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Did Mary Remain a Virgin? ¹

William J Bridcut

On 28 August 1996 Pope John Paul II announced that Jesus had no brothers or sisters, and that his mother Mary remained a virgin to the end of her days. This assertion has usually been denied by Protestants, largely because the New Testament does not support it, but the present Pope is determined to give Mary a high profile and has done what he can to promote her cult within his own church. Mariology is an aspect of Roman Catholic doctrine which is often ignored, but it creates as much of a barrier to ecumenical relations as the papal claims do. In this timely article, William Bridcut sets out the evidence for Mary's perpetual virginity and demonstrates the weakness of the Roman position. It can only be hoped that our church leaders will cease ignoring the question and pay attention to this issue, which has deep roots in Roman Catholic piety but which is rejected by most Anglicans. Churchman has undertaken to publish the following article, not in order to stir up needless controversy, but rather to remind people that we cannot afford to ignore the claims of truth, even as we seek to have warmer relations with other churches. Christian unity cannot be based on fantasy, however pious it may be. Rome ought to be humble enough to admit that its Marian beliefs have no real foundation, and that only a close adherence to the teachings (and the limits) of Scripture can bring about a solid and lasting reconciliation between us.

The words of Jesus to his mother Mary and to his disciple John, 'Woman, behold, your son'; and to John, 'Behold your mother'² are said to constitute the strongest argument against the idea that Mary gave birth to and reared other children besides Jesus.³ How could Jesus be so insulting as to entrust his mother to John if Mary had other children?

But no matter what interpretation we put on the 'brothers' and 'sisters' of Jesus whom we read about in the Gospels, there is a difficulty if Mary is entrusted to a man who is not called 'brother'. The difficulty is admittedly greater if the 'brothers' and 'sisters' of Jesus were children of Mary, but there is still a difficulty. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and who was possibly a cousin of Jesus, is not called 'brother' and yet the Lord's mother

1 The substance of this article was given as a paper at a conference organized by The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Newry, Northern Ireland.

2 The Lord's words were the theme of the ESBVM conference.

3 This is the argument of Hilary of Poitiers (c 315-68), Ambrose of Milan (c 339-97), Epiphanius (c 315-403), Bishop J B Lightfoot (1828-89) and Archbishop J A F Gregg of Armagh (1873-1961).

is given into his hands.

Different answers are given by those who believe that Mary had other children: that John was close to Jesus and was fairly prosperous and had influential friends⁴ or that the 'brothers' and 'sisters' were married and so were less able to give Mary a home. These reasons are given when it is supposed that Mary stayed with John for the remainder of her life. But we are not told that.⁵ It is possible that Jesus simply wished to spare his mother the agony of watching him die and spare himself watching her, and so he asked John to take her away from the scene of crucifixion. This is borne out in Acts where after the resurrection the mother of Jesus is yet again linked with the Lord's brothers.⁶

Marcion, the prominent second century heretic, had used the Lord's question, 'Who is my mother and who are my brothers?' in an effort to prove that Christ was not really human. When Tertullian replied,⁷ he wrote as if there were no other view than that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were children of Joseph and Mary. Writing at the end of the second century, Tertullian showed not the slightest sign of consciousness that he was going against an established tradition in favour of the perpetual virginity of Mary.⁸ Origen, the third century Alexandrian theologian, contradicted Tertullian, but he did not say that Tertullian was going against the teaching of others. Origen merely argued that his own view was admissible.⁹ Even Hilary of Poitiers who in the middle of the fourth century, in his commentary on Matthew, was the first resolutely to uphold Mary's eternal virginity, had to defend it against numerous people. They had appealed against this doctrine to the text of Matthew's Gospel and, as a result, rejected this new 'spiritual doctrine' as it was called.¹⁰

4 John 18:15,16

5 John Wenham *Easter Enigma* (Exeter 1984) p 138

6 Acts 1:14

7 *Against Marcion* 4:19; *On the Flesh of Christ* 7; *On the Veiling of Virgins* 6; *On Monogamy* 8.

8 We find a similar unconsciousness in other places. In one of three apocryphal writings attributed to James, James (whose father is presumably Joseph) is said to be a physical brother to Jesus as well as a spiritual brother (2 Apoc Jas 50:8-23 and 51:19-22). This writing is said to date from the first half of the second century. A later copy of it, deposited late fourth century, was discovered in 1946 near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.

In another Nag Hammadi Gnostic text, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, Jesus says to Thomas, 'You are my twin... you will be called my brother' (138:7-11). This apparently spiritualizes an alleged physical kinship. See the article by James A Brashler in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* III 820.

9 See J B Mayor's commentary on James page x and 'Brethren of the Lord' *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* I 320. Origen took the view that the 'brothers' of Jesus were children of Joseph by an earlier marriage.

10 See Hans Von Campenhausen 'The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church' *Studies in Historical Theology* 2 (SCM 1964) p 72. Hilary also held that the 'brothers' of the Lord were sons of Joseph.

As time passed, those who quoted Scripture in the hope of showing that Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus were treated as people who did not understand, even though they might have been able to read.¹¹ It is, however, to the Scriptures that we must turn.

Matthew 1 and Luke 1-2

At the end of the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel we read that Joseph took Mary as his wife but did not know her *until* she had borne a son, that is, Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary *before* the birth of Jesus. Matthew felt it necessary to say this for he knew that otherwise everyone would assume that during that time Mary and Joseph would have had a normal sexual relationship. On this assumption, Matthew would have expected his readers to have understood that, apart from the period before our Lord's birth, Joseph and Mary lived together as any ordinary married couple.

Matthew wrote like one who knew that the 'brothers' mentioned later on¹² were Mary's children, but did not want to say so explicitly at this point. If Matthew knew that Mary remained a virgin, he would have made it clear that Jesus was her *only* child. Instead, he used an expression which suggests that Joseph and Mary had normal sexual relations after the birth of Jesus.

In the first chapter of Luke's Gospel the angel informed Mary that she would have a son and Mary asked, 'How can this be, since I have no husband?' These words have been construed to show that Mary had taken a vow of virginity. But the picture of Mary in Luke's Gospel is that of a normal Jewish girl looking forward to marriage. Indeed, she had already entered the process of Jewish marriage. We have no evidence from this period that Jewish betrothed women ever took such a vow, and without more information the people for whom Luke was writing would not have seen such a vow at this place. Mary was wondering how she could conceive immediately or in the near future since she was still in the betrothal period and had not yet been sexually united to Joseph.¹³

In Luke 2, Jesus is described as Mary's *firstborn* son. If there were no other children, why did Luke not speak of Mary's *only* son? We ask this because Luke was not slow to speak of an only child. In two incidents in

11 Jerome *Against Helvidius* 2

12 Matt 12:46; 13:55

13 In the discussion following the reading of this paper, the Roman Catholic author of *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London 1975), Canon John McHugh, added that Mary's marriage to Joseph would have been rendered invalid if she had taken a vow of virginity.

the Gospels, the raising of Jairus' daughter and the healing of the demon-possessed boy the disciples could not cure, Luke spoke of an only child while Matthew and Mark, who recorded the same incident, did not.¹⁴ Luke was also the only Evangelist to record the story of the widow of Nain who had an only son;¹⁵ yet Luke, who had specifically mentioned three only children, did not describe Jesus in this way.

Why did Luke not say that Elizabeth gave birth to her *firstborn*? Had he done so, and later written about John the Baptist's 'brothers', we would have assumed that Elizabeth had other children even though, unlike Mary, she was well on in years.

Matthew 12:46-50 and Mark 3:31-5

In these places we read of Jesus teaching in a house when Mary and his brothers came along and a message was sent in to say "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you." Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking [at his listeners] he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."

In speaking like this, the Lord Jesus was saying that there were closer bonds than those of blood, and his words would have had force only if the spiritual relationship he described were seen to be as close as *the closest* of family ties. Our Lord's words would have fallen flat if he had said, as it were: 'Whoever does God's will is my cousin.' The words lose their significance if the contrast is not on the one hand with Mary and Jesus' blood brothers and on the other with those who do God's will.

But notice also that Jesus said: 'Whoever does God's will is my *sister*.' There is no mention of sisters waiting outside the house.¹⁶ Commentators give different reasons as to why 'sister' is introduced, but can we not say that Jesus would not have said 'sister' unless he had uterine sisters? Jesus was drawing attention to a spiritual relationship closer than the closest of family ties, he would not therefore introduce 'sister' unless 'sister' described the closest natural brother-sister relationship.

Matthew 13:54-8 and Mark 6:1-6

Here we are told that Jesus in his last recorded visit to a synagogue was

14 Luke 8:42; Matt 9:18; Mark 5:23 and Luke 9:38; Matt 17:15; Mark 9:17

15 Luke 7:12

16 'Sisters' is added by a few MSS but see B M Metzger *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* on Mark 3:32.

teaching as though he were a qualified rabbi who also displayed exceptional powers. When Jesus came into his own country the people 'were astonished, saying: "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter [or the son of the carpenter], the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him.'

Jesus was no longer a familiar face around Nazareth, but he was still recognised and the recognition was confirmed by those who knew his close relatives. The people maintained that Jesus could not be what he seemed since they knew who he was, and they spoke of brothers and sisters to show that he was quite ordinary. What was more, they knew his background and made it plain that, since he had come from an ordinary village family, Jesus had no right to set himself up as the Messiah from God. It can be hurtful to see someone from the same humble background promoted above us and resentment can set in. In this case they said of Jesus: 'We know his origin, he cannot be the Christ.'

When the crowd said in effect, 'He is only ordinary', the 'put down' loses its savour of scandal if it was not meant that the brothers and sisters were other children of Mary.

Conclusion

The ecumenical study *Mary in the New Testament* says that the normal meaning of the Greek ἀδελφός is 'blood-brother' and adds: 'Clearly it is later church tradition that has led many to argue for the broad translation.'¹⁷ The note in the Roman Catholic *New American Bible* on 'brother' and 'sister' on Mark 6:3 reads: 'The question of meaning here would not have arisen but for the faith of the church in Mary's perpetual virginity.'¹⁸

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¹⁷ *Mary in the New Testament* Raymond E Brown *et al* edd (London 1978)

¹⁸ *The New American Bible* (Wichita Kansas: Catholic Bible Publishers 1988)