

Global Emphasis

THE GIFT OF MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANITY

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

Some of us have had the privilege of visiting the ancient Church of the Nativity in the heart of Bethlehem, which is considered one of the Christian faith's most sacred sites. It is the oldest standing church in the Holy Land. Situated on Manger Square, the church is built over a grotto, the place where Jesus is said to have been born. Thanks to the visit of ancient Middle East sages, which we refer to as the Magi, the Church of the Nativity has survived throughout the centuries. The story is told that in A.D. 614, when the Sassanian army (Persians-today's Iranians) invaded the Holy Land, they proceeded to destroy all the churches. However, the Church of the Nativity was spared destruction because of the depictions of the Magi on the walls of the church. It is said that the invaders entered the church in full battle mode, armored, helmeted, with swords raised, ready to desecrate and destroy. However, when they encountered frescos depicting men in Persian dress, men who looked like they did, they recognized their ancestors, the Magi. Seeing themselves so honored and respectfully depicted, the invaders lowered their swords, retreated respectfully, and spared the ancient church from harm.



Christianity in the Middle East

The story powerfully illustrates how Middle Eastern in origin our Christian faith is. As we celebrate the coming of the Christ Child, we are reminded that it was only later that the center of gravity of the Christian faith moved, over the centuries, to the West. When we forget that the Christian faith was originally Middle Eastern in orientation, we lose our truest sense of identity: the richness of who we really are.

Today most Christians in the Middle East are members of historic Churches whose roots go back to Jesus' ministry, the original twelve disciples, and the first Pentecost. I have friends who can trace their lineage to ancestors who heard Peter preach at Pentecost and Mark (the Gospel writer) preach in Alexandria, Egypt, where he went after Pentecost. Indeed, today's Arab Christians are the direct descendants of these Pentecost believers, with much to teach us from their rich heritage of faith and experience over the last two thousand years. Christians in the Middle East have carried on an unbroken faithful witness to the teachings of Christ since the first century, often under the most difficult circumstances on earth.

As we read the Nativity story we are also reminded that our Bible, in its entirety, is an ancient Middle Eastern book – or, more accurately, a collection of ancient Middle Eastern books bound together in one volume for our benefit. Written in three Middle Eastern languages, from a diverse array of Middle Eastern cultures and representing thousands of years of Middle Eastern history, our Bible is indeed one of the most complex volumes of Middle Eastern literature to interpret. In order to fully understand its content, we must see it through the cultural lens of the Middle East. During this time of year, we are accustomed to reading the Scriptures of the Nativity given to us by the Gospel writers, and singing about this magnificent story of the Incarnation in the hymns, canticles and carols of our Western liturgies. It is easy to forget that it is an ancient Middle Eastern story, fully embodying the region's first-century culture—as well as many elements of Middle Eastern culture today, which in many ways has remained quite unchanged.

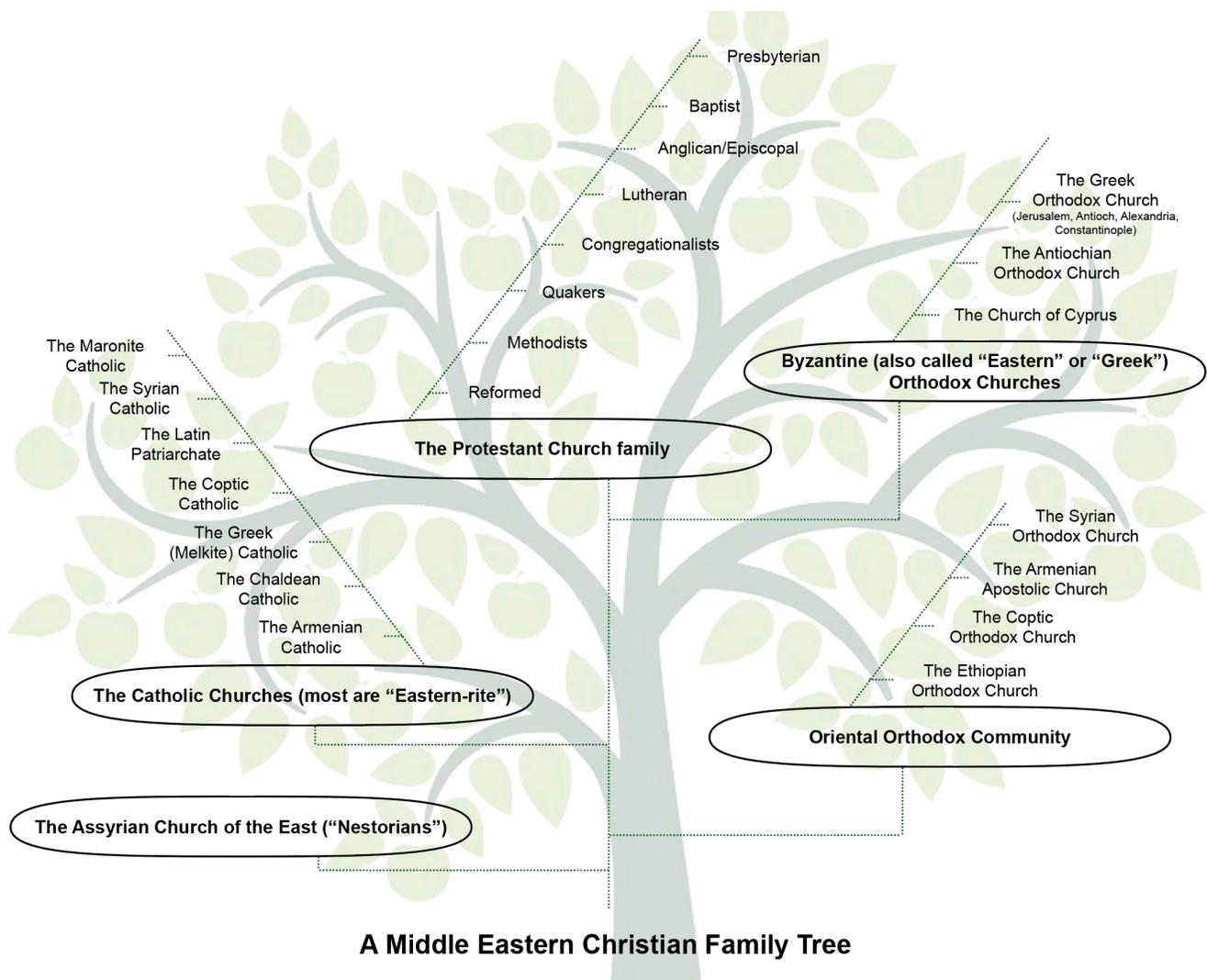


A meeting of the Middle East Council of Churches

Today's Christian Church throughout the Middle East is a small minority with Islam being the principal religion. Yet the diversity within this minority is greater than in any other part of the world, as virtually the entire spectrum of worldwide Christianity is represented. The world's oldest churches are to be found there and many claim specific apostolic founders. Others emerged in the course of theological and political disputes in the first several centuries A.D. Others are the result of evangelizing zeal at various periods including the 19th and 20th century. The breach between Eastern and Western Christianity has kept the churches of the two hemispheres in virtual isolation from one another for over a thousand years. Consequently, many Westerners are unfamiliar with the present-day distribution of the churches in the Middle East.

Today there are still about 10 million Christians in the Middle East. This represents a small minority among over 210 million Muslims and 3.5 million Jews in the region. Yet these churches carry rich spiritual, cultural, and theological traditions, most of which are very different when viewed from our Western Christian experience. Yet there is a great deal we can learn from them. Their incredibly rich Middle Eastern Christian spirituality, which is Oriental ("Eastern") in its orientation, teaches much about prayer, meditation, fasting, and even martyrdom.

Today's Middle East churches are grouped according to five major families.



The largest church family in the Middle East is known as the **Oriental Orthodox Community**. The largest single church in this "family" that is predominately in the Middle East is the *Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt*, which traces its roots to the Pharaonic Egyptians who converted during St. Mark's ministry. The rich tradition of monasticism in the eastern desert is very alive today, as is the Coptic missionary movement. Next in size is the *Armenian Apostolic Church*, with its unique ethnic history (Armenia was the first nation to claim Christianity in A.D. 301), and successive persecution. It has approximately 2 million members worldwide. The *Syrian Orthodox Church*, with its Patriarch in Damascus, is the smallest of this church family (approximately 160,000 members) due to extensive immigration.

The second family is the **Byzantine (also called Eastern or Greek) Orthodox Churches**. They constitute three self-governing Churches that are linked by theological belief, liturgy, and canon law, with the Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul, Turkey (formerly known as Constantinople). They belong to the wider family of Orthodox Churches in Russia, Ukraine, Europe and North America. The *Antiochian Orthodox Church* (named for the city where Christians claimed the term "Christian" in Acts 11) counts approximately 1.3 million members, primarily in Lebanon and Syria. This Church has provided outstanding leaders in the modern ecumenical movement in the Middle East. The *Church of Cyprus* (mentioned in Acts 11:19) is a product of Paul and Barnabas' missionary journey. It constitutes approximately 80% of the population in Greek-speaking Cyprus. The *Greek Orthodox Church* also has a significant presence, with Sees in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople.

The third grouping is the **Eastern Catholic** family that accounts for approximately 15% of Middle East Christians. These churches all accept the ecclesiastical authority of the Pope in Rome, but most are not considered “Latin-rite,” but rather “Eastern-rite” churches (their liturgy is more like the Eastern Orthodox). These include the Chaldean Catholics, the Armenian Catholics, the Maronite Catholics, the Greek/Melkite Catholics, the Syrian Catholics, the Coptic Catholics and the Latin Patriarchate



A Bedouin Christian man

The largest of these churches is the *Melkite Catholic Church*, with significant communities in Israel/Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. They follow a Byzantine liturgy, and their doctrine

is closer to the Orthodox Churches from whom they broke in the 5th century. The *Maronite Catholics* are found primarily in Lebanon, and they are an Eastern-rite (liturgical) Church that dates back to the 4th century, with an independent tradition tied to the Lebanese Mountains. There are approximately 1.2 million Maronites in Lebanon, but over 6.5 million in Europe and the United States. Smaller Catholic communities include the *Chaldeans* (Iraq), *Armenians*, *Syrian Catholics*, and *Coptic Catholics*.

The fourth church family is the **Assyrian Church of the East**, one of the oldest churches in the Middle East. They were sometimes known as the *Nestorians*, and were excommunicated in the 5th century on the alleged grounds that they followed the heretical teachings of Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople (428-431). Their church is found in Iraq, Iran, India, China and Tibet - with approximately 250,000 members. They were the first church to send missionaries to China in A.D. 410.

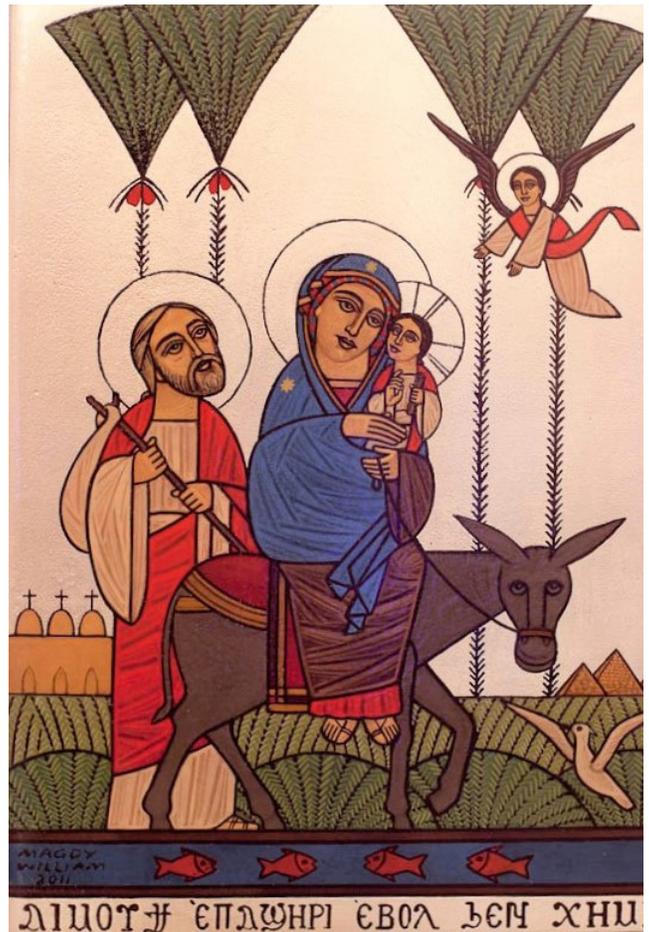


Fr. Emmanuel Gharib,
a Kuwaiti priest in Kuwait City

Lastly, there is the **Protestant** family, the Episcopal/Anglican and Evangelical churches, the most recent arrivals in the region. Most of these churches are called “evangelical,” which simply means “Protestant” in the Middle East. They are the results of American and European missionary work during the previous 180 years. They include Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Reformed, Methodists, and Quakers.

As far as Anglicans/Episcopalians are concerned, there are two provinces in the Middle East within the Anglican Communion. The first province is *The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East*, which includes three dioceses: *Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf* (the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as Iraq and Yemen), *The Diocese of Iran*, and the *Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem* (Israel/Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon), with which the Episcopal Church in Wyoming has a close relationship. The second province is *Episcopal/Anglican Province of Alexandria*, which covers Egypt, North Africa and the Horn of Africa.

There is a tremendous amount to learn from our Middle Eastern sisters and brothers. The historic Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, where we lived for ten years, has undergone tremendous challenges, from intense persecution during the pre-Islamic period to the difficulties of being the minority faith in their country, as they are today. At the heart of Coptic spirituality is the story of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt to take refuge from King Herod's order to murder all the young children in and around Bethlehem. Throughout Egypt one can visit sites where it is believed that Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child stopped, rested, and stayed during their exile. Very near where we lived in Cairo is a Coptic monastery built on the site where the Copts believe the Holy Family crossed the Nile to safety as they headed to Upper Egypt. For centuries, the Holy Family's journey throughout their country has brought profound encouragement to Copts during times of great hardship, for it lays the foundation for the way they understand God. This is illustrated in all the Coptic icons of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt. In each there is always an angel or dove portrayed hovering above and around them as they journey through the desert, representing the saving and protecting presence of God.



Coptic Icon of the Holy Family's "Flight to Egypt"

Both the original Nativity story and the experiences of the Middle Eastern Christians today remind us of God's beautiful nature and character. Our Middle Eastern sisters and brothers, out of their abundant experiences of faith over the centuries, teach us that just as the angel or dove hovers above the Holy Family in the Coptic icons throughout their journey, so too God's protecting presence goes with us throughout our lives.

When visiting Damascus, Syria during the Christmas season, I was introduced to a Middle Eastern Nativity hymn of adoration from the historic Syrian Orthodox Church titled "Praise to the Eternal Light of Love." It is a profound reminder of the faithfulness of God.

Praise to the divine Light
Praise to the Light of Light
Praise to the Light of Life
Praise to the Light of the world
Praise to our Light
Eternal Light, shining beyond the heavens,
radiant Son, even into our very hearts.
You illumine our lives, allowing us to see You
You enlighten us allowing us to know You
You came to dispel the darkness of our lives
Thank you for coming to enlighten us
to the splendor of Your Love.