



DID MARY, the mother of Jesus, HAVE OTHER CHILDREN?

The people in Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, are quoted as saying: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?" (Matt. 13:54-56; see also Mk. 6:3).

Who were Jesus' brethren? Were they younger brothers—sons born to Joseph and Mary—as taught by Helvidius? Or, were they older than Jesus—sons of Joseph by a previous marriage—as taught by Epiphanius? Or should the term "brethren" in this case be understood as meaning *cousins* of Jesus—as taught by Jerome?

The **FIRST viewpoint** we will consider is that the brethren of Jesus were *cousins*, the viewpoint commonly held by Roman Catholics. I had not even *considered* that James, Joses, Simon, and Judas could be anything but actual brothers of Jesus (sons of Mary) until I read a small booklet written by a minister of the Church of God (7th Day)—certainly not one who would be prone to embrace a Roman Catholic position!

In this booklet, as he compared scripture with scripture, he concluded that Jesus *did* have cousins by these very names! And, if he had cousins named James, Joses, Simon, and Judas, how likely would it be that children of Joseph and Mary would have the same identical names?

With this teaching, it is pointed out that the term "brethren" is sometimes used of relatives other than actual brothers. Abraham and Lot are spoken of as "brethren," but were actually uncle and nephew (Gen. 13:8, cf. 11:27). Jacob was Laban's nephew, yet he called him "brother" (Gen. 29:13,15). Close relatives like cousins were called "brethren" (Lev. 10:4; cf. verse 1). Adam Clarke says: "It is certain that the Hebrews gave the name of brethren to all the *relatives* of a particular family (Gen. 31:32,37,46)."

The people at Nazareth referred to Jesus as "the brother of James" (Mk. 6:3). Years later, Paul mentioned "James the Lord's brother" in these words: "Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see *Peter*, and abode with him fifteen days. *But other*

of the apostles saw I none, *except James the Lord's brother*" (Gal. 1:19).

Assuming from this verse that James, the Lord's brother, was an *apostle*, one can turn to the list of the twelve apostles (Lk. 6:14-16). Two had the name James: James the brother of John, and James the son of Alphaeus.

We know that the first James mentioned, the brother of John, suffered martyrdom: "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James *the brother of John* with the sword" (Acts 12:2). It follows, then, according to this viewpoint, that the apostle James who is mentioned *after* this time—Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; James 1:1—is the other James, the son of Alphaeus. If this is the same James that Paul spoke of as "the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19; 2:9), being the son of Alphaeus—not a son of Joseph—would require that he was Jesus' brother in some other sense of the term.

The name that follows James on the list of Jesus' brethren is Joses (Matt. 13:55). Their mother—"Mary the mother of James and Joses"—was among the women who witnessed the crucifixion (Matt. 27:56). In Mark's account she is called the mother of "James the less" or *little* (Mk. 15:40). *Hastings' Bible Dictionary* says this was "probably on account of the shortness of his stature, to distinguish him from the other Apostle James."

When we turn to the parallel account in John, we learn something else about Mary, the mother of James and Joses: "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, *and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas...*" (John 19:25).

Because it is highly unlikely that sisters would each have the name Mary, the "sister" of Jesus' mother must have been her *sister-in-law*. From this verse we also learn that she was "the wife of Cleophas." According to Hegesippus, a second century writer, known to us through the writings of Eusebius (Hist. Eccles. 1.iii.c.11), Cleophas was the *brother* of Joseph. If so, this would confirm that the "Mary" mentioned in John 19:25 was the *sister-in-law* to Mary, Jesus' mother. This would make the children of Mary and Cleophas—James and Joses—*cousins* of Jesus.

But in Matthew, James was called the son of Alphaeus. Were Cleophas and Alphaeus the same person? *The Pulpit Commentary* (note on John 19:25) says that the name Cleophas "is by almost all admitted to be identifiable with Alphaeus." A number of Bible dictionaries say these names were but two forms of the same name.

In the Bible it was not uncommon for a person to be mentioned by different names or a name in different forms: Paul/Saul (Acts 13:9), Timothy/Timothus (1 Tim. 1:2; 1 Cor. 4:17), Simon/Peter/Cephas (John 1:42; Matt. 4:18), Thomas/Didymus (John 11:16), Joseph/Barsabas/Justus (Acts 1:23), etc.

Judas and Jude are different forms of the same name. In the list of the apostles, two were named Judas: Judas Iscariot and Judas "the brother of James" (Lk. 6:16; Acts 1:13—KJV). Because "James the son of Alphaeus" is mentioned in the immediate context, we can assume that James and *this* Judas were brothers. This relationship is further confirmed when we turn to the book of Jude. The opening words are these: "Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and *brother of James...*" (Jude 1:1).

In translating from one language to another, sometimes extra words must be supplied to express the proper sense. To the credit of the King James Version, words supplied by the translators are given in *italics*. In the list of the apostles, the wording is "Judas *the brother* of James" (Acts 1:13—KJV). The words "the brother" have been supplied, but were probably based on the same expression in Jude that is not in italics. Otherwise, depending on which words are supplied, "Judas of James" could have another meaning, like the *son* of James, as some have translated it. The whole thing might hinge on whether a person is better known as the father of someone, the son of someone, or the brother of someone.

If James, Simon, and Judas were brothers, the supplied wording could even be "the brothers." In this case, it would read: "...James the son of Alphaeus, Simon called Zelotes, and Judas [the brothers] of James"! Otherwise, why would James be mentioned, then someone totally unrelated in between, and finally Judas the brother of James?

According to *Fausett's Bible Dictionary*, citing Hegesippus, Simon was a son of

Cleophas. If Cleophas and Alphaeus were the same person, this would confirm that Simon Zelotes, James, and Judas (Jude) were brothers. When we include the name Joses, we have the four names that are mentioned as the “brethren” (cousins) of Jesus. It is not very likely that Mary and Joseph also had four sons with the very same names.

According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (p. 519), the cousin viewpoint developed by Jerome “was followed by Augustine, the Roman Catholic writers generally, and carried over into Protestantism at the Reformation, and accepted, even though not urged, by Luther.”

Because Mary and Joseph were poor, their sacrifice was a pair of birds, allowed by the law for those who were “not able to bring a lamb” (Lk. 2:22,24; Lev. 12:2,8). Joseph, who is never mentioned after Jesus was age 12 (cf. Lk. 2:42), evidently died between that time and the time Jesus began his ministry. With Mary being widowed, her economic situation could have become very difficult. Could it be that Joseph’s brother Cleophas, along with his wife Mary, took in Jesus and his mother? If the two families were joined in one house at Nazareth, this would provide a strong reason why the people there might speak of James, Joses, Simon, and Judas as “brethren” of Jesus, and the daughters in the family as his “sisters.”

But, while the “cousin” viewpoint includes some interesting coincidences, it is certainly not conclusive. As *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says, “this complicated theory labors under many difficulties,” pointing out that the identity of Cleophas with Alphaeus—essential to the theory—rests “upon obscure philological resemblances of the Aramaic form of the two names,” affording at best “a mere possibility.” Matthew’s father also had the name Alphaeus (Mk. 2:14; Matt. 9:9). Probably two different men by this name are intended, or else we would have to add *Matthew* as a brother of James, Joses, Simon, Judas, and Jesus!

Many Jewish people had the same name. In the list of the twelve apostles, two had the name Judas, two had the name James, and two had the name Simon—out of twelve men, half had duplicate names (Lk. 6:14-16). In addition to the apostles named Simon, there was Simon the leper, Simon the Pharisee, Simon the sorcerer, Simon the tanner, and Simon the Cyrenian.

By confusing common names, it is possible to piece together some strange theo-

ries—like: “It was the father of the apostle Paul who carried the cross of Christ!” The man who carried the cross, Simon the Cyrenian, was the father of *Rufus* (Mk. 15:21). Paul spoke of Rufus’ *mother* as his mother (Rom. 16:13). Therefore, Paul’s father was Simon the Cyrenian! I am not convinced.

It would certainly seem that “Mary the wife of Cleophas” was the sister (sister-in-law) of Jesus’ mother in John 19:25. At the cross of Jesus were “his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.” But some understand this to mean *four* separate women, not three. If so, then Mary the wife of Cleophas would not be the same as the sister of Jesus’ mother.

Probably the biggest difficulty with the “cousin” teaching is this: it requires that three of Jesus’ “brethren” were apostles. This cannot be, for the Scriptures repeatedly make a distinction between the apostles and “the brethren of the Lord.” While the twelve apostles were with Jesus *in* a house, “*his brethren* and his mother came, and standing *without*, sent unto him” (Mk. 3:13-19, 31). We read about “his mother, and his brethren, *and* his disciples” (John 2:12). When Jesus called the twelve, his brethren were still unbelievers: they “*did not believe in him*” (John 6:70; 7:5). It was not until later that they became believers, so that prior to the Day of Pentecost they prayerfully awaited the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:13,14). In this passage, the apostles—including James, Simon, and Judas, who are mentioned by name—continued in prayer “with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and with his brethren*” (Acts 1:13,14). This statement would be quite confusing if three of them had just been mentioned (as apostles) and are then mentioned again!

Years later, Paul makes the same *distinction*: “Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, *and as the brethren of the Lord?*” (1 Cor. 9:5).

Foundational to the whole theory that three of Jesus’ brethren were apostles is an interpretation of Galatians 1:19. While on a visit to Jerusalem, Paul said he saw Peter, “but other of the apostles saw I none, except James the Lord’s brother.” This does not necessarily imply James was an apostle. He could simply be saying he didn’t see any of the apostles except Peter—but that he did see James, the Lord’s brother. *The New International Version* says: “I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother.” Lightfoot cites early writings, such

as *The Epistle of Clement*, which indicate that James the Lord’s brother, though a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church, was not one of the twelve.

As far as “Jude...the brother of James” (Jude 1:1) being one of the twelve, his own words pretty well rule this out: “But, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how that THEY [not we] told you there should be mockers in the last time...” (Jude 17, 18). Whereas, when the apostle Peter made a similar statement, he said: “Be mindful...of the commandment of US the apostles...that there shall come in the last days scoffers...” (2 Peter 3:2,3).

The SECOND view we will consider—that the brothers of Jesus were actually sons of Joseph and Mary—has been traced back to Tertullian and others, but was more fully developed by Helvidius of Rome, an obscure writer who lived in the fourth century. The strong point with this view is that the word “brethren” is allowed to retain its primary and normal meaning.

The people of Nazareth said: “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?” (Matt. 13:55,56). If these brothers and sisters were only cousins, one wonders why they would be mentioned? It would seem the reproach was intended for Joseph, Mary, Jesus, and their other children—not someone else’s children.

While it is true that “brethren,” in a secondary sense, could mean cousins, it should be noticed that a variety of people—in a variety of circumstances—all used the same term. Not only did the people of Nazareth call them “brethren” (Matt. 13:55)—so did Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “...his mother and *his brethren* stood without,” desiring to speak with Jesus. They also recorded the words of *someone else* who, on this occasion, used the same term, “Behold, thy mother and *thy brethren* stand without.” John used the same term, speaking of Jesus’ “mother, and *his brethren*” (John 2:12; cf. 7:3, 5, 10). In the book of Acts, we read that the apostles, Mary the mother of Jesus, “and *his brethren*” gathered for prayer (Acts 1:14). Paul, writing to the Corinthians, referred to them as “*the brethren of the Lord*” (1 Cor. 9:5); and, writing to the Galatians, spoke of “James the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19).

We can grant that people in Nazareth, under certain circumstances, might have used the term “brethren” in a secondary sense—

as meaning cousins—but is it feasible that *all* of these others would use the term in a secondary sense?

Those who hold the “cousin” theory point out that a number of these verses mention Mary as being with these “brethren”—at various times and places (Matt. 12:46; Mk. 3:31; John 2:12; Acts 1:14). They ask the question this way: If these were actually Mary’s sons, why—in this many verses—are they never called Mary’s sons? Why are they *always* called Jesus’ brethren?

Because Mark 6:3 refers to Jesus as “THE son of Mary,” some have taken this as proof he was Mary’s *only* son. But “THE son of” does not necessarily have this meaning, as a comparison of other verses will easily verify. Earlier in the book of Mark, a verse mentions “James THE son of Zebedee” and goes right on to say: “and his brother...” (Mk. 1:19). Many examples could be given (cf. Lk. 3:22-38).

On the other hand, in speaking of Jesus and his brethren, the people of Nazareth said: “Is not *his* mother called Mary?” If they had said, “Is not *their* mother called Mary?” the case for Jesus “brethren” being Mary’s sons would have been strengthened.

That Mary could have had other children after the birth of Jesus is based on Matthew 1:25: “Joseph...knew her not [did not have sexual relations with her] *till* she had brought forth her firstborn son.” The *major point* of this passage—and on this Roman Catholics and Protestants agree—is that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary *before* Jesus was born. But the Roman Catholic teaching goes clear beyond this, claiming that Joseph *never* had sexual relations with her, that she remained a virgin throughout her life, and so, of course, never had any other children. The debate centers on the word *till*.

Those who suppose Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, point out that “*till*” (or “*until*”) does not necessarily require a change in action. If we said, “We will serve the Lord *until* he comes,” this would not mean we would *quit* serving him *when* he comes (Cf. Rev. 2:25). Verses like 2 Samuel 6:23 can be cited—that Saul’s daughter had no children *until* the day of her death. Obviously she did not have children after her death. Or Deuteronomy 34:6—that no one knew the location of Moses’ grave “*until* this day.” Of course they didn’t know the location after that time either!

But there are *many* verses in which “*till*” *does* imply a change. The woman who lost a coin sought diligently *till* she found it (Lk.

15:8)—she did not continue looking after this. Upon entering a town for ministry, the disciples stayed in one house *till* they departed that place (Mk. 6:10)—they did not continue staying in that house after they departed. Jesus told the disciples not to reveal certain things *till* he had risen from the dead (Mk. 9:9)—but after the resurrection they did tell those things. Certain ones accompanied Paul *till* he was out of the city, and they returned home (Acts 21:5,6)—they did not continue accompanying him. Some of Paul’s enemies said they would “neither eat nor drink *till* they had killed” him (Acts 23:12)—but, of course, after this they intended to eat and drink. In these examples a change in action is unmistakable.

Some writers present *only* examples of “*till*” that can be used to support their view. But the fact is, the word itself can go *either way*. Good Biblical exposition must be honest and complete—so that conclusions are not based on partial evidence.

Does Matthew’s statement, “Joseph knew her not *till* she brought forth her firstborn son,” actually mean he *never* knew her intimately—that she remained a virgin throughout her life? If this were the case, why use the word “*till*” at all? He could have simply written, “Joseph *never* knew her”! If celibacy had been the goal of Joseph and Mary, why get married? Among the Jewish people, the sexual union between husband and wife was not frowned on—indeed it was the very thing that made them “one” (Gen. 2:24; Gen. 2:24; cf. 1 Cor. 6:16).

Possibly because many Christian converts came from very sinful backgrounds, some began to carry the idea of virginity to the other extreme. In time, some would come to think of the sexual relationship, even between husband and wife, as wrong. The idea of monasteries developed, a rigid asceticism emerged, priests were forbidden to marry.

With a growing emphasis on Mary, some came to believe—not only that she was a virgin when Jesus was conceived, as the Bible says (Lk. 1:26-35)—but that her virginity extended through her whole life! As the story grew, some began to teach that *she* was born with an immaculate conception, that she is now the Virgin Queen of Heaven, so highly exalted that sinners can pray to her, now, and at the hour of death. Some today even suppose she is a *co-redeemer* with Christ, contrary to the simple, basic truth of verses like John 14:6 and Acts 4:12.

Though Mary was chosen of God to be the mother of Jesus, in the Scriptures she is

not given a position of superiority (Matt. 12:46-50)—nor is there any hint this would be her position in the future. As *The Encyclopedia Britannica* states, during the first centuries of the church, no emphasis was placed upon Mary whatsoever. So these other ideas about Mary—including the doctrine of her *perpetual* virginity—were things that developed later. We see no reason to believe that after the birth of Jesus Mary could not have given birth to other children.

A common argument used to show that Mary had other children is based on the statement that she “brought forth her *firstborn* son” (Lk. 2:7). Would this not imply a “second-born,” a “third-born,” etc.? So it would seem. However, as Lightfoot has written: “The prominent idea conveyed by the term ‘firstborn’ to a Jew would be not the birth of other children, but the special consecration of this one.... Thus ‘firstborn’ does not necessarily suggest ‘later-born,’ any more than ‘son’ suggests ‘daughter.’” Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus to the Temple for this special consecration as the first to “open the womb” (Lk. 2:22-24; Ex. 13:2; Num. 3:13).

Jesus was Mary’s firstborn son *when he was born*—the term, at that point, could have nothing to do with whether others would be born later. If a woman died giving birth to her first child, this would be her “firstborn,” even though she would give birth to no more. When divine judgment fell upon the Egyptians and “all the firstborn in the land” died (Exod. 11:5), this would have included many families that only had one son. The meaning of “firstborn” does not depend on whether other children are born in the future.

An Old Testament passage has sometimes been cited to show that Mary had other sons. After Jesus drove the money changers from the Temple, “his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of your house has eaten me up” (John 2:17). When we turn to this passage, it says: “I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto *my mother’s children*. For the zeal of your house has eaten me up” (Psalms 69:8,9). In this case, the “brethren” were *actual* brothers—the children (plural) of the *same* mother. It would appear, however, that this passage refers primarily to David, for he says just before: “My *sins* are not hid from you” (verse 5). This could not mean Jesus Christ, for he was “without sin” (Heb. 4:15). An incident in the life of David—about zeal for the house of God—is quoted in the New Testament because a *parallel* occurred in the life of Christ. This cannot mean that *everything* about David in this passage refers to Christ.

Perhaps the strongest argument against the view that Mary had other children is based on the words of Jesus on the cross. Referring to John, Jesus said to Mary: "Woman, behold thy son!" Then, referring to Mary, he said to John: "Behold thy mother!" As a result, "from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home" (John 19:26,27). Why would Jesus turn over the responsibility of his mother's care to John, if she had four other sons of her own?

Admittedly, we don't know all the details about this arrangement. One unknown detail might clarify the whole thing. We have no problem believing James, Joses, Simon, Judas, and the daughters that are mentioned, could have been the children of Joseph and Mary, as expounded by Helvidius, but the arguments are not conclusive.

The THIRD viewpoint in our study is generally regarded as the *oldest*: that the brethren of Jesus were children of Joseph by a previous marriage. When Jerome set forth the "cousin" teaching (about 383 A. D.), he did not—apparently *could not*—name a single previous writer who shared his view. This seems like a strange omission, in that he cited others such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Justin on other points. Whereas, the viewpoint that "regards these 'brethren' as the children of Joseph by a former marriage, and Mary as his second wife," says *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "seems to have been prevalent in the first three centuries and is supported by Origen, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa and Ambrose, Epiphanius being its chief advocate." To this list could also be added Clement, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrosiaster, and Cyril of Alexandria.

Two well-known names among Protestant commentators from years ago are Adam Clarke and Matthew Henry. "James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas," wrote Matthew Henry, "it is probable, were Joseph's children by a former wife." Clarke says it is entirely possible these brothers were sons of Joseph and Mary, *but* there is no solid proof against the teaching they were Joseph's sons by a previous marriage, as taught by ancient writers. He quotes from St. Sophronius: "Joseph, the spouse of the God-bearing virgin, had four sons by his own wife, James, Simon, Jude, and Joses; and three daughters, Esther, and Thamar, and a third who, with her mother, was called Salome."

Clarke also cites Theophylact: "Joseph, the husband of the blessed Mary, had seven children by a former wife, four sons and three

daughters—Martha, Esther, and Salome." He speculated that this "former wife" was the widow of Joseph's brother Cleophas, who died childless. Consequently, if Joseph married her and raised up seed to his brother (Deut. 25:5,6), this would make Joseph's sons both brothers *and* cousins of Jesus!

As the message of Christ went forth and impacted the world, in addition to the *inspired* writers, there were others that sought to explain details about Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the apostles, etc. Some may have handed down pieces of authentic history, but for the most part these accounts are fiction and should be rejected. *Hastings' Bible Dictionary* (p. 496) cites one such doubtful tradition—that Joseph was in his 93rd year when he married Mary who was in her 15th; that he died at the age of 111 when Jesus was 18. Someone may have promoted this teaching to give credence to the claim that Joseph kept Mary a virgin throughout her life!

While we have no reason to believe Joseph was in his 93rd year when he married Mary, he probably was older than her. It would only be speculation to say he died of old age. But, if indeed he was older than Mary, he certainly could have had a family by a previous marriage. This would not prove the "perpetual virginity" teaching, but it would allow room for it. Consequently, some feel that any that hold this view are simply giving in to Roman Catholic claims. This is not the case. The Seventh-day Adventist denomination, for example, does not believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary and commonly exposes errors in Roman Catholicism, yet—and this is significant—they believe the "brothers" of Jesus were *sons of Joseph by a previous marriage*.

This is clearly spelled out in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (vol. 5, pp. 399,400): "The gospel writers make it evident that these were sons of Joseph by a former marriage. The fact that Jesus committed His mother to the care of John (see John 19:26,27) implies that Jesus' 'brethren' (and sisters) were not actually Mary's own children. That these brothers were older than Jesus is shown by their attitude and relationship to Him. They tried to restrain Him (Mark 3:21), they spoke taunting words to Him (John 7:3,4), and otherwise interfered with His conduct (cf. Mark 3:31), as only brothers who were older would dare do in those days."

In this study (initially written in 1998), I have sought to bring together *all* pertinent scriptures and arguments that have a bear-

ing on this subject. I have put a lot of time into this, to study it all out, and to present it in a readable manner. My conclusion is that there is no need to make a dogma out of any one of these three viewpoints. Whether we like it or not, the Bible does not spell out everything—nor does it need to. The things that are written, as John expressed it, "are written, that you might believe that JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD; and that believing you might have LIFE through his name" (John 20:31; 21:25).

The real issue is not who the brothers of Jesus were—the issue is not about Mary, the mother of Jesus—but JESUS HIMSELF! (Acts 4:12; 5:42).



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