

Rise of Christianity
World History
Kienast

Christianity began in the Roman province of Judea. The religion was founded by a Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth who was born there around 7-2 BCE. Judea was one of the provinces of the Roman Empire that was problematic. The Jews in Judea were constantly rebellious and resistant to Roman control. Many religious Jews found solace from these problems in the belief in the prophecy of ancient scripture. The Torah predicted that the troubles of the Jewish nation would one day be solved by the rise of a “messiah”, a word that means “savior.” Many Jews therefore hoped that this messiah would rise up and lead them out of Roman control.

Christians believe that this prophesized messiah did come. They see Jesus of Nazareth as the messiah, but believe, due to his teachings, that salvation from the world’s problems would come after a person’s death, not during this life. Jesus taught that obeying the one true God and following God’s commandments were important to living your life in a moral way. He taught that eventually this world would end and that another kingdom, a perfect kingdom after death, would be established. Christians disagree on the nature of this kingdom after death, with some arguing that the righteous and moral are rewarded with a place in a divine kingdom, and others arguing that all people will get a second chance at perfect life in a kingdom that Jesus will establish after this world passes away. Christians also fundamentally believe that Jesus is the only person to ever lead a perfect life without sin, and therefore he provided a ransom for sinners on earth. Christians believe that people die only because they are sinners, and that God would let people live forever if they followed his commandments. Jesus did follow those commandments perfectly, and still allowed himself to die at the hands of the Romans, providing a “ransom” or a sacrifice paid to satisfy the bondage and debt of humanity as a result of sin.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a town north of Jerusalem. Historians disagree on exactly when he was born, but agree that it was somewhere between 7 and 2 BCE. Not much is known about his early life, but historians and religious scholars believe that Jesus began to preach about his beliefs around age 30. That was the age that Jewish law held that a person could become a “rabbi” or a religious teacher. While Jesus’ teachings were embraced by many in Judea, many others objected to his views. Jesus preached that he was a king and would lead people into an eternal kingdom. This belief made the Romans uneasy. You can imagine that the Romans were suspicious of any talk of rebellion in an unsettled place like Judea. Many wealthy people were upset with Jesus’ embracing of the poor and the socially unfit. Jewish religious leaders doubted that he was the messiah and were upset that an “imposter” was leading many people away from their own teachings. In the end, a group of religious leaders convinced the Roman government in Judea, led by a proconsul named Pontius Pilate, that Jesus was a threat. The Romans cooperated and had Jesus executed, believing that it was better eliminate even a potential threat to their empire.

An important point to be made is that Jews did not kill Jesus. Jesus himself was a Jew, his mother and father were Jews, and his followers and friends were Jews. Did a group of Jewish leaders ask for his death? Yes, but that doesn’t mean that all Jews in Judea favored his death. Why mention all of this? For centuries after the death of Jesus, people have blamed Jews for the

death of Jesus. Often Jews were blamed as a way to discriminate against them. If the population was suffering through a crisis, it was easy to blame the Jews for their troubles. They were “outsiders” who came in because of the Jewish Diaspora and were “cursed by God” because they killed Jesus. Using illogical reasoning, populations figured that killing Jews or persecuting them would find favor with God since they were “cursed.” These demented notions led to centuries of Jewish persecution.

After Jesus’ death, Jesus’ followers began calling him Christ, a word that comes from the Greek “Christos” which means “messiah.” Followers of Jesus are therefore “Christians” or followers of the messiah. Christianity was initially spread throughout the Roman Empire by apostles, or the messengers of Jesus, many of whom were his followers during his life. So, how was Christianity spread out of the Middle East? It was spread by the apostles, especially two named Peter and Paul, who used Roman roads and trade networks to spread the faith. These apostles established early churches in Roman trade cities such as Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. Paul’s letters to these churches are evidence of this. Many of the books of the New Testament are letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians, and Romans who were early Christians.

The Christian church in Rome is of particular importance because that church, established as the Roman Christian Church, later became known as the Roman Catholic Church somewhere around 115 CE. Disputes about the teachings of Jesus that arose among early Christians threatened to fragment the early Christianity, and it was the Roman Church that brought some measure of order and unification to early beliefs. Eventually the Christian leadership in Rome was recognized as the authority and a central government for the Christian faith was established there, called the Vatican.

Before that unification could happen, Christians endured nearly 200 years of persecution before the Romans themselves began to tolerate, and then accept Christianity. This begs the question, of how Christianity became popular in the Roman Empire after initial persecution. One contributing factor is that people gravitated towards anything that would offer a new hope, especially in late Empire. As the Empire fell, people were desperate to try anything new, especially a religion that taught that salvation was offered for everyone. Christianity was also similar to some of the Roman cults and therefore was easily integrated or synthesized into the Roman belief system. A number of Romans believed in Mithraism which followed a man named Mithras, the son of the sun god who came to earth to rescue mankind. Sound familiar? Christians also helped with integrating Christian beliefs into Roman society by allowing Roman beliefs to influence early Christianity. For example, no one quite knew exactly when Jesus of Nazareth was born. Most scholars believe that he was born sometime in the fall or spring, but certainly not in December. The reason December 25 was chosen as Jesus’ birthday was that the Romans already had a massive celebration on that date. December 25 was the culmination of the Saturnalia celebration. The Saturnalia festival was a week-long celebration held in honor of the Roman god, Saturn. The festival ended with the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year) on December 25. During this festival it was common to give gifts and to decorate temples with fir trees. Again, sound familiar?

The final contributing factor to the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire involved the adoption of Christianity by Rome’s leaders. Christianity had become so popular by 300 CE that

Constantine, the emperor of Rome during that period, adopted Christianity as his personal faith. While Constantine's conversion may be due to his attempts to make the people happy, it was nonetheless a momentous event. Constantine eventually passed the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, granting complete tolerance to all religions, including Christians. That said, later Constantine developed hostile stance towards Pagans (non-Christians). He eventually outlawed paganism in an attempt to unify the empire under Christianity. The only problem at this point with Christianity was that it was still disorganized as far as what various Christians believed. There was no set doctrine, or set of beliefs, even within the Catholic Church. Constantine therefore ordered a meeting of all religious leaders to meet in a Roman town called Nicaea in 325 in an effort to create a doctrine of unified beliefs. Eventually the Council of Nicaea developed doctrines that became the core belief system of the Christian faiths and eliminated any alternative ideas that were created when Christianity synthesized with other cultures and faiths. Alternative views of the religion were problematic before the Council of Nicaea. For example, as Christianity spread into polytheistic areas, some Christians argued for the religion to be polytheistic. This alternative idea threatened a foundation of Christianity, monotheism, so the Council of Nicaea firmly established that the religion should worship one God. One huge issue that was decided by the Council of Nicaea was the role of women in the Church. From the foundations of Christianity, believers debated about the role of women in the Church. The issue mainly centered around whether women would be allowed to be religious leaders. Being the patriarchal society that it was, it is no surprise that the Romans ended up banning women from Church leadership. Women were not allowed to make decisions within the Church and only men could lead monastic orders.