

# Roman Religions

A History of Religion in the Roman  
Empire

# Greco Roman Culture

Romans adopted the Greek Gods but changed their names

- Examples
  - Zeus=Jupiter
  - Ares=Mars
  - Poseidon=Neptune
- Polytheistic

# The Pantheon

Temple to the Gods



- The Pantheon
  - begun in 27 BC.
  - rebuilt by Emperor Hadrian, between AD 118 and 128, with some alterations made in the early 3rd century.
  - circular building of concrete faced with brick, with a great concrete dome rising from the walls
    - front porch of Corinthian columns supporting a gabled roof with triangular pediment.

# Rome Expands and New Religions come to Rome

- Rome expands into new territories,
  - cultural diffusion led to new religions spreading throughout the Empire.
- Persians-> Mithraism
- Greeks->Stoicism
- Greeks->Epicureanism
- Palestine-> Judaism
- Egypt> Isis

# Stoicism (philosophy/religion)

- Comes from the Greek word->Stoa meaning porch
  - Developed in Greece
    - Teaches self-control and detachment from distracting emotions.
    - clear thinker, levelheaded and unbiased.
    - Stoicism is designed to empower an individual with virtue, wisdom, and integrity of character

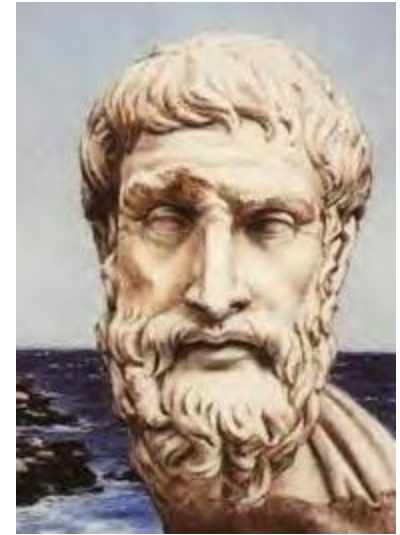
Marcus Aurelius (emperor 162-180 AD) was the most famous Stoic, he wrote the Book, Meditations.



Marcus Aurelius - Gilded Bronze Equestrian Statue.  
Capitoline Hill. circa A.D. 161-180.

# Epicureanism (philosophy/religion)

- Greek Religion/Philosophy
- Epicurus, the highest pleasure was obtained by knowledge, friendship, and living a virtuous and temperate life.
  - Enjoy simple pleasures,
  - abstain from bodily desires, such as sex and appetites.
  - When eating, one should not eat too richly, for it could lead to dissatisfaction later.
- The Romans altered the basic meaning
  - Epicurus -> the love of pleasure or hedonism.
    - provided the Romans with an excuse to indulge in food, wine and other activities.
    - Roman Parties would last days and include meal after meal, purging themselves (vomitorium).



Epicurus  
(c. 340–c. 270 BC)

# Cult of Isis

- Egyptian Religion
- Men and Women could join
- God was resurrected
- Long Initiation Process
- Priestesses of Isis were healers and midwives
- Isis became a goddess of magic



# Cult of Mithras

• Persian Religion, briefly the State Religion of Rome

- God -> resurrection process
- Baptism ritual
- Only Men Associated with the sun
- December 25 was Mithras' birthday!
- Ritual sacrifices of Bulls
- **3<sup>rd</sup> Century, popular amongst Roman soldiers**

**Little is known about the actual beliefs of the Cult  
Banned after Theodosius made Christianity the State  
Religion**



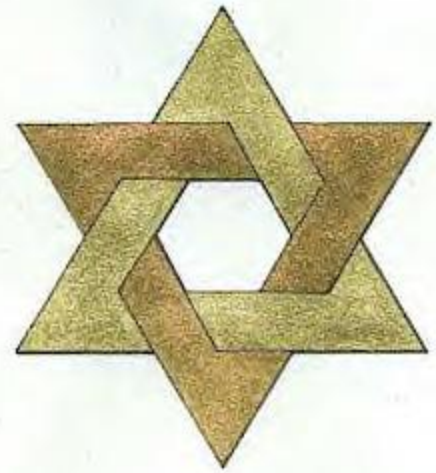
**Wailing wall located in  
Jerusalem, last remnant  
of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple**

# Judaism



- Monotheistic Religion -> East- No other God(s) can be honored
- Foundation religion for Christianity and Islam.
- Started with Abraham who entered into a covenant with God
- The Bible (Old Testament for Christians) ->written document for the religion
- Written laws: Ten Commandments issued by God through the Jewish prophet, Moses.
- Originally centered in Palestine and Judea, Jerusalem ->capital

# Judaic Culture



- Judaism -> monotheistic religion- One God
- Requirements
  - Circumcision, part of the covenant between God and Abraham, cutting off of the foreskin of the penis
  - Kosher dietary customs, no pork (pig products) or shellfish, various meats etc...have to be killed a specific way
  - Read Hebrew
  - Jewish custom/religious laws state that any child of a jewish woman is jewish, otherwise conversion is relatively difficult
- At its peak approx. 10% of the Roman Empire  
Population (4 million)
- Following the fall of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple at Jerusalem (66 AD)  
Judaism no longer had a central or main religious  
worshipping site



# Jewish History up to 135 AD

(all dates are approximations)

- 1800 BCE Abraham enters into Covenant with God
- 1200 BCE Moses descends from Mt. Zion with the Ten Commandments
- 730 BCE Building of the 1<sup>st</sup> temple in Jerusalem
- 570 BCE Babylonian Captivity. Destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> temple of Jerusalem
- 500 BCE Building of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple of Jerusalem
- 335 BCE Alexander the Great takes over Palestine/Judea
- 63 BCE Romans occupy Palestine/Judea

# Jewish History continued

- Herod becomes local leader, Jewish but upsets many because he's so "Roman"
- Approx. 4 BC, Jesus is born
- Approx. 30 AD, Jesus crucified
- **66-70 AD, the Last Revolt- Destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple. A new temple is not created afterwards Judaism becomes decentralized with authority spread out amongst many synagogues**

**•117 AD Masada falls to Romans, zealots commit suicide (see picture)**



**•135 AD, Rome evicts Jews from Palastine beginning of diaspora. In the 19th Century a plan to reestablish Israel as a Jewish Homeland**

# Christianity

- Based on the teachings of Jesus, a Jew from Nazareth.
  - The stories Jesus allegedly told are located in the New Testament of the Bible. The stories are mainly in the form of allegories, stories with a message.
  - **For Christians Jesus is the Messiah, commonly referred to as the “Son of God”**
  - Jesus was born to Joseph and Mary. It is debated whether he had any brothers or sisters.
  - **Christians generally believe that Jesus performed several miracles including helping a blind man regain his sight and turning water into wine**
  - Jesus was ordered to be crucified by the Roman authorities in Palestine with the acquiescence and/or agreement of the local Jewish population.
  - **Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead three days after his crucifixion and ascended into Heaven**

- **Followers of Jesus helped spread the ideas of Jesus- “Disciples”**
- **Conversion to Christianity was and remains relatively simple.**
- **Today, Christianity -> largest religion in the world with over 1 Billion followers.**
- **The term “Christ” comes from the Greek word meaning anointed one.**



# Jesus' Teachings



The Sermon on the Mount by Carl Heinrich Bloch.

- There are a large number of teachings of Jesus.
  - Sermon on the Mount which contains the Lord's Prayer (“our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name...”)
- Jesus teachings included:
  - turn the other cheek
  - love one another as God loves you
  - Live humbly
  - Be of Pure Heart
- The Bible's New Testament is based on the life and teachings of Jesus. The Bible's Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible.
- Like Judaism and later Islam, there is only one God

# Peter

St. Peter's  
Basilica,  
Rome



- Most famous of the disciples was Simon, who became known as Peter.
  - Peter ->Greek word for rock (Petra), Peter was to be the rock of the church. Peter was at the Last Supper and was a friend to Jesus
- Like the other disciples Peter ->Jewish
- Went to Rome and ->known as the Bishop of Rome
  - 1st Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. The Office of Pope is sometimes called the Seat of Peter and the main church of the Vatican is named St. Peter.
- Peter ->martyred (killed for failing to give up his faith) in 64 AD by the Roman Emperor Nero, he allegedly was crucified upside down.



Epistles  
(letters) of  
Paul

# Paul

- Paul (originally known as Saul)
- **Not a disciple of Jesus** nor a member of the cult of Jesus
  - **Epiphany** along the road to Damascus (a city in Syria) ->ardent follower of Jesus.
    - » Before this he was a Jewish critic of Jesus -> may have participated in the persecution of the followers of Jesus.
  - Traveled thousands of miles to build churches.
  - Corresponded with those churches -> letters, = epistles.
  - Letters -> earliest writings of the New Testament which include Corinthians and the Epistles of Paul
  - Eased the conversion process to the Cult of Jesus by allowing new followers to maintain many of their old traditions.
    - » Peter argued -> new members to the Cult must -> Jewish traditions such as circumcision and a Kosher diet amongst others.
  - Like Peter, Paul was made a Saint. The best known Cathedral in London England is known as St. Paul's



# Paul's Travels through the Roman Empire



# The Gospels- The New Testament

- The term “Gospel” literally translates to “The Good News”.
- Individual writers wrote the Gospel’s at various different times. Each writer named the Gospel for a different disciple.
- Four Gospels -> New Testament -> Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
- Written between 70 AD and 110 AD.
  - Other Gospels were also written (at least 11 others) however church leaders felt that the 4 chosen were the best representation of Jesus’ teachings.
- The stories in the Gospels are believed to be the stories of Jesus.

# Early Christianity

- Roman Government persecuted Christians almost from the start. The Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome (64 AD).
- Cult of Jesus spread through the Mediterranean, especially in Asia Minor after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD
- Christianity was a fast growing religion,
  - especially appealed to women. Early Christians were charitable and against infanticide.
- By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century possibly as many as 20 % of the Roman Empire was Christian
- Christians like Jews refused to honor the Roman Emperors. Jews in the Roman empire were largely excused from it but members of the Cult of Jesus were not.
- Over the years, several people were martyred (killed because they refused to give up their faith). Their dedication to their faith inspired others to join the Church.

# Early Christianity continued...

- Roman Emperors continued to persecute Jews until the Edict of Milan
- 313 AD, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan tolerating Christianity.
- 325 AD Nicene Creed adopted helping to unify early Christianity
- 330 AD Constantine moves the Empires capital to Constantinople (Byzantium) in Asia Minor
- 395 AD Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the State, all other Religions are banned
- 453 AD, Pope Leo I (Leo the Great) talks Attila the Hun out of entering and rampaging through Rome

# Constantine the Great

285-337 AD



Father -> Roman General, fought the Barbarians along the Rhine River, mother, Helena -> Christian

Constantine - strong leader who could be ruthless, he executed his first wife and son.

Reunified -> Roman Empire after battling his brother in law at the Battle of Milvian Bridge.

Years later he attributed his victory to a vision from God he had the night before the battle where his men had crosses emblazoned on their shields. Constantine helped make “the cross” the primary icon of the Christian faith.

Sent his mother, Helena-> Jerusalem to find the relics of Jesus as well as to help build churches in the area.

-> helped build the **Church of the Holy Sepulcher** (one of the oldest Christian Churches in the world) on the site where Jesus was crucified (Golgotha).

# Church of the Holy Sepulchre

Originally built by the mother of Emperor Constantine in 330 A.D., the Church of the Holy Sepulcher commemorates the hill of crucifixion and the tomb of Christ's burial.



The best piece of evidence that the tomb of Jesus was in this area is the fact that other first-century tombs are still preserved inside the church. Called the "Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea," these burial shafts (kokhim) are clearly from the time of Christ's death and thus attest to some kind of burial ground in the area.

# Constantine Continued

**Constantine helped centralize and unify the Christian Church, including the well known prayer called the Nicene Creed (“We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...”)**

**In addition to helping foster the growth of Christianity, Constantine reunified the Roman Empire and moved the capital from Rome to Byzantium (in Asia Minor) which he renamed Constantinople.**

**As a result Rome’s steep decline was accelerated**

- **Unclear whether Constantine ever converted to Christianity many believe he did so on his deathbed**

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✝

# Constantine helped make the Cross the Main Icon of the Christian Religion, however there are many others, here are a few of the symbols



"Chi-Rho" or "sigla": the letters "X" and "P," representing the first letters of the title "Christos," were eventually put together to form this symbol for Christ ("Chi" is pronounced "Kie"). It is this form of the Cross that Constantine saw in his vision along with the Greek words, TOUTO NIKAI, which are rendered in Latin as "In hoc signo vinces" and which mean "in this sign thou shalt conquer."



**Fish:** the fish, or Ichthys, was one of the most important symbols of Christ to the early Christians. In Greek, the phrase, "Jesus Christ, Son of God Savior," is "Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter." The first letters of each of these Greek words, when put together, spell "ichthys," the Greek word for "fish." This symbol can be seen in the Sacraments Chapel of the Catacombs of St. Callistus. Because of the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the fish symbolized, too, the Eucharist (see stylized fish symbol at right).



**3 Nails:** 3 nails symbolize the Crucifixion. They are three in number because two nails were used to secure Christ's Hands, and a third was used to secure His Feet. The 3 nails are often combined with other symbols, such as they are in the Jesuit seal -- the letters IHS with the three nails underneath, all surmounted by a Cross.



**Rose:** the Holy Faith, Our Lady, martyrdom, the secrecy of penance. Five roses grouped together symbolize the 5 Wounds of Christ.



# Christianity the State Religion

- From the Edict of Milan (313 CE) Christianity became the unofficial State Religion
- Theodosius (395 CE) made Christianity the State Religion, all other Religions are Banned.
- By the 5<sup>th</sup> Century growing split between the Emperors in Constantinople and the Popes in Rome
- 537 CE Justinian builds Hagia Sofia
- 7<sup>th</sup> Century Mohammed begins the Islamic Religion
- 8<sup>th</sup> Century Iconoclasts outlaw all graphic representation of Christianity
- 1054 the Eastern and Western Christian Churches split into two
- 1095 Beginning of the Crusades to regain the Christian Holy Lands and reunite the Eastern and Western Churches

# Hagia Sofia- Built by the Emperor Justinian in 537 AD



Interior of Hagia Sofia



Hagia Sofia



Constantine and  
Justinian making their  
offerings to Mary and  
the baby Jesus