

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

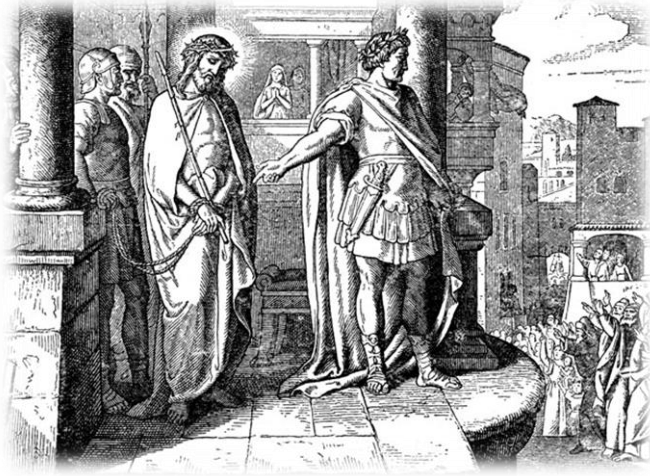
After the assassination of Julius Caesar and the deaths of Brutus and Cassius, Octavian, the adopted son of Caesar, fought a civil war with Mark Antony for control of Rome. When Octavian achieved victory, Mark Antony and his lover, Cleopatra the Queen of Egypt, committed suicide, effectively making Octavian the undisputed leader of the Roman world. Rather than calling himself a king, a term that still sent up red flags for many democratic Romans, Octavian declared himself an *emperor*. In spite of the name change, this position held all the kingly powers of a dictator or absolute ruler. Renaming himself Caesar Augustus in order to evoke the name of his adopted father, whom he declared to be a god, Octavian transformed the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire. The month of July was renamed for Julius Caesar, and August was named for Caesar Augustus himself.



Although Caesar Augustus ended the centuries-old republic, his reign was one of prosperity and peace throughout the known world, often called the *Pax Romana* or “Roman peace.” He was the first of a long line of emperors, and each new emperor incorporated the name *Caesar* into their own. For centuries afterward the term *Caesar* lived on around the world through kingly titles like *czar* and *kaiser*. Ironically, the reign of Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man the world had ever seen, would be overshadowed in fame by the birth of a simple carpenter.

THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY While religion played an important role in Roman society, the worship of Roman gods was impersonal and often practiced without a great deal of emotion. The Roman gods were many and varied widely—even the Roman emperors were worshipped as gods. As the empire grew, so, too, did a new religion called Christianity. Born as a movement within Judaism, it emphasized a more personal relationship between God and people—and attracted many Romans.

On the far edge of the Roman Empire, lay a region called Palestine. This region, which encompassed the region formerly known as Israel in older times, was home to a people called the Jews or Israelites. Their homeland had become part of the empire through the conquests of Pompey the Great a generation before. Now during the reign of Caesar Augustus, an inconspicuous birth occurred. According to the New Testament a man named Jesus of Nazareth was born in the town of Bethlehem. His religious ministry would change the world.



At the age of thirty, Jesus began his public ministry. For the next three years, he preached, taught, did good works, and reportedly performed miracles. His teachings contained many ideas from Jewish tradition, such as monotheism (or belief in only one god) and the principles of the Ten Commandments. Jesus emphasized God's personal relationship to each human being. He stressed the importance of people's love for God, their neighbors, their enemies, and even themselves. He also taught that God

would end wickedness in the world and would establish an eternal kingdom after death for people who sincerely repented their sins. Some of the Gospels are thought to have been written by one or more of Jesus's disciples (or pupils). These twelve men later came to be called apostles.

As Jesus preached from town to town, his fame grew. He attracted large crowds, and many people were touched by his message. Because Jesus ignored wealth and status, his message had special appeal to the poor. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," he said. His words, as related in the Gospels, were simple and direct. Women, an often ignored demographic of society, were among some of Jesus's most devoted followers as well. The special attention that Jesus paid to marginalized groups—women, the poor, and even children—made his message resonate with many.

Jesus's growing popularity concerned both Roman and Jewish leaders. When Jesus visited Jerusalem about A.D. 29, enthusiastic crowds greeted him as the Messiah, the chosen one—the one whom the Bible had said would come to save the Jews. The chief priests of the Jews, however, denied that Jesus was the Messiah. They said his teachings were blasphemy (or contempt for God). These Jewish leaders accused Jesus of defying the authority of Rome. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, arrested Jesus and sentenced him to be crucified or nailed to a large wooden cross to die.

After Jesus's death, his body was placed in a tomb. According to the Gospels, three days later Jesus rose from the dead, and Jesus began appearing to his followers. The Gospels go on to say that then he ascended into heaven. The apostles were more convinced than ever that Jesus was the Messiah. It was from this belief that Jesus came to be referred to as Jesus Christ. *Christos* is a Greek word meaning "messiah" or "savior." The name Christianity was derived from "Christ."

CHRISTIANITY SPREADS Despite political and religious opposition, the new religion of Christianity spread slowly but steadily throughout the Roman Empire. One man, the apostle Paul, had enormous influence on Christianity's development. Paul began as Saul of Tarsus, a Jew who had never met Jesus and was at first was an enemy of Christianity. While traveling to Damascus in Syria, he reportedly had a vision of Christ. He changed his name from Saul to Paul

to symbolize his change of heart and spent the rest of his life spreading and interpreting Christ's teachings. His conversion inspired the phrase "a road to Damascus experience," which means a sudden change of belief.

The *Pax Romana*, which made travel and exchange of ideas fairly safe, provided the ideal conditions for Christianity to spread. Common languages—Latin and Greek—allowed the message to be easily understood. Paul wrote influential letters, called Epistles, to groups of believers or churches in other parts of the empire. In his teaching, Paul stressed that Jesus was the son of God who died for people's sins. He also declared that Christianity should welcome all converts, Jew or Gentile (non-Jew). It was this universality that enabled Christianity to become more than just a local religion.

JEWISH REVOLTS AND CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION The Jews despised their Roman overlords, and many of Jesus's critics had hoped that as the messiah, he would overthrow the Romans and set up an earthly kingdom. They did not understand Jesus's message that his kingdom "was not of this world" and his warning that "those who live by the sword will die by the sword." A little more than thirty years after the death of Jesus a band of Jews rebelled against Rome in A.D. 66. In A.D. 70, the Romans stormed Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple complex. All that remained was a western portion of the wall, which today is the holiest Jewish shrine. The Jewish fortress near Masada held out until A.D. 73. About a half million Jews were killed in the course of this rebellion.

The Jews made another attempt to break free of the Romans in A.D. 132. Another half-million Jews died in three years of fighting. Although the Jewish religion survived, the Jewish political state ceased to exist for more than 1,800 years. Most Jews were driven from their homeland into exile. This dispersal of the Jews is called the Diaspora. Centuries of Jewish exile followed the destruction of their temple and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

This period is called the Diaspora, from the Greek word for "dispersal." Jews fled to many parts of the world, including Europe. It was not until 1948 that Israel was restored as its own self-governing nation.

Christians also posed a problem for Roman rulers. The main reason was that they refused to worship Roman gods. This refusal was seen as opposition to Roman rule. Some Roman rulers also used Christians as scapegoats for political and economic troubles. By the second century, as the *Pax Romana* began to crumble, persecution of the Christians intensified. Romans exiled, imprisoned, or executed Christians for refusing to worship Roman deities. Thousands were



crucified, burned, or killed by wild animals in the circus arenas. Other Christians and even some non-Christians regarded persecuted Christians as martyrs. Martyrs were people willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of a belief or a cause.

Despite persecution of its followers, Christianity became a powerful force. By the late third century A.D., there were millions of Christians in the Roman Empire and beyond. The widespread appeal of Christianity was due to a variety of reasons. Christianity grew because it embraced all people—men and women, enslaved persons, the poor, and nobles; gave hope to the powerless; appealed to those who were repelled by the extravagances of imperial Rome; offered a personal relationship with a loving God; promised eternal life after death.

THE EMPIRE CONVERTS A critical moment in Christianity occurred in A.D. 312, when the Roman emperor Constantine was fighting three rivals for leadership of Rome. He had marched to the Tiber River at Rome to battle his chief rival. On the day before the battle at Milvian Bridge, Constantine prayed for divine help. He reported that he then saw an image of a cross— a symbol of Christianity. He ordered artisans to put the Christian symbol on his soldiers' shields. Constantine and his troops were victorious in battle. He credited his success to the help of the Christian God.

In the next year, A.D. 313, Constantine announced an end to the persecution of Christians. In the Edict of Milan, he declared Christianity to be one of the religions approved by the emperor. Christianity continued to gain strength. In 380, the emperor Theodosius made it the empire's official religion.

By this time, Christians had given their religion a structure, much as the Roman Empire had a hierarchy. A hierarchy is a group of persons organized in order of ranks, with each level subject to the authority of the one above. At the local level, a priest led each small group of Christians. A bishop, who was also a priest, supervised several local churches. Shortly after the crucifixion of Christ, the apostle Peter had traveled to Rome from Jerusalem and became the first bishop there. According to tradition, Jesus referred to Peter as the "rock" on which the Christian Church would be built. As a result, all priests and bishops traced their authority to him. These bishops said that Peter was the first pope, the father or head of the Christian Church. They said that whoever was bishop of Rome was also the leader of the whole Church. Also, as Rome was the capital of the empire, it seemed the logical choice to be the center of the Church.



THE EMPIRE DECLINES The Roman Empire didn't fall overnight; in fact, its fall might be better described as a "decline." Under the leadership of successive emperors, Rome's might diminished bit by bit. The Empire split in two and eventually succumbed to barbarian invasions. Many scholars have researched the Roman Empire to analyze what factors caused its demise. Their answers are often contradictory, yet there were some trends that many agree weakened the empire.

Throughout time the Romans became less dedicated to their empire. Feelings of loyalty eventually weakened among average citizens. In the past, Romans cared so deeply about their republic that they willingly sacrificed their lives for it. Conditions in the later centuries of the empire caused citizens to lose their sense of patriotism. They became indifferent to the empire's fate. A loss of morality and the break-down of the Roman family have also been cited as factors in the empire's demise. Others claim that the empire just became too large to manage, and its greedy emperors lost control of their subjects.

No matter what the reasons were, the Roman Empire faded away, but its legacy lived on. Historian R.H. Barrow has stated that Rome never fell because it turned into something even greater—an idea—and achieved immortality.

Latin, the language of the Romans, remained the language of learning in the West long after the fall of Rome. It was the official language of the Roman Catholic Church into the 20th century. Latin was adopted by different peoples and developed into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Romanian. These languages are called Romance languages because of their common Roman heritage.

The Romans were masterful architects. Visitors from all over the empire marveled at the architecture of Rome. The arch, the dome, and concrete were combined to build spectacular structures, such as the Colosseum. If you look at architecture today, you will see the fingerprints of the Romans.

Roman law inspired many modern law practices. Some of the most important principles of Roman law were: All persons had the right to equal treatment under the law, a person was considered innocent until proven guilty, the burden of proof rested with the accuser rather than the accused, and a person should be punished only for actions, not thoughts. Also any law that seemed unreasonable or grossly unfair could be set aside.

The Christian church, too, outlived the empire that nurtured it. Through the work of missionaries, Christianity spread all throughout Europe, and the teachings of Jesus Christ helped shape the nations that succeeded Rome.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did Caesar Augustus forever alter the Roman world?
2. How did Christianity incorporate marginalized groups?
3. How was the kingdom of which Jesus spoke different from other kingdoms?
4. Governments often choose scapegoats (or innocent victims) on which they can blame society's problems like the Romans chose the Christians. Who are some examples of scapegoats in modern times?
5. How did the legacy of Rome continue even after the fall of the empire?