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Ronald C. Fay

Liberty University, rcfay@liberty.edu

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GRECO-ROMAN CONCEPTS OF DEITY

Ron C. Fay

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois, USA

1. Introduction

Paul always wrote with a purpose in mind, a purpose built upon his understanding of the people to whom his correspondence was addressed. For example, the Corinthian correspondence displays detailed knowledge about the Corinthian church such that Paul directly criticized how a specific person was behaving (e.g. 1 Cor 5; cf. Phil. 4:2). Paul also utilized his knowledge of the places to which he wrote, including religious details (e.g. temple prostitution in 1 Cor 6:12-20). When Paul wrote to the pagan world, he assumed a common set of facts, including cultural and religious norms. At the same time, he wrote from his own Jewish ideas as well. In each piece of correspondence, Paul centered his thought on God, yet he explained how God should effect his readers. Paul assumed his readers would have a familiarity with the God of Israel, yet he did not hesitate to clarify and correct misperceptions based upon the culture of the day. It is due to this dual usage that the theological landscape of Paul's time needs to be understood in order to clarify his writing, writing that assumes this level of knowledge. The purpose of this article is to look at the Greco-Roman concepts of deity, or the meaning of deity, of the first century in order to ascertain what Paul's readers would have understood when he wrote about God.

The Roman people of the first century defined themselves and their world through the gods and goddesses they worshipped. While sharing between the Greek and Roman cultures occurred, especially with respect to the nature and function of the gods, first-century Rome held a unique blend of Greek and Roman thought such that only the term "Greco-Roman" could encapsulate the true nature of the culture. Stewart Perowne describes this mixture as the older impersonal Roman gods being adapted to fit their more human seeming and yet more divine Greek counterparts, such as Juno taking on the traits of Hera.¹ This article will

¹Stewart Perowne, *Roman Mythology* (Library of the Worlds Myths and

describe the Greco-Roman concept of what is meant by “god,” or *deus*. In order to set boundaries for the term, this chapter will describe a statue to give a pictorial rendering from Rome about the associated cult while also reflecting the theology of the people. This chapter will then turn to look at how the various myths of Rome shape what the people believed about the nature of the gods, the issue of worship, the idea of triads, and the questions surrounding salvation (what is it and when is it). These topics were chosen due to their influence on the world view of a typical person from Rome and their intersection with Christianity. After looking at these areas, the issue of the Imperial cult will conclude the discussion. All of these sections will be limited to descriptions based upon occurrences or items from the first century or earlier in order to avoid anachronistic findings. These discussions will paint a picture of what the Greco-Roman concept of deity was in first-century Rome.

2. *The Greatest God: Jupiter*

Upon Capitoline Hill was the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus (Jupiter best and greatest). This hill lies in the heart of Rome, surrounded by the Circus Maximus, the giant statue of Nero, and later the Flavian amphitheater (more commonly called the Coliseum). This area constituted the public face of Rome, both to her enemies and to her citizens. The main temple held the altars to Jupiter and his two consorts, Juno and Minerva. A statue of Jupiter sat within the main hall of the temple, dominating the place of worship. This statue looked much like the statue of Zeus at Olympia, with the great god seated on his throne.² In his right hand he held a thunderbolt, ready to strike down any opposition. He wore a purple toga with designs of gold, signifying his royal or imperial status as ruler of the gods. He also wore a tunic covered in palm branches, indicating victories. Around his head he wore a wreath, which led to the title of Jupiter Victoris and the later association of the wreath with victory in various games or in war. During various festivals, his face would be painted red.³

Legends; New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1984), 12-7.

²For a full description of both the statue and the temple, see Samuel Ball Platner, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (rev. by Thomas Ashby; London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 297-302. See also the picture in Perowne, *Roman Mythology*, 14.

Typically the greatest god wore sandals, with the ties around the lower ankle. His hair hung in curls around his head, matching the beard which covered his face. In other statues, such as the one found at the Villa Albani in Rome, Jupiter often holds a rod or staff in his right hand and a bolt of lightning in his left.⁴ He is depicted with an eagle as his totem animal, a symbol that derives from Zeus.⁵

The great deity who rules the sky goes by the name of “Dyaus Pitar, Dies-piter,”⁶ or Jupiter. The people of Rome attributed him with various names including “Tonans (Thunderer), Fulgur (Lightning), Fulgurator (Sender of Lightning),”⁷ and Sky-Father. A rock that fell from the sky had been placed centuries before Paul’s time in Jupiter’s temple, perhaps considered a physical representation of him, and thus the name Lapis was added to Jupiter. He is the king of the gods, reigning from on high, and so his name became used for oaths and treaties.⁸ Typically the covenant document would include his name as the witness and executer of punishment if the terms were not met or kept. Due to the mix of cultures, many attributes and stories about Zeus accreted to Jupiter. Ferguson lists the numerous associations:

As the culture of Greece spread in the Hellenistic age it was natural to find Zeus identified with numbers of supreme local gods . . . Thus already Herodotus can identify Zeus with Amen-Ra. In Syria Zeus was on with the local Ba’al; at Baalbek with Hadad, the consort of Atar-gatis; at Doliche with the old supreme god of the Hittites who had survived in that obscure corner. Here we have two

³Ovid, *Fasti*, 1.201-2; and Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 33.111-2; 35.157.

⁴See Perowne, *Roman Mythology*, 19.

⁵Possibly the image of the eagle derives from Zeus’ abduction of Ganymede, as in *Iliad*, 20.267-72. However, the eagle can also be the symbol of sovereignty. See the discussion on Jupiter borrowing from Zeus below.

⁶John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (Aspects of Greek and Roman Life; London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 33. Cf. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 125-6. Burkert discusses the various common roots of these titles or names.

⁷Ferguson, *Religions*, 33. The name “Sky-Father” is the title of the chapter in Ferguson’s book.

⁸Strangely enough, it is often by the name of Jupiter Lapis that such treaties are made, as the Romans consider the stone evidence of how he watches over all. See *ibid.*, 33-4.

of his most widespread guises under the Roman Empire. Jupiter Heliopolitanus is found in Athens, Pannonia, Venetia, Puteoli, Rome, Gaul and Britain, and Jupiter Dolichenus traveled even more extensively. Philo of Byblus makes explicit the identification with Ba'al-shamin, the Lord of Heaven found throughout Phoenicia and Syria.⁹

The main source for common knowledge about Zeus from the fifth century B.C. until the patristic age comes from the Homeric works, though more from the *Iliad* than other sources.¹⁰ The original Jupiter, in terms of Roman mythology, likely ruled over oaths, oath taking, and punished those who broke oaths.¹¹ Rome originally had gods with little resemblance to humans, but as the Romans grew in knowledge of the wider world, so did their gods come to resemble humanity just as the neighboring religions taught. By no means does this type of syncretism stand alone, as Zeus often became another name for the ruling deity or else the sky-god of other peoples.¹² Rome often borrowed deities or theological concepts from people they conquered or with which they came into contact. One need only look at the various accounts of non-Roman gods being taken into the city¹³ or the Roman adoption of various mystery cults.¹⁴ This borrowing did not in any way inhibit the fervency of any of the cults, and in some cases enhanced them. Though Jupiter had Roman roots, most of those roots were below the first century surface, and only the Greco-Roman tree remained.

Much of the description of Jupiter fit the Roman emperors as well. Typically generals who won major battles or wars would parade into the city wearing a purple toga with traces

⁹Ferguson, *Religions*, 34.

¹⁰See especially the passages in David G. Rice and John E. Stambaugh, *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion* (SBL Sources for Biblical Study 14; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 1-20.

¹¹Perowne, *Roman Mythology*, 17.

¹²Ferguson, *Religions*, 37-43. In this section, Ferguson relates the different local gods with which Zeus became identified.

¹³See the two stories in Jan Bremmer, "The Legend of Cybele's Arrival in Rome," in *Studies in Hellenistic Religion* (ed. M. J. Vermaseren; EPRO 78; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 9-22.

¹⁴These will be dealt with below, yet note that Isis came from Egypt and Mithra/Mithras originally from Persia.

of gold and wearing the wreath of a victor on their heads. While seen as honoring to the general allowed to so parade, it also honored Jupiter in that his name was invoked with each victory. Just as Jupiter watched over oaths, so did he watch over battles. In this way, the common person in Rome saw the image of Jupiter used as a symbol of victory.

Jupiter alone could empower other gods. As Zeus in Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles' mother Thetis acknowledges him greatest of the gods and how none can overcome him once he acts, something that Hera also acknowledges. All the emperors who wanted to be accorded divinity looked to Jupiter as their patron or even ultimate father, since it was he alone who could grant them true divinity. This becomes more explicit with the second century emperors such as the arch of Trajan depicting Jupiter welcoming the emperor home with open arms and gives him a lightning bolt, thus transferring his divine power and dignity to Trajan.¹⁵ The Stoics went so far as to declare the universe simply the city of Zeus/Jupiter.¹⁶ The only entity ever said to rule over Jupiter/Zeus was fate (or the Fates, when personified), but this was never consistent in the literature. He is the only god who had multiple set festivals every year by Roman law under different names (on Sept 13 as Jupiter Optimus Maximus, on April 13 as Jupiter Victor, on June 13 as Jupiter Invictus).¹⁷ As seen by this, Jupiter Optimus Maximus lived up to his name in the mythology and ethos of the first century, and the Roman people saw him as the protector of the city and themselves.

Jupiter did not dwell alone on the hill. He was part of a triad, known as the Archaic triad, as the three great gods of Rome all had statues upon the hill. Along with Jupiter, Quirinus and Mars also originally ruled over the city of Rome. Mars had his own temple upon the hill, complete with statues and other cultic accoutrements.¹⁸ Quirinus had less to proclaim his greatness yet still had a presence.¹⁹ This triad was later overtaken in popularity, though not authority, by the Capitoline triad of Jupiter, Minerva,

¹⁵Ferguson, *Religions*, 40.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷Kurt Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (München: Beck, 1960), 80.

¹⁸Pierre Gros, *Aurea templa: recherches sur l'architecture religieuse de Rome à l'époque d'Auguste* (Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1976), 92-5, 142-3, 166-9, and 189-95.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 116-7. See also Bernadette Liou-Gille, *Cultes "Héroïques" romains: Les fondateurs* (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1980), 141-56.

and Juno, as seen in the temple of Jupiter built by Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, the last king before the republic. This triad, however, stood above the rest of the Roman pantheon as the great gods of Rome. Quirinus was the cultic name for Romulus, the founder of Rome and a descendant of Aeneas the Trojan hero.²⁰ Finally, Mars paralleled Ares as the god of war.²¹ Jupiter was the Father of all, parallel to Zeus in Greek thought. Though he was part of two triads, he was considered the greatest of the Roman pantheon by the people whom they invoked as the god of the Roman empire. As seen in Jupiter, the Roman gods borrowed heavily from Greek mythology, but the accumulation of foreign gods did not end there.

2. *Gods and Mystery Cults*

In borrowing from other cultures, cults sprang up around various patrons (those who had enough money) at various times, usually dedicated to specific deities. For example, the cult of Isis built a large following in the Greco-Roman world based upon the universality of her appeal as mother of all, a fertility aspect. Nearly all cultures had some sort of fertility goddess (Artemis of Ephesus, Asherah in the ANE, etc.), and various peoples often assimilated Isis into this role by combining her with their current fertility goddess. Isis, though, did not have much sway in Rome until the time of Caligula.²² Her cult followed much the same pattern of other mystery cults in terms of membership, function, and goals. Mystery cults forced a person to become initiated into the cult before any of the deeper teachings were divulged.²³ The idea of joining a cult was not parallel to a conversion, as joining merely meant adding another deity to one's personal worship rather than ignoring all other gods for the cult just joined. For example, when Cybele joined the Roman pantheon in 201 B.C. or when Diocletian made Mithras a formal god of Rome in A.D. 307, neither constituted a break from previous gods.²⁴ Mystery cults

²⁰Liou-Gille, *Cultes*, 135-208.

²¹Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, 114-6.

²²Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity* (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 132-3.

²³John M. Court, "Mithraism Among the Mysteries," in *Religious Diversity in the Greco-Roman World: A Survey of Recent Scholarship* (ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok and John M. Court; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 182-95. Court notes that the rituals "provided" salvation through "what could be loosely termed 'sacramental' means" (187).

²⁴In fact, Diocletian was combining Mithras with *sol invictus*. See Gary

were considered additions to the religious life of an individual rather than a radical change. Mystery cults neither detracted from nor were a substitution for religion in the home. People could choose what type of religious life they wanted simply by choosing to which god or gods they would devote time and resources.

The difference between mystery cults and the formal cults hinged on the function. Burkert defines a mystery religion as being “initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.”²⁵ People appeased the normal gods through sacrifices, as keeping the gods from working negatively in the devotee’s life remained the primary goal. Offerings for healing or some other benefit also occurred frequently.²⁶ In the mystery cults, the individuals came together in order to pursue a deeper level of religion. This does not mean the mystery religions ignore these two functions, rather the mystery cults supplement them with additional reasons for worship and offerings.²⁷ A specific element of the mystery religions, however, is the use of magic. This magic functioned only for those within the cult, as one had to be special (i.e. a member) before one could ask for favors from the deity.²⁸ The cults were also focused on the afterlife, though not all in the same way. The following discussion will focus primarily on Isis, the Mother of All, and Mithras, a warrior god from Persia, in the city of Rome as both had widespread influence as their cults were adapted in different areas and sectors of life.

Isis originated as an Egyptian goddess who was the sister and wife of Sarapis/Osiris and the mother of Horus, which directly connected her to the ruling pharaohs of Egypt.²⁹ Osiris

Lease, “Mithraism and Christianity,” in *ANRW* 28.2:1302-32, cf. especially 1322. Walter Burkert mentions how even the use of the terms “‘faith’ and ‘salvation’ . . . do not imply ‘conversion’” (*Ancient Mystery Cults* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987], 14). See also *ibid.*, 17 in regards to the initiation of Lucius into the Isis cult.

²⁵Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 11. Burkert’s definition is evidently one commonly used by other experts in the field. For example, see Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1:247 n. 3, where they use his definition.

²⁶See the helpful work by Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 12-5.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 15. Burkert mentions that one of Isis’ original cultic functions was to heal disease, especially considering her close ties with Asclepius in the Greek world.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 24-5.

²⁹France Le Corsu, *Isis: mythe et mystères* (Paris: Les Belle Lettres, 1977),

ruled Egypt as the first king, but his brother Set grew jealous and killed him. Set, after a number of other events, finally cut the body of Osiris into pieces, but not until after Osiris had impregnated Isis. Isis gave birth to Horus who defeated Set. Horus went on to rule the country as the first pharaoh. Egypt, therefore, considered Isis the mother of all the pharaohs and the mother of all of Egypt. The Egyptians directly linked her to the Nile itself, and as the Nile brings life to Egypt, so did Isis bring life to all, becoming the mother of all.³⁰

The idea of a goddess of motherhood, or one who is mother of all, had only partial parallels in Greek culture, and virtually none in Roman. The worship of other goddesses, such as Venus or Magna Mater, paralleled in some aspects the worship of Isis due to common attributes. Isis played the role of wife and mother *par excellence*.³¹ Those who worshipped Isis spoke of her as being worshipped under other names and specifically used those attributes as points of contact.³² When Cybele became part of the pantheon, for the first time a deity parallel to Isis could be called Roman.³³ Isis was well-known in the Roman world, however, as both the Greeks and the Romans held her in high esteem.³⁴

Some inscriptions designate Isis as the upholder of the entire Greco-Roman pantheon,³⁵ but this was not the norm. Versnel argues for a henotheistic idea, such that Isis is the great goddess and the one most worthy of devotion, but not the only goddess.³⁶ Admittedly, Octavian disallowed Egyptian gods to be worshipped in Rome proper, and Tiberius worked to eliminate all

7-13. There are two slightly different versions of the tale, one Egyptian and one Roman, but the Roman version is not attested until the time of Plutarch.

³⁰R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1971), especially 30-1.

³¹Le Corsu, *Isis*, 15. Cf. Sharon Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women in the Greco-Roman World* (EPRO 51; Leiden: Brill, 1975).

³²Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 1:281.

³³She joined Palatine Hill in 201 B.C., and her temple was dedicated in 191.

³⁴Ladislav Vidman, *Isis und Sarapis bei den Griechen und Römern: Epigraphische Studien zur Verbreitung und zu den Trägern des ägyptischen Kultes* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970), 97.

³⁵Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 1:281.

³⁶H. S. Versnel, *Ter Unus: Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism* (Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion 1; Leiden: Brill, 1990), especially 35-8 and 44-52.

non-Roman cults (or at least what he considered non-Roman) from the city.³⁷ Caligula, however, quickly reinstated the Egyptian gods upon attaining the purple after Tiberius and likely not only took part in the cult³⁸ but established some of the feasts.³⁹ Claudius, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian⁴⁰ all showed either direct or indirect support for the Isis cult, with Domitian rebuilding the temples of Isis and Sarapis exemplifying direct support and Vespasian and Titus spending the night in the temple of Isis before their victory processional in Rome exemplifying indirect.⁴¹ Isis did not ascend to a place by the triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, as though she were conquering Rome and the Roman pantheon.⁴² Even in her own temples, other Roman gods, such as Dionysus and Venus, had statues present.⁴³ The cult did not compete with the Roman gods in general, rather the Emperors and Senate added them to the current list of gods.

As the cult of Isis spread, the function moved from the foundation of a ruler cult (Egypt), to a worldwide celebration of motherhood, to finally allowing various forms of salvation to the adherents. The worship of Isis varied from place to place, and as the cult grew, it became adapted by the regional needs of the cultists.⁴⁴ Salvation in the Isis cult was firmly entrenched in the physical world at the beginning.⁴⁵ Magic ruled in their conception

³⁷See especially the brief summary in Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 196.

³⁸Suetonius, *Gaius* 54.2; 57.4.

³⁹This is the conclusion reached by Michel Malaise, *Les conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens en Italie* (EPRO 22; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 221-8.

⁴⁰For a complete listing of the various relationships between the cult of Isis and the emperors, see Tran tam Tinh, "Les empereurs romains versus Isis, Sérapis," in *Subject and Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity* (ed. Alastair Small; Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 17; Ann Arbor: Thomson-Shore, 1996), 215-30.

⁴¹Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 196-7.

⁴²Witt, *Isis*, 72.

⁴³Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 1:281-2. For a more comprehensive discussion and description, see Le Corsu, *Isis*, 182-9.

⁴⁴The famous "diffusion" for which Le Corsu argues unconvincingly (*Isis*, 211-78).

of the world, and the cultists sought it above all other things with respect to the cult.⁴⁶ Part of salvation was the achievement of longer life.⁴⁷ Due to the confluence of Isis with the Greco-Roman religiosity of the time, a priest of Isis claimed to have visited the Elysian fields (the Greco-Roman version of paradise) which were evidently promised to him.⁴⁸ Sharon Heyob argues for a future state of salvation, as women looked to escape from this world and enter into the next, basing this conclusion upon the inscription *doi,h soi ;Osirij to. yucro.n u[dwr*.⁴⁹ She finds this conclusive because of the association of Osiris with water being salvific. The problem is this inscription (or variants⁵⁰) occurs only five times, and of those only four refer to women,⁵¹ plus the link between water and salvation is rather weak. However, Vidman strengthens this case by describing a sarcophagus he had seen.⁵² The picture on the left side is summarized by Heyob as follows: “A seated woman holds in her left hand the lid of a small box which at the same time a man standing near her holds in his left hand; with his right hand he anoints her left eye.”⁵³ The woman is named Tetratia Isias, and it is her husband Sosius Iulianus who made the sarcophagus for her. The longer poem names Tetratia as Memphi (or Memphius, depending on the form), since often people are renamed after entering the Isis cult.⁵⁴ The final line written on the side with Latin letters but spelling Greek words reads as “*caere calihanes aepoe su plerophoru psyche*,” which Vidman revises to “*caere calliphanes*

⁴⁵Although some scholars prefer the term “transformation” to “salvation” (cf. Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 287 n. 119), the notion is close enough to the Christian concept for the term to remain the same.

⁴⁶Le Corsu, *Isis*, 192-3.

⁴⁷Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 290.

⁴⁸Burkert, *Mystery Cults*, 26.

⁴⁹Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women*, 61.

⁵⁰There is only an extra occurrence of the article in some inscriptions, as seen in Vidman, *Isis und Sarapis*, 13.

⁵¹Moreover, only three occur in Rome. See the listing in Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women*, 61 nn. 33-4.

⁵²Vidman, *Isis und Sarapis*, 132-8. This description follows the observations of Vidman.

⁵³Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women*, 62.

⁵⁴The name confusion comes from the vocative being the form used. See Vidman, *Isis und Sarapis*, 132-3.

aepoe su plerophoru psyche,” giving the Greek sentence of Cai/re, callifanh,j, ei;poi sou/ plhrofo,rou yuch|/.⁵⁵ Festugière amended this to “Cai/re, callifanh,j,” ei;poi soi, “plhrofo,rou yuch,,” which implies that Iulianus gave to Memphi the correct secret words needed to gain salvation from Isis when she judges.⁵⁶ Contrary to Vidman’s view, Burkert states the following as his conclusion to the matter of salvation and Isis, “The main emphasis, at any rate, is on the power of Isis ruling in this cosmos, changing the fates here and now for her protégé.”⁵⁷ This does not answer the evidence from the inscriptions nor from the sarcophagus that Vidman details. In the end, with the majority of the evidence pointing toward little thought of afterlife in the Roman version of the Isis cult, and with the post-first century dating of the sarcophagus, It is more likely that salvation beyond this life was not an emphasis of the Isis cult in first century Rome.

Mithras also had his cult in the Greco-Roman world, though it was not as widespread as that of Isis during the first century. Just as Jupiter Lapis ruled over covenants or agreements in Rome, so did Mithras perform the same function in Persia, as evidenced by his name meaning “mediator of a contract.”⁵⁸ The earliest inscription to Mithras in Rome itself can be dated to A.D. 102, though this points toward an influence during the first century.⁵⁹

Mithras was linked with the sun long before becoming a Roman or even a Greek religious figure.⁶⁰ At first, he merely served the sun as the child of Aditi.⁶¹ Later, he was equated with the sun himself.⁶² Many Parthian kings bore the name

⁵⁵Ibid., 135.

⁵⁶A. J. Festugière, “Initée par l’époux,” *Monuments Piot* 53 (1963): 135-46. The problem with this solution is the conjectural nature of it.

⁵⁷Burkert, *Mystery Cults*, 27.

⁵⁸Klauck, *Religious Context*, 140.

⁵⁹Ibid., 141.

⁶⁰Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel,” *JRS* 90 (2000): 145-80.

⁶¹See Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 203.

⁶²Hugo Gressmann, *Die orientalischen Religionen im hellenistisch-römischen Zeitalter* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1930), 139. Lease (“Mithraism and Christianity,” 1320 n. 110) translates the appropriate phrase as, “in the tenth *yashta* of the Avesta Mithra has a place equal to Ahura-Mazda, and is also equal

Mithradates, showing the close affinity for Mithras in their cultic system.⁶³ Especially key in understanding the significance of such a name lies in seeing Mithras as the balance between the good god Ahura Mazda (also called Ormuzd) and Ahriman (also called Angra Mainyu) as the evil, though lesser god.⁶⁴ This triad stood above the other deities in the Iranian pantheon.⁶⁵ Though it later became a symbol of his role as psychopomp,⁶⁶ the link with the sun displays the physicality and this-worldliness of Mithras.

The Mithras cult had two distinguishing characteristics, as laid out by Klauck.⁶⁷ First, he had no consort. While Isis was balanced by Osiris (or vice versa), Mithras did not have a comparable mate. Second, his history or back story does not contain some tragic event. Isis wandered looking for Osiris, whom Set murdered, yet Mithras does not have a parallel episode of affliction. Both of these features are unique among the mystery religions as far as is known, as even Demeter has the tale of Persephone with Hades (covering both consort and suffering).⁶⁸

The worshippers of Mithras slowly began to blend him into the surrounding deities already present. Part of the same dynasty that had kings named as Mithradates also had tombs upon which Mithras was sculpted as the enthroned god Apollo-

to the sun.”

⁶³Eckart Olshausen, “Mithradates VI. und Rom,” in *ANRW* 1.806-15. Olshausen focuses on the skirmishes between Mithradates VI and Rome, though he does devote some time to Mithradate’s lineage. Cf. Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 203.

⁶⁴Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 103. The hymn describes how Mithras would cross the sky in his chariot and Ahriman would hide in fear.

⁶⁵For more on the Iranian pantheon and the place of Mithras in it, see John R. Hinnells, ed., *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies* (2 vols; Totowa, N.J.: Manchester University Press, 1975), 1:1-248.

⁶⁶Bruce Lincoln, “Mithra(s) as Sun and Savior,” in *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell’ Impero Romano* (ed. Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J. Vermaseren; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 505-23.

⁶⁷Klauck, *Religious Context*, 141-2. The two items come from Klauck and are reinforced by other scholars as well. Mithraism did later incorporate some suffering aspects, but the dates for such inscriptions, manuscripts, and authors come from outside the range of this study, so the ideas run parallel to rather than being part of the historical backdrop of apostolic Christianity. See Lease, “Mithraism and Christianity,” 1327-30.

⁶⁸For the comparison between Isis and Demeter, see Le Corsu, *Isis*, 58-61.

Mithras.⁶⁹ Mithras came to be identified with Perseus, the son of Zeus and Danae who slew Medusa. The link becomes very evident by looking at various depictions of Perseus killing Medusa compared to Mithras killing the bull: both look away from that which they are killing.⁷⁰ With Mithras, there is no discernable reason for his turning away from the bull. In fact, any other parallel slaughtering or heroic victory over a foe always has the god or hero watching the accomplishment. Perseus, however, must glance aside lest he be turned to stone by the Gorgon's gaze. This same Perseus fathered Perses, from whom the Persians took their name.⁷¹ Perseus himself became a hero later elevated to god status in Tarsus, as the citizens of the city worshipped him.⁷² King Tiridates of Armenia tells Nero that he worships Mithras.⁷³ The use of symbols in the cult best displays this slow Greco-Romanization of Mithraism. When the Mithras cult purchased or took a building from a different cult, a majority of the old symbols were left alone, such as a thunderbolt, a sistrum, the name of Jupiter-Sarapis, or even a crown of Venus.⁷⁴ Unlike Isis, there are no extent occurrences of someone naming Mithras as above the pantheon, and in fact some Mithraic chapels included statues of other gods (e.g. Apollo, Demeter) combined into the worship of Mithras.⁷⁵ In the original Iranian version of the cult of Mithras, there is little to no indication of any associated mysteries.⁷⁶ This underscores the blurred line between deities and how readily the Romans adapted

⁶⁹Theresa Goell, "Nimrud Dagh: The Tomb of Antiochus I, King of Commagene," *Archeology* 5 (1952): 136-44.

⁷⁰David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 30-1.

⁷¹Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 204.

⁷²Ibid. See also Dio Chrysostom, 33.45.

⁷³Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 205. Finegan dates this occurrence to A.D. 66.

⁷⁴Samuel Laeuchli, "Mithraic Dualism," in *Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome* (ed. Samuel Laeuchli; Garrett Theological Studies 1; Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 46-66. See especially 47-53.

⁷⁵Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 282-3.

⁷⁶Carsten Colpe, "Mithra-Verehrung, Mithras-Kult und die Existenz iranischer Mysterien," in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies* (ed. John R. Hinnells; 2 vols; Totowa, N.J.: Manchester University Press, 1975), 2.378-405.

foreign aspects to their own established gods and heroes.

An important point in terms of dating the Mithraic mysteries in Roman itself comes from Manfred Clauss, who takes the evidence as pointing toward the mystery cult beginning in Rome and moving outward from there.⁷⁷ Clauss notes that the earliest inscriptions found about Mithras in the Roman Empire all occur at about the same time, the end of the first century or the beginning of the second.⁷⁸ However, instead of a progression in age of the inscriptions as one approaches Rome, the opposite seems to be true. The inscriptions are all by those who formerly lived in Rome.⁷⁹ The expansion shows movement from Rome and toward the provinces, in which case a date of the strong establishment of the cult in the city before the end of the first century becomes likely.

Salvation in the Mithraic rites has stirred some controversy in two respects. First, some scholars have tied salvation and the entire cult to astrological phenomena, noting how the initiates graduate to new levels within the cult (there are seven levels, from initiate to head of the cult) based upon the Zodiac symbols.⁸⁰ In fact, the signs of the Zodiac surround the bull-slaying scene that dominates the walls of most Mithraic chapels (often in caves).⁸¹ Brandon argues for salvation being focused on the afterlife based upon the parallels in the ANE and because Zoroastrianism had a salvific bent originally.⁸² This overlooks two significant factors. First, the data would only make a case if in fact Roman Mithraism directly followed the original teachings of Zoroaster. This is negated by the mystery cult that Mithraism had become, since in Iran it had been a public religion.⁸³ Second, while

⁷⁷Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries* (New York: Rutledge, 2001).

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 21-2. Clauss also notes that there were multiple inscriptions or offerings within a short time span, something he believes points toward the ready acceptance of the cult.

⁸⁰This is the main argument of Ulansey, *Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*. See especially 67-124. Ulansey links the bull-slaying with the rites of the equinoxes.

⁸¹Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 207.

⁸²S. G. F. Brandon, "The Idea of the Judgment of the Dead in the Ancient Near East," in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies* (ed. John R. Hinnels; 2 vols; Totowa, N.J.: Manchester University Press, 1975), 2.470-8.

ANE religions may have looked for a salvation for the afterlife, the Romans typically did not. The argument from parallels does not overcome the absence of evidence. Thus, the salvation offered in the Mithraic mysteries offered no transcendent answer. Mithras gave power or help to those in need in this world, not in any world to come.⁸⁴ Finegan argues that the movement of the initiate from one grade to the next must be paralleled by the movement of the soul's ascendance from one planet to the next since the planets each fit a grade of initiation. However, there is little to no evidence backing such a claim, and this seems to be a case of allowing the imagery to overshadow the facts.⁸⁵ Often found in the guise of Helios, he never took his flaming chariot beyond this physical reality, and thus a life beyond this one could not be in view for his followers since their god would be absent.

The mystery cults of Isis and Mithras clearly display important traits of Roman religion, traits which convey the religious stance of the residents of first-century Rome. First, there is little concern for the world to come, as most Romans in their religious practices were concerned primarily with earthly life.⁸⁶ This is especially noteworthy in the case of Mithras, as the Zoroastrian form of the cult concentrated upon the world to come.⁸⁷ Second, these private cults were often combined with the public cults, such that even though one must be initiated into Isis or Mithras, still the common gods were honored even in the places set aside only for Isis or Mithras. Third, this combining did not lead, in general, to any competition, as adding another god to the pantheon was not religiously problematic. Fourth, the gods just discussed all formed triads of different kinds. Jupiter combined with Mars and Quirinus to form one triad (or with Juno and Minerva). Isis naturally came to Rome with Sarapis and Horus. Mithras mediated between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. Each of these triads formed a complete unit. Fifth, the Romans had no

⁸³Contra Roger Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis," *JRS* 88 (1998): 115-28. Beck is trying to bring back the hypothesis of Franz Cumont which has been out of favor for nearly 25 years.

⁸⁴Contra Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, 208-9.

⁸⁵Though a common position, see especially the rebuttal of Finegan's argument for an eschatological focus in Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 27-8.

⁸⁶Cf. Robert Turcan, "Salut mithriaque et sotériologie néoplatonicienne," in *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell' Impero Romano* (ed. Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J. Vermaseren; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 173-91.

⁸⁷For more information, see Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 27. This point cannot be overstressed in this discussion.

trouble connecting the new gods to heroes or humans of some sort. Even though Isis was the mother of the pharaohs, this did not stop the Romans from accepting her (though they tended not to use such a title for her), just as Mithras was closely connected to Perseus of Tarsus.

Adherents of these mystery cults were not looking for salvation in eschatological terms nor a life after death experience, instead they wanted help now. Some of the mystery cult members used the cult as a political tool, to make their names known by sponsoring the public events. The focus throughout was on how to help oneself, either by the favor of the god invoked or else by the members with which one would come into contact. Some cults were built around humans who ascended to divine status, such as Heracles or Dionysus. In turn, the idea of humans as gods needs to be investigated.

3. *Humans as Gods*

Worshipping a ruler was not something invented by the Romans, rather these type of cults were a common phenomena among nations of the world.⁸⁸ The Roman Imperial cult grew quickly outside of Rome itself since it was an outlet for displays of loyalty to or acclamation of the current ruler of Rome or the favored dynasty.⁸⁹ Octavian was worshipped as Augustus by groups from various cities as an appeal for patronage and to cement alliances.⁹⁰ The Imperial Cult was not strictly about magnifying the Emperor as ruler, rather it was about magnifying the Emperor as the one who stands for Rome and the Empire (though this might be disputed in the cases of Nero and Domitian). Octavian, rather than having the cult focus solely on himself, allowed the various groups he conquered to build alters to *Roma et Augustus*, signifying that the ruler was identified directly with the

⁸⁸See the different precursors listed in Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 200-3. For literary backgrounds in Greek and Roman culture, see Andreas Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970), 9-25.

⁸⁹For a sweeping review of literature on and from the Imperial Cult in the first century, see Christian Habicht, "Die augusteische Zeit und das erste Jahrhundert nach Christi Geburt," in *Le Culte des souverains dans l'Empire Romain* (ed. William den Boer; Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 19; Geneva: Hardt, 1973), 39-88.

⁹⁰For example, the altar where Drusus called together the Gauls.

city and Empire.⁹¹ The point is that the Roman Imperial cult was used as a political tool to bring other peoples into the empire. For this reason, the cult spread through outlying provinces without having a firm foothold in Rome itself. The Imperial cult originally deified Rome (as the goddess Roma) and the Emperor to the conquered or allied nations by presenting them with altars of Roma and Augustus.

3.1 *Religious and Historical Foundation*

The first person to be deified by the city of Rome, a practice typically performed by a decree from the Senate as in this case, was Julius Caesar.⁹² A debate surrounds the timing of this event, especially since the enactment by Rome did not necessarily follow upon the formal ratification of divine honors. In addition, with the making and breaking of alliances by Antony and Octavian, the Senate was unable to carry out much in the way of their own official proclamations.⁹³ Julius claimed divinity for himself through Aeneas of Troy, who alleged his own divine status by descent from Venus. The Senate offered Caesar multiple honors for his various victories through 47-44 B.C., and Julius already held the position of *pontifex maximus*, a position that placed one man between the nation and the gods.⁹⁴ Through these honors, the Senate granted Julius divinity, possibly even during his own lifetime.⁹⁵ People who owed Caesar either favors or money, any sort of debt, made inscriptions calling him god.⁹⁶ Sacrifices were made on Caesar's birthday during his lifetime, an act made official in 42 B.C. An inscription on a statue in the city of Rome labeled him as having divine status, as did many other inscriptions.⁹⁷

⁹¹Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire* (3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1987-2002), 1.1:104-5. Fishwick describes how coins portraying the altar had ROM ET AVG stamped on them.

⁹²This discussion will follow Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 1.1:56-72 and Weinstock, *Divus Julius*, especially 270-317.

⁹³For an overview of the vacillating relationship between the Senate and the emperor, see Alföldi, *Kaiserreiche*, 25-38.

⁹⁴With respect to the importance of this position, note that every emperor thereafter took this title to solidify political power with religious trappings.

⁹⁵This debate is covered deftly in Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 1.1:56-7.

⁹⁶Weinstock, *Divus Julius*, 300-1. See *ibid.*, 300 n. 7 for details of the use of these titles.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 53.

Octavian officially deified Julius Caesar after his death and after his murderers were killed. During his lifetime, Julius turned down the title king while not turning down the title of god.⁹⁸ This continued the idea of a ruler cult in European politics (obviously something that could not be instituted during the Republic era), a desire of rulers for more political control patterned after Alexander the Great.⁹⁹ Typically the pattern began with the person who would become a ruler earning great military victories (hence Domitian's striving to earn the name Germanicus), the country prospering, and the emperor dying with witnesses to his spirit ascending to heaven.¹⁰⁰

This pattern of the deification of the ruler began with divine status in the provinces and conquered nations during the life of the ruler and then in Rome after death (including Imperial families in the case of Livia, Augustus' wife, and Trajan deifying his father and sister)¹⁰¹ continued during the rules of Nero and Domitian. While there is less direct evidence for Nero, Domitian demanded divine honorifics when holding court. Juvenius Celsus and others named him *despo,thj te kai. qe,oj*, both in oral and written communication per his instructions.¹⁰² Martial also compared Domitian to Janus and Jupiter, and he described him as Heracles.¹⁰³ This last comparison likely is tied to the statue of Heracles bearing Domitian's face. In addition, Martial

⁹⁸Elizabeth Rawson, "Caesar's Heritage: Hellenistic Kings and Their Roman Equals," *JRS* 65 (1975): 148-59.

⁹⁹J. P. V. D. Balsdon, "Die 'Göttlichkeit' Alexanders," in *Römischer Kaiserkult* (ed. Antonie Wlosok; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 254-90. The title "master of the world" was accorded to both Julius Caesar and Octavian, clearly patterned after Alexander. See the discussion about the statue of Julius standing on a depiction of the world, a direct parallel to statues of Alexander, in Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 1.1.57.

¹⁰⁰Elias Bickermann, "Die römische Kaiserapotheose," in *Römischer Kaiserkult* (ed. Antonie Wlosok; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 82-121.

¹⁰¹Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 89.

¹⁰²See especially Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 67.5.7 and 67.13.4, and Martial, *Epigrams*, 5.8.1; 7.34.8; 8.2.6; 9.66.3. For other comments using this type of titulature, see Martial (4.67.4; 5.2.6; 5.5.1, 3-4; 6.64.14; 7.5; 7.8.1, 2; 7.12.1; 7.40.2; 7.99.5-8; 8.1.1; 8.31.3; 8.82.1-4; 9.16.3; 9.20.2; 9.23.3; 9.24.6; 9.28.5, 7; 9.65.1-2; 9.101.23-24; 14.76), Statius (1.1.62; 3.3.103, 110; 4.2.6; 5.1.42, 112, 261), and Dio Chrysostom (45:1, 4). All of these references involve the mention of *deus*, *dominus*, *kuri,oj*, *despo,thj*, or *qe,oj* in reference to an emperor.

¹⁰³Respectively, Martial, *Epigrams*, 7.8.5-6; 9.28.10; 9.101.1.

mentioned how all the gods worship Caesar and how the emperor is to be worshiped by everyone.¹⁰⁴ Leonard L. Thompson objects that this must be some sort of exaggeration on the part of Cassius and Suetonius, as these terms occur nowhere else together in relation to Domitian in that they never occur on coins or any official documents.¹⁰⁵ David E. Aune replies to this objection by stating that only official titulature or honors may be used in official documents, “inscriptions, coins, or medallions.”¹⁰⁶ At the same time, Thompson makes a good point when he questions the veracity of Suetonius and Dio Cassius. Cassius especially defames Domitian at every opportunity, stating that Domitian reviled his brother.¹⁰⁷ This does not square with the evidence in that Domitian did “more for the cult of Titus, than Titus had done for that of Divus Vespasianus.”¹⁰⁸ This does not end the debate, however, for promoting Titus with divine honors necessarily strengthens the rule of the emperor, especially one who had been distanced from his living family (geographically, if not politically) yet sought divine honors for himself. The first step in a living emperor desiring worship would be to ensure the cult was already strong through the worship of past emperors. Rather than a mark of love, the fervency with which Domitian elevated his brother could simply have been politically and religiously expedient (if one can separate the two for Rome), as was the case with the deification of Julius by Octavian.¹⁰⁹ Thompson gives evidence against himself, noting that the crowds and lower officials used the language of *dominus et*

¹⁰⁴*Epigrams*, 8.4 and 9.64.6.

¹⁰⁵Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 105. The section on the vocabulary associated with divinity and the emperors covers 104-7.

¹⁰⁶David E. Aune, *Revelation* (3 vols.; WBC 52a-c; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997-1998), 1:311.

¹⁰⁷67.2.5. Thompson (*Apocalypse and Empire*, 96-104) summarizes well the various problems in the accounts of Cassius and Suetonius, though he does not mention that the latter tends toward a more moderate position, even complimenting Domitian’s poetry.

¹⁰⁸Kenneth Scott, *The Imperial Cult Under the Flavians* (New York: Arno, 1975), 62.

¹⁰⁹See Suetonius, *Dom.*, 13.1. With respect to Octavian, he was consumed with being granted his right to bear the name Caesar, knowing how much this name stirred the legions and the people. Note how he agreed to the mediated position of having a Second Triumvirate in order to validate his adoption. With respect to Octavian exalting Julius, and using this for political gain, see Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 1.1.75-6.

deus and that Martial later had to disavow his use of the same terms for Domitian.¹¹⁰ Titus minted coins that utilized the title “DIVI F” (divine Flavian or possibly *filius*) for his brother as successor to the throne.¹¹¹ In addition, it is clear that Trajan was also called *dominus* (translated by Dio Chrysostom as kuri,oj).¹¹² One should also note that there was a mixture of divine titles used for the emperors throughout the Roman world, with such names as “(1)god, (2)son of god (i.e., *divi filius*, huiòs theoû), (3) god made manifest, (4) lord, (5) lord of the whole world, (6) lord’s day (*Sebaste* is a pagan, while *Kyriakē* is Christian), (7) savior of the world, (8) epiphany, (9) emperor.”¹¹³ Clearly the titles of divinity were used for the emperors not just in the provincial areas of the empire, but even in Rome itself.¹¹⁴

The population of Rome also sacrificed to the emperors and their images. As soon as Augustus returned from Actium, the senate ordered that libations be made to him. Some scholars consider this in the light of later developments as being a circumlocution referring to his *genius*, yet nothing in the actual historical documents calls for such speculation.¹¹⁵ Fishwick seems to side with those who argue for the *genius* to be the one receiving the sacrifice, yet he also notes that for Dio and other authors, “the distinction between a man and his *genius* may not always have been safe,”¹¹⁶ a tacit admission to a lack of evidence and a telling remark regarding the fine distinction between *genius* and person. What happened in the Greek lands became common in that existing groups (often called *koinon*) adopted the current emperor as their cause or patron, devoting time and money to worshipping their person of choice. Thus, Octavian only needed to agree to the request of the groups in Asia and Bithynia in order to begin a cult

¹¹⁰Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, 106.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 223 n. 19.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 104. See Dio Chrysostom, *Or.*, 45.4.

¹¹³David E. Aune, “The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John,” *BR* 28 (1983): 5-26, here 20. Aune examines the relevant texts to make his case.

¹¹⁴For a brief overview of some of the more crucial references, see Alföldi, *Kaiserreiche*, 49-53.

¹¹⁵Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 2.1.375-6 n. 2.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*

there.¹¹⁷ The establishment of the cult under Octavian resulted from a passive acquiescence, not an active policy. This allowed the cult to gain power for the emperor without the emperor being seen as grasping for political strength, and therefore the Senate accepted this since it gave more control to Rome especially in light of Octavian's typical request of altars to Rome and himself.¹¹⁸ Octavian had no need to press his divine status, as others thrust the honors upon him of their own wills.¹¹⁹ Various emperors, including Gaius Caligula and Nero, built statues and temples in their own honor, with Caligula building a temple in Rome itself.¹²⁰ Both of these rulers used Jupiter/Helios imagery (a sun crowning the head) for themselves, making an explicit claim. The Senate even prostrated themselves at the empty throne of Gaius when he was gone, a clear sign of worship.¹²¹ They went so far as to waste a full day praying for Gaius while he was absent from Rome.¹²² In addition, Tiriadates I prostrated himself before Nero in AD 66.¹²³

3.2 *Emperors as Gods Outside of Rome*

While most of the early emperors refused divine titles or worship within Rome itself, many of them allowed for or even encouraged the promulgation of the cult outside of Rome. Various cities and provinces vied for the opportunity and authorization to build a temple to the current emperor. Pergamum held a temple to Augustus and Rome, a temple that tied Octavian's power directly to the people, as per his description of himself as "*per consensum universorum potitus rerum omnium.*"¹²⁴ Tiberius refused divine honors when given to him while living, yet that did not stop them from occurring.¹²⁵ He rejected statues and other

¹¹⁷G. W. Bowersock, *Augustus and the Greek World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 116.

¹¹⁸See especially Suetonius, *Aug.*, 52 and Tacitus, *Ann.*, 4.37.

¹¹⁹Andreas Alföldi, "Die zwei Lorbeerbäume des Augustus," in *Römischer Kaiserkult* (ed. Antonie Wlosok; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 403-22.

¹²⁰Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 59.11.12 and 28.1-2. Cf. Donald L. Jones, "Roman Imperial Cult," *ABD* 5:806-9, here 806.

¹²¹Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 59.24.3-4.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 59.24.5.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 62.2.

¹²⁴*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 34.

¹²⁵For example, Tacitus, *Ann.*, 4.37-38.

forms of honor typically reserved for either Augustus or dead emperors.¹²⁶ This did not, however, keep the populous from doing as they wished. Contrary to Tiberius' stated desires, the title *DIVUS* appeared on coins with his face and there is a written record of him being called son of the god.¹²⁷ Smyrna won the right to build a temple for Tiberius from among eleven candidates.¹²⁸ Other cities built temples associated with the living emperor, as Pompeii constructed a temple of Fortuna Augusta, which consisted of white marble that extended into the street, displaying the importance of the temple.¹²⁹ The temple even had niches prepared in order to hold statues of the Imperial family. The temple stood north of the forum, directly opposite the baths, a very prominent place for a temple. Claudius disallowed a cult of himself as well, yet according to a letter he sent to a prefect, he still permitted statues of himself and his family to be erected in Alexandria.¹³⁰ The introduction to this letter, written by a local prefect, named him "our god Caesar," and the significant portion reads:¹³¹

I have deemed it necessary to display the letter publicly in order that reading it one by one you may admire the majesty of our god Caesar and feel gratitude for his good will towards the city.

Even though Claudius rejected divine accolades everywhere, a temple was erected in his honor in Britain.¹³² Vespasian, the ruler after Nero, also refused divine honors during his life. However, upon his death bed he reportedly declared "I am becoming a god."¹³³ Titus, successor to his father Vespasian, consecrated both

¹²⁶For certain titles being used only for Augustus, see *ibid.* For the rejection of divine titles for himself, see Suetonius, *Tib.*, 26.1.

¹²⁷See Jones, "Roman Imperial Cult," 806.

¹²⁸Tacitus, *Ann.*, 4.55-56.

¹²⁹Paul Zanker, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 82.

¹³⁰C. K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (Rev. ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 47-50. Cf. Jones, "Roman Imperial Cult," 806-7.

¹³¹Barrett, *Selected Documents*, 47.

¹³²Tacitus, *Ann.*, 14.31.

¹³³Suetonius, *Vesp.*, 23.4. Jones ("Roman Imperial Cult," 807) takes this to be a joke, yet this seems an unlikely interpretation of the event, especially when

his father and his sister Domitilla, building a temple for the former in Rome.¹³⁴ Trajan, the last emperor during the first century, deified Domitian.¹³⁵ He also verbally rejected divine honors, yet he had a temple built for himself in Pergamum. He was considered to be an aspect of Jupiter by the people. With respect to the persecution of Christians under Pliny the Younger, he used the litmus test of offering incense, wine, and worship to the image of Trajan, a practice which Trajan endorsed.¹³⁶ These emperors (the so-called sane ones, when compared to Nero, Gaius Caligula, and Domitian) offered lip service to denying deification during their lives, but they let statues be built in their image, offerings of incense and wine be given, temples be erected in foreign locals, and various titles to appear in public all of which point toward an informal form of deification. At the very least, the people offered them worship as gods even if they in life denied the honors themselves. While no formal evidence for deification of these emperors occurs within Rome during their lives, those who lived within the Roman empire outside of the city hailed these rulers as gods, and therefore those in Rome knew of the divine status afforded them.

3.3 Emperors as Gods in Rome: Caligula, Nero, and Domitian as Case Studies

In contrast to these emperors, Caligula, Nero, and Domitian demanded divine honors while living. Caligula had a troubled childhood, often being shuttled from one parent figure to the next, spending time with his great-grandmother Livia and his grandmother Antonia.¹³⁷ He enacted popular legislation and cleared many prominent citizens of wrong doing when he first ascended the throne, albeit in an illegal manner since he ignored the legal will of Tiberius.¹³⁸ After this, however, Caligula changed dramatically. He pushed for the deification of Tiberius, something that the Senate rejected. He moved from asking for the formal

those who heard him took him seriously, as Suetonius describes the event.

¹³⁴Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 45-8.

¹³⁵Jones, "Roman Imperial Cult," 807. The following information about Trajan derives from the article by Jones.

¹³⁶Ibid. Cf. Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.96.

¹³⁷Tacitus, *Ann.*, 6.20.1 and Suetonius, *Gaius*, 10.1; 23.2.

¹³⁸Suetonius, *Gaius*, 13-16; Philo, *Leg.*, 8-13; Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 59.2-3.

approval of his grand-uncle's divinity to asserting his own.¹³⁹ He caused temples to be erected in his own honor in Miletus and, more importantly, in Rome herself.¹⁴⁰ He deified his favorite sister upon her death, going so far as to push a senator under oath to state that he had witnessed her apotheosis.¹⁴¹ Drusilla is understood as his favorite because some of his other sisters had likely been involved in plots against him with Lepidus, their lover.¹⁴² As his rule grew more authoritarian, so did Caligula encourage the establishment of his cult as a private practice (as opposed to the public, state sponsored cult of dead emperors), though the Senate did give him honors with respect to temples, a priesthood, and linking him with Castor and Pollux.¹⁴³ This makes his assassination more likely to be linked to his poor rule, overwhelming arrogance, and poor sense of humor.¹⁴⁴ The importance occurs in that the reason the leaders of Rome began to dislike Caligula was based more on his personality and vicious politics than on his desire to be deified, as is commonly argued.¹⁴⁵ Even Seneca's attribute of divinity to Caligula raises the point in that Seneca's description of sacrifices (clearly an ironic reflection on the context of the execution of Caligula's enemies) is ironic in terms of the sacrificial content, not the act of sacrifice.¹⁴⁶ In terms of titles, Caligula readily received divine recognition from the eastern portion of the empire, as the culture there included worship of whoever ruled.¹⁴⁷ He did not stop with accepting honors, but extended his policy to

¹³⁹Note the use of different titles mentioned in Manfred Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart-Leipzig: Teubner, 1999), 90.

¹⁴⁰Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 59.11-12; 28.1-2.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 59.11.3.

¹⁴²Anthony A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New Haven, 1989), 104-12.

¹⁴³Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott*, 92-3.

¹⁴⁴Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 155-9. The poor sense of humor relates to the immediate cause of his murder, as he was humiliating a guard who then killed him.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁴⁶Seneca, *Tranq.*, 14.9. For a discussion of the irony of the scene, see Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 157-8.

¹⁴⁷A. A. Barrett, *Caligula*, 142-3. For the references to Caligula's divinity from the east, see 143 n. 15.

force the spread of his cult by such rash acts as planning a temple in Miletus (of his own accord) and attempting to raise a statue of himself as Zeus Epiphanes in the Temple in Israel.¹⁴⁸ He was worshipped as Jupiter Latiaris in Rome.¹⁴⁹ Gaius Caligula gathered unto himself the worship due the gods and the titles bestowed upon them, until such point as commoner and high ranking officials alike both granted him divine honor.¹⁵⁰

Nero tended toward the more aggressive pursuit of divinity during his lifetime as well. The early part of Nero's reign remained a quiet affair, as his mother and two counselors governed in his stead since he was so young and deferred to them. As he lived his life publicly, often spending his leisure time in theaters, he also performed politics publicly. He entertained Tiridates, king of Armenia, who made public obeisance to him twice.¹⁵¹ He performed music before the crowds, and people called for his "divine voice" (*caelestem vocem*).¹⁵² He sang or performed often in the guise of a hero or god.¹⁵³ He left Rome for Greece, where he competed in sundry games. After leaving Greece, he entered Rome as though he were Augustus himself by using one of Augustus' chariots, wearing a purple robe trimmed with gold stars, sporting an Olympic crown, and holding the Pythian.¹⁵⁴ Suetonius reports of anecdotal evidence where people compared Nero to Apollo in terms of music, the Sun in terms of chariot driving, and that Nero wanted to follow in the footsteps of Heracles as well.¹⁵⁵ Athens bestowed upon him the name "new Apollo," and Cos called him "Asclepius Caesar," both of which display connections to prominent gods who had well established cults of their own.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸Josephus, *Antiq.*, 18.8. Cf. Barrett, *Caligula*, 143.

¹⁴⁹Suetonius, *Gaius*, 22.2 and Dio Cassius 59.28.5.

¹⁵⁰Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 155-6. Gradel pins this conclusion onto Dio Cassius. Cf. Caligula calling himself "*optimus maximus Caesar*" in Suetonius, *Gaius*, 22.1.

¹⁵¹Suetonius, *Nero*, 13.

¹⁵² Suetonius, *Gaius*, 21.1.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 21.2.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 25.2.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵⁶Michael Grant, *Nero: Emperor in Revolt* (New York: American Heritage, 1970), 83-107. Cf. Elias Bickermann, "Consecratio," in *Le Culte des souverains dans l'Empire Romain* (ed. William den Boer; Entretiens sur l'antiquité

Nero held the East, and particularly Greece, in high regard due to their culture and due to the worship they gave to rulers.¹⁵⁷ He promulgated worship of his *genius* throughout Rome, something that essentially equated worshipping the emperor, especially as *genius* worship was slowly disappearing.¹⁵⁸ The latter portion of Nero's reign rocked the Roman Empire with its turbulence and Nero's disregard for anything but himself.¹⁵⁹ When Nero died, many thought he was still alive since some reports said he was and some people believed he was alive because the way he died differed in the various reports.¹⁶⁰ The belief that he still lived was active enough twenty years after he died that false Nero's appeared and gained support of various factions.¹⁶¹ Writings even call him the *avgaqo.j dai,mwn de. th/j ouvkoume,nhj*.¹⁶² Nero claimed divine status as one of the gods, though not as seriously as Caligula did.¹⁶³

The last of the emperors in this case study is Domitian, about whom much has already been said. Domitian began his reign by advocating the cult of his brother, Titus.¹⁶⁴ This was not done incidentally, rather Domitian planned on using this for his own gain. With both his father and brother declared divine and with his brother already having minted coins acceding divine

classique 19; Geneva: Hardt, 1973), 9.

¹⁵⁷Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors: A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome 31BC-AD 476* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 39.

¹⁵⁸Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 188-9. Gradel also points out how the iconography worked, the same picture moving from depicting the Roman *genius* to depicting that of the emperor.

¹⁵⁹Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984), 100-18.

¹⁶⁰Tacitus, *Hist.*, 2.8.1.

¹⁶¹See the discussion of false Nero's in Hans-Josef Klauck, "Do They Never Come Back? *Nero Redivivus* and the Apocalypse of John" in *Religion und Gesellschaft im frühen Christentum* (WUNT 152; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 269-73. Klauck gives a full description of the various pretenders.

¹⁶²POxy 7, 1021.

¹⁶³For more information on Nero and his will to be a god, see Claus, *Kaiser und Gott*, 98-111.

¹⁶⁴Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, 61. Grant states that "whatever their personal relations had been, it was still necessary to exalt the Flavian house."

titles to him,¹⁶⁵ Domitian took the next logical step. He never forced the issue in formal or legal documents, staying within the bounds of the titles that the Senate had voted him, but he did insist on those words in person.¹⁶⁶ He asked to be called lord and god, and spoke of his divine perch.¹⁶⁷ Within Rome, Domitian raised statues of himself made in gold and various other metals and put them in prominent places.¹⁶⁸ He placed so many of them around the city and they were so expensive that some graffiti read *avrkei/* (meaning “it is enough,” and also a pun on the word arch, since that is where the statues were placed).¹⁶⁹ He wore a purple robe to the quinquennial contest he held in honor of Jupiter Capitolinus, at which he wore a crown with the images of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva while the priests seated with him wore the same with the addition of his own image.¹⁷⁰ He named himself *censor perpetuus* in A.D. 85, a political power play that resulted in Rome understanding he had taken absolute control of the Empire.¹⁷¹ He reinstated the *genius* of the emperor within two weeks of taking the office, a practice which Vespasian had halted since it harkened unto the Julio-Claudian family instead of the Flavians.¹⁷² However, with Domitian encouraging the cults of Titus and Vespasian, the use of the *genius* promoted Domitian even more since his family (including his dead son) were all deified.¹⁷³ He also propagated his

¹⁶⁵Thompson, *Imperial Cult*, 223 n. 19.

¹⁶⁶See above. Note especially Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 67.5.7 and 67.13.4.

¹⁶⁷Suetonius, *Dom.*, 13.1-2. For a strong discussion of Domitian’s use of “lord and god,” see Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott*, 120-1.

¹⁶⁸While it was normal for client nations to place a statue of the current emperor or the emperor who conquered them inside their major temple, it was considered unseemly for this to be done in a prominent place inside of a Roman temple, especially for one of the major gods. See Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 2.1.547. Domitian and Gaius both placed statues of themselves next to the temple statue, a clear claim to equivalence with a god.

¹⁶⁹Suetonius, *Dom.* 13.3.

¹⁷⁰Suetonius, *Dom.*, 4.4.

¹⁷¹Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, 65.

¹⁷²Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 190-1.

¹⁷³Robert A. G. Carson, *Coins of the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 32-3. Coins appeared with a child entitled as “DIVVS CAESAR IMP DOMITIANI F.” Later, Domitilla was named Diva on a coin as well.

cult outside of Rome herself, erecting temples in his own honor.¹⁷⁴ Domitian required the titles and sacrifices of a god, persecuting those who did not bow to his whims. He was wise enough to keep his demands from reflecting in official documents or inscriptions in order to not anger the Senate by using names he had not earned or been granted, yet he still felt as if it were his right. The people of Rome did not object to his usurping divinity, they objected to his cruelty. His assassination was a political issue and not a theological one.

3.4 *Summary*

With respect to the position of the emperor, the imperial cult had become a political tool used to smooth the subjugation of people by connecting the emperor with the pagan gods. This is an understated conclusion, however, as the importance of sacrifices, titles such as “god” and “savior,” the construction of temples, and other uses of divine honors demonstrate. The emperors in general may have declined certain names or edifices, yet Caligula brought the matter to its logical conclusion when he declared himself a god. His youth helped him to ignore the political obfuscation of denying divinity to himself while still accepting all of the privileges, something that the “sane” emperors tended to do only outside of Rome. The various emperors would deify their predecessors and families in order to heighten their own power, linking themselves directly to divinity. The citizens of the Empire, both inside the city and everywhere outside her walls, comprehended the importance of what it meant to offer sacrifices to statues of whoever currently reigned.¹⁷⁵ The emperors of Rome may not have always held the name of god, yet they accepted the titles, worship, and authority inherent in such a position. Roman citizens understood what these various honors meant, and they did not hold back in offering worship and sacrifices to those men, departed or living, who had ruled them.¹⁷⁶ Divinity was conferred formally by the Senate, but the population often conferred it through private practices. Being born a human was not an insurmountable barrier to godhood within the mindset

¹⁷⁴See Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 2.1.486 n. 68.

¹⁷⁵Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 228.

¹⁷⁶On the significance of sacrificial offerings to emperors living and dead, along with the combined cults of emperors and gods, see S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 216-20.

of first-century Rome.

4. *Conclusion*

The disparate threads of Jupiter, the mystery cults, and the Imperial cult all point toward one conclusion: the concept of *deo* (and *deus*) had a large semantic domain in first-century Rome. Jupiter was the one god above all other gods, especially when linked with Greek mythology as Zeus. At the same time, Zeus could be controlled by fate or he could wrestle with fate, there was no set understanding. Zeus ruled the Greek pantheon with an iron fist, yet those same gods who quaked in his presence worked to ignore his commands. Jupiter did not compete with his fellow gods for worshippers as he remained a focal point of being Roman, though some people would gravitate toward a particular god. Participation in the cult of Jupiter did not bring about a future salvific state, rather participation in the cult was part of being a citizen of Rome. In addition, Jupiter was not the only god of Rome, in fact he was not even the only main god of Rome. Whereas Athens would hold to Athena and Ephesus to Artemis, Rome itself held to a triad of gods.

This idea of a triad links closely with the mystery cults mentioned. Isis occurred in a divine triad as well, having her husband Osiris/Sarapis and son Horus as parts of her worship. Horus became the father of the pharaohs, and thus through him the Egyptian rulers could be called gods, but this was not a formal part of the Roman version of the cult. Although some aspects of the Isis cult looked for a future salvation, the research surveyed has found this to be the exception rather than the norm, as most adherents of the cult looked for benefits in this life instead of a future state. Isis herself did not compete with other gods, as their statues appeared in the midst of her temples. The cult of Isis did not replace public worship, rather it added a private dimension to the religious life of the adherent.

In the same way, the Mithras cult was a private cult that did not disrupt from public rites. Those who were initiates in the cult also worshipped the major Roman gods. Mithras also had a triad, as he mediated between Ahriman and Ahura Mazda. The idea of a life after death was not a central focus of Mithraism, and the Roman version in particular displayed virtually no signs of an afterlife salvation. Mithras was closely related to Perseus through various drawings and inscriptions, such that some of the same characteristics appeared in depictions of both.

The Imperial cult of Rome deified some Roman emperors (and family members) upon death and some attestation of apotheosis. Ascending upon death was not enough for some of them who wanted to be declared gods or treated like gods while

alive. While these typically were the “mad” emperors, they were not censured for this desire but for other reasons. The Imperial cult was a state cult such that participation was seen as an act of reaffirming citizenship rather than replacing or superseding normal observances to the pantheon. In fact, honoring the emperors honored the gods since the emperors were descended from them. The Imperial cult was a form of politics and had nothing to do with next-world orientation.

Combining these various aspects together, one begins to see the picture of what *deus* meant to a Roman citizen. First, there was no theological barrier between divinity and humanity, as certain humans (emperors or heroes) could aspire to be or become gods. Gods becoming human was not a problem either, though this was done simply for the amusement of the god. Roman citizens would not object to human beings of special lineage claiming to be gods or having others advocate divine status for them.

Second, religion in Rome was focused more on the state than on the afterlife of the individual, so the concept of god meant appealing for help now rather than an eschatological hope. The typical resident of Rome worried more about money and food than about tomorrow. The state was a powerful entity that controlled what occurred in the life of each Roman, thus the state religion focused on the state. Politics and religion were combined through both the imperial cult as well as the regular cults (both mystery and normal) since the festivals and memberships were used to gain political power by gaining votes through public religious service to the city. Life for the typical citizen focused on this life and this city, not other places or times.

Third, the gods occasionally occurred in a triad, such that the main deity being worshipped fit in a group with two others gods, all closely associated with one functionally above the others, even if it was not the god typically venerated (e.g. Osiris ruled over Isis even though the cult was of Isis). When gods had overlapping functions, the greater of the two would absorb the other and be renamed. The citizens of Rome had no problem with new gods being added or old ones absorbed, what mattered to them was that the function continued and some sort of unity prevailed. Thus *deus* (and *deus*) is a loose term, allowing much flexibility while stressing power and accomplishment. Being a god did not denote responsibility, instead it conferred on the person a special status and the responsibility was imparted to the worshippers.

It is into this religious world that Paul wrote. While not a follower of the gods of Rome, Paul still had an understanding that comes from familiarity due to a shared culture. Though separated as a Jew, Paul understood the pagan mindset and utilized

it, both strengths and weaknesses, for his own ends. By examining the Greco-Roman concept of deity, further insight can be gained by reading Paul's letters with this information in mind.