The Holy Family in Egypt

Contributed by Synodical Committee of the Coptic Orthodox Church
Tuesday, 18 September 2007
Last Updated Friday, 10 July 2015

The advent of the Holy Family to Egypt, seeking refuge, is an event of the utmost significance in our mother country's long history.

Moved by the spirit of prophecy, Hosea foresaw the flight from Bethlehem where there was no safe place for the Christ Child to lay his head, and the eventual return of the holy refugees from their sanctuary in Egypt, where Jesus had found a place in the hearts of the Gentiles, when he uttered God's words: "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (Hosea I I : 1) . In the Biblical Book of Isaiah, the prophet provides us with a divinely inspired prediction of the effect the Holy Infant was to have on Egypt and the Egyptians: "Behold the Lord rides on a swift cloud, And wilt come into Egypt; The idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, And the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst" (Isaiah 13:1)

The authority of Old Testament prophecy , which foretold the crumbling of idols wherever Jesus went, further foreshadowed the singular blessing to be bestowed upon Egypt, for its having been chosen as the Holy Family's haven, and upon its people for having been the first to experience The Christ's miraculous influence. God's message also delivered through the prophetic utterance of Isaiah "Blessed be Egypt, My people" (Isaiah 19:25), was an anticipation of the coming of St Mark to our country, where the Gospel he preached took firm root in the first decades of Christianity. Isaiah goes on to prophecy: "In that day there will be an alter to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt and a pillar to the Lord at its border. And it will be for a sign and for a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt" Isaiah 19:19-20)

According to the traditions of the Coptic Church, the altar mentioned is that of the Church of the Virgin Mary in AIMuharraq Monastery, a site where the Holy Family settled for a period of more than six months; and the altar-stone was the bed, upon which the Infant Savior lay. Al-Muharraq Monastery is located, literally, "in the midst of the land of Egypt" ... Standing at its exact geographical center. As for the "pillar at its borders ... which will be for a sign and for a witness ..." surely there can be no more demonstrable, concrete proof of the fulfillment of this prophecy than that the Patriarchal See of the Apostolic Church in Egypt was established by St. Mark himself. It is situated in Alexandria, on Egypt's northern borders.

But the prophecy, knitting a perfect pattern of things to come, does not stop there. It continues, "Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and will make sacrifice and offering" (Isaiah 19:21). As Christianity in Egypt spread, churches were built throughout the length and breadth of the land, and the sites chosen were, primarily, those which, had been visited and blessed by the Holy Family's sojourns. The New Testament records the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies as they unfold in their historical sequence. " - behold an angel of the Lard 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" (Matthew 2:13) Joseph complied and a donkey was fetched for the gentle Mother, still so young in years, to ride with her newborn Child in her arms. They set out from Bethlehem on their predestined journey, the hardened old carpenter, who was Mary's betrothed striding ahead, leading the donkey by its leash into the untracked paths of a wilderness dark as the desert nights, and unending as the mother of never ending horizons. Such an arduous journey, it was fraught with hazard every step of the way. In those far-off days, there were three routes which could be followed by travelers traversing Sinai from Palestine to Egypt, a crossing which was usually undertaken in groups, for without the protection of well-organized caravans, the ever present dangers- even along these known and trodden paths were ominously forbidding.

In their escape from the infanticide fury of King Herod, the Holy Family - understandably - had to avoid the beaten tracks altogether, and to pursue unknown paths, guided by God and His angel- They picked their way, day after day, through hidden valleys and across uncharted plateaus in the then rugged wastelands of Sinai. They endured the scorching heat of the sun by day and the bitter cold of the desert by night. Being preserved from the threat of wild beasts and savage tribesmen, their daily sustenance miraculously provided, the all-too- human fears of the young Mother for her Infant calmed by the faith that infused her with His birth. They arrived, at last, safely, for God had pre-ordained that Egypt should be the refuge for the One who was to bring the message of peace and love to mankind.

The tortuous trails they followed in their passage across Sinai, and their subsequent travels within Egypt, are chronicled by Pope Theophilus, 23rd Patriarch of Alexandria (384 - 412 AD.). He testifies, in his celebrated annals, dial on the eve on the 6th of Hator (the Coptic month corresponding roughly with November), after long prayer, the Holy Virgin revealed herself to him and, after relating the details of the Holy Family's journey to, and from Egypt, instructed him to record what he had seen and heard. It is a source which no Christian believer would question.

Besides, it is a virtual certainty that, at a time when happenings of a momentous or historical nature were transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next, the account of Pope Theophilus' Vision confirmed the oral tradition of supernatural occurrences which accompanied the arrival of a wondrous Child in the towns and villages of Egypt some four hundred years earlier.