

# Introduction

The Christian religion was founded by a group of fishermen and peasants from Galilee, a rural backwater in an unimportant region of the Roman empire. They were the followers of a relatively minor wandering prophet who had died as a condemned criminal. When their movement came to the attention of the Roman authorities, it was brutally suppressed. Yet little more than three centuries later, the Christian religion had become the faith of the empire itself. Christian bishops had combined Christian theology with classical philosophy to create an intellectual and spiritual synthesis that would endure for over a thousand years, while Christian emperors were busy dismantling the ancient religion of Rome itself and supplanting it with the official teachings of a triumphant church. How did this happen? How did this unregarded Jewish cult come to displace the traditional religion of the empire and go on to become the largest religion in the world?

In this book we trace the first four centuries of Christianity. These centuries were the most tumultuous and important in the religion's history. They saw Christianity not only being founded but being refined and defined as it faced a series of potentially crippling challenges, both internal and external. These forced Christians to reflect on their faith and what it meant. By the end of this period, Christians possessed official declarations of doctrine and practice, holy writings, and ecclesiastical and monastic structures that were capable of enforcing orthodoxy. None of these things existed in the days of the first disciples of Jesus. So the first four centuries were truly a crucible for Christianity. It began rather rough and ill-defined, caught between a disapproving Jewish leadership and a hostile Roman state. It endured centuries of proscription, persecution, and massacres in both the Roman and the Persian empires. It emerged stronger than ever – but had

it been refined by the experience, or changed out of all recognition?

Throughout, our focus is on what the Christian religion really meant to its adherents. How did they live and what did they believe? Why did they believe these things? To understand these, we must place the early church in its social and cultural context, and see how the early Christians interacted with the world around them. For the crucible of the first four centuries did not simply refine and transform the Christian religion: it did the same thing to the pagan and Jewish religions, and to society as a whole.

This book is divided into three main sections. The first three chapters tell the story of the founding of Christianity and its first century, roughly the period in which the New Testament was written. Since this period is relatively well known and covered, these chapters are relatively brief. Chapters 4–7 then cover the next two centuries. In them we find out how Christianity developed and spread within Roman society and beyond during this period, and how it reacted to the increasingly violent persecutions against it. We also find out how Christians began to construct notions of orthodoxy and heresy, and how they distinguished between them. Finally, the last four chapters of the book cover the fourth Christian century. We see how Christianity was decriminalized, promoted, and finally made the official religion of Rome, and how the traditional Roman religion was increasingly marginalized and forbidden. But we also see how Christianity was riven by its greatest internal divisions yet, and how it forged a new understanding of its doctrinal and spiritual heritage.