



WHO ARE THE PALESTINIAN ARAB CHRISTIANS OF THE HOLY LAND?

*And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and [k]Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and [l]visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and **Arabs**—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” **Acts 2:1-11***

After two thousand years, Christian families are still living and worshiping in the land where Jesus was born, died, and resurrected. These Christians are not immigrants. They are not converts from Judaism or Islam. They are the descendants of those who first believed in Jesus Christ. They live in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and other places in Palestine and Israel. These Christians, whether they live in Israel, the West Bank or Gaza, are ethnically Palestinian. They are the Arab Palestinian Christians – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. They have maintained a continual living witness in the land of our Savior’s birth and have helped preserve the Holy Sites sacred to all of Christianity. **Together, they comprise the Mother Church.**

There are many practical ways this local Church lives the gospel. These living witnesses of Christ’s historic presence in the Holy Land can help us understand the Bible by giving us a deeper understanding of its’ cultural context. Palestinian Christians are also ideally placed as bridge-builders in a land associated with conflict. They share the Old Testament with the Jewish people. They share the culture, language and national aspirations with the Islamic peoples of the Holy Land. They also act as a conduit between the Churches and cultures of the East and West. They provide a buffer between the growth of both Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism in the region. **They are the “Living Stones.”** They are the living Church giving both breath and hands as evidence of the faith to which the physical stones of the Holy Sites give witness.

Yet, many Christians are unaware that there is even an indigenous Palestinian Christian population in the Holy Land. Even fewer know the severity of the conditions they endure. It is easy to see how the Palestinian Christians have come to feel as though they suffer in solitude, without the solidarity of the rest of the Body of Christ. It is also easy to see why Christians are leaving the Holy Land in vast numbers.

In 1948, the Christian population of the Holy Land was over 18%. Today, it is less than 1.5 %. In Jerusalem, in 1944, Christians numbered 30,000. Today, that number has dwindled to 9,000. The estimated number of Christians in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem is 1.37% of the population. The percentage of Arab Christians in Israel, including Israeli-controlled parts of Jerusalem is 1.66%. The Bethlehem Governorate is home to the highest percentage of Christians in Palestine (43.4%). Almost 6% of the Palestinian Christian population lives in the Gaza Strip.

The Arab Christian population continues to shrink as Christians emigrate for safer conditions. The Holy Land Christians are the living church in the land where Jesus was born, died, and was resurrected. They do not want to leave the land where their families have lived for centuries. If they continue to leave at the current rate, there may soon be no living church left in the Holy Land. There will always be holy sites to visit, but there will be no living stones, no living Body of Christ. This creates a very real concern that Christianity in the Holy Land could become a dead religion without the presence of vibrant living communities.