

# **The Apostle Paul, Asian Diaspora and Mission**

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## **I. Introduction**

This paper analyses the characteristics of the biblical Jewish Diaspora and the Septuagint Scriptures and synagogues that were important to them. It analyses the Apostle Paul and his missionary bands' strategy of visiting the Diaspora synagogues as a base for their ministry. It then looks at the contemporary Asian church's mission vision and how this might correspond with the Asian Christian Diaspora in Australia and how they can become a greater force of 'new' missionaries in the world today.

## **II. The Jewish Diaspora**

The term 'diaspora' means the scattering of the people of God (the Jews) 'in the midst of a hostile environment' (De Ridder 1975:215). Oxford's Concise Dictionary defines 'diaspora' as the 'dispersion of the Jews among the Gentiles mainly in the 8-6th Century BC' (Moore 1997:364). In Germany the term 'is used of members of any religious body living as a minority among those of other beliefs' (Cross 1974:399).

The Hebrew terms for diaspora translated in the Septuagint (LXX) 'all have the sense of the process of 'leading away, deportation, or exile, or of the state of those led away, deported or exiled' (De Ridder 1975:215). After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Jews did become a people without a home. Thus the meaning of diaspora evolved to cover all the Jews who lived outside their original homeland.

'The ancient world was characterised by continued movements of peoples' (DeRidder 1975:59). During the inter-testament times and onward, Jewish communities dispersed in countries across the civilized world. 'From at least the time of the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC), and possibly even earlier, there were large Jewish communities living outside Palestine' (Bray 1996: 53). The Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans all took Jewish captives to their respective nations. However, there was also 'voluntary emigrations of Jewish settlers during the Graeco-Roman period to all the countries bordering Palestine, and to all the chief towns of the civilized world, for the sake chiefly of trade' (Unger 1966:1153).

Accounts exist of Jewish Diaspora settling in China (referred to as Sinim in Isaiah 49:12), India, Arabia and Ethiopia (DeRidder 1975:60-69). Other sources indicate 'multitudes of

Jews in North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Italy' (Bolt & Thompson 2000:264). Jews were not the only race to disperse during this time. There were also movements of Greeks, Phoenicians and Assyrians who established colonies outside their homelands.

The NT makes mention of Jewish Diaspora when the Jews in Jerusalem said about Christ's ministry, 'Will he go where our people live scattered among the Greeks?' (John 7:35). James in his epistle begins with 'To: Jewish Christians scattered everywhere' (James 1:1). Peter addresses the same audience, 'To: The Jewish Christians driven out of Jerusalem and scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia' (1 Peter 1:1). These NT references indicate that the Jews were dispersed from at least the Mediterranean to Western Asia.

A place of Jewish Diaspora significance was the 'great intellectual centre [of] Alexandria' (Bray 1996:49) in Egypt. The Jews at Alexandria were 'deeply immersed in Hellenistic civilization' (1996:53). By NT times, there were at least a million Jews living in this city (Cross 1974:399).

There was a strong connection between the Jewish Diaspora communities and Jerusalem. 'Through the [payment of the temple] tax, Diaspora communities were linked to and participated in the temple's life and worship. Diaspora literature shows deep respect for the holiness of the temple' (Evans & Porter 2000:292). The temple was visited by regular pilgrimages of Diaspora communities. This meant that Palestine held significance as their Holy Land and was important to Jewish identity.

Diaspora Judaism's missionary impact was great. It 'affected early Christianity, for the Jewish Christians kept close contact with the synagogue communities' (Winter & Hawthorn 1981:44). 'According to the Talmud, the scattering of Jews among the nations was for a missionary purpose: 'The Holy One, blessed be he, did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that the proselytes might join them' (Pes. 87b)' (Bolt & Thompson 2000:275).

### III. The Septuagint and the Jewish Diaspora

'The Septuagint [LXX] was the Bible of early Christianity before the NT was written' (Unger 1966:1149). It was the translation of the entire Hebrew Bible (the OT) into Greek. The name comes from a story that the translation (circa 300 BC) was done 'in seventy-two days by seventy-two scholars sent from Jerusalem to Alexandria' (Latourette 1975:15) during the reign and at the request of Ptolemy Philadelphus. However, the LXX was 'actually the work of many different hands' (1975:15) over many centuries but likely

still done in Alexandria as 'Egyptian Jews regarded the Torah as their key text' (Evans & Porter 2000:292).

The LXX was a powerful force 'in both Alexandrian Judaism and in the philosophy of the Jewish Diaspora' (Unger 1966:1149). Its use spread to all parts of the Greek (Hellenistic)-Jewish world. Once the Diaspora began using Greek, there was no turning back to Hebrew. As Christianity emerged, 'the use of Greek was fully accepted by most Jews, and it seemed perfectly natural that the New Testament should be written in that language' (1996:48).

The LXX was important for the Diaspora and Gentiles alike as it released them from the narrow isolation of the Hebrew language and people and gave them to the Graeco-Roman world through the divinely prepared instrument of the Greek language, the lingua franca of the Graeco-Roman age. It was a definite factor in the preparation for the coming of Christianity and the New Testament revelation (Unger 1966:1149).

Perhaps the most significant contribution the LXX offered was the translation of the proper name of 'God' in Hebrew being 'Yahweh' to the Greek 'kyrios' meaning 'Lord' or 'Master'. This meant that the Gentiles did not see Yahweh as a foreign deity 'but that Israel was the elect people of the God of the world' (De Ridder 1975:87).

The LXX did contain a group of books that were not in the Hebrew OT canon and this caused some problems. 'At the time of the Reformation, these books were removed from the Protestant canon and placed at the end, where they are usually referred to as apocrypha ('hidden') or more correctly, as deuterocanonical ('of secondary status') (Bray 1996:26).

#### **IV. The Diaspora Synagogues**

The LXX was used for reading and teaching in the synagogue services and therefore it was taken throughout the entire civilized world. The services played a crucial missionary role as they attracted not only proselytes (Gentiles who adopted the complete range of Jewish beliefs and practices, including circumcision) but also a class it termed 'God-fearers' (Gentiles who accepted most of Judaism's ethics and some of its cultus, but refused circumcision (Winter & Hawthorn 1981:44).

Constant contact by the Diaspora with the surrounding Greek culture impacted the Jews' identity and development. 'Culture Jews were not only Jews, but Greeks also, in respect to language, education, and habits; and yet in the depths of their hearts they were Jews' (Unger 1966:1154). Therefore the Diaspora felt a strong philosophical connection with

their 'relatives' in Palestine. The synagogues were key to helping the Jewish Diaspora preserve and uphold 'the faith of their fathers' (1966:1154).

The synagogue became the place for the 'popular worship of God, without sacrifice, and the instruction of the community in the implications of Scripture as applied to living according to Yahweh's will' (De Ridder 1975:77). The synagogue provided the avenue for the religion of the Jew to be shared with the Gentile as well as the Jew. The synagogue was a place of religious revolution: 'the creation of liturgy which was not concerned with sacrifice was no small change in Jewish life' (1975:77). The synagogue placed Judaism on display - 'thrust on the world stage through the Diaspora and Exile' (1975:83).

The centres of the Jewish Diaspora that included trading places, military stations, agricultural settlements and synagogues 'became a nucleus for the proselyting of surrounding areas' (1975:76). It was the Jews' religion that allowed them to exercise 'a powerful influence on the peoples with whom they were thrust into daily contact' (1975:76). Therefore, the strength of Judaism 'lay in the days of the Roman Empire in the Diaspora, not in Judea and Galilee, for many of the returned exiles showed their determination to continue the association of the Jewish people with the history, the religion, and the land of Israel' (1975:76).

There are two ways of viewing the Jewish synagogues: 'a kind of temporary measure invented by the Jews while separated from the Jerusalem temple' (Bolt & Thompson 2000:15) or the 'legitimate expression of the gathering of the people of God' (2000:15). This later view sees the synagogue as 'an extension of the Old Testament view of the ingathering of the Gentiles to precisely the place where God gathered his people Israel' (2000:15).

## **V. The Apostle Paul's Missionary Bands to the Jewish Diaspora**

The Apostle Paul's heritage was unique. His father, while Jewish had the 'highly prized privilege [of] Roman citizenship' (Latourette 1975:68). Paul was born and raised in Tarsus, a Hellenistic (Greek) city in Asia Minor. Therefore he was of Diaspora origin (Bray 1996:54). He knew Greek proficiently and was steeped in the LXX. When he went on his missionary journeys, he visited the Jewish Diaspora synagogues throughout the Gentile region.

On his first journey, Paul preached in the synagogues in Salamis, Cyprus (Acts 13:5), Antioch in Psidia (Acts 13:13) and he and Barnabas preached at the synagogue at Iconium (Turkey) (Acts 14:1). On his second journey, Paul and Silas preached in the

synagogue in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1) and Berea (Acts 17:10). Paul debated with the Jews at the synagogue in Athens (Acts 17:17) and spoke to the Jews and Greeks at the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:4) then he was at the synagogue at Antioch of Syria (Acts 18:19). Finally, on his third missionary trip, Paul ministered in the synagogue at Ephesus (Acts 19:8).

Paul's strategy was to visit important centres of culture and trade in each area. He deliberately went to the synagogues first. He knew the importance of these centres meant communication spread from them to the surrounding areas and beyond. Paul also knew that in order for the nations to be gathered before the throne of God, proclamation of the gospel was intended for the Jew first, wherever they lived (Bolt & Thompson 2000:16).

Although Paul was aware of 'his calling to the Jews, his own people (Rom 10:1), Paul [saw] himself called especially to be an apostle to the Gentiles' (Verkuyl 1978:113). Therefore Paul was very adaptable to the contexts he ministered in. 'He could employ Palestinian-Jewish concepts, Hellenistic-Jewish concepts, and Hellenistic-Gentile concepts as the occasion required' (1978:113). However, due to the success of Paul's mission to the gentiles,

Christianity quickly moved out of the Jewish community and became prevalingly non-Jewish. This was highly significant: Christianity had ceased to be a Jewish sect and, while having roots in Judaism, was clearly new and different from their faith (Latourette 1975:75).

God prepared the way for the Gentile mission through four bridging streams: the Jewish Diaspora; their synagogues; the Scriptures in the heart language (the LXX); and the messenger - the Apostle Paul and his missionary bands.

## **VI. Today's Asian Church and Asian Diaspora**

The growth of the contemporary global church has come as a surprise to some.

What many pundits thought was the death of the church in the 1960s through secularisation was really its relocation and rebirth into the rest of the world. The results started to become visible in the last half of this century as evangelical Christianity seemed to burst out into a myriad different forms in a thousand places around the globe' (Hutchinson 1998:48).

An amazing story of growth has been the Korean church. The Korea Research Institute

for Mission (KRIM) reports that at the end of 2000, there were 8,103 Korean missionaries serving globally. Korea is now the second largest missionary sending country in the world only after the USA (Moon 2001:1). What is so remarkable about this growth is that Korea is a mono-ethnic and mono-cultural society. The Korean missionary movement 'was made possible only with divine intervention and wisdom that chose the foolish things and the weak things of the world to put to shame the wise and the mighty (1 Cor 1:27,28)' (2001:5). 'It is ironic [for Korean Christians] to be scattered around the world to form diaspora communities, and even more so to go out to save souls with the gospel' (2001:1).

Just as the Korean church and its Diaspora have become significant players in global missions, so to has other parts of the Asian Diaspora. Is the later more suited than western missionaries for outreach back into Asia?

In today's 'global village' home and overseas do not have the meaning they used to hold. So-called 'diaspora' workers may not be considered cross-cultural missionaries in the sense that they will be working alongside people of their own ethnic group. They will not need to learn the language of their target group since it is their own language. However, they may be seeking to reach this target group in another part of the world (Sztó 2001:4).

The Diaspora can be mobile in their missionary activity. For example, 'A Singaporean missionary who had served in JapanŠ could be strategically re-deployed in Singapore to do evangelism among the Japanese in that country' (2001:4).

People of the same culture can often be more effective in reaching people of that culture. However, sometimes the opposite is true and an outsider can be more effective than someone from their own culture. While Asian Diaspora may be effective back in an Asian mission context, they may find it difficult to adapt to living and serving in poor, rural and dangerous situations. 'While in many places Asian Christians have suffered much for their faith, the present 'professional' Asian missionary force probably has not come out of that kind of a background' (2001:4).

## **VII. Australian Asian Christian Diaspora**

'People have carried their religions around the globe for millennia, but this has become a far more common phenomenon since the middle of the twentieth century' (Hinnells 1997:682). This is due to communications, travel and post WWII migration. The world's major religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been associated with this migration (1997:683).

Migrants from Asian countries such as China have steadily been arriving in Australia for decades. However, many Australians tend to associate recent migrants with the importation of pagan gods and idols, and point to the rise of temples and mosques as proof— interestingly enough, though, many Hare Krishna devotees are Caucasian, as are many Falun Gong followers. On the other hand, there is a solid core of Chinese Christians in all the major cities in Australia' (Mok 2001:38).

An Australian Chinese church website lists 47 congregations in Sydney, two in Wollongong, 33 in Melbourne, three in Canberra, five in Brisbane, four in Adelaide, five in Perth and one in Darwin.

Generally, these churches are organised along ethnic lines (Hong Kong, Taiwan, East Malaysia, etc.), since many are the result of church-planting initiatives by 'missionaries' from 'mother' countries. Thus the 'Bread of Life' churches are 'daughters' of Lin Liang Tan in Taiwan, and Senior Pastor Cho Shen Zhu makes periodic pastoral visits to Australia to oversee his 'offspring' (Mok 2001:38).

According to an Internet listing of the Japanese churches, there are seven in Australia. An Internet directory of Indonesian Australian churches lists 19 congregations 12 of which are in Sydney. Melbourne is said to host ten Filipino congregations and at least seven Korean ones.

The Australian 1996 Census indicates there are 4.2 million immigrants from 233 countries. The primary Asian original homelands are China/Hong Kong, India, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, India, Philippines and Indonesia. Migration for Asians to Australia has not however, been straightforward. 'Australia's entry into the twentieth century was marked by anti-Asian xenophobia. Bitter opposition to the presence of coloured labourers [the first migrants] intensified— directed in particular at the Chinese' (Hinnells 1997:729).

However, Diaspora churches have provided a cushion for Asians settling into Australia. 'As long as there are new migrants, the Chinese people will gravitate towards the church for close fellowship, help and loving attention' (Mok 2001:39). According to Dr Gordon Lee, pastor of the Hillsong Chinese church, Sydney, the Chinese ethnic church will survive in Australia 'as long as the church continues its 'cultural maintenance' practises and is regarded by the Chinese population as the 'preservers' of Chinese culture and language'. (2001:39).

If Asian Diaspora go back to their original homelands or neighbouring areas as

missionaries, there is the matter of how they would best operate. Do they imitate their western counterparts or do they operate like their Asian counterparts? While Asian characteristics may be visible in their mission agencies and in the style of leadership, activities and methods, 'on the whole [they] tend to follow the Western pattern' (Szto 2001:2).

Therefore Asian agencies easily repeat mistakes that western agencies have made. 'Issues such as denominationalism, paternalism, over-reliance on 'technological' or 'scientific' skills and individualism have not been grappled with' (2001:2). This is compounded by the 'success-or results-oriented, kingdom-building mentality of some of the larger churches in the more affluent Asian countries' (2001:2) which can flow on to the daughter Diaspora churches in Australia.

The question of appropriateness of western sending structures adopted by Asian Christians is evident in the Korean mission scene. These were copied from British and North American structures.

There may be a need for thorough evaluation on how much Korean agencies understood and practised the organisational principles of the western models. The current western models are products of centuries long refinement and tuning-up. However, as the point of gravity in missions shifts toward non-western world for the first time in history, a critical review of the appropriateness of western sending structures is urgently needed' (Moon 2001:8).

Asian Diaspora churches likely share with their original homeland counterparts the need to develop Asian missiology to tackle issues peculiar to Asian societies. These include family or clan obligations, ancestor worship, witness in pluralistic societies, or in antagonistic societies, dialogue with people of other religions, and the impact of secularism and globalism on traditional Asian cultures, to name a few (Szto 2001:2).

A challenge for the Korean church is to forget about its mission growth from a quantitative perspective, and thus to reflect on the issues of qualitative growth. [It] should embark on globalisation of its missionary movement overcoming parochialism to be used for world evangelisation in this global age (Moon 2001:8).

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Just as the Apostle Paul focussed initially on reaching the Jewish Diaspora as a means of impacting the surrounding Gentiles with the gospel, so too must the modern Asian

Diaspora seriously consider its part in global missions. Paul's methods focussed on the use of Scripture (the LXX) and places of worship (the synagogue). Likewise, as the Asian Diaspora and the parallel Asian Church grapples with its need to understand the biblical mandate for mission, it may find it has a significant role to play just as the Jewish Diaspora, their synagogues and the LXX had in reaching the Gentiles that surrounded them.

People from the Asian church now comprise part of the Australian Diaspora. As this body grows in its understanding and involvement in the biblical mandate for mission, it too must become involved in overseas cross-cultural ministry. It needs to develop effective strategies and structures to do this with input from its Asian homeland counterparts.

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