

The Birth of Roman Christianity

Roman Emperors had not viewed Christianity in a positive light until Roman Emperor Constantine the Great decided to become involved in a controversy that was dividing groups located in different parts of his empire. It has been calculated that between the first persecution under Nero in 64 CE to the Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, Christians had experienced 129 years of Roman persecutions and 120 years of Roman toleration and peace.¹ Many of the persecutions were very harsh and many Christians lost their lives and property. In order for us to understand why the Romans persecuted and distrusted Christians, we must understand the Roman view of religion.

- *Religions were valid only in so far as they could be shown to be old and in line with ancient customs.*
- *Religion was first and foremost a social activity that promoted unity and loyalty to the Roman state (a religious attitude the Romans called pietas [piety]). Cicero wrote that if piety in the Roman sense were to disappear, social unity and justice would perish along with it.²*
- *Christianity was viewed as a "superstition taken to extravagant lengths." Superstition meant that Christianity was something foreign, different, new with innovative teachings that were regarded with distrust.³*

Judaism had been a "**religion**" in the Roman Empire long before Jesus was born. This information makes it clear that the Romans were aware of the "**newness**" of Christianity.

Christianity and Judaism were not connected in any way.

Roman Emperor Constantine the Great was named **Flavius Valerius Constantinus** when he was born on Feb. 27, 280. His mother was named **Helena**, described as a barmaid. His father was a Roman officer named **Constantius Chlorus**. By the time his father became **Governor of Dalmatia**, he required a new pedigreed wife, so he married **Theodora (Flavia Maximiana Theodora)**. Constantius sent his old wife and her son Constantine off to live with the Eastern Roman Emperor, **Diocletian**, at **Nicomedia**.⁴

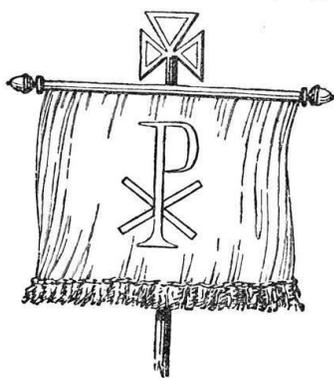
When **Constantius Chlorus** was elevated to the **rank of Caesar** in **293**, Constantine became a member of the **Court of Diocletian** at the age of **thirteen**. Constantine developed into an officer of much promise while serving under Diocletian. In **306**,

Constantine was allowed to return to his father and accompany him on a campaign to **Britain**. Later that year, after his father had become ill and died, the troops hailed **Constantine as the new Augustus**.⁵

At the **Conference of Carnuntum in 308**, where all the **Caesars** and **Augusti** met, it was demanded that Constantine give up his title of Augustus and return to being a Caesar, but he refused. Shortly thereafter, while Constantine was successfully campaigning against the Germans, news reached him that **Maximian** had turned against him. Constantine immediately marched his legions into Gaul to confront him, but Maximian fled to Massilia. Constantine laid siege to the city and the garrison of Massilia surrendered, but Maximian either committed suicide or was executed by his soldiers in **310**.⁶ In **311** four men were engaged in a power struggle for control of the Roman Empire.

- In the **Eastern Empire** it was **Licinius** and **Maximinus Daia**.
- In the **Western Empire** it was **Constantine** and **Maxentius**.

In 312, Constantine invaded Italy and attacked Maxentius, who is believed to have had up to four times as many troops. After Constantine won battles at Augusta Taurinorum (Turin) and Verona, he marched on to Rome.⁷



Source⁸

Constantine later claimed that he had a vision on the way to Rome, during the night before battle. In this dream he supposedly saw the **'Chi-Ro'**, the symbol of Christ, shining above the sun. Seeing this as a divine sign, Constantine had his soldiers paint the symbol on their shields.

Constantine defeated Maxentius at the Battle at the Milvian Bridge on Oct 312. Maxentius, together with thousands of his soldiers, drowned as the bridge of boats his force was retreating over collapsed. Later, a tradition emerged in which Constantine saw this victory as directly related to the vision he had had the night before – *Constantine saw himself as an “emperor of the Christian people.”* However, it is questionable as to whether he even viewed himself as a Christian. He would not be baptized until he was on his deathbed. Why would he wait until December 25, 323 to exempt Christians from pagan purification rituals?⁹

Constantine's actions after his vision reflect his gratitude to the God of the Christians, much more than his acceptance of any of any Christian sect's doctrines. Constantine did not ban the practice of other religions. *He did, however, become the protector of and a benefactor to a number of Christian churches.*

Constantine's relationship to Christianity changed when a conflict between two Egyptian Christian leaders from Alexandria, Egypt broke out. It is called "**the Arian Controversy**."¹⁰ In 318 CE, an Alexandrian Christian teacher named **Arius** accused **Bishop Alexander of Alexandria** of teaching the false doctrine that "**God and Christ were of the same essence**." Arius was a devout Christian who believed the church had strayed from the original message of Jesus and advocated that Christians return to the teachings of the early church.

"God is the Father – one, infinite, and indivisible. He is uncreated, existed forever, and ruled as sole sovereign and judge. No other God exists but He. Given His nature, He could not impart it to any other being. He has no equals."¹¹

Bishop Alexander responded:

"Arius had drained the dregs of impiety by his unscriptural blasphemy against Christ."

Alexander called for a council of bishops meet and judge Arius.

- *It found him guilty of apostasy, schism, heresy, blasphemy and declared that Arius' teachings were those of the Antichrist.*
- *Arius was excommunicated and exiled from the Alexandrian Church. At that point in time, rulings made by local councils of bishops held no authority beyond their local borders and their groups.*

Arius, however, continued to actively evangelize and acquired many new followers. In addition, he gained the support of two other bishops who were very powerful – **Eusebius of Caesarea** (*the personal historian of Emperor Constantine*) and **Eusebius of Nicomedia** (*a relative of the imperial family*). They brought the situation of Arius to the attention of Constantine.

At that time the Roman Empire was becoming increasingly divided because of power struggles between Eastern and Western leaders. Scholars believe that this situation played a role in Constantine's decision to become involved in Christianity. He was looking for a way to keep his empire together and he saw Christianity as a way to achieve his goal. Networks of Christians and churches were spread throughout the Empire.

The **Arian Controversy** provided Constantine with an opportunity to become much more involved in Christianity. **Constantine called the first imperial council to resolve a Christian matter. 1,800 bishops were invited** over from across the empire to meet in the summer of **325 CE at Nicaea**. Only **298 bishops from the Eastern Empire** and **2 bishops from the Western Empire** attended. The lack of participation may not have been a sign of a lack of interest; *it may have been out of fear*. After years of persecutions by Roman emperors there is a good chance that they may have considered the possibility that this was a trap.

At the Council of Nicaea, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea presented a creed for consideration that he felt Bishop Alexander and Arius could agree upon. However, it became clear that its acceptance depended on how certain key words were interpreted. After a great deal of debate by the bishops and their inability to reach an agreement on those words, **Emperor Constantine surprised everyone by providing his own interpretation**. Constantine declared that the Father and the Son were **homoousios** (Greek word; **substantia** in Latin) -- "**of the same essence**" or "**consubstantial**;" not "**of a different essence**." Initially Constantine offered his interpretation as an option, but **he soon changed it to a demand for a unanimous vote of acceptance by the bishops**.

Arius disagreed with Constantine's position because **it would mean that Jesus would be equal to the Father**. He argued that **the result would be the existence of two gods**, which was **a direct violation of the monotheistic teachings of the early Jerusalem church -- there is only one God**.

Arius found himself in a very different situation that after the council met in Alexandria. **The Council of Nicea was backed by the authority and power of the Emperor of the Roman Empire and its ruling were enforced throughout the Empire**.

- *The council excommunicated Arius.*
- *His writings were ordered to be burned. Anyone caught with them would become a "criminal of the Empire;" which could be punished by "capital punishment."*

- *Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicea, the two bishops that supported Arius, were deposed.*

For over three centuries local churches formulated their own beliefs and creeds, but the Council of Nicaea that changed.

- Christian beliefs and creeds were now governed by a legal standard enforced by the Roman Emperor's power.
- Failure to comply would have new consequences in the Empire.

The two deposed bishops were also friends of Constantine and understood the politics of the empire; **they soon recanted and healed their rift with the emperor.** But privately they continued to support Arius.

In 335, the Synod of Tyre and Jerusalem met and restored Arius and his friends into communion with the Church. Both Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia played leading roles in this synod. Athanasius was excommunicated. He left on a trip to complain to Emperor Constantine the Great, whom he encountered mid-road. After Athanasius persisted in requesting an audience, Constantine agreed to hear his complaint. The emperor then wrote a *Letter to the Bishops Assembled at Tyre* (LNPF ser. 2, vol. 2, 278) requesting that they meet in his presence to discuss the matter. Some of the bishops flee home, but Eusebius of Nicomedia and his consort met with Constantine. The emperor agreed with the findings of the council concerning Athanasius. In February, Athanasius was sent into exile at Trier. Arius was fully restored as a member of the Church. The position and creed of the Roman Catholic Church was this:

Jesus is completely human and only a man, not God!

It is extremely important that you understand what the Arian Controversy revealed about the creeds and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Something that was ruled as divine truth by one council, became heretical by the ruling of another council.

A majority of votes determined "divine truths."

The next Roman Emperor, **Constantius II**, reunited the Eastern and Western Empires under the Arian banner. Several church councils took place after he became emperor and they endorsed Arianism, including the **Council of Sirmium** in 357, which ruled:

- *Jesus as Lord and Redeemer, the only Son of God.*
- *Two Gods may not and shall not be taught.*

This had to be mindboggling for everyone in the Church! However even though he was in exile, Athanasius didn't give up. He understood the politics of the Roman Empire and actively campaigned to gather the support needed to reverse the decision of the Council of Sirmium. He finally convinced some leaders of the to call new councils to revisit the issue in 359 and 360. Both councils condemned Arian and ruled that his teachings were once again heresy. Both councils judged Arian bishops to be Jews, heathens, antichrists, and blasphemers. Athanasius was back in power again, but the latest rulings made it clear that "**Jews are now viewed as the enemies of Christianity.**"

The Arians shifted their base of support from the Western Empire to the Eastern Empire, where they continued to proclaim, "**the Arian divine truth,**" while at the same time in the West Western Empire, "**it was heresy.**" In **367**, Bishop Athanasius also published his list of accepted books, which contained the books that are now "**The New Testament.**"

In 380 Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire when Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica.¹²

In 381 the **Council of Constantinople** met and produced the creed that laid the doctrinal foundation for modern Christianity. It not only reaffirmed the **Nicene Creed of 325**, but it expanded the doctrine about "**the Father and Jesus to include the Holy Spirit**" -- "**the Person of the Holy Ghost is to be worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son.**"¹³

In 385, the first sentence of capital punishment of Christians by Christians was handed down. **Bishop Priscillian of Spain and six of his followers** were **tortured and decapitated.** *What grave heretical offense had Bishop Priscillian and his followers committed?* He was married when he became bishop, something that was very common at that time. However, the Church changed their position on that, and a newly appointed married bishop was required to put away his wife and renounce the marriage. **Bishop Priscillian refused to do it and supported his decision by appealing to Scriptures.** His position gained popularity among other bishops. That was when The Imperial Court stepped in and demanded that he do it or "**it would cost him his head.**"

By the end of the fourth century, beliefs about Jesus were still a source of division.

(1) Roman Church: *“In Christ there are two natures united in one person.”*

(2) Antioch Church: *“Jesus was fully human, that the Godhead dwelt in him, but did not eclipse his humanity.”*

(3) Alexandria Church: *“Jesus’ divinity must take precedence, even if was at the expense of his humanity.”*

In 395 Theodosius I died. **Marcian** (born 396, Thrace—died early 457, Constantinople) became Emperor of the Eastern Roman Emperor.¹⁴ The next conflict was about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Bishop Nestorius of Antioch wanted Mary’s title changed from “**The Mother of God**” to “**The Mother of Christ**,” which reflected his group’s beliefs that “**Jesus was fully human**.” In 431, the **Council of Ephesus** ruled that Mary was “**The Mother of God**.”

Imperial edicts that began with Theodosius I deprived all who were judged to be heretics and pagans of the right of worship, banned them from holding civil offices, exposed them to heavy fines, confiscation of property, and banishment. By 435, there were **sixty-six laws against Christian heretics** plus many others against pagans. After the death of Theodosius II in 450, Marcian appointed Emperor of the Western Empire too.

In 451 the **Council of Chalcedon** was called to address the final major controversy over God in the Roman Church. The relationships of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit continued to raise questions in the minds of many Christians. The council ruled that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all of the same ***homoousios*** (*essence, substance*).

The Trinity became the official belief of the Roman Catholic Church.

In 455, an East Germanic tribe attacked and plundered the Western Empire. The once powerful Roman Empire began to crumble. However, as the Western Empire became weaker, **the power of the Roman Church grew**. Interestingly, some members of the invading Germanic armies converted to Christianity.

The Christianity that existed in **500 CE** was a very different from **the movement founded by Yeshua** (the Jewish Jesus), **the movement of the Apostle Paul**, early Christian groups (**Ebionites**, **Marcionites**, **Alexandrians**, and **Arians**), the “Church” created by the ruling of **Constantine the Great**, or the **churches in Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria** prior to the **Council of Chalcedon** in **451** – *which was only 1,572 years ago for those of us living in 2023!*

¹ <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/history/persecution.htm>

² Robert L. Wilkin, "The Piety of the Persecutors." *Christian History, Issue 27 (Vol. XI, No. 3)*, p. 18.

³ <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/history/persecution.htm>

⁴ <http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/p/constantine.htm>

⁵ <http://www.roman-empire.net/decline/constantine-index.html>

⁶ <http://www.roman-empire.net/decline/constantine-index.html>

⁷ <http://www.roman-empire.net/decline/constantine-index.html>

⁸ <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-QpBVGdL-Ic/Tb7hKPopCCI/AAAAAAAAAgc/hu1wa-IX0sQ/s1600/Labarum.jpg>

⁹ <http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/p/constantine.htm>

¹⁰ Blasphemy: Verbal Offense against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie by Leonard W. Levy (The University of North Carolina Press; Chapel Hill, North Carolina and London; © 1993 by Leonard W. Levy; pp. 15-49).

¹¹ <http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/arianism.php>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_as_the_Roman_state_religion

¹³ <http://trushare.com/86jul02/JY02TOON.htm>

¹⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcian>