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# Who Are the Christians of the Holy Land?

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## FACTSHEET 1

# Who Are the Christians of the Holy Land?

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## FACTSHEET 1

# Who Are the Christians of the Holy Land?

This fact sheet forms part of the 'Preserving the Palestinian Christian Community' project produced by Palestinian Vision ('PalVision') with the support of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS). The project has sought to raise awareness about Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land and to highlight challenges they face, including in particular threats to their religious identity and continued presence in Jerusalem. This factsheet, along with others in the series, aims to provide a basis for advocacy work and to inform discussion about action required to protect and preserve the Palestinian Christian population in the Holy Land.



Figure 1: The Holy Land at the time of Jesus



## INTRODUCTION

According to the Holy Land Christian community's religious beliefs and traditions, these Christians are descendants and heirs of the first Christian community, which lived during the first century AD. This community experienced the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit and it believed in Jesus Christ as the community member's Saviour. These were the first people Jesus referred to as "living stones" in the First Epistle of Peter and "salt of the earth" in the Gospel of Mathew. These early Christians originated from Jewish, pagan, and Arab communities. In addition, every nation and civilisation that came to, settled in, and eventually departed from the Holy Land, left behind some of their traditions, beliefs and culture. These merged with, and melded into, the traditions, beliefs and culture of the Holy Land Christian community. Additional Christians, from outside the Holy Land, later came to serve and protect its Christian shrines and churches. For example, Byzantine Emperor Constantine I had churches erected on many Christian holy sites. He also had monasteries built in many parts of the country. Later, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Urban II commissioned the Crusaders from Europe to take over the Holy Land and rebuild churches that had been destroyed, especially the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. After Saint Francis visited the Holy Land in 1219, many monks who were his followers also visited the Holy Land and its holy sites. These monks served the existing Christian communities as clergy and some established their own parishes and churches.

The local Christian community consists of 13 different denominations and churches today, each with a different place of origin and ethnicity, e.g., Armenian, Greek, Russian and Syrian. The local Palestinian Arab Christians, from all of these denominations, are descendants of the first Christian community, which began after the first Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down to the disciples, as described in the Acts of the Apostles.





## Why local Christians are called the Christians of the Holy Land.

For Christians, the Holy Land refers to all the territories associated with Jesus Christ's life, including his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. These are the cities and other places where Jesus lived, travelled and visited, as well as the roads that connected these places.<sup>1</sup> These territories were part of the Roman Empire in Jesus' time. Today they are part of the Israeli and Palestinian political territories. The Holy Land consists of four distinct geographical regions: the Coastal Plain, Central Chain of Mountains, Jordan Rift Valley, and Negev Desert.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament of the Bible clearly refers to the geography of the country during Jesus' time. For example, the Gospel of Luke described Jesus' travel from Nazareth to the Galilee,<sup>3</sup> while the gospels of Mathew and Mark identified Jesus' baptism at the River Jordan, possibly near Bethany-across-the-Jordan.<sup>4</sup> The Gospel of Mark also chronicles time Jesus spent in the Judean desert, or wilderness, where Satan tempted Him three times.<sup>5</sup> The New Testament presents clear geographical information about Jesus' travels and the places he visited.<sup>6</sup>

1 Figure 1: Stirling, J., "An Atlas of the New Testament" (London: George Philip & Son LTD 1944, 4th edition). P.3

2 Ibid 4, See map 2

3 Ibid 1, Luke 3: 23

4 Ibid 1, Mathew 3:13; Mark 1:9

5 Ibid 1, Mark 4:1

6 Figure 2 Map 2: Stirling, J., "An Atlas of the New Testament" (London: George Philip & Son LTD 1944, 4th edition). P.1



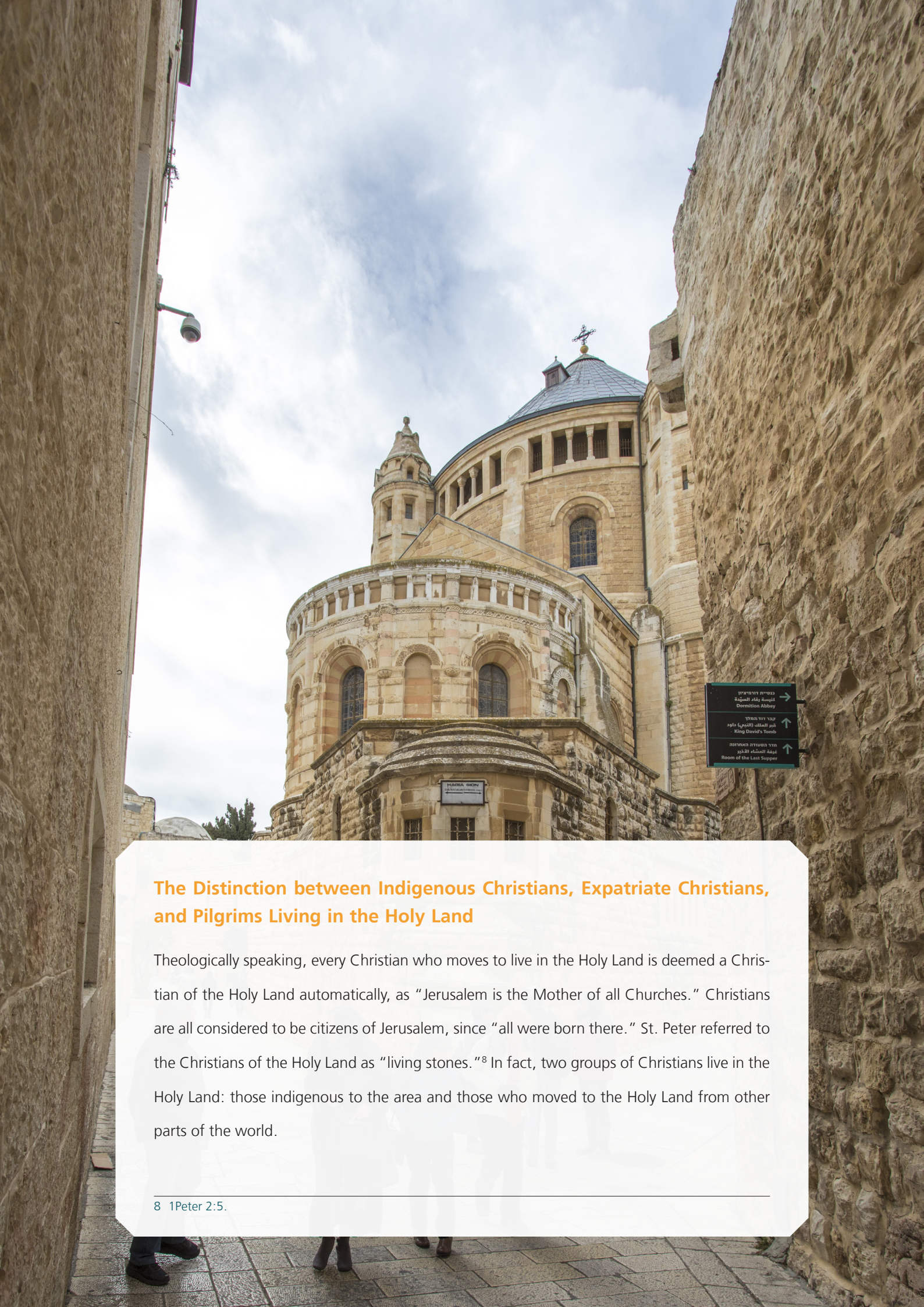
Figure 1: The Holy Land at the time of Jesus

## Christian Identity in the Holy Land

The Holy Land's Christian identity derives both from its church affiliations (i.e., denominations), as well as the local Christian community. Each of the 13 Christian denominations in the Holy Land has a jurisdiction that serves the mission of its existence, that of keeping church property viable and each denomination's parishioners observant. Three Patriarchs reside in Jerusalem: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Armenian. In addition, Jerusalem is home to 10 Archbishops and Bishops, five Catholic: (Melkite, Maronite, Syrian, Armenian, and Chaldean); three Orthodox: (Coptic, Syrian, and Ethiopian) and two Protestant: (Anglican and Lutheran).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sabbah M. (2006)., "Christian identity in the Holy Land" News from the Holy Land, Palestinian Christian, Jerusalem, <sup>29</sup> September 2006. [online] Available at: [http://www.holysepulchre.be/en/Palestine\\_en.htm](http://www.holysepulchre.be/en/Palestine_en.htm).





## The Distinction between Indigenous Christians, Expatriate Christians, and Pilgrims Living in the Holy Land

Theologically speaking, every Christian who moves to live in the Holy Land is deemed a Christian of the Holy Land automatically, as “Jerusalem is the Mother of all Churches.” Christians are all considered to be citizens of Jerusalem, since “all were born there.” St. Peter referred to the Christians of the Holy Land as “living stones.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, two groups of Christians live in the Holy Land: those indigenous to the area and those who moved to the Holy Land from other parts of the world.

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8 1Peter 2:5.



## The Living Stones: the lives of indigenous Christians

The indigenous people who believe in Jesus' mission and follow him today are ancestors of the early Christian communities and consist of Jewish converts (Judeo-Christians), Greek/Roman converts (Gentile-Christians) and Arab converts (Arab-Christians). Historically, the indigenous Christian community has been impacted by local cultural, political, and social changes that shaped its identity.<sup>9</sup> Currently, Palestinian Christians living in Israel are Israeli citizens, whereas those living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories hold Palestinian citizenship. Palestinians Christians who live in Jerusalem hold a vulnerable permanent residency status that was imposed on them by Israel after its 1967 occupation.

## Expatriate Christians living in the Holy Land

Expatriate Christians come to live in the Holy Land to be part of Christian-based missions. Most are clergy and related personnel who come to work in churches, schools and universities.<sup>10</sup> Some were assigned to work in the Holy Land by church leaders. Some came to study the roots of their religion. Others came out of a desire to live in the Land where Jesus lived. Still others came to work with pilgrims and a few were motivated to help local Christians.

## Clergy and members of religious orders

Over the centuries foreign clergy and pastors, spanning the diversity of religious orders, have come to minister in the Holy Land's Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant parishes and pastoral centres with the purpose of serving local Christians and international pilgrims.

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<sup>9</sup> Sabella, B., "Palestinian Christians: Challenges and hopes". (Bethlehem: Bethlehem University) [Online]. Available at: [www.al-bushra.org/holyland/sabella.htm](http://www.al-bushra.org/holyland/sabella.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Directory of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land, Latin patriarchate press, Jerusalem 2005.



## The Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church refers to a united group of Christian Churches that share the Christian faith through the same theology, tradition, and worship, combining the Greek, Middle Eastern, Russian and Slavic cultures. The word orthodox combines the Greek words *orthos* ('right') and *doxa* ('belief'). After Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church hierarchy, alongside the empire's civil hierarchy, was based in Byzantium, later named Constantinople, and today the city of Istanbul. Christianity spread from its eastern roots westward to Europe, which became more dominant in Church politics. After the 1054 Great Schism, or East-West Schism, the eastern and western parts of the Church divided, based on both doctrinal and political differences. The eastern part of the church continued to observe traditional orthodox doctrine and practices, while the western Church became the Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup> Six Orthodox Churches are present in the Holy Land today: the Greek Orthodox Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, and Russian Orthodox Church.

Among these Orthodox churches present in the Holy Land are the "Oriental Orthodox Churches," which include the Armenian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church and Syrian Orthodox Church. Christians who rejected the Council of Chalcedon in 451 became Monophysitist. Their theological belief maintains that in the one person of Jesus Christ, divinity and humanity are united. This theology, Monophysitism, forms the theological basis of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Wellman, J., "What Do Orthodox Christians Believe?" posted on November 18, 2013. [Online] Available at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2013/11/18/what-do-orthodox-christians-believe/>.

12 Metropolitan Bishop of Damiette, «Interpretation of the Christological Official Agreements between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches»– Egypt Co-President of the dialogue Damascus, 3rd Feb, 1998. [Online]. [Accessed 30 December 2011]. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monophysitism>



## The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church is a division of Christianity composed of churches that describe themselves as Catholic. It came into being after the Great Schism in 1054, when the eastern and western parts of the Byzantine church split. The word Catholic literally means “universal.” These churches recognise the authority of the Pope in Rome and share certain traditions in theology, doctrine, liturgy, ethics, and spirituality.<sup>13</sup> A number of Catholic churches are present in the Holy Land today: Latin/Roman Catholic, Melkite Church (Greek Catholic Church), Armenian Catholic Church, Chaldean Church, Coptic and Abyssinian Catholics Church, and Maronite Catholic Church.

## Protestant Church

Several Protestant denominations also are present in the Holy Land currently, but most are relatively small and do not have great numbers of local parishioners. The larger ones include the Anglicans and Lutherans, while others include the Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, First Baptist Bible Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mennonites, Pentecostal, Scottish Presbyterian, Southern Baptist Convention, Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Brethren, International Evangelical Church and the Quakers. Many of the Protestant denominations are part of the United Christian Churches but most are not counted among the officially recognised 13 Christian denominations in the Holy Land.

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<sup>13</sup> Oxford Dictionary of English. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.OxfordDictionaryofEnglish.com>



## Recommendations

Based on the history summarised in this factsheet, it is recommended to develop an inclusive education plan to be implemented in Christian and Muslim educational institutions in the Holy Land, both within the Palestinian curriculum, as well as the Israeli curriculum for Palestinian citizens of Israel, who live within Israel, particularly in the northern part of the country. This inclusive education plan will supplement educational materials currently in use within the religious education curriculums. The supplementary educational materials and curriculum would be introduced as an integral part of the overall curriculums for all students within and beyond the Green Line. The main components of the recommended education plan are summarised as follows:

1. The goal of intensified interfaith dialogue will be to foster greater confidence, openness, and mutual acceptance between participants and within broader society. Its ultimate aim will be to overcome obstacles to Christian, Muslim and Jewish co-existence in Israel and Palestine. The importance of dialogue between Palestinian Christians, Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews in the Holy Land has been highlighted for decades, both locally and internationally. This dialogue should neither aim to shape the identity of its participants, nor to hide the differences between them. Rather, it should aim to develop a deeper and more nuanced mutual understanding among followers of the three faiths. Dialogue in the Holy Land includes unique aspects because of an inextricable interconnectivity with the three Abrahamic faiths, each of which also espouses special links with the land and its history.
2. An Awareness Education Programme should be established to provide contextual Christian religious education that addresses the historical narrative of, and problems currently faced by, Palestinian Christians. This programme will be based on the Christian religion, faith and cultural heritage, with an emphasis on real life faith and practice that often has not been obvious or explained to fellow Palestinians of other faiths and even to Christians themselves. This lack of clarity about beliefs and practices has led to a distancing of Palestinian Christians from their religious and cultural roots and lack of understanding of the Christian faith and cultural heritage among the wider Palestinian community. Implementation of this educational programme should reach all students in Palestinian and Christian education institutions in the Holy Land and should be firmly rooted in the Palestinian historical narrative and context.



## Conclusion

This factsheet presents historical background about Holy Land Christians' roots, as well as development of their communities and culture in the Holy Land. This research seeks to foster awareness among all Palestinians, the international community and within Palestinian educational institutions to strengthen Palestinian Christian presence and resilience in the Holy Land. Local Christians have faced numerous difficulties throughout history, and these continue with many attempts to deface the Christian identity in the Holy Land through misleading information about Christianity within Palestinian society, political conflict and religious differences.

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