

When Catholics call Mary the “Blessed Virgin,” they mean she remained a virgin throughout her life. When Protestants refer to Mary as “virgin,” they mean she was a virgin only until Jesus’ birth. They believe that she and Joseph later had children whom Scripture refers to as “the brethren of the Lord.” The disagreement arises over biblical verses that use the terms “brethren,” “brother,” and “sister.”

There are about ten instances in the New Testament where “brothers” and “sisters” of the Lord are mentioned (Matt. 12:46; Matt. 13:55; Mark 3:31–34; Mark 6:3; Luke 8:19–20; John 2:12, 7:3, 5, 10; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 9:5).

When trying to understand these verses, note that the term “brother” (Greek: *adelphos*) has a wide meaning in the Bible. It is not restricted to the literal meaning of a full brother or half-brother. The same goes for “sister” (*adelphē*) and the plural form “brothers” (*adelphoi*). The Old Testament shows that “brother” had a wide semantic range of meaning and could refer to any male relative from whom you are not descended (male relatives from whom you are descended are known as “fathers”) and who are not descended from you (your male descendants, regardless of the number of generations removed, are your “sons”), as well as kinsmen such as cousins, those who are members of the family by marriage or by law rather than by blood, and even friends or mere political allies (2 Sam. 1:26; Amos 1:9).

Lot, for example, is called Abraham’s “brother” (Gen. 14:14), even though, being the son of Haran, Abraham’s brother (Gen. 11:26–28), he was actually Abraham’s nephew. Similarly, Jacob is called the “brother” of his uncle Laban (Gen. 29:15). Kish and Eleazar were the sons of Mahli. Kish had sons of his own, but Eleazar had no sons, only daughters, who married their “brethren,” the sons of Kish. These “brethren” were really their cousins (1 Chr. 23:21–22).

The terms “brothers,” “brother,” and “sister” did not refer only to close relatives. Sometimes they meant kinsmen (Deut. 23:7; Neh. 5:7; Jer. 34:9), as in the reference to the forty-two “brethren” of King Azariah (2 Kgs. 10:13–14).

## NO WORD FOR COUSIN

Because neither Hebrew nor Aramaic (the language spoken by Christ and his disciples) had a special word meaning “cousin,” speakers of those languages used either the word for “brother” or a circumlocution, such as “the son of the sister of my father.” But circumlocutions are clumsy, so the Jews used “brother.”

The writers of the New Testament were brought up to use the Aramaic equivalent of “brothers” to mean both cousins and sons of the same father—plus other relatives and even non-relatives. When they wrote in Greek, they did the same thing the translators of the Septuagint did. (The Septuagint was the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible; it was translated by Hellenistic Jews a century or two before Christ’s birth and was the version of the Bible from which most of the Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament are taken.)

In the Septuagint the Hebrew word that includes both brothers and cousins was translated as *adelphos*, which in Greek usually has the narrow meaning that the English “brother” has. Unlike Hebrew or Aramaic, Greek has a separate word for cousin, *anepsios*, but the translators of the Septuagint favored *adelphos*, even for true cousins.

You might say they transliterated instead of translated, importing the Jewish idiom into the Greek Bible. They took an exact equivalent of the Hebrew word for “brother” and did not use *adelphos* in one place (for sons of the same parents), and *anepsios* in another (for cousins). This same usage was employed by the writers of the New Testament and passed into English translations of the Bible. To determine what “brethren” or “brother” or “sister” means in any one verse, we have to look at the context. When we do that, we see that insuperable problems arise if we assume that Mary had children other than Jesus.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would conceive a son, she asked, “How can this be since I have no relations with a man?” (Luke 1:34). From the Church’s earliest days,

as the Fathers interpreted this Bible passage, Mary’s question was taken to mean that she had made a vow of lifelong virginity, even in marriage. (This was not common, but neither was it unheard of.) If she had not taken such a vow, the question would make no sense.

Mary knew how babies are made (otherwise she wouldn’t have asked the question she did). If she had anticipated having children in the normal way and did not intend to maintain a vow of virginity, she would hardly have to ask “how” she was to have a child, since conceiving a child in the “normal” way would be expected by a newlywed wife. Her question makes sense only if there was an apparent (but not a real) conflict between keeping a vow of virginity and acceding to the angel’s request. A careful look at the New Testament shows that Mary kept her vow of virginity and never had any children other than Jesus.

When Jesus was found in the Temple at age twelve, the context suggests that he was the only son of Mary and Joseph. There is no hint in this episode of any other children in the family (Luke 2:41–51). Jesus grew up in Nazareth, and the people of Nazareth referred to him as “the son of Mary” (Mark 6:3), not as “a son of Mary.” The Greek expression implies he is her only son. In fact, others in the Gospels are never referred to as Mary’s sons, not even when they are called Jesus’ “brethren.” If they were in fact her sons, this would be strange usage.

Also, the attitude taken by the “brethren of the Lord” implies they are his elders. In ancient and, particularly, in Eastern societies (remember, Palestine is in Asia), older sons gave advice to younger, but younger never gave advice to older—it was considered disrespectful to do so. But we find Jesus’ “brethren” saying to him that Galilee was no place for him and that he should go to Judea so he could make a name for himself (John 7:3–4).

Another time, they sought to restrain him for his own benefit: “And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for people were saying, ‘He is beside himself’” (Mark 3:21). This kind of behavior could make sense for ancient Jews only if the

“brethren” were older than Jesus, but that alone eliminates them as his biological brothers, since Jesus was Mary’s “first-born” son (Luke 2:7).

Consider what happened at the foot of the cross. When he was dying, Jesus entrusted his mother to the apostle John (John 19:26–27). The Gospels mention four of his “brethren”: James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude. It is hard to imagine why Jesus would have disregarded family ties and made this provision for his mother if these four were also her sons.

## FUNDAMENTALIST ARGUMENTS

Fundamentalists insist that “brethren of the Lord” must be interpreted in the strict sense. They most commonly make two arguments based on Matthew 1:25: “[A]nd he did not know her until (Greek: *heos*, also translated into English as “till”) she brought forth her firstborn son.” They first argue that the natural inference from “till” is that Joseph and Mary afterward lived together as husband and wife, in the usual sense, and had several children. Otherwise, why would Jesus be called “first-born”? Doesn’t that mean there must have been at least a “second-born,” perhaps a “third-born,” and so on? But they are using a narrow, modern meaning of “until,” instead of the meaning it had when the Bible was written. In the Bible, it means only that some action did not happen up to a certain point; it does not imply that the action did happen later, which is the modern sense of the term. In fact, if the modern sense is forced on the Bible, some ridiculous meanings result.

Consider this line: “Michal the daughter of Saul had no children till the day of her death” (2 Sam. 6:23). Are we to assume she had children *after* her death?

There is also the burial of Moses. The book of Deuteronomy says that no one knew the location of his grave “until this present day” (Deut. 34:6, Knox). But we know that no one has known since that day either.

The examples could be multiplied, but you get

the idea—nothing can be proved from the use of the word “till” in Matthew 1:25. Recent translations give a better sense of the verse: “He had no relations with her at any time before she bore a son” (*New American Bible*); “He had not known her when she bore a son” (Knox).

Fundamentalists claim Jesus could not be Mary’s “first-born” unless there were other children that followed him. But this shows ignorance of the way the ancient Jews used the term. For them it meant the child that opened the womb (Ex. 13:2; Num. 3:12). Under the Mosaic Law, it was the “first-born” son that was to be sanctified (Ex. 34:20). Did this mean the parents had to wait until a second son was born before they could call their first the “first-born”? Hardly. The first male child of a marriage was termed the “first-born” even if he turned out to be the only child of the marriage.

### THE HOLY FAMILY

Fundamentalists say it would have been repugnant for Mary and Joseph to enter a marriage and remain celibate. They call such marriages “unnatural” arrangements. Certainly they were unusual, but not as unusual as having the Son of God in one’s family, and not nearly as unusual as having a virgin give birth to a child! The Holy Family was neither an average family nor should we expect its members to act as would members of an average family.

The circumstances demanded sacrifice by Mary and Joseph. This was a special family, set aside for the nurturing of the Son of God. No greater dignity could be given to marriage than that.

Backing up the testimony of Scripture regarding Mary’s perpetual virginity is the testimony of the early Christian Church. Consider the controversy between Jerome and Helvidius, writing around 380. Helvidius first brought up the notion that the “brothers of the Lord” were children born to Mary and Joseph after Jesus’ birth. The great Scripture scholar Jerome at first declined to comment on Helvidius’ remarks because they were a “novel, wicked, and a daring affront to the faith of the whole world.”

At length, though, Jerome’s friends convinced him to write a reply, which turned out to be his treatise called *On the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary*. He used not only the scriptural arguments given above, but cited earlier Christian writers, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr. Helvidius was unable to come up with a reply, and his theory remained in disrepute and was unheard of until more recent times.

So, if it is established that the “brethren of the Lord” were not Jesus’ brothers or half-brothers through Mary, who were they?

Prior to the time of Jerome, the standard theory was that they were Jesus’ “brothers” who were sons of Joseph though not of Mary. According to this view, Joseph was a widower at the time he married Mary. He had children from his first marriage (who would be older than Jesus, explaining their attitude toward him). This is mentioned in a number of early Christian writings. One work, known as the *Proto-evangelium of James* (A.D. 125) records that Joseph was selected from a group of widowers to serve as the husband/protector of Mary, who was a virgin consecrated to God. When he was chosen, Joseph objected: “I have children, and I am an old man, and she is a young girl” (4:8–9).

Today, the most commonly accepted view is that they were Jesus’ cousins. Of the four “brethren” who are named in the Gospels, consider, for the sake of argument, only James. Similar reasoning can be used for the other three. We know that James the younger’s mother was named Mary. Look at the descriptions of the women standing beneath the cross: “among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (Matt. 27:56); “There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome” (Mark 15:40).

Then look at what John says: “But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25). If we compare these parallel accounts of the scene of the crucifixion, we see that the

mother of James and Joseph must be the wife of Clopas. So far, so good.

An argument against this, though, is that James is elsewhere (Matt. 10:3) described as the son of Alphaeus, which would mean this Mary, whoever she was, was the wife of both Clopas and Alphaeus. But Alphaeus and Clopas are the same person, since the Aramaic name for Alphaeus could be rendered in Greek either as Alphaeus or as Clopas. Another possibility is that Alphaeus took a Greek name similar to his Jewish name, the way that Saul took the name Paul.

So it’s probable that James the younger is the son of Mary and Clopas. The second-century historian Hegesippus explains that Clopas was the brother of Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus. James would thus be Joseph’s nephew and a cousin of Jesus, who was Joseph’s putative son.

This identification of the “brethren of the Lord” as Jesus’ first cousins is open to legitimate question—they might even be relatives more distantly removed—but our inability to determine for certain their exact status strictly on the basis of the biblical evidence (or lack of it, in this case) says nothing at all about the main point, which is that the Bible demonstrates that they were not the Blessed Virgin Mary’s children.

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## Mary & the Saints

### “BRETHREN OF THE LORD”