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**Review of divine honours for the Caesars: The first Christian's responses.  
By Bruce W. Winter**

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## REVIEW

*Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians' Responses.* By Bruce W. Winter. Pp. x+338. Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015. ISBN 978 0 8028 7257 9. Paper £23.99/\$35.

AFTER a short introduction (pp. 1–22), Winter makes his case in two steps. In the first part of the book (pp. 34–123), he presents historical evidence on divine honours for Roman emperors in the first century. Then, in the second part (pp. 127–306), there follows an analysis of the ‘first Christians’ responses’ to such phenomena. With regard to the first part, Winter makes a good case in chapters 1–4 for imperial cults as being widespread and permeating the public sphere. In many cities, citizens would have been expected to demonstrate their loyalty by participating in cultic events in honour of the emperor. With regard to the Jews, Winter concludes in chapter 5 that, on the one hand, their traditional customs were officially recognized by the Romans so that they did not have to participate in imperial cults directly, while, on the other hand, they managed to express their loyalty to the emperor by integrating him in their own cultic system.

Many of Winter’s theses put forward in the second part have already been published previously. Still, it is helpful to have them collected together and updated to a certain extent in dialogue with more recent scholarship (e.g. ch. 9 on Galatians). Further, it is noteworthy that actual Christian ‘responses’ are not as prominent in the second part of the book as one might think. For example, chapter 6, which deals with the situation in Athens at the time when Paul visited it, would seem to fit at least as well into Part I. The only mention of Christian responses to these cults is made in reference to Paul’s converts mentioned in Acts 17:34: they would have been under social pressure to participate in the cult but not able to do so due to the theological notions Paul put forward in his speech. While certainly an interesting thought experiment, no *actual* responses are in view there yet. The different options they had and the different consequences associated with these decisions are then explicated in the chapters that follow: Christians could attempt to be regarded as Jews in order to be exempted from emperor worship (as in Galatia; ch. 9), the official perception might be the same (as in the case of the Gallio ruling; ch. 5), Christians might want to

participate in imperial cults though they would not have been required to do so as 'Jews' (as in Corinth; ch. 8), or it could also be the case that the Christians avoided emperor worship and were consequently persecuted (as was the case with regard to the Thessalonians, and the readers of Hebrews and Revelation).

In the first part of the book (and also in chs. 6 and 7), Winter makes a strong case for the assumption of a potential clash between the early Christian world-view and dominating practices in their cities. It is indeed very likely that the first Christians were confronted with different expressions of emperor worship and that they would have been challenged by these encounters. Still, it remains unclear to what extent the all-encompassing rhetoric reflected in official inscriptions necessarily reflected everyday realities.

Many of the theses put forward in the rest of the book will no doubt remain controversial given the fact that many of the details of Winter's arguments might raise scepticism (e.g. the claim that in 1 Cor. 8:9 *ἐξουσία* should be understood in such a civic sense and refers to the 'right' of some Corinthians to participate in cultic activities). However, another striking feature of the second part of *Divine Honours* is even more notable. It is more about the *preconditions* or *consequences* of Christian reactions to Empire than about these actual responses. Further, where Winter does address these 'responses' themselves, he does so in rather broad categories (summarized above) and almost exclusively on the level of the actions of the Christians in the communities behind the texts. By contrast, the question of how this clash of world-views was dealt with by writers like Paul and how this influenced the texts we are dealing with, is not very important to Winter's project. In this regard, Winter differs markedly from other recent contributions in New Testament studies, in particular in relation to Paul. Winter does not pick up these discussions (and the associated scholars, such as N. Elliott, N. T. Wright, and J. M. G. Barclay) and, hence, he does not comment on the key concepts (e.g. J. Scott's 'hidden transcripts' or R. B. Hays's 'echoes') and passages (e.g. Rom. 1:3-4; Phil. 2:6-11) associated with this discussion. The reason for this probably is that Winter sets out to answer a very specific question (very first sentence, p. ix: 'Why were imperial cultic activities not a problem for the first Christians?'). Further, his approach to read the New Testament texts against the background of the accumulation of background data (following E. A. Judge; cf. pp. ix-x) stands in a certain tension with a predominant interest in methodological questions.

While the independent character of Winter's approach contributes to the enthralling nature of his work, this also inevitably makes it difficult to bring Winter's work into direct conversation with other recent contributions. Although it is certainly justifiable to focus on the specific question of how Christians reacted to social pressure to participate in emperor worship, this approach is at least associated with the danger of missing important aspects of what could certainly also be designated as early Christian 'responses' to divine honours for the Roman emperors. That Winter might be missing important facets of this complex interaction with Roman ideology is also reflected in his basic assumption that the fact that the Jewish roots of Christianity were incompatible with imperial cults was an 'unhappy coincidence' for the first Christians (p. 48). The notion that the Christians perceived many expressions of imperial ideology as an attack on their world-view in the sense that Christ's superiority was primary is indeed likely. However, this can hardly explain the use of technical Roman terms and such *lexemes* for which unprovocative alternatives existed. While Winter rightly rejects Roman derivation of christological titles, he does not seem to recognize that this still leaves room for a much more sophisticated engagement with Roman ideology than he allows for. When, to give only one example, Paul explicitly invokes the Roman emperor by means of a carefully crafted metaphor of the Roman triumph in 2 Cor. 2:14, this can hardly be coincidental but requires an explanation that presupposes a more conscious interaction with competing notions in the Roman sphere. Thus, New Testament scholars will do well to heed Winter's basic conclusion that pressure to participate in imperial cults was a constant sociological factor for the first Christians, while also remaining open towards other paradigms for understanding the interactions of the first Christians with the Roman Empire that display different emphases—thus shedding more light on specific texts produced by them.

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