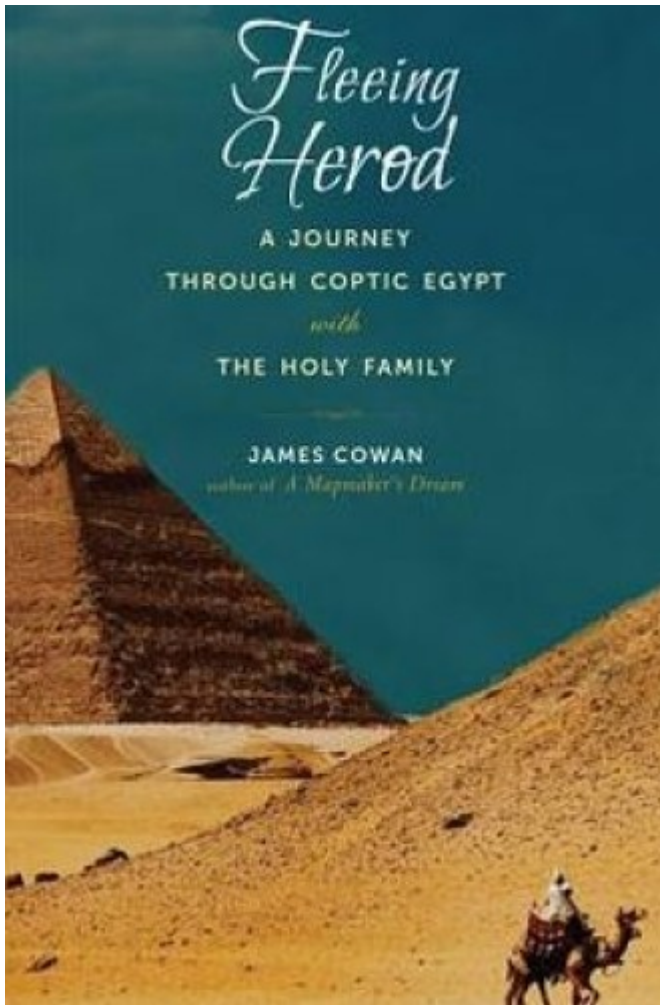


Fleeing Herod, by James Cowan

reviewed by [Paul-Gordon Chandler](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Fleeing Herod

By James Cowan

Australian writer James Cowan has written a captivating account of a journey through modern Egypt following an ancient itinerary—the footsteps of the Holy Family. The Coptic Orthodox Church is deeply attached to Egypt's role in sheltering Joseph, Mary and the Christ child, and monasteries across Egypt stand as witnesses

to the legendary travels of the Holy Family, as well as to the origins of desert monasticism and to waves of persecution of Christians.

Cowan, author of the novel *A Mapmaker's Dream* and a study of the Persian poet Rumi, writes in a genre similar to Bruce Feiler's *Walking the Bible* and William Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain*. He follows a fourth-century text written by a Coptic pope, Theophilus of Alexandria, titled *The Vision of Theophilus*, and masterfully weaves ancient texts into his narrative. A map would have been helpful, but his notes, bibliography and glossary of terms provide an ample supplement.

The power of Cowan's work is anchored in his numerous conversations with monks, nuns, guides and fellow pilgrims, often rendered verbatim. At times the exchanges are hilarious, at other times deadly serious.

In the city of Sakha, north of Cairo, Cowan meets Mother Adrosis and is shown a revered "footprint of Christ." A conversation about miracles develops:

"Miracles are God's way of healing the wound," replied Mother Adrosis. Her glasses seemed to mist over as she spoke.

"Miracles are therefore an expression of the world struggling to come to terms with forces bent on trying to undermine it," I reasoned.

"That is so, Mr. James. They are the wings of a butterfly the instant it breaks free from its chrysalis. We see these as real, but are they not in fact a wonder? How one creature is born anew from another is one of the great mysteries, surely. Such is the nature of the miracle: it is also one reality born anew from another."

At one point Cowan encounters a Muslim guide in a Christian sanctuary. He quickly realizes that the church's image of St. Mary's Tree, under which the Holy Family is supposed to have taken shelter, is as important to Muslims as it is to Christians. A discussion about faith and devotion ensues, with the guide, Mohe el-Dein, stating:

"Let us not forget that you as a Christian and I as a Muslim, we draw our sustenance from the same root."

"As people of the Book, perhaps?"

Mohe el-Dein glanced at the Tree of Saint Mary, its tangled branches bending over, a battered sentinel, a lighthouse perhaps, its beacon flashing

intermittently.

“Everything we think and believe finds its origin here, in Egypt. This country precedes the Book,” he said.

Cowan moves from the Nile Delta, through the dusty streets of Cairo, to Upper Egypt and Mount Qussqam, where the Holy Family is said to have sheltered for six months. Along the way he talks to Coptic believers who esteem the miracles attributed to the young Jesus. Cowan is a careful listener, who probes the variety of worldviews he encounters with respectful curiosity. At one point he muses, “Egypt is not a place but a dialogue with the infinite.”

The book reflects Cowan’s own dialogue with the infinite. At the monastery of Deir al-Muharrag near Mount Qussqam, Cowan meets Father Angelus, a librarian and mystic. Although reluctant to leave his cave, Father Angelus agrees to meet with Cowan and his Coptic traveling companion. The tables are turned, and Father Angelus is the one asking the questions.

“It is dangerous, what you are doing. Do you realize that?” Father Angelus again interrogated me.

“Dangerous?” I inquired.

“Yes, delving into the spiritual life like this: great risks are attached to it. Destruction is ever-present.” Father Angelus spoke in a voice like that of an Old Testament prophet.

“People have been most helpful, Father,” I said.

“Very good. But you must be careful. The Spirit is not a conversational exercise. It is something you live. With passion, and with heart.”

Cowan’s book moves on the boundary between fact and supposition, tradition and mysticism. His book is about the unraveling of mysteries, the guiding roles of dreams, and the courage to question one’s own beliefs.