

EXEGETICAL NOTE ON THE "PERPETUAL VIRGINITY" OF THE BVM.

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1. The references in the NT to the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus (Mark 3.31-5 and parr. cf Mark 6.3 and parr.) and to James as "the Lord's brother" (Gal.1.19) can be taken as evidence that Mary was not historically "always a virgin"; for she had other children after Jesus. This remains one legitimate reading of these texts.
2. However, it is not the only possible reading of them. At Mark 3.21, the evangelist refers, in a general way, to the "relatives of Jesus" (Gk. *hoi par' autou*). So, his later designation of this group as "brothers" (3.31) may not be a precise description of their relationship to Jesus. It could rather be controlled by the terms of the traditional saying which is about to be quoted ("Who is my mother and my brothers? etc."), for which he is providing a new narrative setting.

At Mark 6.3, Jesus' fellow townsfolk describe him as "the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon" and ask "Are not his sisters also with us?" Matthew (13.55) and some manuscripts of Mark, read "son of the carpenter" here. It is possible, therefore, that Matthew and early scribes of Mark attributed to the people of Nazareth a misperception of Jesus' origins as the natural son of Joseph (cf Matt.1.16 and Luke 3.23) and perhaps also, then, a misperception of his true relationship with his so-called "brothers"¹.

At Gal 1.19, Paul is probably using the phrase "the brother of the Lord" to distinguish this James from some other James, presumably the son of Zebedee and brother of John, one of the Twelve (who had recently been martyred, see Acts 12.2). The designation "apostle" would not have been sufficient to make that distinction, for unlike later NT documents (e.g. Luke 6.3 cf Acts 1.26), for Paul "apostle" denoted a wider group than that of the Twelve (cf. 1 Cor 15.5 & 7 cf. Rom 16.7).

A complicating factor in all of the above references is that we cannot be certain whether the evangelists or Paul were always using the word *adelphos* "brother" in the strict sense, or were using it more loosely to include other close family relationships, like that of cousin (Gk. *anepsios* cf. Col 4.10). A broader meaning for *adelphos* may be suggested by Mark 6.17-18 (for, Philip was actually the step-brother of Herod Antipas).²

¹ On the implication of Matthew 1.25 see note 4 below

² And cf also Gen 24.48 and Gen 29.12 (LXX).

3. Doubts about the identification of James, Joses, Simon and Jude as the actual brothers of Jesus (i.e. other children of the marriage of Mary and Joseph) or as step-brothers (i.e. children of Joseph from a previous marriage³) arise because of certain references in the gospel passion narratives. According to Mark (15.40), among the women observing the crucifixion of Jesus “from afar” was one referred to as “Mary, the mother of James the younger (*mikrou*) and Joses”. This woman is referred to again at Mark 16.1 as “Mary, the mother of James.” (Matthew has in parallel “Mary, the mother of James and Joseph” (27.56) and “the other Mary” (27.61) respectively; Luke calls her Mary Mother of James at 24.10). It is noteworthy that James and Joses/Joseph are the first two names in the list of Jesus’ so-called brothers referred to above, but it would be very strange if the synoptic evangelists were intending to refer to Jesus’ own mother with the phrase “mother of James and Joses”.

In John’s gospel, the women at the cross stand “close by” (perhaps symbolising greater faithfulness) and are identified as “his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” (Jn 19.25). If the second Mary in this list is also to be found in the synoptic accounts (and it is difficult to think of any reason why this should not be the case) then she must be the mother of James and Joses. In other words, Clopas could have been the Virgin Mary’s brother (whose wife shared the same name as his sister). Hence, their children, although they are called Jesus’ “brothers” would actually have been his cousins. In a first century Jewish extended family, living together in the same small town, it would not have been felt necessary or appropriate to define the relationship more precisely.

If, as most NT scholars believe, the Epistles of James and Jude are pseudepigraphical works which have their origin in Jewish Christian circles in closer touch with traditions about Jesus’ family than the gospels of Mark and Luke or Paul⁴, then it is worth noting that even these letters do not claim authorship by the actual brothers of Jesus. “James” calls himself merely “servant of Jesus Christ” (1.1) and “Jude” adds to that designation, “brother of James”.

4. In short, it is not as obvious as some assume that “a plain reading” of the New Testament inevitably leads to the conclusion that Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus, but had other children. Of course, several other factors helped to promote the view of St Jerome that the so-called “brothers” (and sisters) of Jesus were in fact his cousins, but there is evidence, unaffected by these later factors, that already pointed to this conclusion.
5. Finally, the title “perpetual Virgin” – (*aei parthenos, semper virgo*) – is still legitimate, even if it is not understood as a literal, historical assertion. Since Mary

³ So also already the Protoevangelium of James 9.2;17.1;18.1

⁴ We might expect Matthew as a Jewish Christian to be better informed. His statement at 1.25 that Joseph “knew her not until (*heos hou*) she had borne a son”(RSV) implies in English that the “until” clause sets a time limit to the action of the main verb. This is not so in the Greek where the emphasis falls on the birth of the son, as the following sentence “and he called his name Jesus” makes clear. The conjunction *heos hou* should thus be translated “up till the time when” leaving open the question of whether Joseph acted differently thereafter.

functions as Virgin Mother of the Messiah in the order of salvation-history, she can be said to be “always a virgin” even if she had other children in the normal way. For, salvation-history, while related to ordinary history, nevertheless also transcends it.

Bibliographical note.

For further historical-critical discussions of this complex issue, see in addition to the classic study of J.Blinzler *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu* (SBS 221, 1967), R.E.Brown et al. *Mary in the New Testament* (Chapman 1978 pp 65-72, Protestant and Catholic); J.McHugh *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (DTL 1975 – Catholic) and R. Bauckham *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus* (T. and T. Clark 1990 – Evangelical Anglican).