

# Indians of the Dispersion

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*By Vivienne Stacey*

## 1. Introduction

God often works through the dispersing of people. Centuries ago He worked through the dispersions of Jews. Today He is working through dispersions of Christians including many Indians who are working abroad. Let us look first at the Jewish dispersions and then at present day Indian dispersions.

## 2. The Jewish Dispersions

We will consider briefly three Jewish dispersions.

### 2.1 A dispersion resulting from political pressure and conquest.

It was the policy of the Babylonian imperialists to transport some of their conquered peoples for resettlement far from their homelands. After the destruction of Jerusalem a large number of Jews were taken to Babylon. However, while in captivity they still maintained a distinctively Jewish way of worship. They continued to worship the on God, Yahweh, despite the idolatry around them. Thus, they had an unconscious influence upon their rulers, attracting some idolaters towards a purer form of worship. During their long period of exile the Jews in Babylon, cut off from the Temple, built synagogues as places of worship. When some of the Jewish exiles returned to their native land they introduced synagogues and synagogue worship. Others for economic reasons never returned home although after the Persians had defeated the Babylonians they were free to do so.

### 2.2 A dispersion resulting from economic pressures.

A couple of centuries later Alexander the Great conquered the known world, spreading his Greek civilization as far as India. Under economic pressure Jewish migrants settled in key cities like Alexandria on the coast of Egypt. Here they were able to trade and make a better living than if they had stayed in their own land. As the years passed by a new generation of Jews grew up in Alexandria who had forgotten the Hebrew their parents taught them. They were unable to read the Old Testament in its original language of Hebrew. Parents are generally concerned about the religious education of their children. These Jewish parents in Alexandria campaigned for the making of a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into everyday Greek, the language spoken all around them and which they now used in their homes. So a translation was made so that they, their children and grandchildren could read the sacred scriptures in a modern Greek version. This famous translation became known as the Septuagint. Later the New Testament writers were able to quote directly from this translation. Several centuries later the Septuagint proved a great help in discussions between Muslims and Christians over the reliability of the Old Testament manuscripts. Most of the oldest Old Testament manuscripts that we now have are those of the first century before Christ and were found in the Qumran caves in 1947. The prophet Isaiah wrote in the eighth century before Christ. The translators of the Septuagint took a scroll of Isaiah belonging to the third century before Christ or earlier and from this the translation was made.

The scroll used wore out and we no longer have one so old. Copies had been made. The oldest copy we now have was found in the Qumran caves and belongs to the first century before Christ. Muslims accused the Jews of changing the text of the Old Testament. In answering the charge of the corruption of the text of the Old Testament it helps to compare the first century BC Hebrew manuscripts with the Septuagint translation, as the Septuagint translators had a manuscript in front of them which was at least two centuries older than what we now possess. If the Greek is a good translation of the original Hebrew it confirms the reliability of the Hebrew text. Those parents in Alexandria, Jews of the dispersion, never guessed what a service their translation would provide not only for the New Testament writers but for Christian apologists after the rise of Islam. Truly God, the Sovereign Lord, uses dispersions for His own purposes.

### **2.3 A dispersion resulting from religious persecution.**

In the Acts of the Apostles we read of a third dispersion. Jewish believers in Christ, Hebrew Christians, were scattered through persecution and thus they spread out from Jerusalem into many places and areas around (Acts 8 verse 1). The earlier dispersion groups in Pontus, Bythynia, Galatia and numerous other places (1 Peter 1 verse 1) formed the stepping stones from which the gospel was preached in these districts. The new dispersion linked up with the older one. Clearly we can see that the primary factors in causing the Jewish dispersions were politics, economics and persecution.

## **3 The Indian Dispersions**

The dispersion of Indians in lands outside India is a national matter bringing economic advantages to the nation as well as to individuals. During the last ten years I have made frequent visits to the oil states of the Arabian Gulf. Wherever I have been— in the Sultanate of Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait--I have met Indians. Very often they are Indian Christians from Kerala. The most significant matter about the Indian dispersion may well be the comparatively large number of Christians who are part of it. In one Gulf state I visited the ophthalmological department of one of its newest hospitals and found that both the head of the department and his deputy were Indian Christian doctors. Most of the thirteen or so government hospitals in the country are staffed by Indian and Pakistani Christian doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians and cooks. It is not unusual for eighty percent of the staff to gather together for worship on Fridays or Sunday. Linked to the hospitals is a network of dispensaries covering the whole country. These too are manned by Christians.

1. God, the Lord of history and of the nations, uses dispersion for His own purposes. (1 Peter 1 verses 1 and 2). Most have gone to the oil lands to earn money but that does not mean that God cannot and will not use believing Christians among them to bring His light into dark and remote places.
2. The Indian Christians of the dispersion have formed worshipping groups in Muscat, Salalah, Bahrain, Kuwait, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha and in many other Arab towns, In these strongly Muslim areas Christ is praised in Malayalam, Marathi, Hindustani and many other Indian languages. Often without pastors but welcoming visiting itinerant preachers and teachers, responsible laymen are developing their gifts for organization and teaching. I well remember an Indian congregation of about 120 in Muscat, worshipping

in Malayalam. Their leaders warmly welcomed me, invited me to speak at the weekly service after satisfying themselves that I really believed the truths of the faith. How right they were to test the theology of the itinerant teacher. Much lay initiative is being shown in these groups. A few have priests like some of the Syrian and Mar Thoma congregation.

3. Indian Christians abroad could bring greater missionary vision to the Indian church at home. Believers are exhorted to pray for the places where they live and for the people around them. (Jeremiah 29 verse 7). "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf." Prayers may now be being made for villages and towns for which Christians have neglected to pray for centuries. Dispersed Indian Christians belong to churches in their homeland and have the responsibility of helping their congregations to pray in an informed way for Bahrain or for wherever it is that the member now lives.
4. Dispersed Indian Christians sometimes earn five or ten times as much money as they would earn in India. They have the responsibility not only to help their own households and families but to help the church in India, "the household of faith". Some are doing this but more help could be given especially to those enterprises which serve across the borders of denomination, for example, the Bible Society, The Union of Evangelical Students of India, the Far East Broadcasting Association, the Scripture Union, the Indian Evangelical Mission etc.
5. India has had a Christian Church since the first century. It is true that up to the seventh century there were some Christian tribes and congregations in the Arabian Peninsula. Since the rise of Islam there has, however, been only a minute Christian presence in that large peninsula. Today because of oil and the development it brings there are more expatriates, including more Christians, than at any other period in history on the soil of Arabia. Some of the most memorable days of my life have been days of Christian festivals when I have joined in Arabia with Christians from many lands to celebrate Christmas and Easter. A joint sunrise service attended by people of twenty nationalities with Bible reading and hymns in a dozen languages is a moving reminder of the universality of Christ and His church.
6. It is true that most expatriate groups including the Indians stick closely together in community and do not always mix much with the nationals of the land. Arab contractors and their work arrangements do not generally permit much social interchange. Some Indian Christians lack spiritual life or missionary vision and are almost totally caught up in materialism and the effort to earn as much money as possible in the few years they intend to spend in the Gulf States. However, there is always the keen minority who find ways of outreach through personal conversations, Arabic literature, cassettes, radio etc. Most Indian Christians who have a personal relationship with God through Christ are not likely to deny Him when the Arab enquires. The greatest significance of the Indian Christian dispersion, as I have seen it, is that it is present in places where for so long Christ's followers have been absent.