

SIMON THE ZEALOT

We have already studied a ‘Simon’, - Simon Peter, the most outspoken of the disciples and the one to whom the other eleven regularly looked up to as their spokesman.

The second ‘Simon’, though, has a lesser profile. He is in what we have already described as the third group of disciples ... Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John in the first and more prominent group ... Philip, Bartholomew/Nathanael, Matthew, and Thomas in the second group who are given a lesser mention ... and then finally James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas/Thaddaeus, and Judas Iscariot.

In Mt. 10:4 and Mk. 3:18 this second Simon is referred to as *Simon the Canaanite*, and in Lk. 6:15 as *Simon called Zelotes*, and in Acts 1:13 *Simon Zelotes*.

Normally when we think of a Canaanite we think of one who comes from the land of Canaan. Canaan was the name of the fourth son of Ham, the youngest son of Noah (Gen. 9:18), and when Ham sinned against his father Noah, Noah declared, **Gen. 9:25** Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. ... **26** And he [*Noah*] said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. ... In the Greek language this Canaan is spelled *Χανάναν*, meaning ‘lowland’ ... and it described the land conquered by the Israelites when they came from out of the wilderness after having left Egypt forty years previously.

Now, does that mean that one of the disciples, - Simon the *Canaanite*, - was a Gentile ... of Gentile origin ... a non-Jew? ... Well, the word associated with Simon is not actually the same as the people connected with Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah. It *seems* to be the same word in our English, but in the Greek it is an altogether different word. The word associated with Simon is not the term referring to a Gentile from the peoples of Canaan.

Instead, it is the word, *Κανανίτης*, and it means something completely different. Whereas *Χανάναν* means ‘lowland’ referring to the area/region in which the ancient Canaanites dwelt, *Κανανίτης* comes from another Hebrew word which means ‘to be passionate’ and ‘to be zealous for’, and in this context it is the description of a Jewish man called *Simon Zelotes* ...

Please turn to Num. 25, **10** And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, **11** Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, while he was zealous [*Heb. qana'*; *Gr. ζήλος*] for my sake among them ... **12** Wherefore say, Behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace: **13** And he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous [*Heb. qana'*; *Gr. ζήλος*] for his God

So it is from the meaning of this word that Simon and others like him took the title “the Zealous”, the fervent and passionate Hebrew fanatically jealous for his beloved nation of Israel and its legacy and history. ... It also has to be said that another common use of this word had negative connotations. For example, **Gen. 26:14** For he [*Isaac*] had possession of flocks, and possession of herds, and great store of servants: and the Philistines envied him ... **30:1** And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister. At the same time, it is the word used to describe *God* being jealous, for example, **Zech. 8:2** Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I was *jealous* for Zion with great *jealousy*, and I was *jealous* for her with great fury. **3** Thus saith the LORD; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the LORD of hosts the holy mountain.

... And Simon was burning with this overwhelming passion for his nation, and all things Jewish. He was an extremely dedicated and deeply-spirited Jew. He belonged to an organization which fanatically promoted their Jewishness, especially at a time when the Roman Gentiles were occupying their land. They despised the Romans and the Greeks before them because their land had been given to the children of Israel by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The foreigners had no right to come in and invade their land. They had no right to introduce their pagan gods, and introduce a religion contrary to the worship of YaHWeH. In fact, anything non-Jewish was abhorrent to them ... and it meant they could freely justify political opposition and the use of force in the pursuit of their aims.

... And it was from out of these people Jesus particularly chose this man to be a disciple. ... Simon’s focus was all Jewish ... he would not have taken the Gentiles ‘under his notice’. ... And you could begin to understand how some of the Jewish authorities were so apprehensive of what Jesus was doing ... especially when He became associated with such a man as Simon the Zealot,

a known instigator of strife! ... You can understand how they feared Jesus was manoeuvring Himself to potentially lead a rebellion.

... And it *was* a very plausible threat for the Jewish Sanhedrin took it extremely seriously, as is shown by the special meeting they called to discuss the matter in the days following Pentecost. It was at this meeting Gamaliel stood up and addressed the court, [Acts 5:34](#) Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; [35](#) And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men. [36](#) For before these days rose up Theudas [*'God-given'*], boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought. [37](#) After this man rose up Judas [*'he shall be praised'* ... cf. [Gen. 49:10](#) *The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be ... Micah 5:2* *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel*] of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed. ... These were 'would-be' Messiahs setting out on a path of revolution ... and underlying their whole demeanour was a belligerent Judaism which despised everything that was not Jewish.

These rebels and revolutionaries were mostly centred round the Galilee region. They had become re-mobilised since the decree from Caesar Augustus went out to hold a census throughout the region, at the time Jesus was born. The Zealots had resented Caesar's decree because they considered it to be a flagrant abuse of their religion for what right had a foreign power based on a pagan and idolatrous system to legislate and to have such jurisdiction in their beloved land?! So, Josephus the Jewish historian recorded in his *Antiquities of the Jews* how the Zealots rose up under a man called Judas of Gamala (Galilee, cf. Acts 5:37). However, his revolt was crushed, and he was killed ... but the Zealots refused to be deterred.

Indeed, their flames of passion for their country were greatly kept lit as they remembered the glorious days during the times of the Maccabees (167-160 BC). They were a Jewish family who rose up against the invaders at that time who were the Greek Seleucid dynasty. The worst 'king' of this Seleucid dynasty was Antiochus Epiphanes [*'God Manifest'*]. The Apocryphal books of the Maccabees describe in ornate language their successful exploits ... ^{1 Macc.}
^{2:44} And they gathered an army, and slew the sinners in their wrath, and the wicked

men in their indignation: and the rest fled to the nations for safety. ⁴⁵ And Mathathias and his friends went round about, and they threw down the altars: ⁴⁶ And they circumcised all the children whom they found in the confines of Israel that were uncircumcised: and they did valiantly. ⁴⁷ And they pursued after the children of pride, and the work prospered in their hands: ⁴⁸ And they recovered the law out of the hands of the nations, and out of the hands of the kings: and they yielded not the horn to the sinner. ⁴⁹ Now the days drew near that Mathathias should die, and he said to his sons: Now hath pride and chastisement gotten strength, and the time of destruction, and the wrath of indignation: ⁵⁰ Now therefore, O my sons, be ye zealous for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of your fathers. ⁵¹ And call to remembrance the works of the fathers, which they have done in their generations: and you shall receive great glory, and an everlasting name. ... And the Zealots were hoping for another Maccabee-type-Messiah to champion their Israelite cause. ... ‘Get rid of the invaders’ was their cry. ‘Establish our people once again as an independent nation, and make it ready for the Messiah to reign!’ ... That was their message! Israel for the Israelites! Push out the foreigners and bring this land back under the control of the Hebrew people again! ... And that is what many of them were looking to Jesus for, [Jn. 6:15](#) When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.

So, that is the background from which Simon the Zealot came. Such was his devotion to the cause, he would have been prepared to die and become a martyr. ... They were a passionate, strong-willed and strong-minded people to whom their nation was everything! And that is the kind of person Simon was before Jesus met him.

Just for a moment though ... think of how uneasy the relationship between Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax-collector had the potential of being. Imagine the two of them working together as the disciples of Jesus. What would Simon have thought of Matthew? There were probably no two groups of Jews who hated each other more than the tax-collectors and the Zealots ... and yet Jesus chose one of each ... Matthew had sold his soul to the Romans for money ... the same Romans Simon had been determined to kill and drive out of his land. ... What would the working relationship have been like between Simon and Matthew?!! Surely, it was so ingrained within Simon he could not have found it easy even looking at Matthew, who he would have considered a traitor! In fact, in many ways ... while the Romans were *bad*, anyone who colluded with them from within the Jewish nation was *worse*!

Such a wide gulf would have been between the two ... a deep political chasm which defied anyone to cross it. ... And yet the Lord brought these two together as one through grace ... He chose two men from opposite ends of the spectrum, - through God's sovereign and saving grace, - and yet they served Jesus together! *Together* they sat at His feet. *Together* they entered the boat on the Sea of Galilee ... I wonder if the Lord paired them *together* when He sent the disciples out on mission two-by-two? *Together* they were called to serve the Lord ... and serve Him they did. ... They were in the upper room at the Last Supper *together*. They were in the Garden of Gethsemane *together*. After Christ's ascension they were praying *together* in the upper room, prior to Pentecost ... and on the Day of Pentecost they were standing *together*.

And then think of Simon the Zealot in relation to Peter. If Simon had been the conniving type, he could have infiltrated the disciples and won them over to his side ... and Peter would have been an influential man to have on your side ... And also the twelve disciples with all their influence could recruit more for the Zealot cause. No, these former things did not even cross his mind for the revolution was never mentioned.

Think too of the opportunity for a partnership with Judas Iscariot. Judas Iscariot wanted money, and power, and influence ... Those were qualities Simon as a Zealot, - in his former days, - could have manipulated and redirected and used for his political aspirations.

But, Simon had changed. I would not for one moment suggest he lost the great love for his beloved homeland ... and I wouldn't be surprised if he had been one of the disciples that was behind the question, [Acts 1:6](#) *When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time [i.e. after the resurrection] restore again the kingdom to Israel?* ... There is nothing wrong with loving your country ... The fiery enthusiasm he formerly had for politics and for his nationalism I don't suppose would have extinguished completely, but his *deep* passion for his country had been replaced by his even *deeper* passion for serving the Lord. ... There is nothing wrong with being loyal to your country and, in fact, I think you ought to be for it was where the Lord had you born into ... But all the old ways of serving that country Simon the Zealot had left behind, and he loved his people now for the Lord's sake. ... I would imagine too that he still wanted the Romans out and the nation to belong to the people of Israel again, as it did in the days of King David ... but his main priorities had changed, [Heb. 11:10](#) *For he looked for a city*

which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. He had heard Jesus speaking about coming back for him and taking him to His Father's house (Jn. 14:2) ... and *that* was his priority now.

In this world what previously was precious to him had faded, and the things of God had taken their place. ... The things of earth had grown strangely dim in the light of the glory and grace of God in Christ Who had captured his heart and soul. He was a changed man! ... Look at him now serving with Matthew, a former conspirator with the enemy, - a former traitor who Simon would not have thought twice about killing! Look at him now with men who did not share the same political ideology as he formerly did ... and God was using them all together in the service of Jesus.

There is no problem Christians entering politics ... but where it does become sad is when we see Christians entering politics and politics taking the priority over the faith they espouse. It is sad to see Christians taking on a new job that involves going against what they formerly believed and practised ... Simon the Zealot was not like that though for he left it all behind to follow Jesus.

The historical records about how he died are not clear. Eusebius, the trustworthy church historian, recorded the tradition that Simon preached in Egypt, in parts of Africa, and even as far away as the British Isles before suffering execution by being sawed in half in Persia. Another tradition says he was martyred in Lebanon in 65 AD. Another says he was crucified in Jerusalem ... Another says he was martyred in a town called Caistor ('Roman camp') in Lincolnshire. ... And another tradition said he became the second bishop of Jerusalem, where he died peacefully and was buried.

Whatever happened to him, the Lord changed him into a new man who was able to work in any situation and with anyone. He had been called and changed and converted. He had been there with Jesus when the Roman centurion pleaded with the Saviour to heal his sick servant, - Simon the Zealot did not chase him away as he once would have done ... and neither did he deride Jesus for helping a Gentile in his hour of need. Indeed, how his heart must have been so extraordinarily changed when he stood beside the Lord and listened to Him say, **Mt. 8:10** *I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. **11** And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.* ... Gentiles and Jews united in Christ, as Isaiah had prophesied over six hundred years earlier, **Is.**

49:6 I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.. Yes, even the Gentiles. The people Simon the Zealot never liked before, he now loved them for the sake of the Gospel... because he had learned *God* so loved the world ... and, in the Master's service, *he* must love it too. Amen.