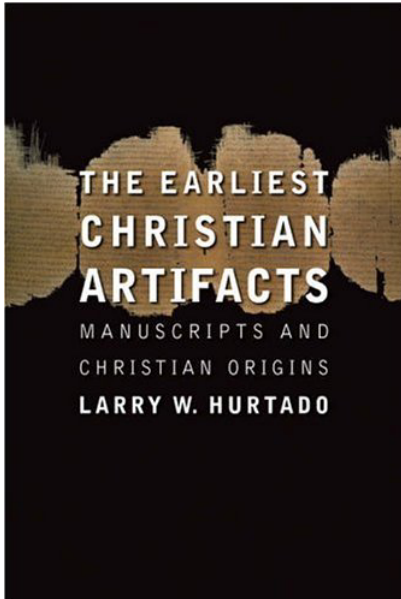


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Hurtado, Larry W.

The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins

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Larry Hurtado's most recent book, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*, offers a welcome survey of overly neglected evidence regarding the history of the church in the early post–New Testament period. While manuscripts have not themselves been completely neglected, scholarly interest in them has focused for the most part on matters of textual criticism and the use of these manuscripts to uncover the earliest form of what these texts *say*. Our almost exclusive interest in the linguistic content of early Christian manuscripts has distracted us from their important character as *artifacts*, as tangible evidence about the scribes who produced them and the Christian communities that used them. This is not something about which most scholars would need to be reminded in the case of other archaeological data; the actual linguistic content of an inscription, for instance, is clearly only part of the message it communicates to historians across the millennia, and in some instances not even the most important information it provides. In the introduction to his book, Hurtado reminds us that the same holds true for our earliest Christian manuscripts, which are (as the title suggests) among the earliest artifacts that can be identified with certainty as stemming from Christians.

Hurtado perceives scholarly interest in early Christian manuscripts (including textual criticism) to have waned severely in the twentieth century, at least in the United States (in other countries, e.g., Germany, the situation seems to have been different). Yet it appears always to have been the case that, except for the surges of interest that occur as a result of some exciting new find, the vast majority of scholars of early Christianity have focused on the linguistic content of the textual evidence, with only a small minority working on archaeology and artifacts, including manuscripts and inscriptions. Be that as it may, Hurtado is certainly not a lone voice crying in the wilderness, nor does he claim to be. A few very recent books have focused particular attention on the subject of early Christian books and manuscripts, and these are referred to and interacted frequently throughout Hurtado's book. Hurtado also explicitly emphasizes that he is not engaging in recruiting for this particular field or suggesting that all scholars of the New Testament or early Christian history become specialists in paleography and papyrology (191). Hurtado's call is for what is currently a narrow and somewhat isolated scholarly discipline to be taken into greater account by those working in other areas of the history of earliest Christianity. As such, this book's message is most welcome.

After introducing the topic of early Christian manuscripts as artifacts and the general scholarly neglect thereof (outside of the small number of scholars specifically working in this narrow discipline), Hurtado proceeds to spend the rest of the book surveying some of the insights that can be gleaned only through a study of the physical manuscripts themselves, considered as evidence of Christian material culture. His first chapter discusses what we can learn by simply looking at which early Christian books were copied, how many copies of each are extant, and what this suggests about the popularity or otherwise of various early Christian writings. The most popular book outside of those that eventually became canonical was the Shepherd of Hermas. Indeed, among the texts that came to be considered canonical, only the Psalms and the Gospels of Matthew and John are found in more copies of apparently Christian provenance than Hermas. From the same period as our single earliest copy of the Gospel of Mark, we have the same quantitative manuscript situation for several extracanonical Gospels. This important information about the number of copies of various books is not something one could ascertain simply by examining the text of a critical edition of the Greek New Testament.

The evidence from Oxyrhynchus shows how many early Christian writings, probably within decades of their composition, had made their way from elsewhere in the Roman Empire to even relatively remote cities in Egypt. The format in which specific books were copied and collected (whether on rolls or in codices, whether individually or together with other texts) may also tell us something about the status of these books as "Scripture" or otherwise for the Christians who purchased and read the copies. Unfortunately, the features that can indicate the Christian provenance of certain religious texts do not

similarly identify the Christian ownership of other forms of literature; it would have been extremely interesting to have some way of determining what *else* Christians were reading in this period. But at the very least, it is clear that Christians not only read texts that were later defined as canonical but also did not limit themselves to those writings that would be considered “orthodox.” Christians who do not appear to have been Marcionites or gnostics, if one may judge by their appreciation of the Jewish Scriptures, nonetheless read works that reflect some of these other trajectories. This too suggests that, while we may still find it useful to speak of distinct Christian “communities,” we must at the very least envisage them as communities that read one another’s literature and that were in contact with (and potentially exchanged ideas with) one another. Such information can be gleaned from the manuscripts themselves in a way that cannot necessarily be obtained from the writings of the same period.

The second chapter focuses on what is perhaps a somewhat more familiar topic among those covered in Hurtado’s study: the Christian preference for the codex. Hurtado considers many of the views expressed in earlier scholarship to reflect an inadequate acquaintance with the relevant data and statistics. At the end of this chapter (90–93), Hurtado very helpfully provides pie charts and graphs with precise data regarding the percentage of manuscripts we have from various religious traditions and the proportion of the literature from each tradition that is found in codices, rolls, and other formats. In the third to fourth centuries, the codex gradually replaced the roll as the format of choice for literary works. Not finding reason to regard Christians in this period as simply “ahead of the curve,” anticipating a cultural shift somewhat earlier than most of their contemporaries, Hurtado evaluates a number of other proposals regarding how to account for this early Christian preference. Of them, he finds most plausible Gamble’s suggestion that the collection of Paul’s letters in a single codex may have paved the way for the use of this format for Christian Scriptures more generally. Hurtado also mentions as another example of the importance of considering the physical characteristics of the codex format the question of the original ending of Mark’s Gospel. If the ending of Mark was in fact lost and the manuscript in question was a codex, then it is likely that the *beginning* of the Gospel would have been lost in the process as well. (Although Hurtado does not mention it, this is in fact the scenario proposed by N. Clayton Croy in his book *The Mutilation of Mark’s Gospel*.)

The third chapter is devoted to the study of *nomina sacra*, the scribal practice of writing certain words as contractions, usually with a horizontal line above them. Although contractions and abbreviations were well known in this period, the *nomina sacra* are distinctive, since abbreviations were normally found only in contexts in which space (e.g., inscriptions on coins) or repetition (“documentary” texts such as contracts and ledgers) made them useful, and only numbers are normally marked by a horizontal line over the

letters. While Christian interest in gematria could possibly account for the contracted form of the name Jesus, in the other instances there is no apparent symbolism to the numerical value of the words or abbreviations used. Other possible explanations for the custom of using *nomina sacra* are also surveyed in this chapter, such as a possible precedent in the various circumlocutions for the divine name in Jewish texts and the possibility of some ritual or liturgical action when these words were read. Although none of the possibilities mentioned decisively resolves the issue, the key point once again is that these are characteristic Christian visual symbols from this period and that they need to be integrated more fully into the study of this period in Christian history.

Chapter 4 is relatively short but extremely significant. It considers the *staurogram*, the tendency of Christian scribes to combine the *tau* and *rho* in abbreviations of the Greek word for “cross” into a pictogram that presumably depicts Jesus crucified. This subject is significant because it is found in manuscripts from before the time of Constantine and thus indicates that the cross did indeed serve as a Christian symbol in that earlier period. Chapter 5 is devoted to other scribal features, such as the size of Christian codices, margins, and the letters and words themselves, as well as the introduction of what Hurtado calls “readers’ aids,” which we tend to think of as entirely absent from ancient Greek manuscripts, such as punctuation and spaces to delineate sense units (whether words or paragraphs). Early Christian manuscripts differ from others from the same time period in their tendency to incorporate precisely such features, features that professors who are relatively unfamiliar with the manuscripts themselves often claim are altogether absent from our earliest copies. These features are significant because, among other reasons, they provide clues regarding the way a text was understood in the period in which a given manuscript was copied. Many of these features, considered together, also indicate a broad concern to facilitate the reading of Scripture. After some brief concluding remarks, the book includes a bibliography that includes useful web links, a catalogue of second- and third-century Christian literary manuscripts, and some black and white photos of select manuscripts.

There is no doubt that this book draws attention to an area of scholarship with which many of us are insufficiently familiar and whose resources are underutilized. Hurtado’s book also illustrates how, when considered from this perspective, the early Christian manuscripts (their verbal content notwithstanding) are like other archaeological data, inasmuch as they do not “speak for themselves.” Their interpretation will inevitably be a matter of dispute as they are related to broader scholarly hypotheses and theories about early Christianity. Although Hurtado admirably advocates that theories be shaped by the evidence (144), it is inevitable that the views we already hold will shape our interpretation of artifacts, and Hurtado himself should of course not be regarded as an exception to this. There are several instances where Hurtado seems predisposed against a particular

conclusion, and while he may well be justified in his views, at the very least it seems fair to observe that a full account of his reasoning is not provided within the pages of this particular study. For example, if (as Hurtado argues) the *nomina sacra* IH was in fact valued (and perhaps even introduced) because its numerical value of 18 corresponds to that of the Hebrew word for “life” (115–19), why might the *tau-rho staurogram* not have been used because of its resemblance to the *ankh*, the Egyptian symbol for life (145–47)? At this point, arguments offered in different chapters seem to be in tension with one another. A similar observation may be made regarding those instances in which Christians seem to have anticipated a cultural trend. Why, for example, is Hurtado willing to accept that Christians were “at the cutting edge” when it came to punctuation and other features that made reading texts easier (178–79) and yet unwilling to grant that the adoption of the codex could represent something similar?

Hurtado’s assessment of the *nomina sacra* as expressions of reverence for what were for early Christians *divine* names is on the whole plausible, and it seems certain that this was their function for at least some of the scribes who used them. Nevertheless, even the very few examples of names such as Abraham and David and words such as “power” being abbreviated in the same way raise problems for this conclusion. At the very least, such evidence indicates how much work remains to be done on this topic before a fully satisfactory solution is likely to be forthcoming. What must be emphasized in the present context, of course, is that, were we dealing with an unsolved mystery regarding the *meaning* of a Greek word in the New Testament, as opposed to the way it is *written*, far more attention would have been paid to the matter than has been paid to the question of the *nomina sacra*.

There is a possible explanation for the preference of the codex for scriptural writings and the use of the *nomina sacra*, which is only hinted at in Hurtado’s book. Early Christian writers regularly expressed the opinion that Jewish scribes had “tampered” with the Scriptures so as to remove “references to Christ.” Might it not be plausible to suggest that copies of these writings in codex form as opposed to in rolls, and including *nomina sacra*, might have been ways that Christians identified their own copies of these writings, ones guaranteed to be free of such suspected tampering? The use of the same format and characteristics for specifically Christian Scriptures would then perhaps be an extension of this. While Hurtado raises the possibility that Christians used the codex to distinguish their Scriptures from other writings viewed similarly by contemporaries (80), far more could have been said about this and about the possible underlying motives they may have had for doing so.

To the extent that other scholars trace the course of development of the canon and of Christology differently than Hurtado does, they may find his interpretation of some

aspects of the data less persuasive. But it must be said that Hurtado has devoted a great deal of research to these very topics, and only a study that seeks to interpret the development of early Christian practice in relation to all the relevant textual and material evidence will be potentially capable of providing persuasive counterarguments. Hurtado's book is at once an introduction to an important and neglected field and a contribution to his ongoing dialogue with other scholars working on these topics.

Hurtado has provided use with an important book that should be widely read by those interested in the history of early Christianity. There is a wealth of archaeological data and evidence regarding material culture and symbolism that is available and yet underutilized. I share Hurtado's hope that his book may play some part in remedying this situation.