Chapter 9 Handout – Brethren of the Lord

Brothers of the Lord

Although the early Reformers Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli held that Mary was "ever Virgin," Protestants since then have generally thought that the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus were his full blood brothers and sisters and hence were other children of Mary. The Catholic Church, invoking Mary as "ever Virgin" from early centuries, has maintained that Jesus was her only child. In the early second century there was already a tradition that the brothers of Jesus were sons of the widowed Joseph by a previous marriage. The New Testament never says that these "brothers and sisters" are children of Mary. Furthermore, in Mark 15:40 and Matt 27:56 one of the women at the cross is another "Mary, the mother of James and of Joses/Joseph," but these are listed as brothers of Jesus in Matt 13:55 and Mark 6:3. Hence they are sons of a *different* Mary, though they are called Jesus' brothers.

This strongly suggests that, since the writers of these expressions were Jews, they followed the general Near Eastern custom of referring to any close relatives as "brothers" or "sisters," as we can see from Gen 13:8; 14:16, where Lot is called the brother of Abraham, although he was actually Abraham's nephew. Similarly, the Hebrew term for "brother" is used in Gen 29:15 to mean simply "relative."

Fr. Montague adds a personal touch. Today in India and Africa this tradition is still followed, as I know from personal experience. On one occasion, one of my novices in Nepal introduced a visitor as his "brother," but after some conversation with the visitor, I discovered he was a third or fourth cousin.[1]

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[1] Montague, G. T. (2011). *First Corinthians* (p. 153). Baker Academic.