

The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus

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The New Testament mentions the fact that Jesus had brothers and sisters on several occasions. Note the following references:

- Matthew 12:46-47: *brothers*
- Matthew 13:55-56: *brothers* named James, Joses (Greek is Joseph), Simon, and Judas, in addition to *sisters*
- Mark 3:31-32: *brothers*
- Mark 6:3: four *brothers* named James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, in addition to *sisters*
- John 2:12: *brothers*
- John 7:3, 5, 10: *brothers*
- Acts 1:14: *brothers*
- I Corinthians 9:5: *brothers*
- Galatians 1:19: James, the Lord's *brother*

From the passages above, it is clear that Jesus had 4 brothers, whose names we know, and at least 2 sisters, neither/none of whom we know by name.

Christians have debated for centuries the interpretation of this New Testament data that Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters. There are three primary views among scholars: (1) that they were actually Jesus' cousins rather than siblings (this is the Roman Catholic view); (2) that Jesus' brothers and sisters were born to Mary and Joseph after Jesus was born (the view of most Protestants); and (3) that they were His older half-brothers and half-sisters (i.e., His step-siblings) from a previous marriage by Joseph (the Eastern Orthodox view and of a minority of Protestant scholars).

The Roman Catholic View

All Christians believe that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit, a fact which is plainly taught in Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-35. Because Roman Catholic scholars have elevated Mary to new spiritual heights of perfection in its doctrine of the alleged Immaculate

Conception, a doctrine which is not Biblical, they have historically held the first view, that the *brothers* and *sisters* of Jesus were actually His cousins rather than His siblings. In this way, this church can maintain that Mary remained a virgin throughout all of her life. But there was a Greek word available for *cousin*, and it was used twice in the New Testament (Luke 1:36, 58). Furthermore, the words translated as *brothers* and *sisters* have the same normal meaning as the English words do. Therefore, this Roman Catholic position must be rejected.

The Majority Protestant View

So the question remains as to whether these siblings of Jesus were born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus' birth, or whether they were Joseph's children by a previous marriage. In other words, was Joseph a widower or divorcee when he married Mary or not?

The major arguments used to defend this view that these brothers and sisters were the younger children of Joseph and Mary are summarized below:

- The fact that Jesus is called *the carpenter's son* (Matthew 13:55) and *the carpenter* (Mark 6:3) suggests that He was the oldest sibling and that He took over His father's carpentry business after Joseph's death.
- The fact that Joseph and Mary had not noticed that Jesus had been left behind in Jerusalem during the family trip at Passover when Jesus was 12 years old (Luke 2:41-45) suggests that Jesus could not have been the youngest because they certainly would have taken greater care with their younger children.
- The fact that Jesus was the oldest child of Joseph and Mary is supported by the use of the Greek word translated as *first-born* in Luke 2:7, as in Jesus being Mary's *first-born son*, thus implying that she later had other sons, or at least children. Furthermore, another Greek word is used in the New Testament to describe an *only son* or *only daughter* (Luke 7:12; 8:42).
- The fact that Matthew 1:25 states that Joseph kept Mary a virgin *until* Jesus was born implies that sexual relations between Joseph and Mary followed Jesus' birth and that it probably led to other children.

Counter-arguments to this view are summarized below:

- The fact that Jesus was known as *the carpenter's son* and *the carpenter* does not necessarily mean that He took over Joseph's business after the latter's death. First, the New Testament does not inform us as to the time of Joseph's death. The last we read of him alive is at the Passover in Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old (Luke 2:41-45). Joseph had evidently passed away between that time and Jesus' crucifixion because Jesus asked the apostle John to care for His mother Mary (John 19:2-27) when He was on the cross. Second, Joseph had four other sons from which to pass on his carpentry business. It is likely that Jesus was referred to in this way in amazement and/or sarcasm as someone who had no formal rabbinic education and, therefore no authority in their eyes to teach spiritual matters. Thus He was simply *the carpenter's son* or *the carpenter*.
- The fact that Joseph and Mary temporarily lost Jesus at the Passover time when Jesus was 12 years old does not necessarily prove that He was the oldest. The crowds traveling the dusty roads on their return to their separate home towns must have been huge, so this fact could explain the confusion in not knowing that Jesus was not among them during the first day of travel. After all Jesus was a 12-year-old male child, which means that He had virtually reached the age of accountability in the Jewish culture.
- The fact that Luke 2:7 uses the Greek words translated as *first-born son* rather than *only son* does not prove that Mary had other sons after the birth of Jesus. Rather, the use of the same Greek word translated as *first-born* in the New Testament outside of Luke 2:7's mere factual reference to Jesus suggests a theological reason why this word was used. Jesus is called the *first-born* among many *brethren* who are saved (Romans 8:29), the *first-born* over all *creation* (Colossians 1:15), and the *first-born* from the dead (Colossians 1:18). The reference to *the church of the first-born* (Hebrews 12:23), in context, is a reference to the Church as the church of Jesus Christ. In the Hebrew culture, the first-born son was the preeminent son who receives the birthright, which includes inheriting the lion's share of the property upon the death of the father. In a theological sense, Jesus is the first-born in that He is the preeminent One in whom we all may share by faith in the divine, eternal inheritance. It is reasonable that Luke wished to emphasize this theological point by using the word for *first-born* in Luke 2:7.
- The fact that Matthew 1:25 states that Joseph kept Mary a virgin *until* Jesus was born, implying that sexual relations between Joseph and Mary followed Jesus' birth, does not prove that the two of them had any children together. It is agreed that this text, and the Biblical view of sex in general, strongly suggests that Joseph and Mary had normal sexual relations after the birth of Jesus. In opposition to the Roman Catholic position, we cannot

accept the theory that Mary was perpetually a virgin. However, even in Biblical times, many women did not bear children. Perhaps Mary had, or developed, a physical problem which prevented her from having any more children after Jesus. After all, her conception of Jesus was of supernatural origin.

The Eastern Orthodox and Minority Protestant View

The major arguments used to defend the view that Jesus' siblings were older half-brothers (or step-brothers) and half-sisters (or step-sisters) from a previous marriage of Joseph are summarized below:

- The fact that Jesus committed the care of His mother Mary to the apostle John at the time of His crucifixion (John 19:26-27) strongly implies that Jesus' brothers and sisters were not actually Mary's children. Even if Jesus was the oldest among His siblings, His death would have automatically left the responsibility of Mary's care to the next oldest among them if they were also her biological children. And if He were the youngest child among His siblings, He would not have been in a *social* position to give instructions concerning the care of His mother unless He was Mary's only biological child.
- The fact of Jesus' brothers' behavior toward Him strongly implies that they were all older than He was:
 - (a) they attempted to restrain Him (Mark 3:21; cf. vv. 31-32)
 - (b) they spoke harshly toward Him (John 7:3-5)

The culture of the times in Bible lands when Jesus lived on earth informs us that younger brothers would never have dared to speak toward Jesus the way the above New Testament passages report that they did.

Our Position

The Roman Catholic view that the references to Jesus' siblings are actually describing His cousins must be rejected for at least two reasons. First, the Greek word for *cousin* existed, and was used, in the New Testament times, but never to describe Jesus' brothers and sisters. Second, it is based on an unbiblical elevation of Mary which attributes sinless perfection to her (as the reason for Jesus' sinlessness) and extols the virtue of virginity so that she is considered to have been a lifelong virgin.

Although the cumulative effect of the Biblical evidence in favor of the view that Jesus' siblings were younger children born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus' birth is superficially strong, the alternative explanations to each of them are also both reasonable and strong. Furthermore, the Biblical evidence that Jesus' siblings were older than He seems to be of a stronger nature. Therefore, our conclusion is that Jesus was Mary's only biological child, and that Jesus' brothers and sisters were the older children of Joseph born under a previous marriage, thus being His half-brothers (or step-brothers) and half-sisters (or step-sisters).

The Life of His Brothers and Sisters

Very little is known about Jesus' brothers and sisters. We are not even told the names of His sisters. And nothing specific is known about two of His brothers, James (or Joseph) and Simon. John 7:5 tells us that Jesus' *brothers did not believe in Him*. However, after the resurrection His *brothers* are included with those in the upper room praying and described as being *with one accord* with each other (Acts 1:14). Also, I Corinthians 9:5 implies that His *brothers* were associated with the apostles. Moreover, Paul calls Jesus' brother James an apostle in Galatians 1:19 and one of three pillars of the Church (2:9). Obviously, something happened to bring about their conversion. In I Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul says that James saw the resurrected Jesus, and this James was distinguished from one of the twelve apostles (v. 5). It is therefore probable that all of Christ's siblings saw the resurrected Jesus and that this was the cause of their conversion. In any case, early Church tradition only says that Jesus' relatives were active in the Church for a few generations.

The only other fact known about two of Christ's brother, James and Judas (or Jude), is that each of them wrote one book of the New Testament (James and Jude). Although there was some dispute about that, we discuss the reasons for our conclusion, which corresponds to the majority testimony of the early Church.

Regarding the books of James and Jude, some have questioned their authorship because the authors there call themselves *servants* rather than apostles of Christ (James 1:1; Jude 1). There were only three prominent men named James in the early Church, (1) the apostle who was the son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John (Matthew 4:21); (2) the apostle who was the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13); and (3) the brother or half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3) and brother of Jude (Matthew 13:55). James, the brother of John, was martyred in the mid-40s (Acts 12:2) and was not mentioned as playing a significant role in the early Church. James, the son of Alphaeus, is not noted outside of his mention as one of the apostles of Jesus. Because the death of James the brother of John was mentioned before references to the James who

played a prominent role in the Church in Jerusalem, the James who played the prominent role must be the brother of Jesus (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 2:12). Therefore, we can confidently identify the author of the book of James as James the brother of Jesus.

The New Testament mentions only one Jude (or Judas) with a brother named James, and that was the one who was also a brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Therefore, we acknowledge with most of the early Church Fathers that the book of Jude was written by the brother of Jesus.