



Jews In The Diaspora: The Bar Kokhva Revolt

Submitted by: Jennifer Troy

Subject Area: Jews in the Diaspora: Bar Kokhva Revolt

Target Age group: Children (ages 9-13) –To use for adults, simply alter the questions to consider.

Abstract: The lesson starts out in a cave-like area to emulate the caves used during the revolt. Then explain the history with Hadrian and how he changed his mind after a while. This lesson is to teach the children about the revolt and how they did it. They spent their time digging out caves all over the land of Israel and designing an intricate system so that they were able to get food and water in, as well as get in and out if entrances were sealed off. The students will learn about how the Romans were trying to convert the Jews--thus learning what Hellenists were. This lesson is designed to be a somewhat interactive history lesson, so that they remember it and enjoy it. The objective of this lesson is for the kids to understand what the rebellion was about, why it happened, how it happened and what it felt like to be in their situation. This is also one of the important events recognized by Tisha B'Av and it is important for the children to know it.

Materials:

- An outdoors setting where you can find a cave-like atmosphere
 - If find a cave, make sure to bring candles and matches for light in the cave.
- Poster board with keywords relating to the era and revolt- if you like to teach with visuals.

Key Terms/ names:

- Shimon Bar-Kohkva
- Diaspora- period of time where Jews spread out and lived outside of the “Holy Land” of Israel and the land of Israel was controlled by multiple other people. Ie. The Romans
- Hellenists- Jews during the Diaspora, who conformed themselves to the Greek/Roman culture and basically stopped being “Jewish” except in certain matters of faith.
- Hebraists- Jews during the Diaspora, who retained the religious beliefs and practices of Judaism, as well as continued to speak Hebrew, and refused to relinquish their Jewish customs, traditions, and culture. They refused to submit to the non-Jewish influences that surrounded them.



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Procedure:

- 1.) Before beginning teaching the lesson, go outside and find a cave-like atmosphere where you plan to take the students.
- 2.) Explain to the students that you are taking them on a walking history adventure.
- 3.) Begin hiking towards your spot. If the group is small enough, begin explaining the time period while walking towards your spot. If not, just wait until everyone is situated and ready to begin his or her journey as part of the Bar Kohkva Revolt.
- 4.) Begin by explaining that the Romans had taken over the Holy Land, and Hadrian was the ruler.
- 5.) Describe the setting for the Bar Kohkva Revolt.
 - *Key points to stress:
 - They built an entire underground tunnel system so they could get food and water.
 - They lived down there all the time, except when they needed to go out and get food and to fight.
 - There were rooms all throughout the caves and tunnels for families to be in.
 - The connection to Tisha B'Av (the day where we mourn the both destructions of the Temple and many other bad events which have happened to the Jews, including the Bar Kohkva Revolt in which the final battle of the Bar Kohkva Revolt was fought and lost at Bethar.
- 6.) Explain the Diaspora in more detail stressing how the Jews spread out and went to Europe, Russia, etc and lead to how we all live outside of Israel now.

*For 4, 5 & 6- see notes and research section under the Bibliography and Additional Resources.

Questions to Consider:

- Why were the Jews revolting? What were they protecting?
- Do you think Hadrian was unfair?
- Do you think the underground tunnel system was a good plan? Can you think of an alternate plan?
- What would you have done? Would you have become Hellenist in order to make the situation easier and not have to deal with being prohibited to practice Judaism.

Comments and Feedback:



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This lesson worked very well and the students seemed to retain a majority of the information. I think teaching a lesson in an environment similar to the environment in the story allowed them to connect with the situation and experience. Make sure you have everyone engaged or they can tune out very easily. The very best place to teach this lesson is in an actual cave using candles for light so they feel connected.

Bibliography/Additional Resources:

Leiman, Sondra. *The Atlas of Great Jewish Communities: A Voyage Through History*. UAH Press: New York, 2002.

Additional Resources and Research:

Bar Kokhba Revolt

The Bar Kokhba revolt marked a time of high hopes followed by violent despair. The Jews were handed expectations of a homeland and a Holy Temple, but in the end were persecuted and sold into slavery. During the revolt itself, the Jews gained enormous amounts of land, only to be pushed back and crushed in the final battle of Bethar.

When Hadrian first became the Roman emperor in 118 C.E., he was sympathetic to the Jews. He allowed them to return to Jerusalem and granted permission for the rebuilding of their Holy Temple. The Jews' expectations rose as they made organizational and financial preparations to rebuild the temple. Hadrian quickly went back on his word, however, and requested that the site of the Temple be moved from its original location. He also began deporting Jews to North Africa.

The Jews prepared to rebel until Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah calmed them. The Jews then satisfied themselves with preparing secretly in case a rebellion would later become necessary. They built hideouts in caves and did shoddy work building weapons so that the Romans would reject the weapons and return them to the Jews.

The Jews organized guerilla forces and, in 123 C.E., began launching surprise attacks against the Romans. From that point on, life only got worse for the Jews. Hadrian brought an extra army legion, the "Sixth Ferrata," into Judea to deal with the terrorism. Hadrian hated "foreign" religions and forbade the Jews to perform circumcisions. He appointed Tineius Rufus governor of Judea. Rufus was a harsh ruler who took advantage of Jewish women. In approximately 132 C.E., Hadrian began to establish a city in Jerusalem called Aelia Capitolina, the name being a combination of his own name and that of the Roman god Jupiter Capitolinus. He started to build a temple to Jupiter in place of the Jewish Holy Temple.

As long as Hadrian remained near Judea, the Jews stayed relatively quiet. When he left in 132, the Jews began their rebellion on a large scale. They seized towns and fortified them with walls and subterranean passages. Under the strong leadership of Shimon Bar-Kokhba, the Jews captured approximately 50 strongholds in Palestine and 985 undefended towns and villages, including Jerusalem. Jews from other countries, and even some gentiles, volunteered to join their crusade. The Jews minted coins with slogans such as "The freedom of Israel" written in Hebrew. Hadrian dispatched General Publius Marcellus, governor of Syria, to help Rufus, but the Jews defeated both Roman leaders. The Jews then invaded the coastal region and the Romans began sea battles against them.

The turning point of the war came when Hadrian sent into Judea one of his best generals from Britain, Julius Severus, along with former governor of Germania, Hadrianus Quintus Lollius Urbicus. By that time,



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there were 12 army legions from Egypt, Britain, Syria and other areas in Palestine. Due to the large number of Jewish rebels, instead of waging open war, Severus besieged Jewish fortresses and held back food until the Jews grew weak. Only then did his attack escalate into outright war. The Romans demolished all 50 Jewish fortresses and 985 villages. The main conflicts took place in Judea, the Shephela, the mountains and the Judean desert, though fighting also spread to Northern Israel. The Romans suffered heavy casualties as well as Hadrian did not send his usual message to the Senate that “I and my army are well.”

The final battle of the war took place in Bethar, Bar Kokhba’s headquarters, which housed both the Sanhedrin (Jewish High Court) and the home of the Nasi (leader). Bethar was a vital military stronghold because of its strategic location on a mountain ridge overlooking both the Valley of Sorek and the important Jerusalem-Bet Guvrin Road. Thousands of Jewish refugees fled to Bethar during the war. In 135 C.E., Hadrian’s army besieged Bethar and on the 9th of Av, the Jewish fast day commemorating the destruction of the first and second Holy Temples, the walls of Bethar fell. After a fierce battle, every Jew in Bethar was killed. Six days passed before the Romans allowed the Jews to bury their dead.

Following the battle of Bethar, there were a few small skirmishes in the Judean desert caves, but the war was essentially over and Judean independence was lost. The Romans plowed Jerusalem with a yoke of oxen. Jews were sold into slavery and many were transported to Egypt. Judean settlements were not rebuilt. Jerusalem was turned into a pagan city called Aelia Capitolina and the Jews were forbidden to live there. They were permitted to enter only on the 9th of Av to mourn their losses in the revolt. Hadrian changed the country’s name from Judea to Syria Palestine.

In the years following the revolt, Hadrian discriminated against all Judeo-Christian sects, but the worst persecution was directed against religious Jews. He made anti-religious decrees forbidding Torah study, Sabbath observance, circumcision, Jewish courts, meeting in synagogues and other ritual practices. Many Jews assimilated and many sages and prominent men were martyred including Rabbi Akiva and the rest of the *Asara Harugei Malchut* (ten martyrs). This age of persecution lasted throughout the remainder of Hadrian’s reign, until 138 C.E.

Shimon Bar-Kokhba (Approx 15-135) by Shira Schoenberg

Shimon Bar-Kokhba was the leader of the Jewish revolt against Rome between 132 and 135 C.E. Bar-Kokhba united his army in Judea and led the Jews in battle. This rebellion later became known as the Bar-Kokhba revolt.

There are few sources about Bar-Kokhba. Those that exist in Talmud, Midrash and Church Father Eusebius are largely legendary. Even his name is uncertain. His first name, Shimon, was found written on coins from the time of the revolt. His last name, however, is written with many variations, such as Ben Koziva or Bar Kozevah, in different documents. It is probable that his name was originally Bar Koseva, which is either his father's name or the name of a Judean settlement. It was likely changed to Bar-Kokhba during the revolt, as a reference to a verse in the Bible referring to the Messiah as a star



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(*kokhav*). This would be fitting as Bar-Kokhba was descended from the Davidic dynasty (which is the Messianic dynasty according to Jewish tradition) and the Messianic hopes of the nation centered around him.

Bar-Kokhba was an imperious dictator who was in charge of both the army and the economy during the Jewish revolt against Rome. He held the title of Nasi, which could be a Messianic allusion or could simply refer to the one in charge of army, administration and economy. Bar-Kokhba had unlimited authority over his army and was concerned with even the most minor details. He was not afraid to threaten senior officers of his army with punishment. The 400,000 soldiers in his army were said to have been initiated either by having a finger cut off or by being forced to uproot a cedar tree. Bar-Kokhba relied on his own powers and, according to aggada, when he went to battle he asked God to "neither assist nor discourage us."

Despite this attitude, Bar-Kokhba strictly adhered to Jewish laws including Sabbath, tithes and holidays. Letters written in his name between 132 and 134 C.E., found in the Judean desert between 1952 and 1961, reveal his concern for Jewish observance. These letters also show his preoccupation with everyday issues such as supplying food to the camp and solving problems of land ownership.

Before and during the rebellion, Bar-Kokhba and his men controlled large amounts of land in the Judean hills, Judean desert and Bet Guvrin. They also maintained contact with Jews in other areas. Bar-Kokhba led the Jewish army through three and a half years of revolt. He died in a massive battle at Bethar, in the Judean hills. He was succeeded as ruler by his son Rufus, who was followed by Rufus' son Romulus.

The Diaspora

The Jewish state comes to an end in 70 AD, when the Romans begin to actively drive Jews from the home they had lived in for over a millennium. But the Jewish Diaspora ("diaspora" = "dispersion, scattering") had begun long before the Romans had even dreamed of Judaea. When the Assyrians conquered Israel in 722, the Hebrew inhabitants were scattered all over the Middle East; these early victims of the dispersion disappeared utterly from the pages of history. However, when Nebuchadnezzar deported the Judaeans



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in 597 and 586 BC, he allowed them to remain in a unified community in Babylon. Another group of Judaeans fled to Egypt, where they settled in the Nile delta. So from 597 onwards, there were three distinct groups of Hebrews: a group in Babylon and other parts of the Middle East, a group in Judaea, and another group in Egypt. Thus, 597 is considered the beginning date of the Jewish Diaspora. While Cyrus the Persian allowed the Judaeans to return to their homeland in 538 BC, most chose to remain in Babylon. A large number of Jews in Egypt became mercenaries in Upper Egypt on an island called the Elephantine. All of these Jews retained their religion, identity, and social customs; both under the Persians and the Greeks, they were allowed to run their lives under their own laws. Some converted to other religions; still others combined the Yahweh cult with local cults; but the majority clung to the Hebraic religion and its new-found core document, the Torah.

In 63 BC, Judaea became a protectorate of Rome. Coming under the administration of a governor, Judaea was allowed a king; the governor's business was to regulate trade and maximize tax revenue. While the Jews despised the Greeks, the Romans were a nightmare. Governorships were bought at high prices; the governors would attempt to squeeze as much revenue as possible from their regions and pocket as much as they could. Even with a Jewish king, the Judaeans revolted in 70 AD, a desperate revolt that ended tragically. In 73 AD, the last of the revolutionaries were holed up in a mountain fort called Masada; the Romans had besieged the fort for two years, and the 1,000 men, women, and children inside were beginning to starve. In desperation, the Jewish revolutionaries killed themselves rather than surrender to the Romans. The Romans then destroyed Jerusalem, annexed Judaea as a Roman province, and systematically drove the Jews from Palestine. After 73 AD, Hebrew history would only be the history of the Diaspora as the Jews and their world view spread over Africa, Asia, and Europe

As political aspirations subsided, the Jewish community was increasingly led by scholars and rabbis. Even during the period of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine, large Jewish communities developed in Egypt and Babylonia. After the fall of the Temple, Babylon's Jewish community became the most important in world Jewry and its academies the most influential centers of Jewish learning. In 8th-century Iberia, a large Jewish community played an important part in intellectual and economic life. From the 9th to the 12th cent., Spanish Jewry enjoyed a golden age of literary efflorescence marked by a highly creative interaction between Jewish and Islamic culture.

From the Crusades to the Enlightenment

From the time of the Crusades date the persecutions that persisted until the 18th cent. During this period the ownership of land and most occupations other than petty trading and money lending were forbidden to European Jews; the ghetto came into



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existence. The Jews, who had earlier been an agricultural people, became an urban population. The Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and from France in 1306. In 1391, forced conversions began in Spain; in 1492 all remaining Jews were expelled. Many of the exiles perished; others found asylum in the Netherlands and in the Turkish possessions. The German Jews, who experienced periodic expulsions throughout the 15th cent., fled to Poland, where, although subject to persecution, they build a thriving culture.

After 1492, Spanish Jews (see [Sephardim](#)) spread throughout the Mediterranean world, often absorbing smaller Jewish communities they encountered. In some places they continued to speak a Judeo-Spanish language known as Judaisim or Ladino into the 20th cent. Some Sephardim also migrated to Western Europe. The other large branch of the Jewish people, known as *Ashkenazim*, formed in the 9th cent. with the settlement of Jews in the Rhine valley. Marked by their use of Yiddish, a German-Jewish language, the Ashkenazim also migrated east into Poland. The Polish-Lithuanian community became a major center of world Jewry in the 16th cent., distinguished by its high level of Talmudic scholarship. The political vulnerability and religious faith of the Jews led to the rise of several messianic movements; one of the most important was led by [Sabbatai Zevi](#). In the 18th cent. [Hasidism](#) arose among the Jews of Eastern Europe.

Emancipation and Secularization

Modern political emancipation of the Jews began with the American and French revolutions. In Germany and Austria emancipation of the Jews was proclaimed after the Revolution of 1848. Simultaneously, the [Haskalah](#) encouraged the secularization of Jewish life, and the integration of the Jews into the societies in which they lived. Especially in Western Europe, this led to considerable acculturation, and even assimilation, of Jewish communities. The religious Reform movement advocated a form of Judaism shorn of its national elements and emphasizing ethical content rather than adherence to traditional Jewish law.

JEWISH LIFE IN THE DIASPORA

[Print Preview of Section](#)

The Jewish diaspora began with the Babylonian conquest in the 6th century BC. Many Jews understood their presence outside the land of Israel as exile. God had imposed exile as a punishment for their sins, they



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believed, and they would be unable to return to their land until God redeemed them from exile by sending a Messiah. In time some Jews interpreted exile as independent of geography. In their view exile meant exile from God, and exile could occur even in the land of Israel, especially when non-Jews dominated Israel. Other Jews did not understand their lives in the diaspora as an exile; they chose to live outside the land of Israel.

For some 2,500 years Jews have continued to live outside the land of Israel. In the early centuries of the diaspora, they established substantial communities in Asia Minor, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Later they spread to the rest of the globe. Each Jewish community interacted with the local culture, and Jewish life and culture became remarkably diverse as a result. In particular European Jews and the Jews of the Mediterranean basin, including Spain, developed different ways of observing the Jewish religion and different identities as Jews. The European Jews (outside of Spain) are called Ashkenazim (from the Hebrew word for “Germany”) and the Jews of Spain and the rest of the Mediterranean basin are called Sephardim (from the Hebrew word for “Spain”).

A The Early Centuries of the Diaspora

Historians know very little about the early centuries of Jewish life in the diaspora. During the Babylonian captivity part of the Jewish community successfully maintained a distinct identity and culture, but the circumstances of this community remain a mystery. Nor is there much information about Jewish life in the Persian Empire; what we do know is that some Jews longed to return to their land, but others remained in Persia (and later Iran) into the 20th century. The picture becomes somewhat clearer during the period of Greek and Roman rule, when substantial Jewish communities developed in Alexandria, Egypt; Cyrene, Libya; Antioch (in present-day Turkey); Rome (in present-day Italy); and cities throughout Asia Minor. Jews in most of these communities spoke the dominant language, Greek, and they based their religion on a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures known as the Septuagint. Each of these Jewish communities seems to have developed its own distinct form of the Jewish religion, which differed from the religion of the leading rabbis in Palestine. Palestine was the name the Romans had officially given the province of Judea in the 2nd century CE.

Some Jews were quite comfortable living under the domination of the Hellenistic and Roman empires. Others deeply resented their domination by *pagans* (followers of polytheistic religions) or the lack of respect they received from the dominant culture. In Palestine and the diaspora the Jews revolted unsuccessfully against Roman rule. Simon Bar Kokhba, for example, led revolts in Jerusalem in the 2nd century that received support from Jews throughout the region. Before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, many Jews throughout the diaspora had sent money to support the Temple, which seems to have served as a source of solidarity for Jews as a nation. After Temple was destroyed, the Jewish communities of the diaspora no longer had this unifying mission, and they had little in common other than the maintenance of a distinct Jewish identity.



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B The Babylonian Community

The Jewish diaspora community that flourished best was in Babylonia. The Parthians, who ruled Babylonia and the rest of Mesopotamia until 224 CE, granted Jews considerable autonomy, and Jewish economic and religious life responded favorably. The Jews in Babylonia experienced a brief period of persecution in the 3rd century, after a Persian dynasty known as the Sassanids defeated the Parthians. Babylonian Jewry soon regained basic freedoms, however, and this community continued to grow and flourish for another 1,000 years. The learning of rabbis prospered in Babylonian religious academies and found expression in commentaries on oral law and in interpretations of the Torah. The commentaries on oral law in Babylonia produced the Babylonian Talmud—the Hebrew and Aramaic text that served as the basis of Judaism. The rabbinic Judaism that had developed in Babylonia was a further development of a form of Judaism that became dominant in Palestine in the 2nd century, due in large part to Roman recognition of rabbis as the religious and political leaders of the Jews.

C The Spread of Christianity

The social and political situation of the Jews changed markedly in the 4th century, after Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. His conversion ushered in a process through which Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and Jews were considered subversive for their refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. Many leaders of church and empire believed that Jews should not be allowed to remain in the Roman Empire if they continued to practice their religion, as Jews were seen as potential contaminants of the true faith, which they rejected. However, this position was rejected in favor of a view presented by Christian theologian Saint Augustine. Like other Christians, Augustine believed that the Jews fully deserved to be degraded and humiliated. But instead of arguing for their destruction or forcible conversion, he felt that they should live in a state of poverty and humiliation. In this way Jews might be punished for their refusal to acknowledge the new revelation in Christ and might serve as witnesses to the superiority of Christianity. Although harsh, Augustine's position often served to save Jews in Christendom from annihilation.

Constantine established a new capital in Byzantium (now Istanbul, Turkey), in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. He renamed the city Constantinople. After Rome fell to invaders in 476, the Roman Empire in the west collapsed, but the Roman Empire in the east, which came to be known as the Byzantine Empire, remained strong. Attitudes toward Jews in the Byzantine Empire differed from attitudes in the Western Roman Empire and the states that succeeded it. The Byzantine Empire had far more Jews under its rule than did states in the Western Roman Empire, and it dealt more harshly with them. Jews under Byzantine rule often had difficulty making a living and, among other obstacles, they were barred from building new *synagogues* (places of assembly for prayer) or holding public office.



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D Under Islamic Rule

Islam, another monotheistic religion, arose in Arabia in the 7th century, and Islamic forces conquered much of the Byzantine Empire in the 7th and 8th centuries. For the most part Jews welcomed the change in rule. Although Jews also experienced religious and economic obstacles under Islam, conditions for them improved. The Islamic conquests extended from Babylonia to Egypt and included Palestine. For the first time in centuries the two major centers of Jewish life, Babylonia and Palestine, were under the same rulers. But the balance had shifted, and Babylonia had become the more significant cultural and intellectual center. From the 8th to the 12th century extraordinary cultural achievements took place in the Islamic world, and Jews, especially in Babylonia, participated in and benefited from those achievements.

Academies in Babylonia, headed by rabbis called *geonim* (plural of Hebrew *gaon*, meaning “eminence”), were instrumental in establishing the Babylonian Talmud as the authoritative text of the Jewish religion. They also established Babylonian customs as the norm throughout the Jewish world. The geonim fostered the principle that study was the highest religious ideal. The most significant of the geonim was Saadia ben Joseph, a remarkable 10th-century intellectual who translated the Hebrew Bible into Arabic, the language of Islamic lands. Through this translation and a commentary on the Bible in Arabic, Saadia founded Jewish literature in Arabic and became the first of many Jewish philosophers in the Islamic world. Only the philosopher Moses Maimonides of Egypt surpassed Saadia in importance. Benefiting from Saadia’s pioneering spirit, Maimonides elevated the world of Jewish learning to unimagined heights in the 12th century. The Jews of the Islamic world also transmitted philosophical works of the ancient and Islamic worlds to European Christians. They translated many of the philosophical classics from Arabic to Hebrew, and other Jews helped translate them from Hebrew to Latin, which was the written language of educated Europeans at that time.

E Under Christian Rule

From the 8th century to the late Middle Ages, culture remained largely stagnant and undistinguished in Christian Europe while flourishing in the Islamic world. Beginning in the 8th century the kings of the Franks and the Holy Roman Emperors encouraged Jews to settle in Provence (now part of southern France) and the Rhineland (now part of Germany). Communities in Aix, Marseille, and elsewhere in Provence and in Mainz, Speyer, and other cities of the Rhineland became early centers of European Jewish life and retained their importance for centuries.

The encouragement of Jewish settlement resulted from an assumption that Jews had useful economic skills, especially as traders. As Jews neither owned land nor worked the land as peasants for feudal masters, they depended directly on European rulers for protection. That dependence meant that rulers could safely entrust the Jews with economic privileges without any threat to their own power. The economic privileges heightened resentment that the European masses already felt toward Jews, a resentment rooted in religious



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difference. The arrangement did not lead to any sustained persecution of Jews for several centuries, however.

The situation of European Jews changed in 1096, the year of the first Crusade, a military expedition to take control of the Holy Land (Palestine) from Muslim rulers. As the Crusader armies gathered, they directed their religious hostility at Jewish communities of the Rhineland, massacring the people and destroying the settlements. Local authorities lacked the forces to stop the rampaging Crusaders. In some communities, the Jews preferred to commit collective suicide rather than fall into the hands of the mobs. The Crusades inaugurated a new era in the life of the Jews of Europe.

THE SILENT CENTURIES

The Diaspora

by Al Maxey

([Hebraists](#)) ([Hellenists](#))

Although Palestine was the traditional homeland of the people of Israel, by far the largest number of Jews lived outside of the borders of the "Holy Land." These people were known as the Jews of the Dispersion, or *The Diaspora*. They could be found in virtually every city and settlement of the empire where commerce or colonization had taken place.

The dispersion, or scattering, of the Jewish people really began in earnest with the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. At this time King Sargon of Assyria deported many of the inhabitants of Israel and resettled them in colonies throughout Assyria. When the Southern Kingdom fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC, the Jews were again deported and resettled in a foreign land. Although thousands of Jews chose to return to their homeland after King Cyrus freed them, most of the Jews preferred to remain where they were. They had become established in these foreign nations, and had begun to prosper there. These foreign lands had become their new home.

With the coming of Alexander the Great, many new opportunities arose for migration and resettlement in various distant parts of the Greek Empire. Many Jews chose to leave their homelands in the hope of perhaps improving their station in life. Thus, they set off to strange lands to "make their fortune." In the city of



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Alexandria, Egypt at this time it was estimated there were as many as 2 million Jews --- the largest single concentration of Jews in any one foreign location.

When the Roman General Pompey entered Palestine in 63 BC, he took captive many of the Jews and resettled them in Rome. Later, when these Jews were given their freedom, many of them chose to remain in Rome. By the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, there were approximately 8000 Jews living in the city of Rome.

Among the Jews of the Dispersion, two main groups emerged:

1. **The Hellenists** --- Those who succumbed to the Greek (and also Roman) culture, and in many ways compromised their own beliefs and traditions.
2. **The Hebraists** --- Those who clung tenaciously to their culture and religion, and refused to give in to the Greek and Roman ways of life.

THE HEBRAISTS

The Hebraists, or the "Hebrews" (as they were also called), were those Jews who not only retained the religious beliefs and practices of Judaism, but who also continued to speak the Hebrew language and refused to relinquish their Jewish customs, traditions, and culture. They were determined never to submit in any way to the non-Jewish influences which surrounded them.

Perhaps the most famous Hebraist of the New Testament was the apostle Paul, who described himself in the following manner: "Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, *a Hebrew of Hebrews*; as to the Law, a Pharisee" (Philippians 3:5). In Acts 22:2-3 Paul addressed the crowd "in the *Hebrew* dialect," saying, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the Law of our fathers, being zealous for God."

Although Paul was born in a Greek city, and although he was therefore a Roman citizen (Acts 21:39; 22:25-29), and although he was well educated in the Greek language and customs, nevertheless he remained faithful to God and His Law and his Jewish traditions. "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Galatians 1:14).



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Although there were undoubtedly many Hebraists living in foreign lands, all of whom were loyal to their God and Judaism, most of these people chose to return to Palestine where they could center their lives and worship around the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul even made a point of the fact that although he was born in the Dispersion, he was brought up and educated in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). Acts 21:27ff describes an incident in which Paul had a run-in with some Hebraists in Jerusalem.

THE HELLENISTS

The vast majority of the Jews living in the Dispersion, however, were not Hebraists, but Hellenists. These were Jews who had conformed themselves to the Greek/Roman culture, and who had basically ceased being "Jewish" except in certain matters of faith. The Sadducees, for example, tended to be Hellenists, whereas the Pharisees were generally Hebraists.

The Hellenists did not see any need to retain the Hebrew language, but rather spoke Greek, or whatever happened to be the language of the country in which they dwelt. They also adopted the customs of their pagan neighbors, and in many cases conformed to their surroundings so completely that they were hardly recognizable as Jews. Some were even seeking to have their circumcision surgically undone so that they would appear physically more like the Gentiles (see -- I Corinthians 7:18, where Paul alludes to this practice). At times, even their worship was influenced by their pagan surroundings. Archaeologists have discovered an ancient synagogue at a place called Dura-Europos on the Euphrates River which had incidents from heathen mythology depicted in the mosaics and paintings on the synagogue walls.

One of the first real problems to arise within the church in Jerusalem was as a result of a misunderstanding between these two groups. As a result of this disturbance, seven men were appointed to serve in a special capacity to try and alleviate the situation. Some consider these seven to be the first *Deacons* in the church. "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the *Hellenistic* Jews against the native *Hebrews*, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food" (Acts 6:1). Stephen, who was very likely a convert to Christianity from among the Hellenists, was one of the seven selected. Some scholars even feel his Hellenistic tendencies may have contributed to his martyrdom (Acts 7).



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