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## Chapter 4

# Exploring the Major Dispersion Terms and Realities in the Bible

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### Introduction

The concept of Jewish scattering or dispersion is evident throughout the Bible. From the time of the Old Testament, the Jews have been dispersed out of Palestine. As used in this paper, the expression “Jewish dispersion” refers to the scattering of Jews outside their homeland. It is also the technical name for all the nations outside of Palestine where Jewish people had come to live (Moo 2000:50).

In a general and expanded way, the Jewish dispersion began with the deportations by the Assyrians (722 B.C.) and Babylon (597 B.C.), and later spread throughout the Roman Empire to Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. The focus of this study will be on the Jews living outside of Palestine (Brown 1967: 55) throughout the known world during the biblical period.

This chapter fulfills three purposes. First, it seeks to survey all the Hebrew words of the Old Testament and all the Greek words of the New Testament that reveal the concept of scattering or dispersing of the Jewish people. Second, it explores dispersion realities during biblical times (e.g., synagogues, proselytes, God-fearers). Third, in light of the first two purposes, this paper aims to list some insights on the impact of the Jewish dispersion on Christianity and its missions mandate.

## Biblical Terms for the Concept of Scattering

The study of biblical scattering begins with an investigation of the major terms used in the Old and New Testaments on the concept of dispersion. This section inspects all the occurrences of the seven Hebrew roots that communicate dispersion in the Old Testament. In addition, this section discusses the two Greek cognate words on dispersion in the New Testament.

### Hebrew Root Words on the Old Testament Concept of Dispersion

The concept of dispersion or scattering in the Old Testament is contained in seven root words with different contexts and uses. Such a variety of words in Hebrew shows that there is no fixed or technical word for the concept of dispersion. The seven root words that communicate different aspects of the concept of scattering are: (1) *gola* (exiles)/*gala* (remove)/*galut* (captivity), (2) *zara* (spread, winnow), (3) *nadah* (banish), (4) *napas* (scatter), (5) *pus* (disperse), (6) *pazar* (scatter abroad), and (7) *parad* (separate).

#### Gola (Exiles)/Gala (Remove)/Galut (Captivity)

The Hebrew word *gola*, which occurs 41 times in the Old Testament,<sup>33</sup> can mean captivity, captive, those carried away, or removing. It is a feminine noun that refers to anyone carried away captive or to captivity itself. Most of the references to captivity apply to the Babylonian captivity of Judah resulting from Judah's sinful disobedience.

Related to the noun *gola* is the verb *gala*, which occurs 187 times.<sup>34</sup> In its transitive sense (which is found in the Qal, Niphal, Piel, Pual, and Hithpael stems), *galah* means "to uncover" (occurring 112 times in the Hebrew and 7 times in the Aramaic). In its intransitive sense (which is found in the Qal, Hiphil, and Hophal stems), it means "to go into exile, to remove, to depart," and occurs 75 times in the Hebrew and twice in the Aramaic). *Galah* is remotely related to the Ugaritic verb of motion *gly*, "to leave" or "to arrive at," and to the Arabic *gala*, "to emigrate."

The basic meaning of the intransitive *gala* appears in Ezekiel, where the prophet receives the command to "go forth," and in the lament of Phineas's grieving wife: "The glory of Israel is departed." Similarly, this meaning is found in Isaiah's words of lament: "The mirth of the land is gone" (Isaiah 24:11) and in

<sup>33</sup> The 41 occurrences of *gola* are found in the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Nahum, Zechariah) and Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

<sup>34</sup> Of the 187 instances of *gala*, 50 are in the Qal, 32 in the Niphal, 56 in the Piel, 38 in the Hiphil, 7 in the Hophal, 2 in the Pual, and 2 in the Hitpael.

Zophar's description of the fate of the wicked: "The increase of his house shall depart" (Job 20:28).

The prophets, especially Amos and Jeremiah,<sup>35</sup> prominently announce the judgment on Israel of being led or carried away into exile. In some passages, the Lord is designated as the one who leads Israel into captivity (Jeremiah 29:4, 7, 14; Ezekiel 39:28; Amos 5:27; Lamentations 4:22; 1 Chronicles 5:41). At one time, His activity of judging the nation is identified clearly with a political event: "... the Lord by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar" (1 Chronicles 5:41).

The Lord's judgment to lead Israel out of the land into exile functions as a major contrast to his carrying out his promises to give the people the land as a gift at the beginning of their history as a nation. Similarly, his repeated promises to them in giving the land contrasts sharply with his repeated warnings through the prophets to lead them out of the land. Thus, *gala* may have become a specialized term later in the nation's history to mean "to be taken into exile," when deportations of whole population groups as a means of conquest entered into Israel's history (Jenni and Westermann 1997:316).

In addition to *gala* and *gola*, the Hebrew word *galut* adds value to the concept of scattering. *Galut* means "captivity, captive, or carried away captive." The 15 references to the feminine noun *galut* point to a group of captives (Isaiah 20:4, 45:13; Jeremiah 24:5, 28:4), or to a period of captivity, variously specified as the captivity of Jehoiachin (2 Kings 25:27; Ezekiel 1:2) or our captivity (Ezekiel 33:21, 40:1). Almost all of the occurrences refer to the exile of Judah in Babylon.

### Zara (Spread, Winnow)

Aside from *gola/gala/galut*, the Hebrew root *zara*, which occurs 38 times in the Old Testament, contributes to the concept of dispersion the ideas of fanning, casting away, and winnowing. The basic thought behind the verb *zara* is to stir up the air to produce a scattering and spreading effect. In its verbal forms, *zara* indicates the acts of scattering or dispersion for purification or chastisement.

As grain is cleansed of chaff by using a fan to blow it away, God's people need purifying and chastening too. Thus the Lord is said to metaphorically "fan" his people (Jeremiah 15:7), with the result of them being scattered as chaff to various distant places. Moses warned Israel that this would happen if they forsook the covenant (Leviticus 26:33). Jeremiah (49:32) and Zechariah (1:19; 2:2) also referred to Israel's dispersion by the Gentile foreign invaders. They were to suffer the consequences of their disobedience and unfaithfulness to God.

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<sup>35</sup> The prophetic passages that talk of Israel's judgment in being led into captivity are Amos 1:5; 5:5, 27; 6:7; 7:11, 17 and Jeremiah 13:19, 20:4, 22:12, 27:20; cf. Lamentations 1:3.

### ***Nadah* (Banish)**

So far, we have seen that *gola/galah/galut* refer to captivity or exile and that *zara* refers to being spread or winnowed (with a view to purification or chastisement in relation to Israel). The next Hebrew word on dispersion is *nadah*, which occurs 55 times in the Old Testament, meaning “to impel, drive away, or banish.” The root basically refers to the action of forcibly driving or pushing something away.

The basic meaning of *nadah* emerges in Deuteronomy 19:5 and 20:19, where it represents the swinging action of an ax (i.e., impelling something away from oneself). David also used this forceful figure when he spoke of the disaster Absalom intended to bring upon him (2 Samuel 15:14). The root *nadah* also pictures the force of wind blowing away a swarm of locusts (Joel 2:20), and the intensity of driving a flock of sheep away (Deuteronomy 22:1) through lions (Jeremiah 50:17), men (Isaiah 13:14), or inept shepherds (Ezekiel 34:4).

Moreover, the Hebrew root is used of God, the great shepherd, who will disown and dispel the flock if they follow false under-shepherds (Deuteronomy 30:17). The flock of God’s people will be driven away from his presence into the thick darkness of captivity (Isaiah 8:22) in foreign lands, where they will be mocked (Jeremiah 24:9), eat unclean bread (Ezekiel 4:13), prefer death and will eventually die (Jeremiah 8:3).

However, in contexts where *nadah* appears, God promises not only that he will refine them, but also that he will not completely destroy them (Jeremiah 46:28). He will also return his purified flock to the green fields of the Promised Land (Ezekiel 34:16). God will gather and tend his flock, punish their former oppressors (Jeremiah 46:28), establish his own people forever in his grace (Zephaniah 3:19), and extend his grace beyond the physical descendants (Isaiah 56:8).

### **Napas (Scatter)**

In addition to *gola/galah/galut*, *zarah*, and *nadah*, the fourth Hebrew root on dispersion is *nadas*, which means “to break, dash, beat in pieces, overspread, and scatter.” It occurs in only three instances (Genesis 9:19; 1 Samuel 13:11; Isaiah 33:3), where the idea of scattering involves the act of shattering or breaking into pieces. When the concept of being broken up happens, then the scattering also occurs.

### ***Pus* (Disperse)**

The fifth Hebrew root on scattering is *pus*, which occurs 66 times in the Old Testament.<sup>36</sup> It basically means to disperse or scatter. This word is first used in Scripture to describe the scattering of the families of the Canaanites (Genesis 10:18). It happens on the heels of the Tower of Babel incident (Genesis 11), in which the builders of the tower did not want to be scattered abroad upon the earth. However, the Lord made scattering inevitable by destroying their language.

Three categories repeatedly serve as the subject or object of *pus*, namely: (1) scattering of armies, either the enemy's (Numbers 10:35) or Israel's own (1 Samuel 11:11); (2) scattering of sheep (Ezekiel 34:5-6; Jeremiah 23:1) inadvertently, or through some external threat or the absence of a shepherd; and (3) scattering of Israel, which is sometimes likened to scattered sheep (1 Kings 22:17). When the clause "I/He/the Lord scatters Israel" occurs, it is confined to the prophetic books, either as a reference to past scattering (Ezekiel 20:23) or as a threat of future scattering (Ezekiel 22:15). Thus, it is not the Assyrians or Babylonians who scatter the people of God. They are simply instruments of scattering. God himself is the "scatterer."

### ***Pazar* (Scatter Abroad)**

The first five Hebrew roots reveal different aspects of the Old Testament concept of scattering: (1) *gola/galah/galut* show captivity, (2) *zarah* highlights spreading or winnowing, (3) *nadah* stresses the idea of banishment, (4) *napas* emphasizes scattering, and (5) *pus* surfaces the idea of dispersing. The sixth Hebrew root, *pazar*, occurs ten times in the Old Testament (half of which are found in the Psalter).<sup>37</sup> It basically means "to scatter abroad, give freely." *Pazar* is also related to the Hebrew root *bazaz*, which means "to distribute, to scatter."

### ***Parad* (Separate)**

The seventh and last Hebrew root related to scattering is *parad*, which appears 26 times in the Old Testament. The basic meaning of *parad* is to divide or separate. There are four categories in the use of this word: (1) separation of a river into tributaries (Genesis 2:10), (2) separation of the wings of a bird (Ezekiel 1:11), (3) separation of friends on an amiable basis (Genesis 13:9), and (4) dispersal of peoples (Genesis 10:5). In Proverbs, *parad* has the nuance of driving

<sup>36</sup> The 64 occurrences of *pus* are broken down as follows: 12 times in the Qal, 15 times in the Hiphal, 37 times in the Hiphil. This Hebrew root is used most often in the prophets (37 times, with 18 of them in Ezekiel and 10 in Jeremiah).

<sup>37</sup> The ten occurrences of *pazar* are found in Esther 3:8; Psalm 53:5, 89:10, 112:9, 141:7, 147:16; Proverbs 11:24; Jeremiah 3:13, 50:17; Joel 3:2.

a wedge between solid friendships, thus dividing and separating friends through discord (Proverbs 16:28; cf. 18:1, 18).

In summary, there is no single, fixed, or technical Hebrew root for the concept of scattering or dispersion. Seven Hebrew words express different aspects of the concept. Of these seven roots, the words *gola/galal/galut* probably communicate more the process of “leading away,” “deportation,” or “exile.” They may have become technical terms for exile or banishment after the destruction of Jerusalem and loss of the Palestinian homeland (Schmidt 1962:99).

Regarding Israel’s captivity and scattering, God is the one who does the scattering, using foreign nations as instruments of the dispersion. Yet God will not allow the scattering to be permanent. He will cause the people’s return, after refinement and chastisement of the whole nation.

## Greek Words in the New Testament for the Concept of Dispersion

Besides investigating the major Hebrew roots on the Old Testament concept of scattering, it is important to check out the Greek words on the same concept in the New Testament. Two Greek words convey this concept of dispersion; namely: *diaspora* (scattered) and *diaspeiro* (to scatter). These two New Testament words add depth to the Old Testament understanding of dispersion.

### *Diaspora* (Scattered)

The Greek word *diaspora*, a verbal substantive, is commonly translated as “scattered.” It occurs only thrice in the New Testament. These are:

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” (James 1:1); and
3. “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1).

In John 7:35, the Jews in Palestine raise the questions, “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?” Their questions reveal a lack of comprehension of Jesus’ comment, “You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come” (John 7:34).

In these questions by the Jews, the word *diaspora* (“scattered”) is used as a reference to the Jewish minority in the midst of other religions, in this case the Greek-speaking environment (Sänger 1990:311). The “Greeks” are a general reference to Gentiles, whom Jews would normally call Greeks (cf. Col. 3:11).

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,” as a reference to the true people of God (thus broadening the Jewish roots to include the church of James’ day).

Although the figurative sense of Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) may be the possible reference to “the twelve tribes *scattered* among the nations,” it seems better to take the scholarly consensus<sup>38</sup> that the expression refers to the Jewish Christians, who were scattered across the Roman empire. The following references to Jewish institutions and practices contribute to the conclusion of a Jewish audience:

1. the believers whom James addressed met in a “synagogue” (James 2:2);
2. the believers shared the assumption that monotheism is a foundational belief (James 2:19);
3. the people believed that the law was central to God’s dealings with his people (James 1:21, 24-25; 2:8-13; 4:11-12); and
4. the people understood the Old Testament imagery of the marriage relationship to indicate the nature of the relationship between God and his people (James 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 James’ use, 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 refer to the northwest quadrant of Asia Minor bordering the Black Sea (Davids 1990:7), an area which Luke reports Paul was not allowed to evangelize.<sup>39</sup> In addition to a Jewish Christian audience, Paul addresses the Gentile Christians (1

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<sup>38</sup> Dibelius simply specifies the addressees as the *diaspora* Jewish Christian church and thus not Palestinian (Dibelius 1976: 47). Other scholars even venture to name the provenance of the letter. Moffat locates the work in Egypt, due to its alleged wisdom affinities (Moffat 1928). Reicke and Laws see similarities between the epistle to Hermas and alleged Roman flavor, such that they argue for a Roman provenance (Reicke 1964, 6 and Laws 1980, 22-26). Ropes places James in Caesarea of Palestine-Syria (Ropes 1916, 49; cf. Davids 1982, 28-34).

<sup>39</sup> In Acts 16:6-10, Luke narrated that Paul established churches in the southern area of Galatia. Of course, Paul did so later in the Western province of Asia.

Peter 1:14,18; 2:9-10, 25; 3:6; 4:3-4). He even applies categories to them that relate to Jews.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Peter's use of *diaspora* can include the "communities of people living outside their native land, which are not Jerusalem or Palestine but the heavenly city" (Davids 1990:46). These scattered communities were to view their lives on earth as temporary (thus, as aliens, sojourners, pilgrims, and foreigners who belonged to heaven).

### *Diaspeiro* (Scatter)

Aside from the three occurrences of the word *diaspora* found in John 7:35, James 1:1, and 1 Peter 1:1, it is important to discuss the verb form of *diaspora*, which is *diaspeiro*. Only three instances of this verb appear in the New Testament. These three instances occur in the following verses (all found in the Book of 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); and
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 cases, *diaspeiro* relates to the scattering of the Christians of Hellenistic Jewish origin, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians from the *diaspora*, into areas with a non-Jewish majority (Acts 11:19), but also in the area around Jerusalem and toward Samaria (Acts 8:1). The unique contribution of these verses in the use of *diaspeiro* is that those who were scattered served an essential purpose in the expansion of early Christianity or to missions (Acts 8:4-8, 40; 11:19-21).

### Use of Dispersion in the Septuagint

Besides the Hebrew and Greek words for dispersion in the Old and New Testaments, the use of the word *diaspora* in the LXX (Septuagint) can shed light on progressive use of the term over time. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew

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<sup>40</sup> For example, Peter described the Gentile Christians (i.e., who were "once not a people" and now are "the people of God" [2:10a]) as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (which are descriptions given earlier for Israel).

Old Testament (i.e., LXX or Septuagint, including the Apocrypha), the technical term *diaspora* is found in 12 passages: Deuteronomy 28:25; 30:4; Nehemiah 1:9; Psalm 146:2; Isaiah 49:6; Jeremiah 13:14; 15:7; 34:17; Daniel 12:2; Judith 5:19; 2 Maccabees 1:27; and Psalm of Solomon 8:34. They generally refer to the “dispersion of the Jews among the Gentiles” or “the Jews as thus scattered” (Schmidt 1962:99).

The term *diaspora* is used in the LXX for the exile of the scattered people of God among the Gentiles (Deuteronomy 28:25; 30:4; Psalm 146:2; Isaiah 49:6; Jeremiah 15:7; 34:17; 2 Maccabees 1:27; Judith 5:19). Moreover, *diaspora* can refer to both the dispersion and the totality of the dispersed (Isaiah 49:6; Psalm 146:2; 2 Maccabees 1:27; Psalm of Solomon 8:34). However, in the LXX the three cognate Hebrew words *gola/gala/galut* are always rendered in the Greek with words other than *diaspora*.<sup>41</sup>

## Dispersion Realities in the Bible

The study of the major Hebrew and Greek words on dispersion reveals the understanding and usage of the concept throughout the Bible. In addition, a quick survey of some key passages or instances in the Bible delineated the dispersion realities of the Jewish people in both the Old and New Testaments.

### Dispersion Realities in the Old Testament

It is difficult to ascertain how early the voluntary dispersion of the Jewish people to non-Palestinian communities began. However, there is a hint of an established Jewish colony in Damascus during the reign of King Ahab. Ben-Hadad said to the king, “I will return the cities my father took from your father. You may set up your own market areas in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria” (1 Kings 20:34). Possibly, similar alliances of Kings David and Solomon with Phoenicia would have created more similar colonies there.

However, the conquests of the Assyrian kings introduced the new dimension of dispersion. Assyria forced the transplantation of segments of the Jewish population to other parts of the empire. In the eighth century BC, Tiglath-pileser III carried many Israelites captive to Assyria (2 Kings 15:29), and Sargon transported 27,290 Hebrews from Samaria and settled them in Mesopotamia and Media (2 Kings 17:6).

Then the more thorough dispersion began with the Babylonian exile. King Nebuchadnezzar transplanted to Babylonia the choicest of the Judean population (2 Kings 24:12-16; 25:11; Jeremiah 52:15). Probably 50,000 were

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<sup>41</sup> The Greek words *αιχμαλωσια*, *αποικια*, *αποικισμος*, *μετοικεσια*, *ανδ παροικια*, are associated with the three Hebrew words *gola/gala/galut*.

transported, and Jewish communities were formed in Babylonia, as in Tel-Abib (Ezekiel 3:15) and Casiphia (Ezra 8:17). Here the Jewish religion was maintained; prophets like Ezekiel and priests like Ezra sprang up; the old laws were studied and worked over; the Pentateuch was elaborated.

Many Jews decided to remain in Babylonia, despite Cyrus's permission for the Jews to return to their land (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). From this center, Jews radiated to many parts of the East (Nehemiah 1:1ff; Tobit 1:9-22; Isaiah 11:11). Thus, the Jews reached Media, Persia, Cappadocia, Armenia, and the Black Sea.

In 608 BC, Necho took King Jehoahaz and probably others to Egypt. In this general period, colonies of Jews lived in Egyptian cities of Memphis, Migdol, Tahpanhes, and Pathros in Egypt (Jeremiah 44:1). Recently discovered papyri prove the existence of a large Jewish colony and a Jewish temple at the First Cataract in the fifth century BC.<sup>42</sup>

## Dispersion Realities in the New Testament

Having looked at the Old Testament realities of the Jewish dispersion, it is time to examine dispersion realities in the New Testament. These are quite 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 the Acts of the Apostles.

## Dispersion Realities during the New Testament Period

After his capture of Jerusalem in 63 BC, Pompey carried off hundreds of Jews to Rome, where they were sold as slaves. But in the middle of the second century BC, the Roman Senate was anxious to extend protection to the Jews. The Senate had a circular letter in favor of the Jews written to the kings of Egypt, Syria, Pergamum, Cappadocia, and Parthia, and to a number of Mediterranean provinces, cities, and islands where Jews were presumably present (1 Maccabees 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 Pentecost crowd demonstrates that the spread of the dispersion

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<sup>42</sup> Other Jews seem to have followed Alexander the Great to Egypt (Jos. *Bj* II. xviii. 8; *c. Apion* ii. 4). Many others migrated to Egypt under the Ptolemys (*Ant.* xii. i. 1, ii. 1 ff). Philo estimated the number of Jews in Egypt in the reign of Caligula (38-41 AD) at a million.

was not confined to the Roman empire. It was also prominent in the Persian sphere of influence.

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

### Dispersion Reality through the Synagogues

However, the dispersion communities were situated in different cultural settings, and they formed their own synagogues (like the "Synagogue of the Freedmen"<sup>43</sup> in Acts 6:9). The synagogues were places of assembly used by Jewish communities primarily for public worship and instruction, or for assembly purpose.

The Greek derivation of the term *sunagoge* indicates a gathering, void of any religious connotation. But with the first century AD, the term *sunagoge* appeared in Jewish sources (like Philo and Josephus) and especially in the New Testament more and more in the sense of a "place of assembly" (cf. Grabbe 1988:401-410) and a "house of worship and instruction"<sup>44</sup> (cf. Kee 1990:1-24).

Although the origin of the synagogue cannot be certainly recovered, a dominant theory has been proposed. The beginning of the synagogue could have been during the Babylonian exile, with its consolidation 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, described 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

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<sup>43</sup> The "freedmen" refers to a group of Jews originally from Italy who had settled in Jerusalem and had their own synagogue. Philo (*Legatio ad Gaium* 23.155) tells of Jews who lived across the Tiber in Rome, "most of whom were emancipated Roman citizens," originally captives brought to Italy.

<sup>44</sup> Aside from *sunagoge*, another Greek name for the place of Jewish worship is *proseuche*, "prayer." It is used metonymically in the sense of "house of prayer." The two terms *sunagoge* and *proseuche* probably originated from different cultural centers. The term *proseuche* seems to have been adopted by the Hellenistic Jews of Egypt and spread to Greece, Asia Minor, and Rome. It is sometimes used as a technical term for a place where Jews gathered to pray (cf. 3 Maccabees 7:20). On the other hand, *sunagoge* reflects the Palestinian scene.

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 (quoted in Hastings 1989: 478-479).

Thus, reading from the Scriptures and exposition of the Law constituted the focal point in 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. They fulfilled some secular and semi-secular functions such as funeral services (*Tosef. Meg.* III), political gatherings (*Life* LIV), meeting places for public announcements (*Lev. Rabbah* 6.2), inns for itinerant travelers (*P.T. Ber.* 5d),<sup>45</sup> and law courts for administering justice. In the New Testament, synagogues are even found in juxtaposition to 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 diaspora Jews first. When he arrived at a new place, his first stopover was a diaspora synagogue.

This pattern in Paul's activity is seen 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 (17:17), Corinth (Acts 18:4-6), and Ephesus (Acts 18:19; 19:8). Even though he declared in Pisidian Antioch that he would "now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46) due to the Jews' rejection, Paul still continued to address fellow Jews first 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 (Galatians 1:16), and although he called himself "an apostle of the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13), Paul nevertheless thought himself obligated to all human beings:

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<sup>45</sup> A Tannaitic ruling forbids eating, drinking, and sleeping in the synagogue (*T.B. Meg.* 28a-b). However, most scholars take the term *synagogue* in this context in its larger sense of comprising the precinct, which contained a special guest room.

“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 Corinthians 9:20-21).

Thus, in Paul’s missionary journeys, Luke depicts Paul as continuing to enter the synagogues of the Jews.

## Dispersion Realities through Proselytes and God-fearers

Both proselytes and God-fearers are found in the New Testament. They were influenced toward Judaism because of the efforts of the diaspora Jews. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul encounters and addresses 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 *proselytos*, which literally means “one who has come over” (Fitzmyer 1998:243) or “to turn around” (Neusner and Green 1999:133). It is used in this passage in a technical sense, as a “convert” to Judaism, one who has submitted to circumcision and has been won over by Jewish missionary efforts among Gentiles (cf. Matthew 23:15).

In a less technical sense, *proselytos* occurs in the LXX as the translation of the Hebrew term *ger*, which refers to a “resident alien” (Exodus 22:21; Ezekiel 14:7). Although some rabbis vehemently opposed accepting converts (claiming that they were the source of the troubles that often plagued the Jews), 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, some restrictions or theoretical distinctions were maintained. Apparently, converts could not marry into a priestly family, especially into the high priest’s clan. Several sages believed that converts could not own a parcel of Israel’s land, and some held that they 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., *mityehudim*, “declared themselves Jews”).

Conversion to Judaism was not an uncommon phenomenon in antiquity, as attested by sources as diverse as Juvenal, Josephus, Joseph and Asenath, and early Christian documents.<sup>46</sup> Jewish rituals of conversion included circumcision for males, donation of money to the Temple, and eventually ritual immersion.

Besides the proselytes or converts, Paul also talked about another group of Gentiles who were influenced by diaspora Jews. This second group is known as the "God-fearers." In Acts 10:2, Paul described 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")—seen in Psalm 115:11; 118:4; and 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*, "worshipping God" or "God-worshiper" (Acts 13:50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7; cf. 18:13; 19:27). As quasi-technical phrases, both seem to have been used to denote "God-fearers" who were non-Jews sympathetic to Judaism, and who did not submit to circumcision or observe the Torah in its entirety, but who did agree with the ethical monotheism of the Jews and attended their synagogue services (cf. Wilcox 1981:102-22). 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).

## Dispersion Realities in Extra-Biblical Literature

Besides biblical literature and dispersion realities through the synagogues, proselytes, and God-fearers, a number of extra-biblical sources picture the period of the Jewish dispersion.<sup>47</sup> Probably few major cities or regions lacked a community of resident Jews.<sup>48</sup>

Evidence of Jewish settlements or communities were found in Nehardea, Nisibis (Josephus *Ant.* 18.9.1 §§311-312), Seleucia (Josephus *Ant.* 18.9.8-9

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<sup>46</sup> 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 are 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).

<sup>47</sup> A sampling of these extra-biblical sources are as follows: Artapanus; Aristobulus, Demetrius; *Joseph and Asenath*; Josephus; *Epistle of Aristens*; Philo; Pseudo-Philo; *Pseudo-Phocylides*; some of the *Sibylline Oracles*; *Testament of Abraham* and *Wisdom of Solomon*. Other sources include some papyri and inscriptions, six excavated diaspora synagogues, and texts from non-Jewish authors who wrote their perceptions on Jews and Judaism.

<sup>48</sup> Instances that support the statement that probably few major cities or regions were without a community of resident Jews are as follows: Philo *Leg. Gai* 214, 281-83; *Flacc.* 45-46; *Vit. Mos.* 2.232; Josephus *Ant.* 14.7.2 §115; *J.W.* 7.3.3 §43; 1 Macc. 15:23-24; *Sib. Or.* 3:271-272; Acts 2:9-11.

§§372-379), Antioch (Josephus *Ant.* 12.3.1 §119),<sup>49</sup> Lydia and Phrygia in Asia Minor (Josephus *Ant.* 12.3.4 §§147-153),<sup>50</sup> the kingdom of Bosphorus,<sup>51</sup> Egypt,<sup>52</sup> Teuchira, Apollonia, Ptolemais, and Latin-speaking North Africa (Trebilco 2000:284), Macedonia, Greece, Thessaly, Boetia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, most of the Peloponnese and the islands of Euboea and Crete (Philo *Leg. Gai.* 281-282), and Rome.<sup>53</sup>

By the end of the first century B.C., Philo could 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). Although Philo’s figures are not reliable, there is no doubt that the Jewish population did grow fast (Collins 2000:5).

Evidence seems to indicate that the total Jewish population of the *diaspora* considerably exceeded the Jewish population in Palestine (Tcherikover 1970:292-295), and that diaspora Jews constituted a group of significant size. Scholars often suggest that five to six million Jews were living in the *diaspora* during the first century, but such figures can be only speculative.

What was the economic situation of the diaspora Jews? While the general impression from the papyri “is that of a hard-working people earning its living by tenacious labor,” there were many who prospered, and no branch of economic life was closed to them (Tcherikover and Fuks 1957-1964:19; Applebaum 1976:701-727).

Specifically, Jews of the diaspora were soldiers, land-owning farmers, agricultural laborers, shepherds, artisans, manual workers, traders, merchants, bankers, government officials, and slaves (Trebilco 2000:286). In some Roman writers, 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.

So far, the first major section of this paper has surveyed the different Hebrew and Greek words in the Old And New Testaments respectively, and in extra-biblical literature during the biblical period. In the second major section, this chapter looks at dispersion realities during biblical times, especially those

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<sup>49</sup> The Jewish community in Antioch, which was the largest in Syria, probably began in the third century B.C.

<sup>50</sup> Between 221 and 205 B.C., Antiochus III transferred 2,000 Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylonia to Lydia and Phrygia as military settlers. This provides unambiguous evidence of Jewish communities in Asia Minor.

<sup>51</sup> Jews lived in at least three towns in the kingdom of Bosphorus. A Jewish inscription from Gorgippia dated 41 A.D. refers to the manumission of a female slave in a synagogue (Levinskaya 1996:227-246). The author spends a whole appendix on the inscriptions from the Bosporan kingdom.

<sup>52</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. give evidence of a Jewish military colony at Elephantine, a colony that included a Jewish temple.

<sup>53</sup> A significant number of Jews lived in Rome. Josephus recorded that Pompey brought a number of Jews to Rome as prisoners of war in 63 B.C. (Josephus *Ant.* 14.4.4-5 §§70-71, 79). He also wrote that 8,000 Roman Jews supported an embassy from Judea (Josephus *Ant.* 17.11.1 §300).

that reveal the influence of diaspora Jews through the synagogues, proselytes, and God-fearers. In the third and last section, this paper will provide insights on the Jewish dispersion in relation to Christianity and its missionary mandate.

## Insights on the Impact of the Jewish Dispersion

Movements of individuals (e.g., Abram to the Promised Land; Joseph to Egypt; Ruth with Naomi to Israel) and groups (e.g., Jacob and his household to Egypt; Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt and toward the wilderness experience) appear early in the Old Testament. Various reasons existed for voluntary migration, but the reason for more widespread and expanded forced migration was the series of conquests by foreign nations.

The Jewish dispersion was mainly triggered by conquests of the Assyrian,<sup>54</sup> Babylonian,<sup>55</sup> and Roman (specifically, Pompey)<sup>56</sup> empires. The harsh realities of conquest would have severely wounded the pride of God's chosen people. 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. Psalm 79:4, 10) by the enemies of God, because of their exile.

However, despite the pain and consequences of conquest and their eventual dispersion, the Jewish people learned valuable lessons throughout their national experiences. These experiences were also used providentially by God to impact more people worldwide in relation to Christianity and its missionary mandate.

Four lessons of lasting value to the Jewish nation can be learned from the scattering of its people: (1) God's orchestration and control of the Jewish dispersion; (2) the hope and reality of the people's regathering after the scattering; (3) Israel's role as a witness to all nations in the midst of its dispersion; and (4) sovereign preparation for the advent of Christ and the spread of Christianity.

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<sup>54</sup> After the death of Solomon (931 B.C.), the kingdom was divided into two, Israel consisting 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 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., when Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722. The Assyrians took large numbers of the population captive and replaced them with immigrants. Cf. 2 Kings 15–17.

<sup>55</sup> In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the invading Babylonians, who then dominated the Middle East. Jerusalem fell in 597 and was deported in 581 B.C. Large deportations of the population followed. After the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia (539–530 B.C.), Jews were encouraged to return from exile (although a significant number stayed). However, the monarchy was not restored. Cf. 2 Kings 23–25 (cf. 2 Chronicles 36).

<sup>56</sup> Pompey took hundreds of Jews to Rome as prisoners of war (Trebilco, "Diaspora Judaism," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds. *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 280–296).

## God's Orchestration and Control of the Dispersion

God warned the people through Moses that if they forsook his covenant with them (Leviticus 26:33; Jeremiah 49:32; Zechariah 1:19; 2:2), they would be dispersed by foreign Gentile invaders. The Scriptures also make it clear that the foreign invaders were merely instruments of the dispersion. God was often referred to as the orchestrator of the dispersion, the controller of its scope and intensity.

The prophets consistently echoed God's message of judgment to those who refused to change their ways—the flock of God's people will be driven away from his presence into the thick darkness of captivity (Isaiah 8:22) and into foreign lands where they will be mocked (Jeremiah 24:9). They will eat unclean bread (Ezekiel 4:13), prefer death, and will eventually die (Jeremiah 8:3). Again, God was presented as the source of the dispersion, the purpose of which was for the people's purification, discipline, and chastisement (Jeremiah 29:4, 7, 14; Ezekiel 39:28; Amos 5:27; Lamentations 4:22; 1 Chronicles 5:41). God wanted to keep for Himself a holy nation.

## Hope of Regathering after the Scattering

The first lesson for the nation is God's full control of the Jewish dispersion for the purpose of purification. However, the second lesson brings a message of hope. He will not chastise them forever. His process of refining them will not lead to their destruction (Jeremiah 46:28). He will bring them back to the land that he promised to them (Ezekiel 34:16).

As their good shepherd, He will gather and tend His flock, punish their enemies (Jeremiah 46:28), establish His own people under his care (Zephaniah 3:19), and extend his grace beyond what they deserve (Isaiah 56:8). Just as He is in charge of the scattering of the people, so is he also in full control of their regathering. He brings the lost heart of the people back to Himself.

## Israel's Role as Witness to the Nations

While the Jewish nation was dispersed, it served as a witness to the nations. Its witness, especially throughout the Roman world, was to be a light for monotheism, and a testimony for the value of Scriptures and the messianic hopes. It was due to the strange and unique influence of Judaism and circulation of the glowing visions of Israel's prophets among the nations that so widespread an expectation existed (mentioned by Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus) that from Judea would arise a ruler whose dominion would be over all.

## Preparation for Christ's Advent and the Spread of Christianity

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. Not only did the Jewish dispersion prepare the way for Christ, the world's redeemer in the fullness of time, but when he had come, suffered, died, risen, and ascended, it 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. It was in the synagogue where they first sought an audience in the cities they visited. The presence of proselytes and God-fearers in these synagogues and cities showed the influence and impact of Judaism through the Jewish dispersion.

Thus, God has used the Jewish dispersion to draw forth the understanding of God's sovereign hand in scattering and regathering his people, in using them to be a witness to the nations despite Israel's chastisement, and in preparing the way for the coming of Christ and the spread of Christianity.

Even to this day, the preservation of the "dispersed of Israel" is one of the marvels of God's providential government of the world, proving the truth of his word through Amos: "For I will give the command, and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve, and not a pebble will reach the ground" (Amos 9:9).

## Summary

In this chapter, a survey had been conducted to cover all the Hebrew words of the Old Testament and all the Greek words of the New Testament that reveal the concept of scattering or dispersing of the Jewish people. Dispersion realities during biblical times, e.g. synagogues, proselytes, God-fearers, had been explored. Gleaned from the survey and dispersion realities are insights on the impact of the Jewish dispersion on Christianity and its missions mandate. Thus a biblical foundation is in place for the study of other diasporic groups in the many case studies of Part 4.