

Larry W. Hurtado: *Destroyer of the Gods. Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press 2016. XIV, 290 S., 1 Karte. \$ 29.95. ISBN 978-1-4813-0473-3.

Larry W. Hurtado is Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology in the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. He is well known for his scholarship on New Testament writings, the Apostle Paul and Gospel of Mark, early Christian manuscripts and many academic books, among them, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (2015) and *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (2003). He has written on historically contextualized early Christianity, especially in two works aimed at a wider, non-specialist readership, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God* (2005) and *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (2016).

Hurtado has also targeted his recent book, *Destroyer of the Gods. Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, at wider, non-specialist audiences. His main purpose is to “highlight some major features of early Christianity that made it distinctive” (p. 5). Hurtado starts with a discussion on ancient and modern ideas of the cluster of phenomena that are called ‘religion’. In the ancient world, the cult of Christ, Christianity, was regarded as odd, bizarre, even dangerous since it did not fit what ‘religion’ meant for ancient Romans. This is important to remember because our modern western views of religion are mostly due to the influence of Christianity and, consequently, we tend to work with our modern unquestioned assumptions about religion. The modern use of the term ‘religion’ in the research of Antiquity causes problems as we are blinded to the exceptionality of the Jesus movement or early Christianity among the ancient religious phenomena.

This exceptionality in the eyes of outside observers is the theme of the first chapter “Early Christians and Christianity in the Eyes of Non-Christians” (pp. 15–36). Hurtado looks first at the Jewish responses and then pagan criticism, the well-known passages such as the mentions by Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Galen, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian, and Celsus, coming to the conclusion that outsiders “saw early Christianity as distinguishable from the many other groups and movements of the time” (p. 35).

In my view, Hurtado here runs the risk of taking the mentions in the ancient sources at face value. Neither Christian writers (insiders) nor Greco-Roman

writers (outsiders) were objective observers. We should not be misled by the hostile rhetoric of Greco-Roman elite writers in which Christians appear as an anomaly, oddity, and danger in the ancient world. Comparative material indicates that similar hostile rhetoric was hurled against other cults, for example, against the adherents of Bacchus and the followers of the Druid religion that were seen as clandestine, preposterous, and even treacherous. Similarly, the term *superstitio* was a versatile concept that was applied to various cults, beliefs, and practices, not just to Christianity. Nor should we be deluded by Christian apologists who represented their own religion as unique. Every group probably regarded itself as distinct from others.

The second chapter “A New Kind of Faith” (pp. 37–76) returns to the problems caused by the modern western notion of ‘religion’ that is considered an activity distinguishable from other areas of life (for instance, political issues). In Antiquity, the ‘religious’ sphere was intertwined other areas of communal life. Furthermore, ‘religion’ is usually regarded as voluntary and personal – this is divergent from what ‘religion’ was in Greco-Roman Antiquity.

Hurtado does not give much attention to the voluntary and personal aspects of Greco-Roman religious life. Many Greco-Roman religions had both public official cults and more personal private cults. For example, during the imperial period, the goddess Isis was worshipped not only in public cults connected to seafaring and the *annona* as well as emperor worship, but also in private cults in which the personal relationship with the worshipper was emphasized. Similarly, the goddess Cybele or Magna Mater was venerated both within the Roman civic religion and as a private affair. Ancient religious life ultimately appears as more multifaceted than Hurtado represents it. One may also ask whether ‘religion’ for early Christians was an activity as distinguishable from other areas of life as we modern observers tend to interpret it.

Hurtado states that, in contrast to other ancient religions, early Christianity “represented a different kind of religion, both in beliefs and in practices” (p. 43). According to Hurtado, Christianity lacked those things that in the eyes of most ancient peoples comprised ‘religion’, namely, altar, cult-image, priesthood, sacrifices, and shrines. One might add that these were precisely the things that became an essential part of late antique Christianity.

The veneration of one deity only made the cult of Christ distinctive from the other cults of the early Roman Empire that could be depicted with the

metaphor of a “cafeteria of Roman-era deities” (p. 45). This led early Christians to abstain from the worship of other deities, for example, denying a deity worship (typically sacrifice) was the same as denying the deity’s reality. Therefore, early Christians, were labelled as *ἄθεοι*, ‘atheists’.

Every ancient people had its peculiarities, including the Jews. The Jews’ refusal to take part in the cults of gods other than their own deity was regarded as their ethnic peculiarity, and, therefore, they had repeatedly attained the freedom to abstain from making sacrifices connected with the emperor worship. However, Christians were not a particular ethnic group and consequently, could not claim any traditional ethnic privilege to justify their refusal to venerate the civic gods. This was the “particular Christian offence” (p. 52). This refusal could be even taken as a subversive action.

How strict then were early worshippers of Christ in excluding other gods and abstaining from sacrifices? Hurtado dismisses the argument of Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (*Religions of Rome*, 1998) according to which Christian leaders’ repeated exhortations to religious exclusivity most likely reflect a more relaxed attitude toward sacrifices by the majority of early Christians. Hurtado asks how else we could explain that the ‘orthodox’ vision of Christian exclusivity became successful numerically against other, less exclusive versions of Christianity.

To be precise, there is no way of proving this either. There is actually no way of telling whether the exclusive stance was successful numerically. The only thing we can say is that Christian leaders who stressed religious exclusivity are very well represented in the extant sources. And another thing we can state is that in the following centuries Christian writers repeated similar exhortations to their listeners. The relaxed stance continued to be a vexing problem for Christian leaders.

Hurtado also argues that Christian practices were distinctive. He admits that there were similarities with Jewish or Greco-Roman practices – in baptism, invoking or acclaiming the deity, a shared meal, practices of prayer, or assembling regularly for worship – but in all cases he sees essential differences. Hurtado makes important observations in explicating the peculiarities in the cult of Christ but from time to time explaining away the similarities and highlighting differences seems factitious. However, every cult in the Roman world certainly had its own peculiarities. A shared meal or the form of

prayer, for example, was certainly peculiar in each cult or in each religious community.

Hurtado also makes a clear distinction in regard to the loves between the Greco-Roman worshippers and their gods in comparison with the love of early Christians and their God. He admits that “ancient people could have a genuine sense of religious awe, gratitude, and devotion to their various gods” but it is nonetheless difficult to find “the notion that the gods love humanity” in pagan texts (p. 65). He adds that we ought to be cautious in considering poetic texts as indicative of the attitudes of ordinary people as these texts were written by the elite writers (p. 222 n. 65). This is correct but one might also ask whether the same caution should also be practised in interpreting Christian writers’ attitudes. Did the Apostle Paul, Ignatius, Tertullian or Origen represent ordinary people?

In the third chapter “A Different Identity” (pp. 77–104), Hurtado argues that early Christianity was also distinctive in its translocal and transethnic character. Greco-Roman ‘pagan’ cults were local and ethnic, Jewish tradition was also linked to ethnicity. Hurtado also states that there was no religious identity really as a distinguishable conceptual category in Antiquity. Gods were linked to certain ethnic groups, and in that sense, there was ethnic religious identity. Hurtado admits that there was translocal and transethnic religious identity connected with the worship of Roman emperors and the cult of the goddess Roma in the eastern provinces. For some reason, he does not elaborate any comparison with the translocal and transethnic nature of the so-called mystery cults that spread throughout the Mediterranean area.

Religious identity as a conceptual category is linked with voluntary religion that implies a religious choice. Here the so-called mystery cults are mentioned as comparative material. Hurtado acknowledges that “mystery cults’ may give us something of a *partial* [Hurtado’s italics] analogy” to early Christianity (p. 83). He mentions the images of the goddess Isis with the infant Horus that offered the model for the later depictions of the Madonna and the infant Jesus. Analogies are partial because exclusive commitment to the Christian God was demanded of Christians as the basis of their religious identity. This was revolutionary in Antiquity and it is also noteworthy that “from an amazingly early time the young movement both focused on Jesus and had a sense of distinctive group identity” (p. 99).

It is interesting how different interpretations and conclusions can be drawn from the very same material on religious life in the Roman world. Whereas Hurtado sees significant differences between early Christianity and other Mediterranean religions and stresses the uniqueness of Christianity, the researchers of ancient religions usually seek parallels and shared features and see the cult of Christ as one among the ancient religious phenomena, reflecting the general trends, for example, the monotheistic trend in the imperial period.

Chapter 4, “A ‘Bookish’ Religion” (pp. 105–141), discusses the ‘scripturalization’ of Christian worship, from very early on. Christian corporate reading of scripture is compared with the Jewish synagogue practices as well as other religious groups. In the Greco-Roman cults, sacred writings were reserved for consultation of their priests, not participants. In their reading practices, Christian circles more resemble Greco-Roman philosophical groups. Hurtado also points out the “sheer volume of production of new Christian texts” (p. 118) as well as the phenomenally prolific and varied literary output. This is all correct though one might also ask whether this is due to the immense projects of preserving ‘foundational’ Christian writings by the succeeding generations at the time when Christianity had become the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

Christian groups were innovative in adapting and developing literary forms as well as in copying and circulating their texts. The Apostle Paul used the letterform for his communication. I do not quite understand why Hurtado regards the letter as a humble literary form. The letter was a highly valued form of writing and no particular innovation. Philosophers and elite writers such as Cicero and Seneca (whom Hurtado also mentions), not to mention many later writers, wrote letters which were later carefully edited and published in wide circulation. The *codex*, the ancestor of the modern leaf book, became prominent in Christian use for sacred writings. At the same time with the spread of Christianity, the *codex* gradually replaced the roll book form. Hurtado interprets the use of the *codex* book form for sacred texts as a counterintuitive and even countercultural move but it is hard to verify this.

The last chapter, “A New Way to Live” (pp. 143–181), is a discussion on ethical questions. Hurtado stresses that his intention is not to present any stereotypes of the Roman era as “one of simple decadence and a moral wasteland” (p. 144). Instead, he discusses the innovation of early Christianity as a ‘religion’ with behavioural demands. Much of his discussion treats the

Apostle Paul and the concept of *πορνεία*. In ancient Jewish and then early Christian usage, this term came to refer to a variety of male sexual activities that traditionally were more or less tolerated in the wider Greco-Roman world, namely men having sex with prostitutes, courtesans, and slaves. Hurtado depicts Paul as challenging the dominant ‘double-standard’ Greco-Roman morality of his time. Furthermore, what is new, according to Hurtado, is the concern for collective behavioural effort. Similarly, Christian teachers challenged and condemned child exposure, gladiatorial games, and sexual abuse of children.

Again, there is comparative material from other circles of the Greco-Roman world, for instance, exhortations of philosophers and moralists to sexual moderation and condemnation of practices such as child exposure. However, Hurtado dismisses the voices of philosophers, for example, Stoics, arguing that these appeals were targeted at only a few dedicated students while the Christian ethos was a collective commitment. The key distinction was “a strong effort to promote this behaviour in all adherents, of all social levels” (p. 172). Now, one might ask whether the difference in group ethos between philosophical and Christian communities was that profound. The activities of philosophers, including wandering popular philosophers, seems to have been wider and more multifaceted (and less elitist) than Hurtado tends to represent them. Another comparative example that Hurtado dismisses is a household cult with strict orders about sexual behaviour, documented in a first-century BCE inscription from Philadelphia (*Tituli Asiae Minoris* V 1539). Why cannot we compare this household cult in Philadelphia and its commands with the early Christian household cults evidenced in New Testament letters with their household codes?

In the conclusion, Hurtado stresses that he has analysed early Christianity as a historical phenomenon and aimed at historical interpretation. Notwithstanding all my puzzling questions and even criticism on a number of details above, his exploration of similarities and differences is a balanced and dispassionate inquiry with well-thought-out arguments, and, in addition, pleasant reading in its clarity. The Jesus movement, the cult of Christ, or early Christianity, in Hurtado’s own words, is certainly “a valid historical project in its own right”, without theological aims (p. 196).

Furthermore, *Destroyer of the Gods* is a welcome and important book as it challenges what seems by now have become the mainstream, at least in late antique studies, namely highlighting the similarities between Christianity and

other ancient religions and stressing the embeddedness of Christians in the Greco-Roman world. Therefore, Hurtado's book is a good reminder and sparring partner, challenging the prevailing views and waking us up to analysing differences as well.

Hurtado stresses that he is not advocating Christianity's cause but simply showing the elements that made Christians as a religious group distinct from other phenomena in the ancient world: "Whether you approve of Christianity's influence in shaping behaviour or not is another question" (p. 188). However, one cannot help thinking that Hurtado's book can be interpreted as an apologetic work for the excellence of early Christianity in comparison with other ideologies, even though this is exactly what Hurtado wants to avoid, "simplistic or exaggerated claims of Christian uniqueness in the service of evangelistic or apologetic aims" (p. 9).

Destroyer of the Gods is also a good re-opening of discussion on the tensions of the early Christians in the Roman world. They had to both fit in and be different. Here too is the tension of Hurtado's book: early Christianity was both similar to other religions and philosophies and at the same time distinctive. This tension is observable in Christian apologetic writing, most notably in *Letter to Diognetus* in which the anonymous writer states that "Christians are not to be distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom" (5.1) but also stresses the "unusual character of their own citizenship" (5.4).

Should we not also remember that every religious group had similar tensions in Antiquity? Could we not also see other ancient cults and communities as unique, with their mutual differences? What is distinctive is the fact that Christianity became the religion supported by Roman emperors and eventually the dominant ideology in the centuries after Constantine. The post-Constantinian developments that have often blinded us into taking the ancient concept of 'religion' in modern terms may also have misled us into not seeing early Christians as 'unique' among other 'unique' Mediterranean religions – as similar and as different at the same time.

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