

Document A: Textbook (Excerpted from Original)

Persecution: As Christianity spread through the Roman world, some local officials feared that Christians were conspiring against them. As a result, they arrested and killed many Christians. However, those killed were seen by the early Christians as martyrs, people who die for their faith and thus inspire others to believe. Even many nonbelievers were impressed by the martyrs' faith.

Although Christians often were persecuted at the local level, large-scale persecution by the Romans was rare during the first two centuries after Jesus's life. As it grew, however, some rulers came to see Christianity as a threat and began persecuting those who practiced it.

Source: *World History: Human Legacy, written by Ramirez, Stearns, & Wineburg in 2008 and published in Texas.*

Document B: Tacitus (Excerpted from Original)

In 64 CE, during the reign of the unpopular emperor Nero, a great fire destroyed Rome. The following is an excerpt from The Annals, a history of the Roman Empire written by the Roman historian Tacitus in 116 CE. Tacitus wrote and lived during a time period when Christians were persecuted in large numbers.

All human efforts and all the lavish gifts of Emperor Nero did not **banish** the belief that the great fire was the result of Nero's order. To get rid of the report, Nero placed the guilt and the most exquisite tortures on a group hated for their **abominations**. This group was called Christians by the people.

An arrest was first made of all those who pleaded guilty. Then, upon their information, an immense multitude of Christians was convicted, not for the crime of setting the city on fire, but for the crime of hatred against mankind. **Mockery** of every sort was added to their deaths. They were torn by dogs and eaten, or were nailed to crosses, or were thrown into to the flames and burnt alive.

Source: *The Annals, written by Tacitus in 116 CE.*

Vocabulary

banish: to send someone away from a place as a punishment

abominations: shameful, disgusting habits or actions

multitude: a large gathering of people

mockery: to make something seem foolish or absurd

Document C: Professor Cassel's Article (Excerpted from Original)

The following is an excerpt from an article written by David Cassel in 1998 and published in Christian History and Biography, a journal on Christian history. Cassel is a Professor of Theological Studies at Hanover College in Indiana.

Romans incorporated many religions into their empire. As long as devotees continued to observe Roman religious **rites**, they were free to worship any god they wished. Christians, however, refused to acknowledge any god but their own . . . [and] refused to participate in any non-Christian religious rites, to serve in the army, or to accept public office. . . .

A stranger complaint of Roman critics of Christianity was this. . . . They were thought to be involved in bizarre and terrible religious rituals such as Thyestian feasts and Oedipean [practices]. . . . In these two myths, Thyestes eats his own children, and Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother.

How could Romans associate these myths with Christianity? Most likely the critics misread the Christian Scriptures. New Testament writers referred to their fellow Christians as brothers and sisters . . . and encouraged them to greet one another with a "holy kiss." . . . This could have been misunderstood . . . especially if a married couple were referred to as a brother and sister in Christ. This perspective may have been intensified by the secrecy of early Christian religious services, which were open only to baptized Christians.

The charge of **cannibalism** could also have arisen from a false understanding of the Christian Scripture and **liturgy**. The very words of the **Eucharist**, "Take and eat, this is my body broken for you," could be misread in a literal, cannibalistic sense by a reader that did not understand the metaphor.

Source: "Defending Cannibals," written by David Cassel in 1998.

Vocabulary

rites: religious or social custom

cannibalism: the act of eating human flesh

liturgy: ways of worshiping

Eucharist: a Christian ritual

Document C: Journal Article

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote this document? When was it written?
2. (Close Reading) According to the author, what are the “strange complaints” Roman critics had of Christians?
3. (Close Reading) According to the author, what are some of the reasons why the Romans thought these things about Christians? List two to three.
4. (Corroboration) How does this document’s description of what Romans thought of Christians compare to Tacitus’s account?
5. Do you think this is a trustworthy document for trying to figure out why the Roman Empire persecuted Christians? Why or why not?

After reading the documents, do you think the textbook account should be re-written? Why or why not? If so, how would you change the textbook?