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The Twelve Disciples

All four Gospels indicate that Jesus had twelve disciples who had a privileged status among his many followers. Their names are given in the three Synoptic Gospels and in Acts, as indicated in this chart.

New Testament Lists of the Twelve Disciples

Matthew 10:2–4	Mark 3:16–19	Luke 6:13–16	Acts 1:13–14
Simon Peter	Simon Peter	Simon Peter	Peter
Andrew	James of Zebedee	Andrew	John
James of Zebedee	John of Zebedee	James	James
John of Zebedee	Andrew	John	Andrew
Philip	Philip	Philip	Philip
Bartholomew	Bartholomew	Bartholomew	Thomas
Thomas	Matthew	Matthew	Bartholomew
Matthew	Thomas	Thomas	Matthew
James of Alphaeus	James of Alphaeus	James of Alphaeus	James of Alphaeus
Thaddaeus	Thaddaeus	Simon the Zealot	Simon the Zealot
Simon the Cananean	Simon the Cananean	Judas of James	Judas of James
Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot	(Judas Iscariot) (Matthias, cf. 1:26)

Eleven names appear on all four lists, but whereas Matthew and Mark list a disciple named Thaddaeus who is not found on the lists in Luke or Acts, the latter two books list a disciple named “Judas of James” (which could mean “son of James” or “brother of James”) who is not mentioned in Matthew or Mark.

Church tradition resolved this discrepancy by declaring Thaddaeus and Judas to be the same person, offering the not unreasonable

suggestion that this disciple went by the name Thaddaeus to avoid confusion with another disciple named Judas who was among the twelve. Modern scholars allow that this could have been the case but also note the possibility that changes in the personnel of the twelve might have been made at different times (so Thaddaeus could have among the twelve at one point and Judas of James at another point).

Interpreters also note the slight difference in the order in which the disciples are named, though there is a high degree of consistency in the various orderings. Notably, Peter is always listed first, and Judas Iscariot is always listed last.

The matter is complicated somewhat through consideration of John's Gospel, which mentions "the twelve" (6:67, 70–71; 20:24) but never provides a list. If one scours the entire book, the names of some of the twelve familiar from the Synoptics do appear: Andrew (1:40); Peter (1:42), Philip (1:44), Judas Iscariot (6:71), another Judas (14:22), Thomas (20:24–25), and "the sons of Zebedee" (21:2). But this would account for only eight of the twelve. John's Gospel does not mention Bartholomew, Matthew, James of Alphaeus, or Simon the Zealot. And it seems to speak of someone named Nathanael as though he is among the twelve (1:45–49; 21:2).

At some point in church history, ecclesiastic authorities sought to resolve the confusion by simply declaring (without any evidence) that Nathanael is the same person identified as Bartholomew in the other Gospels. That has seemed satisfactory to many Bible readers,

especially since would otherwise be known of Bartholomew and there would be no biblical stories of his exploits to read on August 24, the day assigned to him in the liturgical church year. Scholars are a harder sell and tend to regard the Bartholomew = Nathanael equation as a somewhat facetious attempt at harmonization. Maybe Nathanael was simply a friend of the disciples or, again, maybe the precise membership of “the twelve” changed over time.

Whatever the exact names of these disciples might have been, all four Gospels hold that the concept of “the twelve” is significant. This is no doubt because the number recalls the twelve tribes of Israel and so Jesus’s designation of a group of followers as “the twelve” was probably intended to symbolize the restoration of Israel that he hoped to effect. Indeed, Jesus is portrayed as promising his disciples that they will judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30).

The significance of the number twelve is also evident in the story reported in Acts 1:15–26, where the early church feels a need to replace Judas Iscariot by selecting Matthias to fill out their number. This process does not continue, however: when James the son of Zebedee is killed (Acts 12:2), no effort is made to replace him. The apostle Paul knew about “the twelve” and, at least two decades before the Gospels were written, he referred to that entity as a group that could authenticate the church’s proclamation of Jesus’s resurrection (1 Cor. 15:5).