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GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Caesar's Messiah Refuted

TEACHING SUMMARY

This teaching examines Joseph Atwill's claim that Rome invented Yeshua and Christianity. It introduces this claim as a form of mythicism, the view that Yeshua never existed historically. The teaching contrasts that view with the scholarly acceptance of Yeshua as a historical person, including the assessment of the atheist New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman.

Atwill's proposed explanation is that the Romans created a peaceful messiah to discourage Jewish rebellion. He attributes Christianity's creation to the Flavian imperial family after the Jewish revolt and connects Josephus with the writing of the New Testament through alleged parallels with his history. The teaching tests this proposal against the chronology and evidence it cites.

The first objection is that Christians are attested before the time Atwill places their invention. Tacitus describes Christians in Rome during Nero's reign, and Suetonius also mentions their persecution under Nero. The teaching adds the early dating of Paul's letters and Peter's reference to Christians as further difficulties for a theory that places Christianity's origin after Jerusalem's destruction.

The second objection concerns Rome's treatment of Christians. The teaching asks why a government that supposedly created a religion to advance its own interests would persecute its followers. It cites both Nero's persecution and Trajan's instructions to Pliny as evidence that Rome sought to suppress Christian faith rather than promote it.

The teaching also challenges the proposed purpose and necessity of the invention. It argues that another message of submission would not necessarily persuade Jewish revolutionaries, who already heard such counsel from other groups. Revelation's portrayal of Yeshua as a conquering king also conflicts with the alleged purpose. Rome continued using military force and other methods of repression, so the teaching rejects the claim that conventional measures had been exhausted.

Finally, the teaching considers the difficulty of persuading people to embrace a fabricated figure while eyewitnesses remained available and persecution made belief costly. It emphasizes the absence of historical documentation for the alleged Roman invention. Its conclusion is that Atwill's explanation lacks historical support and fails to account for the evidence discussed.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Mythicism denies that Yeshua existed as a historical person.
- The teaching distinguishes popular Internet claims from the scholarly assessment of Yeshua's historicity.
- Atwill proposes that Rome invented a peaceful messiah to discourage Jewish rebellion.
- His theory associates the invention of Christianity with the Flavian imperial family.
- Tacitus and Suetonius are cited as evidence of Christians during Nero's reign.
- The teaching also appeals to the early letters of Paul and Peter.
- Roman persecution challenges the claim that Christianity was created to serve Roman interests.
- Revelation portrays Yeshua as a conquering king, complicating the proposed pacifying purpose.
- Rome continued using conventional methods to suppress rebellion.
- The teaching concludes that the alleged Roman invention has no historical documentation.

FILL-IN-THE-BLANK

Basic

1. The author of Caesar's Messiah discussed in the teaching is Joseph _____.
2. The view that Yeshua never existed historically is called _____.
3. Atwill attributes the creation of Christianity to the imperial family known as the _____.
4. Tacitus describes Christians living in Rome during the reign of _____.
5. The historian Atwill connects with writing much of the New Testament is _____.
6. The biblical book that depicts Yeshua as a conquering king is _____.

Challenging

1. The atheist New Testament scholar cited as rejecting mythicism is Bart _____.
2. Alongside Tacitus, the Roman writer cited regarding persecution under Nero is _____.
3. In the correspondence discussed, the emperor who advised Pliny concerning Christians was _____.
4. The teaching cites 1 Peter _____ as a passage that explicitly mentions Christians.
5. Atwill's proposed peaceful religion was intended to stop Jewish _____ against Rome.
6. The teaching argues that people could verify Yeshua's existence because _____ were still around.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the teaching distinguish the historical-existence question from Atwill's particular theory of Roman invention?
2. Why is evidence of Christians under Nero important to the teaching's chronological objection?
3. Explain the tension the teaching identifies between Roman persecution and a religion supposedly invented for Roman benefit.
4. How does Revelation's portrayal of Yeshua challenge the proposed purpose of a peaceful messiah?
5. What reasons does the teaching give for questioning both Rome's need to invent Christianity and people's willingness to accept a hoax?
6. How do the teaching's objections work together to challenge Atwill's explanation?

ANSWER KEY – GROUP GUIDE

Basic

1. Atwill
2. mythicism
3. Flavians
4. Nero
5. Josephus
6. Revelation

Challenging

1. Ehrman
2. Suetonius
3. Trajan
4. 4:16
5. rebellion
6. eyewitnesses