

Quaestio: _____

Early Christianity in the Roman World

Directions: Read and examine the documents below and answer the accompanying questions.

Jesus in Judea

Jesus was a Jewish religious teacher, healer, and prophet from the small town of Galilee in Roman Judea. Most of what we know about Jesus comes from the **New Testament** of the Bible, a compilation of early Christian writings. According to Christian belief, his birth was a miracle, as his mother Mary was a virgin. He was very knowledgeable in the teachings of the **Law of the Torah**, and had his own interpretations that challenged what some Jewish scholars were teaching at the time. He gathered a group of followers, referred to as the **disciples**, who believed he was the **Messiah** (or Christ, from the Greek *Xristos*) meaning anointed one or chosen one. According to Jewish belief, the Messiah was to be a person who would be chosen by God to save the Jews from oppression and lead them into an age of peace. At this time, there were many Jews calling for a revolution against the Romans, who had occupied their land. Some of the disciples were even members of a revolutionary group called the Zealots. Some historians, therefore, believe that the Romans viewed Jesus as a political threat, worried that he was planning to lead a rebellion against Rome. According to Christian teachings, Jesus was arrested, tried, and condemned to death by crucifixion, the typical punishment for rebels. However, Christians believe that he came back to life three days later, visited the disciples, and then ascended to heaven. This event is called the **Resurrection**, and it became central to Christian faith.

“Christianity starts out obviously as a Jewish cult, a Jewish religion. Jesus was a Jew, and all of the early Christians considered themselves Jews.”

Source: Prof. Myles McDonnell, CUNY Baruch College

“One of the [Jewish] scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first (most important) of all?’ Jesus answered [quoting the Torah], ‘The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” “There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Source: Gospel according to Mark 12:28-31, part of the New Testament of the Bible

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Source: Gospel according to Matthew 5:17, part of the New Testament of the Bible

1. **How do the teachings of Jesus reflect his connection to Jewish tradition?**

2. **Examine the first commandment mentioned by Jesus. What belief does it represent?**

3. **What did the Jews believe about the Messiah?**

Paul the Preacher

Soon the message of Jesus spread and many Jews accepted him as the Messiah. However, the early Christians were still a **sect** (subgroup) of the Jewish religion, so **Gentiles** (non-Jews) had to convert to Judaism to become Christian. This meant they had to follow **Jewish Law**, which included kosher food restrictions and circumcision for men. This changed with a man named Paul, a Jew from Asia Minor. Paul never met Jesus in life but claimed to have seen him in a vision, after which he accepted Jesus as the Messiah and became a traveling preacher.

“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.”

Source: Acts 9:3-5, part of the New Testament of the Bible

As a Roman citizen, Paul had access to the wider Roman world, and spread his interpretation of the teachings of Jesus to Asia Minor, Greece, and even Italy. He taught that Jesus was the son of God who had died on the cross as a sacrifice to save the world from sin. One of Paul’s most important contributions was his teaching that Christians were not required to follow the Law of the Torah. His letters to different cities explaining Christian beliefs became a big part of the New Testament of the Bible

“...a person is considered righteous not by [following] the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be considered righteous by faith in Christ, and not by [following] the Law, because no one will be considered righteous by [following] the Law.”

Source: Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians 2:16, part of the New Testament of the Bible

“Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes... If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.”

Source: Paul’s Epistle to the Romans 10:4-12, part of the New Testament of the Bible

Paul’s flexible view that the Law of the Torah was no longer needed for Christians put him into conflict with some of the original disciples and more traditional Jewish Christians, but it also made his teachings more appealing to the Gentiles to whom he preached, who could more easily embrace the new faith.

“The status of the apostle Paul was always in question in the early Church. And the reason was... because he had not been an early follower of Jesus, not known him during his lifetime... so there was tension between Paul and the leaders of the Jerusalem Church”

Source: Robert W Funk, Founder of the Jesus Seminar

“Very often Christians will think what happened between Christianity and Judaism insofar as those two religions eventually split, was that some Jews believed Jesus was the Messiah, other Jews would not, so the big split was over the Messiah-ship of Jesus. That is almost totally wrong. What the split is over is the attitude toward God’s law, [whether we can] begin to decide that there are parts of God’s law that can be left aside.”

Source: John Dominic Crossan, Christian Theologian and former Catholic Priest

4. How did Paul’s teachings differ from those of the disciples in Jerusalem?

5. Why was Paul’s message so appealing to non-Jews?

The Appeal of Christianity

As the message of Christianity spread throughout the Empire, many were drawn to its message of peace, inclusion, love, and a promise of a better life in the next world. It appealed to those who hoped for change the most.

“Christians were promised that they were going to a happier place, a place that they would be welcomed and they would be one of the elect (chosen) in this place called heaven.”

Source: Dr. Karen Hersch PhD, Temple University

“Generally speaking, early Christianity is a religion of the poor, and people who aren’t poor resisted. Any of these social problems which any poor person would encounter in a large city, were things that the Christian organizations would provide”

Source: Prof. Myles McDonnell, CUNY Baruch College

Then [Jesus] looked up at his disciples (students/followers) and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

Source: Gospel according to Luke 6:20-21, part of the New Testament of the Bible

“Women got a raw deal from traditional Roman religion. Within the Roman world, within traditional Roman structures, young girls had a very small chance of surviving. If a family had a second daughter, that daughter would very likely be killed shortly after birth. Christian society didn’t allow this. Women adopted Christianity because, to them, it was a way of preserving their family.”

Source: Prof. Myles McDonnell, CUNY Baruch College

6. To whom did Christianity appeal, and why?

Roman Suspicion and Persecution

While Early Christianity grew steadily within the Roman world, suspicions arose about this strange new faith. Christians were seen as denying the Roman gods, abandoning the tradition, and therefore being unpatriotic and disloyal to Rome. Christians often practiced in secret, which only led to more suspicion.

“In my view, Roman religion was the most tolerant of any religion I can name. What we find, in fact, is that Romans were probably initially surprised by the rigid monotheism of the Christians. They just couldn’t understand why they couldn’t worship other gods.”

Source: Dr. Karen Hersch PhD, Temple University

“What was peculiar about Christianity to a Roman’s point of view is that it originated recently with a particular individual, and that that particular individual was executed as a criminal made the religion even more peculiar and more suspicious to the Roman authorities.”

Source: Prof. Myles McDonnell, CUNY Baruch College

“They saw baptism, they saw Christians lowering people, even children, into the water, and they believed that Christians were drowning people, this is part of their faith. It was their custom to call one another brother and sister if they were in the faith. If an average Roman heard a Christian addressing his wife as sister, an average Roman would think they were engaged in incest. [Romans] heard that Christians ate the body and blood of a man, their god. So Romans hearing this on the street thought Christians are cannibals.”

Source: Dr. Karen Hersch PhD, Temple University

“[Christians] saw with in the demands of traditional state religion within the Roman Empire things that they couldn’t tolerate. The Christians no longer wanted to participate... [Christians who refused to sacrifice to Roman gods] died in the same way that other criminals, or others who disobeyed imperial orders, would have died in the Roman world. Christian persecution is one way of looking at a problem that others might just call law-enforcement and punishment.”

Source: Dr Paul Stevenson, Durham University

7. Why did Christians refuse to sacrifice to Roman gods, and why was this such a problem for Romans?

8. What rumors spread about Christians and why?

There were several periods of intense persecution of Christians, and those who were killed for practicing Christianity were called **martyrs**, people who die for beliefs. They became heroes, and stories about them helped Christianity to grow further. One of the most famous persecutions was under the emperor Nero. A major fire broke out in Rome, and people were suspicious that Nero had set it. To avoid suspicion, he blamed it on the Christians.

[Emperor] Nero [inflicted] the most fearful punishments on those popularly called Christians, a group hated because of their outrageous practices. The founder of this sect, Christus, was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilatus. Thus the [harmful] superstition was suppressed for the while, but it broke out again not only in Judaea, where this evil had its origin, but even in Rome, to which all obnoxious and disgraceful elements from everywhere in the world and receive a large following... A vast multitude (large number) was convicted... Their executions were made into a sport in that they were covered with skins of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs, or they were fastened to crosses or wrapped with flammable materials so that... they could be burned to serve as torches in the night...

Source: Roman historian Tacitus describing the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE

9. How did Nero punish the Christians?

10. How does the Roman historian Tacitus feel about Christians? Cite textual evidence.