

Identity, Fracture and Exodus: The Disappearing Christians of the Holy Land¹

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Introduction

The Christians of the Holy Land are gradually disappearing and now comprise less than 1.5% of the population. While many people may now be aware that Christians are disappearing,² few know the real reasons for this and most have little or no idea who such Christians are in the first place. Visitors to contemporary Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip are often surprised to hear that there are indigenous Christians in the Holy Land, assuming that any local Christians are expatriates. This article is a report on who they are and why they are leaving. It views them in their contemporary context in Israel and the Palestinian Territories and outlines the thirteen historic churches to which they belong. It underlines major features of their identity and history and notes the political, social and economic reasons for their exodus.

Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, has played a significant role in the history of the region and the population today includes Christians as well as Jews and Muslims. It is essential to know at the outset, therefore, that not all the citizens of the

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² See Don Belt “The Forgotten Faithful” in *National Geographic* (June 2009): 78–97; and William Dalrymple *From the Holy Mountain. A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

modern state of Israel are Jewish: some are Palestinian Arabs, of whom a few are Christian. In similar vein, not all Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are Muslim. Again, some are Christian. It is with the indigenous Palestinian Arab Christians in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip that I am concerned in this article: who are they and why are they leaving?

To begin with, a sense of numbers is important.³ First, there are about 7.5 million people in modern Israel including approximately 5.6 million Israeli Jews, 1.3 million Palestinians, and 320,000 immigrants of mixed backgrounds. Of the Palestinians or “Israeli Arabs” as they are sometimes called, about 110,000 are Christian. There is also a small number of Israeli Jewish Christians.⁴ In the West Bank there are about 2.4 million Palestinians of whom about 50,000 are Christian; and in the Gaza Strip about 1.4 million Palestinians of whom about 2,500 are Christian. There are also nearly 500,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. All this means that in the area known today as the Holy Land there are about 11.5 million people. A positive estimate puts the Christians at about 160,000 or nearly 1.5% of the overall population. In relation to Jews and Muslims they are in a double minority and their numbers are dwindling. A century ago, the Christians numbered about 10% of the population. In 1947, the year before the establishment of the state of Israel, they numbered about 7%. So what is happening?

³ The statistics are notoriously difficult to determine and the figures here are approximate. I am indebted to Rania Al Qass Collings et al., eds., *Palestinian Christians. Facts, Figures and Trends 2008* (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2008); Bernard Sabella “Palestinian Christians. Historical Demographic Developments, Current Politics and Attitudes Towards Church, Society and Human Rights” in *The Sabeel Survey on Palestinian Christians in The West Bank and Israel* (Jerusalem: Sabeel, 2006); and the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics.

⁴ These mostly fall within the category of “Messianic Jews.” The number is difficult to establish but there are only a few who are Israeli citizens. For an introduction to the wider world of Messianic Judaism see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Voices of Messianic Judaism. Confronting Critical Issues. Facing a Maturing Movement* (Baltimore, MD: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 2001).