

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Biographical Study: Nathaniel

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New Testament Orientation I

by

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Introduction

One of the challenges on writing a biography about Nathaniel is the lack of information about him in the New Testament. He is only directly mentioned twice in the Bible, both times in the book of John (chapters 1 and 21), with very little information about him revealed. The passage in John 1 is the one, of the two, with the most detail, with Nathaniel's call to follow Jesus described over the course of five verses. The reference in John 21 is simply a listing of those present after the resurrection at the third appearance of Christ. No direct involvement of Nathaniel is recorded other than his presence.

Scholars believe there is a case to be made that the Bartholomew mentioned briefly in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and the book of Acts, is in fact Nathaniel. Through careful examination of the scriptures and extra-biblical historical sources, a compelling case can be made that the Nathaniel and Bartholomew mentioned in the gospel accounts is the same individual. It is not unusual for individuals in the scriptures to have more than one name, and it is interesting to note that the name Nathaniel does not make an appearance in any of those four books.¹

Through using commentaries on the gospels and Acts, as well as scholarly articles, this paper will attempt to both make the case for Nathaniel and Bartholomew being the same individual, and having accomplished that, communicate what is known directly of his life and death. Of course, if he was in fact one of the twelve apostles, we can have a broad view through the New Testament and specifically the gospels of his activities at large as a part of that group, however, this paper will focus only on those events in which he is named as a participant.

¹ Brownrigg, Ronald. "Nathaniel." *Who's Who in the New Testament*. 2002.

Two Names, One Man

Nathaniel

Readers are introduced to Nathaniel in chapter one of the gospel of John. He is a man from Cana, with his name meaning “God has given.”² While there is no direct reference to Nathaniel being called to be one of the twelve apostles, it can be assumed that his invitation to follow Christ is recognized in the beginning of John to establish just such a relationship. While Christ would formally recognize the twelve later in His ministry, John’s emphasis of Nathaniel’s call in chapter one points to a more important connection to Christ throughout His earthly ministry.³ Nathaniel also seems to have a special place of honor in his early recognition of Christ, calling Him the “Son of God”, and the “King of Israel” in verse 49.⁴

Some details to note about Nathaniel include that John connects him to Philip. Throughout the gospels each of the writers seem to consistently split the twelve into groups of four.⁵ While they may vary the order in which the individuals are listed in each foursome, overall the three groupings are listed in the same order. It is most likely not a coincidence that the first group of four listed contains the most visible apostles throughout the gospel narrative, while the apostle consistently listed last is Judas Iscariot.⁶ This would seem to indicate an intentionality in how Nathaniel is listed in this passage following Philip, establishing a relationship we will see

² Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995. 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴ Sproul, R. C. *John*. Ann Arbor, MI: Sheridan Books, 2009. Location 281.

⁵ Bruce, F. F. *The Book of the Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

repeated in the other gospel accounts if it is also accepted that the name Bartholomew is also referring to Nathaniel.

There are two other theories for who the name Nathaniel refers to, however, neither theory carries much support.⁷ The first is that the reference to Nathaniel in John 1 is simply allegorical and that Nathaniel is simply an ideal disciple, hence the name chosen which means “God has given”.⁸ However, this is unlikely because the story is told in such a literal way with no indication that it is some sort of story or example, but is in fact exactly what it seems to be – the calling of a literal man named Nathaniel. The second theory is that Nathaniel is another name for Matthew, since both names have similar meanings.⁹ However, this also seems unlikely because of the pairing of Nathaniel with Philip, as well as the much stronger evidence for the alternate name Bartholomew.

Bartholomew

Bartholomew is mentioned in four places in the New Testament scriptures; Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:14, and Acts 1:13. In all four passages he is included in lists of Apostles present for different events or moments. What is interesting to note is that Bartholomew is not mentioned in the book of John, nor is Nathaniel mentioned in Matthew, Mark, Luke or Acts.

According to William Lane, what we have recorded as the name Bartholomew is not actually a name that people would be given. Instead, it is a patronymic (a name derived from the

⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. 143.

⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁹ Ibid., 143.

name of a father or ancestor) which literally means “Son of Talmai”.¹⁰ It can be assumed that this Son of Talmai had an actual name in addition to this patronymic.

In addition, as previously noted, there seems to be a tendency in the Biblical authors to list the disciples in a specific order. While never defined for the readers, there seems to clearly be a pattern or hierarchy in listing the twelve. In John 1, Nathaniel is paired with Philip. Meanwhile, in Bartholomew is paired with Philip in all three of the synoptic gospels; Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:14.¹¹ A similar pairing happens with Nathaniel being named immediately after Thomas in John 21:2, exactly in the same way that Bartholomew is named immediately after Thomas in Acts 1:13.¹²

While tradition can be a questionable source, coupled with the above information, it does add weight to the argument that Bartholomew is in fact Nathaniel. According to Ronald Brownrigg, “The identification of Bartholomew and Nathanael has been widely accepted by biblical scholars from the 9th century to the present day.”¹³

One Man

While it cannot be known for certain this side of eternity whether or not Nathaniel and Bartholomew were in fact the same man, the evidence to support that idea does seem strong. Consequently, while the only story specifically about Nathaniel in the Bible comes in the first chapter of John, readers are able to assume that he in fact becomes one of the twelve apostles.

10 Lane, William L. *The Gospel of Mark*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974. 135.

11 Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. 143.

12 Ibid., 143.

13 Brownrigg, Ronald. "Nathaniel." *Who's Who in the New Testament*. 2002.

First, because his calling to discipleship was singled out and described, attributing a level of importance to Nathaniel. Secondly, because the name Bartholomew was included several times in lists of the apostles, making a strong case that Bartholomew was an apostle.¹⁴

The following biography of Nathaniel is based on the passages in which Nathaniel or Bartholomew are mentioned. As an apostle, it can be assumed that he was an eye witness and a participant throughout Christ's ministry on earth. However, for this paper, only the instances where he is specifically mentioned as a participant will be included.

Biography

Life

John 21:2 mentions that Nathaniel is from Cana in Galilee. In John 1:47, Jesus describes Nathaniel as a “genuine son of Israel – a man of complete integrity.” In John 1:48 Jesus mentions that He knew Nathaniel was under the fig tree earlier. Very little is known of Nathaniel before his encounter with Jesus. But the above comments do give some insight. The reader can know where he is from, what kind of community he grew up in and what its climate would have been. Nathaniel makes a comment wondering what good can come from Nazareth, referring to Christ – however, nowhere else is Nazareth spoken of in a negative manner, which leaves the question of why Nathaniel would say what he did. One proposed explanation? Leon Morris notes that Cana in Galilee was in close proximity to Nazareth, and Nathaniel's comment may reflect nothing more than a small town rivalry.¹⁵

¹⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. 143.

¹⁵ Ibid., 145.

More significantly, Christ's comments regarding Nathaniel's character, combined with his activity under the fig tree paint a picture of a deeply devoted man of God. Frequently the fig tree would be used a symbol of home, a place where one would go for prayer, meditation and study.¹⁶ Jesus pointing out His knowledge of Nathaniel's time at the fig tree, as well as labeling him a "genuine son of Israel – a man of complete integrity", something Christ would know far more so than any other lead the reader to confidentially identify Nathaniel as one known for his integrity in his family and in his community. He was a man of God who had grown up connected to the Jewish traditions for education and upbringing.

Ministry

The Call. There are five ministry moments that mention Nathaniel as a participant by name in the scriptures. The first is a continuation of the discussion on John 1:45-49 in that it is Nathaniel's call to discipleship, which eventually leads to him being named an apostle. There is some speculation that Nathaniel's reaction to Christ's words about the fig tree are due to Jesus using a phrase that would have had a connection to Jacob and his struggle with God.¹⁷ Brownrigg claims that Nathaniel was reading about Jacob and his struggle while dealing with his own struggle over whether or not Christ was the Messiah; when Christ used language that hinted at that exact topic, it was all the confirmation he needed to know Christ's identity. However, it is a bit of a stretch to come to such a specific conclusion when the text does not claim it. Leon Morris takes a much more cautious stance, simply pointing out the use of language that would have pointed to Jacob without drawing any conclusions from it other than that clearly Jesus revealed

¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷ Brownrigg, Ronald. "Nathaniel." *Who's Who in the New Testament*. 2002.

knowledge of something deeply meaningful and spiritual in Nathaniel’s life – such knowledge could not be had without God’s intervention, and so Nathaniel commits himself to following Christ and his involvement in Christian ministry begins.¹⁸

Choosing of the Twelve. The second ministry moment is recorded in Mark 3:13-19 and Luke 6:12-16; both authors describe the same moment, with different details. Luke mentions that Christ prefaced His choosing of the twelve by spending the night in prayer. Both mention Nathaniel by the name Bartholomew. In this moment, Nathaniel transitioned from a simple student of Christ to one of the twelve who would follow Him everywhere, benefit from a level of exposure to Christ and His ministry that would ultimately equip them to start and lead the New Testament church. More than likely, this was one of the most significant moments of his life.

Both William Lane¹⁹ and Leon Morris²⁰ point out that this new group of twelve represent the people of the twelve tribes of Israel. Christ was directly claiming authority over the entirety of Israel in a way that both honored the past (the twelve tribes) while starting something new. Through their connection to Christ in this unique relationship they were given authority.²¹

The term “apostle” given to them by Christ comes from the verb translated “to send”²², literally naming them messengers in His name, to carry the Good News throughout the world, and after His death and resurrection, to begin the New Testament church.

¹⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. 146.

¹⁹ Lane, *Mark*. 132.

²⁰ Morris, Leon. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988. 145.

²¹ Lane, *Mark*. 133.

²² *Ibid.*, 145.

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve. The third moment in Nathaniel's ministry life is recorded in Matthew 10. In this passage Jesus gives them detailed instructions, including the following:

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Nathaniel is specifically listed in this passage as Luke records the names of those sent out (Luke records him with the name Bartholomew). Matthew records Christ's instructions to the twelve, and His warnings to them. This passage is also a beautiful commissioning of the twelve, empowering them for ministry. Bruner suggests the following outline for Jesus' traveling instructions to them:²³

1. Where to Go in Mission (Not Here But Here), 10:5-6
2. What to Do in Mission (Heralding and Healing), 10:7-8a
3. How to Do Mission (Simply, Not Grandly), 10:8b-10
4. With Whom to Do Mission (The Receptive), 10:11-13a
5. How to Handle Rejection in Mission (Peace Retrieving and Dust Shaking), 10:13b-15

Back to Fishing. The fourth moment involving Nathaniel by name is recorded in John 21:1-14, after the crucifixion of Christ, the third time He appeared to the disciples. Six of the disciples, including Nathaniel, have returned to fishing. In a way, it paints a picture of hopelessness – these are men without a cause returning to what they know. After fishing for the night, they return empty handed only to have Jesus on the shore telling them to cast their nets

²³ Bruner, Frederick Dale. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004. 458.

again – at this point they have not recognized Him. It is only once their nets are overwhelmed with a massive haul that they realize His true identity. For this group of men, it must have been a powerful moment; it would still be very fresh in their minds how they fled Jesus in His moment of crucifixion. They are broken, feeling like failures, “men without a purpose,”²⁴ and Christ simply spends time with them, feeding them, and demonstrating to them His unconditional love. These actions in time turn this group of men who fled danger in fear at the time of His crucifixion into a group of fearless leaders who would all die for their faith.

The Upper Room. Acts 1:12-14, the fifth and final ministry moment in which Nathaniel is named. At this point, the now eleven apostles, the women, Mary the mother of Jesus and Christ’s brothers are following Jesus’ instructions to them to wait for the Holy Spirit’s arrival. They do so in the Upper Room, which some speculate to be the same Upper Room in which Jesus had celebrated Passover with the twelve – but this cannot be proven.²⁵

Not much of significance is mentioned in this specific passage, other than their faithful obedience and patience regarding Christ’s commands. It is our last Biblical mention of Nathaniel, a man who has followed Christ from that first encounter until this one. The eleven do select a twelfth apostle to replace Judas Iscariot. This was a time for prayer, for preparing, for gaining strength before the whirlwind events that triggered the birth of the early church.

Death

The scriptures do not record Nathaniel’s death. Like most of the apostles, very little was ever said about him in the Bible. Most of the recorded history focuses on the words and actions

²⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. 760.

²⁵ Bruce, *Acts*. 40.

of a few, with the implied message that the rest of the twelve were just as involved but unrecorded for history.

Brownrigg records that tradition holds that Nathaniel served as a missionary, traveling as far as India, and finding his death through a brutal flaying at Albanopolis in Armenia.²⁶ Because of this traditional view of Nathaniel's death, he is generally drawn with his skin over his arm and a knife in his hand.

Conclusion

Like many of the apostles, little is actually known of Nathaniel. If it is accepted that Bartholomew and Nathaniel are the same man it brings the total number moments in his life recorded in scripture from two to five. The reality is that gospels, and the New Testament as a whole, seem to only focus on a few of the twelve.

Yet even so, it should not be thought that Nathanael was in any way a minor player – Christ did not call him to be one of the twelve simply to fill a spot on the roster so His apostles had spiritual symbolism with the nation of Israel. Each one of those men were called with a purpose, to complete a vital team of men. As an apostle he had great spiritual authority and influence on the early church, as well as a critical missionary role. His time with Christ equipped him for ministry in a way none of us will experience on this earth. Under his leadership, as well as the other apostles, the early church was born and a movement was started that would ultimately spread throughout the world and change the course of history.

All because, to his astonishment, he encountered something amazing from Nazareth.

²⁶ Brownrigg, Ronald. "Nathaniel." *Who's Who in the New Testament*. 2002.

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