

The Call of the First Disciples, Philip and Nathanael

JCV Integrated Text: **John 1:43-51**

On the next day, Jesus wanted to set out towards Galilee, and He found Philip and Jesus said to him, "Travel with me."

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the same town as Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, "We have found the one that Moses wrote of in the law and the prophets: Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth." But Nathaniel answered, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip retorted, "Come and see."

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said about him, "Look at this, genuinely an Israelite in whom there is no trickiness!" Nathanael responded, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael started to speak, saying: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered and said to him, "You trust me because I told you, 'I saw you underneath the fig tree?' You will see greater things than these!" And He said to him, "Really truly, I tell you all, from today you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Introduction

These notes are divided into two sections to follow the related [LTL2 Living The Ministry Years 1.08a/b videos](#):

- Part A – more detail about Philip and Nathanael and their conversation
- Part B – the detail of the conversation between Jesus and Nathanael

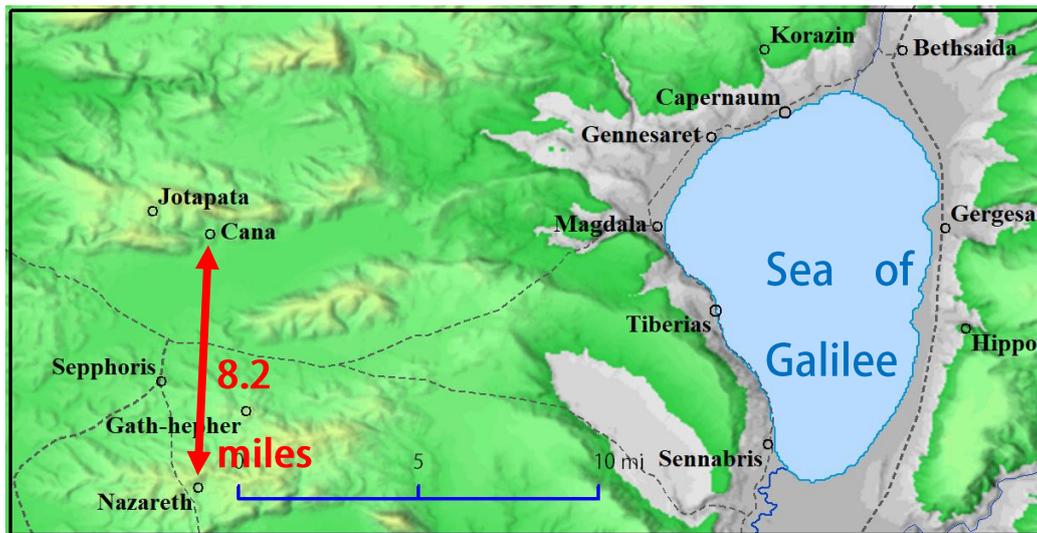
Part A – Philip and Nathanael

Jesus has just called Andrew and Simon Peter the day before. Remember they are from Bethsaida and when He decides to go to Galilee, Jesus goes to find Philip who is also from that town to invite him to travel with Him. This suggests that Jesus, in His Rabbi role ([John 1:38](#)), already has a relationship with Philip.

Although as the text flows Philip finding Nathanael is placed after Jesus calls Philip, it may have happened earlier. We don't know - there is no 'so' in the text to indicate a chronological order. Either way Philip, like Andrew earlier, recognises who Jesus is as he declares Him to be the one that Moses wrote of in the Law and the Prophets.

Nazareth was a very small town not far from Cana where Nathanael grew up ([John 21:2](#)). Philip would have known that Nathanael would be aware of Nazareth and in his response, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", Nathanael is maybe making a comment on what a tiny and insignificant place it was. Philip invites him to come and have a look for himself.

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In Part B we will look at the conversation between Nathanael and Jesus.

Philip

Philip grew up in Bethsaida where it seems Simon and Andrew lived. He often interacts with Andrew. There was a strong Hellenist influence there and, like Andrew, Philip has a Greek name. He would be able to speak both Greek and Hebrew.

Philip (Philip, the Apostle) is often confused with Philip, (Philip the Evangelist) who we meet in **Acts**. They were often confused by early historians and it is important to disentangle the two. Philip the Evangelist was one of the 72 (as Luke, the author of **Acts**, probably was too). He went on journeys in Syria and met the Ethiopian Eunuch.

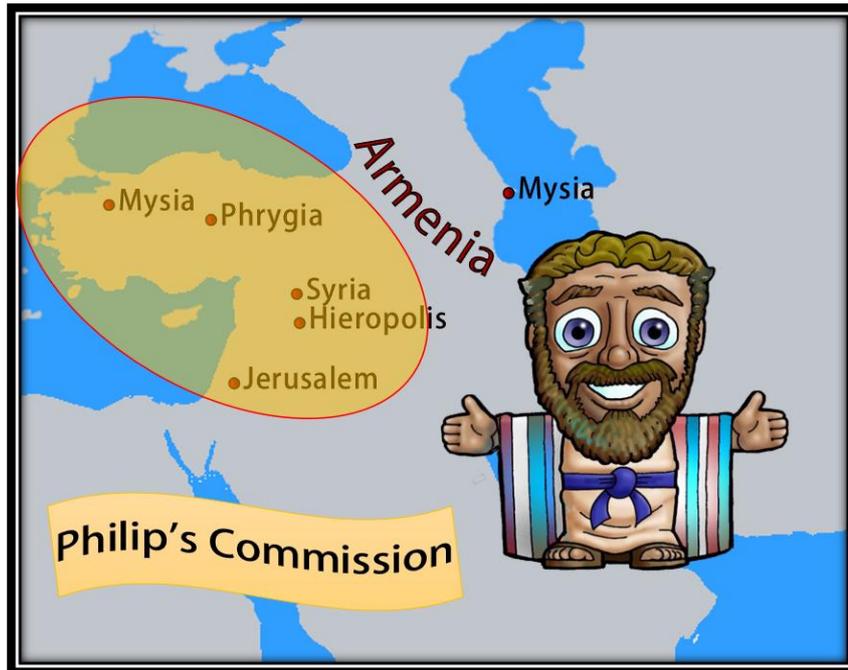
We don't pick up Philip the Apostle so much in **Acts** but he has a key role in the Gospels – particularly in **John**. He appears 11 times in **John** where he has a lot to do compared with 2/3 mentions in each of the synoptics where he isn't named outside the lists of disciples. It is likely he is present at the time **John's gospel** is being written. (~64AD).

Philip is a networker of people. He brings Nathanael to Jesus, finds the boy with fish and loaves and at the beginning of Jesus's last week, when a group of Greek God-fearers are speaking with him, he introduces them to Andrew and links them to Jesus.

At the feeding of 5000 (which takes place just outside of Bethsaida) Jesus asks Philip how they are to be fed. (**John 6:5**). Philip comes from nearby, so he is a natural person to ask.

During the Last Supper he asks Jesus to show them the Father. (**John 14:8**). This gives opportunity for Jesus to express the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Outside of the Gospels, Church tradition tells us he preached in Syria, Greece and Phrygia.



Map produced using Biblemapper.org and cartoon character by freechristianillustrations.com

Stories include some fantastical elements. The apocryphal Greek Acts of **Philip** (Acta Philippi) includes the conversion of a talking leopard and a talking goat.

He went on mission journeys with his sister Mariamne (variant of Mary/Miriam) who later became a Saint in the Orthodox Church .

One tradition has it that Philip and Mariamne were with Bartholomew (also Nathanael – see below) in Heiropolis but were all sentenced to death by crucifixion because the proconsul's wife had been converted by Philip's preaching. However, after Philip is nailed to the cross (upside down) he continues to preach and they begin to crucify Bartholomew. There is an earthquake as Philip is dying. Bartholomew and Mariamne are released but Philip insists that he should not be released and dies on the cross.

Philip's death is likely to be ~65/66AD. There is no indication that he has died in **John's Gospel**. On the contrary he is presented as an eyewitness being named in the traditional 'eyewitness inclusio' of that Gospel – an important technique used by writers so that readers could speak directly to living eyewitnesses to check the veracity of what had been written.

Nathanael/Bartholomew

Nathanael and Bartholomew are thought to be the same person.

Bartholomew appears in the Synoptics. This name is English for 'Bar Talmi' (Greek: Βαρθολομαῖος / "Bartholomaios") which comes from the Aramaic: בר-תולמי / *bar-Tolmay* / "son of **Talmi**" or "son of the furrows". This is more of an 'extension name' and we are not told what his given name is in the Synoptics.

Nathanael, appears in **Gospel of John**. His name means 'God has given'. He came from Cana and has long been identified as **John's** name for the person of Bartholomew in the Synoptics - mainly because in the Synoptics he is always paired with Philip, eg.

Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector... **Matthew 10:3**

So, it is highly credible that Nathanael and Bartholomew are same person. If it were not then the key character of Nathanael disappears from New Testament and Church history beyond.

In this passage, when he hears about Jesus, Nathanael is unsure wondering whether 'anything good can come out of Nazareth,' but when Philip suggests they go together to meet Jesus he goes along and after meeting Jesus confesses him as the Son of God and King of Israel. **John 1:45-49**. Nathanael is also mentioned by **John** in the group of disciples who meet the resurrected Jesus at the Sea of Galilee (**John 21:2**). Bartholomew is paired with **Matthew** in **Acts 1:13** and is credited with carrying **Matthew's** gospel to India.

Trying to piece together the journeys of Nathanael/Bartholomew...

- There are two sources in 4th century (Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History 5:10 and Jerome – see below) which refer to a 2nd century missionary Pantaeus who died in 190AD. He had been to India and discovered that they had a copy of the **Gospel of Matthew** which had been brought to them by Bartholomew – who we believe to be Nathanael. (Note that in the Roman world, India stretched up to Arabia .)

"He [Pantaeus] went to the Indians and the tradition is that he found among them, some there who had known Christ. The Gospel according to Matthew had preceded his coming for Bartholome...had left the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew letters."

Jerome HE 5.10.3 (~400AD)

For more background see 'Mission Of Saint Bartholomew, The Apostle In India', Nasrani Syrian Christians Network [NSC NETWORK]

- There is also a tradition of Bartholomew operating in similar region to Philip and eventually being martyred in Armenia (slightly north of Turkey area).

There is some credibility to each story so, if we try to piece these bits together, we could surmise a sequence of events along the lines of:-



Map produced using Biblemapper.org

They both have a commission to work in Asia Minor and Syria but then Bartholomew goes to India taking **Matthew's Gospel** with him. This means that **Matthew's Gospel** needs to have been written, collated and authorised by then. (We understand this to be late 40s AD - See **LTL2: The Ministry Years 0.01 – When did the Gospels get written**). It would probably be around 50AD when Bartholomew goes to Kalyan in India. Later Bartholomew must go back to where Philip is because he is with Philip when he is executed. (~65AD)

After this Mariamne goes to Lykaionia where she preaches and teaches then dies peacefully and is later beatified. Bartholomew continues his work and goes up to Armenia and the Black Sea.

The traditional story preserved through centuries of Catholicism is that Bartholomew was executed in Albacut in Armenia by King Astyages for converting his brother King Polymios (which means 'Great strength'). However, no records have been found of a King Astyages or a Polymios in that region at the right time - though even so, we still can't be 100% certain they didn't exist

Interestingly, in the town of Kalyan in India there are records of an official referred to with the name Polymios! So, if at that time there is a King Astreges with a brother Polymios who within the Roman world has a level of official authority in India and it is, in fact, this Polymios who is converted by Bartholomew in India, then we could understand how the story and events became blended in the story-telling with that of where Bartholomew is actually executed on the Black Sea.

Part B. Jesus' conversation with Nathanael

Looking at the text in detail.

Jesus' conversation with Nathanael bounces biblical imagery back and forth in a way that tells us more than the words do on their own. The name **Jacob** (יַעֲקֹב / *ya'-qōb*) is usually translated as 'supplanter' (follower / comes after) but the word can also mean 'crafty' or 'deceitful'. If you trip someone up or trick them you can overtake them and take their place. It is translated that way in a lot of versions of **Jeremiah 9:4**.

"Let everyone be on guard against his neighbor, And do not trust any brother; Because every brother deals ***craftily** And every neighbour goes about as a slanderer."

***ie like Jacob (play on words)**

NASB

"... **a supplanter** ..."

RSV

"... **a supplanter** [like Jacob, a deceiver, ready to grab his brother's heel]

AMP

"... **a deceiver*** ..."

NIV

***a deceiving Jacob**

"... **a deceiver*** ..."

ESV

There were those who saw cunning as part of being an Israelite, but Nathanael was not one of them – an Israelite where the 'trickiness' of Jacob has totally gone!

God had first met crafty Jacob at Bethel in a vision of a connection between Heaven and Earth (**Genesis 32:28**). In the years that followed God dealt with Jacob's deceptive, crafty ways until he met Jacob a second time at Bethel and changed his name to יִשְׂרָאֵל / Israel which means 'God struggles' or 'leader/prince of God'.

Nathanael wondering how Jesus knew him, suggests that Nathanael has been dwelling on this and thinking about this character transformation.

Slightly earlier in **Jeremiah** we read,

"I will utterly consume them, says Yahweh. No grapes will be on the vine, no **figs on the fig tree**, and the leaf will fade. The things that I have given them will pass away from them."

"Why do we sit still?"

Jeremiah 8:13,14a

Sitting under your own vine or fig tree was a metaphor used by later prophets as a sign of the Messianic age. **The shade of a fig tree** is used by **Micah** as an image of an age when the **world would come in peace to the Beth-el of Jacob**.

"And it will come about in the last days That the mountain of the house of the Lord ((**Beth-elohi/בית-אלהי**)) Will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, And the peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord And to the house of the God of Jacob, That He may teach us

about His ways And that we may walk in His paths.” For from Zion will go forth the law, Even the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

And He will judge between many peoples and render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war. **Each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree, With no one to make them afraid,** For the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. **Micah 4:1-4**

Nathanael has been meditating under the fig tree, longing for the Messianic Age!

Again in **Zechariah 3**, Yahweh addresses a priest called Joshua (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ / Yeshuah) - translated in early version of the King James as ‘Jesus’. The passage also talks about God’s House (Bethel) and refers to the Branch (same root as Nazarene/Nazareth).

“Thus says Yahweh of Armies: ‘If you will walk in my ways, and if you will follow my instructions, then you also shall judge **my house**, and shall also keep my courts, and I will give you a place of access among these who stand by. Hear now, **Joshua the high priest**, you and your fellows who sit before you; for they are men who are a sign: for, behold, I will bring forth **my servant, the Branch** for, behold, the stone that I have set before Joshua; on one stone are seven eyes: behold, I will engrave its engraving,’ says Yahweh of Armies, ‘and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. In that day,’ says Yahweh of Armies, **‘you will invite every man his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree.’”**

Zechariah 3:7-10

Nathanael has seen a link between the verses in **Micah** and **Zechariah** and the God-King in **Zephaniah’s** vision:

The remnant of Israel **will not do iniquity, nor speak lies, neither will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth [guileless],** for they will feed and lie down, **and no one will make them afraid.”** Sing, daughter of Zion! Shout, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem. Yahweh has taken away your judgments. He has thrown out your enemy. **The King of Israel, Yahweh, is in the midst of you.** You will not be afraid of evil any more.

Zephaniah 3:13-15

So at the end Nathanael acknowledges Jesus as that God-King:

You are the Son of **God**, you are **the King of Israel**. **John 1:49**

Jesus concludes the dialogue by returning to guileful Jacob.

Jacob’s transformation into guile-free Israel was started at **Beth-el** by his vision of a ladder with angels going up and down on it (**Genesis 28:10-22**) and was concluded at **Beth-el** when he saw God the Word face to face (**Genesis 35:6-15**). Therefore, Jesus promises Nathanael that he **‘shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man’**, because, as Jesus will tell Nicodemus, He is the one who ascends and descends (**John 3:13**).