



This eight-part series in “Awake!” is examining an outstanding feature of the Bible—its prophecies, or predictions. The articles will help you to answer these questions: Are Bible prophecies merely the work of clever humans? Do they bear the hallmark of divine inspiration? We invite you to weigh the evidence.

Good News for All Mankind

GOD’S message to mankind is found in the Bible, and that message is one of good news. Accordingly, Jesus Christ spent his life declaring “the good news of the kingdom.” (Luke 4:43) The Bible indicates that this Kingdom is God’s government and that it will remove oppressive human rulership, establish peace, and eliminate all causes of human suffering. (Daniel 2:44; Matthew 6:9, 10) Good news indeed!

Surely such good news would deserve the widest possible distribution. Yet, when Jesus was executed, he left only a small number of followers. Would his message die with him? The Bible predicted just the opposite. It foretold the following: (1) The good news would spread internationally. (2) It would endure intense opposition. (3) False, or imitation, Christians would arise and mislead many. Let us consider these prophecies.

Good News to Be Proclaimed to All Nations

Prophecies: *“In all the nations the good news has to be preached first.” (Mark 13:10) “You will be witnesses of me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the most distant part of the earth.”—Acts 1:8.*

Fulfillment: Soon after Jesus’ death in 33 C.E., his disciples filled Jerusalem with the Kingdom message. They spread throughout Judea and nearby Samaria, and within 15 years, Christian missionaries had been sent to other parts of the Roman Empire. By the year 61 C.E., it could be said that the good news had been preached in many “distant” parts of the earth.

What history reveals:

● Non-Biblical writings from the second century testify to the rapid expansion of the original form of Christianity. Roman historian Suetonius alludes to the Christians as having been established in Rome as early as the year 49 C.E. A letter written to Emperor Trajan about 112 C.E. by Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia (in modern-day Turkey), refers to Christianity as a “contagion” that had “spread not merely through the free towns, but into the villages and farms.” Reviewing the evidence, one historian concluded: “Within less than a hundred years after the apostolic age places of Christian worship were to be seen in the chief cities of the Empire.”

● In the book *The Early Church*, Professor Henry Chadwick states: “The expansion of the church seemed an extraordinary chain of improbabilities. Nothing could have been less likely to succeed by any ordinary standard of expectation.”

Opposition to the Good News

Prophecy: *“People will deliver you up to local courts, and you will be beaten in synagogues and be put on the stand before governors and kings for my sake, for a witness to them.”*
—Mark 13:9.

Roman Emperors Nero (shown at right), Domitian, Marcus Aurelius, and Diocletian instigated vicious persecution of early Christians

Photograph taken by courtesy of the British Museum



Fulfillment: Christians were persecuted by the Jews and the Romans. They suffered arrest, imprisonment, beatings, and execution.

What history reveals:

● Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian writing in the first century, records the execution of Jesus’ brother James at the hands of Jewish religious leaders. The Bible records that Gamaliel, a respected member of the Jewish high court, urged moderation when Jesus’ disciples were sentenced at trial. (Acts 5:34-39) Scholarly works confirm the existence of Gamaliel and say that he displayed an open mind.

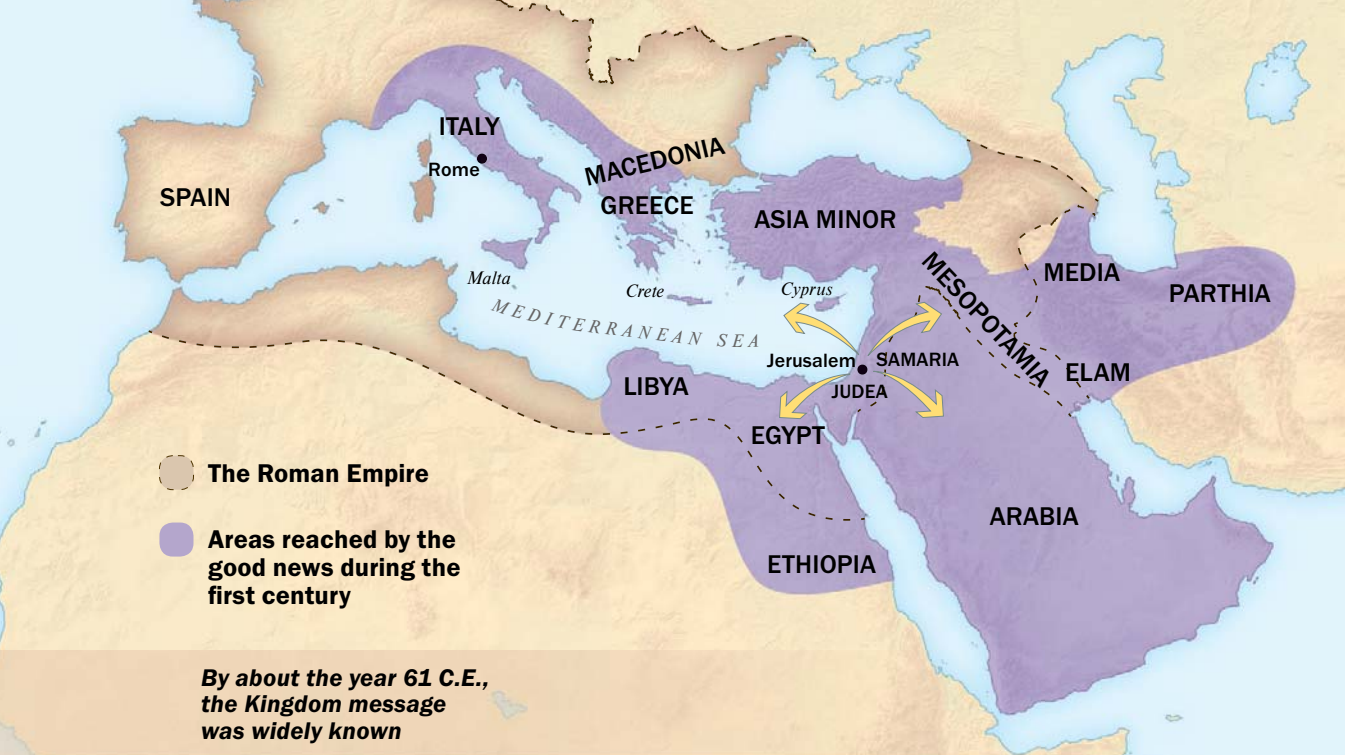
● Historians tell us that beginning with Emperor Nero in 64 C.E., Roman emperors subjected Christians to waves of persecution. The correspondence between Emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger discusses penalties for Christians who would not recant their faith.

● “Persecution, so far from driving the church underground, had the opposite effect,” states Professor Chadwick, quoted earlier. As Christians fled harm’s way, they took their message to new areas. (Acts 8:1) They persevered, often in the face of ostracism by family and friends. This is noteworthy, for Jesus’ followers were “unlettered and ordinary,” with no political influence. (Acts 4:13) Historians agree that “among the small shopkeepers and tradesmen, . . . the Gospel spread most easily.”

In hindsight, scholars marvel at how a group so insignificant could spread Christianity so quickly in the face of such fierce opposition. Yet, Jesus foretold those improbable events *before* they happened. The Scriptures also predicted that this preaching activity would be interrupted.

Imitation Christians to Arise

Prophecies: *“Oppressive wolves will enter in among you and will not treat the flock with*



tenderness, and from among you yourselves men will rise and speak twisted things to draw away the disciples after themselves.” (Acts 20: 29, 30) “There will also be false teachers among you. These very ones will quietly bring in destructive sects . . . , and on account of these the way of the truth will be spoken of abusively.” —2 Peter 2:1, 2.

Fulfillment: The Christian congregation was corrupted by harsh, deceitful, ambitious individuals.

What history reveals:

● Especially after the death of Jesus’ original followers, true Christianity was gradually eclipsed by prominent men who rose from within and adulterated Christian teaching with Greek philosophy. A clergy class soon developed and began to acquire the trappings of political rulers. According to historians, by the time “Christianity” was adopted as Rome’s State religion, not even a

shadow of the first-century congregation remained.

● Over the centuries, this adulterated form of Christianity left a record of violence and greed. Rather than proving themselves to be followers of Jesus, the clergy persecuted those who imitated Jesus’ method of preaching and those who tried to publish the Bible in the language of the people.

During the centuries in which counterfeit Christianity wielded great power, the good news seemed all but snuffed out. However, Jesus indicated that the good news would be revived in the last days. He likened this period to a harvest when false Christians, pictured as weeds, would be separated from genuine Christians, pictured as wheat. (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) At that time, the prophecy about the preaching of the good news would have its greatest fulfillment. (Matthew 24:14) Our next installment will consider that exciting prophecy.