

FROM JESUS TO CONSTANTINE

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

Like most Jewish parents in Judea, Mary and Joseph took their firstborn son, Jesus, to the Temple in Jerusalem so that they could present him to God. Following the law, “. . . they offered a sacrifice . . . to the Lord: ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’” But then, according to the Gospel of Luke, a strange thing happened. While Mary and Joseph were in the Temple, an old man named Simeon came up to them and took the baby in his arms. Simeon had long believed that God wouldn’t let him die until he had seen the one who would save Israel from its enemies. Seeing the infant Jesus made Simeon incredibly happy. This child, he believed was the one. He praised God, saying that now he could die in peace because “these eyes of mine have seen the Savior . . . the glory of your people Israel.”

The Jewish people had suffered again and again during their long history. They had been captives, slaves, and finally the conquered subjects of Rome. But their prophets—those who spoke for God—promised that someday God would send them a great king to free them from enemy rule. This king would be the Messiah, the savior of the Jewish people.

According to the prophet Isaiah, God said: “Here is my servant. . . . I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. . . . He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.” The King was coming. But what would he be like?

Although many Jews expected the Messiah to be a warrior king, Zechariah said that the Savior would be a humble man. “See, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble . . . and riding on a colt. . . . And he shall command peace to the nations.” The prophet

“ THE GOSPELS OF
LUKE AND MATTHEW;
THE BOOKS OF ISAIAH,
ZECHARIAH, AND
MICAH; TACITUS; AND
EUSEBIUS

“ Luke, New Testament

“ Luke, New Testament

“ Isaiah, Hebrew Bible

“ Zechariah, Hebrew Bible

66 Micah, Hebrew Bible

Micah wrote that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. "But you, O Bethlehem . . . from you shall come forth . . . one who is to rule in Israel. . . ."

According to ancient writings, a large, bright star would appear in the nighttime sky when the Messiah was about to be born. And in his story about Jesus' birth, Matthew describes exactly that. He tells how wise men (probably philosophers or astrologers) followed a brightly shining star to Jerusalem. Then, not knowing exactly where to find the infant king, the travelers went to King Herod's palace and asked. It was the logical place to look. But when Herod heard the question, he was scared. Who was this newborn king who threatened his throne? Herod was taking no chances: he ordered the slaughter of all the newborn babies in Bethlehem! But Mary and Joseph managed to escape with their baby to Egypt where they lived safely until Herod's death.

When Jesus grew to manhood, he chose twelve disciples—close, devoted followers—to help him in his work. Then he began to preach, teach, and work wonders in the villages and synagogues near the Sea of Galilee. (Many wonder-workers and healers traveled from place to place in those days.) Jesus didn't challenge Jewish law, but he did see himself as the King of the Jews. He wasn't a military leader or an organizer. He was a peacemaker and healer. People flocked to see him and hear him speak. He preached to peasants and fishermen. And his message was a simple one about God's love.

Later, his followers wrote down the stories of his life—what he taught and what he did. The birth, life, teachings, and death of Jesus are described in what are called the four gospels of the Christian New Testament. The gospel writers do not tell the exact same story, but these were spiritual stories about the meaning behind what Jesus did and said. They were based on stories his followers told, treasured, and passed along. Scholars who have studied the ancient records tell us that the gospels were written down after Jesus' death. No records written during Jesus' lifetime mention any of these events. The historian Tacitus

was the first Roman writer to mention the Christians, 70 years after the death of Jesus.

In his gospel, Matthew records a sermon that Jesus preached early in his ministry. It's called the "Sermon on the Mount" because he preached it, sitting on a hillside, to the people who had gathered there to hear him. It contains some of his most important teachings. Each sentence begins with the word "blessed," which means holy as well as blissfully happy.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

These sayings, called the Beatitudes, emphasize values that were very different from those that the Romans honored—with their many gods and their pride in riches. But Jesus didn't encourage people to rebel against Rome. He even advised them to pay their taxes faithfully: "Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's."

Justice and forgiveness played an important role in traditional Jewish teachings. But Jesus taught a message of unconditional forgiveness, "I say to you . . . if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek as well."

The Jews of Jesus' day knew the law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, . . . and your neighbor as yourself." According to Luke, Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story, a man is attacked, robbed, and brutally beaten. Two of his own countrymen see the man lying on the side of the road, but neither one stops to help. The wounded man is saved by the kindness of a foreigner,

66 Matthew, New Testament

66 Matthew, New Testament

66 Matthew, New Testament

66 Luke, New Testament



Jesus' mother, Mary, with Joseph standing behind her, has just put her newborn son into Simeon's arms. The parents listen, amazed, as the old man praises God for the gift of this child.

a Samaritan. Jesus was saying that neighbors are those who show kindness to one another, regardless of family, race, or group.

After three years of teaching, preaching, and healing the sick, Jesus was arrested by his enemies and brought before a Roman official, Pontius Pilate, for trial. Pilate ordered that Jesus be crucified between two common criminals.

After his death on the cross, Jesus was buried in a stone tomb and a huge rock was rolled against the door. His disciples and other followers believed that, after three days in the tomb, Jesus rose from the dead. After he was taken into heaven by God, the disciples, led by a fisherman named Peter, began to preach about Jesus—that he had risen from the dead and that he would come again at the end of the world.

Believers gathered in closely knit communities, and the leader of each community was called a bishop. Although Jesus' followers feared persecution from the Roman authorities, they convinced many others

that Jesus was the Savior. They called him "Christ," the Greek word for Messiah.

Most of the early disciples didn't go very far from Judea and the nearby Jewish communities in Syria. One of them, however, spread the message of Jesus into the far reaches of the empire.

Saul was the son of a Jewish merchant in the city of Tarsus, and he studied the Hebrew Bible in Jerusalem. He was also a Roman citizen educated in the Greek classics. Saul did not accept Jesus as the Messiah and opposed the Jewish followers of Jesus. One day, he was riding to Damascus. According to the New Testament *Acts of the Apostles*, he was suddenly struck by a vision of Jesus. He fell from his horse and was blind for three days. When Saul's sight returned, he became—to the amazement of Jews and Christians alike—

Jesus' most loyal and eager follower. He changed his whole life and began using a Roman name. Saul became Paul: believer, preacher, and Christian writer.

Paul was determined to preach the Gospel of Jesus to people everywhere. He brought Jesus' simple message from the countryside to the big cities where people were more open to new ideas. His preaching took him all over Syria, Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and the ancient cities of Greece. If it hadn't been for him, Christianity might never have spread beyond Judea. He preached not only to the Jews of the Diaspora, but to others as well. Throughout the Roman Empire, Paul and other missionaries found people who were "God-fearers"—people who admired the high standards of the Jews and appreciated their strong sense of family and community. These people were interested in the message of Jesus, and many became believers.

Paul traveled to Athens, in Greece. There he found an altar dedicated "To the Unknown God." He announced that he had come on behalf of that very god. He preached the good news of a Messiah who promised never-ending life after death. Paul's letters, which were written in Greek, show how he developed the simple teachings of Jesus into a more complicated system of behavior and belief.

Like Jesus, Paul was eventually arrested. He spent more than two years under house arrest, waiting to be tried. His letters, mostly written from prison, were to Christian groups in the different places where he had preached. The letters that survived are among the books of the New Testament. Because Paul was a Roman citizen, he was tried in Rome. During Nero's reign, in the year 62 CE, he became a martyr, which means that he chose to die rather than deny his belief in Jesus as Christ.

In 64 CE, Nero was accused of starting the huge fire that burned a large part of Rome. He didn't want the people to turn against him, so he invented charges against the Christians and blamed them for the fire. Many Christians were tortured. Tacitus describes the brutal murders. "People who admitted to their belief were arrested. . . . Mockery was heaped upon them as they were killed. Wrapped in the skins

JESUS THE STORYTELLER

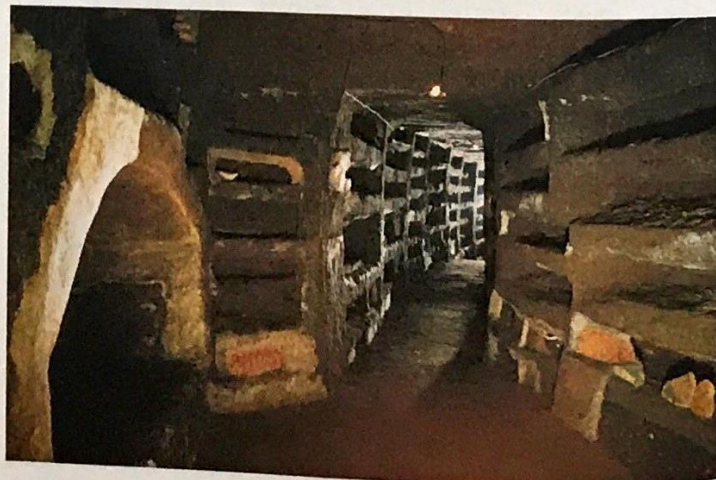
Jesus often told parables—stories that teach a lesson. One of his best known parables is about a rich young man who takes his share of his father's money, leaves home, and spends all the money foolishly. When he is completely broke and hungry, he decides to go home. He plans to beg his father to let him become a servant. But the father welcomes him and throws a party to celebrate his son's homecoming. Jesus said that God is like that father—his love never ends, no matter what.

of wild animals, they were torn apart by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set on fire and burned alive.”

Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire, not because they worshiped Jesus, but because they refused to worship the emperor. This was treason, and the punishment for treason was death. Some governors enforced the punishment, others did not. Many Romans saw Christianity as strange, perhaps dangerous. Christians kept themselves apart from the festivals that honored the traditional gods. They preached that the end of the world was near and that Jesus would soon come back to take his followers with him to heaven. Most of the time, Christians practiced their religion in secret in order to survive. They even buried their dead in their own private cemeteries. Today you can visit these tombs, called catacombs, on the outskirts of Rome.

The Christian community grew slowly during the second and third centuries. By 300 CE, only about 5 to 10 percent of the people in the Roman Empire had been converted to Christianity. But the Church had become much more organized. Each city had a bishop. The priests became a separate body of lower-ranking leaders who led the congregations, or groups of believers.

Christian history took a new and important direction in October of 312 CE. A general named Constantine was fighting for control of the Empire. Though his mother had become a



Christian tombs line the walls of these huge underground rooms, called catacombs, outside the walls of Rome. Pilgrims later came to honor the early Christians buried here.



Christian, Constantine was devoted to the pagan gods of Rome. On the day before an important battle, he had a vision. According to the historian Eusebius, “. . . he saw with his own eyes . . . a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, ‘Conquer by this.’ At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also.” Later that night Christ appeared to him in a dream. The next day, before the battle began, Constantine ordered his soldiers to paint the first two letters of Christ’s name—the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*—on their shields. His army won the battle, and he was sure that Christ had given him the victory. Although Constantine never gave up his pagan gods, he worshiped Christ from that day on.

Constantine became emperor, and his newfound faith completely changed the picture for the Christian community.

“Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 325 CE

TELLING TIME

A sixth-century CE monk first figured out the date of Jesus' birth. Unfortunately, the monk made a mistake, and the year he came up with was at least four years off. How do we know? Because of the link between Herod's reign and the story of Jesus' early life. Official records of Rome state that Herod died in 4 BCE. This means that Jesus had to be born before 4 BCE. Based on a study of Christian texts as well as Jewish and Roman documents, scholars now believe that Jesus was born sometime between 6 and 4 BCE.

This enormous head of Constantine, Rome's emperor from 306 to 337 CE, was once part of a 30-foot-high statue. Only the head, arm, and foot have survived.

He ruled that no one should be persecuted for his or her beliefs. He built many churches but he never forced Christianity on his subjects. And although the Roman army and people remained mostly pagan, Christians no longer had to hide their beliefs. Christianity could spread much more quickly.

By the time of Constantine's death in 337 CE, Rome's ancient gods had lost much of their power among the people. Christianity had become the favored religion of the Roman state. At its head were the bishops of Rome, who called themselves popes. They claimed authority over the entire Christian church because the first bishop of Rome had been Peter, Christ's disciple. But although Rome was the center of Christian authority, it was no longer the only capital of the Roman Empire. Now there were two.

Constantine had built a new capital city in Asia Minor in 330 CE. Its name was Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), and Constantine called it "the New Rome." It was not only better placed to fight against Rome's Persian enemies, but Constantine believed he could create a truly Christian capital. He offered special incentives, including free grain, to encourage people to move there. Constantinople became a focus of education and the arts—a magnet for Christian visitors and pilgrims.

