

ON THE MOTHER
OF GOD

JACOB OF SERUG

Translation
by
MARY HANSBURY

Introduction
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SEBASTIAN BROCK

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HOMILY CONCERNING THE BURIAL, THAT IS
TO SAY, THE DEATH OF THE HOLY VIRGIN
MOTHER OF GOD, MARY, AND HOW SHE WAS
BURIED BY THE APOSTLES.

Son, who in Your love inclined heaven and descended to earth;
and put on a body and became man from the daughter of
David!

Mystical Offspring from whom the heights and the depths are
filled,
fill me with your mystical instruction which brought about
two worlds.

Only-begotten Son, who fashioned man from nothing,
restore the discourse in my weary mind that I may sing to You.

Son, who firmly fixed ten mortal senses in the mortal body,
stay my thoughts and bring them to the place of your Father.

Christ, who have given the Spirit of life to man whom You
created,
pour into me your living discernment, filled with wonder.

710 Hidden-One, who are concealed even from the Watchers and
they do not see You,
shine upon me in stillness so that I may proclaim openly
about your Mother.

O You, who healed the unclean man who had been brought
near to You,
restore and heal the body and the soul of those who await You.

Light of Christ, which illumines the eyes that are darkened,
let your light shine forth on my frailty, and I will be
enlightened by You.

Lord of mankind, who wanted to become human in the flesh,
and rested upon and dwelt within the pure mother, the
daughter of lights.

O You, who dwelt with her for nine months and came to birth,
may my mind produce gifts of praise at your mystical nativity.

O You, who were cherished with lullabys by the pure Mother,
may my tongue pour forth all praise of your sweetness.

Son, who have visited us and fulfilled the whole Economy,
grant me to speak of the burial of the faithful one.

Your Mother endured many sufferings for your sake;
every grief encompassed her at your Crucifixion.

How much sighing and sorrowful tears did her eyes shed,
when they enshrouded You and brought You to rest within
the tomb.

How much terror the Mother of mercy felt at your burial,
when the guards at the sepulchre seized her lest she draw
near to You.

- 711 She endured sufferings when she saw that You were hung on
the cross,
that with a spear they had pierced your side on Golgotha;
and when the Jews had sealed the sepulchre in which had
been placed
your living body which gives life and remits debts.

The Way of All Generations

And to this Mother, who endured these things for You,
the end had come to depart to the world which is full of
blessings.

The time came to proceed on the way of all the generations
who have gone and come to the end with great quaking.

Prior to all the generations, Adam journeyed on that way,
and good Seth and the generations of his just sons of
former times.¹

The pure and innocent generation of righteous Noah traveled
on it,
and that of Shem and of Japheth and of Ham, the sons who
were on the earth.

Abraham and Isaac, the good workers, followed them,
and also the righteous who were on the earth from
generation to generation.

Jacob, the just and humble one, went in that way,
and after him the twelve patriarchs, his beautiful sons.

Joseph travelled there and the sons of Ephraim and Judah,
and with them that humble Moses and the glorious Hur.

After him came Joshua, son of Nun, an admirable man,
and Aaron the priest and all the tribes of Levi.

- 712 David the king and the generation of his kingdom,
also Daniel of Babylonia, a man most pleasing,² and with
him the three innocent children in the furnace.³

Jephtha, the just, and Gideon, the great, who divided a people,
and Samson, the chosen one, who lost his life because of a
woman.

The twelve prophets who departed and went with those of
former times;
also their generations with their times were consumed by death.

Gen 5:6-8.

² Cf. Dan 9:23, Peshitta.

³ Cf. Dan 3:19ff; "innocent," *shafya*, see *Homily I*, fn. 20.

Samuel, the pure one, with Jeremiah of great renown,
also Ezekiel, wondrous in prophetic visions.

Isaiah, that faithful admonisher, departed;
all the prophetic company came to an end.

Those of former times departed, and the time of the wicked
sons came;
the Lord descended to redeem them from error.

The Life and Death of Our Lord

He rested upon⁴ and dwelt in her pure womb, full of grace,
this Virgin who behold her story is being told by us.

He dwelt in her and settled for nine months unimpeded,
and proceeding in order, the time came for the birth.

He willed and was born, and in the Jordan received Baptism;⁵
He performed miracles, healed the sick and purified lepers.

He endured the temptations of the accuser,⁶ trampled him,
conquered him;
the children lauded Him, even the infants with their palm
branches.⁷

He chose for himself a company of twelve,⁸ full of light,
and Judas, the crafty evil spirit, sprang up from there.

713 He betrayed his master and destroyed his soul and became a
reproach;
he had fallen from that position of apostleship because he
had consented.

4 "Rest upon," *aggen*, see *Homily I*, fn. 14.

5 Cf. Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9ff; (Lk 3:21; Jn 1:29ff).

6 Mt 4:1-15; Mk 1:12ff; Lk 4:1ff; "accuser," Rev 12:10.

7 In Vespers of Palm Sunday, the Orthodox Church also commemorates
the children, who perceived the theophany of Christ's entry into Jerusa-
lem, as theologians.

8 Cf. Lk 6:12-16; Mt 10:1ff; Mk 3:13-14.

Then our Lord drew near to death, as we have said;
He died and delivered us, and He rose from the sepulchre
and took us up with Him.

The Death and Burial of the Mother of God

Unto the Mother of this Jesus Christ, Son of God,
death came that she might taste his cup.

The Lord commanded the exalted hosts above
and the flaming legions, the seraphim of light.

Choirs of Watchers descended in their raiment;⁹
with a loud voice they sang their psalms.

All the righteous of every generation came and gathered together,
behold also the righteous and the patriarchs from of old!

The sound of that choir of prophets sings praise,
this one to that one, as seers of truth.

The priests of old and all the company of the sons of Levi,
with their sacrifices and their oblations and their offerings.

That company of the twelve chosen apostles stands
and prepares the virginal body of the blessed one for burial.

John, as a steward of truth
drew near and enshrouded the glorious body of the blessed one.

714 Two illustrious apostles, chosen of the testaments,
were entrusted with that treasure of truth.

The righteous Nicodemus prepared the body of her Son for burial,¹⁰
and the body of this Virgin, that chosen son of thunder.¹¹

The pastors and their flocks came to the top of the mountain,
reverend priests and ministers with their thuribles.

9 "Raiment," *schemata*, see *Homily III*, fn. 6.

10 Cf. Jn 19:39.

11 Cf. Mk 3:17.

The winds struck the great dome of the heavens in gusts;
the heights and the depths chanted praise with their harps.

A light shone forth on that place where men and Watchers
were waiting to prepare the most fair one for burial.

As the Lord had descended and prepared his servant Moses
for burial,¹²
so together with them He buried the Mother, according to
the flesh.

On a mountain top within luminous clouds,
Moses, the prophet, was buried by God.¹³

And even Mary herself, on that mountain of Galilee,
was buried by the Watchers and also by the angels,
together with God.

John, the youthful virgin, drew near and embraced the pure mother
who had been committed to him by our Saviour.

He was a mediator between God and men
while the Watchers descended with great ineffable solemnity.

715 In a cave of stone, in the new sepulchre of Nicodemus,¹⁴
they introduced and placed the Son of this blessed one.

And again this pure mother of the Son of God,
they introduced and placed her in a cave, in a sepulchre
from a cave of stone.

All that company of the Apostles gathered together and stood by,
while in truth, their Master (together) with them laid her in
the grave.

12 Cf. Deut 32:48-52.

13 Cf. Deut 34:6. See Rashi on the death of Moses and his burial by God.
Found in *The Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's
Commentary*, trans. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann (Jerusalem).

14 Cf. Mt 27:60.

Ranks and companies, also choirs of the sons of light;
a clamour of Watchers and a multitude of burning flames.¹⁵

Fiery seraphim with wings closely covered by flames,
with legions and their heavenly divisions.

Mighty Cherubim who are yoked beneath his throne¹⁶
are moved by wonder to give praise with their Hosannas.

Followers of Gabriel, a glowing fiery multitude,
are variously transformed in their natures.

Followers of Michael full of movement in their descent,
feasting, rejoicing, making merry this day with their Alleluias.

Heaven and the air of glory¹⁷ were filled with celestials who
journeyed and came down to the place of earth.

A sweet and pure fragrance blew from the thuribles
of the exalted multitude when they met to descend to earth.

The demons fled and the hosts of darkness;
also all the souls that were afflicted were again assuaged.

716 The demons fled the souls in which they were;
there was rest for those who were being tempted by their
cruelty.

15 Ps 104:4; Heb 1:7; 2 En 1:4f, 9:1-2, 29:3(?); 3 En 7, 15, 22. See also
Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati* 33:10: "The Fire of the Divine Word is more
fierce than the fire of the angels, for the angels come merely from the fire
under the throne of glory, the fiery river which Daniel saw. "A fiery
stream issued and came forth from before Him" (Dan 7:10), and of this
fire they are created; but the fire of the Divine Word comes directly from
the right hand of the Holy One, blessed be He."

It is a common idea in rabbinic literature that angels are formed out of
fiery matter.

16 Cf. Ezek 1:4ff. See the discussion of Merkabah imagery: *Homily II*, fn. 31.

17 "Air of glory," see *Sefer Yetsira*, ch.1:10-14; ch.3:2-8, in David R. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1978). For the discussion of "air of glory" in St Ephrem see, N. Sed "Les hymnes sur le Paradis de S. Ephrem et les traditions juives," *Le Muséon*, 81 (1968), 494-99.

The evil demons were disturbed and agitated,
for they saw the sign which only happened because of our Lord.

They saw heaven discharging multitudes of hosts;
the air was utterly sanctified with sweet fragrance.¹⁸

New sounds were heard from all the birds;
which were chanting in ranks according to their natures.

All living creatures made a joyful sound of praise in their places;
all the earth was stirred by their shouts of joy.

The heavens and the mountains and all the plains which were
adorned,
broke forth in praise when the virginal body was being laid
in the grave.

All living creatures made a joyful sound of praise in their
places;
all the earth was stirred by their shouts of joy.

All trees with their fruits and produce
were sprinkled with dew, the sweet fragrance of their
gladness.

All the flowers which were beautiful in their variety,
sent forth perfume like sweet spices sending forth fragrance.

The waters and the fish and all creeping things within the sea,
were aware of this day and were moved to praise.

All creatures silent or eloquent,
according to their natures rendered the praise which was
due.

18 "Sweet fragrance," Song of Songs 4:16; 3 Enoch 23:18. See also Numbers Rabbah 13:2 (Soncino): "In the hereafter the Holy One, blessed be He, will prepare a feast for the righteous in the Garden of Eden, and there will be no need either of balsam or of choice spices, for the north wind and the south wind will sweep through and sprinkle about all the perfumes of the Garden of Eden, and they will exhale their fragrance."

The Glorification of the Mother of God

717 On this day Adam rejoices and Eve his wife,
because their daughter rests in the place where they are
gathered.

On this day the righteous Noah and Abraham rejoice
that their daughter has visited them in their dwelling-place.

On this day Jacob, the honourable old man, rejoices
that the daughter who sprouted from his root has called
him to life.

On this day the twelve just sons of the lame <one>¹⁹
rejoice greatly and are glad in that she visited them.

On this day let also Judah rejoice greatly,
for behold the daughter who has given life, went forth from
his loins.

On this day let Joseph rejoice and the great Moses,
for one young maiden has called all mankind to life.

On this day let Aaron rejoice and Eliezer
and all the tribe of the sons of Levi with their priesthood.

On this day let David the renowned forefather rejoice,
because the daughter who was from him, has placed a
glorious crown on his head.

On this day let Samuel rejoice with Jeremiah,
because the daughter of Judah dropped dew on their bones.²⁰

19 Cf. Gen 32:31.

20 "Dew" in rabbinic tradition is an agent of the resurrection. See G. Friedlander, tr., *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), 260. See also *Midrash Tehillim*, trans. W. G. Braude, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 540: "*The earth trembled*, (Ps 68:9) and at once all the living in the land of Israel died: But the dead came to life as the Holy One, blessed be He, dropped the dew of resurrection on them..."

Come Ezekiel, trained in prophetic revelation,
if the thing that has occurred is described in your
prophecy!

On this day let also Isaiah the prophet rejoice,
because she whom he prophesied, behold she visits him in
the place of the dead.

718 On this day all the prophets lifted their heads from their
graves,
because they saw the light which shone forth on them.

They saw that death is disquieted and flees from within them;
and <that> the gates of heaven are opened again and the
depths of the earth.

The prophets, the apostles, the martyrs and the priests who
were gathered together, also the teachers and the patriarchs
and the righteous ones of old!

In heaven, the Watchers; in the depths, man; in the air, glory:
when the Virgin Mary was buried as one deceased.

A light shone on that company of disciples,
also on her neighbours and her relations and her kindred.

The heavenly company performed their "Holy, Holy, Holy,"²¹
unto the glorious soul of this Mother of the Son of God.

Fiery seraphim surrounded the soul of the departed
and raised the loud sound of their joyful shouts.

They shouted and said: "Lift up, O gates, all your heads,²²
because the Mother of the King seeks to enter the bridal
chamber of light."²³

21 Isa 6:3; 3 Enoch 35-40. On the celestial *Qedussah*, see P. Alexander's translation and comments in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:288-92

22 Cf. Ps 24:7-9.

23 "Bridal chamber," *Gnoma*, see Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 115-30. See also Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 68 and notes on 172-173.

Heaven was full of the sweet music of the angels,
but the depths were troubled, together with the disciples
who were filled with grief.

The church on high and that below cried out with one hymn,
for neither those above nor those below could suffice to
tell of her.

The ranks of that exalted assembly cried out
from this one to that one, that they might shout their praises.

719 The air dropped living rain on the bones
of the sons of the Church, daughter of the Arameans,²⁴ who
did not deny her.

She wove a beautiful crown and set it on her sublime head
on which valuable pearls were laid.

The name of Christ the King who was crucified on Golgotha,
grants life and sheds forth mercy on the one who invokes Him.

And also on me a sinner who is not capable of praising her,
the Mother of mercy, who brought You forth in the flesh.

O Son of God, by her prayers make your peace to dwell
in heaven, in the depths, and among all the counsels of her
sons.

Make wars to cease, and remove trials and plagues;
bestow calm and tranquillity on seafarers.

Heal the infirm, cure the sick, fill the hungry;
be a Father to orphans whom death has left destitute.

In your pity, drive out devils who harass mankind,
and exalt your Church to the four quarters of the globe,
that it may sing your praise.

Watch over priests and purify ministers;
be a guardian of old age and youth.

24 Arameans/Gentiles.

O Bridegroom Christ,²⁵ to you be praise from every mouth,
and on us be mercy at all times. Amen, Amen.

***End of the Discourse of Mar Jacob Concerning the Death
of the Holy Mother of God.***

²⁵ "Bridegroom," the image of the Messiah as Bridegroom does not occur in the O. T. according to Jeremias. See Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*, 4:1099-1106. In Syriac theology, the image of Christ the Bridegroom is an important one. See Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 92-106. Ample quotations from St. Ephrem are included.