

DIASPORA SYNAGOGUES AND THE SEPTUAGINT

How many synagogues were there among the Diaspora at the time of Paul?

I could not find precise numbers, nor even reasonable estimates of how many synagogues there were among the Diaspora during Paul's day. However, the New Testament indicates fourteen cities beyond the borders of Israel having synagogues in existence before Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, to say nothing of numerous synagogues mentioned that were located within the Land itself. Moreover, regarding the later-mentioned synagogue of Satan in the Revelation (Revelation 3:1), Sardis had a historically large and influential synagogue.¹

Prior to the destruction of the Temple, Jewish worship consisted largely of daily sacrifices, as well as the annual feasts and festivals. These activities were conducted by priests and were attended by the *am ha'aretz* (people of the land) in addition to those who made pilgrimages to the Holy Land from all over the world: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, those from Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, as well as from those parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, Rome, Cretans, and Arabs (Acts 2:9-11). Some of these pilgrims also attended the Synagogue of the Freedmen, consisting of Hellenistic Jews (Acts 6:8-9).

Such Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora lend evidence to the existence of synagogues of significance all over the eastern Mediterranean basin (Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia).² It is probable that synagogues of the Diaspora were everywhere by 200 BC.³ Many synagogues of the Diaspora likely were fully established in the early fourth century (easily inferred from the commission to translate the Holy Scriptures from Hebrew into the common language of the Greek-speaking world (after Alexander had conquered most of the known world).

There is an obvious correlation between the existing synagogues and the starting of churches in every place (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Paul determined to preach the gospel

¹ The synagogue of Sardis was located between Smyrna and Philadelphia on Asia's central trade route to the Near East. It should not be difficult to imagine legalistic Jews from this large and influential synagogue endeavoring to intimidate the spiritual churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia (compare Revelation 2:9 with 3:9). Moreover, the church of Sardis was spiritually dead, though it appeared otherwise (Revelation 3:1), a malady ancient Jewry struggled mightily with; namely becoming enamored with self-righteous, dead works (Hebrews 6:1; 9:14).

² Acts 6:9.

³ Philo of Alexandria (Jewish philosopher circa 20 BC-AD 50), a contemporary of Jesus, Paul, and Josephus, wrote of his fellow Jews: "For so populous are the Jews that no one country can hold them, and therefore they settle in very many of the most prosperous countries in Europe and Asia [Minor] both in the islands and on the mainland..." (*Against Flaccus* VII. 45-46).

to the Jew first, but ultimately to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16; Acts 17:1-2; 28:28). He taught in the synagogues (Acts 13:5) and the marketplaces (the agora, Acts 17:17), also at places of prayer (the riverside, Acts 16:13), and at places of public discourse (the Areopagus, Acts 17:19-22). Yet Paul's priority was to begin with the synagogues. Thus, while the exact number of first century synagogues of the Diaspora is not known, it certainly must have been in the hundreds.⁴ The greatest concentration of synagogues of the Diaspora were located throughout Asia Minor. But there were large synagogues in Babylon, Alexandria, Antioch, Sardis, Rome, Ostia, and elsewhere. These large synagogues no doubt influenced Jewry throughout the world.⁵

First century literature identifies numerous synagogues, though archeological evidence remains scant. Nevertheless, the consensus is that all large Jewish communities had synagogues. However, the synagogues of Delos and Ostia are the only locations that can be dated archaeologically prior to the second century AD. Such scant archeological remains led some to surmise that early synagogues began in homes. Others conjecture that buildings were built atop earlier structures indicating continuous use before and after the second temple was destroyed.

Did 100% of the Diaspora Jews use the LXX?

No, likely not 100%, but most probably did. *The Diaspora* refers to the dispersal of Jewish exiles throughout the world from their homeland since the sixth century BC.⁶ However, over the ages, the term became quite nuanced, carrying cultural and socio-economic values as well as religious mores and regulations, combining them with philosophical, political, and even eschatological undertones.

Jews inhabited the first century Mediterranean world in large numbers.⁷ Jewish communities lived in diverse and ever-changing social settings. Therefore, Barclay

⁴ "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." Acts 15:21.

⁵ In the first century AD, Diaspora Jewry inhabited most cities and towns of the Roman Empire, far outnumbering the Jews in Palestine even before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Thereafter, the hubs of Judaism shifted from cities and regions to countries and nations: from Babylon and Persia to Greece and Rome, then from the European Countries to Russia and the United States.

⁶ 586 BC.

⁷ Estimates range widely from four to eight million. There were some 50,000 Jews living in Rome in the first century, most of which spoke Greek, a relatively few spoke Hebrew and Latin. There was considerable mobility among Diaspora Jewry due to unrest and financial ventures. Examples: There were three expulsions of Jews from Rome: 139 BC; AD 19; AD 49. Moreover, there were an estimated 200,000 Jews residing in Alexandria: where there were three armed uprisings. Most Alexandrian Jews spoke Greek as their native language.

states, “Clearly no single piece of evidence can be taken to represent Diaspora Judaism as a whole.”⁸

Following the death of Alexander, under the rulership of the Ptolemies, the Library of Alexandria was founded, (323-282 BC). In the early third century BC, Ptolemy II commissioned the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek under the direction of the high priest in Jerusalem, who sent six bilingual translators from each of the twelve tribes to participate in the project. The Septuagint (LXX) was completed between the third and first centuries BC.⁹

The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 marked a pivotal point in Jewish worship from earlier priestly practices to later rabbinic study. The necessary formalities associated with the sacrificial system of temple worship prior to AD 70, gave way to the informalities of Post AD 70 synagogue worship, allowing congregational members to perform the reading of Scripture, to offer public prayers, and even to teach the congregation. However, rabbinic synagogues were more than just an institution for teaching. They were also used for social events, lodging travelers, judicial proceedings, weddings, and more. Since early Christians searched and found prophecies in the Septuagint fulfilled by Jesus Christ, the Jews rejected the Septuagint entirely. Early Christians respected the Septuagint because Jesus and the Apostles cited it so frequently.¹⁰

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⁸ Barclay, John M. G. *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE to 117 CE)* by (University of California Press Ltd in arrangement with T&T Clark Ltd, London, England, 1996, Page 4).

⁹ The piecemeal completion of the translation of the Hebrew Bible (Jewish *Tanakh*) into the Greek language (Septuagint, aka LXX) is estimated to range from 280-132 BC).

¹⁰ Jesus literally quoted the LXX some 90 times. The Book of Hebrews quotes the LXX almost exclusively.