

The Jewish Dispersion in New Testament Times

I. Howard Marshall

[p.237]

In this fascinating and authoritative article, Dr. Howard Marshall of the Department of New Testament Exegesis, King's College, Old Aberdeen, summarises our present knowledge concerning the Dispersion in New Testament Times. The sheer magnitude of the Jewish witness to the one true God throughout the Graeco-Roman world in those far off days will come as a surprise to many readers.

There is a well-known scene in the Gospel of John in which the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest Jesus, but the officers were so impressed by the words of Jesus that they returned without having fulfilled their commission. What Jesus had said was, "I shall be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come." These words utterly mystified and amazed His audience. They did not realise that Jesus was speaking of His return to His Father in heaven, and some of them asked, "Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?" (Jn. 7:32-36).

This question by the Jews reminds us of the existence of many of their compatriots outside Palestine in the Dispersion or Diaspora.¹ When we read the Gospels we can easily forget that

[p.238]

there were far more Jews living outside Palestine than within its boundaries,^{2,3,4} but as we turn over the pages to the Acts and Epistles we at once become aware of Jews in every part of the world to which Christian missionaries travelled.⁵ Moreover, there was constant coming and going between the Dispersion and Palestine, as Acts 2:5-11 bears witness, so that some knowledge of the Dispersion is absolutely essential for the student of the expansion of Christianity and by no means unimportant for the student of the Gospels, written as they all most probably were in the lands of the Dispersion.

1. *The Lands of the Dispersion*

From their earliest days the Jews have been a wandering and scattered people. An early creed found in the Book of Deuteronomy makes the Israelite confess, "A wandering Aramaean was my father" (Dt. 26: 5), and throughout the Old Testament we are aware of both the threat of exile from the promised land and the hope of the reunion of God's scattered people. Two large scale deportations from the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah by the Assyrians and Babylonians respectively brought the life of these tiny states to an end (for the former see 2 Ki. 15:29; 17:6; 18:11; for the latter see 2 Kings 24:14-16; 25:11; Je. 52:28-30). Although a number of Jews returned to their own land and set up a state there, their life from now on was that of a dispersed people.

Even Palestine itself must be regarded as a place of dispersion. Except for short periods it was never again in purely Jewish hands; it was ruled by foreign overlords and was partly occupied

by foreigners. In the time of Jesus there was a very mixed population in the land, a fact of which we tend to be ignorant because Jesus confined His ministry mainly to His fellow-Jews and rarely entered Gentile territory.⁶

The reasons for the increase and spread of the dispersion are various. The mass deportations already mentioned were followed by others, especially that made by Pompey when he

[p.239]

intervened in the civil wrangles in Judah in 63 BC. But the main reason for the continued growth of the dispersion was undoubtedly the troubled and unsettled state of life in Palestine from the Maccabean period onwards. The numerous wars and the bitter persecution of various sections of the people combined to make the unknown difficulties of life abroad more attractive than the known hazards of remaining at home. Nor was the land of Palestine itself rich enough to support a large and characteristically prolific population. There was also the urge to carry on trade and commerce overseas. In addition to these factors which explain the wholesale exodus of Jews from their own land, the growth of the dispersion was greatly increased by the success of Jewish missionary endeavour and possibly also by the assimilation of other Semitic peoples to the Jewish race.

The greatest area of Jewish settlement, which is at the same time the one about which we are most scantily informed⁷ and which is of the least significance for the student of Christian origins in the first century AD, was in the east, outside the borders of the Roman Empire in the Parthian Empire. Here Jews had settled after the great deportations which gave rise to the exile. Josephus, whose history of the Jewish war was originally written in Aramaic for the Jews of Mesopotamia, recounts two notable incidents from their history. The first concerns two Jewish adventurers, Asinaeus and Anilaeus, who set up a stronghold near Nisibis and rose to become satraps under king Artabanus before they each came to a sticky end (*Jos., Ant.*, 18: 310ff.); the other is about the conversion of Izates, the king of Adiabene, to the Jewish faith (*Jos., Ant.*, 20:17-96). Both of these incidents fall within the Christian era. More recently, new light has been shed on the later history of the Jews in this region by the archaeological discoveries at Dura-Europos which have uncovered a Jewish synagogue with interesting wall paintings. The Judaism of this area was strongly orthodox, and here the Babylonian recension of the Talmud was produced.

Syria also had a strong Jewish population (*Jos., War.*, 7:45). There was a Jewish colony in Antioch from an early date, with an estimated strength of 10% of the total population of about

[p.240]

300,000 inhabitants.⁸ We also know that there was more than one synagogue in Damascus (*Acts* 9:2), and Josephus says that 10,000 Jews were massacred here in the Jewish war (*Jos., War.*, 2:559-561; in 7:368 the number is said to be 18,000).

The Jewish settlements in Asia Minor are well-known from the account of Paul's journeys in *Acts*. About 200 BC Antiochus III transplanted 2,000 Jewish families from Mesopotamia to Lydia and Phrygia (*Jos., Ant.*, 12:148-153), and by the time of Paul there can scarcely have been a town of any importance without its quota of Jews. They were even to be found across the Black Sea in the Crimea.⁹ Many lived in Cyprus, where there was a powerful uprising in

the time of Trajan and Hadrian, and they were naturally to be found in the principal towns in Macedonia (Philippi and Thessalonica) and Achaia (*i.e.* Greece); the remains of a synagogue have been discovered in Corinth, with the inscription "Synagogue of the Hebrews" written in Greek.^{9b}

As early as 161 BC Judas Maccabees entered into an alliance with the Romans (1 Maccabees 8). This was renewed by Jonathan and by Simon (1 Maccabees 12:1-4, 16; 14:24; 15:15-24); the account of this last renewal (140-139 BC) states that the Romans sent copies of the treaty to a number of places at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, obviously so that the religious freedom of the Jews in these places might be preserved. It was apparently on this occasion that the Praetor Peregrinus forced certain Jews to leave Rome because they were attempting to impose the worship of Jupiter Sabazius upon the Romans. These accounts do not necessarily imply that Jews were already settled in Rome.¹⁰ They were certainly present in large numbers by the first century BC. When Pompey held his triumph in Rome after his victories in the east he brought numerous Jewish prisoners of war with him. They were sold as slaves, but many were allowed to gain their freedom because their refusal to give up their customs, such as refusing to work on the Sabbath and to eat ordinary Gentile food, made them poor servants.¹¹ Their chief settlement in Rome was on the west side of the Tiber. Evidence of their numbers and influence is given by Cicero; speaking at a trial in 59 BC he pretended to hush his tones so that the Jews

[p.241]

present on the outskirts of the crowd of spectators might not hear him (Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28).

When Julius Cæsar died in 44 BC large numbers of Jews mourned both by day and by night at his pyre (Suetonius, *Caesar* 84), and when a Jewish embassy came to Rome after the death of Herod to plead against having Archelaus as ruler 8,000 Jews resident in Rome are said to have turned out in support of it (Jos., *Ant.*, 17:300; *War.*, 2:80). Both Caesar and Augustus favoured the Jews, and they continued to prosper at Rome during the Christian era, apart from a number of incidents which will be mentioned later. Excavations have unearthed the names of some 13 synagogues and revealed six Jewish catacombs, and the Jewish population in Rome has been reckoned at upwards of 40,000 Souls.¹² Outside Rome Jews were resident in Puteoli (cf. Acts 28:13f.). They may possibly have lived elsewhere in Italy and further west; one may speculate whether Paul's desire to visit Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28), coupled with our knowledge of his normal policy of beginning missionary work in the synagogue, indicates that Jews were already to be found in this region.

On the south shore of the Mediterranean the Jews were well established in the Christian era. They settled in Cyrenaica in considerable numbers and were frequent disturbers of the peace (Jos., *Ant.*, 14:114). But undoubtedly the principal area of Jewish settlement in the Empire was in Egypt.

We are exceptionally well informed about the history of the Jews in Egypt from a variety of sources, including the voluminous works of Philo and that immeasurably valuable witness to contemporary events which Egypt is almost alone in providing for us: the papyri.¹³

As far back as the time of Jeremiah, if not earlier, Jews had settled in different parts of Egypt. Jeremiah himself was taken forcibly by Johanan and other refugees to Tahpanhes (or Daphne), and we learn from him that other Jews were settled at Migdol (also in the north of Egypt), Memphis (central Egypt) and Pathros (southern Egypt) (Je. 41-44; cf. 24:8; 26:21-23); they

[p.242]

took up pagan religion, worshipping the queen of heaven. About the same period there were "colonies" of Jewish soldiers with their families at Elephantine (Yeb) and Syene (modern Aswan); from about 515 BC they were in the employ of the Persian conquerors of Egypt. Their religion was definitely unorthodox by Jewish standards. Not only did they build their own temple to Yahweh but they also worshipped alongside him a regular pantheon including Anath, the queen of heaven. No information is available for the period after 404 BC, when Persian rule ceased, and it is probable that the Jews were liquidated.¹⁴

Elephantine is more relevant to Old Testament study. Our real interest begins with the considerable infiltration of Jews into all parts of Egypt, including Alexandria, possibly in the life time of Alexander and certainly from the reign of Ptolemy I onwards (Jos., *Apion* 2:33f.; Aristeas 12-14). In the second century BC the flow of immigrants increased, and c. 160 BC Onias built a temple at Leontopolis. Philo was able to estimate—no doubt with considerable exaggeration—that there were 1,000,000 Jews in Egypt (*In Flaccum*, 6), making up one-seventh of the total population (Jos., *War.*, 2: 385). Alexandria was their chief centre, where they lived throughout the city and especially in two of the five wards into which the city was divided (Philo, *In Flaccum*, 8).

Such was the spread of the Jewish dispersion. In terms of numbers it was a force to be reckoned with. Its economic strength was perhaps less than might have been expected. The familiar picture of the Jew as a prosperous money-lender and wealthy business man belongs to a later age, and the Jews in the Roman Empire generally belonged to the middle and lower classes. On the other hand, the satirical picture of the Jew as a pauper and beggar found in Juvenal is not to be taken as typical (Juvenal, *Satires* 3:10-17; 6:542f.). The principal occupation of the Jews in the Dispersion was farming, but they were also engaged in a host of other trades. In some occupations they almost held a monopoly; these included textiles in Babylon, and the dyeing, glass and jewelry industries in the Empire. In a town like Alexandria there was a number of more wealthy people engaged in money-lending, ship-owning and trade, but such a man as

[p.243]

Tiberius Julius Alexander, a renegade Jew who rose to be Prefect of Egypt, must have been exceptional. By and large, therefore, the Jews did not occupy a position of exceptional economic strength in the Roman Empire.^{3b}

II. The Legal Position and Organisation of the Jews

The Roman Empire in the first century AD consisted of a number of provinces each in the hands of a Roman administration responsible to the Emperor and Senate in Rome. The inhabitants of Rome and Italy were ranked as Roman citizens, and there were of course many

people living outside Rome who for one reason or another possessed Roman citizenship during their lifetime. But the great mass of people living in the Empire were members of national groups and not Roman citizens. This general principle applied to the Jews scattered through the various provinces. A number, like Paul and the freedmen of Pompey, were citizens, but this was the exception rather than the rule. There were also a number of cities which had their own rights of citizenship, usually Greek cities whose special rights had been granted to them before the Roman conquest and were then confirmed by the Romans, and in certain cases the Jews were entitled to these privileges.

Thus the Jews in Rome were for the most part Roman citizens.¹⁵ According to Josephus the Jews in the cities founded by Seleucus I in Syria possessed citizen rights in the cities where they had settled (*Ant.*, 12:119-121). The same privilege is also asserted by Josephus in the case of the Jews living in Alexandria, but this assertion has been disproved by the evidence of the papyri. There were certainly some Jews who shared in the citizen rights of Alexandria along with its Greek citizens, but it now appears that in general the Romans regarded the Jews as being on a level not with the Greek citizens of Alexandria but with the Egyptian native population, and that it was extremely difficult to obtain admission to citizenship.¹⁶

Nevertheless the Jews did possess certain rights and privileges.

[p.244]

In Greek cities before the Roman conquest it was not uncommon for a body of resident foreigners to form an officially recognised group (*politeuma*) with various rights, including that of pursuing their own religion. The citizens themselves could also form groups to follow religious practices other than those sponsored by the state. This was the situation of the Jews in Alexandria and in Berenice in Cyrenaica, and it was upheld by the Romans when they took over the administration. In Roman times there existed a number of clubs (*collegia*) which were voluntary organisations for some religious or social purpose.¹⁷ The Jewish groups in Roman towns occupied a position similar, but not identical to that of these *collegia*. They differed in that membership was by birth and the association exercised a much wider influence over the lives of its members. A number of special edicts regulated the position of the Jewish groups and gave them freedom to practise their religion and (subject to certain restrictions) to follow their own customs and laws.^{3c, 7f.}

The privileges which were thus granted to the Jews by the Romans were on a scale unequalled in their treatment of other religions. Above all, the Jews were allowed to keep their Sabbath, and special arrangements were made to free them from fulfilling any duties which conflicted with their observance of that day. Exemption of Jews from military service was sporadic, but Jews in the army were apparently free from duties on the Sabbath.¹⁸ They were allowed to have their own markets for food, and they had full freedom to carry on their religious ritual in the synagogues. This freedom included the right to raise funds for local use and the very unusual privilege of being allowed to send money overseas; this particular privilege was concerned with the temple tax of half a shekel which every Jew over twenty years of age was required to send to Jerusalem (*cf.* Mt. 17:24-27).^{7g} The Jews were also allowed to live according to their own laws as far as religious and civil cases were concerned; for criminal matters they naturally came under the Roman jurisdiction (*cf.* Acts 19:12-17). Jews who were not Roman citizens were allowed to practise polygamy and follow Jewish laws of hereditary

succession, but those who were Roman citizens had to observe Roman law in these matters. Finally, the Jews were spared from taking part in pagan

[p.245]

festivals and ceremonies to which they had conscientious objections. This privilege arose particularly in connection with the imperial cult, and in return for it the Jews were expected to show their devotion to the Emperor in other ways, such as by praying regularly for him and dedicating synagogues to him.

In granting these privileges to the Jews the Romans were not moved wholly by a disinterested affection for them, although it is true that by and large the Jews took care to cultivate good relationships with the Romans throughout the Dispersion; in this respect they copied the political wisdom of Herod the Great rather than the rashness of the Jews of Palestine who eventually broke out in open rebellion against the Romans with disastrous consequences to themselves. The Romans were moved more by their traditional conservatism in provincial administration and above all by questions of political expedience. During the first century AD Parthia was a standing menace to Roman security on the eastern border of the Empire, and the Romans realised that it was vital to maintain friendly relations with the Jews in the Empire both because of their own strength and because of the danger of any alliance between the Jews and the Parthians.

Within this situation of tolerance and protection by the Roman government the Jews carried on their own way of life. Their set-up was essentially religious and centred on the synagogue and its worship. The synagogue was the governing body in each group of Jews. Two main types of organisation existed. In Rome the Jews were organised around independent synagogues, each of which had its own governing body or *gerousia* with a president and a small executive group of rulers. In Alexandria, on the other hand, the synagogues were organised into one group governed by a council consisting of 71 elders. This latter type of organisation of all the Jews in a city into one group appears to have been characteristic of those places where the Jews were already well established before the advent of the Romans.

The various synagogues and Jewish communities were not independent units but were joined together by strong unofficial links. Before AD 70 the sanhedrin in Jerusalem possessed some

[p.246]

kind of influence over the Dispersion, although its precise legal powers, if any, are uncertain.¹⁹ All Jews were linked with Palestine by the payment of the temple tax, and those who were able to do so went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the occasion of the great festivals (Acts 2:5-11; 8:27f.). Through trade and commerce there must have been a considerable amount of coming and going between all the more important Jewish settlements, so that the Jews everywhere were conscious of being one unified people.

III. Religious Life in the Dispersion

The most conspicuous and characteristic feature of Judaism in the Dispersion, as also in Palestine itself, was that it was a religious community. The Jews owed their special religious

position to two facts, the special choice by God of their nation and their possession of the law of God. Apart from observance of the law a man's privilege of Jewish birth was religiously valueless. It was true that not all the observances required by the law could be upheld outside Palestine—nor within Palestine itself after AD 70—but nevertheless the Jews of the Dispersion sought to honour the law according to the best of their ability. For all his love of things Greek and his desire to expound the law in terms of Greek philosophy, Philo of Alexandria was at heart an orthodox Jew who kept the law punctiliously, and it was a group of Hellenistic Jews from Asia who led the attack against Paul for, as they alleged, bringing Greeks into the temple (Acts 21:27-29). The various modifications which required to be made in the law by Jews living under Greek or Roman governments were of slight importance in comparison with their fundamental loyalty to it.

The basic character of worship in the Dispersion followed naturally from this veneration of the law. Its content was that of the ethical monotheism of the Old Testament and Palestinian Judaism, a religion free from the use of images and idols with a lofty moral emphasis. There was of course no sacrificial temple worship outside Jerusalem (except at Leontopolis in Egypt), synagogue worship being the universal custom. A description has come down to us of the great synagogue in Alexandria, built like

[p.247]

a basilica with a double row of pillars and golden seats for the elders; the various trades sat in their own areas, and when the time came for the congregation to say Amen the attendants had to signal by waving flags (Tosefta Sukkah 4:6).^{6b} There is little information available about the nature of synagogue worship in the first century AD, but in Acts 13:15 we have a glimpse into a typical Dispersion synagogue with its order of service containing prayers, readings from the law and prophets and an address. H. Lietzmann notes that the prayer of the high priest in 3 Maccabees 2:1-20 reflects the kind of prayer used in Alexandria, and also draws attention to the Jewish prayers found in the later Christian work, the Apostolic Constitutions. These reveal a worship that is essentially based on the Old Testament with great emphasis on God's creative power and His mighty acts in history, but also shows certain traces of Hellenistic modes of thought.^{4b}

The synagogues were the centres of a vigorous missionary movement. Jesus said of the Pharisees that they "traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte" (Mt. 23:15), and this comment on the fervour of proselytism in Palestine is echoed by the Roman poet Horace with regard to the Dispersion: "like the Jews, we will force you to come over to our party."²⁰ There was a considerable longing at this time among the pagan peoples of the Empire for a satisfying religion, and it has often been remarked that Christianity profited by this situation, being able to offer a form of religion which lacked the disadvantages inherent in Judaism while preserving all that was best in it. But this should not blind us to the fact that the Jews themselves were markedly successful in their missionary enterprise, as is witnessed by the numbers of proselytes whom we meet in the pages of the New Testament. A very large part of the Jewish literature which has survived from this period has clear apologetic tendencies, even when it is not specifically addressed to the outsider. Attempts were made to remove the obstacles in the way of conversion to Judaism. The ritual aspects of the faith were toned down, while the moral and philosophical side was emphasised. Circumcision was naturally the chief obstacle in the way of men, and this helps to explain why more women became converts, although circumcision was often accepted in the second generation of converts

[p.248]

(Juvenal, *Satires* 14:96-106).

Hence there grew up around the synagogues considerable groups of Gentiles who were Jews in all but circumcision (but consequently deprived, at least in theory, of any share in the age to come) or who had taken even this decisive step and were fully incorporated in the Jewish people. The two classes were called God-fearers and proselytes respectively.^{2b, 7i}

The Jews could not live in the Hellenistic world outside Palestine without being influenced to some extent by their environment. The differences which arose between them and their Palestinian brethren can easily be exaggerated, if we fail to remember that Hellenistic influences also operated in Palestine, but some differences certainly existed.²¹ We should not pay too much attention to the syncretistic fringe of Judaism found especially in Asia Minor and testified to in the magical papyri; this was no more typical of Dispersion Judaism than the Protestant underground sects of today are of orthodox Christianity.²² On the whole Judaism was an exclusive movement, intolerant of other religions and shunning social intercourse with non-Jews. The influences which played upon it consequently affected it only superficially and did not change its essential character.

The most notable effect of Hellenisation was that the Jews of the Dispersion learned to worship in the vernacular with an astounding celerity when compared with, say, the Roman Catholic Church. Greek was the language of the synagogue. The principal literary memorial of the Dispersion which has come down to us is the Old Testament in Greek which was of course the *lingua franca* of the eastern Roman Empire. This must inevitably have produced some differences in the understanding of the Old Testament, but these were merely superficial.

Jewish daily life was also affected by the conditions of the Dispersion. The influence was of course not always towards Hellenisation; in the countryside of Egypt the Jews tended to adopt an Egyptian rather than a Greek way of life. There was certainly a 'liberal' movement in some quarters, and it was not

[p.249]

unheard of for Jews to be seen at the public baths or the games. We also know that the Jews shared to some extent in the artistic pursuits of their neighbours, as is witnessed by the various finds made by archaeologists, particularly at Dura-Europos.²³ As far as Egypt is concerned, there is evidence that the Jews began to adopt non-Jewish personal names and to follow Hellenistic law in such matters as providing guardians for women in court and lending money at interest to fellow-Jews. It appears also that the Jews in Alexandria coveted a Greek education in the gymnasium (which was of course the equivalent of a modern school and not merely a place for training in athletics), but often found admission difficult until Claudius prohibited it; this was connected with the Jewish desire for citizenship in Alexandria, since a gymnasium education was the indispensable qualification for citizenship.^{13c} In these ways Hellenisation had its effect on the Jewish way of life, but did not change its essential character.

Finally, in this section, something must be said about the Jewish literature produced in the Dispersion. It was of course written in Greek, and its interest lies in the evidence which it gives of assimilation to Hellenistic literary forms and ways of thought and in the light which it casts on the self-consciousness and missionary zeal of Judaism. But the remains of what was a great and rich culture are meagre and fragmentary, apart from what has been preserved as a result of Christian influence, and H. Lietzmann goes so far as to speak of a systematic annihilation of Greek-speaking Jewry by her Talmudic sister.^{4c} The result is that, with the exception of such authors as Philo and Josephus, we possess little more than fragments, interesting only to the specialist, from the literature of the Dispersion. We may catalogue briefly the following types of literature.

First, there is the historical literature, written to satisfy the curiosity of the Jews themselves but also with a certain propaganda value. Here we possess in full the two great works of Josephus, the *Antiquities* and the *Jewish War*, which are our principal source for Jewish history in this period. Other writers who preceded Josephus are little more than names: Demetrius, Eupolemus and Artapanus; but we still possess the anonymous writings known

[p.250]

as *2 and 3 Maccabees* which deal with the Maccabean revolt and the legendary attempt of Ptolemy to enter the Temple in 217 BC.²⁴

Second, there are the writings of Jewish philosophers and theologians who attempted to present the Jewish faith in a Greek dress. In the second century BC Aristobulus wrote a philosophical interpretation of the Pentateuch, and his example was followed by Philo, writing in the first century AD. The *Wisdom of Solomon* in the Apocrypha is an example of Jewish wisdom literature written under stoic influence: it probably comes from Alexandria and ante-dates Philo. To this same milieu belongs *4 Maccabees* which discusses the Stoic and platonic virtues and finds them taught in the Law of Moses.²⁵

Third, we have a number of short fragments of Jewish works written in a Greek literary style. Epic poetry is represented by a poem in Homeric hexameters on Jerusalem by Philo the Elder (second century BC) and another poem dealing with the history of Shechem by Theodotus (second century BC). The poet Ezekiel (second century BC) wrote tragedies including a dramatic account of the Exodus.^{71, 2e}

The fourth class consists of works intentionally apologetic in aim. Here we must include a series of works produced under Gentile pseudonyms in order to win an audience. Thus unknown Jewish authors added material to the Sibylline Oracles with a distinct missionary bent. One unknown Jewish apologist wrote under the name of Hecataeus of Abdera (a third century BC opponent of the Jews), and the well-known letter of Aristeas to Philocrates describing the translation of the Septuagint is a pseudonym under the name of an official of Ptolemy II. Another Jewish author wrote a moralizing didactic poem under the name of Phocylides, a Greek poet of the sixth century BC. To these must be added a series of forged quotations from famous Greek poets.^{7m, 2f, 9e} In addition to these pseudepigraphs there are a number of direct apologies and tracts for the Jewish faith. Philo wrote an apology for the Jewish faith, of which only a fragment is preserved. Fortunately the two books of Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, have been preserved and give us a valuable insight into

[p.251]

the polemic which the Jews found it necessary to answer. Mention must also be made of the tract, *Joseph and Asenath*, which describes the conversion of Joseph's wife Asenath (Gen. 41:45) to the Jewish faith.²⁶

Various common themes run through this literature. The writers are concerned to rebut the accusations made against the Jewish race and to establish the superiority of their race and religion over all others. They attempt to show, for example, that the best in Gentile thought was due to Jewish inspiration. Above all they attacked the polytheism which was typical of popular religion and stressed their own monotheism. They showed that true revelation was spiritual and that it found its home in Israel.²⁷

IV. *Gentiles and Jews*

It will already have become apparent that there was a certain amount of ill-feeling against the Jews of the Dispersion. Although for the most part they attempted to preserve good relations with the Romans and did not rise in support of their compatriots in the Jewish war of AD 66-70, they were nevertheless regarded with a certain hostility by their neighbours, and mutual dislike at times broke out into scenes of violence and massacre.

A considerable amount of bitter criticism and scurrilous abuse is to be found in the pages of the Roman satirists and other writers. The Jews were attacked for their social exclusiveness and openly asserted attitude of superiority to other races. They were ready to help each other, but not other people. Their religion was dismissed as a barbarous superstition. Stories were handed down of how they worshipped an ass's head and indulged in human sacrifice, and at the best they were said to worship the air and the clouds. Their incomprehensible taboos, such as abstinence from pork, earned considerable derision, while circumcision made them a laughing stock. In an age of syncretism their uncompromising intolerance of all other religions and their aggressive proselytism were felt to be out of place. Like any other people

[p.252]

they had their share of ne'er-do-wells, and merciless scorn was poured upon the beggars and fortune-tellers, upon the petty thieves and the brawlers.^{3f, 2h}

Some of the writers who developed these criticisms of the Jews are little more than names to us. They include Hecataeus and Manetho (third century BC) who gave a pro-Egyptian version of the Exodus, Mnaseas (an Egyptian historian in the second century BC) who was responsible for the story of the Jews worshipping the ass, Damocritus (first century BC), who spread the tale of the Jews sacrificing a stranger every seven years, and Apion, a first century AD grammarian whom Josephus considered to be sufficiently dangerous to warrant a refutation.⁷⁰ The Roman critics of the Jews included several famous names. They included not only professional satirists such as Horace, Juvenal, Martial and Persius, but the orator Cicero and the historian Tacitus whose account of the Jews shows how they appeared to a well-informed but admittedly cynical historian as an object of scorn.²⁸

It is not difficult to read between the lines in these criticisms and to discount those which are to be taken no more seriously than political mud-slinging in our own day. The early Christians

were accused of Thyestean banquets and Oedipidean intercourse with as little justification. Nevertheless, the contempt felt by Greeks and Romans alike is not to be explained away, and there is no doubt that considerable feeling existed against the Jews. The social tensions which were aroused, the political fear which was felt in some quarters, and the annoyance which was caused by official Roman tolerance of so intolerant a people led to persecution and bloodshed.

Persecution of the Jews in Egypt was rare in pre-Roman times, but when the first piece of serious trouble arose in AD 38 it represented the blowing of the safety valve rather than the first rise in pressure. On this occasion the Greek population in Alexandria took advantage of the visit of the Jewish king Agrippa to insult the Jews and then, in order to maintain favour with the Emperor, who was after all a friend of Agrippa, to demand that the Jews put statues of the emperor in their synagogues. When

[p.253]

the Jews refused to comply, the Prefect of Egypt, Aulus Avillius Flaccus, issued an interdict condemning the Jews as foreigners and interlopers. The Greeks immediately seized the opportunity to launch a pogrom in which insult, plunder and massacre were combined. Flaccus not only winked at these goings on but himself had 38 of the Jewish elders whipped. Shortly after he was recalled to Rome, thanks to the complaints made by Agrippa concerning an earlier dereliction of his duty towards the Jews, and he was condemned to death.²⁹ An embassy led by Philo was sent to Rome by the Jews to appeal to Caligula, but an Alexandrian embassy also arrived under Apion, and the Jews gained nothing. When Caligula died, the Jews attempted reprisals in Alexandria, but these were quelled by the Romans. The new emperor Claudius dealt with the situation in an edict which restored the old rights of the Jews; he also had two of their principal adversaries, Isidore and Lampon, put to death. This was not the end of the matter, however; a papyrus exists containing a letter of Claudius in which he sternly ordered both Greeks and Jews to behave themselves.³⁰

No more disturbances are recorded until AD 66, the year when the Jewish revolt broke out in Palestine. When a meeting was being held to decide to send an embassy to Nero, perhaps in order to assure him of Alexandrian loyalty in view of the outbreak of the revolt, a number of Jews were found to be present and only escaped being lynched when their friends came to the rescue and threatened to burn the place down. They were restrained by the prefect, Tiberius Julius Alexander (AD 66-69/70),^{13f} but the more hot-headed among them refused to listen to a renegade Jew, and the Roman troops were called out. For the second time the Jews were mercilessly slaughtered (50,000 of them according to Josephus, *War* 2:487-498),^{13g} and we hear of no more trouble from them until the later rising under Trajan which led to their almost complete annihilation in Egypt.^{13h}

Trouble broke out in Rome in the reign of Tiberius when a number of rogues (including a renegade Jew) persuaded a lady called Fulvia who was a proselyte to make a valuable gift to the Temple and then absconded with it. When the lady's husband

[p.254]

complained, Tiberius ordered the Jews to be banished from Rome and the Senate passed a resolution sending 4,000 freedmen to Sardinia to quell the brigands there and be a prey to the unhealthy climate (Jos. *Ant.* 18:84; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36; Tacitus, *Annals* 2:85).^{9b} The

banishment was only temporary, and we must indeed wonder whether it could have been carried out effectively. Caligula was of course opposed to the Jews—and to anybody who denied his divinity³¹—but Claudius showed a more favourable attitude. In his reign, however, there took place the famous riots "at the instigation of Chrestus", and a consequent banishment of the Jews for a further period (Acts 18:2). It remains uncertain whether these riots were due to disturbances among the Jews consequent upon the coming of Christianity to Rome.³² Once again the banishment can have been neither long nor complete, and when we come to the reign of Nero we find the Jews well-established at court in such persons as Poppaea, the mistress and later the wife of the emperor, and Aliturus the actor.³³ Josephus himself lived in Rome with court connections, and later still Plotina, the wife of Trajan, may have been strongly pro-Jewish.³⁴

These accounts of the situation of the Jews in Alexandria and Rome give some indication of the way in which anti-Jewish feeling showed itself and make it clear that the blame is not easy to apportion. They confirm that anti-Jewish feeling arose most readily among the neighbours of the Jews, and that in general the Roman government acted against the Jews only when it could hardly do otherwise.

V. Jews and Christians

The story of the attitude of the Jews of the Dispersion to the spreading Christian mission belongs to the history of the Church and hardly to an article which attempts to deal with the background of the New Testament.³⁵ It is sufficient, therefore, to note briefly at this point that the Jewish Dispersion effectively paved the way for the coming of Christianity in a number of ways, as well as providing opposition later to its advance. Its greatest

[p.255]

literary monument, the Septuagint, became the Bible of the early Church, although not of Jesus Himself. The mutual traffic between the Dispersion and Palestine promoted the assimilation of Hellenistic ways of thought in Palestine, so that the background to the teaching of Jesus must not be regarded as exclusively "Palestinian"; the days are gone when any Hellenistic-sounding text in the Gospels must promptly be pronounced "late" or inauthentic, and we have learned that Jew and Greek are both "Tutors unto Christ". Finally, the Jewish Dispersion undoubtedly facilitated the expansion of Christianity. The Christian missionaries began their work in the synagogues where they presented Jesus as the awaited Jewish Messiah and won a response from the God-fearers and proselytes, and to a lesser degree from the Jews themselves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BRIEF ACCOUNTS in *The New Bible Dictionary*, pp. 318-320 (A. F. Walls); W. D. Davies, 'The Jewish State in the Hellenistic World' (*Peake's Commentary*, pp. 686-692); H. Lietzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church*, 1953, pp. 75-103;

See also F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, 1920, I, pp. 137-168; W. O. E. Osterley (and T. H. Robinson), *A History of Israel*, Oxford, 1932, II, pp. 400-424; T. Reinach in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, pp. 560-574; E. Schürer in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, V, pp. 91-09;

I. Howard Marshall, "The Jewish Dispersion in New Testament Times," *Faith and Thought* 100.3 (1972-3): 237-258.

H. Hegermann in J. Leipoldt and W. Grundmann, *Umwelt des Urchristentums*, Berlin, 1965, I, pp. 292-345; II, pp. 234-314.

STANDARD WORKS include: W. Bousset and H. Gressmann, *Die Religion des Judentums*, Tübingen, 1966; J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire romain*, Paris, 1914; R. H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha*, 1963; E. Schürer, *The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 1885-90.

SOURCES: in English translation: C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, 1956; in Latin: R. Neher-Bernheim, *Le Judaïsme dans le Monde Romain*, Paris, 1959; in German: H. Hegermann, *op. cit.*

SPECIALIST WORKS include: H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt*, 1924; P. Dalbert, *Die Theologie der hellenistisch-jüdischen Missionsliteratur*, Hamburg-Volksdorf, 1954; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman period*, New York, 1953-69; L. Goppelt, *Christentum und Judentum im ersten and zweiten Jahrhundert*, Gütersloh, 1954; V. A. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1957-64; A. M. Doms, *Fragmenta Pseudepigraphorum Quae Supersunt Graeca*, Leiden, 1970.

Full bibliographies in R. H. Pfeiffer, *op. cit.*, and H. Hegermann, *op. cit.*

© 1972 I. Howard Marshall & The Victoria Institute. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in June 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

NOTES

¹ The word *diaspora*, used in Jn. 7:35, is found a dozen times in the LXX and refers to the people of Israel exiled among the nations and to their state or place of exile. In the NT the word is also used with reference to Christians; they are scattered abroad in the world, away from their heavenly homeland (Jas. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1). See K. L. Schmidt in G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2, pp. 98 -104.

² Within the Roman Empire, which had a total population of about 55,000,000, the number of Jews is variously estimated between 3,000,000 and 6-7,000,000 (See 2a; 3a). According to H. Lietzmann (4a), there were about 4,000,000 Jews in the Empire, of whom 500,000 lived in Palestine. There were also large numbers of Jews living outside the Empire in the Middle East.

R. H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times*, 1963. (a). p. 189; (b). pp. 194 -196; (c). pp. 200-210; (d). pp. 212-224; (e). pp. 210-212; (f). pp. 224-230; (g). pp. 197-199; (h). p. 191.

³ J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire romain*, Paris, 1914. (a). 1, p. 76; (b). 2, pp. 291-326; (c). 1, 413-424; (d). 2, pp. 265-279; (e). 2, p. 145 n. 5.

⁴ H. Lietzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church*, 1953. (a), p. 76; (b). pp. 90, 101-103; (c). pp. 75f.

⁵ The ubiquity and numbers of the Jews are testified to by a number of ancient writers, including Strabo (quoted in Josephus, *Antiquities* 14:115-118); 1 Maccabees 15:16-24; Sibylline Oracles 3, 271f.; Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 36; in *Flaccum* 7; Josephus, *War* 2:398; 7:43-45.

⁶ F. J. F. Jackson and K. Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, 1920, (a). 1, pp. 137f., 147 ; (b). 1, pp. 152f.; A. Alt, *Where Jesus Worked*, 1961.

⁷ E. Schürer, *The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 1885 -1890, (a). 2:2, p. 223 n. 10; (b). 2:2, pp. 233f.; (c). 2:2, p. 57 n. 44; (d). 2:2, pp. 276-279; (e). 2:2, pp. 271f.; (f). 2:2, pp. 252-270; (g). 2:2, pp. 288-290; (h).

2:1, pp. 184-190; (i). 2:2, pp. 291-327; (j). 2:3, pp. 195ff. (especially 200-208, 211-219); (k). 2:3, pp. 228-248; (l). 2:3, pp. 222-228; (m). 2:3, pp. 270-320; (n). 2:3, pp. 248-270; (o). 2:3, pp. 249-262.

⁸ C. H. Kraeling, *Jour. of Biblical Literature*, 1932, 51, 130-160.

⁹ C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background*, 1956. (a). No. 52; (b). No. 48; (c). No. 27; (d). Nos. 126, 179 - 191; (e). Nos. 207, 221; (f). Nos. 199-202; (g). No. 45; (h). Nos. 5, 6.

¹⁰ Valenus Maximus 1:3. Jupiter Sabazius (the name of a god worshipped in Asia Minor) is evidently a misunderstanding of, or an attempt to find a Roman equivalent for, Yahweh Sabaoth. The Jews in question may have been part of the retinue of Simon's embassy; see 7b.

¹¹ Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 23. The synagogue of the Freedmen in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9) may have been for the descendants of these Roman Jewish freedmen (7c).

¹² By the fourth century there were in existence synagogues of the Augusteans, Agrippians (i.e. of Jews belonging to the households of Augustus and his minister Agrippa), Herodians, Volumnians, Campesians, Syburesians (i.e. from the Campus Martins and Subura districts), Hebrews (i.e. Aramaic-speaking Jews from Palestine), Vernaculi, Calcarensians (i.e. limekiln workers), Sekeni, Tripolitans, Elaians (i.e. of the Olive), and (possibly) Calabrians. See G. La Piana, *Harvard Theological Review*, 1927, 20, 183-403, especially 341-393.

¹³ Earlier accounts of the Jewish dispersion in Egypt are now superseded by the brilliant picture given in the prolegomena to V. A. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, Cambridge, Mass., 1957-64. (a). 1, pp. 1-111; (b). 1, pp. 39-41, 59-74; (c). 1, pp. 25-44; (d). 1, pp. 65-74; (e). 2, Nos. 153-156; (f). 2, p. 418; (g). 1, pp. 78 - 85.; (h). 1, pp. 85-93; (i). 2, No. 157.

¹⁴ For the Elephantine papyri see A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford, 1923; extracts in D. W. Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times*, 1958, pp. 256-269.

¹⁵ See 7d and A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Oxford, 1963.

¹⁶ The older authorities (7e) followed Josephus in holding that the Jews shared Greek citizenship in Alexandria. For the modern view see 13b; H. Idris Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt*, 1924.

¹⁷ See "Clubs, Roman" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

¹⁸ Exemption from military service was granted to Jews in Asia in the time of Julius Cæsar (49 BC; Jos., *Ant.* 14:223-240), but there is no evidence that this was the rule elsewhere (3d). For observance of the sabbath by soldiers see Jos., *Ant.* 14:226f.; cf. 13:251; here again the evidence is very meagre.

¹⁹ The authority of the sanhedrin outside Judaea was a moral authority, dependent on prestige rather than on legal position (7h). The historicity of the incident in Acts 9:2, where the high priest sends letters to the synagogues at Damascus, requesting the extradition of Jewish Christians, has often been questioned (3e); see, however, J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 1969, p. 74. While there is no supporting evidence for this authority of the high priest (or the sanhedrin), there is equally no evidence that would deny the possibility of the high priest using his moral authority in a special case, such as this one was, over synagogues in a town which was in close touch with Jerusalem.

²⁰ Horace, *Satires* 1:4: 142f. On proselytism see especially J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, 1958, pp. 11-19.

²¹ W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 1955, pp. 1-16.

²² On Jewish syncretism in Asia Minor see G. Johnston, *The Doctrine of the Church in the New Testament*, Cambridge, 1943, pp. 15-18. For the use of Jewish terminology in the magical papyri see 9c, and for Jewish "magicians" see Acts 13:6; 19:13-16.

²³ C. Roth, *Jewish Art*, 1961; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, New York, 1953-69.

²⁴ For Josephus see the Loeb translation (9 vols.). For the other writers mentioned see 7j; 2c; R. Marcus, "Hellenistic Jewish Literature", in L. Finkelstein, *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion*, 1961, 2, pp. 1077-1115; A. M. Denis, *Fragmenta Pseudepigraphorum Quae Supersunt Graeca*, Leiden, 1970, contains all the Greek fragments mentioned in the text.

²⁵ See 7k; 2d. On Philo see E. R. Goodenough, *Introduction to Philo Judæus*, New Haven, 1940; H. Lewy, *Philo: Selections*, Oxford, 1946; complete works in the Loeb translation (12 vols.) and extracts in 9d. For 4 Maccabees see R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1964, 2, pp. 653-685.

²⁶ The fragment of Philo is preserved in Eusebius, *Præparatio Evangelica* 8:11. Extracts from Josephus in 9f. Editions of Joseph and Asenath by P. Batiffol (*Studia Patristica* 1-2, Paris, 1889 -1890) and M. Philonenko (Leiden, 1968).

²⁷ See 7n; 2g; P. Dalbert, *Die Theologie der hellenistisch-jüdischen Missionsliteratur*, Hamburg, 1954.

²⁸ See Horace, *Satires* 1:4:142f.; 1:5:100; 1:9:68-72; Juvenal, *Satires* 3:286-298; 6:542-591; 14:96-106; Martial, *Epigrams* 1:41; 11:94; 12:57; Persius 5:179-114; Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 2g; Tacitus, *Histories* 5:1-13.

²⁹ His death was probably for being involved in a plot concerning the Emperor and not as a result of this incident: A Momigliano in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v.

³⁰ See 13d and, in addition to the writings of Philo (*Legatio ad Gaium, In Flaccum*), the papyri in 9g, 13e.

³¹ Despite this, Herod Agrippa was one of the friends of Caligula; *Jos. Ant.* 18: 236f.

³² Suetonius, *Claudius* 25. The possibilities are. (1). that Chrestus was the name of an actual person who was responsible for the disturbances (it was in fact a common name among slaves); (2), that Chrestus, was a wrong pronunciation of Christus (cf. Tertullian *Apology* 3) and Suetonius misunderstood what he heard, the real the riots being some form of Messianic excitement, or, (3). conflict caused by the spread of Christianity Jews in Rome. See W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Edinburgh, 1902, pp. xxif.

³³ *Jos., Ant.* 20:195; *Life* 16. The picture of Poppaea given by Tacitus is somewhat different.

³⁴ See 13i; the writer is somewhat sceptical regarding the evidence.

³⁵ L. Goppelt, *Christentum und Judentum im ersten and zweiten Jahrhundert*. Gütersloh, 1954, gives the most recent account.