Wilhelm Bousset

_Kyrios Christos: A History of Belief in Christ from the Beginning of Christianity to Irenaeus_

Translated by John E. Steely


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Wilhelm Bousset first published _Kyrios Christos_ more than a hundred years ago, in 1913.\(^1\) This work remains the most significant contribution of the _religionsgeschichtliche Schule_, or history of religion school (RGS).\(^2\) First translated into English by John Steely in 1970 (Abingdon), this book is once again available in a centennial reprint edition published by Baylor University Press, who deserves all our gratitude.\(^3\) The pagination remains the same as in the original translation, but a new introduction by Larry Hurtado (v–xx) has been included before all the original front matter. The pages are crisply reprinted without any

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3. Steely's translation was based on the revised German edition, completed by Gustav Krüger and Rudolf Bultmann after Bousset's untimely death in 1920. The German was in its sixth edition by the time the English translation appeared (5).
haziness, as one sometimes finds in such reprints, and the paperback binding should hold up to long usage.⁴

*Kyrios Christos* is best known for its claim that the original “Palestinian primitive community” (i.e., the earliest followers of Jesus, including his disciples) confessed Jesus as the Messiah-Son of Man but did not worship Jesus as the divine “Lord” (*kyrios*). Rather, Bousset asserts that the worship of Jesus as Lord developed on “Hellenistic soil” (such places as Antioch and Damascus). Bousset’s foreword (11–23) illustrates that he considers this his most important point. However, *Kyrios Christos* is not simply a focused argument in that direction. It is rather a history of beliefs about Jesus from the earliest communities through the second century CE, conducted on the basis of the main principle of the RGS that the New Testament and early Christianity must be understood within the diverse religious contexts of antiquity. Bousset’s ambitious project in *Kyrios Christos* should be read in the context of the agenda set by his RGS colleague William Wrede, who called for a comprehensive account of the history and development of early Christian *religion*.⁵ Bousset admits that he was unable to complete this whole task (22–23), but he rightly perceived that by focusing on the center of Christianity, Jesus Christ, the development of early Christianity as a whole is greatly illuminated (23).

The first two chapters, concerning the Palestinian primitive community (31–68) and then the Synoptic Gospels (69–118), establish Bousset’s most controversial thesis and lay the foundation for the whole development he traces. Using the dominant literary-source theories of the time (Markan priority and the Q hypothesis) and the emerging form-criticism developed by Wellhausen, Dibelius, and others, Bousset separates the different strands of the Jesus tradition and discerns in the earliest material a portrait of Jesus as the eschatological Messiah-Son of Man. Not yet *worshiping* Jesus as a divine “Lord,” the earliest followers of Jesus confessed him as God’s chosen agent who would return soon to judge the world. Jesus’s death marked the moment of his exultation, not his defeat. Key to Bousset’s argument is the use of “religio-historical” analogies. Based on his extensive work in “late Judaism,”⁶ Bousset is generally unwilling to attribute to the Palestinian primitive community anything that does have not an analogy in either “Old Testament

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⁴. My copy did have one production flaw: pages 67 and 68 were printed in inverted order. That is, the contents of each page were correct and bore the correct page number, but page 68 precedes 67. Whether this flaw affects all copies of the book I do not know.
piety” or in what we would now call Second Temple Judaism. It should be noted that in this book Bousset has little interest in the words, deeds, or self-understanding of the “historical Jesus,” since his focus is the religion oriented toward Jesus. He consistently places Jesus on the side of Old Testament piety and late Judaism in contrast to Hellenistic religions and later Christian dogma (e.g., 182, 205). In the later Hellenistic communities for which the Synoptic Gospels were written, this Messiah-Son of Man piety is still present but intermingled with developments foreign to the original Palestinian community, such as “Lord” or “Son of God.”

The third and fourth chapters, on the “Gentile Christian Primitive Community” (119–52) and Paul (153–210), respectively, illuminate the radical transformation of the worship of Christ once it moved onto “Hellenistic soil.” Building on the work of Wilhelm Heitmüller, Bousset argues that the transformation of early Christian piety into a Hellenistic cult took place before Paul and that Hellenistic/gentile Christianity is the proper context for understanding Paul’s thought and development. The earlier Palestinian acclamation of Jesus, centered as it was on the Aramaic titles Messiah and Son of Man, no longer made sense in a Greek environment. In a world where rulers and gods were revered as kyrioi, “lords,” it was only natural, Bousset avers, that Jesus should now also be worshiped as the Lord, ever-present in the worship of the community rather than the object of fervent future expectation (e.g., 151). Shaped by such a context, Paul in his letters uses “Lord” as the predominant title for Jesus, while “Messiah” has become a personal name (Christos), and “Son of Man” is completely absent. Characterized by the formula en Christō (“in Christ”), Paul’s personal achievement rests in the way he individualized and “ethicized” the community-oriented mysticism that he inherited (see esp. 157) and in his reshaping of Christianity as a “one-sided religion of redemption” (see, e.g., 182–84, 188).

In the Gospel and Letters of John (ch. 5), Bousset demonstrates how elements of both streams of Christ-piety, the Palestinian and the Hellenistic, merge in a fascinating mix. Bousset sees Johannine Christianity as developed from Paul, in that it, too, presents a one-sided religion of redemption focused on faith in Christ. But terminologically, kyrios is virtually absent, while “Son of Man” reappears in a surprising fashion. Yet even though kyrios is absent as a title, the concept of the ever-present (and even preexistent) Lord is at work throughout the Gospel of John, summarized in the title “Son of God” (215). On a whole, Bousset argues that the Gospel of John reaffirms Paul’s notion of Christ as

7. In other works he does consider a historical Jesus, e.g., Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Vergleich (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1892).
redeemer but embodies it in the form of a mythical narrative of Jesus’s life, whereas Paul refused to know Christ kata sarka (“according to the flesh”) and was content with the fact that Christ died and was raised.

Based on the regnant view of Gnosticism as a widespread pre-Christian movement, Bousset argues that it was Paul’s version of Christianity as a redemption religion that attracted gnostics and that a distinctly gnostic Christology results from the absorption of Jesus into pre-Christian redeemer myths (ch. 6). This resulted in a dehistoricizing of redemption, which in Paul remained an event rooted in history. Jesus is thus much less significant in gnostic worship. Outside gnostic circles, Paul and John both have less influence in the Christ cults of the “postapostolic age” (chs. 7 and 8), the heading under which Bousset discusses the later New Testament literature and the apostolic fathers. But Christ as kyrios (which was not a Pauline invention anyway) remains the dominant focus of Christian worship and experience, and as Christ is increasingly made the center of worship, he is increasingly equated with God.

The last thread of the early belief in Christ is the Logos theology of the apologists (ch. 9), especially Justin, but also Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Tertullian. After discussing the origins of the Logos concept (both “Greek-Stoic” and “Oriental”), Bousset shows how the apologists appropriated it to purvey a rational and universal Christian religion. But their continued commitment to the worship of Christ as the Logos incarnate (417) kept them from completely transforming Christianity from religion into philosophy.

In the final chapter Bousset argues that the various lines of Christology—cult, mysticism, and rationalism—converged in Irenaeus, “the Schleiermacher of the second century” (421). Irenaeus takes the veneration of Christ as Lord and indeed God as given, so that his focus is on negotiating the apparent tension between Paul’s Christology of redemption and the universalizing tendency of the Logos theology: Why did God have to become a man? The answer, for Irenaeus, is the uniting of humanity with God, “deification” (423–24 especially). Furthermore, in an era of increasing debate between gnostics and the proto-orthodox, Irenaeus appropriated Paul but blunted the elements of Pauline theology that were conducive to Gnosticism, such as the one-sided focus on redemption. Thus in one of Bousset’s many moments of “lyrical grace” (see Steely’s translator’s preface, 5), he concludes, “Since all this was eliminated from Paulinism, there remained the ecclesiastically usable Paulinism. The volcano burned out, and its flaming masses of lava became the fertile soil of a new world.”

In the century since its first publication, Bousset’s Kyrios Christos has exerted enormous influence even while attracting intense criticism and discussion. Hurtado’s introduction (v–xx) helpfully surveys this reception and rehearses the well-known critiques of the
book, some of which form a major part of Hurtado’s own research. In particular should be noted the inadequate portrait of early Judaism (with the attendant dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism) and an “orientalizing” tendency, both of which characterized much of the work of the RGS. In Bousset’s defense, however, the charge that he consistently isolated Jesus from his Jewish environment (vii–ix, citing Suzanne Marchand and Susannah Heschel) does not really apply to Kyrios Christos, even if true of Bousset’s other work (e.g., Die Predigt, Die Religion des Judentums). As noted above, Bousset consistently uses the absence of certain ideas (e.g., Son of God, Jesus = Lord) from “Old Testament piety” and “late Judaism” as a criterion for excluding it from the faith of the Palestinian community, and he consistently groups Jesus’s piety with that of the Old Testament.

Two more specific critiques should be mentioned here. First, assumptions of both a widely recognized Son of Man figure in early Judaism and the existence of a pre-Christian redeemer myth have been found to be largely without evidence (for references, see Hurtado on vii and xv–xvii). Bousset’s argument rests at several points on both of these scholarly constructions, and their demise significantly weakens key pillars of his argument. Second and more specifically, Bousset was never able to account satisfactorily for Paul’s statement “Marana tha” in 1 Cor 16:22, which is Aramaic for “Our Lord, come.” Bousset was unsure how exactly to account for this and fluctuated on the matter (see 129 and xii–xiii in Hurtado’s introduction). But while Bousset saw this as a singular counterinstance to the grand development he traced, for many readers (see examples on xii–xviii) until today this seemingly tiny piece of the puzzle signified that the development of early Christian worship of Christ could not be so easily divided into discrete Palestinian-Jewish and Hellenistic-Gentile stages. Worship of Jesus as Lord may, in fact, go back to the earliest, Aramaic-speaking followers of Jesus (so Hurtado, xvii).

In light of a century of debate and discovery, it may now seem that the only thing monumental about Kyrios Christos was how wrong it turned out to be. Yet the inadequacy of Bousset’s answers should not obscure the insight and manner of his questions. At the heart of Bousset’s work lies a recognition of the diverse experiences, practices, and beliefs of early Christians. However one fits the pieces together, one must first perceive the differences present in the sources. Even if different answers are now preferred regarding the chronological and geographical aspects of the development of

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9. Among numerous publications relevant to this discussion, see Hurtado’s most expansive work, in which he offers a construction of early Christ-worship on a scale approaching that of Bousset: Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). One of the central differences between Hurtado and Bousset is that Hurtado does not find the worship of Jesus as a divine figure to be impossible within first-century Palestinian Judaism, even while maintaining its monotheistic character.
Christology, the basic question remains significant: How and why did the worship of Jesus arise? Furthermore, in an age when hyper-specialization has only continued, Bousset’s attempt at constructing a synthetic portrait of early Christian religion is to be applauded. Finally, it would be hard to overstate the significance of Bousset and his RGS associates for the history of modern research on the New Testament and Christian origins. For those who want to understand the shape of the discipline over the past century, I can think of no better place to begin than with Kyrios Christos.