

BOOK REVIEW

Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World. By LARRY W. HURTADO. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 290. Paper, \$19.95. ISBN 978-1-4813-0474-0.

Larry Hurtado, now Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, has had a highly distinguished career as a scholar of early Christianity, with some dozen books and many articles to his name. The present volume, which is aimed primarily at a non-specialist audience, serves to some extent as a handy introduction to his scholarship, since in it he summarizes many arguments that he has developed at greater length elsewhere in the service of a more general thesis, namely, that the “features of earliest Christianity that made it distinctive, even odd, in the cultural environment of the first three centuries AD. . . subsequently shaped assumptions about religion in large parts of our world today” (xi). This is a thesis to which I myself, as a scholar of Graeco-Roman religion, also subscribe, and I found it fascinating to see how an accomplished scholar of early Christianity goes about developing it.

After a brief introduction, in which he provides an overview of Roman/Christian relations and addresses some methodological issues, Hurtado develops his argument over five chapters, each devoted to a particular topic. The point of Chapter One, “Early Christians and Christianity in the Eyes of Non-Christians,” is to demonstrate that “a good many outsiders . . . regarded Christians and Christianity as objectionably different” (35–36). In Chapter Two, “A New Kind of Faith,” he builds on that point by exploring the features of early Christianity that made it seem “objectionably different.” After discussing the modern Western notion of “religion” and sketching out the traditional Graeco-Roman idea of piety as the recognition of all gods by means of specific practices, he presents as a contrast the Christian insistence on the exclusive worship of their god alone and their rejection of most traditional ritual markers of piety. Christians instead emphasized a set of distinctive beliefs, not only postulating a transcendent deity (as did many philosophers), but also insisting that it was possible to have a personal relationship with this deity and that he even became embodied in human form. Just as their exclusive monotheism put them at odds with most people in the Graeco-Roman tradition, so too their recognition of the divinity of Jesus put them at odds with Jews.

Chapter Three, "A Different Identity," focuses on the extent to which early Christians divorced religious adherence from other aspects of social identity, and concludes that "this distinctive early Christian group identity is perhaps the earliest attempt to articulate what moderns would recognize as a corporate *religious* identity that is distinguishable from, and not a corollary of, one's family, civic, or ethnic connection" (104).

In Chapter Four, "A 'Bookish' Religion," he surveys the various phenomena that combined "to make the young Christian movement distinctively text oriented in the context of the varied religious environment of that time:" the emphasis placed on reading texts, the constant proliferation of new texts, the significant resources employed in copying and disseminating them, and even "the distinguishing physical and visual features of early Christian books" (141). Lastly, in Chapter Five, "A New Way to Live," he examines the extent to which adherence to the Christian god involved distinctive behavioral expectations, especially in the realm of sexuality and familial relationships. A brief conclusion summarizes the book's main arguments.

Hurtado's presentation is crystal clear and engaging, so that the book will be easily accessible to non-specialists. At the same time, the breadth of his learning and the years of study that he brings to this project mean that it also has much to offer specialists as well. Although his expertise obviously lies in the early Christian material, he has read widely in the scholarship on the Graeco-Roman religious tradition, so that his analyses of what made early Christianity distinctive in that context are generally well-informed and judicious.

That said, I often found myself wishing that he had developed his theoretical framework a bit more rigorously. For example, the observation that it cannot have been easy for early Christians to avoid idolatry and still maintain social relations (89) seems to me quite right as far as it goes, but does not engage as explicitly as I would have liked with the constructedness of 'idolatry', a category whose boundaries needed constant definition. It seems to me that the need to abstain from idolatry was major factor in leading early Christ-followers to make distinctions between 'religious' and 'non-religious' that had never before been formulated. I also at times had a slightly uneasy sense of *petitio principii*, that an initial assumption about the distinctiveness of early Christianity made its demonstration follow as a matter of course. This struck me particularly in the chapter on early Christian 'bookishness', which by not discussing the 'bookishness' of Roman imperial culture more broadly does not really address the extent to which Christian 'bookishness' differed from it. Lastly, I sometimes felt that Hurtado was a bit too inclined

to present early Christian motivations and values as more in line with those of modern liberal democracies than may in fact have been the case. Is it really accurate to portray Tertullian as a champion of religious liberty and the individual conscience (103)?

These, however, are fairly minor reservations. Hurtado's book is both thoughtful and thought-provoking, well grounded in the evidence and carefully formulated. Classicists who would like to know more about the place of early Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world will find this a stimulating introduction to the topic.

JAMES B. RIVES

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, jbrives@email.unc.edu