

# Chapter 11: The Late Empire and Christianity

Rome underwent half a century of crisis in the middle of the third century CE. Beset along its borders and hobbled by constant infighting, the Empire was at real risk of collapse for decades. It did not collapse, however, and in fact enjoyed a resurgence of a sort that held the Roman state together until the end of the fifth century (the western half of the Empire “fell” in 476 CE).

In fact, the period between the end of the five good emperors and the collapse of Rome was much more complex than one of simple decline and weakness, and even when the city of Rome could not defend itself, Roman civilization left an enormous, permanent impression on Western Civilization. Perhaps most importantly, what began as an obscure cult in Roman-ruled Judea eventually became one of the great world religions - Christianity - thanks to its success in spreading throughout the Roman Empire before the western Empire's collapse.

## Crisis and Recovery

Major crises affected the Empire from 235 to 284 CE. The basis of the crises was increasing pressure from foreign invaders on the Roman borders coupled with political instability within the Empire itself. The emperor Severus Alexander was murdered in 235 CE. All of the emperors to follow for the next fifty years were murdered or died in battle as well, save one; there were twenty-six emperors in those fifty years, and only one died of natural causes(!) Many emperors stayed on the throne for only a few months before they were killed. Not surprisingly, in this environment, most emperors were only concerned with either seizing the throne or staying alive once they had it, meaning they tended to neglect everything important to the stability of the Empire.

Rome's internal political problems were somewhat of its own making - the Praetorian Guard auctioned off the throne, would-be emperors eagerly assassinated their rivals, and Roman elites largely retreated to their enormous estates to profit off of their serfs. Other factors, however, were external: Rome's international environment grew much worse. In 220 BCE, a new clan - the Sassanids - seized control of Persia. The Sassanids were much more aggressive and well-organized than the earlier Parthian dynasty had been, and Rome was obliged to fight almost constant wars to contain the Persian threat. Simultaneously, the barbarian groups along Rome's northern borders were growing larger and better-organized.

Centuries of contact with Rome itself had improved agricultural techniques among the barbarians, leading to population growth. Eventually, these larger, wealthier groups joined together into forces that posed serious threats to the Roman borders.

As the quality of Roman leadership declined and the threats grew worse, the results were predictable: Rome lost battles and territory. The emperor Valerian was captured by the Persian king Shapur I when he led a Roman army against Persia and, according to some accounts, was used as the Persian king's personal footstool for climbing up onto his horse. Another emperor rebuilt walls around Rome itself in 270 CE because of the threat of Germanic invaders from the north, who had pushed all the way into northern Italy. Likewise, emperors, all being generals at this point, traveled constantly with their armies and made their courts wherever they had to while waging campaigns.



*The defeat of the emperor Valerian, kneeling on the left, before the Persian king Shapur I, on horseback.*

The problem was that the entire Roman imperial system hinged on the direct, personal decision-making of the emperor himself. The emperor was supposed to oversee all major building campaigns, state finances, and the worship of the Roman gods, not just military strategy. Thus, in an era when the speed a message could travel was limited by how fast a messenger could travel on horseback, the machinery of the Roman government ground to a halt

whenever the latest emperor was weeks or even months away from Rome. Needless to say, the problem was exacerbated when the Empire was torn between rival claimants to the throne - for a few years toward the end of the crisis period the empire proper was split into three competing “empires” under rival imperial pretenders.



*The three rival “Roman Empires” as of 271 CE.*

## Diocletian

This period of crisis ended with the ascension of the emperor Diocletian in 284 CE. He not only managed to survive for twenty years after taking the throne, he also reorganized the Empire and pulled it back from the brink. Recognizing that the sheer size of the Empire was a detriment to its effective governance, Diocletian decided to share power with a co-emperor: Diocletian ruled the eastern half of the Empire and his co-emperor Maximian ruled the west. Then, about ten years after he took the throne, Diocletian decided to further divide responsibility and each emperor took on junior emperor. This created the *Tetrarchy*, the rule of four. Diocletian further subdivided the Empire, so that for the rest of his reign, the four co-emperors (two “augusti” and two “caesars”) worked together to administer the entire territory.



*A Roman depiction of the tetrarchy dating from the period of Diocletian's reign.*

Diocletian's hope was that the tetrarchy would end the cycle of assassinations. The junior emperors were the senior emperors' respective heirs, destined to assume full power when their seniors stepped down. When that happened, each new senior emperor would then select new juniors. The overall effect was, if it worked, a neat succession of power instead of the constant bloodshed and uncertainty that had haunted Roman politics for half a century; this system was quite similar to the merit-based selection process of emperors that had held during the rule of the Five Good Emperors.

Diocletian also divided the Empire into smaller provinces so that governors had an easier time with administration. These provinces were grouped into larger units called *dioceses* overseen by an official called a "vicar." When Christianity moved from being an illegal cult to the official religion of the Empire (see below), the division of imperial territory into dioceses, overseen by vicars, would be adopted by the Catholic Church, and it persists all the way to the present in the administration of the church.

To deal with the threat of both Persia and the Germanic barbarians, Diocletian reorganized the Roman army and recruited more soldiers, making it larger than it ever had

been. He built new roads for military use to be able to move armies along the borders more efficiently. Borrowing from the Persian practice, he emphasized the use of heavy cavalry to respond quickly to threats. Finally, even though the army itself was now larger, he made individual legions smaller, so that each legion's commander no longer had enough power to take over with a single attack on the current emperor (that worked well enough for Diocletian himself, but it made little difference in the long run).

State finances were in shambles when Diocletian came to power. To try to deal with the problem, Diocletian reformed the tax system and instituted an official census for taxation purposes. He also tried to freeze wages and prices by decree, something that did not work since it created a black market for both goods and labor. Peasants bore the brunt of Diocletian's reforms; most independent farmers that still existed were turned into serfs (*coloni*), one step above slaves. State tax collectors were so feared that many peasants willingly gave their land to wealthy landowners who promised to protect them from the tax agents.

Finally, Diocletian tried to reinstate religious orthodoxy. He believed that too many people had turned away from worship of the Roman gods, which had in turn brought about the long period of crisis preceding his takeover. Thus, he went after sects that he thought threatened stability, including Christianity. He banned Christian worship and executed several thousand Christians who refused to renounce their beliefs in an attempt to wipe out the cult once and for all. Needless to say, this was a spectacular failure.

Diocletian retired in 305 CE due to failing health, as did (reluctantly) his co-emperor in the west. The idea behind the Tetrarchy was that the junior emperors would then become the senior emperors and recruit new juniors - this system worked exactly once, as the junior emperors under Diocletian and Maximian took power. Instead of a smooth transition inaugurating a stable new beginning, however, the Empire was yet again plunged into civil war. A general (at the time stationed in Britain) named Constantine, son of the Tetrarch Constantius, launched a military campaign to reunite the Empire under his sole rule. By 312 CE he had succeeded, claiming total control and appointing no co-emperor.

## Constantine

Constantine did away with the system of co-emperors (although it would re-emerge after his death), but otherwise he left things as they had been under Diocletian's reforms. The eastern and western halves of the Empire still had separate administrations and he kept up the size and organization of the army. He also took a decisive step toward stabilizing the economy by issuing

new currency based on a fixed gold standard. The new coin, the *solidus*, was to be the standard international currency of the western world for 800 years.

Constantine's greatest historical impact, however, was in the realm of religion. He was the first Christian emperor, something that had an enormous effect on the history of Europe and, ultimately, the world. Before his climactic battle in 312 CE to defeat his last rival to the imperial throne, Constantine had a vision that he claimed was sent by the Christian God, promising him victory if he converted to Christianity. There are plenty of theories about a more cynical explanation for his conversion (most revolving around the fact that Constantine went on to plunder the temples of the old Roman gods), but regardless of the fact that he used his conversion to help himself to the wealth of "pagan" temples, he actively supported Christian institutions and empowered Christian officials. Ultimately, his sponsorship of Christianity saw it expand dramatically in his lifetime.

In 324 CE, Constantine founded a new capital city for the entire empire at the site of the ancient Greek town of Byzantium, at the intersection of Europe and Anatolia (he renamed it "Constantine's City," Constantinople, which is today Istanbul). It was at the juncture of the eastern and western halves of the Empire, with all trade routes between Asia and Europe passing through its area of influence. It became the heart of wealth and power in the Empire and a Christian "new beginning" for Roman civilization itself. The city grew to become one of the great cities of late antiquity and the Middle Ages; it was fed by grain from Egypt and brought in an enormous wealth through trade. Subsequent emperors also built up massive fortifications, walls so strong that it took 1,000 years for an enemy to be able to breach them (namely the Ottoman Turks, who finally conquered the city in 1453 CE).

## Religion: Roman Faiths and the birth of Christianity

Rome had always been a hotbed of religious diversity. While the official Roman gods were venerated across the Empire, Roman elites had no objections to the worship of other deities, and indeed many Romans (elites and commoners alike) eagerly embraced foreign faiths. Originating in the Hellenistic kingdoms, many Romans were attracted to *mystery religions*, cults that promised spiritual salvation to their members. These mystery religions shared a belief that the universe was full of magical charms that could lead to spiritual salvation or eternal life itself. In many ways, they were more like cults of magic than traditional religious faiths. A worshiper could join multiple mystery religions, intoning chants and prayers and participating in rituals in hopes of securing good fortune and wealth in life and the possibility of spiritual immortality after death.

Even Rome's perennial adversary Persia supplied sources of spiritual inspiration to Rome. A Zoroastrian demigod, Mithras, became immensely popular among Romans. Mithrans believed that Mithras had been a soldier, slain by his enemies, who then rose to enjoy eternal life. Roman soldiers campaigning in Persia brought Mithranism back to Rome - Mithras's identity as a former soldier made his worship all the more appealing to members of the Roman military. The worship of Mithras was so popular that, some historians have noted, it is easy to imagine the Roman Empire becoming Mithran instead of Christian if Constantine had not converted to the latter faith.



*A relief from an altar of Mithras dating from the second or third century CE. In all of the discovered Mithran temples, Mithras is depicted slaying a bull, which somehow (the details of the myth are long lost) helped to create the world.*

In some cases, non-Roman gods even came to supplant Roman ones; one of the Severan emperors embraced the worship of the Syrian sun god Sol Invictus (meaning "the unconquered sun") and had a temple built in Rome to honor the god alongside the traditional Roman deities. The notion of being as powerful and unstoppable as the sun appealed to future emperors, so subsequent emperors tended to venerate Sol Invictus along with the Roman Jupiter until the triumph of Christianity.

## The Jews and Jesus

The Roman territory of Palestine was a thorn in the Rome's' side, thanks to the unshakable opposition of the Jews. Palestine suffered from heavy taxation and deeply-felt resentment among its population toward the Romans. One key point of contention was that the Jews refused to pay lip service to the divinity of the emperors; the Romans insisted that their subjects participate in symbolic rituals acknowledging the primacy of the emperors. Since the Jews were strict monotheists, they would not do so. In 66 CE there was a huge uprising against Rome. It took four years for imperial forces to crush the uprising, resulting in the greatest disaster in ancient Jewish history: the permanent destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE. In the aftermath, the Romans enslaved or deported much of the Jewish population, which contributed the phenomenon of the Jewish *diaspora*, the people without a homeland united only by the Hebrew Bible, the teaching of the rabbis, and Jewish cultural traditions. Another uprising decades later (between 132 - 136 CE) resulted in the almost complete dispersal of the Jews, to the point that the Jewish homeland was truly lost to them until the foundation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 CE.

In the first century CE, Jewish society, especially its leadership, was divided between rival groups. Some powerful priests, the Sadducees, claimed that all Jews should follow the 10 Commandments, but only the priests of the Temple needed to follow the 613 laws and injunctions laid down by Moses. They were opposed by the Pharisees, who insisted that all Jews had to abide by all of the laws of Moses, and they also preached that a messiah - a savior - would soon come to bring about a day of judgment before Yahweh and bring about the fulfillment of the Biblical Covenant. In the deserts outside of the major cities, a group called the Essenes emphasized a life of asceticism and mysticism, while across Palestine anti-Roman revolutionaries known as the Zealots advocated for armed revolt against the Roman occupier.

The Jewish uprising that occurred against the Romans in 66 CE happened a generation after the death of another Jewish revolutionary of sorts: Jesus of Nazareth. The major source of information on the life of Jesus are the four gospels, accounts of his life and teachings composed after his death by three of his apostles (his closest followers and students), Matthew, Mark, and John, and another early Christian leader, Luke. The gospels were transmitted orally for decades before being recorded in their definitive versions; most scholars now date the written gospels to approximately 90 CE (about sixty years after the death of Jesus). While the specific language of the gospels is, of course, different, and some of the events described are also described differently, the gospels agree on most of the major aspects of the life of Jesus.



According to the gospels, Jesus was the son of the miraculous union of the Holy Spirit, one of the aspects of the Jewish God Yahweh, and a virgin named Mary. Jesus showed an aptitude for theological and spiritual understanding at a young age, debating Jewish doctrine with learned Jewish priests when he was still a boy. At the age of thirty, having earned his living as a carpenter up to that point, Jesus began to preach a message of salvation that revolved around the concept that mankind as a whole could be saved if it sought forgiveness from God for its sins. He traveled and delivered his teachings in the Roman province of Palestine and the nearby puppet kingdoms dominated by the Romans for three years, but was then arrested by the Roman authorities for inciting rebellion. In the end, Jesus was executed in the customary Roman fashion of crucifixion at the age of 33.

According to the gospels, Jesus returned to life, with an angel rolling the boulder back from the entrance to the tomb in which his body had been laid to rest. He renewed his call for devotion to God and the offer of salvation for those who sought forgiveness, then passed into the divine presence. Jesus's followers, led by the twelve apostles, began to teach his lessons to others, and the new religion of Christianity was born. His followers began to refer to Jesus as "the Christ," meaning "the anointed one" in Greek, a reference to the idea that Jesus was anointed to provide salvation for humanity.

## Early Christianity

At the beginning of the Christian faith, there was no single set of texts or beliefs that united Christians. The four major gospels do not agree on everything, because they were written by different people from memory (decades after the apostles themselves were alive). It was St. Paul, a Jewish leader formerly named Saul who underwent a profound conversion experience and became the foremost Christian evangelist, who popularized the notion that Jesus's death on the cross was part of a divine plan that canceled out human sin. For hundreds of years, the Christians debated and argued about what Christ's message had "really" been, because many of Jesus's teachings were, and are, open to interpretation. Early Christians were divided on very significant issues, including:

What God did Jesus represent? One cult believed that the God of Christ was not the Jewish God, who had been vengeful and warlike; according to this sect, Christ's God was a more powerful and loving deity come to save the world from Yahweh.

Was Jesus the messiah? In Jewish doctrine, the messiah was to be a figure who liberated the Jews from oppression and made good on the Covenant between the Jews and God, delivering the Promised Land for all eternity. Many Jews had hoped that Jesus would be a

revolutionary against Roman rule and, since Judea remained in Roman hands after his death, they did not believe that Jesus had been the messiah. Early Christians came to insist, following Paul, that Jesus had indeed been the messiah, but that the "liberation" he offered was spiritual in nature, rather than having to do with prosaic politics. In other words, the potential to save one's soul from damnation superseded the old Covenant.

Was Jesus human, or was he instead somehow God Himself? He had lived like a normal man, but according to the gospels he had also performed miracles, and he claimed to be the son of God. Likewise, while Jesus lived an exemplary life, he also displayed traits like anger and doubt (the latter most famously on the cross when he asked God why He had "forsaken" Jesus), traits that did not seem those of a "perfect" being. This debate would go on for centuries, with equally pious groups of Christians coming to completely different conclusions about Christ's divine and human natures.

Could everyone be a Christian, or was membership limited to the Jews? If Jesus was indeed the specifically Jewish messiah, after all, it did not make sense for a Roman or a Persian or a Celt to be able to convert. In the end, thanks largely to the influence of St. Paul again, most Christians came to believe that the salvation offered by Christ was potentially universal, and that not just Jews could become Christians as a result.

Under the influence of the mystery religions noted above, many early Christians were *Gnostics*, meaning "those who know" in Greek. The Gnostics believed that Jesus had been a secret-teller, almost a magician, who provided clues in his life and teachings about how to achieve union with God. This had more to do with magic than with a recognizable set of religious rituals or customs - for example, many Gnostics believed that it was possible to deduce a series of incantations from Christ's teachings that included hundreds of secret "names of God." If a Gnostic was to properly chant all of the names of God, he would not only achieve salvation but might enjoy power on earth, as well. The Gnostics had no interest in converting people to their version of Christianity; it was a secret they wanted to keep for themselves.

Still, despite the bewildering diversity of beliefs among early Christians, there were common themes, most importantly the emphasis Jesus Himself had placed on the spiritual needs of the common people, even social outcasts. The most radical aspect of Christianity was its universalism. From Judaism, it inherited the idea that all human beings are spiritually equal. Once the debate about whether non-Jews could become Christians was resolved, it was also potentially open to anyone who heard Christianity's teachings and doctrine. Early Christians recognized no social distinctions, which was fundamentally at odds with the entire Roman system, reliant as it was on formal legal separations between social classes and a stark system

of social hierarchy. Likewise, one unequivocal requirement placed on Christians was to love their neighbors, meaning in practice showing kindness and compassion to others regardless of their social rank. Few concepts could have been more alien to Roman sensibilities.

Christianity thus at least potentially threatened the hierarchical nature of Roman society itself. Likewise, it inherited from Judaism a strict monotheism that refused to accept the worship of the Roman emperors. What made it even more threatening than Judaism, however, was that Christianity actively sought out new converts (i.e. Christianity was inherently evangelical, in stark contrast to Judaism which did not seek new members). Roman authorities were thus already very much inclined to be suspicious of the Christians as potential rabble-rousers. In 68 CE, Nero blamed the Christians for the huge fire that consumed much of the city of Rome, and hundreds of Christians were rounded up and slaughtered in the arena. The persecution of Christians became a potent symbol for Christianity as a whole; over a thousand years later when Christianity was firmly entrenched as the religion of Europe, the trope of martyrdom was still used to explain righteous suffering.

## Early Christian Organization

Before Constantine's conversion, Christianity had expanded through missionary work, which succeeded in founding congregations across the Empire but did not seriously disrupt polytheism or the Empire's religious diversity. Imperial sponsorship changed that because it linked secular power to Christian identity. Following Constantine's conversion, being a Christian became a way to get ahead in the Roman power structure, and over time it became a liability to remain a polytheist. Thus, whereas early Christianity had been a religion of the common people, Roman elites flocked to convert after Constantine did so in order to stay in the emperor's good graces.

Early Christians had already developed a distinct hierarchy of worshipers, a divide between priests and worshipers. Bishops were the head of each city's congregation, and they oversaw a staff of priests and deacons who interacted with everyday worshipers and led services. The bishops of main cities, usual the imperial capitals of their respective provinces, came to be called an archbishop. Each bishop oversaw activity in the diocese, again following the imperial structure, in instructing people in Christian doctrine and in building charity networks. One important effect was that the church actively supported charities for the poor and hungry, a practice which won over new converts. This marks one of the first times in history when a religion linked together a message of compassion for the needy and real, practical efforts to *help* the needy. In another strong contrast with Roman practice, Christianity saw disenfranchised

groups like women and the poor (not to mention poor women) play major roles in the church's organization, especially before "official" Christianity came into being under Constantine.

Almost immediately after Constantine became a Christian, bishops saw their secular power increase dramatically. He allowed bishops to serve as official judges, giving Christians the ability to request a bishop instead of a non-Christian judge in trial. Bishops also moved in administrative circles, representing not just the church but their cities in actions and requests before governors and assemblies. In short, bishops suddenly assumed power on par with that of the traditional Roman nobility, directly linking power within the Christian church hierarchy to power within the Roman political system.

The most important bishop was the archbishop of Rome, who for the first few centuries of Christianity was just one among several major church leaders. Originally, the archbishops of cities like Alexandria and Damascus were of comparable importance to the Roman archbishop, but over time Roman archbishops tried to assert authority over the entire church hierarchy in the west. Their authority, however, was not recognized in much of the eastern part of the Empire, and it should be emphasized that it took more than six *centuries* after Constantine for the Roman archbishop's authority to receive acceptance even in the west. Eventually, however, that authority was at least nominally in place, and the Roman church leader came to be known as the "pope," meaning simply "father," of the church.

The pope's role as leader of the church emerged for a few reasons. First and foremost, the symbolic power of the city of Rome itself gave added weight to the Roman archbishop's authority. Second, there was a doctrinal tie to the Apostle Peter, who was supposed to have been given the symbolic keys to heaven directly from Christ, which were in turn passed on to his successor in Rome (the archbishop of Rome) before being crucified. Roman archbishops could thus argue that the Christian church itself was centered in Rome, and that they inherited the spiritual keys to heaven upon taking office - this concept was known as the "Petrine Succession." By the mid-fifth century CE, the popes were claiming to have total authority over all other bishops, and at least some of those bishops (in Western Europe, at any rate) did look to Rome for guidance. In later centuries, the mere fact that the early popes had claimed that authority, and certain bishops had acknowledged it, was cited as "proof" that the Roman papacy had always been the supreme doctrinal power in the Church as a whole.

## Christianity's Relationship with Non-Christian Religions

All across the Empire, massive church buildings were erected by emperors. Right from the beginning of "official" Christianity, Constantine financed construction of huge churches, including the Basilica of St. Peter in what is today the Vatican (at the time it was an obscure graveyard in Rome). The traditional Roman public buildings, including forums, theaters, bathhouses and so on, were often neglected in favor of churches, and many temples to Roman gods and other public buildings were repurposed as churches.

Once it enjoyed the support of the Roman elite, the Christian church began incorporating non-Christian holidays into its own liturgical calendar. December 25 had been the major festival of the sun god Sol Invictus, and early Christians embraced the overlap between that celebration and Christmas, noting that Christ was like the sun as a source of spiritual life. Other Christian holidays like Easter coincided with various fertility festivals that took place in early spring, around the time of the spring equinox. The tradition of saint's days, holidays celebrated in veneration of specific saints, often overlapped with various non-Christian celebrations. Most church leaders saw no theological problem with this practice, arguing that the ultimate goal was the salvation of souls through conversion, so it made perfect sense to use existing holy days and rituals in order to ease the transition for new converts.

That being noted, the incorporation of non-Christian celebrations into the liturgical calendar did not imply that Christians were willing to accept polytheism. Unlike most ancient faiths, Christians could not tolerate the worship of other gods, which they regarded as nothing more than nonexistent delusions that endangered souls. They used the term "pagan," coming from the Latin *paganus*, which means "country bumpkin" or "redneck," to describe all worshipers of all other gods, even gods that had been worshiped for thousands of years at that point. The point here is that Christians used scorn and contempt to vilify worshipers of other gods - "pagan" indicated that the non-Christian was both ignorant and foolish, even if he or she was a member of the Roman elite.

It took about a century for the believers in the old Roman gods, especially the conservative aristocracy of Rome, to give up the fight. As money shifted toward building Christian churches and away from temples, so did Christians sometimes lead attacks to desecrate the sites of pagan worship. Riots occasionally broke out as Christian mobs attacked worshipers of other gods, all with the tacit support of the emperors. In 380 CE the Empire was officially declared to be Christian by the emperor Theodosius I and all people of importance had to be, at least nominally, Christians. There was no sustained resistance to Christianity simply

because “polytheism” or “paganism” was never a unified system, and it was impossible for people who worshiped a whole range of gods to come together “against” Christianity, especially when it was the official religion of the Empire itself.

A much more difficult battle, one that in some ways was never really won, had to do with “pagan” practices. Everyone in the ancient world, Christians among them, believed in the existence of what is now thought of as “magic” and “spirits.” Christian leaders came to believe that, in general, magic was dangerous, generated by the meddling of the devil, and that the spirits found in nature were almost certainly demons in disguise. There was very little they could do, however, to overturn the entire worldview of their followers, considering that even Christian leaders themselves very much believed that spirits and magic were present in the world, demonic or not. Thus, pagan practices like blessing someone after they sneezed (to keep out an invading spirit or demon), throwing salt over one's shoulder to ward off the devil, and employing all manner of charms to increase luck were to survive to the present.

## Orthodoxy and Heresy

Christianity united self-understood “Western Civilization” just as Roman culture had a few centuries earlier. At the same time, because of the peculiarities of Christian belief, it was also a potentially divisive force. Christians spoke a host of different languages and lived across the entire expanse of the Empire. As noted above, there were serious debates around who or what Jesus was. For centuries, there could be no “orthodoxy,” meaning “correct belief,” because there was no authority within the church (very much including the popes) who could enforce a certain set of beliefs over rival interpretations.

The beginning of orthodoxy was in the second and third centuries, when a group of theologians argued that there were three personas or states of the divine being, referred to as the Holy Trinity. In this view, God could exist simultaneously as three beings: God the Father, the being that spoke in the Old Testament, God the Son, Jesus himself, and God the Holy Spirit, the presence of God throughout the universe. This concept did not quell controversy at all, though, because it created a distinct stance that people could disagree with - rival groups of Christians came to refer to their enemies as “heretics,” from the word “heresy,” meaning simply “choice.”

In the late third century, an Egyptian Christian priest named Arius created a firestorm of controversy when he made a simple logical argument: God the father had created Jesus, so it did not make any sense for Jesus to be the same thing as God. Furthermore, it was impossible to be both human and perfect; since Jesus was human, he was imperfect and could not

therefore be God, who was perfect. This belief came to be known as "Arianism" (note that the word has nothing whatsoever to do with the misguided belief in some kind of ancient Germanic race - the "Aryans" - so important to Nazi ideology almost two thousand years later). Arianism quickly took hold among many people, most importantly among the Germanic tribes of the north, where Arian Christian missionaries made major inroads. Thus, Arianism quickly became the largest and most persistent heresy in the early Christian church.

In 325 CE, only a little over a decade after he had converted to Christianity, Constantine assembled a council of church leaders, the Council of Nicaea, to lay Arianism to rest. One of the results was the Nicene Creed (now usually referred to as the Apostles' Creed), to this day one of the central elements of Catholic Mass. In a single passage short enough to commit to memory, the Creed declared belief in Christ's identity as part of God ("consubstantial to the Father" in its present English translation), Christ's status as the son of God and the Virgin Mary, Christ's resurrection, and the promise of Christ's return at the end of the world. There was now the first "party line" in the early history of Christianity: a specific set of beliefs backed by institutional authority.

While united in belief, the Catholics were divided by language, since the western Empire still spoke Latin and the eastern Empire Greek. In 410 the monk Jerome produced a version of the Christian Bible in Latin, the Vulgate, which was to be the main edition in Europe until the sixteenth century. Surprising from a contemporary perspective, however, is that it was not until 1442 (during the Renaissance) that the definitive and in a sense "final" version of the Bible was established by the Western Church when it defined exactly which books of the Old Testament were to be included and which were not.

Meanwhile, in the east, Greek was not only the language of daily life for many, it was the official language of state in the Empire and the language of the church. The books of the New Testament, starting with the gospels, were written in Greek in the first place, and the Greek intellectual legacy was still very strong. There was an equally strong Jewish intellectual legacy that provided accurate translations from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek, providing Greek-speaking Christians with access to a reliable version of the Old Testament.

While it certainly clarified the beliefs of the most powerful branch of the institutional church, as the Council of Nicaea defined the official orthodoxy, it guaranteed that there would always be those who rejected that orthodoxy in the name of a different theological interpretation. Likewise, the practical issues of lingual and cultural differences undermined the universalism ("Catholicism") of the Christian church. Those differences and the diversity of belief would only grow over time.

## Monasticism and Christian Culture

Near the end of the third century, a new Christian movement emerged that was to have major ramifications for the history of the Christian world: monasticism. Originally, monasticism was tied to asceticism, meaning self-denial, following the example of an Egyptian holy man named Antony. In about 280, Antony sold his goods and retreated to the desert to contemplate the divine, eschewing all worldly goods in imitation of the poverty of Christ. He would have remained in obscurity except for a book about him written by a bishop named Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, that celebrated Antony's rejection of the material world and embrace of divine contemplation. According to Athanasius, normal life was full of temptation, greed, and sin, and that the holiest life was thus one that rejected it completely in favor of prayer and meditation away from human company. Thousands of people followed Antony's example, retreating to the wilderness. These early monks were called Anchorites: hermits who lived in deserts, forests, or mountains away from the temptations of a normal social existence.

One particularly extreme sect of early monks were the *Stylites*, from the Greek word *stylos*, meaning "column." The founder of the group, St. Simeon the Stylite, climbed up a pillar in Syria and spent the next 30 years living on top of it. He was so famous for his holiness and endurance in the face of the obvious physical toll of living on top of a pillar that he attracted followers from all over the Roman world who came to listen to him preach. Soon, many others sought out columns in imitation of Simeon.





*A depiction of St. Simeon from the sixth century CE. The snake symbolizes the temptation to abandon his holy life, presumably by getting down off of the pillar.*

Ultimately, pillar-sitting did not become the predominant model of Christian life. Instead, groups of ascetics came together in communities called monasteries. Originally, these early monks spent almost all of their time in prayer, but over time most monastic communities came to embrace useful work as well as prayer and meditation. The most important development in the development of monasticism was the work of Benedict, an Italian bishop, who wrote a book known as the Rule in about 529 that laid out how monks should live. The Rule dictated a strict schedule for daily life that revolved around prayer, study, and useful work for the monastery itself (tending crops and animals, performing labor around the monastery, and so on). Going forward, many monasteries became economic powerhouses, owning large tracts of land and selling their products at a healthy profit.

More important than their economic productivity, at least from the perspective of the history of ideas, is that monasteries became the major centers of learning, especially in Western Europe after the collapse of the western Roman Empire. One of the tasks undertaken by monks was the painstaking hand-copying of books, almost all of which had to do with Christian theology (e.g. the Bible itself, commentaries from important Christian leaders, etc.), but some of which were classical Greek or Roman writings that would have otherwise been lost. Often,

these books were beautifully illustrated by the monks and are referred to as *illuminated manuscripts* - among the finest examples of medieval art.

Outside of monasteries, churches were built in practically every city and town (and many small villages) in the Roman sphere of influence. One interesting and, from contemporary perspective, somewhat peculiar phenomenon in early Christianity was the focus on relics: holy objects. Relics were everything from the bones of saints to fragments of the "True Cross" on which Christ was crucified. Each church had to have a relic in its altar (contained in a special box called a reliquary) or it was not considered to be truly holy ground. All relics were not created equal: the larger the object, or the closer it had been to Christ Himself or the apostles, the more holy power it was believed to contain. Thus, a thriving trade in relics (plagued by counterfeits - it was not easy to determine if a given finger bone was *really* the finger bone of St. Mark!) developed in Europe as rival church leaders tried to secure the most powerful relic for their church. This was not just about the symbolic importance of the relics, as pilgrims would travel from all over the Roman world to visit the site of noteworthy relics, bringing with them considerable wealth - whole regional economies centered on pilgrimage sites as a result.

## Christian Learning

Christian learning was a complex issue, because, strictly speaking, spiritual salvation was thought to be available to anyone simply by accepting the basic tenets of Christian doctrine. In other words, the whole intellectual world of Greek and Roman philosophy, literature, science, and so on did not necessarily relate to the church's primary task of saving souls. Many church leaders were learned men and women, however, and insisted that there was indeed a place for learning within Christianity. The issue was never settled - one powerful church leader, Tertullian, once wrote "what does Athens have to do with Rome?", meaning, why should anyone study the Greek intellectual legacy when it was produced by pre-Christian pagans?

Once Christianity was institutionalized, church leaders generally came around to the importance of classical learning because it proved useful for administration. A vast Greco-Roman literature existed describing governance, science, engineering, etc., all of which was necessary in the newly-Christian Empire. A kind of uneasy balance was struck between studying classical learning, especially things like rhetoric, while warning against the spiritual danger of being seduced by its non-Christian messages.

The most important thinker who addressed the intersection of Christian and classical learning was St. Augustine of Hippo (a Roman city in North Africa), whose life spanned the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Augustine lived through the worst period of Roman decline,

completing his work while his own city was besieged by Germanic barbarians called the Vandals. To Roman Christians, this posed a huge challenge - if all-powerful God had embraced them, why was their Empire falling apart? Augustine's answer was that life on earth is not ultimately significant. In his work *The City of God*, Augustine distinguished between the perfect world of heaven, attainable through Christian faith, versus the flawed and imperfect world of the living. This concept explained the decline of the Empire as being irrelevant to the greater mission of salvation. Thus, according to Augustine, all of learning was just a facet of material life; useful in its way but totally insignificant compared to the necessity of laying one's soul bare to God and waiting for the second coming of Christ.

The irony of these struggles over Christian doctrine versus ancient learning was that the issue was decided by the collapse of Rome. When Rome fell to Germanic invaders in the mid-fifth century, so began the decline of organized learning - there simply was no funding from Roman elites for what had been a robust private school system. In the absence of instruction, literature and philosophy and engineering all but vanished, preserved only in monasteries and in the eastern Empire. Once the western Empire collapsed, the church was the only institution that still supported scholarship (including basic literacy), but over time the levels of literacy and education in Europe unquestionably declined - this decline inspired the contempt of later Renaissance thinkers who wrote off the period between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Renaissance in about 1300 CE as the "Dark Ages."

## Conclusion

Ultimately, after the western part of the Roman Empire fell in the late fifth century, it was the Christian church that carried on at least parts of Roman civilization, learning, and culture. One of the historical ironies of this period of history is that even though Rome's Empire began to decline and (eventually) collapse *politically*, it lived on thanks to a ideas and beliefs that originally arisen in the Roman context - it lived on *ideologically* and *spiritually*.

*Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons)*

[Defeat of Valerian](#) - Ali Ganjei

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[The Tetrarchy](#) - Dennis Jarvis

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