

The Life of Jesus Christ

During the centuries of Roman domination in the Mediterranean region and beyond, many religious practices existed within the Republic and later the Empire. A new religion was created after the death of a man in A.D. 29 who lived in ancient Palestine, located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. His name was Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus the Christ (from the Greek word *Christos*, meaning “savior”) was the founder of a religion which became known as Christianity.

Today, Christians are found all over the world. Hundreds of millions of people claim to follow the teachings of Jesus. Long after many of the religions founded in the Roman Empire died out, Christianity thrived.

Jesus of Nazareth was born, perhaps, as early as 4 B.C. and died in A.D. 29. This may seem odd when you consider that we have been using the initials B.C. in this study to refer to the years and centuries prior to Jesus’ birth. That might suggest that Jesus was born in the year 0, but those who created the modern calendar miscalculated the years, accidentally placing Jesus’ birth four years later than it probably was.

Born during the reign of Augustus Caesar, Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a town in the Galilean region of Judea. He began his career as a teacher and healer. We know only a few events in the life of Jesus prior to his death through a series of four short books known as the Four Gospels.

According to tradition, these books were written by four of Jesus’ followers. Jesus had 12 men called *apostles* who served him during his three-year preaching ministry. Four of them—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—wrote about their experiences with Jesus. Historians date the Four Gospels between A.D. 70 and 90.

Jesus began his preaching ministry at about age 30. For three years, he preached all over Judea, including in the city of Jerusalem. Not only did he preach a simple message, Jesus also healed the sick and cast out evil spirits from possessed victims.

Jesus often spoke to large crowds of poor people, many of whom were illiterate. Perhaps for this reason, he often used short stories, called *parables*, to get his message across. Such stories humanized his message and gave the people simple structures explaining his purpose.

Basically, Jesus’ message incorporated all of the following themes: 1) God (the Hebrew Yahweh) is the father of all humankind; 2) forgiveness and love should be expressed even to one’s enemies; 3) “do unto others as you would have others do unto you”; 4) pay back evil with good; 5) avoid all hypocrisy; 6) forego religious ceremony, ritual, and meaningless tradition; 7) believe in the coming of God’s kingdom; and 8) believe in the final Judgment when all the dead will be brought back to life and be rewarded or punished with either Heaven or Hell.

Some of these messages were often veiled by Jesus, which led some people to misunderstand his message. Certain of his followers and his enemies thought that when he spoke of the “kingdom of God,” Jesus meant an earthly political kingdom. His enemies used these words against him, causing him to be arrested in Jerusalem, tried by a Jewish court, and sentenced by a Roman leader to be executed by crucifixion—the common means of state execution carried out by Rome in A.D. 29 or perhaps 30.

According to the Gospels, after Jesus’ death, he arose and lived again. Those who followed him in life continued to preach his message, leading to the establishment of a new faith based on his life, his example, and his claim to have been the Son of God. Before the end of the 1st century A.D., Christians could be found all over the Roman Empire. By the 300s A.D., Christianity became the official state religion of Rome.



Review and Write

What significant impact do you think the life of Jesus had or continues to have on world history?

The Spread of Christianity

With the death of Jesus of Nazareth, his critics and enemies believed they had destroyed his message for all time. However, they were mistaken. His followers continued preaching his message. Reports began to circulate that Jesus had been seen after his crucifixion and that he had spoken to his followers.

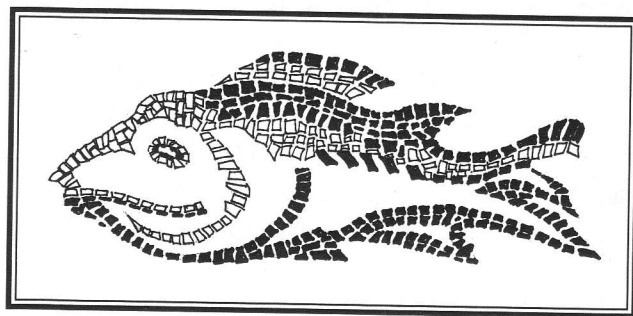
However, there were not many converts to the new religion based on Jesus' ministry immediately after his death. Palestine was the center of the Jewish religion known as Judaism, and many Jews did not believe Jesus to be their savior, the Messiah spoken of by their early prophets.

Early Christianity did take root elsewhere among Hellenistic Jews living outside of Palestine. They were more open to new ideas and less committed to the traditional teachings of Judaism. As a result, early Christians found converts in the Jewish communities of such cities as Athens, Antioch, Corinth, and even Rome.

Although Jesus had limited his message to the Jewish people, in a short time, others were preaching his themes to non-Jews. According to Christian scripture, the Apostle Peter, one of Jesus' 12 immediate followers, began this process.

But another man, known as Saul of Tarsus, was also instrumental in taking the Christian message to non-Jews. Later known as Paul, he was raised in a Hellenistic city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and was well-versed in the Jewish faith, Greek thought, and Hellenistic literature. Paul had first fought against the spread of Jesus' followers after his death, but was later converted to Christianity himself.

Paul took Jesus' message out of Palestine through well-organized missionary trips throughout the eastern portion of the Roman Empire. He preached to and converted Hellenistic Jews and many non-Jews, called Gentiles, who were themselves disenchanted with pagan cults and the state religion of the Empire, which required the worship of the emperor as a deity. Paul was also the writer of many of the books or letters which make up the modern New Testament. His ministry was crucial to the spread of Christianity. After preaching for several decades, Paul was eventually condemned by the Roman state,



and was executed around the year A.D. 65.

Rome came to take a hard line toward the early Church because Roman leaders believed it threatened the power of the Empire. Emperor worship was considered an essential act of patriotism for all Roman citizens. Christians, however, refused to take part in such ceremonies. Therefore, to the Romans, Christians were traitors. In addition, many Christians refused to serve in the Roman army.

Despite their dislike for Christianity, Roman officials did not pass a single law specifically forbidding it. Christians were persecuted periodically by Imperial decree, however. Such persecutions sometimes led to Christians being killed during Roman sporting events.

By the end of the 3rd century A.D., such persecutions came to an end, having failed to destroy the Christian faith. In A.D. 313, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity throughout the Empire. By 395, Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity to be the sole religion of the Roman Empire.

Review and Write

1. Why was the Apostle Paul so important in the spread of early Christianity?
2. From where did early Christianity find its first followers?
3. What cities became important centers of early Christianity?

Daily Life in Rome

During the era of the Pax Romana, two centuries of powerful Roman control and peace, the city of Rome became the great urban centerpiece of the Empire. People came from every corner of the sprawling Roman state. Approximately one million people lived in Rome by the reign of Augustus.

In the middle of this urban melting pot was the Forum. This “downtown” section of the city was the hub of public urban life. Its streets were lined with shops, temples, and theaters. Writers of the day boasted that anyone could find anything he or she might want in the Forum.



As a result of its rapid population growth by the 1st century B.C., the city developed in two very different ways.

Emperors spent large sums ordering the building of great temples, parks, arenas, and government houses. However, the poorer class of people lived in wooden

shanties, closely packed together in neighborhoods we would consider slums today.

Life in Rome could be difficult. Fire was a constant problem for those living in wooden apartments. Also, the night life in Rome was dangerous. Although the city had a large police force, few people ventured out at night. Gangs roamed the streets.

Rome was home to several classes of people. At the top were the aristocrats, who were often the most wealthy citizens. Their homes were large and often featured open courtyards. Here the upper class entertained their friends, reclining at their meals, sometimes eating until full, then visiting a special room where they forced themselves to vomit, making room for another meal.

Many of Rome’s populace lived as artisans. They produced trade goods, such as clothes, shoes, household items, and tools. Such workers usually belonged to a guild called a *collegia*, which was made up of workers who produced similar trade

goods. Often a *collegia* provided a common hall for its members, where dinners were held. *Collegias* helped organize artisans, allowing them to get better prices for their goods.

At the bottom of the social ladder were the many slaves found in Rome. By the 2nd century A.D., perhaps as many as one-third of Rome’s population were slaves. Slaves were treated differently from one master to the next. Some might be treated humanely and fairly. Others were treated cruelly.

To keep the masses in Rome entertained and happy, the local authorities provided the citizenry with free public baths. In the early years of the Empire, one could find as many as 800 public baths in Rome. Some baths were quite elaborate facilities, including gymnasiums, gardens, libraries, and many works of art.

Games and contests of skill were important to life in Rome, too. Many people in the city participated in boxing, wrestling, foot races, and other sporting events. Chariot racing and the fighting games carried out by professional warriors called *gladiators* were favorites.

The largest chariot racing track was called the Circus Maximus, a great marble arena measuring 600 yards by 200 yards. This popular stadium could hold 150,000 people who could watch upward of 24 chariot races a day, some with the emperor present presiding over the events.

But the greatest and most popular sports arena built in Rome was the Coliseum, completed in A.D. 80. Here, gladiators, many of them slaves sold for the purpose, performed in combat against wild animals or other gladiators—sometimes to the death.

Review and Write

Most large cities today have immense arenas which are capable of seating tens of thousands of people. What are some of the events held in such arenas today? Are there any modern sporting events which you think are similar to the Roman chariot races or the gladiator matches?

The Coliseum: Arena of Blood

Today, near the center of the city of Rome, stand the ruins of a great amphitheater dating from the 1st century A.D. It was known as the Coliseum or the Flavian Amphitheater, since it was constructed during the reigns of two Flavian emperors, Vespasian and his son, Titus. The Coliseum is considered one of the best examples of Roman architecture. It was also the scene of many horrific sporting events, which often resulted in death.

The Coliseum was built to seat 45,000 spectators. There was also room among the stadium's four levels to accommodate an additional 5000. The seating was tiered, set on sloping concrete columns, similar to the way modern sports complexes are constructed today. Spectators could enter the Coliseum through 80 different entrances, which allowed the stadium to be filled and emptied without too much delay or crush.

This immense building stands 161 feet high, is 600 feet long (as long as two football fields), and 500 feet wide. The stadium consists of many half-columns which form arches running along the exterior. Huge canvas awnings shaded the crowd; sometimes a giant canvas was stretched over the top of the facility to block the midday sun.

Inside the Coliseum, where the sporting events took place, is a great oval-shaped arena. Although the floor is no longer in place today, originally the stadium could be flooded to allow for water events, such as mock sea battles, held for the amusement of the crowd. Later, facilities were constructed beneath the Coliseum floor, including cages for wild animals and other victims, as well as "locker rooms" for gladiatorial contestants.

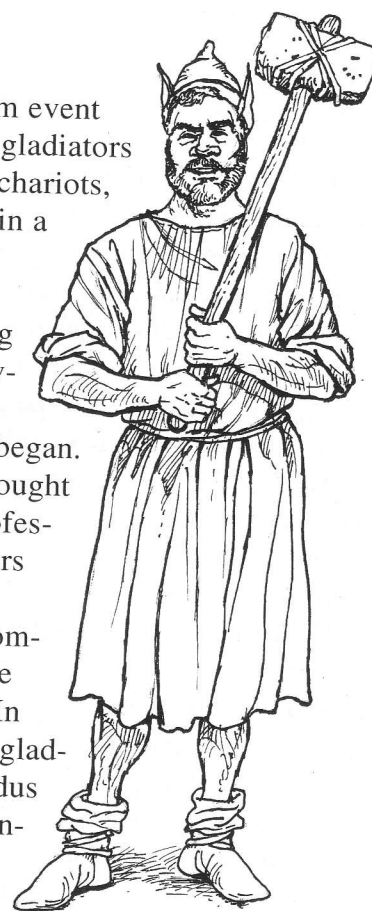
Anyone wanting to watch the games held in the Coliseum had plenty of opportunities during the year. The Roman calendar was full of official, state-sanctioned holidays. During the reign of Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54), 93 days were established as game days. By the second half of the 4th century A.D., the number of game days had been increased to 175, nearly half of the year!

A typical Coliseum event might begin with the gladiators entering the arena in chariots, each warrior dressed in a purple and gold robe. Gladiators were then paired off after casting lots (the Roman equivalent of flipping a coin), and the games began.

Often those who fought in the games were professionally-trained fighters who attended special schools to learn the combative arts. Life for the gladiators was harsh. In the 2nd century A.D., gladiators attended the Ludus Magnus, a Roman training school. There they slept in rough barracks with no comforts.

Because many gladiators were slaves, sold for just such a purpose, guards were posted to keep the trainees from escaping. During training sessions, any combatant who tried to stay out of the fight was whipped or burned with a red-hot iron to force him into the fight.

The weapons used by the gladiators included swords, spears, tridents, nets, and shields. If a combatant was wounded, the crowd often had the power to call for his death if it suited them. A gladiator whose wounds were considered mortal was approached by someone dressed as Charon, ferryman of the underworld, who, wielding a huge mallet, smashed the head of the dying fighter.



Charon of the underworld

Review and Write

What is the most brutal sport held in modern arenas today? Why do you think the Roman games were so harsh, even to the point of killing?

Christianity Takes Root

During the final centuries of the Roman Empire, when the political, economic, and military systems of Rome were slowly falling into chaos, Christianity was gaining more of a following. As life in the Roman system became an increasing struggle and life within the Empire became less secure, people turned to the teachings of the Christians for their answers.

Ironically, the existence of the Roman Empire had, in part, made possible the growth of Christianity into a world religion. The faith it inspired caused its followers and converts to teach others with enthusiasm. Even when early Christians faced death through official Roman persecutions, the thrust of Christianity was not lessened.

The early Church had always stressed the role of the individual. Only after hundreds of years did Christianity develop an involved system of priests and church fathers. Preachers and missionaries, such as the Apostle Paul, moved about from congregation to congregation, delivering sermons and giving advice.

The only organized leadership of the early Church was in the form of elders, men of age who served a local body of believers. Sometimes called bishops, overseers, or *presbyters*, these appointed church leaders were considered shepherds to their flock, a single group of Christians.

By the 2nd century A.D., the titles of bishop and presbyter had been separated into two roles. The local leaders were called presbyters or elders; a leader in a large church group in a city, for example, was called a bishop. The bishops were responsible to the congregations in the vicinity of their mother church. In time, the region administered by a church

bishop was called a *diocese*, after the Roman name used to identify a territorial administrative division of the Empire. Other Church structures were adapted from the Romans. A number of dioceses constituted a province of the Empire. In the Church, a province came to be administered by an archbishop.

Provinces were combined into administrative units called *patriarchates*. This gave rise to the church office called a patriarch. Only a handful of patriarchs existed in the Church of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. Patriarchs served the Church in the larger cities of Rome, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria, for example.

Among these leading patriarchs, the one located in Rome eventually claimed more importance than those in other cities. Somewhere in the 4th or 5th century A.D., the Roman patriarch became the recognized leader of the Church and took on the title of pope, from the Greek word for "father."

Despite such claims of the patriarch in Rome, other patriarchs did not always agree with his claim. In the eastern half of the Roman Empire, especially in Constantinople, the patriarch never accepted the supremacy of Rome's pope.

After the official split of the Roman Empire into two halves—East Rome and West Rome—the patriarchs in Rome and Constantinople went their separate ways. The patriarch in Rome was destined to be the pope of the Roman Catholic Church, while the patriarch in Constantinople would become the leader of the Orthodox Church.

Today, Christianity recognizes many different structures and belief systems within the bodies of those who follow the teachings of Jesus. There are still important differences which persist between the patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic leader called the pope.



Review and Write

Why do you think the political divisions of the Roman Empire were used to create a hierarchy of leaders for the early Church?

Test II

Part I. Multiple Choice (Worksheets 17–21)

Match the answers to the right with the statement on the left.

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| _____ 1. This political alliance brought together Mark Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus | A. Cleopatra |
| _____ 2. This Roman leader was assassinated on the Senate floor in 44 B.C. | B. Jesus |
| _____ 3. Egyptian queen who allied herself with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony | C. Augustus |
| _____ 4. Roman title meaning “venerable or revered one” | D. 2nd Triumvirate |
| _____ 5. Name of one of the conspirators who assassinated Julius Caesar | E. Paul |
| _____ 6. Battle where Caesar’s assassins were defeated by Antony and Octavian | F. imperator |
| _____ 7. Founder of the Christian religion | G. princeps |
| _____ 8. Books of the Bible which describe the ministry of Christ | H. Brutus |
| _____ 9. Apostle who wrote many of the books of the New Testament | I. Four Gospels |
| _____ 10. Name for period of Roman history between 29 B.C. and A.D. 180 | J. Pax Romana |
| _____ 11. Title meaning “first among equals” | K. Philippi |
| _____ 12. Word from which the word “emperor” is derived | L. Julius Caesar |

Part II. Multiple Choice (Worksheets 22–27)

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|---|--------------------|
| _____ 1. Roman leader who established the Julio-Claudian dynastic line | A. Marcus Aurelius |
| _____ 2. Roman leader from A.D. 37–41, who was probably insane | B. gladiators |
| _____ 3. Roman leader during the great fire in Rome in the year A.D. 64 | C. Caligula |
| _____ 4. Founder of the Flavian dynasty of Roman leaders | D. Diocletian |
| _____ 5. Last of the “good” emperors, he ruled from A.D. 161–180 | E. Theodosius |
| _____ 6. Massive sports and games arena in Rome | F. Vespasian |
| _____ 7. Great chariot racing track | G. Augustus |
| _____ 8. Professional combatants who fought during the Roman games | H. pope |
| _____ 9. Church title derived from the Greek word for “father” | I. Circus Maximus |
| _____ 10. Roman leader [A.D. 285–305] who divided the Empire into many districts | J. Constantinople |
| _____ 11. Another name for the eastern Roman capital of Byzantium | K. Coliseum |
| _____ 12. Later Roman leader who officially divided the Empire between his two sons | L. Nero |

Part III. Respond and Write

What do you believe were the most significant problems leading to the end of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire?