

“*Honor the Emperor*”?  
The Roman Imperial Cult and Earliest Christianity

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As its readers often acknowledge, the world of the New Testament seems at once both near and far. Certain features read true to the most mundane details of daily living, while others appear as a window into an unknown past. This paradoxical ‘distance’ can be measured in many ways, and yet surely at least one factor is the socio-political *milieu* into which Christianity emerged. Leaving aside the subtle differentiation between ‘Palestinian’ and ‘Hellenistic’ forms of the burgeoning church, the ultimate socio-political matrix of those nascent centuries remains the *Imperium Romanum*—the empire of Rome. Warren Carter doesn’t overstate the case when he writes: “The Roman empire provides the ever-present political, economic, societal, and religious framework and context for the New Testament...”<sup>1</sup> Any attempt to understand this pervasive framework can also, therefore, be a means of understanding earliest Christianity and its interaction, under direction of the Lord’s apostles, with the soil into which it was planted and from which it grew. This is a necessary, though often ham-handed, endeavor for any interpreter.

One of the more fashionable trends in recent New Testament studies has been fixated on the Roman imperial cult. Not least within this field of interest is the “...flurry of research on the place of the emperor in Roman religion ... [as] New Testament scholars have emphasized the prominence of the imperial cult in the social, political, and religious context of the early Christian churches.”<sup>2</sup> The tone of interest has been altered of late, as the general scholarly consensus acknowledges the development of imperial cult, but only in conjunction with the normal civic rituals and devotions for most of the early empire, during which the New Testament

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 1. “The ‘imperial cult’ refers to a vast array of temples, images, rituals, personnel, and theological claims that honored the emperor ... Incense, sacrifices, and annual vows expressed and renewed civic loyalty” (7).

<sup>2</sup> J. M. G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (WUNT 275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 345. He continues: “A living emperor, like a deified ancestor, might be portrayed as Jupiter himself, or addressed alongside a traditional deity, or he might be portrayed in a traditional Roman pose offering sacrifices to the gods, or in an ambiguous mixture of the two styles ... he formed a hinge point connecting the Roman empire with the divine, and channeling the religious devotion of Roman citizens and subjects into a form that expressed social and political commitment to the Roman empire” (352).

was breathed. The push-back, then, addresses a ‘popular level’ claim; scattered coins and inscriptions coupled with vast secondary literature are poured into a grand tray, it is said, from which a broad brush can then paint over the New Testament in a quest to find ‘hidden codes’ of imperial resistance and subverting parallels of Christ to Caesar. But how much influence can we find the imperial cult to have exerted? And why does that matter?

### Defining Terms: A Ten-Thousand Foot View of the ‘Imperial Cult’

Reconstructing the ancient matrix of ‘political, economic, societal, and religious’ factors is fraught with the dangers of over- or, worse yet, mis-interpretation. This is almost entirely due to the modern inability to conceive of “political, economic, societal, and religious” factors as an intricately woven whole, rather than compartmentalized features of one’s worldview or power. The fact that ‘religious’ appears as but one factor amidst others is to begin with an interpretive blindspot. As historian Edwin Judge said in a playful though sincere maxim:

“When one encounters the word ‘religion’ in a translation of an ancient text: first, cross out the word whenever it occurs. Next, find a copy of the text in question in its original language and see what word (if any) is being translated by ‘religion.’ Third, come up with a different translation: it almost doesn’t matter what. Anything besides ‘religion.’”<sup>3</sup>

Modern conceptions of ‘religion,’ at least in western terms, often take their cue more from how William James or Rudolf Otto might describe ‘religion’; with a tendency to emphasize the feelings and personal experiences of the individual in relation to the divine. Accordingly, the ‘religious’ concerns primarily the individual, and therein is relatively ‘mystical.’ It becomes difficult to see (given these Schleiermacherian overtones) how politics, economics, and culture are part and parcel of the ‘religious.’ In truth, the ‘political, economic, societal, and religious’ are and always have been an intricately woven whole, but perhaps never so plainly as in antiquity. For this reason, we can safely assume we will be traveling into the first century AD with anachronisms well-holstered, and therefore we must strive—whenever we read into the context of a New

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Carl A. Martin and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 1.

Testament passage—to let the context speak on its own terms and not within our pre-conceived categories.<sup>4</sup>

With historians of the previous generation (like M. P. Nilsson and A. D. Nock and to a lesser extent, Ramsey MacMullen) this caveat was largely neglected, and resulted in the Roman imperial cult being seen as primarily ‘political’ (i.e. *not* religious) and therefore primarily ‘public’ (i.e. *not* private).<sup>5</sup> Our approach to the Roman imperial cult, as ‘religious’ activity, must therefore eschew this former treatment. The modern division of the ‘religious’ from the political, economic, and social, as Philip Harland argues:

“...would not be recognizable to people in the ancient context, where honoring deities was very much embedded within the daily life of individuals, whose identities were inextricably bound up within social groupings or communities. Within the ancient Mediterranean, we are dealing with a worldview and way of life centered on the maintenance of fitting relations among human groups, benefactors, and deities within the webs of connections which constituted society and the *cosmos*. Cultic life in antiquity had to do with appropriately honoring gods and goddesses through rituals of various kinds, especially sacrificial offerings, in ways that ensured the safety and protection of human groups and their members. Moreover, the forms which such honors could take do not necessarily coincide with ... what being “religious” means [in modern conception].”<sup>6</sup>

The Roman imperial cult was diverse, and a proper treatment would admit that few of its features, at any given stage of its development in the early empire, are monolithic. It varied under different rulers, and even therein it varied according to practice and according to place.<sup>7</sup>

It only seems as though the imperial cult was a single entity, for in reality it was as diverse as the empire which it inhabited. Nevertheless these diverse strands came together, as George Heyman

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<sup>4</sup> On this point cf. Steven J. Freisen, “Normal Religion, or, Words Fails Us: A Response to Karl Galinsky’s ‘The Cult of the Roman Emperor: Uniter or Divider’” in J. Brodd & J. L. Reed (eds.) *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult* (WGRWSS 5; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 23-25.

<sup>5</sup> So Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Revised Edition; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 48.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 50. On a similar note, Judith Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* (RMCS; New York: Routledge, 2009): “...the Roman empire managed to survive for such a long period of time, not by virtue of ‘Roman power alone’ but by a slowly realized consensus regarding Rome’s right to maintain social order and to establish a normative political culture” (7).

<sup>7</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Third Edition; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 211.

reminds us, for the imperial cult "...represented a matrix of collective religious expressions that encompassed the person of the emperor and the imperial family."<sup>8</sup> The point to be taken here is that imperial cult did not function against, or necessarily in isolation from the normal religious activity of the Roman empire:

"The army sacrificed to the Capitoline triad on behalf of the living emperor and also to his officially deified predecessors; provincials performed *vota* to the gods and sacrificed ... on behalf of the emperor ... In other words ... [the] cults of the emperor were not an independent element of religious life: sometimes the emperor was placed under the protection of the Olympian pantheon or linked with the traditional gods... [and] sometimes cult was offered directly to him."<sup>9</sup>

The absorption and continuity of the imperial cult within the larger religious activity of the early empire largely turned upon the conception of divine benefaction. As they would have it, the fate of Rome was held in the fragile balance of power between mankind and the gods. This was true even in the late republic, where "the question was not whether the gods were perceived to cooperate with [Roman political leaders], but with which political leaders was their favor placed?"<sup>10</sup> The point is crucial, for it is precisely here that we find a departure point for the imperial cult when compared to the plethora of religious activity in the empire. As the roots of imperial succession strengthened, the emperor was increasingly viewed as the personification of Rome, and therefore cultic activity developed in terms of divine benefaction for, through, and to him. We will return to the significance of this development later, where the book of Revelation serves to highlight imperial Rome's intensification of idolatrous glory and 'hideous strength.'

The importance of 'sacrifice' must also be noted as we move away from this terse attempt to define 'imperial cult.' Apart from other means of giving divine honor, sacrifice on behalf of the imperial cult served to generate Roman identity in the far-flung provinces of the Greek east (which is arguably the genesis of such activity) as well as the Latin west, where the former

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<sup>8</sup> George Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2007), 46. He continues: "Just as in ritual expressions of pre-imperial Roman religion, the imperial cult was also part of the *pax deorum* (the peace of the gods). Order, balance, and ritual precision ensured that the fragile balance of the cosmos would be maintained" (91).

<sup>9</sup> M. Beard, S. R. F. Price, J. North, *Religions of Rome Volume I: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 348.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

decorum of republican virtue, with reference to a *living* emperor, constrained expressions of imperial cult to private acts of devotion.<sup>11</sup> This further demonstrates ways in which the perception of the emperor in relation to divine benefaction shifted in the early empire, and resulted in the emperor gaining a relatively novel divine status which became expressed ritually through sacrifice, even in Rome.<sup>12</sup> The ritual of sacrifice also reinforced Rome as the ‘center’ of the world, as Heyman argues:

“The uniqueness of Rome as a sacred place was replicated ritually in the sacrificial practices dedicated either to or on behalf of the emperor. The populace might have rarely seen the living emperor, but sacrificial practices made the emperor ritually present... just as he was iconographically present on coins and sculptures.”<sup>13</sup>

The ubiquity of the imperial cult, in this way, was subtle — and only became antagonistic toward Christians in the sense that the ritual of sacrifice had become universally accepted in the civic functions of a given locale. As an aside, it was likely for this reason that later Christian apologists had to defend against the charge of ‘misanthropy’! By not participating in the maintenance of divine benefaction for, to, and through the emperor (as the figurehead of Rome), the early Christians would (in their aggressors’ eyes) be directly insulting the favor of the gods and therewith the *pax et securitas* (‘peace and security’) of the empire. The ritual of sacrifice then became “the discursive marker in the power struggle between Rome and followers of Jesus.”<sup>14</sup>

### Narrowing the Scope: ‘*Divus Nero*’ as a Test Case

Given the inherent ambiguity of the imperial cult in its variegated development, and the impossibility of properly surveying that development across the early imperial succession, this

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<sup>11</sup> This was not always the accepted view, but has since been successfully argued by Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (OCM; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> See Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> George Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 91. He continues: “The link between Rome, personified in the emperor and a periphery that was encompassed by empire, was ritually connected through sacrifices. The discourse around imperial sacrifices worked two ways. It allowed the conquered, yet obedient foreign lands to express both honor and gratitude for the political benefaction they received from the emperor, at the same time it ritually made the emperor (the embodiment of Roman identity) powerfully present throughout the empire” (78).

<sup>14</sup> Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 46.

study will move to focus on one—perhaps the most widely detested—emperor; the odious figure of Nero, whose name and reputation often conjure thoughts of severe persecution and imperial tyranny. Doubtlessly Nero left an indelible mark upon the development of Christianity, but the particulars of his rightful notoriety are often assumed, and more often misconstrued. The following sections will seek to assess the impact of Nero upon early Christianity while avoiding the tendency to anachronistically describe the development of imperial cult under his rule. We will begin by establishing Nero’s place within the Julio-Claudian dynasty (I); and, having considered a necessarily concise survey of his forbears’ claims to divinity, we will sift similarly concise evidence for Nero’s own divine acclaims (II). Thereafter we will gauge further evidence that either counters or needfully nuances his stature within the early church (III); leading us to concluding thoughts arising from our overall assessment.

### I. ‘It Runs in the Family’ — *Nero’s Julio-Claudian Background*

The Julio-Claudian dynasty began in 27 BC with Gaius Octavian (Augustus) defeating Mark Antony, the sole rival to his pre-eminence among the Roman senate. This elimination ushered in the so-called *Pax Romana*, Rome’s ‘golden age,’ wherein Augustus consolidated his power as *princeps*. As can be seen in the building projects of Herod the Great (Acts 10.1, 24), provincial cities and farther vassals sought the favor of Rome’s emperor. Nevertheless, as “cities began to erect temples dedicated to the worship of the emperor and his family ... only rarely was the imperial cult imposed.”<sup>15</sup> Augustus did not deter the establishment of an imperial cult, neither did he enforce it; rather, he “employed the imperial cult not to fuel some megalomania but to instruct provincials on the patterns and benefits of *Romanitas* and so further the Roman project.”<sup>16</sup> The imperial cult, according to Cassius Dio was (in some sense) a marker of what it meant to be *truly* Roman: “...this practice, beginning under [Augustus], has been continued

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<sup>15</sup> D. Nystrom, “We Have No King But Caesar: Roman Imperial Ideology and the Imperial Cult” in S. McKnight & J. B. Modica (eds.), *Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. Nystrom fails to elaborate on the “project” of *Romanitas*, seeing as “[the emperors’] imperial theology proclaimed that Rome was chosen by the gods, notably Jupiter, to rule an ‘empire without end’ (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.278-9),” W. Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*, 7.

under other emperors, not only in the case of the Greek nations but also in that of all the others, in so far as they are subject to the Romans.”<sup>17</sup>

In AD 14, Augustus’ son Tiberius began his rule. Dominique Cuss notes the variance of evidence and acknowledges the difficulty of identifying Tiberius’ posture towards imperial cult, stating: “...the traditional view is that he discouraged any honors which did not have their roots in the reign of Augustus. However, Tiberius encouraged divine honors for Augustus, and in this way strengthened his own position.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas Tiberius utilized the title of *Divi Augusti Filius*, he nevertheless refused many additional honors and titles; demonstrating a certain respect for the traditional bounds of Roman religion.

This respect could *not* be claimed for Tiberius’ successor, Caligula. He had begun with promise, according to Philo (though in hyperbole): “...all the world rejoiced over Gaius, more than over any ruler since human memory began”!<sup>19</sup> He was widely heralded as the ‘benefactor’ of the entire world, but it would not be long before Caligula reigned, according to Suetonius, as a *monster*.<sup>20</sup> Caligula is held, at the present time, to be the first emperor competing directly with the traditional gods. As an example, Suetonius records that Caligula “gave orders that statues of the gods famous for their sacredness... should be brought from Greece. The heads were to be knocked off these statues and a copy of his [was to replace them].”<sup>21</sup> The bounds apotheosis as a designation for *deceased* emperors was remarkably transgressed in AD 37, when Caligula began his four-year reign with claims of being a *living* god; overturning the decorum of *posthumous* Senatorial proclamation.<sup>22</sup> This development is unprecedented in the imperial succession, and would therefore seem to warrant a thorough investigation—which unfortunately cannot occupy our brief survey. In any case, Caligula’s delusional reign was (quite literally) cut short by his

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<sup>17</sup> Cassius Dio, *Rom. Hist.* 51.20.7, referring to the establishment of the cult of *Roma* and *Divus Iulius*. Cited in George Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* (Paradosis 23; Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1974), 73.

<sup>19</sup> Philo, *Leg. ad Gaium* 11, cited in H. J. Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 303.

<sup>20</sup> *reliqua ut de monstro narranda sunt* — Suetonius, *Calig.* 22.1, also cited in *ibid.*, 303.

<sup>21</sup> Suetonius *Calig.* 22.2f, also cited in *ibid.*, 304.

<sup>22</sup> Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* LIX 26-28.

Praetorian guards in AD 41, who then thrust the cowering figure of Claudius, Caligula’s uncle, to the forefront of the empire.

Claudius was maligned for certain behavioral issues, but certainly not for following after the audacity of his nephew—in fact, he was relatively modest by contrast. Though the private devotions to the imperial family were growing commonplace, Claudius seems to have followed after Tiberius in turning away from more extravagant provincial honors. In AD 54 Claudius was poisoned (most likely in Agrippina’s attempt to maneuver a young Nero to the throne), and so the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty moved into position. Nero had Claudius deified,<sup>23</sup> and even though Claudius became the first emperor to be deified since Augustus, it was not enough to spare him the work (attributed to Seneca) *Apotheosis Divi Claudii*, otherwise known as *Apocolocyntosis* (‘Pumpkinification’), a satire “which degrades Claudius and parodies his supposed apotheosis.”<sup>24</sup>

Official honors, the kind chipped into marble and proclaimed in the *agora*, had always been a part of imperial pomp—and Nero would take great efforts to publicize his status as ‘son of the divine Claudius’—but such acclamations offered little contentment so long as they were offered at a ceremonial or architectural level. Dominique Cuss observes: “under the early emperors, with their general policies of restraint, there are few references to the acclamations of the people, and *it is only under Nero* that they seem to be accepted and even positively encouraged.”<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding Caligula’s furious rise and fall, it is with Nero that we begin to see the dynamic of imperial acclamation shift—we turn now to examine this shift more closely.

## II. Titles for a Tyrant — Gauging the Evidence of Nero’s Divine Acclamation

The desire for honor was certainly not unique to Nero or his reign; the social compulsion toward attaining glory was ingrained within the Roman *cursus honorum*. Joseph Fantin seeks to deflect hyper-criticism along these lines: “[Nero] appreciated flattery and was certainly self-promoting. Imperial cults could be one mode for this expression. However... Nero was not

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<sup>23</sup> Suetonius, *Nero* 9.1.

<sup>24</sup> D. L. Jones, “Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult” in H. Temporini & W. Haase (eds.), *ANRW* (II 23.2; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 1029.

<sup>25</sup> D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament*, 75 (emphasis mine).



restricted to this sphere of activity for the defining of himself.”<sup>26</sup> But when we sift through evidence of Nero’s self-definition, such a well-intended deflection grows difficult to sustain.

Stefan Weinstock notes that Julius Caesar had extravagantly bestowed the title of ‘Liberator’ to himself, but in the wake of his assassination the title fell into dis-use (perhaps because Brutus and Cassius, his assassins, designated *themselves* the *Liberatores*?). Nevertheless, “it was Nero who returned to it. He instituted the cult of Jupiter Liberator—an epithet that Jupiter had never known before ... The institution of the new cult was in anticipation of his declaration of freedom in Greece... in gratitude the Greeks called him Ζεύς Ελευθέριος.”<sup>27</sup> Nero’s identification with Jupiter here takes on Caligula-like enormity. Jupiter was (generally speaking) the center of the Capitoline triad, and thereby the chief god in the Roman pantheon, and thus Nero was situating himself as Κόριος of the empire (which was as much to say ‘of the *world*’). It is in this claim, specifically, that we begin to find rhetoric colliding in the New Testament: “The least one can say is that Κόριος as a title in the imperial cult left its imprint on the first century AD and the early Christian proclamation of Jesus as Lord would doubtless have confronted it.”<sup>28</sup>

Christian proclamation certainly *would* have confronted such an acclamation; but, as with any ‘name’ worth declaring—proclamation turns toward religious *activity*. Bruce Winter explains the impact of imperial cultic activity using Corinth as an example: “Gallio’s ruling ... [meant] that [the Christians] were exempt from the obligation to participate in the many local imperial cultic celebrations in Corinth. However, an unexpected development would occur ... with the accession of Nero. A provincial imperial cult would be approved by the Roman senate and celebrated annually in Corinth.”<sup>29</sup> One can imagine the impact this imperial cult would have upon higher-ranking citizens in Corinth like Erastus (Acts 19.22; Rom. 16.23), and Winter traces

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<sup>26</sup> J. D. Fantin, *The Lord of the Entire World: Lord Jesus, A Challenge to Lord Caesar?* (NTM 31; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 133. Fantin is addressing the Roman provinces, he fails to see the domestic aspirations of Nero’s self-promotion, exemplified in the appointment of the *Augustiani* (as will be shown below).

<sup>27</sup> S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 144.

<sup>28</sup> D. L. Jones, “Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult,” 1031. On Nero as Κόριος, see J. D. Fantin, *The Lord of the Entire World*, 196-203.

<sup>29</sup> B. W. Winter, “The Enigma of Imperial Cultic Activities and Paul in Corinth” in D. E. Aune & F. E. Brenk (eds.), *Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament: Studies Commemorating the Centennial of the Pontifical Biblical Institute* (NovTSupp 143; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 70-1. He mentions that Gallio treats the Christians as a subset of the Jewish religion and therefore not under Roman *Imperium* (which traditionally respected the *mos maiorum* of different ethnic groups): such a ruling “would have been unexpected windfall for them, because they were declared to be a *de facto* Jewish gathering, and able to meet weekly” (ibid).

out many of practical tensions from this very appointment. In any case, whatever the Senate had decreed on Nero's behalf does not necessarily translate to divinity-narcissism from the man himself; so we turn to what Nero appointed on his *own* behalf:

In AD 59, Nero established a group of roughly 5,000 soldiers called *Augustiani*. Cassius Dio relates the duties of the *Augustiani* in ways that point to a further development of Nero's claim to divinity, writing that they were to lead the applause whenever Nero appeared in the theater.<sup>30</sup> Cuss concurs: "*It is under Nero* that the acclamations acquire a more specific cult-value, for the emperor is acclaimed in terms ... which underline the imperial claims to divinity ... [they] held some element of divine worship, whether or not they were made with the all sincerity supposed."<sup>31</sup> The sincerity of the *Augustiani* need not detain us here, as our assessment is of *Nero's* imposition and not its public reception. The 'propaganda' is under review; much like the difference between the claims of North Korean propaganda toward deceased dictator Kim Jong Il's divinity and the questionable sincerity of his 'adoring' crowds—that there *is* propaganda is the point! And consider the Neronian propaganda: "Hail to Nero... our Apollo... the only one from the beginning of time! Augustus! Augustus! O Divine Voice! Blessed are they that hear you!"<sup>32</sup> Here we find a noteworthy echo of Herod Agrippa's downfall. According to Acts 12.20-23 (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 19.343f), the populace of Tyre and Sidon were suing for 'peace' (v. 20) and, as the sumptuously gowned King began to address them, they stirred into repetitious exclamation: "The voice of a god, and not of a man"! The result, according to v. 23, is that an angel of the Lord strikes him "because he had not given glory to God." The confrontation between the proclamation of Jesus and the proclamation of 'Augustus' is once more underscored. Cuss concludes: "...the very name of Augustus suggested a sacred element and the chanting in unison of one of the emperor's titles, perhaps the most significant one for the people (as it linked the emperor in a special way with *Divus Augustus*) was, no doubt, an honor which Nero did all in his power to encourage."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* LXII 20,3.

<sup>31</sup> D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament*, 77 (emphasis mine). "Tacitus (*Ann.* XVI 15,5) is obviously unsympathetic to such forms of worship, regarding all excessive praise as hypocrisy and as a tool in order to advance those who were willing to debase themselves by the very rendering of such acclamations."

<sup>32</sup> Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* LXII 20,5 (cited by D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament*, 79-80).

<sup>33</sup> D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament*, 81.

### III. From the *Pax Neronis* to the ‘Beast’ — Further Evidence of Nero’s Impact

There is, nevertheless, evidence that ‘softens’ this harsh relief of the emperor. Whatever divine honors may have been given him, Nero had qualms about the attachment of unseemly worship, especially as “the word *divus* ... came gradually to have the meaning of ‘man made into god.’”<sup>34</sup> When a temple to *divus* Nero was proposed to be built during his lifetime, he saw it as a bad omen and refused. Tacitus gives the running commentary: “For honors that belong to the gods are not paid to the *princeps* until he has ceased to be active among men.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Nero had weighed the consequences of Caligula’s boasts to commune with the gods *as a god* himself—in any case, Nero’s refusal to see his own temple erected is noteworthy; and may cut against the common assumptions about his divine self-identity.

Furthermore, there are common assumptions about the *totality* of Nero’s reign that need to be redressed, as J. R. Harrison calls us to “...not forget that Roman believers in the mid-to-late fifties AD, the time of Paul’s composition of Romans, were living in the halcyon years ... of Nero.”<sup>36</sup> This so-called *Quinquennium Neronis* (AD 54-59) was “so outstanding ... that Trajan quite often justifiably asserted that all emperors fell far short of Nero in his (first) five years.”<sup>37</sup> The administrative success of this period should not, however, be immediately given to Nero’s renown. He was only 17 when emperor Claudius was killed—meaning much of his early career was vicariously performed by advisors, not to mention the wise placement under Seneca’s tutelage. But this arrangement had its expiration date: “...good administration characterized the early years of Nero’s reign, but later this was to deteriorate severely.”<sup>38</sup>

This deterioration was foremost a result of his ruthless hedonism, and not (as in the of Caligula) a result of claims of divinity. Joseph Fantin concedes: “although there was much

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<sup>34</sup> L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1975), 241.

<sup>35</sup> (Referring to Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.74) L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, 241.

<sup>36</sup> J. R. Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology* (WUNT 273; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 168. This certainly explains Paul’s tact in Romans 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 168 (citing Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 5.3; cf. Lucan 1.33). On the latter reference, see N. Holmes, “Nero and Caesar: Lucan 1.33-66” *CP* 94.1 (1999).

<sup>38</sup> D. L. Jones, “Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult,” 1028-9.

controversy during Nero's rule because of his own actions, his reign saw little development of emperor worship."<sup>39</sup> To inject imperial cult as the impetus for Nero's tyranny or disastrous rule is to succumb to easy generalizations, or (worse yet) anachronism. At the same time, Nero's status and actions are not without their significance for the trajectory of imperial cult within the overarching development of early Christianity. For example; despite the very real possibility of anachronism in tracing Christian persecution to the imposition of imperial cult, one must nevertheless account for the *subsequent* reception and appropriation of Nero in early Christian literature. Here is where Nero's shadow loomed as large in death as perhaps in life.

At the age of 31, Nero died (in part by his own hand<sup>40</sup>), but soon after his demise took on a mysterious shape. A legend began to circulate that Nero had in fact survived and then fled to the Parthians in the east, where he was preparing to return in wrath. According to Tacitus, the first pseudo-Nero appeared on the scene as early as AD 69, less than a year from Nero's death:

“At this time, Achaea and Asia were struck with terror—for which, of course, there was no rational cause—through the belief that Nero would soon return. For various rumors about his death ran around, so that people spun fables about this continually, and believed that he was still alive...”<sup>41</sup>

According to Suetonius, for a surprising length after Nero's death, many could be found dedicating statues of Nero and displaying inscriptions of his edicts “as if he were still alive and would shortly return to destroy his enemies.”<sup>42</sup> In terms of apocalyptic literature, this spells out the so-called ‘*Nero redivivus* myth.’<sup>43</sup> When the apostle Paul wrote about “the secret power of lawlessness ... already at work...” (2 Thess. 2.7), Augustine reasons, “...*he referred to Nero*, whose deeds already seemed to be as those of Antichrist.”<sup>44</sup> This may be a historical reflection from

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<sup>39</sup> J. D. Fantin, *The Lord of the Entire World*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> Suetonius, *Nero* 49.

<sup>41</sup> Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.8.1, cited in H. J. Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 306.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>43</sup> For our purposes, the historical significance lies in the fact that Nero *was* an early Christian referent for the wounded ‘beast’ of Rev. 13.3, regardless of whether such an interpretation was correct. For a refutation of this identification, see the summary of A. King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5* (LNTS 283; London: T & T Clark, 2005), 255-6.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* (VI): Books XVIII.36-XX (trans. W. C. Greene, LCL 416; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 361 (emphasis mine). The original reads: “*Neronem voluerit intellegi, cuius iam facta velut Antichristi videbantur*” (360).

Augustine upon the context of Paul's correspondence—but then he goes on to list contemporaneous views of the Antichrist which correlate to Nero:

“Wherefore some suggest that Nero himself will rise again and will become Antichrist; others think that he was not slain, but was rather withdrawn so that he might be thought to have been slain, and that he is still living in concealment in the vigor of the age that he had reached at the time when he was supposed to have died, until in his own time he shall be revealed and restored to his kingdom.”<sup>45</sup>

The *redivivus* myth points to his notoriety even *centuries* (!) later in Christian interpretation, when the imposition of imperial cult was a cause of intense persecution.<sup>46</sup> The symbolic representation of the emperor cuts both ways: the imperial cult presented Nero as the embodiment of the Roman empire, so then it is little surprise that the book of Revelation would depict “the beast from the sea [as] the Roman empire, *particularly* in its manifestation under the Emperor Nero (13.1-10).”<sup>47</sup> It is here that Philip Harland gives helpful advice:

“Instead of asking what [Rev. 13] tells us about imperial cults... we need to ask: in light of what we know about imperial cults and the actual persecution of Christians, how does John's futuristic, apocalyptic scenario relate to them?”<sup>48</sup>

In some ways, the “beast” of Rev. 13 is modeled on various aspects of the imperial cults, as we will see momentarily. Many interpreters find it likely that John has the myth of Nero *redivivus* in view, in part, from the reference to the beast's “mortal wound” which was healed (Rev. 13.3), and, as Harland notes,<sup>49</sup> the import of 17.9-11 (“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to perdition”):

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<sup>45</sup> (As translated by W. C. Greene), *ibid.*, 361.

<sup>46</sup> Speaking of the *Augustiani*, Cuss says: “Another reason why I consider these acclamations as part of the developing imperial cult is because they are linked with such things as lights and incense, which definitely formed part of cult-worship ... Incense was to hold an important place in cult ritual, and, in fact, at the beginning of the second century, it was one of the methods used to ascertain whether a man was sincere in denying his Christianity — he was obliged to pray to the gods, to blaspheme the name of Christ, and to sacrifice with incense and wine before the statue of the emperor” (D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament*, 79; citing Pliny, *Letters* X 96, 5).

<sup>47</sup> S. Tonstad, “Appraising the Myth of *Nero Redivivus* in the Interpretation of Revelation” *AUSS* 46.2 (2008), 176 (emphasis mine). For an older survey, arguing for the application of the *Nero redivivus* myth to Hadrian, see L. Kreitzer, “Hadrian and the *Nero Redivivus* Myth” *ZNW* 79.1-2 (1988).

<sup>48</sup> Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 226.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

“A passage in the Judeo-Christian *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, which probably dates to the late-first century, also envisions a similar role for the returning Nero: Beliar will come “...in the form of that king [i.e. Nero]... and all men in the world will believe in him. They will sacrifice to him and will serve him, saying ‘This is the Lord, and besides him there is no other.’”<sup>50</sup>

John’s references to the strong delusion of worshipping the ‘beast’ (e.g. Rev. 13.4) seems to reflect the nature of imperial cult activity in terms of the “spontaneous response on the part of civic inhabitants to the power of the emperor and Rome.”<sup>51</sup> In John’s vision, it is the sheer strength of Rome—the type of strength that offers *pax et securitas*—that deludes people into honoring the Roman emperor on par with God.<sup>52</sup> This imagery of military prowess would have cast a large shadow over the provinces which housed (or were within marching distance) of Rome’s mighty legions. The various state apparatuses found throughout the empire legitimated and maintained the perception of Roman might: “When [these apparatuses] were working in tandem, as they invariably do, their combination would impress even more strongly on Roman subjects the sheer indomitability of Rome’s presence and power.”<sup>53</sup>

This display was further reinforced through spectacle; during the early empire, the Roman emperors magnified various events and demonstrations of power: battles were often ‘re-enacted’ in the arenas, and re-counted on coins, or celebrated in grand processions of ‘triumph,’ all of which became powerful ‘media outlets’ to present the public humiliation, defeat, and death of those who might oppose Roman power.<sup>54</sup> As Elizabeth Castelli notes: “...bloodshed in the Roman arena—implicated as it was in the judicial, military, political and religious institutions of the empire—must be read in terms of the logic of imperial interests.”<sup>55</sup> It is at this very juncture of military dominance and imperial cult that one can trace patterns of shifting ideology toward

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<sup>50</sup> *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* 4.4-10, trans. M. A. Knibb, cited in *ibid.*, 226.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>52</sup> See M. Naylor, “The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 8.2 (2010), 207-239.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> On the significance of ‘triumph’ see Christoph Heilig, *Paul’s Triumph: Reassessing 2 Corinthians 2.14 in Its Literary and Historical Context* (BTS 27; Leuven: Peeters, 2017), who argues that Paul explicitly invokes the Roman emperor by crafting a metaphor out of ‘triumph’ in 2 Cor. 2.14.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 8.

divine benefaction. After all, part of a victor's 'triumph' included the dressing of the conqueror as a manifestation of Jupiter (to whose temple the procession route was directed), and he essentially became a 'god-for-a-day,' even during the republic! As Heyward notes:

“Not only did the military hero of the late republic claim the allegiance of the gods as a political tool for their future success, human beings began to flirt with divinity. This produced a new thread in the matrix of ancient Roman religious discourse that contributed to the establishment of the imperial cult. Characteristic of this new discourse is how Epictetus... recorded (how accurately is open to speculation) that a slave would stand near the conquering general and whisper in his ear: “Remember, *you are a man.*”<sup>56</sup>

Returning to the context of Revelation 13, we can hear the faint echoes of those who might exclaim: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (Rev. 13.4). In light of the domineering and blasphemous actions of Roman might, personified in ritual and honor to the emperor, the acceptance of imperial cult, in John's eyes, is unconscious participation in an evil system. This argument has its skeptics. The challenge has been made that it begs to much of the evidence for imperial cult in the early empire. After all, it is argued—speaking in strictly historical terms—that this identification of the apocalyptic 'beast' cannot have taken its cue from cultic activity; as Sigve Tonstad concludes: “...neither the office of the emperor nor the imperial cult has the proportions to fully match the force of the symbols on which the derivation is based.”<sup>57</sup> Or again, Simon Price underlines the “consistent misrepresentation by Christian scholars of the persecution of the Christians,<sup>58</sup> which inflates the importance of the imperial cult and posits a stark choice between Christ and the Caesars.”<sup>59</sup> But while we seek to prevent misrepresentations which 'inflate the importance of the imperial cult,' we also should seek to understand the early

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<sup>56</sup> George Heyward, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 59, citing Epictetus, *Disc.* 3.24.85 (emphasis mine).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>58</sup> See, e.g. Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15. As J. M. G. Barclay notes, imperial cults “were generally incorporated into already existing traditions (Roman or local) or linked with traditional deities in location, name, or practice” (*Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, 352-3). B. W. Winter believes the term *Christianus* “could have arisen from the question posed for Romans over the political loyalty of the followers of Christ.” B. W. Winter, “Roman Law and Society in Romans 12-15” in P. Oakes (ed.), *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 70. Winter discusses the possibility of *Christianoi* being a Roman designation and, interestingly, weighs Nero's *Augustiani* as a grammatical parallel (70 n. 10).

Christian reception of Nero as *the* symbol of antichristic *imperium!* So then, if such reception did not ‘turn’ upon Nero’s divine honors, which is debatable in itself, it must have turned upon the sheer *brutality* of his persecutions—setting a standard for the ‘raging of the beast’ as it unfolded; for example, Domitian was “sometimes called ‘a second Nero’ [because he] attempted to crush Christianity.”<sup>60</sup> That the reign of Nero saw the *specific* targeting of Christians is also a possible reason for the latent symbolism and apocalyptic *gematria* (depending on how one reads the ‘mark of the beast’ in 13.18). Tacitus records Nero’s attempt to shift responsibility of the great fire that ravaged Rome during his reign, therein referring to them as a class of men ‘whom the crowd styled Christians’ (*vulgus Christianos appellabat*).<sup>61</sup> The point to be taken here is that “...although Nero’s persecution of Christians was in no way connected with emperor worship, it did set a precedent for later anti-Christian activity in Rome which was definitely related to imperial cult practices.”<sup>62</sup>

We must also keep in mind that Nero—in terms of Revelation—is a symbolic figure for *Rome*, which is the ‘true’ beast in John’s vision. It is not *Nero’s* might that attracts worship, but rather his representative relationship of that might. Rev. 13.4 has a parallel in 18.18, with reference to Babylon (cf. 18.7; Isa. 47.7-8).<sup>63</sup> Here the wealth and splendor of the city of Rome is seen to evoke admiration, just as her military might evoked worship. Richard Bauckham argues: “If the picture of the great harlot owes something to the goddess *Roma*, John does not actually portray her as an object of worship, as he does the beast. His point is more that, through her corrupting influence, she promotes the idolatrous religion of Rome.”<sup>64</sup>

Revelation sees Rome as the culmination of all the evil empires of history. The beast, as portrayed in Rev. 13.1-2, combines in itself the features of all the beasts which in Daniel’s vision symbolized the evil empires leading up to Rome (Dan. 7.3-8), even so (as Bauckham goes on to

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<sup>60</sup> D. L. Jones, “Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult,” 1033.

<sup>61</sup> B. W. Winter, “Roman Law and Society in Romans 12-15,” citing Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44: “*Ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat.*”

<sup>62</sup> D. L. Jones, “Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult,” 1030. “Suspensions against the Christians in Rome in the 60s concerned their alleged criminality and anti-social behavior: Nero’s persecution has, as far as we can tell, no specific connection to the imperial cult” (J. M. G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, 360).

<sup>63</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18” in L. Alexander (ed.) *Images of Empire* (JSOTSS 122; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 53.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.



argue) the Babylon of Revelation 17-18 combines in itself the the two great evil cities of Old Testament prophetic condemnation: Babylon and Tyre.<sup>65</sup> When John addresses the city of Rome, especially according to the latter of this pair,

“...[he] does not forget that the city is a harlot... and Rome is no ordinary harlot: she is a rich courtesan, whose expensive clothes and jewelry (17.4) indicate the luxurious lifestyle she maintains at her lovers’ expense. The meaning of the picture is unpacked for us when the harlot’s clothing and jewels are described again, in the same terms, in 18.16. Here they are plainly a metaphor for the wealth of the city of Rome,<sup>66</sup> for all the luxury goods listed in 18.12-13,<sup>67</sup> brought to Rome by the great network of trade throughout her empire. In other words, Rome is a harlot because her associations with the peoples of her empire are for her economic benefit. To those who associate with her she offers the benefits of the *Pax Romana* ... unity, security, stability, [and] the conditions of prosperity. But in John’s view these benefits are not what they seem: they are the favors of a prostitute, purchased at a high price.”<sup>68</sup>

This depiction of Rome is underscored by John’s repeated emphasis of the harlot’s delusion: she intoxicates her victims with the wine of her fornication (14.8;17.2;18.3).<sup>69</sup> To be clear, this delusion should be understood in terms of the *Pax Romana*—the intoxicating wine from the harlot’s cup—which, intertwining wealth with might, is at the very core of what the imperial cult promoted. The emperor was seen, therein, as both ‘savior’ and ‘benefactor,’ to all peoples—a boast that John exposes with eschatologically charged allusion to the prophetic denunciations of Babylon and Tyre (cf. Jer. 50-51; Ezek. 26-28).

The claims of Rome, propagated in ever increasing frequency and detail by the burgeoning imperial cult, demonstrate why early Christian claims challenged, countered, and

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 53. He continues: “His portrayal of the fall of Babylon is a remarkable patchwork of skillful allusions to Old Testament prophecies of the fall of Babylon and the fall of Tyre... There are two major sources: Jeremiah’s great oracle against Babylon (Jer. 50-51) and Ezekiel’s great oracle against Tyre (Ezek. 26-28). But allusion is also made to all of the shorter oracles against Babylon and Tyre to be found in the Old Testament prophets (Babylon: Isa. 13.1; 14.23; 21.1-10; 47; Jer. 25.12-38; Tyre: Isa. 23)” (53-4).

<sup>66</sup> See Steven J. Scherrer, “Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at a Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13.13-15,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103.4 4 (1984).

<sup>67</sup> On which see Bauckham, *ibid.*, 53-5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

often exacerbated the shadow of Roman *imperium*. Central to the establishment of God's reign, as it was heralded in the gospel of the spreading church, was (and remains) the subjugation of all earthly powers that oppose God, as well as the rulers that represent those powers (cf. 1 Cor. 2.6; 15.24; Eph. 6.12); "since Rome was the current world power, its defeat and removal was implicit in Christian eschatological hope."<sup>70</sup> The claims of *pax et securitas*,<sup>71</sup> which Rome's might and wealth seemed to guarantee, and which the imperial cult sought to maintain in hallowing the emperor, were thus hollowed by the gospel and cast beneath the footstool of Jesus: "For when they say 'peace and security!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they shall not escape" (1 Thess. 5.3; cf. Phil. 2.9; 2 Cor. 10.5).

Here, in Paul's earliest writing, one can trace the presence of imperial honors and, as James Harrison has demonstrated, the widespread circulation of imperial apotheosis claims which would have competed with the early Christian proclamation of the risen and returning heavenly κύριος. "In response, Paul injected heavily loaded Roman political terms into his presentation of Christ, transformed their ideological content to his theological... advantage, and thereby overturned the absolutist claims of the imperial cult."<sup>72</sup> Those skeptical of claims which 'inflate the importance of imperial cult' (e.g. Simon Price above, n. 59), must account for the shape of New Testament rhetoric, as exemplified here. In light of the more pervasive influence of eastern forms of obeisance to the imperial cult, the epistles become a strong window into the implications of such rhetoric—and would hardly have been missed by the New Testament's earliest recipients!

### Concluding Thoughts: 'Honor the Emperor'?

At the beginning of our assessment, we spoke of the paradoxical 'distance' of the New Testament. We do well to remember the 'distance' of the text as it rests on the foreign ground of the first century, however 'near' it may feel to us in our hermeneutical assumptions. This is a

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<sup>70</sup> Adam Winn, "Striking Back at the Empire: Empire Theory and Responses to Empire in the New Testament" in idem. (ed.), *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament* (RBS 84; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>71</sup> Which became a practical mantra in the early empire, according to Winn, *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> J. R. Harrison, "Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki" *JNT* 25.1 (2002). For the role of the resurrection in this 'anti-imperial' rhetoric, see Edward Pillar, *Resurrection as Anti-Imperial Gospel: 1 Thessalonians 1.9b-10 in Context* (Emerging Scholars; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

necessary to the degree it vitiates against replicating our own socio-political sensibilities into the operative cultural contexts of the Scriptures, and thereby helps us to ‘hear’ them clearly.

We have attempted to demonstrate the unique place of Nero between the establishment of the imperial cult and the pivotal scourging of Christians during his reign—the first example of Christian-specific persecution at Roman imperial behest—which set a trajectory for the way subsequent Christianity engaged with the imperial cult, not to mention the menacing echo of Nero as symbolic fodder for early Christian apocalyptic expressions. As has been noted, others call for an overturn of what they view to be anachronistic applications of the imperial cult to Nero’s reign and subsequent persecution of Christianity. As Simon Price reminds us, we should not think that the imperial cult:

“...was a part of the ideological superstructure nor that it legitimated political power; [for] these views presuppose too crude a view of the existence and relationship of different aspects of society, economics, politics, and religion. Nor should power be seen as a given element of society, located primarily in politics, but as a term for analyzing a wide range of situations. Both diplomacy and imperial cult were ways of constructing the emperor, and religious language was used in both contexts. *Religion is not simply a gloss on politics.*”<sup>73</sup>

The obverse is especially true for the purposes of this paper: ‘politics are not simply a gloss on religion.’ Nero did not suffer from the compartmentalizing effects of postmodern secularism, neatly dividing and making mutually-exclusive that which was a woven whole during early Christianity’s engagement with her Roman imperial environs. To hone in on the consequences of this context is difficult for the modern interpreter who carries such drawers about in their day to day life. But here we are to take our cue from those who engaged the intertwined *economia* of Rome and nevertheless asserted the lordship of the world’s true ‘liberator’ and Κύριος—Jesus Christ. To understand the nature of Jesus’ reign is to relativize not only all the claims and honors of Caesar; but indeed all powers and principalities now made subject to him.

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<sup>73</sup> S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 234-5 (emphasis mine). He continues: “...we must consider the problem of the relationship between the imperial cult and the political system, between the ‘dignified’ and the ‘efficient’ aspects of the state. The issue is all too often neglected by writers on royal rituals, who tend to stop with a description of the rituals themselves and fail to investigate the relationship between the sacred nature of the king and his political power” (235).

As far as Paul is concerned, the exaltation of Christ places the ‘indomitable’ specter of Caesar in his proper bounds; thus John Barclay rightly states:

“Paul’s gospel is subversive of Roman imperial claims precisely by not opposing them within their own terms, *but by reducing Rome’s agency and historical significance to just one more entity in a much greater drama* ... Confronted by temples and statues of Caesar (as he undoubtedly was), Paul makes no special mention of them, not because he was politically naïve but because they represent for him the power of δαυμόνια (1 Cor. 10.14-21) — the same δαυμόνια operative in other cults, with the same delusion and bankruptcy and the same incompatibility with the lordship of Christ.”<sup>74</sup>

It seems fairly evident from this argument that Jesus’ exaltation, to the extent that it relativized Caesar’s claims and end, enabled early Christians to sincerely ‘honor the emperor’ (1 Peter 2.17 cf. Rom. 13.1-7; 1 Tim. 2.12; Titus 3.1f)—for such a posture was fitting for those living as “exiles in the diaspora” (1.1), awaiting the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1.7 cf. 1.5, 13; 2.12; 4.5). This eschatological orientation of all power unto Christ’s rising, reign, and return is highlighted by Peter, who further calls upon believers to be mindful of displaying their subjection to authority (2.12-3.7), not because the empire might flex their muscle, but rather because ‘all... authorities and powers have been made subject to Christ’ (3.22)! In other words, believers can “honor the emperor” *because* they honor the King of kings. The gospel is *necessarily* ‘counter-imperial’ in the sense that Jesus relativizes and subjugates all other claims of power, as Matthew Bridges distilled in his wonderful hymn: “Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne. Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns *all music but its own*”!

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<sup>74</sup> J. M. G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, 386-7 (emphasis mine). He adds: “In an age when ‘politics-as-state-power’ is proving increasingly inadequate as a framework in which to analyze the corruption, oppression, and degradation of our world, it may in fact be a theological advantage that Paul does not oppose Rome, *as Rome*, but opposes anti-God powers wherever and however they manifest themselves on the human stage” (387). For an even-handed ‘push-back’ on Barclay’s criticism of ‘hidden’ rhetoric, see C. Heilig, “Methodological Considerations for the Search of Counter-Imperial ‘Echoes’ in Pauline Literature” in J. A. Dunne & D. Batovici (eds.), *Reactions to Empire: Sacred Texts in their Socio-Political Contexts* (WUNT/II 372; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 87-88.

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