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The Beginning of Christianity

Christianity began under the reign of Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. In order to raise money to fund public roads, baths, and an ever-increasing budget for military expenses, Augustus needed to know how many people lived within the Roman Empire; knowing how many people lived in the empire allowed him to assess the right amount of tax. While historians continue to debate when this **census** actually took place, they agree that the census did not happen all at once throughout the entire empire. Provincial governors were given control over the process, and there were many different customs for how people were to be counted due to the variety of traditions under Roman rule.

Judaea was a province that lay in the eastern outskirts of the Roman Empire. Among its Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek speakers, the cultures and customs varied from that in the Roman capital. Here, Romans were expected to travel to their place of birth in order to be counted for the upcoming census. Romans all throughout Judaea set out for their homelands in order to follow the emperor's decree.

Nazareth was a village in the province of Judaea; this was where Jesus' parents, Joseph and Mary lived and where, according to the Bible, Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel to inform her that

she would give birth to the son of God. Bethlehem was a small village about 90 miles from Nazareth and this was Joseph's place of birth. When news of the census reached the area, Joseph packed his bags and prepared for the journey. Mary had a choice of where to go; she could either travel with her husband or go alone to her hometown. Being eight months pregnant, she naturally chose to stay with her husband. Due to clues that historians have pieced together from ancient Roman documents, historians have hypothesized that this journey, and Jesus' birth, took place in the early fall of 2 BCE.

Shortly after Jesus' birth, he and his family returned to Nazareth, however the Bible mentions very little of Jesus' childhood or teenage years. Only one story about Jesus is mentioned before his ministry began at age 30; he was astonishing rabbis, or Jewish teachers, with his knowledge of the Jewish faith and of Jewish faith. Once the Bible returns to the story of Jesus, it focuses on his work to spread the idea, teachings, and message of an all-powerful God.



A Roman relic depicting the taking of a census.

The Teachings of Jesus

The Bible does not mention much of Jesus from his birth until his adult years; around the age of 30, though, the holy text picks up Jesus' story again with something historic. There was a man who lived in Judaea named John who had been urging Roman citizens to repent for their bad behavior, accept the one true God, and prepare for the return of the Messiah, or a savior who would deliver the Jewish people to their promised land. John the "Baptist," as he was called, spent his days baptizing those who followed his teachings. According to the Bible, when Jesus met John at the Jordan River (where other baptisms were taking place), John immediately knew that Jesus was the chosen one. Jesus was

baptized, John immediately began spreading the word that Jesus was the son of God, and Jesus spent forty days fasting in the wild, seeking to be alone with God in order to understand how to best spread his message of salvation.

Christians believe that God used forty days in the Judaean wilderness as a test for Jesus; here he was in isolation and had no food or water. He was tempted by Satan, or the devil, on three occasions to abandon his condition, but refused the devil on all three tries. Satan tried to persuade Jesus to turn stones into bread, to jump from a cliff and rely on angels to

break his fall, and to forever worship the devil in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus' rejection of the devil has symbolized the eternal struggle that mankind faces between good and evil.

After emerging from the desert Jesus began to teach about the kingdom of God and how to get there. He spoke on hillsides, by the Sea of Galilee, and on streets throughout Judaea, seeking to inform people about how God wanted people to live their lives. To please God and be rewarded in the afterlife, Jesus spoke in simple terms. One had to believe in God and that he (Jesus) was the son of God.

Jesus also taught his followers that God wanted people to treat their neighbors like they would treat themselves; today, this law is referred to as the "golden rule," to treat others the way you wish to be treated.

Jesus often taught in **parables**, or simple stories that have a moral message. One story spoke of a stranger who needed help along the side of a road, and a Samaritan (from the town of Samaria) stopped to help. This parable has taught people around the world to be "good Samaritans" to others.



A painting of John the Baptist.

Stirring Up Trouble

Jesus' teachings of an all-powerful God that was to be revered was nothing new to the area where Jesus lived. He lived in Judaea, an area on the eastern fringe of the Roman Empire with a high Jewish population. The Jews were actually the first to practice monotheism and were historically persecuted, or treated unfairly, for it. However, many Jews became concerned that Jesus' teachings would anger the Romans. The Romans, who were polytheistic, rejected the notion of one God. They also believed their emperor was a divine being in his own right. As Jesus' followers increased, so did those who began to fear how the Romans would respond.

The core of Jesus' followers were his twelve disciples. A disciple is a personal follower of a teacher or a leader. Also known as the twelve apostles, these men were Jesus' most loyal supporters, friends, and believers; they were responsible for spreading Jesus' message. As Jesus' teachings of an all-powerful and all-loving God spread, one who stressed acceptance and equality, it was only natural that more and more people sought to attend his sermons.

Many others came to Jesus' hillside services as rumors of miracles began to quickly spread through the region. According to the Bible, Jesus cured



Jesus teaching his twelve disciples.

several people of blindness, resurrected others from the dead, turned water into wine, walked on water, and even fed thousands of men, women, and children with nothing but a few loaves of bread and several fish. As word of these miracles spread throughout Judaea, Jesus became a very popular individual.

However, Jesus' popularity quickly turned him into one that Roman leaders wanted to keep an eye on. Government officials feared that Jesus was becoming too powerful; his crowds were large and growing, as was his base of believers. Since Jesus claimed to be the son of God, was he also claiming to be more powerful than the divine Roman emperor? Would Jesus' followers start to revolt against Roman rule? Soon, Roman rulers became determined to prevent Jesus' teachings of a monotheistic God uproot the existing social order.

Arrest, Crucifixion, and Resurrection

Around the year 33CE, Jesus and his disciples set out on a religious journey to Jerusalem. They were traveling for the Jewish festival called Passover, a holiday to celebrate when God freed the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. When Jesus arrived in the city he traveled to the Temple and was infuriated by what he found; merchants and money-changers were using the Temple as a place to conduct business to traveling pilgrims, often times cheating the travelers on transactions. To Jesus, actions like this corrupted the holy site.

According to

the Bible, the Temple had been turned into a "den of thieves" and Jesus drove the peddlers from the area, overturning tables and destroying the stalls of the money-changers.

Jesus' actions angered many people and it spurred the Romans into action. Jesus was viewed as a menace, or a person likely to cause harm, and he was now a wanted man. Within a week, Jesus would be dead.

Two days later Jesus' disciples planned a meal to celebrate Passover. At this meal,



A mural painting by Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci of the Last Supper.

Jesus made a bold claim; he said this meal would be his last. Known as the "Last Supper," Jesus also announced that someone at the table would betray him later that evening. After the dinner, Jesus went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. Soon, a contingent of guards and officials swarmed the garden led by Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples. In order to identify who Jesus was to the guards, Judas kissed Jesus on the cheek. Jesus was immediately arrested.

Jesus was charged with treason, or a crime of betraying one's country. The Romans believed

Jesus was trying to overthrow the Roman government with his wild teachings. As was common with other public executions in the time period, Jesus was crucified outside the city walls of Jerusalem at a place called Golgotha, known as "the place of skulls." This place is also called Calvary. After he was crucified, Jesus' body was placed in a tomb where, according to the Bible, he was resurrected after three days. Jesus' spirit then made a series of appearances to his disciples to deliver one final message: disperse and spread the word of God to all nations of the world.

Missions & Persecution

Once Jesus reappeared to his disciples after his crucifixion, and confirmed that he was the son of God, they dispersed throughout Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean World. Like Jesus, many were also crucified by the local population for spreading the word of God. Others were stoned to death, some were beheaded, and only a few lived to see old age.

The persecution, or mistreatment based on religious beliefs, of the disciples inspired thousands of others to carry on their work. One of those was a man named Saul. Saul was an unlikely person to become a missionary, or a person who spreads Christianity, because he heavily persecuted early follower of Jesus. However, while traveling in the desert to Damascus, Saul was blinded by a bright light and, according to the Bible, Jesus appeared to him. This experience changed Saul's life, he quickly converted to Christianity and even changed his name to Paul in order to leave his old life behind.

Paul journeyed throughout Europe, Asia Minor, and the Mediterranean World to spread the word of God. He personally established as many as twenty churches throughout the region. Paul was

eventually arrested by Roman authorities for encouraging people to disobey Roman law. While imprisoned, Paul kept many letters and other records that formed the basis of fourteen different books of the Bible. Historians do not know Paul's exact fate, but it is believed he was either beheaded or torn apart by wild animals in the Circus Maximus in the year 67 CE under Emperor Nero.



A bust of Emperor Constantine

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire the Roman elite increasingly became concerned. Emperor Nero was infuriated that Christians worshipped Jesus (and God) instead of him as the divine emperor. He actively started to persecute Christians, including having them rounded up and fed to lions in the Circus Maximus. Christians were victimized throughout the empire under Constantine became emperor; known as the first Christian emperor, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE that gave full religious freedom to Christians. This paved the way for Emperor Theodosius in 380CE, when he made Christianity the official religion of the empire. In a mere 350 years, Christianity had done the unthinkable: it had evolved from a small, fringe religion to dominate the largest empire the world had ever seen.