

Requirement after reading: when you return home search your Internet for:
Caravaggio – Flight into Egypt Painting. Then read this essay again.

The birth narrative of Matthew's Gospel concludes with the Holy Family's flight into Egypt to escape King Herod's wrath. This of course will require Jesus to return from Egypt – in other words to go through an "exodus" from Egypt as did his ancestors long ago – paying his dues to that event that launched Israel as God's People into world history. In other words Matthew's episode serves as a signature event of Jesus' role to be a new Moses whose mission will be to liberate an enslaved world.

The mention of this flight into Egypt and back again is sparse on detail, which leaves it open to later Christian artists to amplify it with miracles that punctuate the way of the trio. 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 excursion of the infant Christ into the Gentile world well in advance of later missionaries.

The Italian artist Caravaggio (1571-1610) applied much of such legendary license to his own painting of the scene in 1599. 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 other 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 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 Gratia Plena, cradling the light of the world. But that's not all! In the center of the painting, between Joseph and Mary, stands an angel! (its back to us) 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 - 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 their dreams and sense a new dawn rising?

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