

My Neighbor Said:

“How Was Mary Related to Her Kinswoman Elizabeth?”

We know that Mary and Elizabeth were related because the Angel Gabriel made this part of the Annunciation message: “And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren” (Luke 1:36).

In this verse, Gabriel tells us that Elizabeth was Mary’s *suggenes* (pronounced “soo-gen-ays”), which is often translated as “kinswoman.” Elizabeth was the wife of Zechariah, a priest of the tribe of Aaron; she herself was also a descendant of Aaron (i.e., her father belonged to the tribe of Aaron), as we learn in Luke 1:5. Luke also tells us that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, who was a descendant of David and thus a member of the tribe of Judah (Luke 1:26–27).

We are never told directly what tribe Mary belonged to. Some have suggested that she must have been from the tribe of Judah, based on assertions that (a) the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23–38, showing that Jesus is descended from David, actually represents the ancestry of Mary; or (b) that Jewish women were required to marry within their own tribe (citing the Book of Numbers) and thus Mary, like Joseph, must have belonged to the tribe of Judah.

But both of these suppositions are incorrect. The first is not supported by the biblical text; it’s simply a theory that attempts to reconcile certain differences between the genealogies of Jesus given by Luke and Matthew 1:1–17. There are better ways of resolving the apparent differences than inventing a Marian genealogy.

The second is also a misinterpretation of the text. Numbers 36:5–12 describes a specific case of land distribution in the settlement of the Promised Land. Zelophehad, of the tribe of Manasseh, died leaving only daughters. Moses directed that Zelophehad’s land should be divided among his daughters and they should choose husbands from within the tribe (so the tribe wouldn’t lose the territory when they married). There is no evidence that this was a general Jewish law at the time of Jesus’s birth.

We cannot deduce the exact relationship between Mary and Elizabeth from the biblical evidence. However, there is a third-century tradition (attributed to St. Hippolytus) that their mothers were sisters. This would fit with the evidence that we have and would logically explain their close relationship.

For further reading: “[Elizabeth](#)” (Catholic Encyclopedia); “[Why Does the Bible Refer to Elizabeth as Mary’s Cousin?](#)” (Catholic Answers); “[The Genealogies of Christ](#)” (Catholic Answers).

Do you have questions about God, faith, life, the Church, or other related topics? Drop them into the Question Box next to the Parish Bulletin Board. We will answer them ASAP and post them in FlockNote and on the Bulletin Board each week.