

Sorting out the Jesus Family: Mother, Fathers, Brothers & Sisters

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That Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters is a “given” in Mark, our earliest gospel record. He names the brothers rather matter-of-factly: James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. Mark mentions but does not name the sisters, but early Christian tradition says there were two—a Mary and a Salome (Mark 6:3).^[1] Matthew, who followed Mark as his source, includes the same list, though he spells “Joses,” a nickname akin to the English “Josy,” in its full form “Joseph.” He also lists Simon before Judas (Matt 13:55). Luke, in contrast, *drops* the list of names entirely. He is an unabashed advocate of the apostle Paul and inaugurates a long process of marginalizing the brothers of Jesus to the obscurity that we find them today. More often than not, when I teach or lecture about the brothers of Jesus, and the important position of James, the eldest, whom Jesus left in *charge* of his followers, a hand shoots up in the room. The comment is always the same: “I never knew that Jesus even had any brothers.”



There are a number of factors behind this gap in our knowledge of early Christianity. The later Christian dogma that Mary was a *perpetual virgin*, that she never had children other than Jesus and never had sexual relations with *any* man, lies at the heart of the issue. No one in the early church even imagined such an idea, since the family of Jesus played such a visible and pivotal role in his life and that of his early followers.

It all has to do with Mary being totally removed from her 1st century *Jewish* culture and context in the interest of an emerging view of the time that human sexuality was degraded and unholy at worst, and a necessary evil to somehow be struggled against at best. The material world, and thus anything to do with the body, was seen as lower and of less value than the heavenly spiritual world. Scholars refer to this view, quite common in Greco-Roman culture, as *ascetic dualism*.

Humans were trapped in *two* worlds—the material and the spiritual, with *two* modes of being—that of the body and the spirit (*dualism*). Those who denied the body and lived a celibate life, placing emphasis on the higher spiritual things “above,” were viewed as holy and free from the taint of the lower material world (*asceticism*).

Generally this outlook has not found a comfortable home within Judaism because of the emphasis in the Bible upon the *goodness* of God’s material creation (Genesis 1). But there are exceptions. Philo, the 1st century BC Jewish philosopher, honors Plato, the great advocate of ascetic dualism, next to Moses

himself. Philo's influence, not to mention Plato's, was enormous on both Jewish and Christian thinkers. The apostle Paul, as we will see, built his theology around an essentially *dualistic* view of the cosmos in which the earthly was denigrated in favor of the heavenly. He advocated celibacy as a higher spiritual way, though he did not absolutely forbid sex. According to Paul marriage was an antidote for the spiritually weak who might be tempted toward sexual immorality.^[iii] It is easy to see how these tendencies to equate the spiritual life with the non-sexual life were transferred to Mary and her family.

Once one insists that "the blessed Virgin Mary" was "ever-virgin," with no sexual experience whatsoever, then the brothers and sisters have to be explained away. I say this with no disrespect for those who hold such views of Mary. Yet it is important to understand when, how, and why these ideas developed. Good history never needs to be the enemy of devoted faith.

The conflict arises when later forms of ascetic piety and assumptions about "holiness" are imposed on a culture for dogmatic or political reasons. What is lost is the historical reality of who Mary *truly* was as a Jewish married woman of her time. What we lose is Mary herself! The teaching of the "perpetual virginity" is simply not found in the New Testament and it is not part of the earliest Christian creeds. The first official mention of the idea does not come until 374 AD from a Christian theologian named Epiphanius.^[iiii] Most of our early Christian writings before the later 4th century AD take for granted that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were the natural born children of Joseph and Mary.^[iv]

By the late 4th century AD the Church begin to handle the problem of Mary's sexual life with two alternative explanations. One is that "brothers" does not mean literally *brothers*—born of the same mother—but is a general term referring to "cousins." This became the standard explanation in the West advocated by Roman Catholics.^[v] In the East, the Greek speaking Christians favored an different view—the brothers were *sons of Joseph*, but by a previous marriage, and thus had no blood-ties to Jesus or his mother.^[vi] Clearly the problem with the Eastern view for Western theologians was their emerging tendency, born of asceticism, to make Joseph a life-long virgin as well. That way the Holy Family, Jesus included of course, could be fully and properly "holy." Over the centuries it became more and more difficult for Christians, particularly in the West, to imagine Mary or Joseph as sexual human beings, or for that matter even living a "bodily" life at all. Once they become "Saints" in heaven, emphasizing such a potentially degrading "earthly" past became problematic.

If we restore Mary's *Jewish* name—Miriam or Maria, the most common Jewish female name of the day—and put her back in her 1st century *Jewish* village of Nazareth, as a normally married *Jewish* woman, these theologically motivated concerns seem to vanish. We are free to recover a believable history much more fascinating and rich than any theological dogma. The texts of our New Testament records begin to come alive for us. As one of my university professors used to say about historical investigation: "When you get closer to the truth, everything begins to fit."

So who were the brothers and sisters of Jesus? The most obvious answer is that they were children of Mary and Joseph born subsequently in the marriage. Mary became pregnant while engaged, father unknown; Joseph married her anyway, adopted Jesus as his own; and the couple assumed a normal married life, producing four sons and two daughters. Such might well be the case, but there is a problem here that we must not overlook. Once again, it has to do with understanding the lost *Jewish* cultural and religious context of the times.

There is good reason to suppose that Joseph died early, whether because he was substantially older than Mary or for some other unknown cause. After the birth stories he seems to disappear.^[vii] Jesus is called "son of Joseph" or referred to as "the carpenter's son" a few times, but Joseph himself never appears in any narratives and nothing further is related about him. Jesus moved "his mother and brothers" to Capernaum at one point—no mention of Joseph (John 2:12). His "mother and brothers" came seeking him in one story—again, no mention of Joseph (Mark 3:31). Even at the crucifixion of Jesus Mary is mentioned, and possibly one of his sisters, but Joseph is again strangely absent. After Jesus' death his followers were gathered in Jerusalem and "Mary, the mother of Jesus with his brothers" were part of the

group—but no Joseph (Acts 1:14). The silence seems to indicate that something has happened to Joseph.

If Joseph died early and Jesus and his brothers and sisters grew up “fatherless” this surely would have had an important psychological and sociological impact on the family. But if Joseph died *childless* there are further consequences for traditional theological dogmas about Mary. According to the Torah, or Law of Moses, the oldest surviving unmarried brother was obligated to marry his deceased brother’s widow and bear a child in his name so that his dead brother’s “name” or lineage would not perish. This is called a “Levirate marriage” or *yibbum* in Hebrew, and it is required in the Torah (Deut 25:5-10).^[viii] It is one of the commandments of God given to Israel, and pious Jews took it seriously. It comes up in a discussion in the Gospels where Jesus is asked about a contrived case in which a woman is widowed *seven* times and each time successively marries a brother of her first husband (Mark 12:19-22).

Suddenly the issue of who was the father of Jesus takes on a new dimension. If Joseph was not Jesus’ father, and Joseph died without children, was Mary the widow required to marry Joseph’s brother? And do we know anything about Joseph’s brother? Amazingly we do. Though seldom recognized he is mentioned in the New Testament.

We want to follow the evidence wherever it might lead, but the implications that Mary was the mother of *seven children* through *three* different men does sound outrageous today. But what if such a practice was not only normal but not only required but required and honorable within the Jewish culture of the time? Such was certainly the case. To honor a man who died without an heir and thus assure his posterity was one of the most sacred and holy things a family could do. Remember the four women Matthew mentions in his genealogy? Two of the four, Tamar and Ruth, were widows involved in Levirate marriages. Perhaps Matthew knows more than he is explicitly telling us. It would be a mistake to judge any evidence concerning Mary and the fathers of her children by our theological and cultural standards. What we must do is look at the evidence—in this case a set of complex, but revealing, textual clues within the New Testament itself. It is as if, without intending to do so, the gospel writers have left a trail of evidence that we can reassemble bit by bit after nearly 2000 years.

All four of our gospels note that women from Galilee who followed Jesus were present at his crucifixion and attended to his burial. Mark lists the names of three of these women:

1. Mary Magdalene
2. *Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses*
3. Salome (Mark 15:40)

Matthew, who used Mark as his source, has the same list with slight changes:

1. Mary Magdalene
2. *Mary the mother of James and Joseph*
3. The mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew 27:56)

Mary Magdalene was the well-known companion of Jesus about whom we will say much in subsequent chapters. Salome, mentioned only by Mark is very possibly Jesus’ sister, or perhaps, according to Matthew the mother of the two fisherman James and John, who were part of the Twelve (Luke 5:10). In Luke’s account he drops the names and simply says that “women” were present just as he did earlier with the names of the brothers of Jesus (Luke 23:49, 55). As we will see, Luke is not keen to emphasize the family of Jesus.

Note that we have *two women named Mary* who were present. Later, at the burial of Jesus Matthew tells us again that Mary Magdalene was there, as well as “the other Mary” (Matt 27:61). When the women returned to the tomb early Sunday morning to find it empty Matthew again tell us they were “Mary Magdalene and *the other Mary*” (Matt 28:1). So the obvious question is this—Just who is this mysterious one called “*the other Mary*?”

Mark identifies her specifically two more times—once at the burial as “Mary the mother of Joses,” and then at the empty tomb as “Mary the mother of James” (Mark 15:47; 16:1). He also notes again that Salome was present.

So we know this *second Mary* was the mother of a “James and Joses.” But is there any way to identify her further? We do know “another Mary” who has two sons named “James and Joses”—none other than *Mary the mother of Jesus*. These are the very names, even including the nickname “Joses” (that Matthew consistently edits) of her first two sons born after Jesus (Mark 6:3). Is it possible or even probable that this mysterious “other Mary” is Mary the mother of Jesus? It surely should not surprise us that Jesus’ own mother would be witness to his death, and participate in the Jewish family burial practices. And if so why does Mark not openly identify her as such?

Beyond this primary record of Mark, largely followed with some editing by Luke and Matthew, we do have one other *independent* witness as to the identity of these women—namely the gospel of John. Notice carefully his list of the three women at the cross:

1. *Jesus’ mother Mary*
2. His mother’s sister, *Mary the wife of Clophas*
3. *Mary Magdalene* (John 19:25)

Notice, we still have *three* women, but Salome has dropped out and *all three are now named Mary!* No matter how common the name Mary was at the time surely *three Marys* should give us pause. Something seems to be going on here. John knows something that either he, or those who later edited his gospel, chose to veil.

The inclusion of Mary Magdalene does not surprise us, as she is in all the lists. But John tells us explicitly that *Mary mother of Jesus was present*. That would allow us to safely identify Mark’s “Mary the mother of James and Joses” as Jesus’ mother Mary. But then who is the “new” third Mary—the wife of Clophas? And who is Clophas? She is identified as the “sister” of Mary mother of Jesus—but what is the likelihood that two sisters in the same family would have the same name?

Let’s begin with Clophas as we do know something about him. As I will explain in detail later, when Jesus died he left his brother James in charge of his followers. James was murdered in 62 AD and our earliest records tell us that an aged man known as “Simon son of Clophas” succeeded him. We are further told that this Clophas was the *brother* of Joseph, the husband of Mary.[\[ix\]](#) If such were the case it is entirely possible that our mysterious Mary, wife of Clophas, mother of “James and Joses,” was a sister-in-law of Mary, married to her husband Joseph’s brother. That is the solution the church has settled on over the centuries. But notice, if such were the case, what we have is more than a bit strange:

Mary m. Joseph	Mary m. Clophas, brother
James-Joses-Simon	James-Joses-Simon

Is it really likely that two sisters, both named Mary had three sons with the same names born in the same order: James, Joses, and Simon?

What seems more plausible is that Mark's "Mary mother of James and Joses" was the same Mary as the mother of Jesus and that the gospel of John (or its later editors) has created a *third* Mary, wife of Clophas, who in fact was the *same* woman—in order to disguise the fact that Jesus' mother Mary, after the death of Joseph, married his brother Clophas. A decrypted version of John would read

"Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother Mary wife of Clophas and Mary Magdalene."

This would agree perfectly with Mark and not create the absurdity of sisters-in-law of the same name having identically named children, including the nickname "Joses," in the same order of birth. According to this reconstruction our three women at the cross most likely were:

Mary Magdalene

Mary the widow of Joseph who married Clophas, Joseph's brother

Salome, either the sister of Jesus or the mother of the sons of Zebedee

There is one additional point about Clophas that supports this interpretation. His name comes from the Hebrew root *chalaph* and means to "change" or to "replace." It is where we get the English term "caliphate," referring to a dynastic succession of rulers. So this is likely not his given name, but a type of "nickname." He is the one who *replaced* his brother Joseph, who died childless. Clophas is mentioned elsewhere by the Greek form of the same name—*Alphaeus*. His firstborn son was regularly known as "James son of Alphaeus" or "James the younger" to distinguish him from James son of Zebedee the fisherman, brother of the apostle John.^[x]

Given this information rather different but historically consistent picture begins to emerge. Jesus was born of an unknown father, but was not the son of Joseph. Joseph died without children, so according to Jewish law "Clophas" or "Alphaeus" became his "replacer," and married his widow Mary, mother of Jesus. His firstborn son, James, the brother who succeeds Jesus, legally becomes known as the "son of Joseph" after his deceased brother in order to carry on his name. This would mean that Jesus had four half-brothers and at least two half-sisters, all born of his mother Mary but from a different father.

This is one plausible reconstruction of the evidence. There are things we can never know with certainty. Clophas is mentioned only once in the entire New Testament (John 19:25).^[xi] If he and his brother Joseph were much older than Mary it is likely that neither was alive when Jesus was an adult. This is further indicated in the gospel of John when Jesus the eldest son in the family, just before his death, handed his mother over to the care of a mysterious "beloved disciple" that John prefers not to name (John 19:26). I will show evidence later that this person is most likely James, his brother, the next eldest in the family. But whoever it was, Jesus' giving his mother into the care of another indicates she was a widow. We have to remember that the gospels are primarily *theological* accounts of the Jesus story written a generation or more after his death. When it comes to Jesus' family there is much they do not spell out, and there are things they appear to deliberately suppress. We have seen that Mark preserves material that is edited or removed by Matthew and Luke. John knows more than he is willing to say explicitly. The reasons for these tendencies will become clearer as we trace our story through to the end. It is truly a tangled tale of political intrigue and religious power plays with stakes destined to shape the future of the world's largest religion.

What we can say with some degree of certainty is the following. Joseph was not the father of Jesus, and Mary's pregnancy by an unnamed man was "illegitimate" by societal norms. Jesus had four half-brothers and two half-sisters, all children of Mary but from a different father—whether Joseph or his brother

Clophas. Jesus by age thirty functions as head of the household and forges a vital role for his brothers, who succeed him in establishing a Messianic Dynasty destined to change the world.

[i] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 78.8-9 and compare *Gospel of Phillip* 59:6-11 with *Protoevangelium of James* 19-20.

[ii] See his instruction in 1 Corinthians 7.

[iii] The idea of Mary's "perpetual virginity" was affirmed at the 2nd Council of Constantinople in 553 AD and the Lateran Council in 649 AD. Although it is a firmly established part of Catholic dogma it has nonetheless never been the subject of an infallible declaration by the Roman Catholic church.

[iv] This is called the Helvidian view named after Helvidius, a 4th century Christian writer whom Jerome seeks to refute. Eusebius, the early 4th century church historian regularly quotes early sources and refers himself to the brothers of Jesus "after the flesh," surely understanding them as children of Mary and Joseph (see Eusebius, *Church History* 2. 23; 3. 19).

[v] This is called the Hieronymian view in honor of Jerome, the 5th century Christian theologian who was its champion.

[vi] This is called the Epiphanian view in honor of Epiphanius, a 4th century Christian bishop. It occurs as early as the 2nd century text we know as the *Protoevangelium of James*.

[vii] Luke has one story, when Jesus was 12 years old and was left behind after a Passover feast at the Temple. This account does mention his father and his mother but most historians question its historical validity. It appears to be modeled closely on typical stories of the time about a precocious child amazing the wise men of his society (see Luke 1:41-51, compare Josephus, *Life* 7-8). Other than that one story Joseph is completely absent.

[viii] The term "Levirate" comes from the Latin *levir* ("husband's brother"). Jewish authorities differ as to whether or not the Torah has in mind a deceased brother who is *childless* or one who specifically lacks a *male* heir (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Levirate Marriage"). The practical application of this law within Judaism at various points in history is long and complex (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Levirate Marriage and Halizah").

[ix] This is from the 2nd century writer Hegesippus who preserves for us some of the most valuable early traditions about the Jesus family (Eusebius, *Church History* 3. 11).

[x] See Mark 3:18 and 15:27.

[xi] There is a Cleopas mentioned in Luke 24:18 but he does not appear to be the same person and the names in Greek are different.

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