

Dispensationalism and
the Three New Testament References
to the Diaspora
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Further evidence about the relationship between old covenant Israel and the new covenant church is found in the three new testament uses of the Greek word used to refer to the Jews scattered among the Gentile nations. This Greek word is used in John 7:35 to refer to the Jewish "Diaspora." Jesus, referring to His death, said to some Pharisees that He was soon going to a place where they could not find Him. The Pharisees misunderstood Jesus' meaning and asked themselves if Jesus was going to the Dispersion; that is, going among the Jews who lived in the Gentile nations. Pockets of Jews had been living in the Gentile nations ever since the Assyrian conquest of northern Israel and the Babylonian conquest of the southern kingdom of Judah. Both the Assyrians and the Babylonians had resettled Jews among the Gentile nations. This term is used in John 7 to refer to these physical Jews who lived in the Gentile nations and maintained their Jewish identity.

This same Greek word is also used in the opening verse of the epistle of James:

James 1:1

1 James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.

James here uses the term to refer only to the Jewish Christians who were scattered among the nations. We read in Acts chapter two that on the day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' crucifixion, many from the Jewish Dispersion were in Jerusalem.

Acts 2:5

5 And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.

Peter preached the gospel to these Jews on Pentecost, and many believed. We can assume that at least some of these at some point returned to their homes among the nations. With the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution which followed, the book of Acts specifically tells us that there was a Christian dispersion of the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem:

Acts 11:19

19 Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.

James addresses the Jewish Christians who were now living scattered among the Gentile nations as the true Diaspora, the true twelve tribes of Israel dispersed among the nations. Those Jews who did not believe in Jesus continued as a part of Israel after the flesh, but they were no longer regarded as a part of spiritual Israel. They remained Jews outwardly but they were not Jews inwardly.

This letter from James is considered the earliest written book in the new testament. In it, James referred to the Jewish Christians as the true Israel of God when the Christian church was almost exclusively Jewish. We can see that the church was then predominately Jewish from James' choice of words in James 2:2, when he says,

2 For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, ...

The word there translated "assembly" is the word normally translated elsewhere "synagogue." The Christian weekly assembly would be referred to as a synagogue only in the early days of the church when its membership was still predominately Jewish.

The third usage of this Greek word referring to the "Diaspora" is found in the opening verse of 1 Peter:

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion ...

Peter continued to use this same term for the church scattered throughout the nations even though there were by then many Gentiles with pagan backgrounds in the church. In chapter one, verse eighteen, Peter says that those to whom he was writing were redeemed from the "aimless conduct received by tradition from [their] fathers." 1 Peter 4:3 says,

3 For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles -- when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.

It sounds like Peter is primarily addressing Gentiles with pagan backgrounds when he refers to their redemption from the aimless conduct received from their fathers and their doing in the past the will of the Gentiles, which included abominable idolatries. That language points to converted Gentiles, not to converted Jews. Peter continued James' practice of calling the scattered church the "Diaspora" even after its membership became predominately Gentile.

All of these passages, in conformity with covenant theology, point to the origin of the new covenant church as an organic development of old covenant Israel. Contrary to dispensationalism, the new covenant church did not originate as a totally distinct second people of God which has temporarily displaced an Israel which remains in the childhood of the old covenant.