Historical Background of New Testament First Century

1 Caesar Augustus, also known as Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, the first Emperor of Rome, died on August 19, 14 AD.

2 Tiberius Caesar – 14 AD to 37 AD

3 Caligula – 37 AD to 41 AD (Caligula was a childhood nickname meaning 'little boot,' and his later habit of dressing up became part of his legend). He was the first Roman emperor to be assassinated; the story is below.

4 Theodosius I – the Roman Emperor who in 380 AD issued the Edict of Thessalonica, making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and who in the following years (391–392 AD) banned pagan animal sacrifices. Constantine had legalized Christianity about seventy years earlier. This was the same Empire that crucified Jesus Christ, who claimed to be King.

5 August 70 AD – Emperor Vespasian's son Titus (who later became Emperor himself), with the 10th Legion among his forces, destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple, ending the Temple-centered Judaism of that day. This was one of the most heralded and documented wars in Roman and Jewish history. The Arch of Titus still stands in Rome today and records what took place, with images carved in that very era.

6 Titus was almost captured in one of the early skirmishes, which gave the Jewish defenders a false sense of hope and turned up the heat on an unprecedented, emotional battle. It ended up playing out exactly as Jesus had said it would a few decades earlier.

7 Josephus, the Jewish historian, was sent by Titus to try to negotiate with the defenders and was wounded while doing it. Josephus writes about the war in The Jewish War and Antiquities of the Jews, and it runs all through Roman history as well, still visible today in the Arch of Titus, built around 81–82 AD by the Emperor Domitian as a tribute to his brother Titus.

8 The Temple was not supposed to be destroyed. But in the heat of battle, emotion took over, everything was burned, and not one stone was left on another; the stones were thrown down to the ground below, just as Jesus had said would happen.

9 The Temple rebuilt by Herod the Great, a project begun around 20 BC, was so big and powerful that it was an architectural wonder of the known world. Josephus estimated 1.1 million deaths during the siege of Jerusalem, far more than the city's normal population, because Passover crowds had swelled it. The siege began just days before Passover, so many people from across the ancient world were caught inside when Rome built a wall around the city and trapped everyone. Hundreds of thousands starved, and many others were killed. Many survivors were enslaved, and some died as gladiators in the games. Spoils from this war helped pay for the Roman Colosseum, begun in Rome in the years right after 70 AD as a monument to the victory.

10 You can visit the southwest corner of the Temple area today, where the stones still lie on the street where they fell. Roughly forty years earlier, Jesus predicted this would happen and described the siege of Jerusalem in detail in Luke 21. The writings of Matthew, Mark, and Dr. Luke are among the best-attested ancient manuscripts in the history of history ☺️ By most counts, nothing else is even a close second. Other writings from the Roman era pale in comparison. If we accept that a Roman Empire once existed based on its records, then we have even more reason to accept that Jesus Christ existed.

11 The question is not whether he existed and whether the events around his life took place. The question is whether he is who he said he was. As C. S. Lewis put it, Jesus was either who he said he was, or he was badly mistaken or deliberately misleading people. Either millions today are mistaken about him, or millions (if not

billions) of people around the world are right, and He is who He said He was. Is it possible that the evidence of creation points to a God? Is it possible that God showed himself as a human being to remove the mystery of who God is, and showed His love through Jesus? If this is true, then Jesus had to rise from the dead. Amazingly enough, that's also part of his story, which is a part of history! Coincidence?

12 The historical writings of early Christianity are so far ahead of anything else we have from the same era, or any time before, that it's nothing short of amazing when you compare the evidence. From Homer to Plato and Aristotle, nothing comes close. Either we doubt most of ancient history, or we take the claims of Jesus seriously and figure out whether he is a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. If He is Lord, we gain everything. If He is not Lord, we lose very little! Why? Following Jesus will make our lives better, and it will make us better at life! Not a bad worst-case scenario, especially when you weigh the other option. This line of thinking is known as Pascal's Wager.

13



13 Back to the historical evidence. At the time of the siege, Tiberius Julius Alexander was second in command. The fighting in the city ended in late August or early September of 70 AD. Three to four Roman legions, together with auxiliary troops, were used in the siege; estimates often run from 30,000 to over 60,000 soldiers. There were roughly 20,000 or more armed defenders, but most of the dead were ordinary people caught in the middle.

14 Titus's goal was to seize the Temple, not to destroy it. It was too magnificent, and it had been rebuilt by Herod, a king who ruled with Rome's backing, so there was no reason to destroy it. Rome could simply make it a showpiece that celebrated Rome. But as we have seen in history, when that is the intention, something happens and it ends up totally destroyed. Interesting.

15 Many historians document this, since Herod was the one who built it. Herod was nicknamed Herod the Great for his amazing building projects, and this Temple was one of them. When the city finally fell after four years of war, and the Temple was destroyed, the Romans paraded the Menorah and the Table of Showbread (which the public had never seen) through the streets of Rome in a great triumph that mocked the God of the Jews. That scene is carved on the Arch of Titus, which we can still see in Rome today.

16 Titus actually refused the traditional victory wreath, saying (according to the ancient writer Philostratus) that he was simply the instrument through which God had shown His anger. That was unusual for a Roman emperor, or an emperor-to-be. The Flavian Amphitheatre, better known as the Roman Colosseum, was built after this war to celebrate the victory. (The Greek word Nike means victory.) The Colosseum was built between about 70 AD and 80 AD. Around 81–82 AD, the new Emperor Domitian built the Arch of Titus to dedicate the victory to Titus. The arch still stands today.

17 This was one of the biggest, if not the biggest, victory celebrations in Roman history, because of the size, the scale, and the sheer will of the fighters on both sides. In 73 or 74 AD came the very last stand, at Masada, which is an amazing story in its own right. For many years, Israeli soldiers were taken up to Masada for a ceremony where they repeated the vow, 'Masada shall not fall again.' In 1948, the modern State of Israel was founded, and Jews from around the world returned to the land. In 2017–2018, under President Donald Trump, the United States officially recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moved its embassy there.

18 The first Temple was built by King Solomon (the one many movies about the lost Ark are based on). After it was destroyed, a man named Zerubbabel rebuilt it, as recorded in the Old Testament, and Herod later rebuilt and greatly expanded Zerubbabel's Temple. The Temple platform covered about 37 acres and was one of the most magnificent structures in the known world. Jerusalem was the envy of the world, even of Rome. Some of the stones measured roughly 11 × 16 × 44 feet of hand-cut stone, weighing hundreds of tons each. The walls rose more than 100 feet high, and the Temple itself rose high above the walls. The entire 37-acre plaza was built from cut stone. This was one of the most incredible building projects in all of history, even by today's standards. One of Jesus' disciples happened to comment on how magnificent it was, and that's when Jesus told him that not long from now, the whole thing would be torn down. Jesus used a word that ruled out an earthquake; it meant the stones would be purposely pulled down and thrown down below. To his listeners, this sounded like saying the end of the world was at hand, since the only power that could tear down the Temple was Rome. Why would Rome tear down a temple built by Herod, a king who ruled with Rome's blessing? And tearing it down would be very difficult. It seemed impossible. Roughly forty years later, Jesus' exact words and description came true.

19 The early church leaders who came after the apostles were called the Church Fathers. The apostles and first leaders, people like Peter, Paul, Matthew, and Luke, have long been remembered as dying for their faith, most of them martyred, and the leaders who followed them became known as the Early Church Fathers. They were the first generation after the apostles to carry out Matthew 28: go and make disciples, and have those disciples make disciples, and so on. Early church writers pointed to Jesus' prophecy that the Temple would fall, fulfilled about forty years later in 70 AD, as clear public proof of his prophetic authority. Eusebius even called his foreknowledge of that event 'the greatest miracle of all' among the Temple's wonders. We have a great deal of evidence on this, and as with all of Christianity, either everyone involved in this movement was wrong, or the possibility that it is true has to be taken seriously. It's one or the other, which puts many intelligent people in a tough spot. Following Jesus is a thinking person's faith, not a blind faith, and at its heart it isn't about religion. In fact, Jesus argued with the religious leaders of his day over what it meant to follow God. Jesus said that our love for God shows up in how we love others. It is not measured by how we stack up at going to church, reading the

Bible, or giving. Jesus said those things miss the point if we don't love other people. Religion that turns faith into rule-keeping says the opposite, and it is in direct conflict with Jesus' teaching.

20 When Jesus was crucified, all of his followers hit the UNFOLLOW button. The smell and sight of a crucifixion will do that to you. Even His most devoted followers hit the Unfollow button. Peter, one of the most famous, is actually shown as the biggest coward of all. Peter denied he even knew Jesus, and he is the one many remember as the first Pope. After his denial, Peter went out and wept bitterly. Apologists call details like these the 'embarrassment factor' when judging whether a text is reliable. In other words, if a text records events that embarrass the people who wrote it, that is strong evidence the story is true, since nobody makes themselves look bad in their own history unless it really happened. You wouldn't choose to show the first Pope at his worst, but that's what the text does. The Bible is full of these kinds of admissions, as its writers describe their own unbelief and lack of faith at every turn. Not a flattering biography, unless it's true and the message is too important to lie about.

21 Something happened that turned this group of goofy unfollowers into one of the most courageous groups of people in history. This band of frightened people, scared of their own shadows, suddenly emerged with remarkable courage. Seeing a friend alive again, a friend you had watched die on a cross a few days earlier, will do that to you too. It's one more piece of the evidence.

22 Back to 40 AD, when Caligula had been emperor of Rome for a few short years, before he became the first Roman Emperor to be assassinated. Remember, Julius Caesar, killed in 44 BC, was not an emperor; his adopted son Augustus became the first Emperor, as noted at the very top of this document.

23 Caligula was the son of a great military leader, Germanicus. He was just a few months short of his 25th birthday in 37 AD when he took the throne, as the third Roman Emperor.

24 Caligula achieved feats of waste and cruelty that few emperors matched, even his famous nephew Nero.

25 When he first took the throne, everything looked great. There were political reforms, a recall of political exiles, and changes to the tax system. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

26 Caligula was born in 12 AD and spent his early childhood in his father's army camps along the Rhine River. The soldiers gave him the nickname Caligula, which means 'little boot,' because his parents dressed him in a tiny soldier's uniform, boots and all. He later became known for his harsh treatment of others, while he lavished attention on his horse, which he named INCITATUS.

27 Caligula's horse had its own house, with a marble stall and an ivory manger. What a twist compared with the real king, crucified a few years earlier, who was born in a humble, smelly animal manger. Caligula reportedly planned to appoint his horse to the office of Consul, though he was assassinated before that could happen. Stories like this made the leading men of Rome, including the Equestrian order, wonder about his stability.

28 Back to Caligula's early life. The second emperor, Tiberius, never really wanted to be Emperor; he was more of a recluse. He relied on a powerful commander of the Praetorian Guard named Sejanus. Caligula's father died when Caligula was about 7 years old. Caligula's mother and two of his brothers were accused of treason, and each of them was killed or died in exile.

29 Caligula's grandmother Antonia was able to shield him from Sejanus until Sejanus was executed in 31 AD. Caligula then moved in with the aging Tiberius on the island of Capri, and Tiberius is said to have indulged his great-nephew's worst habits. Tiberius reportedly said this about Caligula while they were living together: "I am nursing a viper in Rome's bosom."

30 Tiberius made Caligula and his cousin Gemellus equal heirs to the Empire. Tiberius died in 37 AD.

31 Caligula's ally Macro, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, helped arrange for Caligula to become sole ruler when Tiberius died. Within about a year, Caligula had his adopted son and cousin Gemellus executed and forced Macro to take his own life.

32 Caligula's first big move was a massive infrastructure program, on the heels of recalling exiles and reforming taxes. He ordered practical things built or rebuilt, such as aqueducts and harbors, along with projects that were harder to understand, such as theaters and temples.

33 One project was very unpopular. He lined up hundreds of ships to build a floating bridge more than two miles long across the Bay of Baiae, so he could spend two days riding his horse across the bridge and back. Apparently there was no other reason, which started people second-guessing his mental stability.

34 In 39–40 AD he led military campaigns to the Rhine and the English Channel. At the Channel, he reportedly ordered his troops to collect seashells in their helmets as 'plunder from the sea.' As we know now, there were plenty left over. The Roman biographer Suetonius records him saying, "Remember that I have the right to do anything to anybody."

35 Senators who displeased him were reportedly forced to run for miles in front of his chariot. That helped cut down on disagreements and filibusters.

36 Ancient writers say he had open affairs with the wives of his allies, and rumors spread about his relationships with his sisters. He was tall, pale, and very hairy, and he made it a capital offense even to mention a goat in his presence. Suetonius says he practiced scary faces in the mirror to make himself look even more frightening.

37 He wallowed in luxury. He reportedly rolled around in piles of money and drank precious pearls dissolved in vinegar.

38 He carried his childhood love of costumes into adulthood. He would dress as gods and goddesses, sometimes in women's clothing, shoes, jewelry, and wigs. He wanted to appear as anything other than what he was, which was human. He started thinking he was a god.

39 His wild building projects drained the Roman treasury faster than taxes could fill it. A conspiracy formed among the Praetorian Guard, the Senate, and the Equestrian order, who thought things like naming a horse to high office were a bit over the top.

40 In late January of 41 AD, he was stabbed to death by officers of the Praetorian Guard led by Cassius Chaerea, and his wife and young daughter were killed too. As one ancient account put it, Caligula learned by experience that he was not a god.

41 The Senate tried to use Caligula's assassination as a chance to return Rome to a Republic. But the Praetorian Guard put Caligula's uncle Claudius on the throne, and the office of Emperor stayed in place. Claudius's family line continued until 68 AD, when Nero took his own life.

42 This same Caligula, around 40 AD, only a few years after the death of Jesus, ordered a statue of himself to be placed in the Temple, the same Temple we talked about above, the one built by Herod the Great. Petronius, the Roman Governor of Syria, marched in with two legions to carry out the order, and he was met with unusual resistance from the Jews.

43 Rather than fighting, they lay down in the streets, bared their necks, and said they would rather die than see the Temple defiled. Josephus, who recorded the event, wrote that the Jews threw themselves down on their faces, stretched out their throats, and said they were ready to be killed, and that they kept this up for 40 days.

44 Daily life shut down, the economy was in tatters, and the farmers stopped planting their fields. This was heading toward a massacre. Petronius did not know what to do. He decided to write a letter back to Rome and ask Caligula to reconsider. You don't do that as a Roman official, especially with Caligula. Petronius knew that sending this letter would at least cost him his job, and more than likely his life.

45 Caligula did send back an order for Petronius to take his own life, but news of Caligula's assassination arrived first. Crisis averted, and the Temple survived.

46 Jesus said that something greater than the Temple was here, and he was talking about himself. A claim so outrageous it eventually led to his death. The Temple was everything to the Jewish people, and Jesus spoke of it as a 'tear-down.' He predicted it would be destroyed. Roughly forty years later, it was torn down just as Jesus described in detail in Luke 21.

47 Today, the Dome of the Rock stands on this same location.

48 Muslims built it around 691 AD, and pilgrims from all over the world have traveled to Jerusalem to see it. They come to see the spot where tradition says Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac in Jewish and Christian tradition, or Ishmael in Muslim tradition.

49 Earthquakes damaged buildings on the Temple Mount more than once, and each time they were rebuilt. Then, in 1099 AD, the Crusaders took the land and turned the Dome of the Rock into a church. Eighty-eight years later, in 1187, Muslim forces retook the land and made it a Muslim shrine again, which it remains to this day.

50 In 1948 the modern State of Israel was founded, and Jews from around the world began returning to the land. In 2017–2018, the United States became the first major world power in modern times to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

51 Back to 380 AD, when Christianity became the official religion of the same empire that had crucified Jesus a few hundred years earlier, and pagan animal sacrifices were outlawed soon after. A truly remarkable turn of events.

52 This brings to mind the day Jesus first came on the scene, around 29 AD, walking toward John the Baptist in his first public appearance as an adult. John the Baptist turned, saw Jesus walking toward him, and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Calling someone the Lamb of God is unusual, especially when that same Lamb said he came to die and, as Christians believe, rose again.

53 John the Baptist was pointing to Jesus as the one who would replace animal sacrifices, something that seemed impossible at the time. Yet the Temple sacrifices ended in 70 AD when the Temple fell, and the Roman Empire banned its own sacrifices a few hundred years later. That is a remarkable turn in world history.

54 John the Baptist's words came true, and Christians today remember the death of Jesus as the final atonement. No animal sacrifices are needed; Christians see Jesus, the Lamb of God, as the final sacrifice, fulfilling what the Passover lamb pointed to. The historical events I have described here are documented in Jewish and Roman history.

55 The real question is what caused all of this to happen. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Maybe not, but there is a lot to explain if He did not. Some people who have set out to honestly disprove it have ended up turning from atheism to following Jesus. If you have not reconsidered Jesus lately, maybe it's time to take a fresh look.

56 What say you?