Column: The language of Jesus in Ma'loula
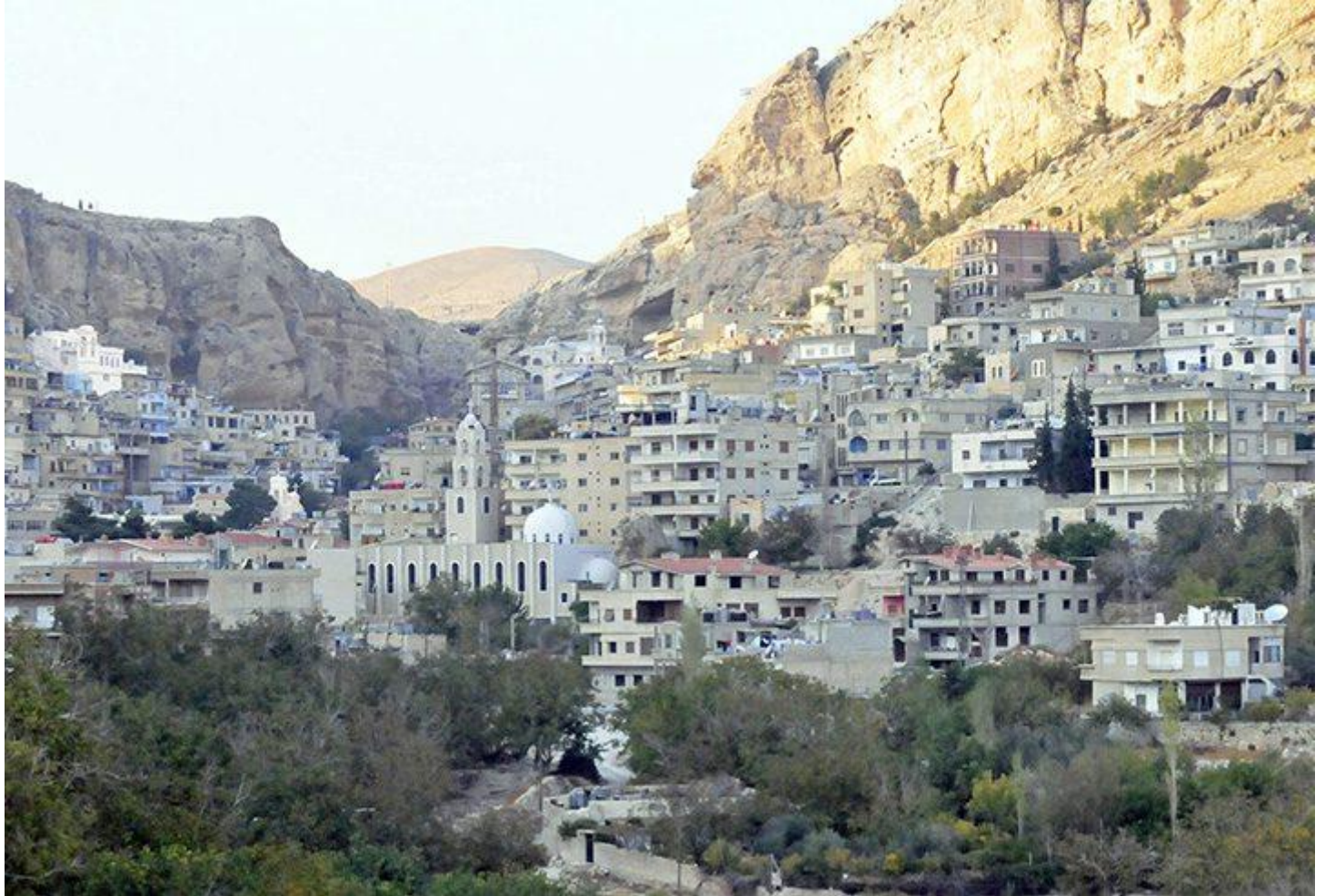
by Don Knebel · August 16, 2016

Ma'loula, Syria, in November 2010 (Photo by Don Knebel)

Until a few years ago, visitors to an ancient mountainside village in southwestern Syria could hear the words of Jesus in his own language. Today, those words have been temporarily silenced.

Ma'loula (or Maaloula) was founded in about 90 A.D. in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, 40 miles northeast of Damascus. Christianity came early to Ma'loula, which has maintained a Christian majority for at least 1,600 years. With a population never exceeding a few thousand, Ma'loula has been home to 40 churches.

The Mar Sarkis Church, one of the oldest in the world, features a unique altar reminiscent of pagan altars, with raised edges for catching sacrificial blood. The adjoining Mar Sarkis monastery honors St. Sergius, a Roman soldier executed for following Jesus. Mar Thecla, another ancient monastery, claims the remains of St. Thecla, said to have been a follower of the apostle Paul.

Because of its geographic isolation, Ma'loula's residents still speak Western Aramaic, the ancient language Jesus spoke. For centuries, priests of the Mar Sarkis Church have recited the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic for visitors from around the world.

In 2010, Ma'loula residents proudly said their motto was, "Everyone is Christian and everyone is Muslim." Christians and Muslim women dressed the same, and both sought healing in Mar Thecla.

Tragically, in 2013 and early 2014, extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda, took over Ma'loula and severely damaged Mar Sarkis and Mar Thecla and other monasteries and churches and looted their historic contents. They demolished a statue of Mary overlooking the city. In April 2014, Syrian government forces, assisted by Hezbollah, recaptured Ma'loula and initiated efforts to restore the damaged churches and monasteries and recover the looted items. A new statue of Mary again overlooks Ma'loula. Its slowly returning residents look forward to again praying in Aramaic for their visitors.