Careful readers of the NT know that one of Jesus' relatives, his brother James, played a prominent part in the early history of the church. Not so well known is the fact that other members of the family were also important figures and continued to exercise leadership in Palestinian Jewish Christianity down to at least the early second century.¹

The family tree shows those members of the family whose names and relationship to Jesus are definitely known. The four brothers of Jesus are named in the Gospels (Mt. 13:55; Mk. 6:3). We can be sure that James was the eldest of the four, and Joses the next in age, but since Matthew and Mark differ in the order in which they list Simon and Judas, we cannot be sure which was the youngest. The name Joses, which Mark gives to the second brother, was a common abbreviated form of Joseph (the form Matthew uses). No doubt Joses was commonly known by this short form in order to distinguish him from his father Joseph. In English usage Jesus' brother Judas has been conventionally known as Jude, and this form of the name is usually used for the NT letter
attributed to this brother of Jesus. All four names are among the most common Jewish male names of the period. From the same passages of the Gospels which name four brothers we learn also that Jesus had sisters. Although Matthew refers to 'all his sisters', we cannot tell whether there were more than two, since Greek can use 'all' for only two. Later Christian literature identifies Mary and Salome to sisters of Jesus. These names were extremely common Jewish women's names within Palestine, but Salome seems not to have been used in the Jewish diaspora. There is therefore some probability that the tradition of these two names goes back to Palestinian Jewish Christian tradition, and so it may be a reliable tradition.

The brothers of Jesus were evidently known as 'the brothers of the Lord' in early Christian circles (Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 9:5), but since the term 'brother' by no means necessarily refers to a full blood-brother, the question of their precise relationship to Jesus, along with that of Jesus' sisters, arises. Since at least the fourth century this issue has been much debated, mainly because of its implications for the traditional doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. The three major views have come to be known by the names of their fourth-century proponents: Helvidius, Epiphanius and Jerome. The Helvidian view, which probably most modern exegetes, even including some Roman Catholic scholars, hold, is that the brothers were sons of Joseph and Mary, born after Jesus. The Epiphanian view, which is the traditional view in the Eastern Orthodox churches, is that they were sons of Joseph by a marriage prior to his marriage to Mary.

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and so were older than Jesus. The Hieronymian view, which through Jerome's influence became the traditional western Catholic view, is that they were first cousins of Jesus.

We cannot here enter this debate in any detail. Although the Hieronymian view still has its advocates, it must be said to be the least probable. The Greek word for 'brother' can be used for relationships more distant than the modern English 'brother'. However, the brothers of Jesus are invariably called his brothers in early Christian literature (both within and outside the NT). If they were actually cousins, we should expect that this relationship would be specified more exactly on at least some occasions. In fact, the second-century writer Hegesippus, who calls James and Jude 'brothers of the Lord', calls Simeon the son of Clopas the 'cousin of the Lord', evidently distinguishing the two relationships. But if the Hieronymian view is improbable, it is not easy to decide between the other two views. On the Epiphanian view, the brothers of Jesus would have been his adoptive brothers (assuming the virginal conception of Jesus as historical fact). In that case, we should not expect them to be called anything except 'brothers'. No NT text offers any further real evidence on this point, but the idea that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were children of Joseph by a previous marriage is
found in three second-century Christian works (the Protevangelium of James, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter), which probably all derive from Syria. It looks as though this was an early second-century Syrian Christian tradition. Reliable tradition about prominent early Christian leaders like the Lord's brothers could still have been available at this time and place. It is true that the Protevangelium of James implies the perpetual virginity of Mary, and so it is possible that reflection on the idea of the virginity of Mary led to the conclusion that Jesus' brothers and sisters could not be her children. On the other hand, it is also possible that the notion of the perpetual virginity arose only because Mary was already known not to have been the mother of Jesus' brothers and sisters. The historical evidence is not sufficient for a firm decision between the Helvidian and Epiphanian views (and so my version of the family tree leaves this open). In any case, we can be sure that the brothers and sisters of Jesus belonged, with him, to the family household of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth. The Gospel traditions regularly refer to Jesus' brothers in company with his mother.

For help with identifying other relatives, we must turn to Hegesippus, who lived in Palestine in the mid-second century and recorded some local Jewish Christian traditions about relatives of Jesus. His work survives only in fragments, mostly quotations by the church historian Eusebius, but Eusebius probably extracted most of what he said about relatives of Jesus. The traditions in Hegesippus tend to be legendary, but the legends are attached to historical figures who were revered as Christian leaders and martyrs in the memory of the Jewish Christian communities of Palestine. That these persons existed and were related to Jesus in the way Hegesippus claims we can be sure.

According to Hegesippus, Jesus' putative father Joseph had a brother named Clopas. The name is extremely rare: only two other certain occurrences of it are known. One of these is in John 19:25. We can therefore be sure that the man to whom this verse of the Fourth Gospel refers is the same Clopas, Joseph's brother. He is mentioned in a list of women who stood by the cross when Jesus was dying: '[Jesus'] mother and his mother's sister, Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene.' Although this could be read as a list of four women, most likely there are only three. If 'Mary of Clopas' was Clopas's wife, then she was in fact Jesus' mother's husband's brother's wife - a relationship which, not surprisingly, the evangelist has preferred to state less precisely as: 'his mother's sister'. So it seems that an aunt of Jesus, as well as his mother, was among those Galilean women who accompanied him on his last journey to Jerusalem and were present at the cross.

Probably Clopas himself was also in Jerusalem at this time. Luke names one of the two disciples in his story of the walk to Emmaus as Cleopas (Lk. 24:18). This Greek name is not the same as the Semitic name Clopas, but it was common for Palestinian Jews at this period to be known by both a Semitic name and a Greek name which sounded similar. Thus, for example, the Greek name
Simon was very commonly used as the equivalent of the Hebrew Simeon, and either name could be used for the same individual. It is very plausible to suppose that Joseph's brother Clopas also used the Greek name Cleopas. Luke names him because he was a sufficiently significant person in the early church for some of Luke's readers to have heard of him. Perhaps his companion on the road to Emmaus was his wife Mary. In any case, John 19:25 and Luke 24:18 are an interesting case of two quite distinct Gospel traditions which corroborate each other. This uncle and this aunt of Jesus were among his loyal followers at the end of his ministry.

Perhaps Jesus' brothers, whom the Gospels indicate were less than enthusiastic about Jesus' activity at earlier points in his ministry, had also come round by the time of his death. Certainly they soon became prominent leaders in the early Christian movement. We know most about James, but since his role as leader of the Jerusalem church is quite well known, we will pass over him rather rapidly here. Already an important figure when Paul visited Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:19), he seems to have risen to a position of unique pre-eminence in the Jerusalem church after the Twelve were depleted and dispersed, so that they no longer formed the Christian leadership in Jerusalem, and especially after Peter ceased to be permanently resident in the city (see Acts 12:1-17). Later writers called him 'bishop' of Jerusalem, and although the term may be anachronistic, he seems to have been more like a later monarchical bishop than anyone else in the period of the first Christian generation. But his role was by no means confined to Jerusalem. Since the Jerusalem church was the mother church of all the churches, and was naturally accorded the same kind of central authority over the whole Christian movement that Jerusalem and the temple had long had for the Jewish people, James now occupied a position of unrivalled importance in the whole early Christian movement. A minor indication of this is the fact that, although the name James was common, this James could be identified simply as 'James', with no need for further explanation (1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 2:12; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Jas. 1:1; Jude 1). He also has the distinction of being the only Christian mentioned by name in a first-century source not written by a Christian. The Jewish historian Josephus records his martyrdom, in 62 CE. The high priest Ananus II (son of Arenas and brother-in-law to Caiaphas) had him executed by stoning, probably under the law which prescribed this penalty for someone who entices the people to apostasy (Dt. 13:6-11). The more legendary account in Hegesippus agrees that he suffered death by stoning.

While James assumed pre-eminence at the centre of the Christian movement, the other brothers of Jesus worked as travelling missionaries. We know this from an incidental, but revealing, reference to them by Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul maintains that, although he has waived his right as an apostle to be supported by his converts at Corinth, he has this right, just as much as the other apostles do. It was an accepted principle in the early Christian movement that travelling missionaries had a right to food and hospitality from the Christian
communities among whom they worked. Evidently, wives who accompanied their husbands on missionary travels also had this right. Paul attributes both the right to support and the right to be accompanied by a wife to 'the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas' (1 Cor. 9:5). In instancing, among the apostles, the brothers of the Lord and Cephas (Peter), Paul intends to associate himself with people whose claim to apostleship and its rights was unquestioned and unquestionable. The Lord's brothers must have been so well known as travelling missionaries that they, along with Peter, were the obvious examples for Paul to choose, even when speaking to the Christians in Corinth. And since it is unlikely that James was well-known for missionary travels, Paul must be thinking primarily of the other brothers: Joses, Simon and Jude.

Such a reference to people Paul assumes to be very well known, but of whose role in the early church we know hardly anything, makes us aware how very fragmentary our knowledge of the early Christian mission is. We might compare it with Paul's tantalizing reference to Andronicus and Junia, 'prominent among the apostles' (Rom. 16:7), who must also have been members of the earliest Palestinian Jewish Christian movement and played an important missionary role, of which we know nothing. But in the case of the brothers of Jesus, Paul's information that they were famous as travelling missionaries correlates with one other piece of information about relatives of Jesus. This comes from Julius Africanus, who lived at Emmaus

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in the early third century and reports, as coming from the relatives of Jesus, information which he probably took from a written source of Palestinian Jewish Christian origin. He says that the relatives of Jesus were known as the desposynoi, a term which means 'those who belong to the Master [or Sovereign: despotes]'. He explains how they were one of those Jewish families who had preserved their genealogy when Herod burned the public genealogical records. He then reports:

From the Jewish villages of Nazareth and Kokhba they travelled around the rest of the land and interpreted the genealogy they had [from the family traditions] and from the Book of Days [i.e. Chronicles] as far as they could trace it.13

The meaning is probably that members of the family of Jesus, travelling around the land of Israel and preaching the gospel to their fellow-Jews, used a family genealogy, like that in Luke 3:23-38, as a way of explaining the Christian claim that Jesus was the messianic Son of David.14 Kokhba is most likely the Galilean village of that name (modern Kaukab), about ten miles north of Nazareth. It may have been, like Nazareth, a traditional home of members of the family. But the significance of the two villages, as the centres from which the mission of the desposynoi operated, may also lie in their names. They may have been given special messianic significance because each can be related to one of the most popular texts of Davidic messianism. Nazareth could be connected
with the messianic Branch (*neser*) from the roots of Jesse (Is. 11:1), while Kokhaba, meaning 'star', recalls the prophecy of the messianic Star from Jacob (Nu. 24:17).

This information from Julius Africanus is of great interest. It gives us a very rare glimpse of Christianity in Galilee, showing us that not only Jerusalem, where James was leader, but also Nazareth and Kokhaba, where other members of the family were based, were significant centres of early Christianity in Jewish Palestine. Moreover, it preserves the term *desposynoi*, not found in any other source. Julius Africanus has to explain what it means, and clearly it is not a term he would himself have used had he not found it in his source. It must be the term by which members of the family of Jesus were known in those Palestinian Jewish Christian circles in which they were revered leaders. It demonstrates that not only 'the brothers of the Lord', but also a wider circle of relatives - 'the Master's people' - played a prominent leadership role.

We already know who some of these other relatives were. Jesus' aunt and uncle, Mary and Clopas, may well have been a husband-and-wife team of travelling missionaries, as Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7) evidently were, and as Paul implies the Lord's brothers and their wives were (1 Cor. 9:5). If, as we suggested, the names of sisters of Jesus - Mary and Salome - were correctly preserved in tradition, this would imply that they were also known figures in the early church. Probably there were other relatives active in Christian leadership of whom we know nothing.

Julius Africanus speaks only of travels of the *desposynoi* within Palestine, but it is worth asking whether their mission may not also have extended to parts of the Jewish diaspora. In particular, there is some reason to think of the eastern diaspora. From the NT we know almost exclusively about Christianity's spread westwards from Palestine, but it must have spread eastwards just as quickly. For Palestinian Jews, the eastern diaspora - in Mesopotamia and areas further east (see Acts 2:9) - was just as important as the western diaspora, and links with it just as close. Pilgrims returning home from Jerusalem, where they had heard the Jerusalem church's preaching about Jesus the Messiah, would have carried belief in Jesus to the Jewish communities in the east, just as they probably did to Rome and elsewhere in the west. But east was also an obvious direction for Jewish Christian missionaries from Palestine to go. Already by the time of Paul's conversion there was a Christian church in Damascus, easily reached from Galilee, and first stop on the routes north to Edessa and Nisibis, in northern Mesopotamia, and east to Babylonia.

We have one remarkable piece of evidence for James's connection with the mission to the eastern diaspora. The Gospel of Thomas, which reflects the Gospel traditions of Christianity in the north Mesopotamian area, contains this dialogue (logion 12):
The disciples said to Jesus, 'We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be great over us?'
Jesus said to them, 'Wherever you shall have come, you are to go to James the Righteous, for
whose sake heaven and earth came into being.'

The remarkable hyperbole of the last clause is a thoroughly Jewish form of
expression, which shows that this is a tradition from the Jewish Christian origins
of north Mesopotamian Christianity. Jesus' alleged saying presupposes the
mission of the apostles and gives James the position of central authority to
which they are to look from wherever their missionary travels take them.
Though there is no probability that the saying is an authentic saying of Jesus, it
most likely goes back to James's lifetime, in which it makes sense as an
expression of the role attributed to James, as leader of the mother church which
claimed central authority over the mission to the diaspora. Whereas in the
Pauline mission field James's authority was played down, in the mission to the
eastern diaspora it was highly respected.

Evidence that some of the desposynoi actually travelled east may be preserved
in a list, given in medieval chronicles, of the early bishops of Ctesiphon-
Seleucia on the Tigris, in central Mesopotamia. The three names following
Mari, the late first century founder of the church, are Abris, Abraham and
Ya'aqub (James). Abris is said to have been 'of the family and race of Joseph' the
husband of Mary, while Abraham was 'of the kin of James called the brother of
the Lord' and Ya'aqub was Abraham's son. While it may seem hazardous to trust
such late sources, the medieval chronicles had access to good older sources. The
claim to descent from the family of Jesus should not be regarded as a mark of
legend, since claims to descent from the family of Jesus are extremely rare in
Christian literature and the very few other such alleged descendants who are to
be found in the literature (all mentioned below) are entirely credible. Later
Christian writers were not in the least prone to invent legendary descendants of
this family or to ascribe such descent to historical persons without warrant. In
favour of the historicity of these three relatives of Jesus is the implication that
Christian leadership in Seleucia passed down among members of this family. As
we shall see, the same thing happened in Palestine. At least it seems a
reasonable possibility that some members of the desposynoi travelled as
missionaries to the eastern diaspora, where their descendants were important
Christian leaders in the early second century.

This excursion to the east has taken us beyond the lifetime of Jesus' brothers,
and it is time to return to Palestine to trace developments there after the death of
James. The second 'bishop' of Jerusalem, after James, was Simeon or Simon
(both the Hebrew and the Greek versions of his name are found), the son of
Clopas.15 Probably this was not a matter of strict dynastic succession, as though
he was considered next in line to succeed. After all, James could never have
been considered 'successor' to his brother Jesus. But a kind of dynastic feeling,
which was natural for people of the time, who were used to associating authority
with a family rather than a mere individual, must have had some weight in the
appointment of Simeon. The model which perhaps best explains the role of
Jesus' relatives in the leadership of the Palestinian church is not that of dynastic succession, but that of the association of a ruler's family with him in government. Just as it was normal practice in the ancient Near East for members of the royal family to hold high offices in government, so Palestinian Jewish Christians felt it appropriate that Jesus' brothers, cousins and other relatives should hold positions of authority in his church. Indeed, the term desposynoi ('those who belong to the Sovereign') could well have the sense, more or less, of 'members of the royal family'.

Simeon the son of Clopas was leader of the Jerusalem church - and doubtless the most important figure in Jewish Christianity - for at least 40 years, until his martyrdom in the reign of Trajan (either between 99 and 103 CE or between 108 and 117 CE). When Luke's first readers read of Cleopas (Lk. 24:18) and John's first readers of Mary of Clopas (Jn. 19:25), many of them would no doubt easily have recognized the parents of their famous contemporary. That we know so little about so significant a figure is another salutary reminder of the great gaps in our evidence for early Christianity. But the great reverence with which he was remembered in Jewish Christian tradition can be seen in Hegesippus's hagiographical account of his death. The historically reliable information in the account is that Simeon was arrested on a charge of political subversion, because he was of a Davidic family and supported the alleged Davidic king Jesus, and was put to death by crucifixion. This fits well into the period between the two great Jewish revolts, when

the Roman authorities in Palestine were highly sensitive to the dangers of Jewish political nationalism. More hagiographical is the statement that 'he bore witness through tortures of many days' duration, so that all, including the governor, marvelled exceedingly how an old man of a hundred and twenty years could thus endure'. A hundred and twenty years is the biblical limit on human life (Gn. 6:3), which no-one after Moses (Dt. 34:7) may exceed, but which someone as righteous as Moses might equal. No doubt Simeon was very old, but if Clopas was a younger brother of Joseph, he could easily have been a much more plausible age at his death. But the age Hegesippus attributes to him tells how Palestinian Jewish Christians regarded him in the years immediately after his death.

Evidently also important leaders in Palestinian Jewish Christianity in the late first century were two grandsons of the Lord's brother Jude, called Zoker and James. According to Hegesippus, they too came under suspicion, since they were descendants of David, and were brought before the emperor Domitian himself. When asked about their possessions,

they said that between the two of them they had only nine thousand denarii, half belonging to each of them; and this they asserted they had not as money, but only in thirty-nine plethra of land, so valued, from which by their own labour they both paid the taxes and supported
themselves.

To prove that they were hard-working peasant farmers, they showed their tough bodies and the hardened skin of their hands. They also explained that the kingdom of Christ was not earthly (and so, Hegesippus implies, not a kingdom whose supporters would rebel against the empire) but coming at the end of history. Convinced they were harmless and despising them as mere peasants, Domitian released them, and ordered the persecution against Christians to cease.

Several features of Hegesippus's account, such as the trial before Domitian himself, are historically improbable, and the story has a strong apologetic thrust. It is concerned to show that Jewish Christianity was not a politically dangerous movement by representing the emperor Domitian as himself recognizing this. It is hard to tell what kernel of historical truth may lie behind the legend. But it is certainly a legend about real historical persons.

Apart from the information that members of the third generation of the family of Jesus were still active in Christian leadership, the most interesting aspect of the story is what it tells us about the farm which the two brothers held in partnership. The size and value given are so specific and precise that it is likely that they rest on accurate tradition. The size of the farm would have been remembered, not because an accurate report of what Zoker and James said to Domitian was preserved, but because the size of the family's smallholding in Nazareth was well-known in Palestinian Jewish Christian circles at this time. The farm was not divided between the brothers, but owned jointly, no doubt because this family continued the old Jewish tradition of keeping a smallholding undivided as the joint property of the 'father's house', rather than dividing it between heirs. So, two generations back, this farm would have belonged to Joseph and his brother Clopas. Unfortunately, because there are two possible sizes of the plethron, it seems impossible to be sure of the size of the farm: it may be either about 24 acres or about 12 acres. In either case, this is not much land to support two families, and Joseph had at least seven children to feed. So it is not surprising that he (and Jesus) supplemented the family income by working as a carpenter. As in the case of many village artisans, Joseph's trade was not an alternative to working the land, but a way of surviving when the family smallholding could no longer fully support the family. It did not necessarily put Jesus' family any higher on the social ladder than most of the peasant farmers of Nazareth.

After Zoker, James and Simeon the son of Clopas the family of Jesus disappears into the obscurity that envelops the subsequent history of Jewish Christianity in Palestine. Only one more member of the family may be identifiable. During the persecution of Christians in 250-251 CE, under the emperor Decius, a certain Conon, a gardener on the imperial estate, was martyred at Magydos in Pamphylia in Asia Minor. According to the acts of his martyrdom, when questioned in court as to his place of origin and his ancestry, he replied: 'I am of
the city of Nazareth in Galilee, I am of the family of Christ, whose worship I have inherited from my ancestors. Perhaps this is a metaphorical reference to his spiritual origins as a Christian, but it seems more plausible to read it as a literal claim to natural family relationship with Jesus. If so, there may be an indirect link with archaeological evidence from Nazareth. At the entrance to one of the caves below the church of the Annunciation, a fourth-century mosaic bears the inscription: 'Gift of Conon deacon of Jerusalem'. Perhaps, as the Franciscan excavators thought, the cave was dedicated to the cult of Conon the martyr from Nazareth, and the later Gentile Christian from Jerusalem dedicated the mosaic out of reverence for his famous namesake who was commemorated there.

References


2 Protevangelium of James 19:3-20:4; Gospel of Philip 59:6-11; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 78.8.1; 78.9.6.


4 Quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.23.4; 3.11; 3.20.1; 4.22.4.

5 Protevangelium of James 9:2; 17:1-2; 18:1; Infancy Gospel of Thomas 16:1-2; Gospel of Peter, according to Origen, *In Matt.* 10.17.

6 Mt. 12:46-47; 13:55; Mk. 3:31-32; 6:3; Lk. 8:19-20; Jn. 2:12; Acts 1:14; Gospel of the Nazarenes frag. 2.

7 Quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.11; 3.32.6; 4.22.4.

8 The other is in an Aramaic document from the early second century CE, found at Muraba 'at (Mur 33, line 5).

9 Mt. 13:57; Mk. 3:21, 31; 6:4; Jn. 7:5.

10 For a fuller account, see R. Bauckham, 'James and the Jerusalem Church', in R. Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Carlisle:
Paternoster, 1995).

11 Antiquities 20.200.

12 Quoted in Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 2.23.4-18. See also the Second Apocalypse of James 61:1-63:32.


14 In my Jude and the Relatives of Jesus, ch. 7, 1 argued in detail that the Lukan genealogy of Jesus derives from the circle of the brothers of Jesus, who adapted a traditional family genealogy to make it the vehicle of a quite sophisticated Christological message.

15 Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 3.11; 4.22.4.

16 Quoted in ibid., 3.32.3, 6.

17 Their names are not preserved in Eusebius's quotations from Hegesippus, but in another ancient summary of Hegesippus's account of them (Paris MS 1555A and Bodleian MS Barocc. 142).

18 Quoted in Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 3.19.1-3.20.7; 3.32.5-6.

19 Martyrdom of Conon 4.2.