

Mary, Fairest Daughter Of Israel, Prepares For Joyful Wedding Day



MARY had grown radiant in spirit, rejoicing in worship, hymns and the sacred statutes.

Editor's Note: The great human love story of the Gospels is that of Joseph and Mary, the virgin chosen to bear the Son of God. But the New Testament account of their story is skimpy. Here, drawing on non-canonical accounts that circulated widely in the early church, an award-winning Associated Press religion writer re-creates their story in all its warmth and glory. This is the first of five articles.

By GEORGE CORNELL
AP Religion Writer

Thou art all fair, my daughter, all grace and comeliness. Thy skin is silken to the touch, thy form like the work of a skilled craftsman. How gentle thou art, my child, how sweet the perfume of thy hair.

Adoration welled in the heart of the girl's aging mother, Anna, as she combed and smoothed her daughter's long, dark tresses. It was a deep-felt morning. For on this day, Mary would be espoused.

How beautiful she is, and pure of soul. Ah, beloved daughter, thou art the treasure of this house. There is no spot on thee. Thy innocence is a garden enclosed, and thou seem over-young for wifehood.

Yet Mary was 15, the proper age for taking a husband. She sat now on a stool, in dewey-eyed reverie, as Anna arrayed her for the ceremony. Her braids had been loosened and flowed over the nape of her neck to her waist.

Lithe, lovely child, thy parents exult in thee, and shall miss the song of thy rising and lying down.

Anna laid the comb aside and began to weave a fillet of yellow marguerites for Mary's hair. The guests would soon be arriving, and all must be made ready.

It was a joyous, yet also heavy time. Mary was not just another daughter of Israel. She had been the sunrise of life to her elderly parents, Anna and Joachim. For 20 years of marriage they had

been childless until her coming. Anna remembered how unceasingly she had prayed in those years.

"O God of my fathers," she had implored again and again, "bless me, as thou didst bless the womb of Sarah in her old age, and givest her a son, Isaac."

Once, kneeling under a laurel tree, she noticed the young sparrows nesting above, and the grief burst from her in a wail.

"Woe unto me. I am not comparable to the very fowls of the heavens; to the very beasts of the earth, for even the beasts are fruitful before thee, O Lord."

Their lack of issue had sorely afflicted Joachim, an otherwise large - spirited and prosperous man. He owned vast numbers of sheep, the greatest herd in the Jezreel valley, and a splendid house in Nazareth.

Yet his affliction could not ease the gall of childlessness.

It was a scandal for a Jew to fail to beget children, a sign of sin and God's disfavor and, in time, the priests had come to scorn his generous festival offerings.

"It is not lawful for thee to offer thy gifts," they said, "seeing thou hast not begat any seed in Israel."

"Now I know that the Lord God of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth greatly blessed us," she exclaimed. "Behold, she that was barren hath conceived!"

The tears of the aging couple, their faces pressed close, flowed together.

"As the Lord my God liveth," Anna had vowed, "whatever I bring forth, whether it be male or female, I will devote it to the Lord my God."

Jubilant and singing praises, Joachim had made a special pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer 100 goats, 10 lambs without spot or blemish and 12 tender calves to the Lord in thanksgiving.

Anna still remembered the first words she uttered after her nine months were fulfilled and she delivered on the 15th day of the month Hathor.

"What have I brought forth?" "A female," the midwife answered.

How swiftly the years had flown since then, and now the girl-child was to be married. Anna's fingers trembled as she placed the ringlet of flowers on the crown of Mary's dark, shining head, and then straightened the folds of her woven white gown.

It was a difficult time, for a mother. She stepped back to survey the girl's appearance, striving to keep the unreasonable sense of loss from her eyes.

Looking at her with an ever-sheltering love, Anna's throat filled, and she felt worn and old and no more of use. The hours that bound them had passed. Come now, my daughter, and take thy bridal seat.

Anna reached out and caught her hand, pressing it, and led her slowly into the forechamber where the maid-servant, Judith, was busily decking the walls with leafy boughs and blossoms.

It was the custom to receive guests throughout the day before the signing of the betrothal agreement, and Mary would be there for all to see, her hair flowing to its full length as a sign of her maidenhood.

How strangely life unfolded. Just as the end of Mary's childhood was being marked with festivities, so was its beginning. That other, earlier celebration had scarcely faded in Anna's memory.

Mary had been a healthy, happy youngster, taking her first toddling steps at the age of nine months. When she was a year old, Joachim had made a great feast, inviting the whole village of Nazareth and even priests from Jerusalem.

In the midst of the jollity and lifting of wine cups, he had stood up, signalled for silence, and then prayed:

"O God of our fathers, bless this child, and give her a name renowned forever among all generations."

"Amen and amen," the assemblage had cried. "So be it."

In keeping with their vow, when Mary was three years old, they had taken her to the Temple to dedicate her to the Lord's service.

They had arranged for her to study there, with other young virgins of well-to-do families, in the care of Anna's kinsman, the aged priest, Zechariah, of the division

of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth. It was they, after the death of Joachim, who had helped Anna guide the child's upbringing.

Mary had grown radiant in spirit, rejoicing in worship, hymns and the sacred statutes, an exquisitely bright - cheeked and devout girl, with glad heart and a voice sweeter than the harps and flutes of the Levites on the Temple stairs.

Surely, Israel had never brought forth so goodly and elegant a bride. Anna moved distractedly about the room, her head swimming with recollections, hopes and fleeting anxieties, as she directed the final preparations.

Two other servants had joined Judith in decorating the house, bringing out extra ottomans and setting out trays of pickled olives, cheeses, fig cakes and other pastries for the throng of neighbors and relatives who would come in a day-long succession.

Anna's lips moved silently, as she bent to adjust a rug.

O Lord, grant that this man that thou hast chosen for her shall deal gently with her. Let him never raise his hand against her, nor speak to her harshly. She is born and nourished in thy loving kindness, O Lord. Give to this woodcutter, Joseph, a worthy heart and good intent.

Anna draped a fresh, sky-blue covering over the couch where Mary would sit with her groom, and brought the girl to the place of honor. There were three knocks at the door, signifying a visitor. Anna walked across the carpeted floor, dabbing at her eyes.

(Tomorrow, Joseph, the Woodworking Groom.)

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Joachim had betaken himself to the desert for long periods of fasting and prayer. And then, at last, it had come to pass. Anna sensed it, like a whisper in her soul, a stirring warmth in her flesh.

She rushed from the house in the twilight and saw Joachim coming from the fields with his shepherds and flocks. Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear, break forth into singing. At the gate of the fold, she met him, and threw her arms about his neck.

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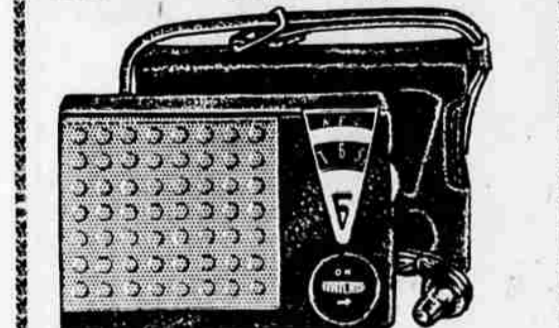
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