

Introduction

Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* is surely one of the most influential academic books in the history of scholarship on the New Testament and the origins of Christianity.¹ As Bousset indicated in his foreword to the first edition, the focus of the book is on the veneration of Jesus in the corporate worship (“cultus”) of early Christian circles, and the key question pursued is how this remarkable phenomenon came about.² Bousset rightly judged this cultic veneration of Jesus as the most important religious development in early Christianity. The question of how it appeared is all the more important given the ancient Jewish concern to protect the uniqueness of the one God, especially in matters of worship.³ In short, under what circumstances did believers feel so free to add a second, distinguishable figure (Jesus) as corecipient of cultic devotion along with God (“the Father”)?

Bousset's thesis (indeed, the key claim of the volume) was that this cultic veneration of Jesus did not emerge in the earliest circles of Jewish believers, the “Primitive Palestinian

¹ The original edition is Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (FRLANT, nf 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913). For brief biographical information, see Hendrikus Boers, “Bousset, Wilhelm,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 1:136–37. For a full biography, see Anthonie F. Verheule, *Wilhelm Bousset: Leben und Werk: Ein theologiegeschichtlicher Versuch* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1973).

² Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, v; p. 11 of this English edition, to which I refer hereafter unless noted.

³ See, e.g., Larry W. Hurtado, “First Century Jewish Monotheism,” *JSNT* 71 (1998): 3–26; republished in Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 111–33.

Community,” and could not have developed there. Instead, he argued, this decisive step was taken in the “Gentile Christian Primitive Community,” in places such as Antioch and Damascus, under the influence there of pagan religious traditions in which various divine figures and divinized heroes were part of the culture. It was in these circles, Bousset insisted, that Jesus came to be revered as “*Kyrios*,” Lord of the gathered community of believers.

To be sure, this happened quite early and quickly, he granted; for it was the faith of this Gentile Christian Primitive Community into which Saul of Tarsus was immersed, and which is thus reflected fully in the epistles he wrote as Paul the apostle. Given that Paul’s “conversion” is typically dated to within the first two or three years (at most) after Jesus’ execution, the development that Bousset posited was astonishingly early. But, he insisted, it was a real departure from, or at least a significant development beyond, anything that Jesus could have expected, or that the Jerusalem church could have entertained. In the Primitive Palestinian Community, Bousset claimed, the resurrected and exalted Jesus was regarded as “the Son of Man,” which Bousset posited was a heavenly figure who would appear soon to consummate God’s eschatological purposes. Although *Kyrios Christos* impressively addresses early Christian developments and expressions of Jesus-devotion diachronically down through Irenaeus (toward the end of the second century), it was this thesis about the origins of the cultic veneration of Jesus that was central, and it was also central in the ensuing debate generated by this book (to which I will return shortly).

The Religionsgeschichtliche Schule

Bousset was a key figure in a scholarly circle called “the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*” (“the history-of-religion school”), a term that originally designated a group of younger scholars in the University of Göttingen in the early years of the twentieth century.⁴ There

⁴ For a description that is also something of an *apologia*, see, e.g., Hendrikus Boers, “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes

were precursors who developed the basic approach, which was to set the New Testament and the origins of Christianity firmly in the ancient historical setting, and to treat the features of early Christianity strictly as the products of historical forces of that time. But through the work of that Göttingen circle, among whom Bousset was an outstanding figure, this approach became remarkably influential.⁵ That influence was then perpetuated and extended, especially through the efforts of Rudolf Bultmann and his many disciples and admirers, both in Germany and in English-speaking countries.⁶

Bousset describes his approach as requiring removal of two barriers that had restricted previous studies: (1) the partition dividing the study of the New Testament from the history of the early church, and (2) “the separation of the religious history of primitive Christianity” from its wider religious environment and developments in the ancient Roman world.⁷ Earlier scholars had proposed that Greek philosophical influences were relevant, and had also emphasized the influence of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. But Bousset (along with his Göttingen colleagues) was convinced that the more important factors that shaped earliest Christianity, and especially the emergence of the “*Kyrios* cult,” were a heavily Hellenized Judaism (as he saw reflected, e.g., in Philo of Alexandria) and especially other (pagan) influences from eastern areas such as Syria and Egypt, where “mystery” cults devoted to particular “*kyrios*” figures thrived.

(2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 2:383–87. For fuller discussion, see, e.g., Werner Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. G. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 245–80.

⁵ Other key figures of the initial circle included Hermann Gunkel, William Wrede, Ernst Troeltsch, Wilhelm Heitmüller, ~~and~~ Richard Reitzenstein, and Paul Wernle.

⁶ E.g., in the United States, key figures who promoted the views of Bultmann and his students included Helmut Koester, James M. Robinson, Robert Funk, and Hendrikus Boers.

⁷ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 11–13.

But however commendable its professed aim of historical analysis and the approach to earliest Christianity as a historical phenomenon, the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* has come in for a good deal of criticism over the past several decades. A number of years ago now, Carsten Colpe showed the fallacies involved in the persistent claims of Bousset and others about a supposed pre-Christian redeemer myth that they posited had influenced early Christianity, particularly in the christology of the Gospel of John.⁸ More recently, Karsten Lehmkühler has shown also how the theological and religious proclivities of Bousset and others of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* shaped their theses about the origins of Christianity.⁹ In Bousset's case, the firm separation of Palestinian and Hellenistic versions of early Christianity provided him (in his portrayal of the former) with a type of early piety with which he could feel somewhat more comfortable in his own liberal Protestant theological stance.¹⁰ In Bousset's eyes, the *Kyrios* cult and the subsequent christological doctrines were an unfortunate set of developments that complicated a simpler and purer faith of Jesus and the first believers.

Indeed, Bousset was concerned very much to promote a particular version of Christian faith, not simply to conduct scholarly studies as represented in *Kyrios Christos*. Along with his considerable body of scholar-oriented publications, he also produced a

⁸ Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). Cf. Wilhelm Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1907); and Richard Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösermysterium* (Bonn: Marcus & Weber, 1921).

⁹ Karsten Lehmkühler, *Kultus und Theologie: Dogmatik und Exegese in der religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), e.g., 293–94, showing that Bousset's own dogmatic preferences likely shaped his historical judgments.

¹⁰ Lehmkühler, *Kultus und Theologie*, 226. Boers' fervent assertion ("Religionsgeschichtliche Schule," 386) that, unlike his critics, there were no theological stakes for Bousset is thus more amusing than correct.

number of works directed toward general readers and concerned with promoting the sort of faith that he espoused, and several of these popular-level works were also translated into English, reflecting his impact transnationally at the time.¹¹ There was (and is) nothing unusual or improper in a scholar holding a religious faith-stance and advocating it. My point is simply that in this respect those who made up the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* were no less influenced by their own religious preferences than were their critics.

In her award-winning book on German orientalism, Suzanne Marchand has set the history-of-religion approach in the context of *fin-de-siècle* German concerns to create a version of Christianity that exponents deemed compatible with modernity, and particularly suitable for the enhancement of the German people. In this project, what she calls the “orientalising” of early Christianity (and of Paul in particular) was a central aim.¹² This involved playing down the significance of the Old Testament and Jewish traditions in favor of positing influences from “pagan” religious groups of an “oriental” provenance. As she also notes, critics then and subsequently have pointed to a certain disdain for Judaism evident in Bousset and others of his school of thought, as well as a curiously selective use of sources,

¹¹ Among his translated works for general readers are these: Wilhelm Bousset, *The Faith of a Modern Protestant* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909); *What Is Religion?* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907); *Jesus* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1906). Other expressions of his religious faith include *Die Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben: Historische und rationale Grundlagen des Glaubens* (Berlin-Schöneberg: Protestantischer Schriftenvertrieb, 1910); and *Unser Gottesglaube* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1908).

¹² Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. chap. 6, “Toward an Oriental Christianity,” 252–91, and also chap. 5, “The Furor Orientalis,” 212–51.

allowing them, for example, to posit as influences upon earliest Christianity ideas and practices attested only in sources much later than these first Christian circles.¹³

This disdain for Judaism that characterized a good deal of history-of-religion scholarship of the time is very much underscored by Susannah Heschel in her critical analysis of German biblical scholars in (and during the years leading to) Nazi Germany. She shows how some scholars used a history-of-religion emphasis to distance Jesus and early Christianity from ancient Judaism, contending, “over time History of Religions became identified with the German Christian movement” (the movement that supported the “Nazification” of Germany).¹⁴ Bousset died in 1920, well before the Nazis came to power, and there is no basis for linking him directly to them, or for ascribing to him a Nazi ideology. But Heschel argues that the “orientalizing” of Christianity advanced by Bousset and others of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* involved positing what she calls “a kind of witch’s brew of religious notions from India, Persia, Greece—but not from Jews,” Judaism providing only “an eschatological valence . . . but little more.”¹⁵ Moreover, as does Marchand, Heschel observes how this was shaped by, and served, interests in promoting a strong sense of the German people as distinctive (*das Volk*) and in particular as distinguishable in religion from Judaism. Indicative of this, from his earliest scholarly work onward Bousset posited a major

¹³ Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 290–91. Bousset’s disdain for Judaism is more evident in another of his major works (that was also heartily endorsed by Bultmann): *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (HNT 21; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1926). See, e.g., critical comments by E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), 24–26, 360 n12.

¹⁴ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 225. For her further discussion of the matter, see 225–32.

¹⁵ Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 59.

distance of Jesus' own religious faith from his Jewish context, portraying Judaism as "diametrically opposed to Christianity."¹⁶

Reception of Kyrios Christos

But let us return to the reception given to *Kyrios Christos*. Originally published in 1913, just a year before the outbreak of World War I, the book immediately ignited a sharp conflict of its own in scholarly circles internationally. Indeed, one of the earliest sizable reviews was by the Princeton Theological Seminary professor Geerhardus Vos in 1914.¹⁷ Major critiques published in 1915 by Paul Althaus and Paul Wernle (the latter a ninety-two-page article), in particular, led Bousset soon thereafter to produce a small monograph as a rejoinder, in which he modified his earlier views on a few matters (e.g., the origins of the *maranatha* expression in 1 Cor 16:22) but otherwise held his ground.¹⁸ Already by 1917, Geerhardus Vos' essay "The *Kyrios Christos* Controversy" required sixty-eight pages to review the debate to that point, also offering Vos' own engagement with some key issues.¹⁹ As I have noted already, in

¹⁶ Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 59–60. This is more evident in some of Bousset's other works, especially his first book *Jesu Predigt im Gegensatz zum Judentum: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892), and also in the major textbook on ancient Judaism published posthumously, Wilhelm Bousset and Hugo Gressmann, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (HNT 21; Tübingen: Mohr, 1926).

¹⁷ Geerhardus Vos, "Kyrios Christos, Wilhelm Bousset," *PTR* 12 (1914): 636–45.

¹⁸ Paul Althaus, "Unser Herr Jesus: Eine neutestamentliche Untersuchung: Zur Auseinandersetzung mit W. Bousset," *NKZ* 26 (1915): 439–57; Paul Wernle, "Jesus und Paulus: Antitheses zu Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*," *ZTK* 25 (1915): 1–92; Wilhelm Bousset, *Jesus der Herr: Nachträge und Auseinandersetzungen zu "Kyrios Christos"* (FRLANT, nf 8; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1916).

¹⁹ Geerhardus Vos, "The *Kyrios Christos* Controversy," *PTR* 15 (1917): 21–89. Commenting on the war-time situation in which this debate was conducted, Vos wrote, "in the midst of the clash of arms the other muses are wont to keep silent; but the muse of

this debate the key issue was whether the treatment of Jesus as worthy of cultic veneration had its roots in Jewish circles of believers in Jerusalem, or, as Bousset contended, first arose in diaspora settings more subject to pagan influences.

At the point of his untimely death in March 1920 (at the age of fifty-five), Bousset was preparing a second edition of *Kyrios Christos*. This task was completed by Gustav Krüger (a former student and colleague), assisted by Rudolf Bultmann, this second edition published in 1921. Thereafter, very much through Bultmann's influence, the book went through several successive reprint editions, with this English translation from the fifth German edition (1965), for which Bultmann wrote an "Introductory Word" in which he heartily endorsed the work as still "indispensable" above all the other works he recommended to his students.

But well before its translation into English, *Kyrios Christos* had become acknowledged in English-speaking countries as a major force in the scholarly investigation of earliest christology. At least two important lecture series in the 1920s were prompted by and shaped very much in critical dialogue with *Kyrios Christos*. In a 1921 book stemming from his Sprunt Lectures at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, J. Gresham Machen assessed *Kyrios Christos* in the following statement that reflects both admiration and critical caution:

It is perhaps too early as yet to estimate the full importance of Bousset's work.

But unless all indications fail, the work is really destined to mark an epoch in the history of New Testament criticism. Since the days of F. C. Baur, in the former half of the nineteenth century, there has been no such original, comprehensive, and grandly conceived rewriting of early Christian history as

divinity is made of sterner stuff and cannot be frightened into retirement. One cannot withhold a word of admiration from the interest in theological problems that sustains itself under such circumstances. It must be genuine indeed" (21).

has now appeared in Bousset's "Kyrios Christos." The only question is whether originality, in this historical sphere, is always compatible with truth.²⁰

Machen went on to indicate that the aim of his lectures was a critical engagement with Bousset's work, with special reference to his hypothesis that Paul's religious beliefs were shaped, not by the "primitive Christianity in Palestine," but by "Hellenistic Christianity" in Antioch, shaped in turn by pagan influences.²¹ In this, Machen correctly identified the crucial question posed by Bousset's programmatic study. Is the Jesus-devotion reflected in Paul's letters substantially indicative also of the religious practices and beliefs of Jewish circles of believers in Roman Judea? Or, instead, was Paul's religion shaped by "Hellenistic Gentile" circles in which a kind of Jesus-devotion significantly different from the faith of the "Primitive Palestinian" circles had developed?

Just a few years later, in his Bampton Lectures of 1926, A. E. J. Rawlinson declared his aim "to grapple constructively in English with the work of Bousset and of other writers belonging to the so-called *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in Germany."²² Granting that these scholars had rightly "set the books of the New Testament in their proper historical context," nevertheless Rawlinson sought to stress "the essentially Jewish character of the New Testament."²³ But it is probably in one of the "Appended Notes" in Rawlinson's book that he most directly engaged the key thesis in *Kyrios Christos*, specifically Bousset's claim that the

²⁰ J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1925), 29. Though dated, Machen's book deserves more notice than it has received. He anticipated views that have come to be associated with later scholars, e.g., his judgment that "there is no evidence that before his conversion Paul was under real conviction of sin" (65, a view often credited nowadays to Krister Stendahl).

²¹ Machen, *Origin of Paul's Religion*, 30.

²² A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), ix.

²³ Rawlinson, *New Testament Doctrine*, x.

origins of referring to Jesus as “Lord” lie in Hellenistic Gentile churches in places such as Antioch.²⁴ In that appended note Rawlinson (along with a number of others then and subsequently) focused on the Aramaic cry, “*Marana tha*,” quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:22, with Rawlinson famously referring to it as “in fact the Achilles’ heel of the theory of Bousset,” and noting Bousset’s varying attempts “to get rid of it.”²⁵

In the first edition of *Kyrios Christos* (1913), Bousset had contended that Jesus was first called “*Kyrios*” by Greek-speaking believers in Antioch, and that subsequently Aramaic-speaking believers adopted the practice, rendering ὁ κύριος into Aramaic as “*Maran*.”²⁶ So this meant that the origins of referring to Jesus as “Lord” lay in Greek-speaking circles of believers in these diaspora (and so somewhat paganized) settings, and the *Marana tha* expression was not evidence of an origin among Aramaic-speaking believers of the Primitive Palestinian Community. But then, in *Jesus der Herr* (1916), responding to critics of this view, Bousset proposed another theory. In place of his earlier claim that *Maran* (“our Lord”) was not used in Aramaic-speaking Jewish circles as a designation for God, and so when applied to Jesus could not signify a divine status accorded him, Bousset now proposed that *Marana tha* was a Jewish curse-formula, meaning “Our Lord (i.e., God) will come to judge you!”²⁷ But thereafter, in the second edition of *Kyrios Christos* this latter view was discarded and his earlier proposal reasserted, as a “possibility” with which “one will have to reckon seriously.”²⁸

²⁴ Rawlinson, *New Testament Doctrine*, 231–37.

²⁵ Rawlinson, *New Testament Doctrine*, 235.

²⁶ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (1913), 99–108.

²⁷ Bousset, *Jesus der Herr*, 22–23.

²⁸ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (German ed., 1921), 84; *Kyrios Christos* (English ed.),

Rawlinson was not alone, however, in finding neither of Bousset's proposals persuasive. Among others, Johannes Weiss criticized both Bousset and also Wilhelm Heitmüller (one of Bousset's colleagues in the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) for severing much of the connections between Paul and "the primitive Church," and in particular Weiss challenged Bousset's claim that the veneration of Jesus "arose altogether spontaneously in Antioch," insisting that, although "the process of its completion took place first in the Hellenistic *milieu*," nevertheless, the origins are earlier: "the religious veneration of Jesus was already present in essence in the earliest church" (i.e., Jerusalem).²⁹ In his much-noted study of Paul, Adolf Deissmann likewise dissented from Bousset, especially on the question of whether Paul's religious beliefs and practices were quite so distinct from that of the Jerusalem church and other circles of Jewish believers.³⁰

But, as mentioned already, among those who were rather more fully taken with *Kyrios Christos*, Rudolf Bultmann was especially influential. Indeed, Bultmann's own approach to early Jesus-devotion was almost entirely taken from *Kyrios Christos*.³¹ In Bultmann's students, likewise, we see the loyal acceptance of the key positions laid out in *Kyrios Christos*, as reflected, for example, in Conzelmann's *History of Primitive Christianity*, in

²⁹ Johannes Weiss, *Earliest Christianity* (English trans., London: Macmillan, 1937; repr., 2 vols., New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959; German ed., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1917), 741nn2–3, and see also 36–39.

³⁰ Adolf Deissmann, *Paul—A Study in Social and Religious History* (English trans., repr., New York: Harper & Row, 1957; German original, 1911), 125–27.

³¹ E.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (English trans., Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967). Having first acquired an acquaintance with Bultmann's works, and then subsequently reading the English translation of *Kyrios Christos* during Ph.D. studies, I recall being struck by how many of Bultmann's positions were simply those he had learned from Bousset.

which particularly the chapter on “Hellenistic Christianity before Paul” shows this.³² As noted earlier, Bultmann was involved in producing the posthumously published second edition of *Kyrios Christos*, and was likely influential in the successive reprint editions.

In his readable and informative study of the history of New Testament scholarship, Stephen Neill praised Bousset as “an outstanding scholar” who “stands far above all others” in the history-of-religion school. Declaring *Kyrios Christos* to be Bousset’s “greatest book” and “a work on the grand scale,” Neill particularly commended Bousset’s “great contribution” in focusing on early Christian circles “primarily as worshipping communities.”³³ But somewhat later in his discussion, noting the lack of any evidence to support it, Neill effectively rejected the crucial claim of Bousset (and Bultmann after him) that the Gentile churches were significantly different in faith from Jewish circles of believers in Jerusalem.³⁴

This English translation of *Kyrios Christos*, published initially in 1970, nearly sixty years after its first publication, surely reflected a continuing interest in, and appreciation for, the book. Indeed, the initial publication of the English translation of *Kyrios Christos* triggered a new flurry of reviews of the work, and also essays affirming its continuing significance. In the same year in which the English translation appeared, Hendrikus Boers published a ringing endorsement of the book as “unchallenged” in “its fundamental conception of the origin and development of NT Christology,” and also in “its methodology and its presentation of the

³² Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*, trans. J. E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), esp. 68–77.

³³ Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 175–76.

³⁴ Neill, *Interpretation of the New Testament*, 195–200.

Christology of the NT.”³⁵ Shortly thereafter, Norman Perrin wrote a review essay on *Kyrios Christos*, hailing it as still one of the “ten most important” books in New Testament studies.³⁶ Perrin noted two points, however, in which subsequent research required modifications of views taken in the book: (1) the origin of “*Kyrios* christology” was “more complex” than Bousset had recognized, “one root” going back to “a use of *Mar* of Jesus as apocalyptic judge in earliest Palestinian Christianity,” and (2) there was a far greater role for the Old Testament “in the formation of early Christian theology.”³⁷

In another article from 1973, Frederick Borsch noted the “enduring influence of Bousset’s general outlook” albeit “modified by a number of refinements and new directions” of opinion at that time.³⁸ Specifically, Borsch urged as a modification of *Kyrios Christos* a greater recognition that “the post-Easter communities were carrying forward the faith of Jesus and even providing insights into an incipient messianic point of reference in Jesus’ own teachings.” That is, Borsch argued for more influence stemming from the effects of Jesus’ own ministry. Also, noting the Qumran community as indicative of various Jewish sectarian currents in second-temple Judaism, he proposed that “the belief and life patterns of pre-Easter ‘Christians’ may have been more influenced than we now realize by understandings and worship practices which were not central to the Judaism of the time.”³⁹

³⁵ Hendrikus Boers, “Jesus and Christian Faith: New Testament Christology since Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos*,” *JBL* 89 (1970): 450–56, citing 456.

³⁶ Norman Perrin, “Reflections on the Publication in English of Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos*,” *ExpTim* 82 (1971): 340–42, citing 340.

³⁷ Perrin, *Reflections*, 342. Perrin also noted Bousset’s now dated liberal Protestant religious stance, 342.

³⁸ Frederick H. Borsch, “Forward and Backward from Wilhelm Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos*,” *Religion* 3 (1973): 66–73, citing 67.

³⁹ Borsch, “Forward and Backward,” 68–69.

In an article published a few years later, however, I offered a more direct critique of some key bases and components in Bousset's argument.⁴⁰ To cite one of these, fundamental to *Kyrios Christos* was the use of a two-fold division of early Christianity—"Palestinian-Jewish" and "Hellenistic-Gentile"—each with a distinctive christological stance, a notion perpetuated in Bultmann's writings and those of his students.⁴¹ This was later modified by Ferdinand Hahn, who urged a subdivision of "Jewish" Christianity into "Palestinian-Jewish" and "Hellenistic-Jewish" circles, producing a three-fold layering of "pre-Pauline" Christianity: Palestinian-Jewish, Hellenistic-Jewish, and Hellenistic-Gentile, a scheme adopted thereafter by a number of scholars.⁴² But, already by the time of my article, this sort of discrete, two-stage or three-stage unilinear scheme was being called into question. Especially in light of the influential work of Martin Hengel, it is difficult now to posit a Palestinian-Jewish setting free from Hellenizing influences, and it is also dubious to posit a Hellenistic-Gentile form of Christianity prior to Paul that was as theologically creative and as fully different in religious faith as Bousset posited. But it is equally difficult to posit Hellenistic-Jewish type of circles significantly different in religious outlook than Palestinian-Jewish circles.⁴³

⁴⁰ Larry W. Hurtado, "New Testament Christology: A Critique of Bousset's Influence," *TS* 40 (1979): 306–17. A German translation appeared later: "Forschungen zur neutestamentlichen Christologie seit Bousset: Forschungsrichtungen und bedeutende Beiträge," *TBei* 11 (1980): 158–71.

⁴¹ E.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1951), 1:33–183.

⁴² Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1969), 12. Among those who adopted Hahn's scheme was Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's, 1965).

⁴³ For an early critique of this view, see Martin Hengel, "Christology and New Testament Chronology," in *Between Jesus and Paul* (London: SCM, 1983), 30–47, and esp.

Another important claim in *Kyrios Christos* was that the key christological confession of the Primitive Palestinian churches was Jesus as “the Son of Man.” This claim rested on a notion then widely accepted that in the ancient setting of earliest Christianity “the Son of Man” was already a well-known title for an apocalyptic redeemer-figure, and that expectations of this figure were quite distinguishable from Jewish messianic expectations.⁴⁴ But from at least the 1970s onward it has become clear that “the Son of Man” was not in fact a title, either in ancient Jewish circles or in “oriental” traditions.⁴⁵ Moreover, there was never any evidence for the use of “the Son of Man” as a confessional title by any early Christian circle. So the depiction of the faith of the Primitive Palestinian circles of believers in *Kyrios Christos* was called into question.

To cite a final problem here, we have noted already Bousset’s shifting positions on the “*Marana tha*” expression, and the critique given by some other scholars. It was crucial for Bousset’s position that the application of the title “*Kyrios*” to Jesus could not have derived from Aramaic-speaking circles to claim also that there was no evidence that the equivalent term, “*Mar*,” was used (without modifiers) as a divine title. Bousset’s position was reaffirmed

60–62. Hengel’s massive study, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in the Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; London: SCM, 1974) has been highly influential in forcing scholars to grant the greater cultural complexity in ancient Judaism in the Jewish homeland as well as in diaspora settings.

⁴⁴ Among works that reflected this notion and helped make it widely accepted for several decades were Rudolf Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man* (rev. ed.; London: Lutterworth, 1943; German 1st ed., 1933), and Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954), esp. 346–50.

⁴⁵ An early doubt was expressed by C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1952), 116–18, and echoed later by Ragnar Leivestad, “Exit the Apocalyptic Son of Man,” *NTS* 18 (1971–1972), 243–67. See now “*Who Is This Son of Man?*” *The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen (LNT 390; London: T&T Clark, 2011).

emphatically by Siegfried Schulz in 1962.⁴⁶ But, as I noted in my 1979 article, there are several reasons for questioning this stance. Among them, there is in fact evidence that the Aramaic equivalent for “the Lord” (*Māryā*’, the definite form of *Mar*) was used as a divine title in pre-Christian Judaism, and also that the Greek *Kyrios* was used by Greek-speaking Jews as an oral substitute for the divine name of God.⁴⁷ In short, in linguistic expressions and in their religious usage, there was a clear connection between Aramaic-speaking and Greek-speaking believers, and likely from the earliest setting, the bilingual Jerusalem church. Crucially, contra Bousset, acclamations of Jesus as “Lord,” and with the connotation of some sort of divine-like status, cannot be confined so confidently to Greek-speaking circles in diaspora settings. Instead, such acclamations likely go back to the very earliest circles of believers, including Aramaic-speaking circles in Roman Judea.

Nevertheless, despite these problems, *Kyrios Christos* has remained a significant influence on scholarly views of the development of earliest Jesus-devotion. For example, the basic scheme was presupposed by scholars such as H. J. Schoeps in his study of Paul and, more recently, Burton Mack in his provocative book on Christian origins.⁴⁸ But, as I noted some years ago now, whether generating endorsements or critiques, *Kyrios Christos* “has

⁴⁶ Siegfried Schulz, “Maranatha und *Kyrios* Jesus,” *ZNW* 53 (1962), 125–44. I cite other scholars who accepted Schulz’ arguments in Hurtado, “New Testament Christology,” 313–14.

⁴⁷ See esp. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Semitic Background of the New Testament *Kyrios*-Title,” in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979), 115–42.

⁴⁸ H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). I have lodged criticisms of Mack’s book elsewhere: Larry Hurtado, “The Gospel of Mark: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Document?” *JSNT* 40 (1990), 15–32.

influenced the agenda of historical investigation of belief in Christ in the formative period of Christianity as has no other work.”⁴⁹

Continuing Significance

In an article published in 1996, I discussed several features of the work that make it a model for the sort of historical analysis of early Jesus-devotion that was needed.⁵⁰ It is fitting to note these again here, as no other work of the twentieth century provides us with such an impressive model.⁵¹

First, there is Bousset’s aim of seeking to understand in historical terms the emergence and early developments of the veneration of Jesus. However much Bousset may be judged incorrect in his own attempt (and I think he was wrong in some important points), surely the aim of critical historical investigation of these important matters remains valid.

Second, *Kyrios Christos* reflects the commendable approach to early Christianity by siting it specifically within the larger religious context or “environment” of the early Roman period. With others of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, Bousset seems to have overemphasized the influence of non-Jewish elements of that Roman environment, underestimating the importance of Jewish influences. But, even if judged incorrect in some of his specific judgments, Bousset’s basic approach is to be applauded.

Third, in *Kyrios Christos* Bousset rightly emphasized the religious experiences and worship practices of earliest Christians. He sought to approach early Christianity as a

⁴⁹ Larry W. Hurtado, “Christ-Devotion in the First Two Centuries: Reflections and a Proposal,” *TJT* 12 (1996), 17–33, citing p. 18.

⁵⁰ Hurtado, “Christ-Devotion in the First Two Centuries,” 18. As I noted, the only twentieth-century work that approaches *Kyrios Christos* in significance is Oscar Cullmann, *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1957; English trans., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959; rev. ed., 1963). But *Kyrios Christos* is in a class of its own in influence.

⁵¹ In what follows, I draw upon observations in Hurtado, “Christ-Devotion in the First Two Centuries,” 21–24.

religious movement, not simply as a record of doctrinal developments. To be sure, the writings of the New Testament can be analyzed as to their theological teachings; but in *Kyrios Christos* we have an impressive focus on the larger religious life reflected in these texts. Bousset correctly saw that the inclusion of Jesus as corecipient of cultic devotion was the major development that in turn demanded and shaped subsequent doctrinal developments.

Fourth, *Kyrios Christos* offers a roughly diachronic treatment of the developments and changes, as well as any continuities, in early Jesus-devotion. It is, emphatically, a historical study across an impressive period and a demanding body of evidence. Even if Bousset's results may be deemed today incorrect, too unilinear perhaps, nevertheless, in this ambitious historical scope we can still commend *Kyrios Christos*.

Finally, in *Kyrios Christos* Bousset offered an explanatory theory of the forces that drove and shaped developments in early Jesus-devotion across the century and a half covered. Essentially, as already noted, Bousset saw the process as one of a progressive paganization of a supposedly pure and simple faith of the Primitive Palestinian Community, a view that must now be judged simplistic and distorting. But, to his credit, Bousset at least felt obliged to offer a theory. If we do not share his choice of theory, we can at least affirm and find instructive his attempt to account for how and why early Jesus-devotion developed.

To speak personally, since my first encounter with *Kyrios Christos* as a graduate student (shortly after this English translation was published), it has been the single most stimulating work on early Jesus-devotion that I have read, and my own work has been shaped in dialogue (and often in disagreement) with it as with no other work. In various publications spanning some twenty-five years, I have conducted my own research program on the origins and developments of earliest devotion to Jesus, and in all this work *Kyrios Christos* has been

perhaps my principal model and Bousset my principal “sparring partner.”⁵² Even if it is now judged dated and incorrect in some crucial matters, it is still a stimulating, at times even thrilling, book to read. I am pleased to see this English translation back in print, which will make it more readily available to a new generation of readers.

Larry W. Hurtado

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⁵² My own attempt to produce something on the scale of *Kyrios Christos* eventuated in *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). It will be for others to judge the effectiveness of my attempt.