



# THE BEREA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## Reflections

“It is a thousand pities that the word ‘child’ has so few words that rhyme with it appropriate for a hymn. But for this paucity of language we might have been spared the couplet that hundreds of thousands must have learned in their childhood: ‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild / Look upon a little child.’ ...

“Why ‘mild’? Of all the epithets that could be applied to Christ this seems one of the least appropriate. For what does ‘mild,’ as applied to a person, conjure up to our minds? Surely a picture of someone who wouldn’t say ‘boo’ to the proverbial goose; someone who would let sleeping dogs lie and avoid trouble whenever possible; someone of a placid temperament who is almost a stranger to the passions of red-blooded humanity; someone who is a bit of a nonentity, both uninspired and uninspiring.” ~ J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (Macmillan, 1961), 26-27

“As the Messiah [in Matthew], Jesus is not an earthly man raised up to the Davidic office; he is a divinely sent person commissioned to the messianic task who embodies the presence of God and executes God’s plan of redemption.” ~ Michael F. Bird, *Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 2012), 67

## Paul Affirms Jesus’s Supreme Status

David Anguish

I previously [referenced](#) Larry Hurtado’s rejection of the thesis that early Christian claims that Jesus was divine are not original to the faith and are instead attributable to the later increasing presence in the church of former pagans who were accustomed to ascribing deity to great personalities (Hurtado 2005, 18-19). But, as Hurtado shows, before the completion of the NT writings, Jewish disciples who were committed monotheists recognized Jesus as divine. Furthermore, we can, for sake of argument, grant the critical claim that Paul wrote only seven of his traditional letters (named [here](#)) and still show that he made claims for Jesus’s deity “between the late 40s and early 60s of the first century C. E.” (Hurtado 2005, 46).

His most elaborate statement is in Philippians 2, in a letter in which he affirms his bona fides as a monotheistic Pharisaic Jew (3.3–6). In 2.5–11, he recapitulates Jesus’s story from eternal existence to “death on a cross” (v. 8) and then celebrates his subsequent exaltation:

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth  
And every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2.9–11 NRSV).

His claims about Jesus are seen to be even more audacious when read in light of Isaiah 45.22–24a:

Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth!  
For I am God, and there is no other.  
By myself I have sworn,  
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness  
a word that shall not return:  
To me every knee shall bow,  
every tongue shall swear.  
Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me,  
are righteousness and strength (Isa 45.22–24a NRSV).

“God is the only comfort. He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from. He is our only possible ally, and we have made ourselves His enemies. Some people talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again. They are still only playing religion. Goodness is either the great safety or the great danger—according to the way you react to it. And we have reacted the wrong way. ~ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, paperback (Macmillan, [1943] 1952), 38

“In summary, we can classify the Gospels as historical narrative motivated by theological concerns. Their intention is not only to convey accurate historical material about Jesus but also to explain and interpret these salvation-bringing events. The Gospels were written not by detached, uninterested observers but by Evangelists, ‘proclaimers of good news,’ announcing the good news of Jesus Christ and calling people to faith in him.”  
~ Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Zondervan, 2007), 29

“Debunking Christianity takes more than just trying to poke a hole in it by raising an objection. That’s because there’s a backdrop of other relevant evidence that creates a strong presumption in favor of faith in Jesus Christ. Simply examining individual challenges isn’t enough; this broad sweep of evidence needs to be kept in mind as each individual objection is weighed.”  
~ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Zondervan, 2000), 250 {2}

In the context of the promise that the LORD (YHWH) would work through Cyrus to deliver Israel from Babylon (vv. 1–13), Isaiah 45.14–25 stresses that the LORD is Creator and Israel’s only Savior; monotheism is explicitly declared in verse 18: “For thus says the LORD ... I am the LORD, and there is no other.” Since there is no other God besides the LORD, idols cannot save (vv. 21–22). Thus, Israel’s appropriate response is to turn to the LORD and be saved, demonstrating their loyalty by bowing down and swearing allegiance (vv. 22–23). Verses 24–25 repeat the claim that the LORD is unique and therefore to be exalted.

Paul uses the language of Isaiah 45.22–23 in Philippians 2. Referring to “Christ Jesus” (v. 5), he says God exalted *him* and gave *him* the name that is above every name (v. 9). Every knee will bend/bow to and every tongue confess/swear that “Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 10–11). The echo is even louder when compared with the LXX text of Isaiah which uses the same words for “knee” (γόνοι, *gony*), “bend/bow” (κάμπτω, *kamptō*), and “tongue” (γλῶσσα, *glōssa*) that Paul uses (“confess” [ἐξομολογέω, *exomologeō*] replaces LXX Isaiah’s “swear” [ὀμνύω, *omnuō*]).

Notice also that Paul uses the word *Lord* (κύριος, *kyrios*) to refer to “Jesus” (v. 10)—his personal name, not the titular “Christ.” This is especially significant because not only is *kyrios* used more than 1,600 times in the LXX “as the Greek rendering for the name of the God of Israel” (Wright 2006, 108), but Isaiah 45 is explicit that *only* YHWH/*kyrios* is God.

It is inconceivable that a monotheistic Jew of Paul’s background, training, and conviction would not have realized the implications of what he was saying about Jesus in Philippians 2. As Hurtado wrote,

This is yet another astonishing example of how far early Christians went in expressing Jesus’ high status. In particular, we have here [Isaiah 45] a biblical passage that is among the most fervent expressions of God’s uniqueness, adapted (and apparently interpreted) to affirm Jesus as supreme over all creation (Hurtado 2005, 50).

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### Works Cited

- Larry W. Hurtado. 2005. *How On Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.  
Christopher J. H. Wright. 2006. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

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