

Most Protestants claim that Mary bore children other than Jesus. To support their claim, these Protestants refer to the biblical passages which mention the “brethren of the Lord.” As explained in the Catholic Answers tract *“Brethren of the Lord,”* neither the Gospel accounts nor the early Christians attest to the notion that Mary bore other children besides Jesus. The faithful knew, through the witness of Scripture and Tradition, that Jesus was Mary’s only child and that she remained a lifelong virgin.

An important historical document which supports the teaching of Mary’s perpetual virginity is the *Protoevangelium of James*, which was written probably less than sixty years after the conclusion of Mary’s earthly life (around A.D. 120), when memories of her life were still vivid in the minds of many.

According to the world-renowned patristics scholar, Johannes Quasten: “The principal aim of the whole writing [*Protoevangelium of James*] is to prove the perpetual and inviolate virginity of Mary before, in, and after the birth of Christ” (*Patrology*, 1:120–1).

To begin with, the *Protoevangelium* records that when Mary’s birth was prophesied, her mother, St. Anne, vowed that she would devote the child to the service of the Lord, as Samuel had been by his mother (1 Sam. 1:11). Mary would thus serve the Lord at the Temple, as women had for centuries (1 Sam. 2:22), and as Anna the prophetess did at the time of Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:36–37). A life of continual, devoted service to the Lord at the Temple meant that Mary would not be able to live the ordinary life of a child-rearing mother. Rather, she was vowed to a life of perpetual virginity.

However, due to considerations of ceremonial cleanliness, it was eventually necessary for Mary, a consecrated “virgin of the Lord,” to have a guardian or protector who would respect her vow of virginity. Thus, according to the *Protoevangelium*, Joseph, an elderly widower who already had children, was chosen to be her spouse. (This would also explain why Joseph was apparently dead by the time of Jesus’ adult ministry, since he does not appear during it in the

Gospels, and since Mary is entrusted to John, rather than to her husband Joseph, at the crucifixion).

According to the *Protoevangelium*, Joseph was required to regard Mary’s vow of virginity with the utmost respect. The gravity of his responsibility as the guardian of a virgin was indicated by the fact that, when she was discovered to be with child, he had to answer to the Temple authorities, who thought him guilty of defiling a virgin of the Lord. Mary was also accused of having forsaken the Lord by breaking her vow. Keeping this in mind, it is an incredible insult to the Blessed Virgin to say that she broke her vow by bearing children other than her Lord and God, who was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The perpetual virginity of Mary has always been reconciled with the biblical references to Christ’s brethren through a proper understanding of the meaning of the term “brethren.” The understanding that the brethren of the Lord were Jesus’ stepbrothers (children of Joseph) rather than half-brothers (children of Mary) was the most common one until the time of Jerome (fourth century). It was Jerome who introduced the possibility that Christ’s brethren were actually his cousins, since in Jewish idiom cousins were also referred to as “brethren.” The Catholic Church allows the faithful to hold either view, since both are compatible with the reality of Mary’s perpetual virginity.

Today most Protestants are unaware of these early beliefs regarding Mary’s virginity and the proper interpretation of “the brethren of the Lord.” And yet, the Protestant Reformers themselves—Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli—honored the perpetual virginity of Mary and recognized it as the teaching of the Bible, as have other, more modern Protestants.

THE PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

“And behold, an angel of the Lord stood by [St. Anne], saying, ‘Anne! Anne! The Lord has heard your prayer, and you shall conceive and shall bring forth, and your seed shall be spoken of in all the world.’

And Anne said, ‘As the Lord my God lives, if I beget either male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it shall minister to him in the holy things all the days of its life.’ . . . And [from the time she was three] Mary was in the temple of the Lord as if she were a dove that dwelt there” (*Protoevangelium of James* 4, 7 [A.D. 120]).

“And when she was twelve years old there was held a council of priests, saying, ‘Behold, Mary has reached the age of twelve years in the temple of the Lord. What then shall we do with her, lest perchance she defile the sanctuary of the Lord?’ And they said to the high priest, ‘You stand by the altar of the Lord; go in and pray concerning her, and whatever the Lord shall manifest to you, that also will we do.’ . . . [A]nd he prayed concerning her, and behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him saying, ‘Zechariah! Zechariah! Go out and assemble the widowers of the people and let them bring each his rod, and to whomsoever the Lord shall show a sign, his wife shall she be. . . . And Joseph [was chosen]. . . . And the priest said to Joseph, ‘You have been chosen by lot to take into your keeping the Virgin of the Lord.’ But Joseph refused, saying, ‘I have children, and I am an old man, and she is a young girl’” (*ibid.*, 8–9).

“And Annas the scribe came to him [Joseph] . . . and saw that Mary was with child. And he ran away to the priest and said to him, ‘Joseph, whom you did vouch for, has committed a grievous crime.’ And the priest said, ‘How so?’ And he said, ‘He has defiled the virgin whom he received out of the temple of the Lord and has married her by stealth’” (*ibid.*, 15).

“And the priest said, ‘Mary, why have you done this? And why have you brought your soul low and forgotten the Lord your God?’ . . . And she wept bitterly saying, ‘As the Lord my God lives, I am pure before him, and know not man’” (*ibid.*).

ORIGEN

“The Book [the *Protoevangelium*] of James [records]

that the brethren of Jesus were sons of Joseph by a former wife, whom he married before Mary. Now those who say so wish to preserve the honor of Mary in virginity to the end, so that body of hers which was appointed to minister to the Word . . . might not know intercourse with a man after the Holy Spirit came into her and the power from on high overshadowed her. And I think it in harmony with reason that Jesus was the firstfruit among men of the purity which consists in [perpetual] chastity, and Mary was among women. For it were not pious to ascribe to any other than to her the firstfruit of virginity” (*Commentary on Matthew* 2:17 [A.D. 248]).

HILARY OF POITIERS

“If they [the brethren of the Lord] had been Mary’s sons and not those taken from Joseph’s former marriage, she would never have been given over in the moment of the passion [crucifixion] to the apostle John as his mother, the Lord saying to each, ‘Woman, behold your son,’ and to John, ‘Behold your mother’ [John 19:26–27], as he bequeathed filial love to a disciple as a consolation to the one desolate” (*Commentary on Matthew* 1:4 [A.D. 354]).

ATHANASIUS

“Let those, therefore, who deny that the Son is by nature from the Father and proper to his essence deny also that he took true human flesh from the ever-virgin Mary” (*Discourses Against the Arians* 2:70 [A.D. 360]).

EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS

“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things, both visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . . who for us men and for our salvation came down and took flesh, that is, was born perfectly of the holy ever-virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit” (*The Man Well-Anchored* 120 [A.D. 374]).

• • •

"And to holy Mary, [the title] 'Virgin' is invariably added, for that holy woman remains undefiled" (*Medicine Chest Against All Heresies* 78:6 [A.D. 375]).

JEROME

"[Helvidius] produces Tertullian as a witness [to his view] and quotes Victorinus, bishop of Petavium. Of Tertullian, I say no more than that he did not belong to the Church. But as regards Victorinus, I assert what has already been proven from the gospel—that he [Victorinus] spoke of the brethren of the Lord not as being sons of Mary but brethren in the sense I have explained, that is to say, brethren in point of kinship, not by nature. [By discussing such things we] are . . . following the tiny streams of opinion. Might I not array against you the whole series of ancient writers? Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and many other apostolic and eloquent men, who against [the heretics] Ebion, Theodotus of Byzantium, and Valentinus, held these same views and wrote volumes replete with wisdom. If you had ever read what they wrote, you would be a wiser man" (*Against Helvidius: The Perpetual Virginity of Mary* 19 [A.D. 383]).

"We believe that God was born of a virgin, because we read it. We do not believe that Mary was married after she brought forth her Son, because we do not read it. . . . You [Helvidius] say that Mary did not remain a virgin. As for myself, I claim that Joseph himself was a virgin, through Mary, so that a virgin Son might be born of a virginal wedlock" (*ibid.*, 21).

DIDYMUS THE BLIND

"It helps us to understand the terms 'first-born' and 'only-begotten' when the Evangelist tells that Mary remained a virgin 'until she brought forth her first-born son' [Matt. 1:25]; for neither did Mary, who is to be honored and praised above all others, marry anyone else, nor did she ever become the Mother of anyone else, but even after childbirth she remained always and forever an immaculate virgin" (*The Trinity* 3:4 [A.D. 386]).

AMBROSE OF MILAN

"Imitate her [Mary], holy mothers, who in her only dearly beloved Son set forth so great an example of material virtue; for neither have you sweeter children [than Jesus], nor did the Virgin seek the consolation of being able to bear another son" (*Letters* 63:111 [A.D. 388]).

POPE SIRICIUS I

"You had good reason to be horrified at the thought that another birth might issue from the same virginal womb from which Christ was born according to the flesh. For the Lord Jesus would never have chosen to be born of a virgin if he had ever judged that she would be so incontinent as to contaminate with the seed of human intercourse the birthplace of the Lord's body, that court of the eternal king" (*Letter to Bishop Anysius* [A.D. 392]).

AUGUSTINE

"In being born of a Virgin who chose to remain a Virgin even before she knew who was to be born of her, Christ wanted to approve virginity rather than to impose it. And he wanted virginity to be of free choice even in that woman in whom he took upon himself the form of a slave" (*Holy Virginity* 4:4 [A.D. 401]).

"It was not the visible sun, but its invisible Creator who consecrated this day for us, when the Virgin Mother, fertile of womb and integral in her virginity, brought him forth, made visible for us, by whom, when he was invisible, she too was created. A Virgin conceiving, a Virgin bearing, a Virgin pregnant, a Virgin bringing forth, a Virgin perpetual. Why do you wonder at this, O man?" (*Sermons* 186:1 [A.D. 411]).

"Heretics called Antidicomarites are those who contradict the perpetual virginity of Mary and affirm that after Christ was born she was joined as one with her

husband" (*Heresies* 56 [A.D. 428]).

LEPORIUS

"We confess, therefore, that our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, born of the Father before the ages, and in times most recent, made man of the Holy Spirit and the ever-virgin Mary" (*Document of Amendment* 3 [A.D. 426]).

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

"[T]he Word himself, coming into the Blessed Virgin herself, assumed for himself his own temple from the substance of the Virgin and came forth from her a man in all that could be externally discerned, while interiorly he was true God. Therefore he kept his Mother a virgin even after her childbearing" (*Against Those Who Do Not Wish to Confess That the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God* 4 [A.D. 430]).

POPE LEO I

"His [Christ's] origin is different, but his [human] nature is the same. Human usage and custom were lacking, but by divine power a Virgin conceived, a Virgin bore, and Virgin she remained" (*Sermons* 22:2 [A.D. 450]).

NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.
Bernadette Carr, STL, 10 August 2004

IMPRIMATUR: In accord with 1983 CIC 827 § 3, permission to publish this work is hereby granted.
+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, 10 August 2004

Copyright © 2004

CATHOLIC ANSWERS
2020 Gillespie Way, El Cajon, CA 92020
Toll free order line: (888) 291-8000
Web: www.catholic.com

Mary & the Saints

THE FATHERS KNOW BEST

