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How to choose an Apostle

By Jim Myers

There were eleven apostles after the loss of Judas, so another man was needed to fill his place. An account of how that man was chosen to be an apostle is recorded in the *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*. This will be the first apostle chosen after Jesus was crucified. *The Book of Acts* is the second volume of an investigative report written by Luke (according to tradition). The author's name is not found either the *Gospel of Luke* or the *Book of Acts*, but the man that asked him to do an investigation for him is found in both books and his name was **Theophilus**. The introduction to the Gospel of Luke states:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent **Theophilus**, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Scholars generally date the writing of the Gospel of Luke at around 80 CE. Theophilus was uncertain about what he had been taught. This tells us that Theophilus received his information from one or more teachers. We do not know who they were or where he was taught, but it reveals that teaching was how he learned about Jesus and his Movement. We also learn that Theophilus was aware of other teachings that disagreed with what he had been taught. This reveals that other teachers, who were also members of the Jesus Movement, were teaching something that disagreed what he had been taught. He was uncertain and wanted to know who was telling him the truth. The *Book of Acts* opens with:

In my former book, **Theophilus**, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (Acts 1:1-2)

As I said above, Luke wrote his report to Theophilus in two volumes. The first, the *Gospel of Luke*, reports on the life and teachings of Jesus. It begins with events that took place before his birth and ends immediately after his resurrection. The Book of Acts begins with Jesus ascending to heaven and ends with the imprisonment of Paul in Rome.

Luke's decision to divide his report into two volumes may have also been influenced by another factor. When we examine the contents of each volume it becomes clear that volume one is about **the acts of Jesus**, while the second is about **the acts of the Holy Spirit**. It is important for readers to be aware of this when it comes to the selection of the new apostle. *The verses below describe the event that took place after Jesus ascended to heaven, but before the Holy Spirit descended to the earth.*

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed," Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:21-26)

What requirements were revealed for one to become an apostle?

- (1) A man must be chosen.
- (2) Has to have been with them the whole time the Lord Jesus was living.
- (3) Must become a witness with us of his resurrection.

Luke reveals something very interesting in the second requirement. He states that the candidates must have been with them for a period that begins with John's baptism and ends when Jesus was taken up from them. Since Jesus did not call any apostles until at least 40 days after his baptism by John, the potential candidates for apostleship would have had to have been there on the day Jesus was baptized by John and was anointed, but before the Jesus Movement began. It would also mean that they had come there on their own to hear John the Baptist and probably didn't know Jesus.

The two men that met those requirements and were proposed as candidates were **Joseph** called **Barsabbas**, whose other name was **Justus**, and **Matthias**. Notice that the first candidate, Joseph was also known by two other names Barsabbas

and Justus. No wonder it gets a little confusing when we read biblical accounts, especially in the New Testament.

The name Barsabbas consists of two Aramaic words, bar (son of) and sabbas (the oath). Some ancient manuscripts have a different spelling for this name – Barsaban – which might reflect Bar-Saba, which means “son of the elder.”¹ According to Eusebius,² who wrote a history of the church in 325 for Emperor Constantine the Great, and Philip of Side,³ Papias told on the authority of Philip’s daughters (see Acts 21:9) *how this man, when challenged by unbelievers, drank serpent’s venom in the Lord’s name, with no harmful consequences.*⁴ This may be part of the reason that the verses 9-20 were added to the end of the Gospel of Mark (chapter 16). Two verses 17 and 18a reflect what we just read above:

And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; **they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all;**

The consequences of someone’s decision to add this to Mark, when they are viewed through a fundamentalist belief system (every word of their translation of the Bible is the literal word of God and therefore must be obeyed), has cost a number of believers their lives. The latest death was reported on May 31, 2012:

A West Virginia Pentecostal pastor who used poisonous snakes during religious services has died of a rattlesnake bite. Mack Wolford, who just turned 44, was killed by a snake he had owned for years. Wolford was performing a religious ceremony when the incident happened. *Wolford’s father, who was also a serpent-handling pastor, died in the same way nearly 30 years ago.*⁵

Getting back to the *Book of Acts*, the name of the other candidate was Matthias, which appears to have been his only name. It is a contracted form from the name Mattiah.⁶ We know nothing else about him, but his name was popular during that period.

*How did they decide which man would become an apostle? **They cast lots.** Why would they choose that method for selecting an apostle? The answer may be found in the words Jesus spoke to Pharisees who were seeking a sign:*

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.” He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except **the sign of the prophet Jonah.** For as Jonah was three days and

three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.⁷

Dr. James Tabor, in his recent book co-authored with Simcha Jacobovici, *The Jesus Discovery*, wrote:

This is quite extraordinary, since it is the only sign Jesus says he will give to his generation, preserved for us in this earliest gospel . . . Jonah and the fish is the most common motif in early Christian art from the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE.⁸

The discovery of an ossuary with a four-line Greek inscription and a drawing that Dr. Tabor interprets to be "the sign of Jonah"⁹ has gathered a great deal of media attention after the recent documentary on the *Discovery Channel*. If Tabor is correct, this pushes the evidence back to the first century that the sign of Jonah was very important to early Christians. *Jonah would have been a well-known and popular story among the followers of Jesus*. It contains an account that may supply the answer for why the early followers of Jesus decided to cast lots to choose their next apostle.

Then YAHWEH sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish." Then the sailors said to each other, "**Come, let us cast lots** to find out who is responsible for this calamity." **They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.**¹⁰

It should also be noted that before the break of the day at the Temple, priests assembled to cast lots that would decide the assignment of the various daily tasks. Therefore, the early Christians simply did what was very familiar in their world. They cast lots and the lot fell on Matthias, which they viewed as a sign from God as to who should be chosen. His position was selected the same way the priests were assigned their jobs in the Temple. **BHC**

¹ The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary by F. F. Bruce; (1990) Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI; p. 111.

² HE 3.39.9

³ Hist. Christ

⁴ The Acts of the Apostles by F. F. Bruce; p. 111.

⁵ http://www.cbs42.com/content/localnews/story/Snake-handling-minister-dies-by-snake-bite/iO4J4rZR00GC9IHajsB_Rg.csp

⁶ The Acts of the Apostles by F. F. Bruce; p. 112.

⁷ Matthew 12:38-40

⁸ The Jesus Discovery by James D. Tabor and Simcha Jacobovici © 2012; Simon & Schuster, New York, NY; pp. 76 & 80.

⁹ <http://thejesusdiscovery.org/>

¹⁰ Onah 1:4-7



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