

## Who Are the Brothers and Sisters of Jesus(Mark 6:3)? The More Articles the Mary-ier Rev. Dr. C.W. Kappes

Historical Christians and their Churches have often claimed to be Scriptural. Sometimes the savvy among them claim that there is a material or a formal sufficiency in Scripture for their doctrines. Since distinctions of a philosophical sort are somewhat hard to come by in the New Testament, Bible-Christians or *Sola Scriptura* Christians walk away disappointed by a mesmerizing amount of distinctions with little to show for it. The Bible, at first glance in the English language, seems to think Jesus had a putative or adoptive Dad (Joseph), a biological mom, Mary, and biological siblings since there doesn't seem to be much to provide the reader of her or his Bible to think differently. So, let us take a look at the Bible evidence provided by Mark that helps us get a handle of Jesus's family tree. Besides, ancestry.com, Christians have a vested interest in knowing about Jesus's family; not only as their God, messiah, prophet, and hero, but because family lessons can often be important for real Christians to apply Jesus's relations to his family to their own lived lives of imitating Jesus (WWJD!). So, let's begin with the classic passage that makes it hard to imagine Jesus as a spoiled only child. I note that I divide the story at the beginning of Mark 6 into a so-called "chiasmus." Mark must have been a deli-worker according to scholars because he loves making the "Markan sandwich." Sometimes, Mark likes to begin a story (the top slice of bread), then jump to an aside story (the meat and cheese), and then return to finish his original story (the bottom slice of bread). Here, we have another of Mark's deli favorites: the layered cake. It's hardly millefoglie (a thousand layers dessert), but it does get a little complex. Take a look at the Gospel of Mark:

**Chapter 6 [A.1]** Then He went out from there and came to His own country (εις την πατρίδα αὐτοῦ), and His disciples followed Him.

[B1] <sup>2</sup> And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue. And many hearing Him were astonished, saying, "Where did this Man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty works are performed by His hands! <sup>3</sup> Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, [i.] and brother (ἀδελφός) of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? [ii.] And are not His sisters (ἀδελφαί) here with us?" So they were offended at Him.

[A.2] <sup>4</sup> But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country (ἐν τῇ πατρίδι),

[B2] among [i.] his own relatives (ἐν τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν αὐτοῦ),<sup>1</sup> and [ii.] [even relatives] in his own house [of family line from which one descends]<sup>2</sup> (ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ)." <sup>5</sup> Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. <sup>6</sup> And He marveled because of their unbelief.

[A.3] Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary is intentionally omitted by Jesus as someone allegedly dishonoring him according to his critics. She is exempted from the list of names by the enemies of Jesus but otherwise Jesus agrees with status of his other family members described in the list of Jesus's enemies.

<sup>2</sup> See Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Dictionary*, v., οἰκία ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Greek%E2%80%93English\\_Lexicon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Greek%E2%80%93English_Lexicon)).

Wow! Mark is a pretty organized storyteller! Notice, the story starts with **Jesus going out** and ends with **him going out**. But this is not a happy tale, for Jesus goes to **his fatherland/homeland** as a prophet and is rejected in **his homeland** although a prophet. When preaching to them, the townsmen were **upset and confused**: he had ordinary **relatives** who apparently don't live in Jesus's family **home** but who don't help single out **Jesus son** of Mary as special in his youth; so *how* could Jesus really be a prophet and **wise** like he sounds with such **no-name family members** (let alone the **female cousin trouble makers**) (?), for **Jesus** was himself humanly **filled with negative emotions** about his own **extended family members** choosing willfully and **unwisely** to not believe in him due to his uneventful earlier life such that they denied **wisdom** and prophethood as being really his. This is despite their admission that **his hands had cured the sick** so that their **unbelief** meant that Jesus could not reward them **by laying of hands** that resulted **in miracles**. Notice, too, that the story goes from the broadest group of people related to Jesus and in three steps arrives at the closes group related to him: (i.) Broadest: "**fatherland/homeland**," (ii) broader: **kinsmens/brothers**, (iii.) least broad: **kinsmen/sisters of his own household/family line**. Jesus **taught** unsuccessfully **wisdom** in his **homeland**, but successfully **taught** elsewhere; his **relatives** (not being children of the same mother, as must be the case according to the next paragraph,) caused him problems due to their lack of fame but it was especially **his own house** or **female relatives who are native dwellers in that locale** who were actively responsible for others' **unbelief** (apparently, from Mark 3:20-21, they told people he was crazy!).

Let's now take a detailed look at Mark 6, above, where there is a tit for tat for each thing mentioned! On the first like-hand [**A1 A2 A3**] each share an 'x-thingy in common', on the second like-hand [**B1 B2**] share 'x, y, z-thingies' in common...but there are also a few things exactly opposite: On one hand *good* 'x' but on the other hand *bad* 'y' among his **relatives**. Now, let's look at the tit-for-tat in our layered [**B1**] Markan pastry: On the first like-hand **James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, and his sisters**, on the second-like hand, Jesus designates this list: **his own relatives** (*syngeneusin*). Tit-for-tat. Now, if we look up the most authoritative meaning of those who are mentioned by Jesus's villager-enemies in their list, Jesus summarily identifies them as his **relatives**. He calls these effectively: "**brothers and sisters of another mother**." This way of listing children of another mother as one's sister is quite Biblical, for example Abraham regarded his wife to be his very sister: "She is truly my sister, by my father, *not by my mother*."<sup>3</sup> The Biblical scholar Jerome had long noticed this not only here, but also in Paul's use of the term "**relatives**" for his own blood kin.<sup>4</sup> If we look up Jesus's preferred term to call his so-called **brothers and sisters**, we read in a lexicon/dictionary: "**συγγενής**: *kinsfolk, kinsmen*; not properly applied to **children** (**ἔκγονοι**) in relation to their parents, and so opposite **ἔκγονοι** [...]"<sup>5</sup> So, for Jesus, who are these **male brothers and female sisters**? In answer, Jesus's own words identify them as **his**

<sup>3</sup> Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, section 14, Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemic Words, ed. J. Dressler, trans. N. Hritzu, The Fathers of the Church 31 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1965), 31. This suggests, too, that the first-century life of Mary or *Protevangelium of James* has a good Biblical basis for teaching that the children who are designated Jesus brothers and sisters are the sons of Joseph from a previous marriage.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, section 14.

<sup>5</sup> See Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Dictionary*, v., συγγενής.

**cousins** (τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν), that is, from his enemies' list of people as being his **kinsmen** or **relatives from another mother**! Now, Jesus and his mom are clearly designated mother and son by Jesus' enemies. This identifying of a son by his *mother* ("son of Mary") is unusual in the Bible, as scholars note, since usually a son is mentioned in relation to his father, *unless the woman is a widow* (see Luke 7:12). All this means is, then, that Mary is a widow and mother of Jesus, but the others in the list are identified by Jesus as belonging to his relatives *who are not sons of his mother*. These **relatives, especially his female relatives in town**, serve as too ordinary, even unimpressive people, in order to convince the rest of the town that Jesus really possesses **wisdom** and **wonderworker** capabilities. Still, Jesus seems, per Mark's pastry-making, to make a distinction between his enemies [B1] **specific appeal to his household in town** & Jesus's **generic familial problem of obscurity** [B2]. The problem of a lack of fame or of great importance includes for Jesus's enemies: Mary and the rest of the family, but probably **James, Joses, Jude and Simon** are not the occasion for undermining Jesus, for Jesus's remarks do not contradict the fact that Jesus's hometown unbelievers are fixated especially on some negative reports or problems created by his **female relatives or sisters**.

While I consider the proof above to be pretty obvious and easily understandable for someone interested in Mark's artistry, vocabulary, style, and story-telling, I should also mention that **brother** (*adelphos*) can mean things like "**kinsman, relative**" in the Greek Old Testament, constantly quoted by Mark. For example, LXX Genesis 29:12 is where Jacob tells Rebekah: "that he is her father's **brother (kinsman; adelphos)**." Again, this happens in LXX Genesis 24:48: "the God of my master Abraham [...] led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's **kinsman (adelfon)** for his son"; so that "**blood brother**" and "**kinsmen**" are the same.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to Jesus's **female relatives** who stayed **in town** and caused **unbelief**, we compare Mark 15:40-41: "Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, **Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph**, and Salome. In Galilee, these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there." There are many positively-mentioned women who, like Mary of Nazareth in Mark 3:31, followed Jesus around to minister to him and even go to Jerusalem with him (Mark 15:41). One can even get the sense that Mark mentions all the women name Mary, not to confuse his reader, but to drive home the point that by following and ministering to Jesus ("doing God's will"), Jesus had many mothers or many Marys in his life!

Finally, I turn now to the last passage in Mark significant for understanding the problematic brothers and sister of Jesus. Mark (3:31-34) recounts:

Then Jesus' mother and **brothers** arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and **my brothers**! Whoever does God's will is **my brother and sister** and mother."

I think that Mark 6:1-6 is key to unravel the meaning of this passage for Mark as a writer. I have already written an article on Luke 11:27-28 that shows that Luke really develops his version of this passage as a major theme in his Gospel that Mary is the first and only one up to the present

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<sup>6</sup> Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, section 14.

time to fulfill: “Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it,” by repeating the Angel Gabriel’s “word” to Mary which she “hears” at the annunciation and then is declared “blessed” by the Spirit-inspired Elizabeth for “having believed.” But Luke is Luke and Mark is Mark. *If* we are Bible Christians and we see that, for Luke, Mary must be the only one up to Jesus to “hear the word of God and keep it,” then we are obliged to interpret Mark consistently with the clear message of Luke; namely, *if* Luke praises Mary by this phrase, then *so too must Mark!* However, scholars do not like to anticipate their findings like this. They want the text of Scripture to speak for itself by interpreting the Bible by its own sources or the author’s apparent intention. So, let’s not assume that Mark *must be like Luke and think Mary is blessed.*

Even so, Mark 3:20-21 and 3:31-34 seems obviously (to me) to anticipate the big squabble and Jesus’s family feud in Mark 6:1-6. First, notice in Mark 3:20-21: “Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” This is clearly a set of family members who is not actively following Jesus around, but who are aware of Jesus’ ministry *only by hearing rumors.* Wouldn’t you know it, this begins another millefoglie or layered pastry of Mark:

[A<sub>1</sub>] Mark 3:20-21: family “**in his house**”<sup>7</sup> (compare **Mark 6:4**) [i.] are those who think he is crazy

[B<sub>1</sub>] Mark 3:22: He has a demon!

[C.] Mark 3:23-29: Jesus’s refutation of the accusation of being possessed

[B<sub>2</sub>] Mark 3:30: He has a demon [again]!

[A<sub>2</sub>] Mark 3:31-32: Mother, **brothers and sisters/kinsmen** (compare **Mark 6:3**) seek him.

[i.] Q: Who are these mother and **brothers and sisters**? [ii.] A: Doers of God’s will

Notice, unlike his **extended-family dwelling in his home** *who do not follow him around* (identified as his **female relatives/sisters** in Mark 6:4) Jesus’s mother and **kinsmen** are mentioned a second time. The **kinwomen** again are distinguished from his lowborn but faithful **relatives** who follow him around with Jesus’s mother. Jesus’s mother and **relatives** in Mark 3:31-34 are “following him around.” They are not causing trouble and not rejecting him like those (Mark 3:20-21; 6:3) **who live in his family home of his Jesus’s patrilineal descent.** He is able to do miracles with those who accompany him on his ministry. A question: Are Jesus’s mother and **relatives** *doing God’s will by following him wherever he goes* or are they like his female **relatives in his**

<sup>7</sup> Compare LXX Numbers 1:2: “Receive the beginning of the gathering of the [biological] **sons** of Israel (**υἱῶν** Ἰσραηλ), by their **relatives/brothers** (**κατὰ συγγενείας**), by **the houses derived from their fathers’ [line]** (**κατ’ οἴκους πατριῶν αὐτῶν**) by number; every male from their names according to the [male] **head** [of the family].” The enemies of Jesus are simply using a Biblical division of Jesus’s family by **sons of Jesus’s mother Mary (=Jesus)**, then **naming relatives** (not of the same father), **and those in the patrilineal house.** See Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 14. The original groupings would have been in Hebrew: larger “**clans**,” smaller “**fathers’ houses**,” and a **male-adult head** (of a family or a bachelor fit for military service). The term: **Father’s houses**, means precisely “**extended family**.” Notice, that what is missing from Jesus’s enemies’ list and from Jesus himself is any reference to a family “**by [male] head**.” This means that neither the enemies of Jesus in Mark 6:1-6, nor Jesus, see their conversation about **Joseph** his (putative) father, **along with those under Joseph: wife/wives and offspring!** See Phillip Budd, *The Word Bible Commentary: Numbers* (Waco TX: Word Biblical Commentaris, 1984), 5:1-2.

**hometown** who don't follow him and are the very scandal by which his townsmen reject him as a prophet? So, what is the point here? The point is, the mother and **cousins** are honorable insofar as they follow Jesus and do Jesus's will; anyone listening to Jesus's talk today and who follows afterwards God's will can be Jesus's mother and **relative**. Jesus does mention in Mark 6 that his **fatherland** provides him –a prophet– with no honor, his **cousins in that fatherland** with no honor, and especially **those in his direct bloodline of descent at his home** are dishonorable, but he excludes from mention dishonor his mother, though Jesus's enemies clearly implicate Mary as a non-entity not contributing to his reputation in Mark 6:3. Shouldn't Jesus list too in Mark 6:3-4 his mother, not just his cousins, who provide him with no honor? He doesn't! What we draw from that seems to be that Mary represents a case that Jesus does not see as detracting from the honor as a prophet, but Mark avoids mentioning anything: from her honorable lineage to Mary's virgin birth; we have no idea when reading Mark in isolation what exempts Mary from Jesus's list of people detracting from his extrinsic honor as a prophet. What we do know in Mark is that **relatives** who **stay home** (don't follow him) are not true family; this is not his mother or **relatives** who do go around with him who are by Jesus's own words his true **family**. The implications are heavy for Mark 6:1-6: Jesus's **physical or biological female extended family** are – to him – not really **his family**, for they did not do the will of God. He could not heal the locals since a condition for such was **believing in him and following him**. Therefore, he had to **teach** God's will, **wisdom**, and show **miracles** in other towns that have nothing to do necessarily with Jesus's **bloodline**!

## Conclusions

Jesus responded to a list of names by his enemies. Jesus clearly identifies those in his **house(hold)** (οἶκος; οἰκία) and his **brothers and sisters**, as his own “**kinsmen** (συγγενεῖς).” Jesus, thereby, definitively excludes the list of **brethren** and **household people** in Mark 3:31-32 and list of **names, brethren, and sisters** in Mark 6:3 from being biological **sons** or **children** (ἔκγονος, -οι) of Mary. Jesus also refuses to name Mary as in his enemies' list, for reasons that Mark does not give. After all, Jesus is okay with repeating his enemies list about all others who dishonor Jesus but Mary is somebody apparently *not* mentioned by Jesus to bring him disgrace in contrast to his enemies' list in Mark 6:3.

Additionally, we can infer several other things that have been my contention in my articles on Mary throughout: (1.) Mark's early Gospel (material prior to 70 AD) tries to avoid Mary mother of Jesus as a focal point; (2.) This will change after the family monopoly of Jesus's blood relatives over church power in some places in greater Palestine is broken during the Jewish war (ending in 70 AD); (3.) After nepotism in the early church, as the earliest Church historian Hegessipus reports (written around 180 AD), is successfully crushed, later Gospels (Luke and John) can feel more comfortable making more deliberate inclusions of Mary in the Gospel texts since a greater mention of the influence and goodness of Jesus's relatives will not risk losing ground to the Jesus-nativist/geneticist party in the Palestine (see Mark 3:21, where bad behavior and unbelief of Jesus's family members serve to support the Evangelists' church over the Jesus-genetic church); (4.) The

result is that Mary's contribution to Jesus's ministry (as well as other relatives) becomes less politicized and more a question of historical and theological interest for Christian readers; (5.) In the end, since the Evangelists are to a greater or lesser extent all using some of the same basic reports and stories about Jesus, they all make sure to include the anti-geneticist/nativist literature (to a varying degree) in their Gospels since memories of the nepotism and attempted hostile takeover by "*la famiglia*" (*mafiosi*!) of the church are fresh enough in people's mind that it never hurts in Luke and John (7:5) to occasionally remind Christians that Jesus's extended family members are sometimes a detriment to the church, sometimes a help, even if there is a far more negative image of them in Mark's Gospel due to the ongoing battle for control between Jesus's mainly non-familial appointed successors and those who are known in the Gospels', Hegessipus's, and Eusebius's (around 300 AD) histories; namely, family members who tried to ride on the coattails of Jesus in order to wield power, influence, and gain fame in the first-century church.<sup>8</sup>

Mark's Gospel, then, avoids mentioning the virgin conception, the virgin birth, and much of Mary's role in the history of salvation. This was strategically necessary to emphasize the universal (versus privately familial) nature of the Church and salvation. As the church began to be more integrated between relatives and non-relatives of Jesus, and as early-church leaders increasingly were taken from people not of Jesus's bloodline, the risk of promoting Mary and other cousins' contributions to the early Church was lessened and the newer Evangelists included an increasing amount of material about the virtuous and celebratory relatives of Jesus; still not without some reminders of how petty Jesus's cousins and extended family could be. Finally, culminating in Luke and John, mention of Mary (the infancy narratives and John's Mary at the cross) seems to have very little risk of being used for a propaganda tool by Jesus's extended family, probably because (sadly) many of them were killed, exiled, enslaved, or dispossessed of their wealth in the Jewish war. The result was, the more that Jesus's apostles and their hand-picked successors became the universally recognized leaders of the Church, the more Mary could be given a place of honor without risk; this is most evident in her privileged place in the midst of the Apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2) in the upper room, omitted by earlier histories for the reasons just mentioned. Since we can now see that Luke 11:27-28, John 2:4, and even Mark 6:1-6 can all be calmly and consistently explained by the principles of: Interpreting Scripture by its sources and by Scripture, Reading the New Testament literally, and finding harmony in the Gospels, we finally conclude that the position and role of Mary is correctly highlighted and celebrated by each Evangelist according to the needs and inspiration that was proper for the time and place of any one Gospel. In the end, Mary can be affirmed as: Ark of the Covenant (Luke 1), the New Daughter of Jephthah (Luke 1), The New Abraham and Sarah (Luke 1), The New Hannah (Luke 1), The New Mother of Samson (Luke 1), the hearer and keeper of the will and God's word (Mark 6; Luke 11), The New Widow of Elijah (John 2), and even more things. To be Biblical, then, is to concede to Mary the honor of each of these roles because they point toward and complement the saving ministry of her son, God, messiah, and savior, Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book I, chapter 7, paragraphs 11–14 (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250101.htm>).