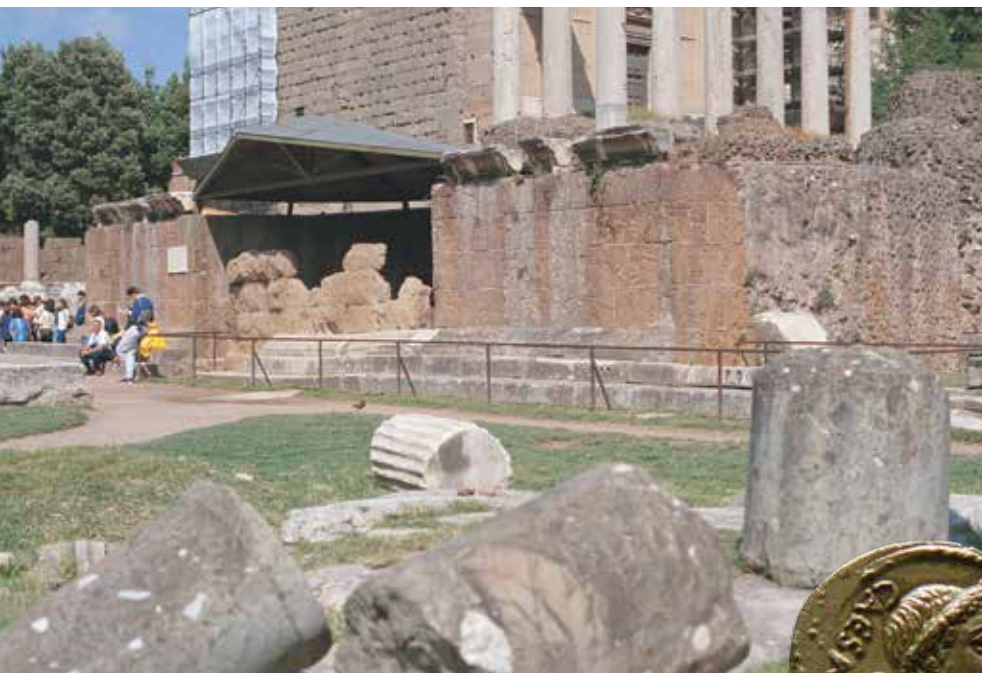
A full-length marble statue of the Roman Emperor Augustus, standing in a classical pose with a draped garment. The statue is set against a dark, textured background.

CHRISTIANITY IN AN AGE OF EMPEROR WORSHIP

Full statue of
Caesar Augustus,
who ruled 31
B.C.–A.D. 14.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/
LOUVRE MUSEUM (35/7/14)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (197/13/5)

Left: Located in the Roman Forum, altar of Julius Caesar.

to appear on coins.

Lower left: Silver denarius of Julius Caesar. He was the first living Roman ruler who allowed his image

Below: Small incense altar, the type families would use in their homes. Romans often burned incense to honor the deified emperor.

By Steve W. Lemke

HOW WAS AN EARLY believer to live out the Christian life in an age of emperor worship? As a key leader in the Jerusalem church and an eyewitness to Christ’s sufferings, Simon Peter served in a church that experienced significant persecution. Peter addressed the subject of persecution of Christians in every chapter of his first epistle, urging his fellow believers not to be surprised when they experienced a “fiery ordeal...as if something unusual were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:11-12).¹ Writing to persons who had struggled “in various trials” and “refined by fire” (1:6,7), Peter urged believers to stand firm in their faith in the midst of suffering (5:9-10). Peter described Rome symbolically as “Babylon” (v. 13), comparing the Christians’ role in the Roman Empire to Jews in their Babylonian captivity. He addressed the epistle to the *diaspora* (1:1), the Christians scattered around the Roman world by persecution

(Acts 8:1), just as the Jews had been scattered in their Babylonian captivity. Peter already knew he would face martyrdom (John 21:18-19). Yet, despite the suffering and persecution, Peter instructed the church to “submit” to the Roman officials (1 Pet. 2:13-14) and even to “honor the Emperor” (v. 17).

Origin

Roman emperor worship began with the worship of Roman Caesars such as Julius Caesar (49-44 B.C.) and Caesar Augustus (31 B.C.–14 A.D.). By the time of the early church, an imperial cult had developed which instituted regular emperor worship. Although most Roman emperors did not claim to be divine during their own lifetimes, their successors often deified them, giving them new names.

When the Romans claimed Caesars were gods, clearly they did not mean a monotheistic Creator God as Scripture described. Greeks and Romans believed in multiple

gods. These gods possessed super-human powers and yet could be fallible, sometimes acting in immoral or petulant ways.

At the same time, the Romans used language that clearly revered Caesars as gods. The imperial cult viewed paying the ruler tribute as more than a patriotic gesture.

Romans believed Caesars possessed a divine eternal spirit called a “genius” or “fortune” residing in them. Roman literature sometimes described Caesars as deified noble ideas or virtues such as peace, victory, fidelity, or fertility, and ascribed titles to them normally associated with deities such as “lord,” “savior,” “founder,” “father,” “provider,” “providence,” “master,” “benefactor,” and “god.”

Romans understood the Caesars to represent the gods as



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/27/73)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (20/9/13)

a manifestation or incarnation of divine presence on earth. Emperors supposedly reigned over heaven and earth, thereby administering divine province, providing peace on earth and ushering in a golden age. Roman society viewed the Caesars as divinely appointed saviors who brought peace and order to life. The imperial cult thus sought with zeal to “evangelize” cities with the good news of the emperor’s divinity.

In Daily Life

The imperial cult guided the practice of emperor worship throughout the Roman Empire. Archeologists have found at least 175 temples and shrines dedicated to emperor worship in Asia Minor alone (present-day Turkey). Priests in these temples praised the emperor in speech, in hymns, and in enacted dramas that glorified the emperor’s

accomplishments. Further, they worshiped statues depicting the emperor. Lighting lamps and candles and burning incense further enhanced the worship experience. Beyond the temples, Caesar worship took place in shrines or altars in the homes of individuals. The imperial cult also sponsored festivals as civic events in which the entire community participated, especially on the emperor’s birthday.

Roman society provided constant reminders of emperor worship. The law required anyone desiring to become a soldier, participate as an athlete in a competition, or become a member of an artisan guild, to offer incense to Caesar. Coins and statues in public artwork bore images of the deified Caesars, often representing the Caesars as gods such as Apollo, Jupiter, Hercules, or Zeus. Roman

Above: Altar of Peace honors Caesar Augustus. Built in Rome in 9 B.C., this monument commemorates Caesar Augustus’s victories in Spain and Gaul, resulting in

a sustained era of peace for the Roman Empire. Reliefs on three sides show the emperor, senators, and their families in procession to the altar’s dedication.

literature also depicted the Caesars as gods. Indeed, symbols of emperor worship permeated Roman society.

Christian Response

Although Christians initially faced persecution from Jews such as Saul (Acts 4-9; Phil. 3:4-6), the Jews lacked authority to imprison or execute anyone without the permission of Roman officials (Matt. 26-27; Acts 22-28). Sometimes the Romans did so to placate Jewish mobs in order to maintain peace and order. The Jews, however, depicted Christians

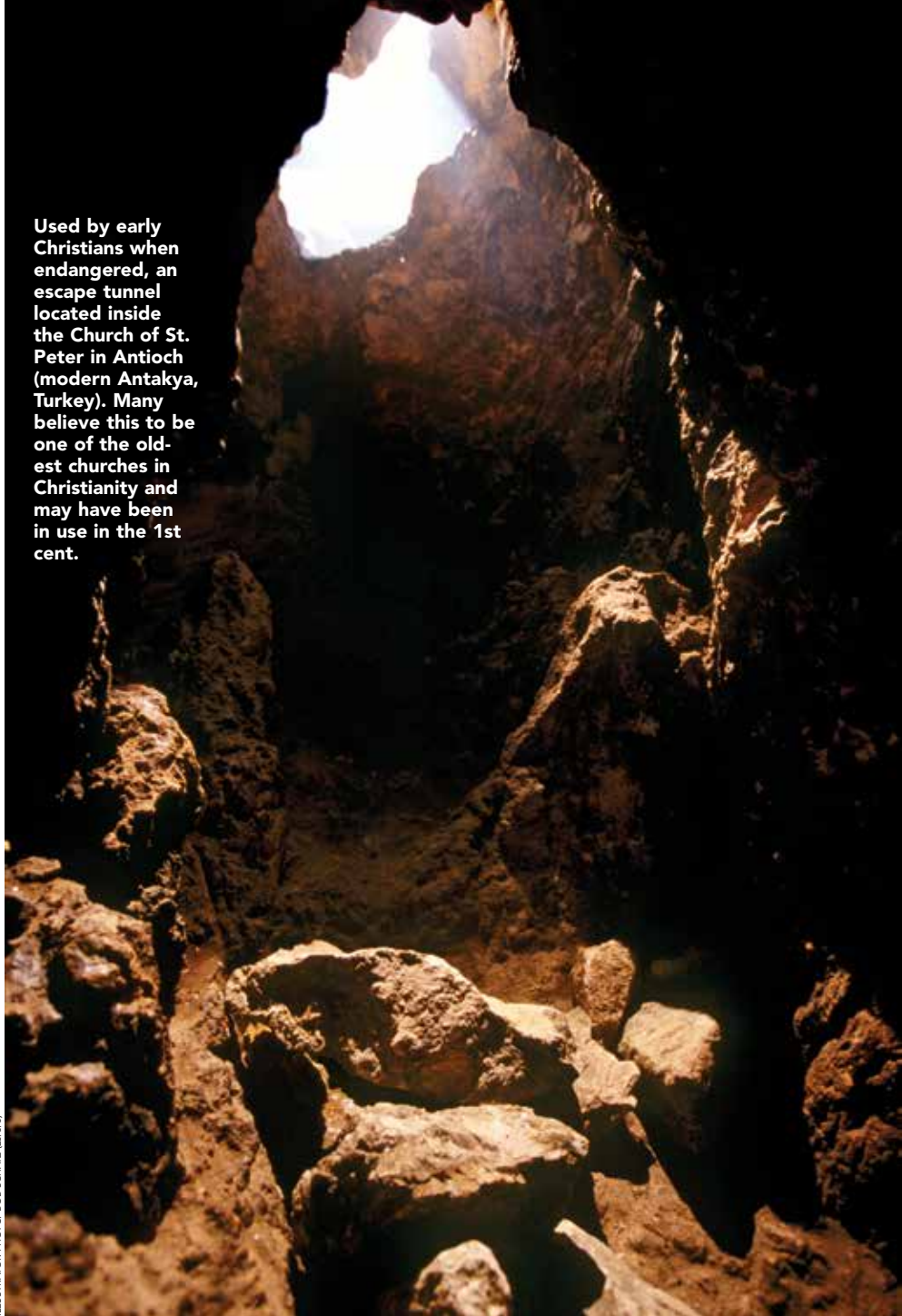
as being anti-Roman because they refused to pay homage to Caesar. While the Romans allowed Judaism to count as a *religio licita* (legal religion), when Christianity emerged out of Judaism, the Romans saw it as an illicit cult, eligible for persecution. Christians therefore experienced persecution from the Romans for at least two centuries, primarily because the believers rejected emperor worship.

Christians scattered throughout the empire had occasion for daily contact with emperor worship through temples, statues, coins, civic events, and loyalty tests. Local Roman authorities compelled persons to prove their loyalty to Rome by paying homage to Caesar and other Roman gods. The Romans often pressured believers to deny Christ as Lord and declare Caesar as Lord. Failure to do so was considered treasonous.²

The required emperor worship took many forms. Roman officials ordered many Christians to offer incense to the gods, to swear an oath by the Caesar's "fortune" or "genius" spirit, or to offer a sacrifice before a statue of the emperor for the emperor's health and safety. Those who performed these loyalty tests received a *libellus*, a certificate confirming that these duties had been performed.

To the Romans, loyalty tests proved one's devotion to Caesar and the empire. Sharing a common allegiance to Caesar ensured unity. Romans believed Caesar and the gods preserved the empire's security, so they regarded those who did not offer the "due honors" to the emperor as potential subversives who could rend the fabric of national unity. Furthermore, since Christians refused to worship Roman gods, many Romans assumed they were atheists.³

Used by early Christians when endangered, an escape tunnel located inside the Church of St. Peter in Antioch (modern Antakya, Turkey). Many believe this to be one of the oldest churches in Christianity and may have been in use in the 1st cent.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO © BOB SCHATZ (2/2/18)

Paying tribute or offering incense to Caesar thus meant more than an act of civic loyalty; it required a religious commitment.

Most Christians distinguished between honoring and worshipping Caesar. Christian teachings encouraged honoring, paying tribute, or praying for the emperor's health and safety (Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). To deny Christ and proclaim "Caesar is Lord," however, denied the central claim of Christianity. Offering

sacrifices to Caesar or pagan idols violated the first three of the Ten Commandments. Some Christians viewed the Caesar's "fortune" or "genius" to be a demonic spirit, and therefore rejected the demand to swear an oath by it. Early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Athenagoras regarded the Roman emperors and other magistrates as being enslaved to demonic powers. The church normally condemned Christians who compromised by paying homage

to Caesar or bribing Roman officials to receive their *libellus*. The “Nicolaitans” condemned in the letters to the churches in Revelation (Rev. 2:6,15) evidently committed just such a cultural compromise.

Thousands of devout Christians suffered incredible persecution at the hands of the Romans in the first three centuries after Christ because they refused to compromise their commitment to Christ by worshiping Caesar. Christians were falsely accused of atheism (for not worshiping the emperor as a god); incest (since married couples were also “brothers” and sisters” in Christ); and cannibalism (for taking communion elements, which represented Christ’s body and blood). Persecuting believers took many forms: imprisonment, forced labor, being attacked by mobs, their cemeteries vandalized, their property confiscated or destroyed, and horrific treatment of Christian women and children.

Below: Marble statue of Emperor Hadrian (ruled A.D. 117-138); from Cyrene in northern Africa. Two of the largest temples honoring Hadrian were in Smyrna and Ephesus. Atypically, the statue depicts Hadrian wearing Greek civilian clothing.

Roman authorities executed many believers by burning them at the stake, beheading, or impaling them. Others were thrown to wild beasts or forced to serve as gladiators for the entertainment of Roman crowds. The persecution continued for a couple of centu-

Below: Roman officer who won Corinth, Aktia, and other sporting games in Neapolis.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ/ ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM IN ISTHMA (11/10/10)

ries; it became even worse in more severe waves of persecution. The Roman persecution continued until A.D. 311, when Emperor Galerius (r. 293–311) issued on his deathbed the Edict of Toleration, which permitted Christians the freedom to worship.⁴

Despite horrific persecution by the Roman officials, Peter advised Christians to acknowledge the due authority given these Roman emperors. Even though Christians are “strangers and temporary residents” in their earthly kingdom (1 Pet. 2:11), Peter instructed believers to “submit to every human authority because of the Lord, whether to the Emperor as the supreme authority or to governors as those sent out by him to punish those who do what is evil and to praise those who do what is good” (vv. 13-14). Peter even called upon believers to “honor the Emperor” (v. 17). To honor, though, is not the same as to worship. Peter knew that emperors were mortal and not gods. He also knew the only One truly worthy of worship: “Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His great mercy, He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1:3). 🇆

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
 2. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 9.
 3. Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2004), 195.
 4. “Edict of Toleration” in Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), 15.

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