Chapter 5

Bethlehem Emigration and Diaspora Relations

Ibrahim is giving visiting relatives a tour of his garden in the hills overlooking Beit Sahour. Over the last thirty years, he has put a lot of effort into transforming this plot of land into his own personal paradise, a garden filled with exotic trees and plants, some of which are rarely found in this part of the world. After a long and colorful life, he looks forward to an active retirement where he can devote all his time to family and friends, visit relatives in Europe and the US, and take even better care of his garden at home. Ibrahim and his wife are happy to have raised three children who have all married and started their own families. At the same time they are saddened that their two sons had to seek opportunities in other parts of the world, one as an engineer in the US, and the other as a doctor in Germany. Ibrahim’s only daughter lives in Bethlehem with her husband; they both have good jobs, and their two sons attend one of the best schools in the area. As far as possible, Ibrahim wishes to see his grandchildren enjoy a happy and carefree childhood in Bethlehem and Beit Sahour. As he sees it, this may be the only thing their homeland can give them. He cannot see a future for Bethlehem in which his grandchildren will be able to find good jobs and make a decent living, and a social environment in which they will feel free and comfortable as Christians. When they are old enough, he believes they will leave the country and seek better lives for themselves in Europe or the US. When they do, there will be no one around to take over his paradise garden.

Ibrahim’s concerns are shared by many of his fellow townspeople. As younger members of the community leave the country in search of better futures in other parts of the world, they feel that their home community, their extended family networks and the overall Christian presence in Palestine are gradually dwindling away.

These worries are not new. As early as during the first wave of emigration in the early twentieth century, people expressed their anxiety about emigration from Bethlehem and its consequences for the local Christian presence (Musallam 1992). In the 1970s, when Mitri Raheb studied theology in Germany with the hope of serving as Lutheran minister in Bethlehem, his local friends told him there would be no Christians left for him to serve by the time he had finished his studies (Raheb 1995:35). For more than three generations of Bethlehem Christians emigration has represented a gateway to better, safer and wealthier lives in other parts of the world, but also a threat to their home communities in Bethlehem.
This chapter focuses on emigration as an economic strategy and as a response to shifting realities since late Ottoman times. I show how certain events in Palestine have triggered large-scale emigration in different periods, and how, with time, Palestinian Christians have established extensive family networks throughout the Americas and later in Europe. With the aid of individual and family histories, I illustrate the need for a transnational approach to understanding the historical developments of emigration as a way of life, and as a response to local hardships among Palestinian Christians. In looking at the role and impact of emigration from Bethlehem, this chapter will also explore the relationship between a global Bethlehem diaspora and the home community in Bethlehem.

**Perspectives on Migration**

In anthropology, early studies of migration were dominated by modernization and development theory, in which migration was widely viewed as a positive force, allowing a surplus workforce to migrate to other countries. Migrants were assumed to support their home communities through remittances, or to return home with fresh capital and newly-acquired knowledge, thus serving as agents of growth and development within their home communities. Studies of migration and migration-based households have shown that in fact, labor migration has rarely fulfilled this promise of development (Brettel 2000, Kearney 1986). In the West Bank, the potential benefits of migration returns have been frustrated by political realities, and efforts to utilize human and economic capital acquired abroad have been effectively thwarted. Dependency theories and, later, World Systems Theory focused on the asymmetric relationships between economic centers and their peripheries within a world economic system (Wallerstein 1974). Migrant-sending countries at the peripheries were seen as being at the losing end of uneven exchanges within highly exploitative economic structures. This perspective tends to highlight the negative effects of migration in terms of economic disparity, powerlessness and dependency on remittances in migrant-sending communities. World Systems Theory emphasizes the structural impediments facing migrants who wish to generate growth and development in their home communities (Brettell 2003). In line with this focus, migrants who return to the West Bank and who wish to utilize resources acquired abroad face considerable challenges. However, such a structural perspective is less appropriate as a means of exploring the constraints and opportunities facing families and individuals in their home communities or as migrants. For this, a transnational approach may be more useful.