

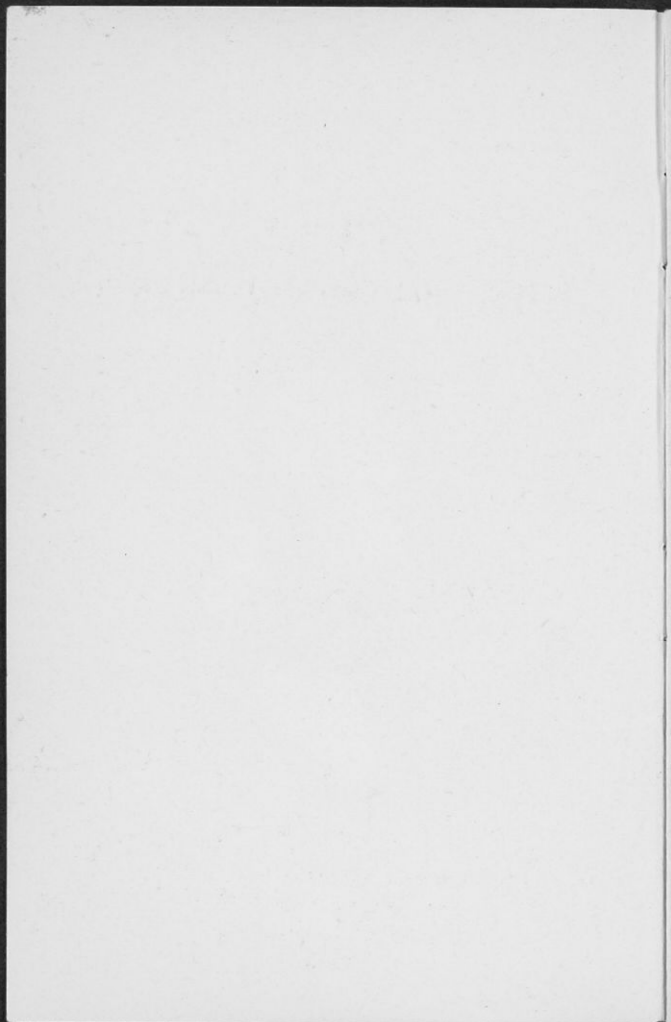
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Did Mother
Have Other Children?

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C. F. DeVine, C.S.S.R.



DID
MARY
HAVE OTHER CHILDREN
?

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ST. ALPHONSUS SEMINARY
Woodstock, Ontario, Canada

Published By
LIGUORIAN PAMPHLET OFFICE
Redemptorist Fathers
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest:

JAMES FULLER, C.S.S.R.

Superior of the Toronto Province

May 25, 1946.

Nihil Obstat:

L. FLYNN

Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur:

✠ JOHN T. KIDD

Bishop of London

London, July 9th, 1946.

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I.



INTRODUCTION

This little pamphlet is concerned with an interesting scriptural problem that occurs several times in the New Testament. It purposes to deal with an expression that at first sight seems to imply that Jesus our Savior had real brothers and sisters, or that Mary had other children besides Jesus. It is a very important problem, for as can easily be seen it has a direct bearing on the Catholic belief that Mary the mother of Jesus was a virgin not only before and during, but also after the birth of her Son.

The Problem

In a dozen or so places in the New Testament certain individuals are referred to as the "brothers of Jesus". In one or other place sisters are also mentioned. Who, then, are these individuals and what is the nature of their relationship to Jesus? Were they real brothers and sisters or not? The first step in attempting to answer these questions

is to take a copy of the New Testament and seek out carefully each place where the brothers or sisters are mentioned.

The places in question are the following:

St. Matthew

12:46-47—"his mother and his *brethren* . . ."

13:55-56—"his *brethren* James and Joseph and Simon and Jude? And his *sisters* . . ."

St. Mark

3:31-32—"Behold thy mother and thy *brethren*."

6:3 —"Is not this . . . the *brother* of James and Joseph and Jude and Simon? Are not also his *sisters* here with us?"

St. Luke

8:19-20—" . . . and his mother and *brethren* . . ."

St. John

2:12 —" . . . he and his mother and his *brethren* and his disciples . . ."

7:3 —" . . . and his *brethren* said to him:"

7:5 —"For neither did his *brethren* believe in him."

7:10 —" . . . his *brethren* were gone up."

Acts.

1:14 —" . . . with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his *brethren*."

I Corinthians

9:5 —" . . . the apostles and the *brethren* of the Lord and Cephas?"

Galatians

1:19 —"But other of the Apostles I saw none, saving James the *brother* of the Lord."

From these citations it is clear that certain individuals are spoken of as the "brothers of Jesus". His sisters are mentioned twice: Mt. 13: 55-56; and Mk. 6:3; although the names or num-

ber of the sisters are not stated. Certain of the "brothers" are, however, called by name in Matthew and Mark, *viz.*: James, Joseph, Simon and Jude.

It is also clear that we are up against a real problem, for no reliable scholar would dismiss the question by saying the "brethren" were simply the companions of Jesus, His disciples, or the Apostles. For although it is true that the English term "brethren" is less precise than the word "brothers", still the word in the original Greek text is *adelphoi*, and that is the exact plural of "brother". Moreover, the "brethren" are mentioned as a separate group and sometimes in the same context with the Apostles or disciples.

It should be noted, however, that we are not concerned here with the question of the virgin birth of Jesus. We are dealing with the virginity of Mary *after* the birth of Jesus. It is theoretically conceivable that Mary could have given birth to Jesus virginally and that afterwards she could have had other children in the natural way by St. Joseph. Thus the two questions are distinct. Still, it is true that most of those who reject the doctrine of Mary's virginity after the birth of Jesus also reject the doctrine of the virgin birth. In fact, outside the Catholic Church few can be found who feel obliged to defend the traditional belief in Our Lady's virginity before, during, and after the birth of her Son.

A Stock Objection

This brief study will make little attempt at originality. The solution to be presented of the problem can be found in any authoritative Cath-

olic commentary on the New Testament. However, the question of the "brethren of the Lord" has an uncanny way of cropping up unexpectedly and in remote places. Usually it is tossed like a hand-grenade that is supposed completely to demolish the Catholic position. It is hoped, therefore, that this little work, which does not pretend to be exhaustive, may prove of some service to a busy curate here and there; to leaders of study clubs; or even to the average Catholic, who stands a good chance of having this problem thrown up to him in discussions on religion.

The manner of presentation of matter will be semi-popular, but there will be no attempt at sugar-coating the arguments in dialogue or other fanciful form. The only way to tackle this problem is to face all the facts squarely. This may be hard going for the average reader but it will repay the effort. A few references will be given in case someone should wish to verify one or other important point. In this connection, the references PG or PL are to the well-known Greek and Latin Patrology of Migne. Since its purpose is not scientific, one cannot expect to find all the aspects of the problem treated in this work. If it achieves the aim of being a ready outline of the problem and its solutions it will have served its purpose.

II.

HISTORY OF THE QUESTION

From the manner in which this question is treated by some non-Catholic authors one would

gather that the problem of the "brethren of the Lord" is a particularly embarrassing one for Catholics. The idea seems to be prevalent in some quarters that until the sixteenth century the Catholic Church had slept serene in its belief that Mary was always a virgin. After the Reformation, however, and the supposed advent of the "open Bible", Catholics, it is implied, were amazed to find that the New Testament refers several times to real brothers and sisters of Christ, and so they at once invented the unsatisfactory subterfuge that the "brothers" were not brothers at all but only cousins. Now, this is not the view of Protestant scholars as a group, most of them being better informed, (some of them even defending Mary's perpetual virginity) but it has a peculiar way of turning up in popular controversy as a difficulty that is supposed to be unanswerable. One would almost suspect that it is presented in Protestant, parochial studyclubs as an unailing weapon whereby to dislodge the average Catholic from his supposedly stubborn "worship" of the Virgin. Why anyone should wish to destroy veneration for the mother of Jesus or attack her prerogative of perpetual virginity is hard to calculate.

As a matter of fact, by the time of the Protestant Reformation the problem of the "brethren of the Lord" was viewed as a question that had been fully discussed and settled centuries before. As early as the fourth century St. Jerome had written his classical treatise *Against Helvidius*. In this work the great biblical scholar faced the problem squarely, and with keen logic and a pungent brilliance of expression treated and solved every objection usually urged against Mary's vir-

ginity. So much so, that it is not without justice that some recent writers have been referred to as "Modern Helvidians", since they present nothing more than a re-hash of the work of Helvidius, a heretic of the fourth century, and the first to question formally the perpetual virginity of Our Lady. These facts will be more clearly evident if we sketch briefly the history of the problem.

The Early Evidence

From the early days of the Church we have not the slightest shred of evidence to show that any objection was raised against a belief in the perpetual virginity of Our Lady. There is no suggestion at all that the expression "brethren of the Lord" could constitute an obstacle to that belief. In fact, there is no discussion of the "brethren" until the end of the second century. This in itself is important. For since the exact relationship of the "brothers and sisters" to Jesus was a question of fact, it could easily be verified and it would be well-known especially to the members of the early Church in Palestine. If, then, we later find a solid tradition in existence regarding Mary's perpetual virginity, it is incredible that such a belief should have sprung into being suddenly and without reason in, say, the fourth century. It must have been founded on the fact that Mary was *The Virgin* without qualification. And it is undoubtedly true that the later celebrated dictum of St. Epiphanius (+403) expresses exactly what was always believed and taught: "Whoever in any age has dared to pronounce the name Mary and has not, if inter-

rogated, straightway affixed the title *Virgin?*" (PG 42, 705).

JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS (93-94 A.D.)—In his work entitled *Antiquities of the Jews* (XX, 9, 1) this well-known Jewish historian has the following statement, ". . . and he brought before them (the Sanhedrin) the *brother of Jesus*, who was called Christ, whose name was James . . . and he delivered them to be stoned." Here apparently we have the phrase "brother of Jesus" used in connection with James the Apostle. Some scholars suspect that this passage from Josephus is not authentic and view it as a Christian insertion. However this may be, and even should the section be genuine, it contributes very little to our investigation. For, it gives no explanation of the meaning of the expression "brother of Jesus" which in fact had already been used, at least equivalently, many times in the New Testament.

HEGESIPPUS (c. 180 A.D.)—Actually, the first sign of any explanation of the designation "brothers of the Lord" is in the writings of a certain Hegesippus who lived in Palestine and wrote his memoirs towards the end of the second century. His writings have been preserved to us by Eusebius, the Church historian, who tells us that Hegesippus knew the successors of the Apostles. For Hegesippus the expression "brothers of the Lord" is equivalent to "cousins of the Lord on his father's side". He gives the Greek word *adelphos* (brother) the force of *anepsios* (cousin). Thus the earliest discussion of the "brethren" brings with it a precise designation of the meaning of the term, and that by a Palestinian who knew personally the early second century wit-

nesses of that Church. A further important point to note is the fact that Hegesippus is not defending Mary's virginity or engaging in controversy at all. He is not treating explicitly of the meaning of the title "brothers of the Lord". He simply and casually refers to an historical fact. This is important evidence.

APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS—The next reference to the "brethren of the Lord" is found in two Apocryphal Gospels: *The Gospel of James* and *The Gospel of Peter*. They are, of course, spurious works, but they are quite ancient, parts of them dating, perhaps, to the end of the second century. In these odd works Our Lady is very definitely pictured as a virgin, but St. Joseph is described as having several children of a previous marriage. Thus, according to Origen's view of these works, the "brethren of the Lord" would have been children of St. Joseph. It is not impossible that this idea should have been proposed by the writers of the Apocryphal Gospels precisely to safeguard the belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary.

TERTULLIAN (C. 217)—It is not until the third century that we find anyone to question the perpetual virginity of the mother of Jesus. In the works of Tertullian there are several statements (cf. PL 2, 835, 945, 989) which, though somewhat obscure, seem to imply that their author did not know, or rejected, the belief that Mary remained a virgin during and after the birth of Jesus. Tertullian certainly defended the virginal conception of Jesus, and if he did deny Mary's virginity during and after the birth of Jesus, he did so on his own authority. Presuming (as did

Helvidius and St. Jerome) that Tertullian's statements really constitute a denial of Mary's virginity and an assertion that Jesus had real brothers and sisters, he then has the dubious distinction of being the only writer of the first three centuries to step apart from the line of Christian tradition.

ORIGEN (c. 245)—Origen, the "Man of Steel", that prodigious Alexandrian writer, refers several times to the "brothers of the Lord". On one point he is very emphatic: they are definitely *not* children of Mary by St. Joseph. Who are they, then? They are children of St. Joseph begotten in a previous marriage. In presenting this latter view, Origen tells us that he is following the Apocryphal Gospels. Now, although this opinion of Origen is rightly rejected by Catholic authors as opposed to the common Catholic teaching that St. Joseph was always a virgin, it should be noted that it is a view that has not been formally condemned, and in fact was later held by several Fathers of the Church.

If we pass over Clement of Alexandria (+c. 215), about whose opinion in this matter there is some question, other Fathers certainly followed the views of Origen. St. Hilary (+366), St. Epiphanius (+403) and St. Cyril of Alexandria (+444) all propose the view that the "brethren of the Lord" were children of St. Joseph by a former marriage. They all, of course, defended the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity. St. John Chrysostom (+407) and St. Augustine (+430) also at one time favored the opinion of Origen but later changed, probably influenced by the arguments of St. Jerome. It is quite clear that these Fathers, like Origen, were under the influ-

ence of the Apocryphal Gospels. It is more than likely that they embraced this opinion because they considered that it satisfactorily disposed of any difficulty against Mary's virginity implied in the expression "brothers of Jesus". In any case, as has been said, they are very emphatic in asserting that the "brothers" are not Mary's children.

ST. JEROME (c. 383)—If we except Tertulian, there is not the slightest evidence of any denial or even serious discussion of the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity until about the end of the fourth century. At that time several bitter disputes arose involving the defenders of the monastic and celibate life on the one hand and the champions of the married life on the other. Both sides probably exceeded the bounds of correctness. It is easy to see, at any rate, how the defenders of the married life would appeal to the fact that Our Lady and St. Joseph were truly married. Pushing an argument too far, and in the heat of controversy forgetful of consequences, they pictured these holy spouses as living a full married life and having children in the natural way. In the midst of these discussions a certain unknown individual, Helvidius by name, proposed in Rome the thesis that Mary the mother of Jesus did not remain a Virgin after His birth, but having connubial relations with Joseph her husband, afterwards bore several sons and daughters.

St. Jerome, being in Rome at this time, was asked to undertake a refutation, and so it was that he came to write his now famous treatise: *On the Perpetual Virginity of Mary against Helvidius*. In this work Jerome, the great Doctor of

the Scriptures, castigates Helvidius unmercifully. He shows that the heretic is departing from the teaching of the Church, the belief of centuries, in thus despoiling the mother of Jesus of one of her greatest prerogatives. St. Jerome speaks against Helvidius as if against an offensive intruder. He answers the objections proposed one after the other; and as for the "brothers of the Lord", they were, says Jerome, cousins and not real blood-brothers of Jesus. In this he was echoing the view already proposed by Hegesippus; and one feels as he reads St. Jerome's monumental work that its author is writing as a man who is simply reflecting the belief of the Church and its ancient teachers.

Helvidius was silenced by the authority and logic of St. Jerome, but a few years later a Roman monk named Jovinianus revived the heresy of Helvidius. Jerome, writing from Bethlehem, again rushed to the defence of Mary's virginity with his treatise *Against Jovinianus*. In Italy St. Ambrose published a refutation of the disciples of Jovinianus. It was not long before the errors which these Saints opposed were formally condemned by the Holy See.

The preceding outline makes it clear that until the end of the fourth century no one except Tertullian dared raise his voice against the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity. This is all the more striking when we find that Helvidius in his attack on this belief could cite no authority in his favor but Tertullian. True, he mentions that Victorinus of Pettau held his views, but St. Jerome, who knew Victorinus' works, denies that Helvidius has interpreted them correctly. St. Jerome, then,

following his predecessors in the Faith, is the authentic voice of tradition in this matter. He defends Mary's virginity as an important doctrine, something that has been handed down from the beginning, and asserts with the greatest emphasis that to deny it is to do something wicked and dishonorable, completely apart from the belief of centuries. And this was well over fifteen hundred years ago!

III.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW DEFENDED

The assertion has been made by some writers that any unbiased reader of the New Testament must at once conclude that Mary had other children after the birth of Jesus. The obvious and natural interpretation of the phrase "brothers of Jesus", it is said, is that they were real brothers in the flesh. It can be readily admitted that a cursory reading of the New Testament could yield such a conclusion. But like so many apparently simple solutions, it is a little too simple. It causes more difficulties than it seems to solve, and, moreover, it neglects the principal elements of the problem, which must be carefully collected from the whole New Testament account, and not from a few isolated sections.

Tradition not Sentiment

The perpetual virginity of the mother of the Lord is a doctrine that Catholic theologians more easily find contained explicitly in Tradition than

in Sacred Scripture. Knowing that this belief is expressly stated in Tradition, theologians can then point to confirmatory reasons for the doctrine in the Scriptures. Like St. Jerome they are inclined to assert that, "We believe that God was born of a virgin because we read it; that Mary had knowledge of man after the birth (of Jesus) we do not believe because we do not read it" (PL 23, 213). Some non-Catholics who deny Mary's perpetual virginity are disposed to ridicule the Catholic position as being based purely on sentimental grounds. A glance back at the historical evidence shows, indeed, that the doctrine was part of the belief of the early Church, but it does not show that it was sentimental. St. Jerome's treatment of the question can hardly be called sentimental. It should be remembered, too, that Jerome was not merely involved in a dispute on marriage *versus* virginity. For lest this be asserted against him he says explicitly: "Nor do we speak as if condemning the married life, for virginity itself is the fruit of marriage" (PL 23, 213). He spoke rather as one with those who had spoken before him: "Am I not able to array against you (Helvidius) a whole series of ancient writers: Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin the Martyr and many other apostolic and eloquent men?" (PL 23, 211).

The early Church was not given to sentiment, neither was it hesitant or doubtful but sang openly and with full voice the praises of Mary *ever virgin* (*aeiparthenos*). Still, for many non-Catholics the belief of the early centuries is as nothing, for it must dash itself to pieces against the obstacle of the "brethren of the Lord". This

expression in the New Testament, they say, is decisive: Christ had real brothers, therefore Mary had real children. With Helvidius they continue to assert: with the birth of Jesus Mary's virginity ceased. Any sort of belief in a perpetual virginity is pure sentiment. This amounts to a denial of the value of Tradition, but it also constitutes a refusal to face candidly the solid arguments advanced in favor of the traditional view.

The Arguments

The general argument for the Catholic or traditional view that Mary was always a virgin proceeds somewhat as follows:—

The traditional belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary is not opposed by any scriptural argument drawn from the use of the expression "brothers of the Lord", because: A.—This expression *can* have a wider signification than real, or blood-brothers; and B.—It *must* have this wider signification.

A.—The expression, "brothers of the Lord" (and its variants: "his brethren"; "brother of the Lord"; "thy brethren", etc.; also the "sisters", for this is the same problem) *can* have a wide signification:—

1. No one will attempt to deny that the word "brother" ordinarily means a son of the same parents. On the other hand no one can deny that it frequently is used in a wider signification of those who are closely united by religious, political, or family bonds. A preacher will often use the expression "my dear brethren" and no one in his audience will think that he is addressing his re-

marks only to his blood-brothers. Members of Religious Orders or social brotherhoods are often called brothers or addressed as "brother". The word allows a wide signification.

2. The New Testament Books although for the most part written in Greek were nevertheless composed in a Hebrew or Aramaic environment. Most of them reflect this environment on almost every page. They have a semitic color about them, which is only natural, and they frequently use expressions or words which are semitic in origin. Now, while no Catholic author holds that the Hebrew word for "brother" (*ah*; *aha*, Aramaic) in its proper or technical signification means anything else than strictly "brother", no reasonable non-Catholic author can deny that this Hebrew (or Aramaic) word sometimes has an extended signification. Nor can he deny that the New Testament expression "brothers of the Lord" was conceived in a Hebrew or Aramaic environment. Thus it could conceivably have a wider or hebraistic signification.

This reasoning becomes clearer when we consult Old Testament Hebrew usage. In the Book of Genesis we read: "Let there be no quarrel, I beseech thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen: for *we are brothers*" (Gen. 13:8). And yet Abraham who is here speaking to Lot was not Lot's brother, but his uncle (Gen. 11:27). Again, in Genesis 29:15, Laban says to Jacob, "Because thou art *my brother*, shalt thou serve me without wages?" Actually, in the context, it is clear that Laban was the uncle of Jacob, the Son of Rebecca. A similar usage is noted in the Book of Leviticus,

chapter 10; while in I Par. (1 Chron.) 23:21 where we read that Eleazar died leaving no sons, "but only daughters, and the sons of Cis their *brothers* took them", the "brothers" who married them were really (from the context) their cousins. Now, in every one of the instances just cited the most ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, renders the Hebrew word *ab* by the Greek word for "brother" i.e. *adelphos*. It is interesting to note, too, that the Protestant Authorized or King James version renders these places by the English "brother" or "brethren." This is a hebraism admittedly, but we have no reasonable grounds for denying that such a hebraism could run over into the Greek of the New Testament, especially since this latter is the logical successor of the Greek of the Septuagint. And so it cannot reasonably be denied that an expression such as the "brethren of the Lord" in the New Testament could be the rendering of an Aramaic expression implying a wider relationship than strict brothers. Especially so in an Aramaic community, and when it is fully realized both how much the vernacular Aramaic influenced the New Testament writers, and how much they depended on the Greek style and expression of the Septuagint. This is put beyond doubt when we know that neither the Hebrew nor the Aramaic languages possessed a word for "cousin". Rather than use an awkward circumlocution such as "the son of one's uncle", they simply said "brother". People in the same community or general locality would easily understand what actual relationship was meant by the term "brother", for among the Hebrews especially, family lines

and ties were carefully noted. Hence we believe that the expression "brethren of the Lord" in a semitic environment *could* designate other relatives of Jesus than strict brothers.

Second Part of Argument

B.—The expression "brothers of the Lord" (and its variants) *must* have a wider signification. It *must* designate a wider relationship than that implied in the word "brother" used in its technical or proper signification, for:—

1. In St. John's Gospel (Jo. 19:26) it is related that as Jesus was dying on the cross He entrusted His mother to the care of St. John. Now, if Mary had other children it is incredible that Jesus would have given her to someone outside the family. At the death of one of her sons Mary simply would have been commended to the care of her other sons and daughters. This would especially be the case in a Hebrew community where family ties were so strong. Any other way of acting would have constituted a scandal, and Jesus in His dying moments would scarcely have left such an example to the Christian world. We are forced, therefore, to conclude that Jesus entrusted His mother to St. John precisely because after His death on the cross Mary would be altogether alone. She had no other children, no sons or daughters who could care for her.

2. When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive and bear a son, she replied, "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" (Luke 1:34). These words of Our Lady to the angel, and particularly the present

tense of the verb, do not make sense unless she had taken at least the firm resolve to remain a virgin even in her married life. Catholic exegesis has always seen in these words of Mary such a firm determination. No single text of the Gospels contradicts this view. Hence the expression "brothers of the Lord" must be interpreted in the light of, and not against this important text of St. Luke.

3. Finally the whole tenor of the Gospel story demands that the expression "brothers of the Lord" be interpreted in a wide sense—relatives of Jesus, but not real brothers. To be convinced of this one has only to correlate the various sections of the Gospel narrative. This can be done here in only a very summary fashion.

St. Matthew and St. Luke relate the story of the infancy of Christ. Both these narratives stress the fact of the birth of Jesus from Mary a virgin. Otherwise they are unintelligible. Therefore we cannot suppose that Jesus had older brothers or sisters. Further, the complete Gospel context excludes also younger brothers or sisters. It is always just Jesus, Mary and Joseph—in Bethlehem, at Jerusalem, in Nazareth—there are no others in that Holy Family. The "brethren" appear later, it is true. But they are entirely absent during the Infancy and Childhood of Jesus. Their late appearance, though not absolutely conclusive of itself, is strong confirmatory evidence that they were not really part of the Holy Family. A more telling consideration is the following.

It is abundantly clear that St. Joseph was not the real father of Jesus and yet St. Luke can say: "Behold thy *father* and I have sought thee sor-

rowing" (Lk. 2:48). Obviously he is using the term "father" in a wide sense, just as in another place he explains: "And Jesus . . . being, as it was supposed, the *son* of Joseph" (Lk. 3:23). If, therefore, St. Luke, in view of his very definite account of the virgin birth, can allow himself the use of the expression "thy *father*" in reference to St. Joseph, this must decidedly be interpreted in the light of what he had already written of the virgin birth. The term "father" as used of St. Joseph must be interpreted widely to mean foster-father, and not real father. So, too, with the expression "brothers of the Lord": it *must* be interpreted in the light of the Annunciation narrative and especially the statement of Mary: "I know not man." It is a parallel case. Besides, the argument holds also for the other Evangelists—the fourfold Gospel story is in reality one historical document.

Then, too, many other expressions in the Infancy narrative as well as in that of the Public Life bear out the view that Jesus alone was the son of Mary. It is always, ". . . the child with Mary his mother" (Mt. 2:11); ". . . take the child and his mother" (Mt. 2:13); ". . . they found Mary and Joseph and the infant" (Lk. 2:16); "and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother" (Lk. 2:34). Never is there the slightest suggestion of other children. Mary is called the "Mother of Jesus", as if He were her only son. She is never called the mother of anyone else. Jesus is designated as "*the* son of Mary", and in St. Mark this is asserted with special emphasis (Mk. 6:3). In a word, it was sufficient to designate Jesus as "*the* son of Mary", and yet

such a title would not have distinguished Him if Mary had other sons.

Therefore, to sum up an argument that could be made more forceful if every text were collated, the whole course of the Gospel story excludes other children: Jesus was "*the* son of Mary"; Mary was His mother. Hence the one phrase that provides a difficulty must be interpreted widely — the "brethren" were relatives, indeed, of Jesus but not His real brothers.

The Relatives of Jesus

But, it may now reasonably be demanded, what connection did these "brethren" have with Jesus, what was the precise nature of their relationship to the Savior? Or, putting it another way: if the term "brothers" *can* express a wide relationship, and *must* indicate a wider relationship than real blood-brothers, what exactly was this relationship?

It must be admitted at once that in the present state of our knowledge an exact answer to this question cannot be given. Several more or less satisfactory explanations have been proposed. However none of these theories can be called certain to the extent that it excludes all probability to opposing views. Some of the explanations can be treated here, but only briefly.

1. As we have seen, Origen and a few others express the opinion that the "brethren of Jesus" were children of St. Joseph by a previous marriage. They would then be in a legal sense half-brothers of Jesus. Now, although the proponents of this view (among them a number of modern non-Catholic writers) defend the perpetual vir-

ginity of Mary, their solution is not tenable. For, although it has not been expressly condemned it certainly offends against the belief of the universal Church in the virginity of St. Joseph. It directly or indirectly depends upon casual statements in the Apocryphal Gospels of James and Peter, and has no greater authority than these ancient though often bizarre works. St. Jerome speaking of this opinion classes it among the "ravings of the Apocryphals", and goes on to say: "You say that Mary did not remain a virgin; but I, for my part, claim more than that, namely that Joseph too was a virgin through Mary, that of a virginal marriage a virginal son might be born" (PL 23, 213). It is very difficult to see how Jerome, steeped as he was in the writings of those who preceded him, could have been ignorant of the genuine state of tradition on this subject.

2. St. Jerome as well as some other Fathers of the Church (v.g. Chrysostom, Augustine) suggest that the "brethren" were cousins of Jesus on His mother's side. That would make them children of the maternal aunt of Jesus, Mary of Cleophas, His mother's sister (Jo. 19:25). However, St. Jerome is not insistent on this view and seems to vacillate at times. As long as he makes it clear that the "brethren of Jesus" are not real sons of Mary, Jerome does not appear too concerned about their precise relationship — whether they were cousins on the mother's side or cousins through St. Joseph does not greatly matter. Hence it does not seem important to delay longer in the discussion of this particular opinion: it is a satisfactory solution although now not much

in favor.

3. Catholic scholars in recent years have come to look with more favor on the view that the "brethren" were cousins of Jesus on His foster-father's side. This would make them children of Cleophas, brother (according to this view) of St. Joseph; and children of Mary, sister of St. Joseph (hence *sister-in-law* of Mary, mother of Jesus—Jo. 19:25). This opinion would be more in accord with that expressed by Hegesippus in the second century and on that account alone it claims many adherents. The whole question depends on how one relates several Gospel texts, principally Mt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40; Lk. 24:10; as well as Jo. 19:25. These texts can be and are variously interpreted. There is hardly space here to discuss the problem completely. Suffice it to say that in this whole discussion there are two clearly distinct questions: I.—Was Mary, the mother of Jesus, also the mother of other children called in Scripture the "brethren of the Lord"? This question has already been answered in the negative from both Scripture and Tradition. The further question: II.—What precise relationship did the "brethren" have to Jesus?—is an entirely distinct question and one that is open to free discussion.

This distinction must be kept clearly in mind, for some recent authors attempt to treat these two questions as one. In so doing they claim that St. Jerome was not consistent in his views. This is to misinterpret woefully the Saint's works. Jerome was vehemently and always opposed to the view that Jesus had real brothers; but when it came to a discussion of the exact relationship

of the "brethren" to Jesus, Jerome, like those who followed him, saw clearly that this was an entirely secondary question that could be solved in different ways.

IV.

SOME FURTHER QUESTIONS

The solution of the problem of the "brethren of the Lord" proposed here (they were not real brothers) implies that Mary was always a virgin. Those who interpret the "brethren" as real brothers of Jesus object that there are strong reasons for believing that Mary was not always a virgin. It would be well, therefore, to consider some of the principal objections commonly urged against Mary's perpetual virginity. They are not new despite their modern dress, since for the most part they were proposed by Helvidius and answered by St. Jerome centuries ago. They are still used, though, and for that reason will be considered here briefly.

1. It is claimed that the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of the mother of Jesus was the belief of the early Church. Yet this doctrine was denied by the important writer Tertullian in the early part of the third century.

Answer: Tertullian is indeed a valuable witness to some points of doctrine. However, it should be remembered that Tertullian, a very rugged individualist, broke away from the authority of the Universal Church towards middle-age and founded an heretical sect of his own.

His references to the virginity of Mary are casual and obscure, and in no instance does he

claim that his views are part of the teaching of the Church. They constitute nothing more than the perverse opinions of an individual heretic. As St. Jerome said of him: "Of Tertullian I need say nothing more than that he was not a son of the Church" (PL 23, 211). It should also be remembered that when Helvidius publicly denied Mary's perpetual virginity, he could appeal to no other authority with any sort of assurance than the heretic Tertullian. This in itself is strong testimony to the universal belief of Christendom in Mary's virginity. Tertullian's break with Tradition is unimportant—one voice does not make a chorus.

2. Even if the Hebrew or Aramaic languages had no single technical word for "cousins", the Greek language had such a word. If the "brethren" were cousins and not real brothers, why did the New Testament writers who wrote in Greek employ the word *adelphoi* (brothers) instead of *anepsioi* (cousins)?

Answer: It is quite true that the New Testament writers could have used the word *anepsioi* (cousins) to express their meaning, and then we should have no difficulty to face. However, they did not do so. We have seen that even though they did use the term *adelphoi* (brothers) they could not have meant anything but relatives or kinsfolk, and that these relatives could have been cousins. Why did they leave the way open to possible ambiguity? First of all it was not a question of their being deliberately ambiguous—there would have been no point in that. As the relationship was a question of fact, it was well known to the first readers of the New Testament

what exact relationship the "brethren" had to Jesus. Being a fact known to all, it could easily be verified and hence there would be little danger of confusion. So, writing in an Aramaic environment, the Evangelists could easily use a phrase (as they have done in other instances) that was a literal rendering of a commonly used Aramaic expression.

If, as seems likely, the expression "brethren of the Lord" (or its equivalent) carried a certain honorary import in Aramaic, this title would naturally be carried over literally into Greek. The near kinsfolk of Jesus on account of their relationship to the Master would be especially distinguished and so it could easily arrive that they would come to be referred to with the title of honor, "brethren of the Lord". In any case it is not unusual that an Aramaic or semitic phrase in general should be rendered literally in New Testament Greek which, as everyone knows, is not classical Greek, but vernacular Greek with a semitic coloring. As a point of considerable interest, reference might be made here in passing to the fact that two recently published pre-Christian papyri (Adler Papyri) contain examples of the Greek word for brother (*adelphos*) being used in the meaning of relative or kinsman.

3. In St. Matthew's Gospel it is said: "When his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, *before they came together*, she was found with child, of the Holy Ghost" (Mt. 1:18). It seems clear, then, that after the birth of Jesus they did come together, and hence Mary was not always a virgin.

Answers: This objection was proposed to St. Jerome centuries ago. It is really pointless. St.

Matthew, in this section of his Gospel is primarily concerned with stressing the fact of the virgin birth of Jesus. He is not concerned here with what happened afterwards. So, even if the phrase "before they came together" refers to marital relations all that is asserted is that Jesus was not born in the natural way, but by the operation of the Holy Ghost.

It is much more probable however, that the phrase "before they came together" should be interpreted in the light of marriage customs of that day. In this sense the phrase would refer to the time of the espousals during which the bride remained with her own people and at the end of which she was led to her husband's house. During the time of the espousals the spouses were looked upon as being almost a married couple, although the leading of the bride to the husband's house was considered the completion of the marriage ceremony. St. Matthew's phrase would mean, therefore,—during the time of the espousals (before they came together) Mary was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

4. But in the same chapter of his Gospel, St. Matthew says of St. Joseph: "And he knew her not till she brought forth her first-born son" (Mt. 1:25). Now, as Helvidius pointed out, if he did not know her "till" or "until", he knew her afterwards; that is, after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary lived normally as man and wife. Besides, Jesus is called "her firstborn son", if "first-born" then there were others after Him, for "firstborn" is the first of many.

Answers: There are two difficulties proposed here: they rest on the meaning of "till" or "until"

and "firstborn". As for the force of the phrase "he did not know her till": this must be interpreted in its circumstances. Again, St. Matthew is stressing the fact of the virgin birth of Jesus. He is emphatically, by repetition, denying to St. Joseph any part in the birth of Jesus—this holy birth was through the Holy Ghost.

Moreover, the expression "did not know her until" can have an exclusive force; it can refer to what did not happen before a certain event without saying anything of what happened afterwards. In the light of the whole Gospel context and the arguments already presented, it *must* have this meaning here. Nor is this an unusual meaning of the phrase in any language. We could say of a certain wicked man that he did not repent until his death, and yet we would not mean that he repented after death. Then in II Kings (II Sam.) 6:23 we read: "Therefore Michol the daughter of Saul had no child till the day of her death." Surely no one would conclude that she had children after her death!

As for the term "firstborn", (which is very likely not an authentic part of the text in Mt. 1:25, but does occur in Lk. 2:7) it does not at all follow that since Jesus is called the firstborn son of Mary she had other sons afterwards. An only son could correctly be called "firstborn son", and was so called in Hebrew law since the term "firstborn" had a technical or legal signification. The Mosaic legislation prescribed certain duties and privileges for the first-born son (v.g. Ex. 13:2, 34:19 etc.) whether he was the only son or the first of many, as long as he was "first". We still say quite correctly of a mother that she died

giving birth to her firstborn son. In the case of Jesus, He was the firstborn and only son of His mother Mary.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the preceding pages has been to endeavor to demonstrate that the expression "brethren of the Lord", used in the New Testament of certain individuals, does not constitute a valid objection against the belief of the Catholic Church in the perpetual virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus. This belief, solidly founded in Tradition, is confirmed by the complete context of the New Testament. It cannot be lightly questioned by anyone who retains a measure of reverence for the Faith of the early Church and is convinced of the historical accuracy of the New Testament writings.

In fact, it is difficult to see why anyone should wish to detract from the glory of the mother of Jesus by denying to her a prerogative that Fathers and Doctors and Saints through the centuries have recognized as peculiarly hers. In the early ages of the Church it became the custom to refer to her simply as *The Virgin* or *Mary Ever Virgin*. Such titles had a doctrinal import. They were the expression of the mind of the Church, and were applied naturally to her whom Elizabeth saluted as "the mother of my Lord" (Lk. 1:43). For it was only fitting that the sanctuary in which the Incarnate Word first found refuge in this world should have been left forever pure and intact. The dwelling which was

peculiarly His should not have been entered by any other. It does sometimes appear, therefore, that those who write so bitterly in attempting to diminish Mary's glory must be led on by hatred for the Catholic Church or that they seek cheap notoriety. Perhaps they are like that unknown man of Ephesus in the story quoted by St. Jerome, who, since he could think of nothing good to do that he might become famous, decided to set fire to the great temple of the goddess Diana, that by this wicked deed he might gain notoriety. If so, they would merit the apt reproach of St. Jerome to Helvidius: "You have set fire to the temple of the Body of the Lord; you have contaminated the sanctuary of the Holy Ghost" (PL 23, 210). Much better it would be if they would use their time and talents to fulfill Mary's own prophecy, "Behold from henceforth all nations shall call me blessed" (Lk. 1:48).



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