

## A Brief Look at the Twelve Apostles

- **“Simon”** comes from the Hebrew for *hearing*. He is also called Peter or Cephas, meaning *rock*, in Greek and Aramaic, respectively. The significance of his nickname appears in 16:16–19. The leader and frequent spokesman for the Twelve, he three times denied Jesus (cf. 26:69–75) but was later restored to fellowship (John 21:15–19). The first leader of the Jerusalem church, from Pentecost until his arrest and escape from prison (Acts 1–12), he subsequently ministered to churches in Asia, Pontus, Bithynia, Galatia, and Cappadocia (1 Pet 1:1), to which he wrote (or substantially influenced the composition of) 1 and 2 Peter. Reasonably strong Christian tradition places him in Rome at least by the early 60s, where he became the bishop of the church in that city (perhaps reflected already in 1 Pet 5:13). *Apocalypse of Peter* 37 narrates his martyrdom by upside-down crucifixion, probably in the late 60s.
- **“Andrew”** comes from the Greek for *manliness*. Like Peter, his brother, Andrew was originally a fisherman from Bethsaida (John 1:44). He was the first-known disciple of John the Baptist to begin to follow Christ (John 1:40).
- **“James”** comes from the Hebrew *Jacob*, meaning *he who grasps the heel* (see Gen 25:26). Another Galilean fisherman and son of Zebedee (4:21–22), he was executed by Herod Agrippa I not later than A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2). He is therefore to be distinguished from the James who wrote the epistle of that name and who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem after Peter’s departure.
- **“John”** in Hebrew means *the Lord is gracious*. He was James’s brother. Like Peter and James, he formed part of the inner circle of the three disciples closest to Jesus. The Fourth Gospel, three Epistles, and the Book of Revelation are all attributed to him, the last of these while he was exiled for his faith on the island of Patmos, probably under the emperor Domitian in the mid-90s. Strong, early church tradition associates his ministry with Ephesus, combating the Gnostic teacher Cerinthus. Reasonably strong, though sometimes conflicting tradition maintains that he was the only one of the Twelve not to die a martyr’s death for his faith. He would thus have lived to quite an old age—at least into his eighties or nineties.
- **“Philip”** comes from the Greek for *horse lover*. With Simon and Andrew, he was one of Jesus’ earliest disciples. He too was from Bethsaida (John 1:43–48) and is to be distinguished from Philip the “deacon” of Acts 6:5 and 8:26–40.
- **“Bartholomew”** comes from the Hebrew for *son of Talmi*. Probably he is the same person as Nathanael, Philip’s companion in John 1:45–49. His home would then have been Cana (John 21:2). Matthew likewise groups Philip and Bartholomew together.
- **“Thomas”** stems from the Hebrew for *twin* (John 11:16). He became famous for doubting the resurrection of Jesus until he personally saw and felt the Lord’s risen body (John 20:24–28). Thomas’s lack of understanding appears already in John 14:5. Possibly reliable later tradition associates him with the establishment of the church in India.

- **“Matthew”** comes from the same Hebrew phrase as Nathanael (*God has given*). He was also called Levi, a converted tax collector, and had this Gospel attributed to him.
- **James, son of Alphaeus**, is also called *ho mikros* in Mark 15:40 (*the small one* or “the younger”), presumably to distinguish him in age or size from James, son of Zebedee. Little else is known for sure about him.
- **Thaddaeus** is also called Lebbaeus in some textual variants and Judas son of James in Luke 6:16. The first two are probably nicknames of devotion or endearment, coming from the Hebrew *taday* (*breast*) and *leb* (*heart*).
- **Simon, ho Kananaios (the Cananean—NIV “the Zealot”)**, was a man whose nickname meant *zealous one*, probably not yet in the sense of a member of the later, more formal political movement known as the Zealots but as one of the predecessors of that movement whose revolutionary aspirations for Israel against Rome perhaps led him to engage in terrorist activities against the government. Contra the NIV, only Luke actually uses the word “zealot” (*zēlōtēs*, Luke 6:15).
- **Judas Iscariot**, infamous for betraying Jesus (26:47–50), was the treasurer for the Twelve (John 12:6). “Iscariot” is usually interpreted as Hebrew for *man of Keriath*, the name of cities in both Judea and Moab, which could make Judas the only non-Galilean of the Twelve. Others take Iscariot as from a word for *assassin* or from a term meaning *false one*. He ended his life by regretting his betrayal (27:1–10), hanging himself, and falling from the rope so that “all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18–19, KJV).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, [Matthew](#), vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 168–170.