

Why do Catholics believe Mary had no other children?

By Graham Osborne

This is often a contentious issue between Christians today. But let us be clear right from the start -**nowhere** in Scripture does it say that Mary herself had other children. However, Scripture does speak of Jesus as "**THE son of Mary**" [Mk 6:3], and not "**a son of Mary**", and the Greek expression used here does imply that Jesus is Mary's only son. Now Scripture also speaks of the "*brothers of the Lord*", but they are **NEVER** called actual "*sons*" of Mary. This is a key distinction, which we will discuss shortly.

Additionally, the testimony from the early Church is virtually unanimous on this, and the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity went without significant challenge for the first 4 centuries of Christianity. Who would know better than the early Church about such things?

For example, in 360, St Athanasius, the great doctrinal defender of the Trinity wrote, "*let those who deny that the Son is from the Father... deny also that he took true human flesh of Mary Ever-Virgin.*"

And around 380, St. Jerome, one of the greatest Scripture scholars in history would answer the first significant challenge to this doctrine, put forward by a theologian named Helvidius. St Jerome responded saying Helvidius' idea of Mary having other children was "*novel, wicked, and a daring affront to the faith of the whole world*". Citing Scriptural arguments and earlier Christian writers, such as Saints Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr and more, he penned his famous treatise, "*On the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary*", stating, "*You say that Mary did not continue a virgin: I claim still more that Joseph himself, on account of Mary was a virgin, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin son was born.*" Helvidius' theory quickly fell into disrepute.

Shockingly to some, the Protestant Reformers were equally unanimous in their belief in Mary's perpetual virginity. Martin Luther declared, "*It is an article of faith that Mary is Mother of the Lord and still a virgin...*" Ulrich Zwingli was equally adamant: "*I esteem immensely the Mother of God, the ever chaste, immaculate Virgin Mary*". And similarly, John Wesley and John Calvin, with Wesley writing that Jesus was "*born of the blessed Virgin Mary, who, as well after as before she brought Him forth, continued a pure and unspotted virgin.*"

So virtually all of Christianity for well over 1500 years held the view that Mary was perpetually virgin. You have to wonder how this novel idea of Mary having other children has resurfaced in recent times, and is held so adamantly by some. More on this shortly, but it rests predominantly in several misinterpretations of certain Scripture passages.

But let us now examine some of the specific Scriptural evidence for this doctrine first. In **Luke 1:34**, the angel Gabriel tells the now betrothed Mary [cf **Mat 1:18**] that she would bear a son. Now this would be an absolutely normal thing to say to someone who was betrothed – essentially married according to Jewish Law. Of course a young bride would be hoping and expecting to bear children. But instead, Mary answers saying, "*How shall this be, since I*

know not man?" This question to the angel makes no sense unless Mary already had some sort of an intention or vow of virginity, with no intention of having relations with a man.

The Angel then answers Mary's question, saying, *'The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will **overshadow** you'* [Luke 1:34-35]. To "overshadow" a woman was a Biblical euphemism for having a marital relationship. After Mary agreed to this proposal, in a spiritual sense, she became the spouse of the Holy Spirit, and from that point, it would have been unfitting for another to have relations with her.

In fact, St. Joseph would in a sense have been required by the Mosaic Law to divorce Mary, because she would then be joined to another (see **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**, **Jeremiah 3:1**). And he might have felt this more keenly knowing that the "other" was the Holy Spirit! Who could possibly be worthy to even wed such a woman, a woman chosen by God Himself to bear His Son, never mind have marital relations with her. But obedient to the Holy Spirit, he takes Mary and Jesus into his home.

And further, consider Uzzah - struck dead for simply touching the Ark of the Covenant [**2 Sam. 6:6-8**], the holy vessel that carried the Word of God in stone in Old Testament times. How much more would Joseph understand the holiness of Mary, the New Ark that now carried the Word made Flesh, and that she, even more so, had been set apart for God alone.

Now some contend that, on these grounds, Mary and Joseph would not have even been truly married, claiming that their marriage would have been invalid because it was not consummated. But a marriage still occurs with the exchange of vows [which had already occurred between Mary and Joseph at their betrothal], whether consummated or not, but it becomes indissoluble when consummated, because the two have now become one flesh.

But still, many object, citing the apparent "*brothers*" or "*sisters of the Lord*", mentioned in **Galatians 1:19**, **Matthew 13:55** and other places. Doesn't this show that the Blessed Mother had other children? No, not at all -and for several reasons.

First, as mentioned above, we cannot overlook the almost constant testimony to Mary's perpetual virginity from almost 2000 years of Christianity.

On this same line, one explanation comes from several historical Church documents written in the first two centuries of the Church. Preeminent among these is the *Protoevangelium of James*, which attests to Mary being a consecrated virgin, and St. Joseph, an elderly widower with children from an earlier marriage, being chosen to be Mary's spouse to guard her, while honoring her vow of virginity.

But an additional explanation focuses on the word "*brother*", which has a wide semantic range in Scripture. It get's used to describe a varied range of relationships -from blood relations to in-laws to close friends. In **Matthew 23:8**, even Jesus said, "*you are all brothers*", while addressing a large number of people who were certainly not all biological brothers. Similarly, in **Acts 1:15** where "*Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (there was a group of about one hundred and twenty persons...)*", certainly these 120 men were not all biological

brothers! This line of Scriptural evidence would not necessarily supplant the idea of a widowed St Joseph, but could in fact augment it or stand alone.

And another key point here rests in the fact that the Hebrew and Aramaic languages used in Jesus' day had no word for cousins or other close relations. If you had a cousin or near relative in Biblical times, they were usually called "*brother*" or "*sister*". I have had several people come up to me after conferences from various Middle Eastern cultures and confirm that this is exactly what they still do today.

We see a perfect example of this in **Gen 14:14** where Lot is called Abraham's "brother", though we know from Biblical genealogies that Lot is his nephew. And similarly, in Gen 29:15, Jacob is called the "*brother*" of his uncle, Laban [also see **1 Chron 23:22**].

But let's look specifically at **Gal. 1:18-19** first: "*I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and... saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.*" Here James is called "*the Lord's brother*". But he can't be Jesus' actual blood brother, because St Paul clearly states he's an Apostle, and a little detective work quickly reveals that of the two Apostles named James, one was the son of Zebedee, and the other the son of Alphaeus. Neither was a son of St Joseph.

But how about **Matthew 13:55**, perhaps the most commonly used verse to question Mary's perpetual virginity: "*Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?*"

To shed some further light on this passage, let us look at the Gospel accounts of the women at the foot of the cross. From **Matthew 27:56**, **Mark 15:40** and **John 19:25**, we can see that there are three Mary's there: the Blessed Mother, Mary Magdalene, and Mary wife of Clopas and mother of James the younger and Joseph [Josés].

We also know that James the younger is also the son of Alphaeus [**Mark 3:16**], and this all works out well, because Alphaeus and Clopas are Aramaic and Greek forms of the same name, so they are almost certainly the same person!

Additionally, the second-century historians, Hegesippus and Papias, record that Clopas/Alphaeus was the brother of St Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus. So James the younger and his brother Joseph would thus be St Joseph's nephews -and actual cousins of Jesus! So at least two of the men called "*brothers*" of Jesus are not His biological brothers!

Additionally, the Apostle St Jude [Judas] confirms in his own Epistle that he is the brother of James: "*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James...*" [**Jude 1:1**]. If this James is James the younger, then Jude would be a cousin of Jesus as well. But either way, he must not be a brother of Jesus, as he would likely have noted this important brotherly relationship before mentioning James.

And it is also possible that the Simon of **Mat 13:55** is the Apostle Simon, called the Zealot. If so, he is likely not a brother of Jesus either, as he is a Cananaean, and Jesus' family hails from Nazareth. This would still not rule him out as being a cousin of Jesus, but it would make

it very unlikely that he was His brother. Additionally, Hegesippus records that Simon was a son of Clopas as well. This would also make him a brother of James, Joseph and Judas, and so, a cousin – or in the Jewish way of speaking, a “*brother*” – of Jesus too!

Now some might object and say that the Greek language certainly does have a specific word for cousin - *anepsios*. Why wasn't that used instead of the Greek word for brother in **Matthew 23:8**?

But remember, it is **NOT** a defined teaching of the Church that the four men listed in **Mat 13:55** -James, Joseph, Simon and Judas –are Jesus' cousins. The Church does not teach definitively who these men are, but it does declare that they are **NOT** the biological brothers of Jesus. And as we have shown above, Scripture seems to clearly show that these men had various relationships to Jesus, but none of them were His biological brother.

So unless these four men had all been actual cousins of Jesus, the more general Greek term of brother [adelphos/adelfhoi plural], which could imply a variety of relationships -from blood relative to in-law to friend -would typically be used, as opposed to the very specific Greek term for cousin [anepsios].

And returning to the question of Elizabeth's relationship to Mary, in fact the New Testament does NOT say specifically that Elizabeth is Mary's cousin [Greek *anepsios*]. It uses the more general Greek word *suggenes*, which broadly means *kinswoman* or *relative*, and gives us no further sense of her exact relationship with Mary. Some English Bible translations render this rather inaccurately as “*cousin*”, but a more accurate translation would be “*kinswoman*”.

And remember, the original inspired language of the New Testament was Greek. Every translation into English or any other language is exactly that, a trans-lation. And translations often fall short of capturing the intent of the original author perfectly. But thankfully we have the Church to assure us that through it's careful doctrinal review of any Church-approved translation, while we may not have a perfect rendering of a particular passage, it will be free from any doctrinal errors.

But let us consider some other places in the New Testament that some suggest indicate Mary might have had other children. For instance, in **Luke 2:7**, it reads that Mary “*gave birth to her first-born son...*” Some reason from this that if there was a “*first-born*” specified, there must be at least a second. But First-born was a title given under the Mosaic Law to the male child who opened the womb (see **Ex. 13:2**; **Num. 3:12**), whether there was a second child or not. It neither implies nor requires any future children at all.

Another common contentious spot is **Matthew 1:25**, where it says, “*Joseph... took his wife but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus*”. Many assume that the word “*until*” implies that after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary did have relations.

But again, there is a misunderstanding of how the word “*until*” was used in Biblical times. It meant that a particular action happened or didn't happen up to a certain point, but didn't necessarily imply any other future actions after that. A few examples might help. In **I Corinthians 15:25** St Paul writes that Christ “*must reign until he has put all his enemies*

under his feet.” Does this mean that Christ will cease to reign after He has put his enemies under His feet. No, it clearly doesn’t. And similarly, in **I Timothy 4:13** St Paul says, “**Until I come, attend to... preaching, to teaching.**” Does this mean that after St Paul arrives, Timothy should stop preaching? Again, the answer is obvious, and gives us a clear insight into how “*until*” was used in New Testament times [see also **Hebrews 1:13, 2 Sam 6:23** and **Acts 25:21**].

And **Matthew 1:18** is similar: “*Before they lived together*”. The Greek term used for “*before*” here does not imply *any* future relations, it is simply used to specify a period of time up to a certain point, but not necessarily beyond it, similar to the way “until” was used in our point above (see **John 4:49** for one of many examples of this usage of before in Scripture).

And one final thought. In **John 19:26**, Jesus said to St John the Apostle, “*Behold, your mother.*’ *And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.*” The Mosaic Law called for the care of the mother to fall to the eldest brother. If Jesus truly had other brothers, it is highly unlikely that in the last actions of His earthly life, Jesus would in fact break the Mosaic Law, offend his family and His brothers, and entrust His mother to someone outside His family.

But the wonderful thing is that the Church has always seen this action of Jesus’ as an invitation to every one of us –to also bring the blessed Mother into *our* homes. Perhaps we should reflect more on this, rather than trying to discredit one of her great titles that has been held by Christians since the time of her Son’s birth.

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NOTE: For the most part, rejection of various Catholic doctrines can be traced back to a rejection of the authority of the Church, which guided Christians for almost 1500 years, and an adoption of the principles of Sola Scriptura, or the Bible Alone, as many refer to it. This principle puts the individual reader as the primary interpreter of Sacred Scripture. The result has been countless misinterpretations of Sacred Scripture, resulting in tens of thousands of different Christian denominations. They are all reading the same Book, and theoretically being lead by the same Spirit, but they are coming up with thousands of different and often contradictory interpretations. Sola Scriptura simply doesn’t work, because this is not how God intended to reveal and pass on His truths to His Church. It was through His Church, guided by the successor of St Peter, and protected in matters of faith and morals by the Holy Spirit that God intended to lead the faithful.