

Essay

Counting to Twelve

Naming the disciples is trickier than you think. Why is that?

By Christopher Zakian

A funny thing happens when you try to name the twelve disciples of Jesus: you end up with *more* than a dozen names. Why is that? And what might it tell us about the disciples, their Master—and the church he established? This article will present some thoughts on these questions.

There are five relevant Scriptural sources: the four gospels plus the Acts of the Apostles. All of them agree that Jesus chose exactly *twelve* disciples. Conveniently, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the book of Acts, provide lists of the chosen Twelve—with close but not perfect agreement among them.

The Gospel of John has no list, and confuses matters when it identifies individual disciples. And Luke adds to the problem, relating the familiar story of the Calling of Matthew the Publican, but substituting the name "Levi" for "Matthew."

By doing so, Luke may be providing a key to this mystery. For "Levi" might have been a *sobriquet*—a descriptive name, or nickname—for Matthew, who was a member of the Israelite tribe of Levi. If other disciples also went by more than one name, then that would explain why we get too many candidates when we start counting the Twelve.

In fact, it turns out that *all but two* of the twelve disciples are identified by a given name plus a "nickname." Now, surely this is more than a simple coincidence: it seems to establish a pattern. And it positively begs for the question: Where did these nicknames come from?

One likely answer might be that they were bestowed by the leader of the group: Jesus himself.

As a matter of fact, there is a famous gospel story in which Jesus does precisely that: he gives a new name to one of his followers. In that dramatic episode, Jesus coins a nickname for Simon the fisherman, subsequently to be called Peter—"the Rock."

Shaping the Rock

The idea of Jesus making up new names for his disciples is (to say the least) an unexpected facet to discover in his mysterious character. And it is a facet that defies the usual solemnity surrounding our reflections on Jesus. After all, coining nicknames for your companions is whimsical: something bestowed not with severity, but with a smile. We can see an inkling of this attitude in the episode with Simon Peter.

Alone for a moment with his disciples, Jesus asks them who they think he is. After a round of incorrect answers, Simon—flushed with inspiration—chimes in: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus blesses Simon for the insight, and reveals that this epiphany came courtesy of God Himself. Then he adds: "Thou art indeed *Peter*; upon this *rock* shall I build my church."

Here we see the essential elements of Jesus' method of coining names. First, there is some wordplay in the name itself: Peter or *Petros* is Greek for "rock."

But there is also some *irony* in the name choice: for as we elsewhere discover about Simon Peter, he is a figure with significant weaknesses. He vacillates in his faith. He is indecisive. He exhibits cowardice as well as recklessness. He can't even control his own household. This is hardly a stable foundation for Christ's church; Peter is not exactly "rock material."

This very realization leads us to a third characteristic of Jesus' nicknaming: a penetrating insight into the *authentic* character of the individual, and an understanding of their greater potential. In Peter's case, he was ultimately able to find the courage and strength of character to live up to his nickname. Perhaps what he needed all along was for someone like Jesus to see that potential in him, and force it out of him—force him to become "the Rock" Jesus knew he could be.

One might add a further dimension to the nickname "Peter," although this one is purely speculative. The fact is that we still today call people "Rock" or "Rocky," and this name is associated with a certain tough physical type. Peter was a fisherman, and hauling in the heavy nets would hardly be work for anything less than a robust physical specimen.

Remember, too, that on the night Jesus was arrested, Peter attacked the company of arresting soldiers at Gethsemane *single-handedly*, armed only with a sword. Only a man confident of his own physical powers would attempt that.

Tough guys

So we have the disciple Simon called Peter: the Rock. If my conjecture is correct, then brawniness seems to have run in Peter's family: his brother Andrew—another disciple—has a name which comes from the Greek word *andreios*, which means "manly" or "masculine," in the martial sense. Andrew, incidentally, is one of the two disciples without a nickname. However, it is not too farfetched to reason that "Andrew" itself may be the nickname, and the original Hebrew name has been lost in transmission.

(This might be the place to briefly note that the Greek names we've received through the gospels are translations of Aramaic—the primary language spoken by Jesus. *Peter* is the Greek version of the Aramaic word for rock, *Cephas*; the latter is the name St. Paul uses when he refers to Simon Peter.)

On the subject of brawn, we might turn our attention to the brothers James and John, the Sons of Zebedee. In this case again, we are told that Jesus himself coined the dramatic nickname for these two: "The Sons of Thunder." What this means exactly is unclear, because James and John are not vividly drawn figures in the gospels. Nevertheless, "Sons of Thunder" is not a likely nickname for a couple of ninety-eight-pound weaklings.

Interpreting the name as "the untamable ones" or "the irresistible ones" (as some scholars suggest) may indicate that the brothers, prior to their association with Jesus, might have flirted with the revolution political groups that were common in Jesus' day. In joining a movement that preached, "Blessed are the meek," the brothers would have turned away from those activities. Was Jesus' nickname for James and John a gentle reminder that they *had indeed* been tamed, by the One who could disperse storms and calm the seas?

That Jesus did associate with revolutionaries—or former revolutionaries, at any rate—is demonstrated by the nickname for the disciple Simon the Canaanite, who is called *Zelotes* or "the Zealot." A reference to the militant nationalists who were to be found in the Galilee region of the Holy Land.

Moses. For a member of that tribe to repudiate his sacred calling and become a tax collector for Rome was fairly disreputable. Perhaps Jesus began calling Matthew "Levi" in an effort to re-awaken his lost sense of heritage, duty to God, and self-respect?

By way of analogy: when a mother becomes angry with her child, she might call him by his full formal name. She does this instinctively; but it serves to remind the child of where he's come from, the burden of name and history which falls on him, and how disappointed she is that he—*of all people*—should require scolding. Of course, this kind of scolding has its origins in love, and the desire to improve another, to get them back on the right track. Matthew's nickname of "Levi" may have been just such a loving rebuke, beckoning the tax collector to return to his heritage.

Hard cases

Philip and James the Less are two weaker cases. Philip, like Andrew, is another Greek name, deriving from the word for "love" in the sense of "friendship"—a likely enough nickname in a group whose principle religious theme was God's love for His creatures.

The disciple James is represented with no less than four *sobriquets*: James the Son of Alphaeus, James the Less, James the Just, James the Brother of Our Lord. The last one just begs for an explanation—but that is the topic of a dissertation, not an informal article. Suffice it to say that, once again, within Jesus' circle of companions, James was called by a variety of names.

The apostle Bartholomew is a more challenging case; he corresponds to the character of Nathanael in the Gospel of John. The name "Bartholomew" would seem to be the nickname of Nathanael, and it would appear to be a contraction of *bar-Tholomeus* meaning "son of Tholomaeus."

Now this might be just a random patronymic name. But it so happens that there was a famous Tholomaeus living in Palestine in the first century. You will encounter him in the *Antiquities* of the Jewish historian Josephus, in which a figure named Tholomaeus is identified as the infamous chieftain of a band of robbers. During Jesus' lifetime, Bar-Tholomaeus might conceivably have been a colloquial synonym for a thief, or (more broadly) an untrustworthy person.

Now this is really just a guess, and the connection between the disciple Nathanael-nicknamed Bartholomew and the criminal Tholomaeus would mean absolutely nothing—were it not for a strange little dialogue in the passage which introduces Nathanael. In it, Nathanael comes off as a cynical skeptic—a regular wiseguy—who regards Jesus' initial greeting as a joke, but who has an unexpected change of heart when Jesus makes a remark about Nathanael's past. Here is the passage, from the first chapter of John:

Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, "We have found the one whom Moses and the Prophets wrote about. He is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip answered, "Come and see."

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile [deceit]."

Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?"

Jesus answered, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Jesus answered, "Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these."

Obviously, Jesus touched a chord in Nathanael with his fig-tree remark—and a deeply *personal* chord, one that would only be known in Nathanael's heart of hearts. Jesus' ability to penetrate this secret was what convinced Nathanael that he was in the presence of someone who was more than a carpenter from Nazareth.

And while the exact significance of "under the fig tree" remains obscure, the general meaning of the exchange is plain: Nathanael—perhaps suffering from a guilty conscience?—seems to feel that he could *never* be described as someone "in whom there is no guile," except in extreme irony. Jesus responds by reminding Nathanael of a time in his life when he *may indeed* have been guileless and innocent—perhaps during the carefree, fruit-eating days of his youth—and the memory is so exquisitely powerful and painful to Nathanael that he immediately believes in Jesus, and signs on as a disciple.

In the case of the last three disciples, the nicknames assigned to them had a more utilitarian purpose: to distinguish men with the same given name. In Jesus' day, probably one man in four bore the name Judas, and that ratio holds among the disciples as well. The three Judas's are Judas Thaddeus, Judas Iscariot, and Judas Thomas.

The name "Thaddeus" means "breast" or "heart"—the seat of the sentiments. It may refer to the disciple's great-heartedness; or perhaps to the common saying "the bosom of Abraham," which would describe someone who had his feet firmly planted in the soil of his faith and people, and who was eager to take up the yoke of service to God. Keeping in mind the earlier suggestion about Peter, there might also be a reference to Thaddeus' physical type: sturdy, broad-chested, "hearty," as we might still say today.

The *sobriquet* of Judas Iscariot comes from *ish-Kerioth*, meaning "man of Kerioth," a town in Judea. All the other disciples—Jesus included—came from Galilee, a region to the north of Jerusalem. Kerioth was a town to the south, and Judas was being distinguished on the basis of his place of origin—as we still distinguish people today, as Yankees or Rednecks, or in the Armenian vernacular as *Sepastatzi's* or *Bo/setzi's*. One can only wonder whether Judas felt like an outsider among so many Galileans. If he felt alienated—with or without reason—perhaps it planted a seed for his more terrible break with the disciples, which led him to betray their master Jesus?

I have saved the most provocative disciple for last: Judas called Thomas, who is also referred to as Didymus. The two words mean the same thing, namely "twin." Of course, this raises the natural question: *Whose twin was he?* He may have been the twin of one of the other disciples, or of a person completely unassociated with the Twelve. But as a member of the band of men who were led by and identified with Jesus, one possible answer to the question could be: "Thomas was the twin of Jesus Himself."

Now of course this is an *outrageous* speculation, with no basis in Scripture or tradition. Nevertheless, it was seriously entertained by some heretical Gnostic sects in the early history of Christianity. (I hasten to add that most Gnostic theology sounds better as a *Twilight Zone* episode than as sacred doctrine.) As for Thomas himself, I don't suppose we will ever know whose twin he really was. But the name is a fascinating detail, and lends an uncanny quality to the colorful cast of disciples: the perennial eeriness of twins.

What's in a name?

this Christ-Adam analogy, because Adam's first and primary occupation was *to name all the creatures of the earth*. It is just possible that Jesus' re-naming his followers was a conscious echo of Adam's role as the original bestower of names.

But something else may be at work here. The reference to Paul is a reminder that he, too, had more than one name: his original name was Saul, and he adopted the name Paul—meaning, incidentally, "small"—after his conversion experience with the glorified Christ. Elsewhere we read of other early church leaders with additional names: Simeon called Niger (Acts 13:1), and Jesus called Justus (Colossians 4:11), for example. Again, a pattern seems to be emerging.

In the Armenian Church, when a young man has prepared for the priesthood, he goes through the Service of Calling. On his knees, the candidate enters the sanctuary and approaches the bishop, who acts and speaks in the role of Christ, choosing the candidate, as it were, from among all others, to take up the pastoral staff. In the Service of Ordination, the bishop lays hands upon the candidate; the Holy Spirit enters into him—and he becomes a new man. And to symbolize and complete this transformation, the ordained priest receives a special gift: a *new name*—specially chosen for him, which is meant both to fit his nature, and inspire him throughout his ministry.

Could it be that this beautiful ritual of our church preserves a *memory* of Jesus' act of giving new names to those he called?

It is true that this theory of naming is only inferred in the Bible, and does not appear there explicitly. But it is also true that in our tradition, priests are considered to be the *literal* successors to Jesus' original disciples (who became "apostles" when they went out to evangelize the world). This is what we mean by "apostolic succession": Jesus laid his hands on the original Twelve and the Holy Spirit entered them; these in turn (with the exception of Judas) laid their hands on a second generation of followers; and so on, down to the present day.

Perhaps receiving a new name was a part of this ceremony from the very beginning? And though it was dimly remembered in the gospels (as at Mark 3:14), a fuller memory of it was "recorded" in the sacrament of ordination.

If that is indeed the case, it only underscores our special historical connection to world of the Bible, through the Holy Tradition of the Armenian Church. That world is truly *alive* in our church, through our prayers and rituals, through the sacraments and holy priesthood. And this realization should guide us, and spark our imaginations, whenever we turn to the pages of Scripture.

This essay was originally published in the Spring/Summer 2009 issue of The Armenian Church magazine.