

The Spread of Christianity in Roman Empire

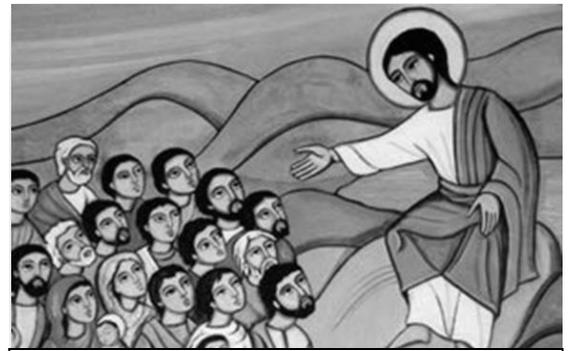
Christianity Briefly

Christianity is the world's biggest religion, with about 2.2 billion followers worldwide. Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ who lived in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago. The Holy Land consists of the lands that make up ancient Palestine, which, in modern days, includes Israel and the Palestinian territories of the Gaza Strip, & the West Bank.

Origins: The Rise of Christianity

Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus was born to a Jewish family in Bethlehem, in present day Israel and the Palestinian territories. Not much is known about the early years of Jesus. What is known is that as an adult he becomes an itinerant teacher. This means he traveled from place to place teaching his beliefs. Jesus' teachings were about ethical concepts such as humility, charity, and love towards others. These core concepts have come to shape the ideal value system for Western Civilization.

As Jesus traveled through the Holy Land he began to gather a large following of disciples. Because of his teachings about love, kindness, and charity he was very popular with the poor, the common people, and slaves. Eventually Jesus and his followers claimed that he was the "Son of God" and the **messiah**, the promised savior of the Jewish people.



Jesus preaching to his disciples.

Eventually, however, Jesus' preaching brought controversy. It threatened the power of the Jewish establishment and the authority of the Roman Empire. The Jewish establishment did not like him because they thought that his claim to be the messiah was blasphemy. The Roman Empire did not like him because he was gathering a large following of people critical of Roman authority. He was seen by some Romans and Jews as a revolutionary who might lead a rebellion against Rome. In time, the Jewish authorities persuaded the Romans to arrest Jesus. He was tried for blasphemy and treason. Jesus was convicted and put to death by **crucifixion**. According to his followers he was resurrected and rose from the dead three days later.



The Resurrection of Christ, by Ron DiCianni

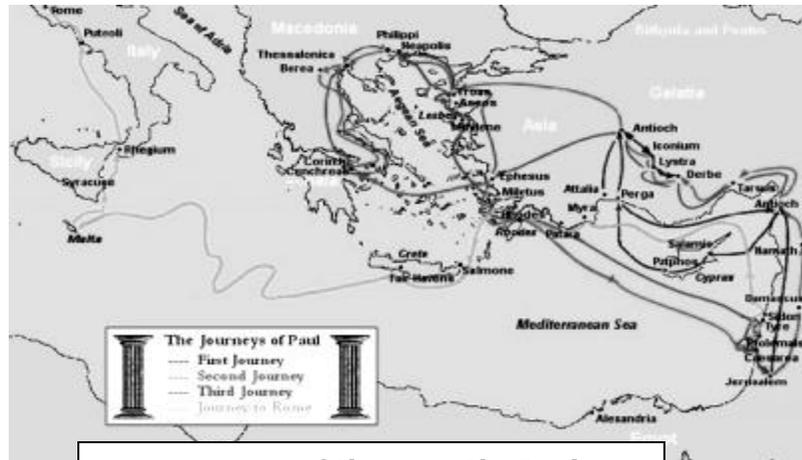
Central Ideas of Christianity

Christianity arose out of Judaism and is a monotheistic religion. Christianity is called an Abrahamic religion because it looks to Abraham as the first prophet of God. Judaism and Islam are also Abrahamic religions. Christians believe that one God created the world. They believe

that God sent his son, Jesus, to earth to save humanity from the consequences of its sins. For this he was crucified and then resurrected. To Christians, the resurrection of Jesus on the third day after his crucifixion was proof that he is the divine "Son of God."

The Spread of Christianity

Christianity began to be spread by followers of Jesus known as apostles. While Peter was the leader of the twelve apostles, it was Paul who encouraged the spread of Christianity by taking the message of Jesus to the **gentiles**. A gentile was anyone who was not Jewish. Paul's decision greatly increased the spread of Christianity.

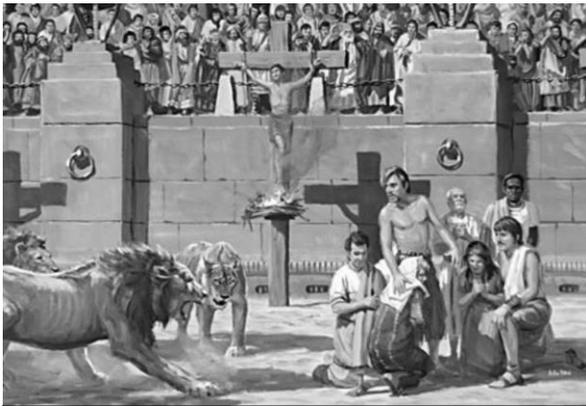


Journeys of the Apostle Paul.

The spread of Christianity was eased by the favorable conditions of the "Pax Romana" in the Roman Empire. The newly constructed roads, bridges, and ports made travel to the numerous Roman cities safer and easier. The common language of Latin helped to spread the message of Christianity quickly throughout the Empire.

Roman Persecution

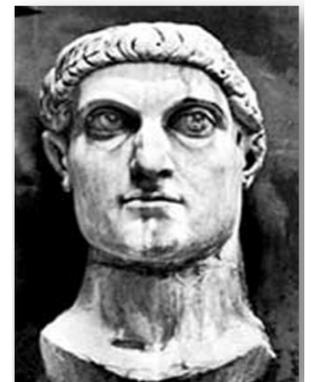
Generally speaking, the Roman Empire was tolerant of other religions as long as they did not threaten the public order. At first, the Romans just saw Christianity as just another sect of Judaism. However, eventually they came to see Christians as a threat to the Empire. This was due to the fact that the Christians refused to bow down to the Roman gods and emperors, which was an act of treason punishable by death.



Christians being fed to the lions.

After almost 300 years of persecution **Emperor Constantine** (r. 306-337 CE) came to power. In 313 CE Constantine passed the **Edict of Milan** which granted official tolerance of Christianity in the Empire and stopped the persecution of its followers. Eventually Constantine himself converted to Christianity becoming the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire. At this point Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and spread wherever the Empire existed.

Official **persecution**, harassment and punishment for a person's beliefs, began under the emperor Nero, who ruled from 54-68 CE. Under Nero, Christians were subjected to arrest, torture, and execution. They were even fed to lions and forced to fight gladiators for as entertainment. Despite this persecution Christianity continued to grow throughout the Roman Empire. One reason for this is because Christianity appealed to the poor and the powerless, of which the Empire had many.



Emperor Constantine