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The Empire Becomes Christian

SOURCE 1



A cross and altar found in Herculaneum.

We can be fairly sure there were some Christians in Pompeii and Herculaneum when Vesuvius erupted because archaeologists found a cross and altar in a house in Herculaneum (source 1).

It was not safe to be a Christian in AD 79, even though the Romans were used to people who worshipped other gods. The Christians believed their God was the only true one. They could not agree to worship the gods of Rome too.

This made Christians seem disloyal, so in AD 64 the Emperor ordered Christians to be arrested. The Christian who put the cross up in Herculaneum had to keep his religion secret. He built a cupboard to hide the cross and disguised the altar as a chest.

Yet just over 200 years later, in 313, the Emperor Constantine announced that everyone, including Christians, could worship whichever gods they liked and Constantine himself was **baptized** a Christian on his deathbed in 337. In 392 the Emperor Theodosius banned all religions except Christianity. Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

i **Baptize** The act of making someone a member of the Christian Church. In the ceremony the priest pours or sprinkles water on the person as a sign that they are starting a new life as a Christian

This was a big change. Why did it happen?

Before you start to find out, remember that Christianity was a forbidden religion for more than 200 years before the time of Constantine. That means the change took a long time to happen.

Some of the causes of the change went back a very long time too. We call causes like that the long-term causes. They are the ones that make an event possible, but do not actually set it off.

You will find other causes that happened much nearer to the year 392 itself. We call these the immediate or short-term causes. They are the ones that set an event off. But they would not be likely to do so if the long-term causes were not already there.

The Christians

i **Christ** The name 'Christ' comes from the Latin word 'Christus' meaning 'anointed one' or 'messiah'.

The Christians believed in the life and teaching of Jesus **Christ** who in about AD 26, left his home in Israel, the land of the Jews and the Roman province of Judea, to travel through the country and preach.

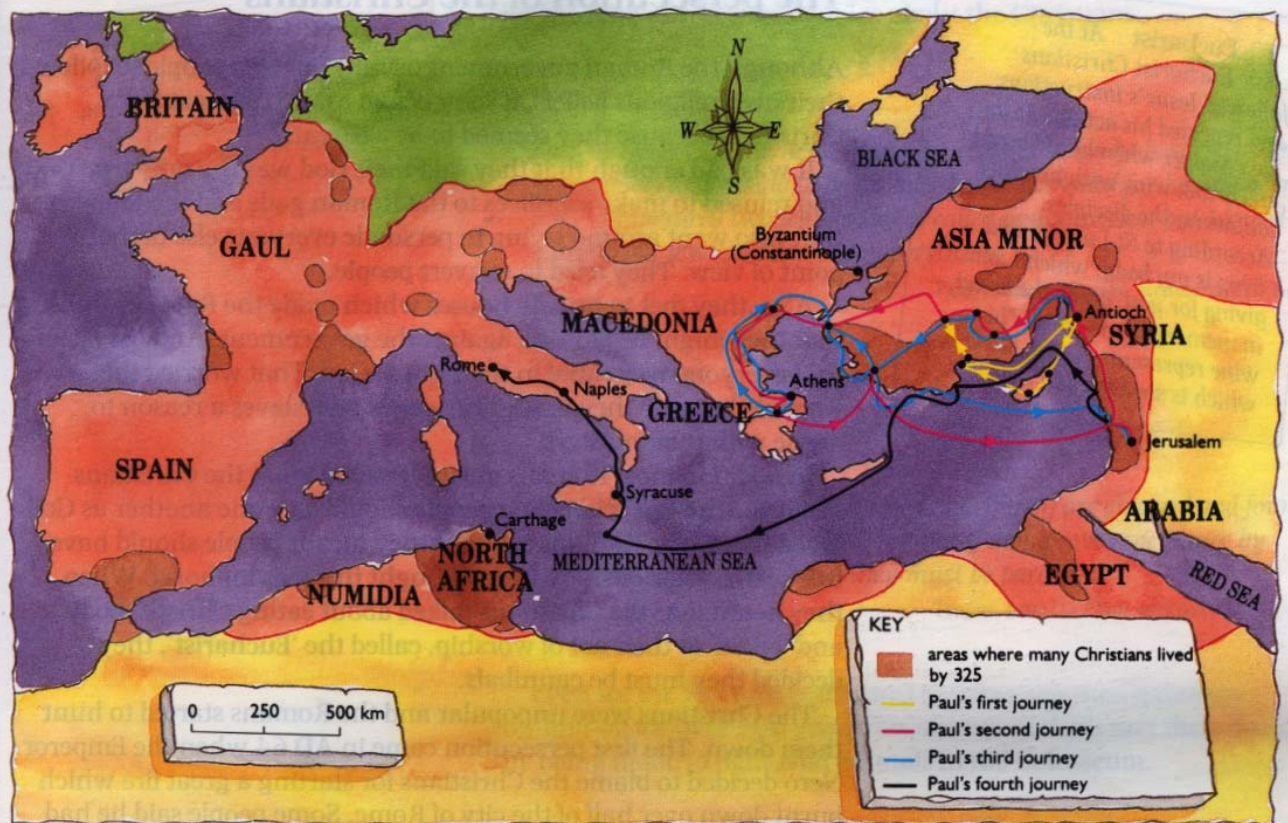
The Jews hated the Romans. They believed that a Messiah, or Saviour, would come and help them to drive out the Romans and once again make Israel rich and prosperous. When they heard Jesus, some Jews decided that the Messiah had come at last.

The chief priests of the Jewish religion did not like his message. He preached that God loved ordinary people however poor and humble, not just wealthy and powerful people. They told the Romans Jesus was dangerous and might lead a rebellion and asked Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, to have him executed.

The spread of Christianity

Jesus's followers believed he came back to life three days after his execution and that they saw him go to Heaven surrounded by a bright light. They believed that Jesus had died to save the world from evil and that people who became Christians and were truly sorry for the things they had done wrong would also overcome death by living a new life in Heaven. They started to travel outside Judea to try to convert people living in other parts of the Empire.

SOURCE 2



Paul's missionary journeys, and the spread of Christianity.

The one who did the most to spread Christianity was Paul, a tentmaker from the town of Tarsus who made four long journeys (source 2). He could speak and write Greek – the main language of people living in the east of the Empire. He taught that anyone who believed in Jesus – rich or poor, free or slave – could become a Christian.

Wherever they travelled, missionaries like Paul set up 'churches'. A church was not a building. It was the name given to several congregations, or groups, of Christians, who met in each other's houses. A church was always based in a Roman city and its surrounding countryside. A bishop looked after each church. All the churches together were called the Church. As the Church grew, Alexandria in Egypt, Carthage in North Africa and Rome itself became the headquarters for the churches in their areas.

The bishop of Rome was the most senior and, in the end, became head of the whole Church. This was partly because he was the successor of St Peter, the first bishop of Rome and the man Jesus himself appointed to lead his followers, and partly because of Rome's importance as chief city of the Empire. The first bishops were called 'papa' – father. Later that title was given only to the Bishop of Rome who became known as the 'Pope'.

i Eucharist At the Eucharist Christians followed Jesus's instructions and repeated his actions at the Last Supper when he ate bread and drank wine with his chief followers, the disciples. According to St Luke he said, 'This is my body, which I am giving for you, break the bread in memory of me', and 'This wine represents . . . my blood which is shed for you'.

The persecution of the Christians

Although the Roman government usually allowed people to follow their own religious beliefs, it soon began to turn against the Christians because they seemed to be a threat.

It was bad enough that they said their God was the only true God and refused to make sacrifices to the Roman gods and the Emperor; they also went around trying to persuade everyone else of their point of view. They tried to convert people.

Also, they met in private houses which made the Romans think that they might be plotting against the government. And they said that everyone was equal in the sight of God. That worried the Romans because they thought it would give slaves a reason to argue with their masters.

In addition most Romans misunderstood what the Christians believed. The Christians said people should love one another as God loved them. The Romans thought they meant people should have free sexual relationships. They thought this was immoral. When they heard that the Christians talked about eating Christ's 'body' and 'blood' at their act of worship, called the 'Eucharist', they decided they must be cannibals.

The Christians were unpopular and the Romans started to hunt them down. The first persecution came in AD 64 when the Emperor Nero decided to blame the Christians for starting a great fire which burnt down over half of the city of Rome. Some people said he had started the fire himself:

SOURCE 3

In order to put an end to the gossip and suspicions, he laid the blame at the door of a group who were already hated for their evil practices – the Christians . . . Christians were arrested . . . All of them were charged but not so much because they were responsible for the fire, but because of their anti-social behaviour.

Their executions were made laughable: they were covered in animal skins and torn to death by dogs, or were nailed to crosses and set alight when evening came.

Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, completed early second century AD

Christians were forced to meet secretly. They even had a secret sign, the fish (source 4).

SOURCE 4

The Christians' secret sign. If you take the first letter of each of the Greek words for 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour' you end up with IΧΘΥΣ – the Greek word for fish.



i **Deaconess** A woman who was an assistant to a priest. Male assistants were called deacons. A deacon could go on to become a priest; but a deaconess could not.

When Pliny was governor of Bithynia and Pontus, he had to ask for the Emperor Trajan's advice about the Christians:

SOURCE 5

*I am not sure . . . whether a man who repents [says he is sorry] should be pardoned for ceasing to be a Christian or punished for having been one . . . I tortured two female slaves called **deaconesses**, but I found nothing but a wicked and evil superstition.*

Pliny, *Letter to Trajan*, written AD 111–113

Trajan replied:

SOURCE 6

The Christians are not to be hunted out. If they are charged and found guilty, they must be punished, but not if they prove repentance by worshipping our gods. Then they must be pardoned.

Trajan, *Letter to Pliny*, written AD 111–113

Even so, the Romans continued to persecute the Christians on-and-off for over 200 years. Thousands of them met their deaths by being made to fight wild animals in the Colosseum.

SOURCE 7



This mosaic shows wild animals attacking people in an amphitheatre.

activity

Imagine you are a Roman emperor in the third century AD. What problems do the changes in peoples' religious beliefs give you? Make a list of them.

i **Winter Solstice** As the days get shorter in winter, the sun sinks lower in the sky until it looks as if it is standing still. This moment is called the winter solstice from the Latin 'sol' [sun] 'stitium' [stands still].

The Unconquered Sun

By the third century the Emperors themselves were showing a strong interest in another religion quite different from the old Roman one. This was the religion of 'Sol Invictus' – the Unconquered Sun – which also came from the East, this time from Syria.

The Romans had always had a god of the sun – Apollo. The difference was that the Unconquered Sun was not worshipped as one god among many. His followers said he was the supreme and only god.

This idea was beginning to appeal to the Emperors who needed to find a religion that would unite all the different peoples of the Empire. In 272 the Emperor Aurelian returned from wars in Syria and built a temple to the Sun. In 274 he ordered that the annual festival of the Unconquered Sun was to be held on the day of the winter solstice, 25 December.

SOURCE 11



The Unconquered Sun.