

Antidote to the images you see on TV

The Gospel account of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt is very sparse on detail. Consequently, later Christian storytellers began to work into the account miraculous items befitting so sacred a journey. Date trees bend down to relieve their hunger. Fields of wheat sprout up in the desert. Egyptian idols fall off their pedestals. The whole event becomes an extraordinary excursion of the infant Christ into the Gentile world well in advance of his later missionaries.

The Italian artist Caravaggio used much of this legendary detail in his 1599 depiction of the episode. Focusing on the Holy Family's pausing to rest en route to Egypt, he divides the scene in two. On the *left* we see an aged Joseph rubbing one sore foot against another, his long, gray hair and beard uncombed, his face in shadow. Beside him lie a basket-entwined bottle corked with a wad of paper and everything else he owns wrapped up in a pillowcase. Darkness, weariness, old age weigh heavily upon this side of the picture along with a barrenness accentuated by several sharp stones that litter the ground near Joseph's feet.

How different that is from the *right* side of the painting where our focus falls upon Mary and her infant. Here we behold color, light, a tree lined river and a blue dawn revealing the only landscape ever painted by Caravaggio. The rocks on Joseph's side of the picture give way on Mary's side to green foliage and even strands of wheat. And Mary and her sleeping child are bathed in a light made even brighter by Mary's wine red gown.

It's as though Caravaggio wanted to picture the contrast between a world not yet illuminated by Christ and one alive with his presence. On the *left*: darkness, weariness, and a footsore Joseph, symbolic of frequently exiled Israel; and on the *right*: a blue horizon, living water, Eucharistic wheat and Mary as Mother Church, cradling the light of the world. But that's not all! In the *center* of the painting, between Joseph and Mary, stands an angel (his back to us spectators) playing a violin and reading from a sheet of music held up by Joseph – containing the words: "How beautiful you are, my love, my delight!" - addressed, of course, to Mary.

But going back to the left and right halves of the painting, do I not find there a contrast applicable to myself – or should I say a transition I'm ever in the middle of? On the one hand, do I not feel like Joseph, weary, running away, footsore, heart sore, wanting simply to sit down and never rise again? And yet, stimulated by the angelic music of God's Word, am I not ever seduced to pass over into that verdant terrain of Jesus and Mary where at last my soul may begin to blossom; where I may share his dreams, sense a new dawn rising? It's never too late, I guess, to complete that transition. After all, Joseph in the painting looks as old as I do – and he made it!

[I have attached a print of this painting. I hope you can open it to see what I'm talking about. If you have trouble then go to the internet and call up Carravaggio's paintings.]

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