

# The “Brothers and Sisters” of Christ

**Issue:** How can the Catholic Church teach that Mary was a virgin after the birth of Christ when there are references in Scripture to the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus?

**Discussion:** There are portions of Scripture that refer to the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus Christ. These passages seem to contradict the Church’s teaching that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Christ. However, if we carefully examine these passages in context, it becomes clear that these “brothers and sisters” are not other biological children of the Blessed Mother. Further, in light of both Scripture and Tradition, we know that Jesus had brothers and sisters in the broader sense of the words, that is, His cousins.<sup>1</sup>

When looking for biblical “evidence” against Mary’s Perpetual Virginity, some Christians typically cite passages referring to the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus in Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3 (see also Mk. 3:31; Lk. 8:20; Jn. 2:1; 7:3-5; Acts 1:14; Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 9:5). Although the Greek word *adelphos* is used in these passages and literally translates as “brother” (also *adelphe*, “sister”), resolving this issue is not as simple as it seems on the surface.

## Dynamic Translation

To understand Sacred Scripture and the intended meaning of words, we must understand the idioms used at that time and how translators have rendered the biblical passages

into our modern language. Every language uses idioms. An idiom is an expression of words that does not mean what it literally says. The intended meaning is different, but people of the same culture understand the intended meaning because of the context of the statement and their knowledge of the language. For example, “quit pulling my leg” usually means “stop telling untrue stories.” If this idiom were translated into another language, the translator would probably not use a literal translation. If he did, the wrong impression would be given. Instead, he would use the words of his language that best mean the same thing the idiom intended. This is called a dynamic translation. However, if the people using the translation understood the idiom, he would probably translate it literally so his audience could appreciate the original statement.

Hebrew, which is the original language of the Old Testament, and Aramaic, which is the language spoken by the Jews of Israel in Jesus’ day, do not have a word for cousin, nephew, or various other kinsmen. To say “cousin” in Hebrew or Aramaic, one must either say “son of my father’s brother” or, the more common choice, “brother” (Heb. *ach*). Your Bible in English will probably tell you in Genesis 14:14 that Lot is Abraham’s “nephew” or “kinsman.” There is no question that Lot is the son of Abraham’s brother (Gen. 12:5) and thus his nephew. But the typical translation of Genesis 14:14, as “nephew” or “kinsman,” is

a dynamic one. The literal translation of Genesis 14:14 actually says that Lot is Abraham’s brother. Why?

When Jews translated the Old Testament into Greek — the version called the “Septuagint” or “LXX” — they had two options. They could translate Genesis 14:14 dynamically, because Greek has a word that means “nephew.” On the other hand, they could translate it literally as “brother,” following the Hebrew expression or idiom. Because they were Jews who understood the Hebrew idiom, they chose the Greek word *adelphos* (brother) as a translation of *ach* (brother, relative). This is a consistent practice in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the English translators use a dynamic translation and call Lot Abraham’s nephew.

## It’s All Greek to Me

When the New Testament authors wrote in Greek, they too were faced with a choice. Jesus, His family, and His disciples spoke Aramaic. The audience of these authors generally used the Septuagint version of Sacred Scripture and were accustomed to the Aramaic idiom. The authors could follow the example of the Septuagint<sup>3</sup> and the Aramaic idiom, calling cousins and other kinsmen “brothers,” or they could use a dynamic translation, such as the Greek word *anepsios* (cousin). They chose to follow the Aramaic idiom, which was the most natural choice given their sources, and thus used the word *adelphos* (or the plural, *adelphoi*) for cousins and kinsmen. In contrast

to the dynamic translations of the Old Testament, English translations often translate the New Testament literally and use the word “brother.”

The Greek word for “cousin” does not appear in the Gospels, perhaps indicating the use of the Aramaic idiom for “cousin.” Nor does the use of the word “relative” (kinswoman) for Elizabeth in Luke 1:36 disprove that the idiom for “cousin” was intended elsewhere. However, we know that the New Testament writers followed the Aramaic idiom because certain people were not “brothers” or “sisters” even though the literal translation implies it.

Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40 speak of Mary, the mother of James and Joseph. In Matthew 27:61 and 28:1, she is referred to as “the other Mary.” John 19:25 identifies this Mary as the wife of Clopas, the adelphe (sister) of Jesus’ mother, Mary. When reading these gospels, particularly John’s, it is clear that three different women were at the foot of the cross, and all three had the name “Mary.” Were Mary the wife of Clopas and Jesus’ mother actually sisters as the Gospel of John states? It is very unlikely that two children of the same parents would be given the same name, so adelphe seems to be used by the New Testament authors in a broader sense here (cousin, kinswoman).

As noted above, Mary, the wife of Clopas is also the mother of James and Joseph. However, both men are described as the “brothers” (adelphoi) of Jesus in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3. How can this be? If Mary the wife of Clopas is the cousin (adelphie) of Mary the mother of Jesus, and she is also the mother of James and Joseph, then clearly these men are not Jesus’ biological brothers. Rather, they are His cousins. In other words, in Matthew 13:55 adelphoi is being used in the Aramaic idiom (“cousins”) rather than its literal Greek meaning (“brothers”). In addition, because James and Joseph are grouped with Jesus’ other “brothers and sisters” in Matthew 13 and Mark 6, we can logically conclude that these other brothers and sisters are Jesus’ cousins too.

There is no linguistic reason to believe that this is not true of all Jesus’ “brothers and sisters.” Because adelphoi does not always refer to literal brothers in New Testament Greek usage, Jesus’ “brothers and sisters” cannot form the basis of a conclusive argument against Mary’s Perpetual Virginity.

### Relative Clauses

Similar arguments, based on the meaning of the words “until” and “before” and “first-born,”<sup>4</sup> do not refute Mary’s Perpetual Virginity either. They are based on false linguistic assumptions. For example, passages often cited to deny Mary’s remaining a virgin after Jesus’ birth include Matthew 1:18, which reads, “before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit...” This is often cited along with Matthew 1:25, which says that Joseph “knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.” The argument contends that the “before” and “until” clauses here imply that Mary and Joseph had marital relations following the birth of Christ. Yet, if understood properly, this is not necessarily the case.

In the Bible’s languages, as in the English language prior to modern times, clauses which begin with “before” or “until” (“till”) do not necessarily imply that after the completion of an action there followed a reversal of the situation described. In other words, to say “x did not happen until y” only meant that “x” did not happen up to a certain point in time (i.e., “y”); it did not necessarily mean that “x” did happen after “y.” A clear example can be found in Paul’s words to Timothy, “Till I come, attend to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, to teaching...” (1 Tim. 4:13). Obviously, Paul did not mean to suggest that Timothy should give up these activities after his arrival. Another such use of the “until” clause is found in Psalm 123:2, which reads, “Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he have mercy upon us.” Obviously, the

psalmist does not mean that we should take our eyes off the Lord after He has mercy on us!<sup>5</sup>

The “before” clause, we know from experience, can be used in much the same way. A biblical example may be found in John 4:49, “Come down before my child dies.” From the context of the passage, we know that the child did not die — he was healed.

### First and Last

Opponents of Mary’s Perpetual Virginity also cite the passage that identifies Jesus as her “first-born” (Lk. 2:7). They argue that Jesus could not be called Mary’s “first-born” unless she and Joseph had more children after His birth. While this argument may seem persuasive in our present culture, we must understand its usage in the light of the Middle Eastern culture of the time. For the Jews of Jesus’ time and their neighbors, “first-born” was always used to refer to the first male child of a marriage, regardless of whether other children were subsequently born to the couple. It was an important legal and religious term meaning that there were no prior male children.

To understand this better, look at Exodus 13. The Lord said to Moses that Israel should “set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb” (Ex. 13:12). This included “first-born” male humans: “Every first-born of man among your sons you shall redeem” (Ex. 13:13b; cf. Num. 3:12; Lk. 2:22-23). Further evidence is found in Exodus 12, when the first-born of Egypt die. Verse 12:30 says, “There was not [an Egyptian] house where one was not dead.” This would include the houses of young couples who only had one son.<sup>6</sup> That Jesus was Mary and Joseph’s “first-born” cannot refute Mary’s Perpetual Virginity.

### Ark of the Covenant

In the words of noted Protestant theologian John de Satge, “There is certainly nothing in the Scriptures to invalidate the conclusion of the [ancient] Church ... that Mary was a virgin all her life.”<sup>7</sup> On the con-

trary, Mary's Perpetual Virginity is implied in the Bible.<sup>8</sup> For example, when Gabriel tells Mary (a betrothed woman) that she will conceive (a future event), Mary responds, "How can this be? I do not know man" (Lk. 1:34). The phrase "know man" is a Hebrew idiom for sexual intercourse (cf. Gen. 4:1), so Mary clearly knows where babies come from. "How can this be?" is an unusual thing for a betrothed woman to say. In the words of Saint Augustine:

Because she had made a vow of virginity and her husband did not have to be the thief of her modesty instead of its guardian (and yet her husband was not its guardian, since it was God who guarded it; her husband was only the witness of her virginal chastity, so that her pregnancy would not be considered the result of adultery), when the angel brought her the news, she said: "How can this be, since I do not know man?" (Lk 1:34).

Had she intended to know man, she would not have been amazed. Her amazement is a sign of the vow.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Mary's question, "How can this be?" only makes sense if Mary had previously decided to remain a virgin after her marriage. Gabriel's answer, of course, is that the conception of Jesus will be miraculous, that is, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:35).

Further, it is interesting to note that the Bible clearly refers to Mary as Jesus' mother, but does not ever directly mention her as someone else's mother, for example, as the "mother of Jesus and Joseph" or "with her was James, her son." The most obvious reason for this, given the other evidence, is that she was not the mother of Jesus' "brothers and sisters."

Finally, the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament has been traditionally viewed by Christians as a type of Mary. Like the ark which

carried the Old Covenant (represented by the tablets of the Law), Mary carried in her womb Jesus the New Covenant. This is why some biblical scholars argue that the mother of the Messiah (Mary) is mentioned immediately after the ark of the covenant in the Book of Revelation (11:19-12:1, 5, 17). The old ark and Mary appear to John at the same time because Mary is the ark of the New Covenant. What was one of the special characteristics of the ark of the Old Covenant? No one could touch it directly and live, because of its holiness; it was blessed by the Lord's presence (2 Sam. 6:6-15).

Mary, likewise, was "full of grace" (Lk. 1:28)<sup>10</sup> and carried the Lord in her womb, and it is unlikely that a pious man (like Joseph) would want to "touch" someone set apart for the Lord. The Church Fathers, who believed the Church's Sacred Tradition of Mary's Perpetual Virginity, also believed that this was a reasonable and very scriptural conclusion.

### Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How do I defend the Church's constant teaching on Mary's Perpetual Virginity when confronted with the objection that the Bible mentions Jesus' "brothers"?
2. Does the Bible prove Mary's Perpetual Virginity? Does it disprove it? How can I confidently interpret passages that relate to Jesus' "brothers"?
3. Why is Mary's Perpetual Virginity important? How does it affect my life?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Catholics believe that some passages of Scripture imply Mary's Perpetual Virginity, but only Sacred Tradition teaches it explicitly. Nevertheless, it absolutely does not contradict Scripture. For more information on Mary's Perpetual Virginity, see the chapter entitled "Always a Virgin" in Hahn and Suprenant, eds., *Catholic for a Reason II: Scripture and the Mystery of the Mother of God* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 1999), available fall 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Consider also 1 Chronicles 23:22, which said Kish died having no sons, only daughters. These daughters then married their kinsmen, that is, their cousins or relatives, who themselves are described as the "sons of Kish."

<sup>3</sup> The apostles preferred to use the Septuagint version of Sacred Scripture. The New Testament is heavily dependent on the Septuagint's writing style and Greek usage. For more information on the Septuagint, see CUF's FAITH FACT on the canon of Scripture.

<sup>4</sup> The best refutation of the "before" and "until" arguments against Mary's Perpetual Virginity is found in Saint Jerome's *On the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary: Against Helvidius*. (This work is available in various collections of the writings of the Church Fathers.) Jerome, the patron saint of Scripture scholars, translated the Bible into Latin from Hebrew and Greek. The claim that Jesus had literal brothers and sisters was completely "novel" (his own word) in Jerome's time, and he refutes this flawed linguistic argument thoroughly.

## Notes (continued)

<sup>5</sup> Other examples include Deuteronomy 34:5-6, 2 Samuel 6:23, Isaiah 46:4, Matthew 28:20, Romans 8:22, 1 Corinthians 15:25, Ephesians 4:13, 1 Timothy 6:14, and Revelation 2:25-26. Some modern translations use “to” or “till” instead of “until,” but the sense is the same. Check your Bible and see. “Until” cannot be used as an argument against Mary’s continued virginity. In addition, “He had not known her when she bore a son” (Knox translation), is a linguistically acceptable translation of Matthew 1:25, so this verse cannot be used to refute Mary’s Perpetual Virginity.

<sup>6</sup> Likewise, an ancient Egyptian funerary inscription tells of a woman who died during the birth of her “first-born,” though it would be impossible for her to have children after that. See Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 286.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in Fr. Mateo, *Refuting the Attack on Mary* (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 1993), 4 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> This probably explains why the major Protestant reformers (e.g., Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli) continued to believe in Mary’s Perpetual Virginity even after they denied the authority of the Church.

<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo 225, 2*, as quoted in Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 221.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek word *kecharitome* is best translated “full of grace” or “perfected in grace,” not merely “favored.”

## RECOMMENDED READING

*Holy Bible* (Catholic edition)

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Vatican II Documents

Luigi Gambero; Ignatius Press, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*

Father Mateo; Catholic Answers, *Refuting the Attack on Mary*

Scott Hahn, audiotapes, *A New Look at Our Lady*

Scott Hahn, audiotapes, *Answering Common Objectives*

Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*

David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic*

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