

“Symbolism of Language: A Study in the Dialogue of Power
Between the Imperial Cult and the Synoptic Gospels”

Sharon Matlock-Marsh

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Religious Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professors: James Strange, Ph.D.
Danny Jorgensen, Ph.D.
Paul Schneider, Ph.D.

Date of Approval
July 9, 2004

Keywords: religion, imperialism, theology, Christology

© Copyright 2004, Sharon Matlock-Marsh

Table of Contents

List of Tables		ii
Abstract		iii
Chapter One:	Imperial Theology and Worldview	1
Chapter Two:	The Social Milieu of the <i>Oikoumene</i>	11
Chapter Three:	The Landscape of Sepphoris and Antioch	18
Chapter Four:	Greco-Roman Mythology and Worldview	24
Chapter Five:	Father/God/Benefactor	31
Chapter Six:	Savior and Healer	40
Chapter Seven:	Signs and Wonders	47
Chapter Eight:	Conclusion	56
Bibliography:		

List of Tables

Table 1	Timeline of the Reign of the Emperor and the Writing of the Gospels	vi
Table 2	G. E. Lenski's Macrosocial Model for Greco – Roman Period	xi

“Symbolism of Language: A Study in
Dialog of Power Between the Roman
Imperial Cult and the Writers of the New
Testament Gospels”

Sharon Matlock-Marsh

ABSTRACT

Long before the writings of the New Testament gospels, where Jesus was being proclaimed as the “Son of God,” and “Savior,” the world existing under the influences of Hellenism resulting from the conquests by Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, had already been well acquaint

ed with and expected to hear certain symbolic language in determining titles for their divine ruler – the emperor. Living within a cosmological framework, i.e., a sacred cosmos, the citizens of the empire accepted the emperor as the manifestation of divinity in the world. This belief existed for centuries prior to Christianity as a reality that was “taken for granted.” In fact, this belief system was never questioned until the time of the emperor Constantine, during the middle of the fourth century C.E. (MacMullen, 85)

The Julio-Claudian dynasty, beginning with the reign of Julius Caesar in the year 62 BCE, through the end of the Flavian Dynasty, beginning with the

emperor Vepasian in 69 CE through the year 117 CE, will be the timeframe of this work. It represents the period of time when the writers of the Synoptic gospels were writing their accounts of the life of Jesus and also for those writing for and about the imperial court reporting on the lives of the emperors. The geographical location in this work will include the territories of the Mediterranean regions, since this was where the extant texts used in this study originated.

This particular time period in and around the area of the Mediterranean was commonly referred to as the early Roman Empire. Within the empire, a worldview that influenced and shaped a belief that the emperor as understood in terms of divinity were already well-established beliefs in the minds of the people.

Living within a worldview shaped by “imperial theology,” the writers of the Synoptic gospels would borrow the existing symbolic language already in use by the imperialistic writers in their legitimating of the emperor as a divine representative of the gods on earth, and then apply these same terms in legitimating Jesus as the *Son of God*. My purpose is not to ignore the Jewishness of the gospel texts, since it is quite obvious that Jewish symbols appear throughout all of the gospel, indicating that members of the existing community of Jews are presenting these writings. However, I am suggesting that the Jewish community living in the Mediterranean area during the period of empire building existed as a minority culture. Hellenism and a Roman imperialistic form of government, which was dominating and oppressing the majority of the

membership of the community – including the Jews, shaped the prevailing social milieu of the empire.

In my thesis, I will support the work of these scholars by showing how Hellenistic and Roman traditions, alongside of Jewish traditions, shaped the way in which these writers attempted to legitimate Jesus as the Christ. Furthermore, I will argue that the existing symbols already established within a Roman “imperial theology” were used to legitimate the superiority of the emperor as ordained through the will of the gods, and as an object of favor by the gods. In other words, “imperial theology” would support a belief that the emperor and the gods were in special relationship. This ideology will develop through the Julio-Claudian and will also prevail in the minds of the believers through the early years of the Flavian Dynasty. By the middle of the Flavian period, the emperor will be perceived as the sole representative of a sovereign, father/god whose main function will be to united the people as one community under one god. Meanwhile, the writers of the Synoptics will borrow these same symbols used under imperialism in their own search for meaning in a world oppressed by Roman authority. These writers will also assign *power* to Jesus, with the purpose of legitimating him as the sole representative of the one, sovereign god over all people.

Writers such as Cassius Dio (40-110 CE), Suetonius (69-140 CE) and Tacitus (54-117 CE) “historians” reporting on the lives of the emperor from this period will be presented as examples of the view that existed within Roman

imperialism. These writers and the writers of the Synoptics were, perhaps, writing in reaction to one another's claims in defining their heroes in terms of divinity. I am also suggesting that the symbols used by all of these writers understand the purpose of their hero-figures in terms of *power*. The writers of the gospels will claim to have the ultimate word, in their effort to override the old political/religious system found within "imperial theology" and replace it with a new form of *power* offered by their hero-figure, Jesus of Nazareth. This new ideology sought to legitimate not only Jesus in terms of power, but also assigned power to the marginal members of society. The terminology that the gospel writers used in legitimating Jesus as the *Son of God* is understood as the "Christology" of the gospels in this work.

Chapter One

Imperial Theology and Worldview

Long before the writings of the New Testament gospels, where Jesus was being proclaimed as “the son of God,” and “savior,” the existing Greco-Roman world under the Roman Empire had already been well acquainted with a symbolic language that had assigned these titles in describing their divine ruler – the emperor. Founded within a cosmological framework, i.e. a sacred cosmos, the community living within the geographical boundaries of the Mediterranean, the *oikoumene* (Johnson, 23), understood the role of the emperor as a manifestation of divinity in the world. From the time of Julius Caesar’s praetorship beginning in the year 62 BCE, through the end of the Republic in 27 BCE, when Octavian Augustus became the first emperor of the newly established Empire, terms and phrases such as “son of god,” “savior” and “father” appeared in extant “historical” recollections, poetry and inscriptions from this period. On some of these inscriptions Julius Caesar was proclaimed as ‘the manifest god from Mars and Aphrodite, and universal savior of human life.’ (SIG 760) Later, the emperor Augustus would also be proclaimed as a “son of god,” (SB 8895) and “god *from* god.” (SB8895)

J.R. Fears, in his research on the early Roman Empire, realized that the *oikoumene*, existing in a cosmological worldview, also believed that all factions of the world were manipulated through a power, which worked through human *action*. Human action, then, became the catalyst that was responsible for the proper functioning of the cosmos. In other words, human *action* was the connection between the sacred world and

the world of the profane; and everything was governed by the supernatural. The gods as representatives of the divine world were believed to be in control of all functions of the physical world; and were also charged with the manipulation of human thought and behavior. This was believed to occur through the interaction with the *thymos* gland located in the chest cavity of every human being. In order to control behavior, the gods merely had to connect with, or “talk to” the *thymos* gland of the individual. This belief resulted in a perception that all factions from the world outside of themselves, especially the gods, were in control of the individual’s destiny, including the determination of one’s fate. The goddess, Fortuna, (Tychee, in Greek), was the personification of this belief. Since the emperor was believed to be in “special relationship” with the gods, a tradition was created that included a belief that the gods interacted with those in power through the *genius* of the emperor; *genius* as the mind of the emperor. (Gradel, 5) This relationship was understood as a superior, or as a “chosen” relationship, which was further granted only to the emperor by the gods in his role to govern the masses. Fears also asserts that those in charge, i.e. the emperors, were also warned of the dangerous consequences for those who did not pay attention to the will of the gods and their expectations. Moreover, since the will of the gods was being revealed through the *genius* of the emperor, it went unquestioned by the masses.

J. R. Fears described the worldview of the Roman Empire as existing in “a myth of supernatural character...beyond military, economic and socio-political bases of power.” (Fears, 1981: 7-9) This definition served to both define and legitimate those members who were both in power and in charge of ordering the world; and who also

acted as benefactors of the general mass population. In addition, he also noted that the empire “was bound inextricably to the collective worship of the community ... Political ideology was formulated in theological terms and expressed through cult and ritual. This aura of supernatural legitimation could be enshrined in and expressed through the figure of the monarch....an image of the ruler as the visible embodiment of cosmic order, divinely ordained to ensure the prosperity of the human race.” (Fears, 1981:7-9)

“Imperial theology,” was the political/religious construct that contained this worldview. It further instituted a relationship between the ruler, likening him to a divine hero, and the ruled, the mass population of the Empire. This worldview included the political/religious within boundaries that were blurred, if boundaries existed at all, and was the essence of how the world was understood. “Imperial theology” eventuated as a means of social control that “reinforced the desired perceptions about the world by those in power, thus creating the desired behaviors of the masses. It included written sources, which sought to legitimate and interpret the emperor’s significance and actions with reference to various divinities.” (Carter, 57) Human action found in the form of worship of the emperor constructed under the imperial cult was “a conveyor of imperial ideology, a focus of loyalty for the man, and a mechanism for the social advancement of the few.” (Edwards, 52)

For the purpose of this work, it is important to note that those writing for or about the imperial court, including Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Tacitus expressed themselves *as believers* existing within the framework of “imperial theology.” For them, this was how the world was understood as *real*. What humans *believed* was true about the world, and

how they chose to use “political/religious” symbologies expressed through *language*, revealed how these writers sought to legitimate the emperor as the manifestation of the god(s) in human form; and more importantly, who also held favor with and possessed unquestionable authority from the god(s). “Imperial theology” was a powerful construct whose function was to order society so that the cosmological world could function properly. Better said, the world was being defined in religious terms in order to assure the continuation of privilege for the ruler and obedience by the ruled.

Sociologist Peter Berger in his work, The Sacred Canopy, concluded that “religion had been the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation ... Religion legitimated so effectively, because it related the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality.” (Berger, 32) Moreover, what he discovered was that the process of legitimation became crystallized at that moment when *belief* became “taken for granted.” (Berger, 32) In other words, it became effective at that point when human beings no longer questioned why things were the way they were. Believers began to believe, merely because “it had always been so.” This, he called the process of “forgetting.” (Berger, 32) “Let the institutional order be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its *constructed* character. Let that which has been stamped out of the ground *ex nihilo* appear as the manifestation of something that has been existent from the beginning of time, or at least from the beginning of this group. Let the people *forget* that this order was established by men and continued to be dependent upon the consent of men.” (Berger, 33) Furthermore, “Let them believe that in acting out the institutional programs that have been imposed upon them, they are but

realizing the deepest aspirations of their own being and putting themselves in harmony with the fundamental order of the universe.” (Berger, 33)

“Imperial theology” remained unquestioned for centuries. Its religious/theological power that resulted from “forgetfulness,” instilled a theology in the minds of the people, which became *traditional*. It also insured that tradition had to be maintained through human *action*. In other words, it was important to recreate one day just as the last, maintaining the “status quo,” merely because “it had always been so.” This theology impacted the worldview of the Roman culture so significantly that any new ideology was met with contempt and suspicion. Some scholars have argued that this system was never questioned until the time of the emperor Constantine, sometime during the middle of the 4th century CE. (MacMullen, 85) So, it was within this religious/theological framework, that “historians’ such as Cassius Dio, Suetonius and Tacitus; and poets such as Martial (born 40-43 CE) and Statius (45-96 CE) wrote their accounts about the emperors as reflections of divinity and hero-figures. The time period discussed in this writing is illustrated in Table 1.

62 BCE	1st year of Julius Caesar's praetorship; Syria becomes Roman province
63 BCE	Pompey in Jerusalem
27 BCE	Octavian (Caesar Augustus) becomes emperor; end of the Republic
6-4 BCE	Birth of Jesus
---	---
	<u>JULIO-CLAUDIAN DYNASTY</u>
6 CE	Judea becomes a Roman province
14 CE	Augustus dies; Tiberius becomes emperor
26 CE	Tiberius flees to Capri; never returns to Rome; Pontius Pilatus governor of Judea
30-33 CE	Jesus is crucified
37 CE	Tiberius dies; Caligula (son of Germanicus) becomes emperor
40 CE	Appolonius of Tyana born, Martial (the poet) born
41 CE	Caligula assassinated; Claudius becomes emperor
44 CE	Agrippa I dies, Judea become province again
51 CE	Claudius assassinated; Nero becomes emperor
55 CE	Tacitus born
64 CE	Rome burns; Nero blames the Christians
66-69 CE	(GOSPEL OF MARK)
66 CE	Beginning of the Jewish revolt; Vespasian leads legions into Judea
67 CE	Josephus surrenders to the Romans
68 CE	End of Julio-Claudian Dynasty; Nero declared public enemy; dies in June
	Reigns of Galba, Otho and Vitellius
69 CE	Suetonius born
<hr/>	
69 CE	Vespasian becomes emperor; founds Flavian Dynasty
70 CE	Fall of Jewish Temple in Jerusalem; emergence of Rabbinic Judaism
73 CE	Masada captured by Rome
75 CE	King Herod Agrippa and sister, Bernice visit Rome: Bernice lives with Titus
79 CE	Vespasian dies: Titus (son) becomes emperor
80-98	Appolonius of Tyana active in Cappadoaia
81 CE	Titus dies (3 year reign); brother Domitian becomes emperor
85CE	(GOSPEL OF LUKE)
90 CE	(GOSPEL OF MATTHEW)
93 CE	Josephus publishes <u>Antiquities of the Jews</u>
96 CE	Domitian dies; Nerva becomes emperor
98 CE	Nerva dies; Trajan becomes emperor
	<u>FLAVIAN DYNASTY</u>
114-117 CE	Parthian War
115/117 CE	Jewish Rebellion in Cyrenaica, Egypt and Cyress
117 CE	Trajan dies; Hadrian becomes emperor
131-135 CE	2 nd Jewish Revolution in Judea; Hadrian destroys and refounds Jerusalem
138 CE	Hadrian dies; end of Flavian Dynasty

TABLE 1 – Timeline of the Reign of the Emperor and the Writing of the Gospels

As reflected in *Figure 1*, the writers of the Synoptic gospels were also writing their stories about the life and purpose of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, as the hero-figure of the new movement called “The Way” in Acts 9:12, was also being described in terms of divinity. In the Synoptics, also, terms such as *son of god* and *savior* also appeared regarding Jesus. The Roman pagan writers legitimated the emperor in terms of Roman religion by showing the Roman gods manifesting themselves through the emperor; while the writers of the Synoptics were also applying the same terminologies to Jesus. Adele Yarbro Collins claimed that the writers of the Synoptics were deliberately using these established political/religious symbols in order to communicate more effectively with those existing Roman imperialistic powers. She also suggested that the writers of the gospels may have “adapted non-Jewish religious traditions deliberately and consciously as a way of formulating a culturally meaningful system of belief and life. Some may find it more likely that such people did not borrow ideas and forms consciously, but simply made use unreflectively of the ways of thinking and speaking that were widespread in the cultural situation at the time.”(Collins, 242) In applying Peter Berger’s theory, I would tend to agree with her latter claim; and would suggest that the political/religious paradigm created through the context of “imperial theology” was so prevalent and powerful, that it was the essence in which the way was understood and defined. The power that ‘imperial theology’ had over the culture merely went unnoticed, its origins forgotten and simply “taken for granted.” Even though the Jewish writers were writing their gospels from a context of Judaism, as most scholars would agree, there is also a greater possibility that this smaller social group was being influenced, perhaps,

unconsciously by the larger, greater and powerful system shaped through “imperial theology.”

The writers of the Synopics, as Jewish writers, were also members of the larger, more dominant social structure shaped within a worldview of “imperial theology.” In examining similarities in terms between those writers of the Synoptic gospels, as Jewish writers, and those by historians representing the imperial court, it appears that all of these writers may have been dependent upon a model from where they were borrowing and developing their christological claims. The Greek heroic myth provided this type of model. Greek mythologies supported a cosmological worldview and defined a relationship that existed between the gods, as divine-heroes, and human beings living a mortal life on earth. The Greek myth serves as a model as to how the world was perceived by those living during the time of empire. In his work, Roman Myths, Michael Grant suggested that “although Roman mythology has to be treated historically – although the mere significance of its component stories have to be examined throughout all the phases that moulded their development – the product that emerges is not what happened, but what people at different times *said* or *believed* had happened.” (Grant, xviii) In other words, each work under observation should not be understood as historical truths, but as written accounts of how the writer perceived and believed through his/her own system of belief.

As mythology shaped a worldview and offered a model that would be copied for years to come, statues, temples and government buildings were erected and as manifestations of these beliefs about the world throughout the empire. These

constructions formed visual emblems of power. The cities of Sepphoris and Antioch, as representative of Roman provinces in both Galilee and Syria possibly home to the writers of the gospels will be discussed, since significant architecture from these two locations confirmed in the minds of the people the superiority of the elite and the favor of the gods for the emperor. From the early part of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the beginning of a belief in the emperor as the representative of a divine father-god who had manifested himself on earth for the benefit of humanity appeared. Along with this, a belief that role of the emperor also served to assure the people of the emperor's concern for them was likened that of a father, as the head of the Roman family. The perception of the emperor as the head of the Roman family was a major category in the development of "imperial theology;" which would continue and culminate by the reign of Domitian. By the Flavian period, and especially with the emperor Vespasian and Domitian, this understanding of the emperor as a reflection of the father/god would become the force behind the shaping of one empire of people under the leadership of Jupiter, as one, sovereign god. In other words, we are looking at the development of a theocracy, with Jupiter uniting his people as one Roman family under the rule of his son, the emperor.

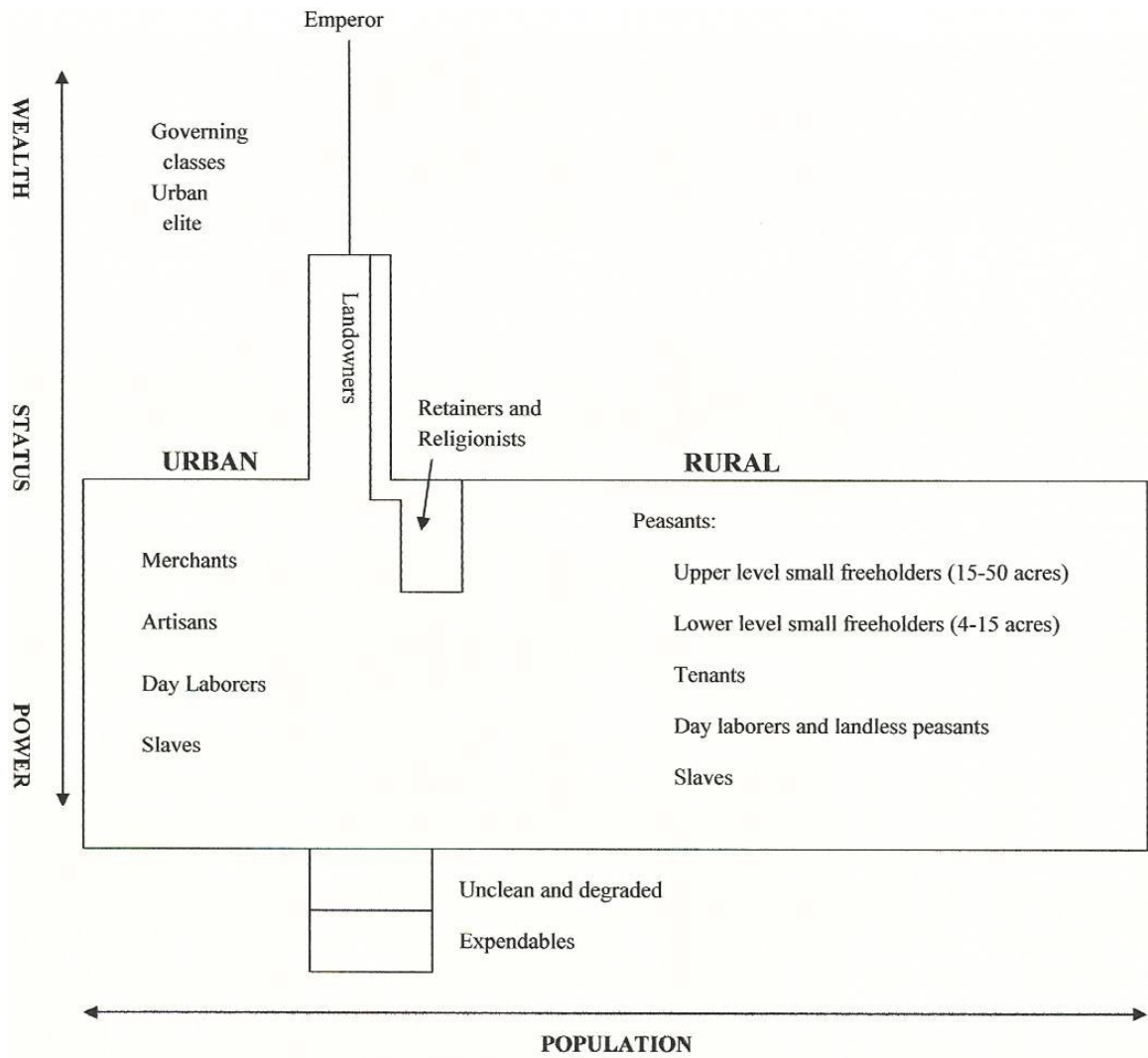
This same category appears throughout the Synoptics. However, the challenge for the writers of the Synoptics would be to establish and legitimate the figure of Jesus as a hero/founder of a new *institutional order*. The language used in legitimating Jesus as the *Son of God* will be referred to in this work as the "Christology" of the Gospels. As members of a community living under the domination of Roman imperialism, the writers of the Synoptics were attempting to present their views as members of a culture living

under the oppression of the elite. In the next chapter, the community of the “ruled” will be discussed since this is the community from where the gospel writers reside and for whom the gospels were being written.

Chapter Two

The Social Milieu of the *Oikoumene*

The social milieu of the culture existing during the time of the writing of the gospels is represented in Table 2 and borrowed from the work of G.E. Lenski's *Power and Prestige: A Theory of Social Stratification*. This chart will be discussed only briefly to offer a "bird's eye view" of the economic/social milieu of the people for whom the gospel writers were including in their stories, the membership of the "ruled." From the bottom of the chart and moving to the top, one cannot help to notice the incongruence in power, status and wealth between the "unclean, degraded and expendables" as representative of the greater portion of the population possessing no power, through the governing classes, the urban elite, and at last, the emperor, as the sole representative of power over the entire mass of population. In this chapter, I will also borrow the work of James Malcolm Arlandson' *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts*, which provides a better understanding of how the "ruled" experienced life as members of a dis-inherited world possessed through the dominating power of Roman imperialism.



Lenski, *Power*, 285.

Table 2 - G. E. Lenski's Macrosocial Model for Greco - Roman Period

To begin, the bottom of the chart is populated with the group that Arlandson has named the “expendables.” These were the members whom society rejected. They represented only 5% - 10% of the agrarian culture, 15% of the urban culture, or both. They included the beggars, homeless widows and orphans, the unemployed, pirates and criminals. Roman law had also relegated some philosophers, magicians, astronomers, prophets and diviners to this class since they were often perceived as enemies of the Romans. The “unclean” and “degraded” were determined as such through occupation, but hereditary factors and disease also played an important role in establishing one’s place in society. This group included prostitutes, slave dealers, brothel keepers, herdsmen, tanners and fullers. However, these occupations did not always come by way of choice. In an honor/shame culture, many members of the “unclean” and “degraded” found themselves in these occupations as a result of a lack of dowry from the poor families into which they were born. Women were usually sold into slavery if they did not possess a significant dowry that would sustain them and also make them acceptable as chattel for marriage. For young women conceived through prostitution, they could never be considered as legitimate wives; only slaves to a master. (Arlandson, 100)

Furthermore, in Roman society, human rights were always passed from fathers to their *legitimate* sons and daughters. Others, (and there were many) were excluded from rights, because they were considered “less than human.” Among these were the slaves, widows and orphans. The Romans perceived themselves as superior to others; those in captivity were also understood as inferior to anyone who was not Roman. This included the lame, blind, deaf and leprous (common ailments among the lower classes) who were

prohibited from earning a living and participating in a normal social life. Since sickness was always prolonged, it prevented this group from gaining employment. As economically unproductive members of society, they were perceived as a burden on society. The poor, more than likely, became sick as a result of poor diet, famine, drought, plague and pestilence. The aristocracy, on the other hand, always took care of themselves first. It was not unusual, then, to see the sick and the “degraded” surrounding the outside of the local temples and shrines where they would gather when their families could no longer take care of them.

As a result of empire building, along with the greater part of the population existing as landless peasants and day laborers, there existed a slave culture throughout both the rural and urban areas. About 10% of the population of slaves worked in the cities as domestics to the wealthy *oikos*. For these slaves, and for those working in the local shops owned by the wealthy, life was much better than that of the day laborers. The wealthy *oikos* had investment in the slaves, so they took better care of them. Life for a female slave proved to be the most dangerous, since their main purpose was for the breeding of new generations of slaves. Many slave women either died in childbirth or as a result of multiple births. In addition, the selling of the children of slaves proved to be quite profitable for the wealthy slave-owners.

Although abortion was common among all women in the Greco-Roman world, it was probably practiced to a greater extent among the slave population. Abortion was motivated as an act of love since it was performed to prevent the births of future slave children whose lives were destined to sexual abuse and lives in the brothel. Men, women

and children were sexually abused, and all children born of a Roman master became his personal property. Most often, slaves were sold as chattel. However, life for a slave woman in Galilee was often better than those living in the greater part of the Mediterranean. In Galilee, the main purpose of a slave woman was to provide sex to a master. However, if sexual union did occur, she either became the slave-wife of the master, the slave-wife of the son or she could go free. The Synoptic Gospels often refer to the landless peasants and day laborers. (Mark 12: 1-8, Matt. 9:37, Matt. 10:10, Matt. 20: 1-8; Luke 15:17)

The main cause of landlessness came as a result of Rome's confiscation of property throughout the Empire. "Loss of land resulted from expropriation by Rome and its emissaries, from limited resources in the face of hereditary laws (a large family living on a small plot could only provide the inheritance to the oldest son, so the others had to look elsewhere), and from takeovers by the urban aristocracy. The latter were effected by foreclosures on farms when debts could not be repaid, or by encroachment, which included moving boundary stones, threatening violence, or taking illegal court action." (Arlandson, 56) With no money from families to inherit, many families had to break up in order to find jobs in other areas. This represented a change in the family structure, which ended the extended family and gave birth to the nuclear family.

The day laborers owned no land and were hired out as landless peasants. Unemployment for this group was often high, even during the productive grape-harvesting season. Employment for day-laborers in the rural areas included weeding, harvesting, picking fruit, ditch digging, manure gatherers, transporting of reeds, wood,

crops and people; guarding animals, fields, city gates, children and the sick and the dead. The cities offered occupations such as barbers, bathhouse attendants, cooks and messengers. They possessed no political power and were subject to the whims of the powerful. The elite perceived them as “expendable” members of society, even though they were productive.

In Galilee, the average pay for a day’s work among the day laborers was one *denarius*. This was enough to purchase one liter of grain for an average family of six to nine members, and represented 38% of the day laborer’s wage. (Arlandson, 62) Since work was never steady, the approximate date for one year’s work included about 200 days. Women as day laborers were employed as domestics; grinding flour, baking bread, washing clothes, cooking and childcare tasks. They were also employed in the fields during harvest time and were expected to work even through childbirth. There was no upward mobility and no dowry to pass on.

“If the period of Augustus and the Julio-Claudians gives the impression of a gradual and sound recovery from a time of great distress, that of the Flavians and Antonines creates one of widespread and general prosperity. If the first saw a good beginning of the Greco-Roman municipal forms and Hellenic culture...the next saw the continuation and culmination of the movement, which reached its maximum strength for the pre-Diocletian period with Marcus Aurelius.” (Arlandson, 21. Quoting T.R.S. Broughton, “Roman Asia Minor,” in *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (ed.F.Tenney; Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1938) The widespread and general prosperity existed only in the urban centers and developed gradually with the growth of the empire. With the

expansion of wealth in the cities a diversity of new occupations developed. These included “bureaucrats, scholars, scribes, soldiers, merchants, servants, numerous “guilds” of artisans, laborers, the working poor and even beggars.” (Arlandson, 21) It was from within these urban centers of the Greek *oikoumene* that the stories from the Synoptic gospels would be told.

Chapter Three

The Landscape of Sepphoris and Antioch

As oppressed representatives of the “ruled” mass population of the empire, the superiority of the elite was visualized throughout the landscape from the time of Augustus, 31-28 BCE – 14 CE through the Flavian dynasty 69 CE – 110 CE. Visuals reflecting the religious/political worldview served as the elite’s symbolics of power that mediated the desired religious, social and political ideology of those who ruled. “The power of images in the Age of Augustus and the images associated with Roman arches in Rome illustrate how invisible but real ‘webs of power’ bound rulers and ruled in networks of visual and verbal discourse.” (Edwards, 7) “Visual discourse” such as these found in the architecture of the *oikoumene* promoted a worldview that insisted on the superiority of the Roman elite. The power that they invoked helped to crystallize the “taken for granted” belief in the sovereign rule of the Roman emperor as destined by the gods and goddesses. “Religious symbols supplied potent images that enabled their proponents to gain adherents, acquire or maintain power or prestige, bolster believers, respond to detractors, and associate with what many felt was the true force behind the world, divine power.” (Edwards, 17) Statues also served as important symbolic images, since the members of the *oikoumene* “thought first to touch the gods through images, because that was where the gods lived; or at least, to images they could be brought by entreaty, there to listen and to act. Whether or not they fitted exactly, whether they

looked like their portraits in stone or wood, they were to be found inside.” (MacMullen, 59)

By the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the writing of the Gospel of Mark, a series of events had occurred, which confirmed the superiority of Roman imperialism and the favor of the gods for the emperor. The end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire with Octavian Augustus would be defined as the Julio-Claudian dynasty. With the death of Herod, the Jews had lost many of their privileges as a people. Jesus of Nazareth had been born sometime between 6 BCE– 4 BCE, and was later crucified by the Roman government between 30 CE-33 CE. By the year 51 CE, the emperor Claudius had dismissed the Jews from Rome, and, finally, in 64 CE, the emperor Nero blamed the “Christians” for the burning of that city. The Julio-Claudian dynasty provided the background for the writing of the Gospel of Mark.

Later, with the Jewish Revolt beginning in 66 CE, the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty was at hand. By the year 69 CE, Vespasian had become the first emperor of a new period of time established under the Flavian Dynasty. In the early years of the Flavians, the Jewish members of the *oikoumene* would witness the fall of their temple in the year 70 CE and the capture of Masada in the year 73 CE by the Romans. These events served as reminders of Roman superiority granted through the favor of the gods. These visuals confirmed the well-established belief under “imperial theology” of the subordination of the Jewish god and his followers. These were the conditions from which the writers called Matthew and Luke would write their gospels.

The Gospel of Mark, written between 66 CE and 69 CE, is a narrative that focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus and his challenge with the Jewish Sanhedrin, the ruling priests and their Roman imperial overlords. The theme of each story is shaped by conflict, which centers on the teachings, healings and exorcisms by Jesus in and around the area of Galilee and Jerusalem. Recently, biblical archeologists and scholars such as James F. Strange and Richard A. Batey have re-discovered that the Galilean city of Sepphoris, played a significant role in the shaping of how the story of the life of Jesus was told through the perspective of Matthew. However, although there is no evidence to suggest that the Gospel of Mark originated in this particular location, most scholars support a theory that Mark was writing in or around Galilee, or was near enough to be influenced by its landscape and culture. The city of Sepphoris was not only representative of an urban culture within Galilee, but it was also the center of government in Galilee from the time that Pompey took control of it in 63 BCE. In addition, it was also home to the seat of the ruling Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. (Batey, 35) As early as the year 3 BCE, when Herod Antipas returned to Galilee from Rome, he chose the city of Sepphoris as his capital. “Sepphoris became the nerve center for the government’s control of Galilee and Peraea. Political policy, military strategy, economic regulations, and cultural affairs were administered from this seat of power.” (Batey, 53) Visuals throughout the landscape of the walled city of Sepphoris shaped both the way in which its members understood the world and also confirmed the superiority of political power under the umbrella of Roman imperialism during the time that Mark was writing his gospel.

Visuals served to reinforce on a daily basis that “imperial theology” had become the *traditional* way in which the world was understood. For example, in the center of the Roman Forum, the *Arch of Augustus* symbolized the power of Augustus and his favor from the gods. This had been constructed in memory of his victory at Actium. “Beyond the arch stood the small round Temple of Vesta, where the vestal virgins tended the sacred fire, symbolizing the life of the City of Rome. To the left was the Temple of Julius Caesar, who had adopted Octavian and made him his heir.” (Batey, 59) The Forum of Augustus was located near the *Via Sacra*, or “the sacred way.” Further west of the temple was the “*Campidoglio*, where Augustus had rebuilt the ancient Temple of Jupiter *Optimus Maximus*...an urban renewal program.” (Batey, 59) These served as effective visuals whose purpose was to display *acts* of beneficence by the ruler over the ruled. Moreover, they assured the masses that the gods and the emperors were concerned for the welfare of the *oikoumene*. Whether or not acts of benevolence were *practiced* does not seem to be an issue.

In another part of the city, on the *Via Lata*, stood “the *Ara Pacis*, an altar of Augustan Peace, commissioned by the senate in celebration of Augustus’ military victories...the altar displayed the pious imperial family in a sacrificial procession.” (Batey, 59) Along the east bank of the Tiber River, just west of the *Ara Pacis*, was the home of Augustus’ imposing tomb, a mere 300 ft. x 136 ft., (Batey, 60) where a bronze statue of Augustus was erected on the roof. “At the tomb’s entrance stood two pink granite obelisks to which were attached bronze tablets recording the *Res Gestae*, Augustus’ great works and accomplishments.” (Sepphoris, 60) Finally, on the east side,

by the Palatine Hill, a Temple to Apollo was erected by Augustus to honor the god of light and reason.

The city of Antioch was also a center of political/religious power. Like Sepphoris, as the center of the Roman province in Galilee, Antioch was the center of the Roman province in Syria. Warren Carter has suggested that in and around Antioch, just after the post 70 CE era, “it was virtually impossible to walk down the street and not be awestruck by Roman presence. Soldiers were stationed in front of and in all administrative and government buildings, including the record office and law courts.” (Carter, 56)

Inscriptions on administrative buildings, courts and the public baths; temples and statues dedicated to the worship of the gods, all depicted a world founded within a paradigm of Roman imperialism. The population used “officials of the Roman administration headed by the legate or provincial governor, and the temples for worshipping various gods, including Jupiter, patron god of the Flavians.” (Carter, 56) “Wherever the eye rested, there must have been the inscribed and painted letters of honorific decrees, testimony to miracles, or regulations specifying the music and victims appropriate to this or that act of supplication or thanksgiving.” (Edwards, 51)

Just outside of Antioch “within sight of this city was the city of Daphne, where one could easily be reminded of Rome’s power. Here, bronze statues stolen from the fallen Temple appeared. Visuals “attested Roman military superiority, and the uselessness of insubordination, and the favor of the gods.” (Carter, 5) They served as a constant reminder to the Jewish population that the gods were in favor of a theocracy shaped and supported by Roman “imperialistic theology.” This was effective in a culture

where the people were “ready ... to attribute powers to images even of mortals, so ready to see the divine even in their fellows!” (MacMullen, 60)

Chapter Four

Greco-Roman Mythology and the Shaping of Worldview

The outward and visible signs in the material world of the *oikoumene* were responsible for shaping “imperial theology” as a prevailing system of belief. Visuals were also reflections of a system that had also become internalized within the minds of the people. To understand “imperial theology” within a subjective context, scholars have had to rely on extant texts from this period. Unfortunately, they have very little in the way of written texts from this period, since this culture was one that relied upon an oral tradition. However, we do have some who were writing. Generally, writing was reserved for the lettered classes, or the elite, but there were also others writing. Probably some among the upper income classes and among some of the artisans transmuted the oral tradition to the written form. Since the gospels were written in *Koine* Greek, a form used by the common people and not by the educated, one could conclude that these writers were probably non-elites living as artisans within the culture.

The methodology used and the rules applied in writing were both interesting and important in understanding how these texts were developed. Furthermore, a common pattern in many of the writings suggests that they had been copied from existing models. The practice of copying from models, called *pseudopigraphy*, was expected and was also considered the acceptable method. (Ehrman, 261) As suggested earlier, the model that was in place at the time was located in Greek mythology. Here, I would argue that this

model originated in the work of Homer, which also responsible for the shaping of “imperial theology” within the mindset of the cosmological world.

The writers of the Synoptics were not excluded from this practice. Dennis MacDonald has suggested that the writer of the Gospel of Mark was using Homer as a blueprint in developing his own Christology. Most scholars agree that the writer of the Gospel of Mark, wrote his gospel first and that the writers of Matthew and Luke were looking at Mark’s gospel as their model. Out of the 661 verses included in Mark, 606 also appear in Matthew and 320 in Luke. For centuries before and continuing through this period, the majority form of communication and expression was based on an oral tradition. It was unusual for the common person to know how to read and write. More unusual, was a concept of original thought.

In *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, author Dennis MacDonald further suggested that children growing up in antiquity who were fortunate enough to learn to read and write, did so by imitating and copying the epic poetry of Homer. He also claimed that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the models from where all writing from this time originated. “If a Greek owned any books – that is, papyrus rolls – he was almost as likely to own the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as anything from the rest of Greek literature. Many of the stories in Mark with parallels in the Homeric epic were commonplace in Greek culture. Homer was in the air that Mark’s readers breathed.” (MacDonald, 8)

Even Plato, who was not a fan of Homer’s, admitted that Homer had educated Greece. (MacDonald, 4) Since the culture relied upon these works for imitation, its contents also influenced the way in which members of the culture understood the world.

As students advanced from copying the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they would then begin to rely on other works by Homer. Evidence of this appeared in one catalogue of manuscripts from Greco-Roman Egypt that listed 604 works by Homer from this period; as compared to 83 by Demostenes, 77 by Euripides, 72 by Hesiod and 42 by Plato. (MacDonald, 4) MacDonald also noted that even Jewish poets, such as Theodotus' *On the Jews* and Philo Epicus' *On Jerusalem* imitated and copied Homer! In light of this, as the dominating influence in the Empire, even the smaller factions of the population, including the Jewish writers were, indeed, also affected by Hellenistic influences.

MacDonald also noticed that in Mark's gospel and in the work of Homer, the hero figures, Jesus and Odysseus both sail with associates (or disciples) who are far inferior to them and fail when confronted with suffering. This is quite evident in Mark's treatment of the disciples in his gospel. Both opposed the supernatural; both visited dead heroes; and both foretold their own return after death. Furthermore, both Jesus and Odysseus were anointed by a wise woman and told about their returning after death. In addition, both stories included themes about a god(s) who controlled storms, could walk on water and provide food for thousands. Like Hector, Jesus died at the end of the story and was rescued from his executioners; Hector being rescued by Achilles and Jesus by the Roman centurion. In the end, just after their deaths, three women mourned them.

Notice the theological implications in Homer's work that Mark transfers to his gospel. This example of Homer is significant, because it reveals another very important characteristic found in writing from this time. It is evident that not only do writers copy from one another, but it is also expected that once a work was copied, the copier would

out do the previous writer by making his story more fantastic. Kenneth Scott has claimed that “it was a rhetorical necessity that a writer....should make out his hero to be superior to the heroes of former times to whom he compared him.” (Scott, 141) MacDonald suggested that Mark did this in his treatment of raising Jesus, his hero-figure, from the dead. By raising Jesus from the dead, Mark “transvalued” Homer. (In the *Odyssey*, Hector is not raised from the dead.)

In addition, the typical form, or shape, of the Greek heroic myth was one that portrayed the hero in four stages: 1) as a heavenly being, 2) who descended to earth as a human being, who would 3) later be exalted by a god to heaven, 4) where he would become a god, himself, and live among other divinities. The hero-myth became the archetype, or model of how the cosmological functioned. Members of the *oikoumene* learned to rely on this model to answer their questions of ultimate concern.

This model appeared in numerous mythological accounts throughout antiquity. Perhaps one of the most effective of all the hero stories responsible for the shaping this worldview was the Greek *Myth of Herakles*. In this particular story, we learn that Herakles “was the son of Zeus, but mortal. Suffering dreadful torments, he immolated himself on a pyre and then ascended through the flames to the gods. He was remembered as a benefactor of humanity and was frequently invoked as an omnipresent helper. He was also the prototype of the ruler who, by virtue of his divine legitimization acted for the benefit of humankind, and was rewarded by being taken into the company of the gods after his death. “This story served as a model for the ordinary person who could hope for a life among the gods as a reward for an upright life of drudgery.....a human being who

suffered for the good of human kind and was, therefore, given a divine nature and status” (Collins, 247)

The Homeric Myth of Demeter, another sacred myth, was relied upon by the Eleusian mystery cult for over one thousand years prior to our period. It was also shaped by this model. However, in application of Scott’s thesis, this story includes an additional element – that of *transfiguration*. In this story, a goddess, as the heroine, *transfigures* herself while on earth. In this particular myth, the goddess Demeter, in her grief and anger over the abduction of her daughter by Hades, descended to earth and “went to the towns and rich fields of men, disfiguring her form a long while.” (Collins, 245) The heavenly goddess descended to earth, became a human and when she revealed the truth about herself, was restored to divinity. “When she had so said, the goddess changed her stature and her form, thrusting old age away from her: beauty spread round about her and a lovely fragrance was wafted from her sweet-smelling robes, and from the divine body of the goddess a light shone afar, while golden tresses spread down over her shoulders, so that the strong house was filled with brightness as with lightning.” (Collins, 245) Transfiguration was a prevailing belief in antiquity regarding the gods and was a common theme in Greek mythology. Fears noticed that these models also appeared in other writings from as early as the time of Augustus and continued through the Flavian dynasties. (Fears 1981a:34-66)

Again, this element was transferred to the gospel narrative commonly referred to as “the transfiguration of Jesus,” found in Mark 9:2-8: “Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as not one on earth could bleach them.”

The historian Suetonius and the poet Horace were also seeing the world through Homer’s model when they described the life of the emperor as a divine hero and benefactor of humanity. In 29 BCE, the poet Horace wrote an ode in honor to Augustus in his *Carmina* 1.2. (Collins, 250) In this work, the father/god, Jupiter sent his son Mercury to earth to avenge the death of Julius Caesar just after the civil war. Horace believed that Mercury would change his form into a youth; implying that Mercury was manifesting himself through Augustus. The historian Suetonius also reporting on the death of Augustus, claimed that his *spirit* had been seen ascending to heaven, and after his death, he continued to send benefactions to the people. In writing about the death of Augustus, Suetonius wrote: “The body was then carried upon the shoulders of senators into the *Campus Martius*, and there burnt. A man of praetorian rank affirmed upon oath that he saw his spirit ascend from the funeral pyre to heaven....He left in legacies to the Roman people forty millions of sesterces; to the tribes three millions five hundred thousand; to the praetorian troops a thousand to each man; to the city cohorts five hundred; and to the legions and soldiers three hundred each; which several sums he ordered to be paid immediately after his death.....” (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 100.)

Poets such as Vergil, Ovid and Horace also “continued the Homeric traditions by identifying Augustus as the earthly counterpart of Jupiter, the god come down to earth, appointed by Jupiter to be ‘father’ and ‘ruler,” ruling his vice-regent over human beings, freeing Jupiter to rule the gods and Heaven.” (Fears 1981a: 66-68). It is additionally

important here to stress the significance of the hero being understood in terms of a father-god, which begins in mythology with Zeus and later with Jupiter. This belief in a personified, father-god became the catalyst behind the power in “imperial theology.” .This was probably the most significant move toward uniting the people under one political/religious worldview. The creation of a belief in a god as a father figure united the people under one political/religious worldview. This belief, as we have seen, was already in place in Greek mythology.

Chapter Five

Father/God/Benefactor

A perception of the god as a father gave power to the gods to bestow upon the emperor authority to rule the culture *as a family*. This belief remained unquestioned by the ruled, since it was believed that the emperor's power had been ordained by divine authority. In other words, Zeus revealed himself through the Roman emperor and the Jewish god, Yahweh, manifested himself through the figure of Jesus in the Synoptics. In the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, the writer of Matthew shows Jesus using language describing the Jewish god, Yahweh, as "his Father in Heaven," his father as "the reign of the heavens" and "Father, Lord of Heaven and earth." (Matt. 6:1) In addition, biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has suggested that the process of *naming* was the most effective means of attaining power during the time of the Empire (Johnson, 537). To be named "Father," was the highest honor to be awarded within both the social structure shaped by Roman imperialism and also within individual Roman families. The Roman family was the most important social structure in Roman culture. Moreover, as a patriarchal system, the father figure commanded the most respect, and, was in fact, the most powerful of all family members – the *pater familias*. This traditional view of fatherhood was transferred to the way in which the gods were also understood, and also in how the emperor was perceived as a father figure for the culture at large.

Although there was already a belief in the culture from as early as the founding of Rome that the kings were also father figures with assignments ordained through deities, a significant change in how the emperor was perceived became apparent with Augustus. Adele Yarbro Collins has suggested that “there was already in the biblical tradition the idea of a God-king who appointed a human king as the divine agent on earth. There is also evidence that the human king was thought to be divine in the period of the monarchy.” (Yarbro, 251) However, S.F. Price noted that beginning with Augustus, “the relationship of the honors to the political standing of the ruler changed....The more elaborate and systematic nature of the imperial administration in contrast to that of Hellenistic kings was accompanied by a perception that the birthday of Augustus was simply the beginning of all things.” With this perception in place “all things” prior to the birth of Augustus could be relegated to the “insignificant and eventually forgotten.”

This belief also set up boundaries where only what was “from the beginning of time” was considered real. This phenomenon also appeared in other religious forms throughout history. For example, from as late as the 4th century CE, the *Priene* inscriptions regarding Augustus report that “since Providence (*Pronoia*, or *Foreknowledge*), which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit human kind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god

Augustus was the beginning of the good news for the world that came by reason of him, which Asia resolved in Smyrna.” (SB8895)

In the greeting of the Gospel of Mark, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” (1:1) borrows language already in use in describing the Roman emperor, as we earlier noted. By the end of the greeting, it appears once again in 1:14; “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The “good news” appears again in 13:10 and 14:9. It is interesting to note that the notes to the Third Edition to the New Oxford Annotated Bible suggests that in the context of the Roman Empire, *the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ*, i.e., Jesus the “anointed” king of Israel, a people subject to Rome, would have been understood over against the “gospel” of Caesar as the “Savior” who brought peace to the world. *Son of God* is missing in the earliest manuscripts. (Coogan, 57 New Testament)

With a perception of Augustus as the representative of the father/god Zeus/Jupiter who was “from the beginning,” and a father of the culture being understood in terms of the Roman family, the blurring of boundaries between the what was religious and what was political became even more apparent. This provided a setting for the birth of nationalistic religion; a theocracy, established as “one nation under one god.” Effort toward this end appeared “from the beginning” with the emperor Augustus. Evidence from inscriptions name Augustus as the “Father of His Country.” (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 5) Elsewhere, “the whole body of the people, upon a sudden impulse, and with unanimous consent, offered him the title of FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY. It was

announced to him first at Antium, by a deputation from the people, and upon his declining the honour, they repeated their offer on his return to Rome, in a full theatre, when they were crowned with laurel. With hearty wishes for the happiness and prosperity of yourself and family, Caesar Augustus, (for we think we thus most effectually pray for the lasting welfare of the state), the senate, in agreement with the Roman people, salutes you by the title of FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY.” (Suetonius, *Augustus* 58) All emperors from the time of Augustus would use him as their model/hero and father/god; and writers from this period on would compare all of the preceding emperors in terms of Augustus.

Kenneth Scott also noticed that as the Roman world moved from polytheism toward monotheism, it became more evident that the people were becoming even more dependent on a belief that the emperor as the sole representative of the father-god who had an even greater interest in caring for humanity. This belief was later crystallized by the time of Domitian. From inscriptions dating from the period of Domitian, we learn that “Jupiter reigns in the skies,” while “Domitian exercises Jupiter’s rule on earth.” (EPIG. IX. 24) Elsewhere, Domitian is referred to as the “Ausonium father” (EPIG. IX. 7.6); “parent of the world,” (EPIG. VII. 7.5; IX. 6.1); “father of the Susonium city,” (IV. Viii. 20); and, “renowned father of the world.” (SILV. III. iv. 48)

From the early part of the Flavian dynasty, “imperial theology” included an additional belief that insisted that Jupiter not only a father, but was *kind*. Kindness would be revealed through the *genius* of the emperor, which gave power to be an even more benevolent ruler.” “The Flavians employed a theology based on an understanding of the

god Jupiter as the supreme God, as the *special relationship* that Jupiter and the emperor enjoyed and functioned to show that ‘the emperor...was above human criticism, because his power was rooted not in human institutions, but in his election by the supreme god of the state.’ (Fears 1981a: 81) ” By the year 66 CE, the emperor Nero would also be depicted as a representative of Jupiter. Furthermore, the state would also be perceived as the institution that provided care and protection for the people. For example, coins from this period showed Nero sitting on a throne with a thunderbolt and a scepter, symbolic of the god, Jupiter. Later, after the Pisonian conspiracy, coins began to depict Nero *as* Jupiter, the Liberator from Greek taxation. (Fears 1981a: 69-74) All emperors following Nero employed Jupiter as the supreme god from whom the welfare of the world depended. As the sovereign god, Jupiter held the knowledge of the world, including the thoughts of the citizens. He was the “ruler of the nations and mighty sire of the conquered world, hope of men {sic} and care {beloved} of the gods who sees everywhere and ‘knows the hearts of all his subjects.’” (SILV.V.1.79-80) (SILV. IV.ii.14-15) (In the gospels we have examples of a kind god)

By the time of Vespasian (69 CE) and Titus (79 CE), the culmination of legitimating the emperor as the “chosen representative” of the monotheistic god and benevolent father, became even more apparent. Also, with Vespasian, the benevolent father began to also be understood to possess additional meaning. This emperor represented a new perception that included a belief that the emperor’s position was being defined in terms of *sacredness*. Perceived as a sacred father, like children, the masses began to seek his approval. In the *Argonautica*, Vespasian was referred to as *sancta*

pater, Latin for “sacred father.” The writer Flaccus begged Vespasian “as a father,” seeking his approval to find favor with him. The poet asked Vespasian to “raise him from the cloudy earth.” (Silvae, IV) In this same poem Vespasian did not return to the earth, but it was predicted that his son, Domitian, would be raised higher than his father and brother and would share with Jupiter in the rule of the world, after the emperor accomplished greater deeds on earth.

Just after Vespasian’s reign, early signs appear suggesting that the emperor had become the *object* of worship. This also was new with Vespasian. The practice of worship was important in Roman society since it fell within the context of human *action*, another important element in “imperial theology.” With the emperor as an object of worship, the practice of worship in the form of imperial cult served to both establish and reinforce this belief. By the year 41 CE, the emperor Titus, the son of Vespasian “became an object of universal love and adoration...born in a small, dingy, slum bedroom close to the Septizonium.” (Suetonius, *Titus*, 1) Additionally, with Titus, was a worldview that included an emperor who suffered. “Titus’ reign was marked by a series of dreadful catastrophes – an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in Campania, a fire at Rome which burned for three days and nights, and one of the worst outbreaks of plague that had ever been known. Through his assortment of disasters, he showed far more than an Emperor’s concern. It also resembled the deep love of a father for his children, which he conveyed not only in a series of comforting edicts but by helping the victims to the utmost extent of his purse.” (Suetonius, *Titus*, 8) The writers of the Synoptics used all

three of these categories in the development of their Christologies. Universal love, and a hero born in poverty and suffering are both major themes used by the Synoptic writers.

By Domitian's reign, the emperor as the manifestation of the caring father/god who had also become the object of worship was in place and had become an established tradition in the Roman Empire. By the year 81 CE most of the members of the culture had forgotten why they believed the way they did or even cared where these beliefs originated. The poet Statius addressed Domitian as "the offspring and father of great divinities." (Silv. I, i,74) We also learn that while Vespasian ruled in heaven, the one son, Domitian ruled the earth; while Vespasian's other children, Titus and Domitilla, like their father became stars. (Scott, 69) Also, Domitian actively sought to support this worldview, and during his reign, issued coins. As an effective means of propaganda, the god *Jupiter Conservator* holding a thunderbolt and a spear on one side of the coin and the emperor on the other reinforced the perception of special relationship between Jupiter and the emperor. The *Capitoline*, which had been destroyed during the war, was rebuilt and re-established under the authority of Domitian. He later dedicated the temple to Jupiter as *Custos*. But what is additionally interesting to note is that a statue outside of the *Capitoline* portrayed the "fatherly Jupiter" holding the emperor Domitian in his lap; establishing yet another belief found within "imperial theology" that a significant relationship was established between the god, Jupiter, and his son, Domitian, whom he cherished and protected *as a son*.

Even though inscriptions from the beginning of the Julio-Claudian dynasty tell of the emperor as a *son of a god*, it becomes apparent by the time of Domitian that the

relationship is even more *special*, since it is shown as a relationship based on adoration and protection. The writers of the Synoptics also use “son of god” language as a prevailing theme and a major category in the legitimization of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Although the Synoptic gospels offer many examples of Jesus as the Son of God, as does the rest of the New Testament, Mark chooses to reveal Jesus’ relationship as a son at significant events, in the presence of crowds and a sign or portent that confirm the phenomenon, because the Jewish God, Yahweh, was also actively involved in the lives of human beings. For instance, at the baptism of Jesus, a voice comes out of heaven and proclaims, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) The demoniac in Chapter 5 reveals that he knows Jesus by shouting at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” (Mark 5:7) In Mark 12:6 the story of the wicked tenants reveals that “he had still one other, a beloved son. Finally, he sent him to them, say, ‘They will respect my son.’” Jesus refers to himself as “the son” and God as his “father” at the end of his discourse in Mark 13: 32: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Adele Yarbro Collins has argued that *Son of God* as a category within Roman imperialism is weak, because Mark was probably using the term in more of a Jewish context, since it is one of the earliest accounts that were so heavily influenced by Judaism. The term *Son of God* “appears in reference to the kings in the Hebrew Scriptures and is also prominent in the writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls. (Collins, 253) However, I believe that in light of the evidence found in the naming of the emperors as

sons of gods, beginning with Julius Caesar also suggests that this, also, was part of the prevailing worldview of the majority culture found within the Empire.

Chapter Six

Savior and Healer

Other inscriptions reveal that “the Carthaeian people honor the god and emperor and savior of the inhabited world Gaius Julius Caesar son of Gaius.” (IG 12.5, 556-557) The perception of the emperor as a savior was also a category of belief that had already been well established in Greek mythology. A savior was understood as a peacemaker or someone who possessed the power to heal. In mythology, the gods (and goddesses) of Rome too were often honoured as saviors, and one of them, *Salus*, had no other function than this. (Weinstock, 167.) Within a Hellenistic framework, the word *salus* included a concern for the welfare and safety of both the private and public sectors. The term, *Salus*, in a Roman context, was personified as a goddess in public affairs and as a god in the private sector. As a peacemaker, the goddess, *Salus*’ concern was for the welfare and safety of her people. “The goddess *Salus* was worshipped all over Italy and received at a temple at Rome by the end of the fourth century C.E., representing the *salus publica*...The private *Salus* would have been much older, may have inspired hyperbolic expressions of gratitude from man to man, and thus became the first Roman equivalent of the Greek *Soter*.” (Weinstock, 137) The Greeks always had their *theoi soteri*, but kings too were acclaimed and honoured as *Soteres*: Ptolemy I, Antiochus I, Antigonus, and Demetrius Poliorcetes, and later Roman generals like T. Quinctius Flamininus.”

(Weinstock, 164) “From the time of the Civil War and Caesar and through the next centuries the established worldview in antiquity believed that the welfare of the State depended on the life of a single man. (Weinstock, 139) Augustus was also named *Salus* and was rewarded with the *corona civica* and the golden shield in 27 B.C. (Dio 53.16.4) Although there is no evidence that this title was given to Claudius, the emperors Tiberius and Caligula both shared the title of *Salus*. (Weinstock, 139)

Later the Greek words *soter* and *soteria* included the *action* of saving one from either physical or mental illness. Perhaps this change occurred as a result of the syncretizing of the Romans with the Greeks under Empire. Remember that human action was a fundamental characteristic in “imperial theology.” Ramsey Mac Mullen has suggested that language such as “savior” or “salvation” in inscriptions had to do with health or other matters of this earth, not of the soul for life eternal.” (MacMullen, 57) In other words, salvation was found in the *action* of healing or in the *action* of establishing peace. Moreover, these actions were performed in this lifetime; and should not be associated with the saving of the human soul.

The Gospel of Mark provides more accounts of healings by Jesus than any other book in the New Testament. It is also important to note that in the worldview found under Hellenism, healings were never understood as miracles. Their world was abundantly supplied with healers. They were a major part of the landscape and were “taken for granted.” From the writings of Philostratus, in his book, *The Life of Apollonius*, he tells of a great neo-Pythagorean teacher by the name of Apollonius of Tyanna who also was a healer living just after the lifetime of Jesus (40 CE) Bart Ehrman,

in *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*,” shared the mythology about Apollonius of Tyanna, which is being included in this work, since it also serves as an example of how models that were established in mythology during our period, also continued after the death of Jesus. This particular story continued to model as it pertained to how healers were being perceived after the life of Jesus. It is important to note, as was suggested by R. Bultmann, that the culture expected and relied upon the themes that appear in these stories. These themes and the symbolic language that was used confirmed their beliefs about these individuals. It also offers an interesting comparison between how the pagan writers were describing their local healer and how the believing Jews just a few years earlier were describing the life of Jesus:

Prior to his birth, a heavenly figure appeared to her, announcing that her son would not be a mere mortal but would himself be divine. This prophecy was confirmed by the miraculous character of his birth; a birth accompanied by supernatural signs. The boy was already recognized as a spiritual authority in his youth; his discussions with recognized experts showed his superior knowledge of all things religious. As an adult he left home to engage in an itinerant preaching ministry. He went from village to town with his message of good news, proclaiming that people should forgo their concerns for the material things in this life...and should be concerned with their eternal souls.

He gathered around him a number of disciples who were amazed by his teaching and his flawless character. They became convinced that he was no ordinary man but was the Son of God. Their faith received striking confirmation in the miraculous things that he did. He could reportedly predict the future, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. However, not everyone proved friendly. At the end of his life, his enemies trumped up charges against him, and he was placed on trial before Roman authorities for crimes against the state.

Some claimed that he had ascended bodily into heaven; others said that he had appeared to them, alive, afterwards, that they had talked with him and touched him and become convinced that he could not be bound by death. A number of his followers spread the good news about this man, ...” (Ehrman, 17)

“A semi fictional biography tells us of sickness caused by a maleficent spirit, who can only be destroyed when a holy man, come to help, calls on the power of some appropriate deity.....And the same holy man, Apollonius, is seen to be capable of this feat also. Powers such as his were commonly on sale in marketplaces.....” (MacMullen, 50)

The understanding and legitimating individuals as healers was also transferred to the way in which the gods and goddesses were being understood. “Asclepius was called “the Savior,”...Isis and Sarapis, too, emerged as especially great healers, workers of endless medical miracles; but many or most gods could heal.” (MacMullen, 49) By the time of the Flavian dynasty, Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Tacitus were also writing about the emperors and their healing abilities. Both Tacitus and Dio reported about the miraculous powers of healing provided by the emperor Vespasian: “Many marvels occurred to mark the favor of the heaven and a certain partiality of the gods (*numinum*) toward him.” Tacitus (Hist.4.81) “Heaven was thus magnifying him.” (Dio, 65.8.2) “and with the help of Serapis the healing of a blind man, and the restoration of a crippled hand. (Tacitus, Hist. 4.81) and (Dio, 65.8.1) A report of the healing of a hand is significant, since the hand was perceived under paganism as holy. This also may be suggestive of Kenneth Scott, again, (see above. Pg. 24) and may be an attempt by Cassius Dio to “devalue” the reports of other local healings, including those by Jesus. This account also appears in Tacitus, Hist. 1.10, 2.78; Suetonius, Vesp.5.2-6; Dio, 64.9.1 and 65.1.2-4; Josephus, W1.23, 4.623 and 3.401-04. It is interesting to note that miraculous healings by the emperors could usually be confirmed by the decline or misfortunes of others!

The Gospel of Mark followed the same pattern. However, what changes in Mark is that Mark's Jesus possessed *authority* over illness/demons. This was lacking with the emperor. In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus appears to have power over unclean spirits, demons: "They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him! And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed." (Mark 1: 21-27) Not only does Jesus have *authority* over the *demons*, but they even *obey*. Mark's literary style also includes "the amazement" of all after any of Jesus' actions. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus always performs healings publicly and always among a crowd. The emperor was also portrayed as a public healer, but Mark uses the literary technique of "amazement" as emphasis to proclaim that these healings are more amazing than others performed at the time. In reading all of Mark's accounts of the miraculous healings of Jesus, read through an allegorical perspective, another prevailing technique in writing in antiquity, the worldview that Jesus was offering could be interpreted as overriding the existing Roman imperialistic government, represented through the symbols of disease and demons. In the following three examples, each of these techniques can be applied.

The account in Mark 1:1-34 suggests that the demons also obeyed Jesus, and that they *knew* Jesus prior to this lifetime. This adds another interesting element. Perhaps Mark was also suggesting that Jesus as a pre-existent being, was also from the beginning of time; the theme that was suggested with Augustus and the legitimation of the emperor as a father who also existed from the beginning of time. “That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” (Mark 1:31-34)

This story and the story about healing of the leper in Mark 1:40-45, also had religious/political overtones, indicating an attempt to de-value, or overrule suppression by Roman imperialism. I would suggest that these stories also reflect a movement from a power that is based corporately; i.e. Roman authority, to a power that is owned by the community of believers. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Leviticus 13-14, *lepers* were persons suffering from skin lesions of any sort, as channel of “unclean” contamination for individuals. (Coogan. 60, New Testament) In this story, the leper challenges Jesus to make him clean, and Jesus responds, overriding the authority of the elaborate institutionalized procedures proscribed in the biblical law that were also very costly. Was this also being applied in describing this writer’s existence under the domination and subversive power of Roman imperialism?

In reading the story allegorically about the woman who was healed from hemorrhages, this also becomes evident. “Now there was a woman who had been

suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years....She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:25-30)

Although the number twelve is used numerously throughout the New Testament, I believe Mark may be using it both symbolically and also for exaggeration. The same can be applied in his overuse of the word *immediately*. More importantly, I'm suggesting that Mark's motivation for this story and the others is a symbolic story, or metaphor, represented by her disease as a symbol of her suppression and ignorance regarding the power of Roman authority holds over her life. Jesus, then, becomes the symbol of healing through the action of breaking from what may have been for her an oppressive tradition and welcoming of a new worldview; which is empowering the community of believers.

Chapter Seven

Signs and Wonders

In a cosmological world, healings by holy men, divine heroes or by those in authority, such as the emperors, were always confirmed through signs, portents or wonders. These were believed to be manifested from the divine world into the human world. Signs and portents were used to establish truth, which assured the believers that any event visited by a sign or portent could be relied upon as one *from the gods*. Furthermore, the *oikoumene* was also shaped by a readiness to believe; which insisted that any event that was *from the gods* should be accompanied by a sign, portent or wonder.

By the early part of the Flavian dynasty this became quite apparent throughout the *oikoumene*. Writers were describing a world that was dominated by signs from the gods, indicating that they were involved in the lives of human beings. This became even more apparent by the time of Vespasian. As a result of the numerous signs and portents appearing throughout the cosmos, Vespasian marked the beginning of an emperor being proclaimed as divinity *during his* lifetime. This was a change from the previous emperors who had previously only received divine honors posthumously. The historian Tacitus, writing in the early part of the second century, told that “the secrets of Fate and the fact that the throne was predestined for Vespasian and his children by signs and oracles (*ostentis ac responses*)” (Tacitus, *Histories*, I, 10.) Although Vespasian insisted that he

was not divinely appointed as emperor, since he lacked the ancestry that legitimated him to a line of the *Divi*, his local community understood him as *civilis*, or man, while in the provinces he received divine honors. However, later, upon considering the omens, Vespasian felt compelled to accept his position as a type of divine “calling,” one that confirmed him as divinely appointed as ruler and had also been endowed with power from heaven. (Scott, 2) Tacitus also reported that when Vespasian’s supporters were encouraging him to accept the position of emperor, they referred to the prophesies of the soothsayers and the movement of the stars (Tacitus, *Histories. Ii*, 78) The historian Josephus also appears to have relied on signs: “Signs which were many and had been everywhere foreshadowed his ascension to the throne.” (B.I. iv, 623;cf.iii) In addition, signs also indicated that Vespasian possessed *numen*, a divine power that could be felt by animals and inanimate objects. (Scott, 3)

Numerous stories that included signs and wonders were told confirming the divinity of Vespasian. For example, in one of these stories, an oxen shook off its yoke while plowing, burst into Vespasian’s dining room, and disturbed a meal that Vespasian was sharing with his servants. The servants then fled from the room in fear of their lives, only for the oxen to kneel at the foot of the emperor, “bowing his head and worshipping him.” (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 5,4: Dio, lxxv, i,2.) Kenneth Scott and Krauss both agree that this myth symbolizes the state shaking off the yoke of the tyrant and submitting to a more considerate master.” (Scott, 4)

Another story circulating at this time, told about an event that took place in the year 69 CE. Here, it was reported that a statue of Julius Caesar on the Island of Tiber

appeared to turn from facing west to east, indication that the new ruler, Vespasian would come from the east. (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 5, 6; Tac. *Hist.* I, 86) To confirm this portent, two suns appeared – a weak sun in the west and a sun that shone with brilliance in the east. (Dio, lxiv, 8,i) Perhaps this represented the fall of Vitellus and the rise of Vespasian. Cassius Dio also reported that a comet (a sign, or portent indicating the death of a ruler) and two eclipses of the moon predicted the downfall and the rapid succession of Otho and Vitellius. (Scott, 7)

In a cosmological understanding of the world, reliance on signs and wonders prevailed in the minds of the members and everything in the world could be understood as a divine sign. This theme also appeared in all three of the Synoptic gospels. Signs and wonders served to prove that a connection existed between the emperor and the gods. Furthermore, signs and wonders also confirmed that a special relationship existed between Jesus and the God of Israel. In Mark's gospel, we learn that while visiting Jesus at the Mount of Olives the disciples asked Jesus to show them a sign: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (13:4) The gospel of Mark also reveals how the believers relied on signs and wonders when legitimating Jesus as the Christ. They also mirrored the same belief shared within the Roman *oikomena* in defining the emperor in terms of divine power. In this gospel, beginning in Chapter 1: 10-11 when Jesus was baptized, "just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Here, again, the father/son relationship is validated and confirmed.

Prophecy is another category that the gospel writers rely upon in legitimating Jesus as the *Son of God*; but it will be signs and wonders that confirm the presence of God in their predictions. In other words, prophecy was understood in terms of signs and wonders. In Mark 13, Jesus discussed with his disciples the probability of false prophets who would appear in the future. He also warned them that they would proclaim that they were saviors. However, even though Jesus warns them about the evils of others using signs and wonder, (Mark 13:22-27) he, himself, also depends upon them when he warn his followers about the future. “False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything. But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”(13: 22-27)

Jesus also appears to rely on signs and wonders in Mark 14 when we are told that Jesus foretold Peter denying knowing Jesus. “While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “this man is one of them.” But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of

them; for you are a Galilean.” But he began to curse, and swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.” (Mark 14:72)

Several signs also appear at the crucifixion scene. In Mark 15:33 we learn that “when it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.” Upon his death, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” I would suggest that this may be an addition by Mark, and borrowed from Exodus 26:33 (the curtain for the Tent of Meeting, not the Temple) to be used in the drama of the story. Right after this we learn that it was a Roman centurion who declared that “Truly this man was God’s Son!” This should indicate and reveal Mark’s belief and motivation for writing this account and should not be taken literally. Here, however, is another indication of what we have seen earlier, where the human/god, the theos/soter is returned to the Heaven. “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into the heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the *good news* everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.” (Mark 16:20)

The way that the Jewish god revealed this sign comes not in the form of an image, but in a dream. In the pagan world, making contact with the gods often occurred while sleeping. For centuries prior to our period, learned men chronicled reports of the gods visiting them in their dreams. Mac Mullen suggests that the pagans “introduced an extraordinary variety of gods and goddesses spread broadcast over all provinces,

acknowledged typically in the form, “To Such-and Such, from having seen,” or “having been advised” or “commanded,” or “by order” or “in a dream.” (MacMullen, 60) The pagan philosopher, Celcus, is quoted, that someone in a certain condition, dreaming or out of his own wish, may have an experience, an illusory vision that carries some message to him, as has happened to tens of thousands.” (MacMullen, 61) Visits by the gods, then, through dreams, were a well-accepted belief throughout antiquity.

Miraculous signs in dreams also appear in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth. In the beginning chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, the writer of this gospel legitimates Jesus as the *Son of God* through signs and wonders. Matthew 1:20-25 reports that “But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord through the prophet had spoken: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

Additional signs appear as the account in Matthew, where we also learn that King Herod’s perception was shaped by signs. In the second chapter of Matthew’s gospel, we find King Herod questioning the chief priests and scribes about Jesus. “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” For we observed his star at its rising, and have come

to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priest and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “in Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet.then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.” (Matthew 2:2-9) Finally, in Matt. 2: 12 when they had “been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

In Mark 4:37-41, miraculous signs also appear in nature: “a violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!” The wind ceased and there was great calm.” (Mark 4:37-41) “Despite the didactic purpose, it is one of the few miracles of Jesus that closely resemble magical action, worthy of the tales of the Hellenistic miracle workers.

Signs and wonders were also confirming the claims being made regarding the divinity of the emperor by the writers of “histories.” As we have already noted, the language used throughout these writings endorsed a belief in the emperor as the manifestation of a sovereign father/god, whose concern was for the welfare of the people. Like the writers of the gospels, those writing about the emperor were also proclaiming that as divinities, the emperors also, could perform miracles that were also being confirmed through signs and wonders *from the gods*. This became especially apparent during the Flavian period and more specifically with the emperor Vespasian. This

emperor was understood as one who had power over the natural world; just as the gospel writers were claiming about Jesus. For instance, Suetonius and Dio reported that a dog, a symbolic sign of sovereignty, brought Vespasian the hand of a human being. The human hand also symbolized sacredness in Roman religion) Later, these writers told a story about an ox that broke out of its yoke, so it could fall (in worship) at the feet of the emperor Vespasian (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 54.4: Dio, 65.1.2-3) The poet, Martial wrote about an elephant who adored Titus, because “it discerns our god.” (Martial, no.20) Additionally, Martial (no. 12) tell of a *power* over the *numen* of wild beasts, (no. 28) over the sea (no. 33) and over hounds. (33)

Domitian was also more powerful than nature: “his *numen* causes eagles and lions to show mercy to their prey; causes leopards, stags, bears, boars, elephants, and bison to perform.” Martial (EPIG. I.6; I.14; I.24, I.104) In Martial’s *Epigrams* (EPIG. IX. 31) a goose sacrifices itself to provide Domitian a favorable omen during the time of the Sarmatian war. It was also reported that Domitian reflected “immortal brightness.” (SILV. I. 1.77) Furthermore, “he outshines the constellations and the morning star and makes the temples more radiant, the altar flames burn brighter, winter becomes warmer, and people reflect his light.” (SILV. IV. 1.3-4, 23-27)

“Once the new dynasty was firmly established there was no further need of heavenly signs, and, logically enough prodigies which in such profusion attended the rise of the Flavian dynasty ceased abruptly.” (Scott, 189) However, Kenneth Scott has also suggested that as an effective means of propaganda, signs and wonders do appear again in describing the events surrounding the death of Domitian. Since he was hated only by

the Senate, and loved by the ordinary citizens and provincials, accounts of divine disfavor over the assassination of the emperor would have to be revealed to the masses so they would not believe that it had been a result of Fate. Signs through dreams were recorded in Suetonius, *Domitian*, 23. that tell about a dream, where Domitian saw a golden lump on his back, a symbolic sign that the state would be happier after his death. (Scott, 190) Elsewhere, reports of dreams foretold how Domitian's mother, the goddess Minerva, abandoned him. In another dream, the philosopher, Rusticus whom he had sentenced to death, returned to him in a dream and threatened him with a sword. (Dio, lxvii, 16) Other signs occurred concerning Domitian, indicating that the gods were not pleased with the events surrounding his suicide. From Suetonius, we learn that "upon his death, lightning struck the temple of *Capitoline Jupiter*, the temple of the *gens Flavia*, and Domitian's bedroom in the imperial palace." (Suetonius, *Domitian*, 15)

In addition, Suetonius reported that by the end of the Flavian dynasty, signs of disaster were numerous. In one, the tree that symbolized the Flavian family and the elevation of Vespasian as divinity fell down; perhaps symbolizing the end of a dynasty. During this same time, in "a violent storm, the inscription from Domitian's triumphal statue was torn off and cast upon a tomb." (Suetonius, *Domitian*, 15) And, finally, Cassius Dio reported that upon the death of Domitian, the philosopher, Apollonius of Tyanna returned from the dead to attend the emperor's death. (Scott, 192)

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

In the gospel of Luke, a man from Jerusalem by the name of Simeon received a sign from the Holy Spirit. “It had been revealed to him by the Holy spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s messiah.” (Luke 2: 25-26) In this story, Simeon was guided by the spirit into the temple where he met with the new born Jesus and his parents. Upon meeting them, Simeon proclaimed, “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed....” (Luke 2:34-35)

James Malcolm Arlandson has suggested that the story in Luke 2:25-35 holds the key for the motivation behind the writing of this gospel. I would suggest, as I have attempted to show in this work, that the Synoptics can be understood within a context of dialogue of *power* between the traditional “imperial theology” ordained through the elite membership of the imperial court and the oppressed, disinherited members of the Greco-Roman *oikoumene* living in the Roman Empire – represented by the Synoptic writers. For this reason, this theory can also be applied to all of the Synoptics. The communities represented in the Synoptic gospels, through use of a symbolic language that was already in use by the imperial court in legitimating the emperor as divinity, transferred the same symbolic language in defining their hero, Jesus of Nazareth in terms of divinity.

It is important to note, that within the Greco-Roman culture of the time, the majority of the population existing under the domination of Roman “imperial theology” also relied upon an oral tradition as the form for communication. Rudolf Bultmann has presented a detailed analysis in his work *The History of Synoptic Tradition*, (Bultmann, 166-179) where he claimed that members living in the culture of the Empire during the two periods discussed in this work *expected* to hear and *relied upon* certain terms and phrases when legitimating a special member of the culture as divine hero- figures. In other words, the themes in Greek mythology, which were fundamental in the structuring of the cosmological worldview, which also gave meaning to their lives were expected to be heard in an oral tradition. Terms and phrases such as *son of god*, *savior* and *father* were also expected and relied upon in the legitimating process in the oral tradition. As writers transferred the tradition into written form, these same symbols were expected to appear, and were also relied upon. Moreover, in applying Peter Berger’s theory, the culture had “forgotten” why these terms and phrases were important or for what purpose they served in the first place. Said differently, it was *traditional* for these sayings and themes to appear in writings from this time.

The gospel writers and the writers for the imperial court were in a situation where each was attempting to legitimate their hero-figure in terms of *power*. One already controlled the worldview supported by “imperial theology;” and the other was in the process of breaking tradition by removing *power* from the establishment of the elite and placing it among the community of believers. As S.F. Price has suggested, the New Testament Synoptics provide a glimpse into the world of a people living in a culture that

was having a problem making sense of an “otherwise incomprehensible intrusion of authority in their world.” (Price. 247)

Bibliography

- Arlandson, James Malcolm, *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997.
- Batey, Richard A., *Jesus & the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991.
- Berger, Peter L., *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Bultmann, Rudolf, *The History of Synoptic Tradition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963.
- Carter, Warren, "Contested Claims: Roman Imperial Theology and Matthew's Gospel," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 29 Summer, 1999.
- Collins, Adela Yarbro, "The Worship of Jesus and the Imperial Cult," *Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*: Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999.
- Coogan, Michael D., ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Third Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Edwards, Douglas R., *Religion and Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Erhman, Bart, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Fears, J.R. 1981a. *The Cult of Jupiter and Roman Imperial Ideology*. Pp. 3-141 in ANRW 11.17.1, ed. H. Temporini & W. Haase. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Fears, J.R. 1981b. *The Cult of Virtues and Roman Imperial Ideology*. Pp. 827-95-48 in ANRW II.17.2, ed. H. Temporini & W. Haase, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Gradel, Ittai, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.
- Grant, Michael, *Roman Myths*. United States of America: Dorset Press, 1984.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999.
- Lenski, G.E., *Power and Prestige: A Theory of Social Stratification*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966.

MacDonald, Dennis R., *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

MacMullen, Ramsay, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*. New Haven: Yale University, 1981.

Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Scott, Kenneth, *The Imperial Court Under the Flavians*. Stuttgart-Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1936.

von Gaertringen, Hiller, *Inschriften von Priene*, Berlin: G. Reimer, 1906, reprinted 1968.

Weinstock, Stefan: *Divus Julius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient> (12/04/03)