

APOSTLE

The general meaning of the Greek word ἀποστολος is “an envoy”, “an appointed representative”, “someone who is sent on a mission”. In the New Testament it is most commonly used to refer specifically to those whom Jesus Christ chose for the task of spreading his kingdom.

Thus in the New Testament, the word may refer to two different kinds of people:

- 1. An envoy, an appointed representative, one who is sent to act on behalf of the sender, someone who acts on the authority of another person, an agent**
- 2. An appointed representative of Jesus Christ, sent out on his authority, an apostle**

After the discussion of the word “apostle”, the article contains a note on the related word “apostleship”.

At the end of this article there is a chart comparing the meanings of “apostle”, “angel” and “prophet”.

1. An envoy, an appointed representative, one who is sent to act on behalf of the sender, someone who acts on the authority of another person, an agent

There are four passages in the New Testament where the Greek word ἀποστολος is clearly used in the general sense of “representative of someone”, not always a representative of Jesus Christ. In the first three of these passages, none of the major English versions uses the term “apostle” (except for the RSV footnote to 2 Corinthians 8:23 which is noted below):

John 13:16 nor is **he who is sent** greater than he who sent him

TEV no **messenger** is greater than the one who sent him

2 Cor. 8:23 . . . as for our brethren, they are **messengers** of the churches . . .

TEV . . . as for the other brothers who are going with him, they **represent** the churches . . .

NEB: delegates of our congregations; NIV: representatives of the churches;

RSV footnote: apostles

Philip. 2:25 Epaphroditus . . . your **messenger**

In both 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Philippians 2:25 the context shows that the reference is to representatives of the churches, not of Jesus Christ.

The fourth passage in which the word ἀποστολος has more general reference, not referring specifically to those whom Jesus Christ appointed, is Hebrews 3:1,

despite the fact that many English versions translate the word *αποστολος* as “apostle” here. Probably the writer of Hebrews used the word *αποστολος* instead of the more common *αγγελος* partly because the latter had been used in its specialised sense in chapters 1 and 2, referring to angels, and partly because *αποστολος* carries more the idea of a man with authority than *αγγελος* does.

Heb. 3:1 . . . consider Jesus, the **apostle** and high priest of our confession.

i.e. consider Jesus, the one who is both God’s representative, who brought us the truth we have believed, and who is also High Priest on our behalf.

A further example where the word is probably used with more general reference is Luke 11:49, a prophetic saying that seems to refer to messengers such as John the Baptist, and even Jesus himself (see Heb. 3:1), as well as the twelve apostles.

Luke 11:49 Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and **apostles** [NEB and TEV **messengers**], some of whom they will kill and persecute.’

 Suggestions for translating *αποστολος* when it does not refer to an apostle of Jesus Christ:

representative, agent

one who represents, one who is sent [try using a verb form]

See also further suggestions for translating below.

2. An appointed representative of Jesus Christ, sent out on his authority, an apostle

When referring to those whom Jesus Christ appointed as his representatives, *αποστολος* is consistently translated in English Bible versions as “apostle”. We will consider first the use of the term *αποστολος* in the Gospels (before Pentecost) and then its use in Acts and the rest of the New Testament (after Pentecost).

In the Gospels the term “apostle” is introduced by Jesus to refer to the twelve disciples whom he chose to be with him and later to become the founders and leaders of the church. Apart from a few exceptions in the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel writers use the term only when they want to refer specifically to the time when Jesus appointed (commissioned) them or when he sent them out on a mission. Otherwise, the apostles are referred to in the Gospels as disciples rather than apostles, since at this time they were still in training. After Pentecost they took up their role as founders and leaders of the church and then they were called apostles.

See further the comparison showing the difference between the meaning of “apostle” and “disciple” in the article on DISCIPLE.

The following is a complete list of all the references to “apostle” (referring to those whom Jesus Christ appointed as his representatives) in the Gospels:

Matt. 10:2 The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew . . .

Mark 3:14 he chose twelve, whom he named apostles (TEV)

The words “whom he named apostles” are not found in all the manuscripts and were probably not part of the original text in Mark. Many editions of the Greek text and many translations do not include them or include them only in a footnote. They may have been introduced into the Mark text by a copyist who remembered the parallel passage in Luke 6:13 where the words do occur.

Mark 6:30 The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

Mark 6:30 refers to the time when the twelve disciples of Jesus returned after they had been sent out two by two, as described in Mark 6:7: “. . . he began to send them out [Greek *αποστέλλω*] two by two.” It is quite possible, therefore, that here the word means “those who had been sent out”, rather than being used as a technical term.

Luke 6:13 . . . he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles . . .

Luke 9:10 On their return the apostles told him what they had done. . . .
This passage is parallel to Mark 6:30 above.

Luke 17:5 The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

Luke 22:14 [at the last supper] And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him.

Luke 24:10 Now it was Mary Magdalene . . . and the other women with them who told this to the apostles . . .

In Acts and the rest of the New Testament, the term “apostle” is the most common term used to refer to those who were commissioned by Jesus Christ to be founders of the church (Matthew 10:2, Mark 6:30; Luke 6:13), and who then took up that function and position. In Acts alone it is used thirty times.

In addition, the term *αποστολος* refers to the following:

(1) In Acts 1:23–26, it refers to Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot:

Acts 1:23-26 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast

lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles.

- (2) It is also used in Acts 14:3–4 and 14 to refer to Barnabas and to Paul, both of whom were specially chosen by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by the church (Acts 13:2–3). Paul frequently refers to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; 11:13; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:1; 15:9; Eph. 1:1), emphasizing the authority given him by Jesus Christ.
- (3) There are at least three other references where other individuals may also be referred to as apostles. The term may therefore have included certain other individuals who were specially commissioned by Jesus Christ as founders of the church:

Rom. 16:7 Greet Andronicus and Junia . . . , they are prominent among the apostles, . . . (NRSV)

Many English versions and most commentators, including early church commentators, believe that the text means that Andronicus and Junia were themselves apostles. Note that the second name is sometimes taken as a woman's name (NRSV and REB: Junia), and sometimes as a man's (Junias). There is no other ancient record of the name Junias, whereas Junia was common, so it seems that the reference is to a woman.

Another interpretation of this text, supported by some commentators, is that Andronicus and Junia(s) were not themselves apostles but they were respected by the apostles.

Gal. 1:19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.

Again, it is disputed whether or not the Greek text of Galatians 1:19 implies that James was an apostle. The NIV and the JB follow an alternative interpretation, implying that James was not an apostle:

NIV I saw none of the other apostles — only James, the Lord's brother.

JB I did not see any of the other apostles; I only saw James, the brother of the Lord.

See for further discussion, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, pages 100–101, who defends the interpretation that James was an apostle.

1 Thess. 2:6 . . . though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

The pronoun “we” here apparently refers back to Paul and Silvanus (Silas) named in 1 Thessalonians 1:1. There is some supporting evidence that Silas was considered to be an apostle (Acts 15:40). As for Timothy, who is also mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, other letters of Paul seem to imply that he was not an apostle, but was rather the assistant of Paul and Silas.

The word *αποστολος* was, therefore, used in New Testament times to refer to others besides the twelve originally appointed by Jesus himself. Its use, however, is apparently limited to those who were specially appointed by Christ in some way and who held a position of authority in the early church.

The main functions of the apostles

The main functions of the apostles in the New Testament were:

- to witness to the fact that Jesus Christ has risen from death
Acts 1:21–22; 3:15; 13:31.
- to preach the gospel and found new churches
Acts 5:42; 6:4; 14:21–23; Gal. 2:7–9.
- to hold spiritual authority in the church (questions concerning right doctrine and practice in the church were referred to the apostles)
Acts 4:37; 6:1–6; 9:27; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; Eph. 2:20.

The fact that God had given authority to the apostles was confirmed by the power he gave them to perform miracles in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 19:11–12; 2 Cor. 12:12).

Common phrases and important collocations

The role of an apostle is linked with various other special roles in the church:

Eph. 4:11 his [Jesus'] gifts were that some should be **apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.**

2 Tim. 1:11 I was appointed **a preacher and apostle and teacher**

Both of the above references illustrate the different offices within the church. Apostles have a role distinct from the others listed but share with them in the total ministry of the church.

apostles and prophets

Eph. 2:20; 3:5; Rev. 18:20.

Both apostles and prophets were agents of God, given power by him to reveal the way in which God would save human beings. The apostles preached the gospel and started churches, whereas prophets were used by God to exhort and encourage believers.

apostles and elders

Acts 15:4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4.

Since one of the primary functions of the apostles was to be a final authority within the church, they are often linked with the other leaders of the church. The difference between apostles and elders is that elders exercised authority as leaders in local churches, whereas apostles did so in the church at large.

apostles and brothers, i.e. apostles and (all the ordinary) church members
Acts 11:1.

false apostles

2 Cor. 11:13; compare also Rev. 2:2.

False apostles were those who falsely claimed to be commissioned by Jesus Christ. They said that they spoke on behalf of Jesus Christ, but in fact they taught lies and led people astray. While the apostles were responsible for guarding the truth of the gospel, false apostles introduced lies and deceptions. “False apostles” might be translated “those liars who claim (falsely) to be apostles” or “those who pretend to be apostles”.

 Suggestions for translating “apostle” when referring specifically to those whom Jesus Christ appointed as his representatives:

In the receptor-language culture, is there any group of people who function as representatives or envoys, ambassadors of a higher authority, having been given authority to act on behalf of the one they represent? If so, the word used to refer to such people might be suitable to translate “apostle”. It will probably need to be qualified by “of Jesus Christ”.

Other suggestions:

representatives of Jesus Christ
(special) messengers of Jesus Christ
sent-people of Jesus Christ

Try to find a word which indicates a position of trust and authority. Note, however, that the meaning of the phrase as a special term will be built up in the receptor language by the contexts in which it is used in the New Testament and by teaching.

In deciding how to translate “apostle” the translation of other words of related meaning should also be considered. The chart on page xxx compares the meaning of “apostle”, “angel” and “prophet”. This may be helpful in identifying the crucial differences of meaning between these terms and thus in finding appropriate equivalents in the receptor language.

Warning: In certain passages in the Gospels (see Matt. 10:1–2; Mark 6:7, 30, 35, etc.; Luke 9:1, 10, 12, 14, etc.; 22:3, 14) the Twelve are referred to first as “the Twelve” or “disciples” and then as “apostles”. In translating these passages, make sure that it is clear that the same group of people is being referred to throughout.

The related word “apostleship”

The noun form “apostleship” (Greek *αποστολη*) refers to the position or ministry of being an apostle. It occurs in the following passages:

Acts 1:24–25 . . . show which one of these two thou hast chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside . . .

TEV . . . show us which of these two you have chosen to serve as an apostle in the place of Judas . . .

Rom. 1:5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations

TEV Through him God gave me the privilege of being an apostle . . .

1 Cor. 9:2 . . . for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

i.e. the fact that you have come to follow Christ is evidence that I truly am appointed by him as an apostle.

A Comparison of the Meaning of “Apostle” (referring to those whom Jesus Christ appointed as his representatives), “Angel” and “Prophet”

The shared meaning of these three words is that they all refer to one who **acts on behalf of a divine being (either God or Jesus Christ), under his orders and with his authority**. The chart below shows the major differences between the words:

Apostle	Angel	Prophet
Human being	Spiritual being	Human being
They are commissioned by Jesus Christ	They work for God	They speak on behalf of God
Their work is to act on behalf of Jesus Christ, with his authority, to found churches and guard them from false teaching	Their work is to deliver a message or do other work as they are instructed	Their work is to speak messages given them by God

For further study

- Grudem, W. *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. Eastbourne, England: Kingsway; Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books (Good News Publishers), 1988. (Grudem argues that apostles correspond to Old Testament prophets and that New Testament prophecy is different from Old Testament prophecy.)
- Walls, A. F. Article 'Apostle' in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, pages 78–80 (= *The New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. pages 59–61).