

Who was Nathanael in the Bible?

Nathanael, whose name is spelled Nathaniel in popular modern usage, was one of the disciples called by Jesus (John 1:43). Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee (John 21:2) and was brought to Jesus by his friend, Philip, who also became one of Jesus' disciples. Nathanael was one of the first to express belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (John 1:49). His name means "God has given" in Hebrew. Interestingly, Nathanael is only mentioned in the Gospel of John; the other three gospels identify him as "Bartholomew."

The call of Philip and Nathanael to discipleship is recorded in the first chapter of John, beginning in verse 43. Jesus went to Galilee and found Philip first, who then went to Nathanael, his friend. Philip told Nathanael that he had found "the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). Nathanael was skeptical and said, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (verse 46). This skepticism was understandable; at that time Nazareth was an obscure little hill town, remote and of no consequence. It was not sophisticated or glamorous, quite the opposite—it was not a place that anyone expected the Messiah to come from. Despite his skepticism, Nathanael followed Philip to meet Jesus. When the Lord saw Nathanael coming toward Him, He said, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (verse 47). Nathanael accepted this description as true and wondered how Jesus knew his character, having never met him before. Jesus explained: "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you" (verse 48). Nathanael then immediately recognized Jesus as the Christ, calling him the "Son of God" and the "king of Israel" (verse 49).

It has been speculated that there was something in Nathanael's mind or actions under the fig tree that caused Jesus to refer to him as "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

This would help explain Nathanael's amazement, as simply having seen Nathanael under the fig tree does not necessarily denote spiritual foresight or anything miraculous. It is obvious that Jesus' mention of "no deceit" triggered amazement in Nathanael; it points to the fact that Jesus knew his thoughts.

Jesus responds to Nathanael's statement of faith with a prophecy: "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that" (John 1:50). Then Jesus prophesies that Nathanael will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man (verse 51). This is a reference to the story of Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28. But instead of ascending and descending on a ladder as they did in Jacob's dream, the angels will ascend and descend on the Son of Man—meaning that Jesus Himself will be the final, efficacious connection between God and humanity (see Hebrews 9:12; 10:10).