

The Holy Family as the Axis of Pilgrimage: A Comparative Study of the Coptic Orthodox Church and Imāmi Shī'ism with Emphasis on the Teachings of Imam Reza(A.S.)

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Article info

Abstract

Article type:
Research Article

Received:
5 July 2025

In Revised form:
20 September 2025

Accepted:
5 November 2025

Published:
28 February 2026



Pilgrimage (ziyarah) is a focal concept in the Abrahamic religions, and its foundation rests upon the “sacred place” a place that derives its sanctity from its connection with the unseen source and God Almighty. The divine truth manifests in various ways, and at times, a family itself becomes the embodiment of the divine, and the places of their residence or passage are transformed into pilgrimage sites. The present article, employing a descriptive-analytical method and a comparative approach, examines the concept of the “Holy Family” in Coptic Christianity and Imami Shi’ism and its role in the formation of pilgrimage. The findings demonstrate that the presence of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and Joseph the Carpenter in northern Egypt imparted a new dimension to pilgrimage in the Coptic Orthodox Church, and their settlement in various locations transformed those sites into places of pilgrimage. The ultimate goal of pilgrimage in the Coptic Church is theosis (divinization, tashabbuh bi Allāh) and union with Christ. In the Shi’i denomination as well, the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S) play a central role in the process of sanctification, and their presence, or the places attributed to them, has brought about the genesis of the concept of pilgrimage. The teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.) open a distinct window onto the philosophy of pilgrimage. He regards “the renewal of the pilgrim’s covenant with the Infallible Imam (A.S.)” as the essence of pilgrimage. This covenant consolidates the commitment to wilāyah (guardianship) in this world and brings about the intercession (shafa’ah) of the Imam for the pilgrim on the Day of Resurrection. Accordingly, if the ultimate goal of pilgrimage in the Coptic tradition is “divinization (tashabbuh bi Allāh),” in the Shi’i tradition, based on the Razavi discourse, the ultimate goal of pilgrimage is “the renewal of the bond of wilāyah with a living and present Imam(A.S.).

Keywords: Family, Pilgrimage (Ziyarah), Shi’ism, Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.), Coptic Orthodox Church, Imam Reza (A.S.).

Reference: Saleh, Seyed Mohammad Hasan. (2026). The Holy Family as the Axis of Pilgrimage: A Comparative Study of the Coptic Orthodox Church and Imami Shi’ism with Emphasis on the Statements of Imam Reza (A.S.). *Imam Reza (A.S.) and Contemporary Sciences*, 3(10), 71-99.

Publisher: Imam Reza (A.S.) International University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22034/ijs.2026.513479.1367>



1. Introduction

Pilgrimage is one of the central and shared concepts among the believers of the Abrahamic faiths, a concept whose foundation rests upon the notion of “sacred space.” This is a space that acquires its sanctity not from social conventions, but from a connection to the transcendent source, God Almighty. The central problem of this research is that Divine Truth manifests in various ways, and in certain religious traditions, this manifestation occurs through a “family”-a family that becomes the very embodiment of the divine, and whose members’ presence, migration, or burial transforms their places of residence or passage into pilgrimage sites. This study specifically seeks to conduct a comparative analysis of this phenomenon in two traditions: Coptic Orthodox Christianity and Imāmī Shī‘ism. It aims to fill the existing research gap concerning the study of the “family” as an “agent of sanctification” and the “axis for the genesis of pilgrimage,” with a particular emphasis on the teachings of Imam Reza(A.S.).

2. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this article is to analyze the role and status of the “Holy Family” in the formation and institutionalization of the concept of pilgrimage within the two denominations of Coptic Orthodoxy and Imāmī Shī‘ism. To achieve this, the research seeks to answer the following questions: What is the relationship between the “Holy Family” and “sacred space” in these two religious traditions? How did the historical presence of the family of Mary and Jesus in Egypt lead to the genesis of a pilgrimage geography in the Coptic Church? In the Shī‘ī denomination, how does the concept of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) become the axis for sanctifying space and forming pilgrimage? And finally, what are the fundamental distinctions in the ultimate purpose and philosophy of pilgrimage in these two traditions, particularly with an emphasis on the pronouncements of Imam Reza(A.S.)?

3. Methodology

This research was conducted using a “descriptive-analytical” approach within the framework of “comparative religious studies.” The research data were collected through library research, consulting authoritative sources including the Quran, the Bible, and narrative, historical, and theological texts, and were analyzed using the “qualitative content analysis” technique. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the two concepts of “the Sacred” and the “hierophany of

sanctity in space.” In this regard, the views of Mircea Eliade on “sacred space” as the “center of the world” and the point of connection between earth and heaven, as well as Rudolf Otto’s perspective on “the Numinous” as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, have been employed. This theoretical framework demonstrates that in both traditions, contrary to the views of sociologists like Durkheim, the source of sanctity is divine “election” (*istifa*), and the Holy Family serves as the mediator for the manifestation and revelation of this sanctity in specific locations.

4. Findings

The research findings can be divided into two axes: descriptive and analytical-comparative. In the Coptic Orthodox Tradition: The historical journey of the Holy Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and Joseph the Carpenter into Egypt, considered a historical event based on the Gospel of Matthew (2:13-15) and confirmed by scholars like Albright, constitutes the primary source of spatial sanctification in this church. The 3,500-kilometer route of this family from Bethlehem to Upper Egypt encompasses 25 points across 8 Egyptian governorates, each transformed into a pilgrimage shrine. These include the Church of Abū Sarjah and the area of Bīkhā Isūs (the footprint of Jesus), where it is believed Jesus’s footprint is imprinted. This presence has created an unbreakable bond between Coptic identity and the person of Mary as the Theotokos (Mother of God), and Coptic theology prioritizes the intercession of Mary over that of the angels. The ultimate goal of pilgrimage in this tradition is a journey toward “likeness to God” and, ultimately, “union with Christ.” In the Imāmī Shī‘a Tradition: The concept of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.), as a family whom the Quran has declared purified from all defilement and sin (Ahzab/33), is the central axis of sanctification and pilgrimage. This specific family (the Five of the Cloak, Ahl Kisa) and the other Shī‘a Imams render any space, time, or object associated with them blessed and worthy of pilgrimage. Just as the migration route of Imam Reza(A.S.) from Medina to Merv has delineated a complete geography of sanctity across Iran.

Comparative Analysis and the Role of Imam Reza’s (A.S.) Teachings: The focal point of the findings is the foundational distinction in the ultimate purpose of pilgrimage based on the words of Imam Reza(A.S.). Transcending phenomenological and space-centric definitions, he defines the essence of pilgrimage as the “renewal of the pilgrim’s covenant with the Infallible Imam (A.S.).” He states: “Verily, for every Imam there is a covenant upon the necks of his friends and followers. Indeed,

among the most perfect fulfillments of this covenant... is the visitation of their graves” (Inna li-kulli Imāmin ‘ahdan fī ‘unuqi awliya’ihi wa shi‘atihi wa inna min tamāmi al-wafa’ bi-l-‘ahd... ziyarata quburihim). From this perspective, pilgrimage is not a one-sided act but a living renewal of a pledge with a living, present Imam who has complete awareness of the pilgrim’s state. This covenant strengthens commitment to wilāya in this world and secures the Imam’s intercession for the pilgrim in the Hereafter. The Razavi teaching, by emphasizing the life and awareness of the Infallible Imam, shifts the semantic foundation of pilgrimage from “space centrality” to “Imam-centrality.”

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research demonstrates that in both Shī‘ī and Coptic Orthodox denominations, the “Holy Family” plays a fundamental role in the process of sanctifying space and in the genesis of the concept of pilgrimage. The presence of the members of these families (the Ahl al-Bayt in Islam, and the family of Mary and Jesus in Christianity), as a manifestation of the Divine, has bestowed a special identity and sacred value upon these places. Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose and philosophy of pilgrimage in these two traditions are distinct. In the Coptic tradition, pilgrimage is carried out along the process of theosis (deification) with the aim of “likeness to God” and “union with Christ.” In contrast, in the Shī‘ī tradition, and based on the discourse of Imam Reza(A.S.), the goal of pilgrimage is not assimilation but the “renewal of the bond of wilāya with a living and present Imam.” This foundational distinction is the most significant achievement of the comparative study of these two religious traditions. This study can open new horizons for comparative research in the theology of pilgrimage, the role of the family in religions, and interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: Holy Family, Pilgrimage, Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.), Coptic Orthodox Church, Imam Reza(A.S.), Sanctity of Space, Renewal of the Covenantal Bond of Wilāya.