

# The Emergence of Devotion to Jesus in the Early Church: The Grass-Roots Derivation of the Trinity

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**Abstract:** *Our familiarity as Christians with Christian faith's conviction that Jesus is divine and that God is triune tends to dull our appreciation of how utterly revolutionary and radical that development in the God-consciousness of Jesus' disciples really was. They, like Jesus, were Jewish. Faithful to their tradition, they held an exclusivist monotheistic notion of God and of devotion to God. Yet, their experience of Jesus resulted in a truly amazing change in their God-consciousness and a radical reinterpretation of their faith in the one God, that was eventually to come to expression in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.*

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**Key Words:** Trinity; Jesus Christ – divinity; Jewish monotheism; Incarnation; New Testament Christology; early Christian worship; Larry Hurtado; Sebastian Moore

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Larry Hurtado's recently published book, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, is a superb study, which traces the evidence of this extraordinary change in God-consciousness in the early Christian movement, by tracking the development of devotion to Jesus in Christian worship from its earliest beginnings, as attested in our earliest written witnesses (ca. 30-170). Hurtado is Professor of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. This fascinating study builds on his previous works, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (1988), and *At The Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of earliest Christian Devotion* (1999), and on the work of the German New Testament scholar, Martin Hengel.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike so many contemporary studies of the Christologies manifest in the scriptural records, Hurtado focuses not on the Christological rhetoric implied in Christological titles that are used in the New Testament writings, but instead on the praxis of early Christian devotion. He concentrates our attention on the emergence of the remarkable phenomenon of devotion to Jesus in the very early Church. He demonstrates that the appropriation of divinity and divine agency, as understood in contemporaneous Judaism, to the person of Jesus, as expressed in devotional praxis, emerged very early and very quickly in the tradition, and that it was this development which fuelled the doctrinal developments and eventually the doctrinal debates of later centuries. Hurtado's study thus highlights the singular importance of devotional practice (the *lex orandi*) in decisively shaping subsequent doctrinal development (the *lex credendi*). In his study, we can see how the *lex orandi* prepares the way for the articulation in formal creeds of the *lex credendi*.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1863), *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

In providing a detailed historical description and scholarly analysis of the extraordinary phenomenon whereby the risen Jesus is accorded worship alongside God, Hurtado offers systematic theologians a rich resource, which is deeply grounded in a conscientious exploration of the scriptural witness and of early Christian writings, for mining the experiential beginnings of Christian Christological and trinitarian doctrine. From a theological perspective, Hurtado's study demonstrates some striking parallels with the writings of Sebastian Moore and Moore's daring attempt, some twenty years ago now, to reconstruct the psychological experience of the disciples that so radically transformed them and led them to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and that the one God was three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and so to describe the disciples' originating experience of the mystery of the Trinity. Moore recognizes that the recognition of the divinity of Jesus is the key in the disciples' radical change of God-consciousness and for the development of a very new understanding of God. Both Hurtado and Moore recognize the utterly revolutionary character of the change in the disciples' understanding of God, that led them from being strict exclusivist monotheists, for whom the Lord Our God is one, to a recognition – indeed a confession – of Jesus' divinity and ultimately to a trinitarian understanding of the Godhead. Both also recognize that the doctrinal debate which eventually emerged concerning the ontological status of Jesus, and which came to a climax in the fourth century with the resolution of that debate at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, had its origins in the profound religious experience of the early disciples and, for Hurtado in particular, in the corporate worship of the early Christian communities.

Yet Moore's contribution, effectively a post-critical constructive return to the biblical narrative that is the fruit of a refined analysis of interiority, has generally been poorly understood and was greeted with a strong measure of suspicion and criticism.<sup>2</sup> Moore's critics were quick to remark that his highly imaginative reconstruction of the disciples' experience was based on a dearth of scriptural data. His work still generally tends to be dismissed as a "spiritual theology."<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Hurtado's critical study has generally been highly praised and applauded for its erudite appraisal of the biblical and other evidence.<sup>4</sup>

My aim in this article is to offer a brief overview of Hurtado's magnificent contribution regarding the emergence of devotion to Jesus in the early Christian witness and its development in the context of Jewish exclusivist monotheism, and to bring Hurtado's research into conversation with Sebastian Moore's reconstruction of the disciples' experience and what he describes as the "grass-roots derivation" of the mystery of the Trinity. Admittedly, Hurtado and Moore are operating in very different realms of meaning, Hurtado in the realm of scholarship and Moore in the realm of interiority, with each realm differentiated from the other in its language and categories and distinct mode of apprehension. I do not wish or intend here to address the larger exploration of interiority that has been Moore's life's work. My interest, however, is to reconsider Moore's reconstruction of the disciples' experience which issued in their confession of the three *dramatis personae* in the light of Hurtado's research into the phenomenon in the early Christian communities of the emergence of devotion to Jesus Christ alongside God,

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<sup>2</sup> See "Review Symposium: Sebastian Moore's *Jesus the Liberator of Desire*, Three perspectives by Stephen J. Duffy, Elisabeth Koenig and William P. Loewe," *Horizons* 18 (1991): 93-123.

<sup>3</sup> In response to such a description, Moore has commented: "I wish people wouldn't call this stuff spiritual theology. It is a somewhat gauche attempt to do real theology in a world whose intellectual climate is still divorced from feeling." "Four Steps Towards Making Sense of Theology," *Downside Review* 111 (1993): 81.

<sup>4</sup> See the comments by Martin Hengel and David Aune, for example.

and later the Holy Spirit. We turn our attention first to Hurtado's research concerning the emergence of devotion to Jesus in the early stages of the Christian movement.

## THE INHERITED TRADITION OF JEWISH MONOTHEISM IN SHAPING DEVOTION TO JESUS

Hurtado argues that Christianity inherited the ancient tradition of Jewish monotheistic exclusivity of worship and a clear rejection of the worship of other gods. Yet he observes that early Christians, including early Jewish Christians, while remaining faithful to the Jewish tradition and its insistence on worshipping the one God, somehow justified and accommodated in its prayer and worship a reverence of the exalted Jesus, as properly due to one who is divine. Hurtado presents an impressive raft of evidence from the early sources of Christianity which indicates an appreciation of Jesus as a figure of unique significance in God's plan and in some way 'divine.'

Consider, for example, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which is understood to have been written around the early to mid-50s, in which Paul boldly confirms a confession of "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and of whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8:5-6). The text clearly accords unique significance to Jesus and to his role, and indicates that Jesus is venerated alongside God. Hurtado rightly draws our attention to the fact that, in the context of Jewish monotheism, this devotion to Jesus alongside God was a remarkably novel development.

Hurtado proceeds to explore how this exclusivist monotheism influenced and shaped Christ-devotion. He contends that Jewish monotheism was a central factor in the actual formation and development of devotion to Jesus and that this extraordinary phenomenon, whereby Jesus is venerated alongside God, developed as a variant form of monotheism.

### *The Early Emergence of a Binitarian Pattern in Christian Prayer and Worship*

Hurtado's research firstly highlights the remarkable phenomenon whereby devotion is accorded to Jesus. The evidence indicates that Jesus is associated with God in remarkable and amazing ways, astonishingly so given that it emerged in the context of Jewish monotheism. (Hurtado often uses the word 'astonishing' in his book!) Indeed, Hurtado's research indicates that a veritable volcano-like explosion of devotion to Jesus occurred, and that it emerged and spread very quickly in the communities of Jesus' followers.

Hurtado argues that devotion to Jesus emerged phenomenally early in Christian practice, certainly within the first two decades of Jesus' death. Hurtado comments: "So far as historical inquiry permits us to say, it was an *immediate* feature of the circles of those who identified themselves with reference to him [Jesus]."<sup>5</sup> As Hurtado explains, "At an astonishingly early point, in at least some Christian groups, there is a clear and programmatic inclusion of Jesus in their devotional life, both in honorific *claims* and in devotional *practices*."<sup>6</sup> Hurtado insists that this phenomenon was not a late development, as some scholars have surmised, nor an import from the surrounding milieu. According to Hurtado, devotion to Jesus emerged as central to and characteristic of Christian practice

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<sup>5</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 2. My italics.

<sup>6</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 4.

from early on, and as a consequence remained thereafter central in the development of Christian thought.

Hurtado reminds us that the emergence of worship of Jesus in the very early stages of the Christian story is utterly remarkable, not because it involved ritual meals with a deity, initiation rites, fellowship, or a focus on ethical demands, as each of those features was to be found within the religious milieu within which Christianity emerged, but because it involved devotion to and worship of the person of Jesus in the context of Jewish exclusivist monotheism. Surveying the patterns of devotional practice as attested in the early records, Hurtado observes that early Christianity developed what Hurtado describes as a binitarian shape in its prayer and worship and a correspondingly binitarian shape to its understanding of God. In this binitarian devotional pattern, there are two distinguishable recipients of Christian worship, God and Christ. Hurtado observes that Christ is included with God (the Father) in prayer and worship, but in such a way as to avoid ditheism. The scriptural data indicate that, in the earliest stages, worship is offered to God to and through Christ. Hurtado notes that the intensity of devotion to Jesus in prayer and in worship is characteristically expressed in ways which also affirm the primacy of God, as the Father. A duality of Christ and God is thus accommodated within a strictly exclusivist monotheistic – even if somewhat subordinationist – understanding of God. Note that Hurtado argues that the devotional pattern, in its earliest forms, is binitarian, not trinitarian.

Observing that the reverence offered to Jesus first appears as an extension and expression of reverence for God, Hurtado contends that this Jesus-devotion, and the Christological rhetoric of the New Testament more generally, involved an adaptation of the principal-agent traditions of ancient Jewish monotheism.<sup>7</sup> In this tradition, as Hurtado explains: “Jesus functions as God’s principal agent, Jesus’ revelatory and redemptive actions consistently portrayed as son on God’s authority, as expressions of God’s will, and as serving God’s purposes and glory.”<sup>8</sup> Hurtado comments that this accommodation of Jesus as recipient of cultic worship with God is unprecedented and that it signals a major development in monotheistic cultic practices and belief. He reiterates that this variant form of monotheism appeared in Christian communities who nevertheless insisted that they remained faithful to the monotheism of the Jewish tradition.

This was a truly phenomenal occurrence, Hurtado reiterates, with no parallel or precedent for this extraordinary expression of devotion to Jesus in the religious environment at that time. It derives from neither of the two major religious patterns of their time, the polytheism of the Roman pantheon or the strict monotheism of Judaism. This devotion to Jesus that is evident in the early Christian communities is therefore not to be ascribed to or dismissed as emerging as a result of extraneous influences or sources in the religious environment of the day. On the one hand, they clearly rejected the polytheism of the Roman religious cults. On the other hand, devotion to Jesus alongside God did not emerge from Jewish faith, which was strictly exclusivist in its sense of the one God of Israel and its scriptures, and which held to an exclusivist understanding of and commitment to the one God of Israel. Such a strong exclusivist monotheistic stance would certainly not have encouraged or facilitated the development of devotion to and worship of Jesus, and indeed would have opposed any ascription of divinity to him. Nevertheless, Jesus-devotion did emerge and indeed flourish, and from a very early stage. But it was not worship of Jesus as a separate deity. Rather, Jesus’ unique significance and Jesus-devotion

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<sup>7</sup> See Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 17-39.

<sup>8</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 53.

and reverence is expressed in terms of his relationship to the one God. So, while rejecting the other deities of the Roman Empire, sometimes at the cost of their very lives, and while maintaining their Jewish exclusivist monotheism, the followers of Jesus spoke of him as God's Son, as Word, and as Christ/Messiah.

Having examined the evidence for the monotheistic religious stance of Hellenistic and Roman era Judaism, Hurtado argues that devotion to Jesus emerged from and was powerfully and profoundly shaped by the religious context of exclusivist monotheism of Judaism, especially in those Christian communities which emerged from within the biblical commitment to the one God. He argues that a recognizably monotheistic concern shaped the emergence of Christ-devotion. Devotion to Jesus thus appears to have emerged as a variation on exclusivist monotheism – a binitarian monotheism whereby the two, Jesus Christ and God, are posited in relation to each other and in such a way that ditheism is excluded and monotheism upheld, in what was effectively an unprecedented and unparalleled form of monotheism. This, according to Hurtado, is the context in which Jesus emerges as a recipient of worship.

While not claiming to offer an exhaustive study, Hurtado examines a number of the significant scriptural texts. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 8 and 10, Paul emphatically rejects worship of anyone other than the one God of Israel *and* the one Lord Jesus Christ. This text thus offers a fascinating insight into early devotion to Christ, with Paul confirming a binitarian exclusivist confession of “one God, the Father, from whom are all things and of whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:5-6) The acclamation of Jesus as Lord, Kyrios, is posited with a close association of Jesus with God and attests to their close connection in devotional practice. We see here that Paul includes Christ within an insistently monotheistic stance. We note too Paul's testimony to Christ's central role and unique significance in creation and redemption and that here Paul also attributes preexistence or foreordination to Christ, as well as an active role as divine agent in creation.<sup>9</sup> Hurtado argues that this text is characteristic of the extraordinary significance given to Jesus in Paul's writings and, as Hurtado comments,

This is all the more phenomenal when we note that Paul's letters show that this was already rather well developed by the 50s, and could be taken for granted by Paul. Indeed, there is hardly an indication in Paul's letters that he knows of any controversy or serious variance about this exalted place of Jesus among the various other Christian circles with which he was acquainted. ... Though Christians struggled over the next few centuries to articulate in varying ways more completely a view of the relationship of God and Christ, the Pauline letters indicate that at an astonishingly early point basic convictions about Jesus that amount to treating him as divine had become widely shared in various Christian circles.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, we see in this text from the First Letter to the Corinthians not only a binitarian pattern of devotion and worship, but that it is already taken for granted by the Corinthian community and is uncontroversial. Given that, as Hurtado argues, this phenomenon of Christ-worship, as expressed in prayer, invocation and confession of Jesus, baptism in Jesus' name, the Lord's Supper, hymns, and prophecy, is evident throughout Paul's letters, it is clear that the binitarian pattern is already well embedded in and pre-

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<sup>9</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 125-6.

<sup>10</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 134-5.

dates the Pauline communities, with the pattern dating back to at least the 40s and possibly even the 30s.<sup>11</sup> As Hurtado explains:

Jesus is revered in a constellation of actions that resemble the ways a god is revered in the Roman-era religious scene... . This is not ditheism. Jesus is not revered as another, second god. Just as Jesus is regularly defined with reference to the one God in Pauline Christological statement, so Jesus is consistently revered with reference to God in the devotional actions of Pauline Christians... There are two distinguishable figures, God and Jesus, but in Paul's letters there is an evident concern to understand the reverence given to Jesus as an *extension* of the worship of God.<sup>12</sup>

Hurtado also examines the conclusion to this First Letter to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 16:22, where he finds further striking evidence in the maranatha formula, "Our Lord, come!" Hurtado argues that the formula is probably a prayer or invocation and he reminds us that its placement at the end of the letter accords it considerable significance. Hurtado observes that here in this very early letter the transliterated Aramaic formula, maranatha, of Jewish Christians, is not translated for its Corinthian audience. In other words, it would appear to be so familiar to Paul's Greek-speaking and mostly Gentile Christians in Corinth that it needed no translation or explanation. The Corinthian Christian community is clearly already well acquainted with it as a feature of their worship practice, and as an invocation addressed to the glorified Jesus. Hurtado concludes that "the practice of invoking Jesus as 'our Lord' must, even at this early stage, already have been sufficiently routinized in Aramaic-speaking circles by the time Paul taught the phrase to the Corinthians, that it carried a certain cachet of tradition and could serve to unite believers across linguistic and cultural lines in a shared devotional practice."<sup>13</sup> As Hurtado argues,

It is evidence that the invocation of Jesus was a widely known feature of early Christian worship that clearly began with Aramaic-speaking believers, and already by the 50s had become well known among Pauline Christians too. That Pauline Christians were not merely taught to invoke Jesus but were given this Aramaic invocation formula as well reflects a concern to promote a shared liturgical practice between Paul's Gentile churches and their Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christian coreligionists and predecessors in the faith.<sup>14</sup>

By way of further evidence of the early emergence of the understanding that Jesus is uniquely significant and an agent of the one God, Hurtado notes that the maranatha formula also appears in The Didache (at 10.6) as part of a grace to be offered at the end of the Eucharist meal.<sup>15</sup>

From the Book of Acts, Hurtado examines Acts 7:54-56 which describes the martyrdom by stoning of Stephen. Stephen's death is presented as the direct reaction to his profoundly Christological statement about seeing Jesus exalted to heavenly glory "at the right hand of the God" (Acts 7:55-58). The writer of Acts presents Stephen's Christological claim as precipitating opposition that results in his death. The account, Hurtado suggests, would appear to indicate that Christological claims and devotional practices were already critical points of conflict in the community.

Hurtado also attends to the canonical synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke and finds evidence that these full scale narrative accounts of Jesus were quickly disseminated, widely read, and enormously influential in the transmission of Christian

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<sup>11</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 137-151.

<sup>12</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 151. My italics.

<sup>13</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 110.

<sup>14</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 141.

<sup>15</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 173, in reference to *The Didache*, 10.6.

faith. They too, he observes, promoted and reflected an intense devotion to Jesus. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, reflects the growing conflict with larger Jewish community. The tension, polemic and controversies concerning Jesus and the status to be accorded to him are very evident here. Devotion to Jesus is clearly a factor in Jewish opposition to the Christian movement developing within its ranks, and Hurtado argues that, in a hardening of the positions as the bitter struggle deepened, it is likely that Johannine Jewish Christians in counter-reaction further stressed Jesus' divine status and origin. The hostility and opposition eventually led to the rejection and indeed expulsion of the Johannine Jewish Christians from the Jewish community.<sup>16</sup> Hurtado also notes that in the report to Trajan by the Roman magistrate Pliny Christians are said to chant a hymn "to Christ as to a god."<sup>17</sup> Worshipping Jesus had thus clearly emerged by that stage as the characteristic mark of the Christian faith, distinguishing Christians from their contemporaries outside of the Christian community. Hurtado contends that it was precisely devotion to Jesus that Jewish and pagan critics of Christianity found to be one of the most objectionable features of Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Hurtado includes an exploration of various other extra-canonical early Jesus books in his study. He further traces the development of devotion to Jesus into the second century, including the accounts of the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. 110) and that of Polycarp (d. c. 155-160). Hurtado's research demonstrates that martyrdom in the early centuries also vividly attests to the profound reverence of and devotion to Jesus, with martyrdom serving as a particularly public form of devotion to Jesus, literally a spectacle of Jesus-devotion.

Hurtado concludes his study with a survey of the writings of the apologist, Justin Martyr. Hurtado observes that Justin's *First Apology* also clearly reflects the binitarian pattern of Christian worship. Justin writes, for example, that it is because Christians give "to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the creator of all"<sup>19</sup> that Christians are charged with madness. Christians clearly worship Christ, but their understanding of the relationship between God (Father) and Christ is clearly subordinationist. Here Hurtado explains that,

We also have to recognize that Justin was basically developing terms and conceptions that come to him from prior Christian tradition. In the first two centuries, all texts from, and affirmed in, the developing proto-orthodox tradition, from the New Testament writings onward, reflect subordination Christology, the Son understood as the unique agent of the Father serving the will of the Father and leading the redeemed to the Father.<sup>20</sup>

Hurtado describes Justin Martyr as the earliest extant example of a proto-orthodox Christian seriously attempting to articulate an understanding of Jesus as divine in terms that are comprehensible and even persuasive to Jewish interlocutors and the wider culture.<sup>21</sup> It was no easy task to explain their radically innovative understanding of the singular significance of Jesus' identity and role, whilst also maintaining a monotheistic position, as Hurtado explains:

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<sup>16</sup> See Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 402-7.

<sup>17</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 606, in reference to Pliny, *Epistles*, 10.96-97.

<sup>18</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 605.

<sup>19</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 605, in reference to *First Apology*, 13.3.

<sup>20</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 647.

<sup>21</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 641.

Proto-orthodox devotion to Jesus honored him as divine within an exclusivist monotheistic stance derived (adapted) from the biblical/Jewish tradition. This, in particular, is what made the effort to articulate Jesus' divine status so demanding; it largely explains the lengthy and complicated nature of Christological debates among Christians in proto-orthodox circles in the first three centuries of Christianity. Had they been able to revere Jesus as something less than divine, or to accommodate more than one deity – that is, had they opted for either of the two major religious patterns of their time – they would not have required such a struggle to develop a theology adequate to their devotional traditions.<sup>22</sup>

As is well known, Justin is rightly esteemed as a prototype of the serious intellectual endeavour to engage and make use of the philosophical categories of the day, combining biblical and Christian convictions in a sustained attempt to engage and employ philosophical categories and currents of his time in order to express and defend the Christian faith. He famously drew on the notion of Logos/Word, a biblical name applied to Jesus in the Christian tradition, and a notion with a rich background in the Greek philosophical tradition. But Hurtado explains that for Justin the Logos is defined by the figure of Jesus – not the reverse – and that the real character of the Logos is derived from the person of Jesus. In other words, Jesus is not divine because he is the Logos, but Logos because he is the only Son. As Hurtado expresses it: “I want to reiterate that for Justin the Logos is first and foremost *Jesus*, whom Christians worship (1 Apol 66-67) ... for Justin the Logos is the Lord Jesus to whom he owes everything. ... Justin did not merely think about the Logos, Justin worshipped and loved him (2 Apol 13.4).”<sup>23</sup> Justin also stresses that the Son/Logos is not a creature but shares in the being of the Father. He refers to the one divine *ousia* and the distinguishable *prosopa* (1 Apol 36-38). Hurtado thus confirms that “Justin is our first witness to the use of new terms in Christian discourses to try to conceive and articulate the unique relationship of Jesus to God, and to accommodate a limited but real plurality within a rigorously monotheistic stance.”<sup>24</sup> Again Hurtado's point is that Jewish exclusivist monotheism played a decisive role in shaping Jesus-devotion and the associated doctrinal developments.

On the basis of the written records, Christian and others, Hurtado thus argues for the emergence of an astonishingly close association between God and Christ and for a binitarian monotheistic pattern of worship and prayer in which reverence is accorded to God and Christ from a phenomenally early stage. Jesus-devotion erupted suddenly and quickly, he argues, not gradually, or incrementally or late. With its origins in Jewish Christian circles, it quickly spread. This Jesus-devotion expressed the Christian conviction regarding the centrality of Jesus and the uniqueness of his role, and it demanded a new view of God, a radical reshaping of the exclusivist monotheism inherited from the Jewish tradition, initially expressing itself in a binitarian form and ultimately in a trinitarian form of expression. This reshaping was accompanied by and expressed in binitarian patterns of worship and devotional practice whereby the exalted Jesus is the recipient of worship along with God. In this way, the early Christians posited a real and radical plurality in the Godhead, initially more focused on Father and Son as somehow pertaining to the one God they worshipped to the exclusion of all others. Thus was established the context of the doctrinal development that would eventually and inevitably emerge as a necessary corollary of their binitarian (and finally trinitarian) devotional patterns of worship.

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<sup>22</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 563-4.

<sup>23</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 648.

<sup>24</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 646.



## THE GRASS-ROOTS DERIVATION OF THE TRINITY IN THE DISCIPLES' EXPERIENCE

More than twenty years ago, Sebastian Moore embarked on a rather daring attempt to reconstruct the psychological transformation of the disciples in the light of their experience of Jesus' death and resurrection. Though they were strict monotheists of the Jewish faith tradition, through their experience of Jesus and particularly through his paschal mystery, they were led to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and God and that God is three. This radical development clearly indicates that they must have experienced a dramatic revolutionary change of consciousness that radically transformed them and their understanding of God.

It is that dramatic change of God-consciousness which the disciples experienced which Moore then seeks to explore. What has been forgotten, and moreover what must be reclaimed if we are to effectively mediate religious meaning in our times, Moore insists, is that the formulation in trinitarian doctrine that God is three is the intellectual recognition of the original psychologically and spiritually revolutionary experience of the disciples whom it radically transformed. As Moore explains, "classical salvation doctrine has seen the drama of Jesus as played out in the sight of God. We have to see it as played out in the experience of the men and women it transformed and transforms in the presence of God."<sup>25</sup> By means of what he himself describes as "a full psychological appropriation of the story of Jesus,"<sup>26</sup> Moore then attempts to reconstruct the experience of the disciples, which led them to this extraordinary position whereby, firstly, they came to think of the risen Jesus a worthy recipient of the devotion otherwise and until then only accorded to God, and to the Jesus-devotion to which Hurtado's study so vividly attests.

Moore's ultimate goal is an understanding of the dynamics of the psychological transformation that occurs in human consciousness when a person affirms Jesus as God, for the recognition that Jesus is God signals the emergence of a radically and irrevocably new God-consciousness. In other words, Moore seeks to identify the 'felt meaning' which grounds the New Testament witness and which undergirds the later doctrinal statements, in order to be able more effectively to mediate Christian faith to contemporary culture in psychological terms. This leads Moore to a probing analysis of religious experience of those first disciples of Jesus who, in and through their experience of his paschal mystery, were the first to express, in their preaching, prayer and worship of Jesus, their conviction of his unique significance and role. As Hurtado's work demonstrates, the risen Jesus was credited with operations which only God could do and worshipped from a remarkably early stage in the tradition. But Moore presses further and asks how it is that the sense of Jesus' unique significance and divine agency arose. He appeals to the notion of a unique form of the experience of the dark night of the soul as the best analogue, though of course a necessarily deficient one. He suggests that the death of Jesus created a sense of the death of God in the disciples and that, with the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, they experienced the risen Jesus as nothing less than the very presence of God in their midst. This experience, Moore surmises, is the one that lies at the very origin of the development of the Jesus-devotion which is the subject of Hurtado's superb study and of the remarkable energy, enthusiasm, courage and hope that characterized Christian praxis and preaching from its beginnings.

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<sup>25</sup> Sebastian Moore, *The Inner Loneliness*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), 116.

<sup>26</sup> Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose are One* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), xiii.

Moore traces a three-stage dynamic in the experience of the disciples. In the first stage, which Moore describes in terms of an awakening of desire, the disciples experience an ecstasy and joy in their interaction with Jesus in Galilee. Moreover, in and through their experience of Jesus, they experience a new and enthralling sense of God, a sense of God that is unburdened by sin and by guilt, a sense of God as not remote or dominating, but as compassionate and loving presence. That stage comes to a devastating conclusion, however, with Jesus' arrest and execution. Moore suggests that, in a second stage that is precipitated by Jesus' dreadful death, the disciples experience sheer desolation and a sense that *everything* is lost. Jesus' death precipitates nothing less than a mortal crisis for the disciples, a profoundly spiritual crisis that is characterized by despair, desolation, shame, and confusion. Here Moore likens their desolation to the inconsolability with which those who have experienced the dark night of the soul speak of that experience.<sup>27</sup> It was a despair that only the experience of God could dispel, an inconsolability which only God could relieve. The appearance of the risen Lord is experienced by the disciples as precisely that, the experience of God and of forgiveness and consolation that only God could give. Into their experience of utter desolation, Jesus appears and God is revealed to them, as forgiveness, compassion, hope and love. God is newly alive for them in the very person of Jesus. They come alive again, alive as never before, with their understanding of themselves, of Jesus, and of themselves radically transformed, liberated and energised, as the scriptures attest so vividly.

Moore describes their initial response to the appearance of the risen Lord Jesus in terms of a realisation that Jesus *is* God. At first, Moore surmises, it is a case of a *displacement* of divinity into Jesus. Jesus is God. God is in Jesus. Jesus is the centre of their new God-consciousness. A larger picture then gradually unfolds in their consciousness. The God of Jesus re-emerges, the Father who had died with Jesus and who now declares his love in the resurrection of Jesus, the God and Father who is the author of this entire loving and life-giving plan. Moore describes this stage as an *extension* of divinity from God to Jesus. In a third development in their God-consciousness, their experience of the Spirit emerges as another power centre for their new experience of God, a kind of "cyclic life flow" between Father and Son. This further extension of divinity emerges from a dawning realisation and conviction that the oneness of Father and Son is itself a divine person, that the Father and Son are connected in person, the person of the Spirit. In this way, Moore reconstructs the dynamics at play in the dawning realisation in the disciples' God-consciousness of the threefold differentiation within God. It is a pattern that unfolds in terms of firstly *displacement* of divinity into Jesus, then an *extension* of divinity from God to Jesus, and thirdly the emergence of a third divine one who is, in person, the *cyclic life flow* between God (Father) and Son, the Holy Spirit.

In Moore's explorations, the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection is the key to that radical transformation of their God-consciousness, a transformation which began with their experience of Jesus in his earthly ministry. It is Jesus in person, in and through his paschal mystery, who carries the disciples into a radically new God-consciousness. His paschal mystery emerges as the psychological pattern or the pedagogy, so to speak, through which their God-consciousness is utterly transformed. As Moore explains:

We talk about the Trinity as though it were from the start a highly recondite doctrine for which we have to seek analogies at the human level. Actually, it is given to us from the start at the human level, in a form that already contains the clue for thinking about

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<sup>27</sup> Moore, *The Fire and the Rose are One*, 105.

it in itself... The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus is the estuary in which this river branches out into the Trinitarian mystery of Jesus "at the right hand" of the Father, the Father dependent for his manifest meaning on Jesus, the Spirit the abundance of this to-each-other-ness of Father and Son "poured out in our hearts". The pedagogy of the Trinitarian mystery is perfect. Jesus in person carries us over from its human articulation ... into the fullness of the economy of Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

In this way, Moore describes what he calls the "grass-roots" originating experience of the disciples' conversion from which issued the proclamation that Jesus is Lord and which eventually came to full expression in terms of the three dramatic personae, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is this kind of grass-roots experience of the disciples' total spiritual transformation that grounds the development of Jesus-devotion, and subsequently the emergence and development of trinitarian doctrine.

### THE EXTENSION OF DIVINITY TO JESUS: HURTADO'S FINDINGS AND MOORE'S IMAGININGS

While Moore is clearly operating in a different realm of meaning than Hurtado, the realm of interiority as distinct from the realm of scholarship, it seems to me that Hurtado's study, at least to some degree, supports and validates Moore's imaginative reconstruction of the experiential beginnings that ground the development of a trinitarian understanding of the Godhead. In doing so, it serves to counter those criticisms of Moore's work regarding a dearth of biblical data to substantiate Moore's construction. At the very least, Hurtado's study confirms that the phenomenon of Jesus-devotion in prayer and worship was a striking innovation that can only have issued from a correspondingly striking experience, and that this phenomenon of Jesus-devotion was evident at a very early stage, perhaps even as early as the 30s, in first century Christianity. While Hurtado describes it as an "astonishingly and surprisingly" early development, however, Moore's reconstruction of the disciples' experience of Jesus' death and resurrection would persuade us that Jesus-devotion was a very plausible response and a conceivably immediate outcome of their utterly revolutionary experiences of the risen Jesus.

That Hurtado argues that the reverence offered to Jesus first appears, in the written records, as an extension and expression of reverence for God, and in a binitarian pattern of prayer and worship, is not incompatible with Moore's description. Moore too speaks of a stage of extension in the developing God-consciousness. But, as he imagines the dynamic at work in the disciples' consciousness, what Hurtado describes relates to what Moore recognises as the second stage, wherein the divinity of Jesus is indeed understood as an extension of divinity from God (Father) into Jesus, but which follows a prior and originating stage whereby, in the euphoria of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, the disciples first apprehend, in what is effectively a displacement of divinity into Jesus, that Jesus himself is God. In other words, given the dating of the written records on which Hurtado's study is based, with the earliest coming from the 50s, Hurtado's findings can reasonably and plausibly fit with Moore's reconstruction of an earlier stage that pre-dates the written record. Indeed, in a brief aside that points to the experience which Moore suggests, Hurtado comments that "In some forms of early 'popular' Christianity, Jesus almost seems to have eclipsed 'the Father.'"<sup>29</sup>

Hurtado's study also confirms the emergence of Jesus-devotion in advance of Spirit-devotion, in line with Moore's reconstruction of the gradual unfolding of a threefold

<sup>28</sup> Sebastian Moore, "Four Steps Towards Making Sense of Theology," *Downside Review* 111 (1993): 79.

<sup>29</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 3.

pattern in the disciples' God-consciousness. Indeed, a further study of the kind that Hurtado has undertaken, which traces the development of Spirit-devotion in prayer and worship in relation to the development of Jesus-devotion, would be most welcome, in order to elucidate further the process at work in the very early development of the consciousness of God's threefold being. Martin Hengel, for example, argues that, "A motivating force in this development was the consciousness that they were 'inspired' by the Holy Spirit, God's eschatological gift, and that they 'interpreted things wrought by the Spirit in a spiritual fashion' (cf. 1 Cor 2:14)."<sup>30</sup> We eagerly await that fuller study.

What clearly is very prominent in Hurtado's study, but does not overtly figure in Moore's reconstruction, is Hurtado's appreciation of how, in the process of extension of divinity from God (Father) to Jesus, that extension of divinity was accommodated within and definitively shaped by the inherited tradition of Jewish exclusivist monotheism, in a process which, at least in the beginning, involved a certain measure of subordination of the Son to the Father. For Moore, the influence of monotheism is, I suggest, initially expressed in the very first movement of *displacement* of divinity into Jesus. What we see then in Hurtado's study is the working out, within a determinedly monotheistic stance, of the later stage of the *extension* of divinity to Jesus.

In the conclusion to his study, Hurtado comments that, "Probably, the continuing vitality of Christianity will remain dependent upon how fully Christians engage the question of Jesus, and how radically they are willing to consider what devotion to him means for them."<sup>31</sup> This is precisely Moore's point in seeking to mediate faith more effectively to contemporary consciousness. Moore recognizes that devotion to Jesus and creedal formulations mean little or nothing if not grounded in personal experience and that the continuing vitality of Christianity in contemporary culture demands an effective mediation of the mystery of Jesus in distinctly psychological terms. As Moore explains:

It seems to me that a primary theological need in our time is for the psychological to mediate the transcendent. Until this comes about, the psychological dimension remains subjective, the transcendent dimension extrinsic. The perennial vigor of Christianity stems from a dangerous memory, of the experience of a group of people being brought to a crisis whose issue was such a freedom in face of our mortality as can only come from the transcendent ground of being. The psychological mediation of the transcendent is *remembered*... To be awakened at this level is to have one's answer to the common view that the Christian myth has lost its power.<sup>32</sup>

The divinity of the risen Jesus and the trinitarian nature of God's being are not just theological realities but deeply psychological realities. The experience of the mysteries at a deeply and profoundly psychological level is necessarily prior to their expression in prayer and devotion and prior to the articulation of doctrine. The task of mediating religious meaning and faith to contemporary consciousness, Moore insists, firstly demands an expressly psychological mediation, a deeply personal awakening, whereby the Jesus story meets and transforms one's own deeply personal story. This is the task which challenges us anew in each and every generation.

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Hengel, "Sit at my Right Hand!," in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1863), 220.

<sup>31</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 653.

<sup>32</sup> Sebastian Moore, *Jesus The Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), x.

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