

Mobile Homes

The Refashioning of Palestinian Merchant Homes in the Late Ottoman Period

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Abstract

This article is about movement and the role it has played in shaping Palestinian homes. The article looks at merchants from Bethlehem as a case study of how mobility produced new types of homes in the late Ottoman and mandate periods, both materially and conceptually. It documents how the merchants' newfound economic success transformed Bethlehem's urban landscape and in turn produced a kind of "mobile home" as they adopted increasingly transient lifestyles, moving between multiple locations across the globe. These trends are explained within a framework of nineteenth century globalization, the birth of corporate identities, and shifting gender relations.

Keywords

Merchants; migration; architecture; Bethlehem; gender; globalization.

Palestinian life before the creation of Israel has often been portrayed as motionless. Even Jaffa, the country's biggest port before 1948, where we might expect to find Palestinians on the move, was portrayed as a point of entry for outsiders but not an exit point for Palestinians. "Ships left Jaffa for Europe, taking away oranges, and bringing back Jewish immigrants," writes Adam LeBor in his best-selling history of Jaffa, as if the outside world was something

that Palestinians simply waited to receive.¹ A cast of Zionist settlers, European missionaries, Russian pilgrims, and British colonial officials flood into Jaffa's docks while the Palestinians look on as passive bystanders.²

In reality, Palestinians were already moving in and out of Jaffa's port in large numbers by the end of the Ottoman period. Palestinian merchants, peddlers, intellectuals, and clergy had long been circulating the Mediterranean, as well as further afield in Asia and the Americas, by the time the first Zionist settlers arrived.³ More broadly, Palestinian history is marked by almost constant movement. We are only beginning to understand the extent to which fellahin in the Ottoman period travelled across long distances to buy and sell produce, disrupting a geography organized around cities and their narrowly defined hinterlands.⁴ Meanwhile, religious scholars, clergy, ascetics, and mystics routinely journeyed from village to village and region to region, recruiting followers as they went.⁵ Marriages were commonly arranged between families from different villages, and even different regions of Palestine.⁶ Pilgrims set off for Mecca, Jerusalem, and Hebron, sometimes returning months or even years later. Soldiers, laborers, and entertainers were recruited by governments and corporations that compelled them to work, fight, and perform in faraway lands. Once we begin to look, we find movement defining people's lives across the whole spectrum of Palestine's modern history.

Home, in both its physical and abstract meanings, is continually conditioned by movement. Movements in and out of the home, as well as through it, determine its daily functions and its architectural design.⁷ Likewise, social mobility as a form of movement complicates the constitution of homes, producing what Bourdieu famously described as the "cleft habitus" – a kind of split personality where residues of a family's older social status coexist with its newly acquired social milieu.⁸ The same bears true of long distance physical movements. It is a basic tenet of diaspora and migration studies that home acquires new meanings when juxtaposed with its antithetical other, "away."⁹ This is not a simple process of yearning for a fixed home that has been left behind. Rather, the journey itself transforms the very notion of home, rendering impossible any dream of returning to a place where home and oneself are unchanged. As Stuart Hall reminds us, it is a question of "routes" as much as "roots."¹⁰

My aim in this article is to explore how a more historicized view of Palestinian movement might affect our understanding of how Palestinians constructed the idea of home in the late Ottoman and early British periods. To do this, I discuss a particular segment of the Palestinian population: merchants from Bethlehem who achieved great economic success trading in mother-of-pearl devotional objects carved in their hometown. These merchants' conceptions of home were transformed by all three types of movement listed above: physical movement within their hometown, social mobility, and long-distance travel. In the middle of the nineteenth century, their newfound economic status allowed them to embark on a significant building spree outside Bethlehem's old town. Then, from the 1860s onward, they began to travel all over the world in an effort to export their products to new global markets. By the turn

of the twentieth century, whole families from Bethlehem were circulating the globe, severely complicating the idea of a fixed “home” and “away.” These movements were highly fluid, meaning families frequently shifted between multiple locations.¹¹

Bethlehem was the trailblazer for these movements, but the phenomenon quickly spread to other cities, towns, and villages across Palestine, especially in the country’s hilly central spine. Living patterns in Jerusalem, Ramallah, al-Bireh, Birzeit, Nazareth, Bayt Jala, Bayt Sahur, and Ramla were all significantly affected by these outward migrations. These areas were in turn part of a broader wave of migration out of Ottoman Greater Syria that saw an estimated six hundred thousand people emigrate to the Americas alone between 1860 and 1914.¹² Most of the migrants were Christians whose education in European missionary schools had equipped them with the languages and business contacts to trade abroad, especially in Europe and the Americas. But as many as 20 percent were Muslim, including from Palestinian towns like al-Bireh, where emigration to the United States in the late Ottoman and Mandate periods transformed patterns of home ownership and land tenure.¹³ A close-up study of how merchants from Bethlehem redefined their notions of home is therefore a question that concerns Palestine and the wider region more broadly. Not all Palestinians had access to the kind of mobility experienced by Bethlehemites. But to challenge the assumption that Palestinian homes were fixed in geographical space, it is instructive to begin with those whose lives were most marked by movement.

The inherent subjectivity of home demands an approach that pays close attention to lived experience. For this reason, I have adopted a methodology that draws heavily on the tradition of microhistory and its commitment to studying “normal exceptions” – relatively obscure, small-scale case studies that put the generalizations of macro historical narratives to the test.¹⁴ Using a range of textual and visual sources collected as part of the ongoing Planet Bethlehem Archive project,¹⁵ the paper focuses on a building in Bethlehem known as Hosh Dabdoub. Built in the late 1850s, the Hosh was the first among a new wave of houses-cum-shops that reflected the newfound mobility of merchant families in the town. Using Hosh Dabdoub as a barometer for a wider series of changes in how homes were designed and conceptualized in Bethlehem, the paper is organized into two sections. First, it traces the emergence of a new type of living space outside of Bethlehem’s old town that merged commercial and residential functions as a result of the consolidation of “family firms” (in reference to Beshara Doumani’s work on Nablus).¹⁶ This involved a distinct corporatization of the family, both in terms of its identity and its living arrangements, as merchants created a web of global trading connections while maintaining a base in Bethlehem. The second section pushes the notion of the family firm in a different direction, examining not the physical structures of home, but the networks of kin and trade that came to anchor Bethlehemites as they lived ever more transient lifestyles. Not needing to be fixed in any one geographical space, I argue the family home was reimagined as a network of partners and clients, represented by new types of branding designed for the global marketplace.

I. Housing the Family Firm



Figures 1 and 2. Hosh Dabdoub, as seen from street level (top) and from the valley to the rear (bottom); photo reproduced in Philippe Revault and Serge Santelli, “Typologie, Espaces et Composition des Maisons Traditionelles,” in *Maisons de Bethléem*, ed. Philippe Revault, Serge Santelli and Catherine Weill-Rochant (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1997), 111.

It was movement that produced Hosh Dabdoub in the late 1850s, and with it a new type of merchant home. For the first time in Bethlehem's history, families began to move out of the cluster of buildings surrounding the church, relocating to the top of the hill known as Ras Iftays. For centuries, the track that led down from Ras Iftays into Bethlehem constituted the main route into town. Today the road is known as Star Street and is lined with grand mansions that date from the late nineteenth century. But until the appearance of Hosh Dabdoub, the track was completely devoid of buildings beyond Qaws al-Zarrara – the large archway that once formed part of the Mamluk-era walls. Numerous paintings, etchings, and even early photographs confirm the extent to which Qaws al-Zarrara marked the definitive start of Bethlehem until the 1850s, with no structures existing beyond it on Ras Iftays.



Figure 3. Luigi Mayer's depiction of Bethlehem in the late eighteenth century, as seen from Ras Iftays, roughly at the point where Hosh Dabdoub was later built. The large archway, Qaws al-Zarara, marks the entrance point into Bethlehem.

The construction of Hosh Dabdoub represented a radical break in Bethlehem's urban geography as well as its changing social structures. Standing alone on the steep eastern slopes of Ras Iftays, it sent a clear signal that the Dabdoub family was leaving behind the traditional pattern of living. The immediate motivation for the move seems to have been a desire to obtain a better position for selling souvenirs to pilgrims and

tourists making their way into Bethlehem. The owner of the Hosh, Yousef Hanna Dabdoub, had become well known in Bethlehem as a carver and seller of mother-of-pearl devotional objects. Now he built his new house at the point where travelers rounded the corner at the top of Ras Iftays to catch their first full view of Bethlehem, spread out below in picturesque fashion along the ridge that culminated at its eastern end with the Church of the Nativity. In a town where selling souvenirs to pilgrims was the mainstay of the local economy, Yousef Dabdoub was able to jump the queue and make first contact with any approaching traveler at the moment when Bethlehem conformed most closely to biblical expectations.



Figure 4. Photograph of Bethlehem taken by Tancrede Dumas, probably in the 1870s. The photographer may well have been standing on the roof of Hosh Dabdoub to take this picture. The Qaws al-Zarrara archway, marking the traditional entrance point into the city, is tucked in among the cluster of buildings in the center of the picture.

A description written in the early 1890s by an English reverend named James Kean allows us to appreciate these advantages. Writing in the second person, Kean describes an encounter that quite possibly took place on the roof of Hosh Dabdoub, just past the so-called David's Wells at the top of Ras Iftays:

You step on to the roof of a newly built cottage by the roadside, and sit

down. The back wall is towards the road, and no higher than an ordinary fence: the ground in front is deeper. Conversation on the roof reaches the ears of the inmates, who begin to come out and look up to see what is the matter . . . Seated on this perch, you gaze south across the valley upon Bethlehem, the eye dwelling especially on the vast confused conglomeration of lofty buildings at the east end. These cover and contain the cave wherein our Lord was born. A certain whiteness seems to add majesty to the general aspect of Bethlehem.¹⁷

Other merchant families in Bethlehem quickly grasped the benefits of being located on Ras Iftays. The Dawid family built their new residence directly opposite Hosh Dabdoub in 1859. They were joined over the course of the next two decades by the Mikel, Batarseh, Abu Jarur, and Sabbagh families, among others. Most of these families hailed from the Tarajmeh clan of Bethlehem – the so-called “translators” who had long since adopted Roman Catholicism and consequently benefited in the souvenir trade with European visitors. But it did not take long before families from other Bethlehem clans set up residence on the road. By the time James Kean made his visit in the 1890s, Ras Iftays had been transformed from a rural track into Bethlehem’s busiest shopping parade, lined with new residences that doubled as souvenir shops and warehouses. At the top of the hill, next to Hosh Dabdoub, an enterprising local baker named Abu Fu’ad established a bakery, while the Sabbagh family opened a cafe where visitors could stop for refreshments and be entertained by an assortment of local musicians, dancing bears, and performing monkeys.¹⁸

Ras Iftays had become a laboratory for Bethlehem’s merchant families to test out a new style of living that merged both familial and commercial functions. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the souvenir trade in the town had become increasingly lucrative, producing a new type of family structure that could now be seen more clearly in the residences on Ras Iftays. Resembling in some ways the “family firms” described by Doumani in the context of Nablus, the merchant families of Bethlehem were highly patriarchal, disciplined family units whose revenue was channeled directly into a centralized family treasury controlled by the patriarch. By the middle of the century, the most successful mother-of-pearl carvers had begun to employ local workers in their workshops, allowing them to concentrate on the sale and distribution of their goods. Those who made this switch from artisan to merchant acquired increasing quantities of capital, especially as tourist numbers rose in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ These merchants were now in a position to expand their trade overseas, finding lucrative markets for their goods in Europe and later in the Americas and parts of Asia.

As Bethlehem’s emergent merchant elite became dependent on revenue from overseas, family firms assumed distinct new characteristics. Sons now took on a vital role as itinerant traders who were sent abroad from around the age of eighteen to find new clients and even open stores. Despite a number of studies that shed important light on the vital role played by women in establishing and maintaining migratory

networks in the Syrian *mahjar* (diaspora), it cannot be overemphasized the extent to which the first wave of Bethlehem's outward migration was a man's world, and specifically a young man's world.²⁰ Sons of eighteen to twenty-five years of age were the cannon fodder in this period for testing out new trading opportunities abroad. Meanwhile, the patriarch remained in Bethlehem to oversee the family accounts and run the central workshop.²¹

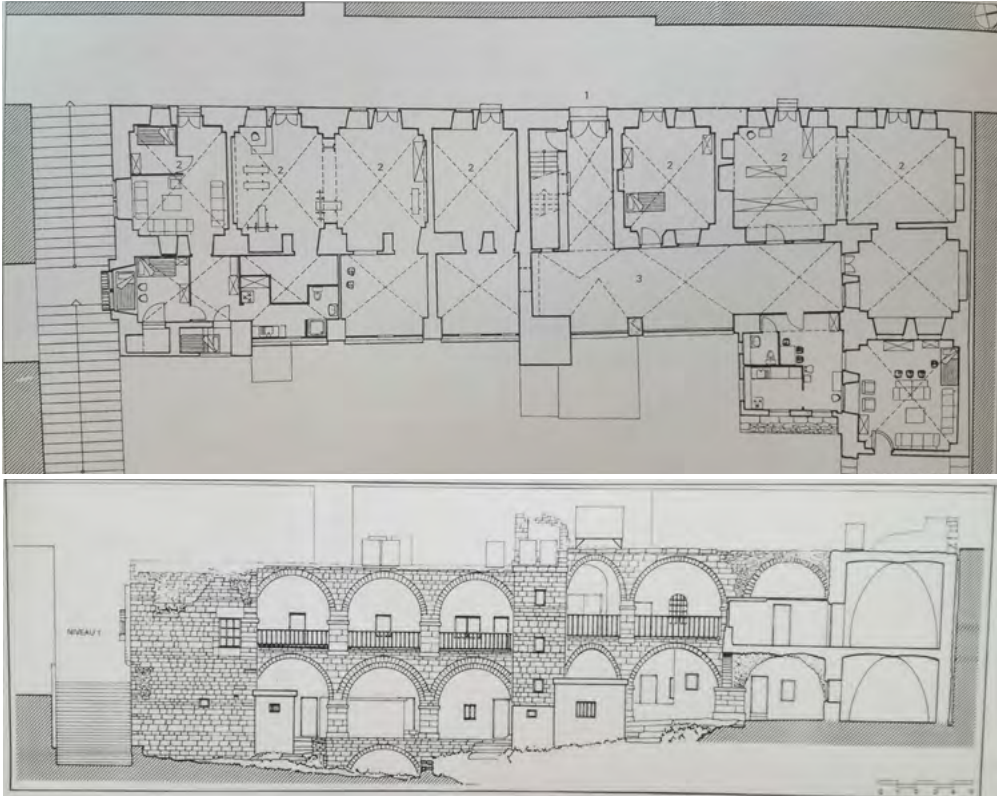
This new world of overseas trade produced several changes in the way families organized their homes. First, their structure was less extended than the family firms in Nablus described by Doumani, as well as the older family units in Bethlehem. In the new world of overseas trade, wider networks of cousins, uncles, and nephews retained an important function, but, at their core, the new businesses consisted of a conjugal couple and their male sons. This structure placed heavy emphasis on families producing male children, leading to higher birth rates, lower female age of marriage, and strict separation of gender roles as women became housekeepers while their husbands travelled the world as itinerant traders.²²

As a result of these changes, homes now performed new functions. Most strikingly, they doubled up as both residences and commercial spaces. In contrast to the cramped conditions of the old town in Bethlehem, the open spaces of Ras Iftays allowed ample space for houses to expand in ways that could incorporate these different functions. In this sense, it is revealing they were still referred to locally as *hosh* (pl., *ahwash*), a word that carries connotations not only of a central courtyard but also some kind of "gathering together" or "piling up." In the case of Hosh Dabdoub, the building was quickly extended to facilitate the new family structure and the need for a workshop and store. A row of adjoining apartments was built to accommodate the various components of the new family structure, doubling the length of the house and giving it a pronounced linear structure never seen before in Bethlehem. Separate apartments for each of Yousef's four sons housed their wives and children while they carried out their overseas ventures.²³ The extended design was completed by the inclusion of a mother-of-pearl workshop and adjacent store at street level to provide easy access to customers and workers. The memoir of Ibrahim Dabdoub (b. 1853), Yousef's younger cousin, describes how Hosh Dabdoub had already become a hub of employment for the souvenir trade in the 1860s:

When I was about twelve years old, my parents set me to learning the trade of mother-of-pearl carving at our uncle Yousef Hanna Dabdoub's house for two and a half years. I became an assistant in their business selling crafts to tourists and visitors. They were skilled in their work and their politics. They used to bring me the carvings and I would go to "spread out" [sell the goods] at Bab al-Dayr.²⁴

Like the mansions built by Nabulsi merchants in al-Salt during the same period, the merchant homes in Bethlehem introduced novel architectural features. In both towns, the merging of commercial and residential functions was vital for merchants who spread their business and family life across multiple locations. Nabulsi families

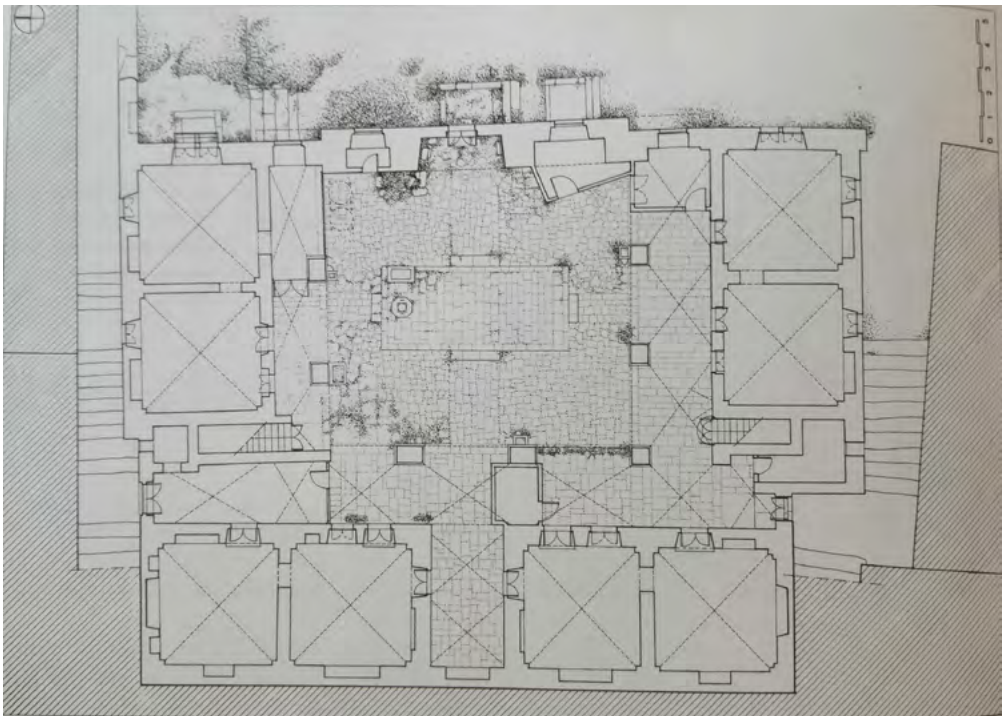
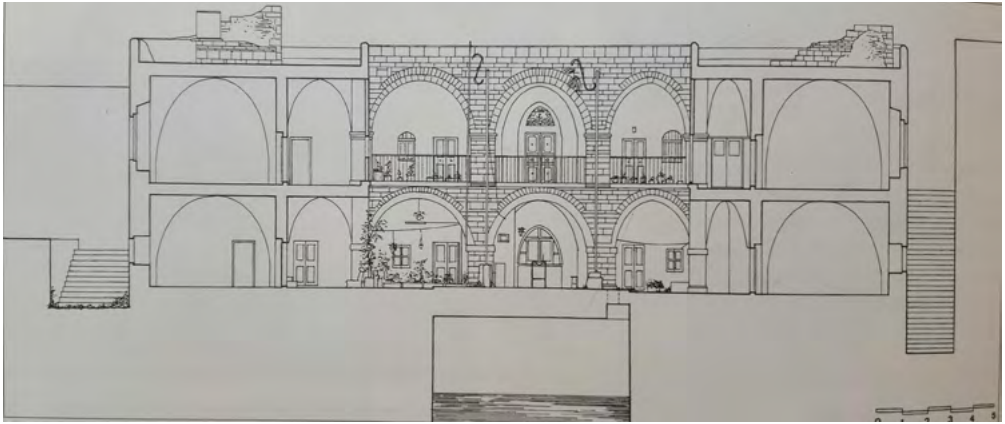
such as the Abu Jabr and Tuqan dynasties split their businesses across both sides of the River Jordan in the late nineteenth century. In the process, they redefined the old center of al-Salt by constructing spacious shops and warehouses along Shari‘ al-Hammam and Shari‘ al-Khadir, topped by luxurious living quarters.²⁵ In Bethlehem, a similar phenomenon occurred whereby merchant families competed along Ras Iftays to display wealth earned abroad, to promote their business, and to raise the next generation of sons to continue the search for new markets overseas.



Figures 5 and 6. Scale drawing and room plan of Hosh Dabdoub, reproduced in Revault and Santelli, “Typologie,” 110.

In the case of Hosh Dabdoub, the street’s location on the side of a steep hill produced a new, linear architectural form characterized by its distinctive *riwaq*: a cross-vaulted covered corridor that connected the various rooms of the house via a series of large, elegant arches. The *riwaq* design was repeated across two floors and then replicated when the house was extended, rendering the house’s linear nature all the more striking. The novel architectural design of Hosh Dabdoub clearly demarcated private from public space. Living quarters were located on the lower floor, below street level, and even included a private chapel, suggesting an emergent privatization not just of the nuclear family, but of religious life, too. Meanwhile, the upper floor

of the hosh was reserved for the commercial life of the family firm. Here at street level, an expansive workshop and accompanying store sought the attention of visitors making their way into or out of town.



Figures 7 and 8. Scale drawing and room plan of Dar Mikel, reproduced in Revault and Santelli, “Typologie,” 114.

Hosh Dabdoub’s design was also clearly intended to project the family’s newfound status back to the rest of Bethlehem. The graceful arches of the *riwaq* were only

visible when looking across the valley from the old center of Bethlehem, suggesting the Dabdoub's decision to move beyond Qaws al-Zarrara was as much a product of parochial rivalries as it was an attempt to reach new customers. The message was clearly effective, judging by the number of families who followed them to Ras Iftays and implemented similar designs. Most strikingly, the Mikel residence (built in 1878) directly mimicked the *riwaq* of Hosh Dabdoub, but also expanded the theme to incorporate a grandiose courtyard within a U-shaped design that opened directly onto the valley below.

Inside these new merchant homes, families adopted a range of bourgeois aesthetics that reflected their newfound cosmopolitan identity. A painting from 1900 by local artist (and photographer) Zakariah Abu Fheleh captures Yousef Dabdoub's son Mikhail with his wife, two sons, and an unidentified young girl. Although the picture was probably painted onto a photograph taken in the Jerusalem studio of Khalil Ra'ad, it is nevertheless highly suggestive of the styles pioneered in Hosh Dabdoub. Mikhail was fifty-two years old at the time and had spent long periods of his life trading in Europe and the Philippines. His mode of dress signals a tentative nod to global and regional styles (western jacket, Ottoman tarbush), while still asserting his rootedness in Bethlehem society (the striped *qumbaz* robe and belt). Around him are further clues to the family's evolving cosmopolitan identity and the specific gender roles it prescribed. His wife Maria is dressed entirely in clothes unique to Bethlehem (embroidered dress and *shatwa* headdress), indicating the extent to which migration was still largely a male preserve at the end of the nineteenth century (discussed further below). The children, meanwhile, seem to have completed a full transition to a more Westernized form of dress, whatever their gender. The props in the picture convey similar messages. The distinctly European-style upholstered chairs upon which Maria and the young girl are seated, combined with the luxurious red curtains, announce the family's ambitions to be part of a Western-oriented bourgeois modernity. At the same time, the two tables help anchor the house in the more immediate region of Bilad al-Sham.

The painting projects an image of the residents of Hosh Dabdoub at a time when the house stood as a symbol of the dramatic changes sweeping Bethlehem. But such was the speed of change that just a few years later a new round of building would leave Hosh Dabdoub looking outdated. Suddenly, in the 1900s and 1910s, an altogether more extravagant type of residence began to appear even further from Bethlehem's old center. Built with the distinctive pink-colored *slayab mizzi* limestone, these palaces still stand today as a testament to a period of Bethlehem's history when unprecedented levels of wealth flowed into the town from its merchants' activities abroad.

These new mansions were the direct result of the merchant families' exposure to European bourgeois lifestyles and architectural forms. A key figure in their design was Morcos Nassar, a local man sent to Paris at the end of the nineteenth century to study architecture. Having laid down a marker in Bethlehem with the design of his own family's house in the 'Anatra quarter around 1900, Nassar was soon being employed by the heads of numerous other merchant families to design enormous,

pink-stone palaces, dotted around the outer edges of Bethlehem. These included Saleh Jiries Giacaman (1908), Saleh and Giries Hirmas (1910), Suleiman Handal (1911), the Baboun family (1913), and later the Jaar family (1932).²⁶ All of these mansions were broadly based on renaissance and neoclassical architectural forms imported from Europe, but they also incorporated Islamic and Ottoman motifs such as pointed archways and Damascene striped stonework to signal the families' rootedness in the local area.²⁷

Unlike the earlier houses on Ras Iftays, the pink stone palaces of the early twentieth century were never referred to as *ahwash*. Rather they were *manazil* (s., *manzil*) or, in more grandiose cases such as the Jacir, Hirmas, or Giacaman residences, *qusur* (s., *qasr*). This reflected not only the fact they were built as complete structures in a single round of building, but also a further shift in the structure of the Bethlehem family firms. The old family firm of the late nineteenth century had required adult sons (along with their wives and children) to be based in the same home as their parents, and to carry out their forays abroad as satellite operations within a vertically integrated structure with its base in Bethlehem. In the Dabdoub family, for example, the four sons of Yousef and Rosa retained their own apartments within the single structure that was Hosh Dabdoub. But as these sons became increasingly steeped in a lifestyle of international travel, Bethlehem became just one of several nodal points in their lives.



Figure 9. Zakariah Abu Fheleh's 1900 painting of Mikhail Dabdoub and family in the Hosh Dabdoub, thought to be painted over a photograph taken in the Khalil Ra'ad studio in Jerusalem. Private collection of George al-A'ma.

By the time Yousef and Rosa Dabdoub died (in 1885 and 1878 respectively), their sons were spread out around the world, dividing their time between Manila, Paris, and New York. This produced a more horizontal type of family firm consisting of partnership agreements between brothers living in various locations. The sons of these brothers were then groomed to perpetuate the system into the next generation. Despite the fluidity of their movements, the generation below Yousef and Rosa still wished to retain a presence in Bethlehem. But when it came to building houses to mark that presence, they were now equal partners in a horizontal business structure, each with his own family that had become accustomed to switching locations. This led to the construction of bourgeois mansions with elegant gardens, designed to house single nuclear families, albeit in a highly opulent manner with teams of servants keeping the houses running.

Among this generation of mansions, or *qusur*, the two built by Mikhail and Jubrail Dabdoub (sons of Rosa and Yousef) still stand today in Bethlehem, situated about two hundred meters apart on Hebron Road. When they were completed in 1922 and 1923, very few buildings stood in this part of Bethlehem, aside from a scattering of other new residences such as the towering Jacir Palace, completed in 1914 a little further north along Hebron Road. These homes were powerful statements of the merchants' newfound status, not only in Bethlehem but in Palestine more broadly. As the newspaper *Falastin* wrote in 1913: "Today the visitor is almost stupefied upon entering [Bethlehem] as the lofty palaces and great buildings come into view, the like of which is rarely found in our biggest cities like Jerusalem and Jaffa, and it would not be an overstatement to say Beirut either."²⁸

The two Dabdoub residences were characterized by ornate facades that blended European and Islamic motifs. They also featured elegant interiors that included drawing rooms for receiving guests and separate bedrooms for each child of the family. They were fronted by elegant wrought iron gates announcing the name of the inhabitant and date of construction, while spacious landscaped gardens stretched to the rear of the properties. Unlike the older *ahwash* on Ras Iftays, these homes did not include any commercial functions. Instead, they seemed to constitute a more naked expression of wealth, as well as a specifically bourgeois ideal of the nuclear family to which these merchants had been exposed during their travels.

While Mikhail and Jubrail built their new residences in Bethlehem, the old Hosh Dabdoub was parceled up by the brothers and rented out as separate apartments affordable to less affluent families. Among the families living there in the 1920s was that of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, later to become a celebrated writer, but in his childhood belonging to a poor Syriac family recently emigrated from Anatolia. In his childhood autobiography, Jabra recalls Hosh Dabdoub in altogether less glamorous terms than conveyed in the painting of 1900. "Hosh Dabdoub, on the edge of the neighborhood, had many rooms," he wrote. "In each room lived a family composed of old and young, women and children, chickens and rabbits."²⁹ A far cry from its heyday in the late nineteenth century, Hosh Dabdoub had been usurped by a far more opulent type of residence as the standard bearer of the town's wealth.



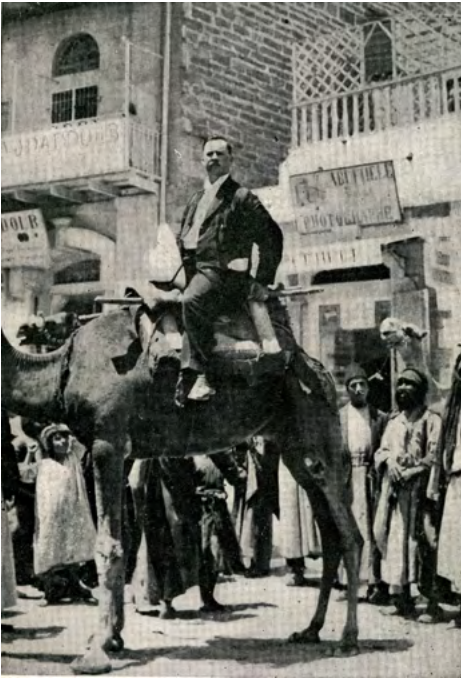
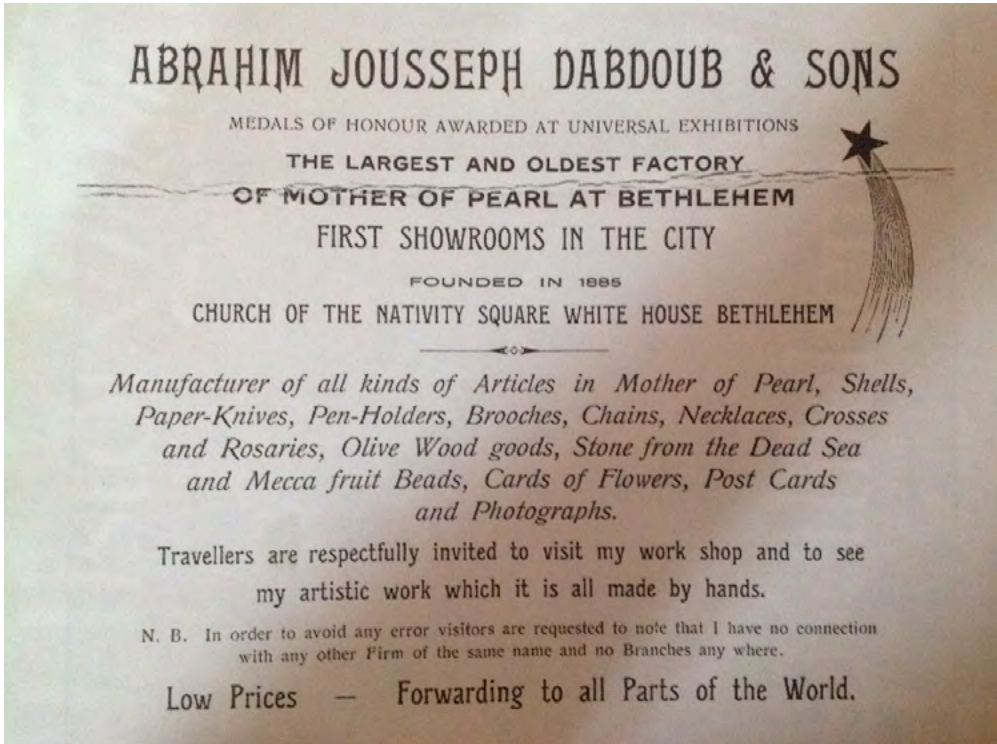
Figures 10 and 11. The houses built by Mikhail Dabdoub and Jubrail Dabdoub on Hebron Road, Bethlehem, in 1922 and 1923.

II. The “Family Firm” as Home

“The effect of migration was clearly visible at the start of the 1920s . . . in the many empty houses and buildings left behind by their owners.”³⁰ This quote from Jabra Ibrahim Jabra confirms that houses in Bethlehem were not always homes. The towering physical structures that cropped up on the outskirts of the town in that period were viewed as much as sites of investment and means to demonstrate socio-economic status as they were places to inhabit on a permanent basis. By the end of the Ottoman period, the lives of Bethlehem families were so infused with movement that it is difficult to pinpoint any particular place constituting a singular home. Consider a hardly atypical page from the unpublished memoir of Ibrahim Dabdoub, describing the movements of his younger brother Anton in the 1880s and 1890s:

After he got married [in 1887], Anton travelled in the company of our uncle Jubrail and Ibrahim, as well as Abdullah Dabboura, to the exhibition in Copenhagen, where they stayed for ten months and brought back a sum of 1,500 French lira, 250 of which went to Anton because the others took a third. Afterward, Anton travelled for a year in the company of Jubrail and Ibrahim, the three of them earning 150 lira, 35 of which went to Anton. Afterward, he travelled alone to Torino in Italy in 1897, staying for ten months and earning 80 lira. Before that he travelled to Portugal in the company of Yaqub Sabaat and his cousin Bulus, staying for around four years. He earned a sum of 300 lira. Then Anton travelled with our nephew Yousef in 1900 to the Paris exhibition, staying abroad for four years, moving from France to Italy and to Germany, making a loss of 90 French lira.³¹

Given the transient nature of these merchants’ existence, it seems equally productive to think of their homes as networks of family and commerce, rather than to focus purely on physical structures bounded within a singular territory. Family remained the key point of reference in a world of uncertainty and mobility. But as discussed above, family structures were in the process of rapid change. In the absence of any territorial center, the family firm became a type of “mobile home” for many Bethlehemites, carrying with it a concurrent set of virtual structures that replaced the stone buildings of their childhood. These virtual structures included an emerging world of branding – logos, insignia, letterheads, shop signs – that became increasingly important in defining a family’s identity and can be traced back to the emergence of the first modern shops in Bethlehem. Hosh Dabdoub and the buildings that followed it on Ras Iftays were located along a linear street where the primary goal was to attract the attention of visitors entering Bethlehem. Coinciding with the birth of print culture more broadly in Palestine, as well as telegraphic and postal systems internationally, the souvenir shops lining Ras Iftays began to create storefront signs and logos, and to print company catalogues with highly stylized family letterheads.³² Because these buildings doubled as residential spaces, a family’s sense of “home” became increasingly linked to these designs.



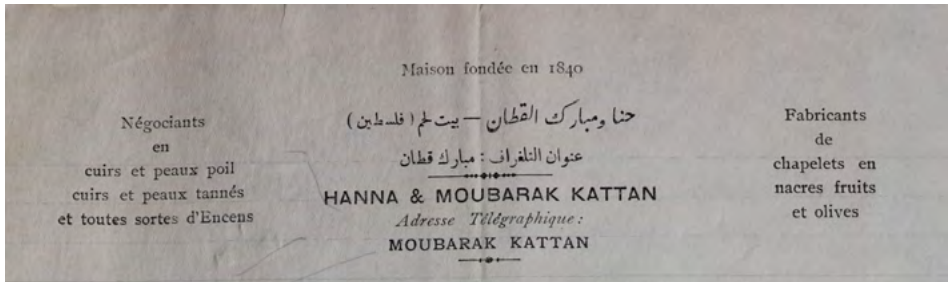
Figures 12 and 13. This business card and photograph from c. 1900 show the logos and lettering adopted by Ibrahim (Abraham) Dabdoub, a son of Yousef Dabdoub. In the photograph the shop sign (partially cut out) of Ibrahim's shop (located in Manger Square) can be seen above the camel's neck.

A range of materials donated to the Planet Bethlehem Archive provide insights into the rich visual language developed by these merchant families. The Dabdoub family had its own set of letterheads, business cards, and logos that were disseminated among its clients, but also refracted back to its own members in various locations around the world. Letters and telegrams were the principal forms of communication with siblings and clients. Every time they wrote or received such a communication, they were given a visual reminder of the virtual “home” that bound them together.



Figure 14. Letterhead used by the two eldest sons of Yousef Dabdoub, Hanna and Mikhail (Michel) for their New York branch of the family business in 1910.

Materials from other families in the Planet Bethlehem Archive give glimpses of the care put into the development of family letterheads and logo designs. Two brothers from the Kattan family, Khalil and Habib, forged a new branch of the Kattan family business in Sudan during the first decade of the twentieth century while their father, Giries, ran the family shop back in Bethlehem. By the 1920s, the brothers had made the familiar transition from a Bethlehem-centered business toward a more multi-centered, global enterprise. Dozens in a series of designs still survive from that period, in which they experimented with different logos to use for branches of the family business they established in Omdurman, Manchester, and Chile. These logos were then distributed across global networks, anchoring the family in a strong visual identity as its movements became ever more fluid and transient. Certainly, the various family members continued to inhabit houses which they constituted as homes in a physical sense, whether in Sudan, Chile, or England. But it is striking from their surviving correspondence the extent to which business affairs were intertwined with the family’s wider identity and sense of belonging. Letters exchanged between the Kattan brothers in the 1920s continually refer to business affairs conducted across global networks as “the foundation of our family’s good name” and “the rock upon which we have built our lives.”³³



Figures 15–19. Logos and letterhead developed by the Kattan family in Sudan and Bethlehem. The letterhead is from the shop in Bethlehem, whereas the logos date from the late 1920s when Khalil and Habib expanded the business into Omdurman, Manchester, and Santiago, Chile. The full collection will be published online when the Planet Bethlehem Archive is launched in 2021.

This imagining of the family firm as a physical foundation (literally a “rock”) is also a common feature of the Dabdoub family letters. In one letter from 1910, Mikhail writes from Paris to his uncle Ibrahim in New York:

O dear uncle, you’ve worked so hard and you’ve immortalized your name by establishing our shop [*mahal*] in Paris. Your hard work is an undeniable favor to all our family. May God save our family! Oh Uncle, you are the rock of our family the way St. Peter was, with God’s will and guidance, the rock of God’s Holy Church. And as Peter was the rock of the church, so you are the rock of our shop. And just as the memory of Butrus is everlasting, your memory will never be forgotten and shall be carried into the future generations of our family.³⁴

The specific vocabulary Bethlehemites used to refer to home is also worthy of attention. When describing the construction of new homes in a physical sense (for example the new mansions built in Bethlehem), the most common word in Arabic was *‘imara*, with its connotations of an architectural edifice. At other times *hosh*, *bayt*, and *manzil* might be used, each carrying the meaning of a physical “house.” Meanwhile, when home was evoked as a more generalized concept from the perspective of being abroad, a different vocabulary was employed. The most commonly used words in this context were *balad* or *watan* (country or homeland), conveying the sense of distance merchants felt from their town of origin as they imagined it from vantage points abroad. This confirms work by the likes of Nadim Bawalsa, who has emphasized the extent to which experiences of living in the mahjar were vital to the formation of Palestinian national identity.³⁵

But there was also a third type of home, this time conjured by the word *dar* – a term that in Palestinian Arabic frequently means “family.”³⁶ In the context of Bethlehem, this assumed a particular significance for families who became accustomed to living transnational lifestyles. Ibrahim Dabdoub initially uses *dar* in his memoir to refer to various physical houses in Bethlehem when describing the location of his own childhood home. But upon his first journey overseas, *dar* begins to be used in a different context: “In 1880 fate decreed I should travel with our brother Anton. Our capital was only the 130 French lira we had from Dar Yousef for goods and travel expenses.”³⁷ From this point onward, there is a clear distinction in the memoir’s vocabulary between *dar* (family) and *manzil* (a physical house). Thus, we find here a specific moment in which the notion of a family home becomes de-anchored from a territorial base in Bethlehem. Furthermore, the use of the first name (Yousef in this case) alerts us to the shifting composition of that very family unit. Yousef is Ibrahim’s cousin, but he now belongs to a different *dar*, even though they used to live in the same physical house. By defining the *dar* around the male head of a nuclear unit, Ibrahim reinforces the newly emerging patriarchal family firm and presages the later architectural shift toward detached palaces built for nuclear families.

Until at least the 1890s, the exclusively male nature of the Bethlehem migrants meant the mobile home was being imagined in distinctly masculine terms – as seen

with the term *Dar Yousef*. Women remained fixed in Bethlehem as guardians of the houses built with money earned abroad. As the next generation of men (who had been sent out to explore conditions abroad) assumed leadership of the family firms, the old patriarchal figure who stayed in Bethlehem withered away. Women were now often the sole keepers of households in Bethlehem as their husbands moved across multifarious migratory networks. This gendered experience of home in the late nineteenth century requires further attention and was undoubtedly fraught with tension, as seen in Nazmi al-Jubeih and Khaldun Bshara's descriptions of women in Ramallah mourning their husband's absences and cursing those who had kickstarted emigration from the town.³⁸

But so fast-changing were these social structures that by the turn of the century women from Bethlehem were becoming equally involved in the refashioning of home as a mobile, corporate entity. Initially this took place through the arranged marriages of girls, typically between twelve and fifteen years old, who were sent to the other side of the world to marry men they had never met and establish new family bases.³⁹ A handful of available sources allow insights into how women navigated these upheavals. Margoth Siman wrote a biography of her mother, Miladeh Jacir, who was married in Bethlehem at the age of fifteen and then journeyed to Baranquilla in Colombia. Once arrived in Latin America, the memoir describes Miladeh struggling to create a new family home (*hogar* in Spanish) as they moved between different locations in Colombia and Central America before eventually settling in El Salvador.⁴⁰ Another Bethlehem-born woman, Katrina Sa'ade, travelled to Mexico from Bethlehem in 1914 at the age of thirteen to marry a Bethlehemite man she had never met. In taped interviews from the 1970s, she describes the relief of moving into a "beautiful home" in San Pedro de las Colonias, but this was subsequently disrupted by the death of her husband and her subsequent movements between California, Mexico, and Palestine.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the sister of the Kattan brothers (mentioned above), Victoria Kattan, wrote a memoir in which she described the traumatic experience of being uprooted from Bethlehem following her marriage in 1924 at the age of sixteen. "I was thinking a lot about Bethlehem and my family," she writes. "The further away from them I travelled, the more I missed them."⁴²

As much as these accounts speak of painful dislocations and the subsequent establishment of new homes in distant lands, the virtual home of the corporate family continued to form an important frame of reference in their lives. Some of the most joyous moments in these sources occur when a letter is received from a sibling on the other side of the world or a community of Bethlehemites is discovered upon arrival in a new country. Katrina Sa'ade recalls enthusiastically her first impressions of Mexico: "We had people from Bethlehem and Jerusalem coming there to enjoy talking to us. I don't remember the names, but they were from Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Ramallah, I think."⁴³ Likewise, Victoria Kattan describes her arrival at the train station in Santiago, Chile, at the age of sixteen:

We reached Mapocho station after nightfall. A lot of people there were hugging me, greeting me with signs of affection. I hardly knew anybody .

. . . A gentlemen hugged me, and though I did not recognize him, I found out he was Antonio Salame, my cousin, son of a brother of mother, of the same name. I felt very happy when I found out who he was. I felt welcomed; it was like seeing a part of my family I had left behind so far away in the Middle East.⁴⁴

Increasingly, these women learned not only how to cope with the effects of relocations outside their control, but also how to be active players in the forging of the family firm as a virtual home, bound together across transnational spaces. Victoria Kattan's elder sister, Josephine, played an instrumental role in the 1910s and 1920s in setting up branches of the family business in Egypt and Italy.⁴⁵ The regular letters she wrote to her brothers in the 1920s, preserved today in the Planet Bethlehem Archive, are a testament to the vital role she played in connecting and strengthening the networks that bound together the Kattan family firm. As one typical extract from a letter she wrote to her brothers in 1921 reads:

No one has written to me from Palestine, while I have written four times to them. If you have news from our parents, tell me about them. I've received a postcard from our brother Habib from every country he's visited. I've received the fifty pounds from Nicola Basil and the second twenty was freed up for you by our brother Habib. You need to keep the twenty with you [in Sudan] because after the revolution that took place in Egypt between the people and the Europeans, no one has the stomach [literally, "the heart"] to work in business.⁴⁶

Here we find a young woman living in Alexandria, demanding information about her parents in Bethlehem while simultaneously updating and advising her brothers on recent business transactions that spanned Egypt and Sudan. Extracts like this confirm the extent to which the formerly central role of Bethlehem in the family business was now receding from view, while the younger generation constructed a more horizontally aligned family firm that was as reliant on women as it was on men.

Katrina Sa'ade, meanwhile, became so proactive in her own family's merchant business that she was even prepared to defy the authority of both her father-in-law and husband, eventually opening her own store in San Francisco once her husband began divorce proceedings against her.⁴⁷ As Katrina recalled when describing her earlier years living and trading between Mexico and southern California:

In Mexico [Hermosillo, Sonora] we had a store; we buy the merchandise and everything. He [Katrina's husband] did not know what to do. I would go to buy the merchandise from the people at the border and bring it in. The customs people would ask me: "Why are you doing this? It's the man's job to do that." "Well," I say, "I have to do it because there is nobody else to do it for me." And I would not have the proper papers, but they would take pity on me and let me bring it in anyway.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Bethlehemites' construction of "mobile homes" in the late Ottoman period is striking in the way it foreshadows the contemporary preoccupations of life in the Palestinian diaspora. Today, Palestinians the world over struggle on a daily basis to construct a sense of home amid lives marked by exile, dislocation, and longing for the old country. But there are also important distinctions that mark Bethlehemites of the nineteenth century as belonging to a vastly different era. The most significant of these is freedom of movement. From the restrictive British citizenship laws of the 1920s through various rounds of Israeli colonization after 1948, Palestinian mobility was progressively shut down as the twentieth century wore its course. Viewing these restrictions within a longer historical framework helps reveal how dramatically they have affected Palestinian life and the constitution of Palestinian homes. In the late Ottoman and early British periods, movement permeated every aspect of life in Palestine. Peasants moved between villages and regions, pilgrims travelled hundreds of miles, and merchants traded across continents and oceans. This is before we even begin to consider non-human movements – of goods, ideas, texts, and many other things besides. These movements constituted a key factor in how Palestinians constituted their homes, whether material or imagined.

Bethlehem's merchant families were exceptional in the mobility they experienced. Many Palestinians did not have access to the capital and connections required to undertake such journeys. But the extremity of the Bethlehemites' mobility forces us to rethink categories of "home" and "away," "insider" and "outsider." A close-up study of Hosh Dabdoub and the family that inhabited it reveals radically new trends in architecture, interior design, and urban geography. It also shines light on a more abstract way of conceptualizing home that emerged as a direct result of movement. The familiar story (told most frequently about Jerusalem) of a new type of bourgeois house appearing outside the old city walls in the late nineteenth century can be retold as a story conditioned by movement and a need to combine residential and commercial functions. Furthermore, these merchants' letters, memoirs, and business transactions reveal entirely new ways of thinking about home that revolved around corporate family identities connected by virtual networks that included Palestine as just one of many nodal points.

The apparent readiness of Bethlehem merchants to fold their town of origin into a multicentered, more mobile sense of home was not necessarily a universal experience of Palestinian migrants. It should not be forgotten how painful the experience of dislocation can be. Famously, Khalil Sakakini was intensely *homesick* during his stay in New York in 1908. His diary and letters from that period express constant yearning and nostalgia for Jerusalem and its surrounding villages.⁴⁹ Accessing the emotional worlds of Bethlehem merchants is a more difficult task as they rarely wrote ego-documents of the type Sakakini penned. But what we can glean from the sources they did leave behind is a switch to a lifestyle conditioned by mobility and an accompanying corporatization of family identity.

The large merchant houses that today still dominate the urban environment in parts of Nablus, al-Bireh, Jerusalem, Bayt Jala, and al-Salt are testament to the extent to which the movement of merchants redefined many Palestinian towns and cities in the late Ottoman period. Uncovering their multiple functions, both as physical homes and as ones imagined from afar, is an important part of understanding how Palestinians constituted their homes in the era before their freedom of movement was brutally curtailed.

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Endnotes

- 1 Adam LeBor, *City of Oranges: An Intimate History of Arabs and Jews in Jaffa* (London: W. W. Norton, 2007).
- 2 Much of the recent historiography on Jaffa in the late Ottoman and British periods emphasizes the participation of local Arab society in the city's modernity. But movement and migration are still the preserve of outsiders in these works. See for example, Mark LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Ruth Kark, *Jaffa: A City in Evolution, 1799–1917* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1990); Menachem Klein, *Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Hebron* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 65–68; as well as LeBor, *City of Oranges*.
- 3 For a study of these circulations in the pre-nineteenth-century era, see Bernard Heyberger, “Chrétiens orientaux dans l’Europe Catholique (XIIe – XIIIe),” in *Hommes de l’entre deux. Parcours individuels et portraits de groupe sur la frontière méditerranéenne*, ed. Bernard Heyberger and Chantal Verdeil (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2009), 61–94. For the larger scale migrations of Palestinians in the nineteenth century, see Jacob Norris, “Return Migration and the Rise of the Palestinian Nouveaux Riches, 1870–1925,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46, no. 2 (2017): 60–75.
- 4 Susynne McElrone, “Villagers on the Move: Re-thinking Fallahin Rootedness in Late-Ottoman Palestine,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 54 (2013): 56–68, online at (IPS) bit.ly/3hBwDkb (accessed 27 August 2020).
- 5 James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 62–84.
- 6 Johann Büsow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 476–83; James Reilly, “The Peasantry of Late Ottoman Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1981): 82–97.
- 7 A theme explored in Judith Flanders, *The Making of Home: The 500-Year Story of How Our Houses Became Homes* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014).
- 8 Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (London: Polity, 2004), 111–13.
- 9 See for example Seforosa Carroll, “Homemaking in the Diaspora: From Displaced Guest to Responsible Host,” in *Home and Away: Contextual Theology and Local Practice*, ed. Stephen Burns and Clive Pearson (La Vergne: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 124–36.
- 10 Stuart Hall, “Diaspora Cultures: Roots and Routes,” keynote address at the Conference on Caribbean Culture, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, March 1996.
- 11 See Jacob Norris, “Exporting the Holy Land: Artisans and Merchant Migrants in Ottoman-Era Bethlehem,” *Mashriq&Mahjar: Journal*

- of *Middle East Migration Studies* 2 (2013): 14–40.
- 12 Kemal Karpat, “The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860–1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (May 1985): 185.
 - 13 See Saleh Abdel Jawad, “Landed Property, Palestinian Migration to America and the Emergence of a New Local Leadership: al-Bireh 1919–1947,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 36 (Winter 2009): 13–33, online at (IPS) bit.ly/31x3FwI (accessed 27 august 2020).
 - 14 The idea of the “normal exceptional” comes from Edoardo Grendi, “Microanalisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni Storici* 35 (1977): 506–20.
 - 15 Information about the project “Merchants and Miracles” and the Planet Bethlehem Archive can be found online at www.sussex.ac.uk/history/bethlehem/ (accessed 1 August 2020).
 - 16 Beshara Doumani, *Family Life in the Ottoman Mediterranean: A Social History* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 234–38.
 - 17 Rev. James Kean, *Among the Holy Places: A Pilgrimage through Palestine* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1895), 114.
 - 18 The bakery, café, and performing animals are described in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *al-Bi’r al-ula: fusul min sira dhatiyya* [The First Well: Chapters in an Autobiography] (Beirut: al-Mu’assisa al-‘arabiyya li-l-dirasat wa-l-nashr, 2001), 84–85.
 - 19 For the rise in tourist numbers, see Naomi Shepherd, *The Zealous Intruders: The Western Rediscovery of Palestine* (London: Harper and Row, 1987).
 - 20 Among the work that documents the key role played by women in the creation of the Syrian *mahjar* is Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar: Transnational Maronites, Jews, and Arabs under the French Mandate* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Sarah Gualtieri, “Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis: Women and Syrian Transatlantic Migration,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004): 69–80; and Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
 - 21 I have written about the exclusively male nature of early emigration from Bethlehem in Norris, “Return Migration.”
 - 22 Based on detailed study of the Latin Parish Archives in Bethlehem. For example, an exhaustive study of the Dabdoub family records between their start point in 1682 and the end of the British mandate in 1948 shows that the number of children per family reached its highest point in the first half of the nineteenth century at 5.34, compared to an overall average of 3.12. Meanwhile, the average female age of marriage reached its lowest point in the second half of the nineteenth century, where it stood at 15.63 compared to an overall average of 17.24.
 - 23 Based on interviews with various descendants of the Dabdoub family members who lived in Hosh Dabdoub, in particular author interviews with Dr. Michel Abdallah Dabdoub, Bethlehem, 15 and 17 March 2011; and Paulette Tissaie Dabdoub, Bethlehem, 14 August 2015.
 - 24 Ibrahim Yuhanna Dabdoub, *Mukhtasar tarikh ‘illat al-marhum Yuhanna Yaqub al-Dabdub* [A Brief History on Behalf of the Late Yuhanna Ya‘qub al-Dabdoub] (unpublished memoir dated 1923), 2.
 - 25 Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95–102.
 - 26 Based on my own visits to these houses and conversations with the staff at the Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP) in Bethlehem.
 - 27 The most famous of the new wave of mansions, the Jacir Palace, is discussed in Diala Khasawneh, *Memoirs Engraved in Stone: Palestinian Urban Mansions* (Jerusalem: Riwaq, 2001), 23–28.
 - 28 “Bayt Lahm wa qusuruha” [Bethlehem and Its Palaces], *Falastin*, 27 August 1913, 2.
 - 29 Jabra, *al-Bi’r al-ula*, 84 (author’s translation).
 - 30 Jabra, *al-Bi’r al-ula*, 66.
 - 31 Dabdoub, *Mukhtasar*, 8–9.
 - 32 For the explosion of print culture in Palestine in that period, see Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).
 - 33 See Habib Giries Kattan to Khalil Giries Kattan, Frankfurt, 10 October 1921. These letters will be published online when the Planet Bethlehem Archive is launched in 2021.
 - 34 Mikhail Dabdoub to Ibrahim Dabdoub, 22 March 1910, Peter Dabdoub family collection.
 - 35 Nadim Bawalsa, “Palestinian Migrants and the Birth of a Diaspora in Latin America, 1860–1940,” (PhD diss., New York University, 2017), 51–73.

- 36 As discussed in Doumani, *Family Life*, 270–71.
- 37 Dabdoub, *Mukhtasar*, 4.
- 38 Nazmi al-Jubeh and Khaldun Bshara, *Ramallah: 'Amara wa tarikh* [Ramallah: Architecture and History] (Ramallah: Riwaq, 2002), 39–44.
- 39 This is borne out strongly in the Bethlehem parish records. To give a single example from the characters referred to earlier, Mikhail Dabdoub's two sons Abdallah and Khalil both married fourteen-year-old girls before going to live abroad with them in Paris and New York respectively.
- 40 Margoth Siman Jacir, *Una Mujer Llamada Natalia* (San Salvador: Minos Tercer Milenio, 2006), 9–18.
- 41 Taped interview with Katrina Sa'ade by Mary Farhat and Henry Bond, Durango, Colorado, 11 July 1978. These interviews will be published online when the Planet Bethlehem Archive is launched in 2021.
- 42 Victoria Kattan de Hirmas, *Mis 100 años de vida* (Santiago de Chile: A and V Comunicaciones, 2015), 42 (author's translation).
- 43 Taped interview with Katrina Sa'ade, 1978.
- 44 Kattan de Hirmas, *Mis 100 años*, 44–45.
- 45 Josephine Giries Kattan was married to an Italian engineer, Nicolo Barbagallo, whose business interests in Egypt and Italy allowed the Kattan family to expand its merchant activities into those areas in the 1910s and 1920s. Josephine played a central role in this process.
- 46 Josephine Kattan to brothers, 6 July 1921. These letters will be published online when the full Planet Bethlehem Archive is launched in 2021.
- 47 As described in Kathy Kenny, "The Power of Place: Katrina in Five Worlds," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 35 (Autumn 2008): 5–30, online at (IPS) bit.ly/2YCaM1l (accessed 27 August 2020).
- 48 Taped interview with Katrina Sa'ade, 1978.
- 49 Salim Tamari, "A Miserable Year in Brooklyn: Khalil Sakakini in America, 1907–1908," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 17 (Winter 2003): 19–40, online at (IPS) bit.ly/3jdXEug (accessed 27 August 2020).