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Saint Marie-Alphonsine and the Resurrection of Jubra'il Dabdoub

Jacob Norris

In 1909 two worlds collided in Bethlehem. A successful and cosmopolitan merchant from the town was brought back from the dead by a local nun who had never left Palestine. This article presents an experiment in biographical writing by reconstructing the miracle and the lives that unfolded around it.

At first glance, the two protagonists could not appear more different. The merchant, Jubra'il Dabdoub (1860–1931), was among Bethlehem's 'pioneer' generation of merchant migrants – young men who boarded steamships setting sail from Jaffa in the 1870s and 1880s, to travel all over the world in a bid to make their fortunes. The nun, Marie-Alphonsine (1843–1927), born in Jerusalem, was a fiercely devout woman who embraced a life of poverty and founded a religious order, the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters (still active today), devoted to serving local Arab girls and women. In 2015 she and Mariam Bawardi were canonized by Pope Francis as the first Catholic Palestinian female saints.

Despite the apparently divergent biographies of these characters, they were both products of the same local society. The article below attempts to place the reader within the world views of Jubra'il Dabdoub and Marie Alphonsine, rather than argue through a detached, analytical style of writing. More specifically, it employs a magical realist mode of storytelling to create a mood in which supernatural occurrences are experienced as routine events while the manifestations of global capitalism are looked upon with wonder and trepidation.

As a literary genre, magical realism constantly seeks to destabilize the reader's sense of the mundane and the extraordinary, the illusory and the real. As such it has much to offer historians interested in adapting their writing to mirror subjects who seem unfazed

by supernatural events while simultaneously living through great social, political or economic upheaval. In the case of Bethlehem, as with Palestine more broadly, profoundly unsettling changes were occurring at the turn of the twentieth century. The article seeks to capture these upheavals through the eyes of the local inhabitants, especially in terms of migration, technology, and the pull of Arab identity, while asserting the sense of magic and piety that underpinned people's experiences of these changes. To achieve consistency in style, I have at times embellished historical sources by drawing on wider research to imagine how a person might have experienced a given event. This is particularly the case with Jubra'il Dabdoub who left behind no written reflections on his life, but only fragments of sources relating to his activities as an itinerant merchant. I have indicated clearly in the endnotes where I have gone beyond the empirically available evidence. Jubra'il Dabdoub is also the subject of a monograph I am currently writing that will explore in more depth the potential of fictional and folkloric narrative techniques to capture the lives of these types of historical actors.



Marie-Alphonsine reviving Jubra'il Dabdoub (painting commissioned for centenary of foundation of Congregation of the Rosary Sisters, Bayt Hanina convent, Jerusalem).

Many years later, as he lay on his second death bed, Jubra'il Dabdoub was to remember his first encounter with 'Izra'il, Angel of Death and transporter of souls to their ultimate destiny.¹ He had contracted the most malicious and lethal form of typhoid fever, known for its certainty to bring death after six days.² In those days the disease was rampant in Palestine, especially during the summer months when the bacteria could spread more freely from flies feasting on contaminated water that passed through the open sewage pipes.³ On the first day, Jubra'il had felt weak and refused his food, immediately raising the suspicions of his wife Mariam. The next day the fever had set in, initially resembling a bout of common flu but quickly developing into something altogether more terrible.

*Franji*⁴ doctors from Jerusalem came and went, administering their strange potions but all leaving with an apologetic shrug of the shoulders. By the end of the sixth day the fever was so wild he had to be tied to the bed to prevent him causing further injury to himself.

As he lay thrashing from side to side, gripped by the *jinn* (spirit) of death,⁵ he heard the priest, Abuna Francis, begin reciting the last rites: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. . . .”⁶

As the priest spoke the words of the Eucharist, Jubra’il felt the room and the people in it become ever more distant. He looked upwards and saw the cloaked, winged figure of ‘Izra’il beckoning him to follow.⁷ Jubra’il struggled to offer words of protest but ‘Izra’il immediately silenced him. “It is not you or I who decides,” he explained, “only Allah.”⁸ As Jubra’il rose into the air he glanced down to see his family gathered around his now lifeless body, burst into shrieks of grief. He was calm now, watching the scene as a curious observer. There was his wife Mariam, still clutching his limp hand, wailing uncontrollably. His son Yusef stood with his head buried in the shoulder of Jubra’il’s brother Mikhail. And there was his sister Sara, frantically tearing her dress to the girdle, later to be sown up with wide stitches as evidence of her mourning.⁹ The only one missing was his eldest son Bishara who had been called the day before to attend to important business in Haiti.

From his vantage point on the ceiling, Jubra’il turned sideways and perceived a dark tunnel opening before him. As he glided into it, a series of bizarre images flashed before him, seemingly in no logical order. He saw a church with the words San Lorenzo Ruiz written above it, standing at the end of a street called Calle del Rosario where the cobblestones were made of giant rosary beads. He thought he recognized the scene, possibly from the time he had lived in a great city called Manila at the very edge of the earth. He reached out to touch one of the rosary beads but instead found himself riding on an enormous wheel spinning high above a white city where miniature people and places from every country had been squeezed into just a few dunums of land. Looking down at his unclasped hand he found he had indeed grasped the rosary beads, but they were small now and he was standing on the Boulevard de Strasbourg in Paris, offering the beads to a man in a black frock coat and top hat. He leaned closer to make out the man’s face, finding to his surprise it was his brother Morcos and somehow he had been transported back to the old family home in Bethlehem.¹⁰ He was a young boy now, sobbing as he looked down at this same brother’s dead body. Increasingly bewildered, he glanced ahead down the tunnel to see a brilliant white light approaching. The outline of a woman emerged from the light, her hand outstretched towards him. Instinctively he handed her the rosary beads that were still in his hand and she dipped them into a cup of water. “It is not your time yet,” she whispered softly, and sprinkled some drops onto his forehead.

* * * * *

When Sultana Mariam Danil Ghattas died on the twenty-fifth day of March in the year of Our Lord 1927, nobody knew she was a saint.¹¹ It was clear she was a pious woman, feverishly devoted to “is-Sideh the Virgin Queen and lactator of divine milk.”¹² During a lifetime of service to Allah, she had cured many people from intractable disease and extracted numerous children from the bottom of wells, all through the use of her treasured prayer beads. But such occurrences were common in those days and could not be seen as

proof of sainthood. Sultana, or Marie-Alphonsine as she became known after taking the habit, had not rescued these people by herself. Rather she had used the beads to invoke the intercession of is-Sideh, her heavenly mother and ever-present guiding force.

It was only after Marie-Alphonsine died that the full extent of her heavenly communications became apparent. For over fifty years she had kept her wondrous visions to herself, confiding only in her spiritual mentor and confessor-priest Abuna Yusef Tannus, and in her secret notebooks where she diligently recorded the apparitions. Upon her death a bitter war broke out among the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters – the order Abuna Yusef established upon Marie-Alphonsine’s request. One faction of the sisters was so violently opposed to any suggestion Abuna Yusef was not the sole instigator of the order, they decided to destroy the notebooks that had been discovered after Marie-Alphonsine’s death. Driven by a fierce parochialism that pitted their Nazarene faction (from where Abuna Yusef himself hailed) against Marie-Alphonsine and her fellow Jerusalemites, they burned the manuscripts that had been written with such painstaking care.¹³ Luckily for the sake of historical accuracy, the charred notebooks had already been faithfully transcribed by a group of Marie-Alphonsine’s followers, led by her sister Hannah. And so proof of those divine visions was preserved and knowledge of Marie-Alphonsine’s saintly status revealed to the world.

Bethlehem, 6 January in the year of Our Lord 1874:

I was reciting the Rosary alone in the Parish School in Bethlehem, in a place decorated for the celebration of the birth of Our Lord Yasua’ the Messiah (adoration be upon him). When I reached the tenth mystery, I was deep in meditation and felt my heart burning with the love of my mother the Virgin Mariam. Suddenly a glorious light appeared to me, beautiful beyond description, and in it the beloved mother, Lady of the Rosary, suddenly appeared as I later depicted her in the picture. She was standing in the midst of glittering clouds, her hand outstretched, her color a kind of luminous white which I cannot explain and whose beauty could not be captured by any description. A rosary was fixed to a cross on her breast, from where it hung down over her hand and all around her in a circle. The beads [*byut*, literally “houses”] separating the decades of the Rosary were the light of stars and in the middle of each star appeared the corresponding mystery, so that the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary appeared all at the same time as the appearance of my sweet mother. Above her head was a crown consisting of fifteen stars, under her feet in the clouds were seven stars containing the Joyful Mysteries of Mariam the Virgin, and under those stars in the clouds were seven other stars containing the Sorrowful Mysteries of my mother Mariam. I looked at all these sights together and oh what a happy moment it was – such passion of the heart which I cannot describe. Oh, what a beautiful mother whom I cannot describe and no picture could come close to resembling the radiance of her beauty. When my eyes saw her for the first time I was in floods of

tears and intoxicated with her love.¹⁴

Such was the strength of Marie-Alphonsine's first vision that it sent her into a trance from which she did not emerge for several hours. As she returned to consciousness, she was left pondering a series of questions. Why had is-Sideh chosen to visit a lowly servant (*'abdah haqirah*)¹⁵ like her? Did she want something from her? And was it by mere coincidence that she had made her appearance on Eid al-Ghittas, the feast of the Epiphany, from which Marie-Alphonsine's family took their name?

Over the course of the next five years Marie-Alphonsine was visited by is-Sideh on numerous occasions, each time reaching new heights of ecstasy.¹⁶ Is-Sideh chose her moments carefully, making sure to reveal herself only when Marie-Alphonsine was reciting the Rosary with particular fervor and always in the places closest to is-Sideh's heart. All the visitations occurred in



Marie-Alphonsine's drawing of her first vision of the Virgin (reproduced in Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra*).

Bethlehem, the site of is-Sideh's most heavenly act and a town where she remained ever present. It was true that every town and village in Palestine contained shrines to is-Sideh frequented by Christians and Muslims alike. Many Muslim villages still paraded effigies of her mounted on a wooden cross as a way to persuade the annual rains to come.¹⁷ In Jerusalem every year on the fifteenth day of August, pilgrims came from far and wide to take part in Eid Intiqal al-'Adhra, the great celebration of is-Sideh's assumption to heaven. Hundreds of tents were erected around the shrine where is-Sideh's empty tomb lay at the foot of the Mount of Olives. In the daytime, Muslim and Christian pilgrims alike circumambulated the shrine together, as if it were the Ka'ba of Mecca, and in the evening the chapel shone brightly with dozens of gold and silver lamps lit as votive offerings to is-Sideh. The worshippers brought with them the sick, young babies, and anyone else in need of is-Sideh's attention, as they shuffled in chaotic procession around the tomb, the Christians praying the Rosary and the Muslims thumbing their own prayer beads and amulets.¹⁸

But in Bethlehem is-Sideh enjoyed a special relationship with the local residents. Every street, well and shrine in the area had some legend or other associated with her.¹⁹ Usually she played the role of protector of the town and its people, such as the time she unleashed a vast swarm of wasps onto an invading army that was attempting to breach the Church of the Nativity. Or when she halted an earthquake by grasping the columns of that same church, leaving holes in the columns still visible today. But when the people

became too proud or treated her with disrespect she was quick to turn her wits against them. One time she was passing a pea field on the northern outskirts of Bethlehem and asked the peasants if they would give her some peas to eat. When they tried to trick her by claiming they were stones, not peas, is-Sideh replied, “Then let it be so,” and the peas were instantly transformed into stones. In their fury the peasants set chase, but she again outwitted them by commanding a great rock to split open and hid inside. This rock was preserved by local families for many years as an example of is-Sideh’s powers and later placed in the Church of the Virgin in the village of Bayt Jala.

Naturally it was in is-Sideh’s most favored places that Marie-Alphonsine encountered her. In one of the early visitations, she appeared high in the sky as Marie-Alphonsine said her Hail Marys on her way to the Milk Grotto – the caves where is-Sideh had spilled a drop of her heavenly milk while nursing the infant Jesus, turning the stone walls white. As Marie-Alphonsine’s visions progressed, is-Sideh began to appear much closer and even talk to her directly. She showed her visions of the future (in this way Marie-Alphonsine was able to foresee the First World War forty years in advance), she introduced her to Jesus and various saints, and she conjured scenes from the Holy Bible before her very eyes. In the midst of these visions and dreams Marie-Alphonsine took on a new aura. To those who looked closely enough, she seemed perpetually bathed in a heavenly light and everywhere she went is-Sideh accompanied her in the form of a beautiful star. She walked around in a state of constant bliss, taking particular delight in earthly suffering which she actively sought to increase by indulging in self-mortification.²⁰ She dreamed of flying hand in hand with is-Sideh across the desert hills to the east of Bethlehem, over the River Jordan and on to the land of Moab where the Bedouin tribes dwelt. In this dream that would later prove prophetic, she and is-Sideh lived for many years among the Bedouin, serving Allah in the blissful hardship of poverty.

Gradually Marie-Alphonsine learned from is-Sideh that she had a special calling. She was to found a new religious order formed exclusively of local Arab girls. This order, proclaimed is-Sideh, would be called the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters and would devote itself to Marian prayer as a way to educate and alleviate the suffering of Arab women and girls. At first Marie-Alphonsine did not understand why is-Sideh had chosen her to perform this role and why the heavenly queen should devote her attention to the poor people of Palestine. Is-Sideh became increasingly irritated at these questions, commanding her with ever more urgency to form the congregation.

“But how, oh Mother, do you choose us poor and despised people?” Marie-Alphonsine asked is-Sideh one day. “Why don’t you do this in the land of the rich in Europe?”

“Remember, my daughter, that out of the thorns roses grow. It was in this country that I was filled with joy, sorrow, and glory, and so it is from you and in you that I reveal the power of my hand.”²¹

* * * * *

Being brought back from the dead was not the first time Jubra’il Dabdoub had benefited from is-Sideh’s assistance. In the year of Our Lord 1888 he had just returned from his latest journey to the edges of the known world, this time in the most northern

reaches of the land of the afaranja, to a strange and magical city they called Kobenhafn.²² Everything in that city was an illusion; every building a mere facade, designed to appear monumental but in fact constructed in the blink of an eye, only to disappear again the next day. He had gone there to sell Bethlehem mother-of-pearl carvings at the great exhibition taking place in the city's central square. Here a vast hall topped by a dome bigger than any he had seen in Jerusalem had been built to house the exhibition. No sooner had the last visitors left the exhibition than this mighty structure was raised to the ground, just as quickly as it had been erected. Even more fantastical was the park located across the street from the exhibition.²³ When Jubra'il tried to describe this garden to people in Bethlehem, they laughed and called him a *khurafa* (storyteller).²⁴ He spoke of people riding on brightly painted mechanical horses that rotated endlessly in the midst of brightly painted castles, of larger-than-life pictures of animals and birds made from thousands of flowers, of colored lamps that never stopped burning, and of a theater whose curtain was a giant peacock's tail. Jubra'il had wondered around this park in a state of great confusion, unsure if he was in a dream.

In this bizarre, make-believe city, Jubra'il had managed to sell a great deal of the crosses, rosaries and miniature nativity scenes he carried in his suitcase, even though the exhibition had been billed as "a celebration of Nordic design and industry." Returning home after ten months with the handsome sum of 1,500 French lira,²⁵ Jubra'il's already considerable reputation as an audacious and skillful merchant was further increased.

This reputation had been firmly established some seven years previously when he had been the first merchant from Bethlehem to reach those distant islands they called the *Filibin* (Philippines). He had heard from the Franciscan friars of a group of islands at the eastern ends of the earth where the people had become Catholic through the hard work of franji missionaries. People in Bethlehem at that time were journeying in their hundreds across the great Atlantic Ocean in search of riches in the Americas. But why not try travelling in the other direction, Jubra'il asked himself. So he set out one day on a donkey, accompanied by his friend Anton Sa'di, reassuring his mother Rosa he would remember to pray the Rosary each day. In Rosa's eyes he was still a boy when he left – twenty-one years old, carrying only a suitcase of crosses, rosaries, and little boxes carved in his father's workshop.²⁶ When he came back nine months later he was a man of the world and that suitcase was now stuffed full of money. As the old men of Bethlehem gathered round Jubra'il in the Nativity Square to hear his fabulous tales of adventure, they realized he had now joined the ranks of the town's *khawajat* – the title bestowed on merchants who enjoyed success trading overseas – and consequently had become a highly eligible bachelor for their daughters or granddaughters. It did not take long for Jubra'il's parents to capitalize on the moment. Within a month of his return he was engaged to Mariam Handal, daughter of 'Isa Handal, one of the foremost *khawaja* of Bethlehem.²⁷

But after six years of marriage, Jubra'il and Mariam were still without child – an unacceptable situation in a town where continuing the family blood line was paramount. So it was that Jubra'il and Mariam took the short walk around the back of the church to the caves of the Milk Grotto where is-Sideh had once nurtured her baby.²⁸ It was here the

holy family had taken refuge while fleeing the wrath of King Herod. As they took shelter is-Sideh had stopped to feed the hungry child, spilling a drop of her heavenly milk and turning the entire cave walls white as she did so. It was well known in Bethlehem that a piece of those chalky walls mixed with water could form a potion so potent it would cure even the most barren of women, not to mention bring forth fountains of gushing milk from the breasts of those struggling to lactate.²⁹ By the time Mariam and Jabra'il visited the shrine, the Franciscan friars had erected a gleaming white chapel over the caves.³⁰ Many years later in the 1930s some of Bethlehem's wealthiest merchants would add their own mother-of-pearl carvings and inscriptions, writing their legacy into the shrine's facade as a greeting to generations of pious pilgrims to come.³¹ But Jabra'il could still remember accompanying his mother Rosa as a young child when it was just a network of musty caverns and anyone could walk in and slice off their own piece of the cave wall. Now the friars had imposed their orderly system of handing out pre-wrapped parcels of powder, stamped with the franji Cross of Jerusalem,³² to those who proffered a Catholic prayer to the Holy Virgin.

Once back in the Dabdoub family home on Star Street, Mariam and Jabra'il eagerly unwrapped the package and emptied the contents into a cup of water. As they took turns drinking the potion, they took out their rosary beads and dutifully prayed a third of the joyful mysteries, recalling the birth of Yasua' the Messiah, followed by a quick Our Father and ten Hail Marys.³³ Having dispensed with the formalities, they proceeded to make their own appeals to the Holy Virgin, beseeching her to bring them a child.³⁴ This ritual was repeated every day for three months until one day Mariam awoke to a violent sickness and announced she had not bled that month. Such was Jabra'il's joy, he sank to his knees and heaped lavish praise on the Blessed Virgin, pledging to her his eternal debt of gratitude. Eight months later on the twenty-fourth day of August in the year of Our Lord 1889, his first son Bishara was born thanks to is-Sideh's generous intervention.

Twenty years later, as he lay surrounded by his family in the clasp of a burning fever, Jabra'il was in no state to summon is-Sideh himself. Those gathered around the bed detected a change in his demeanor as he seemed to enter a series of wild hallucinations. Sensing the urgency of the situation, the priest Abuna Francis began to read the last rites but Jabra'il could give no coherent response at the required moments. Instead he now began speaking in a jumbled mixture of different languages, calling out the names of strange people and places they had never heard before. "*Nasaan ako?*" he exclaimed, adding, "*Es la iglesia de San Lorenzo Ruiz verdad?*" And then, "*Je le vous donne pour seulement cinque francs, monsieur,*" before finally whispering in Arabic, "Is that really you, Morcos?" Suddenly he stopped talking and a look of calm descended on his ashen face as his eyes closed. As the assembled spectators burst into shrieks of grief and Sara tore into her dress, nobody noticed a new delegation that had slipped quietly into the room. Three nuns dressed in their blue habits with long veils covering tightly fitted coifs now stood by the bed fingering their rosary beads as they offered prayers to is-Sideh, the Virgin Queen. "It is good so many people are gathered here," one of them muttered to her companion. "Yes," she replied, "perhaps the sickness that the jinn have brought upon this man can be cast out and diffused among the onlookers in small doses."³⁵ The

third nun now stepped forward having previously been kneeling in intense prayer. She placed her hand on the dead man's forehead. "It is not your time yet," she whispered in his ear and dipped her rosary beads into a cup of water.

* * * * *

"A girl is born in the home of the carpenter!" whispered the women who had crowded into high mass in the Church of San Salvatore in Jerusalem. It was the fourth day of al-Awwal (October) in the year of Our Lord 1843 and the women's faces were a mixture of excitement and trepidation. "May she at least make it to her baptism," one of them muttered.

Her name at birth was Sultana Danil Ghattas. At her baptism a month later, her parents added the name Mariam in thanks to as-Saydeh who had kept her safe during the perilous early weeks of life. Making it to her baptism was indeed a great achievement for little Sultana. Her mother Kattun (Katherine)³⁶ gave birth a total of nineteen times, but Allah had reasoned no family could afford to educate such large numbers and so permitted only eight of them to live beyond infancy. The first of those eight was Sultana. The precise reason 'Izra'il did not come for her was not known. Maybe it was because, when obtaining salt in which to rub the new-born baby, Kattun had taken care not to buy it but to beg for it from a nearby house that faced east, without uttering a word as she did so.³⁷ This had helped distract 'Izra'il's attentions onto the other house, as had Kattun's insistence on dressing the babe with clothes begged from neighbors. Or perhaps it was because the day of her birth had coincided with the feast day of Saint Francis, that most heavenly of Catholic saints who had visited the Holy City and founded the community of friars who still lived there.

Saint Francis and his friars had a special connection to the Ghattas family. Originally from Bethlehem, where the missionary zeal of the Catholic Church had found its most fertile ground, the Ghattas family had been among the Franciscans' early converts in the seventeenth century. Marie-Alphonsine's father Danil worked in the service of the friars as a carpenter and he lived with his family in the house opposite the Franciscan monastery in the western quarter of Jerusalem's Old City where a string of new Catholic churches and hospices was emerging. Danil was known to everybody for his fierce devotion to the cult of is-Sideh and would invite friends and neighbors to his house every evening to pray the Rosary with him. Kneeling before his impressive collection of statuettes and icons of is-Sideh, and enveloped in clouds of incense, he would beseech in loud tones the Virgin Queen to deliver lost souls from purgatory, thumbing his treasured prayer beads as he did so.³⁸ There was no doubt among those who knew Danil that his statuettes and icons were capable of repaying him for his unswerving devotion, such as the day one of his daughters was cured from a grave illness by a mysterious oil emitted by an icon of is-Sideh that hung above her bed.³⁹

Danil's fierce devotion to the Virgin Mariam was matched only by the ferocity of his opposition to his daughter entering the religious life. From a young age little Sultana had displayed an unusual level of piety and quickly became fixated on the idea of joining one of

Jerusalem's Catholic convents. Danil, however, had other ideas. To complete the necessary religious training she would have to travel to Europe – something no respectable father could permit his daughter. Besides, insisted Danil, it was imperative Sultana be married to an eligible young man to improve further the family's status in Jerusalemite society. As she watched the young men of her generation setting out on daring merchant adventures to the furthest corners of the world, Sultana was thus sentenced to a life of domesticity. But she would not be discouraged so easily. Praying incessantly to is-Sideh, she was eventually rewarded when Danil suffered a terrible accident caused by an exploding bottle of methylated spirits. Confined to a long and painful period of recuperation from the severe burns he had sustained, Danil was forced to reflect on the meaning of this episode as his daughter lovingly cared for him. What other conclusion could he reach except to view the accident as a sign of heavenly displeasure at his refusal to grant his daughter's wishes? Upon his recovery Danil duly summoned young Sultana to his room and explained he would no longer stand in the way of her destiny. Overcome with elation, Sultana embraced her father and profusely thanked is-Sideh for her intercession. "But there is one condition," added Danil solemnly. "You will never leave Palestine."⁴⁰

In the year 1877, fourteen years after taking the habit with the Sisters of St. Joseph, Marie-Alphonsine's visions began. As it became clear that is-Sideh was not merely calling for a visit but had a special task in mind, her position with the Sisters of St. Joseph grew increasingly untenable. Although devoted to serving Allah, the Sisters of St. Joseph was a foreign order, populated mainly by *afaranja* who spoke no word of Arabic. Marie-Alphonsine's special calling, by contrast, was to bring the word of Allah to her own people. It was in the terraced valleys and rocky hills of these lands that is-Sideh herself had lived and nurtured the infant Jesus. And it would require one of is-Sideh's own people to spread further the word of Allah and educate those who had strayed from the true path. Above all, it was Marie-Alphonsine's special calling to reach women and girls in the most remote parts of Palestine whose husbands and fathers would never allow them to speak to a *franji*, let alone be able to understand one. As is-Sideh had patiently explained, and later spelled out in more forceful tones, only a lowly Jerusalemite handmaiden like Marie-Alphonsine could perform this holy duty, and it was through devoted recital of the Rosary that she would teach her fellow Arab women to lead a true Catholic life.

Bethlehem, October (Feast of the Rosary), 1877:

After taking communion, I saw the divine Yasua' in a great light, and he consoled me a great deal. Then something changed in this light and I saw a round convent in the shape of a rosary. The Lady of the Rosary was standing on its roof and inside it were fifteen rooms. In each window I saw a nun from the Rosary Sisters, on each of their heads was her name as one of the mysteries of the Rosary. For example, Mariam of the Annunciation, Mariam of the Visitation, Mariam of the Nativity, etc., and I saw myself in the tenth room with the name: Mariam of the Cross. Above the door of the convent was is-Sideh. She looked at me with compassion and kindness and filled

me with joy and light. When I realized what had happened to me, my heart melted with love.⁴¹

In this vision, and many others that followed, is-Sideh provided Marie-Alphonsine with a precise set of instructions for establishing a new order of Arab nuns who would assist Marie-Alphonsine in carrying out the divine mission assigned to her. They would be called the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters and is-Sideh spared no detail in her directives. The style and color of the sisters' habits (monastic blue and white), how they should pray the Rosary (kneeling in prostration in front of the altar), the exact mysteries of the Rosary to be prayed at fixed times of day, when they should hold special fast days for the sake of the Rosary (Mondays and Wednesdays), the design of their future convent (a round temple in the form of the Rosary that would be constructed in Jerusalem in 15 years' time), and the new names to be given to each of the founding sisters.

Listening intently, Marie-Alphonsine realized this would be a sisterhood like no other before it. No longer would she and her sisters take orders from afaranja who flocked to their country to teach them about the religion that originated in those lands. Eager to ensure that this future community of nuns would serve the needs of the Arab nation, she prayed for is-Sideh to appoint an Arab mentor to watch over their progress and protect the sisters from outside interference.⁴² Is-Sideh, herself a local woman, was only too happy to oblige, informing Marie-Alphonsine in one of her visitations that the local priest Abuna Yusef Tannus would be their guide and point of contact with the Catholic clergy.⁴³ When is-Sideh shared this decision with Abuna Yusef himself, he immediately set about establishing the order by informing the Patriarch and recruiting seven local girls as the founders of the order. They were Afifa Suwwan, Regina al-Karmi, Jalila Obays, Amina Habash, and Katerina Suwwan. Each one burned with love for is-Sideh and each one had expressed to Abuna Yusef the same desire to establish an Arab religious community.

The rest of Marie-Alphonsine's life was devoted to converting is-Sideh's instructions into earthly reality.⁴⁴ In 1887 her prophetic dream of living with the Virgin among the Bedouin of Transjordan became a reality when she and her Sisters travelled east across the Jordan to the hillside market town of Salt. At that time wealthy merchants from Nablus and Damascus were flooding into Salt, building their opulent mansions with profits gleaned from the lucrative trade routes that passed through the town on the way to Damascus, Jerusalem, and Mecca.⁴⁵ But Marie-Alphonsine and the Sisters shunned this world of material pleasure that was also seducing the town's Catholic community, and headed instead to the desert plains surrounding Salt where some Catholic Bedouin tribes lived. These nomadic people had long since forgotten how to live as the laws of Rome commanded, adapted as they were to the practicalities of life in the desert and many centuries of intimate relations with the neighboring Muslim tribes. Entering one of the dozens of shrines dotted around the craggy hills that claimed to hold the tombs of ancient prophets such as Yushua', Shu'ayb, and Ayub,⁴⁶ it was impossible to discern which of the worshippers were Christian and which were Muslim.

The women and girls from the Latin families in these communities lived in such isolation from any Catholic teaching that they came to the parish church only once a year

to participate in the Easter celebrations. They would enter the church and immediately head straight to the Holy Table to take communion, having neither fasted nor confessed. Unaware of the correct procedures, they would proceed to perform this ritual several times in the same day, the priest helplessly unable to discern who was who among this once-yearly crowd of worshippers.

Outside the church Marie-Alphonsine tried to teach them the correct way to take communion and the importance of confession as a means of absolution from sin. They listened intently as they puffed on their long clay pipes and sipped their Bedouin coffee, but declared defiantly they would never divulge their secrets to a man. Nevertheless, they were more than willing to confess all to the nuns. Despite Marie-Alphonsine's best efforts to explain that confession could only be heard by a priest, they insisted on using the nuns as their confidants, leaving nothing to the imagination. For these nomadic, desert-dwelling women, Marie-Alphonsine and her fellow Rosary Sisters offered the only direct contact with religious authority, as well as a means to vent their hopes and frustrations. Increasingly, as the nuns entered the church for mass each day, a small crowd of women and girls could be seen tugging at their habits confessing the most unspeakable of sins they had committed. When mass finished and the Sisters prepared to say their prayers to the Virgin, the women would gather round exclaiming, "*Yalla!* The nuns are starting mass and we'll understand it because it's in Arabic!"⁴⁷

In the space of a few months the Sisters had attracted 146 young girls to study in their school and 86 women enrolled in the Confraternity of Christian Mothers they founded in Salt. Following the nuns back to their humble abode in the basement of the parish church after mass each day, the women and girls were given breakfast and taught how to take the sacraments. Above all they were taught how to venerate is-Sideh by thumbing the prayer beads the Sisters had given them as a way of remembering and reciting the 15 mysteries of the Rosary. Most of the women saw no difference between these prayer beads and the many forms of talismans and lucky charms they had always employed to summon their ancestors or local saints who were worshipped by Christians and Muslims alike. Marie-Alphonsine had witnessed these habits shortly after first arriving in the district when she had found Catholic women trying to heal their sick by bringing soil from the grotto of a local dervish. Mixing this soil with water, they would make the patient drink the mixture while clothing them in tree leaves and burning a strange and pungent form of incense. The women swore this ritual had many times cured people on the verge of death, declaring such events to be miracles. Recalling her training with the French nuns in Jerusalem, Marie-Alphonsine tried to persuade them this was mere superstition and could not possibly produce a miracle as only Allah Himself was capable of bending the laws of nature.

It was easier to summon is-Sideh's intervention at locations where the spirit world collided with the human domains, but these locations had to be treated with extreme care as they were also used by jinn and ghouls to cross into the land of the living. Places where water from the interior of the world made its way to the earth's surface were especially known to be such crossing points. All over the countryside there were deep-rooted trees, caves, grottos, cracks in the ground, and especially springs and wells where a particular

jinni might be found. Saints too frequented these sites, stationing themselves there to protect the local population from any unpleasant creature that might emerge from the underworld, including the Devil himself, al-Shaytan. Not wishing to be excluded from this aquatic battleground, is-Sideh herself kept guard over two specific wells in the Bethlehem district – Bir Ona in Bayt Jala and Bir is-Sideh in Bayt Sahur – and had a favorite spring at ‘Ayn Karim where she had once drunk while still in her earthly form. But she could also make unexpected appearances at any number of other wells and springs dotted around the Palestinian landscape.

In total, Marie-Alphonsine performed eight miracles in and around wells, nearly all of them involving the intercession of is-Sideh in some form or another. Most pleasing of all these miracles was the one occurring in 1886 in the Galilean village of Yafet al-Nasra, where a young girl had fallen to the depth of a well and was assumed to have drowned under the water. Undeterred by the pronouncements of the local population that she was dead, Marie-Alphonsine arrived on the scene and cast her rosary into the well, praying to is-Sideh to guide the girl to safety. When she miraculously emerged, the girl described how, as she entered a dream-like state under the water, she had seen the beads light up like a beacon, fall over neck and then pull her up to the surface. This episode brought the Rosary Sisters particular satisfaction as it served to reduce the influence of Protestant missionaries in the village who had been gaining a growing following at the expense of the Catholics. Having witnessed the wonder at the well,⁴⁸ the teacher at the Protestant girls’ school promptly converted to the Catholic faith, bringing several of her students with her into the sisterhood of the Rosary, as well as donating Protestant lands to the Rosary Sisters.

The malign spirits who inhabited these wells and caves often took the form of animals. In Bayt Sahur Marie-Alphonsine was hounded by hyenas, known to be evil jinn and ghouls in disguise who could hypnotize people and lure them back to their caves where they would devour them.⁴⁹ In Bethlehem, meanwhile, al-Shaytan himself appeared to Marie-Alphonsine one day in the form of a fearsome serpent. Unsurprisingly, he chose the waters of a well to make his entry to the realm of the living. As Marie-Alphonsine was sifting wheat with the orphan children in the playground of the Sisters’ school, she instinctively began to pray the Rosary and make the sign of the cross. Getting up to fetch some water, she opened the well to find a strange snake writhing in the water, changing its size as it moved and flicking its enormous forked tongue. People gathered from all over the town, including a Salesian priest who poured holy water into the well. But none could remove the hideous beast from the water. In the morning Marie-Alphonsine opened the well to find the snake had disappeared. For the rest of that summer the Sisters drank from the well until the water had run dry. When they washed the base of the well they found no hole from which the snake might have escaped, and so were left with no option but to conclude they had been visited by the Devil. As Marie-Alphonsine recorded in her notebook, “We deduced al-Shaytan had been so enraged by our recitation of the Rosary that he was thrashing around inside the well. The experience brought no fear to us, but rather increased our veneration of Mariam our Mother.”⁵⁰

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By 1909, the year of his resurrection, Jubra'il Dabdoub had moved back to Bethlehem, bringing to an end a period of several years in which he had shuttled incessantly between Europe and the Americas serving the family business. Upon his return, he found new religious orders were appearing all over town, thanks to money flooding in from foreigners and locals alike. But he would soon have reason to notice a particular community of nuns who called themselves the Rosary Sisters and took in some of the town's poorest young girls. It was not only that this order consisted entirely of local women, unlike the other convents who always included afaranja among their senior ranks, nor was it their feverish devotion to the Rosary that made them stand out. What really grabbed Jubra'il's attention was his merchant friends' talk of their miraculous powers. One of the Sisters in particular, a nun named Marie-Alphonsine, had developed a reputation for being able to summon the Virgin Queen when she was most needed.

Many of the town's khawajat who, like Jubra'il, were now moving back to Bethlehem and building lavish villas on the outskirts of town, began to court the favor of Sister Marie-Alphonsine, eager as they were to support local initiatives in the town, as well as to secure their own safety. The Rosary Sisters had been induced to establish themselves in Bethlehem back in 1893 thanks to donations from franji benefactors who had close connections with the Bethlehem merchants in Paris and now wished to see a girls orphanage opened in the town of the Nativity. But these donations were never enough to provide the Sisters with a permanent abode and it was left to the khawajat to put them up in their own homes. They also provided them with leftover raw materials from their artisans' workshops which the Sisters used to teach the orphans bead-making and wood carving.

There could be no denying that the khawajat were rewarded for their generosity. In one episode that would be remembered for many years to come: Marie-Alphonsine cured Mariam Jiryis Kattan, wife of the wealthy merchant Hanna 'Issa Kattan, from blindness after all hope had been abandoned by their franji physician, a man named Doctor Baker. Undeterred by the pronouncements of modern science, Marie-Alphonsine visited the poor woman and proceeded to dip her rosary beads into a cup of water in her customary fashion. Sprinkling some drops from the cup into Mariam's eyes, she invited the assembled family members to pray fifteen Hail Marys with her, and then promptly left. The next day the family asked for the Holy Rosary water again, saying Mariam's sight had shown signs of improvement. After a few days of this treatment she began attending church again and was soon putting her renewed vision to good use in the Sisters' sewing and embroidery classes.

The khawajat and Marie-Alphonsine could not have been further apart in their life experiences – the one accustomed to material wealth and a life of fluid movement around the globe, the other living in self-imposed poverty having sworn to her father she would never leave the country. But their lives collided during those years she spent in Bethlehem in ways that proved mutually beneficial. By the time it was Jubra'il's turn to experience Marie-Alphonsine's restorative powers, the Rosary Sisters were living next door to him in the house of Yusef Lulos, one of Jubra'il's associates from an old Jerusalem family

that had taken up residence in Bethlehem. In their wanderings these khawajat had seen many fantastical places, people and beasts, but they had not forgotten the sanctity of their hometown as the place where is-Sideh had performed her most wondrous act. Nobody knew it at the time, but as Marie-Alphonsine entered the Dabdoub house, her head bowed in modesty, and set about bringing Jubra'il back from the dead, she was performing the last of her miracles in Bethlehem. Like a modern-day Lazarus, Jubra'il was restored to full health and would live another twenty-two healthy years. So too would Marie-Alphonsine continue her work for many years to come. But her time in Bethlehem was at an end. Just a few weeks later she was recalled by her superiors to Jerusalem after fifteen years of service in the town of Christ's birth.

Marie-Alphonsine lived out the rest of her days quietly in Jerusalem before finally moving back to the old Ghattas family summer house in 'Ayn Karim, where the presence of is-Sideh's favorite spring meant she was never far from her Holy Mother. She died there in a state of sublime peace on the twenty-fifth of Adhar (March) in the year of Our Lord 1927, still reciting the Rosary with her last breath, having fittingly reached the mystery of is-Sideh's assumption at the moment of her departure.⁵¹ It was the day of Eid al-Bishara, the feast celebrating the announcement made by another Jubra'il that is-Sideh would give birth to Yasua' the Messiah. It was only when Marie-Alphonsine's notebooks were discovered upon her death that her fellow Rosary Sisters came to realize that she too had been ordained with a divine mission. Throughout her entire life Marie-Alphonsine had kept her heavenly visions to herself, preferring instead a life of quiet poverty and service to Allah and is-Sideh. In Bethlehem, town of is-Sideh's most heavenly act, she had not secured a permanent shelter for the Rosary Sisters in all her fifteen years of service there, relying instead on the goodwill and acute common sense of the local khawajat. But as with all things, Marie-Alphonsine saw her misfortune as a blessing that had brought her closer to is-Sideh. "Thank you to our beloved mother who descended and allowed us to partake in her suffering and her presence in that town in a humble manger as her abode," read the closing words of her secret notebooks. "Oh, how sweet our life of suffering and poverty. How sweet to partake in the poverty of the Holy Family."⁵²

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Endnotes

- 1 This first sentence echoes deliberately the opening line of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's seminal magical realist novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."
- 2 Benedict Stolz, *A Handmaid of the Holy Rosary: Mother Mary Alphonsus of the Rosary, First Foundress of an Arab Congregation, 1843–1927*, trans. Natalie Bevenot (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1938), 97.
- 3 S. Peller, "Typhoid Fever in Palestine," *Epidemiology and Infection* 28, no. 3 (December 1928): 318–23. See also Salim Tamari's discussion of the uncovered sewage pipes out of Jerusalem in *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 59–60.
- 4 *Franji* (pl. *afaranja*) is a term used historically by Palestinians to refer to western Europeans.
- 5 Belief in jinn was widespread among Christians as well as Muslims in late Ottoman Palestine, and is referenced several times in this paper. Christian belief in jinn was not only the product of folk culture; the most widely circulated Arabic Bible, the so-called Van Dyck translation (completed 1865), used the collective plural of jinn, *al-jann*, on a number of occasions to denote what is usually translated in English as "spirits." For examples, see Van Dyck, Arabic edition, *al-Lawiyin* (Leviticus) 19:31 and 20:6 and *Samu'il al-awwal* (1 Samuel), 28:3 and 9. Jubra'il Dabdoub and Marie-Alphonsine most likely grew up reading this version of the Arabic Bible although as Catholics they may have later switched to the Jesuit Arabic Bible, translated by Augustin Rodet and Ibrahim al-Yaziji and first published in 1880, which also used the term *al-jann* in line with the Van Dyck version.
- 6 Unless otherwise indicated, the description of the miracle recounted here is based on two sources: the first-hand account provided by Marie-Alphonsine in Arabic in her notebooks, transcribed in Arabic into two manuscripts and reproduced by Sister Praxede Sweidan in *Kalimat al-'adhra' al-mukarrama al-umm marie-alphonsine danil ghattas* [Words of the Virgin Mother Marie-Alphonsine Danil Ghattas] (Jerusalem: Latin Patriarchate Press, 2004), translated by the author; and a description provided by the Franciscan scholar Benedict Stolz based on research carried out in the 1930s on the life of Marie-Alphonsine, in Stolz, *A Handmaid of the Holy Rosary*.
- 7 Here I have imagined Jubra'il's near-death visions, based on wider research on near-death experiences and how that research might apply to the specific context of Bethlehem. Belief in 'Izra'il as the angel that transported people to the next world at the moment of death was widespread among Christians and Muslims in Palestine in the early twentieth century. See, for example, H. H. Spoer and A. M. Spoer, "Sickness and Death among the Arabs of Palestine," *Folklore* 38, no. 2 (1927): 115–42. Comparative research on near-death experiences by the likes of Kellehear, Pasricha, and Corazza has suggested the phenomenon of the "life-review" in near-death experiences is a cultural function of specifically Western notions of the interior self and linear notions of time, deriving from the monotheism of Christianity. But these characterisations tend to overlook the existence of non-Western forms of monotheism (Islamic, Christian, Jewish, etc.) that can also espouse linear notions of time. As a Palestinian Roman Catholic Jubra'il seems to straddle these divides and therefore I have included a form of life-review, albeit in jumbled, surreal form. Some of the key publications on near-death experiences include: Allan Kellehear, *Experiences of Near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 28 and 33; Satwant Pasricha, "A Systematic Survey of Near-Death Experiences in South Asia," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 7, no. 2 (1993): 161–71; and Ornella Corazza, "Exploring Space-Consciousness in Near-Death and Other Dissociative Experiences," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 17, no. 7/8 (2010): 173–90.
- 8 'Izra'il was seen as a messenger of God, not the arbiter of a person's death. See Spoer and Spoer, "Sickness and Death," 116–17. Throughout the text I have used Arabic versions of religious terms (such as Allah for God, Yasua' for Jesus, as-Sideh for the Virgin, and the feast days) that were used by local Christians. This serves to emphasize the wider Arabo-Islamic context in which Palestinian Christians lived and the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between Islam and Christianity.
- 9 The accounts of both Marie-Alphonsine and Stolz mention that Jubra'il's sister Sara began to tear her dress at the moment of death. The detail on later sewing it up again with wide stitches was a general practice, described in Spoer and Spoer, "Sickness and Death," 135.
- 10 The flashbacks refer to specific periods or events in Jubra'il's life: his time in Manila where he opened a shop selling Holy Land devotional objects (specializing in rosaries); his attendance of the

- Chicago World's Fair of 1893 (where the world's first Ferris wheel was unveiled); his years living in Paris where he had a shop on the Boulevard de Strasbourg; and the death of his brother Morcos at the age of seventeen when Jubra'il was aged eight. The object of the rosary provides the thread that links these flashbacks as it was integral to Jubra'il's economic and spiritual life, as well as his resurrection.
- 11 The following section is based on Marie-Alphonsine's first manuscript in which she describes her series of visions and dreams of the Virgin Mary. See Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 104–36. Direct quotations from the text are indicated in endnotes.
 - 12 In Bethlehem the Virgin Mary is commonly known as *is-Sideh* – the colloquial Arabic version of *al-Sayyida* (“the lady”). The title “lactator of holy milk” refers to local legends explained in passages below relating to the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem.
 - 13 Only the first of Marie-Alphonsine's two manuscripts (describing her visions of the Virgin Mary) was burned. The second manuscript (describing her work with the Rosary Sisters and the miracles she performed) still survives in its original form.
 - 14 Marie-Alphonsine, first manuscript, 2–5 (reproduced in Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 105–6).
 - 15 '*Abdah haqirah* in the original Arabic. In a religious context 'abdah usually carries connotations of being a servant of God, although literally it means a female slave. Haqirah can be translated variously as wretched or even despicable.
 - 16 Many of Mariam's meetings with the Virgin Mary seem to contain sexual undertones. In one example she writes: “I stayed for a while with her until I quenched the burning thirst of my desire [*ghalil ashwaqi*] for the sweetness of her delights [*udhubat bahjatha*]. In another passage: “The Virgin used to approach me amidst a radiant light, in her hand something round and luminous, and would enter into me. I felt as though I was having holy communion with the taste of honey [*halaawa 'asaliyya*] in my mouth which I kept inside me as long as I could without eating any food.” Marie-Alphonsine, first manuscript, 8 and 38 (reproduced in Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 108 and 123). This mirrors the sexuality described in other analyses of female Christian mystics in the region such as Akram Khater's study of the eighteenth-century Maronite nun, Hindiyya al-'Ujaymi. See Akram Khater, *Embracing the Divine: Passion and Politics in the Christian Middle East* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 173–82.
 - 17 The ritual is discussed in James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 155. Although the effigy was usually named Umm al-Ghayth (Mother of the Rain), Grehan stresses the overlap with the Muslim cult of the Virgin Mary, as well as older pagan practices.
 - 18 Spoer and Spoer, “Sickness and Death,” 18.
 - 19 The following examples are taken from oral traditions that still circulate in Bethlehem. Some of them are mentioned in the research published by Issa Masou at Bethlehem University. See: bethlehem-holy-land.net/Adnan/bethlehem/Stories_of_Places_and_Persons.htm#_ftn1 (accessed 17 January 2018); www.palestine-family.net/index.php?nav=6-20&cid=8&did=6312 (accessed 31 March 2018).
 - 20 The Arabic phrase Mariam uses for self-mortification (or mortification of the flesh as it is often called in Catholic theology) is *imaataat jasadhiyya*. See Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 124 (first manuscript, 40).
 - 21 Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 129 (first manuscript, 50).
 - 22 Jubra'il's journey to Copenhagen is described in an unpublished memoir written by his cousin, Ibrahim Yuhanna Dabdoub, 8 (translated by the author).
 - 23 Jubra'il is describing the famous Tivoli Gardens opened in 1843 and considered to be the second oldest amusement park in the world.
 - 24 According to Emile Habibi, “A *khurafa* is a man who offers up – by way of excuse – the claim that he has acted under a genie's spell ... but isn't believed by people, who say he's just ‘telling fairy tales.’” See “Introduction” (Oration) in Emile Habibi, *Saraya, The Ogre's Daughter: A Palestinian Fairy Tale*, trans. Peter Theroux (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2006), 8–9.
 - 25 Dabdoub unpublished memoir, 8. The earnings of 1,500 French “lira” (as they are referred to in the memoir) were unusually high at the time, although it was divided among the four merchants who travelled to the Copenhagen exhibition – Jubra'il, his brother Ibrahim, his cousin Anton Dabdoub, and Abdullah Dabboura.
 - 26 I have imagined the specific details of Jubra'il's departure, his motivation for leaving, and his tales upon return, all based on wider contextual research on the migrations out of Bethlehem in that period. We know from the Spanish colonial immigration records that Jubra'il and his companion Anton Sa'di arrived in Manila via Singapore on 17 October 1881 and that they opened a shop in the Binondo district selling Holy Land devotional objects. See Philippines National Archive (PNA),

- Manila, SDS 1716, *Radicacion de Extranjeros*, 17 October 1881.
- 27 The dates of Jubra'il's marriage, the births of his children and his wife's previous marriage were obtained from the Latin Parish Archive, Bethlehem.
 - 28 There are no specific sources detailing Jubra'il and Mariam's visit to the Milk Grotto, but it is probable they would have visited the grotto given its widely attested popularity among local residents as a fertility shrine.
 - 29 This particular imagery is borrowed from the fifteenth-century account of Suriano who wrote that women who drank such potions would have "paps and breasts like two fountains." See Francesco Suriano, *Treatise on the Holy Land*, trans. Theophilus Bellorini, and Eugene Hoade (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1983), 137.
 - 30 The Franciscan chapel was built in 1871–72. A number of renovations and modifications have been made since including another chapel built into the back of the caves in 2007.
 - 31 Issa Abdullah Hazboun and his wife Helena donated a large mother-of-pearl cross that today still hangs over the main staircase leading down to the caves. Two separate plaques (in Latin and Arabic characters) beneath the cross record: "Oblatum ab Issa & Helena A. M. Hazboun & fils 1935."
 - 32 Several sources attest to the Franciscan practice of stamping the Jerusalem Cross (a five-fold cross associated with the Crusader kingdom and later the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem) onto packages of the milk grotto powder. See for example Corneille le Bruyn, *A Voyage to the Levant: Or, Travels in the Principal Parts of Asia Minor*, trans. W. J (London: Jacob Tonson, 1702), 200.
 - 33 This has long been the standard ritual of prayer when drinking the mixture and is still practiced today. See www.hazboun.org/arthur/milkgrotto/milkgrot.html (accessed 15 January 2018).
 - 34 This ritual is based on instructions in a leaflet provided today by the Franciscan custodians of the shrine which they claim is according to longstanding customs.
 - 35 In 1927 (the year of Mariam Ghattas' death) H. H. Spoer wrote that she had once met a nun from the Rosary Sisters who had expressed the belief that severe illnesses were produced by jinn and that a large crowd could help disperse the illness. See Spoer and Spoer, "Sickness and Death," 119.
 - 36 See "Blessed Mother Marie-Alphonsine Daniel Ghattas: her life and her miracles," online at en.lpj.org/2015/05/11/blessed-mother-marie-alphonsine-daniel-ghattas-her-life-and-her-miracles/ (accessed on 16 March 2018).
 - 37 There is no direct reference to Mariam's mother doing this, but it was a well-known practice at that time among Jerusalemites whose previous children had died. See, for example, Spoer and Spoer, "Sickness and Death," 141.
 - 38 Spoer and Spoer, "Sickness and Death," 11.
 - 39 Stolz, *A Handmaid of the Holy Rosary*, 28. Reports of icons of the Virgin Mary "sweating" oil that cured the sick were common in Palestine and Syria at that time. See Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints*, 155.
 - 40 Duvignau, *Mother Marie-Alphonsine*, 24–5. Duvignau carried out research on Marie-Alphonsine's life and described her death on these pages of his book. His account is considered authoritative by the Sisters of the Holy Rosary.
 - 41 See Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 124 (first manuscript, 40–1).
 - 42 "I was praying and pleading and asking her to show me the true mentor with a clear sign . . . and I asked her to choose a son of the Arabs of our nation [ibn 'arab min jinsna]." See Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 128 (first manuscript, 48–9).
 - 43 Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 129 (first manuscript, 50).
 - 44 Unless otherwise indicated, the following description of Marie-Alphonsine's life and miracles with the Rosary Sisters is based on her second manuscript, reproduced in Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 138–70.
 - 45 See Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 159–61.
 - 46 In western tradition, the Old Testament prophets Joshua, Jethro and Job respectively.
 - 47 Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 154 (second manuscript, 9).
 - 48 Marie-Alphonsine uses the expression "the wonder at the well" in her description. See Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 142 (second manuscript, 3).
 - 49 Palestinians have long associated the striped hyena with these demonic traits and practices. For an early academic discussion see Tawfiq Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London: Luzac, 1927), 243–5. Striped hyenas still inhabit the Dead Sea wilderness today, albeit in smaller numbers, and continue to be hunted due to their association with evil jinn.
 - 50 Marie-Alphonsine, second manuscript, 17 (reproduced in Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 170).
 - 51 Duvignau, *Mother Marie-Alphonsine*, 238–40.
 - 52 See Sweidan, *Kalimat al-'adhra'*, 170 (second manuscript, 17).