



# The Rise of Christianity

## MAIN IDEA

**RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS** Christianity arose in Roman-occupied Judea and spread throughout the Roman Empire.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Christianity has spread throughout the world and today has more than a billion followers.

## TERMS & NAMES

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

**SETTING THE STAGE** While religion played an important role in Roman society, the worship of Roman gods was impersonal and often practiced without a great deal of emotion. As the empire grew, so, too, did a new religion called Christianity. Born as a movement within Judaism, it emphasized a more personal relationship between God and people—and attracted many Romans.

### TAKING NOTES

**Following Chronological Order** Use a sequence graphic to show the events that led to the spread of Christianity.



## The Life and Teachings of Jesus

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. Rome then took control of the Jewish kingdom in A.D. 6 and made it a province of the empire. A number of Jews, however, believed that they would once again be free. According to biblical tradition, God had promised that a savior known as the Messiah would arrive and restore the kingdom of the Jews. Roughly two decades after the beginning of Roman rule, many believed that such a savior had arrived.

**Jesus of Nazareth** Although the exact date is uncertain, historians believe that sometime around 6 to 4 B.C., a Jew named **Jesus** was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea. Jesus was raised in the village of Nazareth in northern Palestine. He was baptized by a prophet known as John the Baptist. As a young man, he took up the trade of carpentry.

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. (Refer to pages 286–287 for more about Christianity.)

**A Growing Movement** Historical records of the time mention very little about Jesus. The main source of information about his 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, or pupils. These 12 men later came to be called **apostles**.

As Jesus preached from town to town, his fame grew. He attracted large crowds, and many people were touched by his message. 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, were simple and direct:

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

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.

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 one whom the Bible had said would come to rescue the Jews. The chief priests of the Jews, however, denied that Jesus was the Messiah. They said his teachings were blasphemy, or contempt for God. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate accused Jesus of defying 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. The Gospels go on to say that then he ascended into heaven. The apostles were more convinced than ever 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.”

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Hypothesizing

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

## Christianity Spreads Through the Empire

Strengthened by their conviction that he had triumphed over death, the followers of Jesus continued to spread his ideas. 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.

▼ *Christ’s Charge to Saint Peter* by Renaissance artist Raphael depicts Jesus calling the apostle Peter to duty as the other apostles look on.



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

The *Pax Romana*, which made travel and the exchange of ideas fairly safe, provided the ideal conditions for Christianity to spread. Common languages—Latin and Greek—allowed the message to be easily understood. Paul 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). 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 Jews 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 (see map at right) held out until A.D. 73. About a half million Jews were killed in the course of this rebellion.



## 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, including Europe.

In the 1100s, many European Jews were expelled from their homes. Some moved to Turkey, Palestine, and Syria. Others went to Poland and neighboring areas.

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

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. The dispersal of the Jews is called the **Diaspora**.

**Persecution of the Christians** Christians also posed a problem for Roman rulers. The main reason was that they 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.

By the second century, as the *Pax Romana* began to crumble, persecution of the Christians intensified. Romans exiled, imprisoned, or executed Christians for refusing to worship Roman deities. 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.

### Vocabulary

*Scapegoats* are groups or individuals that innocently bear the blame for others.

## A World Religion

Despite persecution of its followers, Christianity became a powerful force. By the late third century A.D., there were millions of Christians in the Roman Empire and beyond. The widespread appeal of Christianity was due to a variety of reasons. Christianity grew because it

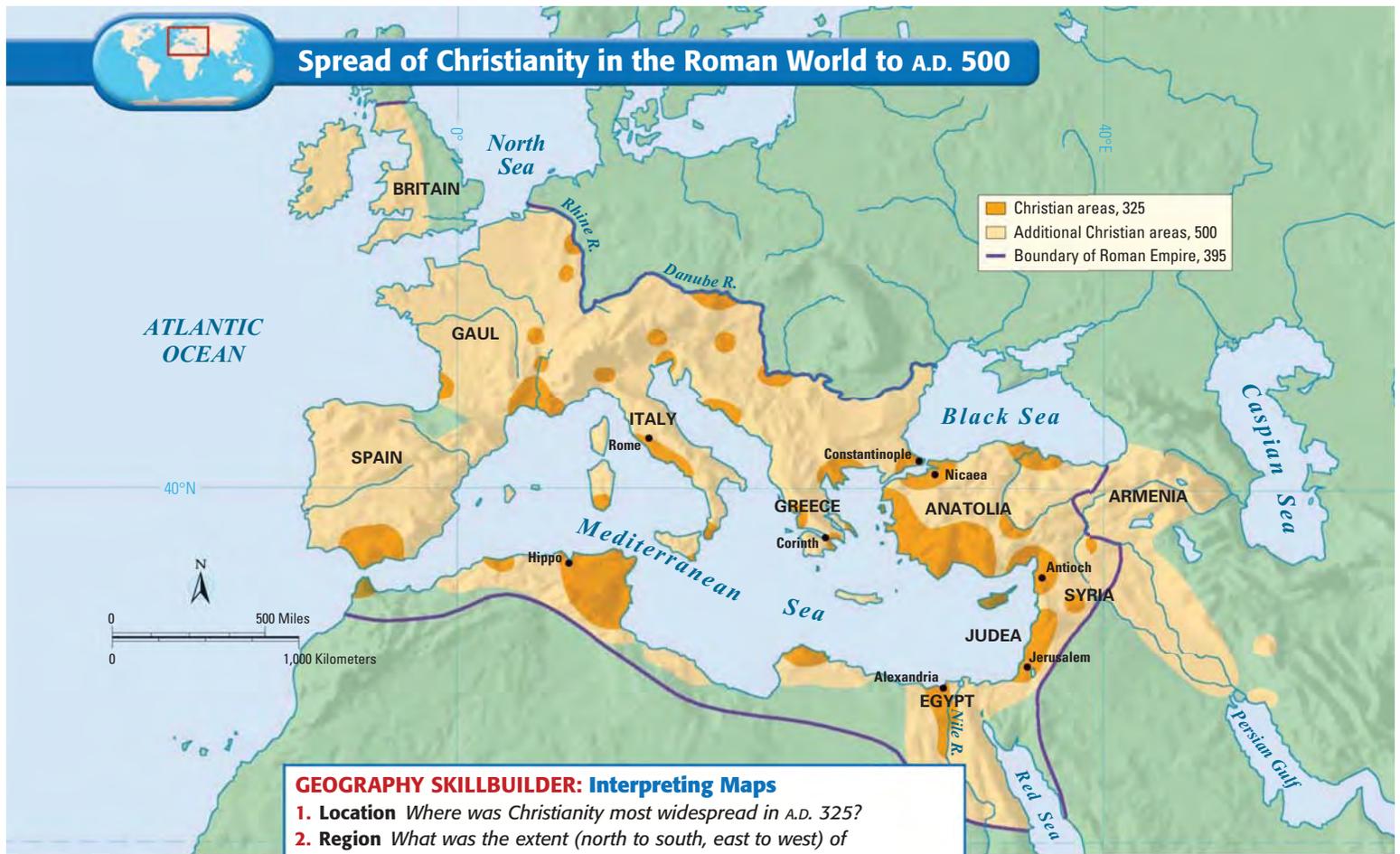
- embraced all people—men and women, enslaved persons, the poor, and nobles;
- gave hope to the powerless;
- appealed to those who were repelled by the extravagances of imperial Rome;
- offered a personal relationship with a loving God;
- promised eternal life after death. **B**

### MAIN IDEA

### Making Inferences

**B** Why were the citizens of the Roman Empire so drawn to Christianity?

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



**Constantine Accepts Christianity** A critical moment in Christianity occurred in A.D. 312, when the Roman emperor **Constantine** was fighting three rivals for leadership of Rome. 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 saw an image of a cross—a symbol of Christianity. He ordered artisans to put the Christian symbol on his soldiers' shields. Constantine and his troops were victorious in battle. He credited 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. Christianity continued to gain strength. In 380, the emperor Theodosius made it the empire's official religion.

**Early Christian Church** By this time, Christians had given 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.

### Vocabulary

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

**A Single Voice** 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 tried 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. The New Testament was added to the Hebrew Bible, which Christians called the Old Testament. In A.D. 325, Constantine moved to solidify further the teachings of Christianity. 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 humans needed the grace of God to be saved. He further taught that people could not receive God’s grace unless they belonged to the Church and received the sacraments.

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:



**PRIMARY SOURCE**

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*

While Christianity continued its slow but steady rise, the Roman Empire itself was gradually weakening. Under the weight of an increasing number of both foreign and domestic problems, the mighty Roman Empire eventually began to crumble.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Analyzing Primary Sources**

Why would St. Augustine write his book after Rome had been attacked?

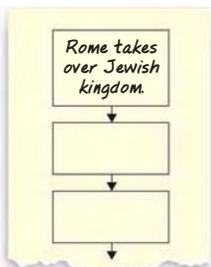
**SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT**

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

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

**USING YOUR NOTES**

2. What event do you think had the biggest impact? Explain.



**MAIN IDEAS**

3. What did Jesus emphasize in his early teachings?
4. Why did the early Christians face persecution from the Romans?
5. What was the importance of the Nicene Creed?

**CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING**

6. **HYPOTHESIZING** Do you think Christianity would have developed in the same way if it had arisen in an area outside the Roman Empire? Explain.
7. **FORMING AND SUPPORTING OPINIONS** Who did more to spread Christianity—Paul or Constantine? Why?
8. **ANALYZING ISSUES** Why do you think Roman leaders so opposed the rise of a new religion among their subjects?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS**  
Imagine you are a resident of Judea during the time of Jesus. Write a **letter** to a friend in Rome describing Jesus and his teachings.

**CONNECT TO TODAY** **OUTLINING A SPEECH**

Locate a recent speech by the pope or the leader of another Christian church and **outline** its main ideas. Then read some of the speech to the class and discuss its main points.