First-century Jewish populations

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Bible version:
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Caution: The population estimates provided here are very approximate.
They are intended to give some idea of the Jewish populations of the 1st century AD.

Somewhere around 4.7 million Jews inhabited the Roman Empire, comprising perhaps 7% of the entire population. (i.e., 7% of about 70 million people.)[1]

Of these 4.7 million, perhaps 700,000 to 1.0 million lived in Judaea.
This means that 3.7 to 4.0 million Jews lived throughout the Empire but outside of Judaea.[2]

Thriving Jewish communities existed in Egypt and in the cities of the Empire:

- North Africa: Alexandria (Egypt) and Cyrene (Libya).
- Syria: Antioch and Damascus.
- Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey): Ephesus and Sardis.
  These cities and others in the province of Asia featured large, thriving Jewish populations centered around robust synagogue communities.
- Greece: Corinth and Thessalonica.
- Italy: Rome (with some 20,000 to 40,000 resident Jews).

Around one million Jews lived in Egypt.
Some 200,000 lived in Alexandria alone, comprising some 30% to 40% of the city's residents.[3]

By one estimate, the population of Asia Minor was 8 to 9 million.
The Jews may well have comprised 10% of this number.

A further 1.0 million Aramaic-speaking Jews lived outside of Roman territory in the Parthian Empire.
These mostly lived in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Persia (Iran).
They traced their roots to the Jews who chose to stay behind when Cyrus of Persia allowed the exiles to return to Judah.

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[1] The Jewish proportion of the Empire may have been as high as 10%, or 7 million.
[2] The Roman province of Judaea from AD 6 to 41 comprised the districts of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea.
From 41 to 44 King Herod Agrippa I ruled Samaria, Judea, Idumea, Galilee, and Perea as a semi-autonomous client kingdom.
Following Agrippa's death, the expanded province reverted to direct Roman rule. Judaea continued as a province until AD 135, when it was finally merged with surrounding territories and renamed Syria Palaestina.
[3] Possibly 40% of the 500,000 residents.

All up, this would mean there were some 5.7 million Jews worldwide.
Although the total could be as high as 8 million — see footnote 1.

Consider Luke's account in Acts 2 of the Jews who were present to celebrate the feast of Pentecost.

Acts 2:5, 9-11 (MEV):

> [5] *Now dwelling in Jerusalem were Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.*
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> [9] *"Parthians, Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,* [10] *Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,* [11] *Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own languages the mighty works of God."*

While no doubt many Jews had come from far and wide to celebrate Pentecost, the foreigners mentioned here were devout Jews who had come, presumably with their families, to settle or retire in Jerusalem.[4]
Additionally, there were "visitors" from Rome (2:10).
Whatever the case, many of these foreigners spoke languages other than Hebrew or Aramaic (Acts 2:6).
But for our present purpose, note where these residents came from:

- The Parthian Empire: Parthians, Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia.
- Asia Minor: Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia.
- North Africa: Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene.
- Cretans: from the island of Crete.
- Arabs: from Arabia.

The normal resident **population of Jerusalem** was probably somewhere between 20,000 and 60,000.
During the festivals this likely swelled to over 1 million.
Josephus informs us that 1.1 million perished during the Roman siege of the city in AD 70.
A further 97,000 survived but were reduced to slavery in one form or another by the Roman army.
That makes 1.2 million. Many scholars believe these numbers to be inflated.
But recall that the pilgrims who came to celebrate the Passover in mid-April of AD 70 did so just as the Roman army was setting up camp outside the walls. These pilgrims were allowed to enter but not exit the city.
They were shut up within the city as if in a prison.
Recall also how Jesus told his followers to flee when they saw the city surrounded by armies (Lk 21:20-21).
The very last opportunity to flee was when the Zealot rebels briefly left the city to engage the Roman army as the latter set up camp outside the walls.

In the book of Revelation John is shown **144,000 people from the various Israelite tribes** (Rev 7:1-8).
They represent the first-century faithful remnant — those Jews or Israelites who believed in Jesus.
This is obviously a symbolic number, but perhaps it provides a rough estimate of the number of Jewish believers.
If they are the remnant within Judaea itself, they would comprise some 14 to 20% of the population.
More likely they represent the faithful throughout the Empire, in which case they would comprise just 3% of the Jewish population.

[4] The verb translated "dwelling" in Acts 2:5 (*katoikeō*, Strong's G2730) suggests that these were now permanent residents.