

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



The Byzantine Empire and Emerging Europe, A.D. 50–800

Lesson 1 The First Christians

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can religion impact a culture?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

transformation conversion; change in character or condition

structure an arrangement in a definite pattern of organization

Content Vocabulary

procurator in the Roman Empire, an official in charge of a province

clergy church leaders

laity regular church members

TAKING NOTES: *Contrasting*

ACTIVITY As you read, use a table like the one below to contrast the Roman state religion with Christianity.

Roman State Religion	Christianity

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The Rise of Civilization, Prehistory–c. 2300 B.C.

Lesson 1 The First Christians, *continued*

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The Western Roman Empire collapsed. Then a new civilization began in Western Europe. This new civilization was European civilization, which was formed by joining three major elements. These elements were the Germanic people who moved in and settled the Western Roman Empire, Roman influence, and the Christian Church.

Judaism in the Roman Empire

Guiding Question *How did a new movement within Judaism lead to the development of a new faith?*

The Jewish people had been independent for a time before the Roman conquest of 63 B.C. Judaea included the lands of the old Jewish kingdom of Judah. However, by A.D. 6, Judea had been made a Roman province, and it was placed under the direction of an official called a **procurator**.

Unrest was widespread in Judaea and Roman rule influenced developments within Judaism. The Sadducees (SA•juh•seez) included powerful priests, and they wanted cooperation with Rome. The Pharisees (FAR•uh•seez) were scholars who felt that obedience to religious law would protect them from Roman influences. The Essenes lived apart from society and shared their goods. Many Jews waited for God to save Israel from oppression. In contrast, the Zealots wanted a violent overthrow of Roman rule. A Jewish revolt began in A.D. 66, but it was crushed by the Romans four years later. The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and Roman power again was supreme.

Jesus was a Jewish teacher. He traveled and preached throughout Judaea and neighboring Galilee a few decades before the revolt. His teachings began a new movement within Judaism.



Reading Progress Check

Summarizing How did the Jews differ about how to respond to Roman rule?

The Rise of Christianity

Guiding Questions *What are the beliefs that define Christianity? How did Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and what were the consequences?*

Reports spread that Jesus had overcome death. The followers of Jesus gained additional support throughout Judaea and Galilee. This led to the development of a new faith known as Christianity.

The Teachings of Jesus

Jesus believed that his mission was to complete the salvation that God had promised to Israel throughout its history. He stated that he did not want to get rid of religious laws or the prophets' teachings—he wanted to fulfill their teachings. Jesus followed the entire law and emphasized the parts

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The Rise of Civilization, Prehistory–c. 2300 B.C.

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that called for personal **transformation**. He said that people should treat others in the way that they would want others to treat them. He said that this was a good summary of the teachings of the law and of the prophets.

Jesus used words from the Hebrew Bible when he said that the first commandment, or rule, was that people should love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. He stated the second commandment was that people should love others as they love themselves. Other important Jewish teachers had similar ideas, but Jesus expressed the ideas especially well and powerfully. The ideas of humility, charity, and love toward others later influenced the value system of Western civilization.

Some people disagreed with Jesus's preaching. They saw him as a possible revolutionary and thought he might lead a revolt against Rome. His opponents finally turned him over to Roman authorities. The prefect Pontius Pilate ordered Jesus's crucifixion. After he died, Jesus's followers said that he came back from the dead and had appeared to them. They believed Jesus was the Messiah, or anointed one. They felt he would save Israel from its enemies and bring a time of peace, prosperity, and monotheism, or the belief in one God.

Christianity Spreads Through the Empire

Early Christianity had many important apostles, or leaders. One was Simon Peter, a Jewish fisherman who had become a follower of Jesus during Jesus's lifetime. Peter was recognized as the leader of the apostles. Another major apostle was Paul, a highly educated Jewish Roman citizen who joined the movement later. Paul took the message of Jesus to Gentiles as well as to Jews. Gentiles are people who are not Jewish. He founded Christian communities in Asia Minor and along the shores of the Aegean Sea.

At the center of Paul's message was the belief that Jesus was the Savior. The Savior was the Son of God who had come to Earth to save humans. Paul taught that Jesus's death made up for the sins of all humans. People could be saved from sin and serve God by recognizing Jesus as Christ and Savior. The term *Christ* is from *Christos*, the Greek word for Messiah.

The teachings of early Christianity were passed on orally (by spoken word) through preaching. However, written materials also appeared. Paul and other followers of Jesus also wrote letters called epistles. They outlined and developed Christian beliefs. Some of Jesus's disciples, or followers, may have recorded some of the sayings of Jesus in writing. Later, between A.D. 40 and A.D. 100, these accounts became the basis of the written Gospels. They told the "good news" about Jesus. These writings give a record of Jesus's life and teachings. They also form the core of the New Testament, the second part of the Christian Bible.

Christian churches had been established in most of the major cities of the eastern empire by A.D. 100. They were also in some places in the western part of the empire. Most early Christians came from the Jews and the Greek-speaking populations of the east. Christianity had spread among a growing number of Latin-speaking people in the second and third centuries.

Roman Persecution

The basic values of Christianity were very different from those of the Greco-Roman (Greek and Roman) world. At first the Romans did not pay much attention to the Christians. They thought Christians were simply another sect, or group, of Judaism, but the Roman attitude toward Christianity began to change.

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The Romans tolerated, or accepted, the religions of other peoples unless these religions threatened public order or public morals. Many Romans began to think Christians were harmful to the Roman state because Christians refused to worship the state gods and emperors. The Romans saw this as an act of treason, and the punishment for this act was death. The Christians, however, believed there was only one God. To them, the worship of state gods and the emperors meant worshiping false gods. Such an action would put the Christians' own salvation in danger. Jews also did not worship the Roman gods. The Romans accepted this and allowed the Jews to follow "the laws of their fathers." However, they did not give this exception to the new religion of Christianity.

Persecuting means mistreating people, sometimes even making them suffer and die. The Roman government began persecuting Christians under the emperor Nero. Nero's reign was from A.D. 54–A.D. 68. The emperor blamed the Christians for a fire that destroyed much of Rome in A.D. 64 and he punished them with cruel deaths. However, the persecutions of Christians decreased in the second century. Christians still represented a small minority in the Roman Empire by A.D. 180, but Christians were a very strong group.

Roman Empire Adopts Christianity

Romans sometimes persecuted Christians in the first and second centuries, but this did not stop Christianity from growing. It strengthened Christianity instead because it caused Christianity to become more organized. Missionaries used the Roman language and organization structures to spread their message. Fear of persecution meant that only the most dedicated and loyal would follow the faith.

An important part of this change was the growing role of the bishops, who began to take more control over church communities. The Christian church was creating a new **structure** that included the **clergy**, or the church leaders, and the laity, or the regular church members. The clergy had separate roles from the **laity**.

Christianity grew quickly in the first century, took hold in the second century, and had spread widely by the third century. Why was Christianity able to attract and keep so many followers?

First, the Christian message had much to offer the Roman world. The Roman state-based religion was impersonal. It existed for the good of Rome. Christianity was personal. It offered salvation and eternal life to individuals. Christianity gave life a meaning and purpose beyond the simple material things of everyday reality.

Second, Christianity seemed familiar. Some thought it was like other mystery religions, which offered personal religious experiences and which often promised life after death. Christianity promised immortality, or life forever, through a savior-god who sacrificed himself. At the same time, it offered more than the other mystery religions did. Jesus had been a human figure, and he was easy to relate to. Christianity also did not require painful or expensive initiation rites as other mystery religions did. People entered into the Christian community through baptism, or using water to become pure.

Finally, Christianity fulfilled the human need to belong. Christians formed communities bound to one another. In these communities, people could express their love by helping one another and offering assistance to the poor and the sick. Christianity satisfied the need to belong in a way that the huge Roman Empire could never provide.

Christianity was attractive to all classes, but it was especially popular with the poor and powerless. Eternal life is promised to everyone, including rich, poor, aristocrats, slaves, men, and women. Paul stated in his letters to the Colossians and the Galatians that all people who believe in Christ are one. Christianity did not call for revolution, but it stressed a sense of spiritual equality for all people. This was a revolutionary idea at the time.

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The Christian Church became more organized in the third century. Some emperors began new persecutions, but their plans failed. The last great persecution was by Diocletian (dy·uh·KLEE·shuhn) at the beginning of the fourth century. However, even he had to admit that Christianity and its followers were too strong to be stopped by force.

Christianity prospered as never before in the fourth century. Constantine became the first Christian emperor. His support for Christianity supposedly began in A.D. 312, when his army was about to fight an important battle. According to the traditional story, Constantine saw a vision of the Christian cross before the battle. The cross had the words, "In this sign you shall conquer." Constantine won the battle. He was now convinced of the Christian God's power. Constantine was not baptized until the end of his life. However, in A.D. 313 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan. It proclaimed, or stated, official tolerance of Christianity. This meant Christians were no longer persecuted. Theodosius the Great ruled from A.D. 378 to A.D. 395. Under his rule, the Romans adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.



Reading Progress Check

Analyzing Prior to the adoption of Christianity in the empire, why did the Romans charge some Christians with treason?
