

Was Jesus an Only Child?

There are some who claim that Mary had children in addition to Jesus, citing one or more of the following Scriptural passages:

“...his mother and his brethren were standing without...” (Matthew 12:46)

“Is this not the carpenter, son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon? Do not his sisters live here near us?” (Mark 6:3)

“For even his own brothers did not believe in him.” (John 7:5)

“...with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” (Acts 1:14)

“...and the Lord’s brothers...” (1 Corinthians 9:5)

“But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.” (Matthew 1:25)

The Church teaches us that Mary was perpetually virgin and this is what we affirm every time we recite the Confetitor. Why the difference? It comes with the fact that almost 20 centuries have passed since the books of the Bible were written and customs have changed, along with the fact that some people read into the text’s meanings which were not intended. First century customs cannot be interpreted with 20th century values.

In the first case, what was the custom for calling someone your “brother,” “sister,” or using the collective term of “brethren?” In Genesis 14:14, Lot is called Abraham’s “brother” but Genesis 11:27 tells us that Lot was the son of Aran, Abraham’s brother. This shows that the terms were used to include cousins, but they were not even limited to close relatives (see Deuteronomy 23:7 and Jeremiah 34:9 for examples). Why was this? Neither Hebrew nor Aramaic (the language most likely spoken by Jesus and the apostles) had a special word for “cousin.” Instead, the words “brother,” “sister,” and “brethren” were commonly used. The writers of the New Testament, although writing in Greek, were raised in the Hebrew tradition and kept to this tradition as they were writing primarily to other Jewish Christians. Acts 2:46 illustrates that these Jewish Christians went to temple in addition to worshipping together.

Now back to Mark 6:3 where the “brothers” of Jesus are named and consider James and Joseph. Compare the descriptions of the women at the foot of the cross in Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40 and John 19:25. From this we find that Mary the mother of James and Joseph must be the wife of Cleophas. No one has ever suggested that the Blessed Virgin remarried, especially since Jesus entrusted her care to John. Similar arguments can be made for the other “brethren.”

Let’s go on to Matthew 1:25 and find the meaning of “until” (or “till” in some translations). “He knew her not until she brought forth her first-born son” doesn’t necessarily mean that

he knew her after the event took place. For example, in 2 Samuel 6:23 we find the line “Michal the daughter of Saul had not children until the day of her death.” Does this mean that she had children after she died?

Some will assert that since Jesus is referred to as the “first-born,” others must have followed. This shows a misunderstanding of the use of the term. Under Mosaic Law, the “first-born” son was to be sanctified (Exodus 34:20). This doesn’t mean that the parents had to wait until a second son was born. The first boy born was termed “first-born” (the one who opened the womb) even if he was an only child.

Finally, let’s look at the Annunciation itself (Luke 1:28 and following). Mary’s response “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (KJV) makes no sense unless she had taken a vow to remain perpetually virgin. At this point in her life, Mary is betrothed, which is by Jewish custom, married to Joseph -- although they have not yet taken up residence together, an event that took place after the marriage feast. The angel Gabriel has just told her that she will have a son, not that she is already pregnant. If she were planning to have relations with Joseph after the marriage feast, the likely result would be a child. Only if she had taken a vow of perpetual virginity does her response make sense. Some say that such a vow would result in an “unnatural” marriage. Is it *natural* to have a true virgin give birth? Is it *natural* to have angels announce the birth of your child? Is it *natural* to raise the Son of God in your family? All these events are *supernatural*.

Was Jesus an only child? In the biological sense, yes. In the spiritual sense, Romans 8:15-17 tells us that we are adopted children of God and co-heirs with Christ if only we suffer with Him. Malachi 2:10 says: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?” Suffice it to say that Jesus has millions of “brethren.”

Suggested Reading:

- Keating, Karl, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA, 1988, pages 282-289.
- Brethren of the Lord, *A Catholic Answers Tract, Catholic Answers*, P.O. Box 17490, San Diego, CA 92177.
- Does Greek prove Jesus had Brothers?, *This Rock, The Magazine of Catholic Apologetics and Evangelization*, May/June 1992, Catholic Answers, P.O. Box 17490, San Diego, CA 92177, page 54.
- Keeping up with the Jameses?, *This Rock, The Magazine of Catholic Apologetics and Evangelization*, October 1992, Catholic Answers, P.O. Box 17490, San Diego, CA 92177, page 29.