

# Why Did Christianity Take Hold in the Ancient World?

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**Overview:** Jesus of Nazareth, also known as Jesus Christ, may be the most widely known person to have ever walked the earth. The religion he inspired, Christianity, is practiced today by about one-third of the world's population. However, Christianity did not have an easy beginning. When it began some 2,000 years ago, it faced enormous obstacles and could easily have died out altogether. This Mini-Q examines how and why Christianity was able to establish a foothold in its earliest years.

## The Documents:

- Document A: The Good Samaritan (parable)
- Document B: Immortality
- Document C: The Individual and God
- Document D: The Individual and Society
- Document E: The Path to Peace (chart)
- Document F: The Journeys of Paul (map)
- Document G: Letter from Roman Judge Pliny the Younger

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

## Hook Exercise: The Roots of Christianity

**Directions:** Below are ten multiple-choice questions. Circle the best answer to each one.

1. About how many years ago did Jesus live?  
a. 10,000    b. 5,000    c. 2,000    d. 1,000
2. In which empire was he born?  
a. Roman Empire    b. Persian Empire    c. Israeli Empire    d. Egyptian Empire
3. Who among the following would have called himself a Christian?  
a. Jesus    b. Muhammad    c. The Buddha    d. The Pope
4. When was the New Testament written?  
a. Before Jesus was born    b. While Jesus was alive    c. After Jesus died
5. Which of the following is not a Christian religion?  
a. Judaism    b. Catholicism    c. Baptist Church    d. Jehovah's Witness
6. Which one of the following is a general term that includes the other three?  
a. Lutheran    b. Baptist    c. Protestant    d. Methodist
7. What language did Jesus probably speak while he was growing up?  
a. Hebrew    b. Aramaic    c. Latin    d. Arabic
8. Which of the following gospels was not included in the official Bible?  
a. Matthew    b. Mark    c. Thomas    d. Luke    e. John
9. According to Biblical historians, about how old was Jesus when he was crucified?  
a. 19    b. 25    c. 33    d. 46
10. The oldest fragments of the New Testament ever found were written in what language?  
a. Greek    b. Latin    c. Hebrew    d. Aramaic    e. English

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## Why Did Christianity Take Hold in the Ancient World?

In some ways, we know very little about Jesus of Nazareth. We do know that he lived about 2,000 years ago in what is modern-day Israel. From the Bible, we know the famous story of his birth in a stable. But we know almost nothing about his childhood or his life as a young man. In fact, it is not until Jesus is in his late twenties that the Bible picks up his story again.

The eastern Mediterranean region where Jesus grew up was multi-cultural. Israel was ruled by Rome at the time, and Greek influences were strong. In fact, along with **Aramaic**, his native language, it is quite possible that Jesus spoke Greek. Still, we know from reading the Old Testament that Jesus lived among Jewish people and followed Jewish law. What made Jesus controversial in his Jewish community was his belief that he was the **messiah**. The Greek word for messiah is “Christo.” It means the savior whom Jewish prophets promised would one day bring peace and harmony to the people of Israel.

Because he claimed to be the messiah, Jesus was considered a threat to the old Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. He also made some Romans uncomfortable; they worried that someone who called himself the Son of God could eventually obtain too much power. Local leaders put pressure on Roman officials to have this gentle but outspoken radical killed by nailing him to a cross, a form of execution usually reserved for the worst criminals.

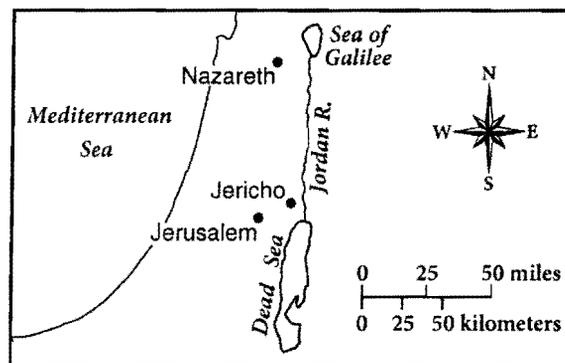
But the story of Jesus did not end with his crucifixion. In fact, it was just beginning. Followers of Jesus, called **apostles**, spread his word by preaching love and kindness and helping those in need. Others spread the word through writing. One convert to Jesus’s teaching, Paul, traveled the eastern Mediterranean for some 30 years after Jesus’s death and wrote a number of

letters that would one day make up about half of the **New Testament**. Four other individuals known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote accounts of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. These accounts, all probably written between 60 and 90 CE, are called the **gospels**. Together, they make up the first four books of the New Testament portion of the Bible.

And so, the words and stories of Jesus were carried forth. Perhaps surprisingly, many of those who accepted his teachings were Jewish. A number of Jews had fled Roman domination in Israel and lived throughout the eastern Mediterranean. They spoke and read Greek and were able to understand the story of Jesus when it arrived. Others who were not Jewish heard the story, too, and eventually added it to their assortment of gods, myths and rituals from Rome, Greece, Egypt and beyond. It was in this rich and sometimes confusing landscape of cultures and religious practices that the teachings of Jesus took root.

Christianity was a slow-growing movement, however. The communities of **converts** that Paul visited were small, their total population as low as two or three thousand. Still, something was underway. By 100 CE, a number of these Jewish and non-Jewish followers were calling themselves Christian. A new religion was being born. Two centuries later, in 312 CE, the Roman ruler Constantine converted to Christianity.

This brings us back at our question. In a region where many gods and cults competed for a person’s attention, what gave the teachings of Jesus staying power? This Mini-Q cannot explore all the reasons, but it does present a few. Study the seven documents that follow and answer the question: *Why did Christianity take hold in the ancient world?*



## Background Essay Questions

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1. How many years ago was Jesus born?
2. If asked what religion he was, what would Jesus have likely answered?
3. Why might Jewish elders in Jerusalem have been uncomfortable with Jesus's claim that he was the Son of God?
4. How did Jesus's story and teachings spread across the ancient world after his death?
5. Define these terms:

Aramaic

messiah

apostles

New Testament

gospels

converts

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**1 CE** – Possible year of Jesus's birth

**27-29** – Jesus begins public ministry.

**33** – Possible year of crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans

**60-90** – The four New Testament gospels are written.

**64-67** – Peter and perhaps Paul (history is uncertain) executed by Romans

**161-261** – Persecution of Christians by Romans intensifies.

**312** – The Roman emperor Constantine adopts Christianity as his own faith.

## Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

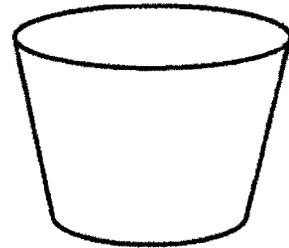
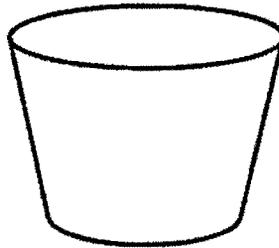
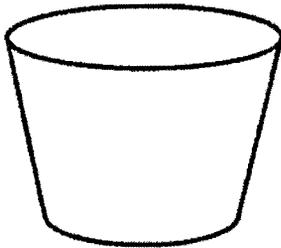
### Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. What terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

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### Pre-Bucketing

**Directions:** Using any clues from the Mini-Q question and the document titles on the cover page, think of possible analytical categories and label the buckets.



## Document A

**Source:** The Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verses 25-37, *The Bible*.

**Note:** This story, called a parable, was probably written down in Luke between 80 and 90 CE. Both the priest and the Levite were Jewish. The victim was also likely Jewish. Samaritans were from an old sect generally disliked by other Jewish people.

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There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test [Jesus] and said, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

He said in reply: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

"You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."

But because he wanted to justify [excuse] himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, and but when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, "Take care of him. If you spend more than I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back."

Jesus asked the expert in the law, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?"

He replied, "The one who treated him with mercy."

Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

### Document Analysis

1. This type of story is called a "parable." What is a parable?
2. What question was Jesus asked that caused him to respond by telling this parable?
3. What did the Jewish priest and the Levite do when they saw the naked, beaten man? What did the Samaritan do?
4. What message was Jesus stating in this parable?
5. How can this document be used to explain why Christianity took hold in the ancient world?

## Document B

**Source:** Religious historian Helmut Koester, as quoted in the 2009 PBS documentary *From Jesus to Christ*.

Why was the Christian community something that people wanted to join? ... One [reason] was certainly that the message that was preached here promised ... immortality, a future life which would be liberation from sickness and from disease and from poverty, and individual isolation. There is a future for the individual ... beyond the powers of this world....

**Note:** Roman society did believe in immortality, but it was a bit complicated. The ancient Romans believed that when one died, one was met by Mercury, the messenger god and son of Jupiter, and taken to the river Styx, where they were received and then judged. After judgment, if they passed muster, they would be sent to one of the two afterworlds, one for heroes, one for commoners.

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## Document Analysis

1. What is the meaning of immortality?
2. According to Professor Koester, why was immortality so appealing to people living in the first century CE?
3. Refer to the note. For the average Roman, was there anything unappealing about the Roman idea of immortality?
4. How can you use this document to explain why Christianity took hold in the ancient world?

**Document C**

**Source:** Religious historian Elaine Pagels, as quoted in *From Jesus to Christ, 2009*.

I was thinking a great deal about why this movement succeeded, and I thought it may have had a lot to do ... with the story they told about the creation [of the earth]. Because they told the story about how human beings were made in the image of God.... Now, if you think about the gods of the ancient world and you think about what they looked like, they looked like the emperor and his court. So those gods looked very different. But this religion is saying that every person, man, woman, child, slave, barbarian, no matter who, is made in the image of God and is therefore of enormous value in the eyes of God. ... That's an extraordinary message. And it would have been enormous news to many people who never saw their lives having value. I think that is a powerful appeal of this religion....

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**Document Analysis**

1. The Jewish and Christian creation story says that God made human beings “in his image.” What does that mean?
2. What did images of gods typically look like in the Roman Empire and other empires of the ancient world?
3. How can this document be used to help explain why Christianity took hold in the ancient world?

## Document D

Source: Helmut Koester, as quoted in *From Jesus to Christ, 2009*.

[We ask again], why was the Christian community something that people wanted to join? ... Rome is a very strict hierarchical system, in which the emperor is at the pinnacle, all the way up and then all the blessings in the world that come to people come down from above. The emperor is the conduit [connecting path] to the divine world. And if you're at the bottom of that social pyramid, not a whole lot of things are coming down to you anymore....

Now the Christian community, as we have it particularly in the letters of Paul, ... says in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free.... Here is a community that invites you, which makes you an equal with all other members of that community. Which does not give you any disadvantages. On the contrary, it gives even the lowliest slave personal dignity and status. Moreover ... the care for each other becomes very important.... If they are hungry, they know where to go. If they are sick, there is an elder who will lay on hands to them to heal them.

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### Document Analysis

1. Helmut Koester describes Roman society as “a very strict hierarchical system.” Draw a simple picture or diagram that illustrates this hierarchical Roman society.
2. According to this Roman social system, who stands between the divine world of the gods and the people?
3. What does Koester mean when he says, “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free?”
4. How can you use this document to explain why people would have joined an early Christian community?

## Document E

Source: Adapted from Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul*, Harper Collins, 2009.

### Roman Ideology and Christianity, Compared

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A crucial difference between the program of Caesar and the program of Christ is between peace through violent victory and peace through nonviolent justice. Here, in comparison and contrast. . . are those two visions:

Roman Ideology → Violence → Victory → Peace

*Versus*

Christianity → Nonviolence → Justice → Peace

There will be peace on earth, said Roman ideology, when all is quiet and orderly.  
There will be peace on earth, said Christianity, when all is fair and just.

### Document Analysis

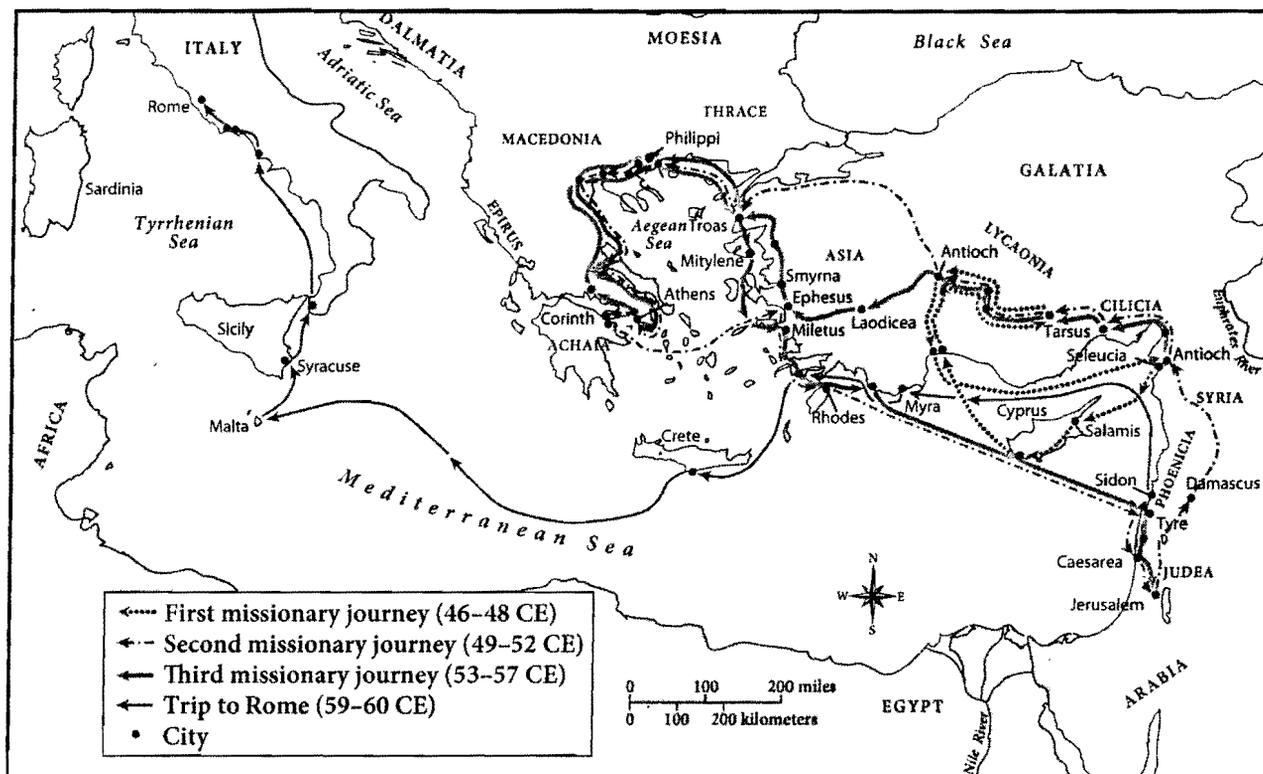
1. What is the meaning of “Roman ideology”?
2. According to Helmut Koester in Document D, who in Rome was the voice of the gods?
3. According to the chart, how did Roman leaders expect to achieve peace in the world?
4. According to the chart, how did Christianity expect to achieve peace in the world?
5. How might one use this document to explain why Christianity took hold in the ancient world?

## Document F

Source: Map adapted from *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* by John McManners, Oxford University Press, 1990.

**Background Note:** Paul was a Jewish tent-maker from the city of Tarsus in modern-day Turkey. Probably a few years younger than Jesus, Paul never met the preacher. In fact, he was angry about Jesus's claims and he spent several years criticizing those who believed. Then, according to Paul's own account, he saw the resurrected Jesus while traveling on the road to the city of Damascus, and it changed his life. He spent the next 30 years traveling the eastern Mediterranean world, spreading Jesus's teachings. It is believed that he wrote most of the 13 New Testament letters on his journeys in the 50s CE.

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## Document Analysis

1. During what years did Paul likely make these journeys?
2. Name several of the cities Paul visited during his travels. Which was the most distant from Jerusalem?
3. According to the background note, who were the people Paul visited on his travels?
4. All of the cities and regions shown on the map were part of one large empire. What empire was that?
5. Which do you think would have been more important in helping Christianity spread, Paul's travels or Paul's letters? Why?
6. How can this document be used to help explain why Christianity took hold in the ancient world?

**Document G**

**Source:** From a letter written by Pliny the Younger, a Roman judge, circa 112 CE.

**Background Note:** Pliny the Younger was a respected Roman administrator who, in 103 CE, was sent to Bithynia (modern western Turkey) by the emperor to help govern this troubled area. Part of the unrest was caused by a new group that called themselves Christians, who refused to buy sacrificial items to offer the Roman gods. Pliny served as judge at the trials of many of those accused of disrespecting Roman beliefs. His reference to them as “Christians” is early evidence that Christianity had become a distinct religion in the Roman Empire.

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(H)ere is the procedure I have followed in the case of those brought before me on account of being Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians. If they confess to it, then I ask them a second and third time, while threatening punishment. If they persist, I order them to be led away [to execution]. For whether there be anything at all they should admit to [in the way of a crime], I have no doubt that at least stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy ought to be punished.

**Document Analysis**

1. When was this document written and who was the author?
2. According to the note, why were Christians rounded up for trial?
3. What did the Christians have to do to be released?
4. Pliny says that he had a number of Christians put to death even though he wasn't certain they had committed a crime. Why?
5. How can this document be used to explain why Christianity took hold in the ancient world?