

# RELATIONAL WEBS: JESUS & DISCIPLES

## Relational Webs Among Jesus and His Disciples<sup>1</sup>

The renewal of interest in relational evangelism is one of the major contributions of church growth thinkers to New Testament studies. church history and church growth theory today. By “relational” I refer to “social systems of common kinship common community and common interest”<sup>2</sup>

The hypothesis I aim to advance in this article may need to be qualified by the possible confusion of common names given to New Testament persons, and words used to indicate kinship. But in naming significant persons, the New Testament writers often indicated familial, communal, or occupational relationships, which leads me to propose that all of Jesus' original twelve apostles except three (Thomas, Simon the zealot, and Judas Iscariot) were related through either kinship, community, or occupation, and that as many as seven of the twelve may have come to Jesus because of the influence of kinship, as well as the strength of Jesus' person and cause.

Beyond the original twelve, even two of Jesus' brothers. James and Jude, became leaders in the Jerusalem church. They have been traditionally identified as authors of the New Testament letters bearing their names, and are strong evidence that Jesus used his relational webs in the building of His Church.

## James and John, The Sons of Zebedee

Among the kinship relationships, the most likely is that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were first cousins of Jesus. The mother of the sons of Zebedee" (Mark 15:41) is identified as “Salome” in Matthew 27:56. In John 19:25, she is identified as the sister of the mother of Jesus. Granted, though identification of Salome as sister of Jesus' mother and mother of James and John is done by a process of elimination, a wide range of New Testament scholars have discovered this relationship. “This would make Salome and Zebedee aunt and uncle, and James and John cousins of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> “The mothers of James and John and of Jesus, were the two sisters Salome and Mary, daughters of Joachim and Anna. That made them first cousins of Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> “If Salome was the sister of Jesus' mother, as the Gospel of John suggests (John 19:25), John may have been a cousin of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

Relationships between the family of James and John and Jesus have a familial character about them. Salome's bold demand that her sons sit at Jesus side in the Kingdom (Matthew 20:20ff) sounds like that of an older aunt talking to her nephew. Furthermore, Jesus' request of his beloved disciple (who I assume to be John) to take Jesus' mother to his home reflects the intimacy of family (John 19:26-27).

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<sup>1</sup> This article was submitted to CHURCH GROWTH AMERICA by Pastor James McKinnell, First Church of the Brethren, Rockford, Illinois. Early Winter 1982 Volume 8 • Number 4

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wolf, Biblical Pattern of Effective Evangelism, The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook, p. 110

<sup>3</sup> The interpreters Dictionary of the Bible. ed. George Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press), p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Brownrigg, The Twelve Apostles (New York; Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1974), p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> “The Apostles.”, In The Bible Almanac eds., James L Parker, Merrill C Tenney, William White. Jr. (Nashville Thomas Nelson Publisher, 1980), p. 527.

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## Matthew and James The Younger

A more tentative family relationship is that Matthew, the tax collector, and James the younger were brothers, and were cousins of Jesus through Joseph, the husband of Mary. The New Testament names an Alphaeus as the father of both Matthew/Levi (Mark 2:14) and James (Mark 3:18). Linguistic associations between the names Alphaeus and Clopas/Cleopas have caused some Bible scholars to think of them as variations of the name of a disciple of Jesus whose sons were Matthew, James the younger, and Joses (Mark 15:40), and whose wife, Mary, was at the crucifixion of Jesus. While this relationship can be worked out within Scripture, the relationship to Jesus is extra-biblical. Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History quotes a second century Christian, native to the Holy Land, named Hegeseppes who "said that Clopas was the brother of Joseph the Carpenter of Nazareth. This would make Alphaeus/Clopas/ Cleopas an uncle of Jesus of Nazareth and the two apostles Matthew and James the younger (together with their brother Joseph) first cousins of Jesus?"<sup>6</sup>

## Jude

Another direct familial relationship may have involved Jude/Lebbacus/ Thaddaeus. He is called "Judas the son of James" (Luke 6:16), but which James is not indicated. He may have been the son of either James the son of Zebedee or James the son of Alphaeus, if so, he would have been a second cousin of Jesus. Therefore, five of the twelve may have had direct familial relationships with Jesus.

## Andrew and Simon

But other familial influences may have been at work in the call of other apostles. John the Baptizer was the son of Elizabeth, a "kinswoman" of Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 1.36). Among the disciples of John the Baptizer were two who became Jesus' apostles, an unnamed one (probably John the cousin of Jesus) and Andrew (John 1:35-40). Although not a relative of Jesus, Andrew influenced his brother Simon to come to Jesus and join his growing number of disciples (John 1:40-41). With the inclusion of Andrew and his brother Simon, as many as seven of Jesus' twelve apostles may have been subject to the influence of common kinship. In addition they shared a common community (Galilee, seaside village of Capernaum), and to a considerable extent a common occupation, commercial fishing.

## Philip and Nathaniel

In regard to common community it is interesting to note that Andrew and Simon were not natives of Capernaum, but apparently had been born in Bethsaida (John 1:44), another fishing village along the north shore of Galilee. This also was the hometown of Philip. No kinship or occupational relationship is indicated, but Philip shared a very similar social context with the first seven apostles. Furthermore, through the web of friendship, he brought Nathaniel to Jesus (John 1:45). And with him, nine of the original twelve apostles of Jesus seem to have relationships to Christ or one another through kinship, community or occupation.

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<sup>6</sup> Brownrigg, p. 142

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## The Other Three

The remaining three apostles have no apparent relationship to Jesus or the other apostles. However the name "Thomas" is a familial Hebraic word meaning "twin" (Θιδυρνις is the Greek word for twin).

Simon the Zealot was a revolutionary guerrilla selected by Jesus. We know nothing of his family or community. Finally, Judas Ish-Kerioth (man from Kerioth), son of Simon Ish-Kerioth, was apparently farthest removed from Jesus and his disciples in terms of community. Kerioth has been identified as a town in southern Judea, and thus Judas may have been the only non-Galilean among the twelve.

## Other Influences

But Galilean webs of relationship provided Jesus with more than apostles. Galileans were probably among the people "who provided for them out of their means" (Luke 8:3). In the hour of crucifixion his mother's generation stood with him after the apostles and other disciples had fled. Furthermore, this community web of relationships provided the core for the Jerusalem Church (characterized as "Galilean" in Acts 2:7) just before its dramatic growth.

It is not my intention to diminish the divine nature of Jesus, nor the spiritual impact of him and his message. But he was a human being in a particular culture, and it appears that he modeled a relational type of evangelism in his ministry that will work among all kinds of Christians carrying out His commission to "make disciples."