



Christianity

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Christianity began in the Middle East. The first Christians came from the Jewish population in the Roman empire. The teachings of Jesus Christ spread to different communities and cultures. Today, there are more than 2 billion Christians in the world.

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Introduction

Christianity began in the early Roman Empire about 2,000 years ago. This was a time and place that saw a great mixing of cultures, languages, and traditions. The religion first developed in Judaea. This was a province of the Roman Empire in the Middle East. There, Jews opposed Roman claims to the land. Many Jews came to believe that a final struggle would happen soon. It was also believed that a savior, or Messiah, was coming. This person would destroy the Roman army and introduce a period of happiness for the Jewish people.

Into this setting was born Jesus of Nazareth (ca. 3 BCE–29 CE). According to Christian scripture, or religious text, he was raised by deeply religious Jewish parents. His ministry began when he was about thirty, and he taught by preaching and telling stories to his followers. Beginning in the late first century, accounts of his life and teachings were collected and written down to help build a community of faith. These books were later called the gospels.

The first followers of Jesus Christ described how he preached of life after death. He also taught about the importance of worshipping God and loving others. Much of his preaching reflected ideas about God and values from Jewish tradition. However, he made powerful enemies by saying he was the Son of God and the Messiah (Christus in Greek, the origin of the English word Christ). His large number of followers made Roman leaders nervous. Roman official Pontius Pilate had Jesus arrested and killed. Some of his followers declared that Jesus rose from the dead after three days. This was known as the resurrection. His return to life became a central Christian belief.



[This wall painting from a third-century Roman catacomb shows Jesus as the Good Shepherd](#), a very common way in which he was portrayed. Catacombs were burial passageways dug in the soft rock where Christians placed the dead and held memorial services. Public domain.

Religious ideas and practices

After his death, Jesus's memory and his teachings survived and spread. Believers met in small private groups. They spoke of Jesus' return to the world and the promise of heaven on Earth in the near future.

Paul of Tarsus was a Jew who converted to Christianity. Paul spread Jesus' teachings around the Roman Empire. He wrote down Jesus' ideas, which later became part of Christian scripture (holy texts). Men and women from all social classes were attracted to Christ's teachings for various reasons. Jesus' message offered the promise of eternal life after death for all who believed in him. He urged care and help for the poor. The fellowship he started also provided a sense of identity, community, and spiritual relationships that offered a new sense of security.

The religion became more organized as it grew in size of worshippers. Large buildings for worship were built. These buildings housed priests, bishops, archbishops. Christianity became more formal. The power within the religion also became centralized.

Men who became Christians developed interpretations of issues that were unclear in early texts. However, not everyone understood the text in the same way. These disagreements often led to the formation of different branches within the Christian religion.

Christianity had sacred books, but most people at this time could not read. As a result, rituals became more important than texts as the faith spread. Saints were people who had lived (or died) in a way that was religiously important. Objects connected with saints, such as their bones or clothing, became relics with special power. Churches that housed saints' relics became places of pilgrimage for those seeking help or blessing.

Society and family life

Some of Jesus' teachings were very progressive for this time period. For example, Jesus considered women the equal of men. However, these ideas were later rejected by Roman officials, and later, church officials. Many men saw these beliefs as attacks on the family and male-dominated society. By the late first-century male church leaders were placing restrictions on female believers. Women were forbidden to preach and could not hold official positions. Women could, however, become nuns at convents. Convents are Christian communities for women to live and practice their religion.

According to Scripture, Jesus had harsh words to say about wealth. Nonetheless, the Christian Church became very wealthy. As it grew, the church bought more land and constructed new buildings.

Political developments and the spread of Christianity

The third century brought civil war, invasions, and chaos to the Roman Empire. Hoping that Christianity could be a unifying force, Emperor Constantine (r. 306–337 CE) supported the Christian Church with money. He also issued new laws to protect Christians. In return, he expected the support of church officials in maintaining order. Christianity then became the leading religion in the empire. In 380 CE the emperor Theodosius made it the official religion.



This mosaic from the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople shows the Virgin Mary with the Christ child on her lap, flanked by two Roman emperors, Constantine and Justinian. Built by Justinian in the sixth century, the Hagia Sophia was the world's largest building at the time. Public domain.

As Christianity gained political power, it also spread outside of the Roman Empire. Missionaries and Christian travelers brought their teachings to new people. Often, existing local religious customs mixed with Christian teachings. By 400 CE, there may have been 10 million Christians in the world. Today, there are more than 2 billion.

Primary source: The Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew is the first book in the Christian New Testament. It contains a collection of Jesus' teachings. These are called the Sermon on the Mount. Among these are the following:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also... (Matthew 6:19–21)

Sources

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This wall painting from a third-century Roman catacomb shows Jesus as the Good Shepherd, a very common way in which he was portrayed. Catacombs were burial passageways dug in the soft rock where Christians placed the dead and held memorial services. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_01.jpg

This mosaic from the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople shows the Virgin Mary with the Christ child on her lap, flanked by two Roman emperors, Constantine and Justinian. Built by Justinian in the sixth century, the Hagia Sophia was the world's largest building at the time. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hagia_Sophia_Southwestern_entrance_mosaics.jpg



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