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AN INVESTIGATION FOR POSSIBLE PARALLELS
OF THE ROMAN IMPERIAL CULT (CAESAR-NERO)
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOK OF HEBREWS

Masters Thesis

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by

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Summary

This thesis is an investigation of possible significant parallels of the Roman imperial cult (Caesar-Nero) in the book of Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews was no doubt greatly impacted by Jewish influence, context, and background. Yet there may be other significant influences that have formed the New Testament book of Hebrews. One such possible influence to the book of Hebrews is the Roman Empire, and more specifically, the Roman imperial cult, the worship of living Roman emperors in god-like terms and the deification of dead emperors. The writer of Hebrews may have used language, forms, and images of the Roman ruler cult to contrast, compare, or clarify their theology and interpretation of Jesus and God. There is the possibility of correspondences between worship of the Roman emperors and the book of Hebrews.

Are there significant parallels of the worship of the Caesars to God in the book of Hebrews? Did the writer of Hebrews use illusions, motifs, and images of the Roman emperor cult in parallel to Jesus Christ? Is the Roman imperial cult influence portrayed in the book of Hebrews? If yes, how and to what degree are they portrayed? If no, what are some of the divergences? This thesis attempts to answer these questions in an investigation for possible parallels of the Roman imperial cult (Caesar-Nero) in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

I hypothesize there are significant parallels of the Roman imperial cult (Caesar-Nero) in the book of Hebrews. Through my findings I conclude that parallels with words and images on a broad level do exist, but discovery of significant parallels of direct influence were lacking. The parallels between Hebrews and the Roman imperial cult were more likely due to common sources, cultural settings, or universal ideas. The three strongest parallels of the emperor cult



(Caesar-Nero) in the book of Hebrews were: divine sonship, enthronement after death, and benefaction. These parallels in combination with the weaker ones do not constitute significant parallelism. The Roman emperor cult does not appear to be a major influence which produced significant parallel for material contained in the book of Hebrews.



Key Terms

1. Hebrews
2. Roman cult
3. imperial
4. emperor
5. Caesar
6. divus
7. benefaction
8. apotheosis
9. Augustus
10. adoption

INTRODUCTION

The book of Hebrews was no doubt greatly impacted by Jewish influence, context, and background. The Old Testament quotations from the Septuagint, references to the cultic sacrificial system, and mention of Old Testament figures such as Moses, Abraham, Aaron, and Melchizedek provides sufficient evidence for the book to have had strong Jewish influences. Yet there may be other significant influences that have formed the New Testament book of Hebrews.

One such possible influence to the book of Hebrews is the Roman Empire, and more specifically, the Roman imperial cult. During the life of Jesus and the decades following, in which the book of Hebrews was written (c.a. C. E. 64-70)¹, there was an overwhelmingly dominate empire in the Mediterranean—the rule of the Romans. The writer and readers of Hebrews came under Roman influence to some degree or another. It may have been very minimal or very great. Such Roman influence may have infiltrated the terminology, ideology, and content of New Testament writings.

¹Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (NIBC) (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 8; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 21; George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 22; Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 351.



Part of the Roman Empire was the Roman imperial cult, the worship of living Roman emperors in god-like terms and the deification of dead emperors. In the mid-late first century when many of the New Testament documents, such as Hebrews, were drafted there was contact and conflict between early Christians and the emperor cult.² Writers may have used language, forms, and images of the Roman ruler cult to contrast, compare, or clarify their theology and interpretation of Jesus and God. Parallels could have easily been drawn and understood for an audience all too familiar with the Roman emperor cult. While the Jewish background is present and unfading in the book of Hebrews, there is the possibility of correspondences between worship of the Roman emperors and the book of Hebrews.

Are there significant parallels of the worship of the Caesars to God in the book of Hebrews? Did the writer of Hebrews use illusions, motifs, and images of the Roman emperor cult in parallel to Jesus Christ? Is the Roman imperial cult influence portrayed in the book of Hebrews? If yes, how and to what degree are they portrayed? If no, what are some of the divergences? This thesis attempts to answer these questions in an investigation for possible parallels of the Roman imperial cult (Caesar-Nero) in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

Hypothesis

I hypothesize there are significant parallels of the Roman imperial cult (Caesar-Nero) in the book of Hebrews. Significant parallels being: the text of Hebrews will contain a considerable collection of words, concepts, images, motifs, ideas, structures,

² David Alvarez Cineira, *Die Religions-Politik Des Kaisers Claudius Und Die Paulinische Mission* (Freiburg: Herder, 1999), 55.

and forms directly correlated with elements of Roman emperor worship during the time of Caesar to Nero.

Basis for Hypothesis

The feasibility for the hypothesis statement is formed on four-fold basis:

1. The Emperor Cult was an Influential Part of the New Testament World

The Roman Empire was a crucial influence on the world, underlying and pervading the New Testament.³ Since the author and recipients were likely exposed to the Romans, Roman culture must be taken seriously as a possible influence for any New Testament document. Cultural influences, be it in language, images, motifs, or forms may have easily become a part of a written document. In the first-century, the Roman Empire was an influential element of the world. Since the Roman Empire was so expansive and the cult of the emperor extensive one must duly consider the influence it may have had on first-century texts, in this case the book of Hebrews.

2. Initial Indications of Parallelism

There are several initial indications that parallelism may exist between Hebrews and the emperor cult. The emperors' portrayal as a god-man may have been used by the author of Hebrews in parallelism with the portrayal of Jesus as a god-man. Both emperors and Jesus are depicted as priests that operate within the sphere of blood sacrifice. Worship and homage is given to both. A divine sonship and new status after death of enthronement in heaven is present in both.

³ Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, 15.



3. Written to a Community in Rome

The recipients of Hebrews likely lived in Rome. There is no mention of a particular city in the text that serves as an indication for a designation. Unlike epistles in the Pauline corpus, in Hebrews the location of addressee is absent. Imagery of 13:14 may suggest an urban designation⁴, “for here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come,” however the city being referred to here is alluded to earlier as the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God (12:22).

Since a specific city is not spelled out in the text scholars have put forth an abundance of locations as their best guesses. They range from Jerusalem⁵ to the Lycus Valley⁶ to Spain. Three particular cities however likely serve as the best plausible destinations of Hebrews: Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Rome. And of these three the most plausible destination of Hebrews is Rome.⁷

At the end of the text of Hebrews the author particularly seems to shed light on the likely destination, “Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings” (13:24). In this statement the author could mean that he is in Italy and people with him send greetings to the recipients who are at an unknown location. Or the statement could mean the author is not in Italy and people with him who originate from Italy send greetings to the recipients who are in Italy. The more natural way to interpret

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989).

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2004), 11.

⁶ Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims: A Commentary on The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: The Pilgrim, 1981), 8.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, Stephen Travis, and Ian Paul, *Exploring the New Testament*, vol. 2, *A Guide to the Letters and Revelation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 243.

the statement is the former, designating the recipients as those in Italy.⁸ The mention of Italy in the text promotes Rome to the top of the list of possible cities but there are other evidences for promoting this city as the most plausible designation.

The leaders in the Christian community in Hebrews are called ἡγεμόναι (13:7, 17, 24). No where else in the New Testament is church leadership referred to using this Greek word. Other New Testament texts refer to Christian leaders as πρεσβύτερος or ἐπισκοπή. The texts of *1 Clement* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* in referencing Christian leaders uses the same designation that Hebrews does, ἡγεμόναι. Both texts are associated to the Roman church.⁹ The earliest external evidence for the existence of Hebrews is from Clement of Rome. In his letter (1 Clement 36.1-6), written in the late first or early second century to the church in Corinth, there are numerous echoes of Hebrews.¹⁰

Hebrews 10:32-34 requests the recipients to recall an earlier time when they had been publicly persecuted, abused, and had their possessions plundered. The recalling of an earlier time persecution could easily be that of a time under Claudius in C.E. 49 when he expelled the Jews.¹¹ Another occasion of widespread persecution was under Nero (64-65) that serves as a possibility to this earlier time to be recalled. The period of persecution under Nero however seems unlikely though for this prior time of hardship. The community of Hebrews has not experienced martyrdom (12:4) which occurred under

⁸ Ben Witherington III, *The New Testament Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 68.

⁹ Guthrie, 71; Witherington III, *History*, 351.

¹⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ above All* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982), 17.

¹¹ Seutonius, *Claudius*, 25.4

Nero. It may be that the current threat of martyrdom exists under Nero and the recalling of the earlier time is under Claudius.

These evidences when combined promote Rome as the most likely destination of Hebrews. If the homily (or letter, or theological treatise depending on how one perceives the book of Hebrews) was sent to a community in Rome, the recipients would have been greatly influenced by the cult of the emperor providing a background from which the writer may have extracted parallels.

4. Recipients were Greeks or Hellenistic Jews

While the traditional heading is ΠΙΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ dating as early as the last quarter of the second century,¹² the document lacks the usual epistolary opening that would indicate an addressee. It is probable that those who gave the title ‘to the Hebrews’ may have not know the original destination, for a local term would have made better sense. James Moffatt puts forth a possibility that the original destination was lost from the fact that it was sent to a small household church that later became merged in the larger local church.¹³ This scenario could very well be true as the author does appear to be addressing to a specific community and their localized needs. The title ΠΙΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ may direct one to a Jewish audience, but this assumption must be set aside if based only on the given late-dated title.

¹² Bruce, 3.

¹³ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Critical Commentary, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, reprint 1968), xv.

Most scholars assume the letter was written to Jewish Christians although a number have argued that the addressees were Gentiles.¹⁴ A mixture of both groups as the recipients is also possible. Greeks or Hellenistic Jews, either group potentially may have been strongly impacted by Roman emperor worship. In particular, if the author was writing to a Greek audience it is further possible that language, images, and forms from the emperor cult were used to help convey content, i.e. the audience, if Greek, would have possibly related easier than Hellenistic Jews to parallels that were a part of the cult of the emperor.

Support for a Gentle audience is found on the basis of both the polished Greek style and the extensive use of the Septuagint. These two dual factors give an initial appearance that the audience was Greeks. Gundry notes, however, that these factors imply nothing about the background of the original addressees but only the background for the author.¹⁵ If this is the case, it seems probable that if not a Greek or Hellenistic Jew recipient, then likely a Greek or Hellenistic Jewish author. Witherington points out (in making a case for Apollo as possible author) that whatever the author's environment, it was quite Hellenized.¹⁶ But the scenario for the book of Hebrews may not be an "either-or" but an "and-both" in regards to author-recipient. For Gundry, in an either-or scenario, the evidence of the polished Greek style and use of the Septuagint implies nothing about the original addressees and solely gives direction to the author. I perceive this to be too limiting. The stylistic evidence and Scriptural quotation source, while no

¹⁴ A list of scholars (Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 23, note 5) as examples include: Moffatt, Windisch, von Soden, Zahn, E. F. Scott, Geerhardus Vos.

¹⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 423.

¹⁶Witherington, *History*, 351.

doubt a reflection on the author, also likely gives clues to the receivers. This does not contradict Moffatt's argument but adds to it. An author will often vary writing style and quoted sources based upon the audience to whom he or she is writing. For Hebrews, it makes little sense to send an eloquent Greek document to those who would struggle to comprehend it. This still only broadly narrows the community down to the likely candidates of the Greeks or Hellenistic Jews.

The probability of a Hellenistic Jewish audience increases considering the author presupposes his recipients' knowledge of Jewish ritual, history, and characters. It seems a Jewish Christian would likely have a greater appreciation for the use of the Old Testament found in the book of Hebrews, such as concerns about the Temple in Jerusalem (9:25).¹⁷ However, could a Gentile audience have an understanding of the Jewish background presented in the book of Hebrews? It is a possibility. While Hellenistic Jews may have been more naturally apt at the Old Testament arguments, the recipients may have easily been Greek proselytes, Godfearers, or recent converts who had gained knowledge of the Old Testament. F. F. Bruce, while opting for a Jewish Christian audience, does point out there were Gentile Christians who considered the Old Testament sacred and authoritative and were very familiar with it, even such details as the Mosaic tabernacle and Levitical offerings.¹⁸

Merely because the Old Testament is extensively used does not necessitate or even suggest it had to be a Jewish audience.¹⁹ The author's presupposed knowledge of

¹⁷ Witherington, *Story*, 68.

¹⁸ Bruce, 5.

¹⁹ David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4.

his audience is not experiential but literary. The Gentile audience did not need to have first-hand experience. Instead they could easily have had a great deal of knowledge of Old Testament images and rituals from the literary text and a great deal of appreciation for such. There are several examples of New Testament texts written to a predominately Gentile audience using the Old Testament at great lengths. Even though there is unanimous agreement that Paul did not write Hebrews,²⁰ Paul's writings to Gentiles at Galatia and Corinth do set precedence within the New Testament. In letters to these communities Paul puts forth complicated arguments and instruction on the basis of the Old Testament to recipients who are Greek.²¹ 1 Peter, also addressing a Gentile audience, is rich in oral-scribal intertexture with the Old Testament, as well as allusions and references to Old Testament figures and stories.

Within the text of Hebrews the warning against apostasy of “an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (3:12) appears to be in expected reference to a return to paganism. It is doubtful that Jewish Christians falling back to Judaism would have been understood to turn away from “the living God”. Another textual indication that the audience is from a pagan background is the mention of the recipients' repentance and cleansing from ‘dead works’ (6:1; 9:14).²²

Since there is no specific quoted audience in Hebrews the best options retained for recipients are Greeks or Hellenistic Jews. Based upon the arguments above I slightly

²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 20.

²¹ Paul J. Achtemeir, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing The New Testament: It's Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 470.

²² Hagner, *Encountering*, 23.

lean towards a Gentile audience, yet either group could have been the recipients. Either group could have easily been influenced by the Roman imperial cult.

The initial indications of parallelism within the text are worthy of further exploration on their own terms. When placed in a combined scenario that recipients of Hebrews are plausibly a Gentile community living in Rome increases the probability of the audience being influenced by the emperor cult. It also increases the probability of the author of Hebrews using the imperial cult in his document for parallelism.

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate, explore, and draw conclusions to the above stated hypothesis. I desire to carry out an in-depth study of the book of Hebrews which this investigation will become a part. No other study has been performed on the topic of parallelisms of the book of Hebrews with the Roman imperial cult to my knowledge. The hypothesis is a viable option to pursue according to the stated reasons. The conclusions will indicate whether to further explore this topic or to look towards other areas for study.

This investigation is important for the study of Hebrews to determine the feasibility of a possible background. The background to a New Testament book is important as “often the choice of a background will become the all-important ‘control’ by which other possible understandings of the texts are filtered out”²³. Various backgrounds have been suggested for Hebrews including Philo, Alexandria, Platonism, Qumran,

²³ L.D. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its background of thought*, Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 65 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.

Gnostic, Samaritan, Jewish, *Merkabah* mysticism, and Pauline theology.²⁴ Is the Roman emperor cult a strong addition to this list?

In this thesis I explore possible influences of the Roman emperor cult spanning from emperors Julius Caesar to Nero as may be displayed in the book of Hebrews. I will explicitly consider parallel aspects of the emperor cult in connection with the Hebrew's portrayal of Jesus. This will answer if the Roman emperor cult was influential for material contained in the book of Hebrews, especially in regards to the author's portrayal of Jesus, which became *significant* parallels within the text.

If the hypothesis is correct:

This piece will show there are sufficient evidences for parallels that need further exploration and study to which I or someone else should consider in a future writing project.

If the hypothesis is incorrect:

This piece directs one to look somewhere else for potential parallelism. It will also provide the Biblical academic community a confident removal of the emperor cult as a possible candidate for parallelism in the book of Hebrews.

For clarity, the purpose of this work is not to be an in-depth study of all aspects of the Roman emperor cult. The purpose of this work is not to produce an exegesis of the text of Hebrews. Commentaries on the book of Hebrews almost exclusively portray a Jewish influence. This thesis strives to add a study to the New Testament field that

²⁴ Ibid, 1-4.

considers the Roman emperor cult as a possible influence in the book of Hebrews, specifically with comparisons between Jesus and the ruler Julius Caesar and emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.

Methodology

1. Formulate hypothesis.
2. Perform initial research to find initial evidence indicating a basis to pursue study or lack of evidence indicating a basis to reformulate or disregard the hypothesis.
3. Develop a focus area. The emperor cult contains an expansive realm. In order to test the hypothesis with effectiveness and efficiency I will develop a focus area that provides the most likely areas of parallelism based upon initial research. As the paper is developed the focus area will be refined and adjusted as possible parallels arise.
4. Compile a review of literature that will be added to throughout the project providing a basis of research.
5. Discover the background and sources of the emperor cult. This step is crucial to understanding possible shared sources between the Roman emperor cult and the book of Hebrews. For it may be that in fact while there are parallels they mostly stem from shared sources.
6. Perform further research, compile, and write on the Roman emperor cult.
7. Compare discovered evidence of the emperor cult with researched and compiled information on the book of Hebrews. Compare any possible parallels of the text of Hebrews including words, concepts, images, motifs, ideas, structures, and forms similar

with elements of Roman emperor worship during the time of Caesar to Nero. This step will be done throughout and at the end of the study.

8. Write on possible parallels.
9. Test hypothesis by compiling parallels and looking at their collective strength.
10. Formulate conclusions.

Focus Area

In Hebrews Jesus is portrayed as both human and divine. He is proclaimed the Son of God which angels are directed to worship (1:2-6). Becoming human he is made a little lower than the angels (2:9). Jesus is portrayed as a god-man. He is displayed as being both human and divine. The Roman emperors lived in a similar status of being both divine and human. This quasi god-man condition familiar in the Roman Empire may have influenced the writer of Hebrews in their depiction of Jesus Christ. Have images, figures, themes, and motifs used on Jesus in the book of Hebrews stemmed from significant influences of Roman emperor worship?

In this thesis, particular focus is given to the periods of Julius Caesar and Augustus. It is this ruler (Julius Caesar was not an emperor) and emperor and their respective reins that set a precedence which the emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero basically followed. The practices and honors bestowed to Caesar and Augustus during and directly after their reigns became the standards of Roman imperial deification and cultic worship. Lily Ross Taylor poignantly writes in her preface:

The period of Caesar and Augustus has the same interest for the Roman imperial cult that the time of Alexander and his first successors has for the Hellenistic ruler worship, for Caesar was the first divine ruler at Rome, and

Augustus gave to the divinity of the ruler the form under which it was destined to endure for three centuries.²⁵

The Julio-Claudian reign is selected then for two reasons: their major influence in the development of the emperor cult and the time periods which likely would have impacted the book of Hebrews. The rulers and emperors considered:

Julius Caesar	63 - 44 B.C.E.
Augustus	27 B.C.E. – 14 C.E.
Tiberius	14 – 37 C.E.
Caligula	37 – 41 C.E.
Claudius	41 – 54 C.E.
Nero	54 – 68 C.E.

Review of Literature

There is an abundance of resources that present a broad history of the Roman world and culture. There are many but fewer resources for the specific study of the Roman imperial cult.

1. Imperial Cult

A. Overviews of Emperor Worship

Ittai Gradel, Emperor Worship and Roman Religion

Louis Matthews Sweet, Roman Emperor Worship

²⁵ Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Middletown: American Philological Association, 1931), vii.



John Ferguson, The Religions of the Roman Empire and chapter “Ruler-worship” in The Roman World

Lily Ross Taylor, The Divinity of the Roman Emperor

Stefan Weinstock, Divus Julius

B. Specific focus in the West

Duncan Fishwick, The Imperial Cult in the Latin West

C. Specific focus in the East

S.F.R. Price, Rituals and Power: The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor

D. Focused Sources

Sabine G. MacCormack, Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity

Focuses on art and ceremony providing a detailed explanation of consecration and apotheosis

Larry Kreitzer, “Apotheosis of the Roman Emperor.” Biblical Archaeologist

Numismatic evidence for the divinity and apotheosis for first century Roman ruler and emperors

Ge, za Alfo?ldy, “Subject and ruler, subjects and methods: an attempt at a conclusion” a chapter in Subject and ruler : the cult of the ruling power in classical antiquity

Summarizes and synthesizes conclusions for emperor worship

E. Ancient Literature

Cassius Dio, Dio's Roman History

Suetonius, Lives of the Caesars

Tacitus, Annals

2. Roman after-life beliefs and ideas

Eugenia Sellers Strong, Apotheosis and the After Life

Franz Cumont, After Life in Roman Paganism.

3. Roman Cult in Comparison with Scripture

David Alvarez Cineira, Die Religions-Politik des Kaisers Claudius und die Paulinische Mission, presents an overall study of the Roman cult of Emperor Claudius. Cineira dedicates one chapter to an overview of the emperor cult under the reigns of Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius. The mission of Paul is presented with overlapping areas of the emperor cult of Claudius. The specific Pauline context and text considered are in 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Corinth, Romans. Cineira with focus on Paul does not include or consider the book of Hebrews.

4. Hebrews

F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews



George H. Guthrie, Hebrews—The NIV Application Commentary

Donald A. Hagner, Hebrews—New International Biblical Commentary

Ernst Käsemann, The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews

David A. deSilva, Perseverance in Gratitude

James Moffat, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews—The International Critical Commentary

CHAPTER 1

THE ROMAN EMPEROR CULT

Background to the Roman Imperial Cult

Kings, emperors, generals, and tribal leaders were often recognized in antiquity in divine or divine-like status. This perspective produced the worship of the ruler which became a central element of ancient religious life.²⁶ Beliefs and views towards leaders

²⁶ Ge, za Alfo?ldy, "Subject and ruler, subjects and methods: an attempt at a conclusion," in *Subject and ruler : the cult of the ruling power in classical antiquity : papers presented at a conference held in the University of Alberta on April 13-15, 1994, to celebrate the 65th anniversary of Duncan Fishwick*, Supplementary series, no. 17. ed. Alastair Small. (Ann Arbor: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1996), 255.

and heroes varied within geographic areas and local customs. The line in antiquity between gods and humans was not fixed. There was no standard and authoritative definition of what a god was²⁷ and therefore honor and homage to a king or ruler could easily become worship of a god. There was widespread worship of men as gods, god-like, or of godly characteristics before and up to the Romans. In antiquity monarchies were largely ruled by divine kings²⁸ or divine representatives.²⁹

The Roman imperial cult and emperor worship did not begin in a vacuum. It had abundant sources and influences stemming from the conquered lands. The sheer size of the empire produces an expansive list of the possible influencers. And it is likely that there is no one sole source for the Roman emperor cult. Instead, it came to be through the operation of countless converging lines of influence.³⁰ Most notably are the Greeks, Ptolemies, Seleucids, Orientals, Persians, and Attalids on the ruler cult. In these Hellenistic realms, powerful chiefs and rulers who delivered people from invaders and ensured their peace were often esteemed as a present god (*επιφανής θεός*, *praesens numen*), a savior (*σωτήρ*).³¹ Worship of the rulers found in the East gave the Caesars an abundant background to draw from and be influenced by with the cult of the ruler. However, it should be noted that the Roman imperial cult was not simply a duplicate or form of borrowed religion and politics of conquered lands. Rome already had a hint of background of apotheosis in pre-Imperial Rome, however, to what degree or

²⁷ Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 60.

²⁸ Taylor, 57.

²⁹ David R. Anderson, *The King-Priest of Psalm 110 in Hebrews*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 21 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 21.

³⁰ Louis Matthews Sweet, *Roman Emperor Worship* (Boston: Gorham, 1919), 81.

³¹ Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 112.

if at all it defined apotheosis of the emperor is contested. Divine honors were frequently given to Roman generals and governors in Greece and the East thus familiarizing Romans with the idea of the deification of a living man.³²

Trying to narrow down an exact background or retrace precise forms throughout Roman history for the ruler cult is beneficial yet difficulties arise as the Roman system, as with most cultures, was a barrage of ideology, religion, and politics which had a mix of duplication, borrowing, reinvention, formulation, introduction, and design. However, the East appears to be a probable source out of the many possible which was modified for the imperial cult.

The West provides less background to the emperor cult. Renowned scholar Duncan Fishwick has declared that:

In origin the impetus to establish the ruler cult came from the East; but in the West provincial cult, at least, was for the most part installed by Augustus and his successors and evolved in concert with the changing requirements of succeeding emperors and dynasties.³³

Pinpointing one exact precursor (Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, etc.) to the Roman emperor cult is improbable. It seems more plausible that the cult has a background partially from the Latin West and to a greater degree a multi-source of conquered lands in the East. With this enmeshed foundation laid, the ruler cult continued to progress and be formulated under the auspices of the whole empire, always in a degree of flux and reformulation giving a continual evolution to emperor worship with the passing of time and of emperors. Two leaders, however, were foundational in the development of the Roman emperor cult: Julius Caesar and Augustus. These two men and their ensuing

³² Eugenia Sellers Strong, *Apotheosis and After Life* (Freeport: Books for Libraries, 1969), 62-63.

³³ Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1987), 92.

programs of honors and apotheosis set the precedence for centuries following. The ruler took form largely from the ideas of divine descent, deification, apotheosis, and benefaction.

Divine Descent

A mode developed among the Roman upper class in the middle and late Republic that entailed linking themselves genealogically with the gods and heroes. It was of fashion to be able to claim descent from a god, a Greek or Trojan hero who had founded a family, town, or city and provided people with a “divine descent”. Julius Caesar’s background is minimal when compared with his successor Augustus with legends of a miraculous birth and omens of divine destiny during Caesar’s childhood all apparently lacking.³⁴ Caesar, however, did lay claim to have a divine descent from Venus through Aeneas of Troy and even more dubiously claimed to be descended from Mars through the Alban kings.³⁵ This claim allowed him to present himself as a representative of the founder of Roman race and son of Venus. Such a claim may seem preposterous to the modern reader. However verification of these claims was irrelevant as almost every contemporary politician laid claim to a similarly grand origin. Octavian, who later had his name changed to Augustus, had a unique divine birth background tale where he was considered the son of the god Apollo. Octavian had been reported to have been

³⁴ Taylor, 77.

³⁵ Sweet, 55; Fishwick, 56.

engendered by Apollo, who had intercourse with his mother Atia while she had once slept in the temple one night.³⁶

Claims of divine descent were simply a part of the Roman culture during the time of the Caesars. It was customary for Rome's leaders to be presented in coinage, statues, and public issuances in light of their divine descent.³⁷ Augustus adopted the symbols and persona of Apollo as he established an era of peace. Nero claimed to be from the great family of Aeneas. In the Roman political arena these claims were used often for gain of office and symbolic representation. It also became one way in which the emperors became associated to their own possible present or eventual divinity in the imperial cult.

In addition to the genealogical claims to gods and/or heroes there are various accounts of prophecy, astrology, and divine omens purported for each emperor. For example there are several miraculous reports given about the birth and childhood of Octavian including prophesy about his birth, dreams about his rise to power, miraculous acts, and accounts of his dealings with the gods as a child.³⁸ Dio records that when Nero was born just before dawn on December 15, 37 C.E. rays not cast by any visible beam of the sun enveloped him.³⁹ This likely gave Nero association with the god Apollo. When Nero was a child Agrippina, his mother, consulted astrologers about her son's future. When they declared he would be emperor and would kill his mother (which he

³⁶ Cassius Dio 45.1.1-5; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 94.4.

³⁷ Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 92.

³⁸ Dio, 45.2.1-7; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 94.5-12.

³⁹ Dio, 61.2.1; Suetonius, *Nero*, 6.1.

later did in 59 C.E.), she replied, “Let him slay, so that he reign.”⁴⁰ Nero’s family also had a background of lore. His ancestor, Lucius Domitius, is said to have encountered two youth of more than mortal majesty. They asked him to carry to the senate and people the news of a victory and as a token of their divinity they stroked his cheeks and turned his black beard to a ruddy hue, like that of bronze.⁴¹

While the prophecies and omens provide interesting tales and accounts, the historical significance is and should be downplayed to the greater political meandering that took place to secure power. They do however provide a glimpse into the divine descent culture of the Roman Empire which included a reality into the belief of omens, prophecies, and dreams.

There really was no need for the elaboration of birth backgrounds to be traced back to the ancient gods as the natural relations substituted for and became equated with the divine. As the leaders and emperors became apotheosized, elevated to divine status, it gave relatives a nearer claim to divine descent.

As Julius Caesar was apotheosized at the end of his life the claim to be descended or in close relation to a god came rather easily for Octavian, the grand-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. The *divi filius* was the natural successor to the deified predecessor.⁴² Octavian became the Son of the Divine Caesar. Numismatic evidence has produced a coin issued in September 31B.C.E which shows the head of the goddess Venus, and the reverse has Octavian brandishing a spear with the inscription CAESAR

⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.9; Dio, 61.2.1-2.

⁴¹ Suetonius, *Nero*, 1.1

⁴² Strong, 70.

DIVI F.⁴³ Gaius Octavius had been named by Caesar, who was sonless, in his will as principal heir receiving three-quarters of his estate.⁴⁴ Adoption of Octavian became official by a *lex curiata* in 43 B.C.E. legitimizing his name *C. Iulii divi filius Caesar*.⁴⁵ Octavian now had a god for a father and had inherited the lineage of Venus via Divus Iulius.

Subsequent emperors had their divine connects in the previous apotheosized emperor(s). Augustus attempting to keep his successor in the blood-line designated his choice by officially adopting Tiberius on June 26th 4 C.E.⁴⁶ At the same time Tiberius was compelled to adopt his nephew Germanicus, who became the emperors grandson in hopes he would eventually become emperor.⁴⁷ Tiberius was merely to be a stepping stone of sorts to Germanicus. To ensure transfer of power from Augustus to Tiberius, Tiberius was placed in partnership with Augustus in the chief powers of the principate, the proconsular imperium, and tribunican power.⁴⁸ In this way Augustus could influence the senate's choice for successor by showing his support of his own candidate. And through the second level adoption process, Augustus even appears to be influencing Tiberius' successor.

There was no formal mechanism for succession. The usual pattern was to pass power to male children. For the emperors, adoption and giving powers of office to the

⁴³ Larry Kreitzer, "Apotheosis of the Roman Emperor," *Biblical Archaeologist* 53.4 (Dec 1990), 213.

⁴⁴ Werner Eck, *The Age of Augustus* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 7.

⁴⁵ Fishwick, 75-76; Taylor 89, 139.

⁴⁶ Suetonius, *Augustus*, 65.1.

⁴⁷ Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 15.2.

⁴⁸ Anthony A. Barrett, *Caligula* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 4.

adopted became method in which the emperor attempted to keep their successor in the Julio-Claudian line. The ability to claim relation with previous emperors was vitally important. Some persons even tried to claim to be the illegitimate son of the previous emperor in hopes of gaining a possible political position but were unsuccessful.⁴⁹ Within the imperial family not only did the direct male blood line count but all imperial connections were fair game. Adoption, male blood line, female blood line, and marriages were all factors. Political supporters and candidates used everything at their disposal. Family relations were crucial in regards to inherited wealth and the oath of loyalty sworn throughout the empire to the emperor and his family. Transference of loyalty from one family member to another was established by Augustus as he determined to found a Julian dynasty.⁵⁰ Yet family relation was not the only factor as age, charisma, political success, military experience, possible opponents, and who you knew all mattered.

While the official decision still came under the approval and vote of the Senate at times it appears as a formality to a decision already made. The will of the passing emperor often gave strong leverage for a particular candidate. Augustus had based his claim to power on the principle of being the son of Caesar. Subsequent emperors would point to adoptions and/or blood relations for political maneuvering. The adoption method had allowed Augustus to claim the title *divi filius* (son of God). Apotheosis became an important ingredient towards the mechanism of succession for incoming emperors.

Apotheosis of the previous emperor gave the current candidate for emperor one more step

⁴⁹ Two examples of are seen in the claims of Cleopatra's son to have supposedly belonging to Caesar and the praetorian prefect Nymphidius Sabinus who had betrayed Nero with hopes of imperial succession using claims of being the illegitimate son of Caligula (Chaplin, 7).

⁵⁰Peter Jones and Keith Sidwell, eds., *The World of Rome: An Introduction to Roman Culture* 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60-61.

towards legitimacy in the political arena. This likely is the predominate reason Gaius Caligula shocked the senate by demanding deification for Tiberius upon his death in 37 C.E.⁵¹ If apotheosis for Tiberius was obtained, which the senate eventually did *not* do, Caligula could possible strengthen the claim of divine descent from his ‘grandfather’.

Augustus’ step-son Tiberius succeeded him and subsequent emperors Caligula, Claudius, and Nero were all related to Augustus in one way or another. Adopted and blood relation to Augustus became an important mark for emperors to be able to trace. All of Augustus’ successors adopted his name, *Augustus*, which eventually lost its character as a name and became a title.⁵² This demonstrates both the importance the emperors had of being relationally connected to Augustus in some sort of fashion and the religious overtones his name carried.

Augustus’ reign was so successful that successors often used their relations to him in promoting their way to imperial power. Tiberius was the son of Livia who was married to Augustus hence becoming the step-son of the emperor. Tiberius later married Julia, Augustus’ daughter, after her husband Marcus Agrippa died in 12 B.C.E. Tiberius eventually became the officially adopted son of Augustus. Gaius, also popularly known as Caligula, took office in 37 C.E. and claimed link by blood-line with both families, the Julian and the Claudian, his mother being the granddaughter of Augustus and his father Germanicus, the nephew and adopted son of Tiberius.⁵³ After Caligula’s assassination in C.E. 41, Claudius took power with the help of the Praetorian Guard. Claudius’ link to

⁵¹ Robin Seagar, *Tiberius* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 208; Barrett, 51.

⁵² Werner Eck, *The Age of Augustus*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 124.

⁵³ Anthony A. Barrett, *Caligula*, (1989, 2).

Augustus was distant—Augustus was Claudius’ great uncle (his mother’s mother’s brother), and was referred to by Claudius as his ‘*avunculus*’ (uncle) and to Tiberius as his ‘*patruus*’ (father).⁵⁴ Claudius’ brother was Germanicus and his nephew was the emperor Caligula whom he succeeded. Claudius used statuary, buildings, coins and festivals to display connections with relatives, especially his parents: the war hero Nero Drusus and his wife Antonia, to whom the title Augusta had been offered by Emperor Caligula, as well as his grandparents Antony and Livia.⁵⁵ With relational connection to Augustus lacking a bit, Claudius was able to bolster claims to divine descent when on January 17, 42 C.E. his grandmother Livia received the honor of a state cult. Another indication of how important Augustus was in the Roman Empire is the fact that this honor was given on same month and day she had married Augustus so many years previous.⁵⁶

Actions by Claudius show the importance that emperors had of the establishment of divine descent. His actions also demonstrate that his successor was likely to come from the family. In 49 C.E. Claudius married his niece, Agrippina the Younger who was Gaius Caligula’s sister.⁵⁷ Agrippina the Younger’s son, Ahenobarbus or commonly known as Nero, the great-grandson of Augustus, now became step-son of the emperor. Nero’s probability for succession was quickly advanced, largely through the conjuring of his mother, with his marriage engagement to Octavia, daughter of Claudius and official adoption by Claudius in 50 C.E. as Nero’s name became Tiberius Claudius Nero

⁵⁴ Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁷ Jurgen Malitz, *Nero*, trans. Allison Brown (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 6.

Caesar.⁵⁸ Later Claudius conferred proconsular authority to Nero, bypassing his own son, Britannicus, as the only probable heir. Britannicus was to turn fourteen in February 55 C.E. and receive the *toga virilis*, the white toga of manhood assumed by boys of ancient Rome, an important moment for his supporters. Yet the celebration never took place as Claudius died on October 13, 54 C.E. of mushroom poisoning, with speculation as to supposed accidental manner of the poisoning.⁵⁹ It was speculated and reported that Claudius was poisoned by Agrippina, so her son might become emperor, which he did. Nero was backed by the praetorian guards and shortly after confirmed by the senate. He secured his position like other emperors who had come before him by eliminating all other threats including Britannicus and eventually his mother who had originally helped him gain the position. Nero not only had connection with Claudius as great-nephew, stepson, and son by adoption but could claim a blood-line with Augustus.⁶⁰

The four emperors, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero, successfully used their relations, specifically any connection to Augustus, to secure their imperium. And Augustus had used his adoption by Caesar to secure his own power. In Roman antiquity, who you knew was as vital as who you were related to. Hereditary succession was the normal and expected mode of transferring imperial power.⁶¹ Blood line was important and arranged marriages were used to keep rule within the family. Heredity in the Julio-Claudian dynasty expanded into the extended family. The divergence from the typical blood line father-son succession was due to many factors with each emperor from lack of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11-12; Champlin, 44-46.

⁶⁰ Champlin, 139.

⁶¹ Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2001), 11.

heirs to political pressures. Adoption became a useful tool that emperors used to promote a successor. The process of adoption, marriage, and gaining favor of the praetorians and senate were all means of political advantage.

The claim for divine descent had preceded Julius Caesar; he was no inventor to such claims yet used his alleged traces to Venus for advantageous uses. The divination of Caesar had placed Octavian in an awkward and fortunate position which he used to capitalize on as he became *divi filius*, a claim and title used by future emperors. The ability to claim relations to Augustus and the imperial family quickly promoted individuals for candidacy as the next emperor, often giving cause for their death. Apotheosis became not only a means bestow honors upon the dead but indirectly upon the living. Divine descent was a factor allowing the Julio-Claudian dynasty to maintain family control of the imperial house for over a century.

Deified: The Living and the Dead

Julius Caesar

There is debate as to whether Caesar, who had taken the office of *pontifex maximus* in 63 B.C.E., was or was not officially deified before death. Many scholars fall on each side of the debate, but there is sufficient evidence to argue for the probability of deification of a *living* Julius Caesar.

From 46 to 44 B.C.E. Julius Caesar gained a series of senatorial honors that have been interpreted to be the progression of divinizing Caesar. Following the battle of Munda in 45, the Senate honored him with an ivory statue of his likeness transported together with the statues of the gods in a procession at the games in the Circus and a

εικων with the inscription *DEUS INVICTUS*⁶² was to be placed in the temple of Quirinus. After the battle of Thapsus in 46, senators decreed him a chariot set on the Capitol facing Jupiter, along with a bronze statue of Caesar associated with a globe of the world and bore an epigraph with the title ἡμίθεος⁶³ or some Latin equivalent. These privileges granted to Caesar were extraordinary.

The honors leaning towards the divinization of Caesar reached a climax in 44. The Senate awarded him the title *Dictator Perpetuo*.⁶⁴ He was granted a golden chair to be carried to the theater where it was exhibited bearing his golden crown and a special carriage to bear his symbols in the procession to the Circus where they were to be placed on *pulvinar* (the couch of the gods).⁶⁵ These acts placed Caesar in a realm which had been associated only with gods. Also in 44 the senate minted coins with Caesar's portrait with the inscription, *CAESAR PARENS PATRIAE* (Caesar Father of the Nation).⁶⁶ No living person up to this time had ever appeared on Roman coinage. Then, just before his death in March of 44, Caesar was decreed by the senate a cult image and name (*Divus*

⁶² Kreitzer, 212; Fishwick, 58; Dio 43.45.3 uses the Greek words $\Theta\epsilon\omega\varsigma$ / $\alpha\nu\nu\iota\kappa\eta\tau\omega\varsigma$ that have several different possible translations including, 'to the conquering god, unconquered god, or invincible god'.

⁶³ Dio 43.14.6; *Dio's Roman History* trans. Earnest Cary, (1987, 235) has "with an inscription to the effect that he was a demigod"; Fishwick (1987, 57) does note that later Caesar had the name of the god removed. It possible was not an epiclesis "demigod" but a proper name there is much debate between scholars on Dio's use and accuracy of the word *hemitheos*, translated by many to be 'demigod'. For a summary of various arguments see (Gradel, 61-68).

⁶⁴ Kreitzer, 213. The background to this event highlights Caesar's recognition as the *lectisternia* dates back to 399 B.C.E. when the general public was instructed from the Sibylline books that for eight days images of three pairs of gods were to be exhibited on couches before tables with food and drink (Howard Hayes Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981], 20-21).

⁶⁵ Cicero *Philippics* 2.43.110; Dio 44.6.1; Suetonius 76.1; Fishwick, 61.

⁶⁶ Kreitzer, 212.



Iulius), a state priest (*flamen*), and a state temple.⁶⁷ All these honors were held for the Roman gods, which directs evidence for the official deification, legal-binding formal deification by the senate, in Julius Caesar's lifetime.⁶⁸ The later actions of Octavian may be understood to be the acknowledgment of a decree previously passed as many of the actions by the senate were not fully implemented, most likely due to the sudden assassination.

It is debated whether or not and to what degree Caesar may have been instigating and promoting these senatorial honors or to what degree the honors were forced upon him. Caesar often accepted honors and did not heavily squelch recognition. Thus it has been questioned whether or not he aimed for the title of king. Yet ancient sources seem to clearly demonstrate Caesar had no aim for kingship. Dio records that on occasions Caesar refused honors he was offered or that had been proposed by the Senate.⁶⁹ Caesar also never took or accepted the title of Rex or the emblem of kingship, the diadem.⁷⁰ On two occasions specific kingship honors were offered to Caesar who rejected them.⁷¹ On January 26th 44 B.C.E. upon Caesar's return to Rome from Alban Mount he was acclaimed king by the people and at that time or earlier his statues were decorated with a diadem. Caesar said his name was not *rex* (king) but Caesar.⁷² Weeks later at the

⁶⁷ Cicero *Philippics* 2.43.110.

⁶⁸ Gradel, 55; Fishwick, 66; Walter C. A. Ker's translation footnote 2 on Cicero's *Philippics*, (1995, 172) in referencing the accumulation of Senatorial privileges granted, Ker concludes 'all signs of divine honors'.

⁶⁹ Dio 43.14.7; 46.1.

⁷⁰ Gradel, 60; Dio 44.11.1 'although he [Caesar] pretended to shun the title, in reality he desired to assume it'.

⁷¹ Weinstock, 318ff; Fishwick, 69.

⁷² Dio 34.10.1, αυτo. j me.n ουvk e;fh basileu.j avlla. Kai/sar kalei/stai.

Lupercalia, Antony called Caesar king, knelt and attempted to put a diadem on his head. Caesar answered, “Jupiter alone is king of the Romans,” and sent the diadem to Jupiter on the Capitol.⁷³ Regardless of the title of rex, the honored god (-like) status he had received entailed a formal monarchical position in the state which would have likely made any such title superfluous.⁷⁴ He had already had amassed offices which made him more than a king: *consul, imperator, triumphator, dictator perpetuo, pontifex maximus, augur, and praefectus morum*.⁷⁵ Caesar was considered both human and a god.

At the funeral of the emperor the soul was thought to rise from the pyre. In July of 44 B.C.E. several days after Caesar’s funeral, a comet appeared which some took to be the soul of Caesar which Octavian later used as a symbol in coinage.⁷⁶ It followed in the early part of the first century that divinity for successive emperors was obtained through the order of death, state funeral, and *consecratio* by *senate consultum*.⁷⁷ *Consecratio* could be preceded during the life of the emperor by a gradual integration to apotheosis⁷⁸ as is seen in the emperor Augustus who was *officially* deified only after death but *unofficially* had been ascribed a more and more divine-like status during his lifetime.

In 42 B.C.E. Octavian initiated the *senatus consultum* for Caesar’s *consecratio*. The *Consecratio* both validated his *acta* and sanctioned the divine status that had been

⁷³ Dio 34.11.1-3; Cicero, Philippic 2.85, *Tu diadema inponebas cum plangore populi, ille cum plausu reiciebat*.

⁷⁴ Gradel, 109.

⁷⁵ Fishwick, 71.

⁷⁶ Kreitzer, 213; Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 103.

⁷⁷ MacCormack, 104.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

given to him while living.⁷⁹ While the masses might have already been participating in religious acts that were averse to ascribing divinity to the emperor, the final say and approval of official divine status was dependent upon the Senate.⁸⁰ The decision for divinity was attained by verdict of the Senate largely based upon the deceased emperor deeds. The Senate consigned the emperor to the company of gods (*consecratio*) or to oblivion (*damnatio memoriae*).⁸¹ Official deification thus came by way of the Senate. For Caesar this was decreed by the Senate on January 1, 42 B.C.E., a two year delay after his death due to the chaos which ensued after he was assassinated. The official deification by the Senate established an example for future posthumous honors of Roman emperors.

Caesar officially became *Divus Iulius*, numbered among the gods of the State, and treated like any other deity in the Roman pantheon.⁸² Tiberius and the senate would later honor Octavian (later becoming Augustus) with apotheosis in similar fashion as Caesar had been. For Augustus apotheosis was something that lied ahead in the future when the emperor would appear in the circle of gods, but while living would be celebrated as one who is preparing on earth his way to heaven.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁸⁰ C.J. Simpson, "Caligula's cult: immolation, immortality, intent," in Subject and ruler : the cult of the ruling power in classical antiquity : papers presented at a conference held in the University of Alberta on April 13-15, 1994, to celebrate the 65th anniversary of Duncan Fishwick, Supplementary series, no. 17. ed. Alastair Small (Ann Arbor: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1996), 67.

⁸¹ MacCormack, 98; cf. divergent view in relation to '*damnatio memoriae*' Chaplin, 29.

⁸² W. Warde Fowler, *Roman Ideas of Deity: In the Last Century Before the Christian Era* (London: MacMillan, 1914), 122.

⁸³ Fishwick, 79.



Augustus

If there was any question about Caesar's divine status before death, there was no question after it. The divinization of Caesar not only propelled him to the level of the gods⁸⁴ but also gave his adopted son a special status. Octavian's title now became *C. Iulii divi filius Caesar*.⁸⁵ This title alone did not give him autonomous authority. But no doubt it was used to promote his position during the triumviral period which had been set up in 43 B.C.E. in conjunction with Antony and Lepidus. In the subsequent years there ensued revenge against Brutus and Cassius for Caesar's death, marriages and alliances, civil war, and struggle for power. During this process Octavian's power grew, largely due to his political maneuvering and accumulated military force gained by promise of financial compensation.

The end of the triumvirate came rather quickly when Lepidus lost his position in May of 44 as his troops defected to Octavian during a dispute over Sicily.⁸⁶ Years later Antony made a few decisions, such as divorcing Octavia and uniting with Cleopatra, which isolated him in the East losing an abundance of long time key supporters from Rome. This effectively allowed Octavian to induce the Senate to revoke Antony's power and go to war against Cleopatra and in reality to go to war against Antony. The opposing power of Antony finally came to an end through Octavian's victories in Actium in

⁸⁴ What exactly is meant by bestowing Caesar to the level of a god is work in itself which has and continues to be explored by various authors. Gradel, 71-72; 101-102, does call scholars to avoid transferring monotheistic views on Caesar's divine honors. The honors, such as temple, priest, the title *Divus Julius*, the inscription 'Deus invictus' to Caesar according to Gradel too easily become misunderstood and should be seen as expressions of 'relative divinity, that is, divine status in relation to all other men.'; also cf. the previous section in this piece "Backgrounds to the Roman Imperial Cult".

⁸⁵ Fishwick, 76.

⁸⁶ Eck, 26.

September 31 B.C.E. and the final blow near Alexandria in 30 B.C.E. which brought Antony's death.

With victory established, Octavian returned to Rome holding a massive celebration in August of 29 B.C.E. which ushered in an era of peace which had been absent during the past two decades. Octavian's victory and position had not been gained easily and there remained a political battle ahead. To help, Octavian continued to use his connection with Caesar to his advantage. For example in 31 B.C.E. after a victory over Antony at Actium a coin was issued showing Octavian with the inscription, *CAESAR DIVI F* (Son of the Divine Caesar).⁸⁷ He also began calling himself *Imperator Caesar divi filius*.⁸⁸ Divination of Caesar had become not only vitally important to recognize and bestow honors on the dead emperor but also gave Octavian a title and status that could be used for political advantage.

Octavian was hailed as the restorer of peace and given far reaching honors. The priests of the state cult were to include his name in all prayers and vows, his birthday was declared a holiday, and sacrifices were offered to his *genius* by citizens in their household devotions.⁸⁹ These measures placed him in a sphere above ordinary humanity. Would the Senate in the midst of the festive atmosphere give him official divine honors?

Octavian had succeeded to Caesar's position as master of the Roman world. But what did that mean? It has been credited to Augustus with destroying the Republic and founding the Roman Empire, and to a large degree this is true.⁹⁰ The republic of the past

⁸⁷ Kreitzer, 213.

⁸⁸ Eck, 50.

⁸⁹ John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (London: Camelot, 1970), 90-91.

⁹⁰ John B. Firth, *Augustus Caesar and the Organization of the Empire of Rome* (New York: Knickerbocker, 1903), 358.

seemed to be gone yet Caesar's monarchical form of government was unviable as Octavian was not too quick to follow Caesar to the grave. Both the Senate and Octavian were in precarious positions. The basis resulting decision was to restore the old republic, at least in name, while using the legal precedents that had become a part of tradition to secure power for Octavian.⁹¹

The restoration of the republic and affirmation of Octavian's power was to appear both natural and official. During 28 and 27 B.C.E. the process of restoring the republic took place and in January of 27 B.C.E. Octavian formally returned the government to the Senate and the people of Rome. He remained consul and in all reality still possessed a massive amount of power. The Senate, in need of his influence, offered his power back to him which he first declined but eventually accepted a position as the commander over the provinces where peace was not fully established for a period of ten years.⁹² It may have appeared that Octavian had lost power but he had in fact gained. His position was now an official Senatorial decree with which they had requested him to assume. No longer was he a ruler in a period of chaos by military force alone. The Senate gave him full legitimacy. He was the sole ruler under the mask of the republic.

On January 16th, 27 B.C.E. the Roman Senate granted the first emperor Octavian the name Augustus. It distinguished him from all other persons. The name later to become a title had religious overtones possibly implying 'holy', 'superhuman', or 'associated with the gods'.⁹³ The title had religious significance and suggested divine

⁹¹ Eck, 43.

⁹² Ibid., 46.

⁹³ J. Ferguson, *Religions*, 90.

characteristics without explicitly calling him divine.⁹⁴ The Greek translation of Augustus *sebastos* was more of a title and may have been derived from the Greek word for ‘worship’.⁹⁵

Suddenly Augustus was in a precarious position in regards to the ruler cult. It has been suggested that Caesar had been assassinated in part due to his collection of power, of which the ruler cult had been a component. Augustus now had to take part in the political necessity of the ancient world in the cult of the ruler, while at the same time avoid that which looked monarchical.⁹⁶ The result was an adopted policy in step with the Republic and enrolled divergently for different portions of society. Direct worship of Augustus was prohibited in the West. The state cult⁹⁷ of the living emperor subsided. Even when Augustus was offered such state divine honors (e.g. a state temple) he refused them.⁹⁸ In fact no *living* emperor after Caesar would become a state god.⁹⁹

Yet the policy also left room for wide-ranging honors, bestowed upon Augustus throughout his reign often by instigation of the Senate, the worship of state gods closely associated with the ruler, a decree that at every banquet a libation should be poured to his *Genius* and the cult of abstractions directly linked with the emperor (*Victoria Augusta, Pax Augusta, Concordia Augusta, Salus Augusta, Numen Augusti*). A month was named after him, quinquennial vows were made in his name, his name was used in hymns, and

⁹⁴ Gradel, 113; Fishwick 84; Eck 50.

⁹⁵ Jones and Sidwell, 51.

⁹⁶ Fishwick, 83.

⁹⁷ For a definition of a state cult and arguments against an Augustan state cult cf. Gradel, 129.

⁹⁸ Dio 53.27.3

⁹⁹ Gradel, 109, 139-161.



his birthday declared a public holiday.¹⁰⁰ And in 7 B.C.E. a major innovation occurred to the emperor cult when Augustus, in review of the neglect cult of the Lares Compitales, set the image of his own *genius* between the statues of the dancing Lares at the crossroads, which became known as the Lares Augusti.¹⁰¹ The worship of the emperor's *genius* was a very frail barrier to personal worship.¹⁰² He was often worshiped in the East in association with the name of Rome.¹⁰³ In the East enthusiasm for the worship of Augustus was rampant. And during the worship of Augustus his family also became a part of the honors, thus his wife Livia and daughter Julia were called goddesses.¹⁰⁴ The compilations of policy and honors effectively had allowed for indirect worship for the masses, i.e. the cult of the emperor, by indirect means.¹⁰⁵

Those who succeeded Augustus, mainly Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero, all followed the Augustan model of the emperor cult, divine honors to the *genius* of the living emperor, and apotheosis after death.¹⁰⁶ Communities and individuals bestowed divine honors and founded ruler cults, even though it broke the boundaries set up by the emperor, while the collective worship of a province continued to partially stay check with

¹⁰⁰ J. Ferguson, 91.

¹⁰¹ M.G.L Cooley, *The Age of Augustus*, trans. B.W.J.G. Wilson (London: London Association of Classical Teachers, 2003), 263.

¹⁰² Sweet, *Roman Emperor Worship*, 66.

¹⁰³ E. S. Shuckburgh, *Augustus: The Life and Times of the Founder of the Roman Empire (B.C. 63- A.D. 14)* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903), 198.

¹⁰⁴ John Ferguson, "Ruler-worship," in *The Roman World*, Vol. 2, ed. John Wacher (London: Routledge, 1987), 770.

¹⁰⁵ Fishwick, 83-86, 90.

¹⁰⁶ Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Roman Civilization: Select Readings*, Vol. 2, 3d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 520.

governing regulations.¹⁰⁷ The procedure for setting up an imperial cult at the level of provincial reign required permission in Rome which typically involved both the Senate and emperor.¹⁰⁸ Approval from the emperor was a crucial factor but the final decision came from the Senate. The Senate's involvement assisted with the discomfiture the emperor had in making decisions for his own cult. It also gave the Senate ultimate control.

In the Eastern provinces Augustus accepted the divine honors which had become an important piece of that culture. The cults of the Roman emperor were extremely widespread throughout the Roman Empire and established on a regular basis. For example, in Asia Minor alone there were thirty-four different cities that had priests of Augustus.¹⁰⁹

Divine worship of the living emperor existed on a municipal, individual, and provincial level while still keeping an avoidance of a full-blown state cult that might have endangered the new emperor.¹¹⁰ Formable as Julius Caesar's consecratio had set a pattern for emperors to follow, so too did Augustus' balanced policy of private worship with the avoidance of state cult become a model for his successors.

Apotheosis was largely anticipated for Augustus. Poets and artist had already portrayed him in a deified state. At his death all that was needed was an official action

¹⁰⁷ Fishwick, 91-91.

¹⁰⁸ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 66.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁰ Gradel, 112, 'On the provincial level, Augustus' regulation was limited to insisting that Roma was worshipped with him in the same temple'.

about the status of the emperor that had already practically been accomplished.¹¹¹ The postmortem celebration was merely a formality but was chiefly important for not only the standing and legacy of the dead emperor but was also an additional crucial factor in establishing a legitimate succession.¹¹²

Tiberius, already in full proconsular imperium, equal to and co-ordinate with Augustus', had a naturally smooth succession. By all means he was already in the position even before Augustus' death. Tiberius had been invested with tribunician power and appointed chairman of the senatorial committee.¹¹³

Augustus died at Nola on August 19th, 14 C.E. In his will he left his private property to Tiberius and Livia and also adopted Livia into the *Iulian gens* which enabled her to take the name Augusta. In September of 17 C.E. Tiberius and his son Drusus delivered funeral orations. Also at the funeral a ritual took place that entailed releasing an eagle from the deceased emperors' pyre to take his soul to heaven.¹¹⁴ A senator and ex-praetor, Numerius Atticus, reported he had seen the soul of Augustus ascended to heaven. Subsequently he was awarded a million sesterces for his report.¹¹⁵ The official *consecratio* took place on or shortly after September 17th, 14 C.E. when he was declared immortal. Velleius records that "Caesar [Tiberius] deified his father, not by exercise of his imperial authority, but by his attitude of reverence; he did not call him a god, but

¹¹¹ Sweet, 73.

¹¹² MacCormack, 95.

¹¹³ G.P. Baker, *Tiberius Caesar Emperor of Rome*, First Cooper Square Press ed. (New York: Cooper Square, 2001), 126-127.

¹¹⁴ Gradel, 305.

¹¹⁵ Dio 56.46.2

made him one.”¹¹⁶ Temples and priests were officially instituted. A special festival, the Augustalia, was established in his memory. Augustus was considered among the gods in heaven, officially becoming a state god, and now called *Divus* Augustus.¹¹⁷ The worship of Augustus not only set the precedence for the imperial cult, but continued during successive imperial reigns.

Tiberius

When Tiberius succeeded Augustus he took on the imperial cult model that Augustan had largely set-up. He was very faithful to this form and rigidly stuck to it throughout his lifetime.¹¹⁸ Tiberius’ following of the Augustan model gave future emperors a lasting precedence. For over two centuries the model which Augustan had established would be assumed by emperors, largely in part to Tiberius. The only shift in emphasis that the emperor cult took under Tiberius was two-fold: his more modest perspective towards his own cult and his emphasis to the worship of his deified father.¹¹⁹

While Augustus had been for the most part indifferent or even encouraging of divine-like honors, Tiberius is more reserved as emperor. Suetonius records that, ‘he forbade the voting of temples, flamens, and priests in his honour, even the setting up of statues and busts without his permission; and this he gave only with the understanding that they were not to be placed among the likeness of the gods, but among the

¹¹⁶ Velleius Paterculus 2.126

¹¹⁷ Dio 56-.46-1; Shuckburgh, 261-262; Gradel 274.

¹¹⁸ Tac. Ann. 4.37, Tiberius verbalizes his following of the Augustan precedent.

¹¹⁹ Fishwick, 149.



adornments of the temple.¹²⁰ Another example of the worship by the Greek provinces of apotheosized emperors and Tiberius' modesty of the imperial cult come in an inscription of 14/15 C.E. in the form of a decree from the Greek city Gythium for placement of the statues on three pedestals.

...on the first [pedestal, the statue] of the deified Augustus Caesar, his father; on the second, to the right, that of Julia Augusta (Livia), and on the third, [to the left], that of Emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus, the city providing him [probably a public official of Gythium] with the statues....On the first day the performance shall honor the son of the deified [Julius] Caesar, the deified Augustus our savior and deliverer; on the second day, the Emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus, father of his country; on the third day, Julia Augusta, the Good Fortune of our province and city...And when the procession reaches the Temple of Caesar, the superintendents shall sacrifice a bull for the preservation of our rulers and for the deified ones and for the eternal duration of their rule.¹²¹

In his reply Tiberius appended the measures passed. He commended them for the honors passed, and considered it fitting that all men in general and the city in particular should reserve special honors befitting the gods in keeping with the greatness of Augustus' services to the whole world. Tiberius then went on to say, 'but I myself am content with the more modest honors appropriate to men.'¹²² He did allow the Asiatic cities to decree a temple to Tiberius, his mother, and the senate.¹²³ But after receiving a similar request from Spain to erect a temple dedicated to him and his mother he declined stating:

But, though once to have accepted may be pardonable, yet to be consecrated in the image of deity through all the provinces would be vanity and arrogance, and the honor paid to Augustus will soon be a mockery, if it is vulgarized by promiscuous experiments in flattery. As for myself, Conscript Fathers, that I am mortal, that my functions are the foremost place among them—this I call

¹²⁰ Suet., Tib. 26.1.

¹²¹ Naphtali and Reinhold, 521.

¹²² Ibid., 522.

¹²³ Tac. Ann. 4.15.

upon you to witness, and I desire those who shall follow us to bear it in mind.¹²⁴

The temple was not to be built. This passage from Tacitus demonstrates both Tiberius' evaluation of his deified father and his modest acceptance of divine honors. Tiberius viewed himself as only man. Tacitus goes on to record that some interpreted this as modesty, many as self-distrust, and a few as degeneracy of soul.¹²⁵ Tiberius may have realized that he lacked the charisma of Augustus and to compare himself with the successful emperor through acceptance of divinity may have been disaster. No matter the perceived interpretation, his actions clearly demonstrate a down play of divine honors.

In general, Tiberius' official stance was to prohibit the worship of himself during his lifetime.¹²⁶ Cultic worship and honors was nevertheless paid to him during his own lifetime in both east and west to some degree. But instead of the promotion of his own cult, Tiberius emphasized the cult of Augustus. He did promote himself in relation to his filial relationship with the now deified father. Temples, festivals, and sacrifices were continually given in honor to Augustus. Permission was needed during the time of Tiberius to build a provincial temple to the deified Augustus but not for a municipal temple. No honor was too great for the apotheosized Augustus.¹²⁷

In Tiberius' last years, basically C.E. 31 and following, he became suspecting of disloyalty, withdrew from affairs of the empire, and left the empire to run on its own. Tiberius died in March C.E. 37. A public funeral was held and Caligula delivered a

¹²⁴ Tac. Ann. 4.37-38.

¹²⁵ Tac. Ann. 4.38.

¹²⁶ Dio 58.8.4.

¹²⁷ Fishwick, 155; 158-161.

eulogy.¹²⁸ While he likely expected apotheosis, he did not achieve such.¹²⁹ His impacting legacy to the imperial cult was modesty and the cult of Augustus which continued to flourish and become strong under his reign and continued under his successors.¹³⁰

Caligula (Gaius)

Moderatio was a favored trait in antiquity and had become part of the routine for rulers. Tiberius is a good example of a ruler with *moderatio*. Honors would be offered, the emperors would modestly refuse, and then people would later offer again or even demand honors be placed on the emperor. In all reality the emperor often desired honors but this display of modesty at least gave appearance of not seeking any positions or powers. It was a societal role of give and take, of benefaction in antiquity.

What would happen however if the emperor so desired honors and he did not portray the modesty he was supposed to? Place this in combination with subjects who in traditional obligation were supposed to offer honors, yet now had no desire to give them or at least failed to offer them quick enough for the emperor's satisfaction. The result was conflict. Within the loosely made protocol for giving and receiving honors problems ensued. Within this scenario the emperor had to make a choice: be patient and hope honors would eventually come, forget about the honors thus forfeiting what was due to an emperor, or demand honors. All three options have potential dangerous consequences. The scenario was the basic state of affairs caused by or presented,

¹²⁸ Suet Cal. 15.1; Dio 58.5.

¹²⁹ Jones and Sidwell, 64; J. Ferguson, *Ruler-worship*, 771.

¹³⁰ Sweet, 75.

depending upon one's historical perspective, to Gaius Caligula.¹³¹ Caligula eventually chose the latter option of demanding honors. It was choice that would lend itself towards the historical characterization of him as a madman as well as giving rise to the popular notion of his insanity in his apparent demand for deification. But Caligula's cult may not be a cut and dry matter. Expert Anthony Barrett notes that the evidence is “characteristically confused and incomplete, and must be evaluated with perhaps even more than the usual skepticism.”¹³²

In Caligula's early years as emperor his actions actually portray the usual modesty. Dio accounts that Caligula had forbidden any one to set up images of him. In another situation Caligula requested the annulment of a decree ordering sacrifices to be offered to his *Genius*. Then in great ironic modesty he had his action of annulment inscribed on a tablet. The modesty, authentic or merely acting a part in the scheme of benefaction, quickly ran dry as Caligula went on to manufacture statues of himself and order temples erected and sacrifices offered to himself as a god.¹³³

The system proceeding Caligula called for official deification only at death. Recent history had already shown the dangers of receiving deification before death through the ill fate of Julius Cesar, a fate which Augustus and Tiberius had both avoided. Yet Gaius appears to have forgotten or ignored the recent lessons of history. His flirtation with divine honor was incessant.

Emperors Augustus and Tiberius were both cautious and vetoed various divine honors offered to them. Not only did this veto avoid a lack of *moderatio*, but also a

¹³¹ Dio 59.25.5.

¹³² Barrett, 140.

¹³³ Dio 59.4.4.

possible death sentence. Caligula however did not follow their ways. He began to emphasize his limitless powers and make show of these while belittling and humiliating those around him, mainly the Senate. Interestingly, the Senate chiefly responded with cooperation. This was likely due to fear as Caligula's behavior was quite unpredictable. By cooperating they may have been avoiding a personal death sentence. Another possible reason for the Senate's following may have been simply the tradition of bestowing honors. This, coupled with the idea of the emperor in a divine like status may have given them hopes to raising their own status; honor by association. This latter reason would have been a gamble for the senators. Those close to him he either flattered to excess or abused to excess, often based on what appeared the result of chance.¹³⁴

In the East, like previous emperors, Caligula had been declared a god and received private worship. The cult of the emperor was duly present at the local level as had been with Augustus and Tiberius. Caligula was referred to by an embassy from the league of the Greek states as *neos theos sebastos* ('the new god Augustus') and by a decree of Cyzicus as *ho Helios neos* ('the new sun').¹³⁵ Philo, a questionable source at times, records that Gaius actually believed he was a god.¹³⁶ In Judea in c.a. 40 C.E., Caligula ordered Petronius, the lieutenant and governor of all Syria, to place a statue of Zeus with the likeness of his own head in the temple at Jerusalem. Petronius stalled the order knowing that it would cause much conflict, and fortunately for the Jews the plans

¹³⁴ Dio 59.4.6.

¹³⁵ Barrett, 143.

¹³⁶ Philo, XXV.162.

for the statue was never carried out.¹³⁷ In Miletus Asia, also in the East, a temple was consecrated to Caligula.¹³⁸

Had Caligula received (demanded) official state divinity before death? Two literary sources including Suetonius and Dio seemingly point in this direction. Both sources record Caligula's affinity for publicly dressing up as and impersonating different gods. Philo uses Caligula's dress and impersonation of Hercules, Bacchus, Castor and Pollux to affirm interpretations that Caligula aspired to raise himself above those in the Senate and desired to be looked upon as a god.¹³⁹ Dress alone, however, does not give solid reason for a confirmation of official deification. While Suetonius and Dio both present Caligula as a madman, the regalia may have simply been another way to promote himself above the Senate. And regardless of the dress it was not an official deification.¹⁴⁰

More interestingly is Dio's recording that Caligula built two temple of his own in Rome, one granted to him by vote of the senate and the other at his own expense on the Palatine.¹⁴¹ Suetonius similarly accounts Caligula setting up a special temple to his own godhead with a life-sized statue of the emperor in gold where extravagant sacrifices were made and rich citizens were bidding for the honor of priesthood for his cult.¹⁴² These two sources, along with Philo, give the appearance that Caligula perceived himself as divine and demanded appropriate treatment, even forcing such through official senate vote.

¹³⁷ Philo, XXXI.207.

¹³⁸ Dio 59.28.1, cf. remarks by Barrett, 146 and Gradel, 179.

¹³⁹ Philo *Leg.* 75-116.

¹⁴⁰ Gradel, 149; Barret, 146.

¹⁴¹ Dio 59.28.2.

¹⁴² Suet. Cal. 22.3-4.

Scholars Ittai Gradel and Anthony Barrett both note that while literary sources may direct one to confirm that Caligula was deified in the Roman state, archaeological sources (epigraphic and numismatic) show an improbable trace of this.¹⁴³ The debate over Caligula's official deification is unsettled. It is complicated by literary sources, particularly Dio and Suetonius, both presenting matters concerning temples of Caligula unclearly while Philo and Seneca give no explicit allusions to a formal cult. Gradel offers a possible reconstruction that Caligula developed the divine worship system only in the private sphere, concluding that Caligula never received state deification.¹⁴⁴ Yet the possibility of an official cult of Caligula in Rome cannot be ruled out. Official state cult or merely private worship, Caligula's involvement of personally encouraging his cult was opposite of the moderation of Tiberius. His demands for god-like honors would be one feature that characterized his rule.

While emperor, Caligula became hated and feared. He had political clashes, property owners had to finance his experiments in government, he falsely accused private citizens, and his achievements on the battle front were basically nonexistent. His random personal attacks on senators, and even members of his own family, brought them personal humiliation and fueled the flames of hatred for the emperor. In one example of Caligula's spontaneous cruel humor, he took his place beside a statue of Jupiter and asked an actor which of the two seemed greater. When the man hesitated Caligula had him flayed with whips.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Gradel, 149-150; Barrett, 146-151.

¹⁴⁴ Extensive arguments laid forth by Gradel, 149-157.

¹⁴⁵ Suet. Cal. 33.1.

From 39 C.E. onwards Caligula's assassination appears to have been in the making from conspirators. However, it was postponed almost two years, likely due to the disagreement of what or who was to follow after Caligula's death. Finally on January 24, 41 C.E. Caligula was assassinated by officers of the Praetorian Guard. The Senate did not vote him apotheosis.

Claudius

Directly following the aftermath of the assassination of Caligula (Gaius) in 41 C.E. his uncle Claudius was found on a balcony at the Palace, saluted *imperator*, and taken safely to the praetorian barracks. Within the days following, Claudius, nephew to the previous emperor Tiberius, took official power with the help of the Praetorian Guard as the senate confirmed him to power. The same year he took office the senate wished to dishonor Caligula but Claudius personally prevented the passage of that measure. However, in Claudius' own regard, he removed his predecessor's images and made reparations for many of the unjust acts Caligula had done.¹⁴⁶

For the most part Claudius had a successful reign. There are a few particulars which may be highlighted. At the beginning of his reign he brought an end to the persecution of the Jews in Alexandria brought by their refusal to worship Caligula.¹⁴⁷ But later during his reign he expelled the Jews from Rome due to constant disturbances at the instigation of *Chrestus*.¹⁴⁸ It is uncertain whether Suetonius is referring to Christ and

¹⁴⁶ Dio 60.4.5; 60.5.1.

¹⁴⁷ A. B. du Toit, *Guide to the New Testament II: The New Testament Milieu* (South Africa: Orion, 1998), 4.4.8.

¹⁴⁸ Suetonius Claud. 25.4.

the Christian cult in Rome or a Jew with that proper name. The Jews were eventually let back in the city by Claudius.

In the realm of the emperor cult Dio records that Claudius deified his grandmother Livia, set up a statue to her in the temple of Augustus, charged the Vestal Virgins with the duty of offering sacrifices for her cult, and ordered women to use her name in taking oaths. For his own cult he at first accepted a silver image and two bronze statues that had been voted to him, but later Claudius declared such expenditures useless, causing great financial loss and embarrassment to the city. He did not accept anything beyond the titles belonging to his office, forbidding any one to worship him or to offer him any sacrifice.¹⁴⁹ Only in Britain did he accept a temple in his honor, and this was likely only to strengthen political connections.¹⁵⁰ The cult had become a political necessity both in the East and West that Claudius could limit but not ignore. It had become a tool for mediation among Rome and her subjects.¹⁵¹ The modesty of Tiberius had been restored.

Claudius had a son named Britannicus whom he hoped would come to be the next emperor.¹⁵² Instead it would be Nero following him, his adopted son-in-law. Tragically, Claudius would rule until 54 C.E. when he died of mushroom poisoning, possibly at the plot of his wife Agrippina, who also happened to be his niece, i.e. the sister of Caligula, for her desire that her own son be in power.

¹⁴⁹ Dio 60.5.2-5.

¹⁵⁰ J. Ferguson, *Ruler-worship*, 772.

¹⁵¹ Cineira, 75.

¹⁵² Suetonius Claud. 43.1.



Claudius died October 13, 54 C.E. and was buried with a magnificent funeral. He received apotheosis and was enrolled among the gods¹⁵³ largely because his adopted son Nero needed it to have a divine descent, to become “son of the deified Claudius”. Therefore the honor of divinity to Claudius was out of a political nature which provided Nero a smoother transition of rule.¹⁵⁴ The deification was speedily done under the precedent of Augustus.¹⁵⁵ Yet the apotheosis was to some degree a farce, as it was suspected his death was the result of foul play from Agrippina and/or even Nero.

Sacrifice was given to the deified Claudius in Arval rituals under Nero and in 69 C.E. but unlike Augustus his cult did not continue in the provinces except possibly in a few cities which owed him special benefaction.¹⁵⁶ Under the reign of Nero, Claudius’ deification took a side role, only to be seen in relation to Nero’s own claims for *divi filius*. This may be evidenced as later Nero joked about mushrooms being the food of the gods and vented on Claudius every kind of insult, disregarding many of his decrees and acts as the work of a madman.¹⁵⁷ The apotheosis to Claudius became an honor neglected and finally annulled by Nero, only to be later restored by Vespasian in the Flavian period.¹⁵⁸

Nero

¹⁵³ Dio 9.1.

¹⁵⁴ Cineira, 79.

¹⁵⁵ Gradel, 304.

¹⁵⁶ Levick, Claudius, 187.

¹⁵⁷ Dio 33.1.

¹⁵⁸ Suetonius 45.1; Dio Nero 17.1.



Nero has much drama accounted for him, much of which may be either true or fictitious. Nero is notoriously known as the one who: had incest with his mother, murdered his mother, played a fiddle while Rome burned, persecuted Christians who Dio describes as, “a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition”¹⁵⁹, executed the apostle Peter, through folly and madness brought the Roman empire to the verge of destruction, and whose life ended in a mysterious death. All of these purported facts no doubt one make him one of the most intriguing emperors. There is much debate on the accuracy of that which he is commonly remembered for, the majority of the main picture coming from the historians Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Suetonius. As has been the case throughout our investigation, the picture depends on the trustworthiness and interpretation of these three accounts when coupled with other literary works and evidences. Many of these aspects are interesting; however they fall outside the focus of this piece. In regards to the emperor cult it appears Nero showed less restraint than Claudius and may be found more in line with Caligula’s megalomania.

The honors for Nero were lavish. The names of some months were changed to his name. April became Neroneus, May became Claudius, and June became Germanicus as each corresponded with his formal proper name of Claudius Nero Caesar Germanicus.¹⁶⁰ He established Neronian Games in Rome. These were designed in Greek fashion and included music, gymnastics, and riding.¹⁶¹ In Asia Minor coins were struck calling him ‘god’ and at Sicyon Nero was identified with Zeus.¹⁶² The towns of Cyme and Synaus

¹⁵⁹ Dio 16.1.

¹⁶⁰ Tacitus, 16.7.

¹⁶¹ Dio 12.3.

¹⁶² J. Ferguson, *Ruler-worship*, 772.



describe him in his lifetime as a god.¹⁶³ There was popularity and an empire-wide urge to make the emperor divine. This often expressed itself in art which showed the ruler in a divine status before death.¹⁶⁴ Poets, often patronized by the emperor or hoping for such patronization, refer to the emperor in godlike supernatural qualities loading their works with favorable characteristics describing Nero. There is even a portrait of Nero dated 59-64 C.E. depicting his apotheosis. In the portrait he is being carried by an eagle, offered a laurel crown, with the emblem of Jupiter around his shoulder, while carrying a cornucopia with overflowing fruit.¹⁶⁵ Coinage at the beginning of Nero's reign more than often portrayed him in realistic terms. From about 64 C.E. on coinage made the emperor's portraits both realistic and idealistic—in a degree displaying Nero as he actually was but with the exuberant grandeur of a great Greek monarch.¹⁶⁶ Much of this may be expected since Nero himself enjoyed watching and participating as an actor, singer, chariot racer, poet, and musician. Many of his unreserved characteristics in fact seem to stem from his involvement in the arts and a fascination with Greek culture.

Nero often played the divine part as he assumed acting roles of heroes and gods. It appears he went through stages portraying Apollo in 59 C.E. to Sol in 64 C.E. to Hercules in 66 C.E.¹⁶⁷ Yet he also played roles one would think he would avoid like Nauplius sacrificed by the Greeks in the Trojan War, Attis castrated, incestuous Oedipus

¹⁶³ Grant, 207.

¹⁶⁴ MacCormack, 103.

¹⁶⁵ Champlin, 32-33.

¹⁶⁶ Michael Grant, *Nero: Emperor in Revolt* (New York: American Heritage, 1970), 200.

¹⁶⁷ Champlin, 138.

blinded, and Orestes who committed matricide, the last close to his own matricide of Agrippina.

Those in the imperial family sometimes received divine honors, and Nero's family was no different. Nero's first child, Claudia, was born to Poppaea Sabina on January 21, 63 C.E. and both mother and daughter were given the imperial title of Augusta. Within four month the child died and the baby girl became, *diva Claudia* or *diva Claudia virgo*, evidenced on coins and inscription. Two years later in 65 C.E. after Poppaea's death, she also appeared on coins and inscription, *diva Poppaea Augusta*.¹⁶⁸ This honor may have been bestowed out of guilt and grief as it is reported that Poppaea, while pregnant, died through a kick from Nero.¹⁶⁹ It is not known whether he intended to kill her since he is said to have loved her and desired children.¹⁷⁰ Regardless, she fell. The deification of the imperial family did not go beyond precedent as there had been similar actions during the reigns of previous emperors and their family.¹⁷¹

Nero also took part in a triumph into Rome usually reserved for war heroes. The triumph was a celebration in which the triumphator rode on in a chariot, wore a purple tunic embroidered with gold palm branches, and over this a purple toga embroidered with gold stars. On his head he might wear a laurel wreath or a public slave might hold a heavy gold wreath over him. In his right hand, he would carry a laurel branch; in his left, an ivory scepter topped by an eagle. The triumphator was meant to represent Jupiter.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁶⁹ Dio 35.4.

¹⁷⁰ Tacitus 16.6.

¹⁷¹ J. Ferguson, *Ruler-worship*, 772.

And even though Nero never was in battle he took opportunities to make a quasi-triumphal entry with full regalia. All symbols of rule, power, and authority.¹⁷²

On June 23, 59 C.E. during a triumphal procession there was a sacrifice at three temples for the safety and return of Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus as an informal triumph over his dead mother. On this occasion it is important to note the sacrifice to the deified emperor was present during Nero's reign. At the New Temple of the Divine Augustus sacrifice was given to the Divine Augustus and the Divine Augusta (Livia), and to the Divine Claudius.¹⁷³

In May 66 C.E. a procession was held to celebrate the installation of the King of Armenia by Nero, an agreement that actually took place three years earlier. The new king of Armenia Tiridates addressed Nero as a god who would determine his fate to which in return Nero thanked him and granted him the kingship of Armenia. The king sat at the emperor's feet was then raised by Nero with his right hand and kissed him. Then Nero removed his tiara and set a diadem on his head, thus removing the symbol of Armenian kingship and replacing it with a mark of the independent Hellenistic king. Later at the theater the king again did obeisance to which Nero responded by giving him a seat at his right hand.¹⁷⁴ Around June of 67 C.E. because of the emperor's laurel there was sacrifice in the New Temple to Divine Augustus, the Divine Augusta, the Divine Claudius, the Divine Claudia (Nero's daughter who lived only approximately 4 months), and the Divine Poppaea Augusta.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Champlin, 214.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 220-221.

¹⁷⁴ Suetonius, 13; Dio 13.1-2.

¹⁷⁵ Champlin, 223-224.



Nero's third and last supposed triumph was on his return from Greece to Rome in late 67 C.E. from his athletic conquest in Greece. This triumph was rather odd because it was one of peace and the arts and not of war and arms.¹⁷⁶ He drove into the city the chariot Augustus had used so many years ago pulled by white horses. Nero wore a purple robe and Greek cloak adorned with stars of gold, the Olympic crown, a wreath of wild olive on his head, and in his right hand the Pythian.¹⁷⁷

In actuality Nero may have not considered himself to be divine, but rather more of an actor. This may be evidenced in his rejection through veto of divine honors both at the beginning of his reign¹⁷⁸ and then again later during his reign. Alternatively however, Nero's rejection, as Tacitus reports, may simply have been a fear that in accepting the honor it would be a bad omen leading to death. For Tacitus goes on to note the usual protocol that while worship of a living emperor by provincials was regular, the honor of divinity was not paid to the emperor until he was deceased.¹⁷⁹ Interestingly Nero was supposedly said to have contempt for all cults—except his own maybe.

At the end of his reign the empire was beginning to collapse. The military and upper class removed their support. Even from the populace of Rome he lost support as they suffered from a shortage of grain while seeing ships arrive full of sand for some court performance of wrestlers.¹⁸⁰ Nero's life ended in tragedy in 68 C.E. as the senate had declared him a public enemy to be punished and killed. Before this could be

¹⁷⁶ Grant, 233.

¹⁷⁷ Dio 25.1-2.

¹⁷⁸ Dio 8.1.

¹⁷⁹ Tacitus 15.74.

¹⁸⁰ Grant, 245.

accomplished Nero committed suicide on June 11, 68 C.E. He drove a sword into his throat with assistance of his secretary Epaphroditus, dying at the age of thirty.¹⁸¹ However, rumors spread that Nero did not kill himself. This caused many to believe or pretending to believe he was still alive. In the following decades at least three “False Neros” appeared in the midst of the gossip about Nero’s death.¹⁸² The false Neros often attempted to gain military force and political support and was subsequently killed because of such. The idea of a returning Nero would continue in legend even into the Middle Ages.

Suetonius tells us that Nero had a ill-regulated longing for popularity, immortality, and undying fame by calling the month of April Neroneus and was minded to name Rome Neropolis.¹⁸³ In the desire for fame Nero received his wish. Out of the many Roman emperors Nero is one of the most commonly famous today, largely for the audacities associated with him. Nero however did not receive the apotheosis, the immortality he likely wished for at death. There would be no Divine Nero. He had left no heir or successor and essentially the empire was up for grabs. Civil war ensued and within a year the empire saw four different rulers: Galba, a governor in Spain; Otho, former governor of Lusitania; Vitellius, commander of the legions in Germany; and Vespasian, who inaugurated the Flavian dynasty and was notably known for his military command in the Jewish War.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Champlin, 6.

¹⁸² Tacitus, *The Histories*, 2.8.1; 1.2.1.

¹⁸³ Suetonius, 55.

¹⁸⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 36.

After his death Nero had a normal funeral with splendor, his statues reappeared in the Forum, and his acts as emperor were not abolished by the senate or his successors. It has often been suggested that he underwent *damnatio memoriae*, damnation of memory, however Edward Champlin suggests this as “incorrect and misleading in various ways” as it is found in no ancient work of that time period.¹⁸⁵ He infers the concept is actually modern from the legal concept of *memoria damnata*, which is the posthumous condemnation of a person accused of *perduellio*, high treason. Champlin thus concludes that while Nero was declared a public enemy shortly before his death, his memory was not condemned.¹⁸⁶ And his memory appears to have continued. While never receiving official deification, for centuries a group of people continued to pay honor to Nero in some circles and his infamy would leave a mythic legacy.

Benefaction

A system of benefaction was largely important in antiquity during the Roman Empire. Benefaction involved two unequal parties: a patron and a client. A patron was one who had resources needed by a client. The client could give expressions of loyalty and honor deemed useful for the patron.¹⁸⁷ Sometime resources were given first followed by expressions of loyalty and honor. On other occasions the opposite was true, first came expressions of honor then resources. Resources in the case of the emperor did not

¹⁸⁵ Champlin, 29.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Achtemeier, Green, and Thomas, 49.

have to be monetary as resources could include such items as military protection or citizenship rights.

In a system of benefaction, worship, religion, and honor often become blurred and had no great distinction. Honor was a pivotal value in the first-century Mediterranean culture. Honor defined by Bruce Malina as:

The value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) plus that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group. Honor is a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgment of worth.¹⁸⁸

The emperor had a claim to worth, being the emperor, which was socially acknowledged through the cult. Therefore honor was given to the emperor often in return for resources and became at the same time an actual form of religion and worship. Religion had much to do with the idea of respect and homage. In first-century Mediterranean culture there were three boundary markers which came together to mark off the one deserving of honor: authority, gender status, and respect. The Roman emperor was set apart by all three and honor was bestowed. In the process he became a god or god-like. Not only was the one at the top chosen for honor, but was entitled to a certain social treatment,¹⁸⁹ hence the Roman imperial cult.

The Roman imperial cult may gain clarity when viewed within or at least greatly influenced by this system of benefaction. Placed in a benefaction framework the cult becomes a mechanism for the emperor and subjects to relate to one another. Provinces, especially in the East, were accustomed to relating to their rulers in god-like ideological terms. Scullard describes this background likely found in the Eastern providences:

¹⁸⁸ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 30.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-31.

The object of early cult had been to secure the goodwill of the spirits or deities by certain rituals which if correctly performed were thought to guarantee the 'peace of the gods' (pax deorum). This notion was semi-legal and contractual: if the worshippers scrupulously did their part, it was hoped or even assumed that the deities would do theirs. Then the State stepped in to undertake this responsibility on behalf of the whole community.¹⁹⁰

When the Romans seized power in regions and municipalities it was natural for these subjects to place their new ruler, the emperor, in divine regards. Divine honor was given and homage paid for benefits of power, mercy, and/or favor. It was a religious phenomenon. The obligation of society and the individual towards power was express in the outlet of the ruler cult.¹⁹¹

Homage was offered as a means of securing the goodwill of the one with greater power. Foreign persons may offer a politician or commander support in money, influence, or manpower in return for favors to themselves and their community. Legal privileges, exemptions from taxes, even admission to the Roman citizenship, had played their part in securing loyalty, first to the Roman state, later to one individual or another.

Gradel notes:

Honours were a way to define the status or social position of the person or god honoured, but it was also a way to tie him down. The bestowal of honors to someone socially superior, whether man or god, obliged him to return them with benefaction. Or we might say to rule well.¹⁹²

The greatest honors and homage went to those with the greatest power, the emperor. But great honor also entailed great benefaction.

¹⁹⁰ Scullard, 19.

¹⁹¹ Alföldy, 256.

¹⁹² Gradel, 59.

The emperor was addressed as Savior and Benefactor. Divine honors were a usual manner of showing the proper attitude to those who were looked upon as deliverers. Augustus' superior *imperium* gave him the auspices—the right to ascertain the will of the gods, and all victories were due in part to his mediation hence he was a deliverer in establishing an era of peace. When Nero made a speech granting freedom to the Greeks in 66 C.E. the official decree of thanks from the town offers him various honors and calls him the “the New Helios lighting the Hellenes”. Other inscriptions, public or private, in Athens identified statues of Nero as “Emperor Nero Caesar Augustus, New Apollo” and “Emperor Caesar, son of a God [namely, Claudius], Augustus Nero, New Apollo”.¹⁹³ Whether bad or good they were worshipped during their rule by the masses because of their power.¹⁹⁴

The emperors' supremacy was acknowledged as inevitable and communication with him was doused with language that corresponded to this view. People in various communities could now petition to one person, the emperor. Petitions for privileges and favors gave persons of what scholars Jeremy Paterson and Nicholas Purcell, referring to the client emperor relations, call a sense that “somebody up there loves me”.¹⁹⁵

The emperor became god-like being remote, all-powerful, and capable of transforming one's life. Benefaction to the emperor which came in various forms of temples, prayers, festivals, and sacrifices all became means to honor and a hopefulness for assistance, protection, or help in return. Even after the emperor was dead, homage

¹⁹³ Champlin, 117.

¹⁹⁴ Alföldy, 256.

¹⁹⁵ Jones and Sidwell, 51.

and benefaction could take place as in antiquity there was a belief that the dead were capable, like the living, of gratitude as well as of resentment. Power of the dead corresponded to the power they possessed in this world. It became advantageous for person to secure their protection or even their co-operation.¹⁹⁶ Even the dead were understood to accept supplications like the gods and in apotheosis the dead emperor became a god.

The imperial cult, however, was not solely about the emperor. The cult also contained components that were vital to the empire. The emperor politically had to take part in the ruler cult, especially in those areas where previous foreign rulers had been viewed in a divine light. The divine, or semi-divine, honors paid to Augustus in the provinces were closely bound up with loyalty to Rome and a belief in her eternal mission.¹⁹⁷ The provincial emperor cult was essentially an instrument for holding subject people in loyalty to the head of the empire and the Romanization of uncivilized, native people.¹⁹⁸ The emperor also enforced the cult as a means for propagation.¹⁹⁹ This may have been the case when Claudius, often very modest, allowed a temple to be consecrated to him in Britain.

Acceptance by the emperor entailed obligations, financial benefactions, favor against rivals, and the like. It was a relationship of give and take and the cult was a means of mediating between the emperor and subjects.²⁰⁰ Often the establishment of

¹⁹⁶ Cumont, 60.

¹⁹⁷ Shuckburgh, 197.

¹⁹⁸ Fishwick, 146-149.

¹⁹⁹ David Potter, "The Emperors," in *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World*, ed. Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66.

²⁰⁰ Levick, 185.

municipal cults and honors to the emperor came from the local level. The emperor was given little say in the matter beyond refusal or acceptance.²⁰¹ The emperor probably received a massive amount of petitions for various reasons. If the emperor did not want to obligate himself he refused the honors. Merely because homage was paid did not mean the benefactor had to receive it.

Germanicus Caesar, nephew and adopted son of Tiberius, while never an emperor, on a special mission to ease a food shortage in Alexandria in 19 C.E. his benefactions produced enthusiastic public demonstrations. In response he issued the following edict:

Germanicus Caesar, son of Augustus and grandson of the deified Augustus, proconsul, declares: Your good will, which you always display when you see me, I acknowledge, but your acclamations, which are odious to me and such as are accorded to the gods, I altogether deprecate. For they are appropriate only to him who is really the savior and benefactor of the whole human race, my father, and to his mother, and my grandmother. But my position is [but a reflection?] of their divinity, so that if you do not obey me, you will compel me not to show myself to you often.²⁰²

Germanicus would not allow honors to be given to him, yet he openly acknowledges the appropriateness of them upon his family. Yet his father Tiberius does not appear to demonstrate this ideology for himself. Tiberius, when offered many high honors, only accepted a few of the more modest honors. He forbade the voting of temples, flamens, and priest in his honor, and even the setting up of statues and busts without his permission.²⁰³ Suetonius records:

²⁰¹ Gradel, 99.

²⁰² Lewis and Reinhold, 523.

²⁰³ Suetonius 26.1.

He [Tiberius] so loathed flattery that he would not allow any senator to approach his litter, either to pay his respects or on business, and when an ex-consul in apologizing to him attempted to embrace his knees, he drew back in such haste that he fell over backward. In fact, if anyone in conversation or in a set speech spoke of him in too flattering terms, he did not hesitate to interrupt him, to take him to task and to correct his language on the spot.²⁰⁴

Tiberius demonstrates that even those who were viewed by others as worthy of flattery often did not receive it with enthusiasm.

The system of benefaction placed as a frame for emperor cult is beneficial to understanding the worship of emperors, but it does not explain all actions. It can too easily become a rigid formula that all emperors and their cults are placed into has been demonstrated previously in this piece, each emperor reacted to the cult differently. Nero and Caligula seem to have promoted it, while Tiberius and Claudius appear to be more modest, and Augustus seems mostly indifferent but promoted himself in coinage as the son of the deified Caesar. All the emperors look as if they slightly modified their stance during the course of their reign, some being more consistent than others. The political situation in Rome and her provinces changed as well.

The variables are too many for benefaction to be the lone filter to sift the emperor cult through. Benefaction, while not the only lens, is a powerful one to analyze, study, and evaluate the worship of the emperor. Obligation, homage, and benefaction influenced and formed the ruler cult. The system of benefaction was a major factor in the imperial cult.

Summary of the Emperor Cult

²⁰⁴ Suetonius 27.

The emperor cult took a variety of forms with each ruler and emperor. The sources forming the worship of the ruler came from an abundance of background both from the East and West, but mostly from the East. The Caesars used divine descent as leverage to their promotion to power. Astrology, prophecy, omens, and legend all became a part of the divine background for these god-like men, for they were viewed in such regards by many of their subjects, especially in the East. Augustus set a model and precedence for the cult as a whole. Apotheosis, however, would only be obtained officially by Augustus and Claudius. Tiberius showed modesty, while Caligula and Nero were more proactive. There appears to have been a fine balance with demanding, accepting, and rejecting honors. The cult may be better understood when viewed through the lens of benefaction. Yet the cult was not simply a political device, for it did contain clear religious aspects—sacrifices, priests, etc. The social, political, and religious elements were all a part of the worship of the emperor.



CHAPTER 2

THE ROMAN EMPEROR CULT AND THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

I have found a number of possible parallels in comparing the text of Hebrews including words, concepts, images, motifs, ideas, structures, and forms similar with elements of Roman emperor worship during the time of Caesar to Nero. The strongest of these parallels are presented:

Divine Background

The divine heritage of Jesus in Hebrews is presented in a two different ways, as son and creator (1:2). Where the portrayal of creator holds no parallel with the Roman imperial cult, the idea of a man being a son of god is one of the strongest parallels. Both emperors and Jesus are denoted as a son of god.

In Hebrews a form of the Greek $\text{ui}^{\circ}, \text{j} \text{o}^{\circ} \text{qeou}, \text{j}$ is used four verses (4:14; 6:6; 7:3; 10:29). The 'Son of God' title is used basically interchangeable with the name of Jesus. In 4:14 the title is even directly used in combination with the name of Jesus, $\text{VIhsou/n to.n ui}^{\circ}.n \text{ tou/ qeou/}$.

The Latin *divi filius* which emperors took as a title is rendered in Greek as θεου/ υι`ο, j.²⁰⁵ The designation θεου/ υι`ο, j is relatively rare in the Hellenistic world and with the exception of the emperor cult is never used as a title.²⁰⁶ The Roman emperor was able to inherit this title only when their adopted father was apotheosized at death and enrolled as one of the gods. Augustus, Tiberius, and Nero were the only ones legitimately able to take the title on the basis of official apotheosis. It is likely Nero even had Claudius deified mainly on the basis to gain the title and become son of a god. The parallelism is evident; Jesus and the noted Roman emperors are portrayed as sons of the divine and given an appropriate title of ‘son of god’.

The process to become son of a god for the emperor required official apotheosis as was noted previously. It also required adoption, which was the case for every emperor excluding Claudius, as he was the uncle of Caligula. Caesar had set the precedence with the adoption of Octavian and Augustus followed suit with the adoption of Tiberius. The adoption was vital for securing future power and the inheritance of becoming a son of a god. The future emperors before the adoption were already often of high rank. Yet in adoption they received a supreme status and the succession of power was set in place. The current emperor may even share office for a time with the adopted son to better secure his position to rule.

Does Jesus receive a similar adoption like those of the emperors as he is declared the son of God in the book of Hebrews? Different from the emperors is the text’s portrayal of Jesus as being declared son directly by the divine (1:3-6; 5:5) and the son’s

²⁰⁵ L.W. Hurtado, “Son of God,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 901.

²⁰⁶ Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 30.



pre-existence before becoming human. The title of son is expressly invested to Jesus by God himself.²⁰⁷ The pre-existence comes from the authors understanding that this is the Son $\text{div ou- kai. evpoi,hsen tou.j aivw/naj}$ (1:2). He is the creator of the universe.²⁰⁸ The Son had an existence before coming into the world, then is made lower than angels while human, and is now crowned with glory and honor (2:9). Jesus is the son of God before, during, and after his earthly experience. For the author Christ is the Son of God not by adoption but by nature.²⁰⁹ In contrast the emperor was adopted late in life and only declared as a son by the human emperor. The son then had to wait to be declared the son of god until his father was apotheosized.

The sonship is a vitally important portrayal of Jesus' identity giving reason for his worship and enthronement. The enthronement, however, appears to actually take place only after his death (1:8; 2:9; 12:2). Therefore, the divine sonship and pre-existence are stressed only in conjunction with the suffering and shame of Jesus' death all of which promote his worthiness of an exalted status.²¹⁰ The author of Hebrews is in seemingly full realization of Jesus' lineage, recording his ancestry from the tribe of Judah (7:14). The family background even becomes a fact the author must maneuver about in placing Jesus as a high priest in the line of Melchizedek. Jesus' earthly parents are not mentioned by name. The author may assume his audience knows this fact or skips it as it is not vital to his presentation. While the emperors have elaborate stories of a divine-like birth,

²⁰⁷ Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, English language ed., trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 97.

²⁰⁸ William Barclay, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, Bible Guides No. 20 (New York: Abingdon, 1965), 63.

²⁰⁹ William Leonard, *Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rome: Vatican Polyglot, 1939), 56.

²¹⁰ Hengel, 88.

prophecies concerning them as children, and astrological signs of their future, none of this exists in the book of Hebrews. These are more reminiscent of the birth narratives found in gospel of Matthew or Luke.

Jesus becomes the son of God not by his earthly parents being apotheosized but through his filial relationship with the father, the monotheistic God. Jesus is the son before he ever became man,²¹¹ an eternal son, which varies drastically from the emperors. The emperors were humans who became gods. Jesus is a pre-existent son who enters the world of humanity,²¹² whereas the adopted Roman son, having the same status and privileges as a natural son, entered into the family inheritance upon the death of his adoptive father,²¹³ Jesus receives his full inheritance to the throne upon his own death.

The possible parallels of divine sonship exist linguistically, in images of adoption, and in the form of future enthronement. Upon further investigation the emperor cult parallelism, however, begins to break down as Hebrews points strongly towards a Jewish source. The Jewish source appears most prominent in the adoptive statements of 1:5 as the verse uses two Old Testament sources. Both of these, Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam. 7:14, are in connection with Davidic kingship. The original association of these verses for Israel was the enthronement of the king subsequently interpreted as his adoption as son of God.²¹⁴ Subsequent Jewish tradition also uses the adoptive formula of 2 Sam. 7:14 in eschatological association with the Messiah (4QFlor. 1:1), with Israel (Jub. 1:24), or with both (TJud. 24:3) interpreted that Israel would share in the divine adoptive sonship of the

²¹¹ Moffatt, 1.

²¹² Ibid, lii.

²¹³ James M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1992), 13.

²¹⁴ Werner Kramer, *Christ, Lord, Son of God* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1966), 109.

Messiah.²¹⁵ William Leonard holds that the proclaimed sonship in Hebrews however is a “homoousiac, not an adoptive relation.”²¹⁶ Hebrews does appear to place Jesus in eternal sonship which does muddles any portrayal of adoption since he is the son before his humanity. Placed in superiority above angles, prophets, and other Old Testament figures, the sonship of Jesus is unique, unshared by any other being.²¹⁷

The Old Testament quotations and Jewish tradition both direct one away from the Roman imperial cult as a source for the author’s image and language for the divine sonship found in Hebrews. Scholar L.W. Hurtado does consider the Roman emperors as a possible source for the New Testament’s use of the title ‘son of God’ he however concludes in advocating that any influence of Roman emperor devotion upon early Christology likely involved Christian recoil and turning more towards Jewish influences for the phrase ‘son of God’.²¹⁸ I find this to be true for Hebrews. The book of Hebrews’ use of the title ‘son of God’ appears to be based less on the emperor cult and more upon a reference to Davidic kingship used to (re-)formulate Jesus as the son of God. The ‘son of God’ is a strong linguistic parallel between Roman emperor cult and Jesus in the book of Hebrews, however, a stronger parallelism will more likely be found within Judaism.

Deification

The book of Hebrews does not contain much narrative of the life of Jesus. Hebrews does offer the New Testament a deep analysis of specific aspects of the life of

²¹⁵ Scott, 104.

²¹⁶ Leonard, 57.

²¹⁷ Barclay, 65.

²¹⁸ Hurtado, 900-901.

Jesus which are theologically heavy laden. His humanity is portrayed as one who is made lower than the angels for a little while (2:9), and becoming a brother and sister to humans (2:11) being like them in every respect (2:17). The incarnation, while viewed as a humiliation, provides evidence of Christ's obedience.²¹⁹ The author is able to promote the divinity of the son and his priesthood, not on the basis of what Jesus did while on earth with miracles and divine signs, but on the basis of the enthronement and his "indestructible life" (7:16).

The author acknowledges his physical descent is from the tribe of Judah (7:14). This state of humanity was necessary for the son according to the author, "so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17). In Jesus' humanity he is tempted, though never succumbing, which has enabled him to *sumpaqh/sai* the weakness of humanity (2:18; 4:15; 7:26). Jesus is also portrayed as a messenger of salvation (1:2; 2:3-4) and even called an apostle (3:1). His message is supported by first hand testimony and the signs, wonders, and various miracles that took place in the early apostolic age (cf. Acts 2:22; 2 Cor. 12:12).²²⁰ A portion of this message and his words are contained in 10:5-7 where it is recorded that Jesus quoted Ps. 40:6-8. The primal reference to Jesus' life throughout Hebrews is in reference to the passion. He is the high priest in Levitical imagery who suffered, bled, endured the cross, endured hostility from sinners, and offered his body and life as a sacrifice for people (5:8; 6:20; 7: 27; 9:12, 14, 26; 10:19, 20; 12:2, 3; 13:12).

²¹⁹ Käsemann, 106.

²²⁰ Hagner, *NIBC*, 42.

The life of Jesus as messenger and high priest who dies as a blood sacrifice has no significant parallels within Roman emperor cult. The emperor is a priest who makes sacrifice to the gods but the possible parallels here are rather weak. There is no offering of the emperor's own blood for the sins of people and no direct comparison with the Roman cultic system. Instead, what is depicted in Hebrews is from the realms of Jewish tradition of the Levitical sacrificial system.²²¹ The Roman imperial cult, especially from municipalities and private citizens, often depicted the living emperor as a god or with god-like status. The book of Hebrews does not focus on Jesus in his humanity as a god or in god-like status, albeit the divine sonship. Instead it focuses on the faithful, obedient work he did during his life through sacrifice. The lives of Jesus and the Caesar hold merely a faint parallel within the image of priesthood. There does however appear to be a stronger parallel between Jesus and emperors in regards to their role and status after death.

Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Claudius were each apotheosized. By the vote of the Senate they were officially deemed gods and given state cult. The apotheosized emperor was believed to have been taken up to a heavenly enthronement with the gods. Art work depicted the emperor on a throne with crown and scepter. If there were questions about the divinity of the Roman emperor while he was alive, his divine portrayal after death was confirmed.

The image of Jesus in Hebrews after his death is of a heavenly descent, gaining a status of perfection, and enthronement with God. This appears to be a plausible parallel with apotheosis of the Roman emperor. Both are portrayed to be transformed in death. Jesus becomes as one who is perfected. The emperor becomes a god and gains official

²²¹ Bruce, 31.

state cult status. Both Jesus and emperor pass through or into heaven. Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of God. The emperor is enthroned with the gods in heaven. Hebrews' portrayal of Jesus may parallel the Roman emperor's apotheosis.

The motifs of 'perfection' or 'better' are prevailing throughout the text of Hebrews. Jesus is presented as one better, greater, or over, the prophets (1:1-3), angels (1:3-2:18), Moses (3:1-19), Joshua (4:1-16), and Aaron and his successors in the priesthood (5:1-12:29).²²² Jesus is also one who has been made perfect forever (7:28). Perfection comes through suffering (2:10; 5:8-9; 7:28). God makes Jesus, the pioneer of salvation, *teleiw/sai* through sufferings (2:10). Jesus' perfection allowed him to become the source of eternal salvation which allowed others who were faithful to be made perfect.

If Jesus became or was made perfect after death, this naturally implies that he existed in a state of imperfection during life. For while he was without sin, holy, innocent, and undefiled (4:15; 7:26), he was apparently not perfect. The perfection referred to must not be a moral or ethical perfection. As previously discussed, the author holds Jesus as an eternal son or pre-existent one. The author seemingly has no problem holding these two ideas together: the eternal son of God, perfected after suffering. The author never goes so far as to deny divinity to Jesus during his earthly existence, nor does he record that Jesus receives divinity after death. Perfection seems to be in a category of its own, separate from divinity. Hagner suggests Jesus' perfection through suffering refers primarily to the accomplishment and fulfillment of God's purposes. The son is associated with a "completeness" in fulfillment of God's plan through his suffering and

²²² Gundry, 426-427.

death.²²³ He has fulfilled the task of his humanity. He has perfectly achieved his task to become a sacrifice and pioneer of salvation, and in this sense is perfect.

The perfection of Jesus does highlight his current status beyond death as living, perfected, and glorified. Jesus has passed through the heavens (4:14) and takes up reign at the right hand of God, a position of honor (1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). The position at God's right hand places Jesus in a place of unrivaled honor and indirectly affirms divinity.²²⁴ The throne is referred to as the *trōnōs* (4:16). In 1:8 quoting Ps. 45:6 God declared his throne, in indication to the son, to be forever and ever. Here he will sit until God makes enemies a footstool for his feet (1:13). The glorification is done by God who saved Him from death (5:5) and brought him up from the dead (6:2; 13:20).

Both emperors and Jesus are placed at higher positions post-mortem. Jesus is perfected. The emperor gains official state cult status becoming a god. Both pass through or into heaven. Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of God and the emperor is enthroned with the gods in heaven. These images present possible significant parallels, but as they are more thoroughly compared they begin to lose strength. In Hebrews the son is glorified and honored because of the suffering of death. Jesus' death is an act of tasting death for everyone (2:9) as a self-sacrifice (9:26) for sin (10:12). The emperor's death has nothing to do with the ultimate salvation of others. Suffering and sacrifice of the one glorified and completion of a plan through death are not components in the Roman emperors' apotheosis. The emperor received an official status of divinity by vote

²²³ Hagner, *NIBC*, 50.

²²⁴ Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 187.

from the Senate. Jesus is made, not divine, but perfected by God because of his death. The emperor automatically goes up to the heavens and is acknowledged by the Senate. Jesus is brought up from the dead by God (13:20). The only parallel which retains its strength is both emperor and Jesus passing through the heavens and becoming enthroned after death.

Benefaction in Hebrews

The worship and honors given to emperors may be better understood when placed in the framework of an ancient system of benefaction. The vertical dyadic relation between individuals of highly unequal status, such the emperor and his clients, involved the exchange of material for immaterial, goods for honor and praise, and military protection for status support and the like.²²⁵ The system entailed the socially superior emperor giving, if he so chose to, economic, militaristic, or political resources to the clients which were usually municipalities, a polis, or private citizens. The clients then gave honor and worship in return for these resources, or in hopes of gaining them. The emperors were considered saviors and their subjects gave expressions of loyalty and honor to them as a part of the religious phenomenon in antiquity. Benefaction and homage paid to those in positions of honor.

The system of benefaction was widespread in first-century Mediterranean culture. The book of Hebrews has parallels which are found within this system. To directly attribute them in parallelism with the Roman imperial cult would be difficult since the ideology of benefaction was wide-spread and falling more under a universal concept.

²²⁵ Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (London: Routledge, 1996; reprint 1998), 145.

While these parallels are broad, they are part of the picture which must be considered in this investigation.

The overall message to the recipients of Hebrews is a word of exhortation (12:5; 13:22). In this exhortation they are called to hold fast to the confession they have made (4:14; 10:23), be imitators of the faithful (6:12; 11:1-40), and run with perseverance (12:1). The tone for much of the letter is uplifting for a community who is struggling to hold on. One may form a picture of a pastoral author pleading for his distant, wavering congregation to stay faithful.

In combination with the exhortation of the audience is a warning to not fall away (3:12; 6:6) or be disobedient (4:11). For with this falling away comes punishment and judgment (6:2, 8). The purpose of the warning scholar David deSilva perceives, placing Hebrews 6 in a system of patronage, is a means to motivate them, “to not undervalue the benefits they have received and will receive from God, in order that they might not reject these in favor of a return to the world’s friendship.”²²⁶ In a system of benefaction this makes sense. The author is attempting to answer the unsettled question the community may be asking: “Is this worth it? Is my homage worth the patronage that I now or in the future will receive?” The writer gives a resounding, “yes”.

Throughout the text the author communicates all the benefits the patron, Jesus, gives to his clients, the community of faith. The most notable are salvation (6:9) and removal of sin (10:12). In conjunction with the benefits being expressed, Jesus and God are portrayed as ones who have been faithful and will continue to be faithful to what they have promised (3:6; 6:18; 10:23; 11:11). Jesus provides salvation (5:9), gives rest (4:3),

²²⁶ deSilva, 241.

and bestows mercy and grace to help the addressees in their time of need and temptation (2:18; 4:6).

The author uses all of the benefits the patron Jesus gives to bolster reasons for his recipients to hold fast to their allegiance to the son, urging loyalty and obedience for is the better way, a mediator providing a new and better covenant (8:6; 9:15; 12:24).

Scholar John Dunnill, in his study of Hebrews “economy of gift-exchange” points out the contrast Hebrews makes between the trade-system of the old covenant and the new covenant.²²⁷ The amount of daily routine exchange under the old covenant entailing daily offerings (5:1; 7:27; 9:6; 10:11) was inefficient since, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins”. There is a lack of return under the old system: no perfection (7:11; 9:9), no forgiveness (10:11), no rest (3:18), no fulfillment of promise (11:39). The new covenant under Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice of his own blood (8:3; 9:11-4) is characterized as a gift-system where there is abundant reward: the gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:4), the heavenly gift (6:4), the blessing and the birthright (12:17, 23), grace (4:16; 13:9), a kingdom that cannot be shaken (12:28), a future city (13:14). In this new covenant the audience is now requested to “continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name” (13:15), good deeds, and sharing of possessions (13:16).²²⁸

Characteristics of benefaction took place within the emperor cult as well as the book of Hebrews. The parallel exists but is captured only at a very broad level. The system of benefaction was a universal concept in ancient culture. While paralleled

²²⁷ John Dunnill, *Covenant and sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 242-243.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 244.



system of benefaction does exist between Jesus and the emperor cult it is rather weak when in light of the investigation to make significant direct connections for parallelism.



CHAPTER 3

SUMMARY EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary Evaluation

While numerous possible parallels were found each exist only on a broad scale parallelism and begin to breakdown upon further comparison with the book of Hebrews. The parallels found appear to exist on a first-century Mediterranean-cultural level more so than those specifically attributable to direct influence of the emperor cult, upon images in Hebrews.

Even initial parallels such as the priesthood of the Caesars and Jesus quickly deteriorated in the process of the research. Jesus is presented as the blood sacrifice (9:12), while the emperors had sacrifices given to them. Jesus is portrayed as a Jewish high priest in comparative terms with Melchizedek and Aaron, while the emperor is himself a Roman priest. The priestly image thus seems to parallel a Jewish influence rather than Roman. This example merely serves as one of the many examples where initial parallels did grow stronger but instead became weaker and weaker the further the exploration continued. After understanding the emperor cult to a greater degree and then

comparing it with the book of Hebrews in detail I was able to discover only a few possible direct parallels. Most were found on a broader cultural scale.

The strongest possible parallels discovered were: son of god, enthronement after death, and benefaction. Combining these parallels with the lesser discovered parallels it does not produce a strong enough basis to consider the hypothesis correct. The Roman imperial cult does not appear to be a major influence upon the author producing parallels within the text of Hebrews. My evaluation finds the formerly stated hypothesis false. There are not significant parallels of the Roman imperial cult (Caesar-Nero) in the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews lacks a considerable collection of words, concepts, images, motifs, ideas, structures, and forms which directly correlated with elements of Roman emperor worship during the time of Caesar to Nero. The hypothesis could more appropriately be restated as: broad parallels exist between the Roman imperial cult (Caesar-Nero) and the book of Hebrews. These broad parallels appear to be a part of the first-century Mediterranean culture and/or come as a result of commonly shared sources. The direct correlation presupposed in the hypothesis which would have produced significant parallels was absent.

Conclusions

It is one matter to notice parallels with words and images on a broad level but another to discover significant parallels of direct influence. In this masters thesis I have prove this true. Instead of the hypothesized significant parallelism, I discovered the parallels between Hebrews and the Roman imperial cult were more likely due to common sources, cultural settings, or universal ideas. The three strongest parallels of the emperor



cult (Caesar-Nero) in the book of Hebrews were: divine sonship, enthronement after death, and benefaction. These parallels in combination with the weaker ones do not constitute significant parallelism. The Roman emperor cult does not appear to be a major influence which produced significant parallel for material contained in the book of Hebrews. One is directed to investigate other areas for possible significant parallels for the book of Hebrews.

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