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## The Dispersion (Diaspora)

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

**DISPERSION** [Gk *diasporá*]. The term used to designate the Jews living outside Palestine and maintaining their religious observances and customs among the Gentiles. The Gk *diasporá* is regularly used in the LXX and extrabiblical Jewish literature, and is found in Jas. 1:1 and 1 Pet. 1:1, where it is used figuratively of the Church dispersed from its heavenly homeland. This article will be concerned with the Dispersion situation mainly in the 1st cent and especially in the lands connected with the NT.

### I. Extent

James prefaced his judgment at the Jerusalem Council with the significant remark that "from earliest generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him" (Acts. 15:21). This "every city" may seem to be an exaggeration, but it is quite modest in comparison to the statements in other literature regarding the extent of the Dispersion. The most famous is that of Philo, quoting a letter from Agrippa to Caligula:

In this way Jerusalem became the capital, not only of Judea, but of many other lands, on account of the colonies which it sent out from time to time into the bordering districts of Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, Coele-Syria, and into the more distant regions of Pamphylia, Cilicia, the greater part of Asia Minor as far as Bithynia, and the remotest corners of Pontus. And in like manner into Europe: into Thessaly, and Boeotia, and Macedonia, and Aetolia, and Attica and Argos, and Corinth, and into the most fertile and fairest parts of the Peloponnesus. And not only is this continent full of Jewish colonists, but also the most important islands, such as Euboea, Cyprus, and Crete. I say nothing of the countries beyond the Euphrates. All of them except a very small portion, and Babylon, and all the satrapies which contain fruitful land, have Jewish inhabitants (*De legatione ad Gaium* 36).

1 Macc. 15:22–24 records the sending of a circular letter favoring the Jews by the consul Lucius to Syria, Pergamum, Cappadocia, Parthia, Sparta, Delos, Myndos, Sicyon, Caria, Samos, Pamphylia, Lycia, Halicarnassus, Rhodes, Phaselis, Cos, Side, Aradus, Gortyna, Cnidus, Cyprus, and Cyrene. Cicero notes that Flaccus the governor of Asia confiscated Jewish money designated for the temple in Jerusalem from central collection points in Apameia, Laodicea, Adramyttium, and Pergamum (*Pro Flacco* 28 [67f]). It is no wonder that Strabo could conclude: "This people has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt" (quoted in Josephus Ant. xiv.7.2).

From such literary data and from inscriptions found all over the Roman world, scholars have attempted to estimate the number of Jews who lived in the Dispersion. Juster set the figure at six to seven million in the Roman empire, Harnack at four to four-and-one-half million. Modern scholars tend toward the higher figure, concluding that the Jews represented approximately 10 percent of the population of the entire Roman empire. About four million Jews lived in the empire outside Palestine and about three million in Palestine. In addition there were about one million in the Eastern Dispersion. Such a high percentage of Jews in the population is not easy to explain, since it represents a phenomenal increase from their numbers at the end of the OT period. The reason for the increase has often been sought in that the Jews, unlike their heathen neighbors, did not practice infanticide and were also by nature more prolific than other peoples. But in the final analysis this explanation is inadequate, and the conclusion must be drawn that Jewish proselyting activities were much more successful than is usually supposed.

### II. Causes

According to the OT prophets, the *ultimate* cause for the Dispersion was that Israel had sinned (e.g., Jer. 9:16). The more proximate

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causes were varied. In earliest times the Jews seem to have left their homeland only under the terms of forced deportation, as after the conquest of Israel by Assyria and of Judah by Babylon. But as time passed and Palestine became the unfortunate buffer state between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties, many Jews voluntarily left the land because of greater opportunity and security elsewhere. Indeed the Seleucid kings seem to have had a policy of granting Jews extensive privileges to encourage them to settle in newly formed Greek cities in Asia Minor and Syria. They evidently considered the clannish, peace-loving Jews to be a desirable stabilizing influence. And although the Jews were not yet the outstanding merchants they became during the Middle Ages, they were not slow to react to the unlimited economic opportunities presented by the Greek cities.

### III. Distribution of Dispersion Jewry

**A. In the East** As a result of the Babylonian Exile of Judeans after 597 B.C., a sizable Jewish Dispersion developed in the eastern regions: Babylonia, Elam, Parthia, Media, and Armenia. These lands were not part of the Roman empire and had not been substantially influenced by Hellenistic culture. Consequently the Jewish communities that flourished there were quite distinct from those of the Western Dispersion. Much of what will be said below about the political, social, and cultural situation that obtained in the West does not apply to the East. The Babylonian Jews became numerous, so that in the 1st cent A.D. Josephus could speak of them as "innumerable myriads" (*Ant.* xi.5.2). They were highly favored by the Parthians, who ruled the area in the time of Christ. Their taxes were light and their *Resh Galutha* ("Prince of the Exile") was dignified as a vassal prince under the Parthian king. In fact, one of the Parthian princes, King Izates of Adiabene, converted to Judaism, as did his mother and other members of his family (*Ant.* xx.2, 4). The Babylonian Jews were considered of purer stock than Palestinian Jews, which led to some jealousy and pride. They remained true to the tenets of Judaism and became exceptional students of the law and oral tradition. In the 6th

cent A.D. their rabbis produced the Babylonian Talmud, the most extensive and influential piece of postbiblical Jewish literature.

**B. Syria** Since it was Palestine's neighbor, Syria early received its share of Jewish immigrants. The first clear notice of Jews settling there is in the time of Seleucus I Nicator, who offered them special privileges in the Syrian cities. But Jews had probably already established colonies in the older cities. Indeed the impact between Ben-hadad and Ahab recorded in 1 K. 20:34 implies that there was a Jewish quarter in Damascus even at that time. With such a long history and with the added incentive of the political privileges granted by Seleucus, it is not surprising to find that the Jews of Syria came to comprise a greater percentage of the population than in any other area of the Dispersion (Josephus BJ vii.3.3). Philo testifies that the Jews lived in Syria "in large numbers in every city" (*De legatione ad Gaium* 33). In Antioch they occupied an entire quarter.

**C. Egypt** The Egyptian Dispersion was established early, but its origin is not precisely understood. Some Jews were taken as prisoners by Sheshonq (the Shishak of 1 K. 14:25f; 2 Ch. 12:2f), the founder of the 22nd Egyptian Dynasty, who invaded Palestine in the 10th cent B.C. Testimony to this effect exists in inscriptions on the walls of the temple of Karnak. Another inscription refers to the participation of Jewish mercenaries in the expedition of Psamtik II against Ethiopia (594–589 B.C.). But one of the most important pieces of evidence about the Egyptian Dispersion is the writing of the prophet Jeremiah. He recounts the establishing of Jewish settlements at Migdol, Tahpanhes, and Noph (Memphis) in Lower Egypt, and in the country of Pathros in Upper Egypt (Jer. 43f). Many of these Jews succumbed to pagan worship and were assimilated by intermarriage. Others were taken prisoner to Babylon by Nebuchadrezzar during one of his later western expeditions (Josephus Ant. x.9.7; cf. Jer. 43:8f). But the remainder settled in Egypt and evidently maintained their Judaism.

One of the most interesting discoveries of recent archeology is that of a series of Aramaic

papyri from the island of Elephantine, near Aswan, which includes official records of a Jewish colony dwelling there. This is concrete evidence that by 500 B.C. there was a settled Jewish community in a remote region of Egypt. Among the records are papyri testifying to the existence of a distinct Hebrew court and a temple dedicated to the worship of Yahweh. That certain sacrifices were rendered in this temple indicates that the community was somewhat schismatic and unorthodox. The most likely theory of origin is that the Jews were descendants of a colony of Jewish mercenaries established to defend this hinterland military outpost. From such evidence it has become apparent, contrary to previous skepticism, that the Dispersion developed very early in Egypt. Philo and Josephus testify that by the 1st cent A.D. it had become a strong minority force in Roman-controlled Egypt.

**D. Alexandria** Jewish influence in Egypt was most strongly felt in the great Greek city Alexandria. At its founding in 332 B.C. the Jews seem to have been granted extensive privileges, and they responded by immigrating in large numbers. According to Philo, two sectors of the city were exclusively Jewish (*In Flaccum* 8).

It was once thought, based on explicit statements by Josephus (*Ant.* xiv.10.1; cf. xii.1.1; 3.1; xix.5.2; BJ ii.18.7) and Philo (*In Flaccum* 10.80), that the Jews as a body had been granted Alexandrian citizenship. But more recently a copy of a letter from the emperor Claudius to the people of Alexandria was discovered and published (H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt* [1924]). Its purpose seems to have been to settle disputes between the Jews and the Greeks of that city by defining the limits of Jewish privileges there. It would appear to be a decree subsequent to the one referred to by Josephus (*Ant.* xix.5.2). On the basis of this new datum, the trend among scholars has been to deny that the Jews of Alexandria had rights of full citizenship. Josephus evidently read more into the words of Claudius than they warranted. The Jews enjoyed great privileges, and possibly formed their own *políteuma* as they did at Berenice; but

they were not Alexandrian citizens. Such, at least, is the present judgment of scholarship.

The Jewish community was undoubtedly large and influential. Philo estimates that there were a million Jews in Egypt (*In Flaccum* 43), a sizable percentage of whom were in Alexandria. Many have been skeptical of this figure; but S. Baron, the author of the most recent authoritative work on the subject, believes that Philo's estimate is quite possible.

**E. Asia Minor** The favorable Seleucid policy that helped to people the Syrian cities with Jews was used in Asia Minor as well. In one instance Antiochus III transplanted two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia to Lydia and Phrygia (Josephus *Ant.* xii.3.4). The tone of the letter preserved by Josephus leads to the conclusion that the Jews were valued as a stable, leavening force in these politically turbulent frontier states. It is therefore likely that this was no isolated instance but part of the regular Seleucid strategy of government. Once located in Asia Minor, the Jews quickly established themselves and adapted to their new environment. The result is that by the time Paul reached that part of the world there was a powerful Jewish settlement in all major cities and towns, even those some distance from the trade routes. Baron finds concrete evidence of thirty-one Jewish communities in Asia Minor and Cyprus. It may be safely inferred that many more have left no mark of their existence.

**F. Greece and Macedonia** Jews were less numerous in the Balkan Peninsula than in Asia Minor. This was probably because there were few Roman colonies there, for the Jews most often flourished where the Roman influence predominated over the Greek. However, the NT provides evidence of Jewish communities at Philippi, Beroea, Athens, Corinth, and Thessalonica. The two last-named cities, along with the island of Cyprus, seem to have been the only large Jewish settlements in localities inhabited mainly by Greeks and Macedonians. Elsewhere few records remain. Inscriptions indicate that some Jews lived in Delphi in the 2nd cent B.C. By that time Jewish settlements had been established at Sparta and Sicyon as well (1 Macc. 15:23).

**G. Italy and the West** Outside the capital city, Rome, not many Jews lived in Italy. The only other localities where literature and inscriptions reflect the presence of Jews in biblical times are Pompeii, Puteoli, and Porto. Puteoli and Porto were seaport towns and suburbs of Rome. Pompeii was evidently a resort town and attracted many Romans, among them a few Jews. Elsewhere in western Europe direct evidence of the early establishment of Jewish communities is notably absent. But Paul's desire to reach Spain with the gospel message (Rom. 15:24) would seem to presuppose that settlements of Jews were already to be found at the western extremity of the continent, for it was Paul's missionary strategy to approach a given locality through its Jewish synagogue. Furthermore, the evidence of a rich Jewish heritage in western Europe in subsequent centuries requires the conclusion, despite the lack of direct testimony, that Jews had already become rooted there by the 1st century.

**H. Rome** As early as 161 B.C. Judas Maccabeus had negotiated a treaty for mutual defense and friendship with the Roman senate. This treaty was renewed by Jonathan (144 B.C.), Simon (141 B.C.), and John Hyrcanus (129 B.C.) (1 Macc. 8:17; 12:1; 14:24). On each of these occasions an embassy from Jerusalem made its way to Rome, and it is quite likely that some of the Jews involved settled there permanently. But the major impetus toward the strengthening of the community was the return of Pompey in 63 B.C. from the conquest of Jerusalem with a large number of Jewish slaves. For reasons now unknown, most of these slaves were soon given their freedom. Meanwhile, Jewish merchants found their way to the capital city of the empire, settled there, and further enlarged the community. So by the 1st cent A.D. a substantial body of Jews had settled in Rome. The majority lived in the portion of the city across the river known as Trastevere, which gradually took on the characteristics of a Jewish ghetto. But others were scattered about the city, even in the best residential sections. Remarks by Cicero, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Josephus lead to the conclusion that the Jewish population in Rome at that time numbered

some forty thousand. Inscriptional notations give evidence of at least seven (Baron finds evidence for thirteen) distinct synagogues within the city. Some owed their existence to the patronage of important figures (Augustus, Agrippa, Bolumnis). Some grew around certain cultural distinctives ("Synagogue of the Hebrews"). Others were oriented to the economic station of their congregations. Still others originated simply to meet a need in a given locality within the city. There is no evidence of an overall organizational structure between synagogues, but there must have been well-established unofficial lines of communication (cf. Acts 28:21). At any rate, the number of these synagogues witnesses to the size of the Jewish community at Rome, and their variety reflects a multifarious population. The gentile population of Rome seems to have had an underlying anti-Semitism, which periodically expressed itself openly. Portions of the Jewish community were expelled from Rome in 139 B.C. (evidently for proselyting among Roman citizens), in A.D. 19 (for the action of two swindlers who pretended to be taking a collection for the temple), and in A.D. 49 (possibly because of Jewish-Christian clashes). On the other hand, Julius Caesar and his immediate successors gave the Jews extensive privileges, evidently because they were valuable political allies. When Caesar died many peoples lamented him, but "above all the Jews, who even flocked to the palace for several successive nights" (Suetonius *Caesar* 84).

#### IV. Characteristics

**A. Political Relationships** Wherever the Jews may have been dispersed they still belonged to "the Nation of the Jews." Pilgrimages to Jerusalem, the annual tax paid by the faithful to the support of the temple, traveling merchants bringing news from place to place — all these factors helped to preserve a feeling of unity among Dispersion Jews and between the Dispersion and Palestine. All the "children of Abraham" were related in the nation Israel, and at this point in her history the nation was scattered all over the world. Such was the Jew's relationship to his native land and heritage. But what of his relationship to the nation, province,

or city in which he found himself? There was a sense in which he was integrated into the local political structure and a sense in which he could not be. On the one hand, certain Jews received the privileges of citizenship, both Roman and local, and could therefore hold office. On the other hand, the Jewish communities maintained some degrees of autonomy and developed their own governmental structure, under the protection of the Romans. In actual practice, the Jews found themselves in a very favorable position, enjoying the privileges of integration into the pagan governmental structure and at the same time exercising relative autonomy in their own self-government.

Roman citizenship had by the 1st cent A.D. become less exclusive than it had been in earlier times. Many Jews were among those granted this honor as a return for favors. Some ancestor of Paul was evidently so honored (Acts 22:25–28). Other Jews received the right when they were freed from servitude to a Roman citizen (Acts 6:9; 22:28). Whatever the means of obtaining the citizenship, those Jews who did so enjoyed great advantages. At the same time they were exempted as Jews from some of the responsibility usually associated with Roman citizenship, notably from military service (because of their observance of the sabbath). Citizenship in the Greek cities was evidently less commonly held by Jews than Roman citizenship. It has previously been suggested that, contrary to the statements of Philo and Josephus, the Jews of Alexandria did not enjoy full citizenship rights (see III.D above). But what of the other cities mentioned by these same writers as localities where Jews were citizens (Antioch, Ephesus, Sardis, Cyrene)? Some scholars suggest that these statements be discounted as exaggerations. They think that any Jew who was a citizen of a Greek city (e.g., Paul, Acts 21:39) became such in his own right, not because the entire Jewish community had attained citizenship. But Ramsay has pointed out that this is highly unlikely unless the individual Jew had apostatized from Judaism, for Greek citizenship depended upon membership in “tribes” (Gk *phylai*), each of which worshiped its own deity. Ramsay’s own

reconstruction is that Jews were admitted to citizenship as a tribe of their own, worshiping Yahweh rather than a pagan deity (Expos, 5 [1902], 19–33). He finds evidence for the existence of such a Jewish tribe in Tarsus, the very city of Paul’s birth. It seems, therefore, that in certain cities the Jews had as a body received the rights of citizenship. Their status in each city must be judged independently, not in the light of the peculiar Alexandrian situation.

The Jewish communities themselves had a high degree of internal organization. The center of the community was the synagogue, and the officers of the synagogue were the officers of the community. They maintained autonomous courts for civil cases involving only Jews, and they preserved records in their own archives. But these are generalizations. They should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Jewish community structure was expressed in a unique way in every locality.

**B. Socioeconomic Status** The activities of Jews in the economic world were just as varied as were their political positions. Most discussions of the means of livelihood commonly pursued by Dispersion Jews err by reading the first-century situation in the light of medieval history. It is, therefore, a frequently held misconception that the Jews were as exclusively involved in mercantile activities at the time of Christ as they became in later centuries. This is an unwarranted assumption. The Syrian, not the Jew, was the proverbial merchant in the literature of the period. And out of sixty bankers mentioned in Egyptian papyri, not one has a Jewish name. This is not to deny that many urban Jews became involved in money-lending and selling. But Jews living in alien lands became farmers, artisans, tax-gatherers, actors, etc., *as well as* merchants, peddlers, and bankers.

While it is true that Jews were to be found in all classes, from the highly privileged nobility to the beggars and slaves, the distribution was, no doubt, rather heavier at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale. In Alexandria the Jews seem to have been relatively well-to-do, occupying one of the finest seaboard residential quarters and holding a number of official positions. The situation was similar in the

Eastern Dispersion. But in Europe, Asia Minor, Syria, and North Africa the bulk of the Jewish population was quite poor. It would seem that in the Dispersion as a whole the Jews were more often than not of the lower middle class and below.

**C. Anti-Semitism** The generally low socioeconomic status of the Jewish communities may partly explain the widespread anti-Jewish sentiment among pagan peoples. But this is at best a superficial explanation. From Rome, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Martial, Cicero, and Tacitus all wrote in derogatory terms of the Jews. Records remain of popular uprisings against the Jews at Rome, Alexandria, Cyrenaica, Antioch, Caesarea, and Damascus. One of the most vexing problems facing the historian concerned with this period is to determine the causes of such universal prejudice against Jews, and solutions are as numerous as scholars who deal with the question. But the answer is probably to be found in a combination of the following factors: (1) that the Jews were favored by the Romans over native peoples, thus becoming the objects of jealousy; (2) that the Jewish religion was mysterious, exclusive, and full of strange practices; (3) that the Jews were socially aloof, clannish, and proud of their inferior (to the pagan mind) heritage. In short, the Jews were *different* in every way, and they refused to conform. Nonconformity is the simplest and most common cause of antagonism in human relationships.

**D. Cultural Integrity** The Jews were different, but how different were they? There are two trends of thought as to how successfully the Jews maintained their cultural integrity in the pagan world. Traditionally, the most prevalent view has been that, while Dispersion Jews adopted certain external aspects of Hellenistic culture, they remained distinctly Jews in heart and mind. These "external aspects" are such things as the Greek language, Greek names, attendance at Greek games, and the use of human and animal figures in decoration. But more recent scholars, especially E. R. Goodenough, contend that these "external aspects" really reflect an internal

transformation. Goodenough points out that the animal and human figures are found in synagogues and cemeteries, the very places where they would seem to have the most religious and cultural significance. He concludes that the Jews were very deeply influenced by Hellenistic ideas and thought patterns. The consensus of scholarship, however, is that Goodenough's arguments are one-sided and that his views are, therefore, far too extreme.

It is obvious that this problem can never finally be solved, for its solution would require a knowledge of the mind of a Dispersion Jew that is impossible to attain. Some suggest that the closest approach can be made through the writings of PHILO. That Alexandrian Jewish philosopher is an enigmatic figure. He has variously been interpreted as a Greek using Jewish terminology (e.g., by Goodenough) and as a Jew seeking a point of contact with the Greek view of life (e.g., by Wolfson). There is something to be said for both explanations. Philo's use of Greek philosophy is not at all superficial — he understands it and sympathizes with it. But it is not his first love. He is at heart a Jew, secondarily a Greek. His purpose in writing is not to develop a Judeo-Hellenistic philosophical system, but to commend a Judaism to the Greek mind.

But even if it might be granted that Philo was at heart a Hellenist, nothing could be concluded from this about the mentality of Dispersion Jewry as a whole. For one thing, Alexandrian Jews are generally admitted to have been more hellenized than the Jews of other Dispersion communities. And furthermore, Philo was by his own admission more liberal than other Alexandrian Jews, for he makes allusion to the "literalists" as a considerable body of theologians opposed to his views. The truth is that the writings of Philo, even if they are rightly understood, cannot be taken as a doorway into the mind and mood of Dispersion Jewry. He was a unique figure and had an uncommon relationship with Hellenistic thought.

A common but misleading practice is to equate Palestinian with "orthodox" Judaism and Dispersion with "Hellenistic" Judaism. The facts do not warrant such a distinction. Palestinian

Judaism was by this time quite “hellenized.” The cities of the Decapolis were thoroughly Greek, as were those along the Mediterranean coast. Greek games had been established at Gaza, Ascalon, Caesarea, Damascus, Kanatha, Scythopolis, Gerasa, Philadelphia, Caesarea-Philippi, Tiberias, Jericho — even at Jerusalem. The Greek language had wide currency in Palestine. Rabbis taught it to their children and borrowed its phraseology for their writings. The Babylonian Talmud contains the remark, “Why speak Syrian [Aramaic] in the land of Israel? Use either the holy tongue [Hebrew] or Greek” (*Sotah* 49b).

On the other hand, there were unique forces at work in the Dispersion against the assimilation of Hellenistic elements. It is not reasonable to suppose that many Jews were able successfully to straddle the fence between the Greek and Jewish cultural heritages. The tendency would be either to fall into complete apostasy or to withdraw into an exclusive form of “Jewishness.” There is therefore no basis for supposing that Dispersion Jewry was necessarily Hellenistic.

**E. Religious Orthodoxy** Nor is there any evidence that the Judaism of the Dispersion was particularly heterodox. Goodenough has attempted to prove that the religion of Dispersion Jews was a syncretism of Jewish and pagan elements. He bases his case almost exclusively on a set of inscriptions found at Panticapaeum, where the Jewish title of deity *theós hýpsistos* (“God Most High”) is found beside the names of Greek gods. Though mystery still surrounds these findings, it would seem that they do indeed reflect a syncretistic Jewish community. But Panticapaeum is on the north shore of the Black Sea, on the fringe of the Dispersion; and there is very little corroborative evidence from other areas of the Dispersion.

Philo’s particular brand of Judaism has previously been alluded to. Some would represent his philosophical system as a kind of Jewish mystery religion. But these commentators seem to have ignored the basic apologetic bent of his writings. His purpose is rather to persuade Greeks of the truth of Judaism than to formulate the definitive

statement of a new sect. In the final analysis it is impossible to be sure of the nature of Philo’s personal faith, but it was apparently a brand of Judaism within the boundaries of orthodoxy.

There were, to be sure, a great number of Jewish magicians in the Roman empire of the 1st century. The mysterious oriental language, the strange practices, the unutterable name of God — these factors equipped a Jew admirably to label himself a sorcerer and capitalize on the superstitions of the pagan mind. But magicians were outside the mainstream of Judaism and were consistently denounced in the rabbinic writings. Magic cannot be called heterodoxy because it is not really religion at all. It is a degeneration of those human impulses that are naturally religious into superficial manipulation of the deity.

There is no evidence of any weight that Dispersion Judaism was anything but orthodox. The basic tenets of Judaism were maintained: monotheism, God’s sovereignty and self-revelation, the elevation of the law, and a lofty ethical code. The ceremonial regulations were maintained except where distance from the temple at Jerusalem (and, after A.D. 70, its destruction) proved an insurmountable obstacle. There may have been a de-emphasis of certain specific requirements in some circles to encourage proselytism, but this was not sanctioned by the majority of Dispersion Jews. The Judaism that Paul encountered in his journeys was distinctly and consistently orthodox.

**F. Proselytism** It may seem strange that a religious group so aloof, so unyielding, so much the object of prejudice and ridicule should attract large numbers of adherents from paganism. But such was the case. Proselytes are mentioned in all areas of the Dispersion. Josephus reports that “many have agreed to adopt our laws; of whom some have remained faithful, while others, lacking the necessary endurance, have again seceded” (*CAp* ii.10). Tacitus deplores the frequent conversions to Judaism, for the proselytes, “the worst rascals among other peoples,” follow all the despicable rules of the Jews (*Hist* v5). Juvenal describes the inevitable, though gradual, proselytism of an entire family to Judaism once the father has

begun to observe the sabbath (*Satires* xiv.96f). Many of the rabbis went to considerable lengths to justify missionary activities among pagans, and the great Hillel is reported to have taught that one's duty is "loving mankind and bringing them nigh to the Law" (*Mish Aboth* i.12). A number of the rabbis themselves are said to have been either proselytes or descendants of proselytes (e.g., Shemiah, Abtalion, Akiba, Meir).

The general impression one receives from all the literary notices bearing on the subject is that proselytes came over to Judaism in large numbers. There is no possible way of estimating what those numbers might have been. But it seems that the Jews really took seriously their mission of being "a light to the Gentiles" (*Isa.* 42:6; 49:1; *Rom.* 2:19). The hunger of pagans for spiritual reality in the degenerating Hellenistic civilization presented them with their great opportunity. The same factors that acted in favor of the spread of the Christian gospel in the 1st cent had earlier been found advantageous to Jewish activities as well.

Proselytes came to Judaism for a variety of reasons and through several different channels. Some lonely souls were attracted by the closely knit fellowship within the Jewish communities. Some were intellectually persuaded through reading apologetic works like the Sibylline Oracles, the Letter of Aristeas, and Philo's writings. Some were won by Pharisaic Jewish missionaries (cf. *Mt.* 23:15). But in the final analysis, the reason so many were attracted is the one frankly given by Josephus: "The greatest miracle of all is that our Law holds no seductive bait of sensual pleasure, but has exercised this influence through its own inherent merits" (*CAp* ii.38). Judaism was a genuinely superior religion. A great variety of religions were available to the first-century seeker. The Stoics represent an appreciation of the highest ethical standards. The success of the mystery religions witnesses to a general desire for significant religious experience. Yet nowhere outside of Judaism and Christianity were the ethical and the religious successfully combined.

## V. Importance to Early Church History

**A. The Septuagint** A number of factors lead to the conclusion that, whatever else the Dispersion may have been, it was a providentially ordained preparatory step for the eventual missionary activity of the Church. One of these factors is the existence and worldwide distribution of the LXX, the Greek translation of the OT dating from the 2nd cent B.C. The LXX is intimately associated with the Dispersion. Such a translation was necessary because large numbers of Jews found themselves in lands where the dominant language, at least of commerce, was Greek. And not only did the need for a Greek OT arise first in the Dispersion, but the translation itself is a product of non-Palestinian Judaism, since it was done in Alexandria. A study of the OT passages quoted in the NT reveals that, though they knew the Hebrew OT as well, the NT writers were quite familiar with the language of the LXX. The early missionaries took advantage of the seedbed prepared throughout the Dispersion by the LXX. Long before they came to a given community the ground had been unknowingly cultivated by Jews who had distributed the translation of the OT in the common tongue.

**B. Synagogues** Wherever the Jews established themselves in any numbers a synagogue quickly developed. Throughout the Dispersion the synagogue had a more prominent function in Jewish life than it could ever have in Palestine. The local synagogue became the general meetinghouse and community hub, the center of philanthropic activities, the schoolhouse, the public court and archive. And of course it continued to function as the locus of religious education, propagation, and worship. In short, it was the very heart of the Dispersion Jewish community. It was into synagogues such as this that Paul and his associates went as soon as they came upon a new town or city. Their missionary strategy was to go "to the Jew first," and the synagogue was the best place to find the most Jews. It was in such synagogues that they received a hearing and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. A more efficient method



of evangelizing the world of Dispersion Jewry can hardly be conceived.

**C. "God-fearers."** As Paul stood to speak in a synagogue, he was faced with four more or less distinct classes of people: (1) Jews by birth, (2) proselytes, (3) curious gentile onlookers, and (4) "God-fearers" (eleven times in Acts; cf. esp. chs 10 and 13). The last-mentioned class consists of a considerable number of Gentiles who had been deeply impressed by the tenets of Judaism and were desirous of embracing it as their own religion, but were not yet willing to take some final step that would bring them into the fold as proselytes. The stumbling block may have been circumcision, or some point of the oral law, or the general social stigma attached to Jews and Judaism.

Theirs was an unstable situation; they had become Jews in the deepest recesses of their hearts, but they lacked either the conviction or the fortitude to make a clean break with the past. It is not difficult to imagine the great opportunity these "God-fearers" offered to the early Christian missionaries. Here were people who recognized the truth of the great principles of Judaism but were not committed to the accretions to the OT religion commonly accepted by first-century Jews. The demands of Judaism most commonly hindering "God-fearers" were exactly those repudiated by Christianity. It is no wonder, therefore, that many of the early converts to the Church had previously been "God-fearers," among them Cornelius, Lydia, Titius Justus, and (probably) the Ethiopian eunuch.

**D. A "Licensed Religion."** Though the Jews saw Christianity as a religion alien to Judaism, the pagan world for a long time refused to view it as anything but a sect of Judaism. This is reflected in the attitude of Gallio, who decided that the conflict between the Jews and Christians at Corinth was merely a matter of "words and names and your own law" (Acts 18:15). It is also apparent in the defenses of Paul before Agrippa and Felix that he has chosen his words carefully so as to portray Christianity as part of Judaism. The reason he was so anxious to do this was that Judaism enjoyed the privilege of assembly as a "licensed

religion." As long as Christian assemblies could remain in the category of "Jews" in Roman eyes they would have legal status. Otherwise their meetings for prayer and worship could be illegal. So in whatever direction the Church was extended it was preceded by Dispersion Judaism, whose status as a licensed religion was applied to the Christian community as well.

## VI. Conclusion

The Dispersion has been interpreted in several ways: (1) as viewed by the OT prophets, it was a just punishment for Israel's sin; (2) as viewed by the ancient pagan world, it was an occasion for hostility against a nonconforming people; (3) as viewed by Dispersion Jews themselves, it was a testimony to the tenacity of their faith and the durability of their heritage; (4) as viewed by the Church, it was the divinely ordained means of providing a beachhead for the spread of the gospel in alien territory. Whatever else may be said, the Jewish Dispersion was and is a phenomenon unparalleled in human history.

*See also* HELLENISM.

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G. A. VAN ALSTINE