

## **The Journey of the Holy Family in Egypt and Its Representations in Coptic Art and Christian Heritage**

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### **Abstract:**

The details of the Holy Family's journey into Egypt are stated in the second chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew. He is the only evangelist who mentions this story. He presents it as fulfillment of the words spoken by God to the prophet Hosea: "*Out of Egypt have I called my son.*" According to the Christian tradition, the promise of Egypt's redemption was fulfilled by the visit of the Holy Family. When "*an angel of the God appeared to St. Joseph in a vision, saying Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and escape to Egypt,*" Information about their journey comes from physical landmarks, such as trees, caves, and springs that have been touched by the passing of divinity. The journey of the Holy Family to Egypt is one of the minor feasts in the Coptic Church. Because of the importance of the theme, it is represented with a variety of materials in both the East and the West. They may be intended for either decorative purposes or religious use.

**Key words:** Gospel, Virgin Mary, Deir, Iconography, Mayamar, Art, Icon.

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## INTRODUCTION

The journey of the Holy Family into Egypt is a turning point in the future of cultural and heritage tourism coming to Egypt. Among the witnesses for this voyage are artifacts on display in museums, physical landmarks, and literary sources. This non-biblical journey is a unique example of international heritage documented throughout the generations in many historical sources.<sup>1</sup> This paper will help readers to appreciate fully the great cultural, artistic, and architectural heritage of Egypt's Christians.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of the Holy Family's presence in Egypt is rooted in a prophecy of Isaiah, who describes the effect the holy child was to have on Egypt and the Egyptians.<sup>3</sup>

### **Hypothetical Questions:**

What is the historical, cultural, religious, and traditional importance of the journey of the Holy Family? What are the results and importance of this study for Coptologists, and for tourism?

### **Aim of the Research:**

This study aims to shed light on the path of the Holy Family, its historical and archaeological significance, and its importance to Egypt. This is the first study to present a selection of art works, dating from different eras, from the East and the West, depicting this theme. They lead to the conclusion that the theme of the Holy Family has been a source for artists from early times until the present, taking the form of icons, mural

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<sup>1</sup> José Pérez-Accino, "Foundations of Faith: Coptic Christianity in Ancient Egypt,"

*National Geographic*, March–April 2019,

<https://www.arce.org/sites/default/files/documents/National%20Geographic%20Red%20Monastery.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> C. Roberts, "Early Christianity in Egypt: Three Notes," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 40 (1954): 92–96.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 19:1.

paintings, illuminated manuscripts, textiles, and sculptures. The study relied on the survey method. The results of the research show that the Journey of the Holy Family is a very important, well-known, and favorite theme, and a source of inspiration for many Christian artists in the East and the West. The paper is not limited to Coptic art because the Holy Family belongs to all the Christians in the world, not only the Copts. The examples of different styles and schools of art in the East and West will help to demonstrate the differences of perspective and style, and how the same

topic is depicted in different styles. These objectives may help to enhance the flow of religious tourism to Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Coming of the Holy Family into Egypt:**

The details of the Holy Family's journey into Egypt are presented in the second chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew. When the infant Christ was born, the king of the Jews was Herod the Great, who ruled from 37–4 BC as a client of the Roman emperor. He reconstructed the Temple in Jerusalem and established the fort at Masada, but he is primarily remembered as the ruler who commanded the killing of all male children, which is known as the Massacre of the Innocents. According to the Gospel of St. Matthew, when the three wise men (kings) from the East, known as the Magi, informed King Herod of the birth of a king in Bethlehem, he slaughtered all the male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding area under the age of two.<sup>5</sup> The Holy Family avoided the massacre by escaping to Egypt, where they remained until an angel of God told St. Joseph that King Herod had passed away.<sup>6</sup>

St. Matthew is the only evangelist who mentions this story. He presents it as fulfillment of the words spoken by God to two prophets of the Old Testament, Hosea and Isaiah.<sup>7</sup> According to the Christian tradition, the promise of Egypt's redemption was fulfilled by the visit of the Holy

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<sup>4</sup> Egyptian Ministry of Tourism, *The Holy Family in Egypt* (Cairo: United Printing and Publishing and Distribution Co., 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 2:16.

<sup>6</sup> الراهب القس فيليبس الانبا بيشوي نبذة مختصرة هروب العائلة المقدسة من بيت لحم الى مصر و العودة, 1999, دار نوبار للنشر.

<sup>7</sup> Hos. 11:1; Isaiah 19:25; Egyptian Ministry of Tourism, *The Holy Family in Egypt*, 22–23.

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Family, and in this way the Nile Valley became a part of the Holy Land.<sup>8</sup> We are not told how long they stayed or given any geographic information about the journey; not even the Nile is mentioned. It was left to the Coptic tradition to work out the details of the Holy Family's journey to Egypt. Information about their travel comes from physical landmarks, such as

trees, caves, and springs that have been touched by the passing of divinity. These sacred sites are spread across the Delta, and are found along the Nile as far south as Asyut. In terms of written documents, there are the *Mayamir* of Pope Theophilus,<sup>9</sup> the *Mayamir* of Anba Zakharious, the *Mayamir* of Anba Keryakos, the *History of the Patriarchs*,<sup>10</sup> Abu al-Makarem, and the Coptic and Ethiopian Synaxarium. It is possible to chart the Holy Family's journey through Egypt by merging written sources with sacred geographical sites. The Coptic Church recognized an official list of the Holy Family's sites for the bimillennial celebration of the flight into Egypt (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup>

The Holy Family's journey can be divided into four geographical stages:

1. The coastal road linking Palestine to Egypt
2. The Nile Delta
3. The vicinity of greater Cairo
4. The Nile Valley

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<sup>8</sup> Matt. 2:13; Gawdat Gabra, "Über die Flucht der heiligen Familie nach koptischen Traditionen," *Bulletin de la Société d'archéologie copte* 38 (1999): p.40.

<sup>9</sup> Theophilus means "friend of God." The "Vision of Theophilus" was originally written in Coptic; however, the full text currently survives only in Arabic, Syriac, and Ethiopian translations, none dating earlier than the fourteenth century.

<sup>10</sup> B.T.A. Evetts, (1904) trans., *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* (Paris: Patrologia Orientalia.), p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> ا.د. اسحق ابراهيم عجمان (2017) رحلة العائلة المقدسة في ارض مصر، دار نشر ابناء روسيا.



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Antony, the founder of systematic monasticism, moved to the desert.<sup>13</sup> Around AD 320, Ammon (d. 353) settled in the desert of Nitria, west of the Nile Delta. Soon five thousand monks were living at Nitria, each in a separate cell.<sup>14</sup> The desert grew so crowded that Ammon, following the advice of St. Antony, established a second community, known as Kellia (Cells), located deeper in the desert. It served as a place of greater solitude for more experienced monks.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the fourth century AD, there were as many as six hundred monks at Kellia.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, St. Macarius the Great (d. 390) established a community at Scetis, the ancient name for Wadi al-Natroun.<sup>17</sup> Accounts of his life tell us that he was directed to the site by a cherub. St. Macarius founded the monastic settlement that bears his name (Deir Abu Maqar), and established a second community called Deir al-Baramus in honor of two young men from Constantinople who had become monks and died in the desert. First Deir al-Baramous was founded, later Macarius withdrew to the place where Deir Abu Maqar was developed by his pupils. Wadi al-Natroun is associated with many famous desert fathers. St. Pishoi, now commonly called Bishoi,

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<sup>13</sup> E. Oram, (2002), "In the Footsteps of the Saints: The Monastery of Saint Anthony, Pilgrimage and Modern Coptic Identity," in *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of Saint Anthony at the Red Sea*, edited by E. Bolman (Cairo: American Research Center in Egypt).

<sup>14</sup> O.E.A. Meinardus (1992), *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Desert*, rev. ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press), p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Monasticism is one of the most important factors that facilitated the continuity of Christianity in Egypt. It is undoubtedly the greatest contribution of the Copts to world civilization. The influential life of St. Antony, written by the Patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius (AD 326–373), had a great effect throughout the Christian world. Cenobitic (communal) monasticism found its way to Europe when in AD 404 St. Jerome translated the Pachomian monastic rules into Latin from a Greek translation that had been commissioned for him from the Coptic original. It is worth mentioning that the monasteries are a major source for Egyptian Christian art, especially the wall paintings.

<sup>16</sup> Brakke, D. (2006). *Demons and the Making of the Monk*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Bishop Gregorios, (1991) "Flight into Egypt," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, edited by A.S. Suryal, 4:1117b–1118b (New York: Macmillan).

founded the monastery that now serves as the papal monastic residence. A century later, monks from the monastery of Bishoi established the neighboring monastery called Deir al-Surian (the Monastery of the Syrians), dedicated to the Virgin Mary.<sup>18</sup> This region, which is still an active monastic center, is believed to have been blessed by the Infant Christ during the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. According to some accounts, the Holy Family saw Wadi al-Natroun (located in Behera Governorate, about midway between Cairo and Alexandria) from afar and blessed it, but others say the family visited the area. But it is certain that the Virgin Mary blessed this place, because she knew that it would become a place for serving God. According to the Coptic tradition, on the way from the Delta to Wadi al-Natroun, the Christ Child created a well in the village of al-Hamra, which is still called Bir Maria today. The well had been abandoned for several years, but is now being restored.<sup>19</sup> Wadi al-Natroun is the most significant monastic center in Egypt. The area is full of ruins of monasteries and caves where the early monastic hermits lived. Today, four large functioning monasteries remain: Deir Abu Maqar, Deir Anba Bishoi, Deir al-Surian, and Deir al-Baramus.<sup>20</sup>

#### The Representation of the Journey of the Holy Family in Christian Art

According to the Gospel of St. Matthew (2:23), after the Infant Christ was born, God appeared to St. Joseph in a dream (vision). This was a crucial moment in the history of Coptic Christians, for Egypt became a second Holy Land when it was blessed by the presence of the Holy Family. Today, the sites where tradition claims that the Holy Family took shelter, and the route they are believed to have taken, form a trail of holiness. The Journey of the Holy Family into Egypt plays an important role in the Coptic Church and is annually celebrated on 1 June.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> G. Gabra, (1999), *The Monasteries of the Eastern Desert* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002); K. Innemée, “Deir Al Surian (Egypt): Its Wall Paintings, Wall Texts, and Manuscripts,” *Journal of Syriac Studies* 2, no. 2, <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No2/HV2N2Inneme.html>

<sup>19</sup> د. رءوف حبيب العائلة المقدسة في مصر, مكتبة المحبة.

<sup>20</sup> O.H.E. Khs-Burmester, (1955) *A Guide to the Monasteries of the Wadi n'Natrun* (Cairo: Société d'archéologie copte), pp.13–14.

<sup>21</sup> Gabra, G., and G.J.M. van Loon. (2007), *The Churches of Egypt: From the Journey of the Holy Family to the Present*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

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**Fig. 2. A filler of the ivory throne of Bishop Maximian. An angel reassures St. Joseph, and the Journey to Bethlehem. Byzantine, a gift of Emperor Justinian. Matt. i, 20 ff. Museo Arcivescovile, Ravenna, Italy, 6<sup>th</sup> century**

The period of the Holy Family’s stay in Egypt is very difficult to define with precision; historians waver between one and four years.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the case may be, another heavenly message was presented to St. Joseph—the fiancé of the Virgin Mary—in a dream (vision), telling him that it was

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<sup>22</sup> According to the papyrus published at Cologne University in 1997, the Holy Family stayed in Egypt for three years and eleven months.

<https://coptic-treasures.com/book/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%B6/>

safe to return to Palestine.<sup>23</sup> This message, like the earlier one, was also in fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Holy Family's stay in Egypt is central to the Coptic religious imagination, neither the length of their stay nor the route they followed is mentioned in the Gospels. This information appeared first in the writings of second-century bishops, who spoke of the Journey of the Holy Family as a fulfillment of the prediction of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament. Later, medieval manuscripts with fascinating titles such as "The Sacred Vision of Patriarch Theophilus" (the patriarch of Alexandria, who ruled in AD 385–412<sup>25</sup> and "The Infancy Gospels in Arabic" added more details, all of which were rounded out by oral traditions, apparitions, and miracles reflecting the physical landmarks found along the Family's supposed route.<sup>26</sup>

The journey is not only commemorated through the archeological and heritage sites, but is also well represented in the minor arts of both Eastern and Western Christianity.

### **The Depiction of the Journey of the Holy Family in Coptic Art:**

Coptic art is a distinctive art associated with Christianity in Egypt, although some art historians define it much more broadly to include works of art created by pagans as well as Christians in the late fourth and fifth centuries. The iconographic representation of the Journey of the Holy Family has remained largely unchanged for almost fifteen hundred years. It shows the Virgin Mary holding the Infant Christ, riding a donkey, and St. Joseph on foot. The route of the Holy Family is depicted in two different ways: either the journey to Egypt or the journey back to Nazareth. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate these two journeys.

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<sup>23</sup> Matt. 2:20.

<sup>24</sup> "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1).

<sup>25</sup> F.M. Guirguis, (2010) "The Vision of Theophilus: Resistance through Orality among the Persecuted Copts" (PhD dissertation, Florida Atlantic University); W. Harmless, (2004) *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford University Press).

<sup>26</sup> O.E.A. Meinardus, (1963) *In the Steps of the Holy Family: From Bethlehem to Upper Egypt* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'aref); Ibrahim, M. (2002). "The History of the Coptic Church: The Holy Family in Egypt." *Mighty Arrows Magazine*, June, pp. 7–10.

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### Icons:

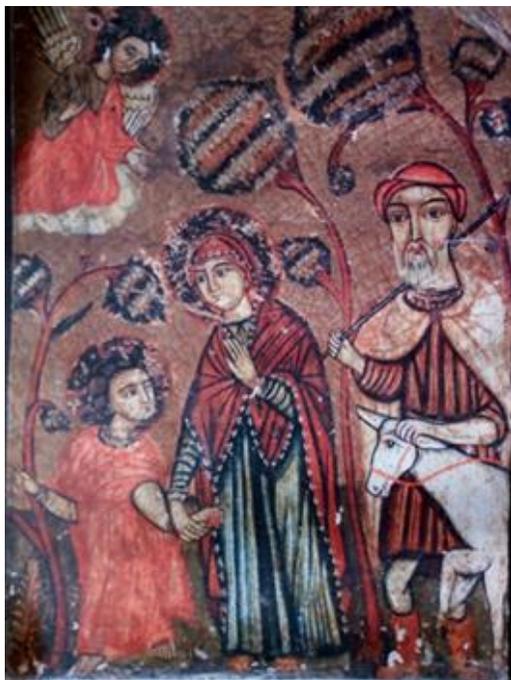
Most of the icons that date from the second half of the eighteenth century bear the signature of “Ibrahim al-Nasikh,” either alone or in association with “Yuhanna al-Armany al-Qudsi.” Many painters were influenced by the style of these two iconographers. A third painter, “Anastasi al-Rumi al-Qudsi,” was responsible for most of the icon painting in the mid-nineteenth century (Fig. 7). Many of these icons are preserved in the Coptic Museum and the churches of Old Cairo.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 3 shows a unique example found in Dayr al-Muharraq. It represents the journey back to Bethlehem. The Virgin Mary is depicted full length holding the hand of Christ; behind her, St. Joseph is depicted beside a white donkey. The Virgin Mary and Christ have halos around their heads, whereas St. Joseph is represented in farmer’s clothes. The Virgin Mary is bending towards Christ, who is looking backwards to his mother.<sup>28</sup> The Virgin Mary is wearing a dark red maphorion with edging over a blue-grey tunic and red shoes. Christ is represented with short brown hair. He wears a red tunic. Above his head the angel of God is protecting and guiding them.

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<sup>27</sup> A. Butler, (1970) *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press.); G. Gabra and M. Eaton-Krauss, (2006) *The Treasures of Coptic Art in the Coptic Museum and Churches of Old Cairo* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press).

<sup>28</sup> R. Coquin, (1991) “Dayr al-Muharraq,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A.S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan,), 3:pp.840–841.

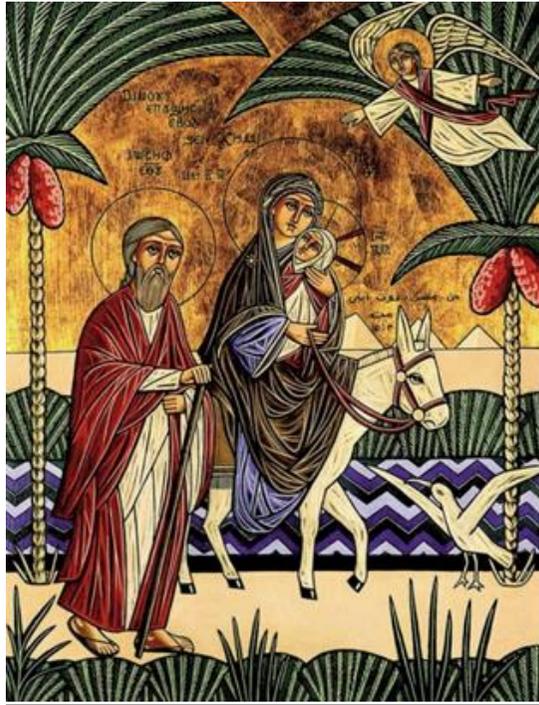


**Fig. 3. An icon by Yuhanna al-Armany, dating to the 1760s, is preserved in Deir al-Muharraq. It depicts the Holy Family departing Egypt for Nazareth. © Photo Church of the Virgin, Deir al-Muharraq**

Figure 4 represents the journey to Egypt. The Virgin rides on an animal carrying the baby Jesus; behind her walks Joseph the Carpenter, and the angel guides and protects them. This icon dates to the twentieth century (Fig. 4).

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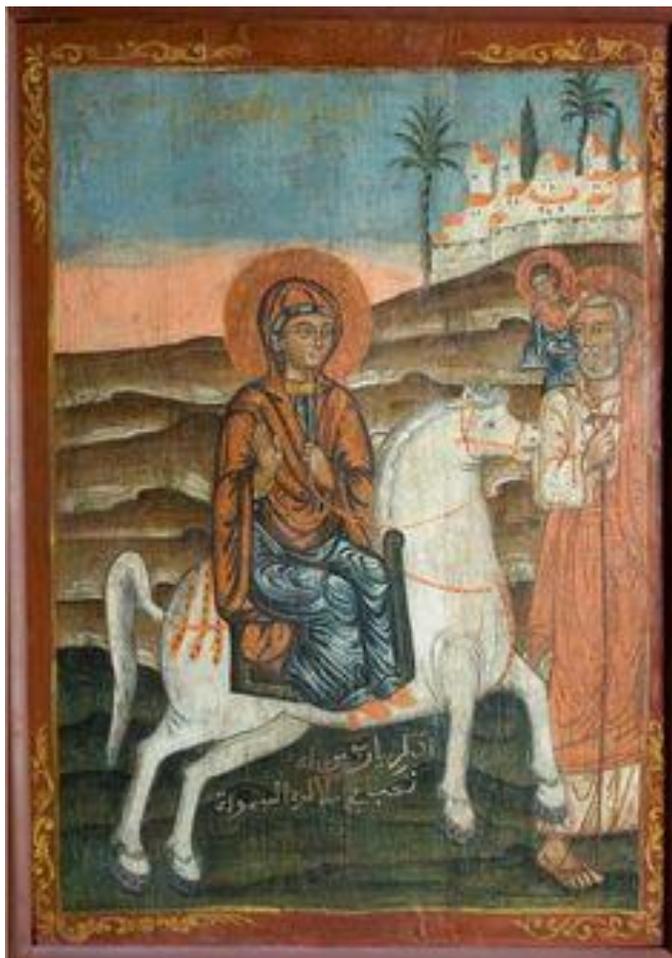
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**Fig. 4. Contemporary icon of the Holy Family's journey depicting the Holy Family traveling between the Nile River and the pyramids, 20<sup>th</sup> century. © Photo Church of the Holy Virgin, Maadi, Cairo**

The icon in Figure 5 is of unknown origin. It is painted on a panel and surrounded with a red-brown border with yellow outline and floral decoration at the corners. The journey is depicted in a green-brown landscape with a blue sky and a reddish sunrise glow on the horizon. In the upper right corner a walled city with white houses and red roofs is represented, with some trees. The Virgin Mary is depicted in the center, riding a white horse moving to the right. Her head, like those of the Christ Child and St. Joseph, is surrounded by a halo. She raises her right hand and holds the reins in her left. She wears a blue and white kerchief under a red maphorion, a blue tunic, and red shoes. St. Joseph walks in front of the horse, looking backwards at her. His hair, beard, and moustache are white. In his right hand, he grasps a tau-shaped staff. He wears a white tunic, a red pallium, and sandals. The Christ Child sits on St. Joseph's right shoulder with one leg towards the front. He turns towards his mother. Christ is wearing a red tunic and blue pallium, and is barefoot. The inscription reads:

“Virgin going to Egypt.” Below the horse: “Lord, remember in your kingdom of heaven him who toiled.”<sup>29</sup>



**Fig. 5. A number of Egyptian sites were depicted in this presentation to highlight some of the sites blessed by the holy journey. 18<sup>th</sup> century. © Photo Coptic Museum**

The icon in Figure 6 is a unique. It dates back to 1849 and preserved in the church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus (Abu Serga) in Old Cairo. It depicts the journey to Egypt with Salome the midwife who appeared behind the Virgin

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<sup>29</sup> Van Moorsel, P. (1994). *Catalogue général du musée copte, The Icons*, Cairo, Supreme Council of Antiquities Press: p. 143.

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Mary. She is drawn in a small scale. Virgin Mary is represented with a crown above her head without a halo.

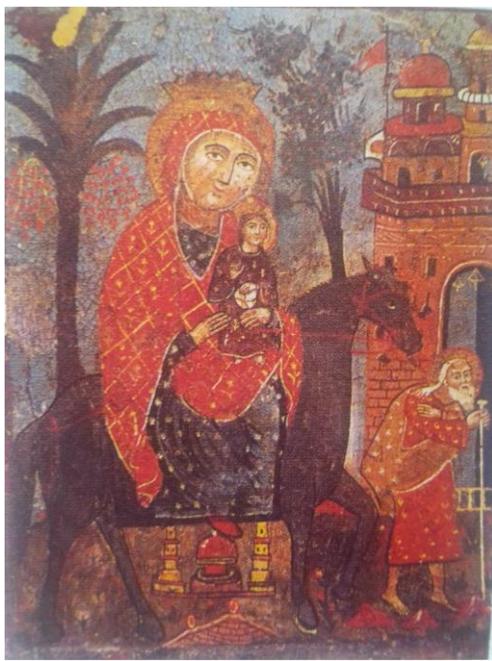


**Fig. 6. Icon dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, Old Cairo. It depicts the journey to Egypt with Salome.  
Photo by the researcher**

The icon in figure 7 is kept in the Church of the Holy Virgin in Musturud, drawn by Anastasi al-Rumi, and dates back to 1840. It represents Virgin Mary crowned carrying Christ child in the crook of her left arm sitting on the donkey. St. Joseph is represented as an old man walking in front of them.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Gabra, G. and Skalova, Z. (2003). *Icons of the Nile Valley*, Cairo: Longman. pp. 144-145.



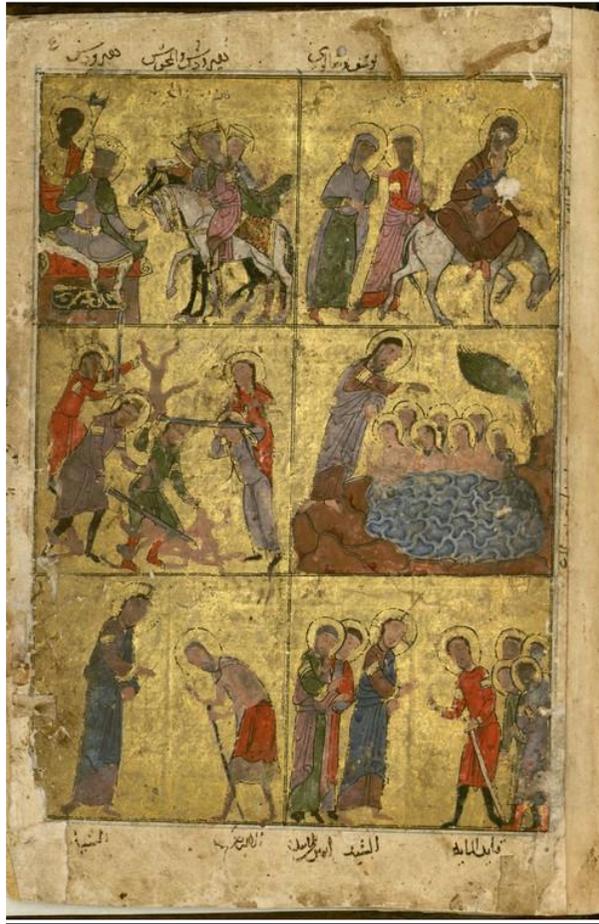
**Fig. 7. Icon in Church of the Holy Virgin in Musturud, by Anastasi al-Rumi, 19<sup>th</sup> century (1840). Photo by the researcher**

### **Coptic Illuminated Manuscripts:**

Coptic manuscripts are like a snapshot of the past. Each provides a unique window. No published transcription of one of these manuscripts can reflect this. Along with their all-important textual content, they also present the art, the life, the history, and even the thoughts of our forefathers. They often depict important biblical themes such as the miracles of Christ and episodes from the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary (Fig. 8).

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**Fig. 8. Third Illumination from the Gospel of Matthew, Fol. 4 v.**  
Image courtesy of library of the University of Fels, Institut Catholique de Paris

### Coptic Textiles:

The Egyptian Christian (Coptic) era produced enormous numbers of textiles that are now displayed in many museums and private collections all over the world. These textiles have come mainly from illegal excavations of burial grounds and mounds. The pieces show a diversity of uses, functional as well as ornamental. Coptic textiles are rich in iconographic

images depicting biblical subjects in Coptic styles. Most designs continued through the centuries.<sup>31</sup>

The piece of Coptic linen and wool shown in Figure 9 is decorated with red-dyed drawings; the central scene is surrounded by people and animals in yellow and blue. The Virgin carries the Christ Child and St. Joseph is next to her. It is currently on display in the Kafr al-Sheikh Museum (Fig. 9).



**Fig. 9. Coptic textiles depicting the Journey of the Holy Family, currently on display in the Kafr al-Sheikh Museum. Image courtesy of Coptic Museum Inv. No. 10517**

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<sup>31</sup> Watterson B., (1988) *Coptic Egypt* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press).

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Other examples of Coptic textiles are on display in museums outside Egypt. Figures 10 and 11 show one in the Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, the State Museums in Berlin, the Bode Museum. The Virgin Mary, holding the Christ Child, rides on the back of a donkey, with St. Joseph behind her. The central scene is surrounded by geometrical embroidery (Figs. 10 and 11).



**Fig. 10. Coptic textile representing the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. Bode Museum, Berlin. Image courtesy of Dr. A. Voigt, the State Museums in Berlin**



**Fig. 11. Coptic textile representing the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. Bode Museum Berlin. Ident. Nr. 4667. 7<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century. Image courtesy of Dr. A. Voigt, the State Museums in Berlin**

**Mural Paintings in Monastic Churches:**

In the Christian era, the monks used abandoned quarries as dwellings. A great example is located in the southern part of a large cave situated to the east of the village of Abu Hinis. This cave church was most probably dedicated to St. John the Baptist. The interior decoration was once covered with narratives. The only surviving ones illustrate the Infant Christ and St. John the Baptist and his father Zachariah. These paintings date to the sixth to the eighth centuries.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately they are damaged. Nevertheless, it is clear from the fragments that the iconographical program is very interesting. In the narthex are some poorly preserved paintings. On the north and east walls are the infancy scenes of Christ. Among these scenes are the Dream (vision) of St. Joseph and the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, which can be seen in Figures 12 and 13. Above each of the figures is a border of stylized plants.<sup>33</sup>

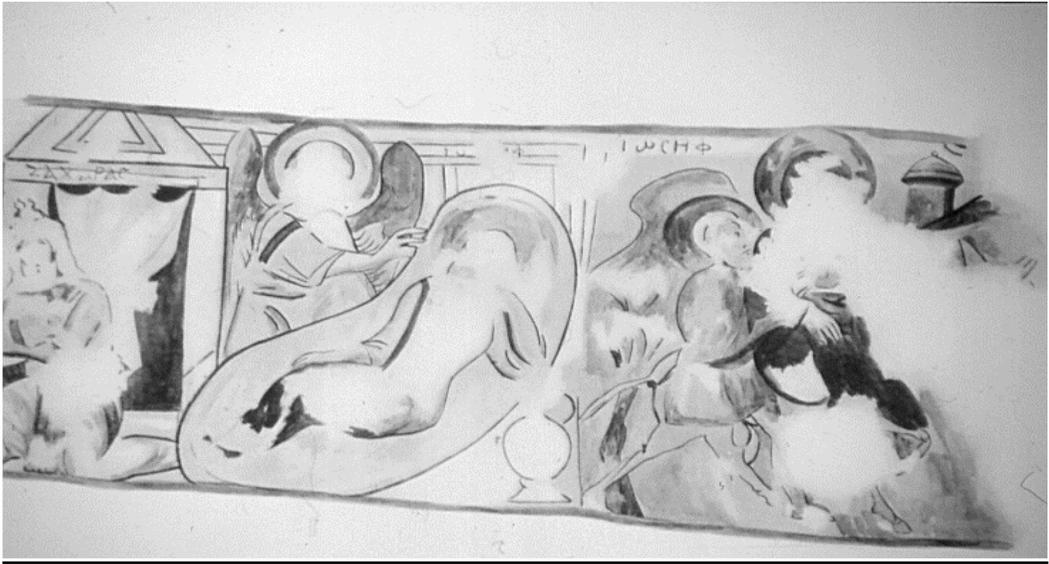
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<sup>32</sup> G.J.M. Van Loon and A. Delattre, (2004) “La Frise des saints de l’église rupestre de Deir Abou Hennis,” *Eastern Christian Art* 1: pp.89–112.

<sup>33</sup> G.J.M. Van Loon and A. Delattre, (2005) “La Frise des saints de l’église rupestre de Deir Abou Hennis: Correction et addition,” *Eastern Christian Art* 2: pp.165–166.

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**Fig. 12. Drawing of the Dream (vision) of Joseph and Flight into Egypt, eastern rock face of the narthex, Abu Hinis. Photo courtesy of G.J.M. van Loon, 2006**



**Fig. 13. The Dream (vision) of Saint Joseph and Flight into Egypt, eastern rock face of the narthex, Abu Hinis. Photo courtesy G.J.M. van Loon, 2006**

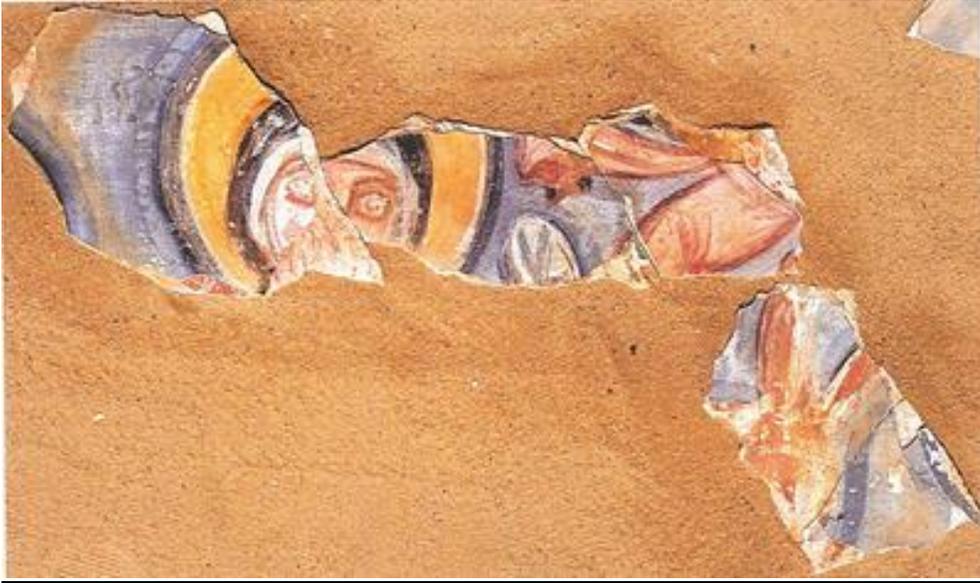
The church in Karm al-Akhbareya was located near Lake Mareotis west of Alexandria. Unfortunately, the building no longer exists, but studies have shown that this church used to have an iconographical program narrating the life cycle of Christ, which could be similar to the iconographical program in the Church of the Virgin in Deir al-Baramus (Fig. 14).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> J. Witte-Orr, “Die Wandmalereien von Karm al-Ahbariya (1993): Malereien des späten 6. Jahrhunderts aus der Umgebung Alexandrias” (PhD diss., Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn).

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**Fig. 14. Fragments of a mural painting from the unoccupied church at Karm al-Akhbareya. Notice the details of the face of the Virgin Mary's head, encircled with the halo. Next to her are traces of the donkey. J. Witte-Orr, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, Ergänzungsband 36 (2010), plate 6a**

### **The Illustration of the Journey of the Holy Family in Western Christian Art:**

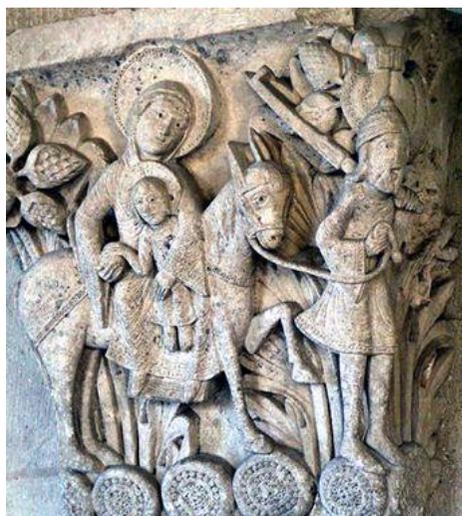
The journey of the Holy Family is represented not just in Coptic art, but in sculpture and paintings in Western art as well. The objects are either part of architectural elements of the church (Figs. 15 and 16)<sup>35</sup> or oil paintings (Fig. 17). The theme is regarded as an important religious event, and the sites visited and blessed by the Holy Family are pilgrimage destination for believers from throughout the world.

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<sup>35</sup> D. Grivot, (1990) *La Sculpture du 12e s. de la cathédrale d'Autun* (Colmar-Ingersheim: SAEP), p. 41.



**Fig. 15. Marble stela discovered in Venice represents the Journey of the Holy Family in Egypt. Bode Museum, Berlin. Image courtesy of Dr. A. Voigt, the State Museum in Berlin**



**Fig. 16. A column capital from the Romanesque Cathédrale d'Autun sculpted with the themes of the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century. After D. Grivot, *La Sculpture du 12e siècle. de la cathédrale d'Autun* (Colmar-Ingersheim: SAEP, 1990), 41**

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The roundel shown in Figure 17, painted in tempera on wood, belongs to a series of three showing the early life of Christ. The sequence comes from the base of an altarpiece that is linked with the artist Tura's chef-d'oeuvre, the Roverella Altarpiece. The central panel is kept in the National Gallery in London. Tura, the court painter to the dukes of Ferrara, was an artist of expressive influence (Fig. 17).



**Fig. 17. Painting of the Journey of the Holy Family to Egypt, 15<sup>th</sup> century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.**  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437849?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=holy+family+egypt&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=12>



**Fig.18. A group statue of the Holy Family surmounts the altar in the Jesuits' Holy Family Church, Matareya, Cairo.  
Photo by the researcher**

Finally, Figure 18 represents a unique example of western art (style) representing the theme of the Holy Family in Egypt. This group statue of the Holy Family surmounts the altar in the Jesuits' Holy Family Church; in Matareya is the work of the sculptor Millifaut.<sup>36</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The Journey of the Holy Family to Egypt is one of the minor feasts celebrated in the Coptic Church. Because of the importance of the theme, it is represented with a variety of materials in both the East and the West.

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<sup>36</sup> A copy of the statue stands in the garden in front of the same church entrance. This church commemorates the Flight into Egypt annually on February 17<sup>th</sup> by celebrating Mass. Gabra, G., and G.J.M. van Loon. (2007). *The Churches of Egypt: From the Journey of the Holy Family to the Present*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

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They may be intended for either decorative purposes or religious usage. The story is depicted most often on icons, textiles, and sculpture, rarely in mural paintings, and never on metal or wood. Though there is some uncertainty about the extent to which Coptic iconography migrated into the West, there is reason to believe that certain details could have been transmitted thanks to Coptic writings and the monastic way of life, which was to become the source of Christian monasticism in the West.

### What the study will add to knowledge:

Promoting the path of the Holy Family will have a great impact on tourism. It will provide scientific information about the archaeological and heritage sites and about the Christian monuments and sites along the route. All these will help to solve many problems that face the field of Coptology, such as the problem of dating, the provenance of certain artifacts, and the history of the deserted sites close to the monuments and monasteries near the route of the Holy Family. Placing these sites on the touristic map will open new fields of study to researchers, such as comprehensive research in the villages and the unpublished churches. The information presented above reveals the richness of the artifacts depicting this journey, and the wealth of the sites blessed by the visit, which will have a great impact on tourist attraction. This study can help to present the raw material for creating a database for the artifacts in Egypt and abroad that depict the journey, and help to preserve the rare and unique paintings by providing accurate information and documentation.

Above all, the various places where the Holy Family stopped will become destinations for religious tourism in Egypt.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, documentation of the major objects in Egypt and in museums abroad is very important. For the West, the object of the project is marketing for religious tourism in Egypt in connection with the journey,<sup>38</sup> whereas in Egypt the objects are believed to narrate the journey as it is described in the Bible. A further aim of the paper is to show that the theme of the Journey

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<sup>37</sup> نادر الفى ذكرى و يحيى شحاتة الزق دور احياء مسار العائلة المقدسة و طريق الحج المصرى القديم في تنشيط السياحة الدينية الي مصر, مجلة كلية السياحة و الفنادق جامعة مدينة السادات المجلد الاول-العدد 2/2 ديسمبر 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Saleh et al., (2009).

of the Holy Family has been depicted from the early centuries until modern times.

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- الراهب القس فيليبس الانبا بيشوي نبذة مختصرة هروب العائلة المقدسة من بيت لحم الى مصر و العودة, 1999, دار نوبار للنشر.

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