

THE JEWISH DISPERSION

We are told in Acts 2 that on the day of Pentecost there were in Jerusalem visitors from the east, from Mesopotamia, Media, Parthia and Elam, then from the north and north-west, from five areas of Asia Minor, Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, Pamphylia and the Roman province of Asia; from the wider Mediterranean world Egypt, Libya, Crete and Rome were represented; finally from the south some had come from Arabia. Obviously this list is not intended to be exhaustive, for it does not mention Syria with its large Jewish population; or Greece, but it does give some idea of how widely the Jews had spread in the century before the birth of Jesus. They stretched from the west coast of India to the south coast of Gaul and probably to the major ports in Spain.

The number of Jews in Arabia at the time was probably small, and they did not come into prominence until the time of Mohammed, when those in the area under his control were either driven out or annihilated, apart from the few who accepted Islam. This was due to special reasons at the time and did not express the normal tolerant attitude of Islam to the Jews. Since Arabian Jewry had little influence on Judaism as a whole, it need not be considered further.

The Eastern Dispersion

It can only be regarded as remarkable that we know virtually nothing of the history and conditions of the large number of Jews living in Parthia and Media during the first century B.C. We may reasonably assume that the picture given us in *Tobit* of a hard-working and pious community often troubled by its neighbours (cf. pp. 61, 96) still held true. It has been pointed out that both in the period when Palestine was under Ptolemaic rule and even more when it was absorbed into the Roman sphere of influence, there was a hostile frontier separating Judea from the eastern dispersion. This must not be exaggerated. Josephus' description of the importance of Nehardea and Nisibis for the collection of Temple taxes—the half-shekel—and gifts (*Ant.* XVIII. ix. 1) rings true. His account suggests, however, that local unrest restricted the number of pilgrims, and that those that risked the long journey went in large caravans for self-protection. It was this lack of "law and order" which increased the Jewish tendency to become town-dwellers in Mesopotamia and Persia.

One interesting result of these disturbed conditions was the setting-up of what was essentially a semi-autonomous Jewish state for a few years in Babylonia. Josephus tells us with considerable pleasure of the exploits of Asineus and Anileus and claims that their power lasted fifteen years (*Ant.* XVIII. ix. 1-9). Power, however, corrupted and finally destroyed the brothers. On their death

the local inhabitants rose against the Jews and massacred many of them.

A more responsible character, Zamaris, left Babylonia at the head of 500 mounted archers. Herod the Great settled him in the far north of his kingdom to control the trade routes from Damascus and protect them from the wild men of Trachonitis. Both he and his descendants seem to have been very popular and successful, and they created an important centre of Jewish population drawn mainly from the Eastern dispersion (*Ant.* XVII. ii. 1, 2).

Evidence for the living contact between Babylonia and Jerusalem may be found in Herod's calling of Hananel from there to be his high priest (p. 112). Common sense suggests that he must have been well known in Jerusalem and acceptable to most of the priestly leaders there.

Perhaps the best illustration of the links between the East and Judean orthodoxy is offered by Hillel. He had studied Torah in Babylonia, though the name of the school or schools has not come down to us. As a mature man he came to Jerusalem about the middle of the first century B.C. to study at the feet of Shemaiah and Abtalion, the acknowledged leaders of the Pharisaic party. After some years he returned to Babylonia, but before the end of Herod's reign he was back in Jerusalem and was soon recognized as leader of the more liberal wing of the Pharisees, especially as he could speak in the name of his two great teachers. His story shows that the Pharisaic leaders in Jerusalem accepted the qualifications given by schools in Babylonia, when former students came to Jerusalem for higher Torah studies. Equally it shows that the provincial could be more liberal than those at the centre.

Historically, the main importance of the Eastern dispersion was its offer of a solidly traditional background for Palestinian orthodoxy, which was constantly being threatened by the infiltration of Greek thought, and of a refuge, when Palestinian Jewry was smashed by Roman power and the growth of Christianity.

There is not much evidence for Jewish missionary work in the area. The chief exception was Adiabene, a small vassal-kingdom of the Parthians in the north of Mesopotamia. Josephus gives us the story how its king Izates, his mother Helena and his whole family were converted to Judaism (*Ant.* XX. ii-iv). Their tombs are still extant in Jerusalem a short distance to the north of the old wall. It seems clear that the local Jews, if there were any, had nothing to do with his conversion, which was very unpopular among the nobles of Adiabene.

Jews in Asia Minor

There are no reasons for doubting Josephus' statement that Antiochus III (223-187 B.C.), after he had won Palestine from the Ptolemies (p. 69), caused his general Zeuxis to send two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylonia to Lydia and Phrygia, where there had been plots against him, because he knew he could count on Jewish loyalty (*Ant.* XII. iii. 4). Because they were not simply voluntary immigrants, they were given many communal rights and often full citizenship in the cities in which they were settled. His successors followed the same policy, and Sir W. M. Ramsay has argued

convincingly in his *Cities of St. Paul* that if Paul was a citizen of Tarsus, it meant that one of his ancestors was settled there with full citizen rights about 170 B.C. by Antiochus IV, when he changed the city's constitution.

It may be that because full citizenship brought them into closer contact with their Hellenized, pagan fellow-citizens, it may be because they were moved so suddenly to an ancient area of Greek culture, they were more than most out of touch with Jerusalem. Here, and virtually here alone in the dispersion, we find evidence for the syncretistic influence introduced by Hellenism (pp. 70, 79), though it may be that modern scholars place too sinister interpretations on the evidence, which may have been little more than an olive-branch to their pagan fellow-citizens. After all, no one takes the pagan depiction of the sun-god in his chariot found in mosaics from Galilean synagogues as evidence for a syncretism which undoubtedly did not exist at the time. Some pagan influence, however, there was, and Acts 19: 13-19 gives some evidence for this. It may also explain Paul's stress on the fact that he was "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil. 3: 5), i.e. the language of his home in Tarsus was Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek. Probably there was a greater acceptance of the Gospel by Jews in this area than anywhere else. The opposition of many of them mentioned in Acts may have been due as much to the fear of losing a favoured position as to religious objections.

All this helps to explain why the Jews of Asia Minor find so little mention in the story of Jewry's last desperate struggles against Rome. They found themselves at home in their surroundings and experienced less dislike from their pagan neighbours than most in the Western dispersion.

Rome

We know little or nothing of the beginnings of Roman Jewry. Perhaps the first Jews to settle there were merchants from Alexandria and Asia Minor. The real growth came as a result of Pompey's interference in Judean affairs, when so many of his Jewish prisoners of war were sold as slaves. When they obtained their freedom, most lived on there as poor freedmen. The community must have been severely shaken by two expulsions, the first under Tiberius (*Ant.* XVIII. iii. 5) and the second under Claudius (Acts 18: 2). The former was the result of a scandal narrated by Josephus, but Philo is probably correct in seeing the anti-Jewish feelings of the emperor's favourite Sejanus as the real cause. Suetonius tells us that the latter was due to internal riots in the Jewish community; most scholars accept that the preaching of Christ lay behind them.

Though in both cases the expulsion order did not stay long in force and may well not have been strictly carried through, their possibility shows us the essential weakness of the community. In addition we have records of eleven synagogues in the city, which suggests its splintered nature. So, here too, while Roman Jewry is of importance in the history of the apostolic and sub-apostolic Church, it did not leave any significant mark on the development of Judaism.

Alexandria

Between the collapse of Persian rule in Egypt in 404 B.C. and Alexander the

Great's conquest of the land in 332 B.C. all known traces of the Jewish communities mentioned in Jer. 44 and of the settlement at Elephantine (p. 23) vanished. There must have been survivors, but they will have merged with the new influx brought in by the Greeks.

When Alexander conquered Egypt, he evidently felt that its age-old communities would not be sufficiently open to the Hellenistic concepts he brought with him. So he built Alexandria, a new city on the Mediterranean, to be mainly Greek in blood and altogether in culture.

Though Josephus, quoting Hecataeus, claims that many Jews joined Alexander's forces (*Contra Ap.* I. 22, cf. *Ant.* XI. viii. 5), there is no suggestion that they were included among the veterans he settled in Alexandria.* Indeed their later anomalous position with massive rights but yet not full citizenship suggests that they were inserted among the original founding members by Ptolemy I. He was able to seize Jerusalem on the Sabbath (*Ant.* XII. i. 1), and took many Jews back with him to Egypt—according to *The Letter of Aristeas* over a hundred thousand—some of whom he placed in garrisons up and down the country; presumably the majority were settled in Alexandria. They were soon joined by others who came because of the advantages offered them. As a result we find at a later date that of the five districts into which the city was divided, two were regarded as Jewish, and they were not confined to them.

Though they were not full citizens, the Jews of Alexandria were in full control of their internal affairs. This need not have caused difficulties, but the additional privileges given them by the Romans aroused jealousy, the more so as these meant that they were relieved of some of the onerous duties falling on others. In addition they were probably never forgiven for the help given to Julius Caesar by Antipater (p. 100) in his conquest of Egypt. Between 38 and 66 A.D. we hear of four riots between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria; in at least the first and last the Jewish community suffered very heavily.

The Greek culture of Alexandria was very mixed. The ancient superstitions and magic of old Egypt and of the Eastern Mediterranean generally mingled with the mystery religions and theosophical and gnostic concepts from India. At the same time, however, it was one of the few great centres of Hellenic culture. Here the educated Jew met the philosophical thought of Greece at its best.

Since the Ptolemies were always tolerant towards Judaism, and the Romans who followed them were normally indifferent, there was never the violent reaction to Hellenistic thought that Antiochus Epiphanes caused in Judea. There were many who opened themselves to Greek thought that they might then offer the riches of Judaism to their neighbours in terms they could understand. An example is the *Wisdom of Solomon* (c. 100 B.C.) in which Hebrew wisdom is offered in terms the Greek might understand and with the adoption of the idea of the immortality of the soul, which is opposed to Old Testament concepts. Philo (died c. A.D. 50) is an example of the Jewish Bible student who tried to harmonize it with Greek thought.

The very large number of Greek words taken up into Rabbinic Hebrew as shown by the Mishnah and Midrashim gives some idea of the influence the

* R. L. Fox, *Alexander the Great* (p. 198) says "perhaps too a contingent of Jews," but gives no evidence.

Western dispersion in general and Alexandria in particular had on the rabbis in Palestine. It went far to reduce the impact of the reaction to the policy of Antiochus Epiphanes.

In the history of religion, however, Alexandrian Jewry's greatest contribution was its translation of the Old Testament into Greek, popularly known as the Septuagint (LXX). From at least the time of Ezra (p. 48) it became general practice to translate the portions of Scripture read in public into Aramaic, the language of ordinary life. Though a tradition must have grown up rapidly, it was not allowed to write down and read this translation. So it must have remained fluid for centuries. The same must have happened in the Western dispersion, only that Greek was used. In Egypt and particularly Alexandria this was gradually felt to be inadequate. Greek friends who visited the synagogue found the translation often crude and noted its variations. So a written translation, first of the Pentateuch, then of the Prophets and Psalms and finally of the Writings was undertaken. The whole operation was completed by c. 50 B.C.

Beyond pointing out that the story told in *The Letter of Aristeas*, that the translation of the Pentateuch was made at the command of Ptolemy II (285–246 B.C.) by seventy-two translators sent from Jerusalem, is mere fantasy, we need not concern ourselves with the history of the LXX.* It is quite likely, at least for the Pentateuch, that what we now know as the LXX is in fact a revision of an earlier translation. What is important is that for the first time the revelation of God became accessible to the Gentile world divorced from the language in which it had originally been given. Until the early Christian Church adopted the LXX and based its controversy on renderings in it, which might not really express the force of the Hebrew, even Palestinian Jews were prepared to give it virtually equal standing with the original Hebrew. Then, of course, it began to be regarded as the work of Satan, and about A.D. 130 it began to be replaced among Jews by the new translation by Aquila.

The translators of the LXX faced the problems that all Bible translators have had to face. So often a literal translation of the Hebrew carried quite different connotations in Greek. The result was a language which at times differed considerably from ordinary popular Greek, but for those Gentiles who frequented the Synagogue, it was evidently easily understandable, and it provided the basic vocabulary for the messengers of the Gospel as they went out into the Greek-speaking world. Before the Church took the upper hand, it is probable that the influence of the LXX lay behind a large majority of those who joined the Synagogue or who were reckoned among the God-fearers.

* Full information and discussion may be found in Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza* (1947) and Bleddyn J. Roberts, *The Old Testament Text and Versions* (1951).