

THE BROTHERS OF JESUS

Excerpt for “Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary” by Dr. Brant Pitre

As is well known, the New Testament contains several references to the "brothers" and "sisters" of Jesus.²⁴ At first glance, these passages seem to be the strongest argument against Mary's perpetual virginity. They are certainly the most popular reason for thinking Mary had other children besides Jesus. Once again, however, we need to examine this evidence in its ancient Jewish context. When we do so, some of the very passages that mention Jesus' "brothers" actually present important evidence that Mary did not have other children. Let's take a few moments to examine the data.²⁵ The "Brothers" of Jesus = Sons of a Different Mary The first and most important reason for concluding that the "brothers" of Jesus are not children of Mary is also the most often overlooked. It is this: The Gospels themselves explicitly state that the so-called brothers of Jesus are in fact the children of another woman named Mary. In order to see this clearly, all we need to do is compare the identities of the "brothers" of Jesus in the account of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth with the accounts of the people present at his crucifixion and burial. For the sake of convenience, I will focus on the evidence in the Gospel of Mark, paying close attention to the names of Jesus' "brothers": He went away from there and came to his own country...And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "...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?" (Mark 6:1–3) And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last...There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him. (Mark 15:37, 40–41)

On the one hand, the Gospel of Mark indisputably identifies "James" and "Joses" as two of the "brothers" (Greek adelphoi) of Jesus (Mark 6:3). As any Greek dictionary will tell you, the most common meaning of the word "brother" is the same

²⁴ 24. See Matthew 12:46–50, 13:55–56; Mark 3:31–35, 6:3; Luke 8:19–21; John 2:12, 7:3–10; Acts 1:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19.

²⁵ For discussion of the "brothers" of Jesus, see Luz, *Matthew*, 1:98, 2:302–4; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (5 vols.; Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2005, 2007), 1:316–32; Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 5–133; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:219; 2:457–58; McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 200–254.

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as in English: "a male from the same womb."²⁶ On the other hand—and this is crucial—the Gospel of Mark also provides solid evidence that the same two men, "James" and "Joses," are the sons of a different woman named Mary. This other Mary is mentioned three times in the account of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. At the crucifixion, she is called "Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses" (Mark 15:40). At Jesus' burial, she is called "Mary the mother of Joses" (Mark 15:47). On the morning of the resurrection, she is called "Mary the mother of James" (Mark 16:1). Who is this woman? Obviously, Mark would never refer to the mother of Jesus as "the mother of James and Joses," or "the mother of James," or "the mother of Joses," especially when he has already referred to Mary as Jesus' "mother" twice in his Gospel (Mark 3:31, 32).²⁷ Although scholars come up with some rather desperate attempts to avoid the obvious, the only plausible explanation is that the mother of James and Joses is a different Mary, and therefore, James and Joses are not the sons of the virgin Mary.²⁸ In support of this conclusion, it is important to emphasize that the same thing is true of James and Joses in the Gospel of Matthew (although Matthew uses the proper Hebrew form "Joseph" rather than "Joses"). In fact, Matthew even refers to Mary the mother of James and Joseph as "the other Mary"! There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee...And Joseph [of Arimathea] took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulcher. (Matthew 27:55–56, 59–61; cf. 13:55)

²⁶ See Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 18.

²⁷ See Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 774: "The second Mary should not be identified with the mother of Jesus"; Joel Marcus, *Mark* (2 vols.; Anchor Yale Bible; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, 2009), 2.1060; Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church*, 13: "We may first of all rule out the possibility that she is the mother of Jesus, since it is incredible that Mark, Matthew, or pre-Markan tradition should choose this way of referring to the mother of Jesus."

²⁸ McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 241: "Unless there is proof to the contrary, this pair of brothers must be identical with the James and Joseph mentioned earlier in the same gospels (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3)."

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It is not believable that Matthew would refer to the mother of Jesus as "the other Mary." Because of this, the Protestant scholars W. D. Davies and Dale Allison admit that this evidence suggests that "the brothers of Jesus" who are named earlier in the Gospel (Matthew 13:55) "were not the sons of Jesus' mother but of another Mary."²⁹ I agree. But I would add that the brothers of Jesus also cannot be the sons of Joseph from a previous marriage, as some people suggest.³⁰ The reason is simple. For Joseph to be a widower, his wife has to have died. But Mary the mother of James and Joseph is obviously still alive at the time of the resurrection! In fact, when Luke refers to her simply as "Mary the mother of James" (Luke 24:10), a strong case can be made that he must be referring to the famous leader of the church in Jerusalem, also known as "James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). The reason is simple. In the words of Richard Bauckham: "Normally in the early church only James the Lord's brother could be called James without risk of ambiguity" (see Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Jude 1).³¹ This leads us to the important question If James and Joseph are the children of another Mary, then why are they called Jesus' "brothers"? The answer is quite simple: in an ancient Jewish context, the Greek for word "brothers" (*adelphoi*) could be used as a synonym for close relatives, such as cousins. Many examples of this usage could be given.³² For now, consider three: But Jacob became angry, and quarreled with Laban [his uncle]; Jacob said to Laban, "...What have you found of all the vessels of your house? Set it here before my brothers and your brothers, that they may decide between us two." (Genesis 31:36–37 LXX)³³ The

²⁹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997), 2:458.

³⁰ E.g., Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church*, 25–44.

³¹ Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church*, 15. Unfortunately, Bauckham dismisses this point, even though it is the Achilles' heel of the theory that Joseph was a widower: the Gospels make very clear that Mary, the mother of James and Joseph—the so-called brothers of Jesus—is still alive. In response to this point, Bauckham makes the unconvincing argument that there are two different sets of brothers: the first "James and Joseph," who are children of Joseph by a previous marriage (Mark 6:1–3; Matthew 13:55); and another "James and Joseph," who were the sons of "a Mary" who were "equally well known figures," but of whom (mysteriously) we have no other information (Bauckham, *Ibid.*, 12–15). Needless to say, this hypothesis strains credulity. See McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 214 n. 13.

³² For full documentation, see Josef Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967), 39–48.

³³ Author's translation. Cf. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27, who translate *adelphoi* as "kinsfolk."

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sons of Mahli [were] Eleazar and Kish. And Eleazar died, but he had no sons, only daughters. And the sons of Kish, their brothers, married them. (1 Chronicles 23:21–22 LXX) On the same day the sons and brothers of king Izates...entreated Caesar to grant them a pledge of protection. For the present he kept them all in custody; the king's sons and relatives he subsequently brought up in chains to Rome. (Josephus, War, 6.356–57)³⁴ Notice here that it is the context that gives us the clue to when the word "brothers" means "relatives" or "cousins." In context, Jacob is clearly using "brothers" (Greek adelphoi) to refer to his cousins, the sons of his uncle Laban (Genesis 31:37 LXX). Likewise, in the second passage, the "brothers" (Greek adelphoi) of the daughters of Eleazar are explicitly identified as first cousins, the sons of the girls' uncle Kish. Last, but certainly not least, Josephus proves that a first-century Jew could use the words "brothers" (Greek adelphoi) and "relatives" (Greek syngeneis) as synonyms in the same Greek text.³⁵ Likewise, when it comes to the "brothers" of Jesus in the Gospels, we have to determine the meaning of the word in context. If all we had were the reference to Jesus' brothers during his ministry in Nazareth, it would be reasonable to assume they were his blood "brothers." However, if later in the same Gospel two of these brothers, "James and Joses," are explicitly identified as the children of another woman named Mary, then the obvious explanation is that the word "brothers" is being used to refer to Jesus' "relatives."³⁶ If there is any doubt about this, it's important to point out that Jesus himself actually uses the word for "cousins" or "relatives" to describe his so-called brothers and sisters. Reread the evidence from Mark, this time paying attention to Jesus' final statement: "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?" And they took offense at

³⁴ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Books V–VII (trans. H. St. J. Thackeray; Loeb Classical Library 210; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 281.

³⁵ Unfortunately, Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:327, ignores the evidence that Josephus uses "brothers" (Greek adelphoi) as a synonym for "relatives" (Greek syngeneis).

³⁶ Compare McKnight, *The Real Mary*, 110–11, who claims that "There is nothing in any of the contexts when Jesus' brothers and sisters are mentioned to suggest that the words mean anything other than blood-brother or blood-sister." To the contrary, Joseph Fitzmyer rightly points out: "In view of the problem created by Mark 6:3 and 15:40, 47; 16:1, where 'Mary, the mother of James the Little and Joses' can scarcely be used by the evangelist to designate the mother of the person crucified on Calvary, adelphos, used of James, is best understood as 'kinsman, relative.'" See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Galatians," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (eds. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 783.

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him. And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own cousins (Greek *syngeneusin*), and in his own house." (Mark 6:3–4)³⁷ The word I have translated here as "cousin" (Greek *syngeneus*) is from the same Greek root as the angel Gabriel's reference to Elizabeth as Mary's "cousin" (Greek *syngenis*) (see Luke 1:36 KJV, Douay-Rheims). What possible reason can be given for Jesus referring to his "brothers" and "sisters" as his "relatives" or "cousins"? Maybe because, according to the Gospel of Mark, they are his cousins.³⁸ Now we could just stop here. If all we had were the evidence from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, it would be enough to conclude that the so-called brothers of Jesus are in fact his close relatives. They are the children of another woman named Mary from Galilee. But this is not the only evidence we possess. The Other Mary = Mary the Wife of Clopas When it comes to the identity of the brothers of Jesus, the Gospel of John also provides an important clue to the identity of "the other Mary" who was present at the crucifixion: But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:25–27) This account of Jesus' death provides us three more significant insights into the relationship between Jesus, Mary, and his "brothers." First, notice that John identifies the second woman at the cross as "his mother's sister, Mary" (John 19:25).³⁹ Although it's easy to miss the point, this verse provides important support for the word "sister" (Greek *adelphē*) being used to refer to someone other than a blood sister. It seems extremely unlikely that Mary's parents would have given both her and her sister the

³⁷ RSV, slightly adapted.

³⁸ McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 214: "Why does Mark not write 'in his own country and among his brothers and in his house'?...The choice of 'kinsmen' in v. 4, coming straight after v. 3, might be an indication that the brothers just mentioned could also be designated as 'kinsmen', i.e., not full blood-brothers."

³⁹ Some scholars have suggested that the text can be read as referring to four women, not three. But this is not convincing. No major English translation renders it as four women (see NRSV, NAB, ESV, RSV, etc.). The reason for this is that the natural reading of the Greek text is three women: the mother of Jesus, her sister Mary, and Mary Magdalene. See Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus*, 16, who rightly notes both "the extreme improbability of two sisters' having the same name Mary" and the fact that "'sister' could designate a more distant relationship such as a sister-in-law."

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name Mary. However, the text makes perfect sense if John is using the word "sister" to refer to a close relative of Jesus' mother. Second, and even more important, when John refers to this woman as "Mary the wife of Clopas" (John 19:25), he gives us an important clue to the identity of "the other Mary" referred to by Matthew and Mark.

If John is referring to the same Mary that Matthew and Mark say was present at the crucifixion and burial of Jesus—Mary the mother of James and Joses—then we have further evidence that James and Joses are not the sons of Jesus' mother. Nor are they the sons of Joseph by a previous marriage.⁴⁰ Instead, they would be the sons of another man—a man named Clopas.⁴¹ Third and finally, but by no means least important, in John's account, Jesus gives his mother, Mary, to the Beloved Disciple to have as "his own" mother (John 19:26–27). I cannot stress the point enough: If Mary would have had any other children at the time of the crucifixion, it would have been unheard of for Jesus to give his mother to one of his disciples. In an ancient Jewish context, to fail to care for one's aging parents was a grave sin—one that Jesus himself describes as a capital offense (see Mark 7:9–13).⁴² Thus, the most plausible explanation for why Jesus takes such pains in the midst of dying to make sure his mother is cared for by the Beloved Disciple is that Mary has no other children. He is her only son. Once again, we could just stop here. If we only had the evidence of the New Testament we've just surveyed, it would be enough to confidently conclude that the so-called brothers of Jesus are in fact his close relatives, the children of Mary and Clopas, relatives of Jesus' family. However, the New Testament is not the only relevant historical evidence we possess. We also have evidence for the identity of Jesus' brothers from ancient church history—evidence that is often mysteriously

⁴⁰ Contra Richard Bauckham, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus: An Epiphany Response to John P. Meier," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994): 686–700.

⁴¹ See Adele Reinhartz, "John," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (2nd ed.; eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 215, n. on John 19:25. See also Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 2:906: "Is 'Mary of Clopas' mentioned by John, the same as the Mary (mother of James and Joses/Joseph)...?...If the two Marys are the same, then perhaps two of the 'brothers' of the Lord were the sons of Clopas...Hegesippus (ca. A.D. 150) says that Clopas was the brother of Joseph, the putative father of Jesus (Eusebius Hist. III ii and 32:1–5...); this would make the two 'brothers' cousins of Jesus' on his father's side of the family...Some scholars would identify Jesus' 'mother's sister,' mentioned by John, with... 'Mary the mother of James and Joses/Joseph,' for then it would be clear in what way James and Joses/Joseph were 'brothers' of Jesus, namely, that they were cousins on his mother's side of the family."

⁴² See Marcus, *Mark*, 1:452, citing Exodus 20:12, 21:17; Leviticus 20:9.

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ignored. The "Brothers" of Jesus = The First Bishops of Jerusalem According to the ancient Christian historian Hegesippus—who was apparently the first person to write a "history" of the Church—two of the so-called brothers of Jesus (James and Simon) also happened to be the first two bishops of Jerusalem.⁴³ Furthermore, they were widely known to be Jesus' "cousins"! Consider the following testimony from Hegesippus, which is quoted by Eusebius in his fourth-century history of the Church:

The same writer [Hegesippus] also [writes]...as follows: "After James the Just had suffered martyrdom for the same reason as the Lord, Simon, his cousin, the son of Clopas, was appointed bishop, whom they all proposed because he was another cousin (Greek *anepsion*) of the Lord. (Hegesippus [2nd century A.D.], quoted in Eusebius, *Church History*, 4.22)⁴⁴ After the martyrdom of James and the conquest of Jerusalem which immediately followed, it is said that those of the apostles and disciples of the Lord that were still living came together from all directions with those that were related to the Lord according to the flesh (for the majority of them also were still alive) to take counsel as to who was worthy to succeed James. They all with one consent pronounced Simon, the son of Clopas, of whom the Gospel also makes mention; to be worthy of the episcopal throne of that parish. He was a cousin (Greek *anepsion*), as they say, of the Saviour. For Hegesippus records that Clopas was a brother of Joseph (Greek *adelphos tou Iōsēph*). (Hegesippus [2nd century A.D.], quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.11.1–2)⁴⁵

Amazingly, the testimony of Hegesippus that the so-called brothers of Jesus were in fact his "cousins" (Greek *anepsioi*) is frequently just ignored by scholars who assert

⁴³ On Hegesippus, see Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 22.

⁴⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (2 vols.; trans. Kirsopp Lake; Loeb Classical Library 153, 265; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926, 1932), 1:375. For the sake of consistency, I have rendered the Hellenized form "Symeon" (*Symeōn*) as "Simon."

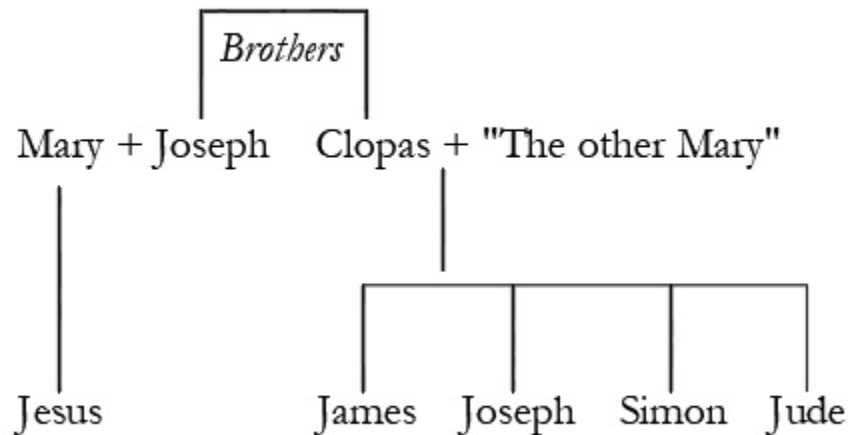
⁴⁵ Schaff, *NPNF2*, 1:146

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that Mary had other children.⁴⁶ But in the face of such historical evidence, this is unacceptable. James and Simon, two of the so-called brothers of Jesus, were not obscure figures in the early Church. In fact, they were the first two bishops of Jerusalem and some of the earliest martyrs. More important, they were known to be "cousins" of Jesus. Notice here that Hegesippus' identification of James and Simon as Jesus' cousins is stated simply as a matter of historical fact. There is no evidence that he is attempting to defend Mary's perpetual virginity. To the contrary, Hegesippus is simply reporting the history of the bishops in Jerusalem.⁴⁷

Now, if Hegesippus is right, then the earliest historical evidence we possess jibes perfectly with the New Testament evidence we saw that the so-called brothers of Jesus—James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude—were in fact the children of another woman named Mary (Mark 6:1–3 15:37, 40–41; cf. Luke 24:10). It also makes perfect sense if this "other Mary" is the same woman who is called the "wife of Clopas" (John 19:25):



⁴⁶ For example, the evidence from Hegesippus that James and Simon are Jesus' "cousins" is ignored by McKnight, *The Real Mary*, 82, 89, 110–11; Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals*; Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*.

⁴⁷ Cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:324, who suggests that the idea that the "brothers" of Jesus were actually his "cousins" was "made up" in the fourth century by Jerome in order to defend the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity. It is unfortunate that Meier ignores the fact that Hegesippus identifies James and Simon as Jesus' cousins in the second century A.D. As the Anglican scholar J. H. Bernard points out: "It is difficult to understand how the doctrine of the [perpetual] Virginity of Mary could have grown up early in the second century if her four acknowledged sons were prominent Christians, and one of them bishop of Jerusalem." See J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2 vols.; International Critical Commentary; London: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 1:85.

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This, I would suggest, is the simplest and most historically plausible solution to the mystery of the "brothers" of Jesus. Again, the best explanation for the ancient Christian claim that the "brothers" of Jesus were his cousins is that the brothers of Jesus were actually his cousins.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Here I am following Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesus*, whose arguments (to my knowledge) have never been refuted. It should be noted that my solution does not require that “Clopas” and “Alphaeus” were the same person (cf. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 14). I should also say something more here about the view that the “brothers” of Jesus were children of Joseph from a previous marriage (i.e., that Joseph was a widower). This view, known as the “Epiphanian” theory, suffers from at least four major weaknesses: (1) It fails to adequately explain why “James and Joseph” are called the sons of another Mary, who is clearly not the wife of Joseph (Mark 6:3; 15:40, 47; 16:1; cf. Matthew 13:55; 27:56, 61); (2) It fails to reckon with the fact that when Luke refers to “Mary the mother of James” (Luke 24:10) without qualifying which “James,” he must be referring to the mother of “James” the bishop of Jerusalem, as per Luke’s custom (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18), also known as “James the Lord’s brother” (Galatians 1:19). If this Mary is the mother of James the bishop of Jerusalem, then it goes without saying that James the brother of Jesus cannot be the son of Joseph. Otherwise, Joseph would be a polygamist, not a widower! Therefore, the “mother of James” in Luke 24:10 must be some other Mary. (3) It fails to take into account that if Joseph had sons by a previous wife, then Jesus would not have been Joseph’s heir (cf. Matthew 1:18–25). That honor would have gone to Joseph’s actual firstborn son. (4) The Epiphanian theory is based directly on the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James, which even in ancient times was considered by many to be historically unreliable. For other weaknesses, see esp. McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 208–22 (esp. 214, n. 13). Unfortunately, in his otherwise excellent work, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus*, Bauckham does not respond to McHugh’s specific criticisms of the Epiphanian hypothesis. For the view that the brothers of Jesus are the sons of another Mary and thus his “close relations,” see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 500.