

Did Jesus have Siblings?
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 6:1-6)

Catholics have always professed that Mary was “ever-virgin,” and that Jesus was her only child. However, when the Gospel describes Jesus as being the carpenter from Nazareth, the son of Mary, it clearly says that he had brothers and sisters, even naming four of them: James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. This passage from Mark 6 (and also the parallel passage in Mt 13:53-56) is a challenge for Catholics, who may not be prepared to explain the contradiction. But actually, we can easily respond to this challenge.

There are three common mistakes people make when reading the Bible today. First, is to take one scripture verse and isolate it from other Bible passages, which very often tell something different, or fill out important details. So the first thing to do is look at the other verse in Mark (and Matthew) where these “brothers” of Jesus are mentioned.

They are mentioned again in the account of the crucifixion (Mk 15:40 & Mt 27:56). Among the women who were present at the crucifixion were several who happened to be named Mary: “*Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses.*” This other Mary – Mary the mother of James and Joses – is not the Virgin Mary mother of Jesus. Another Bible verse from St. John’s account of the crucifixion makes it even clearer. There were three Marys at the foot of the cross: “*standing by the cross of Jesus were 1) his mother, and 2) his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and 3) Mary Magdalene*” (Jn 19:25).

According to early traditions, Cleophas was the brother of St. Joseph, which would make this other Mary, sister-in-law to the Virgin Mary. And therefore, these so-called “brothers of Jesus,” James and Joses, are actually the Virgin Mary’s nephews, or Jesus’ first cousins.

Another detail mentioned by St. John, is that when Jesus sees his mother standing there with the beloved disciple John, he entrusts her into the home of this apostle (Jn 19:26-27). This implies that she has no other sons of her own, because if Jesus had other brothers from the same mother it would be their automatic responsibility to care for their mother; the fact that Jesus has to entrust her to another new “son” indicates that he was her only son.

Thus, just based on a further study of the Scriptures, we can see that the issue of whether Jesus had other siblings is not solved by focusing simply on one isolated verse of the Bible.

The second big mistake is to read the scripture based on a modern mindset, forgetting that the Bible is an ancient document written in ancient languages in a very different culture. We must not project modern practices and linguistic concepts onto the ancient text. If you want to understand the Bible correctly, you have to study the original languages and ancient culture of the Hebrews.

In the language of Jesus (Aramaic), the word “brother” referred to any close relative. There was no separate word for cousin. In the Biblical culture of the Old Testament, the understanding of “family” was broader than it is today. Today it refers mainly to the “nuclear family” of mother, father, and their children. In the Bible, the head of a household was actually the patriarch, and the children of his family included both his children and grandchildren. There are many Old Testament passages that show how both cousins and uncles are called “brothers,” members of the same family (cf. Gn 13:8, 14:14-16; Lv 10:4; 1Chr 15:5-10, 23:21-22). Thus early Christians were not shocked to hear that Jesus had brothers. Like all families of the time, he had *relatives*. The fact that Jesus had other familial brothers and sisters does not deny that he was Mary’s only child, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and she remained ever-Virgin.

A third big mistake which many “Bible-only” Christians make, which is the cause of so many misunderstandings, is to be ignorant of where the Bible came from. As if now all of a sudden, this contradictory verse has been discovered for the first time. For 2000 years, did Catholics never notice that this passage totally contradicted their teaching on Mary’s Perpetual Virginity??

How do you say that the Bible contradicts the Catholic Church, when the Catholic Church put the Bible together in the first place and decided which books are the authoritative ones that belong in the Bible. If you believe the Bible has divine authority, you have to accept the authority of the Catholic Church. The Church didn’t come from the Bible; the Bible came from the Church.

The apostles who wrote the books of the New Testament were Catholics. Their successors, the early Catholic bishops of the first centuries, copied the books of the Bible and preached them. These early Church fathers kept lists of which books actually came from the apostles, and which books did not. In the late fourth century, it was pope Damasus I (366-384) and bishops such as St. Augustine, holding various church councils, that finalized the official list or “canon” of books which belong in the Bible.

The reason we can trust the books of the New Testament, is because the Catholic Church determined these books are apostolic and trustworthy. On the other hand, by what authority do non-Catholics claim to correctly interpret the Bible, except their own personal authority?

All we have to do then, is go back and read the sermons and writings of the early fathers in the first centuries, who were very close to the time of the apostles, to see how they understood and interpreted various passages of the Bible. They were unanimous in proclaiming Mary's perpetual virginity, and interpreting this scripture passage as referring either to cousins of Jesus, or possibly half-brothers of Jesus by a previous marriage of St. Joseph. Important references can be found in the writings of St. Irenaeus, Origen, St. Athanasius (*Orations Against the Arians*, 2.70), Epiphanius (*The Man Well-Anchored*, 120), St. Hillary of Poitiers (*Commentary on Matthew 1:4*), Didymus the Blind (*The Trinity*, 3:4), St. Ambrose (*Letters* 63:111), and St. Jerome (*Against Helvetius*, 21). Above all, the second century document known as the *Protoevangelium of James* tells of Mary's virginity before giving birth, the miraculous way in which she gave birth, and her physical virginity even after giving birth.

On the other hand, in the few instances when some someone may have tried to suggest that Jesus had other siblings from his mother, they were condemned and corrected by other fathers (for example Tertullian was corrected by St. Jerome who pointed out he was a heretic in any case).

So any time someone may try to undermine our Catholic faith by trying to use our Bible against us, we need to ask them those three questions. Are you reading one isolated verse out of context? Are you imposing on the language of the Bible a modern cultural presupposition? And, are you forgetting that you got the Bible from the Catholic Church in the first place, which has always known about this verse and interpreted it correctly and consistently.

Jesus said "No prophet is accepted in his home town," and he was amazed at their lack of faith. People who had grown up with him thought they knew exactly who he was, and made a big mistake. They couldn't believe he had divine, infallible authority to teach and proclaim the truth. This has also happened with the Catholic Church. Every new denomination that comes along and picks up the Bible thinks it knows and understands exactly who Jesus and Mary are, and what the Catholic Church is. They end up stubbornly rejecting the Church even before understanding a single fact of her origin. They make exactly the same mistake about the Catholic Church which people made about Jesus in Nazareth.