

The History of the Coptic Church

The Holy Family in Egypt

Written by: Dr Medhat Ibrahim
Seminarian Deacon, Theological College, El-Mina, Egypt

Welcome back my friends; through the grace and mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we will continue delving into the depths of our sacred Coptic history to learn more of our glorious and great Coptic Orthodox Church. This article will center on The Holy Family in Egypt.

1. The Holy Family in Present Cairo:

Progressing onward in their journey the Holy Family crossed the River Nile until they reached the city of the Biblical Bethshams(Heliopolis) near Matariyah, the modern suburb of Cairo.

According to Ethiopian Synthar, when the Holy Family came to El-Matariyah, the Lord Jesus Christ took St Joseph's stick and broke it into small pieces after using it to dig a spring. The small pieces of the planted stick soon bore plants known as Balsam. The Lord Jesus told His mother from this Balsam, Maroon would be made for Baptism. Until today, in El-Matariyah there remains a street "Balsam" and another in the name of St Mary the Virgin. In this town St Mary asked for bread and the residents of the town once again refused her request. From the time of St Mary's request until present day, no dough will ferment in this city.

In El-Matariyah there is also an aged, large tree that houses a cave in one of its large roots. Tradition purports that the Holy Family concealed themselves within this tree root cave from thieves attempting to steal from them. In El-Matariyah there exists a Cathedral in the name of St Mary the Virgin.

The Holy Family next traveled to the location where the Church of the Blessed Virgin in the Harat Zuwaila of Cairo now stands. They passed through the suburb of Zaitoon. The Virgin Mary has appeared for multitudes in several distinguishable shapes upon her church in Zaitoon from



The Crypt of Virgin Mary Church - Gabal El-Tair - Samalout

April 2, 1968.

Harat Zuwaila is situated in the northeastern district of Cairo. Annexed to this church is the Convent of Nuns. The nuns say that when the Holy Family rested there, the Lord Jesus Christ blessed the water of the well and the blessed Virgin drank from it. This well is located in the floor before the southern sanctuary of the lower church, and the water continues to be utilized for healing the sick.

Journeying southwards, the Holy Family passed the Fortress of Babylon, which determined the route of Upper Egypt. The Holy Family stopped at this location on their return to Palestine.

Twelve kilometers south of Cairo at El-Maadi, on the bank of the Nile River, there is the Church of the Blessed Virgin with its three cupolas. From El-Maadi, the Holy Family took a sailboat traveling southward along the Nile.

The Church of St Mary the Virgin in Harat Zuwaila was designated St Mark's See for approximately 360 years for



23 Popes (Pope Johan the 8th (1310-1320 AD) to Pope Metaos the 4th (1660 –1670 AD).

The churches in Harat Zuwaila today include:

1. The Church of the Virgin
2. The Church of St Marcarius
3. The Church of St George
4. The Monastery of St Mary the Virgin for Nuns
5. The Monastery of St George for Nuns

In El-Maadi, a church is built at the same site where the Holy Family obtained a sailboat to cross the Nile. It is called the Monastery of the Virgin “El-Adoia” which in Arabic means, “pass” as does the name Maadi.

On Friday, March 12, 1976 after completion of the Divine Liturgy, a Holy Bible was discovered floating on the waters of the Nile River opposite the church. It was open to the Holy Book of Isaiah 19:25, “Blessed be Egypt My people.” This Holy Bible is preserved for all generations at this church.

2. The Holy Family in Upper Egypt: Twelve kilometers southwest of Maghagha can be found a village, Ishnin Al-Nasarah. In former times there was said to be as many churches as there was days in a year located within the boundaries of this village. A local oral tradition relates that the waters of a well about 80 kilometers north of the Church of St George was blessed by the Lord Jesus when the Holy Family passed through the village on their way to Baysus (Dair El-Garnus). The sacred well of Dair El-Garnus is situated at the western end of the south aisle of the Church of the Blessed Virgin.

Ten Kilometers in a southern direction on the edge of the



Monastery of St Mary The Virgin, Dornka, Assuit, Egypt

desert is an ancient city of Oxyrhynchus, the present day town of Al Bahnasa. Today Al Bahnasa has only one church, which is dedicated to St Theodore.

Near the ancient Cyanopolis, the present village of Al Kals, the Holy Family took another boat to travel southwards. Advancing 35 kilometers, they passed the Al Tair Mountain, which is almost opposite to Samalut and Bayahu. While sailing past this mountain, a large boulder was about to fall upon the boat and the blessed Virgin became frightened. The Lord

Jesus Christ extended His hand and prevented the boulder from falling and the imprint of His hand remained upon the large rock. When Almeric, King of Jerusalem (1162-1173 AD) invaded Egypt, his army chiseled away a piece of the rock and carried it back with them to Syria in 1168 AD. The Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Al-Tair Mountain was built in commemoration of this visit by the Holy Family.

From Al-Tair Mountain, the Holy Family sailed southward, passing on their journey, the present day Minya, at that time the Rock Temple of goddess Pekhet, called by the Greeks Speos Artemidos. On this site is the present village of Bani-Hassan Al-Asshuruf.

Finally, they passed the Temple of Ramses II, the ruins of which the Roman Emperor Hadrian built the town of Antinoupolis in 130 AD. The village of Shaikhabadah occupies this site today.

Opposite the ruins of Antinoupolis there is the town of Al-Roda which is built on the site where the Holy Family disembarked in order to proceed to the famous City of

Khmunu, the Hermopolis Magna of the Greeks, at the present village of Al-Ashmunain. The ruins of the Basilica of Hermopolis Magna are situated just outside the village of Al-Ashmunian. About 10 kilometers southwards the Holy Family resided for a few days in Mahlaus, the present town of Mallawi. There are numerous Coptic Churches in this town and two are specifically dedicated to the blessed Virgin.



Monastery of St Mary, The Virgin, Dirout Al-Saharif, Assuit, Egypt

Two days further traveling in a southerly direction brought the Holy Family to the town of Kenis (Nikyas, Funkiss) the present Dairot Al-Sharif. The inhabitants of this town were very charitable, and the Holy Family remained there for several days. The Lord Jesus wrought innumerable miracles in this location. All those who had diseases or afflictions came to Him with faith to be healed. Many people believed on Him and the idols in this town were demolished. From Dairot Al-Sharif, the Holy Family traveled via pepleu, the present Beblaw, to the town of Sanabo.

Thereupon, the Holy Family entered the City of Cusea or Ousquam, today known as Al-Ousia. The priests of the idols, who were a hundred in number, pursued the Holy

Family with rods and axes desiring to strike out at them. The Holy Family did not linger in such a town and they continued to travel onward. After a short distance from the town, the Lord Jesus Christ turned toward the town of the violent priests and cursed it and its inhabitants.

Approximately six kilometers west of the town, the Holy Family stopped and rested for a while in the locality of the present town of Meir. About eight kilometers south of Meir, the Holy Family discovered a well. At the location of the well, the Holy Family sojourned for six months in a certain house. This holy place blessed by the visit of the Holy Family, was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin and is known as the Dair Al Muharraaq Monastery. According to tradition, the Church of the Blessed Virgin at Dair Al Muharraaq was the first church built in Egypt.

Also, according to local tradition, the southern most places visited by the Holy Family was ten kilometers southwest of ancient Lycopolis (Asyut) at Establ Antara Mountain Range rising west of Asyut. The Holy Family stayed there in the large rock tombs of the IXth to the XIIth Dynasty. The Church of the Blessed Virgin at Dair Al Adra in Dronka is situated east of the cave in which the Holy Family rested. From Asyut, the Holy Family returned to the site of present Dair Al Muharraaq.

The Return of the Holy Family: On their return, the Holy Family lodged in a cave that is today situated beneath the Church of St Sergius in old Cairo, the ancient Babylon of Egypt. This cave where the Holy Family took rest was a site, which was included in the itineraries of mediaeval pilgrims to the Holy Land.

From Babylon, the Holy Family continued their way northwards stopping at On again. This is near the present site of Al-Matariyha. Here the Lord Jesus was bathed and the well was blessed. A sycamore tree, underneath which the Holy Family was to have found shelter, still stands in a small garden enclosed by a well.

The next place the Holy Family visited on their return to Palestine was Al-Mahammah or the place of bathing. About



three kilometers west of Matariyah on the western bank of the Ismaifiyah Canal, there is to this day a well that was blessed by the Holy Family. The well is situated at the northeast corner of the church, east of the cave where the Holy Family found shelter.

From Al-Mahammah, the next stopping point of the Holy Family was Leontopolis, known today as the ruins of Tall Al-Yahudiyah, near Shebin El-Kanater. Moving onward the Holy Family returned to Palestine along the same route they had utilized to come to Egypt. They passed through Bilbais and crossed the isthmus at Al-Qantara and traveled on the Caravan Route from Egypt to Palestine, along the Mediterranean Coast.

According to local tradition, the Holy Family rested for several days near Gaza in a garden between the Gabal Muntar and Gaza.

When the Holy Family entered Palestine, St Joseph heard that Archelaus reined in Judea under the auspices of his

father Herod. St Joseph was afraid to go there and being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside in the region of Galilee. And He came and dwelt in a City called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene." (Matthew 2:22-23)

The Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt is both a significant and a living tradition for the people of the Land of the Pharaohs. As we see the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt was the spark that spread the flames of Christianity to all regions throughout Egypt. It spread through out Egypt faster than any other country so all Egyptians became Christian in a very short period of time.

We now know how The Holy Family suffered a lot for us for the sake of our salvation. Thanks be to God for He chose our beloved homeland to be his second home and what blessings our land had because of this visit. May the blessings of The Holy Family be with us all, Amen. Remember me in your prayers.

God's Image

From the Holy Book of Malachi 3:3

*A group of women were studying the Holy Book of Malachi. They came to verse three of chapter three, which says, "**He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.**" This verse puzzled the women. They wondered what they could learn from it about the character and nature of God. One of the women offered to find out about the process of refining silver and report back to the group at their next Holy Bible study.*

She phoned a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest other than her curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched, the silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that he needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire, where the flames are hottest, in order to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us where the "flames" are hottest.

*She remembered that the verse says **He "sits" as a refiner and purifier of silver**, so she asked the silversmith if it's true that he has to sit by the fire the whole time the silver is being refined. The man answered that, yes, he not only has to sit there holding the silver, but he must keep his eyes on it the entire time because if it is left even a moment too long in the flames, it will be destroyed.*

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and said, "Oh, that's easy-when I can see my image in it."

If today you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God will not take His eyes off you, nor will He leave you there a moment too long. He is nearby, watching you carefully . . . waiting to see His image in you.

(Author unknown)