

What was Augustus Caesar's impact on biblical history?

Augustus Caesar's birth name was Gaius Octavius. He was the nephew, adopted son, and hand-picked successor to Julius Caesar. Upon Julius' death, Octavian (as he was then called) had to fight to consolidate control, but, when he finally secured his position as the first Roman emperor, he reigned the longest of any of the Caesars in Julius' line, from 63 BC to AD 14. He received the name Augustus ("Venerable") in 27 BC.

Caesar Augustus is only mentioned once in the New Testament, at the beginning of the well-known Christmas story recorded in Luke 2: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (verse 1). As a result of this decree, Joseph had to return to his ancestral home, Bethlehem, and he took with him Mary, who was already expecting the Baby Jesus. While they were there in Bethlehem, Jesus was born, as the prophet Micah had foretold: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2).

The census that forced Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem was Augustus Caesar's most obvious impact on biblical history; however, there are other facts concerning Caesar Augustus that would have been meaningful to first-century readers of the Gospels.

Octavian was given the name Augustus, which means "great" or "venerable" or "worthy of reverence," which is an insinuation that he was worthy of worship. In 42 BC, the Senate formally deified Julius Caesar as *divus Iulius* ("the divine Julius"). This led to his adopted son, Octavian, being known as *divi filius* ("son of the god"), a title that Augustus Caesar embraced. Coins issued by Augustus featured Caesar's image and

inscriptions such as “Divine Caesar and Son of God.” An Egyptian inscription calls Augustus Caesar a star “shining with the brilliance of the Great Heavenly Savior.” In 17 BC an uncommon star did appear in the heavens; Augustus commanded a celebration, and Virgil pronounced, “The turning point of the ages has come.” During Augustus’ reign, emperor worship exploded, especially in Asia Minor, which later became a hotbed for persecution of Christians. (Asia Minor was the area Paul covered in his first two missionary journeys as well as the location of the seven churches receiving letters in Revelation.)

From what we know of Augustus and the worship that was paid to him, it is clear that Luke is telling the story of Jesus in such a way that Christ is seen as the true possessor of the titles claimed by Augustus. It is not Augustus who is Savior and Lord, but “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). It is not Augustus, but Jesus who is the Son of God (Luke 1:32). And it is not in Augustus that the turning point of the ages has come, but in Jesus Christ, who ushers in the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

The Roman creed stated, “Caesar is Lord,” but the Christian only recognizes Jesus as Lord. Because of their longstanding history of monotheism, Jews were granted an exemption from the required emperor worship. As long as Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism, Christians were also exempt from being forced to worship the Roman emperor. But as Jews began to denounce Christians and put them out of the synagogues, the Christians no longer were allowed this exception. Thus, the Roman government was the instrument of Jewish persecution in much of the New Testament. We see the first instance of this in the charges brought against Jesus Himself (Luke 23:1-2). This happened again to Paul and Silas in Thessalonica, where some unbelieving Jews stirred up the crowd by

saying, “They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus” (Acts 17:7).

Augustus Caesar died shortly after Jesus’ birth. While Augustus himself may not have claimed the prerogatives of deity, he accepted divine titles as a means of propaganda. As the Roman religion developed, emperor worship became a patriotic duty. The New Testament refutes Roman religion at every turn, proclaiming Jesus, not Caesar, as the Son of God and Lord (Mark 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1). Augustus decreed the census that was the human mechanism God used to fulfill the prophecy regarding the place of the Messiah’s birth. Augustus thought he was taking measure of the greatness of his kingdom, but, in reality, he was setting the scene for his ultimate Replacement. It was also under Augustus Caesar that the Roman peace was established, roads were built, and a common, stable culture was established so that the gospel could easily spread throughout the Roman Empire. While Augustus and the emperors after him thought they were building their own kingdom, they were simply unwitting and often unwilling actors in the building of the kingdom of God.