WERE PAUL’S WRITINGS INFLUENCED BY THE ROMAN EMPEROR CULT?

By Stephen B. Plaster, Ph.D.
In recent years, there has been a development among some New Testament scholars wherein some references in Paul’s epistles are thought to be related to emperor worship during the concurrent period of the Roman Empire. Some of this interest, as expressed, is in the historical comparison of secular emperors and empires with the Christian king, Jesus Christ, and His Kingdom of the near and the forever.

A second point of interest has been the comparative use of imperial terms with terms used by Paul to describe Christ.

A third point of inquiry has been renewed interest in comparing the culture and powers of the Roman Empire with modern nations such as the United States of America. The focus of this interest has been in examining the emperor cults power within the then Roman Empire to America’s status as a modern capitalist nation.

A fourth inquiry has been an attempt to determine whether terms used in the New Testament to describe Christ and His dominion are: 1) drawn from Roman imperial cult terminology and customs, 2) derived independently but influenced by the Roman system, or 3) developed coincidentally and independently.

A fifth inquiry is to examine the conflict between the Roman dominion and the Christian dominion in order to determine how the ideologies of each system explained, reacted, and responded to its counterpart system.

This paper will analyze the impact of the emperor cult in the Roman Empire during the first century C.E. on the New Testament writings concerning Jesus Christ by focusing on Paul’s letters.
First, I will summarize and cite several authors who have researched this topic and published their analysis.

Second, several primary sources will be presented and cited to establish a baseline of original writings which will be compared.

Third, the analysis of primary sources will be discussed in three areas. These areas of interest are as follows: What terms are common to both the Roman emperor cults and Paul’s letters? What customs are common to both? What ideologies are common to both?

Fourth, what conclusions may be developed? These will be explained and will suggest whether terms used in Paul’s letter are determined by, influenced by, or are coincidental to those of the Roman emperor cult.

John Dart describes the comparison historically between the kingdom of God presented by Jesus in the writings of Paul and the worldview of the Roman Empire in the first century C.E. He reminds us that Julius Caesar was deified after his death in 42 B.C.E. Augustus was anointed as “son of God” and a cult status was begun in his honor. Modern authors have also attempted to find similarities between the Roman Empire and the imperial nature of America today. The key point for Paul in his writings was in advising the churches how to coexist in the present with the power and authority of a Roman government which controls the values and behavior of its subjects in the here and now. Paul makes his declaration of a new social status in the kingdom of God when he says: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28. This statement of social equality conflicts with the hierarchical social order of classes recognized by the Roman system. However, Paul mitigates any threat to the Roman system when he advises Christians to:
“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God.” Romans 13:1. Dart’s premise is that “The escalating attention to the biblical-era empire has been amplified by the open lament of some ethical church leaders and politicians that the U.S. has assumed aspects of an empire—complete with religious images to assure skeptics of its benevolent motives.”¹

Terminology such as the “evil empire” reach back to the historical conflicts between Christianity and the Roman Empire during Paul’s era.

David Horrell compares the renewed interest in the terminology common to both the New Testament writings and the writings of the imperial cult. He believes that common terms that were in use at the time were necessarily used in both group’s writings. He concludes that “The imperial cult itself is one important facet of this imperial context. Whatever the origin or derivation of the various terms used, say, to describe the character of Christ’s dominion and achievements, there seems little doubt that at some points at least these terms coincide with comparable terms used to express the nature of the Roman emperors’ rule and devotion to his cult.”² Proof of the cult status of Rome is found archeologically in coins, temples, statues, plaques, monuments, buildings, and historically in manuscripts of both secular and sacred writings. The deification and worship of Caesar parallels the claims of Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers concerning the deity and worship of Jesus Christ.

Richard A. Horsley, in a more general way, seeks to explain the dominance of the emperor cult in exercising power throughout the Roman Empire which would influence the New

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Testament writers. He likens the pervasive influence of the emperor cult to the celebration of Christmas in the United States. Both feature a festival, an annual cycle, shrines, statues, and gift giving. He says: “American consumer-capitalist Christmas has become far more pervasive in public life than the most elaborate ancient Roman emperor cult.” Since Christmas is a religious observance, it has both a sacred meaning in its origin and a secular effect in its economic impact on society. This example in modern times is likely to mean that the impact of the emperor cult was just as pervasive during the Roman era and therefore must have influenced Paul in a significant way.

Harry O. Maier discusses the concept of bringing peace and order to the world by comparing the stability brought by the emperor to the Roman Empire with the stability brought by Christ’s rule. Maier indicates that Paul’s writings in Colossians are better understood by the common people because they have a previous context of the Roman emperor’s dominion in which they live their everyday lives. Paul describes Christ as follows: “And he is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself—by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.” Colossians 1:18-20. The concepts that would be parallel and more readily accepted are that a great world order has been reconciled with hostile forces, peace established, and dominion rule ordained by a worthy emperor.

Maier makes it clear when he says: “Nevertheless, a first-century Christian audience hearing the letter read aloud would immediately have recognized imperial-sounding themes

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greeted as it was daily by ubiquitous imperial images…celebrating the Roman order as a divinely ordained order representing a pacification of erstwhile hostile and ethnically dispersed peoples, brought by military might into a global pax by a divinely appointed emperor…”

Maier is of the opinion that Paul is drawing directly and purposely on Roman imperial cult terminology, beliefs, and customs.

Kavin Rowe and Peter Oakes have both written on the inevitability of conflict between the dominions of the Roman Empire and the Christian believers living during the first century C.E. Rowe focuses on the point of comparison of Caesar as lord over the Empire and Christ as Lord over all. Both claims are in fact claims to universal lordship. Luke says in his writings: “The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all),” in Acts 10:36 is a key theme throughout Paul’s epistles. Rowe’s point is that Caesar may be called lord in the narrower sense but not in the sense of all eternity which is implied in the phrase “Lord of all” as applied to Jesus Christ. Rowe states the conflict in the lordship universality claim as follows: “The way in which this contrast plays out in Luke—Acts has primarily to do with the nature and shape of Jesus’ Lordship. That is to say, the rival claim not only involves ascription of universality to the same title, but also extends to the context of ‘Lordship’.”

Peter Oakes compares Paul’s writings in I Thessalonians and Philippians to parallel terminology in the Roman Empire at the time which resulted in conflicts of ideology. To take an example verse from the three which are presented regarding the exaltation of Jesus; Paul states as follows: “Wherefore, God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above

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every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.” Philippians 2:10-11. Oakes concludes that “Philippians re-maps space and time. I Thessalonians concentrates on time, although, in doing so, it too clearly re-maps the power structure of the universe. In each letter, Paul strengthens the suffering Christians by emphasizing that the universe is not as it appears. The Christians have a secure place close to the real central power.”6 There is little doubt that conflict arose between these two worldviews as is evident in the writings and in the response by the Roman Empire in persecuting Christians during Paul’s era for the conflicting ideologies.

The deification of a Roman emperor during his own lifetime has its roots in the successes of the Pax Romana during the reign of Augustus. This emperor was treated as a “savior” and presented with divine honors as the “son of god” to Julius Caesar. A cult system of worship with the living emperor at the apex was established and repeated with several successive emperors. Temples, altars, proclamations, songs, festivals, games, and coins would reflect this system of emperor worship. The refinement was that during Augustus’ life, he was accorded divine honors and at his death in 14 A.D. he was given divine celestial status by apotheosis. Tiberius, Claudius, and Vaspasian did not push for living divine status but Caligula, Nero, and Domitian sought divine status.

The various emperor cults were organized by location, by vocation, and by military loyalties. Temples dedicated to the worship of an emperor were erected throughout the empire during the reigning emperor’s lifetime but within Rome itself usually only after his death. Loyalty to the emperor was promoted through the priest of the emperor cult residing in several

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cities. The emperor’s interests would be supported by public recognitions, ceremonies, and feasts benefiting the populace in his honor. The refinement of loyalty to the emperor was expressed in adoration of his virtues as opposed to his person.

Everett Ferguson sums up the emperor cult in this way: “The strength and popularity of the imperial cult is testified to by the large number of private associations that took as their patron the emperor instead of one of the traditional deities.”

During Augustus’ reign, the promotion of Roman ways and lifestyles were superimposed upon the culture of non-citizens of Rome such as the Jews and the Christians. “In communities all across the West, in fact, altars and temples to Rome and Augustus himself are attested, all staffed by locals. Such cult centers therefore acted not only to promote unity in the previously barbarous western provinces and to direct loyalties accordingly, but they also facilitated the assimilation of local populations into the Roman way of life.”

Caligula, too, sought divine honors by encouraging the creation and practice of an imperial cult in his honor. This tempted him to erect a statue of himself in Jerusalem. “Gaius’ excess in this regard is best illustrated by his order that a statue of him be erected in the Temple of Jerusalem.” Also Josephus records in The War of the Jews (JW 2.10.1.184) the following: “Now Gaius Caesar did so grossly abuse the fortune he had arrived at, as to take himself to be a god, and to desire to be so called also, and to cut off those of the greatest nobility out of his

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7 Everett Ferguson, Background of Early Christianity (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 212.
country. He also extended his impiety as far as the Jews. Accordingly, he sent Petronius with an army to Jerusalem, to place his statues in the temple…”

Paul addressed the issue of food offered to idols which should be avoided because the symbolism of partaking of the food is a stumbling block to the weak who might equate emperor worship with Christian worship. He says: “As concerning, therefore, the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth (as there are gods many, and lords many),” I Corinthians 8:4-5.

The use of common terms indicated a linkage between terms used in the New Testament and identical or similar terms used in the language of the Roman Empire. For example, the term “savior” is common to both. Paul says: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church; and he is the savior of the body.” Ephesians 5:23. It is more universally stated by Luke as: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:11. It is also proclaimed by John as follows: “And said unto the woman, now we believe, not because of thy saying; for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.” John 4:42.

A similar reference is found regarding the emperor Vespasian which describes him from Josephus (JW 7.4.1.71) as follows: “…and for those whom he passed by, they made all sorts of acclamations on account of the joy they had to see him, and the pleasantness of his countenance,

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and styled him their Benefactor and Savior, and the only person who was worthy to be ruler of the city of Rome.”

Craig Koester believes the term “savior” was widely used in the Roman Empire and the full title “Savior of the world” was an imperial title for the emperor. He says: “Nevertheless, in the first century, the title ‘Savior of the world’ had striking imperial connotations. Various forms of the title were used for Roman rulers from Julius Caesar to Hadrian, and later emperors…”

The practice of common customs indicates a linkage between worship in the New Testament and similar worship in the Roman emperor cult. For example, Paul says: “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till he come.” I Corinthians 11:26. This verse which repeats the words of Jesus during the last supper are the main focus of Christian worship which was initiated by Jesus, claimed by the church, and customarily practiced around the world for two millennia. Yet, at the beginning of the second century C.E., we find a reference to the practice of worship using wine to honor the image of the emperor Trajan. In a letter to Trajan, Pliny says: “Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image…”

Common ideologies indicate a linkage between New Testament writings and the imperial cult. For example, Paul speaks of a kingdom into which the followers of Jesus have been delivered. He says: “Who hath delivered us from the powers of darkness and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.” Colossians 1:13. This kingdom is a present reality as

11 Ibid, 754.
opposed to another future eternal kingdom of which he speaks elsewhere as a future eternal reality. The ideological concept of being ushered into a kingdom of prosperity by the emperor Gaius Caligula is referenced similarly as a present reality to be grateful for. Philo says”…since the occasion gave equal privileges and communities to all men, so that the age of Saturn, which is so celebrated by the poets was no longer looked upon as a fiction and fable, on account of the universal prosperity and happiness which reigned everywhere.”

We have seen how there are common terms, common customs, and common ideologies between New Testament writings, particularly by Paul, and from the secular historical literature of the first century C.E. regarding the Roman imperial cult system. There is a linkage in that there is similarity of usage by these two systems.

It remains to identify whether these similarities are directly determined, influenced, or coincidental in Paul’s writings to those of the emperor cult. Some, such as Richard Horsley, have postulated that Paul’s writing have been directly determined by the Roman system because his writings reflect an anti-imperial political agenda. Another scholar, Adolf Deissmann, believed that Paul had to be influenced by the imperial cult because it was so dominant in Paul’s era. James McLaren, who focuses on the parallel between the emperor cults and Jewish worship and customs, sees more of a coincidence of influence of the former on the latter whereby the two systems co-existed. Each of these opinions have merit but we have yet to find a manuscript of the period which reveals Paul’s motives in the epistles as they relate to the imperial system. More research and perhaps a new discovery in translating manuscripts will shed light on the nature of the linkage between Paul’s writings and the emperor cults.

Bibliography


