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# The Birth of Christianity A.D. 379


## Step 1 Excite

**D**iscuss what you know about the church's beginnings. Was Jesus the founder of Christianity? When did Christianity become separate from Judaism?

Imagine and discuss what it would be like if laws in your country were passed to put to death all those who professed to believe in Jesus. What if your family and friends who refused to renounce Christ were put to a gruesome death by fighting in arenas with wild animals or gladiators? Imagine that your friends and family were driven underground to survive.

Watch a video. (Look for the videos below at your local video store, or watch television schedules for local listings.)

 [Rome: Power and Glory, Volume V: The Cult of Order](#) ♦  
When the Roman people grow weary of the Empire's moral decay many turn to Christianity. As these beliefs spread, however, the emperor's influence wanes and Christians fall subject to cruel oppression. See description of this six-volume set in the Resources Section.

 [Ancient Rome: The Story of an Empire That Ruled the World](#) ♦  
Volume 4, "The Enduring Legacy," looks at Rome's early indifference to Christianity and how this religion came to dominate the world through Rome's dominance, even as the empire itself was about to crumble. See description of this four-volume set in the Resources Section.

## Step 2 Examine

Christianity was conceived in an environment in which there was a general acceptance of Canaanite, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman gods. The Canaanite god Baal, the Egyptian god Amon, and the Persian god Ahura Mazda were identified with the Greek god Zeus. The Romans called him Jupiter. Only the Hebrews worshiped the one true God.

Jesus was born, lived, and died in a small corner of the Roman Empire. During His lifetime the Romans allowed the Jews to practice their faith and did not make them worship Roman gods.

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Resources recommended in ♦ several lessons, ★ several units, ♥ other HOW Units. 🎥 Key Resource (see beginning of unit).

## Ancient Rome

Jesus was a faithful and observant Jew. He loved the Torah and observed it with the deepest faithfulness and spiritual dedication. He lived by it until his last breath. In the first century, there were literally hundreds of thousands of Jews that believed in Jesus (Acts 2:41,47, 4:4; 6:7; 9:31; 21:20). Very few Gentiles converted before Peter and Paul were sent out to spread the good news to the Gentiles. When God miraculously showed the believing Jews that Jesus was the Messiah for both Jew and Gentile alike, then Gentiles from every nation began to pour into this Jewish faith. The followers of Christ, whether Jewish or Gentile, were seen as one family. Both considered themselves part of Israel. The Gentiles saw themselves as grafted into Israel (Romans 11), not replacing Israel.

By the end of the 1st century A.D. three main movements remained:

1. Pauline Christians: A group of mainline congregations, largely of non-Jewish Christians.
2. Gnostic Christians: Later declared heretics by a series of church councils, and suppressed.
3. Jewish Christians: Remnants of the group originally headed by James, and including Jesus' disciples. Rejected by traditional Judaism because of their faith in Yeshua, and rejected by Christianity as well because they continued their Jewish way of life, Messianic Jews dwindled in numbers until, in the fourth century, they ceased to be a cohesive community.

The word "Christian" was not used until A.D. 42 in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Later, it was adopted to set apart Jews believing in Jesus from unbelieving Jews. Ultimately, it became an identity for the entire Church.

Christianity was first ignored, then persecuted, and finally supported by the Roman government. But it continued to grow, and it became a menace to the empire, threatening to exalt itself above the Caesar. Laws were passed to put to death those who professed belief in Jesus of Nazareth. The Church was driven underground, even into the Catacombs under Rome. When Christians were caught, they were told to renounce their faith in Jesus; if they would not, they were killed. Many times, the method of execution was a sporting event in front of the citizens of the Roman Empire. This was intended to send a clear message to all. Some were put into arenas with wild animals, some into arenas with gladiators. Some were simply put to a gruesome death. In spite of the extreme penalties, this sect called Christians continued to grow and multiply. (Jesus spoke of "persecutions" coming upon His followers in Matt. 5:10-12 and 10:23.)

By the time of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), Constantine, Emperor of Rome, claimed conversion to Christianity and considered himself the leader in the Christian church. He even made it the official religion of the Empire, though he himself worshiped the sun. Life changed















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Blue text indicates Internet link.

drastically for the Gentile believers; they were no longer persecuted. The Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were forced to give up all ties with Judaism, Jewish practices, Jewish friends, and anything Jewish.


Research Christianity's beginnings in Rome. Use any resource (an encyclopedia, nonfiction book, historical novel, or the Internet). We recommend the following:


Books

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[The Usborne Book of the Ancient World](#)  ★  
 Read: "Alternatives to State Religion" (257).
- 
[The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era](#)  ♥  
 Read: "Influences on Christian Organization" (71-88).
- 
[The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome](#)  ♦  
 Read: "The Spread of Christianity" (124-125).
- 
[Caesar and Christ](#) (Story of Civilization III) ♦  
 Read: Book V "The Youth of Christianity" (552-664).
- 
[Our Father Abraham](#)  ♥  
 Read: Chapter 6 "The Jewish Revolts and the Parting of the Way," and Chapter 7 "A History of Contempt, Anti-Semitism in the Church."
- 
[Sketches of Church History From A.D. 33 to the Reformation](#)  
 Read: Chapter 1 "[The Age of the Apostles](#) (A.D. 33-100)" (Available online).
- 
[Restoring of the Early Church](#)  ♥  
 Read: Chapter 7 "The Roman Conquest of the Church" (See description in the [Ancient Israel Resources Section](#)).
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[Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times](#) by Paul Barnett  
 Description: The pathway to understanding the New Testament leads through the vibrant landscape of the first-century Greco-Roman world. The New Testament is rooted in the concrete historical events of that world. We cannot understand the rise of Christianity apart from this. This is the story of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, and the spiritual and intellectual impact which he had on his immediate followers and those who succeeded them. Barnett offers fresh insights. In its engagement with contemporary scholarship and its emphasis on the propelling role of the historical and risen Jesus in the rise of Christianity, this book provides a timely rejoinder to current revisionism in the exploration of Christian origins. Hardcover - 500 pages (November 1999) Intervarsity Pr; ISBN: 0830815880.

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Resources recommended in ♦ several lessons, ★ several units, ♥ other HOW Units.  Key Resource (see beginning of unit).


 [Introduction to the History of Christianity](#) by Tim Dowley (Editor) ♥  
Description: The 2,000-year history of Christianity is a dramatic, intriguing, and often surprising story, told here by more than sixty specialists from ten countries in the most popular one-volume illustrated reference book on church history ever published. The book's strong points include readability, easy transition from one time period to another, a "bird's-eye-view" of church history, highlights concerning most important ideas and/or events, and a good presentation of the unity of Christian faith throughout the centuries, countries, and denominations. Hardcover - 688 pages (July 1995) Augsburg Fortress Publishing; ISBN: 0800629353.


 [Backgrounds of Early Christianity](#) by Everett Ferguson  
Description: Widely used as a textbook since its publication in 1987, this work provides an analytical and systematic introduction to the Roman, Greek, and Jewish political, social, literary, and religious backgrounds necessary for a historical understanding of the New Testament and the early church. Now, Everett Ferguson has thoroughly revised *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, completely updating the bibliographies, rewriting and adding sections, and incorporating many of the critical suggestions received from professors who have used his book. As a result, the book will inform today's students even better than before. Paperback - 611 pages 2nd edition (September 1993) Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; ISBN: 0802806694.

 [Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome](#) ♦  
See description in the Resource section.






### Internet Sources

  [The Birth of Christianity](#)  
Description: Concise article about Christianity's beginnings.

 [The Transformation of Rome from a Pagan into a Christian City](#) by Rodolfo Lanciani  
Description: Chapter One from *Pagan and Christian Rome*, originally published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company Boston and New York, 1892.




 [Christian Origins and the New Testament](#) by James Tabor  
Description: An overview of Christian origins and the New Testament, by the author of [The Jewish Roman World of Jesus](#).

 [The Birth and Rise of the Christian Church](#)  
Description: Links to several historical articles about Christianity's beginnings.

-  [Christian Churches](#) by Rodolfo Lanciani  
Description: Chapter Three from *Pagan and Christian Rome*, originally published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company Boston and New York, 1892.
-  [The Collision With Paganism](#) by Wayne A. Meeks  
Description: Article by Woolsey Professor of Biblical Studies, Yale University.
-  [The Catacombs: A Place of Hiding and Worship For the Early Church](#)  
Description: An explanation of why Christians used these underground rooms and passageways.
-  [Chronology and History of Early Christianity](#)  
Description: A time line of events in early Christianity.
-  [Christian Catacombs](#)  
Description: This site is intended for people who wish to deepen their knowledge of the Christian Catacombs of Rome and of the Church history in its origins. It provides extensive material, in separate sections, dealing with this fascinating and largely unknown topic.

## Step 3 Expand

Choose and complete one of the following activities:

-   Activity 1: Write a Story  
Write a fictional story depicting the effect that seeing a Christian martyred for his faith might have on a pagan Roman. Choose either a pagan main character who witnessed an execution or a Christian main character who observes the reaction to his imprisonment of an unbelieving friend. The conflict of the story should be an inner conflict, a struggle between doubt and faith. Younger students can narrate (orally tell) their story.
-  Activity 2: Answer Questions  
Little is known of Nero's alleged persecution of Christians after the fire in Rome in A.D. 64. Learn about the severest persecutions that came during the reigns of the emperors Domitian, Marcus Aurelius, Decius, and Valerian. Investigate the Roman persecution of Christians. Who made the attempt to extinguish Christianity altogether? Who was Julian the Apostate? Where did Christians have to hide? What were the stories of Vibia Perpetua, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr?

## Ancient Rome



### Activity 3: Write a Summary

Write a summary explaining why many Romans that were not spiritual converted to Christianity.



### Activity 4: Write a Short Work

Write a short work of historical fiction based on the martyrdom of either Vibia Perpetua, Justin Martyr, or Polycarp.



### Activity 5: Create a Monologue

Write a fictional story, turning it into a monologue. Portray your main character in a soliloquy, as if he is speaking aloud his inner struggles.

## Step 4 Excel

Share what you have learned about the Gentile Christians and Jewish believers in Rome with a friend or family member. Correct written work to demonstrate correct punctuation and spelling, and effective use of grammar. Add corrected written work or any illustrations to your portfolio.