

NATHANAEL

In our studies of the disciples we have looked at Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Philip. We have seen how Peter had another name, which was Simon ... James and John were also known by another name 'the sons of thunder' ... and since Philip's name was a Greek name, he would also have had a Hebrew name. ... The next disciple we are studying also had two names ...

- **Mt. 10:2** Now the names of the twelve apostles are these; The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; **3 Philip, and Bartholomew ... Mk. 3:14** And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach, **15** And to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils; **16** And Simon he surnamed Peter; **17** And James the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James; and he surnamed them Boanerges, which is, The sons of thunder: **18** And Andrew, and Philip, and **Bartholomew ... Lk. 6:13** And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles; **14** Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and **Bartholomew**
- **Jn. 21:1** After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. **2** There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and **Nathanael** of Cana in Galilee

Bearing in mind names often carried with them particular significance, what then are the meanings behind Nathanael and Bartholomew?

First of all, Nathanael is made out of two Hebrew words, i.e. the word for 'gift' (*nathan*) and the word for 'God' (*El*) ... Together, the name Nathanael means the 'gift of God'.

The first time the word 'gift' is used in Scripture is in Gen. 34:12. It is an unfortunate story, but we are looking at it simply because of the meaning of 'nathan'.

Shechem was a Hivite, a descendent of Ham, the disgraced son of Noah (Gen. 10:17). He noticed Dinah the daughter of Jacob and Leah ... and lured her into his bed, and defiled her. He reckoned he loved her, and he wanted to marry her so he spoke to his father Hamor, who intended to speak to Jacob (Dinah's father). However, on his way to Dinah's father (Jacob) he happened to meet Dinah's brothers who had heard about what Shechem had done to Dinah ... and they hatched a plan to avenge their sister's honour. They brought Shechem in before Jacob, **11** And Shechem said unto her father and unto

her brethren, Let me find grace in your eyes, and what ye shall say unto me I will give. ¹² Ask me never so much dowry and gift, and I will give according as ye shall say unto me: but give me the damsel to wife. ... Now, the word for ‘give’ is *nathan* ... ‘Nathan’ means a ‘gift’.

To develop this further, the first mention of the name ‘Nathan’ goes back to a royal prince, **II Sam. 5:13** And David took him more concubines and wives out of Jerusalem, after he was come from Hebron: and there were yet sons and daughters born to David. ¹⁴ And these be the names of those that were born unto him in Jerusalem; Shammua [*‘renowned’*], and Shobab [*‘rebellious’*], and Nathan [*‘gift’*], and Solomon [*‘peace’*], ¹⁵ Ibhar [*‘Jehovah chooses’*] also, and Elishua [*‘God is salvation’*], and Nepheg [*‘sprout’*, *i.e. to spring forth*], and Japhia [*‘shining’*], ¹⁶ And Elishama [*‘my God has heard’*], and Eliada [*‘God knows’*], and Eliphalet [*‘God is deliverance’*].

Probably the best known Nathan in the Bible is Nathan the prophet who ministered to King David (II Sam. 12), and also to King Solomon ... There was another Nathan who belonged to the family of one of David’s personal guards (II Sam. 23:36) ... and another Nathan who was one of the leaders who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem with Ezra (Ezra 8:16). So it had been a popular name, and it would have been all the more popular because of the connection with one of the sons of David and Bathsheba ... a ‘gift of God’.

Another name by which Nathanael was known is Bartholomew ... Nathanael Bartholomew ...

As you know, our names had a certain connotation when they were first given, and some of them included a prefix. For a very simple example, ‘Robertson’ simply meant ‘the son of Robert’ ... And, when you put a ‘Mac’ or a ‘Mc’ in front of, it has the same implication, e.g. McRoberts. Well, the Jews had a similar formula in their names ... They used ‘bar’ at the beginning of their names to mean ‘son of’ ...

- Barjona (son of Jonah, ‘son of a dove’; Mt. 16:17, Simon Barjona)
- Barabbas (‘son of a father’; Mt. 27:16)
- Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus, ‘son of the unclean/honourable’; Mk. 10:46, the blind beggar)
- Barsabas (‘son of rest’; Acts 1:23, *And they [the disciples] appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.*)
- Barnabas (‘son of consolation/the prophet’; Acts 13:1)

- Bar-Jesus ('son of Joshua/salvation'; Acts 13:6, the sorcerer in Paphos)

... So when you put the two names of the sixth disciple together you get Nathanael Bartholomew ... Literally, Nathanael ... *bar* ['son of'] *Tolmai* ... *Tolmai*. *Tolmai* is a farming word in the Aramaic language meaning 'furrow'. His family were most probably farmers, workers of the soil (ploughmen), - this is very plausible, taking into consideration the arable area they lived in. ... Or it could simply mean his father was called *Tolmai*. ...

Some commentators suggest Bartholomew may have been a wealthy family ... with links to a royal lineage going back to the reign of David, **II Sam. 3:1** Now there was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David: but David waxed stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker. ² And unto David were sons born in Hebron: and his firstborn was Amnon, of Ahinoam the Jezreelitess; ³ And his second, Chileab, of Abigail the wife of Nabal the Carmelite; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur.

Another suggestion is that Bartholomew might have belonged to a Hebrew sect known as the Tolmaians, whose leader was a man called Tolmai. This sect was devoted to the study of the Scriptures.

Indeed, there *is* an interesting possibility that might be hinted at in Jn. 1:48, Nathanael saith unto him [*Jesus*], Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree ... Now compare that with a passage such as Micah 4, ² And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³ And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ⁴ But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree ... They will be sitting under the fig tree in contemplation of all that will be taking place. It has a similar focus in Zech. 3:10, In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree.

The fig tree was a special place to go for it usually associated the place where students of the Torah would congregate, to be taught by the rabbis. It is very possible, - even probable, - that Philip was meditating upon the teachings of the Torah as he sat under the fig tree ... and it could connect well with what

lay behind the words of Philip in Jn. 1:45, Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. ... We have found the One for Whom we have been prayerfully studying and searching for in the Scriptures ... and hence, Nathanael's exclamation, ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered and saith unto him [*Jesus*], Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. In other words, it looks as if Nathanael was a student who spent his time actively looking for and studying the Scriptures concerning the Messiah.

So, this is Nathanael Bartholomew, 'a gift of God', 'son of Tolmai'. He came from the town of Cana (Jn. 21:2) which was a short walking distance from Nazareth, in Galilee. He was brought to Jesus by Philip, with whom his name is always linked. We have seen how that has been the case with the two sets of brothers, - Peter and Andrew, James and John ... and now we see it with the two friends ... Philip and Nathanael.

In our next study, we shall come back and find out something more of this disciple whom the Lord called, *Nathanael Bartholomew*.