

# **An Uncomfortable Challenge: Lessons for Today's Diasporas from the First Century Diaspora**

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**Abstract:** The global trend of increasing population movement has significant implications for missions. Many of these diaspora communities have significant percentages of Christians who live among populations where Christianity is not thriving. This article looks at the first century Jewish diaspora as an example of a diaspora community that served as a conduit of the gospel to the surrounding majority population. The ways in which a diaspora community intentionally assimilates and acculturates can create opportunities for the diaspora Christians to be vessels of the gospel to large populations with little access to the gospel.

Diaspora communities are visible in almost every city in the world, some more obvious than others.

In missiology there has been an emphasis on trying to reach those diaspora communities. Many of the least reached people groups are inaccessible except for their diaspora communities. This is an important emphasis, but this article will focus on the fact that many of these diaspora communities are more reached with the good news of Jesus than the majority populations surrounding them.

There are diaspora movements that reach into areas where the good news of Jesus has seldom been proclaimed. Among these diaspora movements are many Christians who have put down deep roots among a majority people that is unreached and often unengaged by evangelical witness. Many of these are locations where expatriate Christians have little or no access. Furthermore, many nations are increasing access restrictions for expatriate visas for religious or humanitarian purposes.

Through the centuries, Jewish diaspora communities have been some of the most prominent, and the missiological implications of these communities are worth examining. In the first century there were already Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire. This was especially the case in the cities. Paul's missionary journeys highlight the Jewish Diaspora as he proclaimed the news of Jesus in the local synagogues. Roland Allen notes: "Nearly all the places in which St. Paul established churches were centres of Jewish influence" (Allen 1962, 15). It has been suggested by a number of scholars that the Jewish Diaspora was integral to the spread of the church in the earliest centuries.

To nascent Christianity the synagogues in the Diaspora meant more than the *fontes persecutionum* of Tertullian's complaint; they also formed the most important presupposition for the rise and growth of Christian communities throughout the empire (Harnack 2005, 1).<sup>1</sup>

In today's globalized world, the dissemination of ethnic people groups all over the world is extraordinary. In virtually every country there are significant Chinese and Indian populations. Other peoples have begun emigration patterns, such as Filipinos, Indonesians, and Arabs. Among these diaspora peoples is often a significant number of Christians. Could it be that these diaspora peoples may become integral to the spread of the church for this era? Are these diasporas part of the fulfillment of God's plan?

In 1979, a religious revolution swept through Iran and forced expatriate Christians out of the country. Iran, however, was not left without a witness. There was a Persian Armenian diaspora community living in Iran who identified themselves as Christians. Among this diaspora community were several devoted believers who risked their lives to proclaim the good news among the Iranian majority. While initial efforts were slow and not well-regarded by many in the Armenian community, these brave followers of Christ began to see fruit among the Iranian

majority. One such servant of God, Haik Hovsepian, even had the foresight to translate worship songs into the Iranian tongue, Farsi (Markarian 2008, 7). He later encouraged the Armenian churches to open their doors to the Iranians and even to worship in Farsi. Now some estimates report that there are at least a million believers in the country (Markarian 2008, 9). God used an oppressed and persecuted diaspora community to bring incredible transformation in the lives of hundreds of thousands among a people that was closed to the outside.

In some cases, diaspora movements have created opportunities for those from far away people groups to be reached in our backyards (Wan 2007, 7). But it's the purpose of this article to consider how these diaspora Christians can play an integral role in reaching into the majority groups amongst whom they live and since the model of the earliest expansion of the church was through the first century Jewish Diaspora, this article will examine the lessons gleaned from them.

### **Characteristics of the Diaspora Community**

A diaspora, (“dispersion”) is a people relocated from their place of origin or a “people on the move” (Wan 2007, 7). Originally, the term referred to the Jewish dispersions, but has since been used quite broadly to refer to other dispersed peoples. While statistics are difficult to state accurately, it is estimated that there were five to six million diaspora Jews in the first century (Trebilco and Evans 2000). In Egypt alone, Philo reported one million Jews (Stegner 2000). In fact, there were few cities in the Mediterranean basin that did not have a Jewish community present (Trebilco 1998). While the Jewish Diaspora spanned several centuries, the first and second centuries will be the focus of this description, as the purpose is to understand the characteristic dynamics conducive to the early Christian movement. This article will not offer a

complete description of the Jewish diaspora communities, as the variety of Jewish expressions of life and faith practice is extremely diverse. A generalization will have to suffice.

It was once assumed that Jewish practice in Palestine was more pure and orthodox and that diaspora Judaism had succumbed to syncretism. As with most objects of academic study, the former simple theory has been abandoned for a more complex and nuanced theory of considerable diversity both in Palestine as well as wherever the Diaspora spread. In the midst of this pluriformity, there are shared points of convergence that preserve a distinctly Jewish identity (Stegner 2000).

Under the Roman rule, the Jewish community grew substantially, in part due to gaining proselytes and sympathizers (Trebilco 1998). There was certainly an impact of the Jewish Diaspora on the host cultures (Stark 2006, 5).

Much of the Jewish Diaspora followed paths of trade and commerce and established communities along these mercantile routes. But there were also a significant number that were involved in more humble vocations and even some communities of retired soldiers (Stark 2006, 121, 123).

### **Assessing the Integration and Influence of Diaspora Jews Into Mainstream Society**

When discussing a people's integration into another culture or society the literature is abundant and crosses multiple disciplines. Due to the variety of disciplines, much of the terminology involved varies in usage. Many of the terms are used interchangeably by some and very specifically by others. In seeking to understand the interface between the Jewish Diaspora and

society at large, the terms “assimilation,” “acculturation,” and “accommodation” will be defined and applied. John Barclay has written an insightful article particularly relevant to this subject, “Paul Among Diaspora Jews: Anomaly or Apostate?” (1996). In this article he uses each of the three terms distinctly. This study will use these terms in the same way, because it serves as a useful rubric for understanding the complexity of evaluating integration into society.

### *Assimilation*

Assimilation is a term used widely in various disciplines. It can sometimes be used broadly to note the full integration of a person or people into a new culture. Milton Gordon lists seven dimensions of assimilation: cultural, structural, marital, identificational, attitude receptional, behavior receptional and civic assimilation (Gordon 1964, 71). Barclay defines assimilation as that which is related to the social realm (Barclay 1996, 94). He is careful to measure assimilation not just by counting frequency of contact with Gentiles, but by also considering the quality of the relationships. Here he draws from sociology’s distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ relationships (Barclay 1996, 94). In other words, assimilation is measured by one’s primary social contacts, meaning where one draws social support and looks to for help in moments of difficulty.

### *Acculturation*

Similar to assimilation, acculturation is often used more broadly. Here Barclay’s definition will be followed, referring to the “non-material aspects of the cultural matrix.” (Barclay 1996, 94) In essence, acculturation measures one’s fluency in the language and culture of the new culture. Complete fluency in the language, being well-grounded in the foundational ideas and worldview, and being at home with cultural references characterize someone who is highly acculturated.

### *Accommodation*

The degree of accommodation is assessed by how one integrates their acculturation with their worldview. A low degree of accommodation means the worldview of the individual remains traditional and inflexible. And a high degree of accommodation would see the individual's worldview shaped significantly by the worldview of the surrounding majority population. For example, if a diaspora Jew with a high level of acculturation used it for the propagation of the Jewish worldview without any changes, then the accommodation level would be considered low. On the other hand, if a diaspora Jew sought to integrate the Jewish story into the categories of Hellenistic culture and promoted or favored a Hellenistic worldview, then the accommodation level would be high.

### **Assessment of the Diaspora Jews**

The reality of this kind of study is that diaspora Jews were all over these three scales. There were certainly ghettoized Jews that avoided any element of assimilation or acculturation. The purpose of this article is not to ascertain where all of the diaspora Jews could be plotted on these three scales; rather, it is to look at examples of how diaspora Jews were integral in facilitating the rapid growth of the church in the first three centuries. In other words, not all of the diaspora Jews were intentionally missional, but there were enough to make a significant impact in the vast Roman Empire. This intentionality is referenced by Jesus (Mt. 23:15) as scribes and Pharisees traversed geographical boundaries to make converts. In fact, Michael Green posits that it was Jews that introduced the notion of proselytism to the ancient world (2004, 47). Sociologist Rodney Stark uses numbers to argue the case that the diaspora Jews were indeed missional:

As the practice of inviting guests to worship makes clear, Jews in the Diaspora sought converts, and they seem to have been quite successful in doing so. The best estimate is that by the first century, Jews made up from 10 to 15 percent of the population of the Roman Empire, nearly 90 percent of them living in cities outside Palestine. This would have amounted to from six to nine million people. To achieve these numbers, a considerable amount of conversion would have been required. As Adolf von Harnack recognized, '[I]t is utterly impossible to explain the large total of Jews in the Diaspora by the mere fact of the fertility of Jewish families. We must assume...that a very large number of pagans...trooped over to Yahweh.' (2006, 6)

In terms of assimilation, there were a large number of diaspora Jews that attempted at least a modicum of contact in the larger social structure. Trebilco observes:

Luke indicates that Jews were able to influence the local Gentile population in some places, which suggests that the Jews were respected in their cities (Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5). The presence of God-fearers of some social standing also suggests Jews were a respected group (e.g., Acts 13:16, 48–50; 14:1). (1998)

The Jewish communities around the Roman Empire were able to ascend socially and economically. While the degree to which they contributed to the broader society is less certain, Trebilco proffers that they “made significant social contributions without compromising their Jewish identity” (1998). The diaspora communities were able to contribute and influence because these communities were located in strategic places of learning and commerce. This strategic placement in locations of influence enabled the Jewish community to be missionally engaged with other peoples of the Roman Empire (Sanneh 1989, 16). Returning to Barclay’s defining assimilation in terms of primary relationships, the diaspora Jews still maintained tight-knit relationships within the Jewish community. Even Philo, one often considered an example of a highly Hellenized Jew, was somewhat reserved in degree of assimilation (Barclay 1996, 100). In other words, the Jews were intentionally networked into the larger social structure enough to have influence and respect, even though they reserved most of their primary relationships for fellow Jews.

While the level of acculturation among the diaspora Jews varied widely, there is plenty of evidence illustrating that at least a portion were highly acculturated. The mere ubiquity of the Greek language in Jewish literature, including their scriptures, displays a degree of acculturation.

There was an intentional effort by the Jews to structure themselves and relate to Gentiles in order to attract them to the worship of the one God. The structure of faith practice underwent adaptation as a missional minority faith. The temple in Jerusalem was strictly for Jews and Hebrew was the default language. However, the synagogues (or *proseuchai*, “prayer houses” as they were often called) (Stegner 2000) were more open to Gentile proselytes and there was an ongoing effort to translate books into Greek including the ongoing translation of the Septuagint (Stegner 2000). As an example of the missional inclusiveness of the Jewish communities, Michael Green asserts: “Josephus reports that in Antioch many Greeks were attracted to the Jewish gatherings and became a part of the community.” (2004, 46)

Diaspora Judaism sought to draw both Jew and Gentile into the fold. Often the means used would today be considered a contextualized approach. Language, categories, and metaphors of Hellenistic culture were employed to promulgate the worship of YHWH and became conjoined to the people of God. A well known example is Philo of Alexandria who promoted Jewish belief through his writings (Stegner 2000). In particular, he employed the concept of *logos* to communicate core theological concepts to the Hellenized mind. Lamin Sanneh quotes John Ferguson describing this as “a master-stroke.” He continues:



For here in one concept are fused the Jewish *memra*, the word of God ('God said Let there be light, and there was light'), the late Jewish Wisdom, as seen in *Proverbs*, *Job*, *Ecclesiasticus* and *Wisdom*, the Platonic doctrine of Forms, the Aristotelian doctrine of the Divine Intellect, and the Stoic Divine Reason; the ambiguity of meaning in Logos between word and reason made it an especially convenient term. (1989, 17)

The Jews, while a minority people in the vast Roman Empire, made considerable efforts to communicate their religious beliefs to non-Jews in the language and idiom of the non-Jews. Scot McKnight argues convincingly that the reason for gentile animosity towards the Jews was not nationalism as some have suggested (McKnight 1991, 27). Rather it was due to a proactive effort of many Jews to proclaim their faith in Yahweh "because Judaism was fully assured that truth was on its side... [and] 'among the nations' because Jews were thoroughly woven into the fabric of the Roman world" (McKnight 1991, 117).

In describing the level of acculturation of the Jewish Diaspora, an understanding of their degree of accommodation is already touched upon. While there were definitely those Jews that accommodated to the Hellenized culture to the point of syncretism or outright commitment to a Greco-Roman worldview, this was not normative. It was more common for the diaspora Jews to remain firm in what they considered the core elements of their worldview and practice. Here is just one example of a theological boundary that existed: "Many of them [diaspora Jews] chafed at the ethnic barrier their religion placed between them and their full participation in Hellenic society—the Law made it difficult for them even to eat with their Gentile associates" (Stark 2006, 78).

Recognizing their commitment to maintaining strong convictions, we can also note that many diaspora Jews were intentional with their levels of assimilation and acculturation in order to

propagate their faith among the non-Jews surrounding them. The example of Philo illustrates how the Jews incorporated sophisticated Greek learning into their strategy for the purpose of persuading others of the value of the Jewish faith and way of life. But it was not always the intricate displays of Hellenic literature that impacted people. Many of the gentile God-fearers and proselytes were drawn to the Jewish communities through their lives (Trebilco 1998). As we have already noted, it was even difficult for a gentile to share a meal with a Jew. Yet the seriousness with which the Jews understood their role as God's holy people was attractive to many gentiles. Displaying a well-known and easily observed piety can have a significant impact.

### **Today's Diasporas**

A comprehensive listing of today's diaspora communities is far beyond the scope of this article, and may not even be possible to document in the midst of such a rapidly changing demographic landscape. It has been observed by a number of scholars that among many of the diaspora communities around the world there are high percentages of Christians. The Chinese communities in Southeast Asia have considerable percentages identified as Christians.<sup>2</sup> There are many originating from South Asia who are followers of Christ. The Korean diaspora is noticeably present in Central Asia and growing in many other locations. Many from Southeast Asia have spread across the globe as well.

Many diaspora communities have faced unimaginable suffering due to community prejudice or government policies designed to favor the majority population, not to mention what they may have endured in their land of origin. At times it is nothing more than dietary preferences that create discord with the majority population (i.e. eating pork or beef). In the 1960's Chinese across the globe were associated with communism and faced tragic repercussions. The historical

examples are many and the reasons are multifarious, but suffice it to say that many of the diaspora communities have resorted to isolating themselves from the majority populations geographically, socially, educationally, and economically. This article recognizes that these events have had a scarring impact on many diaspora peoples. Our response to suffering is a test of our faith as we seek to emulate the responses of Jesus and Paul.

### **Proposals**

The intention of this article is *not* to promote total assimilation of the diaspora communities. The language, culture, and heritage of the respective ethnic backgrounds is important and may even be a source of worshipful celebration in recounting the work of God in their story. While we are each clothed in ethnic identity, we are also impelled to have a pilgrim posture (Gen. 12:1-4; 1 Pet 1:17; Heb 11:8-16; 13:14). It is the call to be a blessing that compels us to make sacrifices for the ultimate purposes of God. Listed below are some proposals for the diaspora churches to prayerfully consider as they posture themselves to be salt and light (Matt 5:13-16) among some of the least reached peoples and urban areas in the world.

- *Live and work in the social mainstream*- The example of the diaspora Jews and the early Christians to follow was to live and work in the social mainstream. There can be a tendency among a minority population to grow more insular. That is, they will live, work, and shop in their own communities, severed from the rest of society. As noted previously, the Jews often lived in the economic and educational hubs of a city. It is here, in these strategic locations, that a Christian community can have a magnified impact on the surrounding community.

- *Love the majority even in the face of trials and persecution-* Christians have unequivocally been given the command to love (Mt. 22:37-40). This is not to remain within a confined community but is to be even extended to enemies. Jesus charges us to love our enemies (Mt. 5:44). If Christians are located strategically in the midst of the lost and not in their own ghettos, then the injunction to love our neighbors can operate powerfully to show the love of the Messiah. We see several of the early Christian apologists arguing the church's contribution to the Roman Empire precisely because they lived with integrity and love.<sup>3</sup>
  
- *Use the language and concepts of the majority to proclaim and explain the good news of Jesus-* Commonly, a Christian minority will use terms, language, and practices that are very different from the culture of the majority of the surrounding population. In the New Testament we see the church struggling to overcome cultural differences when the gospel moved from the Jews to the Gentiles. It is noteworthy that even the language of the New Testament itself testifies to the intentionality of addressing the majority population. Terms such as synagogue and Messiah were exchanged for *ecclesia* and Christ. In like manner, diaspora Christians might consider finding substitutes for the common religious terms that are obstacles to the majority population in understanding the good news of Jesus. This undoubtedly will involve a sacrifice, but in order that more may know Christ, what a worthy sacrifice it is.
  
- *Continually look at common church practices and hold more loosely to the cultural practices-* In his challenge to diaspora peoples, Samuel Sikitari urges: "It is a must to

learn the culture of the land as an effective approach for mission.” (2007, 63). We must recognize some of those things that are just cultural and should not become part of our theological convictions. Interestingly, we see this barrier removed among the early Christians when Peter was challenged in a vision from God to eat with the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10-11). In Acts 10:41, Peter states that the Jews were chosen to be witnesses of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. In the same way, followers of Jesus in diaspora communities around the world are chosen to be witnesses.

- *Explain the faith by starting where the listener is at*- An understanding of cultures around the world reveals that cultures operate based on worldview narratives. These worldview narratives shape a person’s assumptions, decisions, beliefs, and actions. Diaspora believers ought to seek an understanding of the dominant worldview of the majority population and critically engage the worldview. This is what we see Philo (as a Jew) and early Christian apologists do with the term Logos. We have an example in Acts 17 as well with Paul addressing Athenians and the worldview assumptions they carry with them. This serves two important functions. First, it is a witness to the surrounding culture. Second, it is worldview reinforcement (discipleship) among the believers. Sometimes too much uncritical exposure to a different worldview can numb believers to the quest to understand and follow the truth. Relevant, critical engagement with the dominant worldview can help believers maintain a healthy perspective.
  
- *Create neutral spaces for non-Christians safely explore faith in Jesus*- Diaspora believers should establish communities that live out their devotion to Jesus. There is a need for

formal communities as well as informal communities. Churches are an example of a formal Jesus community, and we should always be starting new churches. Less formal communities are needed as well. In most of the world, church buildings are considered taboo territory, unwelcoming, possibly even causing defilement. Create spaces that are welcoming to others. Samuel Sikitari observes the exilic Jews could not make the temple available to the Gentiles for worship. Instead, synagogues became spaces for Jews and God-fearing Gentiles to gather together (2007, 58).

- *Be sensitive about sending wrong messages*- Communities of Christians among diaspora peoples need to be sensitive to ways their mere presence can be perceived as a threat to the majority population. Intentional or not, diaspora populations pose a political threat to the majority ethnic group. We see this dynamic when the nation of Israel—once living peaceably on Egyptian soil—becomes enslaved by a new dynasty attempting to consolidate its power (Wright 2006, 268). These threats are sometimes overtly political through transnational political lobby groups (Vertovec 1999, 4) or subtly influential through economic clout. (Prior 1998, 92) While this touches on a highly complex subject, diaspora believers will need to consider carefully how they choose to accommodate and not accommodate in order to make a spiritual impact on the whole population.
- *Release control of the church*- There is a tendency for diaspora Christian communities to make up for their numbers by building large buildings or being ostentatiously different. This is sometimes an attempt at making the majority population respect the minority

presence. It normally has the opposite effect. Eric and Laura Adams describe one of the consequences of becoming too attached to buildings and assets:

The more a local church is defined by buildings, assets, and institution, the more vulnerable the church is to persecution. Persecutors can use threats of taking away these rights and assets as leverage to control the church and silence the 'voice of witness.' The more a local fellowship is defined primarily by community (a network of relationships), the more resistant the fellowship is to persecution. This form of fellowship not only can survive environments of persecution but also often thrive and spread despite hostile scrutiny. (2008, 156)

Diaspora Christians need to be willing to release control, buildings, and personal prosperity. This is not to say that diaspora Christians should sell all of their property, but should continually assess when properties or traditions become obstacles to the spread of the gospel to the majority people. Sometimes the obsession with image and prosperity of many immigrant believers tarnishes true Christianity. Christianity is soon equated with hypocrisy and disingenuousness (Zo 2004, 50).

### **The Balance**

The challenging nature of these proposals is understandable. Diaspora peoples face a number of challenges already as minorities in their nations. Many Christian diaspora peoples are struggling with decreased church attendance and even losing many to secularism or the majority faith (often enticing because of increased personal benefits to those who switch to the majority faith).

(Connor 2008) These concerns are legitimate ones. It is my contention, however, that these proposals for positioning diaspora churches to be missional among the majority people will also significantly aid the diaspora church in growing stronger. When a diaspora or immigrant population begins to see their own switch to the majority people's religious or ideological identity, it is often because the younger generations have a closer bond to the language and

culture of the majority. When the diaspora community begins to articulate the good news of Jesus in the language and culture of the majority people, they also disciple their own people and avoid unhealthy degrees of assimilation.

The proposals listed above are derived from a two thousand year-old context and are addressing diaspora communities all over the globe. Given the diversity of the contexts of these diaspora communities these proposals will need to be uniquely applied in each setting. More research on this topic is necessary. As diaspora communities seek to reach the majority people around them, these accounts need to be documented so that diaspora communities everywhere can benefit from the lessons learned.

While the love of Christ compels us (2 Cor. 5:14) to sacrificially love our neighbors and make disciples of all nations, this does not mean diaspora communities are supposed to erase their own cultural heritage. The heart language of the diaspora community is a powerful way to express heartfelt worship unto the Almighty. It might be that a diaspora community has a rich history of seeing God work powerfully. These acts of God ought to be remembered worshipfully. It is important for a diaspora community not to spurn its own culture, but at the same time it must not neglect the incredible responsibility of the church in the midst of lostness. We are called to be beacons of light in the midst of darkness and this will involve heavy sacrifices (Jn. 12:24). The prophet Isaiah reminds us in 49:6:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant  
To restore the tribes of Jacob  
And bring back those of Israel I have kept.  
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,  
That you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.<sup>4</sup>



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> He further stated: "And in order to comprehend the propaganda and diffusion of Christianity, it is quite essential to understand that the religion under whose "shadow" it made its way out into the world, not merely contained elements of vital significance but had expanded till it embraced a considerable proportion of the world's population." (Harnack 2005, 9) See also: (Sanneh 1989, 19; Stark 1997, 49-71)

<sup>2</sup> See (Mitchell 1974, 29; Coppel 1994, 209).

<sup>3</sup> For an example see Justin Martyr's *Second Apology*.  
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<sup>4</sup> *New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1984.

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