

Jesus' Family

By

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You may find this hard to believe, but about thirty years ago, a parishioner in a Christian church where I was preaching tried to convince me that there was only one version of the Bible that was fit to read—the “*Saint James Version*,” he said. Why? Because, he said, *it was written by Jesus’ very own brother James!*

I was saddened to hear him refer to the “*King James Version*” so incorrectly—especially since King James was anything but a saint!

On the other hand, I was delighted to hear him refer to James as the *brother* of Jesus!

Did you know that James was the brother of Jesus? A lot of Christians don’t!

Think back to December 2002. Oh, was there excitement in the air! Everywhere there were headlines declaring: “**Remains of Jesus’ Brother Found in Tomb.**” [Ostling] “**New Proof for Jesus?**” [Ostling]

Many articles reported that French scholar **Andre Lemaire** had discovered a limestone *ossuary* (a burial box for bones). [e.g., Biema; Laub; Ostling (2); “Possible”; Wilford] Indications were that it dated from around 63 C.E., just three decades after the crucifixion of Jesus. What was striking about this box was its *inscription* which said: “**James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.**” According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, “the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, James by name” was stoned to death as a Jewish heretic in C.E. 62. If his bones were placed in an ossuary, the inscription would have been made the following year. [Ostling, 10/22, A4]

What would have made this discovery significant (had it been authentic) was that it would have been the earliest archaeological evidence of the existence of Jesus. [Ostling, 10/22, A4]

Heated debate is raged over this box! Several points were at issue:

Could the dating of the box be substantiated? [Ostling, 11/02, D5; Wilford, A7]

Could it be shown that the names referred to New Testament persons? “James,” “Joseph,” and “Jesus” were common names. Even Lemaire estimated there could have been twenty “James” in Jerusalem with fathers named “Joseph” and brothers named “Jesus.” Because of that, many biblical experts concluded that nobody could show that these were the New Testament’s individuals. [Fitzmyer in Ostling, 10/22, A1]

The biggest question, however, concerned the inscription. One headline read, “**Experts Cast Doubt on Alleged Archaeological Link to Jesus.**” [Wilford] That article declared that “skeptics in growing numbers are weighing in with doubts about the authenticity of the inscription.” It was coming to be (and still is) considered a forgery because of evidence that it was “written by 2 different hands,” from persons “of clearly different levels of literacy” who utilized “2 different scripts.” [Wilford; cf. Quain, 82fff., for current views. Since then, in 2007, some have claimed that several other ossuaries belonging to Jesus’ family were discovered in 1980. Most scholars remain unconvinced, however. See Quain, 84fff.; Crossan/Reed; Tabor.]

What fascinated me was not whether the box was authentic or a fraud—since, in neither case would it tell us anything about the historical Jesus (whose existence is not doubted by most modern scholars). [Cf. Biema, 70, “Almost no educated person these days doubts that Jesus lived.”; Bernstein, 4-9.] What fascinated me was the fact that many Christians were less concerned about the box than they were about the answer to this question: “*Whose (!) brother?*”

In three decades as a Christian minister, I never ceased to be amazed by the amount of **biblical illiteracy** that appeared before me in the pews of most churches! Time and again, I saw looks of surprise, disbelief and denial whenever I mentioned that *Jesus was a Jew!* Repeatedly, I encountered astonishment and disagreement whenever I mentioned that *Joseph, on learning that Mary was pregnant, but not by him, initially*

tried to end their relationship—despite the fact that that information is part of the “Christmas Story” which is read in many churches every Christmas Eve! It says, in part:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together [sexually], she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. [Mt. 1:18-19]

The same confused disbelief also arose whenever I mentioned that **Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters**—despite the fact that the Bible refers to them repeatedly, names each of the brothers, and says as part of the “Christmas Story” that an “angel of the Lord [Yahweh]” convinced Joseph, in a dream, to stay with Mary, with Matthew 1:25 saying that Joseph then “took his wife, but *knew her not [sexually] until* she had borne a son” whom he called “Jesus,” and with Luke 2:7 declaring that Jesus was Mary’s “*first-born* son.” [Emphases added.]

To ensure that we Unitarian Universalists are not so ignorant, I want to survey for you a little of what scholars know historically about Jesus’ family.

First, as for **Jesus’ ancestors**, we have no reliable historical information. “The majority of scholars” believe that it is historically probable that Jesus was, at least indirectly, related by blood to King David. The strongest support for this comes from the fact that this claim was made repeatedly during and after the New Testament period when there were still living relatives and acquaintances of Jesus who would have known and could have been called to testify by his enemies if it were not true. Nevertheless, scholars are “increasingly” coming to conclude that “the purported descent from David is a theologoumenon”—a theological myth invented to make Jesus match the Jewish doctrine of messiahship. [Brown, 505; 505-512; Covington, 54.]

The oldest historical information we have about Jesus’ family comes from Paul. However, he never mentions any antecedents except Jesus’ mother whom he never names. [Bienert, 471-2, 483; Pazdan 584] The next oldest records are the gospels, and of the four in the New Testament, only Matthew and Luke provide what *appear* to be genealogies. [Mt. 1:1-17; Lk. 3:23-38] Unfortunately they disagree with each other, and even raise the question, “Did Jesus have too many grandfathers?” [Brown, 503f.] Analysis shows that these two lists of ancestors are theological myths about Christ, not historical records about Jesus. [Brown, 94; 57-95; cf. Pazdan, 584] In any case, both genealogies are historically irrelevant because they are based upon Joseph, not Mary, and, as the gospel of Matthew and the whole doctrine of the “virgin” Mary make clear, Joseph was not involved! [Bienert, 487]

After the New Testament period, various gospel-like documents were written which blended theological myths, cultural legends and folktales to provide missing details about Jesus’ family such as the supposed names of Mary’s parents (Joachim and Anna) [Pazdan, 585; Bienert 421ff., 481, 488]; as well as the myth of Anna’s “immaculate [virginal] conception” of Mary (to protect Mary from Original Sin). [Attwater, 236] But these are “articles of [Catholic] faith,” not historical facts. Indeed, “nothing sure is known about [Mary’s] parentage or the place of her birth.” [Attwater, 235; Covington, 52-56.]

Second, what about **Joseph, the husband of Mary**? Although he is not mentioned by Paul or by the gospel of Mark, Joseph does appear in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. [Porter, 974; Bienert, 472, 483] Except in John 1:45 and 6:42 (where there are references to Jesus as the “son of Joseph”) Joseph is mentioned biblically only in stories about the infancy and childhood of Jesus. [*Ibid.*] After the episode describing the twelve-year-old missing Jesus being found after a three-day hunt, Joseph disappears from the Bible and is presumed by scholars to have died. [Lk. 2:41-52; Porter, 974; Brown, 33, 519; Attwater, 203; Bienert, 484] In that story, Mary speaks to Jesus and calls Joseph “your father.” [Lk. 2:48] This may have been meant *honorarily* rather than *biologically*, since by staying with Mary, Joseph would have *legally* become Jesus’ adoptive father. [Porter, 975; Brown, 588] Nevertheless, as Luke 3:23, John 1:45 and 6:42, and the genealogies indicate, many New Testament people (both Christians and Jews) “were evidently of the opinion that [Joseph] was the natural father of Jesus,” a conviction that continued for a long time among the Ebionite Jewish

Christians which caused them to reject the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ and eventually to be expelled from the church as heretics. [Bienert, 487] Relatedly, the explicit declaration in Matthew 1:25 that Joseph put off sexual intercourse with Mary until after Jesus' birth, along with the naming of four brothers and the mention of sisters in Matthew 13:55-56, indicates the historical probability that Joseph and Mary conceived a large family, after the birth of Jesus. [Bienert, 480]

Beyond that, nothing historical is known about Joseph. Even his hometown and his ancestry are unclear. [Porter, 974-5] Later traditions called him "Joseph, the Just" for his treatment of Mary. [*Ibid.*, 974] Whether he was even a carpenter is debated. [Brown, 49, 538-40; Bienert, 484] Most scholars think he was a young man when he married Mary [cf. Attwater, 203], but some post-biblical legendary documents claim that Joseph married a previous wife (Salome) at forty, had six children, that she died after forty-nine years and he then married Mary two years before Jesus' birth, and finally died at the age of 111 before Jesus began his ministry. [Porter, 974; Bienert, 485]

Outside the New Testament, and (most scholars believe) outside the realm of historical fact, there is another name you should know. It is "**Panthera.**" In both Jewish and non-Jewish anti-Christian writings after the biblical period, it was claimed that he was the biological father of Jesus. Details vary from stories of rape to adultery. The form of his name changes. Sometimes he's a soldier, sometimes something else. But in all cases Mary is portrayed as immoral and her son, Jesus, as a charlatan. [Bienert, 484; Brown, 535-537; Covington, 54.] Such scurrilous attacks were widespread and lasted for centuries.

Third, what about **Mary**? The oldest historical reference to Mary is Mark 6:3 where Jesus is called "the son of Mary." [Bienert, 480] This is unusual for, in the ancient world, identification was normally by father as in "Jesus, the son of Joseph." Formal maternal identification identified someone as an illegitimate offspring ["bastard"; cf. Schaberg]. However, maternal identification sometimes occurred informally to indicate that the father was dead. Scholars believe that this was the reason for its (unique) use in Mark. [Brown, 537, 540] For his part, Paul never names Mary. [Bienert, 480; Pazdan, 584] John's gospel also never names Mary and has her appear only at the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry in ways that scholar's interpret to be theological symbolism rather than historical fact. [Bienert, 482; Pazdan, 584] Unlike the synoptic gospels [Mt., Mk., Lk.] which have Mary and all of Jesus' family missing at the crucifixion, only John places Mary beneath the cross—which scholars see as less historical than theological since it is his anti-docetic attempt to prove that Jesus really died. [*Ibid.*]

Scholars are also convinced that neither Mary nor Jesus' brothers and sisters believed in him while he was alive, thinking instead that he might be insane, with Jesus returning their rejection by calling his disciples his true family. [Pazdan, 584-5; Bienert, 472, 480; Bauckham book, 15, 18, 46f., 51, 56; Brashler, 820 e.g., Mk. 3:31-35 = Mt. 12:46-50 = Lk. 8:19-21; Mk. 6:4 = Mt. 13:57 = Lk. 4:24; Jn. 7:5; Mk. 3:21 and see May note p. 1217; Mk. 6:1-6 = Mt. 13:53-58 = Lk. 4:16-30] Mary and his brothers (and sisters?) only became Christians after Jesus' death. [Citations below and Acts 1:14] With that, our historical knowledge of Mary ends for "nothing whatever is known of her closing years, not even [when or] where she died." [Attwater, 235-6]

As for Mary's alleged "virginal conception" of Jesus, that story only appears biblically in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. No one else in the whole New Testament—including Jesus (who would surely have mentioned it in Jn. 8:42)—ever says anything about it! [Brown, 517-533] Though Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 as prophesying the event, it is well known not only that Isaiah was not talking about Mary, but also that he did not use the term "virgin." [Anderson, 331-334; Brown, 523] No one in ancient Judaism believed in virginal birth. [Brown, 524; Bienert, 482] There is also no historical evidence that Mary or Joseph passed along any information about a virginal conception. [Brown, 524, 525f.] What there does seem to be evidence for is *public knowledge of a claim that Jesus was born of an illegitimate pregnancy.* [Schaberg; Brown, 526-528, 534-542] Many scholars cite John 8:41 as an example, for it says that the Jews said to Jesus: "We were not born of fornication," as if he were. [Brown, 535, 541f.] This charge came to be standard anti-Christian polemic from that time forward. It was perhaps in response that the Catholic Church began proclaiming the "perpetual virginity" of Mary. [Bienert, 479, 481; cf. Brown, 594; Pazdan, 585] In any case, these issues—like the

Proclamation in 1950 (!) by Pope Pius XII of Mary's bodily "assumption" into Heaven—are all matters of faith, not of fact. [Attwater, 236; Bienert, 485; Covington, 52.]

That brings us, *fourth*, to the **brothers and sisters of Jesus**. They are mentioned in numerous biblical passages which treat them as the full and natural siblings of Jesus, the offspring of Mary and Joseph. [Pazdan, 584; Bienert, 472, 481] The New Testament never names the sisters, but does name the brothers and implies the order of their births. For example, Mark 6:3 says: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Matthew 13:55-6 has "Joseph" instead of "Joses.") Luke, John and Paul never mention any sisters [Bienert, 472; Ellis, 1174], but Paul refers to the "brothers of the Lord [Jesus]" generally, and to James, particularly. [e.g., I Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19] The "brothers" are also mentioned in Acts 1:19. A few passages repeat these common names and tie them to a different Mary. This confusion (along with a theological desire to preserve Mary's supposed virginity) led some early Catholic scholars to argue that these were only half-brothers and half-sisters of Jesus (by Joseph with a previous wife) or that they were cousins of Jesus. Most scholars, however, (including some modern Catholics) have concluded that these were the full and natural siblings of Jesus. [Bienert, 470, 472-3, 482f.; Brashler, 820; Bauckham book, 19-32; Gilman, 620]

Beginning with the **sisters**, then, we have no historical information beyond the existence of at least two female siblings of Jesus from Mary and Joseph. Unreliable traditions gave them various names including: Lysia, Assia, Lydia, Mary, Anna, and Salome. [Bienert, 472]

Of the brothers, we know nothing historical about "**Simon**" beyond his existence. [Carroll, 29] Some have thought he was identical to the "Simeon son of Clopas" mentioned by Hegesippus as successor of James the leader of the Jerusalem church, but this is doubtful. [Blair, 357; Bauckham book, 21-32]

Likewise, nothing historically reliable is known about "**Joses**" (or "Joseph" or "Josetos"). [Porter, 967f.; Cockerill, 998]

As for "**Judas**," there is also nothing known with historical certainty. There are, however, many traditions about him. Some hold that he was a twin brother of Jesus called "Judas Thomas" or "Dydymus." But most scholars have dismissed these as legends. [Bauckham article, 1101] More interesting is the New Testament claim that he is the author of the "Letter of Jude." [Jude 1] Most modern scholars deny this, however. [Duling, 494; Reddit, 1090; Bauckham article, 1100f., but see 1102 and his whole book which defends it] Another dubious tradition claims he was martyred in Persia. [Attwater, 206] But no one really knows. Then there are some ancient post-biblical reports about Jude's grandsons. But these, too, are not considered historically reliable. [Bauckham article, 1102]

Finally, the one sibling we know the most about historically is "**James**." After Jesus, he was the eldest brother. [Bauckham book, 7] While the other brothers were probably itinerant Christian missionaries (cf. I Cor. 9:5; Bauckham article, 1102), the New Testament and subsequent nonbiblical documents indicate that James remained in the Jerusalem church as its first leader and bishop. [Gilman, 620f.; Bienert, 471, 474f.]

Paul's letters often refer to James, calling him "the Lord's brother" and a "pillar" of the church. [e.g., Gal. 1:19, 2:9] The "mission" of such pillars was to convert the Jews. [Gilman, 620] As a result, at one or more church conferences, James appeared on one side of the debates, while Paul and others whose mission was to convert Gentiles, appeared on the other. [*Ibid.*; Cf. Gal. 2:1-10; Acts 15:1-20]

According to Paul, James was not only the brother of Jesus, but also one of the people to whom the Risen Christ appeared. [I Cor. 15:7]

There is confusion over whether he was ever called "James the younger" in the New Testament. [Gilman, 620; Bienert, 483] But later sources say that he was definitely called "James the just." [Bienert, 473]

Several books are alleged to have been written by him, including "The Letter of James" in the New Testament. [Gilman, 621] Most scholars reject such claims. [E.g., Duling, 482]

What actually became of James is uncertain. It is considered historically probable that he was killed by the Jews as a Christian martyr during the 60s. [Attwater, 182f.; Duling, 482] However, there are competing traditions with different details pertaining to exactly who killed him, where, when, why and how. The same

confusion reigns as to his burial, and that brings us full circle, back to the ossuary bearing the inscription: “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” [Gilman, 621; Bienert, 475-478]

As we move through this Christmas season, it is my hope that we will not let all the hoopla about the *mythical Christ* come between us and our understanding of how important the *historical Jesus* was and is for this troubled world. Even if he was not born of a virgin, was not the “son of god,” or was not resurrected from the dead, anyone who taught people to love their neighbors as themselves and to love their enemies, that person is worthy of our remembering him and celebrating his birthday, for by so doing, we help to bring peace on earth.

NOTE: For historically ambiguous recent quasi-scholarly speculation on the **descendants (!) of Jesus**, see Baigent in sources below. For scholarly argument (a) that **Jesus was married**, see Phipps and Covington (58), (b) that **Jesus was homosexual**, see Montefiore and Smith, and (c) that **Jesus was straight, single and childless**, see McBrien (pp.532-538) and Sheler (12). – For a brief **summary** of many related items of interest, see *Secrets of Christianity: The Real Jesus*. U.S. News & World Report Collector’s Edition, 2011.

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