

## The Dispersion of the Jews

### **Diaspora of the Jews.**

Dispersion of Jewish people from Israel to foreign lands. *Diaspora*, a Greek noun meaning a “sowing” or “scattering,” is regularly used in the Septuagint to mean “exile” (Jer 25:34; cf. Is 11:12; Ez 20:23; Zep 3:10). The word occurs twice in the NT (Jas 1:1; 1 Pt 1:1), referring to Christian Jews residing outside Palestine as a result of the several dispersions in Israel’s history. Diaspora sometimes refers to the exiled people, sometimes to the place of exile.

### ***Causes of Jewish Dispersions.***

Israel’s dispersions were at times a result of its political or economic successes and at other times a result of its religious failures.

*Voluntary Dispersion.* Military, political, and commercial gains necessitated a certain amount of outward movement. Israel’s ambition led to expansion. David expanded his kingdom northward to Damascus (Syria) and eastward to the Euphrates River. In order to occupy and supervise that new territory he “put garrisons in Aram of Damascus; and the Syrians became servants to David and brought tribute” (2 Sm 8:6). Solomon extended Israel’s borders even farther. He “ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life” (1 Kgs 4:21). Military occupation provided bases for a series of colonial expansions and commercial ventures. After a military presence in a tributary nation was no longer necessary, political supervision generally continued.

Commerce provided a number of occasions for dispersion of the Israelites. Shipbuilders at Ezion-geber, a port at the tip of the Red Sea, produced the ships of King Solomon’s merchant marine centered there. The ships sailed on three-year voyages to trading centers along the African coast and perhaps as far as India and Ceylon (1 Kgs 9:26–28). The Cilicians, Egyptians, Hittites, and Syrians bought from Solomon’s traders and sold horses to them (1 Kgs 10:28, 29). A hundred years later the Syrian king Ben-hadad II bargained for his life by promising commercial rights in Damascus to King Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel (874–853 B.C.). To make the most of that opportunity in a city over 100 miles from Israel’s capital, a sizable colony had to be established in Damascus (1 Kgs 20:34).

Jewish merchants sometimes moved to a foreign city for a year to trade (Jas 4:13). Initially having planned to return to Israel, they might be kept in “voluntary exile” by commercial success. Distance might make the trader nostalgic, but success held him in the trade city. Periodic pilgrimages often replaced permanent return.

*Forced Dispersion.* Dispersion also came to the Israelites as a divine judgment, always prophesied long before the dispersion took place. When Moses forewarned Israel of exile, he delivered the Lord’s promise of blessing for obedience: “I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid” (Lv 26:6). But disobedience would bring destruction and dispersion. God warned, “If you will not hearken to me, and will not do all these commandments, . . . and if your soul abhors my ordinances, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, I will do this to you” (Lv 26:14–16). Crops would fail, “sudden terror” would strike, disease would waste, wild beasts would ravage, and even enemies would be amazed at Israel’s desolation. Ultimately God would disperse his people among the gentile nations (Lv 26:16–33). Forty years later, when Canaan was about to be conquered, Moses solemnly repeated the warning against religious unfaithfulness. If Israel forsook God, they would be scattered until they repented (Dt 4:27, 30, 31; 28:64–68; 30:1–5).

When the forcible dispersion of exile finally came, God's prophets pointed not to enemy superiority as the cause, but to God's sentence on Israel's sinfulness. Greed, oppression, dishonesty, pride, idolatry, and a catalog of other crimes against God, and especially against the poor, had called forth divine judgment (Is 3:16; 5:8; Jer 5:28; Ez 8; Am 2:7; 4:1; 8:4–6; Mi 2:2; 3:2; 6:11).

### ***Major Diasporas.***

From the end of the 8th century B.C. onward, Jewish history was marked by several major dispersions.

*Diaspora of the Northern Kingdom.* After Solomon's death his kingdom broke in two. The northern kingdom of Israel sunk deeper into idolatry and immorality (2 Kgs 17:14–18). Jeroboam, the first king of the divided Israel, established a pattern of apostasy ("falling away" from faith). Epitaphs for succeeding kings regularly recorded that the deceased ruler "did not turn from the sins of Jeroboam" (2 Kgs 10:31; 13:11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28). Assyria conquered the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. and took over 27,000 Israelites into exile, as had been predicted (2 Kgs 17:23). They were settled in cities along the tributaries of the Euphrates River and in Media. Assyrians from cities around Babylon in turn colonized Israel (2 Kgs 17:6, 24).

*Diaspora of the Southern Kingdom.* The southern kingdom of Judah suffered exile to the east in Babylonia and to the south in Egypt. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar captured Judeans in several expeditions from 605 B.C. to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The first deportation to Babylon took Jerusalem's treasures from the temple and palace, and "all the princes, and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths; none remained, except the poorest people of the land" (2 Kgs 24:12–14; cf. 2 Chr 36:10; Jer 52:29, 30).

A year later a second expedition focused on the rebellious Jewish vassal king Zedekiah and his sons (2 Kgs 25:1, 6, 7; Jer 52:4–11). In the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Babylonia struck Judah a third time, destroyed the temple and the king's palace, and broke down the city's walls. All but the very poorest people were carried away captive (2 Kgs 25:8–21; Jer 52:12–16).

Shishak, king of Egypt, deported exiles from Judah as early as the 10th century B.C. Judah lost people and also temple gold at that time (1 Kgs 14:25, 26; 2 Chr 12:9). About 400 years later Johanan, a Judean, thought he could escape from Nebuchadnezzar by fleeing to Egypt. Johanan forced Jeremiah and a group of other Jews to go with him; they settled at Migdol, Tahpanhes, and Memphis. Nevertheless the Babylonians pursued them, took control of Egypt, and executed many of the Jews there (Jer 43:5–44:30). Records of property ownership and artifacts of an altar suggest that the few surviving exiles established permanent colonies in Egypt (Is 19:18, 19).

*Other Dispersions.* The Egyptian king Ptolemy I (323–285 B.C.) captured many Jews and carried them off to Egypt about 300 B.C. Those exiles populated Alexandria, a city thereafter noted as a center of both Greek and Jewish scholarship. Elsewhere large colonies of Jews were exported from Babylonia to Phrygia and Lydia by Antiochus III (the Great) of Syria (223–187 B.C.). The Romans transplanted a sizable group of Jews to Rome. The Roman general Pompey took many there as slaves in the 1st century B.C.

How widely the Jews were scattered is suggested in the NT Book of Acts, where Luke listed Jerusalem's visitors: "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome . . . , Cretans and Arabians" (Acts 2:9–11). Those Jews of "the diaspora" were in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost.

Other Jewish communities were located in the Macedonian cities visited by the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys: Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth (Acts 17:1, 10; 18:2–4). Around

the middle of the 1st century A.D. the Roman emperor Claudius “commanded all Jews to leave Rome” (Acts 18:2). Scholarly estimates of the Jewish population in Palestine at the time of Jesus’ birth range from about 4 to 6 million. The dispersion population numbered several times that of Palestine; communities with more than 1 million each flourished in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and Alexandria. Today, with a national homeland, far more Jews still live outside Israel than inside.

### ***Conditions Among Diaspora Jews.***

Jews of “the diaspora” over the centuries have known suffering and rejection, but also prosperity and blessing.

*Social Status.* Although Jews often suffered discrimination in foreign lands (Dn 6:5–17; Heb 11:37, 38), positions of influence and favor came to certain scattered individuals. For instance, a young Jewish woman named Esther was chosen to be queen by the Persian king Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes I (485–465 B.C.), because of her beauty and wisdom. “The king loved Esther more than all the women, . . . so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen” (Est 2:17). She precipitated the downfall of Haman, an anti-Semitic Persian prime minister. To replace Haman she requested the elevation of her uncle Mordecai, another pious Jewish exile (Est 7:3–6; 8:2).

Later the Persian king Artaxerxes I (464–424 B.C.) awarded Nehemiah, a Jew, the position of cupbearer, a powerful and highly esteemed office in the Persian court (Neh 2:1–8). Daniel, another Jewish exile, rose to political power in Babylonia (Dn 1:19, 20; 2:48).

Historically, dispersed Jews have made a cultural name for themselves as scientists, philosophers, musicians, and statesmen. But they have also been the persecuted victims of racial and religious hatred under kings, popes, czars, and dictators.

*Jewish Unity.* In spite of their scattering Jews of various diasporas retained a basic unity with Palestinian Jews through several practices. (1) The great national feasts—Passover, harvest, and tabernacles (Ex 23:12–17; Dt 16:1–17)—continued to be observed abroad. (2) The temple tax used for the temple’s upkeep (Ex 30:11–16) was collected in foreign Jewish communities, even after the temple had been destroyed. (3) All Jews everywhere recognized the authority of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish religious council) over them.<sup>1</sup>

*Positive Aspects.* In exile the Jews tended to abandon the idol worship that had in part alienated them from God. Their exile led them to establish synagogues as institutions for prayer and education. Alexandrian Jews translated the OT Scriptures into Greek, at that time the international language. The result, called the Septuagint, was the version often cited by NT writers.

From the Christian point of view, the network of dispersed Jewish communities had a special significance. They provided strategic bases for the spread of Christianity, which quickly broke out of those communities and into the surrounding gentile world. Thus God used the dispersions to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Rom 1:11–15; 1 Cor 10:11, 12; cf. Ps 67; 3:28, 29; 4:34–37).

Finally, the arts, sciences, and humanities have been greatly enriched by the Jews scattered throughout Western culture. Few other peoples have endured so much ferocious ethnic bigotry as the Jews, yet rewarded that rejection with cultural gifts and graces of such excellence. Although the church of Jesus Christ has become a “new Israel” and the “chosen race” (1 Pt 2:9), the testimony of history and of Scripture indicates that God still has a unique interest in the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (625). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.