

## History of the Coptic Church, Part II:

When our Lord Jesus Christ was born, the Roman Empire extended for about two thousand miles in width from the Antonios Wall and the northern borders of France to the Atlas Mountains and the Tropic of Cancer, known as the “Cancer Latitude.” The Roman Empire extended for about three thousand miles in length from the Atlantic Ocean to El.Frate River.

The Roman Empire was one of the most beautiful regions in the world between the lines of 24 and 56 to the North and surface area of one million, 600 thousand square miles. Most of this surface area was excellent cultivated land. During this era Alexandria, Rome, and Athens were the most important cities in the world.

Egypt during this time was a Roman state under the direct authority of Roman Caesar. Also a Mediterranean state, Egypt was self-supporting. The production of wheat, linens, and cotton was unsurpassed. Egypt exported many products to approximately 100 countries, including Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Even with the abundance of exports, native Egyptians had limited freedom due in large part to the many dominating nations who settled there throughout history.

Egypt during the time of the Roman Empire included 3 divisions and about 36 states. The Greek language was the most frequently spoken. Egypt was the “bread basket” for the Empire. It was first among the other states, in industry and trade.

Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, was renowned for its great architecture, stately museums, temples, and its famous Library and University. The Alexandrian Library was one of the 7 wonders of the world. The City of Alexandria was divided into 5 sections containing official government buildings, which included that of the Roman governor. This section included people of Greek, Jewish, Roman, Persian, Syrian, and Egyptian lineage. As mention by Philo, at the time of our Lord Jesus Christ, about 40% of the Alexandrian people were the rich Jewish who worked in industry and trading. This may explain why the Holy Family fled to Egypt.

### **The Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ:**

*As mentioned in the Holy Gospel of St Luke 2:1-7, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the entire world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn..”*

It is known that a general census took place every 14 years in the Roman Empire (included were Egypt, Syria, and Palestine). In Syria, the census first took place at the time of Kerenlios, governor of Syria. During this period of history, Herod was the king of Judea and Augustine was the Roman Caesar.

The calendar utilized in Rome at that time was related to the foundation of Rome and its symbol was “Announbis conditae A.V.C.” Dionysius Exiguus later changed this to the Christian calendar on 526 AD and its symbol was Anno Domini (A.D.).

However, we believe Dionysius to be inaccurate with his calculations by approximately 4 years as he calculated the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ on 754 A.V.C., but Herod, the Elder who killed Bethlehem’s children died on April 750 A.V.C. and so if we add 3.5 years, the duration of the presence of the Holy Family in Egypt according to Coptic history to the date of the death of the king, Nero which was on 4 B.C. We further know that the Lord Jesus Christ was born in 7 B.C., which is the same time at which Kerenlios was the governor of Syria.

A papyrus, dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, which was studied in Kilon University, Germany, revealed that the Holy Family stayed about 3 years and 11 months in Egypt. The papyrus was written by Fayoum in Coptic dialect and mentioned that the Month of Bashans was the most blessed month of the year. Therefore, our beloved Coptic Church celebrates the Feast of the Holy Visit to Egypt on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June each year.

### **The Blessed Lord Jesus Christ’s Birth and the Scientists of Astronomy:**

The scientist Johannes Kepler in 1603 observed that Saturn and Jupiter in the whale’s group become very close together and appear as one star. Kepler reviewed the writings of Jewish author Abravanel who mentioned that the Messiah would appear when Saturn touches Jupiter in the whale’s group and so according to the statistics done by Kepler, he noted that this occurred in 7 B.C. The year of the Lord Jesus Christ’s birth was 7 B.C.

Also in 1925, the German scientist Schnabel read the writings before the Babylon Era, which belong to the Sippar’s Astronomy School in Babylon, Egypt. These writings predicted that Saturn and Jupiter would become very close in 7 B.C. This explains the trip of the Wise Men from the East to Jerusalem.

### **The Christian History:**

As previously mentioned, Dionysius Exiguus was the first in 526 AD to use the Christian calendar. Exiguus purported that the Lord Jesus Christ was born on December 25, 753 A.U.C. However, as all scientists know Exiguus made a mistake in his calculations. By the comparison of the Holy Gospel of St Matthew 2:1 and the Holy Gospel of St Luke 3:1 we can accurately conclude the following: The Lord Jesus Christ was born before the death of Nero who died the spring of 750 A.U.C. As denoted by Yousifous, the Lord Jesus Christ began His preaching at the time of sharing Tebarious Caesar with Augustine Caesar on 765 A.U.C. This signifies to us that when the Lord Jesus Christ was 30 years of age, Tebarious Caesar had 15 years in authority, and with the addition of these 15 years to the beginning of Tebarious authority, we can conclude that the Lord began His earthly ministry on 779 A.U.C. This further proves that He was born on 749 A.U.C. approximately 4 years before the date mentioned by Exiguus. Being impossible to correct on the Christian Calendar, scientists added the years to the period between Adam and the Lord Jesus Christ to be 4004 instead of 4000. Can you then calculate the date of the Lord Jesus Christ’s birth to have been on December 25 or January 7?

As written in the Apostolic Teachings, chapter 18, “you should celebrate the Feast of the Lord’s birth on the 25<sup>th</sup> of the 9<sup>th</sup> month for Hebrew which is the 29<sup>th</sup> of the 4<sup>th</sup> month for Egyptians.” The Hebrew year is less than the Coptic Year by 11 days. The Hebrew Year also depends on the moon’s movement

while the Coptic Year depends on the solar system. Therefore, one month every three years was added to the Hebrew year to coincide with the solar calendar.

When the Romans designed their calendar which also depended upon the solar system, their calendar started with January and ended with December and so December becomes similar to the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Hebrew Year and the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the Coptic Year so December 25<sup>th</sup> equals the 25<sup>th</sup> of the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Hebrew Year and 29<sup>th</sup> of the 4<sup>th</sup> month “Kiahk” of the Coptic Year as denoted in the Apostolic Teachings.

In 1082 AD, Pope Gregory 13<sup>th</sup>, observed that the solar calendar is 365.2422 and not 365.25 as was known so Pope Gregory did the “Gregorian Correction” where the difference 0.0078 day/year for one day every 128 years so he added 13 days placing 29<sup>th</sup> Kiahk on January 7 and every 128 years, the difference will increase by one day so 29<sup>th</sup> of Kiahk will be 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2101 AD and the 9<sup>th</sup> of January on 2229 and so on.

### **The Flight of the Holy Family From Bethlehem to Egypt:**

The Holy Gospel of St Matthew 2:13-15 states, *“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.’ When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Out of Egypt I called My Son.’”*

1. **The Holy Family in Bethlehem:** After St Joseph had received instruction from the Angel of God to take the young Child, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His mother and flee to Egypt; he also took Salome, a mid-wife. The Family stayed for a while in a grotto, known by Bethlehem residents as “Magharat El-Sayyidah or Magharat El-halib” situated southeast of the Basilica of Nativity.

The Armenian tradition asserts that when St Mary the Virgin tried to breast feed the child, Lord Jesus, drops of her milk fell upon a stone that became white. St Paula built a church upon this site in the name of the Virgin, St Mary. This grotto is filled with white soft stones known as the “virgins’ milk.” Some of the stones were transferred to Europe for the building of churches there. The present Basilica was built in 1872 AD and its stones have the power to stimulate the flow of milk in lactating females.

The Holy Family in its trip to Egypt used a donkey. In the Holy Gospel of St Matthew 21:5 we read *“Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.’”*

2. **The Holy Family in the Land of the Philistines:** The Holy Family went first to the ancient Philistine city and seaport of Ashkelon on the Mediterranean Sea where Samson killed thirty Philistines (Judges 14:19). From there, they proceeded in an almost easterly direction to Hebron. Then they traveled to Gaza about 40 km to the west, where the site of the ancient Canaanite stronghold of Gaza was. They took the route that ran parallel to the shore of the sea, and crossed the Valley of Gaza in about two hours. After a days’ journey from Gaza, the Holy Family arrived at the ancient township of Jenysos, today known as Khanyun, a section of the Gaza strip.

By walking continually on this route, they would have arrived at Raphia, the frontier town between the Gaza strip and the Province of Egypt. Raphia had been the battleground of the contending forces of Ptolemy IV and Antiochus the Great in 217 BC. It was conquered by Alexander Jannaeus the Maccabee and annexed to Judea. Gabinius again restored it to Egypt.

Continuing another 44km, along the caravan route of two days of travel, the Holy Family crossed a stream, and entered the Valley of Al-Arish, which throughout history has formed a natural boundary between Egypt and Palestine.

3. **The Holy Family in the Land of Egypt:** Our Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates the Feast of the Lord Jesus Christ's Flight to Egypt on 24<sup>th</sup> of Bashans, which is the first day of June.

The Holy Family would have arrived at the City of Rhinocolura, the present day Al-Arish. Aba El Makram stated that there were 2 churches in the third century in this city.

The next town entered was Ostrakini, which has since disappeared and replaced today by a small village called Straki, which is in close proximity to Al-Arish. Abraham the Bishop of Ostrakini at the Joint Ephesian Council mentioned this city in 431 AD.

At the southwestern end of the caravan route from Judea to Egypt lies the famous city of Pelusium "Al-Farma" which was the capitol of the state of Agstamnike, seaport and key to the country of Egypt.

Jeremiah the Prophet came to the city as referred to in the Holy Book of Jeremiah 43:5-8: *"Instead Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers led away all the remnant of Judah who had come back to live in the land of Judah from all the nations where they had been scattered. They also led away all the men, women, and children and the king's daughters whom Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, and Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah. So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the Lord and went as far as Tahpanhes. In Tahpanhes the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah."*

At the western side of Al Farma, an ancient church still stands today that is considered as one of the most important places visited by the Holy Family.

4. **The Holy Family in the Nile Delta:** During the time of Gaius Turranius (7-4 BC) the Roman Prefect of Egypt, the Holy Family crossed the narrow isthmus Al-Ouantara. Today it exists as a small village along the Suez Canal. It was over this particular isthmus separating Lake Manzala from Lake Ballah that the ancient caravan route continued from Judea to Egypt. This route had centuries prior been traveled by Abraham and Jacob and his family (Genesis 12:10-42).

In the footsteps of the Patriarchs, the Holy Family entered into the Province of Goshen, the present day El-Sharkia Governorate in Goshen. Visom and Ramsis were the cities the Jews built for Pharaoh, extending to the suburbs of present day Cairo City. This explains how Joseph came to marry Asenath the daughter of the priest of On (Genesis 41:45).

The first city the Holy Family visited in the Nile Delta was Bubastis ("Tell Basta") 2 kilometers south of Zaga Zig. They were not well received in this town; therefore, they went a day's journey farther southwards until they reached the town of Bilbais along the modern Ismailia Canal. Today,

there is only one Coptic Orthodox Church at Bilbais, the Church of St George in the north eastern part of the town, about one kilometer from the main road.

In “Tella Basta,” the Holy Family was not welcomed. A spring of water erupted with this visit that became known for its healing properties. It did not heal any illnesses of the people of Basta.

It was mentioned in the vision of Pope Theophelias, 23<sup>rd</sup> Pope of Alexandria that in “Tella Basta” 2 thieves met the Holy Family. One was Tetus an Egyptian and the other, Dimakos a Syrian. They stole belongings of the Holy Family causing St Mary to weep. Also at this city the people refused to provide the Holy Family with any water. The Lord Jesus Christ touched the earth with His Holy finger and soon a spring of water rose from the earth to quench their thirst. The water of this spring is believed to have healing powers for those of all diseases. For the people of Basta though, it provides no healings. From this city, was St Apollo, the son of Yarstos, who was martyred during the Era of Didadianos (284-305).

In Bilbais, there remains a root of a very ancient tree referred to as St Mary the Virgin’s Tree. It has been told that when soldiers of Napoleon tried to cut this tree, it began to bleed. The soldiers quickly fled frightened at this bleeding.

The Holy Family continued their journey northwards until they reached the next town of Sebennytos (Samannud) on the west side of the Damietta branch of the Nile. The local tradition in Samannud relates that the present church of St Abanoub was built on the ruins of an ancient church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, which in turn was built on the site where the Holy Family visited. In this church the relics of St Abanoub reside. The name “Samannud” means the founders of gods and was known for its production of golden idols.

Having crossed the Damietta branch of the Nile, the Holy Family traveled westwards until they reached a place known today as Sakha, situated about 2 kilometers south of Kafr-Elshaikh. It was at this location that the Lord Jesus Christ placed His Holy foot upon a stone and the mark of the sole of His foot remained. It is referred to as “Bikha Isous (in Coptic)” meaning footprint of the Lord Jesus Christ. This stone was discovered about 1986 AD during excavations of a church.

St Simon who stood for 50 years over the Pillar in the 7th Century distinguished the town of Sakha. St Saverius the Antiochian visited this city in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. We celebrate his memory the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Babah.

After Bikha Isous, the Holy Family traveled westwards and crossed the Rosetta branch of the Nile. Continuing onward they saw from afar the Desert of Scetis (Wadi El-Natrun) and the Lord Jesus Christ blessed it and told His mother, “My mother, in this desert, there will reside many monks who will live the spiritual life and serve God as angels.”

The town nearest the Desert of Scetis is Terenouti “Al-Tarrana” about 40 kilometers from the present Monastery of St Marcarius. 300 years following this blessed visit, St Marcarius came to this area and built 2 monasteries, the Monastery of El-Baramous and the Monastery of St Macarius. Now there are five monasteries in this region:

1. The Monastery of Anba Bishoy
2. The Monastery of St Mary the Virgin and Anba John Kama “El-Syrian Monastery”
3. The Monastery of St Mary, the Virgin, “El-Baramous”
4. The Monastery of St Marcarius

## 5. The Monastery of St George in El-Khatatba

**5. The Holy Family in the Present Cairo:** Progressing onward in their journey the Holy Family crossed the River Nile until they reached the city of the Biblical Beth-shams(Heliopolis) near Matariyah, the modern suburb of Cairo.

According to Ethiopian Synchar, 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 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 8<sup>th</sup> (1310-1320 AD) to Pope Metaos the 4<sup>th</sup> (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.

- 6. 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 were 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 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.

Two days further traveling in a southerly direction brought the Holy Family to the town of Kenis (Nikyias, 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 Muharraq Monastery. According to tradition, the Church of the Blessed Virgin at Dair Al Muharraq 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 Muharraq.

**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.