

## Ancient Rome

### Jews and Christians in the Empire

#### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Describe how the Roman Empire dealt with diverse religions.
- Explain the causes and consequences of two major conflicts Rome had with Jews.
- Identify factors that helped Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire.
- Describe and evaluate the different policies that Rome had toward the Christian religion.
- Cite instances of religious persecution in the Roman Empire.
- Prepare and deliver a persuasive speech on the importance of freedom of religion.

#### PREPARATION

**Handout A: The Treatment of Jews in the Roman Empire**—1 per student

**Handout B: The Treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire**—1 per student

**Handout C: Freedom of Religion**—1 per student

#### Overview

This two-day lesson explores the history of religious toleration and persecution in the Roman Empire.

On the first day, students discuss why religious freedom is important. Then they read and discuss an article on the treatment of Jews in the Roman Empire.

On the second day, students review what they learned the previous day. Then they read and discuss an article on the treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire. Finally, students prepare and deliver speeches to Emperor Theodosius urging him to adopt freedom of religion in the Roman Empire.

#### STANDARDS ADDRESSED

**California History–Social Science Standard 6.7: Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures during the development of Rome.**

(5) Trace the migration of Jews around the Mediterranean region and the effects of their conflict with the Romans, including the Romans' restrictions on their right to live in Jerusalem. (7) Describe the circumstances that led to the spread of Christianity in Europe and other Roman territories.

**National World History Standard 9: Understand how major religious and large-scale empires arose in the Mediterranean Basin, China, and India from 500 BCE to 300 CE.** (4) Understands events in the rise of Christianity (e.g., . . . how Christianity spread widely in the Roman Empire . . .).

**National Civics Standard 25: Understands issues regarding personal, political, and economic rights.** (2) Understands the importance to individuals and society of such personal rights as freedom of conscience and religion.

## Vocabulary

Asia Minor	crucify	Latin
pagan	raze	scapegoat

## Procedure

### A. Focus Discussion

1. Remind students that in earlier grades they studied U.S. history and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Tell them that, among other things, the First Amendment protects freedom of religion. It compels the government to stay out of religion, and it protects people's right to practice the religion of their choice. Hold a brief discussion by asking students: Why do you think freedom of religion is important?
2. Tell students that they are going to learn about the challenges Rome faced in creating an empire with people of many different religions.

### B. Reading and Discussion—The Treatment of Jews in the Roman Empire

1. Give students the following background:

Roman legions conquered all the land and peoples around the Mediterranean. To make their empire work, they had to incorporate these people into the empire. One problem was that the diverse peoples worshiped many different gods.
2. Tell students that this first reading focuses on how the Romans dealt with most religions and the special challenge they faced with the Jews. Distribute **Handout 13A: The Treatment of Jews in the Roman Empire**. Ask students to look for the following as they read:
  - How Romans dealt with most religions of other people.
  - How they dealt with the special challenge posed by the Jews.
3. When students finish reading, hold a discussion on the reading. Questions to raise:
  - What methods did Rome use to win over the diverse people in its empire? How did Rome deal with the problem of diverse religions?
  - What challenge did the Jews present to the Roman Empire? How did Rome deal with the Jews?
  - Two major conflicts between Rome and the Jews are described in the article. How did these conflicts arise? What were their consequences?

## Day Two

### C. Focus Discussion

1. Remind students that previously they read about how the Roman Empire dealt with other religions and the special problem posed by the Jewish religion. To review briefly, ask them:
  - How did Rome deal with other religions?
  - What special problems did the Jewish religion pose?
  - How did Rome deal with the Jews?
2. Tell students that they are now going to read about another religion that posed challenges to the Romans—Christianity.

### D. Reading and Discussion—The Treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire

1. Give students the following background:

Christianity began as a sect of the Jewish religion. At first, Christians just tried to convert other Jews. The apostle Paul started preaching to non-Jews, and the religion slowly spread throughout the Roman Empire.

2. Distribute **Handout 13B: The Treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire**. Ask students to look for the following as they read:
  - The different policies that the Romans had toward Christians.
  - Factors that helped spread Christianity throughout the empire.
3. When students finish reading, hold a discussion on Christianity in the Roman Empire. Questions to raise:
  - Why did Nero target the Christians?
  - What helped the spread of Christianity throughout the empire?
  - What different policies did Rome have toward the Christian religion? (Illegal religion, but not enforced; illegal and enforced; legal; freedom of religion; the only religion allowed.)
  - Which do you think was the best policy? Why?

#### E. Small-Group Activity—Freedom of Religion

1. Explain the following:

The United States, like Rome, has people of many different religious beliefs. In fact, many people have come to the United States to escape religious persecution in their home country. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects religious freedom.
2. Tell students that they are going to have an opportunity to give a Roman emperor some advice on religious freedom. Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Distribute **Handout 13C: Freedom of Religion** to each student. Review the instructions.

Answer any questions that student may have. Consider doing the brainstorm about the benefits of religious freedom as a whole class (and writing students' ideas on the board) instead of having students do the brainstorm in their groups. Give them time to complete the activity.
3. When students are ready, tell them that you will role play Theodocius and call on each group to have its speaker deliver a speech. Ask the other students to evaluate each speaker on a sheet of paper using the three criteria under *logos* and *lexis* on the handout. Have them turn in their evaluations of the speakers to you.
4. After all the speakers have given their speeches, make your decision as Theodocius. Be sure to cite the most compelling arguments of the speakers. When you finish, remind students that Theodocius did not adopt freedom of religion, but instead made Christianity the official religion and outlawed all other religions. End the activity by asking students: Why do you think he made this decision?

### Suggestions for CityYouth Action Projects

At the end of the unit, consider doing a CityYouth action project related to the unit.

Students learned in this unit that religious toleration was a major issue in the Roman Empire. Tolerance remains an issue today. Here are some projects related to tolerance:

- Posters. Make posters showing how diversity helps everyone.
- Celebrations. Hold celebrations for different ethnic holidays.
- School issues. Have students think of issues of tolerance and acceptance at their school. Then have them address these issues by doing public service announcements on the school P.A. system, making posters, or creating something like “lunch buddies” (in which student cliques are mixed up and students eat with new people).

## The Treatment of Jews in the Roman Empire

At its peak, Rome controlled all the land around the Mediterranean. The large sea was, in effect, a "Roman lake." Its conquered peoples came from many different cultures. They spoke many languages—Greek, Celtic, Aramaic, Egyptian, Numidian, Berber, Phoenician, and more. Each culture had its own religion.

Rome won its empire by force. But it could not control such a vast empire by force. It needed to win the support of its conquered peoples. It did this in several ways. Instead of punishing conquered nations, Rome often treated them as partners. It asked them to take part in the glory and wealth of building the empire. To the less advanced peoples in Gaul (France), Britain, and Iberia (Spain), Rome offered a written language (Latin), a legal system, and well-run cities.

For those in the eastern part of the empire (Greece, Asia Minor, Middle East, and Egypt), Rome offered something different. These people had been deeply influenced by Greek culture. Their religion, art, literature, and language were Greek. For them, Rome honored and extended Greek culture. To all its conquered peoples, Rome tolerated their gods as long as they also honored Roman gods.

The Roman religion had many gods. (See "Roman Gods," on page 3.) The chief god was Jupiter. Romans believed that by practicing their religion, the gods would ensure their success.

### Pronunciation Key

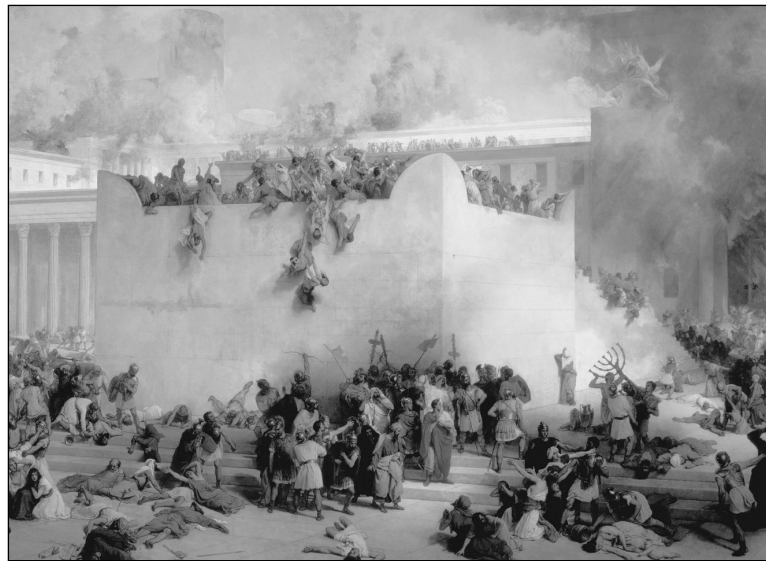
Aelia Capitolina (EE lee uh  
CAP it ole ee nuh)  
Aramaic (air uh MAY ik)  
Ares (AIR eez)  
Bacchus (BOCK us)  
Ceres (SEAR eez)  
Demeter (di ME tur)  
Dionysus (die uh NY sus)  
Furies (FYOUR eez)  
Gaia (JEE uh)  
Hades (HAY deez)  
Hadrian (HAY dree un)  
Hera (HEAR uh)  
Hermes (HER meez)  
Iberia (eye BEER ee uh)  
Judea (jew DEE uh)  
Kronos (CROW nus)  
Masada (muh SAW duh)  
Phoenician (fuh NEE shun)  
Poseidon (poe SIDE un)  
Rhea (REE uh)  
Syria Palestina (SEAR ee uh  
PAL es tee nuh)  
Zealots (ZELL uts)

Like the Romans, almost all the conquered peoples had many gods. They too believed their gods protected them. They knew that other peoples had their own gods. So they found it fairly easy to take part in festivals celebrating Roman gods. It was simply a matter of paying respect to the Romans. In return, the Romans built temples and honored the conquered people's gods.

But the Romans had problems with Jews and Christians. These religions taught that there was just one god. They forbid worshipping other gods. Their members refused to make offerings to Roman gods. They declined to take part in Roman religious festivals. Romans expected these acts as a showing of loyalty. These religions tested Roman tolerance.

### **Rome's Treatment of the Jews**

In 63 B.C., the Romans conquered Judea, the land of the Jews. Rome saw it had a problem when the Jews refused to honor the Roman gods. Rome gave in. It did not make the Jews worship the Roman gods. This solution helped keep the peace and kept tax payments coming to Rome. Soon Rome let Judaism be a legal religion and allowed Jews to worship freely.



In A.D. 70, Roman troops retook Jerusalem from Jewish rebels, destroyed the Great Temple, and razed the city.

But Rome never trusted the Jews. A serious conflict between Rome and the Jews began in A.D. 66 when Nero was emperor. The Roman governor of Judea decided to take money from the Great Temple in Jerusalem. He claimed he was collecting taxes owed the emperor. When rioting broke out, Roman soldiers harshly put it down. Enraged, a group of Jewish radicals, called Zealots, killed the Romans in Jerusalem. They went on to attack Roman troops elsewhere in the Roman province.

Nero sent troops to put down the rebellion. By summer of 68, Rome had regained control of most of the province. Two years later, the Romans retook Jerusalem. They looted and razed the city. They destroyed the Great Temple, the center of the Jewish religion.

Hundreds of thousands died in the slaughter. About 1,000 Zealots escaped to a fort, called Masada, on a mountaintop in the desert. The Romans laid siege to the fort for three years until it fell. The Zealots killed themselves rather than letting the Romans capture them.

After the Romans crushed this uprising, Jews in the empire had to pay an annual tax to the Temple of Jupiter in Rome. But Judaism remained a legal religion, and Jews continued to practice their religion.

About 60 years later, Emperor Hadrian decided to rebuild Jerusalem and make it a pagan city. He intended to build a temple to Jupiter on the site of the Jews' sacred Great Temple. When Jews heard about his plans, they rebelled in 132. They retook Jerusalem. It took the Roman army three years to put down the rebellion. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed.

Hadrian changed the name of the province from Judea to Syria Palestina. He rebuilt Jerusalem and renamed it Aelia Capitolina.

Jews were banned on pain of death from entering the city. They were allowed in only one day a year, on the anniversary of the destruction of the Great Temple. Jews continued to live throughout the Roman Empire, but they had lost their homeland.

## For Discussion

1. What methods did Rome use to win over the diverse people in its empire? How did Rome deal with the problem of diverse religions?
2. What challenge did the Jews present to the Roman Empire? How did Rome deal with the Jews?
3. Two major conflicts between Rome and the Jews are described in the article. How did these conflicts arise? What were their consequences?

## The Treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire

Rome first became aware of Christianity around A.D. 30. It did nothing to stop it. Emperor Tiberius thought the sect might weaken the Jewish religion. He asked the Senate to legalize the Christian faith and make Christ a Roman god. But the Senate refused. Instead, it made Christianity an "illegal superstition," a crime under Roman law.

Christianity was now illegal, but Tiberius ordered Roman officials not to enforce the law. This policy lasted about 30 years, until the time of Nero.

Local people, however, often attacked and rioted against

### Pronunciation Key

Constantine (KON stun teen)  
Decius (DEE shus)  
Diocletian (die oh KLEE shun)  
Gallienus (gal eye EE nus)  
Nero (NEAR oh)  
Tacitus (TASS i tuss)  
Theodosius (THEE oh doh shus)  
Trajan (TRAY jun)



In A.D. 64, a great fire burned Rome. The emperor, Nero, blamed Christians for the fire.

Christians. They especially targeted Christian preachers.

### Nero's Persecution

On the night of July 18, A.D. 64, a fire began at the Circus Maximus. This was the great arena in Rome for chariot races and games. The fire spread quickly and for six days burned much of the city, including Emperor Nero's palace.

A rumor spread that Nero himself had caused the great fire. He was also accused of playing the lyre (like a small harp) while watching the fire. He probably did play the lyre. But he did not cause the fire. Even so, the people of Rome blamed him.

Fearful that Roman mobs would turn on him, Nero looked for a scapegoat to blame for the fire. He decided to blame the Christians. The Christian religion was still illegal. So it was easy to order mass arrests, trials, and executions. The public began blaming the Christians rather than Nero for the great fire.

The Christians suffered horrible deaths. The Roman historian Tacitus described Nero's methods of execution:

Dressed in wild animal skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be lit after dark . . . . Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus . . . .

For years, Christians lived in fear. Many Roman pagans wanted to see the illegal sect destroyed. But Christians kept gaining new believers. In 110, Emperor Trajan tried a compromise. He stated that Christians "are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished . . . ." In other words, the religion was still illegal, but officials were not to look for Christians.

For the next 100 years, Christians practiced their faith openly. Rome's system of roads helped Christians spread the gospel throughout the empire. And the Christians' openness to people from all groups and

classes helped them gain many converts.

But in 250, Emperor Decius started persecuting Christians again. He wanted Romans to follow the pagan religion. Many Christians died. But when Gallienus became emperor, he halted the persecution. Gallienus then went one step further. He recognized Christianity as a legal religion for the first time. Gallienus hoped to bring religious peace to the empire.

### **Christian Bloodbath**

For almost 40 years, the Christian Church thrived. Then, in 303, Emperor Diocletian began the last terrible persecution.

Diocletian had come to power in a crisis. Prices of goods were soaring. German tribes threatened the western part of the empire. The Persian Empire was attacking in the east.

Diocletian moved boldly. He set price controls. He doubled the size of the army. To govern the empire more easily, he broke it into two parts—the Greek-speaking east and the Latin-speaking west. Diocletian ruled the eastern part.

Suspicious of Christians, Diocletian started persecuting them. He demanded that all Christian soldiers resign from the army. He forbid Christian worship services. He ordered churches destroyed. He had Christian members of the government tortured and killed.



When Christian uprisings took place, he got tougher. He ordered the arrest, torture, and killing of priests. In 304, Rome ordered that all Christians honor the pagan gods or face death.

Diocletian and the western emperor retired in 305. Diocletian named their successors, but a civil war broke out. Other Romans claimed the right to be emperor. The war raged on for almost a decade. Even so, the persecution of Christians continued. Galerius, Diocletian's handpicked successor in the eastern empire, hated Christians and started killing them. Christians were crucified and burned alive. Crowds in Roman arenas shouted, "Down with Christians!"

Galerius saw that he had failed to stamp out the Christian religion. Dying of cancer, he stopped the persecution in 311. He begged for Christians to pray for his health. But the killing started again when he died.

Constantine was fighting for control of the western empire. He had a vision that he would win a big battle if he fought under the sign of the cross. He had workers mark his soldiers' shields with crosses before the battle. When they won, Constantine converted to Christianity.

Constantine won the civil war and became the new western emperor. Constantine supported the

Christian religion. The eastern emperor supported the pagan religion. In 313, they agreed to compromise and allow every person "to follow the religion that he chooses."

The two emperors, however, kept battling one another. In 324, Constantine won and became emperor of both parts of the Roman Empire. With Constantine's backing, Christianity became the strongest religion in the empire.

In 395, Emperor Theodosius made Christianity Rome's new state religion. Christians, who had endured so much, started attacking the pagan religion. They closed temples and banned sacrifices to pagan gods. They even changed some pagan celebrations into Christian ones. For example, the church changed the birthday of the sun god on the 25th of December into the celebration of the birth of Christ.

### For Discussion

1. Why did Nero target the Christians?
2. What helped the spread of Christianity throughout the empire?
3. What different policies did Rome have toward the Christian religion? Which do you think was the best policy? Why?

## Freedom of Religion

Imagine that you are an advisor to Emperor Theodosius. Theodosius is a Christian. He is thinking that he will make Christianity the official state religion and ban all other religions.

He has asked for your advice. You are going to get two minutes to give him your advice.

You are going to advise him that the best policy is to permit freedom of religion. In your two-minute presentation, you should:

1. Tell about the harm that religious persecution has caused in Roman history.
2. Explain why religious freedom for everyone is best.

In your group, do the following:

1. Go through the two articles on the treatment of Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire and find examples of how religious persecution hurt people.
2. Brainstorm ideas about why religious freedom is a good idea.
3. Prepare your speech. (It must only last two minutes.)
4. Practice the speech and decide who will deliver it.

Remember what the Greek philosopher Aristotle explained about speech-making. He said that every speech is made of two parts:

1. *Logos*. This is the content of the speech. A great speech must:
  - (a) Have something to say.
  - (b) Be organized and clear.
  - (c) Have a powerful beginning, a good middle, and a strong ending.
2. *Lexis*. This is the delivery of the speech. A great speaker connects with the audience. The speaker:
  - (a) Looks at the audience.
  - (b) Speaks clearly.
  - (c) Makes strong gestures.

Follow Aristotle's advice.