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Was James the Son of Joseph and Mary?

The New Testament simply identifies James as the brother of Jesus without any further specification of family relationships. At first, this seems to indicate that Jesus's parents, Joseph and Mary, had more children in the years after Jesus was born. But, from the second century on, some interpreters have demonstrated that there could be other explanations for how Jesus came to have brothers and sisters. The siblings of Jesus mentioned in Mark 6:4 may have been Joseph's children from a previous marriage (which, if so, means that James was older than Jesus). Or, Joseph and Mary may have adopted children, possibly the orphaned offspring of relatives.

These suggestions appear to be motivated by a desire to preserve the virginity of Mary: in the developing piety of the Christian church, Mary came to be viewed as "forever virgin," and eventually her perpetual virginity was affirmed as a point of sacred doctrine for the Roman Catholic Church. Thus Roman Catholic interpreters tend to regard Jesus and James as legal siblings but not as blood relatives. Most Protestant interpreters view this as a nonissue: the Roman Catholic position on James and the other siblings of Jesus is possible, but it is not supported by anything in the Bible or made necessary by any (Protestant) theological doctrine.

See Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990).