

## Who was Bartholomew in the Bible?

Bartholomew is listed as one of the twelve disciples of Jesus in each of the four references to the group (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). In the Gospel of John, however, he is always referred to as Nathanael (John 1:45-49; 21:2). Bartholomew is a Hebrew surname meaning “son of Tolmai.” So Nathanael is the son of Tolmai, or Nathanael Bar-Tolmei.

In each of the listings of the disciples, the names of Philip and Bartholomew are linked, which could mean they were good friends or even related. What we know about Bartholomew/Nathanael comes primarily from the account of his call by Jesus (John 1:45-49). After Jesus called Philip to follow Him, Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (verse 45). This would seem to indicate Philip and Nathanael were students of the Law and the Prophets and that Philip recognized from their study that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for.

We see from Bartholomew’s next statement, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46) that he held the town of Nazareth in the same regard as many Jews of that day. Nazareth, and all of the area around Galilee, was seen as a low and wicked place. Even Bartholomew/Nathanael, himself a Galilean, was doubtful that anything good, let alone God’s Messiah, could come from such a place.

The next verse gives us true insight into the character of Bartholomew. When Jesus saw him coming, He said, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” The Greek word for “false” means “deceitful, crafty, or full of guile.” Jesus knew Nathanael’s heart, just as He knows what is in every heart. Jesus’ assessment of

Bartholomew was that he was a “true” son of Abraham, that is, a man who worshiped the true and living God without any of the deceit or hypocrisy that characterized the religious leaders of that day.

What follows is a declaration of Jesus’ divine nature and power. Bartholomew/Nathanael asked Jesus how He knew him, and Jesus replied, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you” (John 1:48). Jesus wasn’t present when Philip called Nathanael, yet He had seen and heard their conversation, evidence of His omniscience. He knew not only Nathanael’s words but his heart and sincere character as well. Nathanael (Bartholomew) saw the attributes of divine omniscience and the ability to discern hearts in the Man who stood before him. Nathanael’s familiarity with Old Testament prophecies caused him to recognize Jesus for who He was, the promised Messiah, Son of God and King of Israel (verse 49).

This is all we know about Bartholomew/Nathanael from Scripture. As an apostle, Bartholomew saw the risen Lord Jesus (John 21:2) and was present at the Ascension (Acts 1:1-11). Tradition indicates that Bartholomew was a minister of the gospel in Persia and India. There is no biblical record of his death, but one tradition has it that he was tied up in a sack and dropped into the sea. Another tradition claims that he was crucified. All traditions agree that he died a martyr’s death, as did all the apostles except for John.