

Readings: *Ecclesiasticus 44: 1,10 – 15; Ps. 131(132):11 – 18; Matthew 13: 16 – 17.*

At some time in the second century the work known as the Book of James was written. It has never been accepted as part of the New Testament, but it has been widely read and has influenced the way in which the early events in the life of Jesus and his mother Mary have been told and depicted in art. Scholars differ on the extent to which the contents represent genuine traditions handed down from earlier times. It is significant that some of the details which the Book of James provides in the Nativity stories are found in Orthodox icons.

It is in the *Book of James* that the names of Mary's parents first appear as Joachim and Anna. They are represented as an elderly and childless couple. Joachim wished to make an offering in the temple, but it was refused because he was childless, whereas all the righteous in the Scriptures had fathered children. So Joachim went away into the desert to fast and to pray for a child. Meanwhile his wife Anna mourned, both because she had no child and because she had lost her husband. To each of them an angel appeared announcing that God had heard their prayers and would give them a child. When the due time came Anna had a daughter whom she called Mary (Miriam in Hebrew). When Mary was three years old her parents took her to the temple. (*This is celebrated in the feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin – 21st November.*)

The *Book of James* tells us that Mary "received food from the hand of an angel."

When Mary reached the age of twelve she became one of the virgins who wove the veil for the temple. (*As the veil was sprinkled with blood each year it would have been regularly replaced.*)

The narrative of the *Book of James* continues with the betrothal of Mary to Joseph.

A church of S. Anne was built in Jerusalem in the mid-6th century, and there are 8th century pictures in Rome; but it was not until the late 14th century that her feast was ordered to be kept throughout England. Joachim was not commemorated so much as Anne, although he figures in art from the late Middle Ages. Since 1969 Anne and Joachim have had a shared feast day.

The themes of today's readings are the faithfulness of God to his promises in the Old Testament, and the blessings given to those who are part of that fulfilment – which applies to the parents of Mary whatever their names may have been.