



Most followers of Jesus in decades after his dead and resurrection were Palestinian Jews. Their daily contact with each other and with their environment was in Aramaic, as were their community life and worship meetings.

This is what we would expect when we take into account the ethnic and cultic environment from which Christianity originated.

Jesus himself had been a Jewish teacher who addressed his disciples in the language of the crowds, which was Aramaic.

The love we owe: Heart of the Aramaic Christian Community

In a previous number of the *RCEC Reports* I suggested that for first century Jews the choice to either love Jesus (Aramaic: **rḥm iṣw'**) or curse Jesus (Aramaic: **ḥrm iṣw'**) had been unavoidable.¹

Jesus had taught his disciples that love of God and of their neighbor was the center and summary of the law.

In this article I will argue that the Aramaic behind some passages in the New Testament gives even more prominence to the duty to love than does the Greek text.

In Romans 13:8 Paul exhorts his readers: "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (ESV)

¹ RCECR 22 (March 2010), "The curse and loving Jesus: Confession of the Aramaic Christian Community".

After the instruction in 13:1-7 to pay due respect to the government and to pay the taxes they owe, Paul's appeal to love one another may be somewhat unexpected. Paul is obviously referring to the commandment in the Law to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) as well as to the teaching of Jesus on the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:39-40).

Why does he raise this issue of loving one's neighbor at this place? It seems to be triggered by the expression "to pay what is owed" (ἀποδίδωμι τὰς ὀφειλάς) in verse 7. When we think of owing something, love may not be what first comes to mind. My suggestion is that Paul knew this combination of concepts from the Aramaic Christian community. In Aramaic the words for love and for owing sound very similar. **ḥub** means 'to owe', and **'ḥb** or **ḥbb** means 'to love'.²

The Syriac Peshitta translates Romans 13:8 as follows:

μηδενὶ μηδὲν ὀφείλετε
wal'nāš medem lā **tḥubun**
εἰ μὴ τὸ ἀγαπᾶν ἀλλήλους.
elā ḥad ḥad lmaḥābū

The paronomasia in Aramaic had been the incentive to coin the expression 'the love one owes' or

² Cf. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, p. 416 (חַבַּב = ,love'); Klaus Beyer, *Die Aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer, Ergänzungsband* (Wörterbuch), p. 345: חוּב „Schuld“ ... חוּבָה „Schuld“ ... חוּבָה „schuldig“, and Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*, p. 418 col. 2 (ܥܘܒܐ = ,to owe money') and p. 419 col.1 (ܥܘܒܐܘܬܐ = ,love').

'due affection'.³

However, close association of the ideas of loving and owing was not new. It is powerfully put forward by Jesus in a confrontation with a Pharisee who had invited him to dinner (Luke 7:36-50). When a woman with a bad reputation entered, wet Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair and poured precious perfume on them, the host was appalled: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." (NIV) Then Jesus tells a parable about debt and love:

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

³ This fixed combination may also be behind the Byzantine version of 1 Cor 7:3: „Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her“ (NKJV).

The Peshitta translates as follows:

τῇ γυναίκεὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ
gabrā l'attēh
τὴν ὀφειλομένην εὐνοίαν
ḥubā dmetḥīb
ἀποδιδότω,
neprō'

It is very likely that the original wording of the verse is the one printed in most modern editions of the Greek New Testament, namely τῇ γυναίκεὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω. That text we find in the papyri, the great majuscules and in the Latin versions. The longer text of the Byzantine tradition and in the Peshitta has at least the correct interpretation of what a man owed his wife.

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said." (vv. 41-43 - NIV) Then Jesus contrasts the cold and thrifty reception in the Pharisee's house with the abundant and sincere affection the sinful woman had showed (vv. 44-46). Jesus conclusion is surprising:

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." The reader may be puzzled and wonder what love and debt have to do with each other. The Aramaic words contained a pun which suggested the close connection of (canceled) debt and love. The Aramaic term for 'moneylender' is mārē' ḥawbā, i.e. 'lord of debt'. That is how the Peshitta translates δανειστής in verse 41 (ܡܪܝܢܐ ܚܘܒܐ). The Aramaic for 'love' is ḥubā (Syriac: ܚܘܒܐ), a word with exactly the same consonants as ḥawbā ('debt'). When the moneylender decides to cancel the enormous debt of his main debtor (ḥayābā - v. 41), the logical reaction was abundant love (v. 47).

At the end of the story Jesus turns to the woman, saying: "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests are perplexed: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (v. 49 – NIV) Some of them at least took home the message about the love we owe when the Lord of debt decided to grant us forgiveness.

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Early Christian Liturgical Prayer to Christ A Response to Larry Hurtado

*Since about twenty years,
Larry W. Hurtado (University
of Edinburgh) studies early
Christian worship of Jesus Christ.
Professor Hurtado can rightly be
regarded as one of the most
prominent and distinguished
scholars in this field.*

*On 11 June 2010, I had the
privilege to respond to Professor
Hurtado in the framework of the
study day "Early Devotion to
Jesus: A Dialogue with Larry
Hurtado" held at the Dutch Free
University of Amsterdam.
The following paragraphs provide
a summary of my response to
Hurtado's magnum opum, i. e.,
the monograph Lord Jesus Christ.*

According to *Lord Jesus Christ*,⁴ i.e., Hurtado's *magnum opum*, prayer is a very (613), if not the most (138), important form of Christ devotion.

Hurtado focuses on liturgical rather than private prayer (86; 138; 199-200). Further, Hurtado restricts his research to the first and second centuries C. E. (2). In this report, I will first shortly summarize Hurtado's position concerning liturgical prayer to Christ in the first two centuries C.E. Then, I will present some of my own considerations in response to Hurtado's position.

⁴ L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003 [Paperback 2005]). Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers of this monograph.

Summary of Hurtado's position
With regard to liturgical prayer to Christ in the first two centuries, Hurtado refers to the following evidence: 1 Cor 16:22 (cf. Rev 22:20; Did 10:6); 1 Cor 1:2; Jn 14:14; Ign. *Eph.* 20.1; and Clem. Al. *Paed.* III 12. On the basis of these texts, Hurtado comes to the conclusion that "in the patterns of liturgical prayer preserved in texts of proto-orthodox circles, direct prayer to Jesus is not common" (618). Rather, Hurtado detects a "binitarian" pattern of liturgical prayer: "prayer characteristically offered to God through/in the name of Jesus" (53). Elsewhere, Hurtado even goes so far as to state that "the reverence of Jesus is never at the expense of God ('the Father')."⁵ Hurtado is aware of the contradicting evidence found in Plin. *Ep.* X 96.7. According to this text, the Bythinian Christians of Emperor Trajan's time sung hymns "to Christ as to a god" (*Christo quasi deo*). However, Hurtado dismisses this text by stating that "outsiders tend to portray Christian worship rather simply as directed to Jesus solely, though the actual pattern of Christian worship appears to have been more what we should call 'binitarian,' God and Jesus the recipients" (608). Further, Hurtado dismisses the numerous liturgical prayers to Christ found in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles by labeling them popular and non-orthodox.

⁵ L. W. Hurtado, "Philippians 2:6-11," in: *Prayer from Alexander to Constantine: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Mark Kiley et al. (London: Routledge, 1997), 236; italics added.

Response to Hurtado's position
 In response to the position sketched above it must be said that Hurtado has only a very limited set of primary sources. With regard to the first two centuries C.E., there is certainly more textual evidence for liturgical prayer to Christ. First, Hurtado does not even mention that -as many prominent Matthean scholars suggest (e.g., Bonnard; Bornkamm; Frankemölle; Lohmeyer)- the cries for help the disciples (and others) address to the earthly Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (e.g., Mt 8:25; 14:30; 15:22) might reflect prayers that the Matthean community addressed to the risen Christ. Further, Hurtado does not mention that Ignatius commands the Roman church to pray to Christ: "Petition Christ on my behalf [*λιτανευσατε τον Χριστον υπέρ μου*]"⁶. With regard to the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (= AAA) it must be said that there is an increasing number of recent scholars (e.g., Bradshaw; Elliott; Klauck; Spinks; Varghese) who do not agree with Hurtado that (all) the (references to) prayers to Christ in the AAA are expressions of heterodox and popular Christianity. Thus, texts like the following must be taken into consideration with regard to early Christian liturgical prayer to Christ. In the *Acts of Peter* (ca. 190-200 C. E.), the community prays for Paul as missionary:

"O Lord Jesus Christ, be with Paul, and bring him safely back to us

⁶ Ign. *Rom.* 4.2; ed. Ehrman, LCL 24, pp. 274-275

[*Tu domine Iesu Christe, esto cum Paulo et in pleno nobis eum constitue*]"⁷.

Finally, Hurtado has overlooked the various positive references that Tertullian (ca. 160–220 C. E.) made with regard to liturgical prayer to Christ.

In *De Bapt.* 12.7, for instance, Tertullian comments on the Gospel narrative of the Stilling of the Storm as follows:

"But that little ship did present a figure of the Church, in that she is disquieted 'in the sea,' that is, in the world, 'by the waves,' that is, by persecutions and temptations; the Lord [*domino*], through patience, sleeping as it were, until, roused in their last extremities by the prayers of the saints [*orationibus sanctorum*], He checks the world, and restores tranquility to His own".⁸ Further, also Tertullian's *De Spect.* 25.5 and *Apol.* 2.6 need to be taken into consideration.

Conclusion

Thus, in light of the above evidence it can be stated that there surely are several additional proof texts for liturgical prayer to Christ, texts that Hurtado did not mention or study in his monograph *Lord Jesus Christ*.

In these texts, not 'outsiders' but 'insiders' portray Christian worship as directed to Jesus *solely*.

⁷ ActPet 2 = *Actus Vercellenses* 2; Engl.: Ed. Elliott, p. 400; Greek: Ed. Lipsius/Bonnet, vol. 1, p. 47.

⁸ Engl.: Ed. Roberts/Donaldson [ANFa 3], p. 675; Latin Ed. Schleyer [FC 76], p. 194. For a detailed discussion cf. Boris Paschke, "Das liturgische Christusgebet bei Tertullian," *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 119 (2010): 260-268.

By explaining the "binitarian" pattern of worship, Hurtado states, "In ... devotional thought and practice Jesus holds the second place' to 'the Father'" (618).

However, it appears to me that in most of the early Christian texts presented in this response, Jesus does not hold the second, but rather the first place.

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