

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

*Larry W. Hurtado*

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“Silly,” “stupid,” “irrational,” “simple.” “Wicked,” “hateful,” “obstinate,” “anti-social.” “Extravagant,” “perverse.” The Roman world rendered harsh judgments upon early Christianity—including branding Christianity “new.” Novelty was no Roman religious virtue.

Nevertheless, as Larry W. Hurtado shows in *Destroyer of the gods*, Christianity thrived despite its new and distinctive features and opposition to them. Unlike nearly all other religious groups, Christianity utterly rejected the traditional gods of the Roman world. Christianity also offered a new and different kind of religious identity, one not based on ethnicity. Christianity was distinctively a “bookish” religion, with the production, copying, distribution, and reading of texts as central to its faith, even preferring a distinctive book-form, the codex. Christianity insisted that its adherents behave differently: unlike the simple ritual observances characteristic of the pagan religious environment, embracing Christian faith meant a behavioral transformation, with particular and novel ethical demands for men. Unquestionably, to the Roman world, Christianity was both new and different, and, to a good many, it threatened social and religious conventions of the day.

In the rejection of the gods and in the centrality of texts, early Christianity obviously reflected commitments inherited from its Jewish origins. But these particular features were no longer identified with Jewish ethnicity and early Christianity quickly became aggressively trans-ethnic—a novel kind of religious movement. Its ethical teaching, too, bore some resemblance to the philosophers of the day, yet in contrast with these great teachers and their small circles of dedicated students, early Christianity laid its hard demands upon all adherents from the moment of conversion, producing a novel social project.

Christianity’s novelty was no badge of honor. Called atheists and suspected of political subversion, Christians earned Roman disdain and suspicion in equal amounts. Yet, as *Destroyer of the gods* demonstrates, in an irony of history the very features of early Christianity that rendered it distinctive and objectionable in Roman eyes have now become so commonplace in Western culture as to go unnoticed. Christianity helped destroy one world and create another.

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

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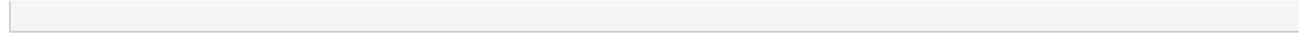
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# From Reader Review Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World for online ebook

**Nigel Ewan says**

This was a great quick read. Hurtado's goal is to present early Christianity as it may have been perceived by Romans living in the first few centuries after Christ. His point: the worldview implications of Christianity were truly radical, defying most established Roman ways of understanding philosophy and religion. As moderns, it is difficult to understand how upsetting the Christianity worldview, moral teaching, and identity would have been to Romans, since *our* most fundamental expectations about religion actually come from the dominance of Christianity itself over the last two millennia of western civilization.

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**Brent McCulley says**

Larry W. Hurtado  
Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian  
Distinctiveness in the Roman World  
Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016  
Pp. xiv + 290. \$19.95.

Perceiving the trend in patristic scholarship to over-emphasize the similarities of pagan religion, philosophy, and the mystery religions with Christianity—especially their influence on the development of early Christianity—Larry Hurtado seeks to provide a corrective reevaluation in his *Destroyer of the gods*. Fundamental to his study is his thesis that “what we call “religion” comprises a considerable diversity” (xiii). In other words, scholars have erred in methodology by anachronistically applying qualities of religion that arose specifically because of the distinctiveness of the Christian religion. While attempting to prove his thesis Hurtado draws out, without minimizing similarities, the distinctive features of early Christianity which he believes are often times glossed over, or worse, misunderstood.

The book itself is divided into five major sections each comprising a unique part of his thesis; namely, Early Christians and Christianity in the Eyes of Non-Christians (chapter 1), A New Kind of Faith (chapter 2), A Different Identity (chapter 3), A “Bookish” Religion (chapter 4), and A New Way to Live (chapter 5). The first chapter deals with the unique religious claims of Christianity, the second treats the worship and exclusivity of the earliest Christians, the third chapter deals with the translocal and transethnic uniqueness of Christianity, the next asserts the uniqueness of Christians in their use of books/scripture as integral to the religion, and the last chapter deals with the high ethical norms of the earliest Christians. Greek terms are transliterated and citations are compiled as endnotes, making the book accessible even to the non-scholar. In the first major section, Hurtado attempts to highlight what non-Christians thought of the earliest Christians: they were quite strange. In this he succeeds, as he lays the backdrop upon which he can hammer home his thesis. The earliest Christians were seen as uneducated, bizarre, and standing against the very fabric of what was considered religious in the Greco-Roman world. Nevertheless, the book goes astray after the first chapter and thereby suffers on multiple fronts: a lack primary material, over-generalizations, dubious claims, imprecise terminology, and unnecessary reputation.

For example, in the introduction Hurtado attempts to clarify “which Christianity” is going to be examined, ultimately concluding only those church fathers who supported “proto-orthodoxy” will be examined. Thus, he confines himself to the “first three centuries” (12). However, one is not exactly sure what the ambiguous term “proto-orthodoxy” even means, as it is not carefully defined but simply taken for granted. He states men

like Tatian and Marcion will be avoided but theologians such as Origen and Clement are readily referenced, thereby throwing his “proto-orthodoxy” term into confusion. Concerning the chronology, while Hurtado claims to survey the first three centuries, he scarcely makes out it out of the first century, not making good on his promise. Indeed, Paul, and the catholic epistles, are quoted *ex abundanti* but one has to venture through one-hundred and three pages before the first substantial quote from a patristic source is encountered, a passage from Tertullian.

In the first chapter, reference is made to the “economic factor” which could have served as a substantial contribution to the study, but this feature is not explored (24). In the second chapter, the early Christian conception that idols/pagan gods are actually demons is mentioned with reference to Paul (50-52), but the subject is then passed over. Hurtado could have bolstered his thesis with this point, a fascinating distinctive feature of early Christianity, by referencing Theophilus and Athenagoras or Justin and Aristides, but this was not even attempted. The similarities between early Christianity and the Greco-Roman philosophical schools are essentially brushed off in one paragraph because, while these too were “translocal and transethnic,” they did not require a change in “how you understood your religious identity” (86-87). Cumbersome terms, again, suffer from a lack of clarity such as “emergent proto-orthodox Christianity” (89). Throughout the book one receives the impression that Hurtado really means canonical New-Testament, or more specifically, Pauline Christianity. Elsewhere Hurtado seemingly contradicts himself. For example, in chapter four, in discussing the unique morality of early Christianity, Hurtado attempts to distinguish early Christian morality, towards females and slaves, from pagan-philosophical ones. After surveying the philosophical ethics of Musonius Rufus, and his assertion that wives and daughters should study philosophy, Hurtado quips that this cannot be unique because Rufus “hardly advocated any radical reordering of society” (263). Yet pages later, after trying to highlight the uniqueness of Paul in his conception of women and slaves, he admits: “The[se] texts do not advocate an overturning, or even questioning, of the social structures of the day” (178). One is therefore left swimming in a sea of ambiguity searching for this supposed uniqueness.

While early Christian distinctiveness deserves a reappraisal by patristic scholars, Hurtado’s study is restricted by a myopic view of the diverse developmental stages of Christianity in the first three centuries. Concerning substance, the book betrays a lack of familiarity with the primary sources, relying too readily on secondary sources. Often times Hurtado reverts to quoting Paul, or doing New Testament word studies, in attempts to prove a historical point that extends well into the second or third century. In a word, it is evident that the work was written by a biblical theologian and not a patristic scholar. In sum, while Hurtado is convinced Christianity was the destroyer of the gods, upon completion the reader is left with an unsettling feeling, unconvinced that this thesis was proven. That is, Destroyer of the gods may leave more questions unanswered than it solves.

Brent McCulley, Calvin Theological Seminary

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## **E says**

Heard great things about this book, but I found it kind of blah. Are we really supposed to be surprised that Christianity was surprisingly distinct from the surrounding Roman culture? That they had a different way of living? That they relied heavily on the written word? That they refused to worship local gods along side their own? That they weren't limited to one ethnic group? Isn't this all Christianity 101?

Got really tired of reading about the "anonymous" author of 2 Timothy or 2 Peter, the supposedly late date of writing of several of the NT books, and, most of all, the author's inability to use the word "comprise" properly. This wouldn't have bothered me except that he misused it, no joke, dozens of times. It might be his favorite word. And he doesn't know what it means. It is NOT a synonym for "constitute" or "compose." Let's

recite: the whole comprises the parts; the parts constitute the whole. Keep that straight and you won't make a fool of yourself in print (well, at least not for this reason anyway).

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## **Luke says**

History book describing and assessing what made Christianity unique in the early centuries of its existence. Interesting for people of all religions and none. Much of what we take for granted about religions today - that they can be transethnic or are often centred around holy writings - are really innovation of the first-century Jesus movement. Written for thinking people of all ages by a longtime Edinburg University professor. Full of great insights on every page. Probably the best book I've read so far in 2017.

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## **Regina Beard says**

In Larry W. Hurtado's book *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, early Christianity is shown as a very different kind of religion compared with the religious thought of the ancient Roman world. Hurtado, an Emeritus Professor at the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, unfolds the little-known origins of Christianity in a thoughtful and thorough monograph. Throughout the book, he highlights the features of early Christianity that were different than those of ancient Romans, and how these differences became widespread assumptions about religion in general in the modern era.

In the preface and the introduction, the foundation of the study is laid by describing the Jesus-movement that emerged during the first three centuries CE. Despite the many differences that made Christians stand out among the ancient crowd, the religion spread throughout the Roman empire. The most dangerous difference was the refusal to serve the gods of the empire in preference to worshipping the one God, which was seen as offensive and irreligious by contemporary people of the day. The first chapter dealt with the hostility early Christians endured during the first centuries and the pagan criticism behind the persecutions, including Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Galen, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian, and Celsus. The author made a very good point at highlighting the economic factors presented by the early Christians who urged others to stop sacrificing and worshipping other gods, which impacted the livelihood of craftsmen and those who raised the animals for sacrifice.

In chapter two, Hurtado explains in depth the differences in what modern people would consider "religion" and its connection to this time period. For the Roman people, religious responsibility was a public service that included reverence and respect to the various gods of the empire, the town, and the family. Even the Roman people's sense of piety and virtue, their idea of prayer, and observances to the gods contrasted with the early Christians, enforcing their outsider status. In chapter three, the idea of religious identity is explored. In the Roman world, one's religious preference was conferred at birth and everyone was presumed to honor the gods as appropriate to their Roman culture and heritage. The Romans enthusiastically embraced the religious cults of other cultures, including Persia and Egypt because they were similar to their own religious beliefs. The problem the Romans had with the Christian religion is that Christians were expected to reject other gods and religious services, which was seen as abhorrent and atheistic.

Chapter three reveals one of the issues that enabled Christianity to persist into the following generations. Christians were prolific in their writing and sharing of their sacred texts. These texts became important and

were incorporated into their worship, which was different compared to other religious groups of the day who did not have sacred writings of this nature and used scrolls instead of books to archive and share with others. In Chapter four, the setting of the Roman era is explored. The violent contests, infant exposures, and sexual escapades were acceptable in Roman culture but contrasted greatly with Christian practices of moral behavior.

*Destroyer of the Gods* is a readable and inspiring discussion about the beginning of Christianity and how it differed from any religious thought before (except for Judaism). The vocabulary and organization created a monograph easy to follow no matter how much knowledge you have about the topic. Hurtado beautifully reveals how these differences subtly become the norm in modern culture and how its roots were formed and flourished against all the odds. As a whole, the text makes a considerable contribution to the understanding of the ancient period between the first and third centuries and delves into a forest of information with an eye for detail and thoughtful interpretation.

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### **Richy says**

I thought this was a very useful and enlightening book. It suffered from two things. First, there was too much repetition and it could have used some tighter editing. Second, I think the author glossed over the place of ministry and the sacraments in early Christianity. Oddly, he emphasized the Christian adoption of the codex as the primary format for their publishing (as opposed to scrolls) and he never really was able to address why this was important. He certainly didn't demonstrate that any of the contemporaries found this odd or unusual. Granted the larger point is the extent to which written communication was important and unusual in the early Christian community, and this aspect was very interesting. I had the feeling he was trying to emphasize Protestant points and gloss over Catholic ones. Having said that, I think this is a useful book for any Christian.

One of the issues he raised was something that I had never considered from the point of view of the pagan (Roman) world. I knew the issue of whether or not Gentiles were required to become "Jewish" Christians was one of the first important controversies in the Church, but I had never thought about how the answer might have created problems for Gentile Christians. If they could remain what they were rather than become Jewish, that created cultural conflicts as they adopted the precepts of Christianity. Becoming Jewish would take them out of their original culture, but becoming Christian did not -- though it greatly changed their relationships to that culture.

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### **Joel Mitchell says**

Larry Hurtado explores ways in which Christians and Christianity diverged radically from the religious landscape of the Roman Empire in the first three centuries AD/CE. The characteristics he describes are largely inherited from Judaism but were regarded as bizarre, offensive, and/or antisocial in Christians who were not ethnically Jewish and thus were abandoning their duties to the gods. The points he discusses included:

- Belief in only one God and absolute refusal to participate in the worship of any other deities (and a

confusing identification of Jesus with God...a major divergence from Judaism)

- A reliance on written Scripture

- Behavioral requirements and community values significantly more restrictive than Roman culture at large - especially in the value of human life (opposing abortion, the exposure of infants, and gladiatorial games) and sexuality (limiting it to marriage in a culture where men were pretty free to sleep with anyone who wasn't married or a freeborn virgin).

The author presents the beliefs and practices of the early Christians fairly neutrally, mostly refraining from evaluating their truth or even elaborating on specific beliefs about Jesus (e.g. he's pretty coy about the exact relationship between Jesus and God the Father). He generally accepts the books of the New Testament as accurately representative of the dominant early form of Christianity though he does seem to consider many of them to be pseudonymous.

The main text of the book is complemented by copious end notes (over 40% of the page count) in which the author interacts with other scholarly works relating to early Christianity and the culture/religion of the Roman Empire. In these notes he generally argues against positions that seek to radically reinterpret or call into question the reliability of early witnesses.

Even though I have some disagreements with the author (e.g. he doesn't seem to hold as "high" a view as Scripture as I do), I found this to be a profitable and fascinating look at the tension between early Christians and the predominant culture of their day. It has interesting implications for how it has affected the way people in general now think about religion (one of his main points throughout) and for how Christians should be distinctive today (something he doesn't really explore).

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## **Brian Watson says**

I think this book has been over-hyped. That's my own opinion of course. The reason I think it's over-hyped is because I didn't find much that was new to me in this book. And, frankly, the title seems to promise more than the book fulfills. The subtitle is more appropriate. Hurtado aims to show that much of what we think to be typical of religions was actually rather new, or at least distinctive, of Christianity as it emerged in the Roman Empire. Within the Roman Empire of approximately two thousand years ago, only Judaism was, like Christianity, largely concerned with ethics and devoted to Scriptures. The pagan religions didn't require the kind of life-encompassing commitment that Christianity (and Judaism) require.

The only bits of the book that struck me as new was chapter 4, "A 'Bookish' Religion," and the portion of chapter 5 that described how Christian views on sexual immorality differed from pagan views of the time. Everything else I seem to have read from Rodney Stark or Alvin Schmidt, or others.

One major critique of Hurtado's work is that he seems to believe, without good reason and without questioning, that Paul only wrote seven letters and that the Petrine letters of the New Testament weren't written by Peter. I realize these are common views among some biblical scholars, but having studied the issue, I find the arguments against Pauline and Petrine authorship terribly weak. It's as if Hurtado is afraid to go against mainline critical views.

Hurtado's skepticism regarding the truth of the Bible is on display in one display on page 147 and the

coordinating end note 17 on page 253. On page 147, he makes reference to someone named Musonius Rufus, an "impressive first-century Stoic philosopher . . . who contended that having children was a civic duty and that infant exposure was contrary to nature and comprises disrespect for the gods. . . ." He also says that Musonius "specifically cites" instances of infant exposure and "responds" to reasons why people who do that to children. Notice that Hurtado does not weaken Musonius' statements with any words such as "allegedly," or "these words are ascribed to Musonius." However, if you look at the end note on page 253, you discover that Musonius "left no writing of his own, and his teachings have been collected from various later sources." Yet one of Rufus's sayings "has obvious resonance with the saying ascribed to Jesus." It seems that Hurtado is more sure of Rufus's words than Jesus' words. I find this to be true in such writers. They don't question what Philo or Tacitus, or anyone else wrote, but then are sure that Paul didn't write, say, 2 Timothy.

That bothers me, obviously. Yet, despite that tendency, the book does present some valuable information, particularly to those who not yet encountered this information elsewhere. It would be good to present to educated people who often assume that Christianity is "just" another religion. In fact, Christianity was quite different from other religions at the time. And though it is the proper continuation of the Jewish religion, it is quite distinct from Judaism (though Hurtado doesn't spend much time discussing that issue).

(Finished reading on July 9, 2017.)

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## **JB says**

Another excellent book by New Testament scholar Larry W. Hurtado. In the first chapter, Hurtado surveys the sorts of criticisms Christians faced from their critics, beginning with the most vociferous (Saul/Paul) through Pliny, Galen, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian of Samosata, Celsus, etc.. He then goes on to examine the nature of Christian "religion" and the then-accepted nature of religion in the Roman world.

Although occasionally a bit overly cautious with his conclusions, he nevertheless makes a powerful case that a lot of our modern assumptions about the nature of "religion" in general are actually due to the spread of Christianity, and were in fact ground-breaking innovations in the Roman world.

For instance, religious commitment that was both exclusive (unlike traditional Roman religion in its many forms) and transethnic (unlike Jewish national custom, which could be tolerated) was profoundly disruptive and offensive. Early Christianity was distinguished in both belief and practice (and, in fact, pioneered the notion of religious liberty and the decoupling of religious and ethnic identity).

While we today consider "bookishness" a natural trait of religion, it was extremely distinctive in early Christianity in the Roman world, and in fact changed the nature of reading itself (i.e., the strong and peculiar Christian preference for the codex over the bookroll gave way to the basic book format to which we're accustomed).

While we today consider ethics a natural trait of religion, this too was distinctive in early Christianity - Hurtado does a good job examining what was distinctive in Christian rejection of normalized practices like infanticide, bloodsports, pederasty, and so forth, as well as the even-handed way in which Christians abolished sexual double-standards that were common wisdom in the Roman world.

The work as a whole is an admirable successor to Robert L. Wilken's *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* and gives some insight into just why the spread of Christianity was viewed so negatively by

practitioners of Roman religiosity.

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### **Roy Howard says**

This an excellent description of early Christian communities by a New Testament scholar and historian. It is especially stunning to see how the precise moral practice of Christian communities set them apart from the Roman culture. These very practices were seen as a threat to the empire and foolish to surrounding society. Christians were known as atheists, and by their behavior they displayed a radical alternative to the prevailing norms.

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### **Matthew Showman says**

I found this book intriguing. It's written from humanistic, scholarly perspective, but the author was respectful to (and perhaps even admiring of) Christianity, as you could probably tell from the title. One of the most interesting aspects for me, personally, was the "bookishness" of early Christians, and aspect which even today affects the regard Western people (religious and irreligious) have for texts. A second was the notion of religion and identity, specifically that Christianity developed an idea that was virtually unique to all of the world, namely, that religion, ethnicity, and daily life were no longer inextricably linked. Thus, whereas today the idea that a person can freely choose a religion is a fundamental assumption (human right) within Western thought, this was novel in the era of Christianity. More than that, this assumption (and even the idea of religion as its own aspect of life) owes its origin to the rise of Christianity, which detached faith from ethnicity and culture.

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### **Leanne says**

I read this to get some basic background for reading Emmanuel Carrère's stunning new novel, *The Kingdom* (Seriously, don't miss that one!) Hurtado's book is helpful and backs up Carrère's basic presentation of early Christianity as being highly distinctive compared with the religions of European antiquity. The resistance to assimilation; the reliance on text and strong demands on lifestyle made the Christian religion stand out at the time and Hurtado gives a lot of interesting examples of what was said about Christians by the elite of the time. They showed up as more ragtag (less affluent members of society) who were much more fanatical compared to paganism, which was more about social rites and ritual and much less about strong unwavering convictions. Paganism was also more of a national religion tied to empire and Hurtado says that Christianity opened up religion as identity not tied to ethnicity or nationality. This is all only in the context of the Roman empire. But I found it stimulating to think of the ways Christianity has changed the way academics talk about religion in general. For example, we discuss Japanese Shintoism in English often using notions and concepts derived from Christianity. Not long ago, I read an article saying that Japan was one of the great atheist countries in the world. But, that can only be so, if religion is defined in terms of monotheistic constructs.

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### **Ivan says**

A bit repetitive. But full of good insights on Greco-Roman backgrounds and some of the distinctive aspects

to the Christian faith—its "bookishness," its behavioral requirements, etc. Fascinating material from a seasoned scholar. A bit repetitive. ;-)

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## **Robert D. Cornwall says**

There have been in recent centuries attempts to portray Christianity as being the product of its Greco-Roman environment. Efforts were made to demonstrate the influence of various mystery cults on Christianity, leaving the question of whether Christianity was in any way unique and distinctive. Larry Hurtado, Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, offers a detailed description of the ways in which early Christianity was quite distinctive. He offers this book as a response to what he calls our "cultural amnesia." We have forgotten both the distinctiveness of early Christianity and the mark left on our cultural mindset by this distinctive faith (p. 187).

When we think religion, we usually have in mind beliefs and practices, ethical concerns, laws, and rituals. We place Christianity and other traditions into this framework, so as to compare and contrast. Hurtado argues that our definition of religion differs greatly from the ancient world's, and that our modern definition largely stems from the emergence and growth of Christianity within the Roman world. Religion in the ancient Roman world was largely concerned with ritual, not doctrine or ethics. The one religion that has the same markers as Christianity is Judaism, but Judaism was itself a different kind of faith tradition. It was distinctive, but those distinctives were linked to ethnicity, whereas the differences expressed by Christianity were trans-ethnic.

In Hurtado's mind the first three centuries of Christianity's existence were formative. The characteristics that mark Christianity were forged in the context of a rather hostile context. Indeed, according to Hurtado, "in that ancient Roman setting, Christianity was perceived by many as irreligious, impious, and unacceptable, a threat to social order" (p. x). We may not perceive Christianity in this way, but its early compatriots did.

Why was Christianity deemed strange and dangerous? Could it be that their sense of exclusive devotion to the God revealed in Jesus put them at odds with their culture? This strangeness led to both social consequences and the possibility of physical death. They were considered odd, first and foremost, because they refused to venerate or honor the gods of Rome and of the home. Rome was rather pluralistic, but it did require giving honor to the gods. It was an act of allegiance. The fact that Jews didn't have to give religious allegiance was due to the belief their stubbornness in resisting civic religion was an ethnic rooted reality. The same couldn't be said of Christianity, which quickly crossed ethnic boundaries.

Hurtado offers a historical look at these important questions about the foundational moments of Christianity. He notes the diversity of expression, but focuses on the proto-orthodoxy that was emerging during this era and became the leading theological vision by the fourth century.

He begins the journey with a detailed description of the way in which Christianity was perceived and understood by its non-Christian neighbors, both Jewish and Pagan. The Pagan critiques are the most interesting because they seem strange to ears. To think of Christianity, as Pliny suggested, being "perverse superstition" seems beyond comprehension. By the second century Christianity had begun to be noticed. It was deemed unsophisticated and dangerous, and needing a response as seen in the responses of people like Celsus.

In chapter two Hurtado begins to explore more fully the distinctives. He shows how Christianity is a new

kind of faith. In the ancient world no distinction was made between devotion to the gods and the rest of life. Religion was simply an expression of one's culture, but for Christians it was much more. They made a distinction between culture and nation and the God revealed in Jesus. Religion was about ritual for the Romans, while little thought was given to beliefs. In a world full of gods, with temples and rituals, to worship one God who lacked idols was incomprehensible. Now there were growing numbers of trans-ethnic religions emerging at the time, including the Mithraism, which was popular among the soldiers, and the cult of Isis, which had spread widely from Egypt. But neither of these religions was exclusive. Thus, Christians were accused of atheism. It had some of the markings of Judaism, but it transcended them.

With the exception of Judaism, which had a strong ethnic identity, ancient religions were non-exclusive. Worshiping the emperor was pledging allegiance to the ruler. To say no to this call to worship was to say no to the government. While voluntary religions were emerging, they were non-exclusive. With Christianity ethnicity and religious identity were separated, the same was true of political loyalty. As Hurtado notes: "Christians refused to honor the gods on which Roman rulers claimed to base their political authority; but Christians affirmed, nevertheless, a readiness to respect pagan rulers, pay taxes, and in other ways be good citizens" (p. 103). What Christians wanted, interestingly enough, was religious freedom. As Tertullian argued, worship can't be coerced, and one could be a good citizen without the religious test. In this Christianity was revolutionary.

From identity we move to the primacy of word in Christianity. Christianity more than any other religion other than Judaism was bookish. There is a uniqueness in Christianity's efforts to emphasize "reading, writing, copying, and dissemination of texts" (p. 105). He notes that one needn't have a fully literate community to be committed to the written word. A community needed but one person who could read the word to the people. Hurtado explores in some depth the role of reading and dissemination of texts, including the ongoing canonization process that standardized texts, beginning with the Pauline letters and then the Gospels in the second century. But it wasn't just the texts that came to be seen as scripture that were shared. Numerous works were produced during the second century and beyond. Paul's letters were unique in their length. No ancient letters were as lengthy as Paul's. Even Philemon is relatively large in comparison to other Roman letters. Then there is the codex. At a time when the scroll was the preferred form of book, Christians embraced the codex, which stands close to the modern book. Thus, Christianity was a text-oriented faith.

Christianity was unique as well in its ethical emphasis. Granted Judaism did the same, but it rarely sought to extend its practices to others. Christianity on the other hand made ethics central to their faith, and sought to expand influence to the rest of the community. In this Christianity was closer to the philosophical schools than religion. Among the practices that Christians opposed was the Roman practice of infant exposure. Romans seemed have few qualms about this, but Christians rescued infants and opposed the practice. They also opposed gladiatorial spectacles. Christians tried to fit in where they could, seeking to be good citizens, but they also believed that faith had behavioral expectations. Somewhat uniquely sexual expectations were applied to males as well as females.

Christianity, as Hurtado argues throughout, was distinctive in its attitude to the religious emphasis of the day, in its exclusiveness and transethnic nature. It was distinctive in its call for religious liberty, as well as its bookishness. It was unique in the way it emphasized behavioral expectations. There are similarities, for instance, to household codes, but even these were modified.

I'm not a biblical scholar or a historian of early Christianity. Yes, I've studied the eras and have some acquaintance, but not expertise. Nonetheless, I believe that Hurtado has offered us a compelling case for the unique nature of early Christianity. I found his emphasis on the way in which contemporary understandings of religion, especially the separation of religion from culture, have their roots in this early period. I believe

that book, which is very accessible to the non-specialist, will be very helpful in understanding the roots of Christianity and how we might live out our faith in the contemporary context, so that one might give allegiance to Jesus and be a good citizen (without giving ultimate allegiance to the state). This is a needed challenge to our cultural amnesia, and thus I highly recommend it.

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## **Coyle says**

Excellent!

Interview with the author available here:  
<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/the-...>

(Or through iTunes 'Christian Humanist Profiles' podcast.)

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