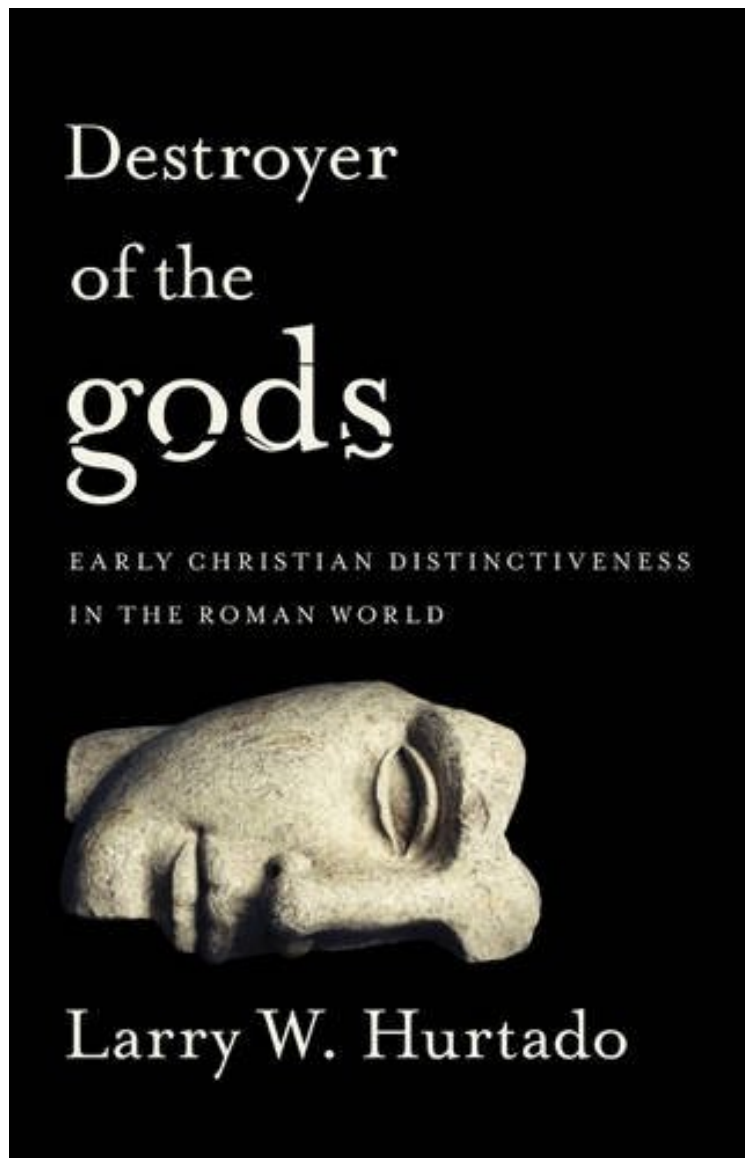


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Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World

Larry W. Hurtado

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Larry W. Hurtado : Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World:

56 of 57 people found the following review helpful. Superb Book on Early Christian Distinctives By Sean McDowell, Ph.D. What was unique about Christian practices and teachings in the first three centuries of the church? And how did such a minority faith which was considered irrelevant, extreme, and at odds with the role religion is supposed to play in a pagan society ultimately prevail? In his recent book *Destroyer of the gods*, New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado focuses on the first of these questions. But his book also has powerful implications for the second. Hurtado explains how Christianity was viewed by pagans in ancient Rome: In the eyes of many of that time, early Christianity was odd, bizarre, and in some ways even dangerous. For one thing, it did not fit with what religion was for people then. Indicative of this, Roman-era critics designated it as a perverse superstition. [1] Although Christians in the early church aimed to be good citizens, and to show due respect and care for both their neighbors and the State (as Christians do today), their beliefs in Jesus as the one true God put them at odds with the prevailing culture (as Christian beliefs and practices increasingly do in our secular culture today). In fact, as Hurtado observes, Christian beliefs were even considered more problematic to Rome than Jewish beliefs. How so? While Jews also refused to honor pagan deities, there is little evidence Roman-era Jews aimed to persuade the masses to abandon their gods. And yet this is exactly what Christians did. In other words, Christians were often allowed to hold Christian beliefs in private, but should expect to sacrifice those beliefs when they enter the public arena. Roman authorities had little problem that Christians worshipped Jesus as God. Their problem, however, was that Christians refused to worship other deities. While Christians considered worshipping pagan deities idolatry, Romans considered such behavior defiance to the state. Jews were often excused since their behavior could be chalked up as a matter of national peculiarity. But Christians could not appeal to any such ethnic privilege. As a result of their refusal to worship the pagan deities, Christians experienced popular abuse, intellectual condemnation, and persecution on a local and (eventually) statewide level. And yet, amazingly, Christianity prevailed. There are many factors that can help explain the growth of Christianity. But as Hurtado points out in *Destroyer of the gods*, Christian distinctives must be taken into consideration as a piece of the puzzle. Consider a few Christian distinctives, which are often taken for granted today: 1. When people worship God, Christians claimed they should withdrawal from worshipping the gods of their families, cities, and peoples. The exclusivist stance of Christianity was so offensive that Christians were often labeled atheists. 2. Christians emphasized that there is one transcendent God who passionately loves his people and can be related to personally. Pagans often spoke of the love of gods toward humans in terms of *philia*, which indicates friendship. But Christians spoke of God with the Greek term *agap*, which connotes a deep love and firm commitment to the one loved. 3. Christianity was a bookish religion. Like Jews, Christians read Scripture publicly, produced voluminous numbers of texts, and committed remarkable resources to copying and disseminating them widely. In fact, in their eagerness to disseminate Scripture, Christians were at the leading edge of book technology of the second and third centuries. 4. Christianity uniquely linked religious beliefs with ethical living. As a result, Christians were on the leading edge of overturning popular practices in ancient Rome such as infant exposure, gladiator battles, sexual abuse of children, and sexual perversity. Christians uniquely called men to the same kind of sexual loyalty demanded of women. 5. Christianity was uniquely diverse. In ancient Rome, there was social stratification between men and women, slaves and free, rich and poor. But Christians began with assemblies that were diverse in gender, age, and social status. Even the least important members of Roman society, such as women and slaves, were considered equal members in the church. There are many other Christian distinctives in the first century, but if you want to read them, you're going to have to check out *Destroyer of the gods*. If you are interested in comparative religion or the ancient roots of Christianity, and how this may apply to the Christian faith today, you will thoroughly enjoy the book. 38 of 38 people found the following review helpful. One of the most IMPORTANT works on Early Christianity in a LONG time!! By sojotneo Larry W. Hurtado is Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. Hurtado has authored numerous books related to early Christianity, including *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* and *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*. Most recently, Hurtado has written a blockbuster of a book and thought-provoking investigation into the distinctiveness of early Christianity within the Greco-Roman context. *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* is an important and well-thought monograph that explores various aspects of the early Christian movement. The goal of the book is to display the uniqueness of early Christianity in the vast religious landscape of the Greco-Roman world. The book begins with a quick survey of early Christianity through the lenses of non-Christians, including both Jewish and Pagan critiques of Christians. Hurtado concludes, a good many outsiders, who were the overwhelming majority of the populace, regarded Christians and Christianity as objectionably different and certainly not simply one group among an undifferentiated lot (p. 35). It is this discovery that establishes the subsequent chapters as the reader is guided through the distinctiveness of early Christian ethics, worship, and more. The entire book is fascinating and chocked full of rich historical commentary on the Christian movement of the second century. However, one of the most exciting chapters in the book has to do with the early Christian interest with the written word. That is, according to Hurtado, the early Christian movement was particularly interested in books a bookish religion. The implications of this fly in the face of the popular misnomer that early Christians were primarily concerned with oral tradition rather than written words. Early Christianity, according to Hurtado, was uniquely fond of reading, writing, copying, and

circulating text. In fact, the modern book likely discovers its origins in the early Christian utilization of the codex. Thus, Hurtado concludes, the young Christian movement [was] distinctively text oriented in context of the varied religious environment of that time . . . textuality was central, and, from the outset, early Christianity was, indeed, a bookish religion (p. 141). *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* by Larry W. Hurtado is a worthwhile investment for anyone interested in early Christianity. Hurtado is usually lucid in his presentation, but this book easily tops the charts of Hurtado's life works. The reader will likely appreciate Hurtado's interaction with contemporary scholarship and sensitivity to make the subject matter accessible to a wide range of readership. While much more could surely be said about Hurtado's treatment of early Christian ethics and worship, in my opinion, the chapter outlined above is alone worth the price of the book. It comes highly recommended! I received a review copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255: Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Provocative Read on both the distinctiveness of Christianity and its capital contribution to the western conception of religion. By Todd Murphy. Larry Hurtado has produced a fantastic read here defining not only the distinctive character of the early Christian social movement in the Hellenistic-Roman world, but also its capital contribution to Western civilization and how we conceive religion in general today. Hurtado presents a litany of perspectives on early Christian practice, traditions, and above all, personal and social ethics. If I were to define Hurtado's position in a nutshell it would say (A) Christianity was unique for its broad and consistent ethical teaching, and (B) it radically determined the direction of Western civilization in its universal expectation that all mankind, Christian or not, were/are bound by a universal standard of Divine law. Finally (C) it was this ethical teaching and influence that led to its overall success. I found Hurtado's book deeply insightful. While I wanted to give it a 5 star rating, and I would for thesis and content, I feel that the prose was somewhat long-winded and repetitive. I honestly feel that the book could have easily been 35% shorter and actually improve presentation and make the subject matter hit harder. The book is for sure well-researched displaying the breadth of Hurtado's expertise. Nevertheless, for researchers, more subtitles and sharper table of contents would have been welcome.

"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.

"This is a fascinating survey of the features that made Christianity distinctive in antiquity and ultimately successful. Hurtado discusses the Christian concept of an exclusive veneration of God, the trans-ethnic and trans-local religious identity, the central role of books and learning and distinctive and challenging forms of behavior within their ancient context. The glimpses into the first three centuries may even inspire contemporary Christians to find their identity and negotiate between social assimilation and difference." Jrg Frey, Chair of New Testament Studies, University of Zurich. "Hurtado sets out to awaken us from our 'cultural amnesia,' to remind us that the origin of Christianity and its remarkable success has more to do with its ability to distinguish itself from other religions in antiquity than to be one with them. Hurtado challenges readers to reconsider what have become common assumptions of religion today that there is a single God and that religious affiliation is a voluntary choice. Without the distinctive rise of Christianity, none of these would be so." April D. DeConick, Chair of the Department of Religion, Rice University. "Comprehensive and quietly authoritative, Larry Hurtado's *Destroyer of the gods* offers its readers a three-centuries' tour of the

Christianizing Mediterranean. The sweep of his panorama never sacrifices the liveliness of telling detail. For those who ask, 'What was distinctive about this new religious movement?' Hurtado offers thoughtful answers. Make room for this book, whether on bedside table or in classroom syllabus or both."

Paula Fredriksen, Distinguished Visiting Professor of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University

"In this very accessible and readable book, Larry Hurtado shows how really distinct early Christianity was in comparison to its surrounding cultures of Greco-Roman paganism and Judaism. This was not only true for aspects of early Christian life that are somewhat familiar to many of us, such as its stricter sexual code, but even here Hurtado shows that the early Christians took their code 'to the streets' and opposed the double standard of their day. Destroyer of the gods is an exciting read across a wide range of interests in early Christianity coupled with many comparisons to religious life today."

Jan N. Bremmer, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, University of Groningen

"In this lucid and wide-ranging book, Larry Hurtado convincingly shows how novel and distinctive early Christianity was in the religious world of the first century. He argues that early Christianity was in many respects a different kind of religion, and was revolutionary in the way that 'religion' has been understood ever since. Along the way, Hurtado sheds much light on the New Testament and on second century Christianity. He hopes to enhance 'our appreciation of the remarkable religious movement' that was early Christianity, and he admirably achieves exactly that."

Paul Trebilco, Professor of New Testament, University of Otago

"Clear and enlightening, Hurtado's coverage of the first centuries of Christianity explains why it was different, more philosophy than religion, and how its emergence as the supreme religion in the Roman world is less paradoxical than usually argued. This account is the nearest one can get to meeting an early Christian and quizzing them."

Robin Cormack, Emeritus Professor, Courtauld Institute of Art

"Hurtado, emeritus professor of New Testament language, literature, and theology in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, discusses the history and evolution of ecumenical Christian practices in this elegantly straightforward book...Hurtado does an excellent job of walking readers through...how very odd early Christianity was for its place and time and how it came to overturn and replace ancient systems and beliefs. Hurtado writes with a measured tone and learned authority. Those wishing to know more about early Christianity will find much here."

Publishers Weekly

"Hurtado's book, written to appeal to a wide audience, explains just how odd and objectionable Jesus' followers, their counter-establishment church, and even their writings looked during the first three centuries of the Christian movement."

The Christian Century

"An important scholarly look at the birth of Christianity within the Roman embrace."

Library Journal

"Whether one applauds or disdains the values of contemporary Western culture, what we assume to be good, true, and normal has been shaped to a surprising degree by early Christianity. Demolishing taken-for-granted assumptions about what religion was, is, and can be, Hurtado's provocative exploration deserves a broad audience."

Matthew W. Bates, Quincy University, OnScript

"Destroyer of the gods is a quick and fascinating read. Professor Hurtado's book allows Christians to explore how a distinctive identity has always been deemed a threat, so that they may better identify how they will practice their faith at a time when this practice is becoming increasingly distinct. The book may be read, however, by non-Christians as well, to explore the dynamics of the collisions between any culture rooted in earthly power and those (of any faith) who profess to set limits on such power in the service of a higher Power."

Karl C. Schaffenburg, University Bookman

"Larry Hurtado reminds us that early Christianity emerged as a profoundly countercultural movement, one that could never be mistaken as mirroring the values of its environment."

Ronald P. Byars, Presbyterian Outlook

"Destroyer of the gods is a very clear and readable book and is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand issues dealt with in early Christian writers, particularly Paul's letters. I thoroughly recommend it to students of the New Testament and more widely as a reminder that there is a cost to a church which stands out in its social and cultural setting."

Tim Gill, ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission

"One does not need a modern point of departure to appreciate Hurtado's work as a historian of antiquity."

Michael Peppard, America Magazine

"Hurtado's clear and well-reasoned voice serves as an authoritative guide through the tangle of earliest Christianity in its Roman environment. From Roman accounts of early Christian oddity to early Christian book culture, Hurtado collects arcane pieces of knowledge that could well serve as material for pub quizzes and amasses them into a plausible and largely compelling analysis. It remains to be seen how someone else will take his work and build upon it."

Jonathon Lookadoo, Marginalia of Books

About the Author

Larry W. Hurtado is Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature Theology in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Born in Kansas City (Missouri), he now lives in Edinburgh.