**Jews in Roman Times**

**In the first century AD, Jews lived across the Roman Empire in relative harmony.**Protected by Rome and allowed to continue their religion, everything was fine until rebellion in Judaea led to a major change in the practice of their faith.

By the beginning of the first century AD, Jews had spread from their homeland in Judaea across the Mediterranean and there were major Jewish communities in Syria, Egypt, and Greece. Practicing a very different religion from that of their neighbors, they were often unpopular. As a result, Jewish communities were often close-knit, to protect themselves and their faith.

**Jews in Rome**

Jews had lived in Rome since the second century BC. Julius Caesar and Augustus supported laws that allowed Jews protection to worship as they chose. Synagogues were classified as colleges to get around Roman laws banning secret societies and the temples were allowed to collect the yearly tax paid by all Jewish men for temple maintenance.

There had been upsets: Jews had been banished from Rome in 139 BC, again in 19 AD and during the reign of Claudius. However, they were soon allowed to return and continue their independent existence under Roman law.
 **The temple in Jerusalem**

Although each Jewish community worshipped at its own synagogue, the temple in Jerusalem remained the spiritual center of their worship.

The temple had been rebuilt three times. The first was when it had been destroyed in 587 BC by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia. The second was when it had been plundered and wrecked by Judaea’s foreign rulers. The third time, it had been rebuilt by Herod the Great in 20 BC.

It had several gates and chambers, some of which were open only to men, some only to women, while others were reserved for priests.

The temple was the meeting place of the Jewish Council, called the Sanhedrin. It also held Jewish holy scriptures and documents. Outside was the temple square – this was a marketplace, where pilgrims could buy sacrificial animals and convert foreign currency into temple coins.
 **Rebellion in Judaea**

Although Judaea was ruled by the Romans, the governors there had practiced the same kind of religious tolerance as was shown to Jews in Rome [expert]. However, Roman tactlessness and inefficiency, along with famine and internal squabbles, led to a rise in Jewish discontent.

In 66 AD, this discontent exploded into open rebellion. Four years later, the Roman army had crushed the revolt, but had also destroyed the temple. The sacred treasures were seized and shown off in a procession through the streets of Rome.
 **Destruction of the temple**

The destruction of the temple fundamentally changed the nature of Judaism. Taxes that were once paid to the temple were now paid to Rome, and the Jewish tradition of worshipping in the temple was over. With only the Western Wall remaining of the temple in Jerusalem, the local synagogues now became the new centers of the Jewish religion.

**Jesus**

**A short life and brutal death was enough to ensure that Jesus’ message of hope and everlasting life would spread across Judaea, across the Empire and ultimately, across the world.**

One of the farthest corners of the Roman Empire, Judaea was a land of ancient traditions and religious fervor. Decades of Roman rule were causing ever more resentment.

**Descent into chaos**

Jesus was born to a family from a village called Nazareth, near the Sea of Galilee. As he was growing up, [Judaea](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/josephus.html) was collapsing into chaos. Its population had split into hostile groups. Preachers and prophets roamed the countryside, drawing enormous, passionate crowds.

At the age of thirty, Jesus joined one of these groups and was baptized in the Jordan River. Shortly afterwards, he began a ministry of his own. Like many other preachers, he traveled around Judaea, taking his message to the homes and synagogues of some of his country’s poorest people.

**A new message**

This message announced that there was a kingdom greater than Rome, that God would provide and that the poorest members of society would find relief and hope. It was a completely new message – one which excited his audiences.

Although his message was proving popular, the claim of his disciples that Jesus was the son of God offended many people. What’s more, his ideas were revolutionary and threatened to undermine thousands of years of social tradition.

**Trouble in Jerusalem**

In around 33 AD, Jesus traveled to the city of Jerusalem for the Jewish ceremony of Passover. There were thousands of pilgrims from around the world and the temple provided services for them to change their foreign money or buy animals to sacrifice.

Jesus was furious. He believed that trade like this corrupted the holy site. According to the Gospel of St John, he wrecked the stalls of the moneylenders and drove them all out of the temple.

**Criminal or martyr?**

This outburst enraged religious leaders and threatened to destroy the fragile peace imposed by Rome. Jesus was arrested on a charge of treason and was crucified, a common form of execution for condemned criminals. To the Romans, Jesus was a troublemaker who had got his just desserts.

To the Christians, however, he was a martyr and it was soon clear that the execution had made Judaea even more unstable. Pontius Pilate – the Roman governor of Judaea and the man who ordered the crucifixion – was ordered home in disgrace. By executing Jesus, the Romans had kick-started a brand new religion that, in time, would spread across Rome and, eventually, the world.

**Paul**

**A dramatic roadside conversion turned Saul into Paul (circa AD 3 - 67) and a persecutor of Christians into one of their greatest missionaries. But in spreading the word, Paul would ruffle many feathers.**

Paul began his working life as Saul, a zealous Jew who traveled around Judaea looking for members of a small Jewish sect who called themselves “the followers of Jesus”. Saul was dedicated to wiping them out altogether.

**Road to Damascus**

But all this was about to change. One day Saul was traveling from Jerusalem on the road to Damascus. There, he claims he saw a bright light and heard the voice of Jesus telling him to stop persecuting his followers and join them.

Saul changed his name to Paul and, with the same energy that he had previously used to destroy the followers of Jesus, he began spreading their message. This was a mission that would take up the rest of his life.

It was a dangerous job. Although he won a lot of converts, Paul also made many enemies. On one occasion, a violent mob trapped him in a top floor apartment. He only escaped death by hiding in a basket and being lowered to safety through a window.

**Traveling the world**

Over the next 30 years, Paul traveled some 10,000 miles across the Roman Empire, preaching in cities that were brimming with the poorest people, desperate to hear a message of hope and everlasting life. Some historians believe that Paul’s family were once Roman slaves who were later freed, and that this experience made his message that much more believable.

While Jesus had only preached to Jews, Paul felt strongly that the message should be spread more widely, to Jews and non-Jews alike. To do this, he had to take a less rigid approach to ancient Jewish customs concerning food and circumcision.
 **Fervent fury**

Abandoning the laws of his ancestors horrified many Jewish followers of Jesus, but Paul was adamant. When he heard that some of his disciples had changed their minds and now required converts to be circumcised, Paul was furious. He wrote to them, telling them that it did not matter. The letter was one of many, and was typical of his passionate approach.

According to legend, Paul returned to Rome, intent on seeing his controversial approach win out. There he was imprisoned for causing a riot that broke out after he invited non-circumcised men into the temple.

In jail, Paul revealed his Roman citizenship and was sent to Rome. Along the way, he was whipped, stoned and shipwrecked. He recognized himself that he had had a tough life, full of danger and worry.

**Massive success**

No one knows how or where Paul died. What is certain, however, is that he had been more successful than he could have hoped. His obstinacy in insisting that his message must be spread to Jews and non-Jews alike had upset many people, but played an important role in helping Christianity to become a new religion in its own right.

In the end, Paul had turned a small Jewish splinter group into the makings of a world religion – one that would eventually conquer Rome itself.

**Early Christians**

**The spread of Christianity was made a lot easier by the efficiency of the Roman Empire, but its principles were sometimes misunderstood and membership of the sect could be dangerous.**

Although Jesus had died, his message had not. Word of his teachings spread to Jewish communities across the empire. This was helped by energetic apostles, such as Paul and by the modern communications of the Roman Empire.

**Spreading the word**

Over 30 years, Paul clocked up around 10,000 miles, traveling across the Roman Empire. He preached in some of the empire’s most important cities. Although places like Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth and Athens looked magnificent, they were also home to tens of thousands of poor, desperate people who were the perfect audience for the Christian message of eternal life.

Like Jesus, Paul spoke to people in their homes and synagogues. But he went beyond Jesus, who had only preached to Jews. Paul believed his message should also be taken to gentiles – the non-Jews.

**Relaxing the rules**

This meant taking a more relaxed approach to ancient Jewish laws about food and circumcision. It was a slap in the face for Jewish tradition, but it was also the central reason for the rapid spread of Christianity.

As the Christian movement began to accept non-Jewish members, it moved further away from the strict rules imposed on Jews. In so doing, it gradually became a new and separate religion.

**An easy target**

Despite its growing popularity, Christianity was sometimes misunderstood and membership could bring enormous risks. Widely criticized after the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, the Emperor Nero tried to divert attention away from his own failings by providing an easy scapegoat: the Christians.

Although the followers of Jesus were working hard to spread the message, there were still very few Christians in Rome. They were regarded with suspicion. Some important Christian rituals were mistaken as cannibalism, others as incest. Christians became an easy target.

Nero wasted no time. He arrested and tortured all the Christians in Rome, before executing them with lavish publicity. Some were crucified, some were thrown to wild animals and others were burned alive as living torches.
 **A new approach**

Despite this, Nero's persecution of the new Christian sect was brief and, in the first century at least, was not repeated in other parts of the empire. When asked by Pliny the Younger how to deal with Christians in the Asian provinces, Trajan replied that they should not be actively pursued. However, they could be punished if they were publicly criticized and refused to abandon their beliefs.

Over time, the Christian church and faith grew more organized. In 313 AD, the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which accepted Christianity: 10 years later, it had become the official religion of the Roman Empire.