

Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods. Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press 2016, xiv + 340 pp., ISBN 978-1-60258-997-1, US\$ 59.95 (hb with jacket).

By the fall of the western empire in the fifth century, Rome and Christianity had become synonymous with one another. When the courtiers around Charlemagne sought to view the Frankish domain as an empire in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, it was to Rome's Christian and imperial identities they turned. However, the success of early Christianity in challenging and usurping the dominant pantheistic religious traditions of Rome is a long and complex process, taking place as it does over four centuries, and spread across this vast Romanised world. Constantine and the councils of the early fourth century would ordinarily loom large in any discussion of the transition from paganism to Christianity, but not so here. Instead, Hurtado sets out to look at the earlier formative period of Christian belief, and to argue that the very success of Christianity was due to how recognisably different it was to other beliefs in the Roman cultural milieu to which it belonged. The central argument is a necessary one; ultimately we do need to recognise how Roman society viewed and judged this new religious sect, and how that plays into the traditional image of the rise of Christianity. The core of Larry Hurtado's book is persuasive, and although a touch speculative and repetitive in parts, presents a useful approach to this period. The argument that unites the disparate chapters is the strongest aspect of the work. I think ultimately that Hurtado is right; the early church was notably different to the forms of religion followed in the Roman world.

There are however a number of issues. First, there are elements of analysis that rest on very little engagement with the contemporary writings, with only fleeting images of the important texts that reflect this world. Second, although this work is certainly reacting *against* something, it is never made clear exactly who and what this book is meant to be reacting against. It would be useful to have in the opening lines a much stronger sense of the bibliographic field it is engaging with, rather than the loose collection of works mentioned at 191-196. And finally, although the argument is a good one, there are gaps in the discussion that would have benefitted from further study.

The preface and the introduction set forth the overall purpose reasonably clearly, but are we really expected to believe that scholars or informed lay readers see all religions as the same? (at p. xii). The introduction (1-13) paints a rapid sketch of early Christianity that is perfectly adequate, although it skirts around the realities of Roman rule, and the extent to which attacks on Christian communities served to give Rome a scapegoat for public blunders and wider societal woes. It is no coincidence that it is in the wake of the horrific fire that ravaged Rome in 64 that Nero encourages his people to direct their anger at Christians. The Romans perhaps take so willingly to this for exactly the reasons Hurtado would recognise; because they stood out, because their beliefs did not translate to the pre-existing pantheistic Roman religion, and because they appeared an easy (and defenceless) target. Hurtado recognises this in his first chapter (at 21-22), but it would make more sense for the purpose of consistency if it was outlined with greater care here too. The brief depictions of the varying branches of Christianity are useful; but only sketches.

The main body of the work is divided into five chapters. The final section of the book contains the conclusion, which runs through the various points already made as well present an ancillary argument/observation about modern 'cultural amnesia' (183-190), and the short bibliographical survey (191-196). The first chapter dips into the many negative reactions Christians faced in both the Jewish and Roman (broadly conceived as pagan) worlds. Here we find reference to important and influential contemporary writers; Tacitus, Pliny, Galen, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian and Celsus (21-34). Although the pace of the chapter is swift, the section on early Jewish reactions is clear and convincing, and here Hurtado engages very well with the available evidence (15-20). His

discussion of Pliny is informed (22-26), and Galen's intellectual reaction poses a number of important questions of early Christianity (26-27). However, the assessments of both Tacitus and Marcus Aurelius are poor and the later discussion of Lucian and Celsus is not grounded closely enough in the evidence; consequently some of the observations here are speculative rather than empirical. The other concern is of course in how useful brief character sketches can be, when they represent different immediate environments and reactions.

The second chapter is much better. Although the opening attempts to define religion is a touch distracting (38-44), Hurtado here paints a very good image of the polytheistic world of Rome; and importantly how religious observances belonged to the political and social realities experienced by contemporaries. The discussion of the *Lares domestici* demonstrates how central Roman religion(s) were to all layers of society (46; 54). Hurtado is successful in identifying how early Christianity would have appeared manifestly different to accepted religious practices in the Roman world; absolute dedication to the principles of the Christian faith would have carried with it immediate and noticeable societal consequences. The discussion on distinctions within Judaism is promising, but a much greater engagement with the evidence was needed to fully support the argument being made (66-76).

Chapters three and four look at the ideas of creating a different identity, and the importance of the written word. Of the two, the third chapter is weaker. The chapter spends too long thinking about labels, without ever really reaching the depth of analysis needed to make them worthwhile. The discussion on Roman identity lacks precision, and the allusion to the imperial cult is unconvincing (77-82). There is no real effort here to think about the ideas found in classical ethnography, and although Herodotus is mentioned, there is no awareness of how differently his concept of universal history was interpreted across the empire (e.g. acceptance/rejection, internal complexity against external homogeneity). This chapter does, appropriately, recognise the notion of Christianity cutting through national/ethnic boundaries, but this needed to be placed with much greater care upon contemporary attitudes towards identity. Chapter four is better (105-142). Here Hurtado recognises an important truth that separated the Christian religion from other contemporary beliefs; the prominence of written communication and the communal nature of listening and interpreting these emergent sacred texts. This provides a notable element of dissonance and distinction with the pagan Roman world. Behind this there rests also the awareness that these communal meetings do not mirror the focus on sites and sacred space found within the pantheistic traditions of Rome. It is however surprising that this implicit acknowledgement is not discussed fully, as it would add yet another dimension to the argument that Hurtado is making. The focus on the codex provides a useful window into this world; but the analysis here is unclear, and too much is made of this as an active choice of written communication (133-138). We are certainly missing comparable Christian writings in bookroll form.

The final chapter considers the concept of difference through a rejection of cultural norms and the strong focus on reforming moral behaviour. There are moments here that certainly reflect a strong sense of difference; however the opening to the chapter is a touch unclear. In focussing on particular aspects of Roman life, Hurtado presents only a shallow interpretation of the contemporary reality, and thus gives an unclear and incomplete image (144-150). This is a pity as some of the evidence is well chosen (Letter of Hilarion at 144-146; inscription from Pompeii at 149). Although Roman religious beliefs may not have manifested such a strong moralistic guide, that is not to say that it does not exist in this world. Hurtado recognises certain philosophical moralistic reactions, but there is no mention here of Roman laws, histories, or literature. The Romans were aware of moral failings, and the vices and virtues to be found both in the past and the present.

This is then an interesting work that dips into a variety of different writings and presents useful observations and moments of analysis. This is not the last word on this period, and nor is it meant to be. Instead it provides an admirable discussion of early Christianity directed towards an educated lay readership, and one that will invite reactions from scholars of the ancient world and the early church. In moving away from looking simply at Constantine and the victory of Christianity, Hurtado is encouraging us to look deeper and to return to those early writings that shape the Christian faith.

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