

The Shepherd of the Exodus Chapel: An *Interpretation*(*)

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Abstract:

The Exodus chapel at Bagawat necropolis in Kharga oasis is renowned for being one of the earliest examples of Christian art and architecture in Egypt; it is distinguished by its figurative art and prominent number of narrative paintings that contains many symbols and significant implications. But the inclusion of an unidentified Shepherd among its overwhelming Old Testament narratives is curious; he was just depicted holding his staff and tending his flock where he was only defined by the artist by an inscription above his head as a “Shepherd”, for the community of Kharga Oasis was not only for Christians- whether exiled or not- but also for many other various communities of diverse thoughts and traditions.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to interpret the shepherd and his symbolism within the narrative art of the Exodus chapel, as well as to identify his people who produced this art in order to shed more light on their understandings and give further insight for their traditions at that remote place of late antiquity Egypt.

Keywords:

Bagawat- Exodus- Good Shepherd- Constantine the Great – Christians- Tree of life
- Jews- Pharisees.

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الملخص:

يعتبر مزار الخروج في جبانة البجوات بالواحات الخارجة واحداً من أقدم الأمثلة على الفنون والعمارة المسيحية المبكرة في مصر، ويعد من المزارات التي تتميز بالعديد من المناظر القصصية المصورة التي تذخر بعدد كبير من الرموز والمفاهيم وكذلك المعاني المتضمنة الهامة. ولقد كان إدراج الراعي المجهول الهوية بين المناظر الكثيرة المستمدة من الفن القصصي للعهد القديم والتي يسجلها المزار من الأمور المثيرة للاهتمام ، حيث يظهر الراعي حاملاً عصاه وهو يرعى قطيعه وقد عرفه النقش الذي سجله الفنان فوق رأسه بأنه "الراعي" فقط ، وذلك لأن مجتمع الواحات الخارجة لم يكن قاصراً في تكوينه على المسيحيين فقط - سواء أكانوا منفيين أم لا - ولكنه كان يضم أيضاً العديد من المجتمعات الأخرى التي اختلفت في أفكارها ومعتقداتها.

لذلك ، فإن الهدف من هذه المقالة هو تفسير الراعي ورمزيته ودوره في المناظر المسجلة بمزار الخروج ، وكذلك تحديد شعبه الذي أنتج هذا الفن ، بما يليق بالمزيد من الضوء على معتقداته وتقاليدته في ذلك المكان البعيد الذي تميزت به مصر في عصورها القديمة المتأخرة.

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The Exodus Chapel (no.30) is known to be one of the oldest Christian chapels in Bagawat necropolis according to its location and architecture; it was attributed to the mid-fourth to early fifth centuries AD as maintained by its mural art¹. The chapel's dome comprises three zones; the central zone is confined for birds inhabiting grape vine, the middle zone is dominated by the narratives of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, while the lower one displays episodes from various biblical and Pseudepigrapha sources. The Shepherd was depicted just below the Exodus; he appears holding his staff and tending his flock which

composed of five sheep, he was just defined as a “Shepherd” (ΠΟΙΜΗΝ) by an inscription above his head (figure1).

In fact, the shepherd of the Exodus chapel was associated by many scholars with the “Good shepherd” due to the familiarity of this non-narrative artistic subject in early Christian art, especially during the third and fourth centuries AD, but as this subject became scanty in the Constantinian period and comparatively disappeared by the early fifth century AD he was considered by them a late example for the theme².

However, the mural art of the chapel includes some unusual peculiarities for this Christian interpretation for not only the shepherd but also for the narratives in a whole, on which it could give a further insight for his role and symbolism within the chapel’s art.

For example, in the Exodus depiction, the artist intentionally added some details to the scene, that were even considered a manipulation by many scholars, he depicted the Egyptian infantrymen and the two horsemen carry shields that bear the *Chi Rho* monogram and even the two horsemen hold banners in the form of dracones (figure 2), and according to Fakhry the shields and the spears of the Pharaoh and his army have probably shared the same details, thus though the crossing of the Red Sea was considered as a type of Constantine’s victory at the Milvian Bridge, and Eusebius compared Maxentius’ troops with Pharaoh’s army where Constantine was presented as a new Moses, the artist treated the troops of the Pharaoh as a Roman Christian army while oppressing the Israelites³.

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This treatment for the scene is worth to be investigated, it was not only the main theme of the chapel, but also, strangely, it is the only depiction in the whole necropolis itself, as well as, by careful examination of details one could notice that the artist did not mean to show that it was just an exile for some Christians accused by imperial authorities according to their beliefs and thoughts, as have been proposed by many scholars⁴ because he did not try to express their Christian views or even identified them as Christians, but on the contrary he identified the people as Israelites, which clearly demonstrates that he specifically meant Jewish people not Christians, who considered Moses as their leader, and not the Christ, moreover, Christians will never identify themselves as Israelites but Christians, and they will not focus on Moses as their foremost prophet but Jews will do.

Another notable aspect in the art of the chapel is the strange absence of any depiction for the Christ, for even the popular pre-Constantinian and Constantinian Christian subjects were not even depicted by the artist⁵, especially, the absence for any reference to the iconography of Crucifixion at least by the lamb or after the official recognition of Christianity by the Roman state in the early 4th century by the jeweled cross, that were somehow familiar at early Christian art⁶.

Over and above, the Christian subjects of the chapel i.e. the theme of Saint Thekla's miraculous escape from the flames as well as the Latin crosses were just a latter additions to the original art of the chapel⁷, even the term "Virgins" written above the seven girls

wearing veils and holding a torch and a censer was also a latter addition, and was not meant from the beginning to identify them as virgins⁸.

Therefore one could deduce that the Exodus chapel was not intended to be for Christians from the beginning, but for Jews, and was Christianized latter by some Christian visitor/visitors. Those people of the first phase were probably from Jewish milieus known to spread in every part of the Roman Empire since at least the first centuries of Christianity⁹.

What reinforces this deduction is the inclusion of some of their traditions within the chapel's art. For example, in the depiction of Adam and Eve in the lower zone, the artist focused on the moment just before their expulsion from paradise (figure 3), for this reason he identified Eve with the name ZWH which literary means 'life', this name was given to her by Adam after the expulsion in order to declare that she shall be the mother of living people (Gen 3:20)¹⁰, due to this moment of expulsion in the Creation account 'Tree of life' becomes the hope to obtain life once more, divine presence, wisdom, and an eschatological promise, this hope have been asserted in many places, for example, in Wisdom tradition texts that associates the realization of wisdom with the 'Tree of life', through Torah, as well as among the Greek-speaking Jewish community especially in the first three centuries, 'Tree of life' was the symbol of hope and restoration from exile, and a sought-after paradise¹¹, that was why the artist used the Crux Ansate instead of the traditional Christian crosses, for this cross was associated with the 'Tree of life' especially

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in the Semitic world, he depicted three Cruces ansatae in the façade of the tableau of the Promised Land with ovoid loops looking more like Ankhs (figure 4), as well in the building Jeremiah stands before¹² (figure 5).

Also, one could tentatively propose that the artist had meant 'Tree of life' when he depicted the seven girls without naming them for rabbinic tradition mainly considers the seven-branched menorah as symbolic of the Torah as the 'Tree of life'¹³.

Moreover, the artist depicted the martyrdom of Isaiah in the lower zone of the chapel; specifically the moment of his execution when a long saw passes through his body by a man stands on either side (figure 6). Surprisingly, though Isaiah is a very important prophet for Christians he did not enjoy the same focus and status that Moses had from the artist, which could suppose that he did not favor the Christian sources of the story but instead he inclined to draw his scene from Jewish sources that highly revered Moses over Isaiah, for the Bavli's version of the tradition, for example, expresses Moses as superior to Isaiah, as well it probably consider Isaiah as an alternate for the Christ, showing that he was executed according to God's will, for his casting aspersions on his people, also the Bavli's version affirms that God did not forsake Jews but He is in a continue relationship with them, depending on what Moses had said for them¹⁴.

Accordingly, one could propose that the first phase of the Exodus chapel's art where the shepherd belongs was for Jewish people, on which he was intentionally included by the artist as a non-narrative subject without giving him a specific name in order to

emphasize on the Jewish concept of shepherding due to its high importance for Jewish people as the flock of God, for shepherds were sent by God for his people in order to show them the right way and to assert His continued relationship with them through Torah i.e. 'Tree of life'.

Those people according to their implied traditions depicted within the chapel's art could be some Jews of Pharisaic traditions; they believe in oral tradition, in resurrection, in heaven and hell, as well as they believed that in all circumstances that affected their lives God had never abandoned them¹⁵ as long as they follow his commandments, like for example what had happened, with Noah, Isaac and Abraham, Daniel in the lions' den, The Three Hebrew Young Men in the fiery furnace, Jonah and the whale, Job, Susannah as well as in their Exodus from Egypt.

Finally, they were influenced by the West and the Greek culture as maintained by the artist's use of the Greek language and his inclination towards the depiction of western subjects, but at the same time some aspects from Syria and the East were revealed, especially in depicting Daniel and Jonah clothed and Job's companions seated¹⁶, which could suppose their eastern tendencies that penetrated the first phase of the chapel's art.

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Conclusion:

This article aimed to interpret the shepherd of the Exodus chapel at Bagawat necropolis in Kharga oasis. Indeed the Chapel is known to be one of the oldest Christian chapels in the necropolis and the shepherd was associated by many scholars with the “Good shepherd”, but however some unusual peculiarities were depicted within the chapel’s art that challenged this Christian interpretation. These peculiarities were observed in the details of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, as well as through considering the strange absence of any depiction for the Christ, and the latter additions for some Christian subjects in the chapel.

Therefore one deduced that there existed a first phase in the Exodus chapel which was not intended to be for Christians, but for some Jews who were identified according to their traditions as Jews of Pharisaic traditions, whom were influenced by the West and the Greek culture and at the same time they proved to have some tendencies towards the East. Thence the shepherd was included by the artist intentionally as a non-narrative subject in order to emphasize on the Jewish concept of shepherding that played a major role in Judaism and Jewish life as well.

Footnotes:

- 1 Fakhry, A. *The Necropolis of el-Bagawat in Kharga Oasis*, Cairo, 1951, p.9
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- 2 Jensen, R.M. *Understanding Early Christian Art* , London, 2000, p.39-40.
- 3 ٨٦-٨٠ ص. أحمد فخري، جبانة البجوات ، ص. ٨٠-٨٦; Martin, Observations, p.254-255;
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- 4 Martin, Observations, p. 255.
- 5 Rassart-Debergh, M. "Painting, mural paintings", in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* , vol.6, New York, 1991, p. 1872-1876; Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, p.88-92.
- 6 Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, p.67; Harley, F. "The Narration of Christ's Passion in Early Christian Art', (ed.) Burke,J.,in *Byzantine narrative. Papers in honor of Roger Scott* , Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, Byzantina Australiensia, vol. 16, 2006, p.221-232; Harley, F. "Death is swallowed up in Victory: scenes of death in early Christian art and the emergence of crucifixion iconography', *Cultural Studies Review* (Special Issue, 'The Death Scene: Perspectives on Mortality'), 17.1, 2011, p.101-24.
- 7 Kuvatova, V. "Iconography of the Procession of Virgins, Chapel of Exodus

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- (Egypt): Origins and Parallels.” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies* 7, 2019, p. 306-318; Martin, Observations, p. 237,247,256; أحمد فخري، جبانة البجوات، ص. ٩٨
- 8 Kuvatova, V. “Iconography of the Procession of Virgins, p.307-308; أحمد فخري، جبانة البجوات، ص. ٩٨
- 9 Barbara Drake, B. & Holcomb. M. “Jewish Art in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium”, in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.
- 10 أحمد فخري، جبانة البجوات، ص. ٨٧
- 11 Faro, I. “Tree of Life,” (ed.) John D. Barry et al., in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.
- 12 Goblet D'Alviella, “Cross”, in *Encyclopedia of religions and Ethics*, Vol 4, New York, (1908-1927), p. 324-329; Spalding-Stracey, G. *The Cross in the Visual Culture of Late Antique Egypt*, Leiden ,2020, p.47.
- 13 Martin, Observations, p.249; Faro, “Tree of Life”.
- 14 Richard, K., *Migrating tales: The Talmud's narratives and their Historical context*, Oakland: University of California Press / S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies, 2014, p. 29-41; Charles, R.H. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol 2, Oxford, 1913; Lacau, P., “Fragments de l'Ascension d'Isaie en copte”, *Le Muséon*, vol. 59, 1946, p.453-67 ; Aranda Perez, G. “Apocryphal Literature,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, New York, 1991, pp. 161-69 ; Knibb, M. A. “Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah”, (ed.) Charlesworth J.H., in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985, vol 2, 143–76; Houtman, A. “The Targumic Versions of the Martyrdom of Isaiah”, (eds.) Baasten M.F.J. & Munk R., in *Studies in Hebrew Language and Jewish Culture*, Dordrecht, 2007, p.189-201; Yassif, E. *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*. Folklore Studies in Translation, Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999,

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16 Martin, Observations, p. 253.

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Figures:

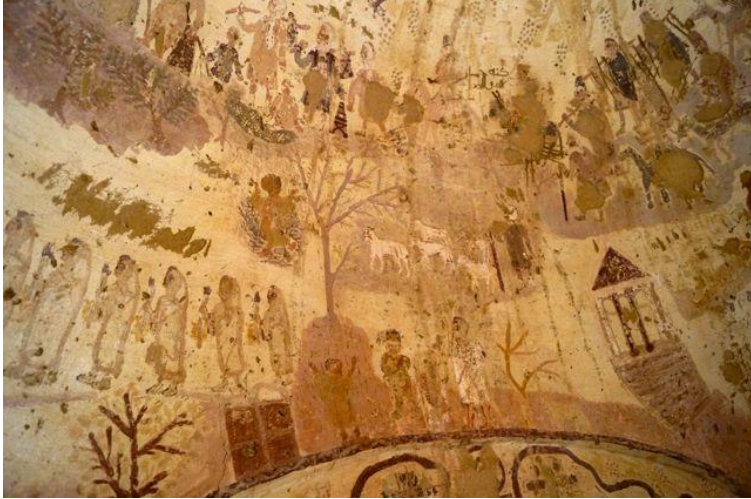


Figure1: Chapel of Exodus. The Shepherd. The author's photo.



Figure2: Chapel of Exodus. The Pharaoh's army. The author's photo.

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Figure3: Chapel of Exodus. Adam and Eve. The author's photo.



Figure4: Chapel of Exodus. The façade of the tableau of the Promised Land. The author's photo.



Figure5: Chapel of Exodus. The building in front of Jeremiah. The author's photo.



Figure 6: Chapel of Exodus. The Martyrdom of Isaiah. The author's photo.