

Anna and Joachim

The calendar of Holy Days at the beginning of Common Worship doesn't draw much upon apocryphal literature – no surprises there! But 'Anna and Joachim, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary', listed in this way for 26 July, are rare exceptions. Their names and the story of the circumstances of the Virgin's birth occur only in New Testament apocrypha, the earliest written text giving us this information being the Gospel of James, from around AD 150.

The traditional story is that Anna, born in Bethlehem, married Joachim of Nazareth, where they lived as a pious couple. However, they suffered from the sorrow of being childless and this led to a certain Ruben denying Joachim entry to the Temple in Jerusalem on the grounds that men without offspring were unworthy to be admitted. Joachim, grief-stricken, did not return home, but fled to the mountains to pray. Anna realised that her sterility was the reason for Joachim's absence, and so she, like Joachim, called upon God. Their prayers were answered when an angel came to Anna promising that she would 'conceive and give birth and the fruit of thy womb shall be blessed by all the world'. The angel also made the promise of a child to Joachim, who thereupon returned to Anna, and in due course they had a daughter, whom they called Miriam (Mary).

These apocryphal texts, of which the Gospel of James is one of the most significant, satisfied desires for more information about the lives of New Testament figures. There are those who consider that they enshrine sound oral tradition. But modern scholars more readily point to the mirroring of stories elsewhere in the Bible, and argue that several of their narratives are inspired by and modelled on these. In the case of Anna, we see something of the story of the barren Hannah being blessed, in answer to prayer, with the birth of Samuel, as told in the Old Testament; there is even a coincidence of name, since Anna (or Anne), as we know it, is actually the same name as Hannah. The story also includes a form of annunciation, expressed in terms similar to that of the Annunciation to Mary, as told in the Gospels; and there are echoes too of the story of the birth of John the Baptist to the hitherto childless but devout Elizabeth and Zacharias. Anna / Anne / Hannah means 'grace' in Hebrew; Joachim means 'he whom Yahweh has set up', both being obviously highly suitable names for the principal figures in this particular context.

Mary's parents are honoured in the Eastern Church as well as the Western, but in the West they were not given much attention in the liturgy until the twelfth century. Indeed, Anglo-Saxon church calendars, which closely follow the wider traditions of the Western Church, have no feast-day for either of them. In the East, though, the cult of St Anne is traceable to at least the sixth century, when the Emperor Justinian built a church in Constantinople in her honour. In the West, despite their absence from the liturgy, we find the earliest sign of Anna's veneration in an eighth century fresco in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome. Mary's 'family story' entered popular imagination in the thirteenth century, thanks to its inclusion in Jacobus de Voragine's Golden Legend collection, and from then on scenes from Mary's early life, including depictions of Anna and Joachim, were given imaginative expression in western art until apocryphal scenes were restricted by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.

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