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**Non-Christian Beliefs Mentioned in the Bible: Part 11**  
***Roman Emperor Worship***

By Freddy Davis

**Introduction**

The Imperial cult of ancient Rome was a religious cult that designated Roman emperors, and some of their family members, as deities. The concept itself emerged out of the Greek and Roman animistic traditions that existed during that time period. The cult was formulated in Rome during the early rule of Augustus Caesar and spread throughout the Empire. While the practice of the cult was widespread throughout the empire, there were significant local variations, and its acceptance also varied from place to place.

**History**

The practice of recognizing Roman emperors as gods was not always a part of Roman society. In fact, during its first five centuries, the Roman government existed as a republic rather than an empire with an emperor. Republican traditions were decidedly conservative and anti-monarchic. The leaders who held office in the Roman Senate recognized no human as their superior. Beyond that, in spite of the fact that the state awarded assorted high honors to gods and various leaders, no citizen was recognized as divine, including the leadership. The animistic tradition of the Roman people did acknowledge the existence of gods, and often high officials were associated with them, and maybe even venerated as quasi-gods. But the officials were not considered gods themselves. The veneration was primarily expressed as an act of thankfulness for the peace and stability that Rome provided. As time moved on, this kind of veneration became more and more associated with loyalty to the empire.

The practice of emperor worship was also not something that emerged full blown in the Roman world. In fact, it appeared rather suddenly and spread over the entire empire within a few decades. In spite of its sudden appearance and rapid spread, it was not ever evenly practiced throughout the empire. The act of worshipping a living emperor was culturally acceptable in some parts of the empire, but there were other places where that was not considered proper. Ironically, Italy (including Rome) was a place where emperor worship was less acceptable, while the Greek world had a previous tradition of giving divine honors to their Hellenistic rulers.

As emperor worship came to be more prominent, it became a unifying factor within the Roman world. It was particularly strong within the army units that were spread throughout the empire, but there were also empirical cult centers that further promoted the practice. Some of the more notable locations were in Lyons (Gaul), Pergamon (Asia), and Colchester (Britain).

The first emperor to be officially recognized as a god was Julius Caesar. This was done after his death. But even while he was living he claimed personal ties to the gods, both by descent and by office. He was from the family Julia, whose members were said to be descended from the gods Aeneas and Venus. As for his office, early in his career, Julius had become the chief priest of Rome and was responsible for fulfilling the religious duties of the ancient kings.

Later, in 45 BC, when he defeated Pompey, Julius took the throne and control of the Roman state. As time moved forward, the Roman Senate did declare him a demi-god,

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and he began to assume more god-like honors. At that time, his full deification as a god was not ratified by the Senate, so he was not yet considered fully a god. Still, he was given a house to live in that looked like a temple, and when the images of the gods were paraded through the city, his was included. His portrait was also put on coins, his birthday was made into a national holiday, the month Quinctilis was renamed July in his honor, and a special priest was ordained to serve in his temple (which put him on the same level as other recognized gods). Eventually he probably would have attained the distinction of godhood in life, but was killed in the Senate before that was able to happen, on March 15, 44 B.C. It was shortly after his death that he was officially declared a god by the Roman Senate.

In 29 BC, the political leaders of Asia and Bithynia requested permission to worship Octavian, Julius Caesar's adopted son and successor, as their deliverer. He was the first living emperor designated as a deity, and to have temples built for him. This was not an unusual request based on the traditions of that part of the world, but it did place Octavian in a precarious position. To maintain order in the empire, he needed to satisfy the expectations of those in that part of the empire. At the same time, he had to be careful not to be seen as desiring deification in Rome where that was not the tradition. The way he was able to walk that tightrope was to allow the worship, but have it directed to Rome and prior emperors, rather than specifically to himself.

In 14 A.D., however, upon his death, the Senate passed decrees that gave him the title Divus (deified one), and declared that he be worshiped as a god. Nearly every Roman emperor after Augustus was consecrated in that way after death.

The imperial cult was at its most popular in the second century A.D. From that time forward, however, it gradually became less popular. By the fourth century it had become completely secularized – partly because of the decay of animistic religion in general, but also because of the official recognition of Christianity.

### Authority

There is no external source of authority for Roman Emperor worship. It was a religious form that emerged out of the already existing animistic worldview, as certain people essentially added the Roman emperor to their already existing pantheon of gods.

### Evidence for the Authority

Roman emperor worship had no objective source of authority. The evidence that was relied upon to validate belief in the deity of the Roman emperor was nothing more than the citizens' belief in their animistic worldview. The understanding of reality in this belief system was based purely upon subjective perceptions. It didn't matter to them whether or not it could be backed up with any kind of objective facts. There was no rational basis for their belief, or any objective evidence that their understanding of reality was correct.

### Worldview Beliefs

#### God

In Roman emperor worship there was no all powerful, creator God. As practitioners of an animistic belief system, these animists believed that humans simply move on to the next life after physical death and become a type of spirit or god in the afterlife. As powerful people in this life, the Roman emperors were looked at by many to be above ordinary people in a way that made them godlike. Those who believed this way venerated the emperors. Over time, the emperors themselves saw the value in having this kind of power and authority, and began to embrace it until full fledged worship emerged.

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## Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

[info@marketfaith.org](mailto:info@marketfaith.org)

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

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## Man

Humanity, in Roman emperor worship, was understood to be the physical expression of a spiritual life force that is eternal. Humans were believed to be material expressions of the universal life energy all living things share.

## Salvation

In Roman emperor worship, there was no need for salvation since an individual's life force simply passes into the next cycle of life after physical death. Thus, it did not concern forgiveness or overcoming sin. Rather, it merely addressed practical ways to effectively make it through this life and into the next.

## Other Beliefs and Practices

### ***Beliefs about Gods and Rulers in the Empire***

Overall, emperor worship would not have seemed strange to most people who lived in the empire during the Roman era, as there was not seen to be a huge gulf between the divine and human realms. An animistic belief frame was quite common. Just as they recognized that there were some gods who were powerful beyond imagination and others that were more immanent, they also saw some humans who were powerful in an almost godlike way, while most were like everyone else.

The populace generally worshiped the gods because they were believed to be able to provide for needs that they could not provide for themselves. The worship practices they engaged were attempts to obtain benefits from the gods for things they felt powerless to gain for themselves.

By the same token, the emperor was seen as so powerful that he could protect them from foreign invaders, and provide an environment that promoted wealth and prosperity. As such, the titles Savior, Benefactor,

and Lord did not seem out of touch with reality.

## ***The Purpose of the Emperor Cult***

The primary purpose of the emperor cult was political. It was a way of creating cohesion between the various provinces in the Roman empire. Obviously, the empire was spread across lands that contained many different ethnicities and cultures. There was a need, then, to give all of those diverse people something common to look to as a unifying factor. Emperor worship served that purpose.

## ***The Nature of Cult Worship***

In its essence, the Imperial cult was not separate from the animistic beliefs that were a part of the understanding about the gods held by the common people. It was essentially the same belief system that was prominent in the Greek world, with the gods only having different names. As a means of promoting unity within the empire, Roman emperors, and other leaders, were deified and made to be a part of the worship practice. These gods were seen to be essential to Rome's survival, and neglecting proper worship of them was considered treasonous.

The imperial cult was a very prominent element of Greco-Roman paganism in the first two centuries after Christ's life on earth. Various communities actually built temples and shrines to the emperors, and conducted regular worship activities.

That said, people did not appeal to the emperors to help with personal crises and illnesses as they would with certain other gods. Rather, the divine power of the emperor was manifested to help the citizenry in general gain material benefits; such as the delivery of grain to a famine-stricken area, money to victims of earthquakes, and the maintenance of peace and prosperity throughout the

empire. As such, the emperor was regarded as the "savior and benefactor of the human race" who had been divinely chosen by Zeus or Jupiter to rule over humanity. By fulfilling this calling, they were rewarded with immortality.

In beginning this new religious observance, Octavian didn't simply start a new religion. Rather, he worked to restore and revitalize the ancient Roman religious institutions, and simply incorporated this new element into it. In this way, the Roman emperor gained complete control over Roman religious life through the office of the Pontifex Maximus (greatest priest).

### ***Cultic Practice***

In order to understand the nature of emperor worship, it is important to recognize that there were two different emphases that were prominent in different parts of the empire.

The first emphasis related to the ceremonial practices surrounding the emperor himself in Rome. It must be remembered that Roman governance emerged out of a republican tradition. Roman citizens elected representatives to the Senate who then created laws for the people to follow. Religious worship was not a part of the governance itself. As such, the Roman emperor was considered a political figure, not a religious one. When emperor worship began to emerge in the empire, it had a different flavor in Rome than in most other parts of the empire. There the emperor was not seen so much as a deity, but rather more as a person worthy of high honor.

The second, and more religious emphasis of emperor worship was seen in the provinces, particularly in Asia Minor. That was a part of the empire where the ancient customs related to governance were more influenced by Greek traditions. There, rulers were seen as divine, and were often associated with a temple-cult. It was in this part of the empire that temples were built and worship practiced for the Roman emperor.

The emperor cult did have its own unique elements. For one, sacrifice was never made to the emperor himself. Rather, it was made "on behalf of" the emperor. The second unique element was that the emperor-cult was joined together with the worship of important local gods by placing a statue of the emperor in those places of worship.

The worship practices themselves closely resembled all other Roman cults in the Hellenistic world. They consisted of sacrifices, feasts to honor the deity's (emperor's) birthday, and the like. The worship was generally officiated by local priests who were responsible for maintaining the temples.

### ***The Tension Between Christianity and the Emperor Cult***

As Christianity was spreading across the Roman empire in its early days, this new Christian movement was, obviously, in conflict with the emperor cult. Emperor worship was a part of the fabric of Greco-Roman society, and, in many ways, was the ideological glue that held the empire together. It was considered a civic duty to worship the empire's gods. Thus, Christianity, with its exclusivist doctrine that did not allow worship of other gods, found itself in conflict with the political duty of the citizenry.

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