

For the first time in ten years, the century-old American Lectureship in the History of Religions (ALHR) underwent a rebirth; and what better place to do it than Atlanta, the city of new beginnings?



John G. Gager Jr., William H. Danforth Professor of Religion, Emeritus, Princeton University, delivered a week-long lecture series titled *Winners and Losers in the Making of Early Christianity* at several Atlanta-area universities during the week of April 1–5, 2013. Gager retired from his position at Princeton University in the spring of 2006, where he had taught since 1968. He received his BA and MDiv from Yale University and his PhD from Harvard University. Gager's scholarly concern is with the religions of the Roman Empire, especially early Christianity and its relations to ancient Judaism. He has also written on the theme of religion and magic. In his book *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Prentice Hall, 1975), Gager adopted an interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion, drawing on the works of social scientists. In *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford University Press, 2000), he argued for a new understanding of the apostle Paul's views of Jews and Judaism.

Gager is also the 2013 American Lecturer in the History of Religion. The American Lectureship in the History of Religions (ALHR) was established by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) in 1891 to encourage groundbreaking scholarship through a lecture and book series. A contractual agreement with Columbia University Press in 1936 established that the book manuscripts this lecture series was designed to promote would be published in a special series by the press. The list of ALHR lecturers, beginning in 1893, reads like a “Who’s Who” in the history of religions, and the list of books generated by this lectureship offers eloquent testimony to the influence this award has had in the fostering and development of that field.

At the request of the ACLS, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) assumed administrative responsibility for the series in 1994. The last ALHR lecturer was Bruce Lawrence in 1999. Publication of the book that grew out of his lectureship, *New Faiths, Old Fears*, was scheduled for fall 2001 but was delayed by Columbia University Press after the September 11, 2001, attacks (the book was eventually published in 2002). During the 2003 calendar year, the lecturer

was Willard G. Oxtoby, University of Toronto, emeritus. Due to his unexpected death, the series for 2003 was cancelled.

After a ten-year hiatus, the AAR relaunched the program with a new administrative structure and a streamlined academic format. Whereas the previous format for the ALHR lecturer provided an opportunity to offer lectures in multiple cities over a nine-month period, that format is no longer feasible for budgetary and administrative reasons. The AAR therefore opted for a new model, based upon a one-week series of lectures to be offered in multiple academic venues in a single North American city.

The AAR kicked off the new ALHR series in its hometown of Atlanta with a series of lectures by Gager given at Agnes Scott College, Georgia State University, Atlanta University Center, and Emory University. The five lectures were:

- A Tale of Two Stories: Winners and Losers in the Making of Early Christianity
- Turning the World Upside Down: An Ancient Jewish Life of Jesus
- Was the Apostle Paul the Father of Christian Anti-Judaism?
- The Apostle Paul in Jewish Eyes: Heretic or Hero?
- Let's Meet Downtown in the Synagogue: Jews and Greeks in the Ancient World

The lectures form a coherent argument about the convergences and divergences of ancient Judaism and Christianity, which will be the core of Gager's forthcoming book from Columbia University Press.

As Gager made clear in his opening lecture at Agnes Scott College (April 1), there have been two very different ways of imagining the elusive period of early Christian formation. In the first, and far more popular version, Judaism was rapidly surpassed by its brash young offshoots in the Jesus movement and gradually faded from cultural and political significance in the late Roman empire. Gager's lectures were designed to counter that master narrative with another in which Judaism never faded away, but rather proved itself to be a vital cultural force with the resources to engage in highly effective polemics against Christian anti-Judaism. Gager stated that the early followers of Jesus never envisioned a world without Judaism, but rather were attempting to imagine the opening of a second door through which non-Jews might gain access to the divine largesse. According to this view, Paul's theological vision, as laid out especially in his letter to the Romans, offers a two-track portrait of salvation, whereby Jews remained under the Mosaic covenant and Gentiles gained access to a new covenant through Jesus Christ. Jewish thinkers up until the nineteenth century understood that this was the main thrust of

Paul's idea. In a fifth and final lecture for the Georgia State Center for Hellenic Studies (April 5), Gager offered some stunning archaeological evidence for the prominence and prestige of Jewish synagogues in the later Roman empire, with donors' lists that suggest the synagogue community may have been composed of nearly one-half Gentile members. These Gentiles were presumably Paul's first audiences.

More than five hundred people attended the five lectures in all, and countless more students met with Gager as he attended multiple classes, luncheons, and receptions throughout the week. Gager, who is as notable for his contributions to teaching as he is for his impressive record of scholarly publications, made a great impression on the Atlanta community.

The AAR plans to continue the lecture series in 2014 in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina, and will sponsor an ALHR lecture series in a different city around North America every other year thereafter. The lecture series is administered by the AAR's American Lectures in the History of Religions Committee, currently comprised of Lou Ruprecht, Georgia State University, and Ebrahim Moosa, Duke University. The committee is actively seeking nominations for new members. Please contact Elizabeth Hardcastle, the AAR's Service Coordinator, at ehardcastle@aar.org. This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it with any nominations.