



---

The Worship of the Roman Emperors

Author(s): Henry Fairfield Burton

Source: *The Biblical World*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Aug., 1912), pp. 80-91

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3141986>

Accessed: 17/05/2014 10:08

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The University of Chicago Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Biblical World*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## THE WORSHIP OF THE ROMAN EMPERORS

---

PROFESSOR HENRY FAIRFIELD BURTON, LL.D.  
University of Rochester, Rochester, N. Y.

---

The impulse that led to the deification of the Roman emperors<sup>1</sup> came from the East. The Pharaohs and the Ptolemies, Lycurgus and Lysander of Sparta, and Alexander the Great were worshiped as divinities both while living and when dead. When Rome conquered the East, the same divine honors were transferred to the Roman proconsuls. Naturally, then, when a single ruler of the empire appeared, he was acclaimed as a god in the eastern provinces. Meanwhile the way had been prepared for the imperial worship in the minds of the Romans themselves. The heroes of Roman legend, as Aeneas, Latinus, Romulus, whom the Romans accepted as historical personages and as the founders of the nation, were believed to be of divine descent and were themselves honored as deities. It was natural, therefore, that the founder of the empire, a new and greater Rome, should likewise be regarded as a god and be accorded the same homage. Another precursor of the imperial cult was the worship of the Dea Roma. This divinity, the personification of the growing power of Rome in the East, was a Greek invention. Temples were first erected to her in the second century B.C. in Asia Minor, her cult became associated with that of the emperor both in the East and in the West during the reign of Augustus and finally received full recognition at the capital through the building of Hadrian's great temple of Venus and Roma.

But the fundamental source of emperor-worship is to be found in one of the primitive tendencies of Roman thought, viz., the veneration of the individual human spirit, the worship of the Genius. The primitive Roman worshiped—in his utilitarian, not to say commercial, fashion—not only the forces of external nature

<sup>1</sup> For a full treatment of the subject see E. Beurlier, *Le Culte Impérial; son histoire et son organisation*. Paris, 1891. A shorter account is given by G. Boissier, *La religion romaine*, Vol. I.

which influenced his life, but also the power that is active within each human being—the Genius of the man, the Juno of the woman. These terms appear from their derivation to have referred originally to the power of reproduction, but they came to designate the total personality of the individual, or rather the duplicate of that personality, identical with the self, yet somehow superior to him and determining his earthly destiny. From the earliest to the latest times the Genius of the *paterfamilias* was worshiped in every home in connection with the other household gods, the Lares and Penates. But the conception of the ruler as the father of the nation was familiar to every Roman. Pater Patriae was one of the earliest of imperial titles. The constantly recurring worship of the Genius of the father by the whole household, including slaves, freedmen, and clients, could not fail to suggest the worship of the Genius of the emperor on the part of all his subjects.

But the Genius designated the spirit of the individual in his earthly existence only. As it was born with him and accompanied him throughout life, so also it died with him. Yet the primitive Roman was a firm believer not only in the continued existence but in the divinity of the souls of men after death. Though their abode was in the lower world, they were felt to be allied by virtue of their immateriality and immortality with the gods above. This sentiment was naturally most strongly felt by each person toward the spirits of his own ancestors. Cicero quotes with approval the ancient formula, "Let each regard his own dead as divine." Since the spirits of ancestors were believed to influence the lives of their descendants for good or ill, offerings were made to them to secure their favor, and fixed days for such offerings were appointed in the Roman official calendar. It is obvious that as the worship of the Genius facilitated the introduction of the cult of the living emperor, ancestor-worship in like manner prepared the way for the deification of the emperors after death.

The Roman worship of rulers began with Julius Caesar. Divine honors were paid to him during his lifetime. Before his return to Rome after the victory at Pharsalus his statue was erected on the Capitoline bearing the title demigod, which, however, he afterward ordered erased. After his return his statue was placed among

those of the ancient deities in the circus. Another statue was inscribed *Deo Invicto*. Games were established in his honor as if he were a god. All this was pure flattery, which was probably taken seriously by no one, least of all by Caesar himself. It was merely the recognition of his newly won supremacy over the Roman world, and as such was accepted by him, just as he accepted the legend of the descent of the Julian family from the goddess Venus and built a temple to her as Venus Genitrix, the mother of his race.

This extravagant homage irritated his enemies and was doubtless one of the influences that led to his assassination. But Caesar's death transformed the compliments of his flatterers into a genuine cult. Popular enthusiasm over his achievements and indignation at his death found expression in religious adoration. It was really the Roman populace that raised Caesar to the rank of a god. The common people, Suetonius tells us, were convinced of his divinity. But Octavian, who as the emperor Augustus was destined to succeed him as sole ruler, promptly identified himself with the popular movement. The senate formally conferred upon Caesar the title of Divus, "the deified," and ordered a temple to be erected for his worship.

When Octavian by the defeat of his rivals brought the whole Roman world under his sway, he too was universally hailed as a god. There was doubtless the same mingling of flattery and sincerity in the homage paid to him as in that accorded to Julius Caesar, and his attitude toward it was much the same as that which had been taken by Caesar. As the grand-nephew and adoptive son of Julius he used the title *Divi Filius* in documents and on coins. The title Augustus, "the venerable," conferred by the senate and adopted by him as a surname, had a religious significance as designating one worthy of reverence, and marked him as more than man. But Augustus refused to accept divine honors at Rome. He allowed no temple to be erected to him in the city. He was under no illusion as to his divine powers. When envoys came to report to him that a palm had sprung up on one of his altars, he made light of the alleged miracle with the remark, "Evidently you do not often burn incense there." Yet for political

reasons he encouraged the new worship in the provinces and even permitted the provincials to build temples in his honor, but always with the proviso that they be dedicated to the goddess Roma as well as to himself. Roman citizens in the provinces were forbidden to share in the cult of the emperor, but might worship the deified Julius in connection with the Dea Roma. At the close of the reign of Augustus the imperial cult had spread throughout the provinces and had even invaded Italy, and wherever it was established it already exceeded in popularity all other forms of religious worship.

Although Augustus had steadily rejected all divine homage at Rome during his lifetime, immediately after his death in 14 A.D. the senate passed decrees conferring upon him the title *Divus* and providing for his worship as a god. The unpopularity of Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, and Domitian prevented their deification by the senate, though they had been worshiped in their lifetime, especially in the eastern provinces. With these and a few other exceptions, every emperor down to the fall of the western empire in the fifth century was consecrated after death. In the earlier days the deification of a deceased emperor was the expression of popular esteem. But in later times character and ability were often disregarded and the honor became a formal one, conferred as readily upon Commodus and Caracalla as upon Marcus Aurelius or Constantine. It is noticeable that the recognition of Christianity did not interrupt the creation of imperial deities. By this time, however, the cult had largely lost its religious character. Other members of the imperial family besides reigning emperors frequently received formal deification. The total number of persons who were raised to the rank of *Divi* during the five centuries from Julius Caesar to Valentinian III was seventy-four, of whom thirty-eight were rulers of the whole or a part of the empire, and sixteen were women.

The forms of the imperial cult were much the same in character and presented the same variety as the worship of the older divinities. The worship of the living ruler and that of the deified emperors were in general identical, but with certain differences in detail. The living emperor was sometimes identified with one of the ancient deities, especially in the East. Caligula was wor-

shipped as the Sun at Thyatira, Nero as Apollo, and Hadrian as Zeus in many cities. But though honored as a god under his own name, the emperor rarely assumed the title *Deus*; his usual designation was *Aeternitas*, used in a personal sense like *Majestas* or our "highness." His *Genius* was invoked in oaths, and such oaths had the same validity in the courts as those taken in the name of Jupiter himself. His statues were sacred and, like the statues of the gods, gave the right of asylum.

The deification of a deceased emperor was authorized by a formal decree of the senate, which alone had power to introduce new forms of worship. But the senate acted at the suggestion of the reigning emperor, and divine honors proposed by him were rarely denied. The ceremony of consecration usually occurred a number of days after death, when the body had already been cremated or placed in its sarcophagus. It was therefore represented by a waxen image resting on an open bier. The bier was carried to the Forum accompanied by a distinguished procession. After the funeral oration, delivered from the rostra by the reigning emperor, the procession passed to the Campus Martius, where the funeral pyre had been constructed. This was of wood, tower-like in form, several stories high, draped with richly embroidered cloths, decorated with paintings and medallions, and fragrant with perfumes, fruits, and flowers. Here in the presence of the imperial family, the magistrates, the senators, the knights, the court officials, and bodies of cavalry and infantry, the bier was placed within the pyre, the funeral torch was applied, and as the flames burst forth an eagle was released from the summit and soared into the heavens, typifying the ascent of the emperor's spirit to its new abode among the gods.<sup>2</sup>

The private worship of the emperors on the part of families and individuals was simple, consisting chiefly in the burning of incense before the image of the emperor and in offerings of food

<sup>2</sup> A relief on the pedestal, now in the Vatican gardens, of the column of Antoninus Pius depicts the apotheosis of Antoninus and Faustina. See the frontispiece. The emperor and empress, accompanied by two eagles, are borne to heaven by *Aeternitas*, the central winged figure. The sitting figure at the right represents Rome in the act of decreeing the apotheosis; that on the left personifies the Campus Martius where the final act of deification took place. See *Römische Mittheilungen*, 1912, 1-20.

and drink in connection with the worship of the household gods. The public worship was elaborate and costly, including not only offerings and sacrifices but public games of every sort—chariot races, gladiatorial shows, athletic exhibitions, dramatic and musical contests—often lasting several days. The expenses were defrayed partly by the imperial government, partly by a tax levied by the local authorities in the provinces or in the cities, and partly by contributions on the part of individuals.

The public imperial worship took several distinct forms, which may be designated as the Roman cult—the worship of the *Divi* at the capital, the provincial cult—conducted by the provinces as such, the municipal cult—conducted by the individual cities, and the popular cult—the organized worship on the part of the lower classes. The worship of the deified emperors naturally flourished at Rome, where they were best known and likely to be longest remembered. Separate temples were dedicated to many of them in the city, as the existing remains of the temples of Caesar, Augustus, Vespasian, and Antoninus still testify. In the provinces the actual head of the empire was the chief object of veneration, though nominally the goddess Roma and usually the *Divi* were associated with him. The provincial cult was in charge of a council representing the cities of the province. Its center was usually the provincial capital, where the imperial temple was located and where the chief festival was held each year, generally on the emperor's birthday. The city worship both in Italy and in the provinces usually arose as the expression of gratitude for some special favor or as a compliment on the occasion of a visit of the emperor. The adherents of the popular cult were the commercial and artisan classes, chiefly freedmen, who were in general excluded from all official positions, even in the municipalities, and were therefore flattered at being brought through this cult into relation with the head of the state.

The priesthoods of the imperial worship, of whatever type, conferred the highest distinction upon those who held them. The priests, except those of the popular cult, bore the title *Flamen*, an ancient and venerable one, held from the earliest times by the chief priest of Jupiter, Mars, and other deities of the first rank.

The Flamines of the Divi at Rome were usually members of the imperial family. Elsewhere the priests must be men of high standing in their community and class and also of some wealth, for they were expected to contribute largely to the expenses of the worship. The seat of the imperial cult was known as the Augusteum or Caesareum—terms originally applied to temples of Augustus and the deified Julius, but later, when their names became mere imperial titles, designating the place of the worship of the emperors in general. This was often the most imposing and most frequented temple in each city.

If now we pass from the forms of the imperial cult to its spirit, we must consider it, not only from the religious point of view, but in its relation to the personality of the emperor and especially with reference to its political importance. The Romans did not sharply distinguish religion from politics; for religion was a function of the state, and the worship of the gods which were recognized by the state was part of the duty of the citizen. Emperor-worship therefore expressed the attitude of the worshiper toward the emperor as the embodiment of imperial power. The spontaneous growth and speedy popularity of that worship among all classes of people in every part of the Roman world marks the general recognition of the imperial government as the dominant force in public and private life and of the reigning emperor as a sort of earthly providence. The emperors were from the first fully alive to the political significance of the worship offered them. They accepted the religious devotion of the people as an evidence of political loyalty. The association of the worship of the reigning emperor with that of the goddess Roma tended strongly to give to it an impersonal and political character.

Yet as time went on the cult of the living emperor became increasingly personal. Though still addressed, as at first, primarily to Roma as the symbol of imperial authority and secondarily to the emperor as the instrument of that authority, the thought of the worshiper was gradually withdrawn from the abstract divinity and centered itself upon the personality of the actual ruler. The worship of the deified emperors had the same political character; for the divine honors paid them after death were but the



continuation of the deference inspired by their imperial authority during life. Yet their worship had at the same time a distinctly personal quality. In the case of the nobler emperors it was the expression of genuine respect for their virtues or of appreciation of their services to the state. In the provinces, however, the cult of the *Divi* was generally united with that of Roma and the reigning emperor and thereby largely lost its personal character.

To distinguish and measure the religious element in the worship of the emperors is a more difficult matter. Did the worshipers in the imperial temple really believe in the divinity of the emperors? Did the emperors themselves believe in their own divinity, present or future? It must be remembered that to the Greek or Roman the distance between the divine and the human was infinitely less than to us. Even the greatest of the polytheistic deities was an insignificant being in comparison with the omnipotent, all-wise God of modern theism, while the minor divinities were but slightly magnified men. The Roman conception of divinity as applied to the emperors had something of the ambiguity that attaches to the word divine itself, which they used, just as we do, not only in the strict sense of superhuman, but in a rhetorical way, as a mere superlative, in the sense of godlike. The emperor cannot have been regarded, at least in his lifetime, as literally superhuman, even though he was honored as a god with every outward show of reverence. In the thought of the worshiper the divinity of the living emperor can only have meant a decided superiority, of one sort or another, to other men. Each worshiper's conception necessarily varied with his character and mental capacity; for then as now men created God in their own image. The average Roman was an ignorant and superstitious believer in the gods. But to him the distinguishing attribute of deity was power. Wisdom and morality in the highest sense hardly entered into his notion of a god at all. To the common man, therefore, the power wielded by the absolute ruler of a world-empire doubtless appeared so inconceivably great that he had no difficulty in believing him the equal of any of the gods. If the essence of divinity is the possession of power, then surely the all-powerful emperor must be divine.

But what shall we say of men of intellect and character, the poets, rhetoricians, and philosophers who lent their talents to the glorification of the imperial deities? Surely they were not dazzled by the splendor of imperial power nor blind to the mental and moral defects of their rulers. Such men, if they believed in the gods at all, held a high conception of deity. They rejected the myths which attributed human passions and follies and immoralities to the immortal gods. They certainly did not accept the divinity of a Caligula or a Caracalla, living or dead. They might, however, consistently worship such emperors as Augustus or Trajan or Marcus Aurelius, whom they honored for their ability as rulers and for their character as men, thereby testifying that they believed them to possess those super-eminent qualities and capacities which men attribute to their gods. But most men of intelligence in the Roman empire were skeptical as to the existence of any gods whatsoever and cannot therefore have believed sincerely in the divinity of the emperors. The formal worship of their rulers on the part of the majority of intelligent men, while it may have expressed personal respect and political loyalty, can have had no strictly religious quality.

The cult of the deified emperors presents the problem in a slightly different form. Can the members of the senate have really believed in a god whom they had just created by their votes? Yet the emperor Tiberius and his mother Livia are said to have offered sacrifices to Augustus as a god. Germanicus tells his soldiers that the deified Augustus looks down upon them from his abode in the heavens. Pliny assures us that Trajan believed in the divinity of his predecessor Nerva. But these and similar acts and utterances may well have been prompted wholly by political and personal motives; hence they fall short of proving a distinctively religious faith in the divinity of the emperors. To the believer in personal immortality it may have seemed possible—in view of the mystery that envelops the state of the disembodied spirit—that one who on earth had reached the summit of human greatness and exhibited the noblest human virtues should after death rise to the rank of a god. But the great mass of thinking men were quite as skeptical about personal immortality as con-

cerning the existence of the gods. They can hardly therefore be supposed to have believed in the divinity of the deceased emperors, regarding whose continued existence they were in doubt. A hint as to the feeling of the emperors themselves is furnished us in the famous remark of Vespasian on his deathbed, "I suppose I am becoming a god," which is cited by his biographer as an instance of his love of a jest, but which doubtless reflects the rude soldier's skepticism as to his approaching divinity. In brief, then, while the ignorant multitude worshiped the emperors, living and dead, in a blindly superstitious fashion, and the skeptical majority of intelligent men paid them a purely formal and conventional homage, a devout minority, who still believed in the gods and in immortality, may have viewed them with some measure of true religious sentiment.

The imperial cult reached the height of its popularity in the second century, but thereafter gradually lost its religious importance until in the fourth century it was completely secularized. The decline of emperor-worship was connected with the general decay of the old religion. After the recognition of Christianity the formal public worship of the emperors soon came to an end. Yet a large part of the old ceremonial, because of its political importance as the highest expression of loyalty, survived for nearly two centuries. The custom of kneeling before the emperor and before his statue was retained, though the practice was disapproved by the church. The emperor's acts were called sacred, his virtues divine, and the epithet eternal was added to his name. The title *Divus* was formally conferred by the senate upon the deceased emperors, but it had become a mere mark of respect and was freely used by Christians as well as pagans. In the provinces the priests of the imperial worship were still elected by the local council, but the functions both of priests and council were purely political. The machinery of the municipal and popular cult also survived under the same restrictions. Constantine even permitted the city of Hispellum in Umbria to build a temple in honor of his family, but on the condition that no pagan worship should be performed in it.

The attitude of both Jews and Christians toward the worship

of the emperors had always been hostile, as might have been expected. Caligula once ordered his statue to be set up in the synagogues in Alexandria and in the temple at Jerusalem. The Jews made vigorous protests without effect, but the assassination of the emperor prevented the execution of his purpose. No further attempt was made to impose emperor-worship upon the Jews.

The Christians were not so fortunate. Yet their position was logical and was clearly and consistently maintained. They honored the emperor as ruler, but declined to recognize him as a god. This distinction the Roman authorities refused to admit. They insisted that the worship of the national gods—and the emperor in particular—was the duty of every citizen and that to refuse was an act of disloyalty. Hence the mere profession of Christianity was regarded as a crime against the state. One who was accused of that crime might clear himself by the simplest act or word implying reverence for the gods or acceptance of the divinity of the emperor. Several notable instances are recorded in which this test of loyalty was applied to the Christians. Pliny in his well-known letter to Trajan reports that as governor of Bithynia he required them to worship the gods and to offer wine and incense before the emperor's statue. Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna, when commanded by the proconsul, as the condition of his release, to swear by the Genius of the emperor, replied, "You do not know what I am. I am a Christian."

But while the church never relaxed its protest against the worship of the emperors, it did not forbid its members to participate in such ceremonies and functions of the imperial cult as were non-religious in character, especially in the later centuries when its religious aspect was becoming less prominent. As early as 300 A.D. Christians were permitted to hold the imperial priest-hoods and perform the civil duties of the office, but were forbidden, on pain of excommunication, to conduct sacrifices in honor of the emperor or to preside at the gladiatorial games, which the church condemned. Even after Constantine, when public sacrifices were no longer offered to the emperors, the church looked with disfavor upon the secularized cult, doubtless because of its association with paganism; for its external features—the priesthoods, the temples,

the feasts, the games—were still identical with those of the old religion. On moral grounds, too, a large part of the surviving ceremonial—the excessive adulation of the emperor, the license and extravagance that accompanied the festivals, and especially the brutality of the gladiatorial sports—was repugnant to Christian feeling.

The growth of emperor-worship was contemporary with the rise and spread of the Christian doctrine of the deity of Jesus. The question of a possible relation between the two movements is an interesting one. The points of contrast are obvious and striking. The emperor, standing at the summit of worldly greatness, was deified by official decree as the incarnation of political power, regardless of his character or worth. Jesus, rejected by his countrymen and condemned by the state, was venerated by his disciples as the ideal of purity, spirituality, and divine love. That the belief in the divinity of Jesus can have been suggested by the prevalent worship of the emperors is highly improbable, especially as that belief originated precisely in those circles in which the most bitter hostility had always been felt toward emperor-worship. But it is not at all impossible that, as Christianity became known throughout the Roman world, the acceptance of Jesus' divinity by converts from paganism may have been facilitated by their familiarity through the imperial cult with the idea that one who lived on earth the life of a man might at the same time possess a divine personality which was destined to survive in the life after death.