

THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF JESUS – HIS COUSINS

The brothers and sisters of Jesus appear in Matt 12:46; Mark 3:32; 6:3; John 2:12; 7:1-10; Acts 1:14. They are not blood brothers and sisters of Jesus but his cousins. You may ask, “What is the evidence for making this claim?” The following are reasons.

1. In Mark 15:40 and Matt 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. Clearly this Mary could not be Mary the mother of Jesus because the evangelists would have stated clearly if she were. So the crucifixion scene suggests that Mary is not the mother of the brothers and sisters of Jesus.
2. When on the cross in John, Jesus gives his mother to John to be looked after (John 19:25-27). According to Jewish law, if Jesus had younger brothers and sisters it would be beyond strange and would be illegal if Jesus asked someone who was not a family member to look after his mother.
3. We believe that Semitic usage of the words “brother” and “sister” underlies their usage in the Gospels. There is no word in Aramaic or Hebrew for cousin so brother/sister were used instead. Even when the Hebrew OT was being translated into Greek in the LXX/Septuagint the practice continued since it was the Semitic way of expression. Likewise it continued in the NT, following its adoption in the LXX. Examples in the OT of uncle/nephew being translated as “brother” are the following:
 1. in Gen 13:8 where the Hebrew describes Abraham and Lot as brothers whereas they are uncle and nephew.
 2. Gen 14:14
 3. We see the same in Gen 29:11-15 to describe the relationship between Jacob and his uncle Lot.
 4. Likewise in 1 Chron 23:22 the same word *adelphos* (brother) is used to translate cousins.

The word “brother” was used sometimes to refer to all Jews. See Deut 15:12; 17:15; 22:1; Rom 9:3

4. When Matt writes in 1:25 that Joseph did not know Mary until she had given birth to Jesus the use of “until” ἕως οὗ (*heos hou* in Greek) does not imply that they had marital relations after the birth. *heos hou* in Greek implies continuation beyond the time indicated. Other examples of similar usages are 2 Sam 6:23 where we read that Michal had no children until the day she died. Another usage is in Deut 34:6 where no one knows where Moses is buried until this day (ἕως τῆς ἡμέρας ταύτης). The use of until may not be evident in some of translations because translators have removed it due to it making for a strange translation. Gen 35:4 in the LXX adds until this day (ἕως τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας). See also Psa 123:2 ἕως οὗ (122:2 in the LXX); Isa 46:4; In Matt 28:20 Jesus is with us until the end of the age (ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος). Surely Jesus did not mean that he would not be with us after the dissolution of the world. In 1 Cor 15:25 Christ must reign until (ἄχρι οὗ rather than ἕως οὗ) he has put all his enemies under his feet. Surely this does not mean that he will not reign afterwards.
5. Describing Jesus as Mary’s “first-born” in Luke 2:7 does not imply that Jesus had younger brothers. It was the normal way to describe the first baby whether or not other children followed. The attitude of the “brothers” betrays that they are not children born

subsequently to Jesus 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. In 382/3 St Jerome complained about [Helvidius](#) who interpreted Matt 1:25 to mean that Mary had other children. Jerome said this is ‘novel.’ 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.
8. 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.
9. Mary’s question to the angel in Luke 1:34 was seen in the early Church as referring to her vow of lifelong virginity.
10. 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.
11. 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 431 AD.
 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 Martin I, A.D. 649
 3. The [Immaculate Conception](#) of Our Lady proclaimed by Pius IX on 8th December 1854.
 4. The Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven proclaimed by Pius XII on 1st November 1950.

You may be aware that there is a movement in the Church now to have a fifth and final dogma of Our Lady proclaimed, Mary as [Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces and Advocate](#). You can read more about the movement petitioning for the proclamation of this dogma at www.voxpopuli.org