

## Why Did Christianity Take Hold in the Ancient World?

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In some ways, we know very little about Jesus of Nazareth. We do know that he lived about 2,000 years ago in what is modern-day Israel. From the Bible, we know the famous story of his birth in a stable. But we know almost nothing about his childhood or his life as a young man. In fact, it is not until Jesus is in his late twenties that the Bible picks up his story again.

The eastern Mediterranean region where Jesus grew up was multi-cultural. Israel was ruled by Rome at the time, and Greek influences were strong. In fact, along with **Aramaic**, his native language, it is quite possible that Jesus spoke Greek. Still, we know from reading the Old Testament that Jesus lived among Jewish people and followed Jewish law. What made Jesus controversial in his Jewish community was his belief that he was the **messiah**. The Greek word for messiah is “Christo.” It means the savior whom Jewish prophets promised would one day bring peace and harmony to the people of Israel.

Because he claimed to be the messiah, Jesus was considered a threat to the old Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. He also made some Romans uncomfortable; they worried that someone who called himself the Son of God could eventually obtain too much power. Local leaders put pressure on Roman officials to have this gentle but outspoken radical killed by nailing him to a cross, a form of execution usually reserved for the worst criminals.

But the story of Jesus did not end with his crucifixion. In fact, it was just beginning. Followers of Jesus, called **apostles**, spread his word by preaching love and kindness and helping those in need. Others spread the word through writing. One convert to Jesus’s teaching, Paul, traveled the eastern Mediterranean for some 30 years after Jesus’s death and wrote a number of

letters that would one day make up about half of the **New Testament**. Four other individuals known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote accounts of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. These accounts, all probably written between 60 and 90 CE, are called the **gospels**. Together, they make up the first four books of the New Testament portion of the Bible.

And so, the words and stories of Jesus were carried forth. Perhaps surprisingly, many of those who accepted his teachings were Jewish. A number of Jews had fled Roman domination in Israel and lived throughout the eastern Mediterranean. They spoke and read Greek and were able to understand the story of Jesus when it arrived. Others who were not Jewish heard the story, too, and eventually added it to their assortment of gods, myths and rituals from Rome, Greece, Egypt and be-

yond. It was in this rich and sometimes confusing landscape of cultures and religious practices that the teachings of Jesus took root.

Christianity was a slow-growing movement, however. The communities of **converts** that Paul visited were small, their total population as low as two or three thousand. Still, something was underway. By 100 CE, a number of these Jewish and non-Jewish followers were calling themselves Christian. A new religion was being born. Two centuries later, in 312 CE, the Roman ruler Constantine converted to Christianity.

This brings us back at our question. In a region where many gods and cults competed for a person’s attention, what gave the teachings of Jesus staying power? This Mini-Q cannot explore all the reasons, but it does present a few. Study the seven documents that follow and answer the question: *Why did Christianity take hold in the ancient world?*

