

The Origins and Spread of Christianity

EQ: How did Christianity Originate and spread?

36.1 Introduction



In this chapter, you will discover how a new religion, Christianity, spread throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity was founded by Jesus, a man who lived from about 6 B.C.E to about 30 C.E. The New Testament of the Christian Bible tells that Jesus was put to death by crucifixion, a form of execution in which a person is tied or nailed to a cross. Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God and call him Jesus Christ.

As time went on and Christianity gained followers, many Romans saw the faith as a threat to Roman order and tradition. Several emperors tried to stop the spread of the new religion through violent persecutions. Then, in 312 C.E., the day before going into battle against a rival, the emperor Constantine had a vision of a cross hanging in the sky. Around the cross were the words “In this sign, you will conquer.” That night he had a dream about Jesus. The emperor saw the vision and dream as a sign that he would win the battle if he accepted Christian beliefs.

Constantine's soldiers went into battle with the first two letters of the word *Christ* on their shields. At the Battle of Milvian Bridge, near Rome, they won a great victory. From that time on, Constantine favored the Christian God over all others. His mother became a leader in the faith. By 380 C.E., Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire.

How did this happen? Where did Christianity begin? How did it gradually spread throughout the Roman Empire? In this chapter, you will find answers to these questions.

36.2 Judea: The Birthplace of Christianity

The birthplace of [Christianity](#) was a remote territory at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. According to the New Testament, [Jesus](#), the founder of Christianity, was born in this region. The Romans called it Judea. It had once been part of the ancient kingdom of Israel ruled by kings David and Solomon.



The Jews of the region were devoted to their homeland and to their belief in a single God. This belief, together with their religious customs, set them apart from their neighbors in the ancient world.

Once an independent kingdom, Judea came under Roman rule in 63 B.C.E. The Romans tried to govern the country by putting in charge Jewish rulers who agreed with Roman rule. But several times, groups of Jews rebelled against Roman control.

In 37 B.C.E., Rome appointed a man named Herod to be the king of Judea. Although Herod was not Jewish by birth, he practiced the Jewish religion and rebuilt the Temple of Jerusalem. However, many Jews distrusted him. They saw

him as a puppet of the Romans.

When Herod died in 4 B.C.E., his kingdom was divided among his three sons. Once again, unrest broke out. Finally, Rome sent soldiers to Judea to take control. They replaced Herod's sons with a military governor.

The military governor kept order and made sure Judeans paid taxes to Rome. But he usually left local affairs to the Jews themselves. For example, a council of Jewish leaders ruled the holy city of Jerusalem. The council was headed by a high, or chief, priest.

Judea was outwardly peaceful. But many Jews hated the Romans. In their sacred writings, they saw prophecies that one day God would send a savior to restore the glorious kingdom of David. This savior was called the **Messiah**, or “anointed one.” *Anointed* means “blessed with oil.” More generally, it means specially chosen by God.

36.3 The Birth of Jesus

No one knows exactly when Jesus was born. Our modern calendar dates the start of the Common Era from the supposed year of Jesus's birth. But after careful study, historians now believe that Jesus was probably born in about 6 B.C.E., during the reign of King Herod.

Historical records tell us a great deal about the days of the Roman Empire. The lives of the emperors, for example, were recorded in detail. But there were few historians to write about Jesus. Instead, most of the information about him comes from the writings of his followers.

These writings make up the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Among them are four **Gospels**. The Gospels are accounts of Jesus's life that were written in Greek by four of his followers, some years after Jesus's death. The followers' names have come down to us as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus's birth. According to Luke, Jesus's mother, Mary, lived in a town called Nazareth in the Roman territory of Galilee. There, the Gospels claim, an angel appeared to her. The angel told Mary she would have a child and that she should name him Jesus.

Luke's gospel says that around this time the Roman emperor Augustus ordered a census, or head count, of all the people in the Empire. Each man was supposed to go to the town of his birth to be counted. Mary's husband, a carpenter named Joseph, set out from Nazareth to his hometown of Bethlehem (BETH-lih-hem), in the territory of Judea. Mary went with him. In Bethlehem, she gave birth to Jesus.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus's family returned to Nazareth after his birth. The New Testament gospels say little about Jesus's childhood. It is likely that he grew up in Nazareth and learned carpentry. According to Luke, at age 12, Jesus astonished the rabbis, or teachers, in the great Temple of Jerusalem with his wisdom and his knowledge of Jewish law.

When Jesus was about 30, a preacher known as John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Messiah—the savior the Jews had been waiting for. After 40 days of praying in the wilderness, Jesus began to preach in Galilee.



36.4 The Life and Death of Jesus

According to the Gospels, Jesus began preaching in Galilee, an area in present-day Israel. At first, he preached in synagogues, or Jewish places of worship. Larger and larger crowds gathered to hear him. So Jesus began teaching in open areas—in the street, on hillsides, and by the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus called a small number to be his followers, or **disciples**. The disciples were mostly simple people, such as laborers and fishermen. Throughout his life, Jesus spent time with ordinary people, the poor, and the sick, rather than those who were wealthy and important.

The Teachings of Jesus Jesus based his teachings on traditional Jewish beliefs. But the Gospels say he put special **emphasis** on love and mercy. Of all the Jewish laws, he said, two were the most important. The first was, “You shall love your God with all your heart and all your soul.” The second was, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

According to the Gospels, Jesus told his followers that the kingdom of God was coming soon. But to Jesus, God's kingdom was not an earthly kingdom of power and riches. Instead, the kingdom of God meant a time when people would live according to God's will. Then, Jesus said, everyone would know God's love for all people, even those who suffer or who are looked down upon by others.

One of Jesus's favorite ways of teaching was through **parables**, simple stories with moral or religious messages. Jewish law says that you should love your neighbor as yourself. When asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Once a traveler was beaten and robbed on the road. Two people passed by and ignored him. Then a Samaritan stopped and helped the injured traveler. In Jesus's time, the Judeans and Samaritans did not get along. Because of the Samaritan's good deed, however, Jesus considered him a neighbor, worthy of love.



Teachings like this shocked and angered some of Jesus's listeners. To some Jews, this way of thinking was wrong and dangerous. Others worried that Jesus's growing following would cause trouble with the Romans. Jesus did not preach revolt against the Romans. Still, it was easy for some people to see him as a troublemaker.

The Crucifixion and Resurrection According to the Gospels, after a year or two of traveling and preaching, Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Passover. The festival celebrated God's rescue of the Jews from Egypt more than a thousand years before Jesus's time. Every year, thousands of Jews came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Roman soldiers kept a sharp eye out for anyone who might start a demonstration against Rome.



According to the Gospels, Jesus said that his enemies would come together to destroy him and that he would be killed. The Gospels then tell that one of Jesus's disciples, Judas, had decided to betray him. After a final meal with his disciples, Jesus went to pray in a garden. Judas then reported where Jesus could be found. As Jesus was led away under guard, the other disciples ran away. Christians call Jesus's final meal with his disciples "the Last Supper." Jesus had gained a large following in Jerusalem. The city's Roman rulers feared that his supporters might stir up trouble. They worried that Jesus might lead a revolt. To end this threat, they decided that he must die. According to the Christian Bible, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, ordered that Jesus be executed. In Roman times, a common form of execution was to be crucified, or tied or

nailed to a cross until dead.

According to the New Testament, the Romans took Jesus to a hill outside the city walls. There, they nailed him to a cross and left him to die between two other condemned men who were also crucified. A few faithful followers took his body and buried it in a tomb carved out of rock.

The Gospels say that three days later Jesus rose from the dead and then appeared to his disciples. Christians call this event the [Resurrection](#). Belief in the Resurrection convinced Jesus's disciples that he was the Son of God. According to the Gospels, Jesus left them again some time later to join his Father, God, in heaven. His disciples then began spreading the news of his life and teachings.

36.5 The Missionary Work of Paul

The early converts to Christianity were Jews, just as Jesus and his disciples had been. One such [convert](#) was Paul. He is one of the most important people in Christianity. He devoted his life to spreading the teachings of Jesus. After his death, the Roman Catholic Church named him a saint.

Paul came from Tarsus, a town in present-day Turkey. At first, he opposed Christianity and helped to persecute Christians. According to the New Testament, one day Paul was traveling to Damascus in present-day Syria. He saw a blinding light and heard the voice of Jesus. The vision changed Paul's life. He adopted the Christian faith and became a [missionary](#).

As an educated man with Roman citizenship who spoke Greek, Paul made it his special mission to convert non-Jews, called Gentiles, to the new religion. He spent 17 years visiting cities throughout the Greek-speaking world. Wherever he went, he made new converts and started new churches.

In his preaching and letters, Paul stressed the need to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. He taught that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, were God's children. Jesus, he said, was the Christ, God's chosen one. He was a Messiah for everyone, not just his fellow Jews.

Paul's journeys took him through much of the empire. He preached throughout Asia Minor, in Greece, and in Rome. Sometimes his visits caused riots when angry Jews protested what they considered blasphemous, or unholy, teaching.

For a time Paul was jailed in Rome, where he continued to write letters to other Christians. Tradition says that he was beheaded by the Romans in about 65 C.E. By that time, the Romans were beginning to persecute Christian believers.



36.6 Christianity Spreads



By the 60s C.E., Christians were beginning to attract the notice of the Romans. Christian preachers traveled along the roads of the empire, winning converts to their new religion. Both Paul and Peter, a close friend of Jesus, preached in Rome. At first, Rome was not unfriendly to Christians. What was another god, among so many?

But Christians refused to worship the other Roman gods. Worse, they would not accept that the emperor was a god. Their way of life seemed to be an insult to Roman customs. Instead of wealth and luxury, they preferred simplicity. Recalling Jesus's message of peace and love, many refused to serve in the army.

As the number of Christians grew, many Romans saw them as a threat to Roman order and patriotism. Eventually, the Christian religion was declared illegal.

Some emperors were determined to make an example of these disloyal citizens. For refusing to honor the Roman gods, Christians were sentenced to die in cruel and painful ways. Some were crucified. Some were burned to death. Others were brought into arenas, where they were devoured by wild animals in front of cheering crowds.

But the persecutions failed to destroy the new religion. Instead, Christians won new admirers by facing death bravely. Christianity offered many people in the empire a sense of purpose and hope. It taught that even the poor and slaves could look forward to a better life after death if they followed the teachings of Jesus.

Gradually, people of all classes began to adopt the new faith. By 300 C.E., possibly as many as 30 million Christians lived in the Roman lands of Europe, North Africa, and western Asia.

At the beginning of the chapter, you read about the emperor [Constantine](#) and how a victory in battle made him favor the Christian religion. In 313 C.E., Constantine announced the Edict of Milan. An *edict* is an order. In this edict, Constantine gave Christians the freedom to practice their religion openly. Future emperors also accepted the new faith. Emperor Theodosius I banned all pagan sacrifices. By 380, Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire.