

# Did Mary Have Other Children?

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All of us are probably aware that the Catholic and Orthodox churches believe and teach that Jesus was the only child born to Mary. In 411, Augustine wrote that Mary, "remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her breast, always a virgin" (*Sermons* 186, 1: PL 38, 999 as quoted in paragraph 510 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p122a3p2.htm#510>). We might also know that many Anglicans believe this. But we might be surprised that some Protestants believe this. In fact, Martin Luther, Huldrych (or Ulrich) Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, and John Calvin all believed it. In his *Commentary on Matthew*, Calvin even called anyone who disagreed "pigheaded and fatuous." Perhaps even more surprising is that the eminent Baptist theologian, John Gill, regularly waffled on this subject, seeming to believe it by comments he made, but never, as far as I know, making a clear statement committing himself to it. Is there clear, biblical proof one way or the other?

## Jesus' Birth

The first Scriptural evidence is in Matthew 1:18: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." The Greek word translated "before" is *prin*. It means "prior" or "before." "Came together" is translated from *sunelthein*, which means to convene. But it was also used to mean to come together in marital relations. So, in other words, before Joseph and Mary had consummated their marriage, Mary was found to be pregnant with a child from the Holy Spirit.

Verses 24 and 25 are often cited by Catholics as evidence of Mary's perpetual virginity: "Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS." The word "knew" is from the Greek word, *eginōskin*. As *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* explains, this normal Greek word for "knew" was used by Jews as an "idiom for sexual intercourse between a man and a woman." "Till" serves a very great purpose in this verse. The Catholic argument is that the word "till" or "until" (*heōs* in the Greek) does not necessarily mean that the action prior to the point indicated (in this case, sexual abstinence)

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does not continue afterward. In other words, Joseph and Mary may not have ended their sexual abstinence after Jesus' birth. They may have continued to refrain from sexual intercourse for the rest of their lives. Catholics say that this is, in fact, what happened. John Gill takes a similar position regarding the word "till": "Joseph knew her not till she had brought forth, the meaning is certain that he knew her not before. But whether he afterwards did or not, is not so manifest, nor is it a matter of any great importance." Oh, but it is important when millions of people who believe in Mary's perpetual virginity venerate her and pray to her. Yes, it is important that we find the truth of this matter.

As I said above, "till" is translated from *heōs*. It is a conjunction that means "till" or "until." According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, eleventh edition, the conjunction "until" means, "up to the time that: up to such time as."

This meaning is seen in many Scriptures. For example, in Matthew 2:13, 15, and 19-20, we read, "And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until [*heōs*] I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.... And was there until [*heōs*] the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.... But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life." Clearly, *heōs* in these verses means to do something (flee to and stay in Egypt) up to a given point (the reappearance of the angel upon the death of Herod) and then stop doing that (leave Egypt and go to Israel).

This meaning is found in dozens of Scriptures referring to both time and place. I'll give a verse where *heōs* is used of place: "And he [Jesus] led them out **as far as** [*heōs*] to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them" (Luke 24:50). Did Jesus lead them farther than Bethany? No. The action of leading stopped at Bethany.

Nevertheless, although they are hard to find, it is true that there are exceptions. For example, in John 5:17, Jesus says, "My Father worketh hitherto [*heōs arti*—"until now"], and I work." Are we to assume from this that from this point on Jesus and the Father stopped working? No. The Bible gives us clear evidence that this is not so. Thus, there are

exceptions. They are rare. And we can know they are exceptions from other evidence.

So, how are we to understand *heōs* in Matthew 1:25? Unless there is plain evidence to the contrary, we should take *heōs* in Matthew 1:25 in its common and natural meaning, which is that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary until, and only until, the birth of Jesus. After that event, their abstinence ended. Had God wanted us to understand that Joseph never had sexual relations with Mary, the Holy Spirit would hardly have been likely to inspire the word *heōs* to be used here. "Knew her not till" Jesus was born implies that after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary began the normal sexual relations of a married couple.

Also notice "her firstborn son." Firstborn is from the Greek *prōtokokon*, and it means exactly what you would think: the first child someone has. A more literal translation of the Greek here reads, "her son, the firstborn." It implies that she had children that followed. Some say this phrase does not belong in Matthew 1:25. This is not the place to argue that point, but the phrase is unquestionably genuine in Luke 2:7: "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

Once again, Gill hedges, "Jesus is called Mary's firstborn, because she had none before him; though she might not have any after him; for the first that opened the matrix, was called the firstborn, though none followed after, and was holy to the Lord, Exo 13:2. Christ, as to his human nature; was Mary's firstborn; and as to his divine nature, God's firstborn." Unfortunately for Gill, Jesus is never called God's firstborn,\* but is called God's only begotten (see John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). "Only begotten" is from the Greek word *monogenēs*. In fact, this word would have been the perfect word to use if the Holy Spirit wanted to particularly describe Jesus as Mary's only child. Matthew 1:25 and Luke 2:7 would then say, "her son, the only begotten." But the Holy Spirit does not say this. He says "firstborn."

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\* Jesus is called "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), "the firstborn of every creature" (Colossians 1:15), "the firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18), and "the first begotten of the dead" (Revelation 1:5). None of these refer to His relationship to His Father. This is also true of Hebrews 1:6, which says, "And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him." Viewed in context, we see that this refers to Jesus' preeminence over the angels, humans, and all creation, but it does not say or mean that He is God's firstborn.

Alternatively, the Bible could simply have said that Jesus was Mary's son, a more general term that does not indicate either whether the child was an only child or, if there were siblings, the birth order. In fact, this is how the Bible describes an only child born around the same time as Jesus. Of the birth of John the Baptist, the only child of Zacharias and Elisabeth, Luke 1:57 says, "Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son." Since John was their only child, he is not called a firstborn. But, since Jesus is called a firstborn, we are to understand that he had siblings.

### **Jesus' Brothers and Sisters**

Toward the end of Matthew 13, we read that Jesus went to Nazareth, where He was brought up, and spoke in the synagogue. The townspeople, who all knew Him and His family well, said, "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things?" (Matthew 13:55-56; see also Mark 6:3).

This seems clear enough. But the Roman Catholic Church has this response: "Against this doctrine the objection is sometimes raised that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus. The Church has always understood these passages as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact James and Joseph, 'brothers of Jesus', are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ, whom St. Matthew significantly calls 'the other Mary'. They are close relations of Jesus, according to an Old Testament expression" (paragraph 500, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/para/500.htm>).

John Gill also insists, "**And his brethren**; not strictly so, but either the sons of Joseph by a former wife; or Mary's, or Joseph's brothers or sisters sons, and so cousins to Christ; it being usual with the Jews to call such, and even more distant relations, brethren." Gill, following the Catholic theologians on this matter, seems willing to accept any other scenario but the most obvious. Do these people name Jesus' uncles and aunts? No. Why, then, should they name His cousins? Are they not referring to Joseph, the man they think of as Jesus' father (although Jesus was really the Son of God), when they say, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" Of course. Do they not directly name Mary as Jesus' mother? Yes. If they do this, even using the label "mother" for Mary, it would be completely inconsistent to use "brethren" to refer to Jesus' cousins. It is plain that they are naming the members of his

immediate family. This is very strong evidence against the Catholic position.

### **A Messianic Prophecy**

Apparently John Gill and the Catholics have forgotten or want to ignore the obvious wording of the Messianic prophecy in Psalm 69:8-9: "I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children. For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me." In his commentary on verse 8, Gill takes "brethren" to mean the Jews in general and "also to such who were still nearer akin to him, according to the flesh." In commenting on "an alien unto my mother's children," Gill points out that "alien" can be taken as "Gentile" or "heathen," but completely ignores "my mother's children." For this prophecy to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, He had to have had brethren, and His mother had to have had other children. In fact, the Psalmist was simply using the Hebraism of repeating something two different ways when he said, "I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children," for, of course, these two phrases mean exactly the same thing. Jesus' brethren were His mother's children. This prophecy is devastating evidence against the Catholic assertion that Mary had no other children.

By the way, this also puts to rest Gill's suggestion that the brothers of Jesus might be the sons of Joseph by a former wife. They cannot be so if they are, as the Psalm says, His "mother's children."

Other Scriptures that refer directly to Jesus' siblings are Matthew 12:46-49; Mark 3:31-34; Luke 8:19-21; John 2:12; John 7:3-10; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19. Never once, in all the references to these people, are they referred to with the Greek word *suggenēs*, which has the general meaning of "cousin" or "kinsman." The word used is always *adelphos*, "brother."

### **A Distorted View of Marriage**

Something I want to point out here is that the Catholic doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity leads to a distorted view of sex in marriage. Catholics maintain—without any biblical evidence—that Mary herself was immaculately conceived and remained without sin all her life. The idea that she never had sex is a part of this doctrine.

However, the Bible shows that this view backfires on itself. While sex outside of marriage is a sin, within marriage, sexual relations are clearly sanctified (Hebrews 13:4). Yet, the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity intimates that sexual intercourse with her husband would somehow have defiled her, and that she is to be revered because she remained a virgin. This makes a mockery of God's institution of marriage. The sin would have been in Mary's remaining a virgin (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

By the way, the Bible never so much as hints at other Catholic doctrines that Mary was born from an immaculate conception, that she was sinless at birth, or that she remained sinless. The Bible tells us, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The only one born of a woman who knew no sin was Jesus Christ: "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The truth is that Mary was a human being and sinner like any other. To say otherwise is a denial of the Bible's teaching of the total depravity of all humans. (For more information on total depravity, print out our booklet on that subject from this page: [http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg\\_010.htm](http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg_010.htm). Or, you can listen to our radio program on total depravity using this link: <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/audio/totaldepravity.mp3>).

In summary, there is not a shred of evidence in the Bible to support the idea that Mary remained a virgin and never had other children after giving birth to Jesus. In fact, as we have seen, there is much evidence to the contrary. Additionally, the notion that had Mary remained a virgin even though she was married to Joseph carries with it the idea that it was somehow noble and beautiful for this married woman to refrain from sexual intercourse with her husband, that sex would somehow have tainted her. This directly contradicts the Bible's teaching that sex in marriage is right and good and ought to be done. Scripture only indicates that Mary and Joseph refrained from sex until Jesus was born so as not to put His paternity in question and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled (Isaiah 7:14). But after that, they conducted themselves as a normal husband and wife, and Mary gave birth to the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the Scriptures.

You might be interested in reading our related article, "Was Mary the Mother of God?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/motherofgod.htm>).