

## Rome and the Development of Christianity

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How did Christianity become the most widely practiced religion in the world? After starting out as a relatively small sect of Jews, this movement became the official religion of the Roman Empire within 400 years. Out of 6.8 billion people in the world today, approximately 2.5 billion now profess to be a Christian. Christianity is a very diverse religion with three major branches and a plethora of denominations. As the Christian movement grew as a social, political, and religious institution, it dramatically influenced the development of Western Civilization. How did this happen?

Most Christians would probably say that the success of Christianity was the result of the truth of the message that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of all. The promise of salvation being open to everyone who accepted Christ was, and certainly still is, a powerful message. This universal message of Christianity appealed to the downtrodden peoples of the Roman era, just as it still appeals to so many today. In an uncertain world, the promise of life after death is powerful and can be difficult to resist. (see Figure 4.1)

The Romans influenced the development of Western Civilization in a variety of ways, but the Roman impact on the Western religious beliefs and practices is perhaps their greatest legacy. The Romans were a polytheistic people, worshiping many gods. However, by the first century, they had conquered Palestine, home of the Jews. (see Figure 4.2)

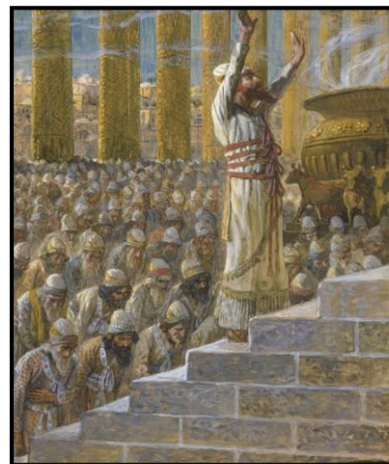
Many Jews accepted the Roman conquest of their lands and willingly worked with them. However, a sizable percentage of the Jewish people resisted Roman rule and refused to recognize and honor the Roman gods, earning the ire of their conquerors. The Romans put down several Jewish revolts and eventually destroyed their most sacred building, Solomon's temple. During the period of Roman rule, many Jewish prophets and religious leaders spread the belief that a messiah would appear and usher in a new period of greatness for God's "chosen people," the Jews. (see Figure 4.3)



**Figure 4.1 - Roman Empire**



**Figure 4.2 – Destruction of Jerusalem**



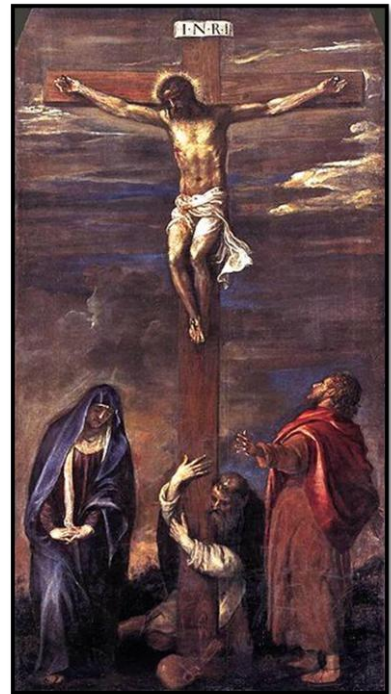
**Figure 4.3 – Solomon's Temple**

The early first century is the time when Jesus Christ appeared, spreading a message of non-violence and love, and offering up the possibility of salvation for all. Jesus gathered around him a small group of disciples, and when he preached, many others gathered to hear. The Romans feared that these large gatherings might contribute to another Jewish rebellion. Some Jewish leaders also feared the revolutionary message that Jesus preached. They saw Christ as a threat, not only to Rome, but to their own privileged position and encouraged the Romans to execute Jesus as a heretic and a threat to civil society. (see Figure 4.4)

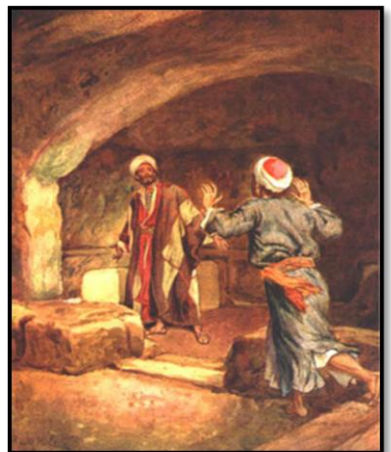
Following His crucifixion, the Disciples of Christ spread His message, claiming that He had arisen from the dead. They claimed that Jesus was the Son of God who had died on the cross to atone for the sins of all humankind. At this point, the early Christians were exclusively a small sect of Jews. However, an early and very important convert to the teachings of Christ was a well-educated Jew named Paul. He helped convince the followers of Christ that all people including gentiles and not just Jews should be offered this promise of salvation and redemption. With this decision, Christianity could then become more than just another version of Judaism. (see Figure 4.5)

Paul was actually a Jew called Saul of Tarsus. He opposed the teachings of the early Christians and, at the time, was a determined persecutor of the early followers of Jesus. One day while he was traveling to Damascus to imprison any Christians he might find, he had a vision. The story regarding Paul's conversion experience is in the Bible in Acts 9. According to the Bible, Paul said a great light shone down upon him, and then he heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Trembling, Saul asked, "Who art thou, Lord?" The voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." Paul was shaken and dazzled by the light he had seen, and when he arrived at Damascus, he was a changed person. On that day, he changed his name to Paul and began to spread the Christian message. (see Figure 4.6)

Paul was the key figure in the spread of this new religion, Christianity. He was a Jew, but also a Roman citizen, which enabled him to travel widely in the Roman Empire, establishing small communities of Christians. Paul was concerned that these communities would not continue to follow his teachings after he moved on, so he wrote letters to them to reinforce his



**Figure 4.4 – Crucifixion of Jesus**



**Figure 4.5 – Jesus' Empty Tomb**



**Figure 4.6 – Paul's conversion experience**



perspective on the teachings of Christ. These writings were later incorporated into the Christian New Testament. (see Figure 4.7)



Figure 4.7 – Paul

Over the next several centuries, Christianity continued to grow and spread across the Roman Empire, despite official policies of persecution by various Roman authorities. One of the Disciples, Peter, had traveled to Rome and established a Christian community. Peter led the church in Rome for 25 years before being executed by the Emperor Nero. The apostle Paul was, eventually, imprisoned for his missionary activities, and he was sent to Rome. The facts are uncertain, but he may also have been beheaded by the Emperor Nero. Despite these and other persecutions, the Christian community in Rome survived. (see Figure 4.8)



Figure 4.8 – Peter

In the first couple hundred years of development, Christian communities were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Keeping the Christian community unified was a major concern of church leaders. The large slave population of the urban areas of the Roman Empire were particularly open to the universal message of salvation for all those who accepted Christ. Many upper class Romans then began to view Christianity as "a religion of slaves."

Roman emperors and their supporters would often use Christians as political scapegoats. The Emperor Nero began the public execution of Christians at the coliseum. Feeding Christians to the lions became literally true. However, despite these persecutions the Christian community within Rome continued to grow, and Christian communities across the Roman Empire began to thrive. Many Roman leaders saw this growing movement as a threat to Rome. (see



Figure 4.9 – Nero

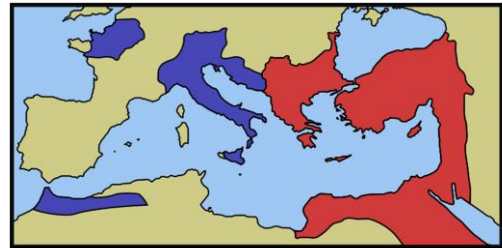
Figure 4.9)

However, by the beginning of the fourth century, the persecution of Christians came to an official end. The Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity when he issued the Edict of Milan in 313. Constantine's mother was a Christian, and he fully embraced Christianity after victory in a major battle in 312. He credited his success in battle with a vision of a cross, believing that God supported his cause. Constantine was able to become emperor of Rome as a result of this victory. For his actions, the Eastern Orthodox Church honored Constantine as a Saint. Constantine's later decision to divide the empire and establish a second capital in the East contributed, however, to the eventual division between the Orthodox and Catholic branches of Christianity. (see Figure 4.10)



**Figure 4.10 – Constantine's vision**

By the end of the fourth century, many Romans had converted to Christianity, and in 380, the Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. It would not be long, though, before the collapse of Roman power in the West. When the Western Roman Empire fell, the Church and its leaders survived and became the dominant influence in Western Europe. In the East, the empire survived and supported a thriving Christian community in what became known as the Byzantine Empire. (see Figure 4.11)



**Figure 4.11 – Division of empire**

By the early second and third centuries, many Roman communities had small groups of people who claimed Jesus Christ as their Savior. Eventually, the Greek term Christian (Christianos) which meant "followers of Christ" was adopted. Besides a belief in Jesus, many of these small communities throughout the empire established their own teachings and scriptures that were often very different from one community to another. The stories of Christ had spread, primarily, by word of mouth, so confusion about exactly what it meant to be a Christian was not uncommon.

The earliest writings that would later be included in the New Testament Gospels were the Epistles written by Paul, probably within about 20 years of Christ's crucifixion. The four Gospels were written sometime between 60-90. Other Christian letters and writings existed during this era; many were attributed to the disciples and other important figures. This contributed to a great debate within and among various Christian communities over what the official doctrines of Christianity should be. In 325, Emperor Constantine called together the Council of Nicaea. This great council of early Christian leaders debated what scriptures should be agreed upon. Many writings were declared heretical, and some were destroyed. (see Figure 4.12)



Around this time, the Roman Catholic Church began to consolidate its position of prominence. In the fourth century, the Bishop of Rome adopted the title of pope and claimed preeminence over all Christians. The Eastern Orthodox churches rejected this teaching. By the fifth century, there were five cities vying for positions of leadership within the growing Christian movement. Constantinople, now the home of the Emperor, was second in status only to Rome, but Antioch in Syria, Jerusalem in Palestine, and Alexandria in Egypt were, also, all important centers of Christian teaching. (see Figure 4.13)



Figure 4.12 – Council of Nicea



Figure 4.13 – Important cities

During this early period, two important statements of faith were agreed upon by many Christians. They were *The Apostles Creed* and *The Nicene Creed*. *The Apostles Creed* was a statement of fundamental Christian beliefs drawn up in response to the challenge presented by various heretical teachings, such as the Gnostic Gospels. In 324, *The Nicene Creed* was formulated, addressing questions raised by the so called Arian heresy. Arius was a Christian bishop who believed that Jesus was only a human and was not God. This led to the adoption of the Holy Trinity.



Figure 4.14 – Church of Rome

In 367, a bishop from Alexandria presented the earliest preserved list of the books that would be included in the New Testament. Later, two councils under the guidance of one of the great leaders of the early Church, St. Augustine of Hippo, approved these books as Church canon.

The fall of the Roman Empire in the West was a threat to the thriving Christian community. The Roman political and economic system totally collapsed, and a period of unrest and instability ensued. Rather than suffer the fate of most institutions, the Christian Church was the one institution that survived. Not only did it survive, but within a short period of time, the Christian leaders of Rome became the political leaders as well. The Church in Rome began to grow in influence, and eventually, most of the barbarian tribes who had helped to bring about the downfall of Christianity were converted. (see Figure 4.14)

Along with the growing influence of Rome, the rise of the powerful Byzantine Empire helped to ensure that Christianity would not only survive, but thrive. Another institution that played an influential role in the success of Christianity into the Middle Ages was Monasticism. As early as the third century, some Christians began to live in monasteries. Monasticism is a form of asceticism whereby one renounces worldly pursuits and concentrates solely on spiritual goals. These individuals, or monks, emphasized the virtues: humility, poverty, and chastity. Christian monasteries spread across Europe and became repositories of learning. They not only played an important role in keeping and protecting much of the knowledge accumulated by Roman civilization but also in preserving the accomplishments of the Greeks and other ancient peoples as well. (see Figure 4.15)

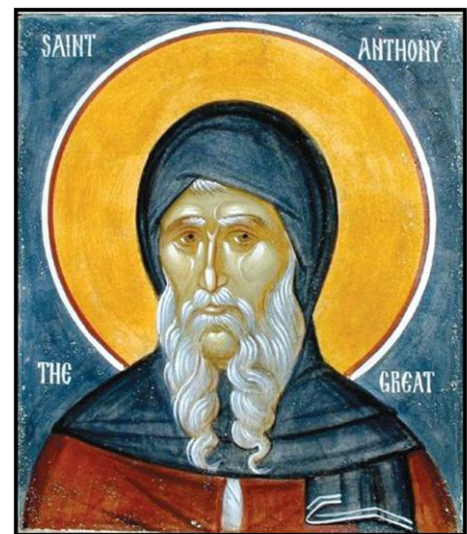


Figure 4.15 – Saint Anthony the Great