The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary

Jerome (c. AD 347–420)

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Against Helvidius.
This tract appeared about a.d. 383. The question which gave occasion to it was whether the Mother of our Lord remained a Virgin after His birth. Helvidius maintained that the mention in the Gospels of the "sisters" and "brethren" of our Lord was proof that the Blessed Virgin had subsequent issue, and he supported his opinion by the writings of Tertullian and Victorinus. The outcome of his views was that virginity was ranked below matrimony. Jerome vigorously takes the other side, and tries to prove that the "sisters" and "brethren" spoken of, were either children of Joseph by a former marriage, or first cousins, children of the sister of the Virgin. A detailed account of the controversy will be found in Farrar's "Early Days of Christianity," pp. 124 sq. When Jerome wrote this treatise both he and Helvidius were at Rome, and Damasus was Pope. The only contemporary notice preserved of Helvidius is that by Jerome in the following pages.

Jerome maintains against Helvidius three propositions:- 1st. That Joseph was only putatively, not really, the husband of Mary. 2d. That the "brethren" of the Lord were his cousins, not his own brethren. 3d. That virginity is better than the married state. 1. The first of these occupies ch. 3-8. It turns upon the record in Matt. i. 18-25, and especially on the words, "Before they came together" (c. 4), "knew her not till, &c." (5-8). 2. The second (c. 9-17) turns upon the words "first-born son" (9, 10), which, Jerome argues, are applicable not only to the eldest of several, but also to an only son: and the mention of brothers and sisters, whom Jerome asserts to have been children of Mary the wife of Cleophas or Clopas (11-16); he appeals to many Church writers in support of this view (17). 3. In support of his preference of virginity to marriage, Jerome argues that not only Mary but Joseph also remained in the virgin state (19); that, though marriage may sometimes be a holy estate, it presents great hindrances to prayer (20), and the teaching of Scripture is that the states of virginity and continency are more accordant with God's will than that of marriage (21, 22).

1. I was requested by certain of the brethren not long ago to reply to a pamphlet written by one Helvidius. I have deferred doing so, not because it is a difficult matter to maintain the truth and refute an ignorant boor who has scarce known the first glimmer of learning,

but because I was afraid my reply might make him appear worth defeating. There was the further consideration that a turbulent fellow, the only individual in the world who thinks himself both priest and layman, one who, as has been said, thinks that eloquence consists in loquacity and considers speaking ill of anyone to be the witness of a good conscience, would begin to blaspheme worse than ever if opportunity of discussion were afforded him. He would stand as it were on a pedestal, and would publish his views far and wide. There was reason also to fear that when truth failed him he would assail his opponents with the weapon of abuse. But all these motives for silence, though just, have more justly ceased to influence me, because of the scandal caused to the brethren who were disguised at his ravings. The axe of the Gospel must therefore be now laid to the root of the barren tree, and both it and its fruitless foliage cast into the fire, so that Helvidius who has never learnt to speak, may at length learn to hold his tongue.

2. I must call upon the Holy Spirit to express His meaning by my mouth and defend the virginity of the Blessed Mary. I must call upon the Lord Jesus to guard the sacred lodging of the womb in which He abode for ten months from all suspicion of sexual intercourse. And I must also entreat God the Father to show that the mother of His Son, who was a mother before she was a bride, continued a Virgin after her son was born. We have no desire to career over the fields of eloquence, we do not resort to the snares of the logicians or the thickets of Aristotle. We shall adduce the actual words of Scripture. Let him be refuted by the same proofs which he employed against us, so that he may see that it was possible for him to read what is written, and yet to be unable to discern the established conclusion of a sound faith.

3. His first statement was: ”Matthew says, Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privately. But when he thought on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.” Notice, he says, that the word used is betrothed, not intrusted as you say, and of course the only reason why she was betrothed was that she might one day be married. And the Evangelist would not have said before they came together if they were not to come together, for no one would use the phrase before he dined of a man who was not going to dine. Then, again, the angel calls her wife and speaks of her as united to Joseph. We are next invited to listen to the declaration of Scripture: ”And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took unto him his wife; and knew her not till she had brought forth her son.”

4. Let us take the points one by one, and follow the tracks of this impiety that we may show that he has contradicted himself. He admits that she was betrothed, and in the next breath will have her to be a man’s wife whom he has admitted to be his betrothed. Again, he calls her wife, and then says the only reason why she was betrothed was that she might

one day be married. And, for fear we might not think that enough, "the word used," he says, "is betrothed and not intrusted, that is to say, not yet a wife, not yet united by the bond of wedlock. But when he continues, "the Evangelist would never have applied the words, before they came together to persons who were not to come together, any more than one says, before he dined, when the man is not going to dine," I know not whether to grieve or laugh. Shall I convict him of ignorance, or accuse him of rashness? Just as if, supposing a person to say, "Before dining in harbour I sailed to Africa," his words could not hold good unless he were compelled some day to dine in harbour.

If I choose to say, "the apostle Paul before he went to Spain was put in fetters at Rome," or (as I certainly might) "Helvidius, before he repented, was cut off by death," must Paul on being released at once go to Spain, or must Helvidius repent after death, although the Scripture says "In sheol who shall give thee thanks? Must we not rather understand that the preposition before, although it frequently denotes order in time, yet sometimes refers only to order in thought? So that there is no necessity, if sufficient cause intervened to prevent it, for our thoughts to be realized. When, then, the Evangelist says before they came together, he indicates the time immediately preceding marriage, and shows that matters were so far advanced that she who had been betrothed was on the point of becoming a wife. As though he said, before they kissed and embraced, before the consummation of marriage, she was found to be with child. And she was found to be so by none other than Joseph, who watched the swelling womb of his betrothed with the anxious glances, and, at this time, almost the privilege, of a husband. Yet it does not follow, as the previous examples showed, that he had intercourse with Mary after her delivery, when his desires had been quenched by the fact that she had already conceived. And although we find it said to Joseph in a dream, "Fear not to take Mary thy wife";

and again, "Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took unto him his wife," no one ought to be disturbed by this, as though, inasmuch as she is called wife, she ceases to be betrothed, for we know it is usual in Scripture to give the title to those who are betrothed. The following evidence from Deuteronomy establishes the point. "If the man," says the writer, "find the damsel that is betrothed in the field, and the man force her, and lie with her, he shall surely die, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife. And in another place, "If there be a damsel that is a virgin betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her; then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife: so thou shalt put away the evil from the midst of thee. Elsewhere also, "And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her.

But if anyone feels a doubt as to why the Virgin conceived after she was betrothed rather than when she had no one betrothed to her, or, to use the Scripture phrase, no husband, let me explain that there were three reasons. First, that by the genealogy of Joseph, whose

kinswoman Mary was, Mary's origin might also be shown. Secondly, that she might not in accordance with the law of Moses be stoned as an adulteress. Thirdly, that in her flight to Egypt she might have some solace, though it was that of a guardian rather than a husband. For who at that time would have believed the Virgin's word that she had conceived of the Holy Ghost, and that the angel Gabriel had come and announced the purpose of God? and would not all have given their opinion against her as an adulteress, like Susanna? for at the present day, now that the whole world has embraced the faith, the Jews argue that when Isaiah says, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son," the Hebrew word denotes a young woman, not a virgin, that is to say, the word is Almah, not Bethulah, a position which, farther on, we shall dispute more in detail. Lastly, excepting Joseph, and Elizabeth, and Mary herself, and some few others who, we may suppose, heard the truth from them, all considered Jesus to be the son of Joseph.

And so far was this the case that even the Evangelists, expressing the prevailing opinion, which is the correct rule for a historian, call him the father of the Saviour, as, for instance, "And he (that is, Simeon) came in the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, that they might do concerning him after the custom of the law; and elsewhere, "And his parents went every year to Jerusalem at the feast of the passover. And afterwards, "And when they had fulfilled the days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and his parents knew not of it. Observe also what Mary herself, who had replied to Gabriel with the words, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? says concerning Joseph, "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I sought thee sorrowing. We have not here, as many maintain, the utterance of Jews or of mockers. The Evangelists call Joseph father: Mary confesses he was father. Not (as I said before) that Joseph was really the father of the Saviour: but that, to preserve the reputation of Mary, he was regarded by all as his father, although, before he heard the admonition of the angel, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost," he had thoughts of putting her away privily;

which shows that he well knew that the child conceived was not his. But we have said enough, more with the aim of imparting instruction than of answering an opponent, to show why Joseph is called the father of our Lord, and why Mary is called Joseph's wife. This also at once answers the question why certain persons are called his brethren.

5. This, however, is a point which will find its proper place further on. We must now hasten to other matters. The passage for discussion now is, "And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took unto him his wife and knew her not till she had brought forth a son, and he called his name Jesus." Here, first of all, it is quite needless for our opponent to show so elaborately that the word know has reference to coition, rather than to intellectual apprehension: as though anyone denied it, or any person in his senses could ever imagine the folly which Helvidius takes pains to refute. Then he would teach us that the adverb till implies a fixed and definite time, and when that is fulfilled, he says the event takes place which previously did not take place, as in the case before us, "and

knew her not till she had brought forth a son." It is clear, says he, that she was known after she brought forth, and that that knowledge was only delayed by her engendering a son. To defend his position he piles up text upon text, waves his sword like a blind-folded gladiator, rattles his noisy tongue, and ends with wounding no one but himself.

6. Our reply is briefly this,-the words knew and till in the language of Holy Scripture are capable of a double meaning. As to the former, he himself gave us a dissertation to show that it must be referred to sexual intercourse, and no one doubts that it is often used of the knowledge of the understanding, as, for instance, "the boy Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem, and his parents knew it not. Now we have to prove that just as in the one case he has followed the usage of Scripture, so with regard to the word till he is utterly refuted by the authority of the same Scripture, which often denotes by its use a fixed time (he himself told us so), frequently time without limitation, as when God by the mouth of the prophet says to certain persons, "Even to old age I am he. Will He cease to be God when they have grown old? And the Saviour in the Gospel tells the Apostles, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Will the Lord then after the end of the world has come forsake His disciples, and at the very time when seated on twelve thrones they are to judge the twelve tribes of Israel will they be bereft of the company of their Lord? Again Paul the Apostle writing to the Corinthians says, "Christ the first-fruits, afterward they that are Christ's, at his coming.

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father, when he shall have put down all rule, and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. Granted that the passage relates to our Lord's human nature, we do not deny that the words are spoken of Him who endured the cross and is commanded to sit afterwards on the right hand. What does he mean then by saying, "for he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet"? Is the Lord to reign only until His enemies begin to be under His feet, and once they are under His feet will He cease to reign? Of course His reign will then commence in its fulness when His enemies begin to be under His feet. David also in the fourth Song of Ascents speaks thus, "Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look unto the Lord our God, until he have mercy upon us. Will the prophet, then, look unto the Lord until he obtain mercy, and when mercy is obtained will he turn his eyes down to the ground? although elsewhere he says, "Mine eyes fail for thy salvation, and for the word of thy righteousness. I could accumulate countless instances of this usage, and cover the verbosity of our assailant with a cloud of proofs;

I shall, however, add only a few, and leave the reader to discover like ones for himself.

7. The word of God says in Genesis, "And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and the rings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem, and lost them until this day. Likewise at the end of Deuteronomy, "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in the valley, in the land of Moab over against Beth-peor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. We must certainly understand by this day

the time of the composition of the history, whether you prefer the view that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch or that Ezra re-edited it. In either case I make no objection. The question now is whether the words unto this day are to be referred to the time of publishing or writing the books, and if so it is for him to show, now that so many years have rolled away since that day, that either the idols hidden beneath the oak have been found, or the grave of Moses discovered; for he obstinately maintains that what does not happen so long as the point of time indicated by until and unto has not been attained, begins to be when that point has been reached.

He would do well to pay heed to the idiom of Holy Scripture, and understand with us, (it was here he stuck in the mud) that some things which might seem ambiguous if not expressed are plainly intimated, while others are left to the exercise of our intellect. For if, while the event was still fresh in memory and men were living who had seen Moses, it was possible for his grave to be unknown, much more may this be the case after the lapse of so many ages. And in the same way must we interpret what we are told concerning Joseph. The Evangelist pointed out a circumstance which might have given rise to some scandal, namely, that Mary was not known by her husband until she was delivered, and he did so that we might be the more certain that she from whom Joseph refrained while there was room to doubt the import of the vision was not known after her delivery.

8. In short, what I want to know is why Joseph refrained until the day of her delivery? Helvidius will of course reply, because he heard the angel say, "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And in turn we rejoin that he had certainly heard him say, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife. The reason why he was forbidden to forsake his wife was that he might not think her an adulteress. Is it true then, that he was ordered not to have intercourse with his wife? Is it not plain that the warning was given him that he might not be separated from her? And could the just man dare, he says, to think of approaching her, when he heard that the Son of God was in her womb? Excellent! We are to believe then that the same man who gave so much credit to a dream that he did not dare to touch his wife, yet afterwards, when he had learnt from the shepherds that the angel of the Lord had come from heaven and said to them, "Be not afraid: for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people, for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord; and when the heavenly host had joined with him in the chorus "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men of good will;

and when he had seen just Simeon embrace the infant and exclaim, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart, O Lord, according to thy word in peace: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation; and when he had seen Anna the prophetess, the Magi, the Star, Herod, the angels; Helvidius, I say, would have us believe that Joseph, though well acquainted with such surprising wonders, dared to touch the temple of God, the abode of the Holy Ghost, the mother of his Lord? Mary at all events "kept all these sayings in her heart. You cannot for shame say Joseph did not know of them, for Luke tells us, "His father and mother were marvelling

at the things which were spoken concerning Him. And yet you with marvellous effrontery contend that the reading of the Greek manuscripts is corrupt, although it is that which nearly all the Greek writers have left us in their books, and not only so, but several of the Latin writers have taken the words the same way. Nor need we now consider the variations in the copies, since the whole record both of the Old and New Testament has since that time been translated into Latin, and we must believe that the water of the fountain flows purer than that of the stream.

9. Helvidius will answer, "What you say, is in my opinion mere trifling. Your arguments are so much waste of time, and the discussion shows more subtlety than truth. Why could not Scripture say, as it said of Thamar and Judah, 'And he took his wife, and knew her again no more'? Could not Matthew find words to express his meaning? 'He knew her not,' he says, 'until she brought forth a son.' He did then, after her delivery, know her, whom he had refrained from knowing until she was delivered."

10. If you are so contentious, your own thoughts shall now prove your master. You must not allow any time to intervene between delivery and intercourse. You must not say, "If a woman conceive seed and bear a man child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as in the days of the separation of her sickness shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days. She shall touch no hallowed thing," and so forth. On your showing, Joseph must at once approach, her, and be subject to Jeremiah's reproof, "They were as mad horses in respect of women: every one neighed after his neighbour's wife." Otherwise, how can the words stand good, "he knew her not, till she had brought forth a son," if he waits after the time of another purifying has expired, if his lust must brook another long delay of forty days? The mother must go unpurged from her child-bed taint, and the wailing infant be attended to by the midwives, while the husband clasps his exhausted wife. Thus forsooth must their married life begin so that the Evangelist may not be convicted of falsehood. But God forbid that we should think thus of the Saviour's mother and of a just man. No midwife assisted at His birth; no women's officiousness intervened. With her own hands she wrapped Him in the swaddling clothes, herself both mother and midwife, "and laid Him," we are told, "in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn"; a statement which, on the one hand, refutes the ravings of the apocryphal accounts, for Mary herself wrapped Him in the swaddling clothes, and on the other makes the voluptuous notion of Helvidius impossible, since there was no place suitable for married intercourse in the inn.

11. An ample reply has now been given to what he advanced respecting the words before they came together, and he knew her not till she had brought forth a son. I must now proceed, if my reply is to follow the order of his argument, to the third point. He will have it that Mary bore other sons, and he quotes the passage, "And Joseph also went up to the city of David to enroll himself with Mary, who was betrothed to him, being great with child. And it came to pass, while they were there, the days were fulfilled that she should be delivered, and she brought forth her first-born son." From this he endeavours to show that the term first-born

is inapplicable except to a person who has brothers, just as he is called only begotten who is the only son of his parents.

12. Our position is this: Every only begotten son is a first-born son, but not every first-born is an only begotten. By first-born we understand not only one who is succeeded by others, but one who has had no predecessor. "Everything," says the Lord to Aaron, "that openeth the womb of all flesh which they offer unto the Lord, both of man and beast, shall be thine: nevertheless the first born of man shalt thou surely redeem, and the firstling of unclean beasts shalt thou redeem. The word of God defines first-born as everything that openeth the womb. Otherwise, if the title belongs to such only as have younger brothers, the priests cannot claim the firstlings until their successors have been begotten, lest, perchance, in case there were no subsequent delivery it should prove to be the first-born but not merely the only begotten. "And those that are to be redeemed of them from a month old shalt thou redeem, according to thine estimation for the money of five shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary (the same is twenty gerahs). But the firstling of an ox, or the firstling of a sheep, or the firstling of a goat, thou shalt not redeem; they are holy. The word of God compels me to dedicate to God everything that openeth the womb if it be the firstling of clean beasts: if of unclean beasts, I must redeem it, and give the value to the priest.

I might reply and say, Why do you tie me down to the short space of a month? Why do you speak of the first-born, when I cannot tell whether there are brothers to follow? Wait until the second is born. I owe nothing to the priest, unless the birth of a second should make the one I previously had the first-born. Will not the very points of the letters cry out against me and convict me of my folly, and declare that first-born is a title of him who opens the womb, and is not to be restricted to him who has brothers? And, then, to take the case of John: we are agreed that he was an only begotten son: I want to know if he was not also a first-born son, and whether he was not absolutely amenable to the law. There can be no doubt in the matter. At all events Scripture thus speaks of the Saviour, "And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were fulfilled, they brought him up to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord) and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons.

If this law relates only to the first-born, and there can be no first-born unless there are successors, no one ought to be bound by the law of the first-born who cannot tell whether there will be successors. But inasmuch as he who has no younger brothers is bound by the law of the first-born, we gather that he is called the first-born who opens the womb and who has been preceded by none, not he whose birth is followed by that of a younger brother. Moses writes in Exodus, "And it came to pass at midnight, that the Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon: And all the first-born of cattle. Tell me, were they who then perished by the destroyer, only your first-born, or, something more, did they include the only begotten? If only they who have brothers are called first-born, the only

begotten were saved from death. And if it be the fact that the only begotten were slain, it was contrary to the sentence pronounced, for the only begotten to die as well as the first-born. You must either release the only begotten from the penalty, and in that case you become ridiculous: or, if you allow that they were slain, we gain our point, though we have not to thank you for it, that only begotten sons also are called first-born.

13. The last proposition of Helvidius was this, and it is what he wished to show when he treated of the first-born, that brethren of the Lord are mentioned in the Gospels. For example, "Behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, seeking to speak to him. And elsewhere, "After this he went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, and his brethren. And again, "His brethren therefore said unto him, Depart hence, and go into Judaea, that thy disciples also may behold the works which thou doest. For no man doeth anything in secret, and himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou doest these things, manifest thyself to the world. And John adds, "For even his brethren did not believe on him. Mark also and Matthew, "And coming into his own country he taught them in their synagogues, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren James, and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Luke also in the Acts of the Apostles relates, "These all with one accord continued stedfastly in prayer, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren. Paul the Apostle also is at one with them, and witnesses to their historical accuracy, "And I went up by revelation, but other of the apostles saw I none, save Peter and James the Lord's brother.

And again in another place, "Have we no right to eat and drink? Have we no right to lead about wives even as the rest of the Apostles, and the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? And for fear any one should not allow the evidence of the Jews, since it was they from whose mouth we hear the name of His brothers, but should maintain that His countrymen were deceived by the same error in respect of the brothers into which they fell in their belief about the father, Helvidius utters a sharp note of warning and cries, "The same names are repeated by the Evangelists in another place, and the same persons are there brethren of the Lord and sons of Mary. Matthew says, "And many women were there (doubtless at the Lord's cross) beholding from afar, which had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Mark also, "And there were also women beholding from afar, among whom were both Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome"; and in the same place shortly after, "And many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem. Luke too, "Now there were Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them."

14. My reason for repeating the same thing again and again is to prevent him from raising a false issue and crying out that I have withheld such passages as make for him, and that his view has been torn to shreds not by evidence of Scripture, but by evasive arguments. Observe, he says, James and Joses are sons of Mary, and the same persons who were called

brethren by the Jews. Observe, Mary is the mother of James the less and of Joses. And James is called the less to distinguish him from James the greater, who was the son of Zebedee, as Mark elsewhere states, "And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid. And when the sabbath was past, they bought spices, that they might come and anoint him." And, as might be expected, he says: "What a poor and impious view we take of Mary, if we hold that when other women were concerned about the burial of Jesus, she His mother was absent; or if we invent some kind of a second Mary; and all the more because the Gospel of S. John testifies that she was there present, when the Lord upon the cross commended her, as His mother and now a widow, to the care of John. Or must we suppose that the Evangelists were so far mistaken and so far mislead us as to call Mary the mother of those who were known to the Jews as brethren of Jesus?"

15. What darkness, what raging madness rushing to its own destruction! You say that the mother of the Lord was present at the cross, you say that she was entrusted to the disciple John on account of her widowhood and solitary condition: as if upon your own showing, she had not four sons, and numerous daughters, with whose solace she might comfort herself? You also apply to her the name of widow which is not found in Scripture. And although you quote all instances in the Gospels, the words of John alone displease you. You say in passing that she was present at the cross, that you may not appear to have omitted it on purpose, and yet not a word about the women who were with her. I could pardon you if you were ignorant, but I see you have a reason for your silence. Let me point out then what John says, "But there were standing by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. No one doubts that there were two apostles called by the name James, James the son of Zebedee, and James the son of Alphaeus. Do you intend the comparatively unknown James the less, who is called in Scripture the son of Mary, not however of Mary the mother of our Lord, to be an apostle, or not? If he is an apostle, he must be the son of Alphaeus and a believer in Jesus, "For neither did his brethren believe in him.

If he is not an apostle, but a third James (who he can be I cannot tell), how can he be regarded as the Lord's brother, and how, being a third, can he be called less to distinguish him from greater, when greater and less are used to denote the relations existing, not between three, but between two? Notice, moreover, that the Lord's brother is an apostle, since Paul says, "Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and tarried with him fifteen days. But other of the Apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother. And in the same Epistle, "And when they perceived the grace that was given unto me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars," etc. And that you may not suppose this James to be the son of Zebedee, you have only to read the Acts of the Apostles, and you will find that the latter had already been slain by Herod. The only conclusion is that the Mary who is described as the mother of James the less was the wife of Alphaeus and sister of Mary the Lord's mother, the one who is called by John the Evangelist "Mary of Clopas," whether after her father, or kindred, or for some other reason.

But if you think they are two persons because elsewhere we read, "Mary the mother of James the less," and here, "Mary of Clopas," you have still to learn that it is customary in Scripture for the same individual to bear different names. Raguel, Moses' father-in-law, is also called Jethro. Gedeon, without any apparent reason for the change, all at once becomes Jerubbaal. Ozias, king of Judah, has an alternative, Azarias. Mount Tabor is called Itabyrium. Again Hermon is called by the Phenicians Sanior, and by the Amorites Sanir. The same tract of country is known by three names, Negebh, Teman, and Darom in Ezekiel. Peter is also called Simon and Cephas. Judas the zealot in another Gospel is called Thaddaeus. And there are numerous other examples which the reader will be able to collect for himself from every part of Scripture.

16. Now here we have the explanation of what I am endeavouring to show, how it is that the sons of Mary, the sister of our Lord's mother, who though not formerly believers afterwards did believe, can be called brethren of the Lord. Possibly the case might be that one of the brethren believed immediately while the others did not believe until long after, and that one Mary was the mother of James and Joses, namely, "Mary of Clopas," who is the same as the wife of Alphaeus, the other, the mother of James the less. In any case, if she (the latter) had been the Lord's mother S. John would have allowed her the title, as everywhere else, and would not by calling her the mother of other sons have given a wrong impression. But at this stage I do not wish to argue for or against the supposition that Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary the mother of James and Joses were different women, provided it is clearly understood that Mary the mother of James and Joses was not the same person as the Lord's mother. How then, says Helvidius, do you make out that they were called the Lord's brethren who were not his brethren? I will show how that is. In Holy Scripture there are four kinds of brethren-by nature, race, kindred, love. Instances of brethren by nature are Esau and Jacob, the twelve patriarchs, Andrew and Peter, James and John.

As to race, all Jews are called brethren of one another, as in Deuteronomy, "If thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And in the same book, "Thou shalt in anywise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shall thou set king over thee; thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, which is not thy brother. And again, "Thou shalt not see thy brother's ox or his sheep go astray, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt surely bring them again unto thy brother. And if thy brother be not nigh unto thee, or if thou know him not, then thou shalt bring it home to thine house, and it shall be with thee until thy brother seek after it, and thou shalt restore it to him again. And the Apostle Paul says, "I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites. Moreover they are called brethren by kindred who are of one family, that is patria, which corresponds to the Latin paternitas, because from a single root a numerous progeny proceeds. In Genesis we read, "And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we are brethren.

And again, "So Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east: and they separated each from his brother. Certainly Lot was not Abraham's brother, but the son of Abraham's brother Aram. For Terah begat Abraham and Nahor and Aram: and Aram begat Lot. Again we read, "And Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife. and Lot his brother's son. But if you still doubt whether a nephew can be called a son, let me give you an instance. "And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen. And after describing the night attack and the slaughter, he adds, "And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot. Let this suffice by way of proof of my assertion. But for fear you may make some cavilling objection, and wriggle out of your difficulty like a snake, I must bind you fast with the bonds ofproof to stop your hissing and complaining, for I know you would like to say you have been overcome not so much by Scripture truth as by intricate arguments. Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, when in fear of his brother's treachery he had gone to Mesopotamia, drew nigh and rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well, and watered the flocks of Laban, his mother's brother. "And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice, and wept.

And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother, and that he was Rebekah's son. Here is an example of the rule already referred to, by which a nephew is called a brother. And again, "Laban said unto Jacob. Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? Tell me what shall thy wages be. And so, when, at the end of twenty years, without the knowledge of his father-in-law and accompanied by his wives and sons he was returning to his country, on Laban overtaking him in the mountain of Gilead and failing to find the idols which Rachel hid among the baggage, Jacob answered and said to Laban, "What is my trespass? What is my sin, that thou hast so hotly pursued after me? Whereas thou hast felt all about my stuff, what hast thou found of all thy household stuff? Set it here before my brethren and thy brethren, that they may judge betwixt us two. Tell me who are those brothers of Jacob and Laban who were present there? Esau, Jacob's brother, was certainly not there, and Laban, the son of Bethuel, had no brothers although he had a sister Rebecca.

17. Innumerable instances of the same kind are to be found in the sacred books. But, to be brief, I will return to the last of the four classes of brethren, those, namely, who are brethren by affection, and these again fall into two divisions, those of the spiritual and those of the general relationship. I say spiritual because all of us Christians are called brethren, as in the verse, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. And in another psalm the Saviour says, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren. And elsewhere, "Go unto my brethren and say to them. I say also general, because we are all children of one Father, there is a like bond of brotherhood between us all. "Tell these who hate you," says the prophet, "ye are our brethren. And the Apostle writing to the Corinthians: "If any man that is named brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner: with such a one no, not to eat. I now ask to which class you consider the Lord's brethren in the Gospel must be assigned.

They are brethren by nature, you say. But Scripture does not say so; it calls them neither sons of Mary, nor of Joseph. Shall we say they are brethren by race? But it is absurd to suppose that a few Jews were called His brethren when all Jews of the time might upon this principle have borne the title.

Were they brethren by virtue of close intimacy and the union of heart and mind? If that were so, who were more truly His brethren than the apostles who received His private instruction and were called by Him His mother and His brethren? Again, if all men, as such, were His brethren, it would have been foolish to deliver a special message, "Behold, thy brethren seek thee," for all men alike were entitled to the name. The only alternative is to adopt the previous explanation and understand them to be called brethren in virtue of the bond of kindred, not of love and sympathy, nor by prerogative of race, nor yet by nature. Just as Lot was called Abraham's brother, and Jacob Laban's, just as the daughters of Zelophehad received a lot among their brethren, just as Abraham himself had to wife Sarah his sister, for he says, "She is indeed my sister, on the father's side, not on the mother's," that is to say, she was the daughter of his brother, not of his sister. Otherwise, what are we to say of Abraham, a just man, taking to wife the daughter of his own father? Scripture, in relating the history of the men of early times, does not outrage our ears by speaking of the enormity in express terms, but prefers to leave it to be inferred by the reader:

and God afterwards gives to the prohibition the sanction of the law, and threatens, "He who takes his sister, born of his father, or of his mother, and beholds her nakedness, hath commited abomination, he shall be utterly destroyed. He hath uncovered his sister's nakedness, he shall bear his sin."

18. There are things which, in your extreme ignorance, you had never read, and therefore you neglected the whole range of Scripture and employed your madness in outraging the Virgin, like the man in the story who being unknown to everybody and finding that he could devise no good deed by which to gain renown, burned the temple of Diana: and when no one revealed the sacrilegious act, it is said that he himself went up and down proclaiming that he was the man who had applied the fire. The rulers of Ephesus were curious to know what made him do this thing, whereupon he replied that if he could not have fame for good deeds, all men should give him credit for bad ones. Grecian history relates the incident. But you do worse. You have set on fire the temple of the Lord's body, you have defiled the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit from which you are determined to make a team of four brethren and a heap of sisters come forth. In a word, joining in the chorus of the Jews, you say, "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren James, and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? and his sisters, are they not all with us? The word all would not be used if there were not a crowd of them. Pray tell me, who, before you appeared, was acquainted with this blasphemy? who thought the theory worth two-pence? You have gained your desire, and are become notorious by crime.

For myself who am your opponent, although we live in the same city, I don't know, as the saying is, whether you are white or black. I pass over faults of diction which abound in every

book you write. I say not a word about your absurd introduction. Good heavens! I do not ask for eloquence, since, having none yourself, you applied for a supply of it to your brother Craterius. I do not ask for grace of style, I look for purity of soul: for with Christians it is the greatest of solecisms and of vices of style to introduce anything base either in word or action. I am come to the conclusion of my argument. I will deal with you as though I had as yet prevailed nothing; and you will find yourself on the horns of a dilemma. It is clear that our Lord's brethren bore the name in the same way that Joseph was called his father: "I and thy father sought thee sorrowing. It was His mother who said this, not the Jews. The Evangelist himself relates that His father and His mother were marvelling at the things which were spoken concerning Him, and there are similar passages which we have already quoted in which Joseph and Mary are called his parents. Seeing that you have been foolish enough to persuade yourself that the Greek manuscripts are corrupt, you will perhaps plead the diversity of readings.

I therefore come to the Gospel of John, and there it is plainly written, "Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. You will certainly find this in your manuscript. Now tell me, how is Jesus the son of Joseph when it is clear that He was begotten of the Holy Ghost? Was Joseph His true father? Dull as you are, you will not venture to say that. Was he His reputed father? If so, let the same rule be applied to them when they are called brethren, that you apply to Joseph when he is called father.

19. Now that I have cleared the rocks and shoals I must spread sail and make all speed to reach his epilogue. Feeling himself to be a smatterer, he there produces Tertullian as a witness and quotes the words of Victorinus bishop of Petavium. Of Tertullian I say no more than that he did not belong to the Church. But as regards Victorinus, I assert what has already been proved from the Gospel-that he spoke of the brethren of the Lord not as being sons of Mary, but brethren in the sense I have explained, that is to say, brethren in point of kinship not by nature. We are, however, spending our strength on trifles, and, leaving the fountain of truth, are following the tiny streams of opinion. Might I not array against you the whole series of ancient writers? Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and many other apostolic and eloquent men, who against Ebion, Theodotus of Byzantium, and Valentinus, held these same views, and wrote volumes replete with wisdom. If you had ever read what they wrote, you would be a wiser man. But I think it better to reply briefly to each point than to linger any longer and extend my book to an undue length.

20. I now direct the attack against the passage in which, wishing to show your cleverness, you institute a comparison between virginity and marriage. I could not forbear smiling, and I thought of the proverb, did you ever see a camel dance? "Are virgins better," you ask, "than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were married men? Are not infants daily fashioned by the hands of God in the wombs of their mothers? And if so, are we bound to blush at the thought of Mary having a husband after she was delivered? If they find any disgrace in this, they ought not consistently even to believe that God was born of the Virgin by natural

delivery. For according to them there is more dishonour in a virgin giving birth to God by the organs of generation, than in a virgin being joined to her own husband after she has been delivered." Add, if you like, Helvidius, the other humiliations of nature, the womb for nine months growing larger, the sickness, the delivery, the blood, the swaddling-clothes. Picture to yourself the infant in the enveloping membranes. Introduce into your picture the hard manger, the wailing of the infant, the circumcision on the eighth day, the time of purification, so that he may be proved to be unclean. We do not blush, we are not put to silence. The greater the humiliations He endured for me, the more I owe Him. And when you have given every detail, you will be able to produce nothing more shameful than the cross, which we confess, in which we believe, and by which we triumph over our enemies.

21. But as we do not deny what is written, so we do reject what is not written. We believe that God was born of the Virgin, because we read it. That Mary was married after she brought forth, we do not believe, because we do not read it. Nor do we say this to condemn marriage, for virginity itself is the fruit of marriage; but because when we are dealing with saints we must not judge rashly. If we adopt possibility as the standard of judgment, we might maintain that Joseph had several wives because Abraham had, and so had Jacob, and that the Lord's brethren were the issue of those wives, an invention which some hold with a rashness which springs from audacity not from piety. You say that Mary did not continue a virgin: I claim still more, that Joseph himself on account of Mary was a virgin, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin son was born. For if as a holy man he does not come under the imputation of fornication, and it is nowhere written that he had another wife, but was the guardian of Mary whom he was supposed to have to wife rather than her husband, the conclusion is that he who was thought worthy to be called father of the Lord, remained a virgin.

22. And now that I am about to institute a comparison between virginity and marriage, I beseech my readers not to suppose that in praising virginity I have in the least disparaged marriage, and separated the saints of the Old Testament from those of the New, that is to say, those who had wives and those who altogether refrained from the embraces of women: I rather think that in accordance with the difference in time and circumstance one rule applied to the former, another to us upon whom the ends of the world have come. So long as that law remained, "Be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the earth"; and "Cursed is the barren woman that beareth not seed in Israel," they all married and were given in marriage, left father and mother, and became one flesh. But once in tones of thunder the words were heard, "The time is shortened, that henceforth those that have wives may be as though they had none": cleaving to the Lord, we are made one spirit with Him. And why? Because "He that is unmarried is careful for the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married is careful for the things of the world, how he may please his wife. And there is a difference also between the wife and the virgin. She that is unmarried is careful for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit:

but she that is married is careful for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. Why do you cavil? Why do you resist? The vessel of election says this; he tells us that there is a difference between the wife and the virgin. Observe what the happiness of that state must be in which even the distinction of sex is lost. The virgin is no longer called a woman. "She that is unmarried is careful for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. A virgin is defined as she that is holy in body and in spirit, for it is no good to have virgin flesh if a woman be married in mind.

"But she that is married is careful for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. Do you think there is no difference between one who spends her time in prayer and fasting, and one who must, at her husband's approach, make up her countenance, walk with mincing gait, and feign a shew of endearment? The virgin's aim is to appear less comely; she will wrong herself so as to hide her natural attractions. The married woman has the paint laid on before her mirror, and, to the insult of her Maker, strives to acquire something more than her natural beauty. Then come the prattling of infants, the noisy household, children watching for her word and waiting for her kiss, the reckoning up of expenses, the preparation to meet the outlay. On one side you will see a company of cooks, girded for the onslaught and attacking the meat: there you may hear the hum of a multitude of weavers. Meanwhile a message is delivered that the husband and his friends have arrived. The wife, like a swallow, flies all over the house. "She has to see to everything. Is the sofa smooth? Is the pavement swept? Are the flowers in the cups? Is dinner ready? Tell me, pray, where amid all this is there room for the thought of God? Are these happy homes? Where there is the beating of drums, the noise and clatter of pipe and lute, the clanging of cymbals, can any fear of God be found?

The parasite is snubbed and feels proud of the honour. Enter next the half-naked victims of the passions, a mark for every lustful eye. The unhappy wife must either take pleasure in them, and perish, or be displeased, and provoke her husband. Hence arises discord, the seed-plot of divorce. Or suppose you find me a house where these things are unknown, which is a rara avis indeed! yet even there the very management of the household, the education of the children, the wants of the husband, the correction of the servants, cannot fail to call away the mind from the thought of God. "It had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women": so the Scripture says, and afterwards Abraham received the command, "In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice. She who is not subject to the anxiety and pain of child-bearing and having passed the change of life has ceased to perform the functions of a woman, is freed from the curse of God: nor is her desire to her husband, but on the contrary her husband becomes subject to her, and the voice of the Lord commands him, "In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice. Thus they begin to have time for prayer. For so long as the debt of marriage is paid, earnest prayer is neglected.

23. I do not deny that holy women are found both among widows and those who have husbands; but they are such as have ceased to be wives, or such as, even in the close bond of marriage, imitate virgin chastity. The Apostle, Christ speaking in him, briefly bore witness

to this when he said, ”She that is unmarried is careful for the things of the Lord, how she may please the Lord: but she that is married is careful for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. He leaves us the free exercise of our reason in the matter. He lays no necessity upon anyone nor leads anyone into a snare: he only persuades to that which is proper when he wishes all men to be as himself. He had not, it is true, a commandment from the Lord respecting virginity, for that grace surpasses the unassisted power of man, and it would have worn an air of immodesty to force men to fly in the face of nature, and to say in other words, I want you to be what the angels are. It is this angelic purity which secures to virginity its highest reward, and the Apostle might have seemed to despise a course of life which involves no guilt. Nevertheless in the immediate context he adds, ”But I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.

I think therefore that this is good by reason of the present distress, namely, that it is good for a man to be as he is. What is meant by present distress? ”Woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! The reason why the wood grows up is that it may be cut down. The field is sown that it may be reaped. The world is already full, and the population is too large for the soil. Every day we are being cut down by war, snatched away by disease, swallowed up by shipwreck, although we go to law with one another about the fences of our property. It is only one addition to the general rule which is made by those who follow the Lamb, and who have not defiled their garments, for they have continued in their virgin state. Notice the meaning of defiling. I shall not venture to explain it, for fear Helvidius may be abusive. I agree with you, when you say, that some virgins are nothing but tavern women; I say still more, thateven adulteresses may be found among them, and, you will no doubt be still more surprised to hear, that some of the clergy are inn-keepers and some monks unchaste. Who does not at once understand that a tavern woman cannot be a virgin, nor an adulterer a monk, nor a clergy-man a tavern-keeper? Are we to blame virginity if its counterfeit is at fault?

For my part, to pass over other persons and come to the virgin, I maintain that she who is engaged in huckstering, though for anything I know she may be a virgin in body, is no longer one in spirit.

24. I have become rhetorical, and have dispotted myself a little like a platform orator. You compelled me, Helvidius; for, brightly as the Gospel shines at the present day, you will have it that equal glory attaches to virginity and to the marriage state. And because I think that, finding the truth too strong for you, you will turn to disparaging my life and abusing my character (it is the way of weak women to talk tittle-tattle in corners when they have been put down by their masters), I shall anticipate you. I assure you that I shall regard your railing as a high distinction, since the same lips that assail me have disparaged Mary, and I, a servant of the Lord, am favoured with the same barking eloquence as His mother.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.