



THE BEREHA PAGE

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

Was Jesus God? Let the Bible Speak

David Anguish

In 2018, the Pew Research Center released a report under the following headline and summary statement: “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean? *Nine-in-ten Americans believe in a higher power, but only a slim majority believe in God as described in the Bible*” (Pew 2018). The first paragraph reports that the number who expressed certainty about belief in God had declined in recent years while the number who said they had doubts or didn’t believe at all had grown. The two succeeding paragraphs add texture:

These trends raise a series of questions: When respondents say they don’t believe in God, what are they rejecting? Are they rejecting belief in any higher power or spiritual force in the universe? Or are they rejecting only a traditional Christian idea of God—perhaps recalling images of a bearded man in the sky? Conversely, when respondents say they do believe in God, what do they believe in—God as described in the Bible, or some other spiritual force or supreme being?

A new Pew Research Center survey of more than 4,700 U.S. adults finds that one-third of Americans say they do not believe in the God of the Bible, but that they do believe there is some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe. A slim majority of Americans (56%) say they believe in God “as described in the Bible.” And one-in-ten do not believe in any higher power or spiritual force (Pew 2018).

As I read those paragraphs, the thought occurred that here is another feature of the modern West that is similar to the first-century Greco-Roman world. As Larry Hurtado explains in his book, *God in New Testament Theology*, among Western heirs of twenty centuries of Christian influence, there is an assumption that the word “‘God’ usually designates ... ‘the supernatural creator and overseer of the universe,’ and an implicitly monotheistic assumption frames how this ‘God’ is seen.” This “is widely taken as relatively fixed and obvious and is not an issue” (Hurtado 2010, 27). But in the world of Paul and John, where there were “Gods galore,” that was not the case.

In the ancient world of the first Christians ... the words for *god* (e.g., the Greek word *theos*) designated one of many kinds of divine beings. There was neither one deity nor even one genus or definition of deity. Instead, there was a veritable cafeteria of divine beings of various orders, attributes, and functions.... So, in that setting, when one spoke of a “god” it was not automatically clear who or what the referent was (Hurtado 2010, 27).

The result of this was that, whether philosophically, socially, or politically, most first century people did not readily understand the Judeo-Christian concept of “God.” Thus, before Christians could invite people to turn to *theos*, they had to clarify what they meant by the word. Paul illustrates one approach to that effort in Acts 17.16–31 and implies the need for it in other settings in 1 Thessalonians 1.9–10 where he contrasts “idols” with the “living and true God.”

Hurtado also notes that “large parts of the current world” outside the West are like the

ancient world in their understanding of the word “god.” But the Pew study indicates that the difference between the West and the rest is no longer as stark. This means that, as we talk with people—including many who bring our world’s “veritable cafeteria” of views with them to our church gatherings—it is increasingly likely that we will need to clarify what we mean when we urge them to believe in and grow a relationship with “God.”¹

This cultural situation gives us much to think about. How do we understand “God”? Is our understanding based on philosophical definitions, cultural views, what we have absorbed from our church environments, or the breadth and depth of the biblical revelation? As we think about working from a common frame of reference in conversations with our cultural neighbors, do we give thought to questions we may need to ask to ascertain what *they* mean by “God”?

More specifically, we need to think about these questions as we talk about belief in Jesus as God. What do we mean by that? What do others think we mean? And do any of those meanings correspond to the way the New Testament depicts him as “God with us”?

In a paragraph that assumes the point made by Hurtado, N. T. Wright points in a direction that can help us be more precise:

In much of Western Christianity down through the years, and particularly in the rather noisy conservative Christianity which has reacted (not unnaturally) to the Enlightenment, we have been so concerned to let the gospels tell us that the story of Jesus is the story of God incarnate that we have been unable to listen more carefully to the evangelists tell us *which God they are talking about* and *what exactly it is that this God is now doing*. We are quite happy to hear about the “God” of Western imagination, less ready to hear about the God of Israel. We are quite happy to hear that “Jesus is God,” in some sense. That, we have assumed, is what the gospels are telling us. We are less ready to hear that the God of Israel had promised to do certain specific things, in particular to establish his sovereign rule over Israel and the world, and that Jesus was embodying this intention (Wright 2012, 84).

“The God of Israel had promised to do certain specific things ... and Jesus was embodying this intention.” We need not tease out the specifics of Wright’s (or Hurtado’s) view of the nature of God to appreciate the point that we should allow Scripture to provide its own definition of what it means by “God” and any claim that Jesus was God among us.

Works Cited

- Larry W. Hurtado. 2010. *God in New Testament Theology*. Abingdon Press.
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- N. T. Wright. 2012. *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*. HarperOne.

¹ Related to this is an observation made in light of the Pew study by James Emery White. Commenting in *Outreach Magazine*, he noted an increasingly common use of the term “God” “in the post-Christian world,” namely, “the idea of ‘my’ God. As in, ‘That’s not the way *my* God thinks.’ That’s not the way *my* God feels” (White 2018).

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