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“RISE, TAKE THE CHILD AND HIS MOTHER, FLEE TO EGYPT...” (MATT 2,13). BUT WHY TO EGYPT?

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INTRODUCTION

After the Magi's departure from Bethlehem, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. He ordered him to take Mary and Jesus and go to Egypt on account of Herod who wanted to kill the child. Why did God choose Egypt as a place of refuge for the Holy Family? St. Matthew informs us that this was supposed to be a fulfillment of God's words in the Book of Hosea, "out of Egypt I called my son" (Matt 2,15; cf. Hos 11,1). In their original context, these words appeared long before Christ and referred to the Israelites' departure from Egypt. It was the Hebrew people that God was speaking of when He referred to them as His "son" (cf. Exod 4,22) and it was this "son" whom He led out of

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Egypt. For this reason, in the Jewish tradition, the words “out of Egypt I called my son” were not considered messianic; the Jews would rather consider them to be an expression of Israel’s liberation from slavery.¹ In addition, even if these words from the Book of Hosea could refer to a situation in the future, the question still remains: why did this Old Testament prophecy have to be fulfilled in the life of the Messiah? Why did there have to be a connection between Jesus and Egypt in God’s plan of Salvation?

This article does not attempt to give an exhaustive answer. Obviously, around the first century A.D. there were diverse currents of thought concerning the Messiah and his identity, but it is beyond the scope of the present essay to examine them all. Only certain leads will be pursued and presented here for consideration, bearing in mind that Jesus and His teaching cannot be separated from the history of the Hebrew people. This is something that St. Matthew was well aware of, because he was deeply rooted in the Old Covenant tradition, just like those to whom he addressed his Gospel.

1. EGYPT FROM AN ETYMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In Hebrew, the word *Egypt* is rendered *mitsraim*. This term appears for the first time in the Book of Genesis, as the name of the son of Ham (cf. Gen 10,6). *Mitsraim* became the father of the Egyptian people who, together with the land they inhabited, were henceforth referred to by this name in the Bible.² Moreover, the word *mitsraim* is in the plural form, but its root is difficult to determine.³ It is usually assumed that the root is *m-c-r* (to bound, confine, limit).⁴ That is why it is often said that the term *mitsraim* could refer to the two borders which were formed as

¹ Cf. Y. Kiel, *Trey Asar. Sefer Hoshea (Daat Mikra)*, ed. Y. Kiel et al., Jerusalem 1971–2003, p. 85.

² Interestingly, after Israel, Egypt is mentioned in the Old Testament more often than any other nation or people. Cf. S. Avramski, *Mitsraim*, in: *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, ed. M. and B. Palyi et al., Jerusalem 1951–1980, vol. 24, p. 232.

³ Cf. K. A. Kitchen, *Egypt, Egyptian*, in: *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology [NIDNTT]*, ed. C. Brown, Grand Rapids 1986, vol. 1, p. 530.

⁴ Cf. E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, New York 1987, p. 376.

a result of Egypt's geographical layout.⁵ This layout consists of an upper region and a lower region, or, looking at it differently, an eastern region (on the Nile's east side) and a western region (on the Nile's west side). While the root *m-c-r* is a possible etymological option for the origin of the term *mitsraim*, it should be noted that an alternative root could be *c-r-r* (cramped, restricted, depressed, worried).⁶ In fact, it is from the root *c-r-r* that the noun *mecar* (bond, distress) is formed,⁷ while its plural form is rendered *metsarim*.⁸ Consequently, the term *mitsraim* could refer not only to geographical boundaries, but also to distress and suffering. This would be in line with the fact that Egypt in the Old Testament is usually portrayed as either a place of refuge from distress, or a place which has been associated with suffering and persecution.

2. EGYPT AS A PLACE OF REFUGE

When the land of Canaan was afflicted by famine, Abraham (Abram) and his wife, Sarah (Sarai), went to Egypt in search of nourishment (cf. Gen 12,10). This way, Egypt became a place of refuge for the first Israelite patriarch and matriarch. Many years later, Abraham's great grandson, Joseph, also ended up in Egypt after being sold to a group of Midianites and Ishmaelites who in turn sold him to the Egyptians (cf. Gen 37,28.36). Joseph remained in Egypt and eventually reached a high social status that enabled him to save the inhabitants of Egypt as well as his own brothers and father during a famine in Egypt and Canaan. Joseph brought his family over to Egypt and with the approval of Pharaoh was able to have them settle down there. Still, they knew that in the future their descendants would have to depart from Egypt and return to the land of Canaan in order to fulfill the promise which God made to Abraham (cf. Gen 46,4; 50,25).

⁵ Cf. K. A. Kitchen, *Egypt, Egyptian*, in: *NIDNTT*, vol. 1, p. 530.

⁶ More on the various meanings of the verb *c-r-r*, see L. Kohler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Leiden 2001, vol. 2, p. 1058.

⁷ Cf. M. A. Phelps, *mecar*, in: *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis [NIDOTTE]*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, Grand Rapids 1997, vol. 2, p. 1076.

⁸ As in Lam 1,3.

Vatican II reminds us that “God, the inspirer and author of the books of both Testaments, in his wisdom has so brought it about that the new should be hidden in the Old and that the Old should be made manifest in the New”.⁹ It should not come as a surprise, then, that there is a parallel between the Holy Family’s journey and the journey of Abraham and his wife to and from Egypt. In both cases, the journey takes place on account of a distressful situation. Another noteworthy Old Testament event is the settling down of Joseph and Jacob’s family in Egypt and their sojourn there on account of constraints in their homeland. In fact, when we compare the lives of Joseph in the Old Testament and St. Joseph in the New Testament, we see that both of them ended up in Egypt thanks to God’s providence. It was thanks to Joseph’s stay in Egypt that the forefathers of the Hebrew people survived, just as in the New Testament, it was thanks to St. Joseph’s journey with Jesus and Mary to Egypt that the Messiah was protected from Herod’s reach. Furthermore, Joseph’s request concerning the transfer of his bones back to the land of Canaan (cf. Gen 50,25) brings to mind the eventual return of the Holy Family to the land of Israel.

The positive portrayal of Egypt as a place of refuge recurs in the life of various Israelites who throughout the ages had gone to Egypt to seek refuge and security there.¹⁰ By the second century B.C., Alexandria became a place where Jewish presence was quite notable and it was there that the Septuagint both developed and reached its final form. By the time of Jesus, it was common for Judean and Galilean rabbis to frequently visit their Jewish colleagues in Egypt.¹¹

3. EGYPT AS A PLACE OF BONDAGE

For Jews living in the land of Israel, the image of Egypt as a place of refuge was much less prevalent than its image as a place of suffering.¹²

⁹ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, 18 Nov. 1965, 16.

¹⁰ The present article does not discuss the lives of these persons. For a detailed discussion of this theme, see G. Galvin, *Egypt as a Place of Refuge* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament, 2. Reihe), Tübingen 2011.

¹¹ Cf. R. Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash* (Studia Judaica. Forschungen zur Wissenschaft des Judentums; ed. E.L. Ehrlich and G. Stemmerger: 52), Berlin 2009, p. 5.

¹² Cf. K. A. Kitchen, *Egypt, Egyptian*, in: *NIDNTT*, vol. 1, p. 531. See also H.-J.

This was a consequence of the difficulties which the Israelites began experiencing in Egypt after the death of Joseph (cf. Exod 1,8–14). For this reason, Egypt is often depicted negatively in the Old Testament.¹³ The same is true for the rabbinical literature.¹⁴ In it, there are numerous references to pagan practices and an immensely immoral life-style in Egypt.¹⁵

The Israelites' enslavement in Egypt ended when God liberated them through the mediation and leadership of Moses. This event made such an impact on the national consciousness of the Jewish people that from then on they would think about their destiny in light of this liberation.¹⁶ Their exodus from Egypt became an image and a foretaste of every liberation from physical and moral enslavement. Moreover, Judaism identifies eschatological times with messianic times, when the future Messiah will come as a second Moses.¹⁷ This probably has to do with the fact that Moses is presented in the Old Testament not only as a person privileged by God, but also as one whose attributes are the

Fabry, *mitsraim*, in: *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and H. Ringgren, Grand Rapids 1973–2001, vol. 8, p. 521.

¹³ See some Old Testament examples of negative portrayal of Egypt: Neh 9,9; Jdt 5,11–12; 6,5; Bar 2,11; Isa 10,26; Jer 7,25; 44,14,27–28; Ezek 20,8; Dan 11,42; Joel 4,19; Amos 4,10; Zech 14,19; Mic 6,4.

¹⁴ While it is generally accepted that rabbinic literature spans from the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. until the middle of the eleventh century (c.f. H.L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, Minneapolis 1996, p. 1–2), some of its content may go back to the time of the Babylonian exile (cf. I. M. Gafni, *The Historical Background*, in: *The Literature of the Sages. First Part: Oral Torah, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. S. Safrai, Philadelphia 1987, p. 1–3).

¹⁵ According to 'Abot R. Nat. b.38, out of ten instances of sorcery in the world, nine take place in Egypt, and out of ten instances of prostitution, nine take place in Alexandria. In addition, *Sanh.* 67b speaks of a certain rabbi who went to Alexandria and bought a donkey there. When he wanted to give it some water to drink, the donkey turned into a piece of wood. For more examples, see A. R. Schulman, M. Aberbach and H. Z. Hirschberg, *Pharaoh*, in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik, Detroit 2007, vol. 16, p. 28–30. See also R. Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons*, p. 172–173; 183–184.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Avi-Jona and I. Ta-Shema, *Yetsiat mitsraim*, in: *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, vol. 20, p. 186, 190–191. See also J. G. McConville, *Exodus*, in: *NIDOTTE*, vol. 4, p. 601; R. Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons*, p. 5.

¹⁷ A subtle allusion to the Messiah as the Suffering Servant who will come into the world as a second Moses could be seen in Isaiah's Suffering Servant songs (cf. Isa 42,1,4). It is also worthwhile noting that the title "Servant of the Lord", so clearly present in these songs (cf. Isa 42,1; 49,3,5–6; 52,13; 53,11), refers to Moses seventeen times in the Old Testament. More on this subject, see M. A. Taylor and J. E. Harvey, *Moses*, in: *NIDOTTE*, vol. 4, p. 959–960.

same as the Lord's (cf. Exod 4,16; 7,1). In addition, the Jews believed that when the Messiah comes into the world, his teaching, behavior and even various events in his life will be identical to those of Moses. This can be noted particularly in some rabbinic traditions, where the Messiah is seen as a new Moses who leads the people of Israel to a new promised land, to be ruled by a messianic king forever.¹⁸ An allusion to this future new Moses is found in the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses says:

A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen...And the Lord said to me..."I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I will command him" (Deut 18,15.17–18).

Some rabbinic sources put an even greater emphasis on the similarity between the first Moses, as the first redeemer of Israel, and the new Moses, as the Messiah. In one of the sources we read:

As was the case with the first redeemer, so will it be with the last redeemer. About the first redeemer it was said (Exod 4) that Moses took his wife and sons and put them on a donkey. It will be the same with the last redeemer, as it was said (Zech 9), poor and riding on a donkey. As the first redeemer brought down the manna, as it was said (Exod 16), I am raining you down bread from the heavens, so will the last redeemer bring down the manna.¹⁹

Evidently, then, in Jewish thought the Messiah was expected to be a new Moses. Consequently, since Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, the Jews were convinced that there was going to be a connection between the new Moses and Egypt as well. But what kind of a connection? This question leads us to the Matthean description of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt.

¹⁸ Cf. B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, New York 2011, p. 23–24. See also D. C. Allison, Jr. *The New Moses. A Matthean Typology*, Minneapolis 1993, p. 142.

¹⁹ Cf. *Qoh. Rab.* 1,28.

4. THE FIRST MOSES AND THE NEW MOSES

4.1. PHARAOH AND HEROD

St. Matthew’s Gospel is the only one that contains a reference to Egypt. The Evangelist mentions this country four times and he does it only in the context of the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt (cf. Matt 2,13–15,19). The first mention of Egypt is made after the last reference to the Magi:

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, [the Magi] departed for their country by another way. When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him” (Matt 2,12–13).

St. John Chrysostom notes that for the ancients, Egypt in the west and Babylon in the east represented the whole world.²⁰ He concludes that God called the Magi from the region of former Babylon and at the same time sent the Messiah with St. Joseph and Mary to Egypt in order to foretell the conversion of all nations unto Christ.²¹ This is an important observation, especially in light of the fact that the Magi were astrologers. As such, we can say that their distant counterparts were Pharaoh’s magicians and sorcerers, although there is a difference. When Moses was born, Pharaoh had already decreed that the midwives should kill all newly born Hebrew boys (cf. Exod 1,15–16). According to rabbinic tradition, Pharaoh announced this decree under the influence of his magicians who informed him that a Hebrew boy was to be born who in the future would endanger not only the Egyptian ruler, but all Egyptians as well.²² And so, while Pharaoh’s sorcerers were on their ruler’s side (cf. Exod 7,11), the Magi not only refused to cooperate with Herod, but even deceived him.²³ In

²⁰ Cf. M. Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 1–13 (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; New Testament I a [ACCS])*, ed. T. Oden, Downers Grove 2001, p. 31.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Cf. *Sot.* 12a.

²³ In *Exod. Rabbah* 1.26 we read that when Moses was growing up in the Egyptian royal palace, he often played with Pharaoh’s crown while putting it on his own head. Seeing this, Pharaoh’s magicians and sorcerers were distraught. They advised Pharaoh

that respect, the Magi were more like the midwives in Egypt who tried to save the Hebrew children by deceiving Pharaoh. These women told him that by the time they showed up in the Hebrew households, the Israelite women would have already given birth, which meant, in turn, that Pharaoh's decree could not be carried out (cf. Exod 1,19).

It was under these circumstances that Moses was born. Ironically, he was saved by the daughter of Pharaoh, who adopted him as her son (cf. Exod 2,5–10), but did not inform her father that the child was an Israelite (cf. Exod 2,6). The fact that Moses was rescued by an Egyptian woman is a significant detail that could subtly allude to Jesus' situation. As the new Moses, he, too, found temporary hospitality among the people of Egypt. This enabled him to flee from the evil designs of Herod – the new Pharaoh – who was deceived by the star-guided Magi.²⁴

An examination of rabbinic literature confirms the Jewish conviction that when God acts, his actions are already shedding light on future events which can take place many centuries later.²⁵ It may therefore be possible to conclude that both St. Matthew and his audience were able to recognize details in the life of Jesus that reminded them of situations in the life of Moses. This would have been particularly significant with regard to the role which Egypt played in the life of Jesus against the background of the role which this country played in the life of Moses.

Bearing this in mind, let us now turn to the words which the angel addressed to St. Joseph before the birth of Jesus:

to forbid such behavior on the part of young Moses, because this – in their conviction – could be a sign that Moses would one day become a threat to Pharaoh and Egypt. This is another example which shows the difference between the Egyptian magicians and the Magi who, after their visit to Bethlehem, did not return to Herod (cf. Matt 2,12).

²⁴ It is interesting to note that just as a star appears at the birth of Jesus, so does a supernatural light fill the house where Moses is born, according to the rabbinic account of *Meg.* 14a.

²⁵ Many examples attest to this fact. In the midrashic account of *Pirqe R. El.* 42 we read that many years after losing his chariots and charioteers in the Red Sea, Pharaoh reappeared as the king of Nineveh and repented thanks to the message of Jonah. This way, the Egyptian ruler was able to make amends for the evil he had committed against the Israelites when he had made their life miserable in Egypt. More on this subject, see R. Ulmer, *Theological Foundations of Rabbinic Exegesis*, in: *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, ed. J. Neusner et al., Leiden 2005, vol. 2, p. 944–964. See also R. Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons*, p. 152–154.

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Matt 1:20–21).

By saying that the Child born of Mary “will save his people from their sins,” the angel actually explains the meaning of the name “Jesus” – *Yeshua*, since this name means that God saves. Still, the salvation from sin which the angel is referring to, could subtly echo the “salvation” of Israel from physical slavery in Egypt which was accomplished through Moses.²⁶ Through the words of the angel, anyone familiar with the Old Testament could detect the connection between the role of Jesus and the role of Moses, because both freed their people from something. In addition, the angel’s instruction to Joseph about bestowing a human name upon the Son of God confirms that Mary’s spouse was to play a significant role in preparing Jesus for his mission as a new Moses. In what way? By carrying out a new exodus (from sin) for the good of all God’s children.

4.2. NIGHT

Joseph takes Jesus and Mary and goes with them to Egypt at night (cf. Matt 2,14). Why do they go at night? Is it only because a flight at night would be safer? While this may be undoubtedly so, we need to remember that details in the biblical text often have a deeper meaning. We can look at the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt at night in light of the Jewish Passover ritual. It is a meal that commemorates both the angel of the Lord’s passing over the homes of the Israelites, as well as the Hebrews’ departure from Egypt. When the Jewish family gathers for the Passover meal, everyone sitting at the table perceives himself as someone

²⁶ Cf. A. Sadek and B. Sadek, *Un fleuve d’eau vive. Trilogie sur l’entrée du Christ en Egypte. Tome I: Les Sources (Le Monde Copte 34)*, Limoges 2011, p. 30. It is worthwhile noting that according to one reference in the Book of Ezekiel, the Israelites’ slavery in Egypt was not only physical in nature, but moral as well, as a result of their sinfulness (cf. Ezek 20,5–10). This is the only Old Testament reference to the Israelites’ sinfulness during their time of slavery in Egypt.

who is actually taking part in the Exodus.²⁷ Consequently, the Passover ritual revolves around a repetition of the question, “How does this night differ from any other night?” The word “night” here has to do with the fact that this festive Jewish meal is eaten in the evening, when it is dark outside, because it was at night that the Lord struck down “every first-born of the land, both man and beast” (Exod 12,12). Only the Israelite households were spared, because their doorposts were marked by the blood of a lamb (Exod 12,12–13.22–24.29–30). That same night Pharaoh told the Hebrew people to leave Egypt and the biblical text refers to that night as the “night of vigil” – *leyl shimurim* (Exod 12,42).

In Jewish tradition, the term “night of vigil” means that God kept watch over Israel and, as a result, the Israelites keep watch every year in order to commemorate their redemption from slavery.²⁸ For the Jews, the fact that the Lord was watching over Israel was a sign that He would always save His chosen people from danger.²⁹ This, in turn, leads us to the profound meaning of the word “night” with regard to the flight of Joseph with Jesus and Mary from Herod.³⁰ Any Jew reading St. Matthew’s Gospel and seeing a reference to such terms as “night”, “escape” and “Egypt,” could recognize here the allusion to the Israelites’ flight from Pharaoh.³¹ The Hebrew people’s exodus from Egypt as well as their flight from Pharaoh points to another exodus: the departure of the Holy Family from Judea to Egypt at night and its escape from Herod who is the new Pharaoh.

4.3. TWO DIRECTIVES

Both St. Joseph and Moses are directed by God to move from one place to another. When we compare the pertinent verses, we see an in-

²⁷ Cf. R. Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons*, p. 6.

²⁸ Cf. A. Chacham, *Sefer Shmot. Parshiyot Shmot-Itro (Daat Mikra)*, p. 209–210.

²⁹ Cf. *Exod. Rab.* 18; *Num. Rab.* 20.

³⁰ Some exegetes, such as S. Muñoz Iglesias (*Los Evangelios de la Infancia IV. Nacimiento e infancia de Jesus en San Mateo*, Madrid 1990, p. 279), believe that the term “night” does not have any significant meaning here. Such a claim is debatable, though, especially in light of the role which the Exodus event plays in the history and identity of the Jewish people.

³¹ Cf. G. M. Soares-Prabhu, *Jesus in Egypt. A Reflection on Mt 2,13–15, 19–21 in Light of the Old Testament*, “Estudios Biblicos” 50 (1992) p. 236–237. See also G. Galvin, *Egypt as a Place of Refuge*, p. 175–176; D. C. Allison, *The New Moses*, p. 152.

teresting similarity. Let us examine these two texts. The first one consists of God’s words (through an angel) to Joseph in Egypt:

“Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead” (Matt 2,20).

In Midian, God says to Moses after he killed an Egyptian:

“Go back to Egypt, for all those who sought your life are dead” (Exod 4,19).

St. Matthew uses the verb *θνῆσκω* – “to die” in the third person plural form, just as it appears in the Hebrew Old Testament and the Septuagint. Such usage of the verb “to die” in Matthew’s Gospel is intriguing, because we know from the context that only one person – Herod – sought to kill Jesus (Matt 2,13). Why, then, does the angel inform Joseph that “those who sought the child’s life are dead”? Shouldn’t the angel say that the *one* who sought the child’s life *is* dead? Could it be, perhaps, that the words of the angel were intended as an allusion to what Moses had heard from God many centuries earlier (“Go back to Egypt, for *all those* who sought your life *are* dead” – Exod 4,19)? Apparently, Joseph’s experience is a recurrence of something which had taken place in the life of Moses, because Moses, too, heard that he could go back to the place where earlier his life had been in danger. In addition, the Book of Exodus then notes that after hearing God’s words, “Moses took his wife and his sons, and started back to the land of Egypt, with them riding the ass” (Exod 4,20). Joseph, similarly, after the words of the angel, first “rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt” (Matt 2,14). Later, he “rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel” (Matt 2,21). This similarity may be meant to draw our attention to the fact that Jesus is indeed a new Moses.³²

³² M. J. Wilkins (*Matthew, The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. T. Muck, Grand Rapids 2004, p. 112) dismisses the similarities between Exod 4,19 and Matt 2,20. He concludes that St. Matthew only presents various events in the life of Christ as the realization of the promise given to the Israelites concerning their redemption (beginning with their departure from Egypt). Still, other exegetes, such as H. Seebass (*Moses*, in: *NIDNTT*, vol. 2, p. 640–641) and M. A. Taylor with J. E. Harvey (*Moses*, in: *NIDOTTE*, vol. 4, p. 961) note that the similarities are significant enough to warrant a clearly intended parallelism between Moses and Jesus (as the new Moses).

5. ST. JOSEPH – THE MESSIAH’S HERALD AND A FAITHFUL “SON”

Moses journeyed to Egypt with his wife and children as an adult, whereas the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt took place when Jesus was an infant. For this reason, it is not to Jesus, but to Joseph that the angel directs his words and tells him that he is to return to Egypt, for “those who sought the child’s life are dead” (Matt 2,20). Apparently, then, before Jesus can become a new Moses, this role must be taken up – at least temporarily – by Joseph, his guardian, due to Jesus’ young age. But can we use the term “new Moses” in reference to St. Joseph? Shouldn’t the expression “new Moses” be reserved for Jesus alone, since, after all, it is not Joseph who is the Messiah? It may be worthwhile noting, that even God addresses Mary’s spouse (through an angel) with a title that in the Gospels is reserved to Jesus alone: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary, your wife, into your home” (Matt 1,20). Even though the title “son of David” is a messianic one, God acknowledges that Joseph is a “son of David” as well. Moreover, this fits right in with the messianic expectations of the Jewish people. They were convinced that as the messianic times would draw near, the Old Testament Joseph would appear in the land of Israel in order to prepare the way for the Messiah, because he was the first among the sons of Jacob to leave the promised land and go to Egypt.³³ If Joseph in the Old Testament is a type of St. Joseph in the New, then we could say that the return of St. Joseph with Jesus and Mary from Egypt is a fulfillment of the Jewish expectation that before the Messiah comes, he must be first heralded by the Old Testament Joseph. For this reason, the words which St. Mathew cites from the Book of Hosea, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Matt 2,15), do not refer to Jesus alone, but to St. Joseph, too. After all, St. Joseph is also a son, because, while Jesus is the Son of the Father hypostatically, St. Joseph is a “son” of the Father by means of having been chosen to be the guardian of the Father’s Son.³⁴ At the same time, St. Joseph is a “son” of the Father, because of his faithfulness to God, which is affirmed by the title

³³ Cf. *Sifre Deut (VeZot Haberakha)* 333.

³⁴ I am grateful to Father Andrzej Laton, STD for suggesting this to me. He elaborated on this subject at a lecture entitled *Saint Joseph de Kalisz (Pologne) et la jésé- phologie contemporaine*, which he delivered during a symposium on St. Joseph (*Saint Joseph et la Paternité Divine d’après Jean-Paul II*) in Strasbourg, France in April and May, 2012.

“just” or “righteous” that the Evangelist uses in reference to the spouse of the Virgin (Matt 1,19).³⁵

In addition, St. Matthew describes Joseph’s faithfulness by using ten verbs to refer to his obedience: Joseph “rose,” “took,” “departed,” “stayed” (cf. Matt 2,14–15), and again “rose,” “took,” “went,” “departed,” “went,” and “dwelt” (cf. Matt 2,21–23).³⁶ “Ten” is a number that keeps recurring in the Exodus narrative:³⁷ God sent upon the Egyptians ten plagues. The first one involved the changing of Egypt’s waters into blood (Exod 7,20). Significantly, the first public miracle performed by Jesus involved the changing of water into wine in Cana (John 2,9). Furthermore, the tenth plague in Egypt was the death of the Egyptian firstborns (cf. Exod 12,29; Ps 78,1), while the last stage of the Holy Family’s sojourn in Egypt ends with a death as well – that of Herod’s, who is the new Pharaoh (cf. Matt 2,19–20). Also, God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments and – according to rabbinic belief – tested them ten times, while they failed him ten times.³⁸ Their disobedience after the Exodus stands out in stark contrast to the obedience of Joseph in the New Testament.

Another reference to Joseph’s faithfulness has to do with the term “land of Israel” (cf. Matt 2,20–21).³⁹ This expression appears in the New Testament only two times and only in St. Matthew’s Gospel, where the Evangelist refers to the “land of Israel” in the context of the Holy Family’s sojourn in Egypt:

When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel (Matt 2:19–21).

What meaning did the term “land of Israel” have for Jews and Christians of Jewish origins, to whom St. Matthew addressed his Gospel?

³⁵ More on this subject, see J. Stefański, *Święty Józef jako sprawiedliwy w świetle dziedzictwa Starego Przymierza*, in: *Patrzmy na Jezusa, który nam w wierze przewodzi. Księga pamiątkowa dla Księdza Profesora Jana Łacha w 85. rocznicę urodzin*, ed. W. Chrostowski et al., Warszawa 2012, p. 553–577.

³⁶ Cf. Sadek and Sadek, *Un fleuve d’eau vive*, p. 45.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Cf. ‘Abot 5,4; Num 14:22. See also Y. Z. Moshkovitz, *Sefer Bamidbar (Daat Mikra)*, p. 116.

³⁹ Cf. G. M. Soares-Prabhu, *Jesus in Egypt*, p. 242.

The expression “land of Israel” appears in rabbinical texts only in the context of faithful adherence to all the moral and cultic regulations which were to be observed in the promised land.⁴⁰ It seems, then, that the term “land of Israel” could be tied with an image of a faithful Jew who lived in accord with the will of God and the Law. Undoubtedly, this could be perfectly applied to St. Joseph who goes to the land of Israel in accord with God’s will. As a faithful Jew, he is unlike the Israelites who were unfaithful to the Lord after leaving Egypt, and he even surpasses Moses who, at a certain moment, faltered (Num 20,12). Indeed, St. Joseph’s departure to Egypt and his faithfulness in all that this departure entailed serves as a reversal of Israel’s failures.

6. THE HOLY FAMILY’S SOJOURN IN EGYPT IN LIGHT OF THE BABYLONIAN AND ASSYRIAN EXILES

St. Matthew is the only New Testament author who refers to Rachel, the mother of the patriarch Joseph. The Evangelist speaks of her as weeping over the death of the infants murdered by Herod (cf. Matt 2,18). Rabbinical sources note that Rachel rose from her grave in Ramah, crying, when her son, Joseph, was taken to Egypt.⁴¹ Ramah was the region from which the Babylonian armies led out the inhabitants of Judah and exiled them to Babylon in 586 B.C.⁴² In fact, the term “land of Israel” that the Evangelist uses with reference to the departure of the Holy Family from Egypt (Matt 2,20–21) is used in the Book of Ezekiel mostly in the context of the Jewish people’s return from the Babylonian exile.⁴³ This points to God’s design in an interesting chain of events that take us through centuries: Rachel, one of the four Jewish matriarchs, weeps over the departure of her son, Joseph, to Egypt. Many centuries later, she cries again over the Jews who are exiled from Judah to Babylon. When the messianic times arrive, she weeps over the innocent children who are murdered by Herod. Finally, one gets the impression that Rachel may

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Cf. L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia 2003, vol. 1, p. 338.

⁴² Cf. S. Muñoz Iglesias, *Los Evangelios*, p. 267.

⁴³ Cf. Ezek 11,17; 13,9; 20,38.42; 37,12. On this subject, see G. M. Soares-Prabhu, *Jesus in Egypt*, p. 243–245.

be crying one more time over Jesus, Mary and Joseph who are being “exiled” from the promised land to Egypt.⁴⁴

This shows that God does not forget His chosen ones. He so arranges everything, that St. Joseph, “filling in” for Moses, leads the Son of God with His Mother to Egypt and eventually returns with them to the land of Israel, just as the inhabitants of Judah returned to their homes from the Babylonian exile. Peculiarly, among the Evangelists, only St. Matthew mentions the Babylonian exile in his Gospel (cf. Matt 1,11.12.17), although he is silent about the return of the Israelites from the Babylonian exile. Why? Perhaps for him a much more important return from “exile” takes place when the Holy Family returns from Egypt to the “promised land”. This hypothesis may seem to be far-fetched thought, because while the Holy Family was returning from Egypt, it ended up not in the south, but in the north, which in the Old Testament is associated with the northern kingdom and the ten tribes which comprised it until 722 B.C. The Assyrians exiled and dispersed those tribes, so they were thought to be lost. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the prophets spoke of future times, when these tribes would reappear and re-join the remaining southern tribes in order to form, once again, the united kingdom of all twelve tribes as in the days of David and Solomon (cf. Isa 11,11–12; Jer 3,18; Ezek 37,15–28; Amos 9,14–15). Significantly, therefore, after Joseph takes Jesus and Mary and embarks with them from Egypt to Judea (in the south), he is redirected towards Galilee (in the north) and settles down there. Bearing in mind that the prophets envisioned a Messiah who would unite the South and the North in order to form a new Israel, it is no wonder that when Jesus eventually calls the Twelve Apostles upon whom he establishes his Church as the new Israel, He does not gather them in Judea, but in the Galilean region where at one point the lost ten tribes had been living before they were exiled.

It seems, then, that the Holy Family’s departure to Egypt and its return from there, are reflected in the two exiles (Assyrian and Babylonian), as they relate to the messianic times.⁴⁵ The Jews may have known about this relationship (between the exiles and the messianic times), but they had no way of knowing that when the Messiah comes, Egypt would play a role in the manifestation of this relationship. St. Matthew’s account

⁴⁴ Cf. G. M. Soares-Prabhu, *Jesus in Egypt*, p. 245.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. T. Barrera, *El Relato de la Huida y Regreso de Egipto (Mt 2,13–15a.19–21). Estructura y Composicion Literaria*, “Estudios Biblicos” 50 (1992) p. 258–260.

of the Holy Family's departure to Egypt and its return from there points to the fulfillment of what the Old Testament was only able to foreshadow.

7. THE BOOK OF ISAIAH AND CHRISTIANITY IN EGYPT

The Book of Isaiah is sometimes referred to, as "the fifth Gospel," because, among the prophetic books of the Bible, it contains the largest number of prophecies about the Messiah.⁴⁶ Taking this into consideration, the following words from the Book of Isaiah are noteworthy:

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 [...] On that day there shall be an altar to the Lord in the land of Egypt, and a sacred pillar to the Lord near the boundary. It shall be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt, when they cry out to the Lord against their oppressors, and He sends them a savior to defend and deliver them. The Lord shall make himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the Lord in that day; they shall offer sacrifices and oblations, and fulfill the vows they make to the Lord. Although the Lord shall smite Egypt severely, He shall heal them; they shall turn to the Lord and he shall be won over and heal them [...] Blessed be my people Egypt, and the work of my hands Assyria, and my inheritance, Israel (Isa 19,1.19–22. 25).

The above oracle predicts some unusual events. It speaks of God's blessing upon Egypt, the appearance of a savior and the proper worship of God that will take place in Egypt. Since in the Book of Exodus the Israelites were the ones who left pagan Egypt and were pursued by Pharaoh's chariots, here the entry of the God of Israel into Egypt seems to display a "reversed" order of history: the Egyptians are no longer the persecutors of God's chosen people, but the recipients of His benevolence. It is not surprising, then, that these words about a nation traditionally perceived as an oppressive enemy were an enigma to Jewish commentators throughout the ages. The rabbis would attempt to understand this oracle by relating it to various later historical events which could at

⁴⁶ Cf. J. F.A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel. Isaiah in the History of Christianity*, Cambridge 1996, p. 1–5. See also C. R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39 (Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for teaching and Preaching)*, ed. J. L. Mays et al., Louisville 1993, p. 1.

least partially explain its fulfillment.⁴⁷ They concluded that, at best, this prophecy could refer to the messianic times which, by Jewish conviction, were yet to come.⁴⁸

We know, though, that the messianic times have already arrived with the coming of the Son of God into the world. The Church Fathers understood Isaiah’s image of the Lord coming into Egypt on a cloud as a reference to the Incarnation.⁴⁹ In their writings, the cloud often represents the Blessed Virgin Mary who, by the will of God, made it possible for the Son of the Father to come into the world as God Incarnate.⁵⁰ As a result, the movement of Jesus from the land of Israel to Egypt, under the direction of Joseph, could be an image of the *kenosis* of the Son of God who comes from heaven, in order to become Emmanuel, or God with us.⁵¹ In this case, the land of Israel represents heaven and Egypt represents the earth as a temporary place for the Son of God who is “in exile” until the Ascension.⁵² That’s how St. Joseph’s role becomes even more significant, because it is to him that the Father entrusts not only the mystery of the Incarnation (cf. Matt 1,20), but also the mission of introducing this mystery into the world. This can be seen when Joseph bestows a name upon the Incarnate Son (cf. Matt 1,21) and introduces Him into the realities of daily human life (cf. Matt 13,55). In the divine plan of Salvation, just as there is no Incarnation without Mary who gives the Son of God His human nature, so can we say that there is no Incarnation without Joseph, under whose fatherly leadership and protection the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity is made manifest in and through the human experience of family life, work and spiritual growth (cf. Luke 2,51–52).

Pondering over the reason why God in the Book of Isaiah is said to be coming to Egypt (cf. Isa 19,1), Eusebius (III–IV A.D.) notes that the Father sent His Son from the land of Israel to Egypt, because Egypt was the first place where atheism was practiced.⁵³ This ancient Christian

⁴⁷ Cf. A. Chacham, *Sefer Yeshahayahu. Prakim alef – lamed he (Daat Mikra)*, p. 207–209.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ For the comments of Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Chromatius and Eusebius on this subject, see S.A. McKinion, *Isaiah 1–39 (ACCS, Old Testament X)*, p. 135–140.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Cf. A. Sadek and B. Sadek, *Un fleuve d’eau vive*, p. 46;49.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Cf. S. A. McKinion, *Isaiah 1–39 (ACCS; Old Testament X)*, p. 137.

writer also reminds us that Pharaoh was the first person who fought the people of Israel as a ruler who admitted that he did not know the Lord (cf. Exod 5,2).⁵⁴ Theodoret (IV–V A.D.) makes a similar observation and adds that the words of Isaiah about the trembling idols of Egypt (cf. Isa 19,1) were fulfilled in the person of Herod, the new Pharaoh, who feared the Infant Jesus and whose murderous plans against the newly born Messiah were thwarted by the Holy Family's flight to Egypt.⁵⁵

There is also an ancient collection of homilies from the fifth century, the *Opus Imperfectum*, whose anonymous author writes that God remembered the evil He had sent upon the Egyptians by means of the ten plagues and decreed that many centuries later He would send His Son to these people, in order to manifest His mercy and good disposition towards them. This way, just as in the past the Egyptians suffered when their warriors drowned in the waters of the Red Sea, so does the coming of the Messiah to them in Egypt make possible their future reception of the waters of Baptism which give eternal life.⁵⁶

The above interpretation was adopted by the Coptic Christians who have become convinced that the coming of Jesus to Egypt, thanks to Joseph who brought Him there with Mary, prepared this ancient land for the reception of the Gospel.⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that of all Arab countries, Egypt today has the largest number of Christians. Could it be seen as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy? Perhaps. In fact, the Coptic Church in Egypt has many shrines which commemorate the various stages of the Holy Family's sojourn in this land. Of particular interest is the monastery of the Blessed Virgin Mary in al-Muharraq in southern Egypt. This monastery was built on the spot where, according to tradition, the Holy Family was staying for six months, and where the angel of God appeared to Joseph after the death of Herod and told him to go back with the Infant Jesus and his Mother to the land of Israel.⁵⁸ The same tradition recounts that Jesus returned there with Mary and the Apostles after His Resurrection and consecrated a large stone which would later

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Id., p. 138.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew (Opus Imperfectum)*, ed. T. C. Oden (*Ancient Christian Texts*; ed. T. C. Oden and G.L. Bray), Downers Grove 2010, vol. 1, p. 39–40.

⁵⁷ Cf. A. Sadek and B. Sadek, *Un fleuve d'eau vive*, p. 25–35.

⁵⁸ Cf. C. Hulsman, *Tracing the Route of the Holy Family Today*, in: *Be Thou There. The Holy Family's Journey in Egypt*, ed. G. Gabra, Cairo 2002, p. 106–112.

serve as an altar until the Day of Judgment. This altar can be seen in the monastery today, and the Copts are convinced that it is not only the oldest Christian altar in the world, but also the altar which was referred to by Isaiah more than six hundred years before Christ (cf. Isa 19,19).⁵⁹ That is why the Copts emphasize not so much the Holy Family's *flight* to Egypt, but rather its *entrance* into Egypt in accord with God's plan for the eventual evangelization of this land.

8. WORSHIPING IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH: FROM EGYPT TO THE PROMISED LAND

When Moses demanded that Pharaoh let the Israelites leave Egypt, he based his request on God's own words: "Israel is my son, my first-born... Let my son go, that he may serve me" (Exod 4,22–23). In other words, God wanted the Israelites to leave Egypt not only for the purpose of freeing them from slavery, but also for the purpose of freely worshiping Him. That is why after the Exodus God told the Israelites to build a portable sanctuary (cf. Exod 25,8–9). This is where God was to be worshipped and where, from then on, He would speak to His people through Moses.⁶⁰ It was a new experience for the Israelites who up until then had communicated with the Lord in open spaces without an enclosed place of worship. Pondering upon this change from open space to an enclosed sanctuary, the rabbinic tradition concluded on the basis of Hos 11,1 that before leaving Egypt, the Hebrew people had been on the spiritual level of a little child.⁶¹ Only after the Exodus – as the rabbis explained – did the Israelites become more mature and needed a more personal contact with the Lord.⁶² This, in turn, necessitated an enclosed place of worship which, after their entrance into the promised land, was replaced by the Jerusalem temple.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Cf. R. E. Averbeck, *mishkan*, in: *NIDOTTE*, vol. 2, p. 1131.

⁶¹ Cf. *Cant. R.* 3; *Num R.* 12; *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 1, 3–4; *Yal Shim. Cant.* 3. See also M. ben Yashar, *The Bible in Rabbinic Interpretation: Rabbinic Derashot on Prophets and Writings in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature*. Hosea, Ramat Gan 2004, p. 437.

⁶² Ibidem.

⁶³ Ibidem.

The above rabbinic interpretation about the beginning of a more personal contact with God by means of the tabernacle (or the house of God) takes on a further meaning in light of the situation of Jesus after His return with Joseph and Mary to the land of Israel. Under the guardianship of Joseph, there begins a time of hidden life for the Son of God in the family house in Nazareth, which becomes a temple where the Incarnate God lives. Inside the portable temple in the desert, Moses, as head of his people, could speak with God face to face. In the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth, Joseph, as head of the Holy Family, could speak with God face to face as well, but in a new way. Even though in the time of Jesus the formal house of God was in Jerusalem, it no longer contained the Ark of Presence. At the same time, in the hidden "temple" which was the home of the Holy Family in Nazareth, the living God-Messiah lived among His people, although they were not aware of it. Only Joseph and the Blessed Virgin knew about it. It was already the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' later prophesy, that "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (John 4,21). The exodus of Jesus, Mary and Joseph from Egypt and their settling-down in a place where Jesus was at the center became a sign that the time of the Jerusalem temple was coming to an end and a new era was being ushered in: a time of growing "in age and favor before God and man" (Luke 2,52).

CONCLUSION

Why did God send Joseph with Jesus and Mary to Egypt? The Bible, rabbinic and patristic sources as well as Coptic tradition suggest that Egypt plays a significant role in the formation of the Jewish people's religious identity. Moses and the Hebrew patriarchs who traveled to Egypt and journeyed out of it experienced the Lord's providence in such a way that their lives foreshadowed the messianic times. Consequently, St. Matthew presents the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt in such a way, that his audience could see how the most important Old Testament events in the life of the Israelites foreshadowed other events in the life of Jesus the Messiah, especially in His childhood. Egypt appears as a multifaceted "bridge" that connects these events from the Old Testament and the New. It is a connection made possible by the divinely ordained fatherly role of St. Joseph who became an instrument of preparing Jesus for His role as the new Moses.

Streszczenie. Bóg kazał św. Józefowi, aby udał się wraz z Jezusem i Maryją do Egiptu. Słowo Boże, źródła patrystyczne i rabiniczne oraz tradycja koptyjska sugerują, że Egipt wpisał się w historię narodu wybranego jako miejsce ściśle związane z jego tożsamością. Wskazuje na to wędrowanie patriarchów do Egiptu oraz ich powrót stamtąd, jak również wyjście Izraelitów z Egiptu oraz ich późniejsze wygnanie asyryjskie i babilońskie. Ponadto, skoro Mesjasz wywodził się z narodu wybranego i miał być jego wybawicielem, to nie mogło zabraknąć Egiptu również i w życiu Mesjasza, którego św. Mateusz przedstawia jako nowego Mojżesza. W ten sposób Egipt staje się nie tylko tymczasowym celem wędrówki i miejscem zamieszkania Syna Bożego, ale również miejscem, które łączy wydarzenia w życiu narodu Izraela z wydarzeniami ukazującymi Jezusa jako nowego Mojżesza.

Słowa kluczowe: Józef; patriarchowie; Mojżesz; Egipt; Wyjście; ucieczka do Egiptu.

Abstract: God told St. Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and flee with them to Egypt. But why was Egypt chosen as a place of refuge for the Holy Family? Egypt was vividly present in the collective memory of the Jewish people as a place of oppression and refuge. In fact, the Hebrew people would view their life experience throughout the centuries in light of their ancestors' Exodus from Egypt. Egypt became a reference point which helped the Israelites retell their story to future generations and understand their entire history in light of their patriarchs' and Moses' relationship with this land. Bearing in mind the principle that Old Testament events serve to foreshadow events in the New, Egypt becomes a necessary stage in the life of the Messiah as well, who is clearly presented by St. Matthew as the new Moses. In His Person, He exemplifies the New Israel – the Church – which serves the Lord in Spirit and in truth.

Keywords: Joseph; patriarchs; Moses; Egypt; Exodus; flight to Egypt.

