

The Twelve in the New Testament and the Early Church:

An Overview

The New Testament includes three lists of The Twelve, the group of men Jesus chose from among his disciples to follow him especially closely and witness the events of his ministry. It also provides a list of The Eleven, those who remained of the group after the death of Judas Iscariot, who committed suicide as described in Matt 27.5. These lists are in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts:

Matthew 10.2-4	These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.
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Mark 3.16-19	So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.
Luke 6.13-16	And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.
Acts 1.13	When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

According to Matthew 10.24, the Twelve are:

- Simon Peter and his brother Andrew
- James son of Zebedee and his brother John
- Philip and Bartholomew
- Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector
- James son of Alphaeus and Thaddeus

- Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

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- Matthew and Thomas,
- James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus,
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In Luke 6.13-16, the Twelve are:

- Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew
- James and John
- Philip and Bartholomew
- Matthew and Thomas
- James son of Alphaeus and Simon, who was called the Zealot
- Judas son of James and Judas Iscariot who became a traitor.

Luke also has as a second list, the list of The Eleven. It is at the beginning of Acts and names

those who witness the Ascension and then return to Jerusalem to elect Mathias to take Judas Iscariot's place:

- Peter
- John and James
- Andrew
- Philip and Thomas
- Bartholomew and Matthew
- James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot
- Judas son of James

These lists are very similar, but not the same. The first four men named are always Peter, Andrew, James, and John. But, although the second pair of brothers are always kept together, the first pair isn't. In Mark and in Luke's second list, Peter stands alone at the top of the list, followed by James and John, and then Andrew, separated from his brother. The pairs of Philip and Bartholomew and Matthew and Thomas are the same in the three Gospels and Acts, but in Matthew and Acts the order of the four names is different from what it is in Mark and Luke. The final set of four (or three) names ends with Judas Iscariot's name in the three in which he is included and the internal order of the names differs. The second Simon's nickname is given in an Aramaic form in Matthew and Mark and its Greek equivalent in Luke and Acts.¹ Matthew and Mark name Thaddaeus as part of this group, but Luke names Judas son of James where we

1 Simon likely was not part of the later, fanatical anti-Roman political party called Zealots, since they really only emerged after the Jewish War – probably he was instead one of those called “zealots for the Law”, whether someone who was extreme in his own piety or a Pharisee who also interpreted the Law very strictly to others we don't know.

would expect Thaddaeus, in both his Gospel and Acts.

Could Thaddaeus be the same as Judas son of James? Judas was a popular Hebrew name (Yehudah), after the patriarch who was one of the 12 sons of Jacob in the book of Genesis. Thaddaeus was derived from the nicknames of several popular Greek men's names. So possibly a man named Judas son of James (another popular name) may have had a Greek nickname because his own name was so common. It also seems possible that after Judas Iscariot's actions, another member of the Twelve named Judas might be known by preference by a nickname. So these two possibilities create a third one, that the tradition known to Matthew and Mark and the tradition known to Luke may have referred to the same man in these two different ways. But we can't be sure. Some scholars think that Thaddaeus and Judas son of James are two names (or a nickname and a name, to be precise) referring to the same man and others think that two different men are meant. In that case, the theory is that one man died and was replaced by the other during Jesus' ministry, thus producing the variation in the lists. To me it seems more probable that there were two ways of referring to the same man.

So what else do we know about these twelve men besides what can be deduced from their names and nicknames? The sources available to us are the New Testament itself and the writings of early church fathers and historians, some of whom seem to have been as curious as we are about them!

Let's begin with the information in the New Testament. Simon Peter is very frequently named in the Gospels and Acts, which tell us about Peter's impetuous character, his leadership of the others, and his failures in the Garden and at the High Priest's house on the night of Jesus' arrest. They also narrate his return to leadership in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Judaea and Samaria. Paul mentions him in the Epistles to the Corinthians and Galatians. Paul said in

Galatians that Peter was the apostle to the Jews just as he (Paul) was the apostle to the Gentiles. There are two letters in the New Testament attributed to Peter. Scholars are divided over the authenticity of the letters, with more accepting 1 Peter as an authentic work of the apostle than 2 Peter.

James son of Zebedee and John his brother are part of the “executive committee” composed of James himself, John his brother, and Simon Peter, who accompanied Jesus to the Transfiguration and other important events when all the Twelve were not present. Simon Peter, both sons of Zebedee, and Thomas are part of a group of disciples who encounter the risen Jesus beside the Sea of Galilee in Jn 21. James’ death is narrated by Luke in Acts 12. John is associated with Peter in the miraculous healing in Acts 3. John is traditionally believed to be the author of the Gospel of John, although there are problems with that identification, as there are with all the attempts to identify the John who wrote that Gospel. John, Simon Peter, and James the brother of the Lord are sometimes referred to as the pillars of the church in Jerusalem.

Andrew receives less attention than his brother Simon Peter. In John’s telling, it is Andrew who brings Simon Peter to meet Jesus the first time (Jn 1.35-42). He is also mentioned in John’s account of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Jn 6.8) and in the account of a group of Gentiles who want to meet Jesus in John 12.20-22.

Philip appears in the lists of the Twelve and in several accounts in John’s Gospel: he is one of the disciples of John the Baptist who become followers of Jesus, and he introduces Nathanael to Jesus (Jn 1.43-51). Like Andrew, he was involved with the miracle of the loaves and fishes (Jn 6.5-7) and with the Gentiles who sought Jesus out in John 12. At the Last Supper it is Philip who asks Jesus to show them the Father (Jn 14.8-14). Another man named Philip was also a disciple, and part of the group of seven chosen to be deacons in Acts; later Christian

writers often confused the two Philips, making it hard sometimes to disentangle them.

Bartholomew is mentioned only in the lists in the Gospels and Acts. Some commentators think that he is the same as the person called “Nathanael” in John’s Gospel because each man is associated with Philip, but it seems unlikely.

Matthew’s Gospel describes the call of Matthew the tax collector, and the subsequent dinner at his home at which Jesus was present in the same terms as Mark and Luke use to describe the call of Levi son of Alphaeus the tax collector. Possibly Matthew and Levi are the same person. Though all four lists name Matthew as a member of the Twelve, only the list in Matthew’s Gospel describes that Matthew as a tax collector. At least one scholar has put forward the theory that at some point in the tradition “a Levite, the son of Alphaeus” was misunderstood as “Levi, son of Alphaeus” but this seems a bit far-fetched. Other than this story in Matthew’s Gospel, and the lists themselves, Matthew is not mentioned in the New Testament.

There is more to say about Thomas. In addition to appearing in all four lists, he is also named in John’s Gospel. He is mentioned in John 11.16 in connection with the story of Jesus and Lazarus, in Jn 14.5 as asking a question at the Last Supper, in the famous story of “doubting” Thomas in Jn 20.24-9, and in Jn 21.2 as one of those present at the breakfast on the beach after the resurrection.

Other than in these lists Thaddaeus/Judas son of James is only mentioned in John's Gospel, where he was one of the disciples named during the account of the Last Supper (Jn 14.22). James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Cananaean/Zealot are only mentioned in these lists. The final member of the Twelve named is, for obvious reasons, Judas Iscariot the betrayer. He is mentioned in all four Gospels and in Acts, particularly with reference to his actions at the Last Supper and his betrayal of Jesus to the authorities in the Garden of Gethsemane. John has

more to say about Judas Iscariot than the other evangelists,

The New Testament takes the story of the Twelve up as far as the Jewish War, which was a catastrophe for Jewish followers of Jesus as it was for other Jews. Around the time of its outbreak in 66 CE, Jewish followers of Jesus fled Jerusalem and Judaea for Pella (in Galilee) and beyond. Any surviving members of the Twelve still in the city would presumably also have left at that time. By 66 CE we know that at least 2 members of the original group had died, James son of Zebedee and, of course, Judas Iscariot. Judas was replaced by Matthias, but there is no evidence that James was replaced after his death. For further information about the Twelve after the Jewish War, we must look to church traditions.

We know from Acts that Simon Peter travelled in Roman Palestine and Asia Minor after the Resurrection, as well as being one of the three leaders of the Jerusalem Church. Tradition in the early church strongly associates him with Antioch and of course Rome. He is supposed to have been the first bishop in both cities. Peter is said to have been martyred in Rome during the persecutions of Nero around 68 CE and is believed to be buried at the site of St Peter's Basilica.

John son of Zebedee is said to have settled in Ephesus after leaving Jerusalem and been a leader in the church there. Church tradition is divided as to whether he lived there until old age and died naturally late in the first century CE or was martyred earlier. Many early writers identify John the Apostle with John the Evangelist and of course John the Evangelist wrote sufficiently after the other three that he must have lived until late in the first century. He is said to be buried in the Basilica of St John in Ephesus.

Andrew is said by Origen to have preached in Thrace and by Hippolytus of Rome to have preached in Scythia -- these Roman provinces are modern Macedonia and Bulgaria. Later church writers claimed he went as far north and east as modern Ukraine and Russia. This is why he is

regarded as the patron saint of those countries. He is said to have been martyred in Patras in northern Greece, where his body is also believed to be buried.

Philip the Apostle is traditionally said to have gone eastward and preached in Phrygia (in modern Turkey) and Syria. For centuries he was supposed to have been buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Rome, but recently (in 2011) archaeologists working in modern Turkey at the site of the ancient city of Hieropolis found a tomb that they believe to be that of Philip the Apostle.

Bartholomew is also said by tradition to have gone east. Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History quoted a second century CE Christian teacher in Alexandria, Pantaenus, who travelled as far east as India as a preacher and teacher and reported that, according to the Indian Christians he (Pantaenus) spoke to, Bartholomew had preached to them and left with them a copy of the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew letters. It is not at all impossible that someone from Roman Palestine or Roman Egypt could have travelled to India: the Silk Road was already an established trade route and there was an extensive spice trade with the southwestern coast. It is not known what Pantaenus meant by referring to a copy of Matthew in Hebrew letters. So this story of Pantaenus raises at least as many questions as it answers. Bartholomew is supposed to be buried either in Benevento, Italy, or Rome.

Early tradition about Matthew is very scanty. Both Irenaeus and Clement Alexandria say that he preached among the “Hebrews” (likely Aramaic-speaking Jews) before going to preach to others. Who those others may have been is not clear in church tradition, although the alleged sites are all in the eastern Roman Empire, or adjacent areas like the kingdom of Parthia (in modern Iran). He is believed to be buried in Salerno, Italy.

Thomas is famously supposed to have preached in India, specifically in Kerala, on the

Malabar Coast of southwest India, where there was a Jewish colony. This was a major centre of the spice trade, some of which was with the Roman Empire, so as in the case of Bartholomew there is no intrinsic improbability about someone travelling to the Malabar Coast from the Roman Empire in the first century CE. There is still a group of Christians in India called St Thomas Christians who claim that their church was founded by the apostle Thomas. He is believed to be buried either in Otrono, Italy, or Madras, India.

There are no early church traditions specifically about James son of Alphaeus. Early Christian tradition tried to identify him with other men named James in the New Testament. He is usually distinguished from James son of Zebedee and James the Lord's Brother. But Church Fathers like Papias and Jerome identified him with James the Less, or the younger, who is named several times in the New Testament in connection with his mother Mary. For example Mark 15.40 differentiates two women named "Mary" as "Magdalene" on the one hand and "mother of James the younger and Joses" on the other, and then names the two women again as "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James" in Mark 16.1. Several modern scholars either accept this identification or think it is at least possible.

Thaddaeus, or Judas son of James, is also supposed to have evangelised in the eastern Roman Empire and adjacent areas, such as Judaea, Idumea, and Syria. He is also linked with Armenia in tradition. He is believed to be buried in St Peter's Basilica in Rome, with Simon the Zealot, who is traditionally associated with him as a preacher and missionary. In fact there are virtually no early traditions about Simon the Zealot, so linking him with Thaddaeus was the easiest way to go.

So we can see that early Christians preserved some traditions and accounts about individual members of the Twelve, while others were really only known as names on a list. Some

scholars think that the group was more important to the early church, as an authoritative body of witnesses to Jesus ministry, death and resurrection, than most of the members were individually.

The exception would be leaders like Peter or evangelists like Matthew.