Christianity from Judaism to Constantine: Crash Course World History #11

Crash Course: World History
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=====Introduction (00:00)=====

Hi there my name's John Green; this is Crash Course World History and today we're going to talk about Jesus.

(0:06) So this is a Roman coin from around the time Jesus was born in the Roman Empire, and it calls Augustus, the emperor, the son of God. (00:13) So let's just state at the outset that in 4 BCE, being the son of God, or at least being the son of a god was not such an unusual thing. But a poor Jew being the son of God — that was news.

(00:33) Any understanding of Christianity has to start with Judaism, because Jesus was born a Jew, and he grew up in the Jewish tradition. (00:40) He was one of many teachers spreading his ideas in the Roman province of Judea at the time, and he was part of a messianic tradition that helps us understand why he was thought of not only teacher but something much, much more.

=====Thought Bubble (00:50)=====

Let's go straight to the Thought Bubble today.

(00:51) The people who would become the Jews, were just one of many tribal peoples eking out an existence in that not-very fertile crescent world of Mesopotamia after the agricultural revolution.

(01:00) The Hebrews initially worshipped many gods, making sacrifices to them in order to bring good weather and good fortune. But they eventually developed a religion centered around an idea that would become key to the other great western religions.

(01:11) This was monotheism, the idea that there is only one true god (or at least that if there are other gods around, they are total lameoids). (01:20) The Hebrews developed a second concept that is key to their religion as well: the idea of the covenant, a deal with God.

(01:26) The main man in this, the big macher was Abraham. Not to make this too much of a scripture lesson, but it's kind of hard to understand the Jews without understanding Abraham, or Abram as he was known before he had his big conversation with God. (01:37) Recorded in Genesis 17: "When Abram was ninety years and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, 'I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.' " (01:47) And I'm a make a covenant with you and a bunch of cool things will happen like you're gonna have kids and your descendants will number the stars and you can have all the land of Canaan forever, it's gonna be awesome. I'm paraphrasing by the way, Thought Bubble.

(01:59) So God promised that Abram would have kids with his wife even though the dude was already like 99, but there was a catch: (02:05) "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised." Keep it PG-13, Thought Bubble.

(02:15) Now that is asking a lot from a guy, especially a 99-year-old geezer like Abram living in a time before general anesthesia. But those were the terms of the deal, and in exchange God had chosen Abraham and his descendants to be a great nation. From this we get the expression that the Jews are the Chosen people.

(02:31) Thanks for keeping it clean, Thought Bubble.

=====About God (2:33)=====

So, some important things about this god:

(02:35) One, singularity. He — and I'm using the masculine pronoun because that's what Hebrew prayers use — does not want you to put any gods before Him.

(02:42) He is also transcendent, having always existed and he is deeply personal – he chats with prophets, sends locusts, etc. But he doesn't take corporeal form like the Greek and Roman Gods do.

(02:52) He is also involved in history, like he will destroy cities, and bring floods, and determine the outcome of wars, and possibly football games. Stan, no! FOOTBALL games!

(03:02) Probably most important to us today, and certainly most important to Jesus, this god demands moral righteousness and social justice. (03:09) So, this is the god of the Hebrews, Yahweh, and despite many ups and downs, the Jewish people have stuck with him for- according to the Hebrew calendar, at least- over 5700 years.

(03:18) And He has stuck by them too, despite the Jews being, on occasion, something of a disappointment to him. Which leads to various miseries, and also to a tradition of prophets who speak for God and warn the people to get back on the right path lest there be more miseries.

=====The Romans (03:31)=====

Which brings us back to our friends, the Romans. By the time that Jesus was born, the land of the Israelites had been absorbed into the Roman Empire as the province of Judea. (03:39) At the time of Jesus's birth, Judea was under the control of Herod the Great, best known for building the massive temple in Jerusalem, that the Romans would later destroy.

(03:48) And by the time Jesus died, an expanded Judea was under the rule of Herod Antipater. Also, unhelpfully, known as Herod. Both Herods ultimately took their orders from the Romans, and they both show up on the list of rulers who are oppressive to the Jews, partly because there's never *that* much religious freedom in an empire.

(04:04) Unless you are, wait for it... The Mongols [Mongoltage] or the Persians.

(04:10) Also, they were Hellenizers, bringing in Greek theater and architecture, and rationalism. And in response to those Hellenistic influences, there were a lot of preachers trying to get the Jews to return to the traditions and the godly ways of the past, including the Sadducees, and the Pharisees, and the Essenes, and the Zealots.

=====Jesus (04:27)=====

And one of those preachers, who didn't fit comfortably into any of these four groups, was Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a preacher who spread his message of peace, love and, above all, justice, across Judea over the course of his actually average-length life for his time.

(04:40) He was remarkably charismatic, attracting a small but incredibly loyal group of followers, and he was said to perform miracles — although it's worth noting that miracles weren't terribly uncommon at the time.

(04:51) Jesus's message was particularly resonant to the poor and downtrodden and pretty radical in its anti-authoritarian stance. (04:57) He said it was easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven, he said the meek were blessed, that the last would be first and the first would be last — all of which was kind of threatening to the powers that be, who accordingly had him arrested, tried and then executed in the normal method of killing rebels at that time: crucifixion.

(05:15) Also, just to put this question to bed, the Romans that crucified Jesus, because he was a threat to their authority. Later traditions saying that the Jews killed Jesus? Very unfortunate, also, very untrue.

(05:27) We're not going to discuss Jesus's divinity, because:
1. This isn't a theology class, and
(05:31) 2. Flame wars on the Internet make me so uncomfortable I have to turn to camera 2. Hi there camera 2, I'm here to remind you that
3. Fighting over such things, like fighting over whether the proverbial cake is a lie, rarely accomplishes anything, plus
(05:45) 4. What matters to us is the historical fact that people at the time believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One, the son of God. And they believed that he would return some day to redeem the world.

=====Christianity (05:55)=====

Which leads us to two questions about Christianity:

(05:57) First, Why did this small group of people believe this? And second, why and how did that belief become so widespread?

(06:05) So why would people believe that Jesus was the Messiah?

(06:07) First. The Jews had a long tradition of believing that a savior who would come to them in a time of trouble. And Judea under the rule of Herod and the Romans... definitely a time of trouble.

(06:15) And many of the prophecies about this savior point to someone whose life looks a lot like Jesus's. (06:20) For instance, Isaiah 53 says the person will be misunderstood and mistreated, just like Jesus was: "He was despised, and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face he was despised; and we didn't respect him."

(06:35) And a lot of the prophecies like Daniel 7:14, for instance, explained that when the Messiah comes there will be this awesome, new, everlasting kingdom. And that had to sound pretty good to people who'd had their autonomy taken away from them.

(06:46) So some religious Jews saw Jesus in those prophecies and came to believe either during his life or shortly thereafter, that he was the messiah. (06:53) Most of them thought the new everlasting kingdom was right around the corner, which is probably why no one bothered to write down much about the life of Jesus for several decades, by which time it was clear that we might have to wait a bit for this brilliant new everlasting kingdom.

(07:06) I should note, by the way, that the idea of a messiah was not unique to the Jews at the time. Even the Romans got in on the action, for instance, the Roman poet Virgil wrote of a boy who: "Shall free the earth from never-ceasing fear, he shall receive the life of gods, and see Heroes with gods commingling." Sound familiar?

(07:22) But Virgil was writing about Emperor Augustus in that poem, not Jesus, which points again to the similarities between the two. Both called sons of God. Both sent to free the earth from never-ceasing fear. But one ruled the largest empire in the world; and the other believed that empire, and the world, needed to change dramatically.

(07:39) So why did the less wealthy and famous son of God become by far the more influential? Well, here are three possible historical reasons:

(07:46) Reason #1: The Romans continued to make things bad for the Jews. In fact, things got much worse for the Jews, especially after they launched a revolt between 66-73 CE, which did not go well.

(07:58) By the time the dust settled, the Romans had destroyed the Temple and expelled the Jews from Judea, beginning what we now know as the Jewish Diaspora.

(08:06) And without a Temple or geographic unity, the Jews had to solidify what it meant to be a Jew and what the basic tenants of the religion were. (08:13) This forced the followers of Jesus to make a decision: were they going to continue to be Jews following stricter laws set forth by rabbis, or were they going to be something else.

(08:22) The decision to open up their religion to non-Jews, people who weren't part of the covenant, is the central reason that Christianity could become a world religion instead of just a sect of Judaism. (08: 30) And it probably didn't hurt that the main proponent of sticking with Judaism was James, Jesus's brother, who was killed by the Romans.

(08:37) Reason #2: Is related to Reason #1 and it's all about a dude named Saul. (08:42) No, not that Saul. Yes, Saul of Tarsus, thank you.

(08:45) Saul, having received a vision on the road to Damascus, became Paul and began visiting and sending letters to Jesus followers throughout the Mediterranean. And it was Paul who emphatically declared that Jesus followers did NOT have to be Jews, that they did not have to be circumcised or keep to Jewish laws or any of that stuff.

(09:00) This opened the floodgates for thousands of people to convert to this new religion. And the other thing to remember about Paul is that he was a Roman citizen, which meant that he could travel freely throughout the Roman Empire. This allowed him to make his case to lots of different people and facilitated the geographic spread of Christianity.

=====Open Letter (09:15)=====

Oh, it's time for the open letter? Alright. An open letter, to the fish.

(09:23) But first, lets see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, Stan. It's my favorite album Jesus Christ Superstar, finally available in my favorite format, the cassette. Did I color-coordinate my shirt to Jesus Christ Superstar? Yes.

(09:37) Dear Ichthys, So check this out: In the first century when it was still super underground and hipster to be a Christian, you were a secret symbol of Christianity, used to kind of hide from the Romans. (09:47) Ichthys, the Greek word for fish, was an acronym and it was a super clever way to talk about religion without anyone knowing that you were talking about it.

(09:55) But you'll never guess what happened - even in places

where it’s completely fine to talk about Christianity now and to use, you know, regular Christian symbols, like the cross, you have had a huge resurgence thanks to the plastic automobile decal industry. (10:06) I mean seriously, Ichthys, I haven’t seen a comeback like this since Jesus. Best wishes, John Green

=====Conclusion (10:13)=====

And lastly, Christianity was born and flourished an empire with a common language that allowed for its spread. And crucially, it was also an Empire in decline.

(10:21) Like even by the end of the first century CE, Rome was on its way down. And for the average person, and even for some elites, things weren’t as good as they had been, if fact they were getting worse so fast that you might have thought the end of the world was coming.

(10:32) And Roman religion offered no promise of an afterlife, and a bunch of squabbling whiny gods - sorry if I offended adherents to Roman religion, but seriously, they squabble. (10:42) So even though early Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire and sometimes fed to the lions and other animals, the religion continued to grow, albeit slowly.

(10:50) But then as the Roman decline continued, Emperor Constantine allowed the worship of Jesus and then eventually converted to Christianity himself. And then the religion really took off. (10:58) I mean, Rome wasn’t what it used to be, but everybody still wanted to be like the Emperor. And soon enough there was a new son of God on coins.

(11:05) Thanks for watching. See you next week.

=====Outro (11:06)=====
Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

(11:16) As only 62 million of you guessed last week, the Phrase of the Week was "Chipotle Burrito"; if you want to guess at this week’s Phrase of the Week or suggest future ones, you can do so in Comments where you can also ask questions about today’s video that will be answered, hopefully, by our team of historians.

(11:28) Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome. Ow... again.