



**Hurtado, Larry W.**

***One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism***

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Originally published in 1988 with the second edition coming a decade later in 1998<sup>1</sup> *One God, One Lord* has become a staple in virtually any and every discussion on Christology since then. Unsatisfied with the approach and conclusions of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in general and Wilhelm Bousset in particular, Larry Hurtado has sought to show that early Christian belief in Jesus as divine was not the result of a slow process and/or pagan influences. Whereas in times past the general tendency in studies of Christology was to focus upon the various titles of Christ (e.g., Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, Christ, etc.), Hurtado has traveled what seems to me to be a much more rewarding path of inquiry, namely the cultic devotion to Christ in early Christianity. Recognizing that this Christ-devotion within the earliest years of Christianity was “rather explosive” (ix) Hurtado seeks to explain how such beliefs and practices could have been held by devout Christian *Jews*.

He sees this early devotion to Jesus as a “mutation” of ancient Jewish monotheism, but not one that evinces a violation of this monotheism. His stated goal is to “attempt to trace the extent to which Jewish monotheistic faith could stretch to accommodate reverence for additional figures without breaking.” (14) Hurtado does this by appealing to the category of “divine agency” which

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<sup>1</sup> The book being reviewed here is the 2005 reprint of the 1998 second edition.

he sees as the conceptual background for early Christian devotion to Jesus. In short “divine agency” entails God having a heavenly or exalted chief agent (something like a grand vizier) that stands above all of his other servants and is closely associated with him, who participates in some way in God’s sovereign rule over the earth and in the redemption of the elect. Hurtado classifies three types of “divine agency speculation”: 1) interest in divine attributes and powers (e.g., Wisdom; Word); 2) interest in exalted patriarchs (e.g., Moses; Enoch); 3) interest in principal angels (e.g., Michael; Yahoel).

Chapter 1 looks at how these various divine agents participated in this or that activity of God in the post-exilic Jewish literature thus showing diversity within the common belief in divine agency across the Jewish spectrum. “But common to the descriptions of all these figures is the basic idea that there is a chief agent who has been assigned a unique status among all other servants of God.” (21) But Jesus’ role was more comprehensive in early Christianity than the roles of any of these chief agents. While they may have participated in this or that activity, Jesus appears to have participated in them all (e.g., creation, redemption, lordship, judgment, forgiveness of sins, atonement, etc.)! The latter half of the chapter refutes the claim that Jews worshipped angels.

Chapter 2 briefly surveys the personified divine attributes Wisdom and Logos. Hurtado doesn’t find the classification of these attributes as hypostases particularly helpful or accurate, opting rather to understand them as ways of speaking about God and his activities, rather than as separate beings. But what’s more important for Hurtado is whether or not these personified attributes “acquired a place of cultic devotion in Greco-Roman Judaism.” (48) He finds no evidence that they functioned as objects of prayer and adoration by Jews of that period. Also important for Hurtado is the language used to describe these attributes because of the parallels with the language used to describe the exalted Jesus in early Christianity. This provides a linguistic framework within which the early believers in Jesus could speak about the exalted Christ.

Chapter 3 surveys the exalted patriarchs Enoch, Moses, and to a lesser extent Jacob. Hurtado says:

Along with the other two categories of divine agency thought (personified divine attributes and chief angels), the patriarchs reflect the ability of ancient Judaism to accommodate exalted figures alongside God. This may have enabled the first

Christians to come to grips with their conviction about the exaltation of Jesus.  
(51)

Hurtado makes two closing observations after his survey of these figures, the first being that the OT patriarchs represented the roots of the Jewish tradition and heritage so their exaltation represented “the highest, the most authentic, revelation of God’s purposes—indeed, the only genuinely valid tradition.” (65-6) The second observation is that these patriarchs served as an assurance of eschatological reward for which some Jews hoped. But the most significant observation past these two is that these exalted patriarchs were never accorded the cultic devotion that Jesus was by early Christians. The *Similitudes of Enoch* may picture the Son of Man figure receiving worship, but there is no evidence for this actually being carried out in the real life practice of ancient Jews. Hurtado leaves open the possibility that there may have been other early figures who received the same kind of veneration as Jesus, but he notes that at best such an idea has to be treated hypothetically.

Chapter 4 turns its attention to principal angels, most notably Michael, Yahoel, and Melchizedek from the Qumran document *11QMelchizedek*. Hurtado notes that while the descriptions and duties of these figures vary, they all share one thing in common, i.e., they’ve “been placed by God in a position of unequalled power and honor, making [them] second only to God in rank.” (75) He also takes notice of the fact that while there are clear and intentional similarities between these principal angels and God in their “honorific descriptions” and “references to their visual appearance” a different picture emerges when “one investigates the relationship of principal angels and God in the realm of religious devotion... [t]hat is however much the principal angel acted as agent for God in creation, supervision of the world, and eschatological judgment, there seems to have been a reluctance to make this figure an object of cultic devotion.” (86) As an aside, this is the only chapter in which I found any typographical errors, i.e., the quotation of Alan Segal on p. 74 says “significance” rather than “significant.”

In chapter 5 Hurtado brings it home to Jesus citing all of the New Testament evidence of him as God’s chief agent. But he moves past identifying Jesus as just another in the line of divine agents in Jewish tradition by noting the “distinctive mutation... in the Jewish monotheistic devotion characteristic of early Christianity.” (93) He does this by examining six features of the mutation: 1) Early Christian Hymns, 2) Prayer to Christ, 3) The Name of Christ, 4) The Lord’s Supper, 5) Confessing Jesus, and 6) Prophecy and the Risen Jesus. From these lines of evidence Hurtado contends:

(a) that early Christian devotion can be accurately described as binitarian in shape, with a prominent place being given to the risen Christ alongside God, and (b) that this binitarian shape is distinctive in the broad and diverse Jewish monotheistic tradition that was the immediate background of the first Christians, among whom these devotional practices had their beginning. (114)

The early Christians saw giving devotion to the risen Christ as a practice legitimated by God himself in the manner he exalted him.

I think it fair to describe *One God, One Lord* as a fantastic piece of scholarship, a seminal contribution to the field that sparked an important conversation that has continued in the twenty years since its original release. But with that I can see why some of Hurtado's critics have taken issue with lack of descriptive language in this book. There is no clear definition of terms like "devotion," "worship," or "veneration." He didn't adequately define these terms for more than a decade with the publication of his essay "The Binitarian Shape of Early Christian Worship," in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (Brill, 1999). It was from that essay that Hurtado has drawn largely in other works such as *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Eerdmans, 2000), *Lord Jesus Christ* (Eerdmans, 2003), and most recently his essay "The Binitarian Pattern of Earliest Christian Devotion and Early Doctrinal Development," in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer: Trinity, Christology and Liturgical Theology* (Liturgical Press, 2008).

Also frustrating was the use of end notes in a work so heavily noted. The obvious audience of *One God, One Lord* was those in the academy so I can't understand this choice. There's no subject index but in a book where the chapters are so clearly focused and each section so obviously delineated, there's not much need for one. There are however Scripture/ancient text and author indices which are helpful. If you are a student of Christology then this book needs to be in your personal library. If you are a fan of clear writing and sound scholarship then Larry Hurtado is an author you need to add to your reading list. I would recommend this book to anyone who can read with the caveat that it's mainly a survey and you won't get the detailed treatment of this subject that Hurtado provided 15 years later in his magnum opus *Lord Jesus Christ*. Nonetheless, this is certainly worth the read!