

Did the people in the Bible have last names?

People in Bible times did not really have last names like we think of last names today. They frequently went by something similar to “Simon, son of Jonah” (Matthew 16:17). The phrase “son of Jonah” identified Simon as a different Simon than all the other Simons by this family connection. This functioned very close to a last name. Today, our last names use the same distinction. John Smith identifies John as a part of the Smith family.

Sometimes a person was identified by his tribe, such as “Aaron, the Levite” (Exodus 4:14), which differentiated that particular Aaron from the Aarons in other tribes. In the same way, Jesus was called Jesus of Nazareth to indicate His hometown (Matthew 26:71; John 18:5). Others in biblical times used their occupations as a functional last name, such as “Simon the tanner” (Acts 10:6). “Tanner” wasn’t his last name, but a way to distinguish him from other Simons in the area who had a different occupation. Judas Iscariot’s name was given to him to designate his native place, Carioth, or Kerioth, a small town in the tribe of Judah. Matthew, one of the Twelve and author of the gospel bearing his name, refers to himself as “Matthew the tax-collector” (Matthew 10:3), which reveals not only his occupation, but the astounding fact that even someone as lowly and despised as a tax collector could be chosen by Jesus to become His follower.

We sometimes think the name “Jesus Christ” refers to His first and last names. But it really means “Jesus, who is the Christ / Messiah.” Originally, the title took the form of “Jesus, the Christ,” but it has become common usage to shorten His name to Jesus Christ. This holy name means “Jesus, the Christ who is the Messiah, the anointed one who saves His people from their sins.”