

DESTROYER OF THE GODS

Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World

By Larry W. Hurtado

PREFACE

xi—Focus of book is on first 3 centuries AD

xii—Christianity in the first 3 centuries different than the 1500 years of the European version of institutional Christian religion. Christianity was a rejection of the religions of the day, actually.

xiii—Jonestown reference

INTRODUCTION

1--Focusing on what made Christianity unusual in the Roman period.

2--Early Christianity considered odd, bizarre, dangerous, a “perverse superstition.”

2—The Birth of Christianity

- Began 30 AD. Known as “Christians” by end of first century.
- Roman Judea—spreads after crucifixion/resurrection to Damascus, Antioch (ancient Syria). Then in a decade or two to Turkey, Greece, Rome, Alexandria.
- Started with Jews, then spread to non-Jews (Gentiles)
- Executed for faith
 - 42AD—James Zebedee (Herod Agrippa)
 - 62AD—James the Just (at the behest of Ananus)
- 1,000 Christians by 40AD
 - 7,000-10,000 by 100AD
 - 200,000+ by 200AD
 - 5-6 million by 300AD
- By 100AD—about 100 sites/communities of Christians
 - By 200AD—about 200-400 sites

4—View of Christianity mostly negative by culture. Severe persecution eras include:

- 250AD--Decius
 - 303AD—Diocletian (notice these two eras just prior to Constantine)
- Then: 313AD—Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. (Edict of Milan)

5—Constantine probably adopted Christianity because it had already become so successful despite effort to destroy it. Quote: “No other ‘cult’ grew as same speed.” Note: Islam—few centuries later—grew at warp speed but often at the point of the sword.

Christianity grew largely due to: The power of persuasion. Preaching, intellectual arguments, “miracles” exhibiting Jesus’ power, moral suasion of Christian behavior (including martyrdom).

5—Historical Distinctive

7—Successful religious movements in that day had a continuity and tension with culture. Not alien but distinct.

8—Shakers illustration. Too severe. (Rob, be in the world but not of it.)

8—Epistle of Diognetus—GOOD—unknown author—defends and discusses new emerging Christian faith. He goes on to talk about...

- Romans “discard unwanted babies.” Christians do not.
- Google—Infanticide—common throughout the Roman Empire. Excavation of Hambleton (SE England) in 1912 found bones of 97 infant in mass grave—largest of its kind in Britain.

9--Plentiful religious traditions of the day—only Christianity and Judaism continue today.

9—Christianity sweeping growth amazing (Islam and Buddhism similar)

10—Which Christianity

- Orthodox vs. heretical. By the 2nd Century heresies were forming.
- Proto-orthodox—Orthodoxy before the councils. True belief. OT, monotheistic, apostolic, teachings of Jesus. (Rob—go back, stand true, hold tight, lift up.)
- Vs. Heresies—like Marcionite's (did not treat the OT writings as Scripture and OT God diff than NT God). Gnostics. Valentinian Christianity—Valentinians, 2nd Century AD, form of Gnosticism, salvation of gnosis or esoteric knowledge (consider Paul in I Cor 1—Greeks Wisdom). Ebionites and others.
- Rob—Orthodox Christianity. (Don't add to it or take from it—today, conspiracy theories, hidden insights, etc).
- Don't mix and stir. Stand true to orthodox faith. Consider Jude's admonition.
- NT is "perhaps the most significant and influential literary product of "proto-orthodox" Christianity. (for ex, Marcion Christians only accepted Paul as a valid apostle and only one Gospel—a "version" of Luke.
- Proto-orthodoxy honored all the books of the emerging NT Canon.
- Orthodox Christianity was truly remarkable in the Roman period.

CHAPTER 1—EARLY CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY IN THE EYES OF NON-CHRISTIANS.

15—Jewish Responses

15—Saul/Paul—sought to destroy (Gal 1:13, 1 Cor 5:9; Phil 3:6). Saw Jesus movement as a threat.

18—Key—"inappropriate reverence for Jesus." See Romans 1:3-4; I Cor 15:1-11; Acts 2:32-36.

19—Messiah-claimant—challenge to Roman rule. Priestly authorities ALSO saw Jesus as false teacher.

20—Early tensions. Acts accounts and Josephus. Very good!

20—Pagan Criticism

TACITUS

21-22—Nero and Tacitus—GOOD. False accusations.

PLINY

22-23—Pliny "the younger" (magistrate). Deny or die. Stem the spread? Pagan temples (deserted).

Recant or be punished

23-26—Social and economic factors. Economic impact. Christians stood out—hostilities. Idolatry.

Different category. Defacto Criminalization.

GALEN

27—Physician. Intellectual critique. Defective philosophy. Justin the martyr. Pagan recognizes virtue.

MARCUS AURELIUS

27-28—Disdainful attitude toward Christians. Meditations. Gifted student of philosophy. Interesting that MA/Meditations—had a keen sense of ethics and virtue. But still felt Christianity at odds with Roman culture.

LUCIAN

28-29—Late 2nd Century. Wrote "The Death of Peregrinus." Mocks Christians. Mocks them for their refusal to honor traditional deities.

CELSUS

29-30—2nd Century Pagan writer. "The True Word" was a critique of Christianity (175-180AD). Origen writes a refutation of this several decades later.

30-31—Ridiculed OT, Gospels, Jesus' life and teachings. Jesus was an illegitimate child, that learned magic in Egypt (and more false statements).

32-33—Growth of Christianity—100AD=7,000 to 10,000. 200AD=200,000. 300AD=5-6,000,000.

33—Both Lucian and Celsus wrote, giving credence to size and force of Christianity (if small and insignificant they would not have written it could be argued).

33—False accusations—Christians labeled “monstrous and utterly repugnant, the very dregs of the nations.” (incest, murder, cannibalism, human sacrifice)

34-35—2nd Century was volatile. But by the end of 2nd Century, Christianity was on its way toward dominance. Other religious movements were not the issue—Christianity was seen as a force to be reckoned with. Unparalleled disdain—see quote here.

CHAPTER 2—A NEW KIND OF FAITH

38—Accused of atheism (new religion)

42-43—“Religion” meant and used different in ancient times. Religious practices vs. religions beliefs discussed.

44—Note—The pagan demand to worship the traditional gods was intended to secure and promote social and political unity.

44—A World Full of Gods

45—Roman pantheon of deities—Jupiter, Zeus, etc. A buffet of gods—a virtual cafeteria of Roman-era deities from the many nations. (melting pot). Exclusivity seemed bizarre.

45—Example. Little town in N. Italy, Val di Non—archaeologists found inscriptions dedicated to Jupiter, Minerva, Apollo, Saturn, Mercury, Mars, Venus, Diana, Luna, Hercules, Marsyas, Isis, and only one deity native to that area, Ducavivius. This was a small town and still notice the diversity and mixture of deities. Philippi in Macedonia featured over a dozen including—Jupiter/Hera, Minerva/Athena, as well as Vertumnus (an Italian deity), and others. Farther to the east, in Nicomedia (present day Turkey), there are over 40 deities mentioned. (Rob—many today have mutated Christianity to serve their own purposes—be careful.)

47—Ponder—We think of religion of something we do (go to church, remember Sabbath) vs. Romans = more. (Rob—do vs. are/become. Christians—little Christs.)

47—Romans households, slaves included, gathered daily to reverence the gods. There were processions and sacrificial offerings to the guardian god or goddess of the city. There was nothing like the modern notion of a separate, “secular” space of life free from deities and relevant ritual.

48-49—Various deities linked to sites, venues, spheres of life. Outright refusal to worship deities was deemed bizarre, even antisocial, and, worse still, impious and irreligious. Major business—Central city space, altars, donate, raise animals for sacrifice, craft workers, objects, etc, all focused on worship of the gods.

49—Gods & Idols

49-50—Christians were expected to worship “Roman gods” and idols. Refusal to worship them, like for example the goddess Roma (that conferred legitimacy on Romans rule), was very noticeable. Idols (Greek word eidolon, meaning “image” or “phantom”) were to be avoided, for Christians. See I Thess, approx. 50AD, church with former pagans who Paul challenged to “turn away from idols.”

51-52—Idols=phantom=pejorative word. Paul’s writing reflects a blatant disdain for all pagan gods. I Cor 8-10 is an interesting context. “Idols, idolatry, idol offerings.” Pagan converts living with pagan family members and in a pagan culture.

53—The Particular Christian Offense

53-54—Cease and desist—exclusivity in worship. Total withdrawal (even the Jews practiced some Roman traditions) of Roman worship practices. Refusal to worship a “god” was considered disloyalty and blatant

disregard for the welfare of city, etc. Subversive. Key point=To stop worshipping Roman gods and exclusively worship Jesus. Big problem.

55-56—Jews could get away with it because of Jewish ethnicity. Not so for Christians. There was no precedent for withdrawal.

56-57—Polycarp—early 2nd century Christian leader—the hostile crowd demanding his execution are pictured as shouting, “away with the atheists!” The charge of “atheism” reflects the view of many of the Roman era that Christians were seriously impious and irreverent, failing to exhibit the proper religious stance toward the gods. Note: In short, the radical selectivity and exclusivity of early Christian worship was neither acceptable nor even readily comprehensible to the wider Roman-era public.

57—I Cor 8:4-6. Many will interpret scripture to serve their ends. But this speaks to me about their exclusivity and orthodoxy.

58-62—Revelation offers stern words toward those not practicing exclusivity. Not many rites but some (Romans had more). Baptism, call on the name of the Lord, shared meal, recitation of the Lord’s prayer, plus other prayers, corporate worship (unusual for other groups).

62—The Christian God

62-64—Worship practices crucial for all—but early Christian beliefs about their God was also very distinct and vitally important to the early church. Beliefs, doctrine, orthodoxy. I Tim 6:15-16 speaks about a transcendent God (vs. idols). There is one true God vs. false idols. He is almighty and personal at the same time. Rom 5:1-11, 8:31-39 (notice the transcendent scriptures above and then the relational and personal God scriptures here) show a personal and loving God.

64-66—Love—pagan thinkers refer to love and think mostly about eros and philia. Christianity focuses on agape. Agape appears 143 times in NT and agapao (verb) 116 times. In not other group (religion)—did love play such an unimportant role. To critics, all of this was preposterous.

66—One God...One Lord (Jesus)

66-67—Many early Christians made up of Jews. Christianity emerged with the Jewish tradition (Judaism). Interesting quote—“the Jesus movement was initially one among a number of Jewish religious options of the Roman era.”

67—Ignatius, early 2nd Century AD. Early references to a fully distinguishable and contrasting Christianity vs. Judaism. So interesting...the Jesus movement was a mutation within Judaism in early days (Rob, what about the mutation today away from Jesus and co-mingling many ideas). The key for Ignatius and his orthodox contemporaries...Big Change: Jesus is Central, King, Lord.

69-71—Jesus as Lord. Something new. Rom 10:9-13. This is something NEW! Jesus Movement. Distinctive beliefs, claims, practices, figure (Jesus). Good (in Rome context)—I Cor 8:4-6 (NT Shema). Jesus became central. I Cor 1:2 (Powerful in light of Rome context). Jesus movement—a mutation in ancient Jewish tradition (Hurtado). Revolutionary and new!!!

CHAPTER 3—A DIFFERENT IDENTITY

77-78—Religion “assigned” at birth. In Roman era, all were required to worship the gods. Herodotus (historian)—laws, customs, gods, etc.=is assumed for each person depending on their culture. No options. Assumed. Assigned. Based on the above mentioned realities.

78—Different gods of various people groups included—

Roman—Jupiter, Juno, Mars, Venus, etc. Greek—Zeus, Hera, Athena, etc. others for Egyptians, Syrians, Phrygians, Gauls, etc.

79-80—Jews—Interestingly, their unique approach to religion—only one God, etc, was accepted and understood in Roman world. Various groups were linked to/obliged to Roman deities. Adaption to

Roman ways and Adoption of Roman gods and practices impacted many. Rome was a melting pot attracting many people and religions and false gods.

80-83—Cults like Goddess of Rome or Dea Roma was on the grow. Also Emperor Cults (emperor worship). Many devotees to Rome and their emperors...this was translocal. Emperor worship was added to other deities. Mystery cults were prominent, too.

86—Early Christianity was the only new religious movement of the Roman era that demanded this exclusive loyalty to one deity thereby defying all other cults of the time as rivals.

87—Early Christian Religious Identity

87-91—Notice Paul in I Cor 8-10. See also Rev 2:12-29. Christianity and its exclusivity of Jesus worship was very different. Early Christianity codified beliefs and practiced faith uniquely.

92-93—Christianity was translocal and transethnic. Gentile discipleship was key. Gal 3:28, one in Christ.

94—Labels

95-96—“Christians”—first used by outsiders. “Christians”—likely coined by outsiders...prior to Nero’s brutal persecution of 64AD. (Rob—interesting question...is today more like 64AD or more like 313AD). I Peter—“Christians” became self-designation (by time of composition of NT I Peter 70-120AD).

Ignatius—powerful example of self-proclaimed Christian, Christ follower.

97-98—Labels=Christian, Christians, brothers, believers, saints, holy ones, the assembly, disciples, the Way. Ekklesia—translated “the church” today, (called out or forth) (Rob—called out to go forth as His representatives—that is a vital and big responsibility). Also translated “the assembly of God” or “assemblies of God.” In a key text from Qumran, the site of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Hebrew term qahal is used to designate the “chosen people of God of the last days.” Which is the exact equivalent of the Greek expression frequently used in the NT, “the assembly/church of God.” (Greek: ekklesia tou theou).

99-100—The Early Church focused on Jesus. Once separated from God, not united in Christ.

Incorporating Jews and Gentiles and all who believe. United in Christ. A radical widening of the circumference of God’s People. See I Peter 1—exiles of the dispersion, largely non-Jewish. See 1:18-21 and 4:3-6. Key: All are part of a chosen race, royal priesthood, etc. I Peter 4:16—Christian term used.

101-102—Early Christianity was offensive. But why? Belief in Christ and followerhip of Jesus. The Cross was offensive. To Jews and Gentiles including Romans.

103—Politics—Romans 13 and other (I Timothy 2:1-3; I Peter 2:13-17). “Christians refused to honor the gods on which Roman rulers claimed to base their political authority; but Christians affirmed, nevertheless, a readiness to respect pagan rulers, pay taxes, and in other ways be a good citizen. Excellent page—whole page. Quote by Tertullian is awesome. And then Hurtado quote about being good citizens is key as well. (ROB—we like the early church believe in the importance of being a good citizen.)

(Tertullian was an early Christian author from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. He was also an early Christian apologist and polemicist against heresy, including contemporary Christian Gnosticism. Know as the first writer in Latin to use the term trinity.

CHAPTER 4—A “BOOKISH” RELIGION

105-7—Christianity was “unusual” as a bookish religion (except for Jewish, of course). The “text” was at the heart and soul. Reading...and public reading important and practiced. Importance reflected in Justin. I Tim 4:13. 2 Tim 3:16. I Tim and 2 Tim ascribed to Paul but most likely written posthumously after his death about 64AD. So prob written 70-120AD.

108—Availability of the written text assumed today, but not so in the Early Church.

109—Christian and Synagogue Practices

114-16—Justin Martyr. Gospels being read mid-second century it seems.

118—Writings

118-120—Many extra biblical writings, gospel-like. Christianity was prolific and varied in writing output. Other religions built shrines. No known church structures prior to about the third century AD...but there is a huge catalogue of texts. Another way Christianity was different.

120-121—Interesting—length of ancient letters vs. length of Paul's. Paul's letters resemble the works of philosophers more than Roman era religious groups. Paul's use of letters more serious than any philosophical and religious group of his time.

--Average Greco-Roman letters averaged 87 words. Hardly ever exceeding 200 words. Over 14,000 exist. Contrasted with:

--Cicero 796 letters, ranging from 22 to 2,530 words.

--Seneca, 124 letters, ranging from 149-4,134 words.

--Paul's smallest letter, Philemon, was 395 words. 2 Cor, 4,448; I Cor, 6,807; Romans, 7,101; I Thess, 1,472; Phil, 1,624; Gal, 2,220. 2 Cor 10:10—funny...Paul's letters more impressive than his person.

122-27—Mark, 65-75AD, first gospel. Matthew and Luke used Mark. John adds prologue and dialogue material. Gospels--unprecedented volume of bio material of one person (Jesus).

--Mark, 11,000 words; John, 15,000+ words; Luke 19,000; Luke and Acts together, 38,000 and comprise 25% of NT. Hebrews, 5,000. Revelation, 9,800 words, 6th largest in NT.

129—Copying & Circulation

129—Considerable time to copy each book. Romans, Paul's longest letter, probably took 11.5 hours. Gal, 3.6 hours. Phil, 2.6 hours. I Thess, 2.4 hours.

133—Physical and Visual Distinctives

133-137--Codex=ancestor of modern leaf book. Christians were leader in use of codex. Codex allowed for larger texts over rolls.

CHAPTER 5—A NEW WAY TO LIVE

143—Early Christians sought to live out commitment—social and behavioral practice of faith was huge. Be Christlike. Be Christian.

144—The Roman Era Setting

144-5—Roman discarding of infant babies, known as infant exposure, typically involved casting the unwanted newborn baby on a trash-heap site or some abandoned place. The infant was left to die or be collected by someone, usually to be reared for slavery. Today this creates great revulsion, but not in that era. Boys preferred. Girls thrown out. Common practice. (Brutal)

146-7—500,000 new slaves needed annual in Roman Empire. One estimate states 150,000 were supplied via discarded infants. Others sold off to brothels, prostitution. Christian author Justin condemns as does Jewish writer Philo. Philo goes into details of revolting ways infants discarded (strangle, thrown into sea, took to deserted place where they may be devoured by beasts or carnivorous birds, or taken in by traveling passengers). Josephus, too. Pagan writers thought it unusual that Jews did not abandon unwanted babies. Stoic writer, Masonius Rufus, having children was a civic duty, and that infant exposure was contrary to nature and looked down on by the gods. Even Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the late first or early second century, talked about the Germanic tribes (barbarians), referring to the chastity of their wives and noted they did not discard their infants. And of course Jesus. Shows "civilized Rome" to be the true Barbarians, not the Germanic tribes.

148-9—Gladiatorial contests and other spectacles. Reflected the power of the emperor and the empire he presided over. 50k would attend in Colosseum.

150—Fitting In and Being Different

150-2—Living in the world and not of it. Christians had to live out their convictions without working up the ire of family and friends. (even more than gov't). I Cor 8-10, Rom 14, meals and meat offered to idols. Key statement—I Cor 10:31-33. Crucial passage. Honor God and win the lost. What we do and how we act is important. There is a the big picture to remember, not just personal bias.

152-3—Christianity and Christians explained by others. Good citizens but different. Text goes on to say “live on earth but citizenship in heaven.” KEY stuff here. Many quotes from the Epistle to Diognetus.

Google on Epistle of Diognetus—“Example of Christian apologetics, writings defending Christianity against the charges of its critics. The Greek writer and recipient are not otherwise known. (Rob—defend and describe.)

154—A “Religion” with Behavior Demands

154-5—Roman era religion had little to say about ethics. Christianity, on the other hand, had a lot to say about “how to live.” Behavior and Ethics was/is crucial. In fact, much of Paul’s writing deals with Christian behavior. See I Thess 4:1-12, “how to live to please God.”

156-8—Sexual behavior. Paul addressed often as it was a huge problem. (I Cor, I Thess, etc).

Porneia...illicit sex. Holiness and honor required. Notice page 157—major page/quotes dealing with the various standards in Rome—one by women and the other by men. Paul cuts through this and holds men to a high standard. Very good section here.

158-9—Paul encourages them to encourage one another in love and good deeds. (I Thess 5:11—Build up).

160-5—Sex and marriage in I Cor. To Paul, moral behavior was important. I Cor 6:9-20 another key passage. As believers, they were now required to think differently about sex and many other things. Christianity vs. the prevailing attitudes of the time are discussed. Including sex within marriage. Roman immorality was severe and quite twisted. In the Roman era, sex with prostitutes and courtesans, and with young boys as well, was not only tolerated but even affirmed as a hedge against adultery—specifically sex with another man’s wife or with a freeborn virgin.

166-8—Husband of one wife/wife of one husband. Loyalty to one spouse was honorable. Sexual abuse of children was common in the Roman world, but condemned by early Christianity, as seen in the Didache and other.

169—Pagan Philosophical Voices

172—Religion & Morality in a Pagan Religious Group

172-4—interesting requirements of pagan group in Philadelphia, Lydia—Turkey.

175—The Social Location of Early Christian Behavioral Exhortation

179—Believers present in all social positions (husbands, wives, children, slaves, etc.). Unjust suffering.

CONCLUSION

183-4—Christianity stood out—different. Marcus Aurelius and Celsus—“Christianity odd and incompatible.” Christianity’s “atheism”—refusal to worship the traditional gods. Pliny desired to eliminate Christianity—they were different and a problem—economically, nationally, other.

201—Footnotes—Hundreds of religious movements appear annually. But Christianity endured...why?

205—Interesting thought—Paul flogged times...for the same reason he persecuted others.