

Name: _____
Date: _____

Christianity

Christianity is now the religion of over two billion people on every populated continent, but the faith began as a small movement in the city of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Judea. Jerusalem is a city on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the modern nation of Israel.

Most of the people who lived in and near Jerusalem during the reign of Caesar Augustus were Jews who believed in one God. This was unusual because at that time, most Romans were polytheists. Polytheists are people who believe in many gods.

The Romans allowed the Jews to practice their faith and did not force the Jews to worship Roman gods. About 30CE, a holy man named Jesus began to attract a following in Jerusalem. Jesus' followers came to believe that Jesus was the son of the God of the Jews and that he performed miracles.

The followers of Jesus angered Roman authorities because they refused to follow either Jewish or Roman laws. The authorities arrested and executed Jesus by nailing him to a cross. This form of execution is known as crucifixion. Three days after his execution, Jesus' followers said they saw him risen from the dead.

The followers of Jesus called him Christ. Christ is a Greek word that means "chosen one," because his followers believed Jesus was chosen by God to be his messenger. In time, the followers of Jesus became known as Christians. The Christians taught that people's sins would be forgiven if they became Christian. Their message was not successful with many Jews, but countless pagans throughout the Roman Empire responded to the idea of Christian salvation.

Many passionate believers carried the message of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. One of the most successful was a Greek-speaking Jew named Saul of Tarsus, known to Christians as Saint Paul. As a young man, Paul helped to persecute Christians, but one day, shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus, Paul had a vision in which he believed Jesus spoke to him from heaven. Paul spent the rest of his life writing about Christianity and winning new converts to the faith. Through the persistence of Paul and

other Christian missionaries, small Christian communities developed throughout the Roman Empire.

The first Christians believed that Jesus would quickly return to earth, and so saw no need to create any written records of his life. About fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians combined the stories of the life and wisdom of Jesus into four books known as Gospels. Gospel means "good news."

The Bible is the holy book of Christianity; it consists of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written long before the time of Jesus; it contains the sacred writings of the Jewish people. The New Testament includes the Gospels, along with letters written by Paul and other Christian writers. The Bible has been translated into more than 1,500 languages and has been read by more people than any other book.

At first, the Romans did not mind that Christians did not worship Roman gods. The Roman Empire was prosperous, and there were not many Christians. The Emperor Nero began persecuting Christians in 64CE. Nero blamed Christians for causing a great fire that burned for more than five days and destroyed much of Rome. Within the next two hundred years, barbarian warriors attacked the empire. Many Romans suggested that the Roman Empire was experiencing bad times because a growing group of Christians did not worship the Roman gods.

Roman emperors became increasingly intolerant of Christianity. In 202CE, Emperor banned any Roman citizen from converting to Christianity or Judaism. Those who disobeyed the emperor were often tortured by soldiers or forced to fight wild animals at sporting events. Despite the persecutions, Christianity continued to grow.

Emperor Constantine ended persecution of Christians when he seized power in 306CE. Four years later, Constantine made Christianity legal throughout the Roman Empire. A legend says that on the eve of a battle, Constantine saw a Christian symbol in the sky with words that translate to "By this sign you shall conquer." Constantine never went so far as to establish

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Christianity as the official religion of the empire, but he did legalize the religion and encouraged its growth.

While Constantine supported the Christian Church, he continued to worship Roman gods. In

337CE, Constantine was dying. Only then did the emperor call for a bishop so that he could be baptized into the Christian Church. Fifty years after Constantine's death, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Answer in complete sentences

1. What was a pagan?

*2. Why do you think the Romans did not force Jewish people near Jerusalem to worship Roman gods?

*3. According to the text, why did the followers of Jesus anger the local authorities in Jerusalem?

*4. Why were the followers of Jesus eventually called Christians?

5. According to the text, why were many pagans attracted to the ideas of Christianity?

*6. How does the New Testament of the Christian Bible differ from the Old Testament?

*7. Superstition is belief resulting from ignorance or fear of the unknown. Describe how Roman superstition led to persecution of Christians.

8. What Emperor promoted Christianity and joined the church on his deathbed?

*This is a higher order learning question. You will earn credit for any reasonable answer.