

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 worshiping 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.

ROMAN GODS

Many of the traditional Roman gods were adopted from Greek mythology. Here are some of the Roman gods (with their Greek names in parentheses).

Uranus was the first king of the gods. His wife **Gaia**, the Earth goddess, gave birth to giants, the **Titans**. Fearing the power of his children, Uranus locked them up. But his son **Saturn (Kronos)**, the god of time, escaped and stabbed Uranus. His blood fell to Earth and gave birth to the **Furies**, three goddesses who punished criminals.

Saturn also feared his children would overthrow him. So every time his wife, **Ops (Rhea)**, gave birth, he ate the child in one gulp. But Rhea tricked him when **Jupiter (Zeus)** was born. When he asked for the child, she gave Saturn a rock to eat.

Jupiter overthrew Saturn and the Titans. Known for throwing thunderbolts, Jupiter ruled as king of the gods on Mount Olympus in Greece. The Olympian gods included:

Juno (Hera), Jupiter's wife and queen. Jupiter frequently cheated on Juno. She was constantly exacting revenge on humans or Olympians who fooled around with Jupiter. She was the goddess of marriage.

(Continued on next page)

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.

Roman Gods, continued.

Apollo, god of the Sun. He drove his fiery chariot (the sun) across the sky every day.

Mercury (Hermes), messenger of the gods. He was the son of Jupiter and Maia, the daughter of **Atlas**. Atlas was a Titan who Jupiter punished by making him hold up the world.

Ceres (Demeter), goddess of agriculture. Her beautiful daughter, **Proserpina (Persephone)**, was kidnaped by **Pluto (Hades)**, the god of death and the underworld. Ceres was heartbroken and all plant life started dying. Jupiter sent Mercury to get Proserpina as long as she had not eaten anything in the underworld. But Proserpina had eaten six seeds. So she was made to live with Pluto six months a year (during this time—winter—Ceres mourns for her daughter and plants wither).

Bacchus (Dionysus), god of wine. Bacchus was the son of Jupiter and Semele, a mortal. Jupiter had disguised himself when he courted Semele. Learning of his betrayal, Juno also in disguise went to Semele and told her to make Jupiter remove his disguise. Semele got Jupiter to promise to grant her a wish. Her wish was that he show his true self. Jupiter had to honor his promise. When he did, Semele was burned to a crisp.

Other Olympian gods included **Neptune (Poseidon)**, god of the sea; **Mars (Ares)**, god of war; and **Minerva (Athena)**, goddess of wisdom.

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?