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Book reviews

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

The main aim of Larry Hurtado's latest book, based on a series of lectures delivered in Hong Kong in 2015, is to highlight some of the distinctive features of early Christianity, features 'that made it unusual in the Roman period' (p. 1). Linked with this aim is a concern to alert modern readers to the fact that many of these distinctive, unusual features have come to be 'unquestioned assumptions about religion' in the modern world (p. 2); Hurtado thus seeks to rectify what he sees as our 'cultural amnesia' in this regard (pp. 1, 187). The approach taken in the book is primarily historical and focuses on the evidence of what came to be the 'mainstream', 'proto-orthodox' tradition in the diverse early Christian movement (p. 11). The five main chapters deal with distinct, though not unrelated, topics.

First, Hurtado examines the ways Christians were regarded by others, highlighting the distinctive nature of the opposition they faced. Second, he turns to the exclusiveness of the early Christians, a feature shared with Judaism but with the key difference that early Christianity represented a novel and transethnic movement that could not claim 'traditional ethnic privilege' (p. 53). Christian beliefs about God were also distinctive, with their focus on God's transcendence and redemptive love, and the reverence shown towards Jesus. Third, Hurtado considers the way in which early Christianity represented 'a new kind of religious identity' (p. 89): it was not, like many ancient cults and religions (including Judaism), bound up with a particular ethnic identity, but was exclusive in a way that set it apart from other 'voluntary' religions such as the cults of Mithras and Isis. Early Christianity, 'uniquely, was both exclusive and not related to ethnicity'; it was transethnic and translocal (pp. 92–3). Fourth, Hurtado examines the prominent place of texts in early Christianity, describing it as an exceptionally 'bookish' religion, indicated by the high level of text-production. Finally, Hurtado considers the ways in which early Christianity represented a 'new way to live', rejecting (like Judaism) some practices that were widely tolerated in Roman society (such as the exposure of infants) and focusing much more on ethics than other Roman religions (pp. 154–5). These various aspects of early Christian distinctiveness are reiterated in a clear and concise conclusion, in which Hurtado also emphasises the enduring influence of these originally

novel contributions, notably 'the notion of a religious identity separate from one's national/ethnic identity' (p. 187).

The main stress of the argument is on the distinctiveness of the early Christian movement, yet this is precisely where one may wish to raise questions. For example, in stressing the distinctiveness of early Christian sexual ethics Hurtado notes the comparable teachings among some of the Stoics, notably Musonius Rufus, but sees these as incomparable partly because they were 'essentially directed ... at a few dedicated students' rather than reflecting 'serious efforts to effect changes in the behavior of wider circles of people' (p. 170). Since the Pauline letters from which Hurtado's key examples are drawn were directed to rather small communities (their size is hard to estimate), and given the wide appeal of Stoicism, I wonder whether the judgement could not be reversed. Indeed, an ideological rather than historical investment looks even more likely when Hurtado (quoting Kyle Harper with approval) suggests that in some modern scholarly studies 'the gloomy tribe of Stoic brethren have been allotted too much say' (p. 170).

Yet it is in relationship to Judaism that the question of Christian distinctiveness looms largest. It is perhaps a small quibble to question Hurtado's description of Pliny's test to identify Christians as an 'innovation' not previously attested (pp. 25–6). As Geoffrey de Ste Croix noted in a classic article on the subject ('Why were the Early Christians Persecuted? *Past and Present* 26 (1963), pp. 6–38), the 'sacrifice test' (as de Ste Croix calls it) was used on Jews in Antioch some decades before Pliny. But it is more significant that the overall argument of the book frequently takes the following form: 'X is a distinctive feature of early Christianity. Granted, we also know of this feature in Judaism, but ...' And the reason given for stressing Christian rather than Jewish distinctiveness – the crucial 'but' – is some form of the notion that Judaism was an ethnic tradition, whereas Christianity was transethnic in character. To be sure, the rhetoric of transethnic inclusion finds a prominence in the early Christian sources (most famously in Gal 3:28), but we should I think be more wary of drawing such a categorical distinction between Jewish 'ethnic tradition' and Christian 'transethnic' and 'translocal' identity, when Jewish 'ethnicity' took the particular forms it did, and when Christian identity was also constructed in ethnic terms.

Jews, like Christians, were accused of various anti-social vices. Jewish authors could celebrate, just as Roman authors could bemoan, the fact that adherence to Jewish customs seemed to be spreading widely. And those identified as *Ioudaioi* could also affirm other ethnic identities (alongside or 'nested' beneath their Jewish identity). While 'aggressive' Jewish mission seems unlikely, it was nonetheless possible either to associate with the Jewish community as some kind of sympathiser or godfearer, or to convert and

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become a proselyte, in which case 'exclusive' devotion to Israel's God would be expected. And such a move was hardly less socially disruptive or inviting of hostility than that of conversion to Christianity (cf. p. 55), as the (admittedly atypical) story of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene attests. Is there no 'transethnicity' here?

Such observations are not intended to downplay the differences between (nor the varieties within) both Jewish and early Christian traditions. But they might make us question how firmly the 'ethnic'/'transethnic' distinction can be invoked, and might arouse our critical suspicions when this is the major foundation for assigning most of the distinctives Hurtado considers (aside from the veneration of Jesus) to Christianity rather than to Judaism. Put differently, without this categorical differentiation, most of these achievements could already be attributed to Judaism.

Yet it would be churlish to end on such a query. Overall, this is a compelling and elegantly written study, built on a judicious engagement with an extensive scholarly literature and a lifetime of study of the primary texts. The publishers are also to be congratulated on a handsome (and inexpensive) volume, remarkably free from errors. It seems to me that Hurtado has succeeded in his aim of writing in a way accessible to the (educated) general reader, though the seventy pages of endnotes clearly indicate that this is also a scholarly work. The book's themes will be broadly familiar to scholars, with several summaries of arguments Hurtado has made in greater detail elsewhere. But that does not diminish its value as a synthetic effort to draw together some of the major distinctive features of early Christianity and to emphasise their lasting influence.

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John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. x + 245, $39.95.

John Swinton's theological reflection on time is simultaneously a powerful statement on a perennial topic and the mature thoughts of a scholar who has spent years considering the theological significance of disability. In this book, Swinton aims to integrate the abstract considerations of a systematic approach with a practical theologian's concern for experiential knowledge. His constructive proposal hinges on the distinction between 'clock time' and 'God's time'. Clock time denotes the Western representation of time as