

## The Origins of Christianity

The eventual triumph of Christianity over its rivals is partly explained by the religion's creed and the conditions present in the Roman Empire during the third and fourth centuries. Unlike the other religions, Christianity appealed to both men and women as well as across class lines. The unique appeal of Christianity, however, is inextricably linked to its founder's life and the work of Paul the disciple.

### The Life of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem around 4 BCE. When Jesus was thirty years old, John the Baptist identified Jesus as "one mightier than I." During the next three years, Jesus ministered to the poor and sick. He preached a message of humility and brotherly love. His teachings eventually provoked the anger of the Pharisees, who considered Jesus's condemnation of pomp and ceremony a threat to their position. Jesus was brought before a Roman governor Pontius Pilate and accused of being a revolutionary. He was convicted and executed on the hill of Golgotha in Jerusalem. His followers despaired, fearing that Jesus's crucifixion meant the end of their master's religious movement. Then, a number of his followers reported that he had risen from the dead. Belief in Jesus's resurrection spread among his disciples.

### Jesus's Teachings

There are no contemporary accounts of either Jesus's life or teachings. The Gospels present the fullest record of his existence. The earliest gospels, one written by Mark for example, was written no earlier than 70 CE. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and Mark are called synoptic because their authors based their narratives on a common text. The Gospel of John was the latest of the accounts and was written around 100 CE. The Christian scriptures consist of the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, the 21 Epistles of Paul, and the Book of Revelations. There has never been an agreement among Christians as to the precise meaning of Jesus's message. Jesus preached a renunciation of the world and its temptations. He called on his followers to believe in him and dedicate their lives to faith, hope, and charity. The faithful would find forgiveness for their sins and salvation if they followed Jesus. They would be rewarded with everlasting life in heaven.

### Paul's Contribution to Christianity & their Legacy

Saul of Tarsus, or Paul, transformed Christianity from a small sect of Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah into a world religion. Paul played a pivotal role in both the development of the Christian Church and the formulation of the religion's articles of faith. Paul was a Hellenized Jew who zealously supported the Pharisees. Around 35 CE Paul had a conversionary experience on the way to Damascus. Paul conceived of Christianity as a universal religion. Jesus's early followers considered Christianity a part of Judaism. James, Jesus's brother, led this faction in Jerusalem. He argued that Christians must be Jews and adhere to Jewish Law. Paul recognized that Christianity would be dealt a death blow if prospective converts must undergo circumcision before becoming Christian. Paul became the apostle to the gentiles. Eventually, Paul won out against his conservative fellow Christians. Paul's second contribution to Christianity came in his work as a missionary. He believed that all Christians were obligated to spread the Master's teachings.

Jesus's disciples believed in the imminent return of their lord. Since the Kingdom of God is at hand, they were unconcerned with establishing an institutional base for Christianity. Paul changed this. Paul conceived of Christianity as a religion of personal salvation. His epistles (letters to Christian communities) laid the basis for the religion's organization and sacraments.

### The Appeal of Christianity

Christianity's popularity during the first three centuries of the Common Era rested on several factors. First, Christianity's emotionalism and mysticism offered an alternative to the rational Hellenistic philosophical tradition. Second, the Pax Romana from 27 BCE- 180 CE allowed early Christians to move freely throughout the Empire. The existence of a common language of trade, a Greek dialect, helped the Christian communities stay in contact with one another. Third, the internal and external threats that Rome experienced in the third century left many Romans in a state of confusion and alienation. Christianity offered solace to individuals who felt isolated in a harsh and troubling world.

### The Second Diaspora of the Jews

After the crucifixion of Jesus, the Romans continued to pay attention to the little province of Judea and the Jews who dwelled there. In 66 CE, a group of zealots unsuccessfully rebelled against Rome. The rebellion culminated in the Romans' destruction of the temple at Jerusalem. All that remained was the western wall of the temple, which stands today as the most noted Jewish shrine, the Wailing Wall. In 73 CE, a fortress near Masada—the final Jewish stronghold—fell to the Romans. After a second rebellion in 132 CE, the Jews were dispersed to faraway territories by the Romans in the Second Diaspora. From this time on and until 1948, the Jewish people would not have their own homeland. Judaism would continue, however, in colonies of exiles, some of whose inhabitants would convert to Christianity. Christianity appealed to people of all classes promising eternal life after death, it offered hope to the weak and downtrodden of the world.

### The Persecution of Christianity under the Empire

The persecution of Christians under the Roman Empire was neither as extensive nor as severe as once imagines. Generally, the Romans tolerated different religious beliefs. The official and popular hostility to the Christians can be divided into three categories. In the first century, there were sporadic attacks against the Christians. Officially, Nero took repressive steps against Christians in 64 CE. Most of the anti-Christian actions were, in fact, popular protests against the Christian's unwillingness to celebrate Roman holidays and acknowledge the state religion.

In the third century, there were two periods of brutal persecution. The Emperors Decius, Gailus, and Valerian ordered the execution of many Christians during their reigns from 250-260 CE. At the century's close, Diocletian, 284-305 CE, renewed the anti-Christian campaign. Under Diocletian the persecution reached its greatest extent. The next emperor, Constantine, revoked the anti-Christian laws. Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 CE and ordered that the religion be tolerated in the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.

The evolution of Christianity from a persecuted sect reached its conclusion in 391 CE when Emperor Theodosius I proclaimed Christianity the Empire's official religion. Overall, the persecutions were neither extensive nor prolonged. The net effect may, in fact, have benefited the early Christians in that the government's repressive measures and brutal actions strengthened the Christian community's faith and resolution.

The origins of Christianity date back to the middle of the Roman Empire. The first few centuries of Christianity were full of religious persecution and oppression but toward the third century CE Christianity became the main religion of the Roman Empire. In the chart below list the facts that coincide with the topics of Christianity.

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