. 33/34, pointing to the exchange of letters between Abgar and the emperor Tiberius mentioned in the *Doctrina Addai* (for discussion, see Schnabel, 1:900).

**Simon the Cananean.** Since the leading disciple also had the name “Simon” (Peter), this Simon is identified as “the zealot” (Gk. *ho zēlōtēs* [Lk 6:15; Acts 1:13]) and “the Cananean” (Gk. *ho Kananaios* [Mt 10:4 // Mk 3:18]); the term “the Cananean” is to be derived from Aramaic *qan’ânā’* (“enthusiast, zealot”). Both the Aramaic term and the Greek term have a broad range of meanings; every person who was committed to fulfilling the \*law could be described with the term (cf. 4 Macc 18:12; Philo, *Spec.* 2.253). The term itself does not prove that this Simon belonged to the political movement of the Zealots—that is, the nationalist Jewish group that was willing to engage in active resistance against the Romans (see Revolutionary Movements). Many scholars regard this assumed association as questionable because the Zealot party emerged only in A.D. 66. We do not know how Simon’s zeal for God and the law manifested itself. The fact that he was willing to live and work in the company of Jesus, who was reviled for being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Mt 11:19

// Lk 7:34), indicates his willingness to have his attitude and his behavior changed by Jesus' example and authority.

**Judas Iscariot.** "Judas" (Heb. *Yěhûdâ*) is a venerated Hebrew name, the name of one of the patriarchs. The second name (or nickname) "Iscariot," which distinguishes him from other early disciples with the name "Judas/Jude," probably refers to the place Kariot (Tell Qirioth in the Negev, or Askaroth near Shechem?). He was the treasurer of the Twelve (Jn 12:6), which means that he was regarded as competent in money matters. Like the other members of the Twelve, he was called and sent by Jesus "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Lk 9:2). According to Acts 1:17, Peter reminded the other disciples that Judas "belonged to our number and received a share in our ministry."

All four Gospel writers relate Judas's betrayal of Jesus to the Jewish authorities (Mt 26:14 // Mk 14:10 // Lk 22:4) who subsequently arrest Jesus in Gethsemane. Mark provides no motive for Judas's betrayal; money is mentioned only after he went to the chief priests (Mk 14:10–11; cf. Lk 22:5). Matthew specifically mentions greed as Judas's motivation (Mt 26:14–15), while Luke provides a demonic explanation: "Then Satan entered into Judas" (Lk 22:3). John combines the two motivations: he portrays Judas Iscariot as greedy (Jn 12:4–5) and notes that "Satan entered into him" (Jn 13:2, 27).

Matthew provides a fuller version of the events (Mt 26:14–15; 27:3–10) than Luke: he relates that Judas repented, and that he threw the thirty pieces of silver that he had received into the temple before committing suicide by hanging; the priests used the money to purchase a piece of property. Luke is mostly interested in the horrible fate of Judas, relating that Judas acquired a piece of land (which may simply mean that it was Judas's money that bought the plot of land with the gruesome name "Akeldama," meaning "field of blood"), and that he fell headlong, bursting open in the middle with the result that all his entrails spilled out (Acts 1:18–19). Judas Iscariot was replaced by Matthias in the circle of the Twelve after Jesus' resurrection and before Pentecost (Acts 1:12–26).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. J. Schnabel, "Apostle," ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP, 2013), 39–43.