

Jewish Dispersions down to the Time of Christ: Macedonian of Judea; Jews from the Parthian Kingdom Observe Pentecost, Acts 2:1-11; Alexander the Great Befriends the Jew; Adopts Them into His Administration in Persia; the Phil-Hellenic Period of Parthia

In the early fourth century B.C. Alexander the Great was so impressed with the brilliance of the Jewish people that he acquired a large number of them to his organization, many of which were scattered throughout his holdings between Israel and Persia.

We have already noted the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great in c. 550 B.C. This Empire lasted until 330 B.C. when Alexander the Great conquered the Achaemenid Dynasty. This resulted in the Hellenistic culture of Greece to be spread throughout Persia over the next several centuries.

The Parthian Empire was established in 250 B.C. and lasted until A.D. 226. It was the equal of Rome in its power both commercially and militarily. The border that divided the two empires was the Euphrates River. And its government included the Magi, priests whose bloodline can be traced back to the Jewish tribes that immigrated over the course of some 700 years and who most recently were amalgamated into the Parthian culture.

That many of these Parthian Jews still followed the requirements of the Mosaic Law we only have to consult a passage in the New Testament that confirms their nationality and their presence at the Passover of Acts 2.

Acts 2:1 - When the day of Pentecost had come [**beginning of the Church Age**], they were all together in one place

v. 2 - And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

v. 3 - And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, as they rested on each one of them [**the Holy Spirit is distributing a foreign language among those gathered**].

Acts 2:4 - And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues [**in other languages**], as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

v. 5 - Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men [εὐλαβῆς, **eulabēs**] from every nation under heaven [**makes reference to the nations that make up the Roman and Parthian Empires**].

The word translated “devout” is εὐλαβῆς, **eulabēs** and is used in this context for a pious person but one who is an unbeliever committed to a religion and therefore involved in ritual without reality. These Jews have come to Jerusalem for one purpose: to celebrate the feast of Pentecost which culminated a sequence of events that began at Passover.

Passover occurred over seven weeks before and was followed by the feast of Unleavened Bread. In the midst of the feast of Unleavened Bread there was Firstfruits, and the fourth feast was Pentecost which is fifty days after the feast of the Firstfruits. Pentecost simply means fifty days.



These feasts were a part of God's ritual plan that revealed the Person and work of Messiah and depicted the divine schedule of events leading up to the establishment of His kingdom.

Passover represents the cross with emphasis on redemption through the sacrifice of a lamb: "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7a).

Unleavened Bread emphasizes sanctification. Leaven is representative of sin. Christ, "Who committed no sin" (1 Peter 2:22a), was qualified to be judged for our sins. Through salvation and rebound we have fellowship with God in time.

Firstfruits represents His resurrection. "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Pentecost is not only the day the Church Age began but it is also the beginning of warnings to the Jews that they are going into the fifth cycle of discipline. All of these things were involved in the phrase, "There were Jews living in Jerusalem."

These are religious Jews but they are unbelievers. They have come from all over the Roman and Parthian Empires to observe the feast of Pentecost, a period of great religious activity. They are said to be "out of every nation." They are out of every nation based on several principles. We have noted their dispersions to Assyria and Babylon. A third involved an encounter with Alexander the Great.

When Alexander came to Jerusalem on his campaign to conquer those nations east of Israel including Persia, the Jews came out to meet him. Under the leadership of the high priest they brought out to him the *Daniel* manuscript and showed him the prophecies of his conquests.

Alexander, when he had taken Gaza, made haste to go up to Jerusalem; and Jaddua \ja-dū'-a\ the high priest, when he heard that, was in an agony not knowing how he should meet the Macedonians, whereupon, God warned him in a dream, which came upon him after he had offered sacrifice, that he should take courage, and adorn the city and open the gates; that the rest should appear in white garments, but that he and the priests should meet the king in the habits proper to their order, without the dread of any ill consequences, which the providence of God would prevent. (p. 344 45)

And when Jaddua understood that Alexander was not far from the city, we went out in procession, with the priests and the multitude of the citizens. Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest. The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about.

And when the book of Daniel was showed him,¹ wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended. ... the next day he called them to him, and bid them ask what favours they pleased of him; whereupon the high priest desired that they might enjoy the laws of their forefathers, and might pay no tribute on the seventh year. He granted all they desired. And when they entreated him that they would permit the Jews in Babylon and Media to enjoy their own laws also, he willingly promised to do what they desired.

¹ "The place showed Alexander might be Dan. 7:6; 8:3-8, 20-22; 11:3; some or all of them very plain predictions of Alexander's conquests and successors" (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11, 8, 5n).



And when he said to the multitude, that if any of them would enlist themselves in his army, on this condition, that they should continue under the laws of their forefathers, and live according to them, he was willing to take them with him, many were ready to accompany him in his wars.² (p. 345)

From this we learn that Alexander, impressed he was mentioned in Scripture, immediately took a liking to the Jews and he became their benefactor. He soon discovered that they were excellent in administration and wherever Alexander went during his twelve years of conquest he took Jews. In this way the Jews had yet another dispersion. Also, during the course of the Roman Republic, Jews were discovered to have great abilities in the field of administration and in international business. Therefore, Jews were scattered all over the Roman Empire. Many of these Jews' ancestors had been living away from home for several hundred years, and they had now gathered in Jerusalem to observe Pentecost.

After all this time, these descendants of several Diasporas still held fast to the rituals of Judaism.

Acts 2:6 - And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language.

v. 7 - They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"

v. 8 - "And how is it that we each hear them in our own language in which we were born?"

v. 9 - "Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

v. 10 - Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

v. 11 - Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking the mighty deeds of God."

There are fifteen geographic locations mentioned and they dramatize the vast expanse covered by those Jews who were among the three major dispersions over a 750-year period. Among them are four areas that make up the Parthian Empire: Parthians, Medes, Elamites and the part of Mesopotamia that is east of the Euphrates River (v. 9a).

In Parthia, the period between the Lord's birth and His early youth in Nazareth occurred in what historians refer to as the phil-Hellenistic Period (c. 171 B.C.–AD 10).

This period was characterized by a strong Hellenistic cultural influence, manifested in the use of the Greek language and in particular in the arts, where, however, the national traditions were not completely abandoned. (p. 842)

² Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* in *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, nd), 344–45 (11, 8, 4–5).



Settlement with Rome. The new stage in the phil-Hellenistic period began toward 31 B.C., when, after his victory over Antony, Octavian (now Augustus) was sole master in Rome. Before that, however, he had already proposed to Phraates IV \frā-ā'-tēz\ an alliance and a treaty ending the war. The Battle of Carrhae \kar'-rā\^{3,4} and Antony's defeat raised Parthia to a major power in the eye of Rome. In the end a pact was signed in 20 B.C. that allowed the return of Roman prisoners and the insignia of the conquered legions. A new stage began in relations between the two states, marked by the conclusion of a real peace that recognized the Euphrates as a frontier between them. Phraates IV was dealt with as the sovereign of a great nation. Rome renounced its ambitions in the east, and Augustus inaugurated a policy of respect.

Toward 10 or 9 B.C. Phraates sent his four sons and grandsons to Rome, a gesture that must be understood as one of confidence in a "friendly" power but also as a guarantee that his throne would pass to his son by Musa, an Italian slave girl given him by Augustus. This son, Phraates V, would assassinate his father with his mother's help and occupy the throne from 2 B.C. to A.D. 4 after having married his mother.

The end of the "phil-Hellenistic" period is marked by the clash of the ruling class with foreign influences that had penetrated life in Parthian society. These influences came from Rome and were often introduced by princes of the Arsacid \ār'-sa-sid\ house [which ruled the Parthian Empire] returning from stays abroad.⁵ (p. 844)

³ "Residence of Terah and his son, the Hebrew patriarch Abraham (*Gen. 11:31–32*)" *Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary*, 3d ed., s.v.: "Haran."

⁴ "This battle near Carrhae (53 B.C.), led by Surenas \sur-ā'-nas\ with his light and heavy cavalry, cost Rome seven legions and the lives of Crassus and his son. Through Surenas' brilliant victory the routes to Iran and India were closed to Rome" (Roman Ghirshman, "Iran, History of," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia* [Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979], 9:843).

⁵ Ghirshman, *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 9:842, 844.

