

Introduction

Divine Sons and Their Gospels

The Gospels in our New Testament are famously difficult to categorize as literature. Different from most biographies, they concentrate on events leading to Jesus' death. The canonical Gospels differ among themselves on the best way to present Jesus' teachings, and still again they differ from some of the more sayings-oriented Gospels produced by other Christians, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*.

But this unique status of the Gospels is our problem. In the first and second centuries of the Common Era, the word “gospel,” literally “good announcement” (the Greek word is *euangelion*, which was then fully accepted in Latin as the loan word *euangelium*), was used to describe what actions or events associated with various Roman emperors had occurred for the welfare of the world. Thus in the inscription from Priene, number 4 below, we read of the “gospels”—the announcements of good news—that the birth of the emperor Augustus brought to the world.

The Principate is the time period in which the Roman state came to officially designate one man, popularly called a princeps or “first one,” to lead its empire. The Principate is sometimes delimited to the period from the reign of Augustus through that of Marcus Aurelius (27 BCE–180 CE); sometimes it is extended to the beginning of the reign of Diocletian, before the latter appointed others to join him in leading the empire (27 BCE–284 CE). During either of these periods, the princeps, a single “first one,” was practically speaking the “emperor” of the Roman world, whether he refused the latter title and sought to keep the forms of the Republic—as seen in Augustus's reign—or openly flaunted the Senate and any vestige of Republican government—as evident in records of Domitian's reign.

The title “son of god,” *divi filius*, was routinely assigned to these Roman emperors. Any resident of the Mediterranean who applied the phrase to someone else was speaking in a politically charged environment, and perhaps would be heard as critiquing the reigning emperor, or at least recognizing that there was another source of goodness that approached what the emperor could offer. The imperial office was known as a benevolent source of resources for those who could not support themselves and for cities or peoples who needed financial aid for their region or for an athletic contest.

In this section, a variety of texts are offered that illuminate the New Testament’s Gospels. These Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were written, copied, and canonized by those who regarded Jesus of Nazareth as a divine son who announced the kingdom of God in a way that meant good news for the world. The Romans had executed this person as a criminal, and yet his followers went on to use language and imagery that Roman propaganda of the first century typically reserved for the Roman emperor. This section of the sourcebook therefore seeks to help readers consider what the Gospels must have sounded like to those who first *heard* them—remember that most early Christians could not read—when they encountered them in the first or second centuries ce. We will see in these excerpts that the Roman emperors are described as destined to rule, ushering in a golden age, and as the benefactors of the whole world. Some of them were deified (or proclaimed to be divine) when their life on earth ended. All of the emperors we will mention participated in the religion of divine virtues, that is, the worship of certain qualities, such as Peace, Victory, Concord, Hope, and Faith as divine entities that should be worshiped. The imperial lexicon provided a helpful trove of linguistic resources that the earliest Christians adapted to celebrate and worship Jesus. We cannot prove how conscious the evangelists (the authors of our canonical Gospels) were of the imperially loaded language they used to describe Jesus, and this sourcebook makes no claim to read the intentions of New Testament authors. It is obvious that the evangelists and other New Testament authors faced quite a challenge in proclaiming Jesus to be divine, and his birth and life as good news, in a world where, for the majority of people, the Roman emperor was clearly the son of god and ultimate benefactor; a world that (to judge from these sources) was enjoying the golden age brought by Rome’s widening rule. Reading the New Testament Gospels alongside the texts and images of imperial Rome might help us hear them in a new way.

The Roman emperor is mentioned in a variety of places in the New Testament.¹ Despite the personal excesses and human limitations of the Roman emperors, their influence cannot be ignored by anyone seeking to understand

the social environment in which the New Testament was composed. It is not difficult to see that the people living under Roman rule in the first and second centuries ce did not demarcate the ending of the Republic and the beginning of the empire as clearly as historians are wont to do today. Suetonius's biographies, *The Twelve Caesars*, begin with "Divine Julius," who is usually included in the final years of the Republic, before he presents "Divine Augustus," usually credited today as being the first emperor. This section devotes more space to Augustus than to the other emperors, since his imprint on the form and vision for Roman rule was deepest and most enduring of any who led Rome.

Octavian was born in 63 BCE. After Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE, his will revealed that he had designated Octavian as his adopted son. Though this certainly involved the inheritance of a significant sum of money, it was worth much more in the legitimacy and supporting constituency it brought the nineteen-year-old who aspired to lead the Roman Republic. Octavian—later to be known as Augustus—assumed the title princeps, or "first one." The ways in which he came to lead the Senate, transform the Republic to an empire, and remain in power until he died of old age have been variously debated. In the past, the imperial period of Rome's existence may have been looked at as a natural, perhaps inevitable, development of the laws and reforms initiated by Julius Caesar.² In the twentieth century, Sir Ronald Syme's *Roman Revolution* presented Augustus's accomplishments as a carefully orchestrated and elegantly executed revolution. Syme's book was the breakout moment for the view of the Roman Empire as the result of the calculated steps of Octavian as a brilliant opportunist and revolutionary.³ People understand what happened from the reign of Julius Caesar through the Julio-Claudians, who succeeded him in different ways, along a continuum of continuity or rupture. All agree, however, that Augustus, who led Rome from 27 BCE to 14 CE, was certainly the most influential among those we now call "emperors" of the early Roman Empire, or Principate.

1. Matt. 22:15–22 // Mark 12:13–17 // Luke 20:20–26; Luke 2:1; 3:1; John 19:12; Acts 25:8–12; 1 Tim. 2:2; 1 Pet. 2:13, 17; Rev. 17:9–14.

2. Though Theodor Mommsen's work on the empire was slow to be published and not as extensive as his work on the Republic, this may best summarize the way he would characterize the transition from what we call the Republic to the empire. Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Reimer and Hirscl, 1854–1856); Mommsen, *Römische Kaisergeschichte nach den Vorlesungs-Mitschriften von Sebastian und Paul Hensel 1882–86*, ed. Barbara Demandt and Alexander Demandt (Munich: Beck, 1992).

3. Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939). For an evaluation of Syme's model, see Kurt A. Raaflaub and Mark Toher, eds., *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Not all of the emperors were deified—proclaimed to be divine—upon their physical deaths, but Augustus’s deification was by all accounts a unanimous action by the Roman Senate and people. The golden age that his propagandists claimed he had brought to the world by means of Roman rule was sufficient testimony of his divine status and the gods’ predestination of his rule. But even before death and the apotheosis that marked the Senate’s approval of a deceased ruler, all emperors could be referred to as “son of god,” since each was considered the son of his predecessor, beginning with the divine Augustus, son of the divine Julius. It remains for us to explore how Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John portray Jesus and his accomplishments as divine, in a world where there was always a more obvious rival.

As you read the texts and view the images in this section, please stay alert to how the Roman emperors of the Principate were in some cases viewed as divinely predestined to rule, granted supernatural knowledge or powers, considered to be benefactors for the entire world, and declared to be divine after their physical deaths. An appreciation of the Roman emperor along these ideological lines might enhance how we hear the evangelists’ descriptions of one whom the Romans executed under the sign, “King of the Jews.”