

1-2018

Book Review - Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World, by Larry W. Hurtado

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Recommended Citation

Brindle, Wayne, "Book Review - Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World, by Larry W. Hurtado" (2018). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 10.

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Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World. By Larry W. Hurtado. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016. xiv + 290 pp., \$29.95.

Larry Hurtado is Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. His expertise is in early Christianity and New Testament manuscripts. In this book he highlights major features of early Christianity that made it distinctive and peculiar in its Roman setting, and shows that these features, though unusual at the time, have become commonplace in the modern view of religion (pp. 6-7). Roman-era critics designated it as a perverse “superstition” and “dangerous” (p. 2). Yet no cult in the Roman Empire grew at anything like the speed of Christianity.

In chapter 1, the author surveys first-hand evidence from Jews and pagans. The evidence from Jews is that from Saul/Paul of Tarsus, an early well-known opponent of Christianity. In Galatians 1, 1 Corinthians 15, and Philippians 3, Paul spoke of himself as a violent persecutor of Christians (pp. 16-17). Hurtado believes that Paul’s “zealous anger” against Christians was provoked partly by their reverence for Jesus, their extravagant claims about Jesus, and their devotional practices relating Jesus too closely to God (p. 18). The Jewish authorities had condemned him as a false teacher, and the Christians’ claim that he had been vindicated by God through resurrection seemed outrageous to Paul (p. 19).

The second line of evidence in chapter 1 is from pagan writers. Tacitus and Suetonius wrote of Christians being “hated for their abominations” and promoters of a dangerous and wicked “superstition” (pp. 21-22). Pliny the Younger wrote to Trajan that his procedure with Christians was to give them three opportunities to recant, and then he executed them. A Christian

could recant by reciting a prayer to the Roman gods, making a supplication to an image of the emperor, and cursing Christ (p. 23). The growth of the Christian communities had led many people to abandon the worship of the Roman gods, and this was causing a severe economic impact (p. 24). That Pliny admitted he could not find the Christians guilty of any actual crime shows that Christianity required new measures to deal with it (p. 25). The odd judicial process of allowing people to absolve themselves by worshipping Roman gods and cursing Christ was a new judicial development in the Roman empire, as a specific response to Christianity (p. 26). Marcus Aurelius held a great hostility toward Christians, and saw them as dangerously at odds with Roman culture (p. 28).

Toward the end of the second century, Celsus, an eclectic platonic philosopher, wrote a full-scale critique of Christianity based on pagan religion and Greek philosophy. He portrayed Christians as a threat to the civil and political order of Rome. He could tolerate them if only they would honor the gods and follow society's customs (pp. 30-31). That Celsus wrote such a lengthy critique probably indicates that Christianity was growing rapidly (p. 32). This growing combination of popular abuse against Christians, philosophical critique, and oppression by governing authorities has no parallel in ancient Rome (p. 35).

In chapter 2, Hurtado distinguishes the Christian belief that there is only one true God from typical Roman belief in many deities that were all worthy of respect and worship. Roman-era people commonly accused Christians of impiety or even atheism (p. 38). Christians not only refused to worship the traditional gods (p. 44), but also said that everyone else ought to worship only their God. The Romans had a cafeteria full of gods, and Romans typically accepted and welcomed them all (p. 45). In every area of life, they were expected to take part in honoring the

relevant deity. Romans did not think that one deity would be offended if they worshiped other deities as well (p. 48). But refusing to worship the gods was seen as bizarre and impious (p. 48).

Christians, however, viewed the various gods as idols, false entities, even demonic beings. They certainly could not worship them (p. 50). Pagans made allowances for the Jewish preference for their own God, but it was different with Christians. It appeared to Romans that they were simply withdrawing from sacrificing to the traditional gods; this was arbitrary and bizarre, and had no precedent. The Gentile Christians could not claim any traditional ethnic privilege to justify their refusal to worship the gods (p. 53). Gentiles who converted to the gospel remained Gentiles (p. 56), so they couldn't justify their exclusivism in worship by associating themselves with Jews. Hurtado calls the Jesus movement a "mutation" in ancient Jewish tradition. Jesus had an exalted place in their beliefs and worship that had no precedent in Judaism. It represents a "dyadic" devotional pattern, in which Jesus was linked uniquely with God the Father in worship (p. 68) The believers incorporated Jesus along with God as the recipient of their devotion (p. 75), both linking and distinguishing Jesus and God (p. 73).

Chapter 3 shows that Christianity began to reshape what people mean by the concept of "religious identity." For most people of the Roman era, one's ethnic identity was given at birth, and their gods were linked to that identity (p. 78). Religious identity was a component of ethnic identity (p. 79). But early Christianity was the only new religious movement that demanded an "exclusive loyalty to one deity" (p. 86). This gave them a new kind of religious identity that was not only exclusive but not related to their ethnicity (p. 93).

Chapter 4 shows that the reading, writing, copying, and distribution of texts were prominent in early Christianity (p. 105), an outgrowth of the New Testament emphasis on scripture (1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 3). The emphasis on reading texts in Christian gatherings was similar

to various philosophical groups, where texts were collected, read, studied, distributed, and discussed (pp. 110-111). But other cults and religious groups did not do this. Hurtado thinks that the epistles of Paul were regarded as scripture earlier than the other writings of the NT, due to their authoritative presentation (1 Cor. 14:37-38) (p. 113). Second Peter 3 mentions Paul's letters as scripture, and indicates that his letters had been collected and well-known among the churches by that time (p. 114). Hurtado says that "this Pauline letter collection may have been the earliest step toward the larger collection that we know as the New Testament" (p. 114). As long as there was one person in the church who could read out a text, all the others could thereby gain a knowledge of it.

Early Christianity was distinctively "bookish." Hurtado writes at length about the work involved in writing, copying, and circulating the literary products of the early church (pp. 127-133). Early Christians were "heavily invested" in the activity of copying and distributing the New Testament scriptures and later Christian writings. Churches in various cities were busy "producing texts and copying and disseminating them to Christians elsewhere" (p. 131). There was an extensive interaction among Christians throughout the Roman world, accompanied by a broad circulation of Christian writings (p. 131). During the first three centuries A.D., the broader Roman literary culture preferred the bookroll for literary texts (p. 133). However, Christians preferred the codex, especially for texts treated as scripture. Hurtado cites statistics showing that non-Christians preferred the bookroll over the codex 95% to 5% (based on extant copies of literary texts), whereas Christians preferred the codex over the bookroll by about the same percentage.

In chapter 5, Hurtado shows that early Christianity was distinctive also in many of its behavioral and social practices (p. 144). For example, people in the Roman world commonly

engaged in infant abandonment (exposure) (p. 144). Christians, however, universally opposed it (p. 146); the only large-scale criticism and refusal to engage in this cultural practice came from Christians and Jews (pp. 147-148). Gladiator contests were another activity that illustrated the distinctiveness of Christianity, being widely supported by Roman pagans but opposed by Christians (pp. 148-150). Hurtado then expounds two New Testament passages (1 Thess. 1-5 and 1 Cor. 5-7) to demonstrate how the apostle Paul developed a Christian ethic relating to sex and marriage that was distinctively different from the pagan approach (pp. 155-165). Pagans taught that having sex with prostitutes and boys should be affirmed as a “hedge against adultery,” but Paul taught that marital sex was a “hedge against temptations to extramarital sex” (p. 165).

The book ends with a summary and a brief appendix detailing how Edwin Hatch (1888) and Wilhelm Bousset (1913) introduced erroneous assumptions into the study of Christian origins through the history-of-religion school of thought. A major weakness of the book is its repetitiveness. The author restates ideas and facts that have already been rather exhaustively covered. A major strength of the book is the mass of historical and biblical detail that Hurtado introduces and analyzes. Professors would do well to consider it for courses on New Testament backgrounds or introduction, or on early church history. And chapter 4 on the “bookishness” of early Christianity should be considered “must reading” for all Christian students and leaders.

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