

Lord of Lords - Caesar or Jesus

"...the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings - and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." (Rev. 17:14)

The Christian faith began with antagonism between the Jewish Temple authorities in Jerusalem and the believers ([Acts 4:1-21](#); [5:17-42](#); [6:8-7:60](#)). The Jewish king Herod Agrippa I, who was sympathetic with the Sadducean Temple leaders persecuted the new movement as well ([Acts 12:1-19](#)). Significantly the Roman authorities were often a refuge for the believers who attempted to live and speak for Jesus among the gentile pagans. Paul, the early Jewish missionary often uses his Roman citizenship as a shield against the opposition of his listeners ([Acts 16:22-40](#); [19:23-41](#); [21:27-22:30](#); [23:20-35](#); [24:1-4](#); [25:10-11](#); [24-25](#); [26:32](#); [25:10-11](#); [28:19](#)). In the name of peace and law, the Roman overlords defended the believers against unjust attack. Those followers of Jesus wrote letters to the church communities urging obedience to the God ordained authorities ([Rom. 13:1-7](#); [1 Peter 2:13-14](#)) "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong." (Rom. 13:3)

But things would soon change. By the time the movement Jesus' began had reached 50 years the Roman government had unleashed its furious hatred against the Christians. The book of Revelation is written to people undergoing great suffering at the hands of the Roman authorities for their practices. Revelation is a difficult book to interpret but certainly some references are to the power of Satan as it was unleashed through Rome. The phrase "Babylon" was frequently used by Jewish communities to describe Rome ([Rev. 17:5](#)) and Rome was built on seven hills ([17:9](#)). This demonic force was "drunk" with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. Regardless of future implications of passages like these (and there are many), the readers in Asia would have seen the demonic hatred of Rome for them reflected in these words. What happened between the writing of Acts and Revelation to cause such a change? The answer? The Deification of the Emperors! Nowhere was Emperor worship more radically enforced than Asia Minor.

The Eastern Beginning of Emperor Worship

The roots of the deification of the Emperor go back to eastern practice long before Rome arrived on the scene. The people of Asia minor had always viewed their kings as divine in some way. Croesus, king of Sardis (550 BC) was honored as king as were the kings of Pergamum. A Heroon, a sacred enclosure and temple, where the cult of the ruler was celebrated occupies a prominent place on the acropolis of Pergamum. Here the rulers of the city were honored as gods, a practice which legitimized their absolute power of the king and his dynasty. They bore titles such as Soter (Savior) or Epiphanes, (God Manifested) and were worshipped regularly including a festival on their holy day often their birthday.

The Asian (2) culture came under Greek influence in the millennium before Jesus time and adopted the practice of the people of the area. Alexander the Great, came to Asia in

the fourth century. He declared that he was the descendant of Heracles and Zeus and therefore divine. The cities he conquered were delighted to consider him one of their gods and honored him with statues, festivals and regular sacrifices including offerings to Alexander himself. After he died, his empire was divided among his commanders each of whom continued the practice of declaring themselves divine. This added legitimacy to their rule among the common people. Who would disagree with the rule of a god? Because they were considered divine during their lifetime, temples and altars were built for them and regular festivals held in their honor (3). The cities realized significant gain from the practice as well. The self declared king would honor the city where he was worshipped with variety of benefits, from enhanced status to money for building projects. For the city which became the center of the king's cult, the special honor was being *neokoros* meaning "temple keeper." This meant they were the imperial center which brought added power, status and money to that city. It was customary for cities to compete for the honor of neokorus because of the benefits it brought them. This meant the whole world competed to determine who would honor the deified ruler the most. The people of Asia assumed their rulers were gods.

Divine Emperor

The Roman Empire expanded eastward near the end of the second century BC. When the king of Pergamum, Attalos, willed his kingdom to Rome (133 BC), Asia became a province of Rome. Many cities of Asia sent representatives to Rome offering to establish cults in honor of the rulers of the empire even though Rome was still governed by the Senate, and there were no emperors. When Julius Caesar became emperor the enthusiasm for his official deification grew in the East even though in Rome the rulers were not considered divine. When Julius Caesar was murdered in 44 BC a spectacular comet, so bright it could be seen in Roman skies in broad daylight for eight days. This was interpreted as the divine authentication of Caesar's deity. His adopted son Octavian proclaimed his father "divine" and himself "Son of God" when he became emperor in 27 BC. He changed his name to *Augustus*, a title of supreme majesty and divinity.

The provinces of the empire had honored the goddess Roma, the patron of the empire for almost a century. Smyrna, a city in Asia, was the home of the first temple to the goddess outside Rome itself. Rome represented the power and authority of the empire as defender of peace, truth, and justice around the world. Once the authority was focused in one person, the emperor, and the emperor was already believed to have divine origins, it was a simple step to establish emperor cults along with the existing cult of Roma.

In 27 BC Augustus granted the province of Asia the right to erect temples and statues to honor him. A temple was erected in Ephesus for Julius Caesar and Roma. The non-Roman citizens of Asia were urged to worship these gods though Roman citizens apparently were not at this time. Augustus then ordered a statue of himself and Roma placed in the Precinct of Athena in Pergamum and in the Basilica of Ephesus. The worship of the emperor soon overshadowed the cult of Roma. Especially in the eastern reaches of the empire the eagerness of the people to establish emperor cults encouraged the emperors themselves to demand such an honor. Besides the validity, it gave to their

rule it was a uniting force in an empire fractured by social unrest, a multitude of languages, cultures and religions. Soon an organized priesthood and regulated worship requirements were the order of the day. Still, the process developed slowly.

Augustus died in 14 AD. While he was considered divine and worshipped around the empire, his son Tiberius did not take such honors on himself though after his death the city of Smyrna became *neokorus* for him. Caligula (37-41 AD) who followed insisted on divine honors for his father and for himself. He was the first to enforce emperor worship on his non-Roman subjects with refusal punished with death. Claudius who followed rejected such honors but Nero (54-68 AD) accepted them (4). Vespasian (who destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD) and his son Titus did not insist on being worshipped though they certainly were acknowledged by their subjects as gods.

When Domitian (81-96 AD) became emperor there was significant change in the demand for deification. Domitian was obsessed with his own (and his brother Titus' and father Vespasian's) deity. One of the most brutal of all emperors he demanded worship as god throughout the empire from all his subjects, Roman or otherwise. He established Ephesus neokorus for himself as well as Titus and Vespasian. Domitian insisted on being called "Lord and God" whenever he was mentioned or addressed. Believing that he was the only mediator between the gods and humans, he ordered that any who would not worship the ancient gods and the modern gods like himself should be eliminated by whatever means possible. Blood flowed throughout Asia as the "atheist" Christians (so called because they refused to worship the gods of the Roman world) were slaughtered in cold blood.

The world of Asia was suddenly a very dangerous place for the rapidly growing Christian communities. The believers must be willing to call Caesar "Lord and God" or risk death. Everyone was expected to participate in the regular festivals in which he was acknowledged as divine. Before they entered a city they had to offer incense honoring him as god. This explains change from the book of Acts to Revelation. The emperors claimed not only the titles but the rights as well. They must be obeyed in whatever they demanded for they were "gods" whether taxes, confiscation of property, or any other act. There was no escape for the believers. They could not buy in the market or conduct their business without acknowledging the authority of the emperor over the city. They could not walk through the city without stopping at his altars to acknowledge his "lordship." They could not travel for every town they came to demanded their act of allegiance to the divine emperor. The public fountains providing drinking water for the towns and cities were devoted to the Emperor. Before drawing water one must acknowledge the emperor as the provider of life itself. And enforcing this Satanic policy? The incredible power of the greatest empire the world had ever known. No one had ever resisted its sword for very long. And the believers? Most were not the wealthy and powerful but ordinary people without influence on anyone. This was combined with the bloodthirsty character of the emperors themselves who did not hesitate to order people to suffer the most horrifying tortures ever devised. Nero, who used burning Christians as lights for his own banquets, who raped male and female Christians who had been arrested, who sent thousands to the arena to be torn to pieces in front of parents, children, and friends, set the standard for the treatment of these followers of the Galilean Rabbi. **If you read the**

book of Revelation in light of these conditions, you are gripped by how virulently anti Roman it is, and what kind of suffering the believers were facing. But Caesar was not Lord! He just did not know it yet, even when the "atheist" Christians did.

The process continued after the brutal Domitian. Some of the greatest persecutions came two centuries after Jesus death. Since the focus of this study is the first century after the beginning of the Church we cannot describe their reign of terror. Asia did have other deified emperors within one century of Jesus' death including temples to Trajan (98-117) and Hadrian (117-138) in Ephesus, and a magnificent temple to Trajan in Pergamum. Emperor worship would be a severe test for the believers for more than 250 years.

It is important to understand that the basic reason the believers were persecuted is not the worship of Jesus or the God of the Bible. No one minded how many other gods were worshipped as long as the emperor was acknowledged as god. Because the Emperor was the head of the Roman state, and the state was the basis for all of life, to reject the emperor was to be unpatriotic, un-Roman. Those who belonged to an organization dedicated to a God who claimed absolute authority over all including the Emperor god were suspected of political subversion and severe punishment would soon follow. They were killed for being rebels.

One must not forget that distinction. It is not ones allegiance to Jesus as Lord that was considered dangerous, but the insistence that he must be the *only* Lord of all. All other gods are not gods at all ([Acts 19:23-26](#)) but demonic counterfeits. There can be no mixture of loyalty, no adding of emperor worship to the worship of God. But there was more. The followers of Jesus believed that because there was only one God and Lord his word provides an absolute authority which is the standard to judge everything from personal morals to the conduct of the state itself. The empire of Rome, with or without an emperor who called himself god, did not have authority over the very words of the only God! So the Christians were considered 'atheists,' un-patriotic, and a threat to the stability of the empire. For this they deserve death! **The book of Revelation regardless of its future meaning, was a strident declaration that the whole social of the Roman order was built on a Satanic fraud ;the deity of the Roman emperor. Rome to the people of Asia, the beast from the sea, was not ruled by emperors but by Satan himself. And Jesus would destroy Satan. The empire will not survive either.**

This is very important concept for the Christian community today as well. We do not have "emperor worship" in our culture. Our master is the divine public opinion. For sure, there is one thing that has not changed. It is acceptable for a Christian to practice faith privately in whatever form is chosen as long as it does not infringe on the life of the culture at large. *The idea that there is an absolute standard that takes precedence over the will of the majority, or the decision of the voters is very unpopular. Post moderm society would like to believe it is up to each individual to decide right and wrong for himself.* I have the right to decide is the mantra of the 21st century. That is not acceptable for the follower of the Lord of the universe. He is the authority and his book is the absolute authority regardless of the opinion of anyone. This means Christians must

decide as did our brothers and sisters in Asia whether we will accept the total lordship of Jesus and accept a "higher" authority - what the majority desires.

The Cultic Practice of Emperor Worship

The festival held by the cities where each emperor was worshipped was the most important event in the life of the people. Generally the festivals were held yearly on the same day, usually the emperor's birthday or the day of his becoming emperor. Every person in the city was expected to participate to honor the emperor and to enhance the cities standing as the great patron of that emperor, a distinction that brought many benefits. People from around the province would come to the city that was *neokorus* to the particular emperor being honored. These visitors would spend a significant period of time in the city for the celebration enjoying the baths or the brothels, the theater and the arena. They brought significant income for the temples who sold religious 'souvenirs' as well as to the general economy of the town. Emperor worship had economic consequences. The temples and all the public buildings were washed and decorated with wreaths.

The statues of the emperors and other gods were decorated with crowns and brought out of the temples and paraded daily through the streets led by the image of the present emperor. The procession included the priests of the cult carrying the statues and leading the sacrificial animals. They were followed by the public officials of the city, priests and priestesses from other cults, students, and the ever present religious (and non-religious) prostitutes. At the end of the procession were the curious, the sightseers from other places and any else who wanted to join the festivities. As the procession passed the people who lived along the route of the parade would come out of their homes and offer incense on the altars carried in the procession to publicly declare "Caesar is Lord" and the basis for civilized life. Passersby were expected to do the same. Everyone, guest or citizen were expected to make such a declaration publicly some time during the festival. This created a real dilemma for the Christians who were citizens of the town. They either had to leave town (difficult to do without drawing attention to themselves) or refuse to make the offering (exposing themselves to charges deserving death). Others noted the lack of participation by such a significant portion of their citizens which reflected poorly on the city and might result in penalties from the emperor or at least a loss of his benefits. This put great pressure on the followers of Jesus. Some must have been tempted to simply participate "without meaning it" a denial of the lordship of Jesus.

The procession generally began at the Temple of the Emperor, paraded through the streets of the city and ended in some public place of assembly like the *palaestra* of the gymnasium, the theater, or the *agora* (the public market). The statues would be prominently displayed and the sacrifices offered to them and gifts were brought from the city and its citizens (to which everyone was expected to contribute). Everyone in the city (citizen and guest alike) was expected to offer sacrifice and eat the sacrificed meat as a recognition of the emperors divinity and communion with him. Those who could not afford their own sacrifice received one from the public treasury. Again everyone was to participate as an acknowledgment of the Lord Caesar. This sacrifice was the culminating

moment of the celebration. The animal was killed, the best parts were offered to the "god" and the rest was roasted and served to those who gathered around the altar to be joined ceremonially with the deity. The believers had two choices: Go along with their pagan neighbors so as not to create offense and endanger themselves and their families or stand firm, declare "Jesus is Lord" and risk suffering and even death. The festivities ended with public spectacles including animal and gladiator battles, athletic contests and theater.

The witness of the disciples and the believers was a declaration of war on the Roman state and its Satanic foundation. Jesus the Son of God is "Lord of Lords and King of Kings" ([Rev. 17:14; 19:16](#)). What seemed religious to the Christians was political to the Romans. There was no middle ground. Either Caesar was Lord or Jesus was. To his followers the basis of life and faith was a total commitment to God who was "...the blessed and only ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal..." ([1 Tim. 6:15-16](#)). This issue was should all authority ...government and religious be under God's law or under the "divine emperor"? To the believers there was only one answer. Here were two world views...two empires competing for domination of the world and there was no compromise!

Nowhere was this more at issue than in Asia where the church of Jesus had a strong beginning. They lived "where Satan lives" and where "Satan has his throne" ([Rev. 2:13](#)). This province, where rulers had always been divine was the heart of the demonic emperor cult. The believers, ordinary people, need to be encouraged to know that faith in Jesus requires total submission to his Lordship regardless of the price. He must be served everywhere and in everything whether the cost is economic, social, or even life itself ([Rev. 13:11-17](#)). The believers needed that reminder. Jesus is Lord though it may not seem like it. But the battle is not between the believers and Rome; it is between Jesus and the emperor...no not even that. The battle is between Jesus and Satan and that battle has already been decided. Be encouraged! ([Rev. 20](#)).

Process of Deification

The book of Acts may contain a startling challenge to the growing menace of emperor worship according to an article entitled "Upstaging the Emperor" by N.T. Wright published in *Bible Review*. Luke, using the Jewish interpretation of the book of Daniel which foretold the final victory God's people over the tyranny of the Gentiles, declares that the emperor is not Lord at all. Jesus is Lord in spite of the fact the Roman Empire crucified him (8). A summary of Wright's article is most helpful.

Jesus died on Passover and was raised from the dead 3 days later. For the next forty days he taught the disciples about the "kingdom of God" ([Acts 1:3](#)). Jews understood his kingdom would occur as God and his people defeated Satan and his followers based on Daniel 7. Here great beasts fight to destroy God's people. One of them with iron teeth and ten horns was particularly fierce and cruel. But then one like 'a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples,

nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is on that will never be destroyed." (Dan. 7:13-14). All other kingdoms will be destroyed for their blasphemy against God. By his ascension (Acts 1:1-11) Jesus, often called the son of man, takes his rightful place at God's right hand. Lord of Lords and King of kings. All other authority becomes subject to his.

Wright notes that emperors went through a specific process called *apotheosis* or divinization to be considered deity. In this process witnesses come forward to declare they have seen the recently deceased emperor ascending into heaven thereby clearly divine. His son, the new emperor can now be proclaimed "Son of God" hence divine himself. These witnesses were crucial to the process. Their testimony was the basis on which the emperor's divinity stood.

But now the eleven disciples, ordinary people witness an unbelievable event. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of Man, ascended into heaven. Angels appeared to declare he would return in the clouds to be declared Lord of all ([Acts 1:1-11](#)). They were now witnesses of an event that made Caesar a demonic fraud. He, like all world powers which had opposed God's people would be totally destroyed ([Dan. 9:26](#)). Caesar was in fact in trouble. They were the witnesses to Jews in Judea and to Gentiles around the world ([Acts 1:8](#)) to this amazing fact. Anyone who claims divine authority besides Jesus will be crushed by the mighty power of the divine Lord Jesus. The amazing thing about the ascension, such a radical message for those who thought the emperor divine, is that it came years before the emperors would force their subjects to worship them. The disciples probably did not even know what kind of antithetical message they were bringing. As Wright says "The divine Lord of the world is not Caesar, bestride his brutal empire. It is Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, whom the Roman Empire crucified but whom Israel's God has now vindicated." There would be no compromise.

1. It is important to realize that many Jewish people believed in Jesus, that few Pharisees attacked the movement (a leading Pharisee defended it [Acts 5:34](#)), and that the persecution came primarily from the Sadducee party the party of the temple priesthood as it had for Jesus.

2. Asia is here used in the Roman sense referring to the province in Anatolia or Asia Minor, today's Turkey.

3. Antiochus Epiphanes, the descendant of Seleucis one of Alexander's commanders, ruled over the territory of Israel in the 2nd century BC. Believing himself divine he forced the Jews to honor him with a yearly sacrifice of a pig, set up his statue in the temple in Jerusalem, and ordered regular sacrifices on the altar there for himself. The Jews rose up in revolt, led by Judah Maccabee and eventually drove out the Seleucids and the self proclaimed god, Antiochus. The holiday which commemorates this victory and the cleansing of the Holy Temple which followed is called Hanukkah or the feast of Dedication ([John 10:22](#)) and is still celebrated today. For religious Jews there is no greater blasphemy than for a human to be declared god.

Who is Lord and God?

According to tradition, the apostle John also came to Ephesus—in approximately AD 70. At that time, John was writing or would soon write the book of Revelation, which includes the message to the church at Ephesus mentioned earlier. By this time, the Roman Emperor Domitian had the upper hand in attracting the religious loyalties of the Ephesians.

Demanding that people worship him as a god, Domitian insisted on being called “Lord” and “God” by everyone, including his wife. The Ephesians built huge structures dedicated to Domitian, including a prominent temple designed to be the world center of Domitian worship. One of its features was a twenty-seven-foot-tall statue of Domitian. Anyone approaching the city by sea or by land could see the temple and its statue and know that the Ephesians as a whole believed Domitian to be king of the gods. Along the city streets, altars reminded the people of Domitian’s lordship and their allegiance to him. Once a year, the people had to say publicly in front of the altar, “Caesar is Lord.” Anyone who didn’t recognize Domitian’s lordship, including no doubt the early Christians who acknowledged the lordship of God alone, was subject to death.

A Legacy of Christian Love

It took passionate commitment and courage for the early Christians to stand up for their beliefs in the face of this “mark of the beast.” Despite serious persecution, which included the denial to conduct business in the markets and obtain water from public fountains, the Christians of Ephesus publicly spoke out for Jesus and lived for him in a loving way. They endured great hardships for Jesus and never became weary of living for him.

Where did they get the courage and passion to proclaim the gospel in Ephesus? One reason they could work tirelessly for Christ is because of the mutual love and support they demonstrated to one another. When John wrote, “You have forsaken your first love” ([Rev. 2:4](#)), he was really challenging them to love each other with the love they first had for each other—the love of Jesus. In order to live consistently and publicly for Jesus, they needed to believe in him and care about each other.

The Pollio Fountain, located in Domitian’s Square, was built to remind the Ephesians that the Emperor Domitian was their lord of lords, king of kings, and provider of life. In a similar way, the loving community of Christians was (and still is) to stand in the midst of culture and point people towards God—the true Lord of Lords, King of Kings, and source of life.

A paving stone was unearthed by archaeologists into which symbols of the early church—the “fish” symbol and a cross—had been carved. Somewhere in Ephesus, a person, family, or perhaps an entire community of believers wanted passerby to know, in quiet and unobtrusive way, that Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, Savior, was Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

How will we testify to our world that Jesus is our Lord or Lords and King of Kings?

