A Review of Caesar’s Messiah

By Jerry Russell

In Caesar’s Messiah, Joseph Atwill showed that the Flavian Caesars, Vespasian and Titus, invented Christianity, that is the religion we know as Roman Catholicism. Remarkably, the emperors left behind a veiled confession (or boast) of their work, embedded in the Gospels and the works of Josephus. The religion was invented as wartime propaganda, primarily targeted at Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora, and also at the Gentiles (who were being approached by Jewish evangelists.) This covert act of psychological warfare was successful beyond the Romans’ wildest dreams: even today, the dominant view is that Christianity arose in humble circumstances, and grew to massive proportions while being driven by a variety of philosophical and religious trends, if not by God himself. However, as Atwill pointed out:

... as Christianity describes its origins, it was not only supernatural but also historically illogical. Christianity, a movement that encouraged pacifism and obedience to Rome, claims to have emerged from a nation engaged in a century-long struggle with Rome. An analogy to Christianity’s purported origins might be a cult established by Polish Jews during World War II that set up its headquarters in Berlin and encouraged its members to pay taxes to the Third Reich (29).

Atwill’s new finding is that the ‘Shakespearean’ literature was a deliberately veiled attack against the Flavian humor in the New Testament and the works of Josephus. In another words, Atwill has discovered another hidden genre of literature that connects 1st century Judea and Rome to 16th century Elizabethan England.

When Atwill published Caesar’s Messiah, he was concerned that his work not be seen as anti-Christian, but rather that it would help Christians as well as others to see how Christianity was manipulated by its elite creators for their own benefits. With this new work, there is a concern that Atwill could be seen as anti-semitic as well, as his portrayal of ‘Shakespeare’ as Jewish revenge literature is hardly flattering to the Bard. However, Atwill would be horrified if his work is ever misused as a tool for those who would perpetuate the cycle of religious hate and revenge portrayed by the ‘Shakespearean Project’. On the contrary, it is clear from his words that his hope is that humanity, by understanding the origins of these ancient wounds and ancient hatreds, can learn to overcome them, and that the people (regardless of their ethnic background or religious beliefs) can achieve the benefits of a more functional democracy that transcends the cycle of violence and genocide.

This volume also offers important new insights into the third Flavian emperor, Domitian, and his role in the Flavian conspiracy. Atwill argues that Domitian contributed to the single strand of typology shared by the Gospels and Shakespeare by inventing the Roman Catholic conception of the Trinity and a fictional character named ‘Paul’. Ironically, it was Atwill’s studies of Shakespeare that led him to this insight.
Shakespeare’s muse, Christopher Marlowe, understood the real origins of Christianity as well, and spelled out his views in unmistakable terms. For example, Marlowe put the following words into the mouth of his character Barabas, a wealthy Jewish merchant in *The Jew of Malta*:

BARABAS. In spite of these swine-eating Christians,
(Unchosen nation, never circumcis'd,
Poor villains, such as were ne'er thought upon
Till Titus and Vespasian conquer'd us,)
Am I become as wealthy as I was (II, 3).

With these words, Marlowe’s character categorically denied the conventional wisdom that Christians were first “thought upon” as much as 40 years earlier, during the reign of Tiberius.

As to how Barabas arrived at this understanding, we can only speculate. Indeed, in terms of evidence for the Flavian Origins of Christianity theory, ‘Shakespeare’ and Marlowe obviously can only contribute as a very late secondary source, at the end of a long and problematic chain of custody of the information. Regardless, this book will show that ‘Shakespeare’ shared Atwill and Barabas’s view that the Christians were “ne’er thought upon” until the Flavians invented them. Those who are inclined to dismiss Atwill as a “conspiracy theorist” will be surprised to learn that Shakespeare and Marlowe were also part of that club. And although it is not necessary to agree with Atwill’s theory of the authorship of the New Testament, it is at least necessary to understand the literary basis for the theory, because ‘Shakespeare’ is built on that same basis. Thus, this introduction is a review of his earlier findings, to provide the necessary background for the reader to understand his new research.

Although Atwill’s work is often (and rightly) seen as strikingly original, it should also be seen within the context of the theory of the Roman origins of the New Testament, which has much deeper roots. Bruno Bauer suggested as early as the 1840’s that the New Testament is characteristically Hellenistic and Roman, rather than Judean.1 Abelard Reuchlin2 and Cliff Carrington3 speculated that the Flavian emperors (Vespasian, Titus and Domitian) might have been specifically responsible.

Atwill’s contribution to the Flavian Origins theory was his discovery of a carefully constructed literary subtext that links the New Testament and the works of Josephus into a comic typological and theological system. Within this system, the Biblical Jesus is seen as both prophesying and foreshadowing the true arrival of the messianic “Son of Man” in


the military campaign of the Emperor Titus and his destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Atwill was baffled as to why this subtext had gone un-noticed for so long, even though, as he pointed out, “the works that reveal their satire—the New Testament and the histories of Josephus—are perhaps the most scrutinized books in literature” (10). His new discovery is that at least ‘Shakespeare’ also knew: a fact that he finds reassuring. However, for the skeptical reader, the mystery is only compounded: if there is anything that can compete with the New Testament and Josephus as “the most scrutinized books in literature”, it must surely be the works of ‘Shakespeare’. Atwill is asking his readers to believe, not only that his occulted reading of the Gospels has been hidden in plain sight for two millennia, but that it also somehow became the hidden inspiration for the Bard’s most famous plays -- and then sunk back into the depths of obscurity again -- only to be rediscovered now, when the truth can finally be spoken in straightforward language, without any typological veil, punning, or impenetrable sarcasm.

For many readers, this will be a tough pill to swallow. The claims put forward in *Caesar’s Messiah* have generated a great deal of interest, but have also encountered great resistance. At a most basic level, the accusation leveled by Atwill’s critics is that the entire system he proposes is nothing but a figment of his own imagination; a product of “parallelomania”. Furthermore, critics note, Atwill is a rather unlikely person to have made such a discovery. Although having studied Greek and Latin at a Jesuit school in Japan in his youth, he did not study any related subject in college, and his career was in the field of computer software. Only later in life did he return to his youthful preoccupation with New Testament studies.

Atwill reports that the Dead Sea Scrolls were crucial in re-calibrating his understanding of the historical milieu that gave rise to the New Testament. Many crucial aspects of the Scrolls were not unveiled to the public until 1991, at the instigation of Atwill’s friend and colleague Robert Eisenman, who suggested that a ‘Roman hand’ was at work in the New Testament. Eisenman’s work (for example, see *James the Brother of Jesus* and *The New Testament Code*) was an important influence to Atwill’s discoveries.4

So perhaps Atwill is not such an unlikely pioneer after all: with a love of the field, the freedom to think radically and creatively without fear of repercussions to his career, and with connections going to the vanguard of New Testament scholarship at this exciting juncture, he is a formidable advocate for the Flavian Origins hypothesis.

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Judea and the Cycle of Rebellion against Roman Rule

During the historical period surrounding the alleged life and times of the biblical Jesus, Judea was (in reality) at the epicenter of an epic, violent conflict between the Roman Empire and the adherents of a virulently radical form of messianic Judaism. The roots of the conflict date back earlier, to the age when the zealous Maccabees (also known as Hasmoneans) rebelled against the Seleucids (the remnants of Alexander the Great’s Hellenistic empire) and achieved an uneasy independence in 164 BCE. In 63 BCE, the Romans invaded Judea, and the Maccabees became Roman clients.

A family of foreigners from Edom (in Arabia) eventually usurped the role of the Maccabees as the Romans’ clients and tax farmers in Judea. The rise of this Herodian regime began when Antipater, born as an Edomite nobleman whose family had allegedly converted to Judaism, insinuated himself into Maccabean politics while simultaneously currying favor with the Romans. Antipater was appointed Roman Procurator of Judea under Julius Caesar (47 BCE), and his son Herod became the governor of Galilee, while the Hasmoneans continued to hold the office of high priest.

The Jewish people and their Hasmonean spiritual leaders were deeply hostile to Roman and Herodian rule, and in 40 BCE they revolted under the leadership of Antigonus II Mattathias, who forged an alliance with the Parthians. However, Herod put down the revolt with the help of Roman armies. The Roman senate awarded Herod the title of “King of the Jews”, and Antigonus was sent to Mark Antony for execution in 37 BCE.

It is important to note that at this juncture, the Roman strategy of employing Hasmoneans under their control as high priests had ended in ignominious failure. From that point forward, Herod the Great and his successors appointed the high priests of Jerusalem from among their cronies. There was no way to hide the massive spiritual and nationalistic divide between the people of Palestine and the Herodians, who were hated Roman proxies. It was a problem that cried out for a solution.

Christianity before the Flavians?

The true course of events in Palestine during the ~100 years between the Roman and Herodian takeover which was completed in 37 BCE, and the end of the Jewish war in ~73 CE, has always been a highly speculative topic, which scholarship is unlikely to resolve. In fact an essential aspect of Atwill’s work is to show that the New Testament and the works of Josephus must both be regarded as Roman propaganda, and that treating these documents as factual reporting can only lead to serious analytical errors. Yet these same documents are viewed as far and away the most comprehensive and most primary sources that we have available for that entire historical epoch. Recovering the history of 1st century Judea is, therefore, a matter of judiciously paring away the layers of propaganda from Josephus and the New Testament, with the assistance of supplementary (sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory) information provided by archaeology, source criticism, and other ancient sources.
In *Caesar’s Messiah*, Atwill wrote: “This Imperial family, the Flavians, invented Christianity.” By this he meant that the Flavians (and their court intellectuals) created the religion in the form that we know it, and wrote the Gospels as they have come down to us. However, this does not mean that they invented the religion as an entirely new creation, like Venus emerging from the sea-foam as a fully-grown woman. On the contrary, Flavian Christianity certainly had its precedents. Robert M. Price’s review of *Caesar’s Messiah* complained that “There is way, way, too much else in any and all of the gospel texts that cannot be dismissed (really, neglected) as mere padding, ballast, which is all it would be if Atwill is right.” However, this was a misunderstanding of Atwill’s position. He accepts the fact that the extant Gospels were written by several individuals in different times and places. And he would certainly agree that the Gospels were written with many earlier sources in mind.

At a philosophical and inspirational level, the sources of the Flavian gospels may have included Philo, Seneca, Pythagoras, other Stoics and Cynics, Homer, Gilgamesh, all the Hellenistic mystery cults of the Mediterranean region, and the astro-theological myths of the ancients. Sorting all of this out is a Herculean task that has consumed many scholarly lifetimes, and no doubt will consume many more. However, none of this analysis can account for the specific historical circumstances and events that caused the Christian religion to take the particular form that it did. Similarly, redaction criticism can identify the common source materials that were used by the four canonical evangelists, but they cannot tell us the entire contents of those sources, much less identify their ideological motivations or biases.

The search for the ‘original sources’ of the gospels, along with the search for the ‘historical Jesus’, is often a spiritually-driven quest: that is, once the seeker is convinced that Christianity has been ‘corrupted’ (whether by Paul, or by Flavian influences, or by the Papacy, or by modernity) the goal becomes to recover the purity of the message that was originally delivered by the revered prophet. In terms of its spiritual value, however, the enthusiasm for this quest may be misplaced, as there is no guarantee that the original message is recoverable, or that the prophet had any unique wisdom to impart in the first place. My interest is more from a historical point of view, to understand the dynamics of religious development, and the interplay of elite and populist forces in this process.

In his book *Did Jesus Exist*, Bart Ehrman gave the following summary of scholarly opinion about the ‘historical Jesus’:

… there are several points on which virtually all scholars of antiquity agree. Jesus was a Jewish man, known to be a preacher and teacher, who was crucified (a Roman form of execution) in Jerusalem during the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea.5

If such a person did exist, he was certainly living within the historical milieu of that time, and interacting with the forces that were prevalent. To understand that environment, I

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recommend the works of Robert Eisenman, and also the highly readable summary and review of his work written by Andrew Gould, who wrote:

By careful distillation, Eisenman is able to exhume the lost voice of the defeated rebellion, which, while it did leave some traces in the New Testament, now speaks directly and forcefully to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls. …. many scholars recognize that the ideological conflict between James and Paul is the engine that drives the entire New Testament. But Eisenman is able to show that this conflict is identical to the one between Jewish nationalists and the Roman-back Herodian state, which erupted into the conflagration of the Jewish War over exactly the same issues debated by James and Paul.6

Gould’s review goes on to identify the driving issues behind this ideological conflict, which encompassed not only Judea, but also the entire Mediterranean region, wherever far-flung trading networks controlled by prosperous Jewish merchants and tradesmen of the diaspora competed with their Hellenistic counterparts. On the one side, the Zealots, Sicarii and radical Essenes of the rebellion, rooted in the nationalist tradition of the Maccabees, were concerned about circumcision; the purity of sacrifices and the presence or absence of foreign idols in the Temple; the Hellenistic elite’s practices of niece marriage and sister marriage and intercourse during menstruation, all of which the Zealots viewed as fornication; the purity of dietary practices; the plight of the poor, pitted against the predations of the rich; and the doctrine of salvation by works as well as by faith. On the other side, the Herodians and their allies sought to develop tolerant, cosmopolitan attitudes, in order to facilitate the greatest possible integration with the broader Roman and Hellenistic world.

Eisenman recognized several episodes in the New Testament that appear to be parodies of historical incidents as they were described in Josephus and other sources. From this, he concludes that the Biblical characters of James and Simon Peter are also likely to be parodies of the real leaders of the Jewish rebellion. In Caesar’s Messiah, Atwill reaches a similar conclusion, and also offers the view that another important rebel leader, and possibly a messiah figure to the rebels, was the character Eleazar.

The interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls is highly speculative because the scrolls were written as a sort of underground samizdat literature. All references to individuals were done using code words, and allegorical formulations were generally used for political commentary. However, based on a finely woven tapestry of comparisons to other sources, Eisenman argues that the Scrolls are also referring to the events leading up to the Jewish War, and that the colorful depictions of the Righteous Teacher and the Spouter of Lying are referring to James and Paul, respectively.

In some aspects, we might recognize the religion of the Jewish rebels as a sort of embryonic Christianity. The representations of the earliest Christian ‘koinonia’ community in Jerusalem in the book of Acts may very well be a parody of James’s

church of rebels. Some of the wildly self-contradictory aspects of the New Testament may reflect the survival of the rebels’ literature, which was too popular and well-known at the time to be denied or suppressed, but could be incorporated into the Flavian version of the Gospels alongside newer materials promoting the Roman viewpoint.

However, it would certainly be a mistake to view the Jewish rebel coalition as a purely populist, spiritually and economically progressive movement. Josephus pointed out that they received substantial leadership and economic and political support from the royalty of ‘Adiabene’, consisting of the family of King Monobazus, Queen Helena, and their son Izates. Eisenman noticed that the realms of ‘Adiabene’ and the land of the ‘Edessenes’ seem to be overlapping, and Ralph Ellis has argued that Monobazus, Helena and Izates should be identified as the royal family of the city of Edessa, who were covertly affiliated with the Parthians. According to Ellis, this Izates (who he identifies as the historical King Manu VI) saw himself not only as a messiah to the Jews, but also as a contender for the throne of Rome. If this is the case, then the Jewish rebels were pawns in a vast dynastic struggle being played out between the Parthians and the Romans; and Izates himself was another of (possibly several) rebel leaders parodied as Jesus in the New Testament. Ellis argues that Izates was, quite simply, the ‘historical Jesus’; but I would have to disagree, based simply on Ehrman’s criterion that ‘Jesus’ was a Jewish man who was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

Both Ellis and another self-taught Biblical scholar, Lena Einhorn, have noticed extensive parallels between Josephus’s narrative of events occurring between the years 44 and 56 CE, and a similar series of events and circumstances in the New Testament narrative covering the years 24 to 36 CE. A central figure in Josephus’s account is the ‘Egyptian prophet’, whose story matches Biblical Jesus in many respects, except that his fate following his arrest at the Mount of Olives is not described by Josephus. Later on, according to Acts (21:38), the Apostle Paul was asked if he was the troublemaking ‘Egyptian’ who stirred up a revolt among the Zealots. Einhorn speculates that the New Testament authors told their story with a 20-year time shift, and that Jesus, Paul and ‘The Egyptian prophet’ may have all been the same individual; or, I would add, perhaps ‘The Egyptian’ was indeed a rebel leader of the Zealots, and was the true (but, contrary to Ehrman, time-transposed) ‘historical Jesus’; and that after his execution, Paul the Herodian stepped into his place and tried to lead his movement in a different direction.

Aside from all this speculation about the Jewish rebel movement, its leaders, and its relation to Christianity: it’s also necessary to consider the possibility that there was an

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7 R Ellis, Jesus, King of Edessa (Cheshire; Kempton, Ill.: Edfu Books ; Adventures Unlimited, 2012).

8 R Ellis, King Jesus: From Kam (Egypt) to Camelot (Cheshire; Kempton, Ill.: Edfu Books ; Adventures Unlimited, 2008).


10 Lena Einhorn and Rodney Bradbury, The Jesus Mystery: Astonishing Clues to the True Identities of Jesus and Paul (Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2007).
early Roman and Herodian-controlled form of Christianity which was invented well before the time of the Flavians, and which competed with the radical messianic Judaism of the rebels. This would explain the activities of ‘Paul’ in his conflicts with James, as a promoter of this early form of Christianity. As Gould wrote:

Paul, in particular, was a political/intelligence operative for the Herodian kings, not only before his famous “conversion” on the road to Damascus, but after as well.

In its most embryonic form, Paul’s religion could have been developed as an abstraction of the cult of Julius Caesar, the founding deity of the Roman imperial cult of emperor worship.

During his lifetime, Julius Caesar had aligned himself with the far left wing of the Roman political spectrum; that is, he was one of the populares, a supporter of reforms such as land redistribution, wider access to citizenship, and better pay for soldiers and the lower class in general. In this position, Caesar was at odds with the majority of right-wing optimates on the senate, who were determined to maintain the same extreme level of social stratification that prevailed at the time.

In Caesar’s sojourn in Egypt, he experienced the genuine adulation and reverence that the Egyptians felt for his paramour, Cleopatra VII of Egypt, who was not only admired for her statesmanship, but also was worshipped as a Goddess, an embodiment of Isis. Caesar was also a great admirer of Alexander the Great, who was similarly viewed as a sort of deity by the Greeks. As Pontifex Maximus, the head of the Roman priestly college, Caesar was already an honored religious leader of the Roman republic. And as a war hero and an advocate of the people's human dignity, Caesar was fabulously popular with the general public of Rome.¹¹

In such circumstances, it seems perfectly natural that Caesar may have decided to orchestrate the process of his own deification. His image, carved in ivory, appeared among the assembly of gods at the Roman circus. A day in Caesar's honor was added to the calendar alongside the days of Jupiter. A temple was built in his honor in Rome.¹² Caesar was described as the savior of his nation, and was admired for his was willingness to extend forgiveness to his former enemies. He was revered as a liberator, a great giver of freedom to the Roman people. Reportedly, he was especially admired by the Jews, who regarded him as an ally in their struggle for religious freedom and self-determination.

Following Caesar's death in 44 BC, his apotheosis proceeded apace, driven not only by Caesar's enormous popularity amongst the rank-and-file people of Rome, but also by the industrious promotion by both of Caesar's designated successors, his adopted son


Octavian and his chief priest Mark Antony. The Roman senate officially consecrated Caesar's divinity in 42 BC, and thus Octavian obtained the title of Divi Filius, the Son of God, while Antony was confirmed as Flamine Divus Julius, the priest of the Divine Caesar. The memory of Caesar as a God served both of those men equally, so they both devoted the tremendous resources of the Roman state towards construction and promotion of temples of the Caesar cult, which were erected in Rome, Caesarea, Alexandria, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Phillipi, Thessalonica and Smyrna. These were the same locations that were later named as the earliest centers of the Christian church.

In his book *Jesus was Caesar*, Francesco Carotta postulated that a key ceremony of this Divus Julius cult might have been a re-enactment of Caesar's funeral and Mark Anthony's dramatic memorial oration. As it has come down to us in the histories of Suetonius and Appianus, a centerpiece of the memorial service was a *tropaeum*, which was a pole with horizontal arms that was used to display war trophies. In this case, the *tropaeum* was used to display an effigy or wax simulacrum of Caesar's body cloaked in his blood-stained robe. In other words, it appeared as if Caesar was hung from a cross at his funeral.

Gary Courtney in *Et Tu Judas? Then Fall Jesus* also argued that the Biblical story of Jesus’s trial and crucifixion contains many illogical aspects and contradictions, which can be plausibly explained with the realization that the Gospel stories of Jesus’s trial, crucifixion and resurrection are dramatizations of the assassination of Julius Caesar, his funeral, and his apotheosis. Courtney wrote:

This religious play... may have evolved to comprise the following essential elements:

1. A great and just man who astounds his age by instituting a comprehensive policy of forgiveness.
2. On the verge of becoming the king, he is betrayed and murdered by those he had saved -- the treachery epitomized by his turncoat friend Brutus.
3. When his tribulation begins, his close friend and religious deputy, sworn to protect him, flees in fear and disguises himself.
4. The murdered man's ultimate triumph, being resurrected as a god.
5. His betrayer commits suicide.

What better foundation ‘myth’ could a religion hope for? It would be difficult to create a fiction that could lend itself more readily to a theatrical presentation…. Is it not possible that the betrayal and murder of this ancient founder of the Roman Empire, *pontifex maximus* and common Savior of Mankind, whose name – Caesar,

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Kaiser, Czar – came to be synonymous with king throughout the Western world, and the shedding of whose blood “pierced the hearts of all mankind”, influenced the development of the Christian religion? Is it merely a coincidence that the five points listed above constitute the heart and soul of the Passion of Christ?  

If the ceremonies of the hypothetical Julius Caesar cult eventually became the core of the Christians’ Easter commemorations of Jesus Christ, this could have been the result of a gradual progression. The Roman imperial cult typically focused its public adulation on the current emperor and his father, the most recently deified Caesar. However, it is also believed that the imperial cult functioned as a Hellenistic mystery religion, and my speculation is that Caesar’s funeral may have continued to be secretly re-enacted as a rite of the cult for its more advanced members, while the association of the ritual with Julius Caesar (as a particular human being) was gradually de-emphasized and forgotten. Particularly among Hellenized Jews, a realization might have gradually dawned that Caesar was the messiah that the Jews had been waiting for.

Or it is also conceivable that the Herodians made a deliberate policy decision to adopt this re-enactment of Caesar’s funeral as the core of their own new Hellenistic mystery cult, which would offer the abstracted Caesar to the Jews as the true incarnation of their Messiah. This could have begun at a very early date: Carotta has pointed out that according to tradition, “The Gospel of Mark was written in Latin in Rome 12 years after the ascension of the Lord.” If Julius Caesar was indeed the “Lord” being referred to, this would be just 5 years after the ignominious defeat of Antigonus, last of the Maccabees; and the ‘Mark’ who was attributed with responsibility for this first draft of the Roman Gospel would have been Mark Anthony, the Roman overseer of the Judean province at that time. However, although Caesar was undeniably a historical person, Carotta’s claim that he was the ‘historical Jesus’ would obviously be rejected under Ehrman’s criteria on the grounds that he lived at the wrong time and place.

In an ongoing process of religious innovation, the Romans and Herodians may have continued to develop this hybrid of Jewish and Roman spirituality during the 1st century of the common (that is, Christian) era. As I will relate later, I believe that the Gospels and other documents of the early Roman church were most likely maintained as secrets of the inner sanctuary of the cult, which was operated like other Hellenistic mystery religions of the time; which would explain why copies of these materials have not survived, and would also how the Romans were able to evolve the story over time, while redacting earlier versions.


Stephen Huller in *The Real Messiah*\(^{17}\) proposed that the ‘historical Jesus’ was the leader of a rebellion of the Samaritans during the reign of Pontius Pilate. As Josephus told the story of this event, a certain rebel leader inspired “a multitude” of armed Samaritans to gather with the goal of climbing Mt. Gerizzim to see “sacred vessels” placed there by Moses; but Pilate’s police routed the rebellion, and captured and executed the rebel leader (Josephus, Ant 18.4.85-87).

As a rebel "ordered to be slain" by Pontius Pilate in ~37 CE, this character seems to be an excellent candidate for ‘historical Jesus’ according to Ehrman’s criteria: at least, he is a Jew (although presumably a Samaritan) who lives at the right time and place, and who was a popular preacher -- although Josephus does not tell us exactly where or how he was executed.

Huller goes on to argue that this Jesus was portrayed by the Herodians as a forerunner to another Messiah who would come as the political savior of the Jews. In order to fulfill that prophecy, Huller argues, the young Marcus Julius Agrippa (that is, Herod Agrippa II, then age 8) went to Alexandria in 38 CE, where he was crowned as the Messiah and King of the Jews. This coronation was said to be engineered behind the scenes by Philo, Marcus’s mother (or grandmother) Mary Salome, and the new Emperor Caligula.

The centerpiece of Huller's evidence for his theory is an artifact called the "Throne of St. Mark." Huller argues that this "Throne" could well date to the 1st century CE, as opposed to the dominant view that it is 5th century hagiographic relic. The throne has an inscription in Hebrew stating "Coronation of Marcus the Evangelist" and in Samaritan stating "Year 1". It is decorated with 50 stars, which Huller argues is another indication (along with "year 1") that the throne dates to a Samaritan jubilee year, which fell in 38 CE. On the front, the throne has an image of a ram (or lamb?) standing under a bush, which Huller interprets as an image of the ram that was sacrificed by Abraham in place of his son Isaac, after God released Abraham from the obligation to sacrifice his first-born son. Huller thinks this reflects an early Christology, in which the political Messiah on the throne (that is, Marcus Agrippa) received the benefit of the spiritual Messiah’s sacrifice as the Lamb or Ram of God; in other words, the sacrifice of the rebel leader who was executed by Pilate.

This Herodian form of Christianity would have been based on Philo’s view of the amalgamation of Jewish and Platonic philosophy, and it might very well have incorporated an abstracted form of the cult of Julius Caesar’s funeral re-enactment as well; and the ‘Gospel of Mark Anthony’ (if indeed it ever existed) evolved into the ‘Gospel of Marcus Agrippa’. Aside from the “Throne of St. Mark”, Huller offers a wide variety of tantalizingly suggestive evidence from other sources. However, sadly, the quality of his scholarship is (in my view) spotty at best, and one can only hope that his thesis will attract the attention of other scholars to either confirm or refute the hypothesis.

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If indeed this primitive Herodian Christianity did exist, the Romans might well have been promoting it not only in Palestine but also throughout the Jewish Diaspora and indeed throughout the entire Hellenized portion of the planet. And if this is the case, there might well have been an “Apostle Paul” who was evangelizing around the Mediterranean and writing epistles to his churches, and if so, this “Paul” with his Roman and Herodian allegiances would have been seen by rebellious Messianic Jews in Jerusalem as a “Spouter of Lies”, just as Eisenman says.

One of the most predominant criticisms of Caesar’s Messiah is the evidence (however meager or controversial it might be) that Christianity existed much earlier than the time of Vespasian. And if any or all of this speculation is correct, then of course (literally speaking) the Flavians didn’t exactly invent Christianity. But they certainly did re-invent it, while obliterating any conclusive evidence that there had been anything earlier.

The fact is that we don’t have any of the source documents (such as “Q” or “proto-Luke” or the “Hebrew Gospel”) that are postulated by redaction criticism; nor do we have the hypothetical original autographs of the (Julian) Gospel of Mark Anthony, nor the (Herodian) Gospel of Marcus Agrippa, nor the pre-Flavian Pauline epistles. If Atwill’s hypothesis is correct, it certainly follows that any and all earlier sources have been heavily redacted if not completely re-written by the Flavians, and this fact needs to be the basis of any further analysis. While there may be some truth in what the redaction critics and the Julian Origins theorists and Huller are saying, Atwill is simply not interested in participating in this speculation: neither in Caesar’s Messiah nor in this book.

The Flavians and the Jewish Rebellion of 66 CE

Regardless of whatever stratagems the Romans and Herodians might have devised during a hundred years of uneasy peace, they assuredly did not succeed in healing the deep wounds stemming from the Roman conquest. A movement organized by Jewish sects known as the Zealots and Sicarii was continually fomenting revolution, and in 66 CE the Jews rose up and drove the Romans and Herodians out of the country. Nero sent his general Vespasian, along with Vespasian’s son Titus, to recover the lost territory. Vespasian’s family was intimately connected with the Herodians as well as another powerful Jewish family, the Alexanders of Egypt. When Nero was killed in suspicious circumstances, the support of the Alexanders and Herodians was crucial to Vespasian’s effort to gain the throne. This group of families obviously had the means, the motive, and the opportunity to create a new religion for Judea, and indeed for the entire world. Atwill continues:

...it is odd that so many members of the Flavian family were recorded as having been among Christianity’s first members. Why was a Judaic cult that advocated meekness and poverty so attractive to a family that practiced neither? The tradition connecting early Christianity and the Flavian family is based on solid evidence but has received little comment from scholars (38).

The rogue’s gallery of possible Flavian Christians cited in Caesar’s Messiah includes
Titus’s mistress Bernice (possibly the same person as St. Veronica), Titus Flavius Sabinus (consul in 82 CE, Vespasian’s nephew), Sabinus’s brother the theologian Titus Flavius Clemens, Sabinus’s wife Flavia Domitilla, and the early Pope known as Clement. The patron Saint of France, St. Petronilla, was another member of what the Catholic Church refers to as the ‘Christian Flavii’. Legend had it that Petronilla was the daughter of St. Peter, but sixteenth-century notices show that she was related to the Flavius Clemens mentioned above, whose great-grandfather was Titus Flavius Petronius. The New Testament also records that the Flavians hosted leaders of the early church in their court. While in some cases the sources of this information are late and hagiographic, in other cases multiple and/or possibly primary sources attest to early Flavian involvement in Christianity. These circumstances are extraordinarily difficult to explain if the origins of Christianity are as they are usually depicted: a movement built of humble fishermen, merchants and slaves from Palestine. But, as Atwill noted:

A Roman origin would also explain why so many members of a Roman imperial family, the Flavians, were recorded as being among the first Christians. The Flavians would have been among the first Christians because, having invented the religion, they were, in fact, the first Christians (33).

The great historian of that era, Josephus, soon became part of the Flavian milieu. As the story goes: initially a commander of the rebel forces in the Jewish War, Josephus (who claims to have been born as Josephus bar Matthias, a good Hasmonean name) was captured and delivered to the Romans. Given an audience with Vespasian, the historian predicted that the famous Star Prophecy of Isaiah would be fulfilled with Vespasian’s rise to the throne of the Roman Empire. When the prophecy was fulfilled, the grateful Vespasian adopted ‘Flavius’ Josephus into the royal family, and granted him the patronage necessary to write his extensive works. Therefore, Josephus’s history of the Jewish War, which ended in a tremendous bloodbath and the defeat of the Jewish rebellion in 73 CE, must be read with the understanding that it is a perfect example of the proverb “history is written by the winners.”

**The Flavian Origins Theory is Straight-Talking Common Sense.**

History tells us that Flavius Constantine the Great, inspired by a vision of a flaming cross of light at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 CE, shifted the vast patronage of the Roman government and its tax revenues to Christianity. The Christian Church was endowed with lands and property, and the entire city of Constantinople was built from the ground up as a Christian city. The Council of Nicea was held to unify the tenets of the religion under Constantine’s direction, and all the diverse sectarian forms of Christianity (aside from Roman Catholicism) became official heresies. Historians debate whether Constantine was truly a descendant of the Flavian dynasty of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, or whether his genealogy was a fabrication, in which case his family name may have been chosen in homage to the Flavians and their creation of Christianity.

A brief pagan counter-revolution was attempted under Julian the Apostate (who reigned from 361-363 CE), but by 380 CE, the triumvirs Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius felt confident enough to issue the Edict of Thessalonica, which pronounced that all pagans and heretics in the entire Roman Empire “will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict.”

However, as the saying goes, “Rome was not built in a day.” Constantine’s experience in replacing the existing religions across the Roman Empire should be compared and contrasted with Akhenaten’s experience in his attempt to uproot the old religion of Egypt. Within a single generation, Akhenaten’s Atenite experiment was over, the old Gods and the old priesthood restored, and Akhenaten was all but erased from history (that is, unless he somehow lived on as a type of Moses in Canaan.) Religious beliefs are deeply and tenaciously held, and tend to be passed from generation to generation, so there is tremendous inertia and resistance to change. My view is that Constantine’s success must have been a result of many generations of sustained effort.

Long before Constantine’s time, Christianity (that is, Roman Catholicism) had manifested itself in a style that was clearly destined for Imperial greatness. As early as the epistle of Clement (~95 CE) the Church was already organized in a hierarchical, quasi-military fashion, taking orders from the Bishop of Rome, with a goal of evangelizing the world. Furthermore, as Atwill observed:

When one looks at the form of early Christianity, one sees not Judea, but Rome. The church’s structures of authority, its sacraments, its college of bishops, the title of the head of the religion - the supreme pontiff - were all based on Roman, not Judaic, traditions. Somehow, Judea left little trace on the form of a religion that purportedly originated inside of it (29).

Robert M. Price painted a vivid portrait of the absurdity of the conventional view of Christian origins:

Picture a religious ethic of conspicuous compromise with the occupying authorities, a gospel that tells its believers not to resist any who confiscate their property, but to pay Roman taxes and to carry a legionary’s field pack twice the distance stipulated by Roman law. Imagine a story that blames not just Jews but implicitly nationalistic, messianic Jews for the destruction of their temple. A story that has the messiah predict that the kingdom will be taken from Jews and given to a more worthy nation. Keep in mind how the preacher of this sect befriends Jews who collaborate with Rome and eulogizes a Roman centurion for having faith unparalleled among Jews. He is declared innocent by Roman authorities but nonetheless is done in by Jewish rulers. Then think of how the predictions of the fall of Jerusalem a single generation later correspond so closely to Josephus’

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account of the events, and furthermore, how Josephus even mentions Jesus as a righteous man and even as the messiah of prophetic prediction (though he himself had proclaimed Vespasian the proper object of such prophecy). When someone suggests that Christianity may have been a “safe,” denatured, Roman-domesticated, messianic Methadone to replace the real and dangerous messianic heroin of the Zealots, and that Josephus had something to do with it, it does not sound unreasonable on the face of it.

Price, unfortunately, went on to reject the implications of his own analysis, adding:

What about the Roman-tilting anti-Judaism (maybe anti-Semitism) of the gospels? Again, the old explanations are quite natural and adequate: we are reading the documents of Gentile Christianity which viewed itself as superseding Judaism and Jewish Christianity. Why do their authors seem to kiss the Roman posterior? For apologetical reasons, to avoid persecution. Brandon, Eisler, and others saw that long ago.20

Aside from begging the question of how and why these “Gentiles” would adopt a radical Jewish Messianic Christianity only to ultimately “supersede” it, or how any “Christian” sect that would kiss “the Roman posterior” could be considered anything other than a raw instrument of Roman government power: Price’s argument here is also based on a failure to understand the nature and extent of the specific literary evidence for Flavian complicity, which I will explain below.

But what about the martyrs?

Doubters will scoff that the Romans couldn’t have created and nurtured Christianity while they were simultaneously doing their best to stamp it out. A more extensive response to this question will be following in the third volume of this series, which will deal comprehensively with the supposed periods of persecution. Meanwhile I would like to make the following observations:

1. Up until Constantine’s edicts, all forms of Christianity were equally forbidden from a Roman legalistic perspective. However, in addition to the Roman Catholic form, there were many other nominally Christian sects, including Gnostic sects, as well as (quite possibly) genuinely Messianic Jewish sects. In many martyrdom narratives, it can be difficult or impossible to tell whether the victim was an orthodox Roman Catholic, or a follower of some more zealous sect.

2. Modern scholars have found that the scale of martyrdom has often been overestimated. For a discussion, see Candida Moss’s The Myth of Persecution.21

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3. Many of the ‘Christian’ martyrs were Jewish zealots. For example, Atwill shows in Caesar’s Messiah that the martyrdom of Simon ‘predicted’ by Jesus in John 21 actually foresaw the execution of the zealot leader Simon in 73 CE. Rome had, in effect, used its martyrdom of the zealots as part of its pseudo-history of Roman Christianity.

**Literary imitation, typology, and enigma**

Regardless of any reader’s intuition about the likelihood of a Roman conspiracy to invent Christianity, *Caesar’s Messiah* is fundamentally evidence-based and grounded in literary analysis. The basic methodology is the assessment of literary imitation; that is, borrowing or mimesis. By borrowing literary elements from a predecessor, an author betrays his awareness of the precedent material, as well as revealing his viewpoint or analysis of it.

Literary imitation has been a common practice in all ages, and was highly revered among the authors of the Old Testament, who were especially fond of chiastic forms. Chiasm involves a series of literary elements that are placed in order and then referred to in reverse order, unwinding the chiasm: for example, ABCCBA. These structures can be brief, or very extensive: almost the entire Torah from the middle of Exodus to the end of Leviticus is said to be a giant chiasm. New Testament scholars discovered that the Gospel characters and events are often foreshadowed in the Old Testament, in a relationship in which the Old Testament model is called the ‘Type’ and the New Testament embodiment is called the ‘Antetype’. The theological study of ‘Types’ and ‘Antetypes’ is called Typology, and theological practitioners see New Testament events as evidence of Divine intervention in history. Modern secular literary critics, of course, see it as proof only that the New Testament authors studied the Old Testament and invoked its authority and wisdom in their writings.

In *Caesar’s Messiah*, Atwill focused on a particular variety of typology that involves a series of parallels that are dense, sequential, distinctive, and interpretable. When these criteria are met in abundance, they can be considered as sure evidence of literary dependency. ‘Density’ relates to the number of parallels that occur within a brief amount of text; ‘sequence’ relates to the extent that the parallel references occur in the same order; ‘distinctiveness’ relates to the degree that the parallels must relate to unusual and infrequent words, names or concepts; and ‘interpretability’ relates to the extent that we can understand the reasoning behind the choice to use a particular literary reference; the ways in which the reference has been transformed or slavishly copied, as the case may be; and the point that the author is trying to make.

The New Testament makes abundant use of dense, sequential, distinctive and interpretable mimesis of the Old Testament. A good example is Matthew’s story of

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Jesus’s empty tomb, which draws from the tale of Daniel in the lion’s den. The parallels are highlighted in **bold typeface**: 

**Daniel 6:17-28**

Then a **stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den**, and the king **sealed it**… Then the king arose **very early in the morning** and went in haste to the den of lions. And when he came to the den, he cried out … saying to Daniel, “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions? Then Daniel said to the king, **“O king, live forever! My God sent His angel** and shut the lions’ mouths, so that they have not hurt me…”… And the king gave the command, and **they brought those men who had accused Daniel**, and they **cast them into the den of lions** … and the lions overpowered them, and broke all their bones in pieces … Then King Darius wrote: **To all peoples, nations, and languages** … I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom **men must tremble and fear** before the God of Daniel. For He is the living God… **His dominion shall endure to the end**….

**Matthew 27:59-28:20**

When Joseph had taken the body… he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb… [Pilate’s guards] went and made the tomb secure, **sealing the stone** and setting the guard. Now after the Sabbath, **as the first day of the week began to dawn**, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for **an angel of the Lord descended from heaven**, and came and rolled back the stone … **And the guards … became like dead men**. But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for **He is risen**… Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee… And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “**All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations**… and lo, I am with you always, **even to the end of the age**.”

Parallels include the stone; the seal; the time (early in the morning, or at dawn); the angel sent from God; the guards (accusers) “like dead men” (or, killed); Daniel’s wish for the king to live forever, which foreshadows “Jesus is risen”; and the benediction to all nations in heaven and earth, under God’s dominion (authority) to the end of the age. All these specific parallels occur in two short, dense passages; generally (but not exactly) in sequence; and of course the message is that Daniel is a ‘Type’, that is, a prefiguration of Jesus who is the ‘Antetype’.

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Similarly, the Old Testament Joseph (Genesis 45-50) is a type of the New Testament Joseph, and Moses (Exodus 1-32) is a type of Jesus (Matthew 2:13-4:10). As Atwill explains:

Joseph is described as bringing Jesus, who represents the “new Israel,” down to Egypt. ... a previous Joseph brought the “old Israel” down to Egypt. ... The New Testament Joseph is described, like his counterpart in the Hebrew Bible, as a dreamer of dreams and as having encounters with a star and wise men. Both stories regarding the journey of a Joseph to Egypt are immediately followed by a description of a massacre of innocents. ... each massacre of the innocents’ story depicts young children being slaughtered by a fearful tyrant, but the future savior of Israel being saved. The authors of the New Testament then continue mirroring Exodus by having an angel tell Joseph, “They are dead which sought the young child’s life” (Matt. 2:20). This statement is a clear parallel to the statement made to Moses, the first savior of Israel, in Exodus 4:19: “All the men are dead which sought thy life.” The parallels then continue with Jesus receiving a baptism (Matt. 3:13), which mirrors the baptism of the Israelites (passing through water) described in Exodus 14. Next, Jesus spends 40 days in the desert, which parallels the 40 years the Israelites spend in the wilderness. Both sojourns in the desert involve three sets of temptations (16-17).

The first of these temptations involves bread; the second, tempting God; the third, worshiping and serving only God.

This typological mapping is widely acknowledged by scholars, even though the Old Testament half of the typology sprawls across acres and acres of Old Testament territory, and thus the entire argument could easily be criticized on the basis of Multiple Comparisons Fallacy (that is, each New Testament phrase is compared to many passages of the Old Testament, and thus you would expect a certain number of parallelisms to arise purely by random processes.) In other words, this example fails MacDonald’s density criterion. In this case, we certainly agree with the scholarly consensus that each individual parallel is sufficiently powerful to overcome the Multiple Comparisons bias inherent in this typological example as a whole.
It is important to notice that the differences between the ‘type’ and the ‘antetype’ passages, cannot defeat the proof of literary dependence. On the contrary, it is the differences that allow the later author to convey his own unique message. This point may be illustrated graphically with the three images of the Mona Lisa above. We know that the two images to the right are both inspired by the Mona Lisa (at the left) because of the shared theme and also because of the many shared details, even though the differences are also easy to spot, and each image has its own message to convey. Atwill’s position is that common sense is a good guide in determining whether literary mimesis is involved in linking two passages in literature, just as it’s a good guide in imagery.

Also, note that the use of literary mimesis does not (in itself) prove that the incident being described is fictional: a writer might easily decide to begin with a real but relatively mundane historical event, and dress it up with literary spices and delicacies. In our modern world, we would frown on a journalist or news reporter who was caught indulging in this sort of thing. However, no such code of ethics was even conceived of in ancient times; so the line between fact and fiction is not so easy to discern in ancient literature.

**Sense of Humor Required**

Another aspect of Atwill’s view of Josephus and the Gospels is that they both represent a highly developed, wicked sense of humor. For most of us, who are trained in one way or another to respect the Christian religion as a source of at least symbolic or allegorical spiritual wisdom, this view of the Gospels can be difficult to accept. Similarly, there is a natural tendency to respect Josephus as one would respect any other historian, and to expect a journalistic perspective from him.

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The problem is compounded because one of the essential aspects of humor is its trust and respect for the audience in their ability to grasp the humorist’s perspective. That is, the comedian does not explain or expound upon the meaning of his joke -- he just tells the joke, and then the audience laughs, which proves that they “got it.” The magic is broken if the humorist needs to “spell it out” for the audience.

The problem with Josephan and Gospel humor is that, up until Atwill, the audience (for the most part) hasn’t been laughing, because the ability to appreciate these subtle jokes has largely been lost. First of all, modern readers don’t have the historical background, nor do they have the same command of the classical literature such as Homer and the Old Testament that was possessed by the well-educated elite of the ancients. Many jokes are based on a detailed knowledge of their context.

Another essential aspect of humor is that it is always at someone’s expense; that is, the humorist is “making fun of” his target. Thus, I argue that humor can be a crucial clue in determining the directionality of literary dependence: humorous literature must always be written as a response to a prior source or event. That is, Sarah Palin’s real-life political adventures came first, and Tina Fay’s Saturday Night Live skits came afterwards, presumably to Palin’s chagrin. Again, it’s necessary to understand the historical context in order to see the arrow of time’s ever-forward progression.

In the Flavian comic system, the attack on the targeted Jews is vicious, which presents another problem for modern readers. The era of the Flavians was an era when perhaps the majority of people were held as slaves, treated little better than cattle; an era when death in combat was “up close and personal”; and an era when gladiatorial blood and gore was considered entertainment. It was, overall, an age of great cruelty. The modern zeitgeist has changed: even if the material condition of billions of people is really little better, those of us in positions of some comfort are at least more circumspect about taking pleasure at their plight. Thus, the Flavian jokes tend to fall flat on modern ears because we feel that a more appropriate response would be “ugh” or “ick”, rather than hearty laughter.

In spite of all these problems, my own experience in reading Caesar’s Messiah is that the book is disturbingly amusing, because the Romans were ingenious humorists in their own way, and there is an emotional rush in suddenly seeing the hidden joke. I hope that other readers will have the same experience.

The other type of literary reference studied by Atwill is the enigma. As explained in the online Jewish Encyclopedia article on Philo Judaeus, Philo taught that allegory or enigma is generally signaled by devices such as:

- the doubling of a phrase...
- an apparently superfluous expressing in the text...
- the repetition of statements previously made....

a play upon words...
any peculiarity in a phrase...
noteworthy omissions...
striking statements...
[or] numerical symbolism.

In Josephus, enigmas are often signaled by the insertion of an obvious fable or fantasy within the flow of the historical narrative. Again, humor comes into play, as discovering the solution to an enigma often brings a smile, or perhaps a grimace.

Enigmas may be taken as a license to go searching across all preceding ancient literature, to find relevant information and clues that might explain the meaning of the enigma in its context. Readers who take issue with Atwill’s solutions are, of course, invited to come up with their own, or search the literature for other solutions that have been offered in the past. The criteria for a good solution is that it fits all the information provided in the enigma (not just some of it) and that it makes a point consistent with the author’s overtly expressed intentions.

**The Gospels’ dependency on Josephus**

The dependencies of the Gospels on Josephus’s works are well known. While devout Christians might maintain that the striking parallels are a result of Jesus’s supernatural ability to foresee the future, secular scholars agree that the Gospel authors drew several passages directly from Josephus. The parallels are detailed, specific, extensive, sequential, highly interpretable, and cannot be traced to any earlier common source. Therefore, I am satisfied that this dependency exists in the strongest possible form: the Gospel authors must have had access to a copy of Josephus’s work and they intentionally chose to make use of it.

Atwill has gone beyond other scholars by discovering that the extent of subtle references to Josephus in the New Testament is much greater than has ever been recognized before. All of these parallels, both the well-known overt ones as well as the newly discovered ones, point to the interpretation that the biblical Jesus foretells that his second coming as the Messiah will occur in 70 CE when the Son of Man comes to destroy the Temple in fulfillment of the prophecies of Daniel. In parallel passages in Josephus, we learn that these prophecies (from both Jesus and Daniel) were historically fulfilled in the person of Titus playing the role of the Son of Man, with his conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.

Of course this is not the Messianic outcome that the Jews expected -- not only was Titus a Roman rather than a Jew, but he slaughtered the righteous Zealots and Sicarii and ordinary Jews by the hundreds of thousands, rather than concentrating his fury on the Romans and their Herodian collaborators. But the biblical Jesus’s prophecies were completely consistent with Josephus’s viewpoint: if Vespasian were divine, then his son Titus would obviously share in that divine nature.
Also, the spiritual campaign of Jesus Christ as depicted in the book of Luke foreshadows the military campaign of Titus in Judea, in a sequential series of parallels that Atwill calls “the Flavian Signature”. This creates a Roman parody of a “typological mapping” between Jesus Christ and Titus Flavius, indicating that the Gospel authors must have wanted the sophisticated reader to understand that Titus Flavius, like Jesus Christ, is to be viewed as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of Hebrew scripture.

When the biblical Jesus is seen in this context as a typologically camouflaged Titus Flavius, suddenly a grimly humorous aspect of the narrative emerges. The reader realizes that the Gospels are filled with witty double entendres and punning satire, generally at the expense of the Jewish Zealots as well as Christian gentiles who take the Gospels at face value.

**Josephus’s knowledge of Christianity: the Decius Mundus puzzle**

While many scholars acknowledge that the Gospel authors were aware of Josephus, the topic of whether Josephus knew anything about Jesus Christ or Christianity is far more controversial, and has been an endless topic of debate.

What is widely acknowledged is that two brief, famous passages in Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews* specifically mention the biblical Jesus. In one of these, known as the “Testimonium Flavianum” (18, 3, 63-64), Josephus states that one Jesus (the Christ) was crucified under Pontius Pilate, but appeared alive “to those that loved him” after an interval of three days. This seems to be a clear enough statement of the basic tenets of the Christian faith, but the endless debate goes on over whether Josephus really said all these things, or whether the passage (or some part of it) was a late interpolation by pious scribes of the early Christian era.

In the other passage, Josephus briefly mentions “…the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James…” (20, 9, 200). Again, this seems to indicate that Josephus was well aware of the existence of Jesus Christ, although there is some debate about what Josephus meant by “Christ” or whether those few words might have been a late interpolation.

The vexing aspect of this, which is (or should be) so confounding to faithful believers, is that Josephus could have known this much about Christ and Christianity -- and yet have said so little more about it. During the period between 30 AD and 70 AD, the years at the heart of Josephus’s historical tale -- were Christ’s disciples not hard at work in Judea, growing their Church, doing great miracles, and generally promulgating their proud and excitingly novel religious faith? How could Josephus have been aware of this, and yet not dedicated at least a few chapters to giving his views of this ‘good news’? Josephus was certainly never at a loss for words, in describing any other popular Jewish sect of the time.

Atwill argues that Josephus did indeed have an intimate knowledge of Christian narratives and theology, and that he referred to it often. However, instead of speaking plainly, Josephus wrote vicious satires of Christianity; and these satires were often placed
within typological parallels to passages in the New Testament. Or in the case of the 
*Testimonium Flavianum*, Atwill argues that it can be recognized as genuine in its entirety,
because it can be seen as part of a literary triptych, sandwiched alongside two enigmatic
satires built on New Testament themes. Briefly stated: in the central satire, a rogue named
Decius Mundus pretends to be the god Anubis, in order to trick a dignified lady named
Paulina into having sex with her. The name ‘Decius Mundus’ is a pun on Decius Mus, the
famous Roman war hero who gave himself as a sacrifice in battle to guarantee the Roman
victory in war. ‘Mundus’ means ‘World’, so Decius Mundus is a ‘Sacrifice for the
World’. Paulina and her husband, Saturninus, laughably agree that making love to a God
would be no sin against Paulina’s chastity. So, Paulina and Mundus enjoy a night
together, but then Mundus returns on the third day to boast that he is no God, much to
Paulina’s chagrin. In the other pedimental satire, a woman named Fulvia (whose
husband’s name, again, is Saturninus) is persuaded by three men to send her wealth to the
Jewish temple; but in reality, the three men spend the money “for their own uses.” In the
first satire, Mundus is an ‘antetype’ of Jesus; in the second, the three men may represent
the Roman Trinity. The two stories are, of course, typologically coupled to each other as
well, as they both tell essentially the same tale of a dignified lady with a husband named
Saturninus who is tricked by a religious swindle. The choice to use the name ‘Paulina’ in
the story may be a hint that the Romans viewed the original St. Paul, the author of the
epistles, as a feminized victim of the swindle as well.

Strangely enough, the fact that the *Testimonium Flavianum* triptych was a satire of
Christianity was apparently understood as early as the 4th century by the Christian author
pseudo-Hegesippus, whose Latin paraphrase of Josephus elaborated on the satire by
having Paulina and Mundus discuss the possibility of a pregnancy, thus making her into a
parody of the Virgin Mary. This was pointed out by Albert A. Bell in his 1976 paper
“*Josephus the Satirist*?”; who mentioned that a 1927 paper by C. Pharr had also
fingered the Josephus passage about Paulina and Mundus as a parody of the
Annunciation. Bell, however, withheld his own judgment on the matter, stating:

[The view that Josephus was a satirist] has the decided disadvantage of being
quite subjective. We must assume, on the basis of our own reactions, that the
story of Paulina and Mundus appeared to Josephus as a parody of sorts of the
Annunciation story and that he could depend on his readers to draw the same
parallel. Lacking even a hint of literary evidence to support it, we are justifiably
hesitant to accept this suggestion.

I can only hope that Bell was being ironic himself with this brief, dry spoof of hidebound
academic caution and humorlessness -- especially after having titled his paper with the
bold assertion of Josephus’s comedic aspect, hedged only with a question mark.
However, I note with some discouragement that Bell’s argument disappeared with hardly
a ripple (three obscure mentions in the English language since 1976, in the Google

Scholar citation index); this in spite of its obvious and even decisive relevance to the endless academic debate about the *Testimonium Flavianum*.

**The problem of plausible deniability, and the “Smoking Gun Fallacy”**

In *Caesar’s Messiah*, Atwill argues that the Flavians were proud that they invented Christianity, and that they wanted to be remembered by posterity for their accomplishment. But on the other hand, he often mentions that a particularly complex and obscure typological device was invented because a simpler means of expression would have made Flavian complicity “too obvious”. Is this a contradiction?

At first glance, this seems to be a serious problem with the Flavian Origins thesis. If, as Atwill claims, the Flavians created Christianity primarily for propaganda purposes, then they knew that their work needed to compete with all the other religious sects that were vying for the allegiance of Jews and Gentiles alike, anywhere in the Empire. For that reason, it was obviously essential that the texts be as appealing and as convincing as possible. It doesn’t make sense that the authors would have included anything (such as a complex, self-incriminating typological framework with satirical overtones) that could divert from that goal.

In his review of *Caesar’s Messiah*, Robert M. Price wrote: “only the most obtuse reader, the most tin-eared, can possibly fail to appreciate the sublime quality of so much of the New Testament”, as if Atwill’s theory does not recognize this; on the contrary, the Flavian Origins theory requires that the New Testament would be perceived as having just such a sublime quality, in order for it to succeed in its evangelical goals. Price continued: “As to Jesus’ teachings, Atwill declares that ‘those who see spiritual meaning in his words are being played for a fool’. Such a statement is only a damning self-condemnation, revealing the author’s own absolute inability to appreciate what he is reading.” This, again, is a mis-reading of Atwill’s point. He is not saying that the surface-level spiritual meaning is missing from the text, but rather that it is being used as a sugar coating on a Trojan Horse full of Roman ideological foot-soldiers. I wonder if Price would deny that a multitude of impoverished and enslaved Christians have indeed been played for fools by their masters, the elite.

Furthermore, the Flavian intellectuals also needed to write material that would seem credible within the cultural milieu of the ancient Mediterranean region. That means they needed to write material that was consistent with the pre-existing source materials including both Zealot and Herodian documents, and consistent with the general level of historical understanding among the general public.

However, this latter constraint is not as tight as it would be in a modern environment. At the time that the Gospels were written, the period of its historical setting (that is, the time of Tiberius and Pontius Pilate) was receding into the distant past, and many readers would have only a very general (and highly colored) understanding of the period. Furthermore, literacy was fairly rare at the time, and most of the intended audience of the Gospels would be hearing about them second-hand from the clergy. Of course there was no printing press, so copies of any historical literature were rare and hard to come by.
Thus, the Gospel authors could feel that they could indeed take some liberties with historical truth, without much risk of being caught by the general public.

Nevertheless, there certainly were some intellectuals who would have had a deep understanding of the historical literature, including many documents that have not survived to the present time. For those readers, the Gospels would have conveyed a powerful message that the Flavians were brazen enough to blatantly falsify and invert the factual record, in service of their own propaganda objectives.

In light of the mission-critical “Prime Directive” to avoid alerting ‘hoi polloi’ about the nature of this strange, alien Imperial religious conspiracy, it seems undeniable that the operational security of the project would have been enhanced if the Flavians had chosen to avoid inserting typological traces of their crime directly into the New Testament texts and the works of Josephus. We need an explanation of why they chose to do so, in spite of the fact that they might easily have been inconvenienced at times by the need to explain themselves to careful and suspicious readers, or even threatened with failure of the project if the truth became too widely known.

Contrary to Atwill’s suggestions in Caesar’s Messiah, I do not believe they ever intended for the crime to be discovered by the slaves and commoners (“hoi polloi”) who made up the vast majority of Christian believers. However, considering the level of sophistication of the vast majority of people at the time, the Roman intellectuals simply weren’t concerned that the public would recognize the fraud. All they needed to do, was avoid leaving any “smoking guns” that would overcome the level of plausible deniability in the Gospel texts, and make the deception obvious to even the most obtuse reader. Within that limitation, they apparently considered themselves free to consider a variety of objectives with their writing. (In fact, as a general rule, I believe that evidence of elite criminality and conspiracy is strewn about today by the same general standard: obvious to the sophisticated reader, but never so obvious as to represent a “smoking gun” that might alarm the general public.)

Based on the extensive monuments that the Caesars of the Imperial cult constructed for themselves, their vanity may have been so great that we can hardly imagine it today. While they may not have cared what the ‘hoi polloi’ knew, they might have been especially concerned to leave a message that future royals and their intellectuals would understand and view with respect and, presumably, admiration.

My view is that the typology may have also been used as a teaching tool in the Imperial secret service, which may have been embedded within the Roman Imperial cult. The early Roman Catholic (Christian) church may also have been operated at that time as a mystery cult. 27 Perhaps the temples dedicated to the worship of Jesus and/or the current Emperor were run like modern Masonic lodges, with the higher levels of membership (and the great secrets) reserved to loyal and long-term functionaries of the Imperial service, and that these higher levels were accompanied with appropriate accolades.

prestige and financial rewards. And I’m imagining that, just as in the modern corporate and political system, exhibiting a certain level of sociopathy couldn’t have done any harm to a young man’s prospects. If this was the case, then Josephus was being ironical when wrote in his book Against Apion: “There have been indeed some bad men who have attempted to calumniate my history, and took it to be a kind of scholastic performance for the exercise of young men” (1, 53).

If this theory that the Gospels were primarily used as secret documents of the Roman imperial cult and the (closely related) embryonic Roman Catholic church, it would also help to explain the mystery of the Gospels’ late appearance in the overt historical record. We argue that the Gospels must have been written under the Flavians, not only because they contain so much material that is pertinent to their agenda, but also because there is little if anything in the Gospels that would indicate any knowledge of events that transpired after the death of Domitian (96 CE). However, the first church father to write openly of the existence of four gospels was Irenaeus, in approximately 180 CE. Because of this, there have been claims that the Gospels were first written at this time, falsifying Atwill’s theory.

But, Irenaeus clearly stated his own viewpoint that all four of the canonical gospels existed from the earliest days of Christianity, and possessed full apostolic authority:

Matthew… issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia (Against Heresies, III, 1, 1).

Those who claim that Irenaeus invented the four Gospels, or that they were first written during his time, have not explained how he could foist such a fiction on other members of the Catholic Church at such a late date, and hope to retain any credibility. It seems much more likely that there is some grain of truth in his claim that they had existed much earlier, and that his true purpose in writing about the Roman Gospels was to assert their claims of superiority over the many apocryphal “gospels” that were proliferating at the time. Some of these apocryphal gospels might have been earlier Roman drafts that had been superseded, and others might have been similar to modern “fan fiction”. However, all of them needed to be stamped out, as the Roman hierarchy had determined that the time had come to bring Christianity into a single large tent. As Irenaeus explained:

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It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the "pillar and ground" of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh (III, 11, 8).

Such arguments aside, the status of the four Gospels before Irenaeus remains a matter for speculation. However, considering the rapid spread of Christianity during the 1st and 2nd centuries, the lack of any such documentary evidence is in itself quite surprising. From a Bayesian perspective, this increases the likelihood of the hypothesis that the Gospels were indeed maintained as secret documents of the early Roman Catholic Church.

Without further ado, let’s look at this lesson plan that might have been taught at the thirty-second degree of the Imperial cult. The lessons are presented in the order that they appear in the Gospel of Luke.

**Fishing for men**

The parallels are highlighted in bold typeface.

**Luke 3:21**

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. ....And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ Now Jesus ... began his ministry. ... “ (Luke 5) “ ... Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret,... all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken ... Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.’ So they ... followed him.” ...

**Matt. 11:21**

Jesus prophesied “Woe to you, Chorazain”.

**Josephus (Wars 3.10)**

“Vespasian pitched his camp... [at] the Lake of Gennesareth. ... Jesus and his party ... made a sally upon them. Vespasian... thereupon sent his son... to disperse them.” [Titus:] “For you know very well that I shall go into the danger first, and make the first attack upon the enemy. Do not you therefore desert me, but persuade yourselves that God will be assisting to my onset. ... And now Titus made his own horse march first against the enemy, as did the others with a great noise after him... Jesus fled over the country, while others of them ran down to the lake ... and some were slain as they were getting up into the

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ships.” The city was taken, but some rebels fled in ships. Vespasian went to the lake. [A long digression follows, describing the lake; the name Genesareth is repeated 3x.] “Some have thought it to be a vein of the Nile, because it produces the Coracin fish as well as that lake does which is near to Alexandria.” [Vespasian’s vessels destroyed the rebels’ ships, leaving the rebels] “drowning at sea”, [to be] “killed by darts,” [or] “the Romans cut off either their heads or their hands.”

As a typological sequential parallel, this is only moderately impressive. Critics will note that every military campaign has its onset; and the warrior’s call for his troops to have courage, and his bravely leading them into battle, must be a commonplace across hundreds of ancient manuscripts. The somewhat distinctive shared elements between the New Testament and Josephus passages are: a son (of God, no less) sent into battle; the location (Genesareth); and the involvement of a character named Jesus (which was, however, apparently a very common Judean name at the time, judging from the sheer number of possibly distinct Jesus characters mentioned in Josephus’s text.)

However, if we recognize that the Josephus passage contains an enigma, the situation becomes more interesting. He says: “Some have thought it [the lake of Genesareth] to be a vein of the Nile, because it produces the Coracin fish as well as that lake does which is near to Alexandria.” It’s obviously ridiculous that anyone would think that the Sea of Galilee (Genesareth) is a vein of the Nile: the ancients for millennia before Josephus knew their geography better than that. And, there is no lake anywhere near Alexandria: it’s in the Nile delta, where any body of water would be more akin to a swamp. Such absurdities should surely be a clue that Josephus’s warped sense of humor is coming into play.

The answer to the riddle is that the Jews are like fish, and that Hellenized Jews are found in great numbers in Alexandria, just as they are in the area of Palestine near the Sea of Galilee. The “Coracin Fish” seems to be a pun on the name of the town “Chorazain”, which Jesus curses in the passage from Matthew. In Josephus’s narrative, we find that Titus is slaughtering these “fish” by the thousands. To make the point clear, Josephus ends the story with his all too graphic description of the Romans killing men with darts, drowning them, or cutting their limbs off, in their rout of the Jewish rebels at sea.

This warrior’s metaphor of “fishing for men” is a well-known literary trope; see for example:

...the mighty Laestrygonians came thronging from all sides.... at once there rose throughout the ships a dreadful din, alike from men that were dying and from ships that were being crushed. And spearing them like fishes they bore them home, a loathly meal. (Odyssey 10:119-124; also see Odyssey 12:245-255, 22:381-389.)

Ancient readers of the New Testament, who learned their Homer in grammar school, might have been pleased to find that the Gospel authors appear to have inverted and ennobled this barbaric trope. However, in the final analysis, the joke is on the Christians,
since Josephus’s humorous point is that the “Coracin fish” in the lake are the Jewish rebels that are being “fished” by the Romans.

The New Testament passage is tightly coupled to the Josephus enigma by this distinctive concept of “Fishing for Men” as well as by the various less distinctive elements. Jesus’s spiritual gathering of his followers and his call for them to be “fishing for men” grimly foreshadow Titus’s actual slaughter of the Jews, occurring at the same location at Genessareth, allegedly forty years later.

The Demons of Gadara

In Josephus (Wars 4.7.389-437) we meet the rebel leader John, who was “beginning to tyrannize” in the countryside. He attracted a following among the rebels, who “thought they should be safer themselves, if the causes of their past insolent actions should now be reduced to one head, and not to a great many.” Josephus explained that “as it is in a human body, if the principal part be inflamed, all the members are subject to the same distemper; so, by means of the sedition and disorder that was in the metropolis … had the wicked men that were in the country opportunity to ravage the same.” Men “joined in the conspiracy by parties, too small for an army, and too many for a gang of thieves … Nor was there now any part of Judea that was not in a miserable condition, as well as its most eminent city also.” Getting word of the threat, Vespasian “marched against Gadara”… the Jews were quickly surrounded by the Roman forces “and, like the wildest of wild beasts, rushed upon the point of others’ swords; so some of them were destroyed... and others were dispersed … But Placidus … slew all that he overtook, as far as Jordan; and when he had driven the whole multitude to the riverside … the number of those that were unwillingly forced to leap into Jordan was prodigious. There were besides two thousand and two hundred taken prisoners. A mighty prey was taken also, consisting of asses, and sheep, and camels, and oxen. …”

In other words, Josephus is expounding a theory which likens the spread of “sedition” to a disease, in which the “distemper” of “one head” infects the multitude, who seek to abandon their free will and responsibility to that one individual. The rebels then become like wild beasts, fit to be destroyed. Elsewhere, Josephus explains his view that “Demons … are no other than the spirits of the wicked” (Wars 7.6.185), so by that definition John and his followers may all be seen as demons.

In Mark 5:1-20 (also Luke 8:26-39) Jesus has come to the “land of the Gadarenes.” He met a man (the demoniac) who was possessed “with an unclean spirit” who was always “crying, and cutting himself with stones.” Jesus asked the demoniac, “What is thy name?” The demoniac replied, “My name is Legion: for we are many. … Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding.... And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine; and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea (they were about two thousand), and were choked in the sea.” The demoniac was healed, and “began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him.” The version of the story in Matthew (8:28-33) has Jesus meet two demon-possessed men, who accuse Jesus of “tormenting us before the time”.
There are several peculiar and enigmatic aspects to this pericope. Why should one man be possessed by a legion of demons? Why are swine being herded in such huge numbers, where pork is taboo? Why does Matthew mention two demoniacs, where Mark and Luke see only one?

The enigma is solved by recognizing that Josephus’s John is an antetype to the demoniac: just as the biblical Jesus meets a man who is possessed by demons, who are sent into wild beasts and destroyed, so also John is like a demon who infects a multitude of Jewish radicals, and they become like animals to be destroyed.

Within this conceptual framework, there are many specific verbal parallels: the location near Gadara (at least according to some early manuscripts); the size of the parties “too small for an army, and too large for a gang of thieves” (which is a good definition of the size of a legion); wild beasts rushing; Jewish rebels (like the swine) forced into the sea; and the number “about two thousand” (or in Josephus, to be exact, “two thousand two hundred”) -- although oddly, the two thousand biblical swine are destroyed, while the 2200 rebels in Josephus are captured. In Josephus, the Romans also capture a “mighty prey” of livestock, but no swine, presumably because the swine have been drowned.

Atwill suggests that perhaps the 2nd demoniac in Matthew’s version represents John’s brother Simon (Peter), and that they are being tormented “before the time” because the time of their torment belongs later in the typological sequence. Later on, John and Simon are caught coming out of the tombs (like the demoniac), where they have been cut by stones in tight quarters (like the demoniac). Then John was sent to Rome, where he presumably published the gospel of John, just as the biblical demon took the opportunity to publish in Decapolis.

**Destruction of Jerusalem: prophecy and fulfillment**

This set of parallels has been universally acclaimed since the early days of Christianity, so there should be no controversy that these are real parallels. Basically, the scheme is that Matthew’s Jesus launches into a series of prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem. The prophecies are fulfilled in Josephus’s *Wars of the Jews* (6.5) and a few other scattered passages, as will be noted below.

The devoutly orthodox Catholic explanation for this, of course, is that Jesus’s prophecies were fulfilled in history exactly as it unfolded, and as Josephus accurately reported. Unfortunately, the logic of this interpretation leads to the conclusion that Titus is the second coming of the Son of Man; an unpalatable conclusion which can be (rather awkwardly) finessed (but not really avoided) by viewing Titus as a passive instrument of God’s wrath, and moving quickly on to the prophecies of Revelation, where the true coming of Jesus “in power and glory” might be (arguably) deferred to the infinite future. If there are any orthodox Catholics or other fundamentalists reading this, I can only ask them to consider whether Atwill’s explanation makes more sense overall.

Liberal religious scholars prefer the explanation that the New Testament authors borrowed their quotes verbatim from Josephus.
It should be mentioned at this juncture, that Josephus in the Jewish Wars argued that all of the events that transpired, were in accordance with the arcane prophecies of the book of Daniel. As Josephus stated:

… And indeed it so came to pass, that our nation suffered these things under Antiochus Epiphanes, according to Daniel’s vision, and what he wrote many years before they came to pass. In the very same manner Daniel also wrote concerning the Roman government, and that our country should be made desolate by them. All these things did this man leave in writing, as God had showed them to him … (Ant. 10.11. 276-277).

And as Atwill explained, this led to some chronological claims by Josephus that seem suspect, to say the least:

[Josephus’s] recording of the perfect alignment of events in the time sequences Daniel predicted is either his witnessing of supernatural phenomena or a deliberate falsification. Currently there is contention among scholars regarding virtually all of the chronology Josephus gives in Wars of the Jews. For example, Josephus gives a later date than Suetonius and Dio for when Vespasian began to prepare for the civil war in Rome that led to his becoming emperor. It is probable that Josephus did this to provide support for the Flavian claim that Vespasian was not anxious to become Emperor. This “shaping” of time by Josephus to create Flavian propaganda is exactly the same technique he used to create the alignment between the Flavian campaign in Judea and the prophecies of Daniel (314).

Jesus, of course, endorses this same prophet Daniel; as well as, implicitly, the exact same jiggered interpretation of Daniel’s ambiguous prophecy as Josephus devised:

....and then the End will come. “When you have seen (to use the language of the Prophet Daniel) the ‘Abomination of Desolation,’ standing in the Holy Place—let the reader observe those words— “then let those who are in Judea escape to the hills...(Matt. 24:14-16).

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Josephus and the New Testament authors conspired together to achieve this synchrony; or at least, that Josephus was working from some independent source of the Christian narrative, and that he labored to comply with its chronology and its interpretation of Daniel. If the New Testament authors copied their timeline from Josephus, there would have been no need for Josephus to tamper with real historical events.

Even more convincingly: to accept the conventional explanation that the New Testament copied Josephus, requires a severely impaired sense of humor, as I will explain.

Jesus begins his prophesying in Matthew with this curse:

...upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom
you murdered between the temple and the altar. “Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation (Matt 23:34-36).

The scenario Jesus foresees does indeed begin to unfold exactly one generation (40 years) later. Jesus invokes the memory of Abel and Zechariah son of Berechiah, who are both well-known Old Testament characters who were ignored or mistreated by their contemporaries. Somehow, Josephus doesn’t seem to have gotten the memo that Jesus was talking about history, not prophecy; and in due course, we find that Zacharias amusingly meets his fate again in the temple, exactly as Jesus described. It comes as a humorous surprise to find history repeating itself as precisely as this.

…these zealots and Idumeans were quite weary of barely killing men, so they had the impudence of setting up fictitious tribunals and judicatures for that purpose; and… they intended to have Zacharias the son of Baruch, one of the most eminent of the citizens, slain… Now the seventy judges brought in their verdict that the person accused was not guilty… hereupon there arose a great clamor of the zealots upon his acquittal… So two of the boldest of them fell upon Zacharias in the middle of the temple, and slew him (Wars 4.5.338-344).

Surely Josephus knew his Old Testament well enough that we can be confident this joke was no accident.

After this, the prophecies and their fulfillment unfold smoothly enough (although the sequential order between Jesus and Josephus is not unbroken.)

Jesus:

the disciples... said, “... what will be the sign of your Coming and of the Close of the Age?” “Take care that no one misleads you,” answered Jesus... “Many false prophets will rise up and lead multitudes astray (Matt. 24:3-5);

Josephus:

The great distress the jews were in upon the conflagration of the holy house. Concerning a false prophet, and the signs that preceded this destruction (Wars, Heading to Book 6, Chapter 5).

Jesus:

“for then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world and assuredly never will be again (Matt. 24:21).

Josephus:

… the misfortunes of all men, from the beginning of the world, if they be compared to these of the Jews, are not so considerable as they were (Wars, Preface, line 12).
Jesus:

there will be **famines and earthquakes** in various places (Matt. 24:7);

Josephus:

many ... were worn away by the **famine**….Moreover… the priests … felt a **quaking**, and heard a great noise… (Wars 6.5.274, 299).

Jesus:

“then let those who are in Judea **escape to the hills**; “let him who is on the roof **not go down to fetch what is in his house**; “nor let him who is outside the city stay to pick up his **outer garment** (Matt. 24:16-18).

Josephus:

the multitude also that was in the city joined in this outcry with those that were **upon the hill**....And **now the Romans**, judging that it was in vain to spare what was round about the holy house, **burnt all those places**… They also **burnt down** the treasury chambers, in which was an immense quantity of money, and **an immense number of garments**… (Wars 6.5.274, 281-282).

Jesus:

“And **alas for the women** who at that time are **with child or have infants** (Matt. 24:19)!

Josephus:

There was a **certain woman** that dwelt beyond Jordan, her name was Mary.... snatching up her son, who was a **child sucking at her breast**, she said, **“O thou miserable infant! ....”** As soon as she had said this, she slew her son, and then roasted him, and ate the one half of him... (Wars 6.3.201-208).

Jesus:

…**immediately after those times of distress the sun will be darkened**, the moon will not shed her light, **the stars will fall from the firmament** (Matt. 24:29),

Josephus:

Thus there was a **star resembling a sword**, which stood over the city, **and a comet**, that continued a whole year… (Wars 6.5.289).
Jesus:

“Then will appear the Sign of the Son of Man in the sky; and then will all the nations of the earth lament, when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with great power and glory (Matt. 24:30).

Josephus:

...a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared: I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sun-setting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities (Wars 6.5.297-299).

The Woe-saying Jesus

Immediately after having described all of these amazing signs from the heavens, and great holocaust of conflagration and slaughter, Josephus gives us a signal that his sense of humor is undaunted by the disaster.

But, what is still more terrible, there was one Jesus, the son of Ananus, a plebeian and a husbandman... (Wars 6.5.300).

In what possible way could this “Jesus, the son of Ananus” be “still more terrible” than everything that has happened to this point in the destruction of Jerusalem? Josephus goes on to explain that this Jesus is nothing worse than a self-righteous big-mouth with a strange and repetitive message:

four years before the war began, and at a time when the city was in very great peace and prosperity, came to that feast whereon it is our custom for everyone to make tabernacles to God in the temple, began on a sudden to cry aloud, “A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides, and a voice against this whole people!” This was his cry, as he went about by day and by night, in all the lanes of the city (Wars 6.5.300-301).

Hmm... why does this Jesus sound so much like Biblical Jesus?...

[arriving at Jerusalem at the time of the Passover feast] ... His disciples came and called His attention to the Temple buildings. ”You see all these?” He replied; “in solemn truth I tell you that there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be pulled down” (Matt. 24:1-2).

“For just as the lightning flashes in the east and is seen to the very west, so will be the Coming of the Son of Man (Matt. 24:27).
the Kingdom of the Heavens be found to be like ten bridesmaids who took their torches and went out to meet the bridegroom and the bride (Matt. 25:1).

Josephus continues to regale us with the saga of Jesus ben Ananus thusly:

However, certain of the most eminent among the populace had great indignation at this dire cry of his, and took up the man, and gave him a great number of severe stripes; yet did not he either say anything for himself, or anything peculiar to those that chastised him, but still went on with the same words which he cried before. Hereupon our rulers, supposing, as the case proved to be, that this was a sort of divine fury in the man, brought him to the Roman procurator, where he was whipped till his bones were laid bare; yet he did not make any supplication for himself, nor shed any tears, but turning his voice to the most lamentable tone possible, at every stroke of the whip his answer was, “Woe, woe to Jerusalem!” (Wars 6.5.302-304).

Jesus ben Ananus’s fate seems to be unfolding in a remarkably similar way to the biblical Jesus of Nazareth: the indignation of the Jews, the beatings and chastisement, the trip to the Roman procurator, and the unresponsiveness to interrogation. Moreover, his repetitive curse “Woe, woe to Jerusalem” clearly echoes Luke 11:43-52, where Jesus calls down “woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites”, repeating the curse five times, extending it to lawyers, and giving five different weighty justifications. In the synoptically parallel passage in Matthew (23:13-33), the curse “woe to you” is repeated eight times, again with eight different explanations.

However, unlike biblical Jesus (who was, of course, crucified), this Jesus ben Ananus gets off with a warning (although, like biblical Jesus, he is derisively referred to as a “madman”; see Mark 3:21 and John 7:20):

And when Albinus (for he was then our procurator) asked him who he was, and whence he came, and why he uttered such words; he made no manner of reply to what he said, but still did not leave off his melancholy ditty, till Albinus took him to be a madman, and dismissed him (Wars 6.5.305).

Nevertheless, Jesus ben Ananus ultimately meets his demise during the Passover season, comically in the exact same moment as he prophesies his own doom.

he continued this ditty for seven years and five months, without growing hoarse, or being tired therewith, until the very time that he saw his presage in earnest fulfilled in our siege, when it ceased; for as he was going round upon the wall, he cried out with his utmost force, “Woe, woe to the city again, and to the people, and to the holy house!” And just as he added at the last, “Woe, woe to myself also!” there came a stone out of one of the engines, and smote him, and killed him immediately; and as he was uttering the very same presages he gave up the ghost (Wars 6.5.308-309).

Biblical Jesus also mentioned the phenomenon of being crushed by stones:
“Have you never read in the Scriptures,” said Jesus, “The Stone which the builders rejected has been made the Cornerstone: this Cornerstone came from the Lord, and is wonderful in our eyes? That, I tell you, is the reason why the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a nation that will exhibit the power of it. He who falls on this stone will be severely hurt; but he on whom it falls will be utterly crushed” (Matt. 21:42-44).

And also:

And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." But He answered and said to them, "I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out" (Luke 19:39-40).

But ironically, according to Josephus, when the stones came it was Jesus ben Ananus who was utterly crushed (thus making a mockery of Jesus’s prophecy); and furthermore, when the Jews cried out the coming of the stones: it was not the stones themselves that they proclaimed, but rather they said “THE SON COMETH”; that is, the Son of Man; that is, Titus.

… Now the stones that were cast were of the weight of a talent, and were carried two furlongs and further. The blow they gave was no way to be sustained….accordingly the watchmen that sat upon the towers gave them notice when the engine was let go, and the stone came from it, and cried out aloud, in their own country’s language, THE SON COMETH…(Wars 5.6. 269-274; see 1915 Dent translation.)

It might be objected that perhaps Josephus is lampooning Jewish prophetic voices in general, or the rebels’ messianic dreams and pretensions more particularly. But given all the detail in this portrayal of the woe-saying madman Jesus: in my opinion, Josephus could not possibly have made it any more clear that this Jesus ben Ananus is a parody of Biblical Jesus.

Moreover, time has proven that Josephus was exactly correct in his own prophecy that Jesus would become a more terrible calamity for the Jews than anything that happened in the war, by inspiring countless generations of anti-semitism. This is a cue that Josephus was not only fully aware of Christian narrative and doctrine, but he also understood its crucial importance in the grand schema of Imperial propaganda.

Although, as both Biblical Jesus and Josephus assure us, our individual fates are in our own hands:

Jesus:

… those who stand firm to the End shall be saved (Matt. 24:13).
Josephus:

Now if any one consider these things, he will find that God takes care of mankind, and by all ways possible foreshows to our race what is for their preservation; but that men perish by those miseries which they madly and voluntarily bring upon themselves… (Wars 6.5.310).

Lazarus, the Human Passover Lamb, and the Last Supper

Josephus tells a story which becomes the causus belli for Titus’s final assault on the Temple:

.... I am going to relate a matter of fact, the like to which no history relates, either among the Greeks or Barbarians? It is horrible to speak of it, and incredible when heard. I had indeed willingly omitted this calamity of ours, that I might not seem to deliver what is so portentous to posterity, but that I have innumerable witnesses to it in my own age....

There was a certain woman that dwelt beyond Jordan, her name was Mary; her father was Eleazar, of the village Bethezob, which signifies the house of Hyssop. ... and it was now become impossible for her any way to find any more food, while the famine pierced through her very bowels and marrow.... She then attempted a most unnatural thing; and snatching up her son, who was a child sucking at her breast, she said, "O thou miserable infant! for whom shall I preserve thee in this war, this famine, and this sedition? .... Come on; be thou my food, and be thou a fury to these seditious varlets, and a by-word to the world, which is all that is now wanting to complete the calamities of us Jews." As soon as she had said this, she slew her son, and then roasted him, and eat the one half of him, and kept the other half by her concealed. Upon this the seditious came in presently, and smelling the horrid scent of this food, they threatened her, that they would cut her throat immediately if she did not show them what food she had gotten ready. She replied that she had saved a very fine portion of it for them, and withal uncovered what was left of her son. .... she said to them, "This is mine own son, and what hath been done was mine own doing! Come, eat of this food; for I have eaten of it myself! Do not you pretend to be either more tender than a woman, or more compassionate than a mother; but if you be so scrupulous, and do abominate this my sacrifice, as I have eaten the one half, let the rest be reserved for me also" (Wars 6.3.199-211).

Josephus describes the incident as "so portentous to posterity, but that I have innumerable witnesses to it in my own age." Why would this event be "portentous to posterity" and how would Josephus have "innumerable witnesses"? With this introduction, Josephus seems to be signaling that this story represents an enigma to be solved. Although the event was reportedly discussed among many, there could be at most a few of the "sedigious" who witnessed the Cannibal Mary’s display of half her son’s carcass, and no witnesses at all to Mary's first speech, or to the murder of the child.
The timing of this incident (at Passover), the reference to “the house of hyssop” (a plant used to mark Israelite houses at the time of passover), and the statement that the child is “roasted”, lead to the conclusion that the child is a human passover sacrifice. Thus, Josephus’s tale represents a grimly concrete actualization of the spiritualized ritual of the Christian eucharist.

The names of Mary and Eleazar also suggest a possible relationship to the New Testament. In Luke 2:34-35, Simeon gives Mary a prophecy that “a sword will pierce through your own soul”: a prophecy apparently fulfilled by the famine, which “pierced through her very heart and marrow.” Mary’s admonition to the “varlets” to “Come, eat of this food” is reminiscent of Christ’s words at the Last Supper, and the mention of "innumerable witnesses" seems to be an echo of the multitudes who reportedly witnessed Jesus' resurrection, which indeed was a myth "portentous to posterity".

Mary describes the event as a "myth for the world", and a "fury to the varlets" that would "complete the calamities of the Jews". Atwill further sees a pun on the words "mythos" (myth), "mysos" (an atrocity), and "misis" (inspiring bitter hatred, in this case the bitter hatred by the Romans against the Jews.) This again seems uncalibrated and inappropriate as a commentary on the plight of the starving Jews; but if it's talking about the anti-Semitic effects of the Christian myth against the Jews, it is tremendously perceptive, if not prescient.

Atwill noted another odd parallel between the Josephus passage and the New Testament. Luke 10:38-42 and John 12:2-3 both describe a dinner at which Mary and Jesus are present, and Martha is serving. If we assume that the two passages are both describing the same dinner, they may be taken together as follows:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. (John 12:2–3)… But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:40–42).

In this pericope, Lazarus has just recently been raised from the dead. However, he's been dead for 4 days, which is one day later than his soul would have departed from his body, according to Jewish lore. So unless one is inclined to believe in very unlikely miracles (from either a Gentile or Jewish perspective), Lazarus is nothing but a dead body. We also meet Mary, who is served a meal of "the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." This, of course, is exactly the same portion that Cannibal Mary has saved for herself of the child. And if Lazarus is dead, "they made him a supper" is an invitation to draw the conclusion that a macabre double entendre was intended.

Thus, to summarize: in Josephus, Mary is eating her child; in the NT pericope, Mary logically seems to be eating the body of Lazarus, who allegedly was resurrected but is
obviously dead; and according to Christianity's spiritualized interpretation, the believers are eating the body of Christ the son of Mary, after his alleged resurrection on the third day. The passages from Josephus and the New Testament are tied together primarily by the central and distinctive themes of the Eucharist and its association to cannibalism, the Passover sacrifice of Jesus, and the Resurrection. But the grim joke is also pulled together by the very specific verbal motif of the "good portion… not taken away."

**The New Root and Branch**

Although “the New Root and Branch” is a many-tentacled and sprawling satire, it is relatively simple to understand. Atwill summarizes the system as follows:

The purpose of this particular satire is to document that the “root” and “branch” of the Judaic messianic lineage has been destroyed and that a Roman lineage has been “grafted on” in its place (219).

A recurring aspect of the theme is that the character who is “pruned” is always named Eleazar. This, along with Eleazar’s role in being “made [into] a supper” in the Cannibal Mary parallel, leads Atwill to conjecture that Eleazar is an antitype for the true leader of the Jewish rebellion, who was ignominiously pruned from history.

The reader is encouraged to refer to *Caesar’s Messiah* for further information about this theme, which is repeatedly employed by ‘Shakespeare’, as Atwill demonstrates in this volume.

**Is Atwill guilty of “Parallelomania”?**

Perhaps the most common objection to Joseph Atwill’s work in *Caesar’s Messiah* is that his premises are based on what is called “parallelomania.” Samuel Sandmel (*Journal of Biblical Literature* 81: 1-13, 1962) defined this error as follows:

We might for our purposes define parallelomania as that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction.... The key word in my essay is extravagance. I am not denying that literary parallels and literary influence, in the form of source and derivation, exist. I am not seeking to discourage the study of these parallels.... Detailed study is the criterion, and the detailed study ought to respect the context and not be limited to juxtaposing mere excerpts.

In his writing in *Caesar’s Messiah*, Atwill was not primarily concerned with mounting a scholarly defense against these concerns. Instead, he was simply writing down the parallels as he encountered them in the texts, and exploring the implications of his particular interpretation. The same is true of this volume: it is mostly expository, rather than analytical and comprehensive.

Nevertheless, his study is certainly detailed, the parallels are certainly extensive, and Atwill paints a compelling historical context.
In *Caesar’s Messiah*, Atwill made an argument that the Gospels were all written together, based on his solution of a puzzle embedded in the various Gospel accounts of the apostles in the empty tomb, looking for Jesus. My view is that as a mathematical argument, this can be largely defeated based on the assumption that the author of the Gospel of John had access to the other three Gospels when he wrote his own version. Similarly, early editions of *Caesar’s Messiah* included a statistical argument based on the sequential aspect of the parallels between Luke and Josephus; an argument that dismissed legitimate questions about the strength of the parallels, the possibility of common sources, the directionality of the parallels, and the effect of multiple comparisons.

Frustrated by criticisms, Atwill produced the Flavian Signature edition of *Caesar’s Messiah* (2011), which provided many more parallels in the sequence relating Josephus’s Jewish Wars to the gospel of Luke. However, this was arguably going in precisely the wrong direction to satisfy the critics, because the new parallels were, in general, not as convincing as the ones he had already identified. In the process of arguing from these new parallels, Atwill appeared to be violating Sandmel’s caution against “overdoing the supposed similarity in passages.”

Rather than relying on a simple combinatorial analysis of Atwill’s parallels, I would suggest that a more viable approach is to start by considering those parallels which have already been widely recognized. Atwill’s interpretive framework is far more powerful than any other framework in terms of explaining all aspects of these ancient literary devices, especially the ironic, enigmatic and humorous aspects. Once this is agreed to, the more obscure parallels in the Flavian Signature can only add to Atwill’s case; especially considering that most of these parallels are highly interpretable within the Flavian Origins framework.

It is certainly possible, as Atwill suggests, that the Romans themselves were well aware that the creation of a long sequence of literary parallels represents an indisputable statistical and combinatorial signature that the parallels were intentionally planted. If modern mathematical and experimental approaches to textual analysis can overcome critical objections based on multiple-comparisons considerations and source criticism, then this combinatorial approach has the potential to provide an academically ironclad proof of the Caesar’s Messiah thesis. The entire set of 46 parallels in the Flavian Signature is presented as an appendix to this volume, and the reader is invited to review the data and reach their own conclusions.

The critics have certainly not met the burden of proof of showing that there are any alternative source analyses or interpretations that could compete with Atwill’s, or that the parallels are not compelling, or that his work fails to meet Sandmel’s criteria of standing up to detailed analysis. However, fulfillment of any demand for a comprehensive, even Bayesian, analysis of the relative probabilities of the Flavian Origins hypothesis as compared to its competitors, will need to await the attention of a better (or at least, braver) mathematician. Meanwhile, it is my view that many of Atwill’s critics are far more avid practitioners of the sins of “parallelomania”, and that other authors generally attempt to support parallel source analyses that are far weaker; while *Caesar’s Messiah* builds a mountain of evidence that can only be explained by the Flavian Origins thesis.