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Between scripture and performance: cohesion and dissent at the Feast of Mary's Dormition in Jerusalem¹

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ABSTRACT In contrast to popular Marian rites throughout the world, the Jerusalem Dormition Feast is held on a canonical route that includes the purported sites of some of the key moments in the Virgin's life. The festival boasts an ancient liturgical order consisting of utterances and customs that are assiduously preserved by Jerusalem's Greek-Orthodox Church. Drawing on Engelke's distinction (2007) between scriptural authority and religious performance and numerous scholarly analyses of cohesion and dissent at assorted Marian shrines (e.g., Eade and Sallnow [1991]), this article explores the reactions to the local ceremonial on the part of various participants. While the clergy strives to impose its particular reading of the Scriptures on all the attendees, the different lay groups insist on performing rituals that give expression to their own knowledge of the canon and their own understanding of the Virgin's nature. All told, their reactions range from rigid obedience to creative practices and heated dissent. The event ultimately splinters off into several factions and the host's orderly script is compromised.

KEY WORDS anthropology of religion; worship of Mary; Jerusalem pilgrimage; canonical rites; Greek Orthodoxy; Scripture and performance; scriptural sites

Every 25 August, well before the crack of dawn, Artemisia walks barefoot through the quiet streets of Jerusalem's Christian Quarter. Bearing a fragrant wreath of basil, this Greek-Orthodox woman hurries to the crowded square of the Holy Sepulcher Church to partake in the Feast of the Virgin Mary's Dormition. At about the same time, Miriam, a Palestinian teacher from the West Bank city of Ramala, wakes up her two toddlers and carries them through military roadblocks. They too are heading for the 'Great Church,' where pilgrims from all over the Orthodox world await the departure of the Dormition of the Theotokos Icon.² A farrago of local lay devotees, pilgrims from abroad, and Greek-Orthodox clergy begin to

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²While referring to Mother Mary, Theotokos literally means the one who gave birth to God. The word derives from *theos* (god) and the ancient Greek verb *tiktō*, a gender-neutral word for 'I give birth' (see Rubin [2009: 42]). This appellation emphasizes the two natures of Christ as promulgated at the

form a procession that will escort the icon through the Old City's streets to a grotto in the Valley of Kidron, which is commonly known as Gethsemane Church or the Tomb of Mary. According to Orthodox tradition, when the Virgin 'fell asleep,' the Apostles escorted her body to this gravesite from where she was subsequently assumed to heaven. The procession is thus *supposed* to be a reenactment of these solemn events.

Similar to celebrations at many other Marian shrines, such as Our Lady of Lourdes in France, Mexico's Basilica of the Guadalupe, the Madonna of the Annunciation in Tinos, and the Shrine of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jerusalem's Dormition Feast includes acts of worship, healing, and miracles that evoke both cohesion and discord. However, in contrast to most popular Marian venues throughout the world, the Jerusalem festival is held on a canonical route that includes the presumed sites of some of the most important moments in the Virgin's life (Jansen 2009; Rappaport 1979; 1999: 53–54; Tambiah 1968; 1981). The scriptural tradition of the Dormition Feast at Mary's Tomb that appears in several canonical texts, some of which are over 1600 years old (Shoemaker 2002: 3) attests to the route's holiness.³ In addition, liturgical accounts and archeological discoveries confirm the existence of a vivid Marian ceremony in and around Jerusalem from as early as the 5th century at the Church of Kathisma (Seat of the God-Bearer) and later on at the Church of Mary.⁴ Likewise, the Dormition Feast boasts a venerable liturgical order consisting of utterances and customs that are assiduously preserved by Jerusalem's Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate, the festival's organizer. As explained to me by various representatives of the Patriarchate, the annual observance of these same customs is part of their efforts to adhere to the institution's scriptural tradition and perpetuate what they deem to be the most authentic way of venerating the Holy Mother. On the one hand, many of the lay participants come with their own expectations, imaginings, and rituals in all that concerns Marian worship in Jerusalem, much of which runs counter to the official Greek-Orthodox tradition.

The objective of this paper is to describe the panoply of religious customs and ceremonies that are performed by the various devotees participating in the festival marking the Virgin's last corporeal days on Earth. Drawing on Engelke's distinction (2004; 2007) between scriptural authority and religious performance, Coleman and Eade's idea of performative action (2004), and the numerous analyses of conflicting displays of cohesion and dissent at Marian shrines throughout the world (Bax 1990a, 1990b; Bowman 1991; Eade and Sallnow 1991; Gómes-Barris and Irazabal 2009; Napolitano 2009; Turner and Turner 1978; Tweed 1997; Wolf 1958), I explore the reactions to the festival's Greek-Orthodox ceremonial on the part of the different lay groups in attendance.

Council of Chalcedon in 451: Jesus' divinity; and the fact that he was 'born of' a human mother (Rubin 2009: 48).

³Among the other important developments concerning the cult of Mary during the 6th century was the establishment of the following feasts: the Annunciation, the Nativity of Mary, and the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Shoemaker 2002: 116).

⁴Literally a 'seat,' *Kathisma* refers to a monastic scheme for reading the Book of Psalms. During the 1950s, archaeologists discovered the Kathisma of the Theotokos – a large 5th-century basilica and monastery – at Ramat Rachel, a kibbutz on the southern outskirts of modern-day Jerusalem (Shoemaker 2002: 84). The Church of Mary was located in the Jehoshapat Valley.

Several anthropological studies have been conducted on the present state of pilgrimage to Jerusalem's holy sites. For the most part, the authors emphasize the unique attributes of these experiences, such as the centrality of biblical narratives, the abundance of cultural traditions, and the religious and political struggles that generally inform the city's canonical places (Bajc 2006; 2009; Bowman 1991; 1993; Feldman 2007; Sered 1986; Sizer 1999). However, the disparity between Scripture and performance in the context of a single shrine has attracted far less attention in the literature, and scholars have yet to examine modern-day rituals at the Tomb of Mary.⁵ Against this backdrop, the nub of my fieldwork consisted of my own observations of Orthodox masses, blessings, processions, rosaries, and other rituals during Jerusalem's Feast of Dormition from 2003 to 2010. Although the festival is held every year between 25 August and 5 September, the ethnographic data that will be presented here concentrate on the opening day, namely the dawn procession to Gethsemane. The three main groups that take part in this rite are: the clergy of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem; pilgrims from all around the Orthodox world, most of whom arrive in small groups that are led by their hometown priest; and Orthodox Arabs residing in the Palestinian territories and Israel. The local Arab devotees are far and away the largest group, despite constituting a community in crisis: their population is dwindling; and they are alienated from an increasingly unsympathetic Israeli body politic (Cragg 1991: 235, 237; Dumper 2002: 105)

Over the course of my fieldwork, I kept a diary with in-depth descriptions of the rituals. During the various stages of the customs and ceremonies, I held discussions and chatted with more than 30 people involved with the festival: lay and clerical pilgrims from abroad; several representatives of the local Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate; police officers that were responsible for securing the procession; and Palestinian Christian participants. During these conversations, I expressed my interest in the rituals, asked questions, and presented myself as a university lecturer conducting research about holy places in Jerusalem. Most of the pilgrims and local participants were happy to talk with me, share their views, and relate stories about their personal lives. Some even inquired about my own life in Jerusalem. In contrast, the ecclesiastical hosts were much more reluctant to talk. Even those that agreed to be interviewed were usually quite laconic.

As we shall see, the Patriarchate strives to impose its particular reading of the Scriptures on all the attendees. With this in mind, the clergy labor to synchronize their interpretations with the actual performance. Above all, they undertake to forge their ancient local symbols, especially of the Dormition and Assumption, into a tangible set of funerary rituals that will underpin the entire festival. However, the different lay groups⁶ arrive with their own agendas and expectations of Jerusalem (cf. Jansen [2009]). They insist on performing rituals that give expression to their own knowledge of the Scriptures, their own understanding of the Virgin's nature, and their own feelings towards the city, the Bible, and the

⁵In 2006, Jonathan Ventura wrote an unpublished thesis under my supervision: *The Cult of the Virgin in the Greek Orthodox Community in Jerusalem and Nazareth* (master's thesis, The Hebrew University). The study examines the relations between the poetic and political elements of the rituals in the Tomb of Mary.

⁶Although many of the Orthodox arriving from abroad are accompanied by members of the cloth, I use the term lay and laity to distinguish the Greek-Orthodox hosts from overseas pilgrims and local Christian Arabs. Moreover, the term pilgrim will refer exclusively to devotees from abroad.

Dormition Feast. Throughout the day, their reactions to the Patriarchate's script range from acceptance to antagonism; order to chaos, and rigid obedience to creative dissent. As a result of these contradictory aims, the festival ultimately splinters into several factions, as the hosts' rituals and symbols fail to unite the masses. This divisiveness naturally precludes the possibility of a shared experience or script that bridges the disparate ethnic and nationalistic identities of the various attendees. Instead, the festival's events are rife with animosity that occasionally deteriorates into outright violence.

Holy Land pilgrimage

Before delving into the thick of the Dormition Feast, I would like to place this study within the context of the existing literature on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Jerusalem stands apart from other pilgrimage destinations largely on account of two factors. Firstly, over the ages, Christians have created a landscape in Jerusalem that reflects their own perceptions of biblical events and scriptural texts (Halbwachs 1992; Wilkinson 1990). In so doing, Christian pilgrims hope to make the Scriptures 'come alive' when visiting the city's canonical sites. The second factor consists of two elements: modern-day political and religious conflicts in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East; and the religious facets of the State of Israel, not least the status of its Christian communities and their rites within the context of both the Jewish state and the predominately Muslim population of East Jerusalem.

Multiple ethnographic accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy Land demonstrate that participants expect a full bodily experience of whatever biblical event transpired at the site they happen to be visiting (Feldman 2007). For example, pilgrims smell the herbs in Gethsemane and see Jesus' footmark at Veri Galilee. In his seminal study on this topic, Bowman (1991: 99) sheds light on the textuality of Christian imagining of sacred places and demonstrates how rituals are structured according to the pilgrims' sectarian identity (1991: 107). Moreover, he describes how different Christian groups (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant) engage in the complex process of interpreting the significance of holy places, and how each group incorporates their own understanding of Biblical events into their attendant rituals and narratives. In her article on Anglican pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Bajc (2006) argues that the expanse's biblical past is invoked through 'cognitive meta-framing,' thereby transposing the pilgrims from the mundane act of sightseeing into a scriptural reality. This process fuses the Christian religious memory, as articulated by the group's spiritual leader (e.g., a pastor), with the Israeli historical memory, as conveyed by the Israeli tour guide, into a single linear meta-narrative. In another study, Bajc (2009) examined the connection between the Biblical text and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher through the prism of the six denominations that claim rights to the sacred compound: the Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Greek-Orthodox, Syriac-Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Churches, who are embroiled in festering conflicts concerning their rights at and the administration of the 'Great Church.' After describing these feuds, Bajc discusses how they shape the way all the streams comprehend the differences between one another and the boundaries within the compound. To strengthen her argument, Bajc expands on the division of space at the annual Holy Fire ceremony. Similar to Bajc, Feldman (2007) studied Protestant visits to the Holy Land. He claims that the Israeli tour guide and Protestant pastor co-produce a mutually satisfying performance that

transforms the highly contested terrain of Israel/Palestine into the 'Land of the Bible.' By listening to the co-producers' explanations of the different Biblical sites on the tour, the pilgrims stake a claim to the land. Correspondingly, in his or her capacity as a 'native' and an authority on scriptural knowledge and prophecy, the guide assumes the right to name the places. The pilgrimage experience is thus infused with the charged ambiguity of the encounter between Protestant visitors and Jewish Israelis at significant biblical sites (2007: 351).

In her comparative study of pilgrimages to Rachel's Tomb and the Milk Grotto of the Virgin Mary, Sered (1986) explains how women have developed their own customs, rituals, and beliefs at canonical Holy Land shrines that commemorate female saints. The Matriarch Rachel died after giving birth to Benjamin and was buried, according to Jewish Midrash, in Bethlehem – the location of the present-day site.⁷ Similar to the character traits of Mary in Christian sources, Jewish tradition views Rachel to be a suffering mother who accompanied her children into exile, cried for them, and interceded with God on their behalf. In consequence, visits to Rachel's Tomb, a Jewish site, are usually spurred on by problems concerning marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth, especially fertility. For instance, the most popular ritual at this shrine is to tie a red string around the tomb seven times and then wear the thread as a fertility charm. Located in close proximity to Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, the Virgin's Milk Grotto is a place where the Holy Family presumably rested upon taking flight to Egypt. While nursing Baby Jesus, the Holy Mother spilled some milk, and the cave's black walls miraculously turned white. Apropos of these events, lactating women believe that eating some of the white powder from the Grotto's walls will augment their milk supply (1986: 9).

According to Sered, the uniqueness of these shrines rests in the fact that both Rachel and Mary are deemed to be prototypical women of their respective faiths, namely mothers with special ties to God and embodiments of the female urge for fertility (1986: 17). Sered contends that, from the perspective of the female devotee, a visit to either site constitutes a sacred act that endows the supplicant with some power. In this respect, the female pilgrims who participate in these rituals are essentially coping with the marginal status of women in patriarchal societies (1986: 19). Sered also refers to the constraints at both shrines. For example, the Milk Grotto is a 'dark, private, and even antisocial' shrine, in which the pilgrims must ring a doorbell to gain admittance and are subsequently chaperoned by a male Franciscan guard throughout their stay (1986: 16, 20). As we shall see, the worship at the Tomb of Mary is also informed by tensions between the organizers and lay participants. Moreover, drawing on Bowman, Bajc and Feldman's insights on the unique experience of Jerusalem pilgrimage, especially the attempts to make the Scriptures 'come alive' I will analyze the unique mix of emotions (from the spiritually uplifting to the vexing), rituals, and scriptural symbols and relics at Mary's Tomb.

The worship of Mary

The cult of Mary and its various shrines have attracted a great deal of anthropological research. Some of these works shed light on the cohesion and antagonism at

⁷The Midrash is a corpus of homiletic exegeses on the Bible.

Marian sites by highlighting the tension between the Virgin's universal and local sacred imagery and the discord that informs pilgrimage to her shrines.

Turner and Turner (1978) conducted a comparative study on the worship at different Marian shrines. One of their primary goals was to determine how the faithful perceive the Madonna. In the Turners' estimation, she generally embodies the idea of a container or vessel. By virtue of the Assumption (the ascent of Mary's soul to heaven), the Theotokos connects heaven and earth in a 'bodily way.' In addition, she is tender, capricious, and sensitive to suffering. Rather than punishing the sinner, the Holy Mother laments the sin. Nevertheless, she is aggressive towards those who threaten her children. Mary is also widely seen as one who gives succor to the infirm. On account of these traits, the image of the Virgin is a lodestone for multifarious social groups, and many Marian sites are thus endowed with a strong sense of *communitas* and powerful symbols that are widely accepted by the pilgrims, diverse as they may be (1978: 230).⁸ The Turners' tableau of the Virgin has indeed stimulated many other works on Marian shrines, which have significantly enhanced our understanding of what Levi-Strauss (1963) referred to as 'the effectiveness of symbols.' Most of these scholars assume that the veneration of Mary involves the use of highly evocative mega-symbols during ceremonies, pilgrimage journeys, and in everyday life as well. For example, Wolf's groundbreaking study (1958) analyzed the Virgin of Guadalupe's profound impact on manifold social-cum-cultural relationships and norms in Mexico, such as kinship and the sanctity of the family. Moreover, he shows how this image reinforces Mexican identity and nationalism.

Since the 1990s, scholars have been criticizing the long-standing anthropological focus on the effectiveness of symbols and the *communitas* that they ostensibly inspire. Moreover, they argue that, while a shrine can indeed serve as a powerful repository of symbols that effectively transmit religious meaning, it can also constitute a venue for the interplay of numerous imported, often antagonistic, and even radically polarizing perceptions, images, and discourses concerning the object of sanctification (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 5, 10). Accordingly, the various symbols and narratives of the Virgin's life drive individuals and cultural groups to conceive, adopt, and champion disparate and possibly conflicting representations of the Marian shrines (compare with Bilu [1988: 302]). All of the Marian sites that are discussed below indeed oscillate between *communitas* and discord.

Despite Our Lady of Lourdes' highly organized veneer, which is grounded on a shared belief in the site's holiness, Eade (1991: 51, 59–62) describes how visitors resist the ecclesiastical administration's authority in manifold ways, while embedding their own customs into the proceedings. In so doing, Eade casts doubt on the Turners' above-mentioned account (1978: 230) of the amity at Lourdes and other Marian venues (also see Harris [1997]). In his article on the Shrine of Medjugorje, Bax (1990b) focuses on the erstwhile Yugoslavian religious leadership's strident opposition to some of the popular rituals therein, to the point of inciting rivalries, tension, and protests at the site (1990a: 63; 1991). Skrbis turns his attention to Medjugorje after the secession of Yugoslavia, when the newly founded state of Bosnia-Herzegovina assumed control over the shrine, (2005; also see Herrero [1999]). According to Skrbis, various symbols of the Madonna converge at Medjugorje.

⁸Also see Levi-Strauss (1963) and Dubisch (1995: 247).

For instance, an extremely divisive, chauvinistic discourse is advanced by Croatian nationalists, whose narrative of the apparitions presupposes the chosenness or divinely ordained uniqueness of but one of the multiple groups that worship at the site (2005: 444).

Tweed (1997: 10) argues that Cuban-Americans view Miami's Our Lady of Charity as both a house of Marian worship and a platform for nationalistic symbols. The shrine's dual function enables the faithful to comprehend and articulate their own identity as a diasporic people by superimposing the landscape and history of their homeland onto their new urban environment. During services, they articulate their collective identity, yearn for Cuba, and transport themselves back to the island by means of transtemporal and translocative symbols. That said, as Napolitano (2009: 97) puts it, the Madonna is not, a mere 'enunciatory position' or, like other Marian representations across the Americas, a symbol of a nation in exile. She is also a 'nexus of ambivalent affect embodied and mobilized, transnationally, at particular historical conjunctures.' For example, in her work on Guadalupe celebrations in Rome, Napolitano argues that these festivals help promote ultramontane ambitions of the Roman Catholic Church. More specifically, religious principles are 'transnationally reproduced in Mexico and in Rome, to redefine Mexican notions of *patria*, faith, and family.' According to Napolitano, these celebrations also help rewrite and appropriate Mexico's cultural memory of the harrowing Cristero War (1926–29). Alternatively, Gómes-Barris and Irazabal (2009) show how the Celebration of Guadalupe in Los Angeles' Latino communities creates an 'enchanted space' (Holloway 2006) that connects the celebrants with their older relatives back in the home country. These ties help the older generation pass on familial customs to scions who have immigrated abroad. Finally, Gálvez (2009: 3) argues that, by dint of their devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexican immigrants are finding the will and vocabulary to stand up for their rights and demand immigration reform and respect.

In her account of the Orthodox pilgrimage to Our Lady of Tinos Church in Greece, Dubisch (1995) describes a dynamic experience featuring a variety of symbols and meanings that pertain to the Annunciation, most of which are mutable and frequently contested. Although the celebration in Tinos surrounding the local Panagia Evangelistria Icon is indeed a major public rite, she found that its general character is largely shaped by the devotees' personal needs, emotions, inner states, and nationalist ethos.

The literature on the cult of Mary takes us to different directions, including the following: the construction of narratives, rituals, and group identities; the formation of categories and boundaries; and the characteristics of the Virgin's nature and how these traits are commemorated or worshipped. These studies demonstrate that the popular veneration of Mary can encompass both megasymbols that engender a shared identity among the faithful and antagonistic practices that reinforce differences and conflicts between various devotees. Unlike the above-mentioned shrines, all of which commemorate relatively recent sightings of the Virgin, the Dormition Feast in Jerusalem takes place at canonical sites where key events in the Holy Mother's worldly life are said to have transpired. Notwithstanding the differences between the Jerusalem Marian sites and the ones surveyed herein, the above-cited research constitutes an illuminating point of departure for the ethnography that ensues.

The dawn procession to Gethsemane

In Jerusalem, the Greek-Orthodox Church considers itself to be the sole authentic stream of Christianity – an irreplaceable link in an age-old chain. Its priests and nuns claim to perpetuate the ancient tradition of monasticism, which dates back to the colony of monks that was established in the Judean Desert during the Byzantine era. Moreover, they consider the region's Orthodox settlement, liturgy, and ceremonies to be part of an unceasing effort to perpetuate a legacy that harks back to biblical times. Unlike many other Christians across the globe, the Greek-Orthodox faithful in Jerusalem still set their holidays and fasts according to the Julian calendar, thereby preserving what they believe to be the sacred time of these events. For instance, while millions of believers celebrate the Orthodox Feast of Dormition on 15 August, the Jerusalem version falls on August 25. From the local clergy's standpoint, the Jerusalem rites are performed in venues that the Madonna personally visited. Although the details of Mary's final days on Earth are not covered by the Gospels, Orthodox monks explained to me that the various components of the Dormition rite are predicated on ancient interpretations of the apocryphal narratives, such as the *Protevangelium of James* from the late 2nd century CE.⁹ During interviews and informal discussions, the organizers always stated their conviction that their rite is the most genuine representation of Mary's Dormition, so that every last detail of their script must be meticulously performed each and every year.

As in any other Orthodox festival, an icon – in this case, the Icon of the Dormition – stands at the forefront of the procession (see Dubisch [1995: 65]). The Dormition Icon's permanent residence is the Metoxion of Gethsemane Church, a small monastery adjacent to the Holy Sepulcher Church.¹⁰ Following an all-night vigil at the Metoxion, a funeral procession heads out of the building at the break of dawn. Insofar as the Greek-Orthodox clergy are concerned, the main objective of this procession is to transfer the icon to Mary's Tomb. They also believe that this annual event constitutes a symbolic return to the final days of the Virgin's corporeal life and her funeral procession, in which the Apostles carried her body through the streets of Jerusalem en route to a burial plot at the foot of the Mount of Olives. One of the Greek Orthodox priests that I interviewed summarized what he considered to be his denomination's narrative:

At the time of her death, the disciples of our Lord, who were preaching throughout the world, returned to Jerusalem to see the Theotokos. All of them, including the Apostle Paul, were gathered together at her bedside. At the moment of her death, Jesus Christ himself descended and carried her soul to heaven ... Following her repose, the body of the Theotokos was taken in procession and laid in a tomb near the Garden of Gethsemane. When the Apostle Thomas arrived three days after her repose and requested to see her body, the tomb was found to be empty. The bodily assumption of the Theotokos was confirmed by the message of an angel and by her appearance before the Apostles.

⁹The *Protevangelium of James* is one of the earliest known accounts of the Virgin's life (see Cormack [1985: 169]; Shoemaker [2002: 29]). While this particular name dates back to the 16th century, the proto-Gospel was probably composed in Syria or Egypt before 150 CE. By the 6th century, it was classified an 'apocryphal' text, namely a hidden and unrecognized part of the canonized tradition (Rubin 2009: 9).

¹⁰*Metoxion* is the Greek word for priory – a small monastery that is often dependent on and the offshoot of an abbey.

The organizers contend that the procession to Gethsemane is indeed based on several early Byzantine accounts of Mary's Dormition and Assumption. As a result, the ceremony is replete with the symbols of death, mystery, and rebirth that are featured in these traditions. The Orthodox clergy officiate over the procession in strict adherence to their interpretations of the ancient Jerusalem traditions of Mary's last days. What is more, they attempt to dictate their funerary script to the 'flock.' However, almost all of the lay groups have their own ideas, scriptural interpretations, and expectations of the rite, which often diverge from those espoused by their hosts. In consequence, the event is conducted in a less than uniform fashion. At various stages, different groups tend to stress their own particular needs, feelings, and aspirations, while alternately heeding to, ignoring, resisting, or even interrupting the Patriarchate's efforts to run the event as a funeral. However, at the outset, the organizers manage to conduct a regimented ceremony that fully conforms with their wishes, as the above-noted vigil at the Metoxion is held entirely in Greek and is presided over by Orthodox priests, foremost among them Father Philomenos, the superior of the Gethsemane Monastery.

The service at the Metoxion is held in the presence of the Dormition Icon. Encased in a wood and glass display case, the two-sided effigy, which was apparently crafted in the 19th century, is inserted into an oklad (a traditional silver frame) mounted on a cross. Mary's face is illustrated in great detail, and shadings create a sense of depth on the wooden base. The slumbering Virgin lies on her back and a sparkling metallic crown graces her head. It bears noting that, in the Orthodox tradition, icons are not mere physical ornaments, but contain a spiritual dimension which constitutes the heart of the *proskinima* – a Greek term for the set of rituals performed upon entering a church.¹¹ Participants explained that the Dormition Icon possesses miraculous powers in all that concerns livelihood, fertility, health, solace, and other basic human needs.

Lay devotees, mainly pilgrims from Orthodox countries, are constantly entering and leaving the priory. At the entrance, devotees light candles, leave a couple of coins in a charity box, and offer a short prayer. Many of them kneel down on the carpet opposite the icon and kiss the glass encasement. Outside the sanctuary, dozens of believers sit on the floor of the Metoxion's small courtyard and the adjacent steps, which led to the Holy Sepulcher's main square. At this point, everyone is braced for the pending moment when the icon will be ushered out of the building. Upon the conclusion of the vigil, the clergy remain inside to tend to the final preparations. Meanwhile, the congregants spill out of the Metoxion and join the hundreds of devotees who have already assembled on the square and around the entrance to the Holy Sepulcher compound in the direction of Dyers Market Street (*Rechov Shuk Ha'tzaba'im* in Hebrew and *Tariq al-Sabaghin* in Arabic). According the Old City Police, about 3000 people take part in the procession every year. However, the numbers fall off considerably during times of war or security threats in the general area.

Few as they may be, the faithful have come from far and near: local residents arrive from their homes in the Old City and the neighborhoods of East Jerusalem; others come from Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and other towns and villages across the

¹¹The *proskinima* includes lighting a candle, kissing the central and other icons, crossing oneself, and genuflection (Dubisch 1995: 66).

West Bank and Israel; pilgrims from Russia, Romania, Serbia, Greece, and other Orthodox countries usually stay at hotels and hostels in the vicinity; and the ceremony's hosts – the patriarch, bishops, monks, and nuns of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem – live in and or next to the Old City's Christian Quarter. With respect to the entire local Christian population, the different sects (Greek-Orthodox, Armenians, Catholics, Ethiopians, and Copts, among others) constitute but a small minority amid Muslim Arabs and Israeli Jews.¹² From the perspective of some Muslims, the Palestinian Christians are an anomaly and are guilty by association with European imperialism, the Jewish state, and other purveyors of modernity (cf. Jansen [2009: 34]). These tensions are palpable in the comportment of the denominations' religious leaders (most of whom are foreign), the shaky confidence of the local Christian communities, and the sour relations between the clergy and Arab laity.

Several minutes after the vigil, black-garbed Orthodox sisters descend the steps of the Metoxion and enter the plaza. As the first members of the Patriarchate to leave the priory, they stir up the emotions of the growing crowd even further. The nuns are carrying Byzantine-style paintings of the Holy Mother and Son along with wreaths of basil and lilac. Likewise, the processional route is demarcated with wreaths, candles, and torches. These objects, which constitute the principal Greek funerary symbols, are meant to bolster the Orthodox Church's Dormition narrative. In fact, the death motif dominates the event's initial phases, as the clergy manage to dictate their version of the feast to all the participants – at least for the time being.

Down in the street, the faithful continue to wait for Father Philomenos carrying the icon of Mary. At exactly five o'clock, church bells mark the beginning of the funeral procession with a thunderous peal, thereby heightening the tension in the immediate vicinity. Philomenos finally emerges from the priory, heads down the steps, and enters the densely packed street with the icon hanging on his shoulder and the effigy itself in his hands. The energetic, white-bearded superior is accompanied by a representative of the local Arab community, who holds the edge of the venerated object. In so doing, the latter symbolically partakes in the solemn task of conveying the Dormition Icon to Gethsemane. This gesture, as per the testimony of several local participants, is an attempt on the Jerusalem Patriarchate's part to soothe communal strife and ensure that the ceremony proceeds in a peaceful manner.

Men and women pack the narrow entrance to the compound in order to catch a glimpse of the Dormition Icon. As soon as the father reaches the square, pilgrims

¹²According to the *CIA World Factbook* (2009), the following statistics are available on Palestinian Christians:

Population group	Christian population	% Christian
West Bank	167,000	8
Gaza Strip	10,000	0.3
Arabs in Israel	123,000	9.1
Non-Arabs in Israel	29,000	0.4
Total (only Arabs)	302,000	6.0
Total (including non-Arabs)	331,000	3.0

scurry towards the miraculous article, but are driven back by a cordon of furious Orthodox monks, some of whom even resort to violent shoving. Amid the chaos, monks and nuns form two parallel lines in an effort to carve out a path for the icon-bearer. At this stage, all the church bells of the Christian Quarter ring in concert. This is the signal for the participants to gather forth and commence with the procession. In the meantime, one can sense the mounting intervention of the Israeli police. Together with the Greek monks, albeit for different reasons, the police officers try to channel the overflowing masses toward less-crowded areas, but their efforts also come up short. Members of the cloth form a moving barrier between the icon and the crowd with the intention of preventing marchers from getting ahead of the vanguard, clogging up the way, or otherwise impeding the father's progress. The animosity between the Greek organizers and those who dare approach the sacred object flares up time and again. At this stage, the hosts' impatience is palpable, as they push and vociferously dispense orders – in Greek – to the lay devotees. Nevertheless, waves of Russian, Serbian, Cypriot, Romanian, French, Greek, and Palestinian believers descend upon the icon from every conceivable angle. These testy encounters foreshadow the conflicts that are destined to flare up throughout the course of the day.

From the Holy Sepulcher, the procession heads in the direction of Olive Press Street (*Rechov Bait Ha'bad* in Hebrew and *Tariq Khan al-Zayt* in Arabic). Hundreds of people squeeze into the narrow street and advance at a glacial pace. Many others, especially packs of youngsters, proceed via alternative routes past the shuttered stalls of the bazaar. Entire Palestinian-Christian families join us from the side streets. Among the ranks of marchers are mothers cradling babies while keeping an eye on their other children. At the same time, scores of priests and nuns hastily wind their way past the growing crowd.

Numerous women indeed partake in the rite, including dozens of female groups from Eastern Europe. Most of these pilgrims don shawls and dresses. Some march barefoot and hold wreaths, which are comprised of an assortment of branches, spices, and flowers. A few brandish small torches, whereas the majority wields thin brown and white candles as well as paintings of Mary and Jesus. All these objects are usually provided by Orthodox Christian households along the processional route, a contribution which bestows the rite with a special intimate feel. According to the handful of locals I spoke to, this generous act is extremely important to the Christians living in the Old City, given their declining numbers and precarious state throughout the region. Some of the Arab women also walk barefoot in small bands, each of which sings in unison. When I asked some of the women why they march barefoot, they explained that it helps them bond with the holy ground on which the first Christians escorted the Virgin to Gethsemane. In so doing, 'we are fulfilling Mary's oath' and 'earning our personal redemption on the way to the Mount of Olives.' Some of the pilgrims that were interviewed have returned to Jerusalem after several years for the purpose of fulfilling a vow to, say, clean Mary's tomb or polish the icons in the shrine. The common denominator among all the above-mentioned acts is that they involve individuals acting on their own initiative, rather than heeding to the program laid down by the ecclesiastical organizers. These deeds concord with their own understanding of the Dormition Feast and are often designed to remedy their own personal problems.

More and more young Christian Arabs gradually emerge from the Old City's back alleys. Upon joining the procession, they are immediately engulfed by the

masses. By the time we reach Gethsemane, the Palestinians will have become the majority and Arabic the dominant language of both conversation and song. According to both security officials and participants alike, in recent years the Israeli authorities have granted more entry permits to Orthodox Palestinians from the territories wishing to attend the procession.

As the pace picks up, the atmosphere is charged with a sense of exhilaration. Arab Christian youth wearing fashionable jeans and tricot shirts huddle together on the side. The girls hold loud conversations and their mobile phones are constantly ringing. This style of dress and behavior stands in complete contradistinction to the ecstatic yet grave demeanor of the pilgrims and clergy, not least the tormented countenances of the silent nuns, the assertiveness of the monks, and the zeal of the barefooted Marianites. The overall appearance and comportment of the Palestinian participants also contrasts sharply with the organizers' funeral script. In other words, there is acute tension between the expectations of the clergy and the Palestinian laity, as most of the latter view the procession as a sort of family outing. The local Arabs' laid-back demeanor along the road to Gethsemane indeed draws the Patriarchate's ire. However, the myriad displays of independence on the part of the lay participants fail to dampen the hosts' resolve, as they tirelessly labor to execute their funerary script 'according to the book.'

From Olive Press Street, the cluttered procession enters the Via Dolorosa, where the marchers pass Muslim Jerusalemites, among others, heading in the opposite direction. Some are on their way to pray, while others are going to the bazaar to open up their shops. The Muslim pedestrians are clearly rankled by the oncoming stream of brisk and unexpected traffic, which disrupts their early-morning routine. At this point, devotees begin to chant Marian hymns particularly suited for the Dormition Feast. A few women hand out song sheets in Arabic, and a soft melody rises above the din. The closer we get to the Lions' Gate on the Old City's eastern wall,¹³ the higher the decibel level, as multiple pilgrim groups sing and pray in a variety of languages. However, the songs in Arabic quickly gather momentum and stand out among the rest. After crossing the Valley Street (*Rechov Ha'gai* in Hebrew and *Tariq al-Wad* in Arabic), the route widens a bit, so that the congestion starts to ease up.

Once the procession reaches the Via Dolorosa, the path is laden with churches and other sacred sites, most notably the Fourteen Stations of the Cross. In addition, devotional stops have been set up at the entrance to all the Greek-Orthodox churches along the route, which are already open in honor of the festival.¹⁴ To mark the occasion, the hosts have decorated the entrances with candles, branches, and an assortment of Byzantine-style icons and paintings. Orthodox priests perch themselves on the steps of these churches and sprinkle holy water on the passersby. These temporary stations serve as inspirational-cum-commemorative attractions that remind the participants of the canonical events that, according to sacred Orthodox texts, transpired at these very spots. For the most part, it is the overseas faithful who pause to kiss the proffered icons and briefly pray at the festooned entrances.

¹³The Lions' Gate, which was built by the Ottoman Emperor Suleiman the Magnificent in the early 16th century, is also known as St. Stephen's Gate and the Sheep Gate.

¹⁴A taphos (the symbol of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre) is usually engraved on the entrance of Greek-Orthodox churches in Jerusalem.

The closer we get to the Lions' Gate, the tighter the security. Throughout the early-morning hours, Israeli Border Patrol troops are arrayed along side streets and at key junctures, and soldiers can be seen overhead leaping from roof to roof. Additionally, policemen and policewomen accompany the marchers. The troops operate their communication devices, converse out loud in Hebrew, and pass on orders to one another (cf. Bajc [2009]). Although the Israeli forces make a concerted effort to keep the peace and protect the marchers, as per the authorities' understanding of the security needs, they inevitably add to what is at times a stressful atmosphere. During the first two years we surveyed the procession (2003 and 2004), security was beefed up on account of the Intifada, which was also responsible for a decrease in the number of attendees. Unrest in Gaza and the Second Lebanon War had a similar impact in 2006.

As the faithful exit the Old City through the Lions' Gate, the olive trees dotting the eponymous mountainside appear in the distance. A new day is upon us, as the sun caresses the Holy City with its pleasant late-summer rays. The mere sight of the Mount of Olives arouses the pilgrims' fervor. Believers describe the mountain as a sacred place that is distinct from Jerusalem – untainted by the city's impurity.¹⁵ Many of the lay participants claim that the trek to the mountain is an opportunity to strengthen one's faith and enhance one's sense of freedom and rejuvenation. In contrast, the clergy underscore the symbols of assumption that are embedded in this area, as the Mount of Olives is also identified as the place from which other saints ascended to heaven. Once they pass through the Ottoman gate, the faithful are much more inclined to give their own interpretation to the setting. For example, several of the pilgrims stated that the darkness symbolizing the agony of Mary's death gives way to the brightness of morning and the attendant expectations for a miracle, redemption, or consolation. While the ecclesiastical hosts persist in their efforts to maintain the funerary atmosphere, the pressure that they hitherto exerted on the lay devotees to follow their rigid script – with varying degrees of success – evaporates into the fresh morning air of the deep and expansive Kidron Valley.

The descent from the Old City to Mary's Tomb traverses Jericho Road (*Derech Yericho* in Hebrew and *Tariq al-Maqdisi* in Arabic), where a large contingent of Border Patrol troops has already taken up positions. Police officers stop traffic in both directions, so that the procession can cross the busy two-lane highway without pause. The decorum that was forced upon the faithful by both the clergy and the narrow streets of old Jerusalem is instantaneously breached, as the long line of marchers disperses in every direction. Upon crossing the road, the opening of the grotto comes into view and the terrain enables even the laggards to see the icon-bearer. The religious ferment intensifies all the more due to the poignancy of the singing. The participants fill the streets outside the city's wall and proceed towards the stairs leading down to the small square in front of Gethsemane Church. Just outside the entrance is the Grotto of the Agony; and in front of the square sits the tomb of a Muslim saint (Cust 1929: 44). With Father Philomenos back in view, the faithful have but one objective in mind: to get as close as possible

¹⁵In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources, the Mount of Olives and the Jehoshaphat Valley are tied to the Vision of the End of the Days, the Day of Judgment, and an assortment of other local eschatological myths (Elad 1995: 141–144).

to the Dormition Icon. Once again, hundreds of believers rush to kiss the holy object, thereby riling the Greek clergy who struggle to keep the clamorous throngs at bay.

The sheer number of pilgrims gathered outside the modest structure triggers a series of dramatic events. As the vanguard reaches the square, young nuns approach Philomenos and ecstatically kiss his hands. The monks protecting the venerated object assume a cold yet non-confrontational attitude towards the effusive sisters, but have little patience for the laity. In parallel, the superior attempts to tamp down the fevered pitch in order to keep emotions from spilling over. Despite the monks' heavy-handed efforts to restrain the on-rushers, waves of pilgrims close in on the icon. Some manage to break through the monastic cordon and fondle the venerated article. Amid the chaos, Philomenos barely manages to reach the door to the tomb.

In sum, the contrasting desires of the hosts and the various lay groups burst to the surface as the procession reaches Gethsemane. Whereas the former are interested in sticking to the funeral script and conducting their practices according to the local Marian traditions, the majority of the participants are primarily concerned with performing rituals and fulfilling expectations that revolve around the worshiping of, kissing, and crawling next to the Dormition Icon. As we shall see, the irreconcilable aims of the clergy and flock will continue to clash within the confines of the ancient shrine.

Scripture versus performance: consent and dissent at the Madonna's Tomb

Built inside a subterranean cavern, the Church of Gethsemane or Mary's Tomb is a Crusader-period complex with Byzantine foundations. Its commemorative-style cruciform structure is intended to embody the Virgin's death, resurrection, and ascent to heaven (Pringle 2007: 287; Schiller 1978: 103). Testimonies and writings from the Middle Ages bear witness to the sanctity of the cave's entrance, which is hewn into the mountain. These same sources also indicate that the tomb has been a popular pilgrimage destination since the 6th century. A monumental Crusader-era staircase, consisting of 48 steps, leads down to the ancient crypt (Schiller 1978: 103).

Within minutes of Father Philomenos' arrival, the laity are allowed into the church. Given the context of the festival, the stifling August heat, and the humidity inside the cave, visitors to the dimly lit shrine are likely to feel as if they are entering a womb. Standing near the entrance, an Orthodox nun opens boxes of candles, while a few dozen barefoot women arrange the candles that have been lit into wide swathes. Some of the participants have informed me that the candles are produced especially for this occasion, and they believe that the candles are imbued with the Holy Mother's spirit.¹⁶ Within half an hour, the stairs are covered with a stream of shimmering brown and white candles, which emits a brilliant yet faint glow. Most of the Patriarchate's representatives are busy preparing for their funerary ceremonies, whereas the flock's main objective is to reach the spot where the Dormition Icon's will remain for the next ten days.

¹⁶The candles are produced at a workshop in the Dair Hajla Monastery, between Jerusalem and Jericho.

The crypt is indeed abuzz with devotees, who are immersed in ritual activity. The farrago of personal and often improvised prayers, ceremonies, and other rituals all express or consist of a full repertoire of symbols and demands, many of which are incompatible with the other practices going on around them. In consequence, the differences and disputes between the various lay groups and the ecclesiastical organizers become ever more salient. Each group positions itself in a separate location for the sake of performing their own rituals, and a medley of different songs resonates throughout the cave. While the prayers at the Metoxion were held exclusively in Greek, various languages can be heard in Mary's Tomb, foremost among them Arabic, Greek, Russian, Polish, and French. Among the events in progress are ceremonies at the site of what the Greek-Orthodox believe to be the tombs of Joachim and Anne (Mary's parents), which are located in a recess about a third of the way down the stairs. Inside this chamber, a priest slices bread into small pieces with a gilded knife while praying in Arabic. It is worth noting that none of the overseas groups attend any of the hosts' events in the grotto. The organizers, who are well aware of this 'snub,' perform their rituals in the compound's Orthodox shrines according to their own timetables, which are unknown to the rest of the participants. By this stage in the day, most of the pilgrims are sweaty and their hair is disheveled. Many appear to be exhausted, and some have even fallen asleep in isolated corners of the grotto.

The Patriarchate's clergy conduct most of their services to the right of the bottom step, by the eastern iconostasis. This screen partitions the church's main floor into distinct areas, each of which is under the jurisdiction of either the Greek-Orthodox or the Armenians (see Cust [1929: 12, 35]). Among the participants, the Orthodox clergy are the only ones who are familiar with the internal division of the compound. As a few of the Patriarchate's representatives explained to me, the Syriac-Orthodox Church has the right to hold services in some parts of the grotto. The Catholic Church once had exclusive possession of the entire structure and even holds various documents that confirm these rights. However, by the early 18th century, the Greek-Orthodox and Armenians each controlled an altar in the church, and the Latins were completely expelled in 1757 (Cust [1929: 35]). In a domed passage (a Byzantine remnant) to the east sit the chapel and aedicule that house Mary's sepulcher. A handful of devotees wait in line to enter the small aedicule. When their turn arrives, they squeeze into the entrance and bend down to touch and kiss the stone. The lamps and other hanging ornaments in the chapel's right and left wings belong to the Orthodox and Armenians, respectively. Behind the aedicule is an Orthodox chapel, next to which rests the Altar of St. Bartholomew. This devotional table is owned by the Armenians, but the Syrian Jacobites conduct their ceremonies around it at specified times throughout the year. The adjacent Altar of St. Stephanos and all the outer extremities of the church belong to the Greek-Orthodox.¹⁷ The passage containing the sepulcher leads to the northern part of the cave.

As opposed to the Patriarchate's clergy, who situate themselves in their designated areas, the lay believers are mostly interested in the Dormition Icon and are

¹⁷In 1923, the Armenians sought to replace a pair of old, worn-out icons next to the St. Stephanos Altar. The Syriacs protested that the Armenians had no right to implement such changes because the altar belongs to them. However, the Armenians proved that the icons had Armenian inscriptions on them, and the British authorities allowed them to proceed (Cust 1929: 36).

completely uninterested in the inter-denominational divisions and politics. The vast majority of pilgrims and local Christians indeed cluster to the left of the aedicule, for the purpose of entering a narrow room that hosts the venerated object. We will shortly expound upon the icon itself, but let us first complete the survey of the compound. At the end of the room hosting the icon is a rounded apse, which is nearly fenced in by Greek-Orthodox altars. Mounted onto one of these altars is the *Panagia Iersolymitissa* (Panayia the Jerusalemite). According to local Orthodox legend, this icon was painted by Sister Tatiana in 1870 following a revelation that she experienced opposite Mary's sepulcher. The *Panagia* is surrounded by Byzantine-style paintings, whose primary motifs are the Dormition and Assumption.¹⁸ Although most of the pilgrims are unfamiliar with Tatiana's vision, many of them kiss and pray before her icon.

Reposed on an ornate chair in the prayer room behind the sepulcher, the Icon of the Dormition is out in the open, accessible to anyone willing to brave the extremely tight lines and heavy humidity. Besides the desire to touch and kiss the sacred *epitaphios* (icon), many devotees are eager to partake in the popular Greek-Orthodox rite of crawling. The mass crawling at Mary's Tomb has undergone certain changes over the course of my multi-year study. While almost all the laypersons that enter Gethsemane Church are bent on crawling before the sacred object, the Greek clergy are opposed to this practice or, at the very least, wish to limit its scope. The laity, especially Palestinian women, adamantly insist on their right to perform this ritual, which they consider to be the festival's highpoint. Similarly, the Palestinian faithful are usually the first ones to get in line and animatedly encourage others to take part in the crawling ritual, even in the face of the pushing and stern rebuke of the Orthodox monks in their effort to ease the congestion and hurry things along.¹⁹ Not only does the crawling attest to their devotion, but it is an act of defiance against the uncompromising demands of the 'alien' organizers. Just as the Arabic singing in the streets constituted a protest against the Patriarchate's insistence on sticking to the Greek liturgy, many women obstreperously struggle to preserve the crawling tradition without any intervention on the part of the ecclesiastical hosts.

The icon's accessibility elicits a tremendous amount of excitement as well as frustration. In stark contrast to Jansen's description (2009: 38) of the Jordanian worship of Mary in Husn, the symbols evoked in Gethsemane Church are exceedingly local. Pilgrims stand in a long, disheveled, and extremely cramped line in order to share a fleeting moment with the icon. Following a protracted wait, which entails some feisty pushing and shoving, they finally make it to the back room where an Orthodox nun, who was first installed in 2006 to supervise the ritual. Although she looks weary and apathetic, the sister helps maintain a relatively decorous line. Moreover, she explains how to touch the effigy's face and body, to scatter flowers and basil leaves, and crawl away from the icon. The devotees are less than pleased about

¹⁸The panoply of icons and gilded paintings that are scattered throughout the church are showered with kisses throughout the day, but the main object of the pilgrims' attention is the Dormition Icon.

¹⁹The feud between the laity and the ecclesiastical hosts over the crawling ritual hit a nadir in 2003. Some of the organizers unilaterally decided to prevent the faithful from crawling, with the stated objective of easing the gridlock in the back room. With this in mind, they began to disperse the crowd from the area. However, they encountered stiff resistance, as dozens of women forced their way in and performed the ritual. The following year Palestinian and foreign women launched an effort to ensure that all the devotees could partake in the crawling ritual in an orderly fashion.

the sister's presence and would prefer to conduct the ritual without any 'interference.' In any event, each person is only granted a few seconds with the object, before being shoved out by clergy and other participants. After hearing the sister's instructions, all the devotees kiss and caress the venerated article before dropping to one knee. Some women seek to accentuate their fervor by continuing to lie on the floor next to the narrow and congested exit routes. Yet another practice that involves the Dormition Icon is to pray for the health or recuperation of one's children by rubbing pictures of them on the effigy.

Hundreds of Palestinian women and a handful of men file into the cave during the morning hours. Additionally, local schoolgirls arrive in their uniforms and perform the crawling ritual a single time before heading off to class. In contrast, many of the foreign pilgrims repeat the crawling ritual dozens of times. Several of the foreign women sit on the floor for hours, praying and crying to the Virgin.

Conclusion

Jerusalem's Feast of Mary's Dormition consists of a panoply of religious actions and reactions in a scriptural expanse. I have recorded manifold crowd scenes, or what Coleman and Eade (2004) term 'performances in motion,' which expose the fractured dynamics of the interactions throughout the first day of the feast. Drawing on Bowman's insights on pilgrimage to Jerusalem (1991), I sought to elucidate the 'multivocality' of the canonical sites along the processional route and found that the ritual proceedings were informed by two interconnected theoretical dichotomies: Scripture and performance (Engelke 2004: 2007); and cohesion and dissent (Turner and Turner 1978; cf. Eade and Sallnow [1991]). In other words, there were considerable gaps between the participants' goals or desires and the actual religious experience.

One of the major themes that the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate sets out to promote and evince is the post-Gospel canonical narrative of Mary's demise and resurrection. This motif is conveyed via black outfits, wreaths, candles, incense, devotees walking barefoot, somber music, and other practices or symbols that represent bereavement and foster the environment of a traditional Greek funeral. In fact, many of the Orthodox priests that I interviewed believe that the purpose of these symbols is to authentically evoke and relive the Virgin's death and her 'transfer from earth to heaven' at the Mount of Olives. With this objective in mind, the clergy vigorously attempt to compel the pilgrims to abide by their devotional scheme, for the purpose of enabling the 'flock' to partake in 'the piety of the Apostles' who accompanied the Madonna through the streets of Jerusalem to her burial spot in the Kidron Valley. During the first stages of the procession, many of the devotees from abroad make an effort to follow the organizers' countless instructions and initially accept their 'official' funerary script, so that Scripture and performance are synchronized. However, as the marchers edge closer to Gethsemane, various groups start to contest the official narrative by giving voice to their own demands and interpretations of the sacred events that are being commemorated along the scriptural route. In other words, the lay participants are highly committed to conducting their own rituals, fulfilling their own imaginings, and tending to their personal needs. In so doing, they increasingly eschew the codified tradition and funereal theme in favor of their temporal concerns, especially rituals and symbols that pertain to health issues and fertility. As we have seen, the

emphasis on this-worldly concerns often triggers intense bodily and/or emotional experiences. There are numerous manifestations of these sort of emotions throughout the day, such as kissing icons, praying in their own language, and crawling next to the Dormition Icon, even if this entails ignoring or interfering with the establishment's wishes. The first and most prominent dispute revolves around the flock's avid desire to touch and kiss the icon as many times as possible during the procession. Scores of participants hurl themselves at the tightly guarded effigy, while the clergy try to keep them at bay for the purpose of ensuring that the icon remains at the vanguard throughout the march. Over the years, a similar conflict has evolved over the crawling ritual in Mary's Tomb. Whereas the organizers contend that kissing the icon and crawling by its side are completely alien to the Dormition or Assumption traditions, most of the pilgrims consider these customs to be the emotional and religious pinnacle of the entire festival.

Upon launching this project, I was surprised by the rather modest state of Marian worship in Jerusalem. The relatively small crowds, undersized venues, and frugal amenities are all the more baffling in light of the Virgin's burgeoning standing and the vibrant popularity of Marian ceremonies throughout the rest of the Christian world (Napolitano 2009; Warner 1976: 88). In my estimation, the findings presented herein give rise to the following questions: Why do scriptural sites that emphasize the sacredness of land elicit rancor? How are researchers to define the animosity at canonical shrines? And why do the organizers' symbols fail to satisfy the laity and unite them around a set of accepted meanings and practices? An in-depth comparative study between scriptural and other popular devotional sites would go a long way towards answering these questions and enhancing our understanding of holy places in general.

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