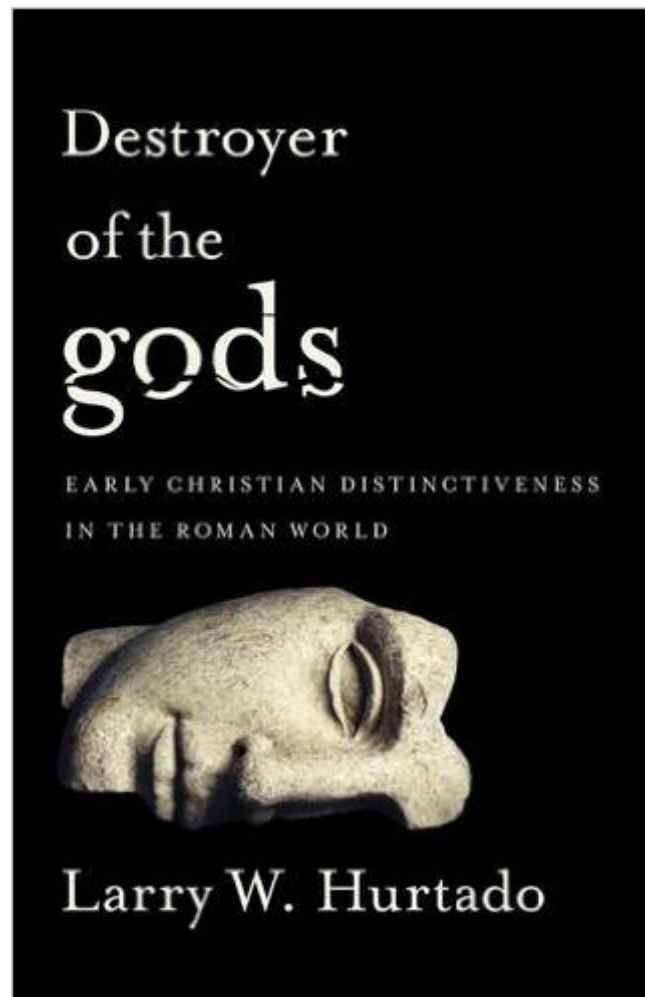


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Destroyer Of The Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness In The Roman World



Synopsis

"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.

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Customer Reviews

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!!

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