To understand the birth of Christianity, one must understand the history of the Roman Empire. By A.D. 30, about 2,000 years ago, Rome's empire was huge. It covered almost all of the lands that touched the Mediterranean Sea, including the land occupied by the Jews. Jesus was a Jew, as were almost all of his early followers.

The Romans had no tolerance for rebellion against their government. But the Jews had a religious reason for resisting Roman control. The Romans expected the Jews to worship the emperor as a god. But the Jewish religion commanded them to worship only one god, who was called Yahweh. Their refusal to worship any of the Roman emperors infuriated those rulers. The emperors were used to getting their way, and they did not take the Jewish resistance lightly.

In 26 B.C., the Romans established direct rule over the Jews. They appointed Pontius Pilate as governor of their territory. Pontius Pilate had little tolerance for Jewish customs. More than once, he violated their religious beliefs in their holy city of Jerusalem. He even stole money from the treasury of their holy temple.
According to Jewish texts, humans' time on earth was limited. It was to be replaced by God’s everlasting kingdom. Jews believed that the end of the earthly world would be brought about by a messiah. Many Jews were awaiting this messiah to deliver them from Roman rule. For some, this messiah was Jesus.

**Jesus of Nazareth**

Jesus began to teach in the Jewish tradition. He preached love and tolerance. He was also believed to have performed the miracles of healing the sick, walking on water and even raising the dead.

Jesus claimed that there was a life after death. He taught to love even one’s enemies. In light of the coming kingdom of God, there was no reason for hate, he said. A small group of disciples, or followers, believed he was the promised messiah who would bring an end to Roman rule.

Some time between A.D. 30 and 33, Jesus went to spread his word in the city of Jerusalem. Gaining followers there was not easy for him. Some people believed that Jesus was a troublemaker. Furthermore, some of the high priests of the Jewish Temple supported the Romans. The high priest was appointed by Pontius Pilate to keep the Jewish population in line. Some historians believe the priests received wealth and power for their cooperation with the Romans.

Jesus decided to target these priests and their control of the Temple. He organized an attack on their trading activities, a great source of their wealth.

The attack gave Roman officials the excuse they needed to arrest Jesus. On the night of the Passover Seder, known to Christians as the Last Supper, Jesus was arrested. He had been hiding. But Judas of Iscariot, one of his disciples, told Roman officials where Jesus would be.

**Crucifixion and the growth of Christianity**

Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, who sentenced him to death. He was beaten and crucified, which means nailed to a cross.

Three days after his death, Jesus' tomb was found empty. For the next 40 days, his disciples claim that they saw visions of Jesus having risen from the dead, or resurrected. The resurrection story is a central part of Christianity.

Most Jews rejected the idea of Jesus as their messiah. In the years that followed Jesus' death, the Romans treated the early Christians as a small, Jewish group. This all changed with Paul of Tarsus.
Paul began to spread Christian ideas to non-Jews. Many of the poor people in the region took comfort in the ideas of a loving god and a life after death. The Romans persecuted these Christians for rejecting the Roman religion. But Paul traveled far and wide, and his followers did a remarkable job spreading Christianity. Almost 400 years later, it became the official religion of the Roman Empire.