

Jot & Tittle

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Four Obscure Disciples

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Most Christians know that Jesus had twelve disciples, but most Christians probably can't name all twelve. We might remember Peter, Andrew, James, John, Matthew, and regrettably Judas Iscariot. We might even remember Philip or doubting Thomas. But how many would recall Bartholomew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, or Simon the Zealot? This study will explore what the Bible reveals about these four obscure disciples.

Bartholomew

Bartholomew is mentioned by name only four times in the New Testament and only in lists of the twelve apostles (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). The Bible records nothing distinctive about his life or ministry. His name "Bartholomew" itself provides very little information. "The name means 'son of Tolmai' or 'son of Tholami' or 'son of Tholomaeus.'"¹ But no one by these names is mentioned in the New Testament.

There might, however, be a clue to an additional aspect of Bartholomew's life based on the association of his name in the lists of the disciples. "In the first three gospels Philip and Bartholomew are constantly named together, while Nathanael is nowhere mentioned. In the fourth gospel Philip and Nathanael are similarly

combined, but nothing is said of Bartholomew."² Based on these associations, we may conclude that Bartholomew also went by the name of Nathanael. The name "Nathanael" means "gift of God."

Nathanael was first introduced to Jesus by Philip and expressed doubt that anything good could come from Nazareth (John 1:45-46). Jesus described him as a "true Israelite in whom there is nothing false," that is, completely sincere. In the ensuing conversation Nathanael (Bartholomew) declared that Jesus was the Son of God (John 1:47-51). Nathanael was also one of the disciples who, after Jesus' resurrection, joined Peter in a fishing expedition on the Sea of Galilee and met Jesus on shore the next morning (John 21:2). This reference also informs us that Nathanael was from the town of Cana, the location of Jesus' first miracle.

James the Son of Alphaeus

The best known disciple by the name of James was the son of Zebedee and the brother of John. But there was another disciple among the twelve named James. In the lists of disciples he is always referred to as James the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). Another disciple, Levi, who was also called Matthew, had a father named Alphaeus (Mark 2:14), so James and Matthew may have been brothers. However, James and Matthew are never identified as brothers in the New Testament, so two different fathers by the name of Alphaeus are probably in view.

A woman by the name of Mary witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and she is recorded as having a son named James as well as a son named Joses (Matthew 27:56; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10). This James is also called James the Younger, or James the Lesser, referring either to his age, notoriety, or stature (Mark 15:40). A woman named Mary and identified as the wife of Clopas is mentioned in John 19:25 as being present at Jesus' crucifixion, and it makes sense to identify this Mary as the mother of James the Lesser. If this identification is accurate, Alphaeus and Clopas are the same individual, two names for the father of James the Lesser. "Some have argued that Alphaeus is an alternative form of Cleophas (Clopas), which would mean that 'James son of Alphaeus' is the same person as 'James the younger' (Mark 15:40) and that his

mother's name was Mary (Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; 16:1; John 19:25). But such connections are by no means certain."³ Some have even conjectured that Mary the mother of James the Lesser was a sister or sister-in-law to Mary the mother of Jesus, making James the Lesser a cousin to Jesus, but this connection is even less certain.

Thaddaeus

Another obscure disciple was named Thaddaeus, which “comes from a root roughly signifying ‘the beloved.’”⁴ He is mentioned by this name in only two lists of the twelve disciples (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18). Many manuscripts of Matthew 10:3 attach the name Lebbaeus, identifying Thaddaeus as a surname. However, the lists of the twelve disciples recorded by Luke (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13) do not include Thaddaeus, but do include a second disciple by the name of Judas (not Judas Iscariot). This Judas was either the son or brother of James—literally “of James.” Judas of James is likely the same person as Thaddaeus. “Through elimination he appears to be identified with (lit.) ‘Judas of James’—which could mean either ‘Judas son of James’ or ‘Judas brother of James.’”⁵ Judas Thaddaeus, therefore, may have been a brother to James the son of Alphaeus,⁶ but since they are never described as brothers in the Gospels and since Judas is never mentioned as a son of Alphaeus, this connection seems unlikely. Judas Thaddaeus may have preferred the name Thaddaeus because of negative associations of the name Judas after Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus.

Judas (not Iscariot) Thaddaeus is quoted in John 14:22 as asking Jesus in the Upper Room why He intended to show Himself to the disciples and not to the whole world. Jesus assured him of God's unique love for those who love Jesus.

Simon the Zealot

Among the twelve disciples there were two who shared the name James and two who shared the name Judas. There were also two who bore the name Simon—Simon Peter and Simon the Zealot. Simon the Zealot is mentioned only in the lists of the twelve disciples (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). Matthew and

Mark use an Aramaic term, *Cananaean*, while Luke uses a Greek term, *Zelotes*, to distinguish this Simon from the more famous Simon Peter. Both terms mean “Zealot.” Only this nickname provides any hint of the character of this obscure disciple. The name Zealot, related to the term for zeal, could be translated “enthusiast, fanatic.”⁷ “The Zealots were nationalists, strong upholders of Jewish traditions and religion; and some decades later they became a principal cause of the Jewish War in which Rome sacked Jerusalem. The Zealots were probably not so influential in Jesus' time.”⁸ It's interesting to speculate on how this disciple who was so zealous for his Jewish roots got along with Matthew, a disciple who had been a tax-collector for the occupying Roman government!

Although the twelve disciples were the closest followers of Jesus during His earthly ministry, not all of them had the kind notoriety that we might expect. At least four were obscure by any measure—sincere Bartholomew, little James, beloved Thaddaeus, and zealous Simon. Their lives are a testimony to God's ability to work through obscurity. Christians today who think that their lives are insignificant in God's work can take comfort in the lives of these four obscure disciples.

¹ Carson, D. A. “Matthew” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, p. 238.

² Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 126.

³ Carson, p. 239.

⁴ Carson, p. 239.

⁵ Carson, p. 239.

⁶ Unger, p. 616.

⁷ Bauer, Walter; Arnt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Danker, Frederick W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 338.

⁸ Carson, p. 239.