

## The Flight into Egypt

The episode of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt is recounted in the Gospel of St Matthew. The Magi had come to Bethlehem to adore the Infant King and to bestow on him their gifts full of meaning. Warned from Heaven, they did not fulfil their promise of going back to Herod, but went straight to their own country.

They had come providentially to represent the Gentiles and, as it were, Our Lord paid a return visit to the Gentiles. It was in this wise: 'An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in his sleep, saying: Arise and take the child and his mother and fly into Egypt, and be there until I shall tell thee. For it will come to pass that Herod will seek the child to destroy him, Joseph arose and took the child and his mother by night and retired into Egypt' (Mt 2:13-14).

Very simple words but covering an extraordinary event. Why into Egypt? In the first place, there were reasons of a geographical character. Escape to the north was impossible. Eastwards meant entering the interminable desert which would have been too much for them. The only refuge from Herod's jurisdiction was Egypt. 'Egypt will soon stretch out its hands to God' (Psalm 67). So even

without the angel having specified their destination, they would have gone there. God's providence utilised human considerations. But there were deeper reasons why Egypt should be their refuge and their habitation, and these reasons I propose to bring out.

Regarding the precise route taken, I have consulted a number of books and it seems to me that the best description of their itinerary is that given by Fr Eugene Hoade, the Franciscan, who is prominently associated with the Holy Land and has spent most of his life there.

The holy refugees began by moving south through the mountains of Hebron. This meant the following of precipitous and cliff-edge paths, hazardous even by day, unthinkable in darkness except in circumstances like theirs. At dawn they looked from the height upon the plain of the Philistines. Then to the west to Gaza, which is on the Mediterranean. Mary of Agreda, one of the great visionaries, says that there they remained for two days to recover from sheer exhaustion. It is not certain, but it is likely enough, that there they joined a caravan for Egypt.

At Beersheba begins the barren wasteland which after a little while turns into pure desert, a sea of sand. Whether they were alone or with a caravan, they would after this point have to observe a precise schedule which would allow them to halt for the night at certain spots. These would be dictated by the presence of water, an oasis.

Legend is busy in regard to that journey, I suppose more than about any other period of their lives. It tells a tale of miracles which come to the rescue of those harassed ones. But that would paint a picture different to reality. They did not work wonders, though they may have been miraculously helped, a distinction which I discuss a little later. That journey was no picturesque excursion. They

were left to suffer all the hardships of the way like any other travellers, save that they were more poorly equipped than any others.

By day the heat was intense, producing tortures of thirst and mirages. At night the cold was severe and they slept upon a mat with no overhead covering. All along the route which would be the established one to Egypt were strewn the bones of animals which had perished on the journey. The greatest suffering, it is said, experienced by Mary and Joseph was that of fear, sheer fear. Mary's sensitivity raised this in her to pure agony. But even a more intolerable emotion was the realisation that her child was already the subject of hate, causing his life to be sought.

The babe itself was shielded solicitously from all those trials. It was cradled in the loving arms of its mother, sheltered from the heat of the day and the cold of the night and amply nourished from its mother's breasts.

Not everything was disagreeable. They were moving through territory bristling with memories for the Jewish mind. Two thousand years before, pursuant to the great Covenant, father Abraham had taken symbolic possession of it for the Chosen People. It had been crossed by all the ancestors of their race. Joseph, the predecessor of St Joseph, was brought through it as a prisoner, having been sold for silver by his brothers. He was destined to become mighty in Egypt; it was on account of him that his father Jacob and his brothers came and settled in that land. They were followed by a continuous trickle of migrants. Both Joseph and Jacob died in Egypt and were embalmed and buried there. Hundreds of years later Moses and Aaron would rise up and lead their people out of Egypt.



Now the Holy Family were passing through that region so full of historical associations. That unpretending maid and her child were the culminating point of all that history. Mary's mind would be full of it, and she and her spouse would discuss the varied roles which each place had played in the past. Later on this territory would become the abode of a multitude of hermits, the Fathers of the Desert.

If we take a map in the effort to follow them, it would appear that they went along the Mediterranean from Gaza to El Arish which was formerly known as Rhinocolura. The name means the place of the people without noses, the reference being to a punishing of the people there by cutting off their noses. It marked the boundary line between Herod's kingdom and Roman Egypt. Now at last they were safe, they had passed out of Herod's jurisdiction.

Then to Pelusium, the ruins of which are 90 miles due east of the present Suez Canal; and then south-west to enter the verdant valley of the Nile; then through Goshen where their forebears once lived (Gn 45-10); and on towards Heliopolis.

Certain landmarks, eagerly anticipated, had come in sight, and soon were under spellbound inspection. Dominating the panorama near Ghizeh, were the Pyramids and the great Sphinx. The latter, 189 feet long, cut out of a hill of rock, has been a riddle of the ages. It has become the very sign for unrevealed mystery.

Had its secret anything to do with the Mighty One whom the divine plan had now stationed before it in fulfilment of the prophecy: 'Behold the Lord will enter into Egypt. And the idols of Egypt shall be moved by his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst thereof' (Is 19:1).

It is a curious thought that of all the man-made structures on which the Holy Family gazed during their sojourn on Earth, none now survive but those.

It is insisted by most of the ancient writers that when the Holy Family passed through the massive stone arches into Heliopolis, all the idols in a neighbouring temple fell to the ground. It was a tradition among the learned in Egypt dating from the abiding of the Prophet Jeremiah in that country, that a King of the Jews would come and that the idols would be destroyed.

Nowadays Catholic opinion does not endorse the numerous wonders which the older writers attributed to Our Lord during infancy. Moreover, the gospel describes Cana as having been the beginning of his miracles. Nevertheless I think this episode of the idols could be granted, because it was not worked directly by the Holy Family nor for the purpose of conveniencing them; and some portents would have to be expected as the halo or accompaniment of persons so uniquely great. They are not the same as miracles worked directly by them. That episode would be in the same order as the earthquake which took place at the time of Our Lord's death, or the biblical account of the destruction of Dagon, the Philistine idol, when the Ark of the Covenant was put in his temple.

They passed through Heliopolis to a place called Matarieh which is six miles north of Cairo.

It was there that Mary and Joseph made a humble abode. Many are of the opinion that soon they moved into Cairo. There was a large Jewish colony at Leontopolis, about twelve miles from Heliopolis, and it would unquestionably help the Holy Family. There was a commendable fellow-feeling among all the exiled Jews.

Matarieh was a beautiful village shaded by sycamores. Even today the remnant of a great sycamore is pointed out as Mary's tree by the Moslem guides. These latter allege that she frequently sheltered under the tree in the days when it possessed abundant foliage. In Matarieh is the only fountain of sweet water in Egypt, called to this day the Fountain of Mary, because in it Mary bathed her infant and washed their clothing.

The journey from home to that destination was three hundred miles, as I work it out by scale on the map. Different authors say that it took them ten to fifteen days to accomplish it, but this seems to represent too fast a rate of travelling in the circumstances. It would work out at between twenty and thirty miles a day. I feel it would be wiser to assign a longer duration to the journey, say twenty days.

How did they maintain themselves in Egypt? St Joseph certainly plied his trade, and would be given work by the Israelite colony. Mary is believed to have earned by needlework, at which she was expert. But it is also suggested by some of the writers that they had a lean time, and one account declares that Mary had to glean in the fields. If that was the case it would denote the poverty line.

It is alleged that it was during the stay in Egypt that Mary wove the seamless robe for her son which grew with his growth.

Residence in Egypt was a change of environment for them which could hardly be more drastic. Out of the warmth of the full Jewish ceremonial, stimulated by the immediate expectation of the Messiah, they were abruptly transferred to the chilly atmosphere of paganism and idolatry. Many of the idols were inhabited by evil



spirits who gave impressive demonstration of their power. However, the presence of a colony of the Jews should mean that they preserved their national way of life with its religious rites, including the annual celebration of the Passover in the very land in which it had originated.

But here arises some difference of opinion among the historians. Orsini says that in Heliopolis there was a Temple of Jehovah, built on the lines of the great Temple on Mount Sion in Jerusalem. This does not seem probable. A mere colony could not build such a Temple nor provide the priests or the lavish ceremonial which it would require. On the other hand Fr Faber, who was a very intelligent investigator, declares that there was no temple and probably no synagogue. This is a jump from one extreme to the other. Why not a synagogue? Little communities of Jews everywhere have their synagogues. You will understand that there is a vast difference between a temple and a synagogue. The former has the sacrifice; the latter was and is only a meeting place for the Sabbath. It would require no more than a premises and a Rabbi. Note that a Rabbi is not a priest, but only an expounder of the law. No doubt any layman could fill his place. So we can take it as probable that there was a synagogue in the vicinity of the Holy Family, to which of course they would resort.

But this was no ordinary case of a devout family deprived by departure from Jerusalem of the glorious celebrations of the Temple. This pair had an extraordinary compensation for that withdrawal. They had Jesus. How then could they seriously miss a ritual, however elaborate and meaningful? Because in relation to Jesus such a ritual would be precisely what the shadow is to the substance. All the rich ceremonial of the Old Law was only a pointing

to the Redeemer, an anticipation of his coming and of his saving sacrifice. It only drew its efficacy from a faith in that coming. Therefore, if one thinks, Mary and Joseph had everything. Absorbed in the divine child, one may imagine that they would have as little missed the ritual as one would miss the signposts along a familiar road.

It is certain that Mary's mind would dwell ever more intently on the scriptures, now visibly in process of fulfilment. The brilliant intellect of the Immaculate Conception would draw life from every word of that holy text. She would see things which no one else would perceive. Phrases that other eyes would idly pass over, would be to her prophetic or symbolic of that beautiful child which she kissed in ardent love or pressed to her bosom in fear, according to the particular aspect of her contemplation. She wondered too how much deeper that sword of sorrow predicted by holy Simeon would penetrate into her heart. Her agony was to come through Jesus. So that terrible things were waiting along the road for him and for her?

The genealogy of the human race which began with Adam is but her own family tree. All the founders of her people are links of the long chain leading to the last link which she was holding in her arms, that seed which is the New Adam. With awe she ponders on the truth that she is the woman prophesied at the Fall, and ever after the gleam of hope in the darkness.

Everywhere around she saw the slaves labouring where her ancestors had worked and on the same sort of tasks, mixing clay, making bricks, building, digging. Her love went out to them. She saw her own people in them. And the mother of all men received them into her maternal heart.



What inconceivable blessings must have descended on that land of refuge and hospitality during the stay of the Holy Family there! Mary of Agreda says that persons who were in touch with them became saintly and great.

What would have been the providential design in their visit to Egypt? In addition to the saving of the child's life, there must have been a purpose proper to the texture of Salvation. No doubt it was that Jesus had to go to the scene of the origins of the People of God so as to assimilate himself to them. He had to join himself to the primitive Mystical Body. The substance had to add itself to the shadow. He had, so to speak, to take up the running from all his forebears or figures, from Abraham on, who had spent fateful periods in Egypt.

It was in Egypt that the Israelites really grew into a nation out of the thousands of poor colonists who had followed the Patriarch Joseph. In Egypt they were welded into a real people by persecution.

The stay of Jesus there must have had a million meanings and symbols in it. It was so much part of the major plan of things that it was woven into prophecy: 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Mt 2:15) – spoken ages before that son had come into the world.

How long was the Holy Family in Egypt? Fr Faber, who collected all the opinions, says that seven years was the general belief. It comes as a shock to hear that modern scholarship is cutting down on that. Fr Hoede opts for a few months. Roschini says the same, but one very worthy recent authority grants four years.

I have to say that I find it hard to reconcile myself to that estimate of months. The tradition and the general Christian idea think in terms of a much longer period. This is supported by an extensive legendry. I would like

to be able to align myself with that estimate of four years.

The end of the stay came. St Matthew informs us: 'When Herod was dead, behold an angel of the Lord appeared in sleep to Joseph in Egypt, saying: Arise and take the child and his mother and go into the land of Israel. For they are dead that sought the life of the child' (2:19-21). So with the same promptitude which had characterised their flight, they turned their backs on the Pyramids and set out for home.

It is believed that the return journey was accomplished by sea, which would be the easier way and the natural course. Because now there was no need for concealment. They could get a boat at Memphis which would cover the journey to Alexandria in two days. Then another boat from Alexandria to Jamnia, four days. Then around the foot of Mount Carmel to Nazareth.

They had intended going to live in Bethlehem but on learning that Archelaus, the vicious son of cruel Herod, was reigning in Judaea, they went instead to Galilee where Antipas, the other son, ruled and they settled down in Nazareth. Again this choice between Archelaus and Antipas was the instrument of Providence. For the prophecy said: 'He shall be called a Nazarene' (Mt 2:23).