



Langenberg Joseph, *La Fuite en Egypte*,
Basilique de l'Assomption, Kevelaer, 1889. (photo L.Toschi)

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« Joseph and Egypt »

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JOSEPH AND EGYPT

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This paper will attempt a broad and yet concise survey of the Flight into Egypt, briefly examining Sacred Scripture, the apocrypha, the Church fathers, Egyptian holy sites, liturgy and devotions, art, papal Magisterium, and spirituality. Greater importance is given to the earlier sources and to the later thoughts accepted by more reliable authority. From this sample survey, incomplete as it will be, there will emerge certain conclusions regarding the significance of this biblical episode and Joseph's role in it.

THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In Genesis 10, the "table of nations" lists the descendants born to Noah's three sons after the flood. The intent is not simply to give a genealogy of persons, but rather a description of the origin of all the known peoples of the world. "The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth.... These were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled" (Gn 9:18-9). The sons of Ham are the "Hamitic" or African peoples. Among Ham's four sons is "Egypt" (Gn10:6; 1 Chr 1:8), referring to the Egyptian peoples.

The great Nile makes Egypt a fertile land of plenty. After Abram first passed through the promised land of Canaan, he encountered severe famine in the Negeb and had to take refuge in Egypt (Gn 12:10). Because of Sarah's beauty she was taken into Pharaoh's palace and it went well with Abram (12:11-6). For unknowingly taking in Abram's wife, Pharaoh was stricken with severe plagues and had to ask her and Abram to leave (12:17-20). Abram returned to the Negeb quite wealthy (13:1-2).

Isaac's son, Jacob (Israel), settled in the land of Canaan with his twelve sons. Of these, Jacob's favorite was the one finally born to Rachel, after her long years of barrenness. He was given the name Joseph, meaning "Yahweh adds" (Gn 30:22-4; 37:3). Joseph dreamt that his brothers' sheaves bent down to his and that the sun, moon and stars bowed down to him (37:5-10). Out of jealousy, his brothers plotted to kill the "master dreamer" (37:11-20). Through the pleading of his brother Reuben, however, his life was spared. A caravan laden with goods to be sold in Egypt passed by and Joseph ended up being sold in Egypt¹ to Potiphar, Pharaoh's chief steward, while his brothers told Jacob he had died (37:21-36).

Joseph found favor with Potiphar and was put in charge of his household and all his possessions, and "the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake" (Gn 39:5). When Joseph resisted all the advances of Potiphar's wife, he was falsely accused and imprisoned, but also found favor with the chief jailer and was put in charge of all the prisoners (39:7-23). In prison he interpreted dreams (40:5-22), for which he was called to interpret Pharaoh's dreams of seven fat cows eaten by seven scrawny ones, and of seven healthy ears of grain swallowed by seven shriveled ones. Joseph not only explained that the dreams foretold seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine, but he also offered a program for reserving sufficient grain each year so as to be prepared (41:1-36). Pharaoh placed him "in charge of the whole land of Egypt" (41:41) to implement his plan. During the time of famine, Pharaoh directed all the Egyptians to "go to Joseph," *Ite ad Ioseph* (41:55).

¹ In the New Testament a summary of Israel's history in Egypt, from Joseph to Moses, is found in Stephen's discourse in Acts 7:9-40.

Joseph's brothers too had to travel to Egypt for help to survive the famine. This became the occasion for the whole chosen people to migrate to Egypt (Gn 46-7). When Jacob died there they took him back to Canaan to be buried in the field that Abraham had bought (50:12-3). They all nevertheless continued to live in Egypt (50:14,22). When Joseph died, "he was embalmed and laid to rest in a coffin in Egypt" (50:26).

Centuries after Joseph's death, the Israelites continued to be fruitful and to increase greatly in Egypt. "They became so numerous and strong that the land was filled with them" (Ex 1:6-7). Trouble began when "a new king, who knew nothing of Joseph, came to power in Egypt" (1:8). He oppressed the Hebrews and ordered their male babies killed (1:9-22). The great Moses was saved and chosen to be God's instrument for leading the chosen people out of slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea and back toward the promised land (Ex 2-14). Egypt, the place of refuge and abundance, had become the "place of slavery" (Ex 13:3; Jos 24:17). God's angel struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians, while sparing those of the Hebrews (Ex 12:12-30; Nm 33:4), who were to celebrate perpetually their Passover liberation (Ex 13:42ff; Dt 16:1ff). The waters "were afraid" when God's arm redeemed his people, "the descendants of Jacob and Joseph" (Ps 77:16-7). The Lord had "brought a vine out of Egypt" (Ps 80:9). God commanded faithfulness to the Covenant established through Moses after leaving Egypt (Lv 26:45; Dt 29:25; Jgs 2:1; 1 Kgs 8:9,21; 2 Chr 5:10; Jer 34:13). He identified Himself as the one "who brought you out of Egypt" (Lv 11:45; 19:36; 22:33; 25:38; 26:13; Dt 5:6). They are known by God's work for them (Jdt 5:10-4).

On leaving Egypt, "Moses also took Joseph's bones along" (Ex 13:19). The bones were buried in the plot Jacob had bought in Shechem (Jos 24:32). "No man like Joseph has been born, and his dead bones are cared for" (Sir 49:15). His memory remains tied to Egypt. Assembling to sing to the Lord and blow the trumpet on the pilgrimage feast of harvest is said to be "an edict of the God of Jacob, Who made it a decree for Joseph when he came out of the land of Egypt" (Ps 81:5-6). Right after Abraham, Joseph is remembered as a model, since "when in distress, [he] kept the commandment, and he became master of Egypt" (1 Mc 2:53).

Psalm 105 sums up the entire history of God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham. When the people were still few in number and undergoing a famine, He sent ahead "Joseph, sold as a slave," until "the word of the Lord proved him true" and the king released him and "he made him lord of his house and ruler of all his possessions," *Constituit eum dominum domus suae, et principem omnis possessionis suae* (105[104]:21). "Israel entered Egypt; Jacob lived in the land of Ham. God greatly increased his people." Moses worked signs and wonders in Egypt, and He brought his people out with joy. Egypt rejoiced when they left. (105:23-43). The names of Abraham, of the great Moses, and particularly of Joseph are associated with Egypt.

Thus, Egypt was a place of refuge from famine, and a source of abundant blessing for the salvation and growth of God's people. The people were even tempted to want to return to the comfort they had there (Ex 16:3; Nm 11:5; 21:5). Not the ultimate goal, however, Egypt had become a place of slavery from which the chosen people had to be liberated, in order to be able to enter into their own land of Canaan, first promised to Abraham. The stay there had led the Israelites to fall into idolatry at times (Jos 24:14; Ez 20:7-8; Wis 15:14-9) and had made them ready to worship a golden calf in the desert (Ex 32). During the period of the kings, the prophets had to warn against the false hopes of allying with Egypt or seeking refuge there (Is 30:1-7; Jer 46; Ez 29-32), for "The Egyptians are men, not God" (Is 31:3). One day their idols will tremble before the Lord (Is 19:1; Jer 43:12-3; Ez 20:7-8; 30:13; Hos 11:1-2), who will establish his altar there and send them a savior (Is 19:19-20).

THE NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGE, MATTHEW 2:13-15,19-21

The theme of this paper, “Joseph and Egypt,” derives from a few verses of a single New Testament passage, chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew.² These brief verses are written against the rich and important background briefly outlined above. As with all Scripture passages, they have been and continue to be a source of reflection and commentary since they have been written. Here we examine the text.

Magi from the East were the occasion for King Herod to become troubled over the birth of “the newborn king of the Jews” in Bethlehem (Mt 2:1-8). After the Magi came to worship and present their gifts and then depart, “behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him’” (Mt 2:13).

Herod’s jealousy, cruelty, and willingness to execute even his closest relatives are well documented.³ (We accept the basic historicity of the flight into Egypt as amply defended,⁴ rather than the opinion of those who would reduce the narration to myth, midrash, or “verisimilitude.”⁵) He would not tolerate the mention of any king other than himself. In this case, however, he put his small, temporal, earthly kingship in conflict with the almighty, eternal kingship that “does not belong to this world” (Jn 18:36). An angel of the Lord intervened on behalf of the small child.

The angel came to Joseph, the chosen head and protector of the holy family. The combination of the appearance of the angel of the Lord and a dream was the same doubly powerful means of divine communication to Joseph that he had first experienced in receiving his mission toward the child and toward his wife (Mt 1:20-3). The dreams recall Joseph’s namesake who was associated with both dreams and Egypt in the history of Israel.

The angel’s instruction was to flee into Egypt, which had been a place of refuge for the chosen people, not only from famine, but also from murderous kings (1 Kgs 11:40; 2 Kgs 25:26; Jer 26:21). As commanded and necessary, Joseph obeyed immediately, setting out for Egypt, without any time for planning or preparation. The precious gifts just received from the Magi (Mt 2:11) perhaps provided the livelihood needed in such a desperate situation. In Egypt Joseph would surely have encountered the assistance of “the Jewish brethren” there (2 Mc 1:1,10). He would also be conscious of the ancient admonition to his people: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were an alien in his land” (Dt 23:7).

As with everything associated with the Redeemer of the world, there was a cosmic and transcendent level present in the midst of this human history of fleeing for one’s life and struggling to survive in a foreign land. The Gospel explains that “This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’” (Mt 2:15). The quote is from Hosea, a prophetic book which begins with the image of an

² For a more thorough analysis of Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew, see L. TOSCHI, O.S.J., *Joseph in the New Testament*, Santa Cruz CA 1993, 17-62.

³ F. JOSEPHUS, *The Antiquities of the Jews* XVI 392-396 (XVI, ch. xi 7 in English system); *The Wars of the Jews* I 540-551 (I, ch. xxvii 3-6). EUSEBIUS PAMPHILI, *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 8, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 19, New York 1953, 65-9.

⁴ S. HAHN and C. MITCH, *The Gospel of Matthew*, from the series *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*, San Francisco CA 2000, 20-1. T. STRAMARE, O.S.J., *Vangelo dei Misteri della Vita Nascosta di Gesù*, Bornato in Franciacorta BS 1998, 267-9. TOSCHI, 44-47. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Custos*, 1989, number 14. F. BRÄNDLE, “«La Huida a Egipto» Reflexiones Bíblico-Teológicas,” *Cahiers de Joséphologie*, Montreal, XXIX (1981) 28 notes that even early Jewish anti-Christian literature also connects Jesus with Egypt.

⁵ R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, New York 1993, 225-8, 615-6.

unfaithful wife, representing Israel, whom God in His love nevertheless promises to take back. The particular verse quoted is from Hos 11:1, referring to Israel as God's son, lovingly called forth from Egypt during the time of Moses and the Exodus (see also Ex 4:22). The passage describes Israel's unfaithfulness in "burning incense to idols" and in seeking protection by allying with Egypt instead of trusting in the Lord. God's just anger is again tempered by His loving promise "Out of Egypt they shall come trembling ... and I will resettle them in their homes" (11:11).

While the immediate purpose of going to Egypt was to save Jesus from death at the hands of Herod, the providential purpose was to show the fulfillment of God's loving plan. Herod died and the angel of the Lord advised Joseph to return to the land of Israel (Mt 2:15,19). As God's son, Israel, had sought refuge in Egypt and come forth from Egypt to enter into His covenant love, so now God's Son, Jesus (cf. Mt 3:17), came out of refuge in Egypt to establish "a new covenant" that made the first covenant obsolete (Jer 31:31-4; Heb 8:8-13).⁶

The faith, righteousness and prompt obedience of Joseph are the instruments not only for God's Son to enter Egypt, the symbol of unfaithfulness (see also Rev 11:8), but also for God's Son to come forth from Egypt to the land of Israel, establishing the new and eternal covenant. When the Holy Spirit is poured out at Pentecost in fulfillment of the new covenant, Egyptians are also present there (Acts 2:10).

THE APOCRYPHAL FANTASIES

Against challenges to Mary's virginity in the early centuries, apocryphal infancy narratives⁷ were written as a theological defense of her honor. Their method, however, largely consisted of providing details not found in the canonical Scriptures. Of course they drew from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They may also have had some source material from other oral traditions, but their extensive embellishments most likely came from the imagination of the authors. Foremost among these works is what has come to be known as *The Protoevangelium of James*, which is itself a source for many of the other works of this genre.

In the early versions of the *Protoevangelium*, the concluding chapters 21-5 deal with the Magi and Herod's efforts to kill the child Jesus (as well as John the Baptist), but no mention is made of the flight into Egypt or Joseph's role in protecting the child. Instead it is Mary who hears the news of the infanticide taking place. The vocabulary from Luke 2:7 is used in this different context to say that Mary wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger in order to hide him from Herod's fury. A number of manuscripts do include Matthew's verses about Joseph's dream and the flight to Egypt, but these seem to be later additions, since they somewhat interrupt the flow of the text that otherwise proceeds to Elizabeth hiding John and to Zechariah's martyrdom to protect him.⁸

In *The Gospel of Pseudo Matthew*, Joseph's dream is reported, with the added detail that he is to take the desert route (17,3). There follow detailed episodes of events along the way and on arriving in Egypt, but in all of these the baby Jesus is shown already manifesting miraculous powers, much before beginning his public ministry (Luke 3:23) or performing his first sign at Cana in Galilee (John 2:11). He leaves his mother's embrace

⁶ BROWN, 215, 617. Intent to show the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 is even more plausible, since the chapter is directly quoted in Mt 2:17-18.

⁷ TOSCHI, 1-4.

⁸ A. DE SANTOS OTERO, *Los Evangelios Apócrifos*, BAC, Madrid 1956, 181-8, especially footnote 117; this book has the Greek and Latin texts of the Apocrypha, as well as a Spanish translation. M. R. JAMES, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1963, 38.

to protect Mary and Joseph and their party from frightening dragons, lions and leopards, who halt before him in adoration (18-9), fulfilling Isaiah 11:6. When Mary tires and asks for some dates from a palm tree, Joseph is bewildered at the height of the dates and is more worried about finding water. Jesus makes the palm tree bend down so that they may reach its fruit, and He then causes a stream of water to flow from its roots, and finally rewards it by having angels take one of its branches to heaven to greet with “the palm of victory” those who arrive from the earthly battle (20-1). Next, Joseph complains to Jesus about the heat, and Jesus shortens the thirty day journey to a single day. They immediately come to Hermopolis and then Sotinen where they enter a temple, which was considered the Capital of Egypt and which contained 365 idols. These idols immediately crash to the ground in pieces, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 19:1 (22-3). Then the governor, Apphrodisius, comes to the site and adores the child, saying that they had better avoid His indignation lest they perish “like Pharaoh, king of the Egyptians” (24). After all of this, one could ask why the angel bothered to have Joseph take the child and flee, rather than simply allow the infant Jesus to face Herod. Nevertheless, returning to Mt 2:19-20, *Pseudo-Matthew* succinctly reports that the angel again addressed Joseph and told him to return home in safety (25).⁹

The *Book of the Savior’s Infancy (Liber Infantia Salvatoris)* has more details regarding the Magi. Joseph is the protector who decides to let them enter the cave, and he is vigilant to see that they have right intentions. They converse with Joseph, professing complete understanding of Jesus’ full identity. As they consider returning to Herod, Joseph detains them (89-96).¹⁰

Whereas the text of *The Gospel of Pseudo Thomas* (distinct from *The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas*) treats of Jesus’ infancy from the ages of five to twelve, there are three additional chapters that deal with Egypt, which some editions print as an Appendix, with separate chapter numbers. While Mary is named throughout, Joseph is mentioned only in the opening verse and the concluding one, which tells how he took the child back through the desert and thanked God for bestowing wisdom and grace upon him (3,2).¹¹

The Syriac-Arabic Infancy Gospel recounts how the earth trembled, an idol crashed to the ground, and the touch of Jesus’ diaper exorcized a priest’s son (10-1). Fearing that the Egyptians might burn them alive, Mary and Joseph fled from there only to arrive among a den of thieves, who left them alone for fear of the kingly child (12-13). As they journeyed from town to town, Jesus performed many miracles, often through Mary’s intercession (14-22). On a subsequent encounter with thieves, Jesus revealed that in 30 years two of them would be crucified at his side (23). Joseph is mentioned regularly throughout and in one sentence is even hailed as a god, together with Jesus and Mary (17). Two other paragraphs, possibly twelfth century additions, speak of the Holy Family’s stay in Matarieh, where Jesus caused water to spring from a sycamore, and the sweat of his tunic washed therein left the scent of balm; and in Memphis, where they remained for three years, until leaving for Nazareth during the reign of Archelaus (24-26).¹²

The History of Joseph the Carpenter (also known as *The Death of Joseph*) is found in Arabic and Coptic forms and has the style of a liturgical reading, thought to be used in Coptic monasteries in Egypt for St. Joseph’s

⁹ DE SANTOS OTERO, 230-7. JAMES, 74-8. BRÄNDLE, 26-9 also summarizes the flight according to the apocrypha.

¹⁰ DE SANTOS OTERO, 288-92.

¹¹ DE SANTOS OTERO, 321-324. JAMES, 58-9.

¹² DE SANTOS OTERO, 332-42. JAMES, 80; also *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* is said to come from the Syriac version and to include in XVff a lengthy description of the fall of the idols and temples, 83.

feast.¹³ The texts of the work are thought to come from a Greek original that was used at Joseph's tomb in Nazareth, until the Jews were expelled from there and took it with them into Egypt.¹⁴ As the funeral party was about to put Joseph's body into the tomb, Jesus said: "I remembered the day he took me to Egypt and the great burdens that he accepted on my behalf, and I could only hug his body and weep at length" (XXVII).¹⁵

While not an infancy narrative, *The Acts of Pilate* (or *Gospel of Nicodemus*) also mentions that Joseph took Jesus and his mother into Egypt to flee from Herod. The context, however, is the Jewish accusation at Jesus' trial before Pilate, that from birth Jesus was presented as a king, in competition with Caesar. It is after learning of the flight that Herod killed the innocent Hebrew children in Bethlehem, almost as if Joseph were more to blame than Herod.¹⁶

THE CHURCH FATHERS

In contrast to the fertile and inventive descriptions of the apocryphal writers, the Fathers of the Church exhibit a sober theological depth in harmony with the Gospel and authentic Church Tradition. Rather than imagining the child Jesus as performing miracles along the way, John Chrysostom¹⁷ (347-407), for example, reflects that the angel's order to Joseph shows how God has made Himself totally dependant on him, "the working of miracles not being seasonable as yet. For if from His earliest infancy He had shown forth wonders, He would not have been accounted a Man."¹⁸

Origen (185-254) in *Contra Celsum* responds to Celsus' claim, written around the year 178, that Jesus was an illegitimate child who had to hire Himself out as a servant in Egypt, and that His supposed miraculous powers were really magic tricks learned from the Egyptians.¹⁹ Such calumny is totally insufficient to explain the divine actions of Jesus and his grace at work in the lives of Christians.

Cyril of Jerusalem (315-86) notes that the purpose of going into Egypt was to destroy the idols there.²⁰ Chrysostom sees fulfillment foreshadowed early on by the child Jesus being taken into Egypt, since over all the earth it (along with Babylon, Persia, to which the magi were told to return) was most consumed with the flame of ungodliness. The flight there signifies from the start that Jesus has come to save all, beginning with the most sinful. It also teaches us that, from the beginning, we humans have to beware of temptations and plots in life.²¹ Chrysostom notes that the angel speaks not to Mary, but to Joseph. Joseph does not protest at being told to flee, nor does he question how long their exile might last. His life is described as a series of joys and sorrows: following the joy at the adoration of the magi, there is the terror and danger of Herod's threat and the need to

¹³ TOSCHI, "Liturgical Feasts of St. Joseph" in *Saint Joseph Studies*, Santa Cruz CA 2005, 25-26. DE SANTOS OTERO, 358-60, 364. JAMES, 85.

¹⁴ B. BAGATTI, "Ricerche Cronologiche sulla «Historia Iosephi Fabri Lignarii»", *Cahiers de Joséphologie* XXV (1977) 196. T. STRAMARE, O.S.J., *San Giuseppe Virgulto Rigoglioso*. Casale Monferrato AL 1987, 26-7.

¹⁵ DE SANTOS OTERO, 375.

¹⁶ DE SANTOS OTERO, 445. JAMES, 103. JAMES, 88 also reports that E. A. BUDGE, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, 1915, 682 contains a "Discourse by Demetrius of Antioch" with details about the flight.

¹⁷ *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, VIII 2-4, IX 4, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. X, Grand Rapids MI, 50-61. See also: R. GAUTHIER, C.S.C., "San José en los Padres de la Iglesia y la Alta Edad Media," *Estudios Josefinos*, Valladolid 1996, 151-78, translating *Saint Joseph chez les Pères de l'Église et au haut Moyen Âge*, Montreal 1999. BRÄNDLE 28-30.

¹⁸ *Saint Chrysostom*, VIII 4, 52.

¹⁹ *Origen, Contra Celsum*, I 28-30, Cambridge 1965, 27-9. J. M. CANAL SÁNCHEZ, C.M.F., "San José en los Apócrifos del Nuevo Testamento," in *San Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 126.

²⁰ *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, "Catechesis X," 10, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 61, Washington D.C. 1969, 202.

²¹ *Saint Chrysostom*, VIII 3, 51-2.

flee.²² Herod's killing the innocents is akin to the things done in Egypt by Pharaoh at the time of Moses' birth. At Herod's death Joseph experiences the joy of the angel telling him now not to flee, but rather to return. This relief is followed by another trial, the threat of Archelaus, Herod's son, which is followed by the joy of being able to return to his native Nazareth. Finally Chrysostom harmonizes Luke's omission of the flight into Egypt by simply explaining that the purification rites in the temple occurred before the flight, and the settling in Nazareth took place after the return.²³

Jerome (347-420) offers three reasons why Jesus was conceived to a virgin betrothed, the third of which was so that Mary might have the solacing comfort of a guardian during the flight into Egypt.²⁴ Peter Chrysologus (406-50) says "Joseph, the bridegroom, was chosen as [Mary's] guardian that he might fulfill the type of Christ's Passion foreshadowed in that former Joseph." This is exemplified also in the flight into Egypt.²⁵ The flight was for our sakes, that the prophecies might be fulfilled through this mystery.²⁶ Caesarius of Arles (470-543) states that, by going into Egypt, Christ deigns to cross over to the gentiles, who were given to idols. "Leaving Judea, He is carried to a world which did not know Him, to be worshiped."²⁷

Pseudo-Origen (sixth century), in his second homily on Matthew, relates that the angel speaking to Joseph is the same Gabriel who spoke to Mary and Zechariah, since the mystery of the Lord's birth had been entrusted to him. He orders Joseph to flee into Egypt, so that he might destroy their idols, in accord with the prophecy of Isaiah 19:1.²⁸ Pseudo-Chrysostom recounts Joseph's dialogue, questioning the reasons for the angel's command. The angel responds also about fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 19:1, in accord with God's love in sending His own Son as a sign of reconciliation.²⁹

Venerable Bede (637-735), in preaching on the feast of the Holy Innocents, reflects that the Holy Family's journey to Egypt indicates that faith in Christ will be spread through the gentiles, until the fulfillment when all of Israel will be saved.³⁰ Haimo of Auxerre (died 865) comments that Mary's husband is able to interpret dreams prudently, like the old Joseph of Egypt.³¹

Rupert of Deutz (1075-129) compares Matthew's genealogy to Jacob's ladder, with Joseph being the last rung upon which Jesus rests, as exemplified particularly in Joseph's taking him to Egypt to hide him from Herod, and in his return to Judea.³² Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-153), often given the honorary title "the last Father of the Church," draws extensive parallels between Joseph and his Old Testament namesake, including the

²² *Saint Chrysostom*, VIII 4, 52.

²³ *Saint Chrysostom*, IX 5, 58.

²⁴ *St. Jerome, Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, "Against Helvidius," 4, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 53, Washington D.C. 1965, 15.

²⁵ *Saint Peter Chrysologus, Selected Sermons*, Sermon 146 "The Birth of Christ, Joseph the Affianced Husband, on Matthew 1:18," *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 17, New York 1953, 241. BRÄNDLE 29.

²⁶ *Sancti Petri Chrysologi Collectio Sermonum*, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* Brepols 1982 (CCSL), v. 24b, Sermo CL "De Fuga in Aegyptum," 11.

²⁷ *St. Caesarius of Arles, Sermons 187-238*, Sermon 222 "On the Feast of the Holy Innocents," 2, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 66, Washington D.C. 1973, 140.

²⁸ GAUTHIER, "Saint Joseph d'Après Deux Séries d'Homélies Latines du VI^e Siècle sur S. Matthieu," in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 179-80.

²⁹ GAUTHIER, "Sainte Joseph d'Après Deux Séries," 180-1.

³⁰ *Beda Venerabilis Opera*, "Homelia 10 SS. Innocentium," in CCSL, v. 122, 70. G. PONTON, C.S.C., "Saint Joseph d'Après l'Oeuvre de Bède le Vénéral," in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 211-2.

³¹ HAIMO OF AUXERRE, *Homilia* 12, in *Patrologia Latina (PL)*, 118, 76.

³² RUPERT OF DEUTZ, *Liber de Divinis Officiis*, 3,18, in *PL*, 170, 75-6.

reflection that jealousy is the reason each of them ends up in Egypt, the jealousy of his brothers in the case of the first Joseph and the jealousy of Herod in the case of the second.³³

EGYPTIAN HOLY SITES

Oral tradition in Egypt is considered sacred and care is taken that it be faithfully transmitted from one generation to the next. The Greek text of *The History of the Monks in Egypt*, written around 395, describes a journey to Hermopolis Magna (modern Al-Ashmunayn, 174 miles south of Cairo) and having seen the fallen idols at the temple visited by the Holy Family, in fulfillment of Is 19:1. Tyrannius Rufinus (344-409), who also traveled to Egypt in 375, produced his Latin text, expanding upon the Greek version.³⁴ It is significant that Hermopolis is in the southernmost area that the Holy Family is thought to have visited. It is not far from the revered Mt. Qusqam. Egyptian Christians follow a homily or vision attributed to Theophilus Alexandrinus (384-412) containing numerous details about the flight, and especially the stay at Mt. Qusqam. Its historicity is questionable, however, and its written form probably originated in the eleventh or twelfth century.³⁵

Palladius (368-431) also traveled to Egypt and his *Lausiaca History* confirms the testimony of Rufinus.³⁶ Hermias Sozomen (400-50) reported that multiple Egyptian sources testified that a tree called Persis in the Thebais in Hermopolis was said to heal the sick when touched, going back to the time when the Holy Family approached and it bent down to worship Jesus. He commented that perhaps the tree had previously been an object of pagan idolatry, and therefore the devil was shaken at Christ's presence, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy regarding the idols of Egypt. He does not mention the vision of Theophilus.³⁷ Antoninus Placentinus in 570 visited Egypt and in Memphis noticed a church built on the site of a former temple. He was shown a cloth bearing the imprint of Christ's face, said to have been imprinted there when He wiped his face on it during the Holy Family's visit there.³⁸

A homily by Coptic Bishop Zacharias of Sakha (690-725) describes in detail the various places visited by the Holy Family.³⁹ A homily of Coptic Bishop Cyriacus of al-Bahnasa (Oxyrhynchus) in the late eighth or early ninth century mentions an Abuna Antonius, who discovered precious vessels and documents from the fourth century, including St. Joseph's diary, containing his experiences until arriving at Bayt Isus. A Fr. Thomas guarded the diary in a locked chest, but it has never been found.⁴⁰

Coptic Orthodox believe that as God spoke to St. Joseph in visions and dreams, so has He continued to speak to their clergy through visions and dreams in subsequent centuries and down to the present. They have thus developed an increasingly detailed and growing, official "Itinerary of the Holy Family." We list only those sites having significant reference to St. Joseph. In Old Cairo (Babylon) Joseph drew water for the child, and the

³³ BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *De Laudibus Virginis Matris*, 1, 7, in *PL*, 183, 60; *Super «Missus est»*, in *PL*, 183, 55,69. T. M. SPARKS, O.P., "St. Antoninus of Florence on Saint Joseph," in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 450.

³⁴ *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, ch. 8, London 1981, 3-10, 70, 140, 158. The passage cited is ch. 8 in the Greek, ch. 9 in the Syriac version, and ch. 7 in the Latin version of T. RUFINUS, *De Historia Monachorum*.

³⁵ STRAMARE, *Vangelo dei Misteri*, 271. MEINARDUS, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, Cairo 2002, 11. P. PERRY, *Jesus in Egypt*, New York 2003, xiii, 8, 95, 182, 235, 257.

³⁶ PALLADIUS, *Historia Lausiaca*, 52.

³⁷ S. H. SOZOMEN, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, xxi, in P. SCHAFF, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, Grand Rapids MI 1957, 342-3.

³⁸ PERRY, xii-xiii.

³⁹ STRAMARE, *Vangelo dei Misteri*, 271. MEINARDUS, 11. PERRY, 59, 66, 92, 95.

⁴⁰ MEINARDUS, 11, 13.

Holy Family lived there for some time, hiding from the soldiers. In Maadi Joseph used the Magi's gifts to pay for a boat voyage. At Deir al-Garnous (Bayt Isus), the Holy Family stopped for four days, according to the manuscript of Joseph the Carpenter, reported by Bishop Cyriacus. At Qusia (Qusqam) the Holy Family resided for six months in a house Joseph built out of mud and palm branches; the Holy Family worshiped there and made the spot "the world's first true Christian church"; Theophilus visited and had his vision there in 386. In Deir al-Muharraq North of Asyut, an ancient church was constructed where Joseph had built a house for the Holy Family and there received the dream to return home (Mt 2:20). Amid these legends is also that of Joseph's wondrous staff being broken in pieces and planted by Jesus to take root in al-Qusiya (Cusae, al-Muharraq) or Matariya. It should be noted that there are no traditional Coptic churches or altars dedicated to St. Joseph.⁴¹

LITURGY AND DEVOTIONS

The earliest known feast of St. Joseph anywhere is that celebrated by Egyptian Coptics on Abib 26, which corresponds to August 2 on our calendar.⁴² The current Orthodox Synaxarium for the feast refers to Joseph's strife and toil in the journey with Mary and Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt.

One of The Seven Minor Feasts of Our Lord in the Coptic calendar is "The Escape of the Holy Family to Egypt" or "The Entry of the Lord Christ to Egypt" on Bashans 24, that is June 1 (Ginbot 24 on the calendar of the Ethiopian daughter church).⁴³ The proud proclamation notes that of all the nations, Egypt has this unique distinction of being visited by the Lord. The feast is found in their earliest Synaxarium of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

In 1754 Benedict XIV permitted the Oratorians to celebrate the Flight on the fourth Sunday of April. The Redemptorists and the Confraternity of the Holy Family at Liege later obtained the same privilege. In 1856 this feast was moved to February 17. The pre-Vatican II *Messale Romanum* had a liturgy for the Flight into Egypt to be celebrated in certain places on that day, using texts of Isaiah 19. Celebration of the Feast was permitted to Shrines of St. Joseph at Alex, France, and Montreal, Canada. In 1982 the feast was approved for the current proper calendar of the Sons of the Holy Family.⁴⁴

Right after the Epiphany, the Ambrosian Rite celebrates the "Cristoforia" Feast recalling Jesus' triumphal return from the flight and praying that we may keep our hearts free from the yoke of Egyptian slavery, which is sin.⁴⁵

Individual villages in Egypt also have local celebrations. In Deir Abu Hinnis, for example, the Coptic Orthodox bishop crosses the Nile on January 11-12 to commemorate the Holy Family's journey to Egypt and then process for a festival on a sand hill where the Holy Family is said to have rested when Herod's soldiers were in pursuit.⁴⁶

⁴¹ PERRY, *passim*. MEINARDUS, *The Holy Family in Egypt*, Cairo 1986; *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*, Cairo 2000, 13-27; *Coptic Saints*, 10, 13-4. STRAMARE, *S. Giuseppe Virgulto*, 20-1.

⁴² TOSCHI, "Liturgical Feasts" 25-6.

⁴³ STRAMARE, *Vangelo dei Misteri*, 270-271. MEINARDUS, *The Holy Family*, 18.

⁴⁴ STRAMARE, *Vangelo dei Misteri*, 272; *Giuseppe lo chiamò Gesù*, Casale Monferrato AL 2001, 120. TOSCHI, "Liturgical Feasts" 40.

⁴⁵ STRAMARE, *Vangelo dei Misteri*, 272.

⁴⁶ C. HULSMAN, "Welcoming the Uninvited Savior," *Christianity Today* 2001.

A Menaion (hymn) for the Byzantine Catholic commemoration of St. Joseph on the Sunday after Christmas refers to him as a “minister of the incomprehensible mystery,” for having led Jesus to Egypt to disperse the darkness of idolatry.⁴⁷

Thirteenth century manuscripts for the Office of St. Joseph, found in Brussels, employ homilies of pseudo-Origen and Ven. Bede for the lessons, while a fourteenth century manuscript in Agrigento has an oration recalling that God saved Jesus from Herod’s fury by placing him under Joseph’s care.⁴⁸

A good number of fourteenth century calendars list the March 19 feast with the seven stanza hymn *Iste nutritor Domini sacratus*. The third stanza puts Mt. 2:13 into poetic form: *Angelus Dei apparens in somnis Joseph et dicens: Fuge in Aegyptum, Matremque tollens una cum Filio, Dum dicam tibi*. A Vespers hymn, *Collaudemus toto corde*, sings of Joseph’s “ministry” in the flight and return: *Puer in Aegyptum ductus Joseph ministerio, Ab eodem post reductus Patris est imperio*. A prayer for Lauds in a Cistercian hymnal quotes extensively from St. Bernard’s homily comparing the two Joseph’s in Egypt. A 1488 breviary of the Friars Minor uses the same homily.⁴⁹

The popular *Te Ioseph Celebrent*, introduced into the breviary in 1671 and still used in the Liturgy of the Hours for Evening Prayer for both March 19 and May 1, praises Joseph also for the flight: *Tu natum Dominum stringis, ad exteris Aegypti profugum tu sequeris plagas*, “Holding the born Lord become a refugee, you accompany him to the foreign lands of Egypt.”

In the Little Office of St. Joseph, found for example in the 1741 *Coeleste Palmetum*, the hymn for Sext (midday prayer) is: *Vim Herodis evasisti, monitus ab Angelo, in Aegyptum cum duxisti Virginem cum parvulo. Per moerorem, quem tulisti, isto in exilio, cum gravabor hora tristis mihi sis auxilio*. “You evaded Herod’s force when, warned by an angel, you led the Virgin with child into Egypt. By the pain which you bore in that exile, help me when I am burdened with sadness.” The antiphon is Mt 2:13. For None (mid-afternoon prayer) the hymn, *Ex Aegypto cum defessus*, treats of the return, and the antiphon is Mt 2:23.

Private litanies of St. Joseph⁵⁰ often contained direct references to the flight. In the one found in the devotional manual of the Oratorian Denis Amelote (1609-79), we find the invocations: “You who delivered Jesus from Herod,” and “You who took the child Jesus into Egypt.” In the collection of prayers compiled by the Jesuit Michael Frie (1638-95), there is a scriptural litany with the invocation: “You, to whom the angel spoke in sleep after the Magi’s departure, saying: Rise and take the Child and his Mother, and flee to Egypt.” A 1688 French edition of *The Imitation of Christ* also contains a litany with the invocation: “You who saved the infant Jesus from the furor of Herod’s persecution.” In an eighteenth century Swiss litany we find: “You who at the angel’s warning fled into Egypt with the boy and His mother.” Although the litany finally approved for public devotion in 1909 did not contain phrases of this sort, invocations five through eight, that deal with his role as husband and father, are all deducible from the episode of the flight. The seventh one, *Christi defensor sedule*, “Diligent defender of Christ,” would seem to be a direct reference. A commentary on this invocation involves a

⁴⁷ STRAMARE, “San Giuseppe nella Liturgia Greca,” *Joseph* (83, 10) Milan, Nov. 2004, 14-5.

⁴⁸ GAUTHIER, *Le Culte Liturgique de Saint Joseph en Occident d’après le manuscrits des quinze premiers siècles*, Montréal 2002, 99-100, 119-21, 130-1.

⁴⁹ GAUTHIER, *Le Culte Liturgique*, 36, 139, 166, 179-80, 190.

⁵⁰ GAUTHIER, *Les Litanies de Saint Joseph Du 16^e au 20^e Siècle*, Montréal 2001, 41-2, 50-2, 57-9, 62-3, 99, 105-6.

commentary on the flight, while commentaries on the following one, “Head of the Holy Family,” usually point to the fact that the angel addresses him on this crucial occasion.⁵¹

In the centuries old and repeatedly indulgenced popular devotion of “The Seven Sorrows and Joys of St. Joseph,” the fifth sorrow regards the pains and trials in Egypt, while the corresponding joy is that of seeing the Egyptian idols fall to the ground. The petition is to help us flee from the occasions of sin and to purify our hearts of any idols of earthly affection. The sixth sorrow is the fear of Archelaus’ continued threat, while the joy is to return home from Egypt. The consequent prayer is that in the face of harmful fears, we may also enjoy the peace of a clean conscience, live in union with Jesus and Mary and die in their arms.

Attached to his 1889 encyclical on devotion to St. Joseph, Leo XIII added the prayer *Ad te Beate Ioseph* and asked that it be prayed after the rosary, imploring St. Joseph to defend the Church against the powers of darkness. On the one hundredth anniversary of that encyclical, John Paul II repeated that request and quoted the prayer, which asked St. Joseph to protect us *sicut olim Puerum Iesum e summo eripuisti vitae discrimine*, “just as you once saved the Child Jesus from mortal danger.”⁵²

In the daily prayers of the Oblates of St. Joseph, Psalm 105 (104): 21 is repeated, applying to St. Joseph the reference to patriarch Joseph in Egypt: “God made him master of his household, and put him in charge of all that he owned.”⁵³ The use of the verse originates in the liturgical texts for St. Joseph’s feast.

ART

At least as early as the fifth or sixth centuries, the flight into Egypt was represented in art.⁵⁴ In the Istanbul Archaeology Museum (Constantinople) are found two mid-fifth century sarcophagus pieces, one with the veiled virgin and child on a donkey, and the other of a bearded man, thought to be St. Joseph.

At the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome, originally ordered by Sixtus III in the fifth century, the arch mosaic to the right shows scenes of the infancy of Christ, which include the angel’s warning to Joseph to flee (a theme that is often repeated in art), and then the episode from Pseudo-Matthew of the fall of the 365 idols in Egypt and the reaction of the terrified governor, Aphrodisius. As in a twelfth century sculpture at St. Peter’s Church in Moissac, France, the toppling of the idols will often be a background scene for the flight.

In the Istanbul Ottoman museum is a sixth or seventh century golden reliquary to be worn about the neck, with scenes shown in three sections. The middle section shows the flight next to the nativity. Greek inscriptions identify the bearded old man as Joseph and the domed building to which they are headed as Egypt. As Joseph leads toward Egypt, he looks back toward the virgin and child on the donkey.

At the rock cave church of Abu Hinnis⁵⁵ in Middle Egypt are found wall paintings from the end of the sixth century, in fragmentary state, but still in place. Scenes include the flight, the killing of the Innocents, and Gabriel telling Joseph of Herod’s death.

⁵¹ S. L. JAKI, *The Litany of Saint Joseph*, Pinckney MI 2002, 37-40. D. M. MORIN, *Sur les Litanies de Saint Joseph*, Bouère 1991, 11-3.

⁵² LEO XIII, *Quamquam Pluries*, 8/15/1889, n. 6. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Custos*, 8/15/1989, n. 31. STRAMARE, *Saint Joseph, “Guardian of the Redeemer”*, Santa Cruz CA 1997, 54-5, 59-67.

⁵³ *Family of St. Joseph Prayer Manual*, Santa Cruz CA 2003, 6.

⁵⁴ P. TESTINI, “Iconografia di S. Giuseppe (Sec. IV-VI),” in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 709-12.

⁵⁵ M.-H. RUTSCHOWSCAYA, “The Arts Using Color,” in M. CAPUANI, *Christian Egypt, Coptic Art and Monuments Through Two Millennia*, Collegeville MN 2002, 23. PERRY, 228-31.

In a damaged fresco from the era of John VII (705-707) for Ancient St. Mary's in Rome, Joseph is shown following, rather than leading, the donkey with mother and child.⁵⁶ An eleventh century manuscript illumination at the library of Dionysiou Monastery at Mt. Athos, similarly shows Joseph following while his apocryphal son, James, leads the donkey. Other works will include Salome, instead of James, also drawing on the apocrypha or the Coptic "Vision of Theophilus." In an illustration⁵⁷ for Herrad of Landsberg's (abbess of Hohenburg 1167-95) *Hortus Deliciarum*, whereas Joseph leads, there is also included a young man following, but he is identified as "Joseph's servant."

Gislebertus' column capital done for the Autun Cathedral in 1130,⁵⁸ shows Joseph as protector, sword on shoulder as he leads the donkey. In two other twelfth century sculptures, a column capital for St. Abbondio's Basilica in Como⁵⁹ and Brioloto's baptismal font for San Giovanni Rotondo in Verona,⁶⁰ St. Joseph is shown carrying a rather large Child.⁶¹ The twelfth century column capital for the Monastery of St. Mary of Estany in Barcelona,⁶² instead, shows him carrying a lantern.

Subsequent centuries provide an abundance of representations that we cannot begin to survey here.⁶³ Giotto's 1305 fresco at Padua is certainly influential, exhibiting what has become a very common arrangement of Joseph, guarded by an angel, leading the donkey carrying mother and child. Also beginning in the fourteenth century, a common theme becomes the rest on the flight, as in Master Bertram's altarpiece (1379-83) for Peterskirche, Hamburg. The presence of the palm tree also becomes common, recalling the apocryphal miracle, but also symbolizing that Joseph is the just man who flourishes like the palm, in fulfillment of Psalm 92(91):13. Joseph's role as provider and protector becomes increasingly clear. The apocrypha gradually become less and less influential, particularly after the Council of Trent (1545-63), and Joseph's role becomes more clearly portrayed. The fall of the Egyptian idols nevertheless continues to be seen in the background even in more recent scenes of the flight, but without detracting from Joseph's important ministry.

PAPAL MAGISTERIUM

Without specifically mentioning the flight into Egypt, Leo XIII presents the patriarch Joseph, "who provided for all the needs of the Egyptians," as a prefiguration of St. Joseph, who similarly protects and defends the Church.⁶⁴

From Pius XII we have an explicit reference, offered as an example of Joseph's protective role as model husband and father: "... having learned from the angel that his treasure was threatened, [Joseph] 'took the child

⁵⁶ TESTINI, 711.

⁵⁷ K. YOUNG, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Oxford 1933, 114, 412.

⁵⁸ C. H. EBERTSHAUSER, et. al., *Mary: Art, Culture and Religion Through the Ages*, New York 1998, 37.

⁵⁹ E. CATTANEO, "Testimonianze Iconografiche in Lombardia (Sec. IV-XII)," in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 721.

⁶⁰ F. VERRI, C.S.I., "San Giuseppe nell'Arte Medievale Veneta," in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 732.

⁶¹ J. F. CHORPENNING, O.S.F.S., *Christopher Blancus' Engravings for Jerónimo Gracián's Summary of the Excellencies of St. Joseph (1597)*, Philadelphia 1996, 14-6, describes the significance of other mid-twelfth century examples, from both East and West, of Joseph carrying Jesus.

⁶² JOSÉ DE JESÚS MARÍA, O.C.D., "San José en la Escultura Románica Española," in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 740.

⁶³ See: J. L. RODRÍGUEZ, O.C.D., "Iconografía Josefina en el Gótico Español," in *S. Giuseppe nei Primi Quindici*, 766-769. CHORPENNING, *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love*, Philadelphia 1996, 62-63, 67, 70, 73-81, 101, 148, and particularly 180-4. C. C. WILSON, *St. Joseph in Italian Renaissance Society and Art*, Philadelphia 2001, 5, 65-74; "St. Joseph as *Custos* in the *Summa* of Isidoro Isolano and in Italian Renaissance Art," in *Saint Joseph Studies*, Santa Cruz CA 2002, 105, 109-10; "The Cult of St. Joseph in Early Cinquecento Venice and the Testimony of Marino Sanudo's *Diaries*," in *Studi Veneziani*, XLVII (2004) 289, 307, 309. At <http://www.osjoseph.org/stjoseph/art/> one may navigate to the subjects of the Flight and the Rest and see a number of works, which can be sorted in a number of ways, including by century.

⁶⁴ LEO XIII, *Quamquam Pluries*, 8/15/1889.

and his mother by night' (Mt 2:14) and, clearing brush and stones from the sandy trail, led them into Egypt. He worked hard there to support them. By a new command from heaven, probably a few years later, with similar sacrifice, he then led them back to the town of Nazareth in Galilee (Mt 2:22-23)."⁶⁵

John XXIII twice mentions the flight as an example of Joseph's silent obedience. "Behold [St. Joseph] on the way to Egypt, and then returning to Nazareth, always in silent obedience, showing and then hiding Jesus, defending and nourishing him."⁶⁶ "An author writes that on the holy night of Christmas there shone a single lamp, the one lit by Joseph. Yet that fiery light, that silence of his and that immediate obedience to the voice of an angel, that said 'Flee' and then 'Return,' through so many hardships, going where he did not choose, to years of hard work in Galilee: all this expresses character, tranquillity, encouragement."⁶⁷

Paul VI also praises Joseph's docility: "He had a communication of God's will that took precedence over his actions. Thus his daily conduct sprung from a hidden dialogue indicating what to do.... And Joseph obeys. Later he will be ordered to depart since the newborn Savior is in danger. Without provision, he undertakes a long journey across unfamiliar, scorching deserts, an exile in a foreign, pagan land. He remains faithful and attentive to the voice of the Lord, who will later order him to return."⁶⁸ Years later Paul VI recalls his visit to the great Shrine of St. Joseph in Montreal, which has a number of chapels, dedicated to various groups who invoke St. Joseph's patronage, among which he also mentions the one to "Protector of Refugees,"⁶⁹ a title surely springing from Joseph's role during the flight.

Most significant, however, is the Apostolic Exhortation on St. Joseph by John Paul II. Through the exercise of his fatherhood, St. Joseph is a minister of salvation, who cooperated in the great mystery, as Chrysostom had said.⁷⁰ The flight is summarized and harmonized with Luke's chronology, and the following conclusion is drawn: "And so Jesus' way back to Nazareth from Bethlehem passed through Egypt. Just as Israel had followed the path of the exodus 'from the condition of slavery' in order to begin the Old Covenant, so Joseph, guardian and cooperator in the providential mystery of God, even in exile watched over the one who brings about the New Covenant."⁷¹

A final quote of great pastoral interest is from a homily of John Paul II given at the Shrine of St. Joseph in Kalisz, Poland: "Joseph of Nazareth, who protected Jesus from the cruelty of Herod, stands before us as a great spokesman for the protection of human life from the moment of conception until natural death."⁷²

SPIRITUAL AUTHORS

Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (born c. 935) in her legend "Maria" presents in poetic form the apocryphal events of the dragons, lions, palm tree, idols falling, and conversion of Apphrodisius, following Pseudo-Matthew very closely.⁷³

⁶⁵ PIUS XII, "Discourse to Spouses on the Solemnity of St. Joseph," 4/10/1940.

⁶⁶ JOHN XXIII, "In the Light of the Patron of the Universal Church," discourse 3/19/1961.

⁶⁷ JOHN XXIII, "Every Week," address 5/1/1961.

⁶⁸ PAUL VI, "Sublime Example," homily 3/19/1968.

⁶⁹ PAUL VI, "The Gospel Figure," homily 3/19/1975.

⁷⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Custos*, 8/15/1989, 8.

⁷¹ RC, 14.

⁷² JOHN PAUL II, homily, 6/4/1997.

⁷³ *Hrotsvithae Opera*, "Maria," in CCSL, v. 34, 24-29. K. M. WILSON, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her Works*, Cambridge 1998.

Ubertin de Casale (1259-329) writes that by exposing himself to so many dangers to protect Jesus' life during the flight and return, Joseph was loved by Mary more than any other creature. He nourished, guided and protected Jesus during his mortal life. He is the blessed conclusion of the Old Law. Just as the patriarch Joseph provided the Egyptians with bread for their physical life, so St. Joseph, by nourishing Jesus with such vigilant care, has given all the elect the heavenly bread, source of eternal life.⁷⁴ Ludolphe Le Chartreux (1300-70) reflects that St. Joseph's interior life and his freedom from earthbound concerns are what enable him to see the appearances of the angels. to obey promptly and to share the fatigue of Jesus and Mary on the journey.⁷⁵

Missionaries to New Spain, such as Pedro de Gante (1486-572), identified with St. Joseph's travails in leading the Holy Family into Egypt. They took him as their protector in their travels and they emulated his example in bringing Christianity to a pagan land. St. Joseph was named patron of New Spain and considered its "ruler," in the same way that his Old Testament type and namesake ruled over the land of Egypt.⁷⁶

Jerónimo Gracián (1545-645) describes St. Joseph as "Jesus' Guardian Angel, who protected and carried him on the road" to and from Egypt, fulfilling the angels' role. The Holy Spirit filled Joseph with the fire of love.⁷⁷

Saint Francis De Sales (1567-622) elaborates on St. Joseph's virtues, especially that of constancy, shown in the flight. He shows prompt, unquestioning obedience to the angel's unexpected command. Both Jesus and Mary submissively entrust themselves to Joseph's care and protection. Joseph's faith parallels that of Abraham when God first asked him to leave everything behind and follow God into the unknown. His simplicity and his trust in divine providence enable him to act calmly in the midst of trials. He remains gentle, tranquil and persevering in the face of poverty and of hostility from the Egyptians. He is called "just" because he is perfectly united to the divine will.⁷⁸

Venerable Mary of Jesus of Agreda (died 1666) left a quite lengthy and detailed account of the flight, often following the apocrypha, and mentioning the Coptic traditions regarding Memphis, Babylon, and Matarieh, which is near Heliopolis, the ancient pagan capital. The Holy Family witnesses the fulfillment of Is 19:1 by the toppling of the idols. Mary always shares first in the divine knowledge, but nevertheless waits for the angel to notify Joseph, the head of the family, whom she obeys. Mary at times commissions angels to do her bidding. She cures the sick and crippled and commands the elements. Gradually Joseph shares in the enlightenment. At the age of one, Jesus speaks to Joseph, as he had been speaking to Mary since his birth. He addresses him as "my father." After two years in Egypt, Joseph begins to help Mary by also curing the sick and teaching the faith. Joseph's love for Jesus far exceeds that of all natural fathers for their children. When Jesus is seven they return to Palestine, with Mary and Jesus on a donkey and Joseph following behind.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ U. DE CASALE, *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu*, II, vi "La fuite en Egypte," in S. E. VILLEPELET, *Les Plus Beaux Textes sur Saint Joseph*, Paris 1959, 46-9.

⁷⁵ L. LE CHARTREUX, *La Grande Vie de Jésus-Christ*, in VILLEPELET, 53-4.

⁷⁶ CHORPENNING, *The Holy Family as Prototype*, 18-19. See also TOSCHI, *Saint Joseph in the Lives of Two Blesseds of the Church*, Part I, Santa Cruz CA 1997, for similar devotion in Blessed J. Serra and other missionaries to New Spain.

⁷⁷ CHORPENNING, *Just Man, Husband of Mary, Guardian of Christ, an Anthology of Readings from Jerónimo Gracián's Summary of the Excellencies of St. Joseph (1597)*, Philadelphia 1993, 190-1, 196.

⁷⁸ F. DE SALES, *The Spiritual Conferences*, Westminster MD 1943, 37-53, 380-2. CHORPENNING, *Sermon Texts on Saint Joseph by Francis de Sales*, Toronto 2000, 68-69, 121-124; *The Holy Family as Prototype*, 52-3; *The Holy Family in Art and Devotion*, Philadelphia 1998, 43-4.

⁷⁹ MARY OF JESUS, *Mystical City of God, The Incarnation*, Bk II, ch xxi-xxx, Wheeling WV 1949, 519-608.

Maria Cecilia Baij (abbess in Montefiascone 1743-66) leaves a mystical description of Joseph which shows him to be a sensitive man of faith, humility, obedience and generosity. He experiences great distress, but always followed by great consolation. He witnesses the fall of the idols in Egypt. He constantly prays and receives counsel from Mary. He kneels in adoration before his child. He yearns for the conversion of sinners, for Jesus to be known and loved.⁸⁰

In 1888 Edward Healy Thompson published *The Life and Glories of Saint Joseph*, containing also a studied exposition of Joseph's exalted role during the flight, quoting Church fathers, scholars and spiritual writers. While he omits many of the apocryphal miracles, since they lack sufficient proof, he does affirm the encounter with the good thief, the stay at Heliopolis and the toppling of the 365 idols, the conversion of Apphrodisius, the miraculous tree and fountain at Matarieh, and the general performance of miracles while in Egypt. At the same time Joseph's exalted role is a principal focus throughout the exposition. He argues, for example, that Joseph could not have accepted Apphrodisius' open-ended offer to lodge and provide for the Holy Family, since that role was commissioned to him by God and he was to fulfill it personally by his own labors. Joseph is presented as head, guide, ruler and provider of the Holy Family. He is an honorable part of the divine self-abasement of the Incarnation. The child depends not on angels, but on Joseph who is therefore "the savior of the Savior." Through the incomparable humility of the God-Man, Joseph is charged with nourishing, teaching and parenting him. His fulfillment of these roles entitles him to be called "father" even more than all fathers of the natural order, since his fatherhood is of the supernatural order. Entrusted with God's most precious treasures, Joseph is inseparable from Jesus and Mary, forming a triad with them and belonging to the order of the Hypostatic Union. The stay in Egypt fulfills many Old Testament prophecies, but particularly Isaiah 19, so that Egypt is at least partially evangelized in advance, thereby predisposing it to accept the later teaching of the apostles and produce many hermits and saints. Joseph shares in this mission as an evangelizer, apostle and "doctor of Egypt."⁸¹

In 1896 St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-97) prepared for her novices a dramatization of "The Flight into Egypt." The Holy Family in exile was the best model to help the discalced Carmelites face their own community anguish and fear of secularization and exile. St. Joseph is shown to be always calm and prudent. He marvels that the King of Heaven sleeps calmly in Mary's embrace, saying nothing to her, while the angel has come to him with the heavenly command to flee. Mary affirms, though, that he is God's representative. Joseph would like to spare them the pain of the journey, taking it all on himself, but he must accept the extreme poverty that awaits them all in Egypt. Yet in Jesus they possess all wealth.⁸²

Alexis Lepicier, O.S.M. (1863-936) accepts the reasoning of various fathers cited that the flight in Egypt was to signify the imminent destruction of idol worship. He also explains that Joseph's sorrows during the flight correspond to the Lord's three purposes in fleeing as taught by Aquinas. In a certain sense Joseph suffered more than Jesus and Mary, since he received the message and bore the weight of the responsibility for the entire family. Secondly, Joseph suffered realizing that Herod's cruel ambition foreshadowed all future persecutions against the Church. Finally, he suffered the anxiety of taking the world's Savior into a foreign land he knew not

⁸⁰ M. C. BAIJ, O.S.B., *The Life of Saint Joseph*, Ashbury NJ 1997, 182-244.

⁸¹ E. H. THOMPSON, *The Life and Glories of Saint Joseph*, chs. xxxv-xxxviii, Rockford IL 1980, 287-330. (The event described by Pseudo-Matthew as taking place near Hermopolis Magna, much further South, becomes readily transferred or extended to Heliopolis, probably for the symbolism involved.)

⁸² JOSÉ DE JESÚS MARÍA, O.C.D., *Présence de Saint Joseph chez Thérèse de Lisieux*, Montréal 1999, 20-2, 27-33.

for an unknown period of time. Throughout all Joseph is a model of simplicity, humility and heroic obedience. God rewards him by making him a witness of the conversion of some of the Egyptians. In carrying the light of Jesus, Joseph has the glory of being a minister of the marvels of grace. One form of devotion is to give alms to the poor in memory of the great privations which St. Joseph endured during the journey.⁸³

Herman Heuser published a biblical novel in 1925, wherein the first several chapters deal with the encounter between some Jewish characters in Egypt with the Holy Family and their witnessing the falling of the idols. Joseph is just, gentle, modest and a capable artisan.⁸⁴

Maria Valtorta (died 1961) writes long descriptions she believes are revealed to her. They show no reliance on the apocrypha, but offer such details as the number of donkeys Joseph purchased for the trip. Joseph is described as well built, smiling, not very tall, not over 40, with tan skin, thick hair and beard, dark eyes, and a pleasant face that inspires confidence. He is the head of the family, leading the prayers which Mary answers. He and Mary enjoy holy conversations and he loves teaching Jesus to make things. He is a humble and pure soul who has the great joy of hearing Jesus call him “father.”⁸⁵

Hugh Blunt’s *Life of St. Joseph* (1947) presents him as a man of courage in the flight. He is able-bodied, obedient, loving, patriotic, and a poor laborer, nothing like the “lazy individual” presented by the apocrypha, to which no credence is given.⁸⁶ Rosalie Levy recounts (1955) some of the traditions, particularly the falling of the idols, relying heavily on Mary of Agreda. Joseph’s virtues are prompt obedience, prudence and silence.⁸⁷

Lawrence Brennan’s fascinating novel (1955) describes the drama of fleeing from the pursuits of Herod’s henchmen. In 55 pages there is only the slightest hint of the influence of the apocrypha. A fig tree bends over for them to reach its fruit, but it does so by the providential wind, rather than by a direct command of the child. The idols topple at Heliopolis before the presence of the Holy Family. Throughout, however, Joseph is the protagonist. He makes quick decisions moment by moment on how to avoid the soldiers. He fends off attacking falcons, idolized by the pagans, and his hands are sliced in defense of Jesus. His shadow, standing tall staff in hand, frightens away Herod’s spies who had come at night to kill the child. He is clearly God’s instrument who, on Jesus’ behalf, prevails against all the threats of evil.⁸⁸

Albert Bessières writes (1958) that St. Joseph already knew Herod’s cruelty. From Simeon’s prophecy and the secret departure of the Magi, he deduced his threat and turned to God in prayer, which was responded to by the angel’s message. He also quotes Bossuet’s Panegyric regarding the fatigue of the journey and the sorrow that accompanies the joy of guarding Jesus and that excludes the apocryphal miracles. Fathers and mothers must expect the cross in parenting their children. Finally the author includes a passage from Giovanni Barra, presenting St. Joseph as a model of missionary life, leaving all behind to head for unknown pagan lands, to bring Christ, without expecting immediate results. Joseph’s silent suffering complements his greatness.⁸⁹

Michael Gasnier offers a meditative reflection (1961) on Joseph’s uncomplaining faith. The warning to flee was part of the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus came in humility and self-abasement. Joseph was chosen to

⁸³ A. M. LEPICIER, O.S.M., *Tractatus de Sancto Ioseph*, Paris 1908, 125-128, 209-210; *Go To Joseph*, New York 1923, 161-74.

⁸⁴ H. J. HEUSER, *In the Workshop of Joseph*, New York 1925, 9-25.

⁸⁵ M. VALTORTA, *The Poem of the Man-God*, Centro Editoriale Valtoriano 1986, Vol. 1, 179-204.

⁸⁶ H. H. BLUNT, *Give This Man a Place*, Milwaukee 1947, 53-61.

⁸⁷ R. M. LEVY, *Joseph the Just Man*, Boston 1955, 59-67.

⁸⁸ L. D. BRENNAN, *The St. Joseph Story*, Newark NJ 1955, 224-79.

⁸⁹ A. BESSIÈRES, S.J., *Presenza di San Giuseppe*, Asti 1958, 229-37.

save him from premature martyrdom, and thus to cooperate in the work of redemption. Leaving all behind, he journeyed into the unknown, just as Abraham had done when first called. Jesus depended not on apocryphal miracles, but on Joseph's protection. He experienced all the hardships of survival in a foreign land, without regret, for he knew it was part of God's plan of salvation.⁹⁰

José Antonio del Niño Jesús reasons (1966) that St. Joseph was chosen for his role from all eternity. He obeys immediately, silently, contemplatively, since he knows his mission of service and fulfills it with total dedication. The flight is another important link in the chain of Jesus' redemptive acts. The apocryphal legends of idols falling are pure inventions that are to be discounted, since Jesus would surely have passed unnoticed in Egypt, just as he did in Palestine. Joseph and Mary suffer the pain of isolation from their homeland and from the celebration of their religious feasts, but this is compensated by their joy at the intimacy of their family life and by their awareness that they are doing God's will.⁹¹

Benvenuto Micardi portrays (1982) Joseph as an active apostle among his Jewish compatriots settled in Egypt. When the news of the slaughter of the Innocents reaches him there, it occurs to him that the redemption is already beginning.⁹² The St. Joseph monks of Flavigny, quoting Bernard, Alphonsus Liguori and Francis De Sales, also meditate upon (1996) Joseph's labor and suffering in an idolatrous and unfamiliar nation in order to provide food to the child who feeds the entire world. Readers are invited to honor St. Joseph by willingly accepting trials from God's hands without complaining.⁹³ Referring to the flight, Stephen Binz promotes (2003) devotion to Joseph, who for centuries has been looked to as "the patron saint of refugees and immigrants, the protector of those who have been deprived of their homes, and the protector of those who travel from their homeland to new homes."⁹⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The descriptive details of the flight found in the apocrypha exalt Mary and emphasize the manifestations of the divinity of Jesus from birth. Joseph, an old widower, seems to serve little purpose. This failure to recognize his true role diminishes appreciation of the Incarnation. It contradicts the Gospel account of Jesus' dependence on Joseph for protection and also his hidden preparation for his public ministry in adulthood. This is certainly related to the rise of the early monophysite heresy that failed to admit the fullness of Jesus' human nature. The Coptic Orthodox traditions listed above are mainly conjectural,⁹⁵ due to the preference of mysticism as pure experience rather than God's action in human history.⁹⁶ The background of ancient pagan religions in Egypt favored such a preference, whereas the monotheistic revolution of Judaism in Israel did not.

From the fathers of the Church, from the liturgy, and from the magisterium, we learn that the depth of the Gospel message need not be concerned with filling in imaginary historical details. The meaning of the event is to be found in its transcendence. It is a part of God's eternal plan of salvation history, breaking into human

⁹⁰ M. GASNIER, O.P., *Joseph the Silent*, New York 1961, 111-23.

⁹¹ JOSÉ ANTONIO DEL NIÑO JESÚS, O.C.D., *San José, Su Misión, Su Tiempo, Su Vida*, Valladolid 1966, 195-215.

⁹² B. MICARDI, *Un Uomo Silenzioso, Giuseppe*, Rome 1982, 51-5.

⁹³ MONKS OF ST. JOSEPH'S ABBEY, *Saint Joseph, Époux de Marie*, Flavigny-sur-Ozerain 1996, 88-92; *The Glories of St. Joseph*, Flavigny 1998, 103-5.

⁹⁴ S. J. BINZ, *St. Joseph, My Real Estate Agent*, Ann Arbor 2003, 57-61.

⁹⁵ MEINARDUS, *Two Thousand Years*, 16.

⁹⁶ J. RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance*, San Francisco CA 2004, 25-44.

history at a particular place “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10). Joseph’s role is directly related to the humbling mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness” (Phil 2:7).

The tradition of the toppling of the pagan idols at Jesus’ approach, however, has found acceptance in early historical records, Cyril of Jerusalem, works of art (from the ancient mosaic at Mary Major down to the stained glass window in my parish church), spiritual writings through the centuries, and the still popular “Seven Sorrows and Joys of St. Joseph.” Imagining that the event took place at Heliopolis, “city of the sun,” certainly fits well with the prophecy of Isaiah 19:18 that of five cities in Egypt swearing allegiance to the Lord, one of them would “be called the City of the Sun.” Even those who reject its historicity accept the theology that the True God has come to replace the false gods. In fact one of the major reasons for going to Egypt was because it was the pre-eminent center of paganism and idolatry. The journey there shows from the start that Savior had come for the gentiles, for all the peoples of the earth, especially those most in need. The overthrow of idolatry was prefigured when the idol Dagon crumbled to the ground as the Philistines brought the ark of the covenant into his temple (1 Sam. 5:1-4). Jeremiah 43, Ezekiel 20 and 30, Hosea 11, and especially Isaiah 19 all prophesied that one day Egypt’s idols would tremble before the Lord. Our survey shows very wide adherence from all perspectives to the belief that the flight is connected with the fulfillment of these prophecies.

Sound exegesis, as well as the reflections of Church Tradition,⁹⁷ see that just as the Old Covenant was forged by God leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, so now the New Covenant is effected by God’s Son, who had come to “save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21), entering into the center of idolatry, taking the identity of Israel upon Himself so as to redeem it and lead it out, in fulfillment of Hosea 11:1.

Based on the most reliable authority surveyed here, with respect to the flight into Egypt we can soundly conclude the following about St. Joseph:

1. It is part of the unfathomable mystery of the Incarnation for God to entrust Jesus’ humanity to the fatherly protection, care and upbringing of Joseph, who acts as savior to the Savior.
2. Joseph is the head of the Holy Family, so commissioned by God’s own angel, and he acts as such.
3. God communicates in dreams with Joseph the just man, as He had done with the patriarch of the same name.
4. Joseph is a minister of salvation. “Joseph, guardian and cooperator in the providential mystery of God, even in exile watched over the one who brings about the New Covenant” (RC 14). He collaborates in Christ’s mission.
5. In faith Joseph rejoices to realize that the True God has come to replace the pagan idols.
6. As Israel had a Joseph for protector in Egypt, so too does Jesus, the “new Israel.”
7. As the patriarch Joseph became master of Pharaoh’s house, so St. Joseph is charged with Jesus’ household.
8. As people were told to “go to Joseph” for grain in the Old Testament, so too may we turn in prayer to the intercession of St. Joseph, guardian of the “Bread of Life” (Jn 6:42-8).

⁹⁷ See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 530.

9. As Joseph once defended Jesus from Herod, so does he still defend the Church (the Body of Christ) from the powers of darkness. His fatherly protection of Jesus and Mary is exercised still in his role as Patron of the Church, the family of God.

10. St. Joseph is a model husband. Mary is called the child's "mother" in Mt 2:13-4, not because she is not Joseph's wife (cf. Mt 1:16, 19, 20, 24), but because their marriage finds its purpose in the Savior to whom she has given birth. Joseph's love for her is God-centered and selfless.

11. Joseph is a model father, inseparable from Mary and Jesus. He exercises his fatherhood with love, providing for, protecting, guiding, teaching, and parenting Jesus. No fatherhood of the natural order can surpass his.

12. Joseph exemplifies the virtues of faith, humility, prayerfulness, simplicity, availability, trust, unquestioning obedience, prudence and courage.

13. Refugees, homeless people, the unemployed, emigrants, travelers, and missionaries may all look to Joseph as their particular patron.

14. In our current culture of death, Joseph is a most fitting patron for the protection of human life from conception until natural death.

15. Joseph remains constant through sorrow and joy. He participates in advance in the cross, the paschal mystery of the dying and rising of Christ. From him the whole Church learns to accept its part in the sorrows and joys of its pilgrimage.

As every aspect of the mystery of salvation is important, so are the events regarding Joseph and Egypt an important part of our faith in Jesus Christ.