

The brothers and sisters of Jesus: his cousins

The first eight points below are an excerpt of Thomas Lane, [*The Catholic Priesthood: Biblical Foundations*](#) published by Emmaus Road, 2016.

The brothers and sisters of Jesus appear in Matthew 12:46, Mark 3:31–32 and 6:3, Luke 8:19–20; John 2:12 and 7:1–10; and Acts 1:14. Catholics say they are not Jesus’ siblings but his cousins. Here are some reasons.

1. In Mark 15:40 and Matthew 27:56 there is mention of a Mary who is the mother of James and Joseph. James and Joseph are two of the four named elsewhere in the Gospels as brothers of Jesus. We would expect the evangelists to have clearly stated if she were also the mother of Jesus. So the crucifixion scene suggests that Mary the mother of Jesus is not the mother of the brothers and sisters of Jesus.
2. On the cross in John, Jesus gives his mother to John to be looked after (John 19:25–27). If Jesus had younger brothers and sisters it would be beyond strange if he asked someone who was not a family member to look after his mother.
3. There is no word in Aramaic or ancient Hebrew for “cousin” so brother and sister were used instead. Examples of “uncle”/“nephew” being translated as “brother” are the following:
 - a. In Genesis 13:8, the Hebrew describes Abraham and Lot as brothers, whereas they are uncle and nephew.
 - b. In Genesis 14:14, the Hebrew “brother” refers to kinsman.
 - c. We see the same in Genesis 29:11–15 to describe the relationship between Jacob and Laban.

Even though there is a word for cousin in Greek, *anepsios* (ἀνεψιός), when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek as the Septuagint (LXX) the practice of using the word “brother” continued, since it was the Semitic way of expression. Likewise, following its adoption in the LXX, it continued in the New Testament with the exception of its sole use in Colossians 4:10.

4. When Matthew writes in 1:25 that Joseph did not know Mary “until” she had given birth to Jesus, the use of “until,” *heōs hou* (ἕως οὗ) does not imply marital relations after the birth because *heōs hou* in Greek does not always imply resumption of the negated action beyond the time indicated. Other examples of similar usages are 2 Samuel 6:23, where we read that Michal had no children until the day she died. Another usage is in Deuteronomy 34:6, where no one knows where Moses is buried until this day. The use of the word “until” may not be evident in some translations because translators have removed it due to it making for a strange translation. In 1 Corinthians 15:25 Christ must reign until (*achri hou* rather than *heōs hou*) he has put all his enemies under his feet, and obviously his reign continues afterwards.
5. Describing Jesus as Mary’s “first-born” in Luke 2:7 does not imply that Jesus had younger brothers. St. Jerome explained it this way: “Every only begotten son is a first-born son, but

not every first-born is an only begotten” (*Against Helvidius* 12).¹ It was the normal way to describe the first baby whether or not other children followed. Exodus 13:2 defines first-born as the first to open the womb. The attitude of the “brothers” of Jesus betrays that they are not younger siblings, since they give advice to Jesus (Mark 3:21; John 7:3–4) and it would not have been normal for younger brothers to advise older brothers.

6. In Mark 6:3, Jesus is described by the people of Nazareth as “the son of Mary,” not “a son of Mary.”
7. One of the men named as a brother of Jesus (Matt 13:55) is called Joseph. While it was certainly not unknown for sons to be named after their fathers, it was uncommon.²
8. In AD 382 or 383, St. Jerome complained about [Helvidius](#) (Helvetius) who interpreted Matthew 1:25 and other passages to mean that Mary had other children. Jerome’s document shows Helvidius’ thinking was novel (*Against Helvidius* 3–8). So, late in the fourth century, it was a novel and new interpretation of Scripture to suggest that Mary had other children. In the early centuries, Mary was always understood to be a virgin. Jerome referred to previous Church Fathers who held his view: Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenæus, and Justin Martyr. Jerome also wrote that nowhere is there evidence that Joseph had previously been married and states, “I claim still more, that Joseph himself on account of Mary was a virgin, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin son was born. For if as a holy man he does not come under the imputation of fornication, and it is nowhere written that he had another wife, but was the guardian of Mary whom he was supposed to have to wife rather than her husband, the conclusion is that he who was thought worthy to be called father of the Lord, remained a virgin.”³
9. Even during the Reformation the virginity of Mary was not an issue. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli used the term “ever-Virgin” of Mary. It is only in recent years that the dispute about the brothers and sisters of Jesus has arisen due to a literal reading of the Bible. The Orthodox and Eastern Churches as well as many “High” Anglicans and Episcopalians maintain that Mary remained a virgin.
10. Mary’s question to the angel in Luke 1:34 was seen in the early Church as referring to her vow of lifelong virginity.
11. We need to see this debate in a wider context. Churches which argue for a literal interpretation of the brothers and sisters of Jesus do not have a celibate priesthood. In the New Testament family is redefined beyond the blood family, we are all one family in the Church. The natural order is now subverted and in the Church we are subsumed into the family of the Trinity. The virginity of Mary and celibate priesthood is an expression of this new family with the Trinity.
12. Finally, as you are aware, the perpetual virginity of Mary is one of the four dogmas of Our Lady in the Catholic Church. The four dogmas are
 1. Mary as [Mother of God](#), proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431.
 2. Mary was Ever Virgin, the perpetual virginity of Mary before, during and after the birth of Jesus proclaimed in the third canon of the Lateran Council held in the time of Pope

¹ In *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W. G. Martley, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser., vol. 6, (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 339.

² W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Yale Bible 26 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 9.

³ Schaff and Wace, 344.

Martin I, AD 649.

3. The [Immaculate Conception of Our Lady](#) proclaimed by Pius IX on December 8th, 1854.
4. The [Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven](#) proclaimed by Pius XII on November 1st, 1950.