

Roman Empire and Christianity Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Why did the Roman Empire persecute Christians?

Materials:

- Copies of Document A-C
- Rome and Christianity PowerPoint
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Note: Make sure to preview this lesson before using it. Documents B and C contain some mature content that may not be appropriate for all students.

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction.
 - a. Ask: What do you know about how Christians were treated under the Roman Empire?
 - **Note:** Many students may know about Jesus being executed under Roman rule and some may know about the religious persecution of Christians under Roman rule.
 - b. Use the PowerPoint to provide background information on the treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire.
 - Slide 2: Christianity. *The religion of Christianity originated in the mid-1st century in the Middle East. It began as a Jewish sect and is based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, and by the year 300, about ten percent of the empire's subjects were Christian.*
 - Slide 3: Roman Persecution of Christians. *Christians were persecuted in Rome throughout the 1st to 3rd centuries. Under nine Roman Emperors, Christians were not allowed to practice their religion. Christians were subjected to brutal punishments, including death, under Roman authority.*

Libelli were documents given to subjects of the Roman Empire during the reign of Emperor Decius that certified they had performed pagan sacrifices, which were against Christians' religion. Pictured here is a libellus from 250 CE. Failure to perform pagan sacrifices could result in execution by authorities of the Empire. Some Christians were martyred when they didn't offer pagan sacrifices, while others fled, forged libelli, lied, or obliged authorities to avoid injury or death.

- Slide 4: Central Historical Question. *Today, we are going to try to answer the question: Why did the Roman Empire persecute Christians?*

Note: Keep PowerPoint on hand to display questions (slide 5) after reading Document A: Textbook.

2. Hand out Document A: Textbook.

- a. Have students read the textbook excerpt by themselves or in pairs.
- b. Display PowerPoint Slide 5: According to the textbook...
 - What was the relationship between the Roman Empire and Christianity?
 - Why did the Roman Empire persecute Christians?
- c. Pair-Share: Have students discuss the questions in pairs.
- d. Share out responses.
 - **Note:** Students will likely simply repeat what the textbook reports, that Romans felt threatened by Christians and that some local officials believed Christians were conspiring against them. Ask students to consider what this means. What are some ways that Romans may have felt threatened by Christianity? Point out the textbook does not address the question with any details or evidence.
 - Explain that we are going to continue to explore the question of why the Roman Empire persecuted Christians with two more documents.

3. Hand out Document B.

- a. In pairs, have students read the document and answer the Guiding Questions.
- b. Share out and debrief answers.
 - **Note:** Point out that the excerpt comes from one of Tacitus's histories of Rome. Modern historians in general find Tacitus to be a reliable historian of the Roman Empire. Additionally, Tacitus was alive during Roman persecution of Christians.
 - *Ask: How does this document compare to the textbook? How are they similar? How are they different?*

4. Hand out Document C.

- a. In pairs, have students read the document and answer the Guiding Questions.
- b. Share out and debrief answers.
 - *Ask students: How does this document compare to Tacitus's account and the textbook? How are they similar? How are they different?*
 - **Note:** You may need to clarify what a metaphor is in order for students to understand Cassel's argument.

5. Final Discussion

- a. *Why were Christians persecuted in Rome during the 1st through 3rd centuries?*
- b. *Where else might students look to continue investigating this question?*
- c. *Why do you think the textbook does not provide more information on why Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire during the first and second centuries?*
- d. *Why might the textbook not address some of the less pleasant details of why Christians were persecuted?*
- e. Why might the textbook not raise the possibility that Christians had been misunderstood?

Note: This discussion may go in various directions. However, it is important to note that the basic claim of the textbook, that Roman leaders believed Christianity to be a threat to the empire, is corroborated by the Tacitus and Cassel documents.

6. Final Writing

Individually, have students write a response to the final question: After reading the two additional documents, do you think the textbook account should be re-written? Why or why not? If so, how should it be changed?

Citations

Document A

Ramirez, Stearns, & Wineburg. 2008. *World history: Human legacy*. Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, p. 186.

Document B

Tacitus, *The Annals*, provided by The Internet Classics Archive. Retrieved from <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.mb.txt>

Document C

David Cassel. 1998. *Defending the Cannibals: How Christians responded to the sometimes strange accusations of their critics*. Retrieved from <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1998/issue57/57h012.html>