# The Most Influential Family [1]

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What would you say is the most influential family that ever existed? Perhaps the Habsburgs? Or the Julio-Claudian dynasty of ancient Rome? Or the Khans, following Genghis Khan's conquest of much of the Old World? Or the Medicis? The Kennedys, or the Kardashians?

I have a family that I would like to propose, which may come as a surprise.

Time and again, whether it is Time magazine [2], an analysis of digital content [3], or otherwise [4], Jesus is nominated as the most influential person in the world1. Jesus is indeed a towering figure in history and in the world today. My thesis is that His earthly ministry was a family affair, which continued into the first generation of the Church after His death, resurrection and ascension.

A word of warning: this article contains a fair amount of speculation. I've penned things which not all historians and theologians agree with by a long shot; most Christians won't, actually. If you find all this speculation too much, then simply try and enjoy it like a Dan Brown-eque fantasy!

I need to start by confessing that no-one knows who the progenitor of this family is. That this is something even I cannot speculate about here. But when the family enters history, it is through maternal lines.

## Mary and Elizabeth

It is undoubted that Mary, as the mother of Jesus, looms large for many Christians. Not only was she chosen by God to give birth to Jesus, but raised Him, and having "kept all these sayings in her heart" (Luke 2:19), she must have helped prepare Him, through raising Him through infancy, childhood, and into adulthood, for what was foretold of Him.

Mary was the "relative" (Luke 1:36) of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. We don't know precisely what their relationship was. Elizabeth, we are told, was an older woman. Mary was almost certainly a young woman, perhaps in her late teens or early twenties. Perhaps they were aunt and niece, or cousins, or cousins once or twice removed. Whatever their relationship was, they were close and familiar enough that Mary went to her during her pregnancy, was welcomed there despite her premarital pregnancy, and stayed there for several months.

This raises an interesting point about Jesus's family's social status. Many people assume that Jesus and His family were peasants. But Mary's "relative" Elizabeth was married to a priest. As such, they would at least occasionally have been funded by the Temple taxes2. Such a familial relationship, and Joseph's occupation as "tektōn"—a skilled worker, artisan or craftsman—may mean that the family was not as poor as many have imagined. They certainly had the means to regularly travel from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals, and could seek lodgings at inns.

## John the Baptist

John was born to Zacharias and Elizabeth, despite their old age. He was part of the “baptiser” sect of the Jews. Indeed, he seems to have been a leader in that sect, as “multitudes” (Luke 3:10) came to him. However long his ministry was, and everything that led up to it, we can imagine that Jesus may have been a part (or, at least, aware) of it. Some have claimed that Jesus was a disciple of John. The idea that Jesus may have been someone else’s disciple may make some people uncomfortable, but we do see that they both preached the same message:

> In those days, John the Baptiser came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”
>
> Matthew 3:1–2

> Now when Jesus heard that John was delivered up, he withdrew into Galilee. … From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, “Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”
>
> Matthew 4:12, 17

John began his ministry before that of Jesus. Jesus preached the same core message that John had. And, even though John resisted at His request at first, he did baptise Jesus (Matthew 3:13–15). Finally, Jesus only began His own public ministry after John was arrested.

## James, and John Zebedee—the Beloved Disciple

Here things start to get really speculative. In the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and John, we are given slightly different descriptions of the women who were standing by the cross during Jesus’s crucifixion:

> Many women were there watching from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, serving Him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.
>
> Matthew 27:56–56

> There were also women watching from afar, among whom were both Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; who, when He was in Galilee, followed Him and served Him; and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.
>
> Mark 15:40–41

> But standing by Jesus’ cross were His mother, His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.
>
> John 19:25

Even though, as Mark said, there were “many other women”, some have speculated, based on how the women were described in each of these accounts, whether “the mother of the sons of Zebedee”, “Salome”, and “His mother’s sister”, are all the same person. This would make Salome Jesus’s aunt, and James and John Zebedee His cousins.

If this inference is correct, then this means that when Jesus called James and John to “follow Him”, and they left their father in the boat to follow Him (Mark 1:19–20), this likely wasn’t a spontaneous

act. They were probably aware of the ministry of their relative, John the Baptist, and Jesus's participation (and prominence) in it. Perhaps they were even disciples of John the Baptist, like Andrew was (John 1:35–42). It would then have been natural for them to transition to Jesus as the new leader in the baptiser movement. They may thus all have come across each other during the ministry of John the Baptist before Jesus formally called them to be His disciples[3].

Further, it is my opinion that "the beloved disciple", who is often mentioned in the Gospel of John, is John Zebedee, and also the author of the Gospel of John. If John was a younger man, perhaps barely past adolescence, Jesus may have chosen to take special care of His young cousin. Jesus was particularly fond of His "beloved disciple". Despite the Zebedees' sometimes misguided zeal and anger; see Luke 9:54 and Mark 3:17), they were still part of Jesus's inner circle.

This theory also offers us an explanation why the beloved disciple (John Zebedd) was present at the crucifixion when all the other disciples had abandoned Jesus. In his panic to flee the soldiers at Jesus's arrest, John had run to his mother. If these women were "connected" (both by being related to a priestly family, and having the connection of "Joanna, the wife of Chuzas, Herod's steward"), then being in their company may have been a safe haven for John from the Temple guards who arrested Jesus. John's mother then went to comfort her sister, and John went along. So when Jesus sees the beloved disciple standing by the women, and He asks him to take care of His mother (John 19:26–27), He was not merely asking a trusted friend to look after His mother after His death, but also a family member. If John was a stranger to the family, particularly a young man, this certainly would have been an odd request for anyone hearing it. Jesus did have brothers who could look after His mother, which would make the request even more strange. But it makes sense if He entrusted His mother's well-being to a cousin, especially if Jesus (as the oldest son) was somewhat estranged from His brothers at that point. Even if Jesus's brother ended up being Mary's primary providers, John could still be near enough to her to comfort and encourage her like Jesus intended.

## James and Jude

Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and some Lutherans, in an ancient tradition that goes back to at least the second century, believe that Jesus's mother, Mary, always remained a virgin, even after her marriage to Joseph and Jesus was born. So when Jesus is mentioned as having brothers and sisters (Mark 6:2–3, Luke 8:19–21), these passages are interpreted as either referring to cousins, or Joseph's children from a previous marriage, or "spiritual" brothers and sisters (as people within a church today may call each other "brother" or "sister").

Like many Protestants, I don't believe that Mary remained a virgin after His birth, and that His brothers and sisters mentioned in the gospels were biological siblings. One reason is that, in Luke 8:19–21, when Mary and His brothers came to Him, they likely wanted to discuss something with Him; perhaps a family matter, or a concern about how He was conducting His ministry (which was endangering His life), or the controversial things which He was saying. We don't know. But it is peculiar that His mother and all His brothers came. They likely had to interrupt their income generating work and travel to where Jesus was. If Jesus had an older step-brother or cousin, that man may well have been that patriarch of the family (after Joseph's presumed death). He would be able to speak authoritatively to Jesus and on behalf of the family. But if Jesus was the oldest child, then He was the patriarch of the family. This would create a dilemma for His family if they had concerns or reservations about His conduct. It would then maybe have been necessary for the whole family to come to Him to raise a concern with Him, as there was no one person "above" Him in the familial hierarchy of the day.

It is a powerful testimony to the transformative power of the gospel (and the uniqueness of Jesus) that His siblings, who grew up alongside Him and would have seen His best and His human limitations, would come to confess Him as the Messiah, God incarnate, and be willing to be martyred for His sake.

## Summary

The “relatives” Mary and Elizabeth both had sons who were prominent in the Jewish baptiser sect of the early first century. Salome *may* have been Mary’s sister, and her sons *may* have been part of the same sect that their relatives were leading. Jesus inherited followers from John the Baptist, meaning that His ministry already had a head start, allowing Him to gain prominence quickly. Jesus arguably became the most influential person in the world. But much of what we know about Jesus and His teachings come to us from what His cousin, John Zebedee (Salome’s son) wrote down. Similarly, James and Jude, Jesus’s half-brothers, became prominent figures in the early church, and their writings are also preserved in the Bible, the most influential book in all of human history. By their combined influence and roles in history, I would argue they are the most influential family in history.

## Epilogue

What happened to the “Jesus dynasty”? Unless you are a dyed-in-the-wool Dan Brown fan, Jesus never had children of His own. His siblings (or, if you prefer, extended step-family) did, but almost nothing (reliable) of this is recorded in history (unlike that of Muhammad, whose family legacy features prominently in Islam even today). However, there is one tantalising mention.

According to the early church historian Hegesippus [5] (relayed via Eusebius), the Roman emperor Domitian (r. A.D. 81–96) was fearful of usurpers to the throne, especially those who might claim to be messiah figures. He learned of two grandsons of Jude (the half or step-brother of Jesus), named Zoker and James. Domitian had them arrested and questioned them,

> And he asked them if they were descendants of David, and they confessed that they were. …
>
> And when they were asked concerning Christ and His kingdom, of what sort it was and where and when it was to appear, they answered that it was not a temporal nor an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly and angelic one, which would appear at the end of the world, when he should come in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and to give unto every one according to his works. Upon hearing this, Domitian did not pass judgement against them but despising them as of no account, he let them go, and by a decree put a stop to the persecution of the Church.
>
> Hegesippus

Zoker and James were not wealthy men, and there is no evidence that they were prominent people in the early church, but they understood the beliefs of their grandfather. Domitian did not see them as a threat.

After this event, there are no more records of family of Jesus. No “Jesus dynasty” developed, but rather, in the eyes of the church and history, those faithful to the orthodox teachings became the inheritors of the Kingdom. Indeed, the whole, true church is Jesus’s bride.

## Conclusion

Jesus is rightly considered a towering figure in history. For Christians this is not surprising, as He was uniquely God incarnate. However, with a careful (and, perhaps, imaginative reading of the gospels), His ministry, and the inheritance of the first generation of believers, were largely a family affair. Although no “Jesus dynasty” arose, what those two (maybe three) generations did to support Jesus’s ministry echoes through the millennia, and makes them a contender for the most influential family in history.

- 1. Michael Hart’s book [6], *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, places Jesus third, with Muhammad and Isaac Newton first and second, respectively. This does not really matter, but just to mention: Isa (the Islamic imagining of Jesus), is mentioned

more in the Qur'an than Muhammad himself is, which raises the question what an influence on Muhammad Jesus (Isa) was. As for Isaac Newton, he (in his own words) "stood on the shoulders of giants", and more than previous and contemporary people who passed down knowledge to him, this included his worldview, which was rooted in Christianity.

- 2. Priests served in the Temple on a rotational basis, and typically had other occupations besides their part time role as priests.
- 3. This may explain why there are multiple accounts of Jesus calling Peter and Andrew; they had multiple encounters with each other, and each gospel describes a different encounter. Jesus calling His disciples were not spontaneous, but a process.

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