

The Lost Apostle



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THE ORIGINAL TWELVE APOSTLES ARE NAMED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT as Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Levi (or Matthew), James (the less), Jude (perhaps also named Thaddeus or Lebbaeus), Simon (the Zealot or Cananean) and Judas Iscariot. It is obvious that they fall into two main groups: those who were former disciples of John the Baptist and those who were members of Jesus's extended family. Of the former group are Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, Philip, and probably Bartholomew and Thomas. Family

3 members are Jesus's brothers James (the less), Jude, Simon the Zealot and Matthew/Levi, along with his cousins, James and John the sons of Zebedee. Judas Iscariot could be in either group as he is described as the 'son of Simon' and it is not clear if this means that he is a son of Simon Peter, Simon the Zealot (Cananean) or some other Simon that we don't know about.

Thus at least six, possibly seven, of the original twelve were family members. However, there is one important name missing from the list of apostles and this is Jesus's other brother Joses (or Joseph) who, like James the less, is definitely named as being a son of both Mary and Alpheus. Why should he alone not have been included in the twelve?

It seems to us that the answer to this question is hinted at in several places in the New Testament, most specifically in the Crucifixion story. When Jesus is being tried by Pilate, the latter is clearly willing to release him, making use of an alleged custom among the Jews that a prisoner of their choice should be freed at the Passover. However, the crowd shout out for someone called Barabbas, with the result that he, instead of Jesus, is released.

In the Gospel of St Matthew this Barabbas is described as a 'notable' prisoner (the adjective is actually *επισημου* (episemon), which means

‘official’, whilst St John calls him a ‘robber’. The truth seems to be that he was a noted (that is, recorded) dissident, for in the Gospel of Mark it says: ‘Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whom they begged. And there was one named Barabbas with the rebels having been bound, who in the rebellion murder had done’.

The rebellion being spoken of was probably the event recorded by Josephus the historian of the Jews when Pilate, shortly after his appointment in AD 26, caused widespread commotion in Judea because he insisted on bringing Roman insignia into Jerusalem. Alternatively, it may have been another insurrection, also mentioned in Josephus, that occurred shortly afterwards on account of Pilate’s having spent ‘sacred treasure’ on building a new aqueduct.

This event led to many deaths when an angry crowd of demonstrators was clubbed into submission by Roman soldiers. It is possible that the Barabbas of the Bible was one of the ringleaders of this demonstration. In any event, the name Barabbas, which means ‘son of the father’, is surely a ‘surname’ that is intended to be understood descriptively and not as a personal name. The question is: what was Barabbas’s personal name and who was the father of whom he was the son?

Now according to Lincoln et al, Barabbas’s father was Jesus, the Jews being given a choice between father and son: the suffering Messiah or his heir. It seems to us that the ‘father’ in question is the patriarch of the Holy Family: Alpheus. We have seen that Jesus is a son of Mary but not of Alpheus, and that Mary had at least two sons, Jude and Joseph (Joses), who are stated as being Alpheus’s children.

The ‘son of the father’ could therefore seem to be one of these and his most likely identity - indeed as we shall see the only possibility that makes any sense - is Joseph. If this is so, the choice being offered to the Jews by Pilate was between two brothers, one an unorthodox prophet (Jesus), the other a political prisoner (Joseph Barabbas, son of Alpheus). If this is so, it makes sense that Joseph is not included in the list of apostles, for, unlike his brothers James, Simon, Levi and Jude, he would have been in gaol throughout most, if not all, of Jesus’s ministry; not only that, but if he had

indeed been the ‘black sheep’ of the family (a robber or even a political murderer), he may have been considered unsuited to the task of apostle. The next question, then, is: what happened to Barabbas after he was released?

A possible answer to this question can be found in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, which describes how the disciples gathered together to elect a new apostle to take the place of Judas Iscariot, who, following his treachery, hanged himself. Two candidates present themselves: one is Matthias (who wins when the disciples draw lots) and the other is ‘Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus’. In Acts 15:22 there is a ‘Judas surnamed Barsabas’, who is one of the ‘leading men among the brethren’.

He is sent out with Silas to accompany Paul Antioch. If, as seems reasonable, we assume that Joseph and Judas Barsabas were brothers, it is worth looking at their surname, which is almost exactly the same as Barabbas. We also know that Joseph, the son of Mary, had a brother called Jude, who was also a son of Alpheus or ‘the father’. It would seem, therefore, that the Joseph Barsabas who applies for the seat vacated by Judas Iscariot, and Barabbas, the now free former revolutionary, are one and the same person. He is Joseph, son of Alpheus and brother of St Jude.

There is, however, another candidate for the identity of Joseph, the brother of Jesus, and this is someone called Joses (Joseph) Barnabas. He also asked to be made an apostle, and to persuade the others to accept him, he sold a field and laid the money he received for it at their feet: ‘And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, a Cypriot by birth, having land sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the feet of the apostles’.

The story of how Barnabas became an apostle is deeply symbolic, for when Judas betrayed Jesus, he did so for a payment of thirty pieces of silver. Feeling remorse for what he had done, or perhaps realizing that no amount of money would make up for the fact that he was now an outcast, Judas sought to return the silver to the priests who had paid him: ‘And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, It

is not lawful for to put them in the treasury, because it is the price of blood. And they took council and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in.'

The sale of a piece of land by Barnabas and his giving the money as a donation to the apostles would seem to be some sort of recompense, a recognition that the debt of Judas needed to be paid off if he were to take over his seat. It seems likely that Joseph Barsabas and Barabbas are one and the same person. If so, we can understand why his surname may have been changed again to Barnabas, meaning 'son of consolation'. A clue to this is a curious scene that takes place at the end of Jesus's Crucifixion, in which he apparently gives away his mother for adoption to a disciple, who is generally recognized as being St John the Evangelist.

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's friend Mary, the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. And when Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman behold thy son. Then he says to the disciple, Behold thy mother. And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

There are several things to be said about this scene. First of all, the word translated as 'home' does not mean this. In the Greek it is ἰδία (idia), which seems to be a play on the word ἰδε (ide), meaning 'behold'. A more correct translation might be that the disciple in question took Mary to his own 'beholding' - that is, he recognized her for what she was: his mother. Second, we don't know that it was John, the author of the Gospel, whom Jesus was addressing as the disciple 'whom he loved'. John was in no more need of adoption than Jesus's mother, Mary, who had other children to turn to. However, if the beloved 'disciple' in question was really Jesus's brother Josès and he is identified as Barabbas, this passage makes sense. Having been recently released from a death sentence, he would probably still have been in a very emotional state.

We can imagine him being filled with guilt and remorse at seeing Jesus's death and hesitating from coming too near the Cross. Mary, meanwhile,

would have been torn in half. On the one hand she would have been filled with grief at seeing the Crucifixion; on the other she would have been relieved that her wayward son Joseph/Barabbas had been set free. Neither son nor mother would have known how to deal with each other in these difficult circumstances. In our interpretation, it appears that in calling on his 'beloved disciple' to behold his mother, Jesus is effecting a reconciliation. Having Joseph, her lost son, back with her would indeed have been some considerable 'consolation' for Mary and we can see why his name would have been changed from Barsabas (or Barabbas) to Barnabas (son of consolation).

In any event Joses Barnabas later accompanied Paul on many of his journeys, including the one to Antioch when they went in a party that included Jude Barsabas. This makes it seem even more than likely that Joses Barnabas was the same person as Joseph Barsabas, who was a brother of this Jude.

Identifying Barnabas as Joseph, son of Mary and Alpheus, raises the question of how he could also have been a Levite Cypriot. The emendation that Barnabas was a Levite could mean that he was a priest, rather than of a different tribe; and it is not impossible that Joseph, son of Mary, was born in Cyprus.



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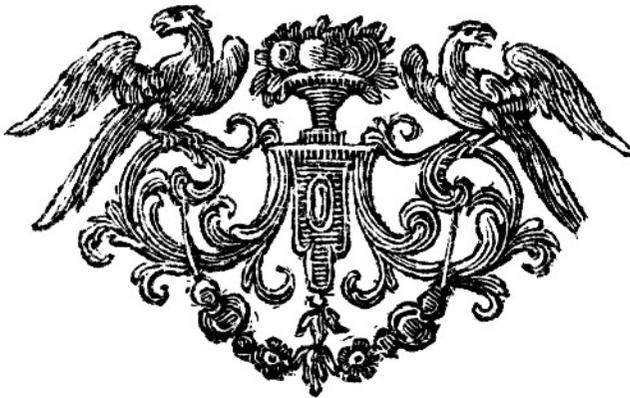
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