



His Grace Bishop Demetrius in the News:

Yearly Reinactment of The Holy Family's Journey Through Upper Egypt

ΠΙΧΙΝΟΥΣΕΜ ΑΠΧΙΝΧΩΙΛΙ ΝΤΕ ΠΙΜΕΣΟ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ ΞΕΝ ΦΡΗΣ ΝΧΗΛΙ.

Excerpts from the July 4-10, 2002, Cairo Times

To the sound of recorded Coptic chants, the boat bearing Bishop Demetrius of Mallawi and several other church officials slowly pulled away from the muddy bank. The brightly colored sail bearing an image of the Holy Family drew the boat across the morning-lit waters of the Nile to the village of Deir Abou Hinnis in the annual commemoration of the Holy Family's crossing of the Nile more than two millennia ago.

As the bishop disembarked on the far side, he was met by ranks of white-clad Christian youth from Mallawi and neighboring villages as they start a procession through the village bearing banners and crosses celebrating the journey of the Holy Family through Egypt.

Egypt takes pride in the fact that this is the only country to have the distinct honor of hosting the Holy Family, said Bishop Demetrius. All throughout the Coptic heartland of Upper Egypt, summer is a time of processions celebrating the trip of the Holy Family—a trip that has become central to the identity of Egypt's Christians.

Since the official millennium celebration of the Family's journey in 2000, which brought government sponsorship and recognition of the tradition, the church has compiled a list of some 25 sites where the Family stopped in the course of their journey through Egypt fleeing King Herod's soldiers.

In a speech to assembled church officials and town elders, His Grace Bishop Demetrius unveiled his plans for Deir Abou Hinnis. On the dusty hill outside of town (Kom Maryam) where the procession had ended, the bishop proposed building a massive facility for the June celebration as well as a second one in January marking Herod's slaughter of children in Bethlehem.

Bishop Demetrius is one of the most active bishops in Egypt when it comes to promoting the actual pilgrimage of the Holy Family. While the trip across the Nile River celebrating the Family's arrival in Deir Abou Hinnis has probably been around for a while, it achieved its current status under the bishop's tutelage.

If anything the tradition has shown itself to be remarkably flexible in its ability to expand and meet the needs of people. The Egypt journey has its basis in the Holy Gospel of St Matthew, chapter 2, where the author describes an angel coming to Joseph and telling him to flee with his Family to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. Nothing further is mentioned of their time in Egypt and with the death of Herod, an angel lets Joseph know it's okay to return.

For the Copts, this Egyptian journey is also fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah (chapter 19) from the Old Testament, which describe the Lord coming to Egypt, great calamities occurring, and the emergence of the righteous worship of the one God.

Other than that, however, there was little to describe the Holy Family's journey in Holy Scripture. Around the fourth century AD, there are reports of a popular tradition of pilgrimage to Hermopolis (Ashmonein) commemorating the Holy Family's time there. This was then expanded on by the holy dream of Coptic Pope Theophilus (385-412) which described several sites and miracles that occurred during their journey. The earliest extant document relating



His Grace Bishop Demetrius as a child, with Abba Mina and His Holiness Pope Kirolos

the dream is a 14th century Arabic manuscript now in the Vatican library.

Those few sites have been expanded now to 25, with locations in Sinai, across the Delta, around Cairo and all down through middle Egypt until Deir Al Muharraq,

near Assiut where the family stayed for a time until called back to Bethlehem. Subsequent miracles and sightings of the Virgin over the next several centuries throughout Egypt are often attributed to the fact that the area must have been blessed at some point by the Holy Family and so are added to the pilgrimage list.

The entire area is rich in sites and the old churches and monasteries that were built in Egypt's Christian period. One of the more famous is Gabel Al Tir (Mountain of the Birds), which is perched on a cliff and overlooks the green sweep of the Nile valley, flanked by desert hills. According to tradition, as the Holy Family passed by, a boulder rolled down towards them, only to be stopped by the hand of the infant Lord Jesus leaving a handprint. A church was carved out of rock at the site. According to the Copts it dates to the 4th century and was built by Emperor Constantine's mother, Queen Helena. Experts say it was more likely built 200 years later. A niche in one of the church's pillars supposedly once contained a handprint, but tradition says that it was removed by the Crusaders and carried back to Jerusalem in the 12th century.

Further back in the desert are the caves that stretch for dozens of miles and provided home for



Christianity's first monks and hermits. In the Cave of the Virgin near Deir Abou Hinnis can be found a rudimentary church with faded wall paintings from the 6th century depicting the flight of the Holy Family. The cave is another official resting place for the Holy Family.

Driving along the dusty road from Gebel Al Tir to Minya, the fields are filled with corn and palm trees line the road with the occasional water buffalo and donkey resting in the shade. The road winds through a series of unremarkable villages until it reaches the hamlet of Sawadah. At one time, this village's role as the final resting place of St. Abahor, a 4th century Christian monk should have been enough to distinguish it. Now however, a massive cathedral rises meters from the road, dominating this village of a few hundred Christians. More importantly, the Holy Family may have slept here.



Sawadah's Cathedral

Born up north, Abahor became one of the Christian ascetics that took up solitary life in the cliff-side caves in the provinces of Minya and Assiut. His spiritual reputation grew and eventually he drew adherents and a monastery was founded that lasted until the 14th century when it became a church. The monastery is carved out of a grotto that looks as though it may once have been a Ptolemaic temple.

While people visit the site in the memory of St. Abahor, the local priest (who also calls himself Abahor) says that the Holy Family stopped here as well and has been petitioning to have the sight



Icon representing the Holy Family in Egypt, returning back to Israel. Dair Al-Muharraq.

included in the official list. He points out that the family was at Gebel Al Tir up the road and was at sites down the road, so they must have passed through and probably stopped—why else would such a great saint as Abahor come to live here if the site hadn't already been blessed?

Throughout the Nile Valley and even in Faiyom there are sites with their own oral traditions claiming that the Holy Family passed through and performed miracles. When it compiled its official list in 2000, the church had to sift through the evidence to decide which places made the cut.

They [the Holy Family] passed through Sawadah, but no texts mention it, while other places are mentioned in the texts, explained Bishop Demetrius.

One of the most gruesome massacres occurred in 1997 in the village of Abou Qurqas, when nine Christians were murdered inside a church by militants. While the rest of the world remembers the Luxor massacre of November

1997 a few months later, for the Copts of Minya, the great tragedy was Abou Qurqas.

According to some estimates, more than 15 percent of Egypt's Christians come from the governorates of Minya and Assiut, while the district of Mallawi, according to the bishop, is 25 percent Christian. ✚

Reference:

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Gates of Heaven

After a long illness, a woman died and arrived at the Gates of Heaven. Saint Peter came by and the woman said to him "This is such a wonderful place! How do I get in?"

"You have to spell a word," Saint Peter told her.

"Which word?" the woman asked.

"Love."

The woman correctly spelled "Love" and Saint Peter welcomed her into Heaven.

About six months later, Saint Peter asked the woman to watch the Gates of Heaven for him that day. While the woman was guarding the Gates of Heaven, her husband arrived. "I'm surprised to see you," the woman said. "How have you been?"

"Oh, I've been doing pretty well since you died," her husband told her. "I married the beautiful young nurse who took care of you while you were ill. And then I won the lottery. I sold the little house you and I lived in and bought a big mansion. And my wife and I traveled all around the world. We were on vacation and I went water skiing today. I fell, the ski hit my head, and here I am. How do I get in?"

"You have to spell a word," the woman told him.

"Which word?" her husband asked.

"Czechoslovakia."

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