

Did Jesus Say His Mother Had Other Sons?

(I was recently told that these words came from Jesus' own mouth)

Written by Steve Ray

I was recently confronted with an interesting argument against Mary's perpetual virginity. The man argued that the Bible itself proves that Mary had other children. He claimed that Jesus expressly states in no uncertain terms that his mother had other sons. He said it must have been overlooked by the Catholic Church.

I knew full well that Jesus had never stated anywhere in the Gospels that his mother had other sons. So I probed a bit further and suddenly realized he was basing his argument on a prophetic Psalm in the Old Testament. It was a very clever argument.

The Old Testament is full of prophecies about the life and Passion of Jesus Christ. Fulfilled prophecies are one of the proofs used by New Testament writers to demonstrate that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, and the Son of God.

Psalms 22 and 69 are often referred to as Messianic Psalms. They are quoted often in the New Testament to show that Jesus fulfilled prophetic passages from the Jewish Scriptures. Psalm 69 is quoted directly to demonstrate its prophetic nature. Let's look at two examples.

First, Jesus has just cleansed the Temple of money changers and John quotes Psalm 69:9 "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for Thy house will consume me.'" (John 2:17). Second, John informs us that from the cross Jesus drank sour wine from a sponge which is seen as a fulfillment of Psalm 69:21 "They also gave me gall for my food and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." However, even though several verses in this long Psalm (36 verses) are used prophetically of Jesus, we are never told that the whole Psalm is Jesus speaking in the first person or that it all explicitly refers to Christ.

Now the man's argument against Mary's ever-virginity went like this: since Psalm 69 is a Messianic Psalm speaking of the coming Christ, then verse 8 must refer to Christ as well. It is from the mouth of Jesus and reads, "I have become estranged from my brothers, and an alien to my mother's sons."

Since this Psalm is used prophetically about Christ, then it must also be referring literally to Mary—informing us that the Blessed Virgin had other sons in addition to Jesus. Since this Psalm applies to Christ it must mean his mother Mary had other sons, right? Wow, the Catholic Church must have overlooked this verse I was told. If they had read this verse, they would never have come up with the teaching that Jesus was Mary's only son.

A good argument? Actually it might be a little bit clever but it's a whole lot naïve. One cannot stretch prophecies in the Old Testament too far, beyond their intended purpose and scope. Remember, in prophecy Jesus is prefigured as the Lamb of God but he doesn't bleat like a sheep, nor did he walk on all fours. Prophecies must be interpreted carefully.

Psalms are to be taken primarily in their literal sense. This Psalm was written by David who *did* have a mother who presumably had other sons. He certainly had brothers. David was also a known and professed sinner. In Psalm 69 David acknowledges his follies and sins and even recognizes them as contributing to his distress. David is a type of the suffering Christ, so his experiences would naturally, though imperfectly, reflect his future son who would eventually sit on his throne.

One must understand the Psalms and how to properly interpret them. Portions of this Psalms *are* prophetic, but that does not prove that all the Psalms, or all verses in a Messianic Psalm *all* refer explicitly to Christ.

But what if we focus in on verse 5 in Psalm 69? Do we ever see *this* verse on the lips of Jesus or quoted in Gospels? It reads, “O God, thou knowest my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from thee.” The Hebrew word for “wrongs” means transgressions, sins, guilt.

If one claims that this whole Psalm uniquely and explicitly applies to Christ, then we must also conclude that Jesus was a sinner since the Psalmist appears to be saying that Jesus had committed wrongs and transgressions which were not hidden from God.

A Protestant manual written for translators of the Bible instructs translators concerning this verse:

The psalmist confesses his *wrongs*, convinced that they are the cause of his misfortune, which is seen as God’s just punishment. The *folly* he confesses is his disregard of God’s laws....Today’s English Version (TEV) has reversed the two lines for greater ease of understanding. *Thou knowest my folly* is sometimes rendered idiomatically as “you know I have had a twisted heart” or “you know that my heart has led me on a bad path.”

In some languages it is not possible or at least not natural to say that one’s sins *are not hidden from thee*. In such cases it will be necessary to switch to an active expression. However, the sense is that God knows fully the sins of the writer, and therefore one may translate “You know full well all my sins, O God” (Bratcher, R. G., & Reyburn, W. D. (1991). *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms*. Helps for translators (595). New York: United Bible Societies).

This is the literal interpretation of Psalm 69:5. No where are we led to believe that this is prophetic statement about Jesus Christ. No where do we find this verse used in relation to him. Yet it is smack in the middle of a Messianic Psalm which has other verses that are quoted in the New Testament as prophecies regarding Christ.

There are three possible ways to deal with this verse. First, that Jesus was a sinner, which is ridiculous and not worthy of a detailed rebuttal. Second, the correct understanding which is to realize it is not a prophetic statement concerning Jesus but just part of David’s Psalm with no specific implications for the coming Messiah. Third, as some have wrongly argued (see McGee below), this is prophecy about Jesus bearing the sins of the world, not confessing his own sins.

Some Protestants like J. Vernon McGee explains it this way,

“How in the world can this verse apply to the Lord? You must remember that He came to earth as a human being. He was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. But the last few hours on the cross He became sin for us. That was the thing He was resisting in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed, “Let this cup pass.” What cup? The cup of sin, which was *my* cup and *your* cup of iniquity. The sin that was put upon Him was awful for Him—it comes naturally for us—but because He was holy, His suffering was terrible” (McGee, J. V. [1997, c1981]. *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (2:787). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.).

What McGee glosses over, is the fact that the words of the Psalmist here are distinctly first person. Jesus bore our sins, not his own. The Psalmist refers to “my follies” and “my wrongs” which in Hebrew are pronouns which grammatically are singular, common and first person. It objectively means “me” and is a reference to the speaker. Scripture never refers to our sins as “his” sins. Jesus never says that taking our sins made them his sins. If he bore the sins of the world they were OUR sins, not his sins. He may have born them but he did not commit them or incur personal guilt for them. If that was the case he would have said, “The wrongs *I carry for others* are not hidden from you.”

To claim Jesus is referring to himself here is utter foolishness. Jesus had no sin—either original or actual.

Since we have dismissed the possibility that these were prophetically the words of Jesus referring to the sins he would bear for the world, then we have the before mentioned possibilities: 1) Jesus was a sinner himself, or 2) this verse does not apply to Jesus prophetically.

Since we know Jesus was sinless, then we must honestly conclude that even though this Psalm has prophetic material foretelling the life and ministry of Jesus, not everything in the Psalm must literally apply to him.

Can anyone find verse 8 used of Jesus or Mary anywhere in the New Testament? No. The earliest Christians never ascribed other children to Mary. One of the first to ever suggest such a thing was Helvedius in the 4th century and he was roundly rebuked by St. Jerome in such a way as to make it clear that such folly was repugnant to the constant teaching of the Fathers.

If someone says that the phrase “my mother’s sons” *must* apply to Mary because it is in a Messianic Psalm, then they must be consistent enough to say that Jesus is a sinner as well. Jesus was not a sinner and Mary had no other sons. Some verses in Psalm 69 refer to Christ, and obviously others do not.

So, is this a clever argument? On the surface, yes. But it is also very incorrect and heretical. It is inconsistent with good biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. And it also flies in the face of the constant teaching of the Church, expressed in the tradition of the Fathers and the decrees of the councils—until of course Protestants, especially Fundamentalist and Evangelicals decided they were 2,000 years smarter than the early Christians.

The perpetual virginity of Mary cannot be proved or disproved by Scripture alone. But the Scriptural proof-texts used to claim Mary had other children are weak indeed, while the arguments of her ever-virginity are substantial. Catholic theology always has, and always will stand the test of time because Our Lord protects the Church and her doctrines and will do so until the end of time.

The only real arguments for Mary having other children are gleaned from the passages that refer to those called the brothers and sister of Jesus. These passages have been easily explained in two ways. First, the brothers are sons of Joseph from a previous marriage. This was a very prevalent tradition in the early Church and still the predominant view in the Eastern Churches. In this case, they would have been Jesus' half-brothers.

An ancient document entitled the *Protoevangelium of James* (AD 120-150) tells the story this way, "And the priest said to Joseph, 'You have been chosen by lot to take into your keeping the virgin of the Lord.' But Joseph refused, saying: 'I have children, and I am an old man, and she is a young girl. I am afraid lest I become a laughing-stock to the sons of Israel.' . . . And Joseph was afraid, and took her into his keeping. And Joseph said to Mary: 'Behold, I have received you from the temple of the Lord; and now I leave you in my house, and go away to build my buildings, and I shall come to you. The Lord will protect you'" (9). This document was much revered in the early Church.

Secondly, the passages referring to brothers of the Lord can be explained by understanding the word *brother* to refer to cousins or close relatives. In Hebrew and Aramaic there is no word for cousin. Those in such a close familial bond were all brothers, or brethren. Anyone familiar with life in the Middle East knows how this close familial bond of extended family members shapes the community even today.

The word *brother* can have four meanings in Scripture: 1) siblings from the same parent or parents; 2) close relatives or kin; 3) in a Jewish context, any other fellow Jew; and 4) one who has a spiritual affiliation, such as a "brother in Christ". The Church has always maintained that the "brothers of the Lord" were either sons of Joseph by a previous marriage (#1) or close relatives such as cousins (#2). Either one fully satisfies any objections.

From the days of Abraham when he called his nephew Lot his brother (Gen 13:8), to the extended families in Middle Eastern countries today, the word *brother* can and does mean a lot more than in our Western culture with its fragmented families. The Greek word for *brother* can be understood here to refer to half-brothers, in the case Joseph might have had children from a previous marriage, or cousins in the sense of kindred or brethren (see Option #1 above).

Never in the Gospels is Mary referred to as the mother of these "brethren" nor are they ever said to be sons of Mary. The same can be said of Joseph. The Catechism (para. 500) explains who these "brothers" are.

Against this doctrine [ever-virginity of Mary] 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.

While on the cross Jesus gives Mary into the care of John because Mary had no other sons to take up the authority of the “first born.” In the absence of the father, the first born was head of the family. At the death of Jesus, had Mary had another son, he would have had the responsibility to care for his mother. But Mary, having no other sons was given by Jesus into the care of the Beloved Apostle John with these words: “Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home” (John 19:27, RSVCE).

From its earliest days, the Church has held fast to the perpetual virginity of Mary. St. Jerome’s famous *Treatise Against Helvedius* hits this issue with Scripture, facts and sarcasm. He is shocked that anyone would be so impious as to suggest Mary had children subsequent to Jesus. He cites early writers like Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus to support his claim that the perpetual virginity of Mary had always been maintained by the Church from its earliest days.

Origen (AD c. 185-c. 254), whom some regard as the greatest biblical scholar of the third century wrote, “There is no child of Mary except Jesus according to the opinion of those who think correctly about her” (Commentary on John, 1:4). His phrase “think correctly” could certainly refer to established tradition and doctrine even in his early time. Origen believed that Joseph was a widower who had children from a previous marriage.

Following Ignatius of Antioch (AD c. 35- c. 107), Origen concluded that Mary was married in order to keep her virginity a private matter. He said, “Mary’s virginity was hidden from the prince of this world, hidden and her marriage to him. Her virginity was kept hidden because she was thought to be married” (Homily on Luke 6:4-4). He strongly espoused Mary as ever virgin and following him the Church was ever vigilant to defend this doctrine.

It wasn’t until after the Protestant Reformation that the doctrine of Mary’s ever-virginity was questioned. Interestingly enough, and a surprise to many Protestants is the fact that many of the notable reformers affirmed the doctrine, men such as Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and John Wesley.

There is much more that can be said about the teaching of Mary’s ever-virginity, but back to Psalm 69—. No matter how others misread and distort their interpretation of Psalm 69, Jesus was not a sinner and Mary had no other children. In no way can Psalm 69 be twisted to put words in Jesus’ mouth that he never said and that go contrary to the constant teaching of the Church.

Oh but wait, my friend Mark Gross reminded me that Mary does have other children—it even says so in Revelation 12:17 “So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

Mary is the woman (Rev 12:1) and we are her children! That is one reason why she is referred to as Mother of the Church.