

IEFS



at the time of Jesus.

THE BELIEFS OF CHRISTIANS

Christians are followers of Christ, which is a title used by them to refer to Jesus of Nazareth.

Historians usually accept that Jesus of Nazareth was a Palestinian Jew who lived two thousand years ago at a time when the Romans were the rulers of Palestine and of many other countries around the Mediterranean. Jesus was a preacher, teacher and healer but he made powerful enemies. He was crucified in about 30 CE in Jerusalem. There are non-Christian sources that refer to him and his followers.

JESUS IN WRITINGS BY NON-CHRISTIANS

Roman historian who lived from about 100–120 CE. He described the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero who blamed the Christian sect for the fire in Rome in AD 64. Explaining who Christians were, he wrote that the originator of the name, Jesus, had been executed when Tiberius was Emperor. This was on the order of the procurator Pontius Pilate.

Jesus – lived from 75–140 CE and was private secretary to Emperor Hadrian, the Roman Emperor.

He wrote books about the lives of the Caesars. In AD 100 on Claudius he says the Emperor expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 CE because 'the Jews constantly quarrelled at the instigation of Chrestus'. This is probably referring to an outbreak of violence between Jews and Christians. Many early Christians were Jews and the dispute would look to be a quarrel among Jews. Scholars think the name was, however, that Suetonius assumed there was a historical figure called 'Chrestus'.

Governor of part of what is now Turkey, in AD 112 CE.

In a letter to the Emperor Trajan to ask advice on the best way to deal with people who had been accused of being Christians. Pliny writes:

'The people who had once been Christians told me that their 'crime' amounted to this – they met on a set day to sing hymns to Christ as a god and to swear an oath together. This was not with the aim of committing crimes but to refrain from theft, adultery, lying and not paying one's debts. They ate an ordinary meal together. They claimed that they had stopped this after I banned societies from meeting. To be sure about this I decided to get at the truth by torturing two slave girls called deaconesses. I found nothing but a perverse and weird superstition.'

Flavius Josephus – a Jewish soldier who was taken prisoner and became a friend of the Emperor Vespasian. He lived from about 37 CE to the end of the first century.

Josephus settled in Rome and wrote about Jewish history for the Romans. He referred to Jesus but it is difficult to be sure whether or not some of the comments have been added by later Christian writers. One reference usually accepted by scholars is about a High Priest called Ananus who assembled the Sanhedrin Council 'and brought before them James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and some others'.



Do you think Jesus looked like this?

To find the beliefs that Christians have about Jesus, one needs to look at Christian sources, particularly a collection of writings called the New Testament. To Christians, these writings are a continuation of the Jewish Scriptures, which they call the Old Testament. Together, the Old Testament and the New Testament make the Christian Bible. (Testament means covenant or agreement; see Chapter 7.) The New Testament includes stories about Jesus and letters by Christian leaders. Most of it was originally written in Greek, the language most commonly used in the Mediterranean area at the time.

When Christianity began the leaders were people who had known Jesus. The followers were mostly Jews, by race and religion. They were known as followers of 'The Way' and they were a sect within Judaism. When new members joined the movement they were baptised in water, usually in a river, and they simply acknowledged that they wanted to follow Jesus. They were not stating what they believed so much as expressing their loyalty to their leader.

THINKING POINT

Look at the description in Pliny's letter of the activities of Christians. Try to imagine those first Christians. What do you think the 'oath' was?

One of the earliest statements of commitment seems to have been 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.

The word 'Christ' in Greek stands for the word 'Messiah' in Hebrew. To the Jews the word 'Messiah' referred to a leader whose coming had been prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures. Messiah means 'Anointed One'. Kings, prophets and priests were anointed in the Jewish religion. Most Jews did not accept the claim that Jesus was the expected Messiah and the Roman authorities saw the claim as treason. When Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, the accusation over the cross read 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.

The word 'Lord' (κύριος in Greek) was significant to both Jews and non-Jews. 'Lord' was the word used for the sacred name of God in translations of the Jewish Scriptures but it was used also of the Roman Emperor. Before long, there would be many who would pay with their lives for daring to offer their loyalty first to Jesus as Christ and Lord.

The word 'disciple' comes from the Latin disco 'I learn' but the disciples of Jesus were not risking their lives simply because they wanted to continue to learn from his teachings. The main reason that the followers of Jesus accepted their crucified leader as their Lord was that they believed that Jesus rose from the dead after his crucifixion. The New Testament describes him being seen by a number of different people during the next 40 days. Among the witnesses of the Resurrection were the apostles. These were disciples who had been chosen by Jesus during his ministry to be 'sent out' to spread his message, which was the gospel or good news about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus promised, before finally leaving them, that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit to spread the message throughout the world.

The adventures of the apostles are told in the New Testament book, the Acts of the Apostles. The message they preached is included so we have some idea of the beliefs they were spreading. In the first sermon that the Apostle Peter gives in Jerusalem, according to the account in Acts 2, he says: