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MINISTRIES

“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”

Caesar’s Messiah Refuted

Did Jesus exist as a historical person? Many atheists and counter-missionaries on the Internet say no. It is claimed that the person known as Jesus—or in Hebrew, Yeshua, as we like to call him—was actually fabricated by the New Testament authors. This idea has become known as “Jesus-mythicism” or simply “mythicism.” One popular documentary pushing this idea is called *Caesar’s Messiah*, based on the book by the same name written by Joseph Atwill.

We will address some of the problems with this documentary and book in a moment. But first, it should be noted that the idea that Yeshua never existed historically is NOT a mainstream view in contemporary scholarship. The vast majority of historians, Christian and non-Christian alike, affirm that Yeshua was a historical person.

For instance, here is New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, an atheist, openly criticizing mythicism as foolish:

This is not even an issue for scholars of antiquity ... The reason for thinking Jesus existed is because he is abundantly attested in early sources ... If you want to go where the evidence goes, I think that atheists have done themselves a disservice by jumping on the bandwagon of mythicism, because frankly, it makes you look foolish to the outside world. If that’s what you’re going to believe, you just look foolish.

—Bart Ehrman. Quoted in Amy K. Hall, “Bart Ehrman on the Existence of Jesus,” *Stand to Reason: Clear-Thinking Christianity*. www.str.org.

Despite the fact that scholars and historians universally reject the idea that Yeshua never existed, this idea still gets spread around on the Internet. And it is quite popular among many critics of Christianity and the Bible that you might encounter.

Some will claim that the New Testament authors borrowed from pagan sources to develop the Yeshua figure they write about. An honest look at history, however, shows that no such thing occurred. We

address many of these alleged pagan parallels in our teaching, [Was Yeshua Copied From Pagan Myths?](#)

However, there is a more recent objection to Yeshua's historicity that we thought was worth addressing, as it periodically makes the rounds within online atheist and counter-missionary circles.

Again, we're referring to what has been proposed by Joseph Atwill in "Caesar's Messiah." The premise of the documentary and the book, is that the New Testament was not written by Jewish followers of Yeshua. Instead, it was written by Romans who wanted to pacify the Jewish citizens of Rome so that they would stop fighting against Rome. They did this by inventing a "peaceful messiah" as a non-threatening, alternative expression of Jewish messianism. According to Atwill:

Jewish sects in Palestine at the time, who were waiting for a prophesied warrior Messiah, were a constant source of violent insurrection during the first century ... When the Romans had exhausted conventional means of quashing rebellion, they switched to psychological warfare. They surmised that the way to stop the spread of zealous Jewish missionary activity was to create a competing belief system. That's when the 'peaceful' Messiah story was invented. Instead of inspiring warfare, this Messiah urged turn-the-other-cheek pacifism and encouraged Jews to 'give onto [sic] Caesar' and pay their taxes to Rome.

—Joseph Atwill. Quoted in "Bible bombshell: Jesus Christ invented by Romans as 'psychological warfare'" www.express.co.uk

So, according to Atwill, Rome invented Christianity to give Jews a different peaceful religion to join so that they would stop fighting against Rome. Rome fabricated a peaceful, suffering messiah instead of a violent warrior messiah that many Jews at the time were anticipating.

There are numerous problems with Atwill's thesis here, but we will just name a few.

First, Atwill claims that the imperial family, the Flavians, "created Christianity" sometime after the Jewish revolt between AD 66-73. Josephus is claimed to have written much of the New Testament because there are some alleged parallels between Josephus's *War of the Jews* and the New Testament (Joseph Atwill, *Caesar's Messiah: The Roman Conspiracy to Invent Jesus* [Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2011], p. 2).

In any case, one obvious problem with this idea is the historical fact that there were followers of Yeshua known as Christians *before* the Jewish war that began in AD 68. The first-century Roman historian Tacitus mentions an "immense multitude" of Christians living in Rome during Nero's reign, between AD 54-68 (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44). If Christianity was a conspiracy created by the Roman Empire sometime after Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70, why would the Roman historian Tacitus claim that there were Christians in AD 64?

Suetonius similarly mentions Christians suffering persecution under Nero (Suetonius, *Nero* 16). So, we already have records that show Christians existing before the time Atwill says Rome invented Christianity.

Additionally, many scholars date Paul's letters no later than AD 68 (Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], pp. 480-481). The apostle Peter explicitly mentions Christians in his first epistle (1 Peter 4:16), which was likely written before Nero started officially

persecuting Christians. For more on the date of 1 Peter, see our teaching [Life in Exile: Introduction to 1 Peter](#). It would be strange for Paul and Peter to write about a fictional character that had not yet been invented.

The early evidence of the Romans persecuting Christians brings up another problem: If the Romans invented Christianity to quell Jewish rebellion, why would Rome be persecuting Christians? Wouldn't it make more sense for the Roman Empire to be *promoting* Christianity during this time?

In addition to Nero's persecution in the 60's, in AD 110, the emperor Trajan advised Pliny to kill professing Christians unless they denied their faith (*Pliny's Letters* 10.97). Again, if Rome invented Christianity for their own agenda, why would they try to suppress it?

These simple facts are enough to dismiss Atwill's claims entirely. But wait! There's more!

Historical problems aside, the third problem with Atwill's thesis is that the New Testament does not accomplish what Atwill claims its goals are. It would not change a revolutionary's mind to hear an unconfirmed story of a self-proclaimed Messiah promoting pacifism. The zealots were already hearing from other Jewish groups, like the Sadducees, that they should be submitting to Roman rule; having one more sect tell them that wasn't going to change their mind. Also, the book of Revelation describes Yeshua as a literal conquering king (Revelation 5:9-10; 11:15-18; 19:11-21), so that defeats the entire supposed purpose of creating this religion.

The fourth problem with Atwill's thesis is that Rome did not have any incentive to pull off such a grand conspiracy. Why would they go through the trouble of fabricating the entire life and teaching of a Messiah figure to trick the Jews when they could have quashed any Jewish rebellion easily? Why change what worked?

Atwill claims that the Romans resorted to inventing Christianity after they had "exhausted conventional means of quashing rebellion." But the Romans had not "exhausted" conventional means; they continually exercised all of those means. War, exile, torture, puppet governments, financial penalties, slander, and social ostracism were all employed to suppress Jewish dissidence. For all intents and purposes, these methods were quite effective. They didn't need to invent a whole new religion in order to deal with the Jews.

Fifth, are we really to believe that so many Jews (and Gentiles!) would fall for such a hoax? Eyewitnesses to Yeshua's life, death, and resurrection were still around. Whether or not Yeshua existed could have been easily verified. It's difficult to believe that any Jew would just start following this Yeshua guy unless they really came to believe that Yeshua was who he said he was and that he really did rise from the dead. Especially since, as we noted earlier, Rome was persecuting Christians! Christians were being tortured and killed for their faith in Yeshua.

Finally, and this should go without saying, there is no historical documentation anywhere that records the Romans inventing the historical Yeshua as propaganda. It's just a fantastic claim without a shred of evidence.

There is a lot more to criticize about the notion that Yeshua is a fictional character. We address several more of these claims in our teaching [Was Yeshua Copied from Pagan Myths](#). However, as far as "Caesar's Messiah" is concerned, hopefully this short teaching is enough to help you see that Atwill's

thesis has no historical basis and, frankly, doesn't make any sense. It shouldn't be taken seriously by anyone.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

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