

JOSHUA (7) – Joshua and Christian Zionism (5)

Covenant Fellowship Church

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The Land, The People, and The Promise A Five-Week Exploration

Week 4: The Modern Middle East and The Mission of the Church

Goal: To apply the theology to the “real world.”



1. Israel: The Diverse Minority

In Israel, the Christian community is unique because it is the only one in the region that has shown modest growth, though its percentage of the total population remains small.

- **Statistics (2026):** Approximately **184,200** Christians live in Israel, making up about **1.9%** of the population.

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- **Demographics:**
 - **78.7%** are Arab Christians (predominantly Greek Catholic/Melkite, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic).
 - **21.3%** are “Non-Arab” Christians, including immigrants from the former Soviet Union and “Messianic Jews” (who often identify as Jewish ethnically but are viewed as Christian in a demographic or legal context).
- **Current Circumstances:** Israeli Christians are among the most highly educated groups in the country. During the 2024–25 school year, Christian students had higher rates of eligibility for university than any other religious group. However, they navigate a complex identity, often feeling like a “minority within a minority”—integrated into the Israeli economy but culturally and ethnically tied to the Palestinian cause.

2. Palestine: The Shrinking Presence

The Christian presence in the West Bank and Gaza is at a historic low, driven by economic hardship and the ongoing conflict.

- **Statistics:** There are roughly **50,000** Christians in the West Bank (approx. **1%** of the population). In Gaza, the community has dwindled to fewer than **800** following the intense conflicts of 2023–2025.
- **History:** Cities like **Bethlehem** and **Beit Sahour**, once Christian-majority, now have Christian populations of roughly **20%** and **60%**, respectively.
- **The Struggle:** The “erosion of the status quo” in Jerusalem and the expansion of settlements have made daily life difficult for leaders like **Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa**, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. Many Palestinian Christians feel abandoned by Western Christian Zionists, who prioritize the State of Israel over the local Christian community.

3. The “Suffering Churches”: Syria and Iraq

The most tragic narrative belongs to the ancient Aramaic-speaking communities. Following the rise of ISIS and subsequent instability, the Christian population in Syria plummeted by nearly **80%**.

- **Iraq:** Archbishop **Bashar Warda** of Erbil has been a vocal advocate for the survival of the Chaldean Church. He warns that without international support, the church in Iraq—one of the oldest in the world—could become a “museum” of dead stones rather than a living community.
- **Syria:** While the government of Bashar al-Assad has historically protected Christian minorities as a political bulwark, the sheer destruction of the civil war has forced a mass exodus of the youth to Europe and North America.

4. Egypt: The Coptic Giant

The **Coptic Orthodox Church**, led by **Pope Tawadros II**, remains the bedrock of Middle Eastern Christianity.

- **The Narrative:** Despite periodic terrorist attacks on churches, the Copts have a “theology of martyrdom” that keeps them deeply rooted. Under President Sisi, thousands of previously “illegal” church buildings have been legalized, though social discrimination remains a reality in rural Upper Egypt.

“The indigenous Christians of the Middle East are the ‘Living Stones’ of the faith. While many Western Christians visit the so-called ‘Holy Sites’ (the Dead Stones), they often overlook the brothers and sisters who have kept the light of the Gospel burning since the Day of Pentecost.” — *Common sentiment among Middle Eastern clergy.*

Christianity in Israel Today

Israel is a striking exception to the regional trend. According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data released around Christmas 2025, approximately 184,200–187,900 Christians live in Israel, making up about 1.9% of the population. This figure has grown steadily—by 0.7% from 2023 to 2024—thanks to natural increase among Arab Christians and immigration (including mixed families from the former Soviet Union and some economic migrants). About 78–80% are Arab Christians (primarily Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, and Roman Catholic), who form roughly 6.8% of Israel’s Arab minority. The rest include non-Arab immigrants and a small but growing number of Messianic Jews (ethnic Jews who follow Jesus but are not counted in official Christian statistics).

Nazareth has the largest Christian community (about 18,900), followed by Haifa (18,800) and Jerusalem (13,400). Israeli law guarantees freedom of religion, and Christian sacred sites are protected and open to pilgrims. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem’s Old City—believed to encompass the sites of Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection—is shared by multiple denominations and draws millions of visitors annually. Christians enjoy full citizenship rights, high educational attainment, and integration into society, though some report occasional social tensions or bureaucratic hurdles.

Religious Demographics: The Middle East (2026 Estimates) (data from Pew Research Center [2025/2026] and the CIA World Factbook)

Country	Muslim Population	Christian Population	Jewish Population	Quick “Mission” Context
Egypt	~101 Million (90%)	~11 Million (10%)	< 100	Home to the Coptic Church, one of the oldest Christian communities in the world.
Israel	~1.8 Million (18%)	~190,000 (1.9%)	~7.2 Million (73%)	The only Jewish-majority state; Christians are mostly Arab-Israelis.
Palestine*	~5.2 Million (98%)	~50,000 (1-2%)	~0**	Historic centers like Bethlehem and Gaza have seen a massive Christian exodus.
Lebanon	~3.8 Million (61%)	~2.1 Million (35%)	< 100	The highest percentage of Christians in the Arab world (mostly Maronites).
Jordan	~10.8 Million (97%)	~220,000 (2%)	< 100	Known for being a relatively safe haven for Christian refugees from Iraq/Syria.
Syria	~21 Million (93%)	~700,000 (3%)	< 50	Pre-war, Christians were 10%; war has caused millions to flee.
Iraq	~44 Million (98%)	~150,000 (<1%)	< 50	In 2003, there were 1.5 million Christians; now they are a tiny minority.
Iran	~88 Million (99%)	~300,000 (<1%)	~9,000	Christianity is growing rapidly through “house churches,” despite restrictions.
Saudi Arabia	~32 Million (87-90%)	~2 Million* (4-5%)	~0	No “official” citizens are Christian, but many foreign workers are.

Country	Muslim Population	Christian Population	Jewish Population	Quick “Mission” Context
UAE/Qatar	~10 Million (76%)	~1.3 Million (13%)	< 500	Christian growth here is driven almost entirely by Asian and African migrant workers.

**Palestine includes West Bank and Gaza. *Jewish population in West Bank (settlers) is often counted within Israel’s national stats.

Christianity in the Palestinian Territories

The picture is far more challenging in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Palestinian Christians—descendants of some of the oldest Christian communities on earth—number roughly 45,000–50,000 in the West Bank (about 1–2% of the population) and fewer than 1,000 in Gaza (down from around 3,000 before October 2023 and a tiny 0.05% of Gaza’s population). Major concentrations remain in Bethlehem (once 86% Christian in the mid-20th century, now around 12%), Ramallah, and East Jerusalem. Overall, Christians have fallen from roughly 10% of the Palestinian population in 1948 to about 1% today, driven largely by emigration prompted by economic hardship, movement restrictions under Israeli occupation, political instability, and—in Gaza—devastating war.

Neighboring Middle Eastern Countries

The story across Israel’s immediate neighbors is one of ancient roots combined with modern decline:

- **Lebanon** once had a Christian majority and still hosts one of the region’s largest communities—roughly 2 million people, or 20–40% of the population (estimates vary widely because Lebanon has not conducted a census since 1932). Maronite Catholics and Greek Orthodox are prominent. Christians hold significant political power under the country’s confessional system, but economic crisis, the influx of Syrian refugees, and emigration have eroded their demographic weight and influence.
- **Syria** had around 1.5–2 million Christians (about 10% of the population) before the 2011 civil war. Today, only an estimated 300,000 remain (roughly 2%). War, displacement, ISIS atrocities, and post-Assad instability have driven massive emigration. Syria now ranks among the world’s most dangerous places for Christians.
- **Jordan** maintains a small but relatively stable Christian minority of 250,000–400,000 (about 1.8–2.2% of the population), mostly Greek Orthodox and Catholic. The kingdom has welcomed Christian refugees from neighboring conflicts and generally allows freedom of worship, though converts from Islam face social pressure.
- **Egypt**, while not sharing a direct land border with Israel proper, is a key regional neighbor and home to the Middle East’s largest Christian community: the Coptic Orthodox Church, numbering around 9.5–10+ million (roughly 10% of Egypt’s population). Coptic Christians face periodic violence and discrimination but maintain a strong institutional presence.

Across the Middle East, Christians have dropped from roughly 13% of the population a century ago to about 3–4% today. Factors include war, economic collapse, lower fertility rates, and targeted persecution in some areas. Yet these communities—Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian, Syriac, and others—continue to maintain ancient liturgies, monasteries, and a living witness to the faith’s origins.