

The Lord's Brothers & Sisters

*What does the Bible have to say about the
brothers and sisters of Jesus?*

by Dr Trevor R Allin

www.livingwater-spain.com

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
The evidence contained in the Bible	3
Did Mary remain a virgin throughout her life? What does the Bible say?	5
Sects that believed that the physical world was bad	6
Did Joseph and Mary take a vow of celibacy?	7
Jesus: Mary's <i>first</i> child	7
Was Mary Joseph's <i>second</i> wife?	8
The prophecy about the other children of the Messiah's mother	8
Was Joseph an old man who died shortly after marrying Mary?	9
The Bible even gives the names of Jesus' brothers	10
Jesus had sisters, too	10
The occasion when Joseph and Mary didn't realise that Jesus wasn't with them	11
What motivates some people to claim that Jesus didn't have brothers and sisters?	12
What does the Bible say about church leaders and marriage?	13
Conclusions	14

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to all those who have helped me by their feedback in the preparation of this book, in particular to my wife and to P & L.

The Author
1st January 2017

© Trevor R Allin 2017
First edition 7.4.2006

Introduction

Christian opinion is divided as to whether or not Jesus had brothers and sisters. Many denominations say that he did, but the Roman Catholic church states that Jesus did not have any brothers or sisters and that his mother remained a virgin throughout her life. Who is right? Why is it important? What does the Bible say? This article focuses on the actual words of Scripture, and where necessary it refers to the meaning of the original Greek words used in the New Testament.

The evidence contained in the Bible

There are dozens of verses in the Bible on this topic. Each numbered paragraph or section in this article contains at least one relevant Bible verse.

1. Matthew 12:46: “ **his [Jesus’] mother and brothers** stood outside, wanting to speak to him.”
2. Matthew 12:47: “Someone told him [Jesus]: ‘**Your mother and brothers** are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ ”
3. Mark 3:21: “**[Jesus’] family** ... went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He us out of his mind.’ ” (*cf Psa 69.8, below*)
4. Mark 3:31: “**Jesus’ mother and brothers** arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him.”
5. Mark 3:32: “A crowd was sitting around Jesus, and they told Him, ‘**Your mother and brothers** are outside looking for you.’ ”
6. Luke 8:19: “**Jesus’ mother and brothers** came to see him.”
7. Luke 8:20: “Someone told him, ‘**Your mother and brothers** are standing outside’ ”
8. Certain Roman Catholic Bibles introduce confusion by adding a note in which they say that a certain Hebrew or Aramaic word can mean “brother” or “cousin”¹ But the confusion caused by this note can only be intentional, since the authors of the notes must know that the New Testament was not written in Hebrew nor in Aramaic, but in Greek and that these languages are linguistically totally unrelated to Greek. So this comment is irrelevant. Further, it deliberately gives the reader false information concerning the true meaning of the Greek text.

With regards to this, the writer Juan Manuel de Prada states², “The Gospels, however, were written in Greek, an extremely rich language that possesses a word to designate each level of relationship (*adelphós, adelphidus, anepsios*, etc.).”

It is significant that Luke has the widest range of Greek vocabulary of all the New

¹ For instance, in the note for Matthew 12:46 in “The New Jerusalem Bible”.

² In the article “Jacobo, Hermano de Jesús” (“James, brother of Jesus”) in the major Spanish newspaper ABC on Monday 4th November 2002.

Testament writers and even writes about the “**foster-brother**”³ of Herod in Acts 13:1, as confirmed by the Jesuit academic Maximilian Zerwick⁴. Nevertheless, when Luke writes about Christ (see the above references), he chooses the Greek word for **brothers**, not “foster-brothers”, “half-brothers” or “step-brothers”.

9. John 2:12: “After this he [Jesus] went down to Capernaum with **his mother and his brothers and his disciples**”. Here, Jesus’ brothers are distinguished from his disciples, so “brother” did not mean “follower”.
10. John 7:3: “**Jesus’ brothers** said to him: ‘You ought to leave here...’ ” John 7:3-10 records in detail an incident when there was a confrontation between Jesus and his brothers, and it repeatedly refers to his brothers, saying what they said to him and what he replied to them.
11. In John 7:4, **Jesus’ brothers** challenge him to reveal himself to the world.
12. John 7:5: says “**even his own brothers did not believe in him**”, which clearly indicates that “brothers” did not mean “believers”; it meant *blood brothers, the original and literal sense of the word*.
13. John 7:6. Jesus spoke to them (**his brothers**), saying, “My time has not yet come.” He then said to them, “Your time is always ready.” Here, the word “your” is in the plural in the original Greek, showing that he was speaking to **several brothers**.
14. John 7:7. Jesus said **to his brothers**, “The world is not able to hate you, but it hates me”. Again, “you” is in the plural.
15. John 7:8. Jesus said **to his brothers**, “You go up to the feast.” As always, “you” is in the plural in the Greek.
16. John 7:10 tells us that “**his brothers** had left for the feast”.
17. After the resurrection of Jesus, we read in Acts 1:14: “They all [the Apostles] joined together constantly in prayer, along **with** the women and **Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers**” The way that the phrase “his brothers” is joined with the phrase “Mary the mother of Jesus” indicates in a very natural way that they were the sons of Mary – not the sons of some other woman.
18. In 1 Corinthians 9:4-5 the Apostle Paul wrote: “Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and **the Lord’s brothers** and Peter?” Although during Jesus’ earthly ministry his brothers had not believed in him (John 7:5), Acts 1:14 and 1 Cor 9:4-5 tell us that after Jesus’ resurrection his brothers *did* believe in him. In fact, their wives were believers, too. Note that this does not refer to “some of the Lord’s brothers, but “the Lord’s brothers. The fact that “some” (a word used in other situations in the New Testament) is not used in either of these passages would appear to indicate clearly that *all four brothers* now believed in Him,

³ Greek: σύντροφος (“suntrofos”)

⁴ In “A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament”, English edition co-authored by Mary Grosvenor, Rome, 2007: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico.

not just “some of them”. At least two of these brothers became leaders in the early church – see below.

19. If the Apostle Paul had wanted to say “the Lord’s *cousins*”, as the Roman Catholic church alleges, he would have used the Greek word for cousin, just as he did in Colossians 4:10, where he spoke of “Mark, Barnabas’s *cousin*”. Juan Manuel de Prada states that it is clear that the apostle Paul (who wrote both these letters) had “a very polished, refined and precise knowledge of the language of the gentiles [Greek]”, and that in consequence of this he did not accidentally use the wrong word when he wrote concerning “**the Lord’s brothers**”.
20. In Galatians 1:19 the Apostle Paul wrote: “I saw none of the other apostles, only **James, the Lord’s brother.**” This is the James who is repeatedly referred to in the book of Acts, for instance in Acts 15:13 and 21:18. He is clearly one of the leading people in the church in Jerusalem (cf. Galatians 2:9).

Most scholars believe that he is the author of the letter of James in the New Testament, and this appears highly probable. (It was not written by James the brother of John, who had been killed in the early days of the church – cf. Acts 12:2.) Among the second and third century manuscripts that have been discovered, there are more copies of the letter by James than of various other New Testament letters, for instance, the letters from Peter and those from John. Larry W Hurtado, former professor of New Testament language, literature and theology at the University of Edinburgh, asks, “Do these several copies of James reflect something of the interest in Jesus’ brother in early Christianity? Or was it simply the contents of the epistle that led to it being one of the New Testament writings that featured early in Christian usage?”⁵

Did Mary remain a virgin throughout her life? What does the Bible say?

21. Matthew 1:19-20 recounts what happened when Joseph discovered that his fiancée Mary was pregnant, before they had married: “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, **do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife ...**’.” In other words, the angel sent by the Lord commanded him to take Mary “**as his wife.**” The meaning of this is unambiguous.
22. Matthew 1:24 tells us that Joseph was obedient to God’s command: “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and **took Mary as his wife.**” He took her “as his wife” indicates that he had with her the sexual relations that are normal between a man and his wife.
23. The following verse gives an important clarification: “but [he] had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matt 1:25, NRSV). This informs us of two fundamental points:

⁵ In “The Earliest Christian Artifacts”, 2006, Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 31.

- 1) Mary remained a virgin until she gave birth to Jesus;
 - 2) The word “until” indicates without the slightest possible ambiguity that subsequently to this event Mary and Joseph started a normal and Biblical (see below) marital relationship.⁶
24. As well as being normal, such relations are commanded by God for married couples: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24)
 25. The importance of this command is underlined by Christ himself, who quoted it (Matt 19:5, Mk 10:7-8a), and added to it his own commentary: “So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man no separate.” (Matt 19:6, Mk 10:8b-9). Indeed, it was God who commanded Joseph and Mary to be joined together in a normal matrimonial union, including sexual union; it is men who have separated them, with a teaching that goes against the Word of God.
 26. Teaching about the family was at the core of Judaism and early Christianity, and Genesis 2:24 is also quoted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (5:31).
 27. Some have suggested that Mary and Joseph abstained from sexual relations throughout the whole of their marriage. But this theory lacks any foundation in the Bible. On the contrary, the Bible commands, “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband” (1 Cor 7:3, NRSV). It also says, “Do not deprive each other of sexual relations” (1 Cor 7:5, NLT).

Those who make this claim about Mary and Joseph imply that for years they went against God’s will for humanity, repeatedly expressed in both the Old and New Testaments, and specifically that they disobeyed God’s command to Joseph in Matthew 1:19-20.

Sects that believed that the physical world was bad

28. In the first century there arose Jewish sects that practised asceticism. They viewed the physical world as evil. Some followers of Jesus who adopted the same attitudes therefore stated that Christ, who was perfect and pure, could not have come in the flesh. He was, they claimed, only a *spiritual* being, “uncontaminated by the flesh”. This teaching influenced some people who claimed to be Christians, but it was recognised as a heresy by the New Testament church. In 1 John we read, “This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world” (chapter 4, vv. 2-3).

According to these groups, the most evil aspect of the world was what they called “the flesh” and the most sinful act of “the flesh” was defined by them as sexual union between a man and a woman. They therefore taught that the only way to live a pure life was to be celibate. (This was a movement of men only.) This goes against God’s

⁶ There is not the slightest doubt about the meaning of the original Greek, even though some Roman Catholic translations change the order of the phrases completely and the meaning of the original text, with the aim of eliminating what the Bible says on this point.

statement in Genesis 2:18: "It is not good for man to be alone." God also said to the man and to the woman, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). This teaching on celibacy also goes against the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7).

29. In spite of these clear statements of Scripture, some of these concepts were adopted in the third and fourth centuries A.D. by religious sects that called themselves "Christian" and were subsequently accepted by parts of the Christian church. In consequence a part of the church began to teach that sexuality (even within marriage) was sinful and impure, and merely a concession by God to "the weakness of human flesh". Yet we read in the Bible, "**Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.** Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are the children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them." (Psa 127:3-5a, NIV, rev 2011) This heritage from the Lord, blessing and reward from Him was clearly experienced by Joseph and Mary.

Did Joseph and Mary take a vow of celibacy?

30. Inspired by the mistaken view that sexual union is sinful, others even invented the idea that Joseph and Mary took a "vow of celibacy" before getting married. Not only is there no Scriptural support for this false claim, but it is based in a totally erroneous understanding of the nature of the physical world. Those who invented this claim based it on the idea that the physical world was bad, but in Genesis 1 we repeatedly read throughout the creation account that God looked at His creation and saw that "it was good" (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). In fact, Genesis 1 ends with the words, "God saw all that he had made, and it was **very good**" (v. 31).
31. The New Testament also repeatedly speaks of the sanctity of marriage. For instance, in Hebrews 13:4 we read, "Let marriage be held in honour by all" (NRSV). The Apostle Paul even illustrates the holiness of marriage by comparing it to the relationship between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:21-33).
32. In the light of all this background, it is not surprising that Matthew 1:25 states: "Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary **until** she gave birth to her son." The "until" (ἕως οὗ in the Greek) can only mean one thing: that after she had given birth to her son, *he did in fact have sexual relations with Mary*, in consequence of which she did not remain a virgin; on the contrary, in the following years she had four further sons and three or more daughters.

Jesus: Mary's *first* child

33. Luke 2:6-7: "She [Mary] gave birth to her **first child**, a son."

It is significant that Luke, who describes Jesus as the **first child** of Mary, *does* use the phrase "only son" repeatedly elsewhere in his gospel, but only with reference to *other* families:

- a mother and her only son in Luke 7:12,
- a father and his only son in Luke 9:38,

so the phrase "**only** child" was part of his vocabulary and he considered it important to specify when a child was an only son of his mother or father – yet he did not use

this phrase in the case of Jesus and Mary, choosing instead to say that Jesus was Mary's **first child**.

Luke also writes (in 8:42) of an "**only daughter**", showing again the importance that he gave to specifying when a child was an **only child**, regardless of gender.

In the Gospels, Jesus is referred to as the "*only son*", but exclusively as the only Son of *God* (e.g., John 3:16), never as the only son of *his mother Mary*.

If someone has several children, they might speak of their *first* child. But if someone has only one child they would never say "my first child ..." when talking about him or her, but only "my child" or "my only child".

Thus Luke clearly indicates here (and elsewhere in his gospel) that Mary had other children. He tells us (Luke 1:3) that he had "diligently investigated everything from the beginning", and many people believe that as part of this process he interviewed Mary the mother of Jesus. Regardless whether or not this was the case, having investigated all the facts he is careful to describe Jesus as Mary's "**first child**".

Was Mary Joseph's *second* wife?

34. Some people claim that Jesus' "brothers and sisters" were children that Joseph had had in a previous relationship, before he married Mary. However, this supposition is undermined by Matthew 2:13, where we read that shortly after the birth of Jesus "an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take **the child** and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.' " Joseph was only told to take **one child** – Jesus – to Egypt.
35. Matthew 2:14 tells us what Joseph actually did: "So he got up, took **the child** and his mother during the night and left for Egypt." (NIV)

If Joseph had already had the other four sons and at least three daughters from a previous marriage, would he have left them behind in Palestine, where Herod had commanded that the children be killed? It is thus clear that Joseph did not yet have any other children.

The prophecy about the other children of the Messiah's mother

36. Psalm 69 is referred to as a "Messianic Psalm", as several verses from it were fulfilled in Christ. For instance, verse 9a, "zeal for your house consumes me", is quoted in John 2:17 and applied to Christ. Verse 9b, "the insults of those who insult you fall on me", is quoted in Romans 15:3 and applied to Christ. Some of the New Testament verses quoted above – for instance, John 7:5: "even **his own brothers** did not believe in him" and Mark 3:21: "[his brothers] said, '**He us out of his mind**' " – are seen by many as a fulfilment of verse 8 of the same Psalm: "I am a stranger to **my brothers**, an alien to **my own mother's sons**." This completely excludes the possibility that Jesus' "brothers" might have been the children of Joseph with some other woman; they were **his "own mother's sons", the sons of Mary**.

Was Joseph an old man who died shortly after marrying Mary?

Another claim made by some of those who try to defend the concept of the perpetual virginity of Mary is that when Joseph married Mary, he was already an old man, and that in any case he died soon after marrying her, so there was no opportunity for the marriage to be consummated. Is there support for this in the Biblical record?

37. We know from Luke 2:41-42 that Joseph was still alive when Jesus was twelve. Those twelve years were more than enough time for Joseph and Mary to have had Jesus' four younger brothers and three or more younger sisters.
38. In John 6:42 we read that the people of Capernaum (John 6:17, 24, 59) said, "Is this not Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we **know**?" Note that the verb "know" is in the present tense; they didn't say, "whose father and mother we knew". From this we must conclude that Joseph was not, as some have alleged, an old man when he married Mary and that he had not died shortly thereafter, nor even some twelve years later. At the time of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, some thirty years after His birth (Luke 3:23), the people of Capernaum knew personally the man whom they assumed was His natural father. From this statement we must conclude that Joseph was still alive.⁷
39. Likewise in Luke 4:22 we read of a different occasion when people said, "Is this not the son of Joseph?" This was a different incident, in a different town, Nazareth, "where he had been brought up" (Luke 4:16). Again, these were people who knew Jesus from before the beginning of his ministry. They also knew personally the man considered to be Jesus' earthly father, and they knew his name.
40. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus said to Philip "Follow me" (John 1:43). Philip then found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). If Joseph had died years earlier, as these people claim, it is not likely that Philip would have identified Jesus by describing him as "the son of Joseph." It is clear that Joseph was known to this new generation of younger people that Philip belonged to.
41. In John 8:16-18, when Jesus was talking about witnesses for him and said that his father was a witness who supported him and had sent him, it is clear to *us*, from the whole context and what Christ subsequently says, that he was talking about his *heavenly* father, but his listeners didn't understand him. They assumed he was talking about the man they considered to be his human father, and replied, "Where is your father?" (John 8:19). The purpose behind their question is obvious: they hadn't heard Joseph speaking in support of Jesus' ministry. Where was he? They would ask him what he thought. *If Joseph had been dead, they would not have asked "Where is he?"; they would have said something along the lines of, "Your father died years ago,*

⁷ At the marriage at Cana (John 2:1-11), which must have occurred at some point previously, Joseph is not mentioned, which may suggest that he was not present. However, more probably it indicates nothing more than that he did not say anything that was relevant to the account. In any case, the evidence from John 6:42 is clear that he had at that point shared approximately thirty years of married life with his wife, Mary.

before you started doing and saying these things, so how can he be a witness supporting your claims?"

42. In Matthew 13:55a we read of an incident in Jesus' "home town" (v. 54), apparently Capernaum. The people were saying, "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" Joseph was not just a man from the past that they had heard mentioned; they knew his profession, which implies that he had been working at least until recently as a carpenter, and indeed apparently was still working.

The Bible even gives the names of Jesus' brothers

43. In Matthew 13:55b we see that the people of Capernaum continued by saying, "Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't **his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?**" We note that they didn't refer to James, Joseph, Simon and Judas as being Jesus' half-brothers or foster-brothers, but brothers. Joseph was clearly not an older man with grown-up sons and daughters from a previous marriage, who had then re-married and had Jesus (as it was thought – Luke 3:23) with his second wife.

Not only did the people of Capernaum say this, but Matthew was inspired by the Holy Spirit to put this detail into his gospel so that we would know the facts and not make a cult of celibacy nor claim that the mother of Jesus was a perpetual virgin. We even have the names of the brothers!

44. Likewise, in Mark 6:3a we read: "Isn't this **Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon?**" There is no possibility here of interpreting this to mean that the brothers were sons of someone other than Mary. We also note that one of Jesus' brothers was named after his father, Joseph.
45. "James, the brother of the Lord" (Gal 1:19) is not the only one of Jesus' brothers who is referred to by name outside the gospels. Another of Jesus' brothers is also referred to by name elsewhere in the New Testament. The author of the letter of Jude in the New Testament describes himself as "**a brother of James**" (Jude v.1). This could also be translated from the Greek as "**one of James's brothers**". Many commentators believe that this Jude is one of Jesus' four brothers, the one whose name is given as "Judas" in many translations of Matthew 13:55. Both in Matthew and in the letter of "Jude" the Greek for the name is the same: Ἰούδας ("Yudas").

Jesus had sisters, too

46. In Matthew 13:56 we read, "Aren't **all his sisters** with us?" The use of the word "all" (Greek: πᾶσαι ("pasai")) indicates that there were a minimum of *three* sisters, possibly more. If there had only been two, the Greek text would have used the word for "both", which is found elsewhere in the New Testament (but never with reference to Jesus' sisters).
47. A parallel passage to Matthew 13:56, Mark 6:3b, likewise states, "Aren't **his sisters** here with us?"

The occasion when Joseph and Mary didn't realise that Jesus wasn't with them

48. Luke 2:41-51 tells us that each year Jesus "parents" (v. 41) went to Jerusalem for the Passover, travelling with relatives and friends. For reasons of security against highway robbers, these groups were usually quite large. Most of the group would have been travelling on foot (and the rest at walking pace on animals or in carts) and it is extremely likely that some of Joseph and Mary's children would have been chasing each other and playing with the children of other families in the group. At that point, Jesus was twelve, and Joseph and Mary might already have had up to four boys and some girls, all of them younger than eleven years old. It would be normal to expect that some of them would at times have been fighting each other, whether as a game or more seriously. Joseph and Mary would have been very occupied supervising their many children. They would also have been very busy and preoccupied with caring for toddlers and babes in arms, even if not all the brothers and sisters had yet been born. Mary might even at the time have been expecting another child. It would not have been the first time that she had travelled with Joseph from one town to another while pregnant or with a newborn baby! (cf. Luke 2:4-5)

In fact, it is reasonable to conclude that it was precisely because Mary and Joseph were so occupied looking after their other children that they did not look for Jesus among the party of travellers. We know from Luke 2:52 that Jesus was a well-behaved and considerate boy, and verse 44 shows that Joseph and Mary were used to him spending hours visiting relatives and friends. From this we may deduce that he was in the habit of not getting in their way and under their feet when they were busy looking after his younger brothers and sisters, and Joseph and Mary would have known from experience that they did not need to worry about him.

If he had been their only child – or if the other brothers and sisters had been *older* than him (as some allege – see above) – it is reasonable to believe that Joseph and Mary would have sought him out sooner or realised earlier that he was not in the group.

Some of these details are not recorded in Luke's account, but an argument from silence is not necessarily a weak one. Hurtado writes,⁸ "In attempting historical work, it is almost impossible to avoid considering arguments from silence. In most historical subjects, especially those from the distant past, we scarcely ever have all the evidence to hand that we would like or need. We have to make do with what survives, and attempt to make the most reasonable use of it. Historical work often involves comparing inferences from the fragments of some past person, event, or period to determine the most likely inference."

In the subject under consideration here, we must bear in mind that other details of family life during Jesus' childhood are also not recorded. However, the inference that I draw in the preceding paragraphs fits in with all the information given here by Luke and also with all the relevant information in other parts of the New Testament, which

⁸ Larry W Hurtado, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh in "Lord Jesus Christ", p. 239, 2003, Grand Rapids, Michigan & Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company

is clear. My conclusion makes sense of an event that is otherwise difficult to understand: how else would it have been possible for Joseph and Mary to travel for a whole day (v. 44) before realising that Jesus was not in the party?⁹

What motivates some people to claim that Jesus didn't have brothers and sisters?

49. In the fourth century, there arose Christian sects that introduced a cult of veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This doctrine goes against the example of the New Testament church, where Mary was treated as just another believer (Acts 1:14).

Further, it goes against Jesus' own explicit teaching. In Luke 11:27 we read that a woman in the crowd called out to Jesus, saying, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." Jesus rebuked her, replying, "[On the contrary,] blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (Luke 11:27-28, NIV¹⁰) The important thing, Jesus said, was not to call Mary "blessed", but to hear the Word of God and obey it.

Those who developed and promoted the cult of veneration of Mary must either have been unaware of this and other related passages in the New Testament, or else they decided to ignore them, as they rejected both halves of this teaching of Jesus:

- they called his mother "blessed";
- they refused to hear the Word of God and obey it.

Hence, the cult of Mary flourished. Adopting the anti-biblical view of the ascetical sects that the world was bad, that "the flesh" was evil and that sexual union was impure, those who developed this cult claimed that Mary was "pure", and then went on to reason that therefore she could not have had sexual union with a man, not even with her husband, because, they argued, that would have made her "impure". The consequence of this totally flawed logic was to claim that she must have remained a virgin throughout her life, and they introduced the title "the Virgin Mary", a term that is not found anywhere in the Bible.

50. It is perhaps significant that the branch of Christianity that insists, against all the historical evidence, that the mother of Jesus *had* to remain a virgin if she was to be "pure" is the same branch that in 1139 AD (more than a thousand years after the founding of Christianity!) at the Second Lateran Council imposed celibacy on its priests for exactly the same reason: the belief that a person who experienced a sexual union was "impure", and therefore, they reasoned, could not handle the "Holy Sacrament"¹¹. There is of course no Biblical foundation for this doctrine. On the

⁹ I have just discovered (July 2015) that the respected scholar John Wenham reached similar conclusions concerning this incident, in "Easter Enigma", Oxford (?): The Paternoster Press for Latimer House, Oxford, 2nd edition, 1992, p. 136: "It is ... difficult to imagine that the story of Jesus getting lost at the age of twelve is the story of an only child. ... On this particular occasion it is not surprising that when they set off for home Joseph and Mary, preoccupied with the smaller children, felt no concern that they had not actually seen the responsible lad Jesus in the caravan. But it is hard to believe that parents of an only child would have travelled a whole day before becoming concerned about his absence."

¹⁰ Words in square brackets represent my own translation of the meaning of the original Greek word, μενοῦν ["menun"], which means "on the contrary". The NRSV and other translations also correctly indicate this.

¹¹ The Second Lateran Council extended to all clergy a prohibition against having concubines or being married that the First Lateran Council had applied only to the members of certain religious orders. The First Lateran Council had taken place sixteen years earlier (in the year 1123).

contrary, the Bible specifically describes such a doctrine as coming from those who “follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons”: “The Spirit says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ... They forbid people to marry.” (1 Timothy 4:1, 3, NIV)

What does the Bible say about church leaders and marriage?

In the New Testament, the word “priest” is not used as a title for any Christian leader. But three other words for leaders *are* used, and – interestingly – in each case there is teaching about marriage and these leaders.

Bishops / overseers

In fact, the New Testament specifies that person with a position of oversight of a church must be married. The Greek word is ἐπίσκοπος (“episcopos”), from which the English word “bishop” is derived. It is sometimes translated “overseer”. 1 Tim 3:2 states, “the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife” (NIV). It goes on to say, that not only should he be married; he should have children: “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.” (vs 4)

Deacons

Likewise, the New Testament states that a person with the role of deacon (Greek διάκονος “diaconos”) must be married – and indeed must have children. In 1 Tim 3:12 we read “a deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.” (NIV).¹²

Philip, who as well as being a deacon was also an evangelist, was married and in fact had four daughters who were all actively involved in Christian ministry (Acts 21:8-9).

While recognising that the terms “bishop” and “deacon” as currently used in some denominations have different meanings from the meaning in New Testament times, it is very clear that both “bishops” and “deacons” are people with some sort of leadership role within the church.¹³

Elders

Another position of leadership, first within Judaism and subsequently in the early church, was that of “elder”, Greek πρεσβύτερος (“presbuteros”). Again, the New Testament states that an elder must be “someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers” (Titus 1:6, NRSV).

¹² There is no indication that Stephen was married, although the New Testament also does not say that he was single.

¹³ In Koiné Greek, the use of a noun referring to a man includes an equivalent reference to women. For example, ἀδελφοίς (“adelfoís”) means “brothers and sisters” or “brother and sister” (rather like the English word “siblings”). We thus observe that in the New Testament church there were, for example, women deacons (Rom 16:1) as well as other women in leadership positions (e.g., Acts 18:18, 21:8-9, Rom 16:3, 2 Tim 4:19). This theme merits separate study.

The Apostles

We also see that the Apostles were married (Matt 8:16, Mark 1:30, Luke 4:38), lived with their wives and even took them with them when they travelled (1 Corinthians 9:5).

The Lord's brothers, who had become believers, were also all married (1 Cor 9:5).

The only explicitly-documented exception in the New Testament of a leader who was single is the Apostle Paul, which enables us to see that single people, too, can serve God and even hold important leadership positions. But it can be clearly seen that it was expected that the most normal was for leaders to be married and to have children. Thus we see the balanced position of the New Testament church, which did not prohibit marriage and considered that it was normal to be married, but accepted that some Christians would not be.

Throughout the first century church at all levels, marriage was respected, married people were honoured and marriage was stated to be the norm, indeed, that which was commanded by God.

Conclusions

- Thus, many dozens of unambiguous references to Jesus' brothers and sisters exclude any possibility of misunderstanding.
- It is abundantly clear that the Bible does not give any support at all to the idea that God's creation is "impure".
- The Bible contradicts the notion that sexual union is "sinful".
- The Bible does not support the Roman Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, it denies it resoundingly in all four gospels and in a very large number of other passages. In the light of these clear Biblical statements, this doctrine is seen to be fundamentally in contradiction with all the evidence of Holy Scripture. There is overwhelming and clear-cut proof that Jesus Christ had four brothers and at least three sisters, born of the union of His mother Mary with Joseph.

Two consequences arise from this:

1. Teaching that marriage is sinful or that those involved in Christian ministry should be celibate goes against the example of the early church and the teaching of the Bible.
2. The cult of veneration of the "Virgin" Mary is mistaken. Mary did not remain a "perpetual virgin". No other conclusion is possible. What is more, the only One worthy of veneration – indeed, of worship! – is Jesus Christ Himself.