

3 The Rise of Christianity

TERMS & NAMES

- Jesus
- apostle
- Peter
- Paul
- Diaspora
- bishop
- pope
- Constantine
- heresy

MAIN IDEA

Christianity arose in Roman-occupied Judea and spread throughout the Roman Empire.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

As the world's most widespread religion, Christianity guides the lives of millions today.

SETTING THE STAGE The worship of Roman gods was impersonal, practiced without a great deal of emotion. Priests used sacred rites to intercede on behalf of worshippers. A new religion called Christianity, born as a movement within Judaism, emphasized the personal relationship between God and people. It attracted many Romans.

Jews Come Under Roman Rule

Roman power spread to Judea, the home of the Jews, around 63 B.C. At first the Jewish kingdom remained independent, at least in name. Jewish kings ruled as representatives of Rome. Some Jews allied with the Romans and accepted their plans to “Romanize” Jerusalem. The ruler Herod, for example, was a Romanized Jew. His loyalties were divided between Rome and the Jewish people, but he ruled with an iron hand and angered many Jews. When he died, the Jews began a revolt against Roman influence that lasted for ten years. Rome finally took control of the Jewish kingdom and made it the province of Judea in A.D. 6.

In an attempt to restore order in Judea, the Romans gave control of religious matters and local affairs to the Jewish court called the Sanhedrin. Jews were divided into two major factions. One group, called the Zealots, wanted to rid their homeland of the Romans. Another group believed that the Messiah, or savior, was soon to appear. According to biblical tradition, God had promised that the Messiah would restore the kingdom of the Jews.

Vocabulary

Zealot: has come to mean a fanatically committed person.

Background

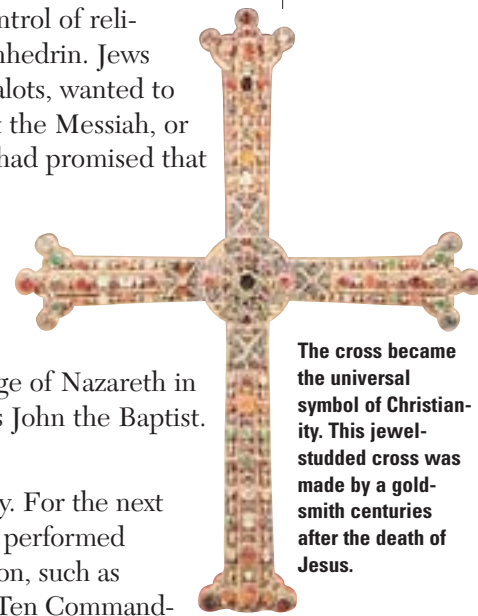
The original dating of the birth of Jesus made in the sixth century A.D. is now generally recognized as being four to six years in error.

The Life and Teachings of Jesus

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea. The date is uncertain but is thought to have been around 6 to 4 B.C. Jesus was both a Jew and a Roman subject. He was raised in the village of Nazareth in northern Palestine. Jesus was baptized by the prophet known as John the Baptist. As a young man, he took up the trade of carpentry.

Jesus' Message At the age of 30 Jesus began his public ministry. For the next three years, he preached, taught, did good works, and reportedly performed miracles. His teachings contained many ideas from Jewish tradition, such as monotheism, or belief in only one god, and the principles of the Ten Commandments. Jesus emphasized God's personal relationship to each human being. He stressed the importance of people's love for God, their neighbors, their enemies, and even themselves. He also taught that God would end wickedness in the world and would establish an eternal kingdom after death for people who sincerely repented their sins.

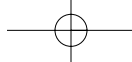
Jesus gathered about himself twelve special disciples, or pupils. Historical records of the time mention very little about Jesus. The main source of information about Jesus' life and teachings are the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament of the Bible. Some of the Gospels are thought to have been written by one or more of Jesus' disciples, who later came to be called **apostles**.



The cross became the universal symbol of Christianity. This jewel-studded cross was made by a goldsmith centuries after the death of Jesus.

Vocabulary

Gospel: means good news.



Jesus is portrayed in this glass mosaic from the fifth century as “the good shepherd,” tending his flock, watching over the faithful.

As Jesus preached from town to town, his fame grew. He attracted large crowds, and many people were touched by his message. Many believed him to be the long-awaited Messiah, the son of God. Because Jesus ignored wealth and status, his message had special appeal to the poor. “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth,” he said. His words, as related in the Gospels, are simple and direct:

THE BIBLE

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on the cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. Give to everyone who asks you for something, and when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back. Do for others just what you want them to do for you.

The Gospel of Luke, 6:27–31

Jesus’ Death Jesus’ growing popularity concerned both Roman and Jewish leaders. When Jesus visited Jerusalem about A.D. 29, enthusiastic crowds greeted him as the Messiah, or king. The chief priests of the Jews denied that Jesus was the Messiah. They said his teachings were blasphemy, or contempt for God. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate thought that Jesus, whom the Romans mockingly called “King of the Jews,” challenged the authority of Rome. Pilate arrested Jesus and sentenced him to be crucified, or nailed to a large wooden cross to die.

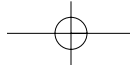
After Jesus’ death, his body was placed in a tomb. According to the Gospels, three days later his body was gone, and a living Jesus began appearing to his followers. Then one day it was said that he ascended into heaven. The apostles were more than ever convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. It was from this belief that Jesus came to be referred to as Jesus Christ. *Christos* is a Greek word meaning “messiah” or “savior.” The name Christianity was derived from “Christ.”

The followers of Jesus were strengthened by their conviction that he had triumphed over death. Led by **Peter**, the first apostle, they spread the teachings of Jesus throughout Palestine and Syria. The cross on which he had been crucified became a symbol for their beliefs.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

A. Hypothesizing

Why did the followers of Jesus think he was the Messiah?



Christianity Spreads Through the Empire

Jesus' teachings did not contradict Jewish law, and his first followers were Jews. Soon, however, these followers began to create a new religion based on his messages. Despite political and religious opposition, the new religion of Christianity spread slowly but steadily throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul's Mission One man, the apostle **Paul**, had enormous influence on Christianity's development. Paul was a Jew whose Hebrew name was Saul. He had never met Jesus and at first was an enemy of Christianity. While traveling to Damascus in Syria, he reportedly had a vision of Christ. He then began using his Roman name, Paul, and spent the rest of his life spreading and interpreting Christ's teachings.

The *Pax Romana*, which made travel and the exchange of ideas fairly safe, provided the ideal conditions for Christianity to spread. The excellent Roman road system made passage by land easy, and common languages—Latin and Greek—allowed the message to be easily understood. Paul was able to travel freely from city to city around the eastern Mediterranean to preach. He wrote influential letters, called Epistles, to groups of believers. In his teaching, Paul stressed that Jesus was the son of God who died for people's sins. He also declared that Christianity should welcome all converts, Jew or Gentile (non-Jew). He said: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." It was this universality that enabled Christianity to become more than just a local religion.

Jewish Rebellion During the early years of Christianity, much Roman attention was focused on the land of Jesus' birth and on the Jews. In A.D. 66, a band of Zealots rebelled against Rome. In A.D. 70, the Romans stormed Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple complex. All that remained was a western portion of the wall, which today is the holiest Jewish shrine. The Jewish fortress near Masada held out until A.D. 73.

About a half million Jews were killed in the course of this rebellion.



The Jews made another attempt to break free of the Romans in A.D. 132. Another half-million Jews died in three years of fighting. Although the Jewish religion survived, the Jewish political state ceased to exist for more

than 1,800 years. Most Jews were driven from their homeland into exile. This dispersal of the Jews is called the **Diaspora**.

Persecution of the Christians Christians also posed a problem for Roman rulers because Christians refused to worship Roman gods. This refusal was seen as opposition to Roman rule. Some Roman rulers also used Christians as scapegoats for political and economic troubles. In A.D. 64, for example, when the emperor Nero was blamed for a disastrous fire in Rome, he said Christians were responsible and ordered them to be persecuted. Both the apostles Peter and Paul were put to death in Rome some time after A.D. 60.

The emperors who followed Nero in the first century did not continue the persecutions. Later, however, as the *Pax Romana* began to crumble, the Romans exiled, imprisoned, or executed Christians for refusing to worship Roman gods. Thousands were crucified, burned, or killed by wild animals in the circus arenas. Other Christians and even some non-Christians regarded persecuted Christians as martyrs.

Martyrs were people willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of a belief or a cause.

Despite persecution, Christianity became a powerful religious force. By the late third century A.D., there were millions of Christians in the Roman Empire. Missionaries spread the faith throughout the empire and beyond.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

B. Recognizing

Effects How did conditions in the Roman Empire contribute to the spread of Christianity?

Vocabulary

scapegoats: groups or individuals that innocently bear the blame for others

Global Impact

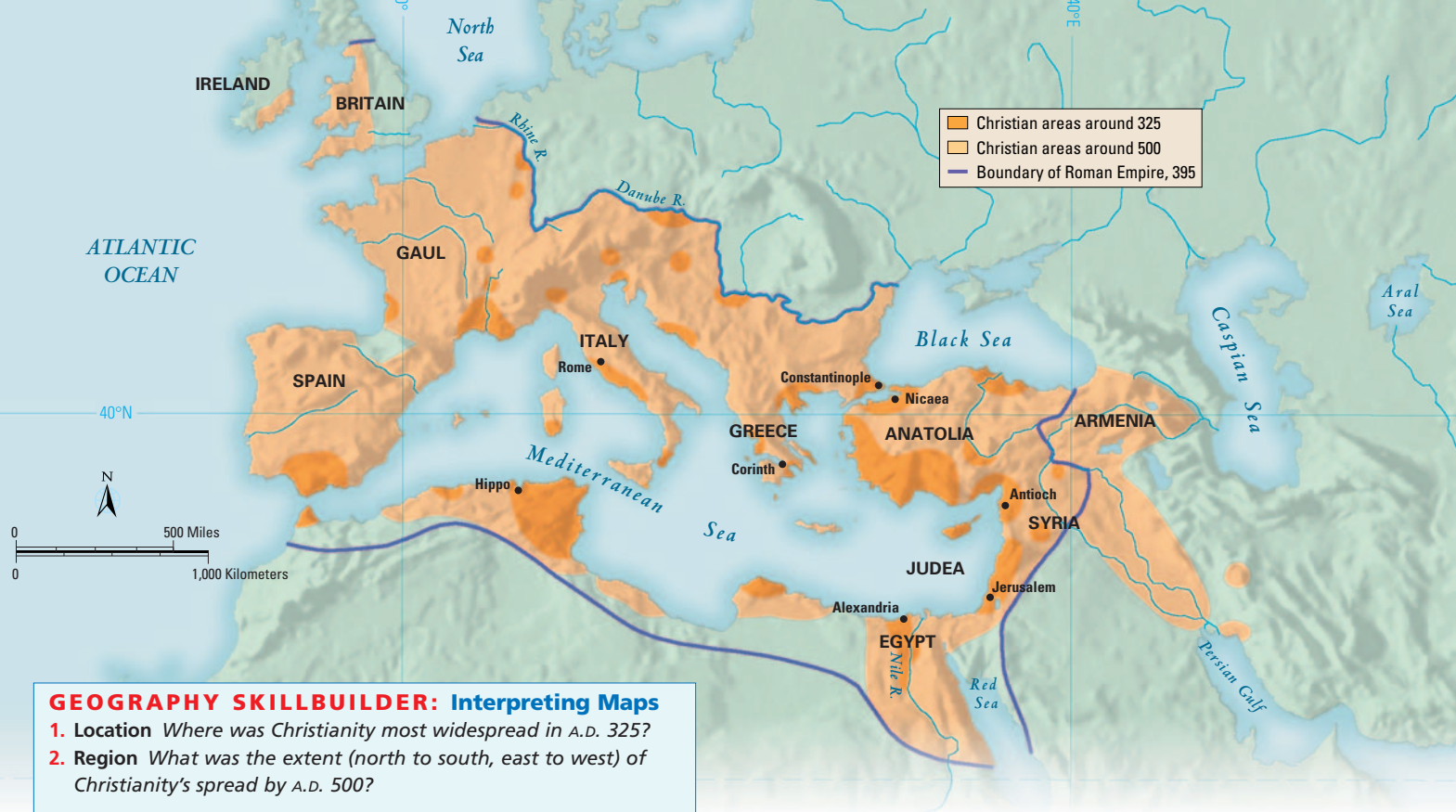
The Jewish Diaspora

Centuries of Jewish exile followed the destruction of their Temple and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This period is called the Diaspora, from the Greek word for "dispersal." Jews fled to many parts of the world. Some moved to Babylonia and the Arabian Desert. Others went to Syria, Egypt, and Spain.

Eventually, Jews spread into France, England, and the Rhineland, where they lived in small groups. In the 1100s, many European Jews were expelled from their homes. Some moved to Turkey, Palestine, and Syria. Others went to Poland and nearby neighboring areas.

The statelessness of the Jews did not end until the creation of Israel in 1948.

Spread of Christianity in the Roman World to A.D. 500



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

- Location** Where was Christianity most widespread in A.D. 325?
- Region** What was the extent (north to south, east to west) of Christianity's spread by A.D. 500?

A World Religion

The widespread appeal of Christianity was the result of a variety of reasons. Christianity grew because it:

- embraced all people—men and women; slaves, the poor, and nobles.
- gave hope to the powerless.
- appealed to those who were repelled by the extravagances of imperial Rome.
- offered a personal relationship with a loving God.
- promised eternal life after death.

Early Christian Church Christians soon began to give their religion a structure, much as the Roman Empire had a hierarchy. At the local level, a priest led each small group of Christians. A **bishop**, who was also a priest, supervised several local churches. The apostle Peter had traveled to Rome from Jerusalem and became the first bishop there. According to tradition, Jesus referred to Peter as the “rock” on which the Christian Church would be built. As a result, all priests and bishops traced their authority to him.

Eventually, every major city had its own bishop. However, later bishops of Rome claimed to be the heirs of Peter. These bishops said that Peter was the first **pope**, the father or head of the Christian Church. They said that whoever was bishop of Rome was also the leader of the whole Church. Also, as Rome was the capital of the empire, it seemed the logical choice to be the center of the Church.

Constantine Accepts Christianity A critical moment in Christianity occurred in A.D. 312, when the Roman emperor **Constantine** was fighting three rivals for his title. He had marched to the Tiber River at Rome to battle his chief rival. On the day before the battle at Milvian Bridge, Constantine prayed for divine help. He reported that he then

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

C. Making Inferences Why were the citizens of the Roman Empire so receptive to a new religion at this time?

Vocabulary

hierarchy: a group of persons organized in order of ranks, with each level subject to the authority of the one above.



saw a cross of light in the heavens bearing the inscription, “In this sign, conquer.” Constantine ordered artisans to put the Christian symbol on his soldier’s shields. Constantine and his troops were victorious in battle. He gave credit for his success to the help of the Christian God.

In the next year, A.D. 313, Constantine announced an end to the persecution of Christians. In the Edict of Milan, he declared Christianity to be one of the religions approved by the emperor. The edict granted “both to the Christians and to all men freedom to follow the religion that they choose.” Christianity continued to gain strength. In 380, the emperor Theodosius made it the empire’s official religion.

Discord and Harmony As Christianity grew, disagreements about beliefs developed among its followers. Church leaders called any belief that appeared to contradict the basic teachings a **heresy**. Dispute over beliefs became intense. In an attempt to end conflicts, Church leaders sought to set a single, official standard of belief. These beliefs were compiled in the New Testament, which contained the four Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, and other documents. In A.D. 325, Constantine decided to end the disputes and the disorder they caused. He called Church leaders to Nicaea in Anatolia. There they wrote the Nicene Creed, which defined the basic beliefs of the Church.

The Fathers of the Church Also influential in defining Church teachings were several early writers and scholars who have been called the Fathers of the Church. One of the most important was Augustine, who became bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa in 396. Augustine taught that while humans needed the grace of God to be saved, God was merciful and gave his grace freely.

One of Augustine’s most famous books is *The City of God*. It was written after Rome was plundered in the fifth century. Augustine wrote that the fate of cities such as Rome was not important because the heavenly city, the city of God, could never be destroyed:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God’s will. . . . By two cities I mean two societies of human beings, one of which is predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other is doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil.

ST. AUGUSTINE, *The City of God*

Christianity increased in both power and wealth despite the empire’s growing internal and external problems.

HISTORY MAKERS



Constantine
A.D. 285?–337

Constantine was a deeply religious man. He initially believed in the traditional Roman gods. He identified with the god Apollo, whom he claimed to have seen in a vision.

Sometime after his conversion to Christianity in A.D. 312, Constantine reportedly remarked that “God is the cause of the exploits I have performed.” He maintained that he received revelations and instructions from God.

Although he legalized Christianity throughout the empire and took a leading role in the affairs of the Christian Church, Constantine was not formally baptized until he was on his deathbed in 337.

Vocabulary

edict: decree or proclamation.

Background

The New Testament was added to the Hebrew Bible, which Christians called the Old Testament.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

D. Analyzing

Motives What do you think was St. Augustine’s motive for writing *The City of God* right after Rome had been attacked?

Section 3 Assessment

1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- Jesus
- apostle
- Peter
- Paul
- Diaspora
- bishop
- pope
- Constantine
- heresy

2. TAKING NOTES

Using a sequence graphic like the one below, show the five or six events that led to the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.



Which event do you think had the biggest impact? Explain.

3. HYPOTHESIZING

Do you think Christianity would have developed in the same way if it had arisen in an area outside the Roman Empire? Explain.

THINK ABOUT

- Jesus’ growing popularity
- the effect of actions Rome took against Jesus and his followers
- the depth of belief of Jesus’ followers
- the advantages of being part of a vast empire

4. ANALYZING THEMES

Religious and Ethical Systems

Who do you think did more to spread Christianity—Paul or Constantine?

THINK ABOUT

- Paul’s travels
- the opening of Christianity to the Gentiles
- Constantine’s power as an emperor