

Behold, his mother and his brethren stood outside, asking to speak to him
(*Matthew 12:47, Mark 3:32, Luke 8:20*).

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These brethren appear as James, Joses, Simon and Judas (Matthew 13:55) or as James, Judas and Simon (Mark 6:2–3). For many contemporary Protestants, these verses pose confusion on the lifelong virginity of Mary. However, a different mother of the first two men, James and Joses, is revealed later in this gospel (Matthew 27:56). These two sons cannot be children of the Virgin Mary, and also the children of the other woman, named Mary.

The term “brethren” can mean spiritual brother, full brother, half brother, stepbrother, adopted brother, first cousin, second cousin, or even nephew. Abraham had a nephew named Lot, later called his brother (Genesis 14:12–14). The greatest biblical scholars of all time and all denominations—Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Wesley, among others, believed that Mary was ever-virgin.

Sacred Scripture calls only Jesus “*the*” son of Mary (Mark 6:3) and calls her only *the mother of Jesus* (John 2:1). By researching all of the statements in Scripture and tradition about who parented whom, one can assemble a coherent family tree of the extended Holy Family, distinguishing certain blood relatives of Mary from possible blood relatives of Joseph.

Luke and John provide a well-rounded picture of Mary’s side of the family. Luke calls Mary a kinswoman of Elizabeth (Luke 1:36), who in turn is called a Daughter of Aaron (Luke 1:5); that means Mary and Elizabeth have a common female ancestor of the priestly tribe of Levi. John testifies that the Virgin Mary had a sister also named Mary (John 19:25). Their names might have differed slightly, one being *Miryam* (after the sister of Moses and Aaron, a very fitting name for a daughter of Aaron), the other in later Aramaic form *Maryam* (meaning “bitter is the sea,” a name of sorrow). Tradition assigns to their parents the names of Joachim and Ann.

Matthew calls Joseph’s grandfather *Mattan* and his father *Jacob* (Matthew 1:15, 16; see Luke 3:23–24). The early Christian chronicler Hegesippus (AD 110–180), in the fifth book of his *Memoirs*, maintains that Joseph had a younger brother, whose name in Aramaic must have been *Hilfai*, which is transcribed into Greek two ways:

- *Alphaeus* (initial H is dropped), the father of James the Lesser (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13); may or may not be the same person as Alphaeus, the father of Levi/Matthew (Mark 2:14).

- *Clopas* (initial H becomes C), husband of “the other Mary,” who stood at the foot of the Cross by her sister, the Virgin Mary (John 19:25) and who is mother of James the Lesser and Joseph (Matthew 27:56) or Joses (Mark 15:40); may or may not be the same as *Cleopas* (a Greek name), one of two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–27), the father of Simon of Jerusalem in the Orthodox tradition.

These names are extremely rare, appearing nowhere else in Scripture. Four rabbinic figures had the name Hilfai, but they lived later, in the Second and Third Centuries. Scholars debate whether Clopas is the same as Cleopas, and whether Alphaeus, father of James is also Alphaeus, father of Matthew, but there is no real data to distinguish them from each other. One thing seems quite certain: Clopas (John 19:25) and Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3) are married to the same woman. Alphaeus is the father of James (Matthew 10:3), who is the son of “the other Mary” (Matthew 27:56), who is the wife of Clopas (John 19:25). So Alphaeus and Clopas must be one and the same man.

Pieces of the family puzzle form an interesting picture when assembled. Two sisters (Miryam and Maryam) seem to have married two brothers (Joseph and Hilfai). Their offspring, then, would be closer than cousins; they are double cousins, virtual siblings. Thus Jesus on the one hand, and James and Joses on the other hand, would be legally and socially bonded as “brothers.” Matthew knows that Jesus is not so related, because of the Virgin Birth that he himself described, but how many others knew at the time? The only people who knew for sure were Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachary. Did the sister know? Maybe. Did the cousins know? Unlikely. Did the neighbors know? Definitely not! They call Jesus “son of Joseph,” and so He was for purposes of law and of heritage. To the same extent that Joseph is father to Jesus, James and Joses are double cousins, and thus virtual brothers to Jesus.