



### Maronite Aramaic Christian Community in Israel

The **Maronite** Church is a Christian community of Syrian origin, most of whose members live in Lebanon. The Maronite Church has been in formal communion with the Roman Catholic Church since 1182, and is the only Eastern church which is entirely Catholic. As a Uniate body (an Eastern Church in communion with Rome, which yet retains its respective language, rites and canon law) they possess their own liturgy, which is in essence an Antiochene rite in the Syriac language.

The Maronite community in Israel numbers about 11,000, most of whom live in the Galilee. This number includes some 2,500 members of the South Lebanese Army who fled across the border and were resettled in Israel in the wake of the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000.

The Maronite Patriarchal Vicariate in Jerusalem dates from 1895. Maronites are part of the Aramean nation that lived in Mesopotamia, the Aramean Crescent and especially the Levant (Phoenicians & Mount Lebanon) and Syria of today. These Aramean people believed in Jesus in very early stages of Christianity. e.g. St. Maroun (351 – 410), St. Afrem (373), the Aramean King Abgar and his Aramean Kingdom (northern Syria today). The term “Maronite” is derived from the monastery of Maroun, which was named after St. Maroun, a fifth century ascetic who lived in Syria of today.

During the Crusades, the Aramean Maronites enhanced their relationship with Europe, which continued to develop during Ottoman rule. The Aramean Maronites’ homeland was an independent area with about 95 percent Aramean Christians and other Christian groups, and the Maronites were the majority among them. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, Maronite majority control of the western area of the Levant culminated in the declaration of the establishment of Lebanon in 1920 under a French mandate, the aim of the Maronites for many years (Khashan 1990, Phares 1995, Myhill 2006). Other historians call the establishment of Greater Lebanon "The Old Sin", since from that time Aramean Christians and especially Maronites lost their domination in Lebanon, their homeland, and demographically became a minority controlled by their Arabs Muslims neighbors, facing great difficulties in expressing their beliefs and opinions and practicing their religion (e.g. in the last Lebanese civil war, the Aramean Maronites and other Christians rejected Palestinian and Arab fighting against Israel from their land, but this attitude lead to tension and a bloody war lasting for 15 years).

According to their historians, Maronites have had Aramic Syriac as their sacred language since the beginning of their existence. They maintained it as their spoken language until Mount Lebanon was conquered by the Arabs at the beginning of the 14th century. The Arabs then began to impose their language on the Aramean Maronites, and Aramaic Syriac began to decline as their spoken language, as it already had among other peoples of the Levant, although in a few places in Lebanon the language continued to be spoken until the 16th century (Fahed 1985, Ad-Dibs 1905). The Aramean Maronites tried to maintain the language, and though they started to pray in both Arabic and Aramaic Syriac around the 18th century, all the prayers, whether in Arabic or Aramaic Syriac, were written in the Aramaic Syriac script.

This continued to be the case until the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (ancient Aramaic books that exist in all Aramean Maronite Churches bear witness to these facts until today), when the Arabic script began to appear next to the Aramaic Syriac script in the prayer-books (around 1935).

Aramean Maronites still live mainly in Lebanon, their ancestral homeland. But many Maronites have immigrated to other countries, and as a result there are Maronite communities in Mexico, Venezuela, Uruguay, Ghana, Sierra Leon, Liberia, Egypt, Sudan, Australia, New Zealand, France, Italy, England, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Syria, Turkey, Kuwait, Cyprus, Canada, USA, and Israel.

Today, the Aramean Christians in the Middle East are facing many obstacles, and specifically the Aramean Maronites in Lebanon continue to struggle for their own homeland and defend their forefathers' land and identity.

Well-known Aramean Maronites include Gibran Khalil Gibran, Ralph Nader and Siman Simani.

**Aramaic:** The Aramaic language is among a group of northwest Semitic dialects which were originally spoken by Aramaic tribes who lived in the Levant. It was also used as a lingua franca in the region that extends from present-day Egypt to present-day Pakistan between 600 BCE and 600 CE (Murad 1974, Abdu 1997, Bae 2004). The language of the Gemara, the latter part of the Talmud, the Jewish people's record of earliest discussion and arbitration of Jewish law and practice, is primarily Aramaic.

One of the Aramaic dialects is Syriac, the Christian version of Western Aramaic. Like Arabic and Hebrew, Syriac is a Semitic language that has a consonantal writing system in which consonants are represented but vowels are frequently omitted. Like its Arabic counterpart, Syriac writing is cursive and is written from right to left; however, unlike the Arabic letters, which can have up to three different shapes depending on their positions (initial, medium, final), the Syriac letters, like the Hebrew letters, can have at most two different shapes depending on whether the letter is in final position or not. Like Hebrew, Syriac has 22 consonants; in addition, there are five vowel diacritics which are placed above the consonants and which are divided into two groups, short and long.

Syriac literature, which was highly affected by Greek influence, burgeoned between the third and eighth centuries CE. In fact, it was through Syriac that Greek learning and thought were passed on to the Islamic world; it was Syriac scholarship which translated the late Hellenistic science texts from Syriac into Arabic. Aramaic Syriac is still spoken in some villages where Aramean Maronites, Catholics, and Orthodox communities live, and efforts have increased to teach the language to the next generation in communities throughout the world including in Lebanon, Israel, the US, France, and Brazil.

**Jish** in Arabic (Gush Halav in Hebrew): An Israeli town located on the northeastern slopes of Mt. Meron, 13 kilometres (8.1 mi) north of Tzfat (Safed). The population is predominantly Maronite Christian and Greek Catholic, with a Muslim minority of perhaps 20%.

Archaeological finds including two ancient synagogues from around 200 BCE, a 4<sup>th</sup>-Century CE Byzantine church, a unique mausoleum and burial caves. According to Roman historian Josephus, Gush Halav/Jish was the last Jewish/Israelite city in the Galilee to fall to the Romans. Sources from the 10th-15th centuries describe Gush Halav (Jish) as a large Jewish village. A small Druze community lived there in the 17th century, and it was re-established in the 18th century by Maronite farmers from Mt. Lebanon.

In 1945, Jish had a population of 1,090. It was largely depopulated during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, but was resettled by Maronites from Kafr Bir'im. In 2010, the population was 3,000.

Sources:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maronites\\_in\\_Israel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maronites_in_Israel)

<http://www.aramaic-center.com/about.html>

[www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/.../Christian\\_communities.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/.../Christian_communities.html)

**This information is current as of 2015.**