

Who was Simon the Zealot?

Simon the Zealot was one of Jesus' disciples. Generally speaking, a zealot is anyone who fervently supports a particular cause. PETA, Greenpeace, and NOW might all be considered organizations that are filled with zealots.

In the context of the New Testament, the Zealots were a party zealous for Jewish independence and throwing off Roman rule. They hoped to accomplish this by inciting the people to rebellion, driving the Romans from Israel, and establishing a Mosaic theocracy. They were also known to target Jews who were sympathetic to Rome. Both Josephus and the Talmud took a negative view of the Zealots' fanaticism.

Simon the Zealot is mentioned four times in the New Testament, in places where the names of the disciples are listed, but beyond this no information about him is given (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). The KJV lists him as "Simon the Canaanite" in Matthew 10:4—the term Canaanite here being a political term, not a reference to a regional home. It is usually assumed that he is called "Simon the Zealot" because, when Jesus called him, he was a member of the Zealots' political movement. If so, the continued use of the designation does not address whether or not he continued to be zealous for Jewish independence while he was a disciple. In any case, we can assume that his priorities changed as he submitted to Jesus' teaching, which included "giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" (Matthew 22:21), and an emphasis on the kingdom of God, which was not of this world and was not established by use of violence and the force of arms (John 18:36). Simon would also have been informed by Jesus' revealing that the temple would be destroyed and Jerusalem would be completely overrun by the Gentiles (Luke 21:5-6, 20-24). Keeping the "nickname" of "the Zealot" may simply have been a way to distinguish him from the other Simon (who later came to be known as Peter) in Jesus'

group. Perhaps, in later years, he was known to be zealous for the gospel. Tradition says that Simon the Zealot preached the gospel in Persia and was ultimately killed for refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.

It is interesting to note that Jesus called another disciple, Matthew, who was a tax collector (Matthew 9:9) and who would have been in the employ of Rome directly or of the Jewish officials who ruled with Rome's blessing. Matthew the publican and Simon the Zealot were from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Because of their greater allegiance to Jesus, they were brothers and co-workers for the gospel. It is unfortunate that today many believers seem to be more committed to a political party or a political viewpoint than to the Christ, the church, the gospel, and the Kingdom of God.