

tely new covenant (Loc. 2160). Therefore, the Law is different also (Loc. 2175). Yet, as Jewish believers they live their lives “in close interaction with the Law and with our traditions” because they live among other Jews in a culture shaped by the Law and that tradition (Loc. 2189). It also helps them make Yeshua more understandable to their people, in a way that “Christmas trees and Easter bunnies” could never do (Loc. 2196).

The closing chapter ends with a conclusion that observing the Torah today is no longer accomplished by living “under the authority of the Law,” but by believing in Yeshua” (Loc. 2214). They challenge their believers to be “consumed with Yeshua, not with laws and traditions,” because “Moses wrote the Torah to lead us to Yeshua” and because “lasting change comes only through Yeshua” (Loc. 2222-2225).

This was an interesting book to read. Its 128 pages are packed with rich explanations of biblical material. One goes away from the book understanding the Old Testament better, especially its grand purpose of pointing towards its fulfilment in Christ. Unlike some other books written by Messianic Jews, authors did not crowd the book with Jewish terminology. They explained their methodology well and illustrated it pretty convincingly.

Nevertheless, there are some ways the authors could improve the book. For example, it was not as clear as it could have been whether they believe in the third use of the Law or not. Sure, most readers will not find this important, but it definitely is an issue that needs to be considered when writing about believer’s relationship to the Old Testament Law. Also, the amount of details would fit better a book that is twice this size. Finally, *Reading Moses, Seeing Jesus* is a book that I would warmly recommend to Jews and Gentiles, believers and unbelievers alike. Indeed, may it help us read Moses more and see Jesus better!

Miroslav Balint-Feudvarski

Larry W. Hurtado

Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World

Waco, Texas, USA, Baylor University Press, 2016, 290.

In his latest contribution, Larry W. Hurtado, Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, argues for the distinctiveness of early Christianity within the Greco-Roman religious world. Hurtado is careful to qualify what he means by “religion,” since as he cogently argues, many modern assumptions about what constitutes “religion”—monotheism, the centrality of sacred texts and the close relationship to applied ethics, among

others—are often appropriated from Christianity (and Judaism) itself and have very little to do with ancient Roman religion prior to the advent and growth of Christianity. This observation of what Hurtado calls “cultural amnesia” gets to the heart of the book’s purpose: to get readers to try and understand anew *why* early Christianity was considered by ancient Romans themselves to be so strange, different, and even offensive and dangerous. Although Hurtado acknowledges throughout the work that there are some similarities between early Christianity and Roman religion and philosophy, he contends that not enough attention has been paid to the much more profound differences that spurred intense criticism and sometimes severe persecution which eventually resulted in quite a revolutionary transformation of the Roman world, a transformation whose effects are still strongly felt in our own time.

While Hurtado is an eminent scholar of early Christianity, this work is not a technical monograph intended only for fellow scholars in the field, though they too will undoubtedly benefit from it, but is rather intended for a broader, though not uninformed, audience. The length of the book, 189 pages before an appendix and end-notes, is thus appropriate and very accessible for the general reader. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, it is divided into five chapters: 1. “Early Christians and Christianity in the Eyes of Non-Christians”; 2. “A New Kind of Faith”; 3. “A Different Identity”; 4. “A ‘Bookish’ Religion”; and 5. “A New Way to Live.” Readers familiar with Hurtado’s scholarship will observe that the author musters many arguments from his earlier work in service of the present project, including discussions on “binitarian” devotion to Jesus and God early on in the Jesus movement and the “bookish” nature of early Christianity including the phenomena of physical evidence within manuscripts (*nomina sacra*) and the Christian preference for the codex. Indeed, Hurtado’s expertise in these areas give him keen insight on how these particular features inform our understanding of Christianity’s distinctiveness in the ancient Roman context.

In chapter one, Hurtado summarizes the responses to the emergent Christian faith, both from Judaism— although Hurtado is careful to note that the early Jesus movement was what he calls, “a ‘mutation’ in ancient Jewish religious tradition”—and the Greco-Roman world. With regard to the latter, Hurtado summarizes what a number of Roman figures wrote about early Christians. One of the more astute arguments is that the criticisms leveled against Christians, for example by Celsus, are likely in response to the upward growth of the movement, so much so that it forced these writers to take up the time-consuming and expensive task of writing. Further, despite Celsus’ argument that Christians were mostly a group of uneducated outcasts from the margins, the fact that he felt the need to respond so sharply to it likely indicates that the movement was rather growing among the educated upper classes, that is, those who would have

access to read or hear his treatise. Hurtado shows that clearly there was a Roman contempt for the upstart religious movement.

However, this contempt might seem unusual considering the well-known pluralistic religious landscape of the Roman world, including the traditional Greco-Roman pantheon, the numerous familial, civic and national deities, the so-called Eastern mystery religions, and even Judaism which was mostly tolerated. Why then was there a peculiar animosity toward Christians? Hurtado proceeds in the remaining chapters to explain what it was that made Christianity so distinct, and despised. In chapter two, the author goes on to show how vastly different this new “religion” was in the Roman context, both from the pluralist Roman religious matrix and even the ancient Jewish tradition with which Christianity shared an exclusivist monotheistic faith. Again, Hurtado is careful to emphasize that the earliest Christians were indeed Jews themselves and that it would be quite anachronistic to conceive of “Christianity” as a distinct religion from “Judaism” at its inception. Nevertheless, as one of the streams of ancient Judaism, Christianity successfully became “translocal and transethnic,” so that by the second century, the Jesus-movement was largely made up of pagan converts throughout the empire.

That development is crucial to Hurtado’s argument in chapter three where he shows that while Jewish religious identity was basically the equivalent to Jewish ethnic identity, Christian converts voluntarily came in much larger numbers from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds into what had grown into that decidedly transethnic/ transnational movement. Hurtado also demonstrates that, though there were other “voluntary” religious adherents, such as those of the so-called “mystery religions” like Mithraism or the ISIS cult, or of the various philosophical schools, these associations did not require a rejection of other, more traditional religious associations, rituals, and identity. Thus those adherents remained firmly entrenched in the Roman religious culture, and were therefore of no threat to it.

Christianity, however, maintained the exclusivist claims of Judaism—with the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah and Lord—while losing its basic ethnic homogeneity. Therefore pagan converts to Christianity, unlike the mystery cult adherents or members of philosophical schools, gained a completely new religious identity, one that necessarily rejected the entire Roman religious tradition and system. The fact that some Christians struggled with this radical identity change (as made clear in Pauline texts which deal with issues of eating food sacrificed to idols, etc.) only proves clearly the kind of social pressure that existed for converts because the change was so sharp and absolute, creating tension and animosity within their social networks.

Another distinguishing mark of early Christianity within the Roman context that Christians inherited from its Jewish roots was its text centeredness, the cen-

trality of sacred writings. Hurtado recapitulates in chapter 4 much of his earlier scholarship on the “bookish” nature of early Christianity and its distinguishing features. One such feature is the public reading of sacred texts in Christian gatherings, largely modeled on the Jewish synagogue. Hurtado also helpfully describes the processes of book making and circulation in the ancient world and other distinguishing marks of early Christian bookishness (the Christian preference for the codex and the use of *Nomina Sacra*), areas that many readers will find helpful and enlightening. Most importantly for the argument of this latest volume, however, is that this “bookishness” and these unique practices were clearly not so important in traditional Roman religion, but rather served as another marker of Christian distinction.

Finally, in chapter 5, Hurtado addresses another very important difference, that Christianity was a religion in continuity with Judaism, which made specific behavioral demands on its adherents and ones that were often in direct conflict with practices well accepted in Roman culture such as infant exposure. Many modern readers again may be surprised to find out that personal and social ethics were not important components of ancient Greco-Roman religion. As such, converts to Christianity were called and instructed to a new way of life, one often vastly different from that of their family, friends and neighbors. Sexual ethics in particular, Hurtado explains, was an area of great difference with Roman culture and thus a deep concern in many early Christian texts. While some philosophical schools exhibited ethical concerns, some of which might find some overlap with Christian teaching, Hurtado shows that Christian ethics were nevertheless distinctive because of their basis in divine commands rather than philosophy and self-discipline.

That early Christianity was novel and distinct in the Roman world may not be a complete surprise to many contemporary readers, but Hurtado’s volume nevertheless succeeds in reminding us just *how utterly different* it was, and also how drastic was the extent of the cultural transformation it initiated. It is also a reminder that “pluralism” is never simply an unlimited and equally tolerated free market of ideas and values. In the Roman religious-cultural-political complex, new or foreign ideas could be tolerated, as long as they remained within the framework of the accepted religious and imperial mythology, or remained in relative ethnic isolation, like Judaism. However, the exclusivist, transethnic nature of early Christianity and its submission to the authority of Jesus as Messiah could not be incorporated into Roman pluralism but rather became a direct threat to its cultural hegemony.

In many parts of the world today, confessing Christians find themselves in a similar situation to the earliest Christians in the Roman Empire. But even in the Western world, so influenced by Christianity over the last two millennia, a

cultural, religious, and ideological pluralism continues to emerge. So while there remain deep cultural and ethical overlaps between contemporary expressions of Christianity loosed from its formerly dominant cultural position and an emerging post-Christian Western culture, Christianity, or at least traditional forms of it, may once again be on its way to becoming a cultural outlier, or considered odd, offensive, or even dangerous. As such, Hurtado's work is not only of historical importance, but also helps Christians today better understand their identity in an increasingly pluralistic world that is decreasingly open to the exclusivist claims of Christian faith.

Greg Thellman