

BOOK REVIEW

Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). xiv + 248 pp. Pbk. US\$20.00.

In *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, Larry Hurtado attempts to overcome what he believes is an unwitting neglect of early Christian manuscripts for the study of Christian origins. Hurtado wants to add to the usual discussion of early documents merely as sources of texts. By viewing these manuscripts as *artifacts* in and of themselves apart from the texts written on them, scholars can gain valuable insights into the culture and history of Christianity in the second and third centuries.

In Chapter 1, Hurtado describes the various Christian manuscripts extant from the second and third centuries and delineates the range, number and contents of the assorted Old Testament, New Testament and non-canonical early Christian manuscripts. Hurtado stresses the importance that Christians placed on the written text and the range over which these texts traveled in the ancient world. He asserts that some of the commonly held ideas of distinct Christian ‘communities’ might need to be reconsidered or at least balanced by the idea that some of the early texts may have been more widely traveled than first believed.

In Chapter 2, Hurtado attempts to address the evidence that suggests that Christians had a preference for the codex over other forms of writing material. After a lengthy delineation of the various documents and their particular media, Hurtado critiques Epp’s theory regarding the codex’s benefit in transportation and Stanton’s theory concerning the gradual development of the codex from notebooks as the cause for the Christian community’s propensity toward the codex. Although there is an interesting, if basic, discussion regarding the creation of codices, part of the disappointment of this chapter is that Hurtado does not posit a theory of his own, but leaves the reader without a viable explanation for the Christian preference for the codex.

The next chapter evaluates the nature of the *nomina sacra* and their use by Christian scribes in their codices. Hurtado commences by outlining the various forms of *nomina sacra* used in different codices and proposes that *nomina sacra* are Jewish in origin and arose from Jewish interest in gematria. Although Hurtado's proposal for the development of the *nomina sacra* for 'Jesus' might be plausible, it is not entirely convincing, because he does not sufficiently outline how it would have spread so quickly, and why the name Jesus was a candidate for making a sacred name form along the same lines as the other *nomina sacra*. However, when discussing why these *nomina sacra* arose, Hurtado makes a strong case for Christian piety through a solid critique of Tuckett.

In Chapter 4, Hurtado treats the adoption and use of the staurogram in Christian manuscripts. Following this, there is a discussion regarding the meaning of this sign and its importance for Christian origins. Hurtado critiques various scholars' approaches to this subject, and supports the idea that the staurogram was an early Christian depiction of Jesus on the cross. This argument is plausible, but would be improved by expanding some of the points.

The final chapter looks at various codex features including size, columns, margins, lines per page, reader's aids, and corrections. These issues are not discussed in full, but provide some insight into how to evaluate these features in a codex and what their importance might be. This chapter is particularly interesting and would be very useful for an introduction to codices and the various formal features of manuscripts.

There are a few other strong points to Hurtado's work. He makes a large number of references to various papyri and ancient texts. By constantly alluding to ancient artifacts, Hurtado is able to provide a number of examples for his theories and to situate the reader within the larger ancient context. This effect is augmented through the use of a number of charts and graphs that are helpful for acquiring a general overview of the subject being discussed. Hurtado's work is also fairly accessible to a reader who might not be very familiar with ancient manuscripts. Although he sometimes gets caught up with technicalities in identifying each text, Hurtado does provide a solid foundation for the reader to understand the nature of ancient manuscripts and their importance for the Christian community in the first three centuries of its development.

One criticism of this book is that Hurtado does not always adequately flesh out his arguments. Although he does a solid job of critiquing others' theories, the book would have been stronger if he had gone into greater depth in supporting his own positions. On the other hand, this economy of argument does allow the unspecialized reader to get a foothold in the subject area without being overwhelmed by the sheer mass of data.

Overall, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts* is a fine exposition of how to use every aspect of ancient manuscripts, not just the text, for gaining insight into Christian origins. This work would be a good introductory tool for people who are interested in the various approaches to evaluating ancient texts, and might make a good textbook for students in an introductory course on the study of ancient manuscripts and Christian origins.

Sean A. Adams
McMaster Divinity College