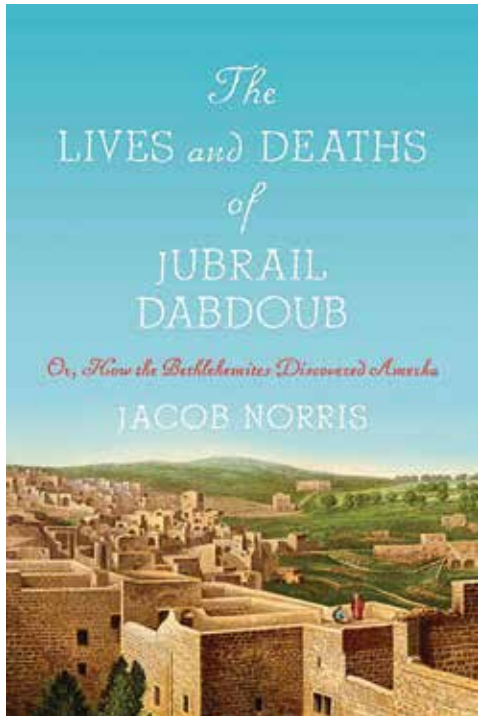


BOOK REVIEW

Chasing Miracles: A Magical Realist Chronicle of Bethlehem's Pioneering Merchants

Review by Eibhlin Priestley

The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dabdoub or, How the Bethlehemites Discovered Amerka, by Jacob Norris. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. 290 pages. \$85.00 hardcover; \$25.00 paperback; \$14.75 ebook.



Abstract

The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dabdoub is a groundbreaking departure from traditional historical monographs, exploring Bethlehem's late nineteenth-century emigration boom and sudden exposure to global capitalism through magical realist prose. The book employs key tropes from the genre to convey a historical "mood," namely the sense of wonder, excitement, bewilderment, and skepticism that swept the town as hundreds of young men set off in search of opportunity and wealth in distant lands known as *Amerka*, forging the first Arab diaspora. Blending source-based research with imaginative writing, Norris creates a rich montage of scenes from the life of Jubrail Dabdoub, one of Bethlehem's pioneering transnational merchants. Representing a major contribution to the fields of Middle East migration and diaspora studies and late Ottoman Palestinian history, the work offers new insights into the symbiotic relationship between religion and commerce in the Palestinian hill town, the transformation of family and business structures, and the reshaping of masculinity. Norris's experimental methodological approach sparks discussions about the role of the historian and the very nature of historical writing.

Keywords

Bethlehem; diaspora; global capitalism; historical writing; magical realism; masculinities; Middle East migration; merchants; late Ottoman Palestine, Latin America.

In a captivating retelling of Bethlehem's late nineteenth-century emigration boom and its age of economic and saintly miracles, *The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dabdoub* pushes the boundaries of historical writing to offer a fresh perspective on the interplay between commerce, religion, and migration in Palestine's pioneering hill town. The book charts the town's transformation through the prism of one of its transnational merchant trailblazers, Jubrail Dabdoub. Born in 1860 "to the sound of chisels and saws cutting through oyster shells" (48), Jubrail came of age on the cusp of Bethlehem's rapid outward expansion rooted in the town's artisanship in olive wood and mother-of-pearl devotional objects. As developments in steam travel, communications technologies, and Palestine's deepening integration into the global capitalist economy opened up new trading opportunities, the Dabdoub family, like many others from Bethlehem's Tarajmeh clan, capitalized on longstanding if contentious links with Catholic Europe and Palestine's position in global mother-of-pearl supply chains, as they jostled to gain a foothold in new international markets.

From the first page, Jacob Norris informs the reader that this is no ordinary historical monograph, and that "it might be necessary to diverge from the impartial tones usually favored by historians" (1). Instead, treading "the porous boundaries between history and fiction," Norris channels source-based research into magical realist prose (183). Two factors inform this decision: Firstly, for Bethlehem's Roman Catholic merchant community, "travel, profit, faith and magic...were inextricably intertwined" (3). Drawing on James Grehan's concept of "agrarian religion," Norris attends to the significance of the Bethlehemites' understandings and practices of Roman Catholicism in guiding their business expansion and conduct in Bethlehem and overseas. Piety and religious patronage of holy sites and religious orders were understood to be rewarded with profit and opportunity and local saints such as al-Khadr, protector of travelling merchants, and the Virgin Mary, guardian of the growth and health of families, were revered.

Secondly, "it was not saintly intrusions or ghostly presences that constituted the fantastical in nineteenth-century Bethlehem. Rather, it was the town's abrupt exposure to global capitalism and the absurdities of European colonialism" (187). Norris's innovative approach underscores the power of storytelling, with magical realism serving as a bridge to understand the intricate interplay of faith, commerce, and the bewildering forces of global capitalism and colonialism in nineteenth-century Bethlehem. The case for writing in a magical realist key is thus rooted in the genre's historic adeptness at expressing the absurdity and violence of modern colonialism and postcolonial nation-state building and destabilizing its logic through Indigenous knowledge and belief systems.

To convey these intertwining dynamics, Norris deploys key magical realist tropes. He describes "encounters with capitalist modernity in the language of wonder, enchantment, and absurdity, while relating interactions with spirits, saints, and the divine using more mundane, quotidian language" (7). The text is replete with recurring dreams, ghostly presences, local folklore and language, interruptions of linear time, and a very present narrator's voice to provide a recognizable framework and situate

his narrative within the canon. Phrases and motifs from magical realist novels by Salim Barakat, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Emile Habibi, Pablo Neruda, Amin Rihani, and Salman Rushdi are also worked into the narrative, underlining fiction's ability to capture a historical mood through imaginative rather than conventional detached and realist academic prose. Norris also draws on the *khurafiyya* oral tradition of Palestinian folk tales and its written interpretations by authors such as Emile Habibi. He further reflects on the broader utility of the genre for modern and contemporary histories of Palestine given that "Zionism's relentless colonization often seems to deny rational explanation" (192).

The narrative is structured in three parts: Part one illustrates the early days of Bethlehem's commercial rise in the 1850s and 1860s through a series of visually rich snapshots of the town: returning migrants spin wild tales of *Amerka* (a geographically flexible land of opportunity), *franji* (Western European) Franciscan friars and pilgrims co-opt the town with their Orientalist imaginations, and Jubrail's parents establish new living and working quarters outside the city walls, setting in motion the family's (and the town's) rise to prominence.

Part two follows the Bethlehemites in a restless search for untapped markets where their fellow rivals and imitators from Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria) had not yet reached. As competition increased, staging posts in the Caribbean were shifted to the "sweet waist of *Amerka*" (82) and from Honduras the Bethlehemites ventured across the Andes where "intrepid young men climbed so high they disappeared into the clouds" (86). Some made it to Chile where they capitalized on a growing transnational network of Bethlehemite traders. Meanwhile Jubrail sets up the first trading post in the Philippines in 1881, cementing the family's position at the forefront of overseas expansion and wealth generation.

Part three introduces the life and work of Sultana Ghattas, a Catholic nun born in Jerusalem in 1843, later known and canonized as Marie-Alphonsine. Her significance to the narrative comes into focus when she resurrects Jubrail from typhoid fever in 1909. Their intersection is emblematic of the entanglement of commerce and religion, not least in the contrasting and symbiotic relationship between the spiraling luxurious lifestyles of merchant families and the asceticism of their spiritual leaders. Thus far, little academic attention has been given to Marie-Alphonsine's writings, so her inclusion here represents the valuable addition of a non-elite Palestinian female voice into the history of this period. This is one of the more empirically grounded sections of the book, rooted in first-hand accounts of her life's work and the spiritual belief systems and practices of Bethlehem. Jubrail's life comes, eventually, to an end in 1931 in the epilogue, against the backdrop of the global economic crash, British colonial rule in Palestine, and Zionist encroachment, factors which led to the dramatically declining fortunes of the merchant community. This is followed by the author's commentary, which unpacks historical themes, methodological considerations, and narrative decisions, and extensive endnotes that evidence the vast research underpinning the narrative.

Norris makes a number of key interventions about Palestine's emergent modernity, its integration into capitalist markets, and the pioneering nature and specific dynamics

of the Bethlehemites' circular mobility, knitting his findings into the narrative and giving them life through the thoughts and speech of the protagonists. First and foremost, he contributes to a body of literature that challenges the notion that the primary direction of movement during the late Ottoman period was *into* Palestine, showing throughout the book how "movement, migration, and exchange were built into Palestinian lives long before the first Zionist settlers set sail for Palestine" (12). His affective retelling of the Bethlehemites' pioneering role in forging the first Arab diaspora (six hundred thousand people left Bilad al-Sham for the Americas between 1860 and 1914) also complements studies on the far-reaching impact of Palestinian communities on shaping culture, industry, politics, and anti-colonial resistance in diasporic contexts. The book is also a counterpart to works dedicated to the impact of circular migrations in other localities within Bilad al-Sham on the reshaping of class structures, social and cultural norms, and aesthetic values.

Norris asserts that Bethlehem's emergent "modernity" was the product of its peoples' own making as Bethlehem's merchants operated as "foot soldiers of globalization" (11). Returning merchants brought home wondrous and bewildering technologies, products, and inspiration for avant-garde architectural styles which "le[ft] the passerby in a state of dazzlement and confusion, unsure if they were looking at an Umayyad palace, a Roman villa, or a Crusader fort" (150). In "Amerka," they successfully established the Bethlehem Holy Land brand before branching out into an array of consumer goods and industries. He depicts them as "arch capitalists who shaped the consumerist world we live in" (12) through their commoditization of religion and expansion of global trade networks. While Sherene Seikaly's *Men of Capital* charts the ways the British Mandate quashed opportunities for Palestine's business class, in Norris's work we find them at the apex of their success and aspiration.

Norris illuminates a period in Palestine's not too distant history in which the dynamics of colonial rule were not yet entrenched and a small, yet influential European presence was treated by the Bethlehemites with varying degrees of opportunism, tolerance, and ridicule. Complicating the colonizer/colonized binary, he argues that "in some ways, Bethlehemites were beneficiaries, not victims, of European colonial networks in the late nineteenth century" (5). A growing global network of naval and railway routes, improved communications technologies and services, and liberal immigration laws in colonial contexts such as Brazil and the Philippines enabled Bethlehemites to capture new international markets and subvert a longstanding extractive relationship with the Franciscan friars in Bethlehem. Norris also shows how artisans and merchants exploited a biblical and Orientalist vision of their hometown through their production and sales techniques to European pilgrims and at international exhibitions that perpetuated Orientalist tropes and colonial hierarchies.

The book also contributes to works on family and gender in late Ottoman Palestine primarily through its exploration of masculinity vis-à-vis the high expectations placed on young men to undertake journeys into the unknown to make their family's fortunes and secure their legacies. Referencing Beshara Doumani's concept of "the family firm" in late Ottoman Palestine, Norris charts how families, marital relationships, and

gender roles were reconfigured into a “brutally and ruthlessly patriarchal” business model premised on young men operating as “satellites,” scoping out and establishing new trading outposts (10). The shrinking pool of young men in Bethlehem led to a phenomenon whereby girls in their early teens were sent abroad to marry into prominent Bethlehemite merchant families in the growing diaspora. The age of marriage dropped to increase women’s childbearing years, specifically the production of sons, to guarantee a wider network of family bases around the world. While travel is shown as a rite of passage for young men, it was equally so for girls who were uprooted from their homes and thrust into new families, cultures, and expectations of them as wives and soon-to-be mothers. Although the intersection of migration and marriage for Palestinian girls is not the focus of this book, it points to a need for more research on this subject.

Norris therefore proposes Jubrail as a “composite merchant” who serves as “a route into exploring a wider zeitgeist gripping Bethlehem” (189). Prominent in his community, Jubrail faced challenges and opportunities emblematic of the way many Bethlehemites negotiated “the bewildering contradictions of the nineteenth century: what it meant to be cosmopolitan and parochial, rational and pious, modern and traditional” (12). Although glimpses of Jubrail appear in Bethlehem’s Latin parish records, colonial immigration records, international exhibition catalogues, business letters, and his cousin’s memoir, much of his life remains blanketed in darkness. Norris thus constructs a “historical ‘mood’” rooted in the emotions and experiences that likely beset the wider community engaged in similar enterprises (6). To this end, Norris draws on the memoirs of Khalil Sakakini, Wasif Jawhariyyeh, and Victoria Kattan who were instrumental figures in this period of transformation in Palestine and the *mahjar* (diaspora). His channeling of the childhood games and observations recorded in Bethlehemite Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s memoir *The First Well* into Jubrail’s childhood years is particularly skillful. A speculative approach rooted in oral histories also enables the incorporation of women’s voices from the Dabdoub family where archival traces reproduced patriarchal and patrilineal notions of family, and business records obscured women’s role in the day-to-day running of the “family firm.”

The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dabdoub thus serves as a new impetus for the important debate about the nature of writing history. Casting all historians as “crafters and stealers of stories, conjuring imitations of a past they could never recreate with exact similitude,” Norris embraces the dynamics of storytelling and imagination, which underpin historical writing as a way of recounting this history in “a more honest way” (7). Norris’s openness about the centrality of storytelling to history writing is refreshing. It goes hand in hand with a certain liberation of the author, who is no longer compelled to present processes and events with rational anthropological and sociological theories of political economy. Norris’s decision to “take at face value the assumptions of Ottoman-era Bethlehemites” (185) regarding religious belief systems in the spirit of the anthropological “ontological turn” can be read as a way of giving credence and respect to the historical perspectives and assumptions of those he writes about and reducing his own interpretation to a minimum.

In doing so, Norris joins a field of creative historical writing led by Saidiya Hartman and her “critical fabulation” methodology, as well as Natalie Zemon Davis, Jonathan Walker, Sarah Knott, and others. In Middle East studies, however, Norris’s experimentation constitutes a radically new approach. One of the few other works that has similarly propped open the door for further experimentation is Charif Majdalani’s 2017 novel *Moving the Palace* which constructs a circular odyssey of migration between Lebanon and Sudan out of archival fragments, using magical, dreamlike, and satirical prose and imagery.

However, as Norris writes himself, “Once we embrace storytelling as an essential part of doing history, the questions quickly arise: What type of story are we telling, and how should that story be constructed?” (184). To answer this question, Norris reflects on his “outsider status” as a historian from the UK, “a country that relates to Palestine with an uncomfortable combination of physical distance and colonial proximity” (7). While Norris makes clear that he is not claiming to express the authentic voice of Jubrail, the question of whether an “outsider’s” imagination can adequately grasp the historical experiences of a community to which they do not belong, particularly in speculative history writing, remains a critical and controversial one that needs further discussion. In this light, central to the way he proposes his method is his disposal with the sense of authority used by many historians to frame their work. What Norris suggests instead is that his work should be considered as just one way among many to tell the multitude of histories of this period.

The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dabdoub is a must-read for historians, graduate students, and individuals concerned with the social, cultural, and economic life of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Palestine. It will particularly resonate with those who draw on visual culture and creative avenues to build a historical picture of, and feeling for, a certain period. It is light-hearted and often amusing, and the author can claim both literary and scholarly merit for his successful exploration of the “grey areas of historical writing” (183). Reading this work feels as if someone has pressed “play” on an old reel of black and white images of late Ottoman Palestine enabling the protagonists to come to life in a remastered color version. Time will tell whether this work will set a new direction in the field, but it is indisputably a refreshing departure for Middle East migration and diaspora studies, breathes new life into the task of history-writing, and is a delight for academic and non-academic readers alike.

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