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**EARLY DEVOTION TO JESUS:  
A REPORT, REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

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*Jesus-Devotion in Recent Study*

Over the last thirty years or so, devotion to Jesus has been a topic of renewed and intense interest among NT scholars, and has begun to win some notice in wider circles of theology as well.<sup>1</sup> Of course, earlier still there were notable studies of NT Christology, often focusing especially on the Christological titles applied to Jesus. Oscar Cullmann's celebrated work, *The Christology of the New Testament* (1957, 1963<sup>2</sup>), is one of the best and most influential studies of this type, and was followed by a number of other works, such as Werner Kramer's *Christ, Lord, Son of God* (1963; ET 1966), and Ferdinand Hahn's *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (1963; ET 1969). Indeed, this focus on christological titles became so characteristic that when I first mentioned to other scholars my own interest in beginning serious work on NT Christology in the 1970s, one response was a weary expression: 'Oh, Lord, not another study of christological titles!' Clearly, the assumption behind this sort of response was that discussion of Christological titles was the only way in which the topic could be approached.

But the work that I report and reflect on here comprises something distinguishable. It addresses more fundamental questions about how, when, and why Jesus came to be revered, especially revered as having a *divine* status and significance. Moreover, there is a broader body of data considered, which includes

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., now, Terrence W. Tilley, 'Remembering the Historic Jesus—A New Research Program?' *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 3-35, esp. 24-35.

not only the verbal expressions of reverence for Jesus (which I have termed the “christological rhetoric” of early Christianity), but also, and very crucially, the wider pattern of devotional *practices*, among which the practices that were a part of corporate worship are central. In an effort to designate this wider body of phenomena, I have used the term “devotion”, which serves as a *portmanteau* that includes both “christology” (i.e., beliefs about Jesus and the verbal expressions of them) and also devotional practices. Also, there is a contrast with the “historical Jesus” focus of the last few centuries. In the latter body of scholarship typically, the devotional stance of the post-Easter period is of no interest, or is even seen as an obstacle to the inquiry, which privileges above all what Jesus intended and thought of himself. But the work on Jesus-devotion reported on here explicitly focuses on the remarkable reverence for him that typified early Christianity.

The publication that in my view represents in hindsight something of a harbinger of the new direction that study took after its appearance is Martin Hengel’s slender book, *Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (1975; ET 1976).<sup>2</sup> The book focused on a recognizable question in NT *christology*: the origins and meaning of the idea of Jesus’ filial relationship and status with God. But this modest-sized volume is noteworthy in signalling a re-opening of the type of critical investigation of historical issues that characterized the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (History of Religions School) of the early twentieth century at its best.<sup>3</sup> Hengel’s investigation of Jesus’ filial status was in fact an exemplary case-study in the larger questions about the sources, influences, and import of the “high” christology of the NT.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on this important group of scholars, see, e.g., Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (trans. S. M. Gilmour, H. C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 206-324.

In an essay published in 1979, informed by Hengel's work and other then-recent studies, I laid out some major weaknesses in the classic study of earliest Jesus-devotion by Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, that required a full, new analysis of matters.<sup>4</sup> I intended this article as a signal of my own hope to contribute to this work. Bousset's book is easily, and justifiably, the most influential work of the twentieth century on devotion to Jesus.<sup>5</sup> But I argued that it was also seriously flawed in some key assumptions, and in several crucial matters had been falsified by subsequent research.

Then, in 1988, my own small book, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, appeared, and, I am pleased to note, stimulated and contributed to a number of subsequent studies, especially by newer/emergent scholars in the field.<sup>6</sup> The main purposes of that book were to explore how the devotion to Jesus reflected in NT texts might have drawn upon Jewish tradition in particular, and also in what ways Jesus-devotion might have represented something innovative or distinctive. One of the features of that book is a quite specific laying out of the phenomena that comprised cultic devotion to Jesus in our earliest evidence; and I argued that these phenomena form a notable, distinctive, and ultimately highly influential constellation that amounted to what I called a 'binitarian devotional pattern', in which Jesus was closely and uniquely linked with God as recipient of corporate cultic devotion.

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<sup>4</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, 'New Testament Christology: A Critique of Bousset's Influence', *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 306-17.

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos. Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (FRLANT, NF4. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913, 1921<sup>2</sup>); ET: *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ From the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (trans. J.E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

Reflecting the rising interest stimulated by this book, a programme unit of the Society of Biblical Literature operated in annual meetings 1991-97, the 'Divine Mediators Group,' which drew a number of contributors, including both experienced and emergent scholars. Only weeks after the second edition of *One God, One Lord* appeared in 1998, The International Conference on the Origins of the Worship of Jesus was held at St. Mary's College (St. Andrews, Scotland), this conference further indicating the growing interest in the subject.<sup>7</sup>

In his endorsement of the original edition of *One God, One Lord* in 1988, Martin Hengel spoke of it as reflecting the work of a number of scholars internationally that comprised what one might call 'a new "*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*".<sup>8</sup> There was and is, however, no "Schule" in the strict sense. There is no father-figure around whom disciples gathered, and those who have contributed to the discussion of the last few decades come from a varied educational background and religious orientations. But it is the case that in the last twenty years or so a growing number of scholars internationally have found a convergence of results in their studies of the phenomena of Jesus-devotion attested in the earliest period of Christianity. Among these are now-senior figures such as Alan Segal (Barnard College, New York), and Richard Bauckham (St. Andrews, Scotland), and a number of comparatively younger scholars such as Carey Newman, David Capes, Charles Gieschen, and Loren Stuckenbruck. In addition, one can point to other scholars who may not at all think of themselves as part of any school of thought, but whose work

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<sup>7</sup> Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila and Gladys S. Lewis (eds.), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers From the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Hengel's comment appeared on the back cover of the Fortress edition, and the expression has been taken up by others subsequently to refer to the work of a number of current scholars working on christology/Jesus-devotion. I discuss more fully the relationship of the newer work and the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 11-18.

leads to similar conclusions. To restrict myself to a few examples among English-speaking scholars here, I mention Larry Kreitzer's *Jesus and God in Paul's Eschatology* (1987), Carl Davis's *The Name and Way of the Lord* (1996), Mehrdad Fatehi's *The Spirit's Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul* (2000).<sup>9</sup>

My 1988 book was intended as an initial stage of work that I hoped might eventuate in a full-scale historical analysis of earliest devotion to Jesus, hopefully something on the scale of Bousset's classic book. This was a daunting aim and, I quite freely admit, required much more than I expected in material to master and issues to address. It was, thus, another fifteen years before I was able to see the realization of this aim, in my large 2003 book, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. In this study, I deal with devotion to Jesus from the beginnings of Christianity down into the latter part of the second century CE, essentially from Jerusalem to Justin Martyr. This book, thus, embodies some 25 years of research and analysis, and also draws heavily upon the work of a number of other scholars from this period and earlier.<sup>10</sup> In light of the enormous effort invested in the book, I am understandably pleased with the generally warm and positive response to it among scholars in the field. Only time will tell if it has enduring value, of course, but

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<sup>9</sup> Key works by those mentioned here include the following: Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven. Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism* (SJLA25; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977); Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998); Cary C. Newman, *Paul's Glory-Christology. Tradition and Rhetoric* (NovTSup 69; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992); David B. Capes, *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul's Christology* (WUNT 2/47; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992); Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology* (WUNT 2/70; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Siebeck], 1995); Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (AGJU 42; Leiden: Brill, 1998); Larry J. Kreitzer, *Jesus and God in Paul's Eschatology* (JSNTSup 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); C. J. Davis, *The Name and Way of the Lord* (JSNTSup 129; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996); Mehrdad Fatehi, *The Spirit's Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul*, WUNT, no. 2/128 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> From an invitation to give a short lecture series in Ben Gurion University of the Negev in 2004, I produced a smaller monograph that both summarizes some points from the larger *Lord Jesus Christ* volume and also includes several articles previously published: Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). The Hebrew edition was published by Ben Gurion University Press.

I gratefully take the liberty of the invitation given to sketch here some of the broad emphases represented in the studies with which I am pleased to have been involved, and to offer some simple reflections on the import of early Jesus-devotion for wider theological circles.<sup>11</sup>

### *Major Results/Emphases*

I turn now to summarizing briefly some of the major results, thus far, of the renewed focus on early devotion to Jesus.

#### *Chronology*

One of the most significant emphases in this large body of recent studies is that a recognizable devotion to Jesus appeared *amazingly early*. In a modest-sized but important article published in 1972, Martin Hengel underscored this chronological factor. Noting that scarcely twenty years lie between Jesus' execution and the earliest letters of Paul, and that in these letters Paul more presupposes than explains a whole body of christological convictions that must reflect his earliest mission preaching prior to any of his extant letters, Hengel rightly emphasized how little time there was for these convictions to have developed. I cite Hengel's memorable statement:

Thus the christological development from Jesus as far as Paul took place within about eighteen years, a short space of time for such an intellectual process. In essentials more happened in christology within

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<sup>11</sup> The volume has now appeared also in French, Spanish and Italian translations. It has been the subject of symposia in Cambridge, St. Andrews, Indiana, Salamanca, and Berlin. Among the 60+ reviews and articles on the book, the most extensive critical engagement thus far is Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "A New Explanation of Christological Origins: A Review of the Work of Larry W. Hurtado," *TB* 60 (2009): 161-205, but cf. my response: L. W. Hurtado, "The Origins of Jesus-Devotion: A Response to Crispin Fletcher-Louis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 61 (2010): 1-20.

these years than in the whole subsequent seven hundred years of church history.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, as Hengel also shows in this article, the time-span in which the most crucial development took place is more accurately about a couple of years *at most*. That is about the time-span between Jesus' crucifixion and Paul's conversion. I propose further that Paul's vehement opposition to Jewish Christians prior to his own conversion-experience was likely provoked by what he regarded as outrageous, even blasphemous claims and devotional behavior concerning Jesus. Paul's prompt association with other Jewish Christians after his own christophany experience suggests that in cognitive content it essentially made him unexpectedly convinced of the very claims about Jesus that he had previously rejected. Furthermore, nothing in Paul's letters signals any difference between him and Jerusalem or other Jewish believers over Jesus-devotion; their differences seem to have been entirely over the conditions on which Gentiles could be admitted to full fellowship with Jewish Christians, specifically, whether Gentiles needed to adopt a full Torah-practice as a further requirement beyond their baptism.

My own analysis led me to agree with Hengel on these chronological data, and also to share his disappointment at the frequency with which some scholars ignore them. The broad import is that an amazing devotion to Jesus appeared more like an *explosion*, a volcanic eruption, than an evolution. However counter-intuitive it will perhaps seem, the exalted claims and the unprecedented devotional practices that reflect a treatment of Jesus as somehow sharing divine attributes and status began among *Jewish believers* and within the earliest moments of the young Christian

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Hengel, "Christologie und Neutestamentliche Chronologie," in *Neues Testament und Geschichte: Historisches Geschehen und Deutung im Neuen Testament. Oscar Cullmann zum 70. Geburtstag* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), 43-67. The essay appeared in English later in Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (London: SCM, 1983), 30-47. I cite here the latter version, pp. 39-40.



movement. This astonishing Jesus-devotion was not the product of an incremental influence of the larger pagan religious environment or the growing influx of Gentile believers in the latter decades of the first century CE. Nor, *contra* Bousset, is there any evidence of supposedly influential circles of Gentile Christians in the crucial first few years, in Antioch of Syria or anywhere else.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, christological doctrines developed over the first few decades and centuries. But when studied closely the evidence indicates that these developments were in fact comparatively less remarkable in their time than the earliest observable post-Easter convictions and practices concerning Jesus. Moreover, the further and later developments in doctrines of the early centuries were actually shaped, driven and demanded by the powerful and audacious convictions and orientation toward Jesus that we find taken for granted and uncontroversial among believers already in the earliest extant texts (e.g., Paul's letters). This may too often be overlooked by historians of dogma.

#### *Devotional Practices*

One of the positive features of the work of Bousset and other contributors to the original *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of the early twentieth century was an emphasis on religious *praxis* as well as theological/christological rhetoric. They cast the net appropriately wide to take in more of the phenomena that comprised devotion to Jesus, and this was, of course, reflective of their emphasis on “religion” (that is, the lived character of religious faith) rather than simply “theology”. For reasons that we cannot explore here, however, attention to the religious *praxis* of earliest Christianity was lessened or overlooked altogether in a good deal of christological scholarship of

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<sup>13</sup> Bousset rightly judged that devotion to Jesus as a divine figure erupted quite early, so early that Paul was converted into and shaped by circles characterized by this sort of Jesus-devotion. But he contended that this did not characterize the “primitive Palestinian community”, and instead arose in places such as Antioch or Damascus where pagan religious influences (which he posited as crucial in generating this devotion) were sufficiently strong: Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 119-52.

the decades thereafter. This concern with devotional practice is, however, another feature that links more positively some of the recent study of early Jesus-devotion with the old *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*.

My own work in particular has emphasized the importance of devotional practices in assessing the place of Jesus in early Christianity.<sup>14</sup> In my book, *One God, One Lord*, I argued that the inclusion of Jesus with God as a recipient of corporate cultic devotion was *the* development that most differentiated earliest Christianity from its Jewish matrix, and that most clearly indicated a significant “mutation” in Jewish monotheistic practice. The research project that led to that book was shaped in part by a very insightful article by Richard Bauckham in which he drew attention to the *topos* of angelic refusal of worship in ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts. Bauckham rightly observed that this made all the more significant the readiness of earliest Jewish Christians to see Jesus as worthy of the worship otherwise reserved firmly for God alone.<sup>15</sup> To cite the key NT examples, in Revelation 19:10 and 22:8-9, John (commonly thought to be a Jewish Christian) starts to worship the glorious angel who appears to him, and the angel forbids this, ordering John, “Worship God!” It is, thus, the more remarkable that elsewhere in the same book, John’s vision of heavenly worship depicts it as directed “to him who sits on the throne, *and to the Lamb*” (Rev. 5:13, emphasis mine). The ready acceptance of the joint worship of Jesus and God by this author who echoes the prohibition of worship of anyone but God is the clearest indication that in Revelation Jesus (“the Lamb”) is completely distinguished from all

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<sup>14</sup> See esp. Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, “The Worship of Jesus in Apocalyptic Christianity,” *NTS* 27 (1981): 322-41. An updated version appears in Bauckham’s book, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 118-49. Bauckham’s study was elaborated later by Loren Stuckenbruck in the published version of his 1993 Princeton Seminary thesis: Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology* (cited earlier).

other divine agents and is uniquely associated with God, and this precisely in the most sensitive matter for ancient Jews and Christians: worship.<sup>16</sup>

In order to demonstrate my findings clearly and enable others to engage them critically, in *One God, One Lord*, and several subsequent publications as well, I have laid out a list of several specific phenomena that amount to what I contend is the inclusion of Jesus as a unique recipient of cultic devotion (“worship” in this sense).<sup>17</sup> These are the following typical features of earliest Christian worship: (1) the singing of hymns about Jesus; (2) the invocation and confession of Jesus; (3) prayer offered through Jesus and/or in Jesus’ name, and (less typically) even to Jesus; (4) ritual use of Jesus’ name in baptism (the entrance rite of the community); (5) the sacred common meal as “the Lord’s Supper” in which Jesus is the presiding presence; and (6) prophecy inspired by Jesus and uttered in his name.

These practices, both individually and collectively, are without precedent or parallel in Roman-era circles of devout Jews. Yet the chronology and other indicators as well show that they arose among *Jewish* circles in the earliest years of the Christian movement, and in my view cannot for these various reasons be ascribed to the conscious or unconscious appropriation of pagan religious ideas and practices.<sup>18</sup> The exalted claims made for Jesus, including pre-existence, participation in creation of the world, heavenly enthronement, unique role as eschatological redeemer, and honorific titles such as Messiah, Son of God, Lord, and even God, for all these we can find occasional parallels in the rich and diverse ancient Jewish tradition. But we find no

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (London: SPCK, 2010). In my view, however, Dunn’s position is influenced too much in reaction to populist versions of Christianity in which Jesus is revered at the expense of God (the Father).

<sup>17</sup> Hurtado, *One God, one Lord*, 100-14; *id.*, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 70-94; *id.*, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 134-53.

<sup>18</sup> See my discussion of “Judean Jewish Christianity” in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 155-216. But cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, “How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: A Reply,” in *Israel’s God and Rebecca’s Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity*, eds. David B. Capes, April D. DeConick, Helen K. Bond, Troy A. Miller (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 55-66.

such parallels for these phenomena of earliest Christian devotional practice. They comprise a genuine and highly significant innovation in Jewish monotheistic tradition of the time.

### *Religious Experience and Religious Innovation*

I referred earlier to the strong indications that this enthusiastic and bold constellation of devotional practices emerged suddenly and forcefully within the earliest years after Jesus' crucifixion. Such a sudden and major development requires some explanation, and it has been another feature of my own studies to try to formulate a theory or model of the forces and factors that generated and shaped this remarkable innovation in religious practice.<sup>19</sup> Drawing upon studies of invention and innovation generally, and upon studies of other major religious innovations in particular (especially by social anthropologists), I have proposed the following four forces/factors: (1) the Jewish monotheistic tradition with its ability to accommodate "principal agent" figures, who can variously be chief angels, OT patriarchs such as Moses or Enoch, or even personified attributes of God (such as Wisdom or Word); (2) the impact of Jesus' own earthly ministry and crucifixion; (3) the wider religious environment of the Roman era (the influence of which is more typically indicated, however, reaction against it); and (4) the crucial role of revelatory religious experiences, through which earliest Christians came to the conviction that God now required them to reverence Jesus as they did.<sup>20</sup>

These religious experiences likely included visions of the risen and exalted/enthroned Jesus receiving heavenly worship, prophetic revelations (issuing in oracles) that it was the will of God for Jesus to be given worship, and also inspired

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<sup>19</sup> See esp. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 27-78.

<sup>20</sup> See esp. Larry W. Hurtado, "Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament," *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000): 183-205; which also appears as a chapter in my book, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions About Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

odes that came to recipients with the force of divine revelation in which Jesus was hymned and praised in terms similar to, and along with, God. We have what I take to be illustrative references to such phenomena in the Acts 7 ascription of such a vision to Stephen, and in the more elaborated vision of John in Revelation 4—5.<sup>21</sup> And let us also not overlook Paul’s own claim to “visions and revelations of the Lord” (2 Cor. 12:1; and also 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8; Gal. 1:14-15). I contend that such phenomena must be taken into account as efficacious historically in generating and promoting religious innovations of the sort that we see reflected in the NT. It bears emphasizing that we do not have to accept the *religious/theological validity* of an experience in order to grant its reality and *efficacy* in generating religious innovation.

#### *“Binitarian” Worship*

I emphasize that the worship of Jesus reflected in the NT did not involve a diminution of the place of God (the Father). Nor was Jesus accorded his own times or places of worship apart from God. In short, this was not the addition of a new deity in some pantheon. Instead, Jesus was worshipped both in response to God’s own exaltation and designation of him as rightful recipient of such devotion; and Jesus’ divine status and significance was expressed with reference to God the Father. Thus, e.g., Jesus is referred to as God’s “Son”, “Word”, or “Image”, and as bearing/sharing God’s glory, name and throne. That is, the worship given to Jesus was clearly intended as obedience to the one God, and as the divinely-mandated way of worshipping aright the one God. In sum, the devotional stance was recognizably “monotheistic”, in the rejection of all deities but the one God, and also in the evident concern to situate the worship of Jesus within the worship of, and commitment to, the

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<sup>21</sup> The Stephen narrative and the scenes in Revelation are obviously literary products, and not simply a record of events. But I propose that they reflect the sort of experiences reported and influential among early Christian circles.

one God of the Bible.<sup>22</sup> In this remarkable and apparently unique re-shaping of monotheistic practice to include Jesus, we see again the influence of Jewish religious tradition, not the wider pagan world of the time.

Moreover, Jesus is linked emphatically with the one God of the biblical/Jewish tradition. Marcion is the most well-known spokesman for the opposite view, that Jesus must be completely dis-connected from the God of the OT, and there have been others down the centuries of similar orientations, though usually not so explicit or emphatic. But the Jesus-devotion articulated in the NT involves the strong affirmation that he is the chosen exalted agent and expression of the OT deity. “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is also the God of Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets.

#### *The Exalted and Human-Historic Jesus*

Although from ancient times to the present there have certainly been Christians who found and find it difficult to hold together meaningfully Jesus as genuinely human and of divine status, the NT and other texts reflecting what we may call “proto-orthodox” Christianity typically insist that the enthroned and glorified Jesus is the same human figure who walked about in Galilee and was crucified by Pilate in Jerusalem. I have urged that this is the broad emphasis that unites the canonical Gospels and that is expressed in their literary character as biographical-like narratives.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, in some other texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* (GThomas), Jesus is almost entirely a heavenly figure who may have come to earth, but whose earthly features are completely insignificant. So, for example, in GThomas

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<sup>22</sup> “Monotheism” is a contested term that in any case requires users to be explicit in their meaning. I have articulated my own usage with reference to ancient Jews and Christians in Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 111-33 (“First-Century Jewish Monotheism”). This chapter appeared previously in *JSNT* 71(1998): 3-26.

<sup>23</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 259-347, on “Jesus Books,” and 427-85 on “Other Early Jesus Books,” where I discuss key examples of extra-canonical gospels, including *Thomas*.

we would never know even the most basic historical facts such as that Jesus operated in Roman Palestine or that he was a Jew. The canonical Gospels all (notably including John), however, are thickly descriptive of Jesus' historical setting, in geography, culture, social groups, issues, and *personae*, and this appears to be quite intentional.

Perhaps the Evangelists were concerned to counter or avoid any early tendency to disregard the human Jesus and the significance of his own activities. In any case, the canonical Gospels are very significant literary expressions of early Jesus-devotion. They certainly do not reflect the "Historical Jesus" interests of the modern period, in which the post-Easter estimates of Jesus are disregarded. In all four Gospels, the accounts of Jesus of Nazareth are written from the standpoint of those who saw him also as exalted to heavenly glory, as bearing divine glory and power. The Gospels seem to me to represent a concern for a fully rounded grasp of the one to whom such amazing devotion was offered, and are, each in its own way, literary expressions of profound theological convictions and concerns that can be instructive for Christians today as well as in the ancient churches for whom these accounts were originally written. The shared emphasis is that the exalted Lord is this historical and human figure, Jesus of Nazareth.

#### *Social and Political Import*

One of the criticisms of my large 2003 book was that it did not give sufficient attention to the social and political implications and import of Jesus-devotion, and I have to admit that this is a fair point of criticism. In my concern essentially to map out when and how devotion to Jesus, especially in cultic phenomena, first emerged and how it was expressed, I did not explore very far the social and political implications for ancient Christians, and I confess that this lack of sufficient attention

to social and political implications of early Jesus-devotion is a shortcoming of much or all of the recent work. In a chapter of subsequent smaller book, which grew out of the invitation to lecture in Israel, I attempted some small penance for this, but I think that there is much more that could be done.<sup>24</sup> Within the limits of this essay, however, I shall limit myself to highlighting selectively a few matters.

From the exhortations to believers and the narratives of events in the NT, it is clear that early believers could expect often to experience rather negative social consequences of their faith in Jesus. The warning ascribed to Jesus that “One’s foes will be members of one’s own household” (Matt. 10:36) indicates that serious tensions could arise from within families, and similar concerns are reflected in other sayings that warn believers that they may have to choose between their commitment to Jesus and the demands of their own families (Matt. 10:37-39//Luke 14:26-27). Other passages predict that believers will be delivered over for interrogation before “councils,” and synagogues, as well as governors and rulers (Mark 13:8-13), and there is the stark warning that they may be denounced by their brother, parent or children, and will be “hated by all for my name’s sake.”

The common reference to such troubles as suffered *for Jesus’ sake* suggests that their intense devotion to him and the extraordinary claims they made about him were likely the sources of the sometimes severe social friction that they encountered. Tensions are reflected between Jewish believers and the larger Jewish communities, and also between Gentile believers and their social environment. So far as the latter are concerned, their shift from a former readiness to revere all the Roman deities to an exclusivist devotion to the one God and the one Lord likely was seen by their pagan relatives and other social circles as arrogant, anti-social, and even irreligious

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<sup>24</sup> For further discussion, see my chapter on “To Live and Die for Jesus,” in Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus become a God?*, 56-82; and for discussion of Jewish opposition to early Jesus-devotion, see 152-78.



behaviour. Moreover, given the ubiquitous place of religion in Roman-era society, the exclusivist stance of Christians would have had an impact on practically every area of social life. For Jewish believers, their commitment to Jesus as Messiah and divinely-approved Lord would have been seen by most other Jews as completely foolish at best, and perhaps even as blasphemous and dangerous to the religious integrity of the Jewish people.

As for political tensions (i.e., involving authorities at civic or higher levels of government), in the earliest decades these were localized and only occasional, as there was no Empire-wide policy about Christians. But it is clear that Christians were in some instances hauled before civic officials, likely in response to denunciations and accusations from the public. There was no crime of being a Christian, but believers' devotional stance could generate strong antagonism. Paul's list of his own sufferings endured for the sake of his mission in 2 Cor. 11:16-33 includes several floggings by synagogue authorities (which, by the way, required Paul's acquiescence), and also "imprisonments, countless floggings" and being beaten with rods three times, these latter sufferings likely from civic authorities. In Acts we have several scenes portraying Paul and other early believers arraigned before civic officials and other government authorities, including the dramatic narrative in 19:21-41, where craftsmen linked to the temple of Artemis complain that Paul's preaching threatened their business interests. Whatever its specific historicity, I think that this scene reflects one of the sources of antagonism against Christians, and I suggest that the *economic* impact of the Christian gospel (real and imagined) upon pagan religious life was

likely more of a factor generating local opposition to Christians than scholars have realized.<sup>25</sup>

In the earliest decades, however, the most severe action of political authorities against Christians was certainly Nero's pogrom in 64 CE. According to Tacitus' account, those who confessed their faith and were arrested comprised "an immense multitude [*multitudo ingens*]" who were then subjected to various hideous means of tortured death.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, even this terrible action was apparently unique and restricted to Rome. By and large, Christians of the first century CE, particularly ordinary believers not prominent in leadership, did not apparently experience official opposition from political authorities. In Revelation, the dire picture of conflict between Christians and the Roman regime, which the author portrays as a monster, is now commonly understood by scholars as more indicative of the author's fears and expectations of the future, and not so much a reflection of current realities at the time Revelation was written.<sup>27</sup>

But by the second century CE, we can see a gathering storm that would ultimately pit the Roman Empire against Christianity. Across the second century, from Pliny's ad hoc action against Christians in Bithynia, the arrest and execution of leaders such as Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Justin, and other incidents such as the martyrdoms of Christians of Lyon and Vienne and also of Scilli, we get the sense of a much more ominous time, with still more frequent state-sponsored persecution to come in the third century. In all of these instances, it is clear that devotion to Jesus was the crucial issue. Believers were ordered to curse Christ, swear allegiance to the gods, or offer incense to the Emperor's image, all of which were actions designed to

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<sup>25</sup> Note, e.g., that Pliny's famous letter to Trajan about actions against Christians in Bithynia includes a concern about the economic impact of Christianity: Pliny, *Epistles*, 10.96.

<sup>26</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.2-5.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990).

subvert the typical Christian faith-stance of exclusivist devotion to the one God and the one Lord Jesus.

Given the negative consequences of Jesus-devotion, whether comparatively milder ones such as harassment or ridicule from family and friends, or more serious consequences such as arraignment and threats from synagogue or civic authorities, what motivated believers to take up Christian faith? What compensation did they see as sufficient for the real or potential costs? Among their reasons was surely an exalted view of Jesus and a powerful sense of being in a genuine relationship with him. In short, in the readiness of early believers to bear all the real or potential social and political consequences of devotion to Jesus we see something of the enabling power of that devotional stance.

I wonder whether Christianity of our time, especially in comfortable Western cultures has the capacity to face anything similar. In an understandable but probably misguided effort to make Christian faith as undemanding as possible, have churches by and large ill-prepared believers for anything in the nature of serious opposition, criticism, or worse? More positively, has the banal simulacrum that passes for Christian faith too widely today anything of the fervour and passion of the Jesus-devotion that empowered early believers to live, think, work, and even die for Jesus? How well does the comfortable and low-demand Western Christianity of today (whether of “liberal” or “Evangelical” stripe) equip believers to engage their own social setting and political circumstances meaningfully and positively?

### *Conclusion*

So, the recent body of scholarship focused on early Jesus-devotion has yielded some interesting results that can also be of relevance beyond the circles of historically-

oriented scholars involved. Devotion to Jesus as divine is not a result of a progressive or early paganization of a supposedly purer form of Christianity, but erupts suddenly and amazingly early, and is more correctly understood as initially a distinctive “mutation” *within second-temple Jewish tradition*.

This requires us to recognize that significant innovations can take place within religious traditions. Moreover, as is often the case with such significant innovations, the Jesus-devotion attested in the NT must be seen as the result of powerful religious experiences of individuals, who then succeeded in influencing the faith of others. We simply have to reckon with an intense “micro-climate” in earliest Christian circles that promoted and enabled such revelatory experiences.

Early Jesus-devotion had profound implications for the social and political lives of believers. Devotion to Jesus as “Lord” severely limited the kinds of reverence and obedience that ancient Christians could give to their families and social groups, and even to the political structures of their time. This, I submit, also has potentially profound implications for theology, in so far as theologians seek to work in a serious engagement with the biblical texts.

Moreover, in a number of other ways, only some of which I have touched on in this discussion, devotion to Jesus re-oriented people’s lives, and drove and shaped other developments in Christianity, especially the well-known creedal developments. Finally, the centrality of Jesus in earliest Christianity is a positive challenge to all aspects of theological work, and a criterion for Christian faith, ethical endeavour, worship, and public life.