



THE BEREIA PAGE

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

Reflections

“Unfortunately, the ideological state of the modern university is unlikely to change anytime soon. In the meantime, Christians need to think more seriously about how to prepare the next generation of believers to handle the intellectual challenges of the university environment (and beyond). We need to do more than prepare them morally and practically; we need to train their minds to engage effectively with an unbelieving world.

“So how’s that going to happen? Ultimately, it will require a macro-shift in the broader evangelical world, moving beyond just pietism and revivalism and recapturing the deep historical and intellectual roots of the Christian faith. And then, that same evangelical world must think carefully and critically about how we pass that robust version of the faith to the next generation....

“Today’s college students need more than dating advice and tips on how to make good grades. They need a framework for dealing with the flood—no, tsunami—of intellectual attacks they will receive from their professors, classmates, and campus organizations. ~ Michael J. Kruger, *Surviving Religion 101: Letters to a Christian Student on Keeping the Faith in College* (Crossway, 2021), 23-24

Claims about Jesus: A Historical Matter

David Anguish

In the late 1970s, academic classes, assigned readings, and a lecture series made me acutely aware of the 1977 book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, a collection of essays edited by John Hick, the English-born theologian and philosopher of religion. He and his fellow-authors advanced the following thesis:

Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2:21) ‘a man approved by God’ for a special role within the divine purpose, and the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us (Hick 1977, ix).

In his 1991 book, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (James Clarke & Co.), Maurice Casey advanced a similar thesis, arguing that the view that Jesus was God originated with the increasing presence in the church of former pagans who were accustomed to attributing deity to great personalities whom they then added to their pantheon.

I am indebted to Larry Hurtado for my awareness of Casey’s book. In his book, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* (2005), Hurtado, at the time Professor of New Testament Language, Literature, & Theology at the University of Edinburgh, included a challenge to Casey’s thesis, arguing that the historical record shows that, before the New Testament writings were completed, Jesus was worshiped as deity by early Jewish believers who were committed monotheists. He explained the significance of the data as follows:

It is one thing to make room for a new additional deity, or to imagine some human figure being made a divinity worthy of worship, in a polytheistic scheme in which multiple deities, new deities, and apotheosis are all legitimate and inherent features of the religious outlook. It is quite another thing, however, in a fervently monotheistic stance, in which one God is exclusively the rightful recipient of worship and all else is distinguished as creation of this one God, to accommodate a second figure in cultic devotional practice and to conceive of a second figure as somehow sharing uniquely and genuinely in the attributes and exalted status of the one God (Hurtado 2005, 46).

Hurtado’s treatment is helpful, first, because it reminds us of the need to begin where our world is as we formulate a case for Christ. In the past, especially in church circles, it sufficed to review the text’s

“But why anything comes to be there at all, and whether there is anything behind the things science observes—something of a different kind—this is not a scientific question. If there is ‘Something Behind,’ then it will have to remain altogether unknown to men or else make itself known in some different way. The statement that there is any such thing, and the statement that there is no such thing, are neither of them statements science can make.” ~ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, paperback (Macmillan, [1943] 1952), 32

“In the contemporary idiom, Michael Jordan is ‘awesome,’ movies are ‘awesome,’ rock groups are ‘awesome.’ When we say ‘God is awesome’ we do not redefine ‘awesome,’ we redefine God. God is like Michael Jordan, movies, and rock groups. Do we call this being relevant?” ~ Mike White, University Chemistry Professor and church leader, via *Christian Studies* 17 (1999): 81-82

“How do most of us decide what to do and what not to do, what to say and what not to say, most of the time? By three standards: (1) social fads and fashions; others’ expectations, peer pressure, ‘everybody’s doing it’; (2) our feelings (‘it can’t be wrong if it feels so right’); and (3) our desire for the easiest, most pleasant, least troublesome life. I think most of us use these three standards far more often than the standard of good and evil, right and wrong, in deciding what to do. If we’re asked why we did something, how often do we answer, ‘Because it was right?’” ~ Peter Kreeft, *Moral Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions* (Servant Books, 1990), 17

deity claims as an introduction to more elaborate discussion of the evidence for them from Jesus’s exemplary life, teaching, miracles, and resurrection. But the appearance in the last few decades of scores of popular-level books, news magazine features, visual media productions, public relations efforts like that undertaken in the early 1990s by the Jesus Seminar, and, of course, the internet calls for a different approach. To show it is a trustworthy source for Jesus’s claims, miracles, and resurrection, we should begin with the questions of history and textual authenticity.

Hurtado pointed to what is involved at the beginning of his book when he wrote, “I am not primarily concerned here with considering the legitimacy of devotion to Jesus. That is a valid religious question, but more suitable for a study in Christian apologetics or for a theological tome” (Hurtado 2005, 1-2). In other words, we must first establish historically what the claims are before focusing on the evidence for belief and practice.

Hurtado’s book also serves to remind us to begin with the earliest historical records, the letters of Paul, and specifically the seven that even critical scholars accept as genuine. In his words, “scholars commonly agree that seven of the New Testament letters ascribed to Paul were certainly written by him and these are usually dated roughly between the late 40s and the early 60s of the first century C. E.” (Hurtado 2005, 33); this was no more than 20-25 years after Jesus’s death. (In canonical order, the seven are Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.)

For purposes of presenting the case for Christ to today’s world, we can, for sake of argument, grant the skeptical claim about the accepted letters and then proceed to show that they “fully presuppose the high estimation of Jesus as Messiah (Greek: *Christos*), Lord (Greek: *Kyrios*), and God’s ‘Son,’ and also the devotional pattern of according to Jesus a reverence that amounts to him being treated as in some sense divine” (Hurtado 2005, 33).

What kind of case can we make? Hurtado’s quotation of Martin Hengel answers (*Between Jesus and Paul*, 39-40): “In essentials more happened in christology [beliefs in/about Jesus] within these few years than in the whole subsequent seven hundred years of church history” (Hurtado 2005, 33).

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Works Cited

- John Hick, ed. 1977. *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
 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.

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