

Foreword

M i t r i R a h e b

At the invitation of Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture in Bethlehem, a group of 50 researchers and scholars met in August 2019 at an international conference with the theme “Bethlehem: A Social History”. This was Dar al-Kalima’s twenty-third international conference and brought together scholars from eighteen countries. What they all had in common was an expertise in areas related to the history of Palestine and the social history of Bethlehem in particular. The participation of scholars from different parts of the world brought not only international scope, persuasions and perspectives to the event, but an ecumenical, interdisciplinary, inter-religious and multi-cultural environment, dialogue, and philosophy.

Several of these scholars were individuals of Palestinian descent who teach at universities in the United States or in Europe, while others were international researchers with a deep knowledge of the region and a remarkable research record. The conference aimed to provide a forum for sharing recent research and sparking international dialogue on the socio-cultural history of Bethlehem. Issues tackled included narratives and identities connected to the city, and analysis of the complex interaction of religion, environment, and culture. The development of the city over the centuries was examined in light of the political and economic factors that have shaped the local socio-religious landscape.

The conference took place in summer 2019 in preparation for 2020 when Bethlehem was due to celebrate its designation as Arab Capital of Culture. The Arab Capital of Culture is an initiative of the Arab world under the UNESCO Cultural Capital program designed to promote and celebrate Arab culture, and to promote cultural exchange and cooperation in the region.

Bethlehem has a unique setting spanning a fertile landscape to the west and desert to the east. Its diverse environment made it a center for Baal and Adonis on the one hand, and the perfect setting for desert monasteries on the other. Its historical and religious significance turned it into a place for pilgrimage and a tourist destination, while its location on one of the ancient trade routes made it a city for expansive cultural exchange. The city's present-day inhabitants of Christian and Muslim Palestinians make it a unique place for inter-religious interaction.

Different aspects of this rich socio-cultural history were highlighted in twenty-eight papers and presentations delivered over three days. We are delighted to include twelve papers in this monograph, thus making these presentations available to a wider audience. While all events related to the Bethlehem 2020: Arab Cultural Capital have had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak, with some events postponed until 2021, we are proud to publish this book in 2020 as per its original schedule.

The book has four parts. The papers in part one have a historical dimension spreading over a period from the Natufian era (12000 BCE) through the Middle Ages to nineteenth century Bethlehem. It starts with Nicholas Blincoe's paper on the mystery of the Ain Sakhri lovers, a sculpture carved from a rounded calcite cobblestone that appears to show two lovers entwined face-to-face in a kiss. The sculpture is often celebrated as the oldest depiction of human

sexual relations. It may not be by chance that the oldest artefact found in the Bethlehem region is a symbol of love; it was love that made the Word incarnate in Bethlehem. The sculpture, which was apparently discovered at Ain Sakhri cave in Wadi Khreitoun in the wilderness east of Bethlehem, was acquired by the British Museum in dubious circumstances, which prompted the author to tackle the issue of the colonial exploitation of Palestine's archeological treasures.

The second paper, by Michele Bacci, on *Local Cults and Their Integration into Bethlehem's Sacred Landscape in the Late Medieval and Modern Periods* looks at the development of religious sites in and around Bethlehem between the twelfth and the fifteenth century in response to both local agricultural needs and the needs of pilgrims on the pilgrimage trails. The third paper, by Sawsan Shomali, examines the travel accounts of two pilgrims: Ida Pfeiffer, a bourgeois Austrian woman, and Mark Twain, an American Presbyterian journalist. What both of these pilgrims had in common was their orientalist perspective: they were searching for biblical Bethlehem and were less concerned with the local people, who are depicted as the inferior 'other', while they reinvented for themselves a new self that is independent, superior, and celebrated.

The papers in the second part of the book have a more anthropological character. In her paper *Beyond the Immovable East: Hilma Granqvist's Ethnography of the Village of Artas*, Felistin Naili looks at the unique contribution of a young Finnish anthropology student who, like Ida Pfeifer and Mark Twain, arrives at Artas, a village south of Bethlehem, in search of remnants of biblical times, and how her encounter with the villagers changed her orientalist outlook and research. Her work on birth, marriage and death in early twentieth century Artas constitutes an anthropological masterpiece.

In her paper on *Saint, Liberator, Martyr: Popular Palestinian Saint George Veneration in the Village of Al-Khader*, Elizabeth Marteiijn provides an ethnographic-theological account of the veneration of the Palestinian Saint George. Marteiijn studied social and religious practices involving Saint George, as well as the theological and ideological ideas that form the basis for those activities. She shows how in a changing context of Palestine, this expression of popular faith has turned into a platform for grassroots theological ideas around martyrdom, liberation, and belonging.

Lance Laird's essay tackles a similar issue to Marteiijn by researching the issue of martyrs, heroes, and saints in their role of constructing a shared Muslim-Christian space in Bethlehem. In his qualitative research conducted in Bethlehem in the aftermath of the first Intifada, Laird's interest was to study how stories of historical and aspirational coexistence can exist with stories of division, suspicion, and conflict, thus highlighting the need for some kind of hybridity.

The last paper in this section is an essay by Amanda Batarseh on *Reading Indigenous Grammars of Place and Narrative Permeability in Bethlehem's Mary*. Stressing both the narrative permeability and indigenous grammars of place articulated by Palestinian folklore, Batarseh asserts a pivotal counternarrative to the imposition of Zionist settler colonial grammars of place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Looking at the fate of Rachel's Tomb, Batarseh shows how a contrived process of eradication or 'rededication' of religious sites by political Zionism has drastically altered the practice of joint veneration within historical Palestine.

The third section of the book is political in nature. Two essays by Tom Selwyn and Glenn Bowmann examine Rachel's Tomb as a place of inclusion or exclusion. For Selwyn, the current setting

of the Tomb, surrounded by walls and watchtowers, speaks of death, the pain of exile, the impossibility of recognition, and the inevitability of separation. Selwyn poses the question whether a reframing of the story of Rachel's Tomb might allow a life-affirming narrative to emerge that would be closer to the history of the Tomb and the spirit of the matriarch herself. Similarly, Bowmann examines how the increasingly incommensurate ideas of local inhabitants and immigrant Jews transformed an inclusive multi-faith site, leading initially to a spatial separation within the shrine, and then to violent and exclusive battles over sectarian and increasingly 'national' properties.

The fourth and final section of the book deals with the creative environment. Nuha Khoury looks at a fictional novel written by a 17-year-old youth from Bethlehem and how Nabil Khoury reflected on the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948 through his novel *Kufr*. Gislen Widen's essay is inspired by a walk along Wadi an-Nar in the footsteps of Swedish novelist, Selma Lagerlöf, whose writing is characterized by the bold use of seemingly contradictory methods and elements: fiction and reportage, mixing documentary with magic and folklore, religious beliefs and saga, as well as Tawfiq Canaan's folkloric writings. Widen's essay is an attempt to approach contemporary Palestine in a similar vein and to avoid getting stuck in the usual Western narrative of the conflict. By using text, paintings, poems, and photographs, Widen allows readers the possibility to think, dwell, and dream.

Last but not least, Dana Sobouh, a German-Palestinian actor, utilizes theater performed on Bethlehem rooftops to observe the developments that are taking place in the city. The view from above, according to Sobouh, not only puts everything into a new perspective but allows for a changed consciousness, awareness of one's own place in society, and highlights the importance of reflection and the

transmission of history. Taking a step back from the daily routine and questioning oneself can reveal different points of view that may not have been obvious previously.

I would like to thank all the authors for participating in the conference and for their valuable time, energy, and thought-provoking articles. Our thanks go also to Ms. Karen Mann for doing a great job in editing this book; Ms. Hiba Nasser Atrash for coordinating the publication process; and Ms. Engred Khoury for the design. Special thanks are due to the Konras Adenauer Foundation for funding the conference and the publication of this book, thereby making it available in print to a wider audience. We hope that this book will provide rich material for writing the social history of Bethlehem and will be an important contribution towards celebrating Bethlehem as the Arab Cultural Capital.

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