30. Mary ever-virgin and the "brothers of Jesus"

Often heard: "Jesus had brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3). Joseph 'knew her not till' she gave birth."
Also heard: "If Mary had other sons, why did Jesus give her to John at the cross?"

Mary had other children after Jesus

HELD BY Reformed many today | Baptist

After Jesus' birth Mary and Joseph had normal marital relations and other children. "Till" implies that changed afterward, "firstborn" implies later children, and the Gospels name Jesus' brothers.

VERSES CITED

Matt 1:24–25; 12:46–50; 13:55–56; Mark 3:31–35; 6:3; Luke 2:7; John 2:12; 7:3–5; Acts 1:14; Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 9:5.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Helvidius (c. 380) argued Mary had other children; Jerome refuted him in *Against Helvidius* (383). Tertullian (c. 200) seems to have assumed the same. Note that Luther and Zwingli affirmed Mary's perpetual virginity, Calvin declined to deny it and rejected Helvidius's arguments for later children, and John Wesley affirmed it; widespread Protestant rejection came after the Reformers.

Mary remained ever-virgin

HELD BY Catholic | Orthodox | Lutheran Confessions; Luther | Anglican classical divines | Methodist Wesley held it

Mary remained a virgin before, during and after Christ's birth. "Brother" (*adelphos*) covers wider kin in biblical usage (Lot is called Abraham's "brother"); James and Joses, named as Jesus' brothers, are sons of a different Mary; "until" does not imply a later change (2 Sam 6:23; Matt 28:20); "firstborn" is a legal title used even for an only child (Exod 13:2); and Jesus entrusted His mother to John at the cross, which would be odd if she had other sons.

VERSES CITED

Gen 13:8; 14:14; 1 Chr 23:21–22; Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25–27; 2 Sam 6:23; Matt 28:20; Luke 1:34; Ezek 44:2.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

The *Protoevangelium of James* (c. 150) treats the brothers as Joseph's children by an earlier marriage; Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17; Athanasius calls her "Ever-Virgin"; Jerome (383) proposes cousins; the Second Council of Constantinople (553) calls her "ever-virgin"; Lateran Synod (649). For virginity "in the birth," Catholic and Orthodox writers cite Ezekiel's closed gate: "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened ... because the LORD, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it" (Ezek 44:2, KJV). Ambrose, writing for a Milan synod (Letter 42 in the Maurist numbering, c. 392), asks, "Is not Mary this

gate, by whom the Saviour entered into the world?" and says it is "shut after birth." Leo's *Tome* (449) says the Son was born "without the loss of her virginity, even as she conceived Him without its loss."

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 496–507 (esp. 499–501).

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Mary remained a virgin before, during and after Christ's birth; the "brothers" are wider kin, "till" and "firstborn" imply nothing about later children, and Jesus entrusted His mother to John at the cross. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 496-507 (esp. 499-501); Second Council of Constantinople (553); Lateran Synod (649).

Orthodox

The Orthodox Church confesses Mary as Theotokos and "ever-virgin": she remained a virgin before, during and after the birth of the Saviour. The "brethren" of the Lord were not Mary's children; Orthodox writers explain them as Joseph's children by an earlier marriage or as cousins, and the word "brother" is read as covering relatives. The title Ever-Virgin is used constantly in the liturgy and was confirmed by the Confession of Dositheus (1672).

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret (1830s), Creed art. 3, Q 186-190; Confession of Dositheus (1672), Decree 6; Thomas Hopko, The Orthodox Faith vol. 1, Symbol of Faith: Incarnation (oca.org); OCA Questions & Answers, "The Perpetual Virginity of Mary" (oca.org).

Lutheran

The Latin text of the Smalcald Articles (I.4) confesses that Christ was born "ex Maria pura, sancta, semper virgine" (the German has only "pure, holy Virgin"), and the Formula of Concord says she is truly the mother of God and "nevertheless remained a virgin." Luther held that she remained a virgin after Christ's birth and that "till" in Matt 1:25 does not imply later relations. Some Lutherans today, for example in the WELS, read the Smalcald phrase as a stock formula and leave the question open.

Reformed

Zwingli preached and printed a 1522 sermon on "the ever-pure maid Mary," and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) confesses Christ "born of the ever virgin Mary." Calvin wrote that no sound inference about later children can be drawn from Matt 1:25 and that "brothers" in Hebrew idiom covers any relatives, calling Helvidius ignorant. The Westminster Standards say only "the virgin Mary" and do not decide the question; many Reformed Christians today hold that Mary had other children.

Sources: Smalcald Articles I.4 (Latin and German); Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VIII.24; Luther, That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew (1523), LW 45:199–229; WELS FAQ, "Subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions" (wels.net).

Sources: Zwingli, Ain Predig vonn der ewig rainen magt Maria (Zurich, 1522; Augsburg print, Silvan Otmar); Second Helvetic Confession ch. 11; Calvin, Harmony of the Evangelists, on Matt 1:25 and Matt 13:55 (Pringle tr.); Westminster Confession 8.2.

Anglican

The Thirty-Nine Articles confess that the Son took man's nature "in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance" (Art. II), and the Prayer Book calls her "a pure Virgin," but the formularies do not rule on her virginity after Christ's birth. Anglicans therefore differ: many classical divines and Anglo-Catholics hold her perpetual virginity with the Fathers, while many Evangelical Anglicans think Mary had other children. Under Article VI neither view is required as an article of faith.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles II, VI; Book of Common Prayer (1662), Christmas collect; ARCIC II, Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (2005), paras 45-46.

Methodist

John Wesley, in his Letter to a Roman Catholic (1749), professed that Christ was born of the blessed Virgin Mary, who "as well after as before she brought Him forth, continued a pure and unspotted virgin." The Methodist Articles of Religion confess only that the Son took man's nature "in the womb of the blessed Virgin" (Art. II) and do not address her later life, so Methodists today hold differing views.

Sources: John Wesley, A Letter to a Roman Catholic (Dublin, 1749), para. 7; Methodist Articles of Religion II (Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church).

Baptist

After Jesus' birth Mary and Joseph had normal marital relations and other children; "till," "firstborn" and the named brothers and sisters of Jesus point that way. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Matt 1:24-25; 12:46-50; 13:55-56; Mark 6:3; Luke 2:7; Gal 1:19.

Where it gets contested: Tertullian (*On the Flesh of Christ* 7; *Against Marcion* 4.19) is the best early witness for the view that Mary had other children (held by Reformed and Baptists), and the *Protoevangelium* is not Scripture. Those who hold Mary ever-virgin (Catholics and Orthodox, with Luther, Wesley and the classical Anglican divines) answer that Tertullian was an outlier who later joined the Montanist sect, and that by the 4th century the belief was universal, East and West. On virginity in

> the birth, Reformed and Baptist writers answer that Ezekiel's vision is of the temple, that Luke 2:23 calls Jesus one who "openeth the womb," and that the Fathers' picture of the birth goes beyond the text.

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