

[Bible chronology main page](#)

[Chronology of the Four Gospels](#)

[Español](#)

The Twelve Apostles

[Rick Aschmann](#)

(Aschmann.net/BibleChronology/Apostles.html)

Last updated:
21-Oct-2019 at 15:51
(See [History](#).)
© Richard P. Aschmann

Contents

1. General Information
2. The Chart
3. The Three Groups of Four
4. Other Groupings in the Lists
5. Other Possible Identifications
 - 5.1. Evidence: Several Mothers at the Cross
 - 5.2. Were James and John Jesus' cousins?
 - 5.3. Was "James the Younger/Less" James [son] of Alphaeus?
 - 5.4. Less Likely Possibilities
 - 5.5. James [son] of Alphaeus was not James the brother of Jesus

1. General Information

The [large chart below](#) shows all of the lists of the twelve apostles given in the New Testament, arranged for comparison, plus additional information. These lists are interesting in a number of ways. First, no list exactly matches the order of any other list; they each have some unique orderings. (It is interesting that two of the lists are compiled by Luke, the writer of Luke and Acts, but do not follow exactly the same order!)

Second, the way the lists are arranged into groups or pairs is important, and provides us with a lot of information. See [The Three Groups of Four](#) and [Other Groupings in the Lists](#) below.

John provides no complete list as such, though all but 3 of the 12 are mentioned somewhere in the book, as shown in the chart. Actually, **John is the only one who mentions many of the apostles in situations other than these lists or the accounts of when Jesus calls them.** In fact, **other than the core group (Peter, James, and John) and Judas Iscariot none of the other apostles are even mentioned (with certainty) in the synoptic gospels except in these lists or in the accounts of when Jesus calls them.** (But see the discussion under [Other Possible Identifications](#) below.)

We know the **fathers** of 8 of the 12, as shown in the chart, though the word "son" (υἰός) is almost never used in these cases (except in John 1:42), being implied by the genitive (e.g. "James of Zebedee"). (It is also possible that we know the names of the mothers of a few of them: see the discussion under [Other Possible Identifications](#) below.)

Another list of the Twelve is mentioned in Revelation 21:14, which says, "The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb". However, it does not provide us with the actual list, which leaves us wondering who exactly was on it. Obviously Judas was not, since he betrayed the Lord, as Peter makes clear in Acts 1:15-22. Was Matthias on it? Or was the apostle Paul the real replacement for Judas? (See comments in endnote [10](#) below.)

2. The Chart

Luke list	Mark list	Matthew list	mentioned in John			Acts list
Official choosing of the 12, early in Jesus' second year of ministry, (mid 28 A.D.), with the complete list (reordered to match the Matthew list)		A complete list of the 12 (probably late in 28 A.D.) which clearly divides the list into distinct groups	A list from an informal meeting of 7 disciples (reordered to match the Matthew list)	Others mentioned in John (if never mentioned marked with —)	Other Information	Another complete list of the 11 after Jesus' ascension (mid 30 A.D.) which divides the text into slightly different groups (not reordered) Mentions in Acts after chapter 1 and in the letters ¹

		Luke 6:14-16	Mark 3:16-19	Matthew 10:2-4	John 21:2	Initial Call	“Official” Call	Hometown	Occupation	Father	Other Info	Acts 1:13		
Group 1 (Jesus' intimate group)	brothers	1. Simon (Peter)	1. Simon (Peter)	1. Simon (Peter)	Simon Peter	(often)	Simon Peter (Cephas) (Jn. 1:40-42)	Mt. 4:18-22 Mk. 1:16-20 Lk. 5:1-11	Bethsaida (Jn. 1:44)	fisherman (see “Official” Call)	John (Jn. 21, 1:42)	Wrote 1 and 2 Peter	1. Peter	Acts 2-5, 8-12, 15 Gal. 2:7-11
		2. his brother Andrew	4. Andrew	2. his brother Andrew		Jn. 6:8, 12:22	Andrew (Jn. 1:35-42)	↑ (north shore of Sea of Galilee, early 28 A.D.)		fisherman (see “Official” Call)	John		2. John	Acts 3,4,8, (12:2) ² Gal. 2:9
	brothers	3. James	2. James [son] of Zebedee	3. James [son] of Zebedee		(never by name)			Bethsaida? (because business partners with the above)	fisherman (see “Official” Call)	Zebedee	Died 44 A.D. ³ (Acts 12:2)	3. James	Acts 12:2 ⁴
		4. John	3. his brother John (Boanerges= Sons of Thunder)	4. his brother John	the [son]s of Zebedee	(never by name) ⁵	(John?) ⁵ (Jn. 1:35-40)			fisherman (see “Official” Call)	Zebedee	Wrote 5 books: John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Revelation	4. Andrew	—
Group 2	usually grouped together	5. Philip	5. Philip	5. Philip		Jn. 6:5-7, 12:21-22, 14:8-9	Philip (Jn. 1:43-46)		Bethsaida (Jn. 1:44, 12:21)				5. Philip	— ⁶
		6. Bartholomew	6. Bartholomew	6. Bartholomew	←?=Nathanael ⁷		Nathanael (Jn. 1:45-51)		Cana in Galilee (Jn. 21:2)				6. Thomas	—
	usually grouped together	8. Thomas	8. Thomas	7. Thomas	Thomas (Didymus) ⁸	Jn. 11:16, 14:5, 20:24-29							7. Bartholomew	—
		7. Matthew	7. Matthew	8. Matthew the tax collector		—		Mt. 9:9-17 Mk. 2:14-17 Lk. 5:27-31 ↑ (Capernaum, early 28 A.D.)	Capernaum?	tax collector (Mt. 10:3) (also see “Official” Call)	Alphaeus ⁹	Wrote Matthew, a.k.a. Levi [son] of Alphaeus (Mk. 2:14-17, Lk. 5:27-31)	8. Matthew	—
Group 3		9. James [son] of Alphaeus	9. James [son] of Alphaeus	9. James [son] of Alphaeus		—				Alphaeus ⁹			9. James [son] of Alphaeus	—
		11. Judas [son] of James	10. Thaddaeus	10. Thaddaeus		Judas (not Iscariot)				James			10. Simon the Zealot	—

				Jn. 14:22									
10. Simon the Zealot	11. Simon the Zealot	11. Simon the Zealot		—								11. Judas [son] of James	—
12. Judas Iscariot , who became a traitor	12. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him	12. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him		Jn. 6:70-71, 12:4-6, 13:2,21-30, 18:2-5			probably Kerioth south of Hebron	treasurer of the disciples (Jn. 12:6, 13:29)	Simon Iscariot (Jn. 6:71)	Committed suicide 30 A.D. (Mt. 27:5, Acts 1:18-19)		(12. Judas replaced by Matthias , Acts 1:26) ¹⁰	— ¹¹
			two other disciples, unidentified		↑ (all in Bethany beyond Jordan, 26 or early 27 A.D.)								

Red: Distinct names given to a particular individual or pair

Green: Out of the order given by Matthew, which is as close to a standard order as any

A double line between cells indicates a break in the list, suggesting the start of a new group (on some browsers it shows up as a very thick line).

Explicitly called brothers in the list

3. The Three Groups of Four

All four of the complete lists of the apostles given in the chart above group the 12 into the same 3 groups of 4, and each group always begins with the same person. So Peter is always number 1, Philip is always 5, and James son of Alphaeus is always 9. Also, Judas Iscariot is always listed last, as number 12. Other than this, the order within each group varies.

The meaning of the first group is clear: these are the 4 fishermen, and are also Jesus’ intimate group among the disciples, especially Peter, James, and John, whom Jesus often takes along with him separately, as in the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-13, Mk. 9:2-13, Lk. 9:28-36), the healing of Jairus’ daughter (Mk. 5:37), and many other cases. (They are usually listed as “Peter, James and John”, though occasionally they are listed in other ways, like “Peter and the two sons of Zebedee” in Mt. 26:37, and in Luke as “Peter, John and James” in Lk. 8:51, 9:28.) Occasionally Andrew is mentioned as well, as in Mk. 1:29, 13:3.

What about the other two groups? They must mean something; otherwise they would not be consistent among the four lists in spite of other variation. And it seems that they do: the second group is the second most important group in terms of (positive) involvement in Jesus’ ministry, as we can see from how many times they are all mentioned in the gospels, as shown in the chart. The third group includes those who have the least (positive) involvement in Jesus’ ministry. James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot are never mentioned at all outside the lists (but see the discussion under [Other Possible Identifications](#) below), and Judas son of James is only mentioned once, in Jn. 14:22, as “Judas (not Iscariot)”.

As for Judas Iscariot, he had lots of involvement in Jesus’ ministry, but all of it was negative, before, during, and after the betrayal of Jesus.

Thus the three groups apparently serve to rank the apostles according to how useful they were to Jesus. For more information about this question, a few helpful links I found are edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2011/01/30/introducing-and-ranking-the-twelve-apostles and various comments at biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/10-2.htm.¹²

4. Other Groupings in the Lists

In English when we enumerate a list of more than 2 items, we only use the word “and” before the last one, as in “Peter, Andrew, James, and John”. However, in Greek this is not the usual practice; instead, “and” (καί) is inserted between all of the items in the list: “Peter and Andrew and James and John”. What is unusual is when a break is made in such a list by leaving out the “and” between two people in the list. This actually indicates the beginning of a new list, and Matthew uses this to break the second and third groups into 4 pairs of individuals, which is what the double lines

between cells indicate in his list in the chart. The Acts list has different groupings, as shown in the chart. We could surmise that these groupings mean something, but in most cases it is unclear what the association would be, except for the cases I have already discussed above or in the footnotes.

5. Other Possible Identifications

This section is somewhat speculative, so take it with a grain of salt.

5.1. Evidence: Several Mothers at the Cross

Many commentators have noted that, if we compare the three parallel lists of the women who were standing within sight of the cross during the crucifixion, we may be able to gain some additional information about some of Jesus' 12 apostles and their connections to him. The three parallel passages are the following:

Matthew 27:55-56: ⁵⁵ There were also **many women** there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, ⁵⁶ **among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.**

Mark 15:40: There were also **women** looking on from a distance, **among whom** were **Mary Magdalene**, and **Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses**, and **Salome**.

John 19:25: ...but standing by the cross of Jesus were **his mother** and **his mother's sister**, **Mary the wife of Clopas**, and **Mary Magdalene**.

All three passages mention at least three women in particular. John 19:25 is a bit unclear as to whether it is talking about 3 women or 4, specifically, whether "his mother's sister" and "Mary the wife of Clopas" are one woman or two. However, the vast majority of commentators conclude that they are two women, including *Baker's New Testament Commentary*, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, and 6 of 7 commentators who express their opinion on the question at biblehub.com/commentaries/john/19-25.htm. The main reason given is that it would be unlikely that two sisters would both be named Mary. Also, the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* says, "S. John is fond of parallel expressions; 'His mother and His mother's sister, Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene' are two pairs set one against the other." We have already seen above that this kind of grouping is not uncommon in the Greek New Testament.

Furthermore, many commentators propose that the women in the three passages be identified as in the following table:

John 19:25	his mother	his mother's sister	Mary [the wife] of Clopas	Mary Magdalene
Matthew 27:56		the mother of the sons of Zebedee	Mary the mother of James and Joseph	Mary Magdalene
Mark 15:40		Salome	Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses	Mary Magdalene

This would mean that of the 4 women, 3 of them are identified as **mothers!**

5.2. Were James and John Jesus' cousins?

This would also mean that Zebedee's wife and the **mother** of James and John was named **Salome**, that she was Jesus' aunt, and that James and John were Jesus' cousins. This has been used to explain why James and John were part of Jesus' intimate group, and why their mother dared to make the request of Jesus that she makes in Matthew 20:20-23 and Mark 10:35-40. She thought being his aunt would give her an in!

But as *Baker's New Testament Commentary* says, "It must be stressed, however, that this harmony, though not improbable, cannot be proved."

5.3. Was “James the Younger/Less” James [son] of Alphaeus?

“James the younger” (ESV, NIV, and most modern translations) or “James the less” (NASB and KJV) is evidently distinguished by this title from James the son of Zebedee. Most commentators suggest that he is the apostle James [son] of Alphaeus listed in the four lists of apostles above. Part of the logic for this lies in the fact that both the name Clopas and the name Alphaeus are probably originally the same name in Aramaic, חַלְפָּאִי /ḥal'pāy/ (see biblehub.com/greek/256.htm). If this is the case, then this apostle is mentioned in two other verses as well, both in reference to his **mother Mary**: Mark 16:1 and Luke 24:10, so he would be mentioned in all three of the synoptic gospels. His **mother Mary** is mentioned in three other verses, in Mark 15:47 as “Mary the mother of Joses”, and in Matthew 27:61 as simply “the other Mary” with Mary Magdalene to see where Jesus was laid, and again in Matthew 28:1 as “the other Mary” with Mary Magdalene and others on resurrection morning at the tomb.

The odd thing about this information is that we never find James [son] of Alphaeus saying or doing anything, but we (possibly) see his mother present in three different scenes at the crucifixion and burial of Jesus! He is one of the Group-3 disciples, so it is interesting that we (possibly) even get any further information about him.

I think that these two suggested connections are probably the most likely of any that have been made. Even so, they are based to a certain extent on conjecture and implication.

5.4. Less Likely Possibilities

Others have pointed out that there is one other context in which two brothers named James and Joseph/Joses are mentioned: in reference to Jesus’s own family, that is, his own half brothers! In fact the second brother is called Joseph by Matthew and Joses by Mark in both contexts.

Matthew 13:55: Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called **Mary**? And are not his brothers **James** and **Joseph** and Simon and Judas?

Mark 6:3: Is not this the carpenter, the son of **Mary** and brother of **James** and **Joses** and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

Churches like the Catholic Church that believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary say that these were not really Jesus’ brothers from the same mother, and some have suggested that this other Mary was some close relative of Joseph or Mary, making these cousins rather than brothers of Jesus. However, the Bible does not teach the perpetual virginity of Mary; instead it makes clear that after Jesus’ birth she and Joseph had a normal marriage relationship, as Matthew 1:24-25 (NIV) makes clear: “²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But **he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son**. And he gave him the name Jesus.” So the plain meaning of Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 is that these were Jesus’ younger (half) brothers, children of his mother Mary with Joseph.

So could Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40 possibly be referring to Jesus’ own mother and brothers? In the context of the verses themselves this is not impossible, but it seems very improbable. Matthew has already told us that this Mary was Jesus’ mother in Matthew 1 and 2, and that these were his brothers in Matthew 13:55, so why would he adopt such an indirect reference in Matthew 27:56? It doesn’t seem likely.

So what do we know for sure about any of these suggestions? Nothing much with certainty, but they are certainly tantalizing!

5.5. James [son] of Alphaeus was not James the brother of Jesus

However, one thing is quite clear: James [son] of Alphaeus could not have been the same as James the brother of Jesus, in spite of some traditions that maintain that he is! The *New Bible Dictionary* entry for James points out that Jesus’ brothers, including James, “apparently did not accept the authority of Jesus before the resurrection (see Mk. 3:21 and Jn. 7:5). After the risen Jesus had appeared to him (1 Cor. 15:7), he became a leader of the Jewish-Christian church at Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19; 2:9; Acts 12:17).” So he clearly was not one of the 12 apostles. And in any case, he was the son of Joseph, not the son of Alphaeus or Clopas!

¹ Not counting mentions in the letters they wrote. John is mentioned in Revelation 1 and Revelation 22, and Peter is mentioned as the author of his two letters.

² References to John in other chapters of Acts are either to John the Baptist (in reference to the baptism he taught and performed) or to John Mark, not to the apostle John.

³ James was the first to die (after Judas), and the only one (besides Judas) whose death is recorded in the New Testament. The only other apostles whose death years are known from tradition died much later, the earliest being Peter, who died under Nero, just as Paul did, perhaps in 66 or 67 A.D., several years after the last events recorded in Acts.

⁴ Other references to James after Acts 12:2 and in the letters are all to James the brother of Jesus, not to the apostle James. This James is explicitly called Jesus' brother in Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, and Galatians 1:19.

⁵ John is never mentioned by name in the book of John, but is often mentioned indirectly. He may have been the other disciple who is not named in John 1:35-40. See footnotes 3 and 9 in [Chronology of the Four Gospels](#), the two footnotes that have links back to this page (footnote numbering often changes).

⁶ Other references to Philip in Acts are all to Philip the evangelist (a.k.a. Philip the deacon), not to the apostle Philip.

⁷ Nathanael is never explicitly equated with Bartholomew, the former only being mentioned in the Synoptics, and the latter only in John, but this very fact, plus the fact that both are associated closely with Philip (Nathanael in John 1 and Bartholomew in 3 of the lists), and that Nathanael appears at both the start and the end of Jesus' ministry, suggests that Nathanael was almost certainly one of the core group, and was probably the same as Bartholomew. Most commentators and traditions maintain this position.

⁸ The name Thomas is the Greek form of an Aramaic or Hebrew word meaning "twin", Hebrew תאִם /tā'ōm/, which only occurs in the plural in the Old Testament תאִמִּים /tə'ō' mīm/. Three times in John the equivalent Greek name Δίδυμος Didymus, also meaning twin, is given in addition, to make it clear that they really called him "twin". However, this is probably a nickname, and the Bible never gives his real name. Neither does it say who his twin was, though one theory which assumes that he is listed after his twin Matthew is given in the next footnote.

⁹ Even though both Levi (Matthew) and James are called the son of Alphaeus, some commentators doubt that they are brothers but the sons of two different men named Alphaeus, since they are never grouped together in the text as are the other brothers. However, at least one commentator, [Ellicott](#), claims that Matthew, Thomas, and James are all brothers, and are grouped together in the list for that reason, and gives some interesting arguments for this. So who knows?

¹⁰ Matthias is chosen as the replacement for Judas in Acts 1:26, but is never mentioned again, though presumably he was acting as a full-fledged member of the 12 apostles in Acts 2:14: "Peter, standing with the eleven" and Acts 6:2: "And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples". (However, apparently the number twelve was occasionally used loosely, as when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:5 that Jesus "appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve", when it must have been just the eleven.)

Many have suggested that the real replacement for Judas was the Apostle Paul, whom Jesus clearly chose and called on the way to Damascus in Acts 9. I tend to the latter opinion, since all of the original disciples were explicitly chosen by Jesus, and so was Paul, but Matthias was not.

Commentators are divided on the issue, some with strong arguments each way. I found so many that it would be pointless to even try to list them. Some say that it doesn't really matter, which in practical terms may be true. But **I'm not sure** I can agree with those who say that Revelation 21:14 is merely symbolic, and that the names aren't really there, though I will grant that Revelation has a lot of symbolic stuff which is hard to separate from what isn't.

¹¹ All references to Judas after chapter 1 of Acts are to other people, not to either of the apostles named Judas. The author of the book of Jude has the same name in Greek, and was probably another brother of Jesus, mentioned in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3. In Jude 1 he is called "brother of James" but "a servant of Jesus Christ", presumably to show humility in not claiming that being Jesus' half brother gave him any special status.

¹² One comment that I found especially interesting at this link was this one in "Bengel's Gnomen", which has some interesting insights, but seems to only be partly true: "The first [Matthew] and third [Luke] arrangements correspond generally to the time of their vocation [calling], and the conjunction of the apostles in twos; the second [Mark], to their dignity before our Lord's passion; the fourth [Acts], to their dignity after His ascension." The first part of this would suggest that the Matthew and Luke lists show the order in which they were called, which if we look at the chart, sort of works for Peter, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew/Nathanael, and Matthew, but we have no record of James being called before early 28 A.D., and can only surmise about John. The second part would suggest that the Mark list indicates their importance during Jesus' ministry, which does seem to be true, and confirms what I have said above about the three groups. The third part would suggest that the list in Acts indicates their importance in the history of the early church, which does seem to be true for group 1: in the gospels James may have been considered more important than John, since he is usually mentioned first, whereas in Acts John is clearly the most important in terms of his activity, and of course was the writer of 5 of the New Testament books, while the only thing we hear about James is that he is the first apostle to die. Actually, after chapter 1 of Acts, none of the other apostles are ever mentioned again in the entire New Testament except Peter and John, as shown in the penultimate column of the table above. So, in short, much of the variation in ordering is probably more random than anything.