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THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is now practiced by more than two billion people on every populated continent. Still, the faith began as a small movement in Jerusalem in the Roman province of Judea. Jerusalem is near the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, just northeast of Egypt in present-day 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 people were polytheists who believed in many gods.

A Holy Man

The Romans allowed the Jews to practice their faith and did not force the Jews to worship Roman gods. About 30 CE, a Jewish 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. Jesus attracted a growing following at a time when Roman authorities feared unrest in Judea. They arrested and executed him by nailing him to a cross. This form of execution is known as crucifixion. Three days after his death, Jesus' followers said they saw him risen from the dead.

The First Christians

The followers of Jesus called him Christ. Christ is a Greek word meaning "chosen one" because his followers believed God chose Jesus as his messenger. Over time, Christianity gradually separated from Judaism. The Christians taught that people's sins would be forgiven if they became Christians. While most Jews did not accept the new faith, many polytheists throughout the Roman Empire responded to the idea of Christian salvation.

Paul

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. Paul initially persecuted Christians, but shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus, he 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 writers, small Christian communities developed throughout the Roman Empire.

The Gospels

The first Christians believed that Jesus would quickly return to earth and saw no need to create written records of his life. Decades after the crucifixion, Christians began writing accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus that became four books known as the Gospels. Gospel means "good news."

The Bible

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 and letters by Paul and other Christian writers. The Bible has been translated into more than 700 languages and read by more people than any other book.

Christians and Rome

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. Emperor Nero began persecuting Christians in 64 CE, blaming them for a fire that burned for nearly a week 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.

Persecution

Roman emperors became increasingly intolerant of Christianity. In 250, Emperor Decius ordered

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people throughout the empire to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Christians who refused could be imprisoned, tortured, or executed. Despite the persecution, Christianity continued to grow.

The persecution failed. In 313, Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal throughout the Roman Empire. By 380, Christianity had become the empire's official religion. A faith that began with a small group of followers in Jerusalem had become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Fill in the Blanks

Christianity began as a small movement in J__r__s__l__m. About ____ CE, a J__w__sh holy man named Jesus attracted a growing following. R__m__n authorities a__r__st__d and c__u__i__i__d Jesus, but his followers said they saw him r__s__n from the dead. They called him C__ri__t and taught that people's sins could be f__r__i__en through the new faith. Christianity gradually s__p__r__t__d from Judaism and attracted c__n__er__s throughout the Roman E__pi__e. Paul, a G__e__k-speaking Jew who had once p__r__e__ut__d Christians, became one of the faith's most successful m__s__i__n__ri__s. Christians later recorded the life and teachings of Jesus in the G__sp__ls, which became part of the N__w T__s__a__e__t. As Christianity grew, Roman emperors sometimes p__r__e__u__ed its followers for r__f__s__ng to w__r__h__p Roman gods. C__n__t__n__i__e made Christianity legal in 313, and by 380, the small m__v__m__nt that began in Jerusalem had become the official r__l__g__on of the R__m__n Empire.

Answer in Complete Sentence

1. Explain why the followers of Jesus were eventually called Christians?

2. According to the text, why were many polytheists attracted to the ideas of Christianity?

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

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