

In this paper I will discuss the Jews in the cities of Greco-Roman times and how they compare to the Jews in the cities of today's society. In addition, I will talk about citizenship in Roman society and how it affected the inhabitants. In James S. Jeffers book *The Greco-Testament Era* he talks about the presence of Jews throughout the Roman Empire and their significant impact on the spread of Christianity¹

Prior to Paul the Apostle beginning his missionary work among the Jewish people in Ephesus in Rome, the entire society was mainly under Greek rule they were not Roman citizens. However, it was of benefit to claim Roman citizenship, due to the Roman law. It gave protection against the provincial governor's jurisdiction over many capital crimes and the use of torture. Provincial governors automatically sent Roman citizens charged with certain offenses to Rome for trial rather than attempting to try the cases themselves.²

Romans in the Eastern provinces lived in a different legal and social atmosphere from citizens in the western provinces. In the West, particularly in Italy Roman civilization predominated and Roman citizenship was regularly granted to whole communities. Over time, the provinces in the West were becoming extensions of Italy in many ways. But in the Eastern provinces during Paul's day, the culture was still predominantly Hellenistic and the language existing city in the East. Apart from the Roman colonies established by generals and emperors in the century or so before Paul, no city in the eastern /empire was made up predominately of Roman citizens. An indication of the importance of Roman colonies is the fact that Paul's travels often took him through them. He visited Antioch and Lystra in Asia Minor, Corinth in Achaea, Philippi in Macedonia, and Alexandria Troas in Asia. All of these were Roman colonies settled by retired Roman soldiers.³

¹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, (Wisconsin: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 211

² Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 207

³ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 208

Paul used his roman citizenship when necessary and when it was not, he did not. However, he was a Jew and did not follow roman lifestyle or adhered to their traditions. I found it cleaver of him to move through the roman society preaching yet weaving in and out of their system using it while bringing their citizens the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Even in Roman colonies, a majority of the population may not have been Roman citizens. Acts suggest that Roman colonies of Antioch, Lystra and Corinth had as many Greeks and Jews as they had Romans (Acts 13:14; 16:2; 18:4). Elsewhere, in the hundreds of Greek and half-Greek cities of the East, Roman citizens were rare. Lists of inhabitants, and even lists of city magistrates from the Greek cities of this period, often include no recognizable Roman citizens.⁴ Frankly, roman citizenship was not that valuable to the average inhabitant of a Greek city. If he was poor, the only thing it allowed him to do was enter the regular army. If he were rich, he could spend his way into the equestrian order and thus into public service, but this required both a lot of money and the right contacts in Rome. We have certain knowledge of only a dozen Roman citizens from the East during the New Testament era who were able to build careers as equestrians. They served as high military officers or procurators. A Roman citizen of non-Roman extraction may well have regarded his citizenship as we regard an honorary degree: of little practical use under most circumstances.⁵

I guess it really was not that big of a deal to be a roman citizen. We see how Paul moved throughout roman society not in fear of any repercussions. He used his Roman citizenship when he needed the freedom. He associated himself to be a citizen of Heaven which in his view was paramount. His focus was mainly on Christians and showing them how to use their citizenship to their benefit. Nevertheless, he never used his roman citizenship to escape persecution because he

⁴ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 208

⁵ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 208

knew that his Lord Jesus Christ had endured such and he would also. He often used his roman citizenship not to escape being beaten but to receive justice.

In scriptures we see Paul using his roman citizenship to his advantage in Acts 21:39 But Paul , I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people.⁶

We see Jews today trying to use their dual citizenship whenever they have major issues in the united states. They fight for issues in Israel claiming a stake in that region due to citizenship, yet they use their U.S. Citizenship when they need to in matters in their communities inside America.

Jews throughout roman empire had a significant impact on the spread of Christianity. We see Jewish communities nearly everywhere Paul and the other early Christian disciples travel. But the Jews were by no means the only ethnic and national minority in the cities of the Empire. Resident foreigners made up a significant part of many major cities of Rome. Some were brought to the city as slaves, while others came willingly, seeking to take part in the general prosperity of the cities.⁷

It seems that foreigners, though having to obey the laws and customs of the city they were residing in, they basically could take over a part of the city if there was a significant number of them and excerpt their own self-rule. We see this today in 21st century society throughout many neighborhoods in certain sections of the boroughs, in New York City. For example, in Boro Park Brooklyn, which is predominately Jewish residents, they have total control of that area and is large enough to implement their own rule on things. It is only when they get into trouble that the laws overall apply. Even some Jews today control police

⁶ Acts.21:39 KJV

⁷Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 211

departments in their communities and the laws are often overlooked to accommodate them. For example, in the early 1990's there was tension between Jews and Blacks in Crown Heights, in Brooklyn New York and the Jews basically had the police department on their side or in their pocket. A tragic accident took place in that set off a series of riots in Crown Heights.

On Aug. 19, 1991, at roughly 8:20 p.m., a vehicle that was part of a three-car motorcade carrying Menachem Schneerson, grand rebbe of the Lubavitch Hasidic community, struck and killed Gavin Cato and seriously injured his cousin Angela. She nearly bit through her tongue and lost half an ear. As the two children lay bloody and trapped beneath the vehicle, driver Yosef Lifsh, 22, a Hasidic Jew, gaped in horror at his path of destruction. Lifsh had been the last car in a trio of vehicles escorting Schneerson home from a visit to the graves of his wife and the former grand rebbe. The lead vehicle was a 71st Precinct police car — because the rebbe had an NYPD escort for all his cemetery visits. It was just one of many privileges police afforded the Jewish community in Crown Heights that raised resentment among black residents, who had a much more turbulent relationship with the NYPD.⁸

This is one incident where one segment of the population controls a community and have special privileges based on their citizenship, and class just as in the Greco-Roman times. The Hassidic Jews were able to use their privileges of having being foreigners who came in a community and possess the entire area they had preeminence over the blacks who were the minority in the community. It often showed when it came to police protections and civil liberties. Being of an ethnicity or belonging to a certain providence you would receive better treatment.

⁸ Rich Shapiro, "Race Riots Erupt in Crown Heights" Daily News (August 1990): 2-3

It seems that “dispersion” has been taking place from the beginning of time. As I continue to read *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* there was so much reminiscence of what I see happening in this era today. People have always moved throughout the world and pushing other folk out or trying to converge on a territory and set up their own ideologies and pushing their agenda on others. In terms of the gospel I am sure that purpose of Paul’s mission was to win souls to the Kingdom of Heaven. Nonetheless, he had to deal with all the distinctions that was not of his belief, which I am quite sure he had to suffer persecution for that. Jews dispersed from Jerusalem in 63 B.C, to Rome as slaves.

By the time of Christ, Jews were widely dispersed throughout the cities and countryside of the Empire and beyond. From the time of the Babylonian captivity, Jews outside Palestine greatly outnumbered those in the land. In New Testament times, only about 2.5 million Jews lived in Palestine, while 4 to 6 million lived outside of Palestine (Philo *Legatio Ad Caium* 36). The regions of Mesopotamia Syria/Asia Minor and Egypt each had more than 1 million Jewish residents, while Italy and North Africa each had around 100,000 Jews. The Jews in Egypt for the most part lived in and around Alexandria and made up about 10 to 15 percent of the population.

There was a substantial Jewish population in virtually every town of any decent size in the Mediterranean region. The largest urban population in the Empire were the 200,000 Jews in Alexandria and the 50,000 in Rome. Most Jews in the dispersion lived in cities, where they could pursue a variety of trades and could often find fellow Jews with whom to associate. Jews in much of Europe would continue to be city dwellers for many

centuries. In the first century B.C. according to Josephus, the Roman governor of Asia Minor confirmed the right of “the Jewish citizens in our city” to come together and have a communal life and adjudicate suits among themselves, and that a place be given them in which they may gather together with their wives and children and offer their ancestral prayers and sacrifices to God...(Jewish Antiquities 14.259-61). The council further instructed the magistrates to set aside a place for the Jews “to build and inhabit” and the market officials to provide “suitable food for the Jews.”⁹

Again, we see this same dispersion happening today. Jews are migrating from Israel to United States and setting up their own communities, throughout many states. I read an article in which the writer broke down into 3 groups of Jews who migrated to American. The writer talked about how today, the American Jewish community is largely Ashkenazic, meaning that is is made up of Jews who trace their ancestry to Germany and Eastern Europe. However, the first Jews to arrive in the U.S. were Sephardic, tracing their ancestry to Spain and Portugal.¹⁰ So, here we see the dispersion coming from that same century as those in Greco-Roman times.

Spain and Portugal. The following article looks at the three major waves of Sephardic and Ashkenazic immigration to America. Sephardic, German, and Eastern European immigrants each contributed to the formation of American Jewry.

Throughout history, it seems that the Jews were always experiencing some sort of upheaval. The Jewish community in Rome dates to at least the second century B.C. It

⁹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 213-214

¹⁰ Joellyn Zollman, “*Jewish Immigration to America: Three Waves*” My Jewish Learning.com (2002)

grew considerably when the Roman Pompey's conquest of Judea in 63 B.C. resulted in the transportation of thousands of Jewish captives to Rome on the left bank of the Tiber River. Many Jews live in this area even today.¹¹

With all the wars and other nations coming in and conquering Israel the Jews have been dispersed all over the world and into slavery.

After Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E., the Roman Empire underwent a period of 38 years of unrest to which the Jews contributed a share. Numerous times they rebelled in the hope of regaining their independence and religious freedom.¹² Christians who worked with ministry in Rome caused a great deal of uproar in their places of worship, in the temples which caused many Jews to be thrown out. Since many of the Jews were slaves, it would have been difficult to really get rid of them because they were property of Roman citizens. Not all Jews were slaves. There were some that had wealth and community status, as well.

With all the different sects of Jews in the Roman Empire, it was very difficult for Christianity to have an impact in that society. The Hasidic Jews seemed to remain separate from the society, just as they are today in New York City. They meet in their own Synagogues, practicing their religious rituals of the sabbath and holy days. These Jews only look at the first five books of the Bible, which they call the Torah. They educate their own children, in their own schools. Then you have some gentiles who did convert from Judaism to Christianity, though many kept some of the traditional teachings.

¹¹Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 208

¹²Israel Ramat-Gan, *From Pompey to the Destruction of the Second Temple (63 B.C.E.-70 C.E.)* From Pompey to Herod (Internet Educational Activities: 1997), <http://sglick@iea.org.il>

Several the earliest converts to Christianity in the cities, according to Partial converts apparently found attractive a religion like Christianity, which religion of a specific people that placed so many restrictions on them.¹³

As Paul the Apostle went about teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Rome, he was successful in actually gaining some converts into the Christianity. Christianity spreaded rapidly throughout the Jewish synagogues. In the book of Acts, we see Paul's missionary work at hand. The mixture of the early church with the synagogues were crucial for the gospel. The teachings of Christ were implemented in these synagogues.

In conclusion, Christianity was born out of Judaism. I say that because the scriptures reading was that of the Jewish scriptures before the letters and Gospels of the apostles were implemented. Much of what Paul did was in line with Judaism. Though, Christianity is based upon the belief of a Triune God who clothed himself in humanity to enter into the world as the Son of God, Judaism highlights the Oneness of God and rejects the Christian concept of God in human form. Nonetheless, the impact of Jewish lifestyle and their willingness to go against Roman rule, fight and set up their own communities and structures many converted. Which had a significant impact on hearing and believing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, as in the Roman Greco times there were Jews for Jesus, we still see in society today the same.

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¹³Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 218

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