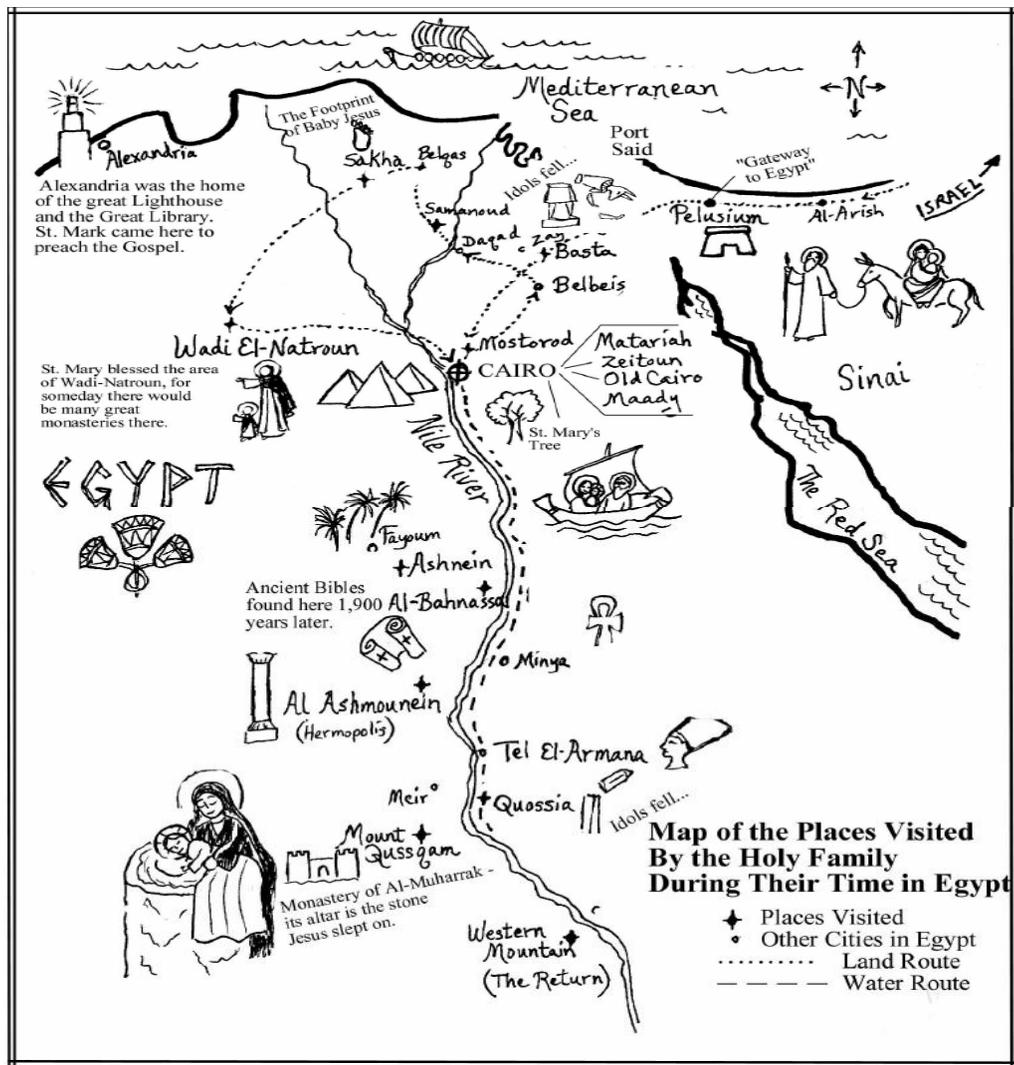


The Holy Family Travels Through Egypt

(preserved by the Copts/Coptic Church)



The second chapter of Matthew tells us that God directed Joseph to take the baby Jesus and St Mary, and flee to Egypt to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod. The Bible does not tell us what happened to the Holy Family while in Egypt, or where they went, or even how long they were in Egypt. The Bible only says that after a time, God sent an angel to Joseph telling him it was safe to return home.

So how do we know about what happened to the Holy Family while in Egypt?

First, almost everywhere the Holy Family traveled, miracles occurred. Statues of pagan gods fell over, water wells suddenly appeared, a child's footprint appeared in stone. Sometimes healings occurred where they had been. People remembered these wondrous events, and told their children, The places, already known to be holy, took on added significance when St. Mark brought Christianity to Egypt. Suddenly it became clear who the mysterious visitors were from years ago, who left behind miracles. Small churches were built over these places to commemorate them, then larger churches were built over them, and in some places, monasteries were built in the area.

Still, so many details were missing from the Holy Family's time in Egypt that the Egyptians were eager to know. Pope Theophilus, the 23rd Patriarch of Alexandria reigning 384 to 412 AD prayed to the Lord to reveal these things to the people, so that they might take blessings from the places. After a long period of prayer, the Pope testified that the Virgin Mary appeared to him, and told him the details of the Holy Family's visit to Egypt, and instructed him to write down all she had told him. And so between the miraculous stories transmitted by word of mouth, and the vision received by Pope Theophilus, we have a fairly clear account of the Holy Family's travel throughout Egypt, which fulfilled many prophecies, including "Blessed be Egypt, My People." (Isaiah 19:25) Some time after leaving their home in Israel, Joseph, St. Mary, and Jesus crossed into Egypt. After traveling through the border town of Al-Arish, the Holy Family passed through Pelusium (now the modern city of El-Farma) considered since ancient times the gateway into Egypt. Pelusium was a large and bustling port city located where one of the branches of the Nile River empties into the Mediterranean Sea during Biblical times, it was the entry point for all land routes that crossed into and out of Africa. Today it is a large and impressive archaeological site, with the ruins of pharonic, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine buildings still being excavated.

The Holy Family traveled onward to the city of Basta, (also called Bubasta) which was a city dedicated to the worship of the goddess Bastis, a pagan goddess with the head of a cat. Thousands of mummified cats were later found there by archaeologists. It was there that statues of pagan gods fell at the approach of the young Christ. One can only imagine how strange these statues of half -animal, half - human gods must have been to St. Mary and St. Joseph. Continuing on, the Holy Family stopped briefly in El-Mahamma (present-day Mostorod), then went northward to Phillipos (now called Bulbeis), Zagazig and Daqado. From there they went to Samanoud, where in the present-day church there is a large granite bowl said to have been used by St. Mary to make bread. Onward they went to Sakha, which used to be called "Pekha Issous," which in Coptic means "The Foot of Jesus." This is because there is a child's footprint in stone, a miracle caused by the very young Jesus. This stone may still be seen at the church that is there. The Holy Family traveled outward to Wadi El-Natroun, where for thousands of years, Egyptians mined a form of salt used for cleaning, purifying, and for mummification. It is here that St. Mary blessed the area, as God had given her knowlegde that someday the area would be the home of many monasteries devoted to the worship of her holy son.

Over the centuries monasteries arose in the area, keeping the light of Christianity burning during times of attacks, invasions, persecutions, famines and plagues. At one time there was said to be several thousand monks and nuns living in Wadi-El-Natrun. Today it is still home to several of the great monasteries of Egypt.

Traveling East, the Holy Family came to the area we know as Cairo and its surroundings. Here they lived in a cave that is preserved under the Church of Abu Serga in Old Cairo. They also took a few minutes to rest in Matariah, at what we call the Tree of St. Mary. The ancient tree (over two thousand years old) still stands, its gnarled and weakened branches supported by wood and metal braces. As with many other locations visited by the Holy Family, there is a well there, from which they drank. At Maady, the Holy Family boarded a small boat and sailed up the Nile River, stopping at several locations, one of which was near what is now called El-Bahnassa. During the Coptic era it was called the House of Jesus, and became a center for many monasteries and convents. An Italian monk visiting the city in the 4th century AD reported that there "were more monasteries than houses" in the area of the city, and that in the city itself, hymns and praises to God could be heard from churches all day and all night. The area was slowly deserted with time, and all but forgotten until the early 1900s, when archaeologists from Oxford University uncovered a huge cache of thousands of papyri written across a period of a thousand years. Some were government receipts, and personal letters, but others were Biblical manuscripts of the oldest pages of the Gospel known to exist. In Samanout, the Holy Family were resting at the foot of a mountain when a large rock came loose and was about to fall on them. The young Jesus reached out with his hand and stopped the rock. To this day a child's handprint can be seen in this stone. Continuing southward into Upper Egypt, the family passed through Hermopolis, a large city dedicated to several pharonic gods. Here also several pagan statues fell at the approach of the young Christ. Today there are rows of Roman columns still standing, and the traces of other ruins of the long ago city. The area is now called El-Ashmounein.

Passing through other towns, the Holy Family made their way to the foot of Mount Qusqom in the area now called El-Muharrak. There they lived in a cave for about six months, in the heart of Egypt. An early church was built over this site within a hundred years of the Christ's visit. The stone on which the young Jesus had lain became the altar. A great monastery now stands over that site, the altar is the same stone; It was while at this cave that Joseph received word from God to return to Israel. The Holy Family made a brief journey south to the Western Mountain, and then began their journey home. The Holy Family stayed in Egypt about three years. It could not have been an easy journey, but Jesus, St. Mary and St. Joseph endured the challenges with joy, for they knew in their hearts that God was guiding and protecting them. And thus the prophesies were fulfilled: "...the idols will fall..." (Isaiah 19:1), "...there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of Egypt..." (Isaiah 19:19), and "...out of Egypt I called My Son" (Hosea 11:1). Indeed, by sending the Holy Family into Egypt for their safety, Egypt was blessed by the Lord: "Blessed be Egypt, My people." (Isaiah 19:25)

But Why Egypt?

King Herod was so angry and terrified when he heard that a new "King of the Jews" had recently been born that he ordered all male children under the age of two to be killed, and so the Lord sent the Holy Family to Egypt to escape the murderous King. But why to Egypt? Why not to Persia, or Arabia, or Greece? Let's take a closer look. In the Old Testament, the prophet Hosea foretold that one day, the Lord would say, "Out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1), and the great prophet Isaiah made several prophesies concerning the coming of the Lord to Egypt, as written in the 19th chapter of the book that bears Isaiah's name. So clearly the Lord sent the Holy Family to Egypt to fulfill the scripture. These prophets were of course speaking what the Lord told them to say. But why did the Lord choose Egypt to be the prophesied land instead of some other place? Perhaps because Egypt was a land of pagan gods, a land where statues were worshipped. The Lord chose it to be an example to the world of how lifeless pagan statues crumble in the presence of the true God.

In addition to being the likeness of an object, a statue also represents an ideal, or belief. And so just as some stone statues of pagan gods crumbled and fell before Jesus in Egypt, more importantly, the ideas the statues represented crumbled at the arrival of the Lord. The idea of false, empty gods fell before Jesus Christ. Egypt was an ancient civilization by the time of Christ. The great pyramids had already stood for almost three thousand years. Religious beliefs of Egypt were also ancient. There existed belief in an assortment of strange gods that looked part human and part animal. Somehow in their hearts, Egyptians were ready for a change; they were ready for the truth. When Christ came to Egypt, their ideas and beliefs began to change. Several decades later, when St. Mark brought Christianity to Egypt, it was quickly accepted, and rapidly spread across the land. The old ideas, represented by pagan statues, crumbled with the arrival of Christianity. But Greece also worshipped statues of gods, as did Rome and Persia. Why didn't God send the Holy Family there for safekeeping, and let their pagan statues crumble? Why Egypt?

Perhaps because in the Old Testament, Egypt had a history of defying God, as shown in the book of Exodus. It took ten plagues and the collapse of the Red Sea upon the army of Egypt before the Jews were able to leave, as was God's will. Yet God knew that the Egyptian people were good, and perhaps by sending His Son there it signaled His willingness to forgive, and to crumble their false ideas on religion. Just as God called Moses out of Egypt to lead His people to the promised land of Israel, the Lord also called His Son Jesus out of Egypt to lead His people - all of us - to the "promised land" that is Heaven. Egypt was greatly blessed by this. But is the blessing only for Egypt? The blessing of Egypt for accepting the Lord applies to all of us, today, yesterday and tomorrow, all around the world. For Egypt represents each of us. Perhaps we were sinful, and defiant of the Lord's will, yet when we accept Jesus into our midst and built in our hearts an altar to the Lord, the Lord forgave us, and our old and false ideas crumbled, just as the Bible said they would.

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