

# Does *adelphoi* ever refer to brothers in Christ not brothers & sisters in Christ?

## THE CLAIM

‘Show where and why, when Paul uses the term “adelphoi” (“brothers”), he means “Brothers in Christ” not “Brothers and sisters in Christ”.’<sup>1</sup>

## THE FACTS

The primary meaning of *adelphos* is 'brothers' as a reference to males who are the sons of one mother. A secondary meaning is 'brothers' as males who share a non-literal 'brotherhood' on a legal, tribal, spiritual, or other figurative basis, or a male who is being referred to with affection (perhaps with a suggestion of filial intimacy), as used in the apocryphal work Tobit 10:12.<sup>2</sup> This usage is established by context.

The broader use of the term as a referent to 'brothers and sisters' on a legal, tribal, spiritual, or other figurative basis is likewise established by context. When the word *adelphoi* appears in a text, the natural reading is 'brothers' as a reference to males unless the context indicates otherwise, and for this reason it is typically translated 'brothers'.

For example, the word *adelphoi* in the following phrases is typically not translated 'brothers and sisters':<sup>3</sup>

- 'Jeconiah and his brothers', Matthew 1:11
- 'Judah and his brothers', Matthew 1:21
- 'Jesus' mother and his brothers' and 'his brothers', Mark 3:31-2
- 'five brothers', Luke 16:28
- 'his mother and his brothers', John 2:12
- 'Jesus' brothers', John 7:3
- 'his own brothers', John 7:5
- 'his brothers', John 7:10
- 'his brothers', Acts 1:14
- 'the Lord's brothers', 1 Corinthians 9:5

It is significant that the passages using *adelphoi* to refer to Christ's siblings are not typically translated as a reference to his brothers and sisters, even though in none of these cases is there any qualification in the verse indicating explicitly that the *adelphoi* here are males, and even though we know full well that Jesus had sisters (Mark 6:3).

It is also significant that *adelphoi* is not translated as 'brothers and sisters' in 1 Corinthians 9:5, despite the fact that the context is a letter to the congregation of brothers and sisters. No qualification is necessary, since 'brothers' (as a reference to males), is the primary meaning of the word.

Qualification is necessary where a secondary or tertiary meaning is intended, not a primary meaning. Even though the letter was written to the Corinthian congregation, this part of the letter is understood as only referring to Christ's literal brothers. That a letter is addressed to the entire congregation does not necessarily mean that *adelphoi* must be translated 'brothers and sisters' throughout.

## THE USE OF *adelphoi* IN ACTS

It should be understood that this usage of *adelphoi* as a specific reference to 'brothers in Christ' and not 'brothers and sisters in Christ' is not unusual in the New Testament. It is used many times in Acts with this meaning, including in direct address:<sup>4</sup>

- Acts 1:16: 'Brothers'<sup>5</sup>
- Acts 2:29: 'Brothers'<sup>6</sup>
- Acts 2:37: 'What should we do, brothers'
- Acts 6:3: 'from among you, brothers'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> The footnote reads 'In light of the compound phrase ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί (andre" adelfoi, "Men brothers") Peter's words are best understood as directly addressed to the males present, possibly referring specifically to the twelve (really ten at this point – eleven minus the speaker, Peter) mentioned by name in v. 13.', *The NET Bible First Edition*, footnote on Acts 1:16 (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The footnote reads 'Since this represents a continuation of the address beginning in v.14 and continued in v. 22, "brothers" has been used here rather than a generic expression like "brothers and sisters."', *The NET Bible First Edition*, footnote on Acts 2:29 (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> 'Reply 1', p. 70 (February 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Though an uninspired work, it still shows how the word was used and understood in common speech.

<sup>3</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

- Acts 7:2: 'Brothers and fathers'
- Acts 7:37: 'from among your brothers'
- Acts 9:30: 'the brothers found out'
- Acts 10:23: 'some of the brothers'
- Acts 11:1: 'the brothers'
- Acts 11:12: 'These six brothers'
- Acts 11:29: 'the brothers living in Judea'
- Acts 12:17: 'James and the brothers'
- Acts 13:15, 26: 'Brothers'
- Acts 13:28: 'brothers'
- Acts 14:2: 'the brothers'
- Acts 15:1, 3: 'the brothers'
- Acts 15:7: 'Brothers'
- Acts 15:22: 'leaders among the brothers'
- Acts 15:32, 36: 'the brothers'
- Acts 15:36: 'the brothers in every town'
- Acts 16:2, 40: 'The brothers'
- Acts 17:6, 10, 14: 'the brothers'
- Acts 18:18, 27: 'the brothers'
- Acts 21:7, 17: 'the brothers'
- Acts 22:1: 'Brothers and fathers'
- Acts 22:5: 'the brothers'
- Acts 23:1: 'Brothers'
- Acts 23:5: 'brothers'
- Acts 23:6: 'Brothers'
- Acts 28:14: 'brothers'
- Acts 28:15: 'The brothers'
- Acts 28:17: 'Brothers'
- Acts 28:21: 'the brothers'

## PAUL'S USE OF *adelphoi*

Many times in Paul's letters the reference is to brothers and sisters, as determined from the context (typically a greeting or farewell which is addressed explicitly to a congregation).

But Paul also uses the word *adelphoi* (nominative masculine plural), and its declensions *adelphous* (accusative masculine plural), or *pseudadelphois*, 'false brothers' (dative masculine plural), to refer specifically to 'brothers in Christ' as opposed to 'brothers and sisters in Christ' in the following places:

- 2 Corinthians 8:23: *adelphoi*, referring to the messengers of the ecclesia, the context indicating that this refers to three men. One is 'Titus' (verse 16), one is 'the brother who is praised by all the ecclesias (verse 18), also referred to as 'this brother' (verse 19), and the third is 'our brother' whom 'we are sending with them (verse 22)
- 2 Corinthians 9:3: *adelphous*, referring to the same messengers of the ecclesia already identified in the previous chapter as three men (see above)
- 2 Corinthians 9:5: *adelphous*, referring to the same messengers of the ecclesia as verse 3
- 2 Corinthians 11:9: *adelphoi*, referring to the 'brothers' from Macedonia
- 2 Corinthians 11:26: *pseudadelphois*, referring to 'false brothers' in Paul's list of dangers he has encountered
- Galatians 1:2: *adelphoi*, referring to the brothers who are with Paul at the time of his writing the epistle
- Galatians 2:4: *pseudadelphous*, referring to 'false brothers' who were brought in secretly to spy on Paul
- Philippians 4:21: *adelphoi*, referring to the brothers who are with Paul at the time of his writing the epistle
- 1 Timothy 5:1: *adelphous*, referring to 'the younger men'
- 1 Timothy 6:2: *adelphoi*, referring to Christian masters
- Hebrews 2:12: *adelphous*, quoting Psalm 22:22 which refers to males

The New English Translation (a standard modern translation which is inclusive of non-gendered terms), translates *adelphoi* as 'brothers' in each of the verses cited above, even though the NET also recognizes that *adelphoi* can mean 'brothers and sisters' and translates it as such overwhelmingly in Paul's letters.

(Jonathan Burke, 2009)

<sup>7</sup> The footnote reads 'It is not clear from a historical standpoint (but it is unlikely) that women would have been involved in the selection process too. For this reason the translation "brothers" has been retained, rather than "brothers and sisters" (used in contexts where both male and female believers are clearly addressed).', *The NET Bible First Edition*, footnote on Acts 6:3 (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).