

RULER CULT

I. A technical phrase for the phenomenon of the ruler cult does not appear in biblical literature. Nevertheless, ruler cult understood as specific institutions devoted to sacrificial or related activities for the worship of a ruler (Hellenistic rulers as well as Roman emperors) may form part of the background of some passages in the Bible and related literature ([Dan 3](#) Gk, Rev and Martyria). Several terms which have been associated with the ruler cult appear in the NT (e.g. *euergetēs*, *sōtēr*, *kyrios*, *Asiarchēs*).

II. Although the Egyptians considered the pharaoh a divine being (→[Horus](#)), they only worshipped him as a god during limited periods. Ruler cult seems to be chiefly a Greek innovation, which is closely related to the religious ideas of the Greeks. Augustus took this over from them, but adapted the concept in line with the new situation in the Mediterranean world after the battle of Actium (FISHWICK 1987). The divine status of the figure who was worshipped by a community depended on his or her ability to confer special benefactions to it. So the cultic veneration by an individual, a city or a province of a ruler reciprocated his benefactions, which means that the ruler cult was part of a mutually advantageous relationship. This appears already from decrees concerning the establishment of a cult for the successors of Alexander the Great and remains valid for the imperial period. The dynastic cults, set up by the rulers themselves, legitimized their power as rulers. Both type of cults intensified the relationship between the ruler and the subjects of the state. The ruler cult was connected to politics and diplomacy, “the (imperial) cult was a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society ... The imperial cult, along with politics and diplomacy, constructed the reality of the Roman empire” (PRICE 1984:248).

A forerunner of the ruler cult was the cult of heroes (→[Heros](#)). A similar veneration as a lesser god could also be received by special human persons, who were the founders of a city or died on the battlefield or had accomplished another feat of importance. The hero cult, however, differs from the ruler cult because of its local character and the limited power of the hero, whose divine help could only be called in at a certain place and under certain circumstances. Founders or liberators of cities and other heroes were often only venerated after their death (see e.g. [Plutarch, Arat. 53.3f.](#) concerning Aratus of Sicyon), while rulers of states in the Hellenistic period and emperors were also worshipped during their lifetime. Only rarely were cults for emperors established after their death. The Spartan general Lysander (died 395 BCE) can be considered as an early example of a human person who was worshipped as a god during his life (according to Duris of Samos, *FGH* 76 F 71; FEARS 1988:1051–1052). Probably elements were incorporated into the ruler cult from divine as well as from hero cult (cf. PRICE 1984:32–36, 233, who argues that ruler cult was modelled on divine cult).

Gk Greek

FGH Fragmente der griechischen Historiker, ed. F. Jacoby

Van der Toorn, K., Becking, B., & van der Horst, P. W. (1999). In *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.). Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans.

Page 1. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 8:20 PM April 22, 2015.

Shortly after Alexander the Great ruler cult became an important factor in the Hellenistic world. Alexander's successors established a posthumous cult for him. Out of the veneration of the deceased ruler, which was organized in Egypt from Ptolemy II onwards until the end of the reign of that dynasty, there arose cults for living rulers and their families. Besides, cities took the initiative in worshipping rulers. Antigonos and his son Demetrius Poliorcetes were venerated as *theoi sōtēres* at Athens and other Diadochi received the same honours from other cities (HABICHT 1956). The koinon of Asia decreed between 268 and 262 BCE a cult for Antiochus I with sacrifices to all the gods and goddesses, to Antiochus and his wife Stratonice and their son Antiochus II. An altar of the kings was part of the temenos (OGIS no. 222 lines 42–43; HABICHT 1956: 91–93). That the divine ruler was expected to bring benefactions to the cities can be seen from the direct connection in this inscription between the cult for the ruler and his protection of the rights of the cities (lines 14–18). In return for benefactions like the restoration of freedom Greek cities bestowed the same honours upon Roman individuals like governors and charismatic generals or venerated the Roman Demos or goddess →[Roma](#) in the second and first centuries BCE (FEARS 1988:1057).

In 42 BCE Caesar was declared Divus Julius which implied for Octavian a status as Divi filius. It is important to distinguish between the ruler cult from the perspective of the Roman state religion and that of the indigenous worshippers in the provinces. In the context of state religion the deification of the emperor after his death and his posthumous veneration were the standard. Only the *genius* or →[Tyche](#) and *numen* of the emperor were venerated during his lifetime. From the Flavian emperors onward it was usual to swear to the *genius* or *tychē* of the living emperor. The first provincial imperial cults were established for Octavian shortly after his triumph at Actium, in Asia at Pergamum (29 BCE) and in Bithynia at Nicomedia. From Dio Cassius 51.20.7 and Tacitus, [Ann. 4.37](#), it appears that the initiative was taken by the provinces. The cult was dedicated to the ruler (Augustus) and to Roma. At the same time Octavian decreed that a cult for Roma and Divus Julius had to be set up in the provinces of Asia (Ephesus) and Bithynia (Nicaea). The cults requested by the provinces were for the indigenous worshippers and the ones for Rome and Divus Julius for the Romans present. The provincial cult at Pergamum still flourished in the time of Hadrian. Shortly after the incorporation of Galatia in the Roman Empire a temple for Roma and Augustus was built at Ancyra for the provincial cult of Galatia (probably around 25–20 BCE). In the Western part of the empire an emperor cult was established in 12 BCE, when the Gallic provinces dedicated an altar to Roma and Augustus at Lugdunum (FISHWICK 1987–1992; for early foundations of provincial imperial cults see DEININGER 1965:16–35).

None of Augustus's successors exceeded in principle the bounds set by him, although some emperors bore marks of divinity (Nero, Domitian, Trajan). After the successful prosecution of two Roman officials charged with maladministration, the cities of Asia decreed a temple for Tiberius, Livia and the Senate at Smyrna, which was ratified by the Senate in 26 CE. A third provincial cult of Asia at

OGIS Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae, ed. W. Dittenberger

no. number

Van der Toorn, K., Becking, B., & van der Horst, P. W. (1999). In *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.). Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans.

Page 2. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 8:20 PM April 22, 2015.

Miletus was dedicated to the emperor Gaius only and may have been instigated by Gaius himself. In an inscription concerning this cult the word *theos* is used in the name of Gaius (ROBERT 1949:206 line 2; →[God \(III\)](#)). In order to maintain good relations with Rome Miletus had to terminate the cult after Gaius's death. After Augustus the imperial cults tended to be directed to imperial authority in general rather than to the reverence for an individual emperor (PRICE 1984:57–59). The emperors became the only object of reverence and in this respect the cult for the Sebastoi at Ephesus (see below) was the trend setter. For the motives of the cities of Asia to establish these cults and the conditions that had to be fulfilled for a successful initiative see FRIESEN 1993:7–28.

Thirteen inscriptions from Ephesus with (originally) dedications from various cities in Asia are witness to another provincial cult of Asia for the Flavian imperial family and its temple at Ephesus. The inscriptions are connected with the inauguration of the temple in 89–90 CE. This temple in Ephesus is called common to Asia, and the city of Ephesus is described as *neōkoros*, i.e. caretaker, of the cult (cf. [Acts 19:35](#)). The cult was for the Emperors. Domitian was probably its central figure at first, but after his death his name was erased and changed into God Vespasian on all inscriptions but one. The motives for the dedications of the cities are usually their reverence (*eusebeia*) for the Sebastoi and their goodwill (*eunoia*) toward Ephesus (FRIESEN 1993: esp. 29–49). Connected with the provincial imperial cult at Ephesus were Olympic games, held at the complex of gymnasium, palaestra and baths of the Sebastoi (to a certain extent modelled on the gymnasium and palaestra buildings at Olympia), which was built during Domitian's rule. After the death of Domitian the games stopped, but they were reorganized from the emperorship of Hadrian onwards (FRIESEN 1993:117–141).

In the ruler cult the religious and the political world went hand in hand, which does not mean that the divinity of the ruler was not taken seriously. The emperor was worshipped as a god on public and private occasions (games, mysteries, processions, lamps, incense and libations, sacrifices with the consummation of the victim, hymns in honour of the emperor and banquets; FISHWICK 1991:475–590). Statues and other representations of the divine emperor were present everywhere in the Greek cities. PRICE (1984:146–156 and 210–233) dwells on the divine nature of the emperor and claims that he did not match the status of the traditional gods. He points among other things to the statues of emperors in the sanctuaries of other gods and to sacrificial practice. Sacrifices were often made to a deity on behalf of the emperor. This view is criticized by FRIESEN (1993:74–75, 119, 150–151 and 166; cf. also VERSNEL 1988:234–237): the temple of the Sebastoi at Ephesus towered above the other temples and the statues of emperors were depicted much larger than those of the gods; the emperor exercised godlike authority in the context of a specific hierarchical relationship and he deserved a divine status, because he accomplished the works of the gods in an unparalleled manner. One should not assume that there existed rivalry between the imperial cult and the worship of the other deities, the imperial cult united the other cultic systems and the peoples of the empire. The emperor's role was similar to that of →[Zeus](#) in the Olympian pantheon.

Van der Toorn, K., Becking, B., & van der Horst, P. W. (1999). In *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.). Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans.

Page 3. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 8:20 PM April 22, 2015.

The imperial cult seems to have declined well before Constantine and disappeared in the fourth century. Cultic activities in the provinces and cities dropped to a minimum by the second half of the third century.

III. Several phrases in biblical and related literature can be connected to ruler cult, although there usually is not a close connection to a specific cult. References to the veneration of a ruler also have a general character.

[Dan 3](#) LXX and Theod., Jdt, [2 Macc 6–7](#); 4 Macc contradict what we know about the general policy of religious tolerance of Hellenistic rulers towards the Jews, which raises the question of to what extent these texts reflect historical events. In all these texts Jews are forced to renounce their religion and participate in a pagan sacrificial ritual or the veneration of the ruler. According to [Jdt 3:8](#) Nebuchadnezzar had decreed that all other gods be destroyed in order that he alone should be worshipped by every nation and invoked as a god (*epikalesōntai auton eis theon*) by men of every tribe and tongue. There is no evidence that Antiochus IV forced the Jews to venerate him personally as Zeus Olympios or another god. The surname Epiphanēs of Antiochus IV and other rulers from the Hellenistic period points to the appearance of a redeeming god (cf. [2 Macc 14:33](#)) or the cultic acting of a divine ruler. The name occurs e.g. in [1 Macc 1:10](#); [10:1](#); [2 Macc 2:20](#); [4:7](#); [10:9](#), [13](#); [4 Macc 4:15](#) (cf. also Philo, [Leg. 346](#): Caligula wanted to change the name of the Jerusalem temple into ‘temple of Gaius, the new Zeus Epiphanes’). The fact that related expressions appear relatively frequently as attributes of the Lord in Jewish literature of the Maccabean period (e.g. [2 Macc 3:30](#); [15:34](#)) may be understood as part of the refutation of a divine status for the Greek rulers. Also other phrases like *evergetēs*, *sōtēr* and *kyrios* may reflect the pagan use of these words (cf. [Luke 22:25–26](#)), which gradually took on a divine meaning and could be connected to ruler cult (see further DEISSMANN 1923:287–324; CUSS 1974:50–88), but also indicated the Lord respectively →[Jesus](#) →[Christ](#) as the sole benefactor, →[saviour](#) or Lord of the Jews or Christians (cf. [Jude 4](#); →[Kyrios](#)). This usage implied at least a repudiation of the divinity of the ruler, which becomes explicit in some Early Christian martyr texts.

As in Jewish texts which hint at the veneration of a ruler, the possible references to the imperial cult in [Rev 13](#) go hand in hand with a self-image which contrasts strongly with the picture of the world of the Roman ruler. [Rev 13](#) contains several allusions to [Dan 3](#), especially in connection with the worship of the first beast and its image. The second beast of [Rev 13](#), also characterized as the false prophet ([16:12](#); [19:20](#) and [20:10](#)), is probably a symbol which can be connected with the high priesthood of the imperial cult (e.g. CUSS 1974: 20, 96–112). Maybe the blasphemous titles of the first beast hint also at the cults for the emperor. John presents the Roman government with the imagery of [Rev 12–13](#) (→[Dragon](#)) and [17–18](#) in a completely unfavourable light. According to several scholars the imperial cult of Domitian at Ephesus was the immediate cause for the putting into writing of Revelation (STAUFFER 1955:147–191; PRICE 1984:197–198; SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA 1985:192–199; cf. PRIGENT 1974–1975). In any case the imperial cult was a source of conflict between Christian and Roman ideologies. The sacrifices, statues (cf. [Rev](#)

LXX Septuagint

Van der Toorn, K., Becking, B., & van der Horst, P. W. (1999). In *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.). Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans.

Page 4. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 8:20 PM April 22, 2015.

[13:14–15](#); [14:9](#), [11](#); [16:2](#); [19:20](#); [20:4](#)), prayers, games and other forms of worship connected with the imperial cult rendered the emperor divine honours and titles which belonged only to God and Jesus Christ (see e.g. [1 Cor 8:5–6](#)). Even if Christians tried to be loyal to the Roman government as much as their belief allowed them to, when they were forced to acknowledge the emperor as Kyrios they had to refuse, because they could not bestow divine honours upon him. Martyr texts focus on this dilemma of loyalty (e.g. [Mart. Pol. 8–11](#): Polycarp had to call the emperor Lord, to offer him incense, to swear to the *genius* of the emperor and to blaspheme Christ; in *Mart. Scil.* 3; 5; 14 the proconsul Saturninus offers the martyrs the opportunity to return to the way of life of the Romans [*ad Romanorum morem redeundi*] by swearing to the *genius* of the emperor). The ideological conflict comes to light in a most painful fashion in the execution of the martyrs, which often took place in the context of games linked with imperial festivals or organized by imperial priests (cf. FISHWICK 1991:577–579).

However, it was not especially the refusal to venerate the emperor that led to the persecutions of Christians, as appears from Pliny's famous letter to Trajan and the Rescript ([Ep. 10.96–97](#)) and Christian martyr texts. Until the reign of Decius the emperor did not take steps against the Christians on his own initiative, and only responded to questions from the provinces. Usually the refusal by arrested Christians to worship the gods in general (including the emperor) led to their execution (for a collection of the evidence see MILLAR 1973; cf. KERESZTES 1979; PRICE 1984:123–126, 220–222), although Pliny ([Ep. 10.96](#)) and some martyr texts refer to the obligation to venerate the emperor or to perform acts which belonged to the imperial cult ([Mart. Pol. 8–9](#); *Mart. Pion.* 8; 18; Eusebius, [Hist. eccl. 7.15.2](#); MILLAR 1973:150, 154–155; FISHWICK 1991: 527, 534, 577–579). Before the first state persecution by Decius (249–251 CE), however, persecutions of Christians were usually the result of successful pressure by city mobs (cf. [Acts 17:6–7](#)) and especially local actions, inspired by fear of unrest and triggered by epidemics, famine and other disasters (VERSNEL 1988:250–253).

The second beast of Revelation is often connected with the high priesthood of the emperor cult. According to DEININGER (1965:41–50) and many other scholars the offices of Asiarch (*Asiarchēs*) and provincial high priest were identical. FRIESEN (1993: 92–113), however, rejects a direct connection between the Asiarch and the imperial cults on good grounds and assumes that the Asiarchate was an office of the city implying various duties. This means that the Asiarchs who are together at the same time at Ephesus according to [Acts 19:31](#) do not have to be understood as high priests or delegates of the provincial council which met at Ephesus. [Mart. Pol. 21](#) mentions Philip of Tralles as the high priest at the date of Polycarp's Martyrdom. Several scholars consider chap. [21](#) a later interpolation, but a Gaius Julius Philippus is mentioned as Asiarch and also as the high priest of Asia in inscriptions (dates of attestation

[Mart. Pol.](#) Martyrdom of Polycarp

[Mart. Pol.](#) Martyrdom of Polycarp

chap. chapter

Van der Toorn, K., Becking, B., & van der Horst, P. W. (1999). In *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.). Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans.

Page 5. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 8:20 PM April 22, 2015.

between 161–169 and 150–170 CE respectively; FRIESEN 1993:101; 179; 195), so that the Philip of the Martyrdom may very well be the Gaius Julius Philippus mentioned.

IV. Bibliography

D. CUSS, [*Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament*](#) (Paradosis 23; Fribourg 1974); J. DEININGER, [*Die Provinziallandtage der römischen Kaiserzeit von Augustus bis zum Ende des dritten Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*](#) (Vestigia 6; München 1965); A. DEISSMANN, [*Licht vom Osten. Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*](#) (Tübingen 1923); J. R. FEARS, [*Herrscherkult*](#), RAC 14 (Stuttgart 1988) 1047–1093 [& lit]; D. FISHWICK, [*The Imperial Cult in the Latin West. Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire I:1; I:2; II:1; II:2*](#) (EPRO 108; Leiden 1987–1992); S. FRIESEN, [*Twice Neokoros. Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family*](#) (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 116; Leiden 1993); C. HABICHT, [*Gottmenschentum und griechische Städte*](#) (Zetemata 14; München 1956); D. L. JONES, [*Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult*](#), ANRW II 23, 2 (Berlin/New York 1980) 1023–1054; P. KERESZTES, [*The Imperial Roman Government and the Christian Church*](#), ANRW II 23, 1 (Berlin/New York 1979) 247–315, 375–386; F. MILLAR, [*The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions, Le culte des souverains dans l'Empire romain*](#) (ed. W. den Boer; Entretiens Fondation Hardt 19; Vandoeuvres-Genève 1973) 143–165; S. R. F. PRICE, [*Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*](#) (Cambridge 1984); P. PRIGENT, [*Au temps de l'Apocalypse*](#), RHPR 54 (1974) 455–483; 55 (1975) 215–235; 341–363; L. ROBERT, [*Le culte de Caligula à Milet et la province d'Asie*](#), Hellenica 7 (1949) 206–238; S. SCHERRER, [*Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult*](#), JBL 103 (1984) 594–610; E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, [*The Book of Revelation. Justice and Judgment*](#) (Philadelphia 1985); E. STAUFFER, [*Christ and the Caesars. Historical Sketches*](#) (London 1955); H. S. VERSNEL, [*Geef de keizer wat des keizers is en Gode wat Gods is. Een essay over een utopisch conflict*](#), Lampas 21 (1988) 233–256.

J. W. VAN HENTEN

RAC Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum

EPRO Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain

ANRW Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt

ANRW Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt

RHPR Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

Van der Toorn, K., Becking, B., & van der Horst, P. W. (1999). In *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.). Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans.

Page 6. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 8:20 PM April 22, 2015.