This will be my last post about the worship of the Roman emperor as a god. I have been trying to make several major points in this thread. So let me begin by summarizing them:

- The reason worshiping the man who ruled the empire would not have seemed bizarre to ancient people was that there was not thought to be an enormous chasm between the divine and human realms (as there is for most people today). There were some gods who were beyond our imagination, and others that were far less powerful – but still more powerful than the guy living next door to you, by an amazing margin. So too, there were some humans who were SO powerful (or smart or beautiful) that they seemed to be more than human.

- The gods generally were worshiped because they could provide things for humans that humans could not provide for themselves. Worship was a way to secure divine benefits – that is, it was a way to be given access to divine power when human strength was not enough to make life livable or enjoyable.

- Gods could provide health, prosperity, victory in war, and so on. And so Gods were called “Savior” “Benefactor” “Lord” and so on.

- The emperor too was amazingly powerful, and could bring deliverance from foreign aggression, the conditions for wealth and prosperity, and so on. And so he too could be called Savior, Benefactor, and Lord.

- It was a very small step, then, to identify the emperor as a kind of God. Not as the greatest god – say Zeus or Jupiter – but as one of the divine beings who was providing assistance to people who could not always help themselves.

Now I want to make a few additional points about how unevenly distributed the worship of the emperor was. As it turns out, he was not worshiped everywhere in the empire, or in the same way, and one question historians have asked is why that is. One question that has perennially interested historians of ancient religion is...

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One question that has perennially interested historians of ancient religion is whether the *living* emperor (the guy there in Rome now, as we speak) was adored as a god, or if only the *deceased* emperors who had ascended to heaven (and thus been “divinized”) were the gods, and the living emperor was not, at this point (though he might have an element of the divine about him).

It is usually thought that the emperors were given cultic status, as divine beings, during their *lifetimes* in the Eastern provinces of the empire, but not in Rome itself and in the western, Latin-speaking part of the empire. In those western places (as well as the East) the emperor was recognized and treated as God only after his death and divinization.

The question is why a living emperor would be worshiped in the East but not so much in the West. There are two theories that I find particularly attractive. The first is that the Greek-speaking East had a long history of revering mighty generals and rulers as divine, but the West did not, so these traditions came to be applied to the emperor once there was an emperor for them to be applied to (i.e., with the first emperor, Caesar Augustus). The second is that Romans wanted those people subject to them to revere the emperor as God as a kind of political leverage to control the subject people. So Roman citizens, living in Rome (and to a lesser extent the western parts of the empire) were not expected to worship the living emperor, but those living elsewhere, especially in the East, were.
Whatever the emperor's status while living, the actual divinization – the emperor's ascent to heaven to dwell with and be with and be one of the gods – happened at death. The decision of whether this had happened to an emperor was made by a vote of the Roman senate. It is not that the senate was *making* the emperor a god. Instead, it was *recognizing* that he had been made a god. As you might suspect, they voted these honors only for the “good” emperors. The awful emperors – e.g., Caligula, or Nero – were decidedly not divinized.

The older view of scholarship, which is receiving a bit of a revival in some places, is that emperor worship generally was promoted by the central authorities in Rome, who very much wanted people in the provinces to worship the living emperor as a god. (Note: until 212 CE, most people living in the provinces were not “citizens” of Rome with privileges of citizenship; they were subject peoples.) The reason should be obvious: you can imagine rebelling against a political ruler you don’t like. But are you likely to rebel against a *god*?

More recent scholars have more widely insisted that the imperial cult was not imposed by the Roman government itself, but that it was almost always pursued on local initiative in the provinces. The idea, in this case, is that local aristocrats would sponsor the building of temples and the worship of the emperors as a way of promoting their own status. They, the local elite, had close ties with the *emperor himself*. In a world that stressed the importance of honor and status, the imperial cult provided an obvious opportunity for the very wealthy to be seen as connected with the ultimate power of the empire. That, for them, was a very good thing.

In short, it may seem to us today to be very strange indeed that anyone would worship a human being (though even today people, in a sense, revere some humans more than others – think major athletes and major monarchs). After all, these people were human with human needs, bodily functions, and all the rest, so it was clear they were human, right? Yes, that too was right. But some humans are far superior to the rest of us, so much so that their status and power cannot be accounted for except by saying they are more closely connected to the divine realm that everyone else, that in some sense they are not only human but also divine.