

Jesus was born in Bethlehem sometime between 6 and 4 BCE and grew up in the town of Nazareth, in Galilee, in what was then called Palestine. At that time, the region was part of the Roman Empire. Jesus, who was Jewish, and all the people of the region lived under Roman rule. Around the age of 30, Jesus became a preacher. He traveled around Palestine talking to people about a new faith. Many people believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the savior predicted by the ancient Hebrew prophets.

Many poor, lower-class people welcomed Jesus's message. But his teachings went against both Jewish and Roman traditions. Religious authorities accused Jesus of blasphemy. Blasphemy means speaking against sacred beliefs. The religious authorities thought that Jesus disrespected Judaism by allowing his followers to believe he was the son of God. The religious authorities convinced the ruling Romans to execute Jesus in 33 CE.

Jesus never went to Rome during his life. Still, his teaching made an impact throughout the Roman Empire, including in Rome itself. After his death, his disciples, or followers, spread out across the Roman Empire teaching about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. Those who believed Jesus's teachings were called Christians.

The Persecution of Christians

After Jesus's death and reported resurrection in 33 CE, his disciples shared his teachings about the Kingdom of God across the Roman Empire. The disciples were not always welcomed as they traveled across the empire. Christians were not popular with the Roman leaders, and a period of persecution, or mistreatment, followed Jesus's death.

Christianity encouraged Romans to reject their traditional religious customs and follow the God that Jesus taught about. Christian missionaries were somewhat successful in converting Romans to follow Jesus's teaching. The Roman emperors, however, felt that Christians were a threat to the government of the Roman Empire, because they refused to worship the emperor or make sacrifices to the Roman gods.



Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, was the center of Jesus' ministry.

Christians were also blamed for situations such as bad harvests or attacks on the empire. Christians were blamed for these types of situations because they denied the gods who were believed to protect Rome and its citizens. Two emperors who encouraged the harshest persecutions of Christians were Maximian and Diocletian. They ruled together from 284–305 CE. These persecutions began in 303 and included acts such as closing churches and burning religious texts. The persecutions lasted until 311, when Emperor Galerius was stricken with a painful illness. Galerius, though skeptical of Christianity, feared that his illness may have been a form of revenge from the Christian God. Galerius's illness eventually killed him, but not before he issued an edict, or an official order, calling for tolerance of Christianity.

After Galerius's death in 311, Constantine I became emperor. Constantine I had seen a vision of a Christian cross before he fought in a battle. This experience and his victory in battle led to Constantine I eventually becoming a Christian. Constantine I was the first Christian emperor. In 313, he issued the Edict of Milan, granting Christians full legal rights.

The Spread of Christianity

Having an emperor who supported, rather than persecuted, Christianity greatly changed life for Christians during this time. After Constantine I became emperor, Christians were able to travel freely around the Roman Empire, teaching about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. It was helpful that the Romans were invested in creating roads and expanding the empire. This gave Christians an easy way to travel and spread the teachings of Christianity. Even during the times before Constantine I reigned as emperor, Christian missionaries were traveling the Roman roads, doing their best to teach about Christianity.

Not only did Constantine I make Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire, he was a personal follower of Christianity. He believed that he was God's chosen leader, and he fought battles in the name of the Christian God. He experienced another vision in which he was told to paint the Christian monogram (☩) on his soldiers' shields, which he did.

After Constantine I became emperor, Christianity was favored by the Roman Empire. Then, as the Roman Empire began to weaken in 395, Christianity gained momentum. After the fall of the unified Roman Empire, Christians continued to spread out through more of Europe and the Middle East.

Roman Catacombs

In the time of the Roman Empire, many statues and churches were built to honor emperors, who were also considered gods. It was important to have ceremonies for every kind of event. Burying the dead and having funeral feasts were essential parts of local custom. It was customary to bury people in underground rock chambers, known as catacombs.

Catacombs were not strictly Christian, or even Roman. Many places near the Mediterranean Sea used underground chambers as burial spaces. The Roman catacombs, however, are the most widespread and ornate catacombs known today, and are associated with the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. More than six million people were buried in the network of Roman catacombs. Some were simple chambers along the walls, where bodies were slid into place. Other burial spaces were more elaborate. Some would be large rooms dug into the walls with elaborate paintings of frescos on the walls.



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Early Christian symbols from the Catacombs in Rome. The fish was a symbol used in Christianity.

These catacombs were used for other purposes, too. During the Christian persecutions in the Roman Empire, they were used as hiding places. They were also used as a shelter, where people could avoid invading armies toward the end of the Roman Empire. Many times during visits to the catacombs, people would make etchings in the walls. Christians carved symbols such as the fish, which stood for Jesus, and the chi-rho cross (✠) into the walls of the catacombs.

Despite the initial persecution of Christians, Christianity has become the largest religion in the world. There are more than two billion believers around the world today. This includes members of the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox churches, Protestant churches, and numerous smaller churches and sects.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** When did Jesus live?
 - A.** from around 6-4 BCE to around 33 CE
 - B.** from around 33 BCE to around 1 BCE
 - C.** from 33 to 66 CE
 - D.** from 600 to 660 CE

- 2.** What convinced Constantine I to believe in the Christian God?
 - A.** a conversation with one of Jesus's disciples
 - B.** a vision in which he saw a cross
 - C.** the death of Emperor Galerius
 - D.** defeat in multiple battles after becoming emperor

- 3.** What purpose did the catacombs serve?
 - A.** They were a place where Romans went to worship.
 - B.** They were prisons for Christians.
 - C.** They were burial grounds for Romans and Christians.
 - D.** They were passageways out of the city of Rome.

- 4.** Jesus never visited Rome during his life, but he instructed his disciples to spread his teachings throughout the world. In what ways were the disciples of Jesus successful in spreading his teachings to the Romans? Provide details and evidence from the passage to support your answer.