In Egypt there are wonderful stories of the Holy Family little known elsewhere in the world. These have been told from father and mother to child for hundreds of years. They tell of the path the Holy Family took in these fabled Egyptian lands and also of wonderful happenings that surround that flight. These stories are treasured by Christian and Muslim alike in Egypt, although they vary a little at times. But whether fact or fiction, in whole or in part (as they may have been embroidered or embellished many times), one thing is certain: They are held close to the hearts of a people fervent with a love of God.

"Arise, and take the child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and remain there until I tell thee. For Herod will seek the Child to destroy him." (Matthew 13), the angel told Joseph in a dream. It fulfilled a prediction made centuries earlier when the prophet Hosea said, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1).

It is believed the Holy Family followed a path close by the sea across the Sinai, entering a village called Ismailia in Egypt. From there they continued on to Tal Basta near the present town of Zagazig close to the eastern edge of the Nile River delta.

At Tal Basta, stories tell of a man named Aqloum who took pity on the Holy Family, inviting them to his home for food and rest. Aqloum's wife, a bedridden invalid, was said to have been healed during the visit. Also at Tal Basta, a story tells of a well from which the Holy Family drank and how the waters from that well became known for their healing powers. At another town, Joseph asked for bread for the Christ-Child and it was refused. To this day, Egyptians insist that bread will not rise in the village where this occurred!

Just south of Tal Basta, in the town of Bilbeis, another story tells of a mother who wept for her dying son, Jacob, and how, as the Holy Family passed, the son arose and was well.

From here the Holy Family turned northward toward a town called Meniet Samannoud and, again, the family grew thirsty but there was no water to be found. The stories vary about this, but somehow water flowed from a stone and became a treasured well.

The tiny footprint of the Christ-Child remained on this stone and the place is known as Picha Isos meaning, "the heel of Jesus."

From here the Holy Family is said to have crossed the Nile and moved deep within the hot deserts of western Egypt, for word of the Holy Family's sojourn in Egypt had passed back to Herod and it was not prudent to stay long in any one place. However, they spent some time in the deep desert valley known as Wadi el Natrun which became, in later centuries, the site of many monasteries continuing to this day.

Out of these deserts they moved eastward across the Nile toward the ancient city of Babylon (Cairo) and rested under a tree in the city of Heliopolis. This is the ancient seat of learning where Moses was educated.

This place is preserved today and known as the Virgin Tree, and one can go there and view a most ancient-looking gnarled tree beside a very old well. It is surrounded by a high protective wall, separating it from the teeming city of Cairo that has grown to surround Heliopolis. But it is like a quiet oasis, this Virgin Tree place, tended by gentle people who seem to have moved back in time to the days of the holy sojourn. And there is a quiet here and a peace and serenity that belies understanding. The story goes that Mary washed the clothes...
of the Christ-Child in the well and that wherever a drop of water fell, a balsam tree grew. There is a history of a grand grove of these tall trees growing on the desert sands, but they have all vanished and the tree and well are all that remain today.

From here the Holy Family is believed to have traveled into Babylon, known today as Old Cairo—an enclave of ancient churches and a synagogue within the heart of modern Cairo. It is told that the Holy Family lived here in a cave for several months. Saint Sergius church stands above this cave and from inside one can peer down a flight of steps to where the waters of the Nile bathe those ancient stones which once held the Christ-Child, Mary and Joseph.

From Babylon, the Family moved south toward the Nile and as they neared a temple that stood on the banks of the river, an earthquake shook the area, toppling the idols within. The prophet Isaiah, had said, "Oracle on Egypt: See, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud on his way to Egypt; the idols of Egypt tremble before him, the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them" (Isaiah 19:1). As the family approached, the earth became calm and they were able to sleep within its walls and refresh themselves before setting sail on a boat against the tide up the River Nile.

This happened at a town called Maadi, and every year the father of the church there embarks on a boat, as the Holy Family once did in commemoration of that event. People come from miles around and fill the Nile with their feluccas, celebrating the joy and singing the time of the presence of the Holy Family in their midst.

In their journey upstream on the Nile, at a narrow place beside a high mountain, Mary noticed a boulder poised as if to fall on their frail boat. It is told that the child Jesus extended his hand to hold back the stone, and that his palm print remained for all to see. This happened in Middle Egypt near Samalut at Gebel al Tair (Mount of the Birds). Stories vary as to whether the Holy Family continued on a boat or by land, but most agree that they spent some time at a place near El Qusiya called Quasqam. There is a small stone there said to have been used as a pillow for the Christ-Child.

Wonderful cliffs with magnificent views stand near the Nile in Middle Egypt. It is believed that it was in a cave on one of these cliffs near the village Durunka, south of Asyut that the angel again visited Joseph in a dream. "Arise and take the child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead" (Matthew 2:20).

Most believe the Holy Family returned as they came, but it was not always agreed as to which event happened in which direction! Neither is the length of the Egyptian stay agreed upon. Muslims generally hold six years, while the Christians usually say it was three and a half years. The Koran mentions how the date palm tree sustained the Holy Family, giving nourishment as well as shelter. In the Franciscan church on top of Mt. Nebo in Jordan, there is the date tree motif in reference to the Holy Family's survival in alien lands. No one knows the truth of these stories which may or may not have been embroidered many times; but the essence is there that once a marvelous Family did, indeed, visit Egypt.

There is another story told how two thieves robbed the Holy Family during their Egyptian sojourn, and how one of them eventually was crucified on a cross beside Jesus. It was he who repented and to whom Jesus said, "Amen, I say unto thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

St. Anthony Messenger-January, 1995