

Popular 1st Century Names

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (Matthew 27:55-56)

You probably noticed the Marys mentioned in Matthew 27:56 – we have Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph (or Joses), and not to mention Mary the mother of Jesus who was present at the cross as well, although not mentioned in this particular verse. We are already talking about a plethora of James, and in the 1st century, Jesus was also a very common name although we don't come across as many in scripture. You will see something about the name Jesus in your homework this week.

This scripture in Matthew also lends to some confusion because we have James and Joseph (or Joses) attributed to this Mary, and then in Matthew 13:55 we have a list of Jesus' brothers who are travelling with Mary, the mother of Jesus: *"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?"* At first you may think it odd that there could be two Marys (possibly related) with sons named James and Joseph. You may be thinking – obviously this is a mistake. Well, if we look more closely at these names you will see why it is quite likely there were two Marys each with sons named James and Joseph.

First let's look at the name Mary. There are 6 mentioned in the New Testament:

- Mary the mother of Jesus
- Mary Magdalene
- Mary the sister of Martha
- Mary the mother of James
- Mary the mother of John Mark
- Mary of Rome (whom Paul greeted upon his arrival)

Why so many? It is derived from the name Miriam – Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron who led the Israelites out of Egypt during the Exodus. She was hailed as a “prophetess” (Ex. 15:20).¹ Miriam was a popular name for girls.

Next let’s look at the name Jesus. In Hebrew it is Jeshua, meaning Salvation, it is the same as Joshua. Joshua of the Old Testament delivered Israel into the promise land. The name means, “Yahweh is Salvation”.² Not surprisingly there are a good number of Jeshuas / Joshuas in the New Testament.

Next let’s take a look at Joses or Joseph. Joses appears to be a derivative of Joseph. There is a long list of Joseph’s in the Bible, approximately 10 men named Joseph, including Joseph the husband of Mary, Joseph of Arimathea, Barnabus who traveled with Paul – his name in Hebrew is Joseph (Barnabus being his Greek name). Likely these men were all named after the patriarch Joseph who was the son of Jacob, sold into slavery by his brothers but rose to power in Egypt providing protection to the descendants of Jacob during the famine that brought them to Egypt. (Interesting to consider that Joseph took Mary and the infant Jesus to Egypt to protect them from Herod the Great Matthew 2:13) Joseph means “increase or addition”³. Very appropriate since the Israelites increased in number during their time in Egypt. They expanded from a tribe of about 80, to a nation of millions four hundred years later.

At this point I don’t want to reveal too much about the name James, but suffice it to say, that James, too, is an immensely popular name derived from a highly significant name in Jewish history. You will learn more about this name and the historical ancestor later.

If you will take my word for it that James is a very common name, and you consider the popularity of the names Mary and Joseph (or Joses) you can see why it is quite reasonable to believe there were two Mary’s each with sons named James and Joseph (or Joses).

¹ Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

² Easton’s Illustrated Dictionary

³ Holman Bible Dictionary