

Caelestes Honores: Emperor Worship among Corinth's Earliest Christians

Recent work on the nature of emperor worship during the Principate has precipitated a sharp shift in our understanding of Roman religion. Older generations of scholarship have insisted that emperor worship was nothing more than *Graeca adulatio*. No educated Greek would have seriously entertained the notion of the emperor's divinity; rather, for the Greeks in the east, emperor worship was empty flattery whose only end was potential imperial favor (Bowersock, 1973). However, during that same year, the tides began shift. Fergus Millar argued that the conception of a *divine human* already enjoyed a long history in antiquity and contended that emperor worship was incorporated into the ritual worship of other gods (Millar, 1973). Both scholars provided substantial primary evidence to substantiate their claims; Bowersock from intellectual elite and philosophers, while Millar relied on material evidence.

Significant conceptual reformulation followed Price's landmark 1984 thesis, with which Clifford Ando (2000) and Ittai Gradel (2002) reoriented scholarly discussion. Divinity, they maintained, was not held in radical, mutually exclusive dualism with humanity; rather, in the Roman world, humanity and divinity, instead of being divided by type, essence, or nature, were distributed on a spectrum according to status and power. As one recent scholar has remarked, "divinity exists along a cosmic gradient" of status measured in honors for benefaction (Peppard, 2011). Thus, just as a client honored his patron for the latter's benefaction, so also do humans honor the gods for theirs. The honors bestowed on the emperors for their benefactions are no different in kind than either of those above; they only differ in degree.

Other advancements were made during this same period. It became clear that emperor worship was not the imperial cult previous scholars believed. Rather than being a top-down tool

of political manipulation, new scholarship demonstrated that worship was initiated locally. Furthermore, emperor worship, their work showed, was not restricted to the Greek east where ‘ruler cult’ had percolated for some time; in fact, emperor worship spread wide in Italy and even at Rome. While never attaining the status of an official state cult, worship of the emperor proliferated from the early days of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The new portrait of emperor worship during the early Principate is that local manifestations proliferated throughout the empire, offering divine honors to the emperors, specifically their *genius* and *numen*. The activity was not restricted to the Greeks, not limited to deceased emperors, nor was the practice systematized through any machinations of the emperors.

How did early Christians interact with and understand emperor worship? This paper proposes to examine evidence extant in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Resonances of emperor worship have already been pointed to by Winter (2015), expanding on earlier work focused on counter-imperial strategies in Thessalonians (Judge, 2008). Examining Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians (10:14–22), I propose that Paul’s language indicates that there were some at Corinth who continued to worship the emperor alongside their new god, Jesus Christ. Indeed, Paul inserts pithy clarification into his argument (10:20): “What am I saying? ... I say that what they offer, they offer to *genii* (δαίμονις)—not to God; I don’t want you to become partners with *genii* (δαίμονιον).” Paul’s attempt to stifle this activity evinces not only his recalcitrance toward imperial authority, as evident in his counter-imperial reinscription of divine honors, but also how *some* Corinthians received or responded to Paul’s gospel in light of the gradation in honors that defined Roman religious practice. Some Corinthians, so it seems, may

have received Paul's gospel as a call to worship a peculiar Jewish *divine man* on par—or at least on the spectrum—with the Roman emperor.

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