

EMPEROR WORSHIP

In the discussion of the book of Revelation, the issue of emperor worship figures prominently in our understanding of the book. During the First Century, worship of false gods was prominent, especially in countries dominated by Gentile populations. Athens was noted for its idolatry (cf. Acts 17), and Corinth was sometimes referred to as “Little Athens”. Besides the major gods worshipped by the people, individuals would sometimes have their own gods. Many cities had a chief god, such as Diana in Ephesus (cf. Acts 19).

When Rome conquered the lands previously held by the Greeks, the idolatry already existing was continued, only with Roman names for most of the gods. The Roman Empire grew to be the mightiest force on the face of the Earth, and its pagan worship is well documented.

Because people viewed their rulers as being superior, it was not difficult for them to ascribe the idea of deity to their rulers (especially since they gave human characteristics to their gods). Thus, in many cultures, the rulers were worshipped as “gods”. It does not seem that the people believed their rulers could do the great wonders generally attributed to the gods, but the status of the rulers was on the same level as the gods. Egypt viewed its Pharaohs as gods, and, in time, Roman Caesars came to have the stature of deity. Consider the following statement by Durant:

Augustus himself became one of the chief competitors of his gods. His great-uncle had set the example: two years after being murdered, Caesar had been recognized by the Senate as a deity, and his worship spread throughout the Empire. As early as 36 B.C some Italian cities had given Octavian a place in their pantheon; by 27 B.C. his name was added to those of the gods in official hymns at Rome; his birthday became a holy

day as well as a holiday; and after his death the Senate decreed that his *genius*, or soul, was thereafter to be worshipped as one of the official divinities...In Italian homes the worship of the Emperor's *genius* became associated with the adoration given to the Lares of the household and *genius* of the paterfamilias; there was nothing difficult in this for a people which through centuries had deified dead parents, built altars to them, and given the name of temples to ancestral tombs. (p. 226)

Emperor worship also served as a solidifying point in a diverse society. While many may have had their individual worship, all had the worship of the emperor in common.

Revelation 13 mentions a beast that would persecute and kill Christians (vs. 7). The description given to this beast is fulfilled in the Roman Empire of that day. That is, the first beast represented the government that oppressed the church and ruled over the nations. A second beast is also mentioned in Revelation 13. This beast caused people to worship the image of the first beast. Thus, this beast was a power that caused people to worship the Roman emperor and refused people the right to buy or sell unless people worshipped the image of the Roman Empire (vss. 12-17).

Emperor worship may have provided the Roman government a good deal of power and control, but it created a critical problem for Christians. Worship of the emperor violated the principles set down by God – Christians are not to worship man (cf. Acts 10:25,26), nor are Christians to worship false gods (cf. Ex. 20; Acts 15; 1 Thess. 1:9). Because the emperor was a human who professed deity, to worship the image of the emperor would mean that Christians believed in the deity of this human.

Although the Christian could not worship the emperor, to not worship the emperor could be very dangerous for them. Thus, the Christian was faced with not worshipping the emperor and being punished for not doing so, or worshipping the

emperor and compromising Christianity. To fail to worship the emperor could be viewed as sedition by the Roman authorities.

Under Roman Law...Christians were liable to suffer penalties imposed by Roman law just because they were Christians, Christian apologists continued to protest that they were innocent of any crime but their protests went unheeded...those who voiced such protests were told that they might easily prove their loyalty to the empire by worshipping the state gods, and in particular by burning incense to the emperor's image or swearing by his divinity...the Christians refusal to countenance such claims, and the language in which they ascribed divine honor to Jesus, could easily be given the appearance of sedition. (Bruce, p. 67)

Durant notes in his book that *"In 93 Domitian executed some Christians for refusing to offer sacrifice before his image ..."* (p. 292).

Emperor worship was best developed in the province of Asia in western Asia Minor. The first temple for emperor worship was erected in Pergamum, dedicated both to the goddess Roma and the emperor Augustus in 29 B.C. The "concillia" was located in Pergamum as well. This assembly was set up to enforce emperor worship which by 12 B.C. had been pushed more forcibly upon people by Augustus. The "concillia" was in charge of state religion.

While some Roman emperors did not encourage emperor worship, some did. Among those who did encourage emperor worship were Caligula, Nero, and Domitian. Emperor worshipped continued to be a part of the state religion up to the days of Constantine (approx. 350 A.D.). Persecution against Christians diminished after the emperor Decius was defeated at Beroea in 250 A.D.

While torture and death could be the result of not worshipping the emperor, there is the possibility that those who enforced the state religion may also have resorted to fakery of some sort to make the image appear to speak. Henrikson alludes to this in his

book on page 180 and cites the work of William Ramsay also in this regards. Throughout history people have played on the superstitions of many to control them. How many times in our own lives have we heard of some “miraculous” happening coming from some statute, painting, etc.? To further emphasize this point, Julius Caesar was deified partly because on the night he died, a comet appeared in the sky. The bright light put off by the comet signified to the people that Caesar’s soul had gone to heaven (“Emperor Worship”, p. 2).

Revelation 13:16,17 make reference to a “mark” given to people to allow them to buy and sell. This “mark” was given to them when they worshipped the image of the beast. One thing we do know is that those who worshipped the emperor received a certificate (*libellus*) showing they had worshipped the emperor. Once the participant had worshipped the emperor, then the participant was free to worship as he or she pleased. Archaeologist have discovered a copy of a libellus. This libellus was found on a papyrus at Oxyrhyncus. It is dated as June 26, 250 A.D. by those who have studied it. It reads as follows:

To the Commissioners of Sacrifice of the Village of Alexander’s Island:
From Aurelius Diogenes, the son of Satabus, of the Village of Alexanders
Island, aged 72 years: --- scar on his right eyebrow.

I have always sacrificed regularly to the gods, and now, in your presence, in accordance with the edict, I have done sacrifice, and poured the drink offering, and tasted of the sacrifices, and I request you to certify the same. Farewell.

Handed in by, *Aurelius Diongenes*.

I certify that I saw him sacrificing. (Signature obliterated)
Done in the first year of the Emperor, Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus
Trajanus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, second of the month Epith.

(“Ancient History Sourcebook”, p. 1)

Emperor worship caused serious problems for the Christian, and helped to destroy the Roman Empire. Yet, those who practiced emperor worship believed they were doing a great service. As one writer said, *“While it is presumably true that those who engaged in activities honoring the emperor in some divine way saw themselves as engaging in a socially useful function, nonetheless it is hard to escape the notion it was a lot of nonsense.”* (“Emperor Worship”, pp. 4,5).

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