
The Relatives of Jesus

by John W. Wenham

Mr. Wenham's interest in Dr. John J. Gunther's paper on "The Family of Jesus" (January-March, 1974) was such that it stimulated him to write something on the subject himself, and it has given us great pleasure to receive it. Although his contributions to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY over the years have been all too few, Mr. Wenham has been a friend of the QUARTERLY from very early days, and is known personally to many readers, and by name to more, as former Vice-Principal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol, and former Warden of Latimer House, Oxford—not to speak of his Elements of New Testament Greek and other publications, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

HARMONIZATION is part of the stock-in-trade of every historian. Presented with apparently reliable independent sources, he prefers to harmonize their details, rather than impugn their veracity, if he can do so without unreasonably forcing the sense or straining probabilities. One particular problem is when to identify and when to distinguish persons of the same name appearing in different contexts in different documents. To fail to identify the same person in different documents may be to deny oneself a flood of light. Wrongly to identify two different people may be to distort and confuse.

This problem was raised in an acute form by the stimulating article of J. J. Gunther in the January 1974 number of this journal, entitled "The Family of Jesus". Firstly, there is the identity of the Marys. Mary is easily the commonest girl's name in the New Testament, there being probably seven different persons so named. In John's account of the passion there are three Marys who must necessarily be distinguished: the Magdalene, the mother of Jesus and Mary "of Clopas". In certain key contexts only Mary Magdalene and one other Mary are mentioned. On the usual view, Matthew's "the other Mary" (called variously "mother of James and/or Joses") is equated with Mary of Clopas, who is thus made a witness of the burial and resurrection. On Gunther's view, however, "the other Mary" is the Lord's mother, and it was she who saw the last rites on Friday afternoon and was at the tomb on the resurrection morning.

There is also a somewhat more complex problem over various groups of men. In the New Testament there are five common boy's

names.¹ The number of people bearing these names (in order of popularity) are approximately: Simon or Simeon 11; Joseph or Joses, Judas, John 6; James (i.e. Jacob) 5. Next in frequency come Jesus (i.e. Joshua) and the two Greek names, Alexander and Philip 4. Of the biblical names (which would be most likely to be favoured in a devout Jewish home), only Joshua/Jesus begins to rival the top five in popularity.

Names from these five occur in three different groupings: (1) the brothers of Jesus—James, Joseph or Joses, Simon, Judas (Mt. 13: 55; Mk. 6: 3);² (2) members of the third group in the lists of the apostles—James “of Alphaeus”, Simon the Zealot and Judas “of James” (Lk. 6: 15f.; Acts 1: 13; cf. Mt. 10: 3f.; Mk. 3: 18); (3) sons of one of the Marys—James the Little (or Less) and Joses (Mt. 27: 56, 61; 28: 1; Mk. 15: 40, 47; 16: 1; Lk. 24: 10).

Gunther equates (3) with (1) and does not exclude the possibility (p. 40) of equating Simon and Judas from (2) with them also. I would disagree with the identification of the Marys and with the identification of (1) and (3) above. But I would then want to identify (2) and (3) rather more firmly. Gunther's equations seem to me to distort and confuse the picture, whereas the other equations (if they can surmount their own considerable difficulties) throw interesting light on the structure of the original cell from which the whole Christian organism grew.

The gospels (RSV) speak thus of the Marys.

Matthew: “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 . . . Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre . . . Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre . . . Jesus met them” (27: 55-28: 9).

¹ To assess their frequency of occurrence, we must omit backward references to those who lived before N.T. times and we must make some provisional judgments as to who are to be identified and who distinguished. The figures given are those arrived at after these operations have been carried out.

² I shall assume that they were children born to Joseph and Mary after the birth of Jesus. For the view that they were children of Joseph by a former marriage, see J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (10th ed., London, 1890), pp. 252ff. J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (London, 1892), chap. 1, replied to this. (See also his article “The Brethren of the Lord” in *HDB*.) C. Harris in the article under the same title in *DCG* attempted, but not successfully, to answer Mayor.

James, as leader of the church in Jerusalem, is a prominent figure in Acts. Judas is mentioned by Hegesippus (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* III. 19, 20, 32). Traditionally they have been regarded as authors of the N.T. epistles which bear these names.

Mark: "women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger³ and of Joses, and Salome and also many other women . . . Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid . . . Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome . . . went to the tomb" (15: 40-16: 2).

Luke: "the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance . . . saw the tomb, and how his body was laid . . . Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them . . . told this" (23: 49-24: 10).

John: "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" (19: 25-27). The only woman mentioned at the tomb is Mary Magdalene.⁴

The only clear reference to the mother of Jesus comes from John, who represents her as being near the cross for her son's farewell and as being escorted from the scene before his death. The other three gospels say that the women watched from a distance and that at least two of the Marys witnessed the burial. The idea that one of these witnesses was the Lord's mother is almost impossible to reconcile with John's account of her being taken away "from that hour". Two complementary pictures are painted: one of grief-stricken women not wishing to come too near the horrifying spectacle; and another of a brief incident towards the end when the Lord's mother and her most intimate friends⁵ come forward to hear Jesus speak.

It has seemed natural to most readers to equate "Mary of Clopas"

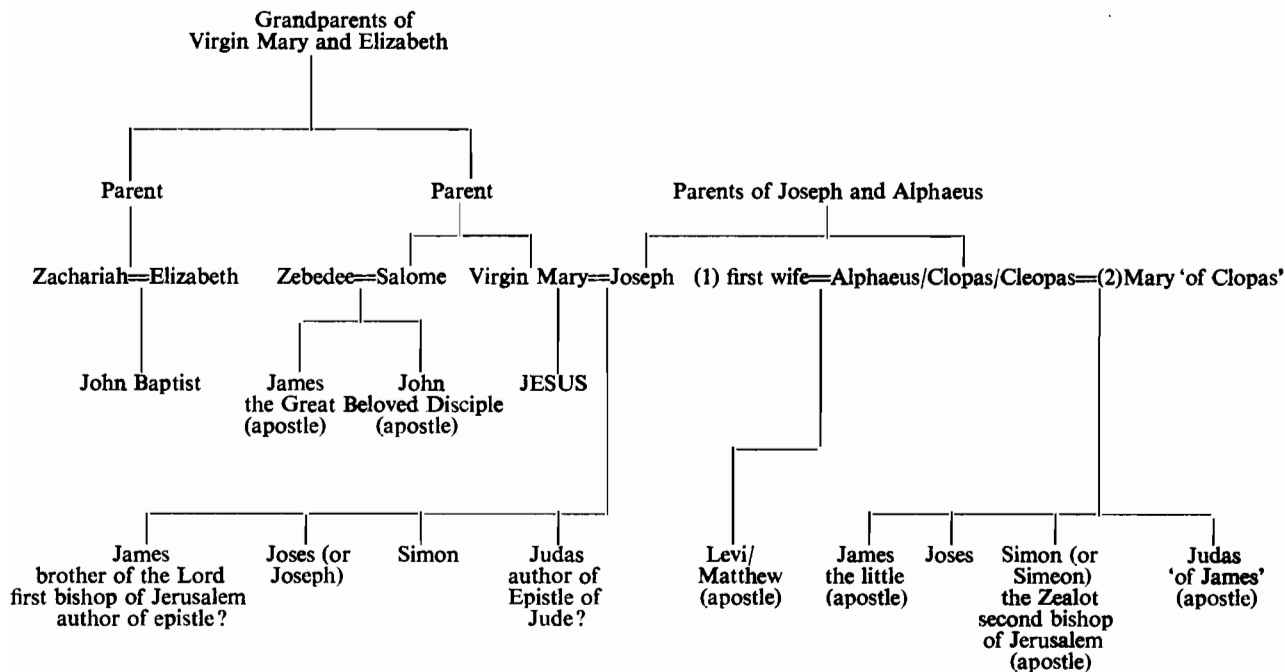
³ ὁ μικρός, frequently rendered "the less".

⁴ [It could be inferred from the plural subject in Mary's report, "we do not know where they have laid him" (John 20: 2), that at some stage she had been accompanied by at least one other. ED.]

There can be little doubt that the Cleopas of the Emmaus road narrative is the same person as Clopas, Luke having adopted the nearest Greek name. Further information (which there is no good reason to doubt) is given by Hegesippus (Eusebius *Ecc. Hist.* III. 11; IV. 22): "Cleophas was the brother of Joseph"; "After James the Just had suffered martyrdom, Simeon, the son of Cleophas, our Lord's uncle, was appointed the second bishop [of Jerusalem] . . . as the cousin of our Lord." He was therefore of course uncle also to the brothers and sister of Jesus. Clearly he and his wife were very close indeed to the Lord's mother, and he was privileged to be present at what was apparently the first resurrection appearance to any of the menfolk. Note that he had a son named Simeon.

The relationships more or less tentatively argued for are set out diagrammatically on p. 9.

GENEALOGICAL TABLE



with "Mary the mother of James and/or Joses" and with "the other Mary", not with the mother of Jesus. Indeed, seeing there were inescapably three Marys, it seems very odd that the Synoptists (who are quite ready to speak of the mother of Jesus) should identify her in such an obscure manner. The suggested explanations for this disguise seem laboured. In view of the fervid quest for texts to buttress the claims of Marian devotion, it is almost incredible that an appearance to the Lord's mother on Easter Sunday morning should not have been recognized and seized upon, if such an appearance is in fact being recorded. The description "the other Mary" would provide only the flimsiest veil. That she was not so identified can only mean that there was no tradition to support such identification. At least as far back as the second century the view (which in due course became Catholic orthodoxy) was being propagated that Mary had no more children. This shows that no tradition had been preserved that "Mary the mother of James and Joses" was in fact Mary the mother of Jesus. The pious belief of many modern Catholics that Jesus must have appeared to His mother is based, not upon documentary data, but upon the supposed fittingness of such a meeting.

Furthermore, while it might be credible (though curious) that John might describe a sister-in-law as "sister", it is scarcely credible that he should call Mary the wife of Clopas—Jesus' mother's husband's brother's wife—"his mother's sister". Therefore, seeing no ordinary family could have two sisters called by the same name, "his mother's sister" and "Mary of Clopas" must be two different people.⁶ This dovetails neatly into the Synoptic accounts, since Matthew calls attention to three leading figures watching the crucifixion: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses and *the mother of the sons of Zebedee*. The last named (whom Mark calls Salome) would therefore be the mother of "the beloved disciple"⁷ into whose care Jesus committed his mother. When John took her to his home, it was almost inevitable that Salome, who was both her sister and his mother, should go with them. Thus Matthew and Mark do not make Salome a witness of the burial. Not surprisingly, however, Mark tells us that she went with the Marys to the sepulchre on Sunday morning. This is a remarkable example of an "undesigned coincidence" between John and the Synoptists.

6 The syntactical arguments for regarding "Mary of Clopas" as standing in apposition to "his mother's sister" carry no weight.

7 The traditional reasons for regarding "the beloved disciple" as John, son of Zebedee, have not been undermined by modern counter-suggestions.

The identification of Salome as the Blessed Virgin's sister seems, therefore, well grounded.⁸ The fact that Salome was his aunt throws interesting light on the relationship between Jesus and his leading disciples. James and John were first cousins to Jesus, and no doubt it seemed natural to their mother that they should be given places of honour in the kingdom (Mt. 20: 20f.). An explanation is also suggested of the question which has perplexed so many: If we accept the traditional authorship of the Fourth Gospel, how can we conceive John calling himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved"? May it not simply be that Jesus and his cousin were of the same age and had been close friends throughout their lives? The fact that at some stage the home of Jesus was transferred from Nazareth to Capernaum (Mt. 4: 13) may be an indication of the closeness of the two families. The intimacy of Jesus and John may also have a bearing on the observed similarity between the style of Jesus' teaching in John's gospel and the evangelist's own style. It is almost inevitable that John's style would have been influenced by a long and close association with so remarkable a friend.

If the equation of "the other Mary" with the mother of Jesus breaks down, then it is almost inevitable that she should be equated with Mary of Clopas. But if the equation of the mothers breaks down, so must the equation of the sons. The sons of Mary and Joseph (James, Joses, Simon and Judas) are not to be equated with the sons of Mary and Clopas (James, Joses and the Simeon of Hegesippus). In particular, James the Lord's brother, who became leader of the Jerusalem church, is not to be identified with James the less.⁹ This means that we must steadfastly resist the temptation to fuse or confuse the two families, even though they have the same names.

⁸ The fact that there appears to be no patristic confirmation of this is not of great importance. The argument from silence is usually precarious, and in this case the N.T. data are of an unobtrusive kind. The Fathers seem to have had only a scanty amount of reliable information about the primitive church, other than what they got from the N.T. J. B. Mayor recalls Jerome "who regarded it as a mere waste of time to leave the Scriptures, the fountain of truth, and follow *opinionum rivulos*, the fancies of later writers who had no other grounds for their guesses than the Scriptures themselves (Jer. *Adv. Helv.* 17)." *Epistle of St. James*, p. xxiv.

⁹ In view of his crucially important position in the church by the time of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, it does not in any case seem likely that a description meaning "the less" would have been retained at the time Mark's gospel was written. The description which survived (as we have seen) was James the Just. It is of course arguable that μικρός (literally "the small") refers to stature and physique, but this too seems a little unlikely, as being a somewhat undignified description of a revered leader of the church. In *koiné* Greek the positive is often used for the comparative, and it seems better (as we shall argue and the *RSV* suggests) to regard it as a means of distinguishing two apostles, one of whom was younger than the other.

But is not the existence of two families having mothers of the same name, and having three (or even four) boys of the same names in a similar (perhaps identical) order, a coincidence too great to be credible? At first glance the odds against it look tremendous, and this is undoubtedly the consideration which has driven so many to try to identify the families. Yet, on deeper reflection, it is not incredible. We are dealing with two families of great piety, steeped in the history and promises of the Old Testament. There were, as we have seen, certain names of immense popularity: Simon, Joseph, Judas, John, James. Jesus (Joshua) was also rather popular, but in view of the special circumstances in which Joseph's son was given his name, it would have been surprising if Clopas had made use of it. In a smaller measure the same might have applied to John, the God-given name of the Baptist. In any case Johanan, in spite of its general popularity, was neither a patriarch nor a man of distinction in the Old Testament, and might well not therefore have had so great appeal to such parents. We are left then with four names, all of which in such homes were more likely to be chosen than any others.

Matthew and Mark do not say that they are giving the brothers of Jesus in order of birth, but they both place James and Joses first, so it is reasonable to assume that it is a chronological order. Similarly, on the only occasion where the two sons of Clopas are mentioned together, the order is James, Joses. This would mean that Joseph and Clopas (and, incidentally, Zebedee) started with the rather obvious choice of Jacob, the progenitor of the nation. They then went on to Joseph, the most distinguished and admirable of the patriarchs as a natural second choice. We do not know the order after this, but in any case between Simeon and Judah there would have been little to choose. Simeon, on the one hand, was a particularly popular patriarchal name; Judah, on the other, was the name of Joseph's and Clopas's tribe and it was the tribe that carried the royal line. Thus, while it is remarkable that the two homes showed such a similar pattern, it is certainly not an incredibly improbable coincidence. Indeed, it might not have been a coincidence at all—who knows what collusion there may have been between these closely related families. A mere impression of improbability is no just ground for impugning the straightforward statements of the text.

But what of the three "minor" apostles: James of Alphaeus,

Judas of James and Simon the Zealot?¹⁰ How are these three to be related to the other two groups? In spite of three names in common they certainly cannot be equated with the brothers of Jesus, because the latter were in unbelief at least till the Feast of Tabernacles before the crucifixion (Jn. 7: 2-5), which on any reckoning must have been after the choosing of the twelve. But could they be sons of Clopas, one of whom was certainly a James and another a Simeon?

There is much to be said in favour of this identification, even though there are maddening silences and uncertainties which make sure conclusions impossible. In the first place, it is stretching the long arm of coincidence yet further if we are to suppose that there were not only two, but three, different groups within the innermost Christian circle sharing the four names James, Josés, Simon and Judas. If there was no family connection which dictated the selection of three *different* popular patriarchal names, it is somewhat of a coincidence that these three all fall in one group. Secondly, it explains at once why the first resurrection appearance to a man was to this otherwise obscure Clopas—he and his wife *and three of their sons* were at the heart of the Christian movement. Thirdly, the name of James' father, Alphaeus (usually pointed by modern editors with a rough breathing, Ἀλφαῖος) is remarkably close to Clopas/Cleopas. Either they are different forms of the same name or we meet another rather surprising coincidence.¹¹ Fourthly, there are difficulties about the idea that James is the father of Judas. While the coupling of two names (as in "Judas of James") usually represents son and father (the RSV interpretation), the use is attested for a man

¹⁰ In the four lists of apostles the order of names varies, but they all divide into three groups with four names in each. Peter, Andrew, James and John always appear in the first group; Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew in the second; James "of Alphaeus", Judas "of James" (called Thaddaeus by Mt. and Mk.), Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot in the third. It should be noted, on the one hand, that there is no systematic recording of relationships—Mark (3: 17) says that John was brother of James, Luke (6: 14) that Andrew was brother of Simon, Matthew (10: 2) mentions both, Acts (1: 13) neither; and on the other, that those bearing the same name, like the Simon's and James', are carefully distinguished. It would seem that the associations of the name Judas caused some embarrassment, so that the lesser known apostle is variously called "not Iscariot" (Jn. 14: 22), Thaddaeus (or Lebbaeus) or "of James".

¹¹ There have been sharp differences of opinion among good authorities on the equation Alphaeus = Clopas. To take two extremes. P. W. Schmiedel (*Encyclopaedia Biblica*, "Clopas") says: "Philologically the names are distinct." A. Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* II, 603, n.l. says: "Alphaeus and Clopas are the same name. The first occurs in the Babylon Talmud as *Ilphai* . . . the other in the Jerusalem Talmud as *Chilphai*." The upshot of the argument seems to be a negative one: there are not enough examples of the transliterated names in Greek and Semitic forms to justify a denial of their possible identification. Positive evidence of their identity in the gospels would of course affect the philological argument.

and his brother (the RSV margin's interpretation).¹² This Judas would have to be distinguished from Judas Iscariot, and from Judas the Lord's brother, and probably from others. If "of James" refers to his father, it would be to some James unknown to us and probably unknown to most of Luke's readers. James, being such a common name, would not therefore be an effective mode of identification. Matthew and Mark avoid the difficulty of distinguishing the Judases altogether by using the name Thaddaeus and placing it immediately after James. In the case of Luke, we find sandwiched between the two names one (Simon) bearing the name of one of Clopas' sons. Both seem very natural ways of indicating a connection, not with some unknown James, but with the afore-mentioned James, his brother. Of course it nowhere says that this is a trio of brothers, but Mark and Luke demonstrably do not call attention to every known pair of brothers, and there is no reason to insist that Matthew must have given a complete list of the relationships.

Telling against the identification is the fact that when Luke lists the twelve apostles (both in his gospel and in Acts) he adopts the same form (Alphaeus) as Matthew and Mark, but in the Emmaus road encounter he calls the disciple Cleopas. The former may have been the transliteration which Luke found at this point in his source, which in this formal context he did not see fit to alter. When, however, it came to the narrative passage, he may well have adopted a Greek name as a piece of conscious Hellenizing for the benefit of educated Greek readers. But Luke's inconsistency here is certainly inconvenient to those who wish to identify the two. Notwithstanding, it rather looks as though one Alphaeus-Clopas-Cleopas had four sons, three of whom were apostles. If this identification is not correct, it merely removes Judas from the list of the sons of Clopas and gives us three apostles of whose connections we know almost nothing.

Finally, an Alphaeus is also said by Mark (2: 14) to have been father of Levi (=Matthew). In each case "of Alphaeus" is used to identify an apostle, and it might be thought that it would fail in its purpose if two apostles had different fathers with the same (not common) name. In addition, Matthew and Acts both put the names of Matthew and "James of Alphaeus" adjacent to one another. This has led some, like E. J. Goodspeed,¹³ to infer that Alphaeus was married twice and had Levi—Matthew by the first marriage and other sons by the second marriage. (Certainly Matthew could not have been a son of Mary of Clopas, since she would not then have been described simply as mother of James or Joses.) If this is the same Alphaeus,

¹² Blass/Debrunner/Funk, *Greek Grammar of N.T.* (Cambridge, 1961), 162(4), p. 89.

¹³ *Matthew Apostle and Evangelist* (Philadelphia, 1959) p. 6.

he remains true to type in his selection of patriarchal names for his sons; and yet one more possible relative of Jesus is discovered in the original Christian cell.

To summarize. We know of the following relatives of Jesus. On his mother's side: Elizabeth was first cousin to Mary, making John the Baptist second cousin to Jesus. Salome was his aunt and her sons James and John were his first cousins, the latter being probably his contemporary and his most intimate friend. On Joseph's side: Clopas was his uncle, three of whose sons (James, Simon and Judas) may well have been apostles and one of whom (Joses), though not an apostle, was well known to the Christian circle, and one of whom (Simon) succeeded James the Lord's brother as leader of the Jerusalem church. If we add Levi the son of Alphaeus, we have eight possible cousins. To which must be added the four sons of Joseph and Mary, two of whom (James and Jude) are traditionally regarded as authors of New Testament epistles.

Thus to identify a dozen relatives of Jesus' own generation among the pioneers of the Christian movement may seem astonishing, yet it is encouraging to see the potential influence of a small group of humble, yet godly, families. They produced a wonderful company of young men, sound in character and responsive to Christ, who were capable of taking a lead in the church of God.

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