

### THE BROTHERS OF JESUS

As is well known, the New Testament contains several references to the "brothers" and "sisters" of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> At first glance, these passages seem to be the strongest argument against Mary's perpetual virginity. They are certainly the most popular reason for thinking Mary had other children besides Jesus. Once again, however, we need to examine this evidence in its ancient Jewish context. When we do so, some of the very passages that mention Jesus' "brothers" actually present important evidence that Mary did *not* have other children. Let's take a few moments to examine the data.<sup>25</sup>

#### *The "Brothers" of Jesus = Sons of a Different Mary*

The first and most important reason for concluding that the "brothers" of Jesus are not children of Mary is also the most often overlooked. It is this: *The Gospels themselves explicitly state that the so-called brothers of Jesus are in fact the children of another woman named Mary.*

In order to see this clearly, all we need to do is compare the identities of the "brothers" of Jesus in the account of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth with the accounts of the people present at his crucifixion and burial. For the sake of convenience, I will focus on the evidence in the Gospel of Mark, paying close attention to the *names* of Jesus' "brothers":

He went away from there and came to his own country . . . And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were

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astonished, saying, ". . . Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:1-9)

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last . . . There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him. (Mark 15:37, 40-41)

On the one hand, the Gospel of Mark indisputably identifies "James" and "Joseph" as two of the "brothers" (Greek *adelphoi*) of Jesus (Mark 6:3). As any Greek dictionary will tell you, the most common meaning of the word "brother" is the same as in English: "a male from the same womb."<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand—and this is crucial—the Gospel of Mark also provides solid evidence that the same two men, "James" and "Joseph," are the sons of a different woman named Mary. This other Mary is mentioned three times in the account of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. At the crucifixion, she is called "Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph" (Mark 15:40). At Jesus' burial, she is called "Mary the mother of Joseph" (Mark 15:47). On the morning of the resurrection, she is called "Mary the mother of James" (Mark 16:1). Who is this woman? Obviously, Mark would never refer to the mother of Jesus as "the mother of James and Joseph," or "the mother of James," or "the mother of Joseph," especially when he has already referred to Mary as Jesus' "mother"

Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*, (NY: Image Books, 2018) pp. 116-126.

twice in his Gospel (Mark 3:31, 32).<sup>27</sup> Although scholars come up with some rather desperate attempts to avoid the obvious, the only plausible explanation is that the mother of James and Joseph is a different Mary, and therefore, James and Joseph are not the sons of the virgin Mary.<sup>28</sup>

In support of this conclusion, it is important to emphasize that the same thing is true of James and Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew (although Matthew uses the proper Hebrew form "Joseph" rather than "Joses"). In fact, Matthew even refers to Mary the mother of James and Joseph as "the other Mary"!

There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; among whom were Mary Magdalene, and *Mary the mother of James and Joseph*, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee . . . And Joseph [of Arimathea] took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed. *Mary Magdalene* and *the other Mary* were there, sitting opposite the sepulcher. (Matthew 27:55-56, 59-61; cf. 13:55)

It is not believable that Matthew would refer to the mother of Jesus as "the other Mary." Because of this, the Protestant scholars W. D. Davies and Dale Allison admit that this evidence suggests that "the brothers of Jesus" who are named earlier in the Gospel (Matthew 13:55) "were not the sons of Jesus' mother but of another Mary."<sup>29</sup> I agree. But I would

add that the brothers of Jesus *also* cannot be the sons of Joseph from a previous marriage, as some people suggest.<sup>30</sup> The reason is simple. For Joseph to be a widower, his wife has to have died. But Mary the mother of James and Joseph is obviously *still alive* at the time of the resurrection!

In fact, when Luke refers to her simply as "Mary the mother of James" (Luke 24:10), a strong case can be made that he must be referring to the famous leader of the church in Jerusalem, also known as "James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). The reason is simple. In the words of Richard Bauckham: "Normally in the early church only James the Lord's brother could be called James without risk of ambiguity" (see Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Jude 1).<sup>31</sup>

This leads us to the important question *If James and Joseph are the children of another Mary, then why are they called Jesus' "brothers"?* The answer is quite simple: in an ancient Jewish context, the Greek for word "brothers" (*adelphoi*) could be used as a synonym for close relatives, such as cousins. Many examples of this usage could be given.<sup>32</sup> For now, consider three:

But Jacob became angry, and quarreled with Laban [his uncle]; Jacob said to Laban, ". . . What have you found of all the vessels of your house? Set it here before *my brothers and your brothers*, that they may decide between us two." (Genesis 31:36-37 LXX)<sup>33</sup>

The sons of Mahli [were] Eleazar and Kish. And Eleazar died, but he had no sons, only daughters.

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And the sons of Kish, their brothers, married them.  
(1 Chronicles 23:21-22 LXX)

On the same day the sons and brothers of king Izates . . . entreated Caesar to grant them a pledge of protection. For the present he kept them all in custody; the king's sons and relatives he subsequently brought up in chains to Rome. (Josephus, *War*, 6.356-57)<sup>56</sup>

Notice here that it is the *context* that gives us the clue to when the word "brothers" means "relatives" or "cousins." In context, Jacob is clearly using "brothers" (Greek *adelphoi*) to refer to his cousins, the sons of his uncle Laban (Genesis 31:37 LXX). Likewise, in the second passage, the "brothers" (Greek *adelphoi*) of the daughters of Eleazar are explicitly identified as first cousins, the sons of the girl's uncle Kish. Last, but certainly not least, Josephus proves that a first-century Jew could use the words "brothers" (Greek *adelphoi*) and "relatives" (Greek *syngeneis*) as synonyms in the same Greek text.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise, when it comes to the "brothers" of Jesus in the Gospels, we have to determine the meaning of the word *in context*. If all we had were the reference to Jesus' brothers during his ministry in Nazareth, it would be reasonable to assume they were his blood "brothers." However, if later in the same Gospel two of these brothers, "James and Joseph," are explicitly identified as the children of *another woman* named Mary, then the obvious explanation is that the word

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"brothers" is being used to refer to Jesus' "relatives."<sup>56</sup> If there is any doubt about this, it's important to point out that Jesus himself actually uses the word for "cousins" or "relatives" to describe his so-called brothers and sisters. Reread the evidence from Mark, this time paying attention to Jesus' final statement:

"I'm not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own cousins (Greek *syngeneis*), and in his own house." (Mark 6:3-4)<sup>57</sup>

The word I have translated here as "cousin" (Greek *syngeneis*) is from the same Greek root as the angel Gabriel's reference to Elizabeth as Mary's "cousin" (Greek *syngenis*) (see Luke 1:36 KJV, Douay-Rheims). What possible reason can be given for Jesus referring to his "brothers" and "sisters" as his "relatives" or "cousins"? Maybe because, according to the Gospel of Mark, they *are* his cousins.<sup>58</sup>

Now we could just stop here. If all we had were the evidence from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, it would be enough to conclude that the so-called brothers of Jesus are in fact his close relatives. They are the children of another woman named Mary from Galilee. But this is not the only evidence we possess.

*The Other Mary = Mary the Wife of Clopas*

When it comes to the identity of the brothers of Jesus, the Gospel of John also provides an important clue to the identity of "the other Mary" who was present at the crucifixion:

But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:25-27)

This account of Jesus' death provides us three more significant insights into the relationship between Jesus, Mary, and his "brothers."

First, notice that John identifies the second woman at the cross as "his mother's sister, Mary" (John 19:25).<sup>39</sup> Although it's easy to miss the point, this verse provides important support for the word "sister" (Greek *adelphē*) being used to refer to someone other than a blood sister. It seems extremely unlikely that Mary's parents would have given both her and her sister the name Mary. However, the text makes perfect sense if John is using the word "sister" to refer to a close relative of Jesus' mother.

Second, and even more important, when John refers to this woman as "Mary the wife of Clopas" (John 19:25), he

gives us an important clue to the identity of "the other Mary" referred to by Matthew and Mark. If John is referring to the same Mary that Matthew and Mark say was present at the crucifixion and burial of Jesus—Mary the mother of James and Joseph—then we have further evidence that James and Joseph are *not* the sons of Jesus' mother. Nor are they the sons of Joseph by a previous marriage.<sup>40</sup> Instead, they would be the sons of another man—a man named Clopas.<sup>41</sup>

Third and finally, but by no means least important, in John's account, Jesus gives his mother, Mary, to the Beloved Disciple to have as "his own" mother (John 19:26-27). I cannot stress the point enough: *If Mary would have had any other children at the time of the crucifixion, it would have been unheard of for Jesus to give his mother to one of his disciples.* In an ancient Jewish context, to fail to care for one's aging parents was a grave sin—one that Jesus himself describes as a capital offense (see Mark 7:9-13).<sup>42</sup> Thus, the most plausible explanation for why Jesus takes such pains in the midst of dying to make sure his mother is cared for by the Beloved Disciple is that Mary has no other children. He is her only son.

Once again, we could just stop here. If we only had the evidence of the New Testament we've just surveyed, it would be enough to confidently conclude that the so-called brothers of Jesus are in fact his close relatives, the children of Mary and Clopas, relatives of Jesus' family. However, the New Testament is not the only relevant historical evidence we possess. We also have evidence for the identity of Jesus' brothers from ancient church history—evidence that is often mysteriously ignored.

*The "Brothers" of Jesus = The First Bishops of Jerusalem*

According to the ancient Christian historian Hegesippus—who was apparently the first person to write a "history" of the Church—two of the so-called brothers of Jesus (James and Simon) also happened to be the *first two bishops of Jerusalem*.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, they were widely known to be Jesus' "cousins"! Consider the following testimony from Hegesippus, which is quoted by Eusebius in his fourth-century history of the Church:

The same writer [Hegesippus] also [writes] . . . as follows: "After James the Just had suffered martyrdom for the same reason as the Lord, Simon, his cousin, the son of Clopas, was appointed bishop, whom they all proposed because he was another cousin (Greek *anepsion*) of the Lord. (Hegesippus [2nd century A.D.], quoted in Eusebius, *Church History*, 4.22)<sup>46</sup>

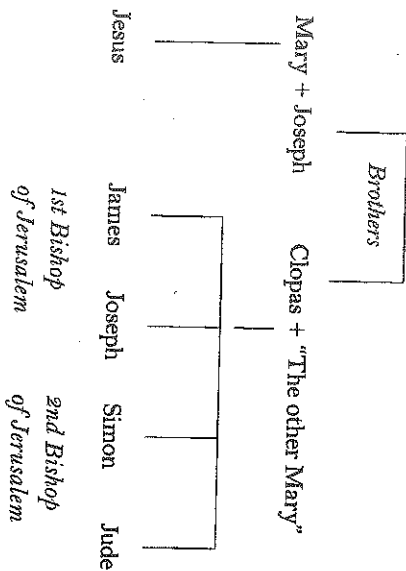
After the martyrdom of James and the conquest of Jerusalem which immediately followed, it is said that those of the apostles and disciples of the Lord that were still living came together from all directions with those that were related to the Lord according to the flesh (for the majority of them also were still alive) to take counsel as to who was worthy to succeed James. They all with one consent pronounced Simon, the son of Clopas, of whom the

Gospel also makes mention; to be worthy of the episcopal throne of that parish. He was a cousin (Greek *anepsion*), as they say, of the Saviour. For Hegesippus records that Clopas was a brother of Joseph (Greek *adelphos tou Ioseph*). (Hegesippus [2nd century A.D.], quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 5.11.1-2)<sup>45</sup>

Amazingly, the testimony of Hegesippus that the so-called brothers of Jesus were in fact his "cousins" (Greek *anepsion*) is frequently just ignored by scholars who assert that Mary had other children.<sup>46</sup> But in the face of such historical evidence, this is unacceptable. James and Simon, two of the so-called brothers of Jesus, were not obscure figures in the early Church. In fact, they were the first two bishops of Jerusalem and some of the earliest martyrs. More important, they were known to be "cousins" of Jesus. Notice here that Hegesippus' identification of James and Simon as Jesus' cousins is stated simply as a matter of historical fact. There is no evidence that he is attempting to defend Mary's perpetual virginity. To the contrary, Hegesippus is simply reporting the history of the bishops in Jerusalem.<sup>47</sup>

Now, if Hegesippus is right, then the earliest historical evidence we possess jibes perfectly with the New Testament evidence we saw that the so-called brothers of Jesus—James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude—were in fact the children of another woman named Mary (Mark 6:1-3 15:37, 40-41; cf. Luke 24:10). It also makes perfect sense if this "other Mary" is the same woman who is called the "wife of Clopas" (John 19:25):

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This, I would suggest, is the simplest and most historically plausible solution to the mystery of the "brothers" of Jesus. Again, the best explanation for the ancient Christian claim that the "brothers" of Jesus were his cousins is that the brothers of Jesus *were actually* his cousins.<sup>48</sup>

## EVER-VIRGIN

At this point, I suspect some readers may be surprised by what we've discovered. Maybe some of you are wondering, "Why haven't I ever heard all this before? Why didn't I know that the Gospel of Luke itself shows that Mary intended to remain a virgin? Why didn't I know that the Gospel of Mark itself shows that the so-called brothers of Jesus were children of another Mary?" I know that's what I wondered when I first stumbled onto the evidence that I've just shared with you. Whatever the reason for our lack of familiarity with this data, one thing is certain: None of it is new.

## THE PERPETUAL VIRGIN

If we go back to the writings of ancient Christians outside the New Testament, not only do we discover that they were well aware of Mary's perpetual virginity, we also learn why they thought it mattered. In this final section, we will take just a few moments to show what ancient Christians had to say about the mystery of Mary's perpetual virginity.

*The Perpetual Virginity of Mary in Ancient Christianity*

Nowadays, the perpetual virginity of Mary is widely rejected by Christians of many denominations, especially those who trace their origins back to the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, it has become so universally accepted that Mary had other children after Jesus that writers nowadays do not even feel they have to defend or explain the assumption that Mary had other children.

Yet it was not always so. Even a cursory study of ancient Christianity shows that from the earliest times, the belief that Mary remained a virgin was held by Christians throughout the known world.<sup>49</sup> Consider, for example, the following quotations, noting the biblical bases for their beliefs:

*If she had had other children, the Savior would not have ignored them and entrusted his Mother to someone else (John 19:26-27); nor would she have become someone else's mother. (Athanasius, On Virginity [4th century A.D.])<sup>50</sup>*

*The expression "until" (Matthew 1:25) need not lead you to believe that Joseph knew her subsequently; rather, it is*