Hurtado, Larry W.

*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*


Moschos Goutzioudis
Thessaloniki, Greece, 54632

This major work, published under the title *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Christ in Earliest Christianity*, deserves a careful reading by all scholars in New Testament studies and related fields. It provides an in-depth historical study of the place of Jesus in the religious beliefs of early Christianity down to the second century (30–170 C.E.). The book represents an achievement of substantial erudition and wide-ranging synthesis that derives from the previous works of the author in the subject. It is sure soon to replace W. Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfagen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913) as the standard work on the subject. Hurtado draws on a wide body of Christian texts in order to answer the question of how first Christians saw Jesus. In his attempt Hurtado points out how important this first period was for the formation of the later Christian tradition. The author’s aim is to offer a new historical description and analysis about the centrality of Jesus in early Christian devotion. Attention to theological development is central for the analysis of this historical phenomenon. For me in particular, this impressive volume of some seven hundred pages made for fascinating reading.

The book is divided into ten chapters, an introduction, and a brief epilogue. The last pages of the book include a bibliography (48 pages) of works cited and three indexes. Hurtado begins his discussion with a substantive introduction to what follows. In this part we find a definition of what “devotion to Jesus” means and a presentation of some major
features that prove that Christ-devotion was an utterly remarkable phenomenon and the result of a complex of forces and factors. Then there is a brief presentation of what previous scholarship has done in this field and a criticism to Bousset’s work. I summarize below what the following chapters contain.

In the first chapter, “Forces and Factors,” attention falls upon the forces/factors that shaped an extraordinarily exalted place of Jesus in the devotional life of the early Christians. Their inclusion of Christ as recipient of cultic devotion was an unparalleled innovation. According to Hurtado, these factors included Jewish monotheism, the impact of Jesus, revelatory religious experiences, and the encounter with the larger religious environment.

In chapter 2, “Early Pauline Christianity,” the author traces the place of Jesus in the religious thought of Pauline Christianity. His main concern is not Paul himself but the beliefs and practices reflected in his letters. After an exploration of the christological titles and devotional practices found in Pauline letters, Hurtado concludes that Paul’s fully developed Christology emerged early after the death of Jesus. It was not a ditheism because Jesus is consistently reverenced with reference to God in the devotional practices of Pauline communities. This way of reference is called by the author “binitarian.”

By some crucial questions concerning the development of this pattern of Christ-devotion, Hurtado turns on the third chapter of his book, “Judean Jewish Christianity.” This part notes some very important aspects of Judean Christianity and its influence in Christ-devotion practice, such as the view that the cultic invocation of Jesus took place amazingly early. Hurtado also proposes that the emphasis upon Jesus’ atoning death that we find developed in Paul may not have been made in the early Jewish Christian setting and functioned more as an apologetic explanation of Jesus’ crucifixion. In the next pages the author expresses the view that Hellenists in Jerusalem as a group did not have a distinctive Christology. He is right to underline that the most influential developments in Christ-devotion took place in early circles of Judean believers.

Chapter 4, “Q and Early Devotion to Jesus,” is structured under the christological view of the Q source. Much of the introductory material adheres to mainstream scholarship and mainly to Kloppenborg’s view. Hurtado explores every aspect of Q or relevance: the centrality of Jesus, the absence of any reference to the salvific significance of his death, christological terms, and many others. He suggests, in contrast with other scholars, that all these differences do not require a theory of a distinct form of Christianity behind Q. Again, this view is in agreement with the thesis that Q pictures one of the several ways in which early Christians expressed their devotion to Jesus.
In a lengthy chapter 5, “Jesus Books,” the author begins his discussion with a substantive introduction to the Synoptic Gospels. The presentation begins with a study of the various literary characteristics of the Gospels and then follows the portraits of Jesus in each of the Synoptic Gospels. Many pages are devoted to the christological title “Son of Man,” which according to Hurtado is not a title (305) but rather functioned in the way a name functions. He then adds that this title was an important feature of Christian devotion to Jesus in the first century that expressed an emphatic reference to Jesus as human being. On the other hand, the “God’s Son” title discloses the higher significance of who Jesus really is.

Hurtado underlines in chapter 6, “Crises and Christology in Johannine Christianity,” the central place of Jesus in Johannine Christianity, presenting all the christological titles that had been ascribed to him. His observations about the theological assertions of the Fourth Gospel that show the marks of controversy with Jewish opponents are again right (406–7). This controversy was concerned with devotion to Jesus, and the internal crisis the community faced was a christological one. Hurtado concludes that the Johannine texts show that Christian views of Jesus was the central issue distinguishing some believers from others.

In chapter 7, “Other Early Jesus Books,” Hurtado gives attention to the many extracanonical Gospels of the second century. Special interest is shown in the Gospel of Thomas because of the significantly different portrait of Jesus that it represents. After exploring the characteristics of this portrait, we find the thesis that Thomas represents a stage of development in earliest Christianity that was subsequent to the stage of the parallel material of the Synoptics. The chapter is concluded with reference to the major distinguishing features that mark off the heterodox Jesus books from the others. During this century, the author believes, there was a radical diversity and an emergence of what he calls “proto-orthodox” expressions of Christianity, two terms that are defined in the next chapter.

In order to understand the above terms better, the author traces in chapter 8, “The Second Century—Importance and Tributaries,” the development of some first Christian traditions that are presented in later New Testament books. Hebrews, Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastorals are treated as indicative of how devotional belief and practice developed in the later first century and thereafter. The main point underlined is that these writings confirm that devotion to Jesus was leading to clashes with Roman authorities.

The ninth chapter of the book, “Radical Diversity,” is devoted to movements and figures that came to be regarded as heretical by proto-orthodox Christians. Hurtado views Valentinus and Marcion as the two figures of the second century who are connected with
major heretical innovations. The basic conclusion of this part is that the devotion to Jesus of the second century constituted the pattern of belief and practice that shaped Christianity thereafter.

In his final chapter, “Proto-orthodox Devotion,” Hurtado, after presenting the three main approaches that early Christians used in interpreting the Old Testament in relation to Jesus, focuses on several phenomena of devotion to Jesus. Hurtado believes that Revelation, Ascension of Isaiah, and Shepherd of Hermas contain material that demonstrate the development of the portrayals of Jesus. Phenomena such as worship, prayer, martyrdom, and the nomina sacra are also explored in this direction. In the last pages Hurtado underlines three main doctrinal developments that are particularly interesting: Jesus’ descent to Hades, Jesus man and God, and the divine Jesus and God.

It is important to appreciate the present volume, since it provides considered responses and further reflections on the subject. The argument is solidly grounded in data and nuanced in terms of scholarship. The extensive notes and bibliography show engagement with scholarship of international scope. The book is well-produced and indexed. It is a solid work of scholarship that contributes to the historical study of the development of christological beliefs of the early Christian church, which shaped the later doctrines. Hurtado is right to observe that devotion to Jesus emerged at an amazingly early point and that, in spite of the diversity of earliest Christianity, the figure of Jesus was central in all its forms.

The book is informed and informative. Hurtado has provided a study that would benefit a wide range of readers. He has also been able to make use of and revise other christological studies running through the earlier 1970s. What we have, then, is not only the climax of Hurtado’s study in this area but a work of rare maturity of scholarship. This is signaled particularly by the measured quality and restraint of his judgments. The hardcover edition of this important work will ensure that it retains its well-deserved place in the library of students of the New Testament for years to come.