**The Rise of Christianity**

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**CHRISTIANITY AS A JEWISH SECT.**

Christianity began with a group of Jews who followed the teachings of Jesus, a Jewish carpenter who attracted many followers during his three-year ministry which began in 30 C.E. Jesus' teachings regarding the Jewish law and his claim to be the "messiah" (the savior of the people) long-awaited by the Jews threatened the Jewish religious leaders, who managed to have him crucified by the Roman authorities in 33 C.E. on charges of heresy. Although the religion initially faltered after Jesus' death, reports that Jesus had risen from the dead bolstered the fledgling church in spite of its continued persecution by the Jewish religious leaders. The years following Jesus' crucifixion saw an increase in the number of "Christians"—so-called because they followed Jesus "the Christ." The religion was not without its growing pains, however. According to the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Epistles* of St. Paul, there soon arose a division of opinion among the followers of Jesus. On the one hand, there was a conservative group centered in Jerusalem, led by James, the brother of Jesus. They clung to the Jewish law of Moses and insisted that all Gentile converts should be circumcised. The other group centered on Paul, a Jew of the diaspora, that is, the Jewish communities living outside Judaea. He had not known Jesus personally, but he had been converted to the new religion that he believed that Jesus had preached, and he was full of zeal. He wanted to reach out to the Gentiles, and he considered the dietary restrictions of Mosaic law and circumcision unimportant. Probably Paul and his followers would have lost the quarrel, except that a Jewish revolt intervened. A sect of Jewish nationalists in Judaea called the Zealots rose in rebellion in the final years of the emperor Nero's reign. The suppression of the revolt was delayed by Nero's dethronement and a year of civil war before Vespasian took over as emperor in 69 C.E.; the next year, Jerusalem was taken by an army led by Vespasian's son, Titus. The Temple was destroyed and its treasures taken to Rome as booty. The Jewish priesthood that had presided over the sacrifices at the Temple no longer had a center for their rituals. The future of Judaism lay with the synagogues and their rabbis, and a rabbinical school that was established at Yavna—later moved to Tiberias—in Judaea was actually encouraged by the Roman authorities. Judaism developed into a religion of the Talmud, which was the collection of writings that constituted Jewish civil and religious law. The Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem that had opposed Paul had not supported the revolt, but still it was a casualty. It was dispersed, and many of its leaders were probably killed. Others fled, particularly to Alexandria.

**PERSECUTION.**

The future of Christianity lay with the followers of Paul's teachings. They had not supported the Jewish revolt, and their lack of support was not forgotten. Christianity had spread rapidly, partly because Christian preachers were welcome in the synagogues of the Diaspora. That welcome began to grow thin, however, and by the reign of Nero (54–68 C.E.), the Roman authorities began to recognize the Christians as a sect separate from the Jews, and an unpopular one at that. In 64 C.E. more than two-thirds of Rome was destroyed in a great fire. Nero needed a scapegoat, and the Christians were unpopular; in some quarters they were blamed for setting the fire. In fact, many Christians at this point in history expected an imminent Second Coming of the risen Christ and may have imagined that the fire that consumed Rome was the opening scene in the destruction of an evil empire. The Christians suffered their first state persecution at this time, but there were more to follow. The persecutions were sporadic until the middle of the third century C.E. when the empire made a systematic attempt to wipe out Christianity. The emperor Decius (249–252 C.E.) faced a Gothic invasion, the first of many that the empire would suffer. The gods seemed to be angry with Rome, and Decius insisted that everyone sacrifice to them and present certificates to that effect. Had Decius lived longer, he would have done Christianity serious damage, but he was killed in battle, and the persecution slowed. At the beginning of the fourth century C.E. there was another determined persecution, but by then Christianity was too powerful to be wiped out.