

Diaspora* in the New Testament and Its Impact on Christian Mission

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The Greek term *diaspora* (διασπορά) refers to the Jewish dispersion (i.e., to the scattering of Jews outside Palestine). It is also the technical name for all the nations outside of Palestine where Jewish people came to live.¹ The Jewish dispersion began in the deportations by the Assyrians (722 BC) and Babylons (597 BC), and later spread throughout the Roman Empire to Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. Thus, *diaspora* generally refers to the Jewish people living outside of Palestine.² Since the original Jewish dispersion, the applicability of the term *diaspora* has been widened to address any religious or racial minority living in the territory of another religious or political society. In this paper, however, I will use the term *diaspora* to designate the Jewish dispersion in the New Testament period.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, I seek to survey how *diaspora* is used in the New Testament. Second, I intend to discuss the diaspora realities in the New Testament period, especially in relation to the presence of synagogues, proselytes, and God-fearers in the book of Acts. Third, I wish to describe the impact of the Jewish diaspora (including Jewish Christian diaspora) to Christian missions.

Use of *Diaspora* in the New Testament Times

The term *diaspora* is found in the New Testament, the Septuagint, and extra-biblical literature produced during the biblical period. I will

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1. D. J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 50.

2. H.-G. Link, "Glossary of Technical Terms," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. C. Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 55.

briefly discuss the occurrences of *diaspora* in these different sources. In the New Testament, the verbal substantive, *diaspora*, commonly translated as “scattered,” occurs only three times as shown in the following texts:

- 1) The Jews said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him? Will he go where our people live *scattered* among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks?” (John 7:35).
- 2) James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes *scattered* among the nations: Greetings (Jas 1:1).
- 3) Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, strangers in the world, *scattered* throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Pet 1:1).

The question that the Jews in Palestine raised in John 7:35 shows that they did not comprehend Jesus’ comment in verse 34, “You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come.” The use of *diaspora* in the questions in verse 35 refers to the Jewish minority residing in the territories of other religions, in this case the Greek-speaking environment.³ The “Greeks” (Ἕλληνας) is a general reference to Gentiles (cf. Col 3:11).⁴ In James 1:1, James greets “the twelve tribes *scattered* among the nations” in his salutation. The mention of the “twelve tribes” can either refer to the literal twelve tribes of the nation of Israel or to the figurative “twelve tribes” who are the true people of God, thereby broadening the Jewish roots to include the church of James’s day.

Although the figurative sense of Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) may be the possible reference of “the twelve tribes *scattered* among the nations,” it seems better to take the scholarly consensus that the expression refers to the Jewish Christians who were scattered across the Roman Empire.⁵ The following references to Jewish institutions and practices contribute to the conclusion of a Jewish audience:

3. D. Sanger, “διδασπορά,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. H. Balz and G. Scheider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1990), 311-312.

4. Although Ἕλληνας may be used to refer to Greek-speaking Jews who resided in Jerusalem in territorially organized synagogues (e.g. John 12:20; Acts 6:1; 9:29; 11:20), non-Greeks (e.g., Mark 7:26), or to Greeks in whose territory the Jews live, the term, Ἕλληνας, is better taken as a reference for Greeks or Gentiles in general.

5. M. Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 47, simply specifies the addressees as the diaspora Jewish Christian church and thus not Palestinian. Other scholars ventured to name the prove-

- 1) The believers that James addressed met in a “synagogue” (Jas 2:2).
- 2) The believers shared the assumption that monotheism is a foundational belief (Jas 2:19).
- 3) The people believed that the law is central to God’s dealings with his people (Jas 1:21, 24-25; 2:8013; 4:11-12).
- 4) The people understood the Old Testament imagery of the marriage relationship to indicate the nature of the relationship between God and his people (Jas 4:4).

In 1 Peter 1:1, Peter describes his audience as “God’s elect, strangers in the world, *scattered* throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” Like the use of James, the Petrine *diaspora* refers to the scattered communities outside Palestine. Particularly, Peter lists the Jewish Christians who lived in the Gentile regions of “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” These localities used to refer to the northwest quadrant of Asia Minor bordering the Black Sea,⁶ an area in which Paul was not allowed to evangelize according to Luke’s report.⁷ In addition to a Jewish Christian audience, Peter addresses the Gentile Christians (1 Pet 1:14, 18; 2:9-10, 25; 3:6; 4:3-4). He even applies to them the categories that directly relate to Jews.⁸ Thus, Peter’s use of *diaspora* can include the “communities of people living outside their native land, which is not Jerusalem or Palestine but the heavenly city.”⁹ These scattered commu-

nance of the letter. J. Moffat, *The General Epistles of James, Peter and Jude* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), 20, located the work in Egypt, due to its alleged wisdom affinities. B. Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 6; and S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 22-26, see similarities in the epistle to Hermas and argue for a Roman provenance. J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1916), 49, places James in Caesarea of Palestine-Syria. Cf. P. Davids, *Epistle of James*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 28-34.

6. P. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 7.

7. In Acts 16:6-10, Luke narrates that Paul established churches in the southern area of Galatia. Of course, later, Paul did so in the western province of Asia.

8. Peter describes the Gentile Christians who were “once not a people” and now are “the people of God” as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Pet 2:9-10). These descriptions were earlier given referring to Israel.

9. Davids, *Peter*, 46.

nities were to view their lives on earth as temporary aliens, sojourners, pilgrims, and foreigners who belonged to heaven.

So far, we have seen the three occurrences of the word *diaspora* as found in John 7:35, James 1:1, and 1 Peter 1:1. I will now discuss the verb form of *diaspora*, which is *diaspeirō* (διασπείρω). This verb appears in only three instances in the New Testament. These three instances occur in the following verses (all found in Acts):

- 1) On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were *scattered* throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1b).
- 2) Those who had been *scattered* preached the word wherever they went (Acts 8:4).
- 3) Now those who had been *scattered* by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews (Acts 11:19).

In all three instances in Acts, *diaspeirō* relates to the scattering of the Christians of Hellenistic Jewish origin. In other words, the verb refers to the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians from the diaspora who were in areas where there was a non-Jewish majority (Acts 11:19) as well as in the area around Jerusalem and toward Samaria (Acts 8:1). The unique contribution of these verses in their use of *diaspeirō* is that those who were scattered served as essential contributors of the expansion of early Christianity (Acts 8:4-8, 40; 11:19-21).

In the Greek translation (i.e., LXX, including the Apocrypha) of the Hebrew Old Testament, the technical term, *diaspora*, is found in a dozen passages (Deut 28:25; 30:4; Neh 1:9; Ps 146:2; Isa 49:6; Jer 13:14; 15:7; 34:17; Dan 12:2; Jdt 5:19; 2 Macc 1:27; and *Ps. Sol.* 8:34). They generally refer to the “dispersion of the Jews among the Gentiles” or “the Jews as thus scattered.”¹⁰ The noun form, *diaspora*, is used in the Septuagint to refer to the exile of the scattered people of God among the Gentiles (Deut 28:25; 30:4; Ps 146:2; Isa 49:6; Jer 15:7; 34:17; 2 Macc 1:27; Jdt 5:19). Moreover, *diaspora* is also used to address both the dispersion and the totality of the dispersed (Isa 49:6; Ps 146:2; 2 Macc 1:27; *Ps. Sol.* 8:34).

In addition to biblical literature, there is a sufficient amount of extra-biblical sources that depict the period of the Jewish diaspora.¹¹

10. K. L. Schmidt, “διασπορά,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 99.

11. Samples of extra-biblical sources are as follows: Artapanus; Aristobu-

These sources seem to support two main reasons for the Jewish diaspora. These two reasons are as follows:

- 1) Forced deportation: This source of Jewish dispersion was triggered by conquests of the Assyrian,¹² Babylonian,¹³ and Roman (specifically, Pompey)¹⁴ empires. These harsh realities of the conquests would have brought severe wounds to the pride of the chosen people of God. They reminded the Jews of the outworking of God's severe judgment through scattering, thus emphasizing pain and curse. In addition, the Jews would have been ridiculed and derided (cf. Ps 79:4, 10) by the enemies of God because of the Jewish exile.
- 2) Voluntary migration: This source of Jewish dispersion from Palestine to the diaspora, arising from diverse motives, was highly significant. It was significant, because such migration involved no curse or shame, but a sense of optimism and restoration of dignity and pride. With the voluntary migration came the benefit that the Jews could not be exterminated at a single stroke. However, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the

lus, Demetrius; *Joseph and Aseneth*; Josephus; *Epistle of Aristeas*; Philo; Pseudo-Philo; *Pseudo-Phocylides*; some of the *Sibylline Oracles*; *Testament of Abraham*, and *Wisdom of Solomon*. Others include some papyri and inscriptions, six excavated diaspora synagogues, and texts from non-Jewish authors who wrote their perceptions on Jews and Judaism.

12. After the death of Solomon (931 BC), the kingdom was divided into two. Israel consisted of the northern tribes with important shrines at Dan and Bethel and the capital subsequently set at Samaria. Judah consisted of the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, with Jerusalem as the capital. The northern kingdom of Israel came to an end in the eighth century BC, when Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Assyrians took a large number of the population captive and replaced them with immigrants (2 Kgs 15-17).

13. In the sixth century BC, the southern kingdom of Judah fell to the invading Babylonians, who then dominated the Middle East. Jerusalem fell in 597 and the population was deported in 581 BC. Large deportations followed. Following the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia (539-530 BC), Jews were encouraged to return from exile (though a significant number stayed). However, the monarchy was not restored. Cf. 2 Kgs 23-25; 2 Chr 36.

14. Pompey took hundreds of Jews to Rome as prisoners of war. See Trebilco, "Diaspora Judaism," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C. A. Evans and S. E. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 282.

final ridding of Palestinian Judaism in Hadrian's war¹⁵
did much to disturb this pride of the diaspora.¹⁶

During the diaspora, there were probably few major cities or regions that were without a community of resident Jews.¹⁷ The origins of the Jewish communities in Babylonia came from the exile, when many Jews decided to remain in Babylonia (despite the permission of Cyrus for the Jews to return to their land as reported in 2 Chr 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4). There are also evidences of Jewish settlements or communities in Nehardea, Nisibis (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.9.1 §§311-312), Seleucia (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.9.8-9 §§372-379), Antioch (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.3.1 §119),¹⁸ Lydia and Phrygia in Asia Minor (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.3.4 §§147-153),¹⁹ kingdom of Bosphorus,²⁰ Egypt,²¹ Teuchira, Apollonia, Ptolemais, and Latin-speaking North Africa,²² Macedonia, Greece, Thessaly, Boetia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, most of the Peloponnese and the islands of Euboea and Crete (Philo, *Legat.* 281-282), and Rome.²³ By the end of

15. Emperor Hadrian re-founded Jerusalem in AD 135 as a Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 162.

16. Schmidt, "διασπορά," 101, comments, "Prior to 70 A.D. the wounds of earlier expatriations could be healed the more easily because in spite of everything Jerusalem still remained as the holy city and therefore as the focal point not merely of the Holy Land but of the whole *diaspora*. After 70 A.D., however, the *diaspora* became, as it were, completely homeless."

17. Instances that support the statement that probably few major cities or regions were without a community of resident Jews are as follows: Philo, *Legat.* 214, 281-83; Philo, *Flacc.* 45-46; Philo, *Mos.* 2.232; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.7.2 §115; Josephus, *J.W.* 7.3.3 §43; 1 Macc 15:23-24; *Sib. Or.* 3:271-272; Acts 2:9-11.

18. The Jewish community in Antioch, the largest in Syria, probably began in the third century BC.

19. Between 221-205 BC, Antiochus III transferred two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylonia to Lydia and Phrygia as military settlers. This provides unambiguous evidence of Jewish communities in Asia Minor.

20. Jews lived in at least three towns in the kingdom of Bosphorus. A Jewish inscription from Gorgippia (dated AD 41) refers to the manumission of a female slave in a synagogue. See I. Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 227-246. The author spends a whole appendix on the inscriptions from the Bosphoran kingdom.

21. The Jewish communities in Egypt were the largest. At the time of the Babylonian conquest, some Jews fled to Egypt (Jer 43:6-7; 44:1; 46:14). Aramaic papyri of the fifth century BC give evidence of a Jewish military colony at Elephantine, a colony that included a Jewish temple.

22. Trebilco, "Diaspora Judaism," 284.

23. A significant number of Jews lived in Rome. Josephus recorded that

the first century BC, Philo was able to claim that “Jews dwelling in Alexandria and Egypt from the Libyan slope to the borders of Aethiopia do not fall short of a million” and “that no single country can contain the Jews because of their multitude” (Philo, *Flacc.* 43, 45). Though Philo’s figures are not reliable, there is no doubt that the Jewish population did grow large.²⁴ The evidence demonstrates that the total Jewish population of the diaspora considerably exceeded the Jewish population in Palestine,²⁵ and that diaspora Jews constituted a significant size. Scholars often suggest that five to six million Jews were living in the diaspora during the first century, although such figures can only be speculative.

What is the economic situation of the diaspora Jews? While the general impression from the papyri “is that of a hard-working people earning [their] living by tenacious labor,” there were many who prospered, and no branch of economic life was closed to them.²⁶ Specifically, Jews of the diaspora were soldiers, land-owning farmers, agricultural laborers, shepherds, artisans, manual workers, traders, merchants, bankers, government officials, and slaves.²⁷ In some Roman writings, Jewish poverty was a byword (Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.14-16; 6.542-547). However, there were also some very wealthy Jews. Thus, diaspora Jews were found in almost all socio-economic strata of that period.

Dispersion in the New Testament

The dispersion realities in the New Testament are evident in the events or passages that show the Jewish scattering and in the presence of synagogues, proselytes, and God-fearers in the historical books of the New Testament (particularly, in the Acts of the Apostles).

After his capture of Jerusalem in 63 BC, Pompey carried off hundreds of Jews to Rome, where they were sold as slaves. In the middle of the second century BC, however, the Roman Senate was anxious to extend protection to the Jews. The Senate had a circular letter written in

Pompey brought a number of Jews to Rome as prisoners of war in 63 BC (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.4.4-5 §§70-71, 79). He also wrote that eight thousand Roman Jews supported an embassy from Judea (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.11.1 §300).

24. J. J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 9.

25. V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 292-295.

26. V. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, eds., *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957-1964), 19; S. Applebaum, “The Social and Economic Status of Jews in the Diaspora,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern, CRINT 1.2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 701-727.

27. Trebilco, “Diaspora Judaism,” 286.

favor of the Jews to the kings of Egypt, Syria, Pergamum, Cappadocia, and Parthia. The letter was also circulated to a number of Mediterranean provinces, cities, and islands, where Jews were presumably present (1 Macc. 15:15ff).

Thus, it is no surprise to read that at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem, there were present after Jesus' ascension "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs" (Acts 2:9-11). This account of the crowd at Pentecost demonstrates that the Jewish dispersion was not confined to the Roman empire. The dispersion was prominent in the Persian sphere of influence also.

These dispersed communities visited Jerusalem and made pilgrimages for the three great national feasts of Israel when possible (Acts 2:5ff; 8:27) and often had closer ties with the mother-country. They even paid the half-shekel tax for the upkeep and services in the Temple, and maintained contact with each other and with Jerusalem (Acts 28:21ff). Moreover, they voluntarily submitted to the national polity and decrees of the great Sanhedrin. Thus, despite their distance, these dispersed communities were loyal to the religion of their homeland.

However, the dispersion communities were situated in different cultural settings and therefore formed their own synagogues such as the "Synagogue of the Freedmen"²⁸ in Acts 6:9. The synagogues were places of assembly used by Jewish communities primarily for public worship and instruction, or the assembly itself. The Greek derivation of the term *synagōgē* indicates a gathering, void of any religious connotation. In the first century AD, however, the term *synagōgē* appears in Jewish sources such as the writings of Philo and Josephus and especially in the New Testament. They refer more to a sense of a "place of assembly"²⁹ and "house of worship and instruction."³⁰

28. The "Freedmen" refers to a group of Jews originally from Italy who had settled in Jerusalem and had their own synagogue. Philo tells of Jews who lived across the Tiber in Rome, "most of whom were emancipated Roman citizens," although they were originally captives brought to Italy. See Philo, *Legat.* 23.155.

29. L. L. Grabbe, "Synagogues in Pre-70 Palestine: A Reassessment," *JTS* 39 (1988): 401-410.

30. H. C. Kee, "The Transformation of the Synagogue after 70 CE: Its Import for Early Christianity," *NTS* 36 (1990): 1-24. Aside from *synagōgē*, another Greek name for the place of Jewish worship was *proseuchē*, "prayer." It was used metonymically in the sense of "house of prayer." The two terms *synagōgē* and *proseuchē* probably originated from different cultural centers. On the one hand,

Although the origin of the synagogue cannot be recovered with certainty, a dominant theory has been proposed; the beginning of the synagogue could have been during the Babylonian exile with its consolidation occurring in Palestine as a result of Ezra's work. In the sixteenth century, Carolus Sigonius, an expert in the field of political institutions of the Greeks and Romans, describes this dominant view:

I would surmise that synagogues were first erected in the Babylonian exile for the purpose that those who have been deprived of the Temple of Jerusalem, where they used to pray and teach, would have a certain place similar to the temple, in which they could assemble and perform the same kind of service. The same, I think, did the other Jews in the dispersion, be it in Asia or in Egypt or in Europe. It was for this reason that the custom of synagogues was first established in the provinces where there was no temple. After the return from Babylon and the restoration of the temple of Jerusalem, the Jews still retained the well-established institution of the synagogue, namely so that while the residents of the city of Jerusalem attended the reading of the Law in the temple, all those coming to the city from the provinces attended the reading of the Law in their respective synagogues.³¹

Therefore, the reading from the Scriptures and exposition of the Law constituted the focal point in the sabbatical gatherings, which gave the synagogues the character of an educational institution. But it has long been recognized that synagogues were not confined to religious worship. It fulfilled some secular and semi-secular functions, like funeral services, political gatherings, meeting places for public announcements, inns for itinerant travelers,³² and law courts for administering justice. In the New Testament, the synagogues were even found in juxtaposition to the magistrates (Luke 12:11).

Paul saw the strategic role that synagogues played in the missionary expansion of God's word. Luke's Acts of the Apostles is full of the narrative motif of depicting Paul, along with his missionary cohorts, evangelizing to the diaspora Jews first. When he would arrive at a new place, his first stop was a diaspora synagogue. This pattern is seen in

the term *proseuchē* seems to have been adopted by the Hellenistic Jews of Egypt and spread to Greece, Asia Minor, and Rome. It was sometimes used as a technical term for a place where Jews gathered to pray (cf. 3 Macc 7:20). On the other hand, *synagōgē* was used in the Palestinian scene.

31. J. Hastings, ed., *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989), 478-479.

32. There is a Tannaitic ruling that forbids eating, drinking, and sleeping in the synagogue (*T.B. Meg.* 28a-b). However, most scholars take the term *synagōgē* in this connection in its larger sense of comprising the precinct, which contained a special guest room.

Paul's activity in the synagogue of Damascus (Acts 9:20). It is repeated in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14), Iconium (Acts 14:1), Philippi (Acts 16:13), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-2), Berea (Acts 17:10), Athens (Acts 17:17), Corinth (Acts 18:4-6), and Ephesus (Acts 18:19; 19:8). Even though he already declared in Pisidian Antioch that he "now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46) because of the Jewish rejection of the Gospel, Paul still continues to address first fellow Jews in synagogues (Acts 18:4-6, 19; 19:8).

Paul saw himself as Christ's chosen instrument to carry the Lord's name "before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Although he spoke of his conversion on the road to Damascus as the place where he received the call to preach Christ among the Gentiles (Gal 1:16) and called himself "an apostle of the Gentiles" (Rom 11:13), Paul nevertheless thought that he was obligated to all human beings:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law I became lone one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law (1 Cor 9:20-21).

Thus, according to Luke, Paul entered the synagogue of the Jews throughout his missionary journeys.

Aside from the diaspora reality of synagogues, the New Testament also depicts both the proselytes and God-fearers in terms of dispersion. They were influenced by Judaism because of the efforts of the diaspora Jews. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul encountered and addressed these two groups that show the dispersion realities of that period.

At Pentecost, the different peoples gathered in Jerusalem were described as "both Jews and converts to Judaism" (Acts 2:11). The term "converts to Judaism" comes from the Greek noun, *prosēlytos*, which literally means, "one who has come over,"³³ or "to turn around."³⁴ It is used in this passage in a technical sense, as a "convert" to Judaism, specifically to refer to those who submitted to circumcision and have been won over by Jewish missionary efforts among Gentiles (cf. Matt 23:15).

In a less technical sense, *prosēlytos* occurs in the Septuagint as the translation of the Hebrew term, *gēr*, which refers to a "resident alien"

33. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 243.

34. J. Neusner and W. S. Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 133.

(Exod 22:21; Ezra 14:7). Some rabbis vehemently opposed accepting converts claiming that they were the source of the troubles that often plagued the Jews. However, many other rabbis favored accepting converts into the community, describing Abraham as the first Jew to seek converts and teaching that all Jews should follow his lead by attempting to win over Gentiles to the worship of Yahweh. However, these rabbis also placed some restrictions or theoretical distinctions. For example, converts were not allowed to marry into a priestly family, especially into the high priest's clan. Also, some sages believed that converts could not own a parcel of the land in Israel. Still others held that converts could not address Yahweh as "the God of our ancestors" in public worship.

If men submitted to circumcision, sojourners could participate in some rituals. In Exodus 12:48, the instruction is clear: "An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the Lord's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it." In addition, Esther 8:17 is the first textual example of conversion to a new belief system, as opposed to ethnic affiliation: "And many people of other nationalities became Jews (i.e. *mitëyahādīm*, "declared themselves Jews").

Conversions to Judaism were not uncommon in antiquity, as sources as diverse as Juvenal, Josephus, Joseph and Asenath, and early Christian documents attest.³⁵ Jewish rituals of conversion included circumcision for males, the donation of money to the Temple, and eventually, ritual immersion.

Aside from the proselytes or converts, Paul also talks about another group of Gentiles who were influenced by diaspora Jews. This second group is known as the "God-fearers." In Acts 10:2, Luke describes Cornelius, the Roman centurion, as devout and God-fearing. The Greek expression for "God-fearing" is *phoboumenos ton theon* (literally, "fearing God"). It is a quasi-technical phrase that occurs again in Acts 10:22, 35; 13:16, 26 and undoubtedly reflects the Septuagintal expression, *hoi phoboumenoi ton kyrion* ("fearing the Lord")—also seen in Psalms 115:11; 118:4; 135:20 as a reference to Jews.

But more often, the term "God-fearers" is taken as the equivalent of the more Hellenistic *sebomenos ton theon*, "worshiping God" or "God-worshiper" (Acts 13:50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7; cf. 18:13; 19:27). As quasi-technical phrases, both *phoboumenos ton theon* and *sebomenos ton theon*

35. According to Josephus, John Hyrcanus I converted the Idumeans; Aristobolus I, the Itureans; and Alexander Jannaeus, Pella. Among the more famous Jewish converts or proselytes were the Ammonite Achior (Judith), the royal house of Adiabene, Flavius Clemens (Vespasian's nephew), Fulvia (the wife of senator Saturninus), and Nicolaus, the Deacon (Acts 6:5). Cf. *Ant.* 11.310, 322-324, 346.

seem to have been used to denote “God-fearers.” They were non-Jews who were sympathetic to Judaism, who did not submit to circumcision or the observance of the Torah in its entirety, who agreed with the ethical monotheism of the Jews, and who attended their synagogue services.³⁶ In other words, “God-fearers” is a quasi-technical term for Gentile sympathizers, who followed many Jewish practices without becoming full converts (especially males for whom circumcision would have been a difficult step to take).

Impact of the Jewish Diaspora on Christian Mission

In light of the preceding discussion on the use of the term *diaspora* in the New Testament and on the diaspora realities in the biblical period, I will share some thoughts on the impact of the Jewish diaspora on Christian missions. The first consideration comes out of the diaspora realities of the New Testament period, while the second set of insights are taken from the use and context of the term *diaspora* in the six New Testament passages.

Jewish Diaspora as Precursor to Christian Missions

It is now believed that Virgil’s conception of a “Better Age,” which was to be inaugurated by the birth of a child, was derived from Isaiah’s prophecies.³⁷ Not only did the Jewish diaspora prepare the way for Christ, but it also furnished a valuable vehicle for the proclamation of the gospel. Wherever the apostles and the early preachers traveled with the good news, they found Jewish communities to whom they offered first the gift of salvation. The synagogues became convenient locations for the effective ministry of Paul and his colleagues. In the cities they visited, they first went into the synagogues to look for an audience. The presence of proselytes and God-fearers in these synagogues and cities showed the influence and impact of Judaism created by the Jewish dispersion. Thus, the Jewish diaspora served as a precursor for a strategic and viable venue for Christian mission to the dispersed Jews.

36. M. Wilcox, “The God-Fearers in Acts – A Reconsideration,” *JSNT* 13 (1981): 102-122.

37. For comments on Virgil’s conception of a “Better Age” and Isaiah’s prophecies, see E. Bourne, “The Messianic Prophecy in Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue,” *The Classical Journal* 11, no. 7 (April 1916): 390-400; N. W. de Witt, “The Influence of the Saviour Sentiment upon Virgil,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 54 (1923): 39-50.

God's Sovereignty in the Expansion of Christian Mission

Aside from the Jewish diaspora serving as precursor to Christian mission to the Jews, it also shows God's providential hand in extending the scope and spread of Christian mission. A quick contextual check of the *diaspora* occurrences in the New Testament shows God's sovereignty in the Jewish diaspora. In fact, God's sovereignty establishes the framework for the missionary expansion of Christianity. To establish the relationship between the concept of *diaspora* and Christian mission, I will examine the presence of missions in the three *diaspeirō* passages in Acts and the three *diaspora* passages in the New Testament. I will also examine the context of these *diaspeirō* passages and the presence of Christian mission-related factors.

First, I will discuss Jewish persecution as catalyst to diaspora mission to the Samaritans by examining the three occurrences of the word *diaspeirō* in Acts 8:1b and 4. The earlier context of Acts 8:1b and 8:4 deal with persecution and martyrdom. Acts 7:54-60 describes the stoning of Stephen. After his martyrdom, a "great persecution" broke out (Acts 8:1a). Saul executed this persecution, by trying to destroy the Jerusalem church. He went from house to house, heartlessly and systematically dragging men and women to placed them in prison (Acts 8:3). Apart from the persecution, the later context reveals an emphasis on mission. The Hellenized Jewish Christians,³⁸ who were scattered in the diaspora, "preached the word wherever they went." Particularly, Philip (a Grecian Jew, who was chosen as a deacon in Acts 6:5) preached about Christ in Samaria (Acts 8:5). As a result of his preaching and miraculous signs, people listened. Many were healed and were rejoicing (Acts 8:6-7). Many people also believed Philip's message and were baptized (Acts 8:12).

Thus, the persecution (along with martyrdom) triggered the diaspora of Hellenized Jewish Christians. Residing outside of Jerusalem, these Christians used their diaspora situation as a setting for their missionary efforts. In other words, the persecution enabled them to fulfill Jesus' commission of becoming witnesses "in all Judea and Samaria" (Acts 1:8). In its wider context, the persecution of Acts 8:1 and the subsequent mission efforts in Acts 8:4 resulted in the formation of "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria," which was strengthened, encouraged, grew in numbers, and lived in the fear of the Lord

38. The Jerusalem church appeared to have been a predominantly "Hebrew" body (Bruce, *Acts*, 162). After the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and Emperor Hadrian's re-founding of Jerusalem in AD 135 as a Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina, the Jerusalem church became a completely Gentile-Christian community, without any continuity with the first-century Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem.

(Acts 9:31). Thus, the inception of such separate communities can be traced to the persecution during the Jewish Christian diaspora.

What I find fascinating in Philip's missionary effort in Samaria was his boldness to proclaim the message of Christ within a hostile setting. As a Hellenized Christian Jew (who was hated for being a Christian), Philip moved away from the hostile persecution of the diaspora, and moved toward another hostile environment in Samaria (where Jews were hated by Samaritans). Historically, the Jews and the Samaritans despised each other.³⁹ Yet, despite historical and cultural hostility, Philip boldly undertook his missionary efforts and saw a great harvest of souls among Samaritans.

Second, I will inspect the *diaspeirō* context of Acts 11:19 for missionary elements. The preceding context talks about how the apostles heard the news that the Gentiles were receiving the word of God (Acts 11:1). Acts 11:2-18 speaks of Peter explaining before the Hebraic Jewish Christians how God opened the door to the Gentiles (specifically to the Roman centurion God-fearer, Cornelius, and his household). Peter's explanation was received well, to the point that the people praised God and said, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). This opening of the missional doors to the Gentiles was exemplified in Acts 11:19-21. Those who were scattered by the persecution related to Stephen's martyrdom went to the northern portions of "Phoenecia, Cyprus, and Antioch" (Acts 11:19a). Although the missional efforts already expanded to the point of leaving Palestine, the recipients of their outreach efforts were Jews only (Acts 11:19b).

However, when some "men from Cyprus and Cyrene" (Acts 11:20a) went to Antioch and "began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20b), the mission was extended. The Greeks (Ἕλληνιστᾶς), as used by the Jews, generally referred to the Gentiles. Amazingly, the Greeks responded in great numbers and "believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:20c), as the Lord's hand was on the missionaries. Therefore, in this strategic passage on the diaspora, we see the further fulfillment of Christ's commission (Acts

39. Judah was isolated from the other tribes of Israel during the settlement period (cf. Deut 33:7). Then the disruption of the Hebrew monarchy after Solomon's death cleaved the tribes (c. 930 BC). The schism widened when Samaritans refused to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple and instead erected their own temple in Gerizim (Josephus, *Ant.* 11.310, 322-324, 346). The hostility continued with the destruction of the Gerizim temple by the Hasmonean ruler, John Hyrcanus, when he conquered Samaria and added it to his kingdom (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.256). Although the Roman conquest of Palestine in 63 BC liberated the Samaritans, the unfriendly relations continued between the Jews and Samaritans.

1:8), that his people be witnesses to the “ends of the earth” (ἑσχάτου τῆς γῆς). From the mission effort to Jews in Jerusalem to Jews in Samaria, the outreach opened widely to the Gentiles who belonged to the ends of the earth.

Encompassing Scope of the Jewish Diaspora and Christian Mission

Having just explored the mission endeavors related to the *diaspeirō* passages in Acts 8:1b, 8:4 and 11:19, I will now turn to the three instances of the word *diaspora* in the New Testament in John 7:35, James 1:1, and 1 Peter 1:1. Admittedly, there is no immediate context of mission in John 7:35. Since the context is that of hatred, hostility, misunderstanding, and unbelief by the religious leaders toward Jesus (cf. 7:32, 41b-44), however, this text suggests that the scope of the diaspora is far and wide (i.e., among the Greeks and Gentiles).

In the Great Commission, the extent of going and making disciples is to “all nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη). As we have seen in the previous sections, the Jewish diaspora reached many nations. There were only a few major cities or regions that were without a community of resident Jews in the biblical world. Thus, both the diaspora and mission are far-reaching and global in scope. In addition, the context of hostility and hatred in John 7:35 is similar to the context of suffering and persecution in Acts 8:1. From this similarity, we glean that mission is usually triggered by hostility, hatred, suffering, and persecution. God’s global work greatly expands in the context of pain and persecution.

The word *diaspora* refers to the twelve tribes in the NIV translation of James 1:1, “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” In 1 Peter 1:1, the enumeration of the locations in the diaspora (i.e., Pontus; Galatia; Cappadocia; Asia; and Bithynia) shows how widespread the Jewish dispersion was. This text also explains the far-reaching spread of mission through and in the diaspora. Therefore, the current brief survey of the *diaspeirō* and *diaspora* passages in the New Testament shows how God used suffering, persecution, and dispersion as the context for expanding his kingdom and for enabling his people to fulfill their mission to become witnesses to all the nations, even to the remotest part of the earth. God used the Jewish diaspora to expand the missionary work to the Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles.

Conclusion

I have examined in this paper the use of the word or concept of *diaspora*, as seen in the New Testament, in the Septuagint, and in extra-biblical literature during the biblical period. In addition, I have discussed

the diaspora realities in the New Testament period, with a focus on the presence of synagogues, proselytes, and God-fearers. Finally, I described how the Jewish diaspora (including Jewish Christian diaspora) is directly related to Christian mission. In God's providence, Christian mission is accomplished through his chosen tools of suffering, persecution, and diaspora. The Jewish diaspora was evident in the New Testament at the time of Christ (John 7:35), was widespread throughout Asia Minor (1 Pet 1:1) and the Roman Empire (Jas 1:1), and sizable in numbers in many major cities and regions (as affirmed by extra-biblical sources). Diaspora also served as the context for the Jewish Christians who were scattered by persecution and reached out to their fellow Jews, Samaritans, and Greeks outside of Jerusalem. In addition, Paul also sought to go to the Jewish diaspora and met them in synagogues as he also met proselytes and God-fearers. Therefore, the Jewish diaspora and the diaspora during the New Testament period prepared the way for Christian mission. Despite the persecution of Jewish Christians, God in his sovereignty catalyzed the spread of the gospel and the expansion of God's Kingdom in Christian mission.