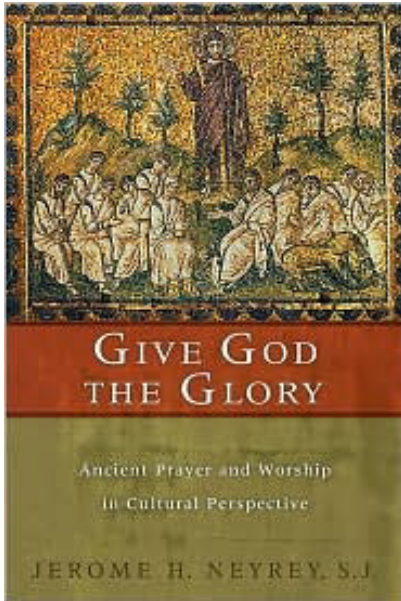


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Neyrey, Jerome H.

Give God the Glory: Ancient Prayer and Worship in Cultural Perspective

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The principal aim of this book is to examine prayer and worship in the early Christian movement through the lenses of its cultural perspective, what Neyrey calls “cultural lenses.” Neyrey does not confine himself solely to the New Testament but also examines other ancient prayers and worship practices of the Greco-Roman religions before and contemporaneous with the Christian movement. The aim of this methodology is to examine both the similarities and differences between early Christianity and its Greco-Roman neighbors, but again from the vantage point of their cultural perspectives. Neyrey acknowledges that there is a wealth of literature written on the subject of prayer and worship, much of which he deems important and valuable. However, from the start Neyrey advises the reader that this book is not about the historical-critical method, important as it is, but that the focus is that of interpretation, not history (4). Neyrey’s *modus operandi*, however, is not so much theological in his treatment of the New Testament as it is sociocultural.

Neyrey describes his over-all approach to biblical studies in one of his favorite expressions, which he calls a tag, “in other words” (1). This is not a new concept for Neyrey, as one of his former books in Pauline studies bears this expression in its title, *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990). By this

expression, Neyrey intends to convey that the biblical texts are not created out of a vacuum but are products of their own social culture, a culture that communicates and thinks “in other words,” that is, communicates and thinks in a way that is disjointed from our modern words and perspectives. From the outset Neyrey informs the reader that he will employ materials from the social sciences in order to interpret the biblical culture, which is different from ours.

A social-cultural approach to the biblical texts necessitates a patient undertaking. It involves understanding the languages of the ancients, at least a reading knowledge of such languages, a historical grasp of the *Sitz im Leben* of the respective cultures under study. In order to make a comparative cultural analysis, one must also become aware of the neighboring cultures of the biblical world. This approach entails allowing ancient documents to speak on their terms vis-à-vis their culture.

In this book Neyrey seeks to lead the reader to learn and to appreciate the “otherness” of the New Testament and the worship language and practice of the early Christian movement. Neyrey maintains that the best way to know and interpret the “otherness” of the New Testament is to utilize the models and the concepts of the social sciences, with specific reference to cultural anthropology (2). In so doing, Neyrey attempts to scale the language barrier between the ancients and modern people by tuning our ears to the language and social constructs of the biblical writers and their initial audiences. This approach enhances and better prepares the modern reader to appreciate and understand what the ancient biblical writers meant to communicate in their own words, what Neyrey means by “in other words.” Neyrey argues that this approach is not optional if one seeks to adequately understand what the biblical texts are saying and states it is “axiomatic that languages have no meaning independent of the cultures in which they are spoken” (3). James Barr cautioned long ago in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) about the “word-concept fallacy,” that words do not contain within themselves an inherent meaning apart from the context. Thus, what words are to context, language is to culture. While words derive their meaning from the context, language derives its meaning from the culture.

Among the important points Neyrey makes is that the person in the ancient biblical world was identified by the group(s) to which one belonged and thus was “group oriented,” quite the opposite of the Western modern concept of individualism. One’s identity and employment was derived from a patriarchal head: the father. The basic institution, Neyrey argues, was kinship, not education or politics. Neyrey also underscores the importance of the family unit and the associations with honor, the “premier value of antiquity,” and respect. He ties this to the Christian conception of God as “Father,” who as a father is also worthy of honor and respect from his children. In addition to this is the

important contrast between patron-client relations, which was an integral part of the biblical social world. Neyrey thus provides a starting point for social-cultural studies from which he will interpret the contents of his book.

In chapter 1 Neyrey begins by examining prayer. He defines it in its classical expression as communication with God, but it is more than this. Borrowing from Bruce Malina's work, Neyrey argues that prayer is an act of communication with discernable contents, such as sender, message, medium, receiver, and purpose with expected results (9). These contents are based on a social-cultural model. The model of communication expressed in prayer is that of sender-message-receiver. He examines various types of prayers, such as petitionary, thanksgiving, praise, acknowledgement, against the backdrop of their social culture. Neyrey comments that, from a monotheistic perspective, because there is only one God and no other, "God has no one to battle, and so is no longer thought of achieving honor" (21). This statement does not seem to harmonize with monotheistic texts such as Zech 14:1-5, which pictures Yahweh going forth to do battle against the nations or even Ass. Mos. 10, where God "alone" will arise "to punish the Gentiles" (10:7, 21-22).

In chapter 2 Neyrey address the topic of prayer but now applies the social-cultural method and raises the themes of honor and shame, as well as the model of patron-client. This model, according to Neyrey, helps explain why kinship and honor were important to early Christians. God was seen as the patron who is addressed variously as King, Lord, and Sovereign, and the Christian community is seen as the client identified by its group, thus the importance of group orientation in the biblical world. Honor is expressed in the attribution of worth, value, and respect to God, which must be publicly acknowledged, an important practice in the honor system of the biblical social world. Thus Neyrey underlines the importance of the church (client) giving honor to God (the patron), as acknowledging God as the rightful recipient of worship. Kinship ties are reinforced to demarcate who belongs to the group and who does not; thus there is a contrast, for instance, between those who are the children of God and those who are not. Neyrey notes that favoritism thrived in the patron-client world of the Bible and cites a number of examples, such as God choosing Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau (55 n. 66). While a case can probably be made from the Old Testament for these examples, Neyrey neglects an important point raised by Paul, that the choosing of Jacob over Esau was based not on any inherent goodness in either of them that would have won God's approval but instead on God's purpose and choice to achieve his divine purposes (Rom 9:10-18), thus absolving God of any favoritism. Neyrey also remarks that the pattern seems to be that God chooses the younger brother over the older, as in the biblical figures just mentioned. Neyrey mistakenly lists "Joseph over his brothers" as an example of the younger being chosen over the older. However, Joseph was not the youngest of his siblings; Benjamin was the youngest (Gen 35:24; 43:29).

In chapter 3 Neyrey examines five prayers in the New Testament: the Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer (6:9–13); the prayer of the church in Acts 4:24–30; the doxologies (Rom 16:25–27, Eph 3:20–21; Jude 24–25, 1 Tim 1:17); the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55); and the final prayer of Jesus in John 17. Neyrey examines each of these while applying the model of communication in prayer that he treated in chapter 2. In the Lord's Prayer, Neyrey notes that kinship and honor are evident in the address of God as "our Father" and ascribing honor to him in hallowing his name and acknowledging his kingly status in petitioning his kingdom to arrive. The patron-client relationship is evident in the request to supply one's daily bread. In his treatment of the doxologies, Neyrey demonstrates how honor is a common motif that reflects the social cultural emphasis of the patron-client relationship. The purpose of doxologies, Neyrey argues, is to confirm and acknowledge God's greatness. An important point Neyrey raises is that, since God lacks nothing, there is nothing humans can add or give to God. Thus praise and doxology are confirmatory in nature. In his treatment of the prayer of Jesus in John 17, Neyrey again applies the model of communication in prayer but notes a new pattern of patron-broker-client. In this case Jesus is ascribed an important role, that of the broker or mediator who functions as the agent between the broker and his clients. This three-part model provides a very helpful paradigm that contributes to understanding the Christology of the New Testament particularly in places (such as Paul and John) where Jesus is presented as the agent between God and believers.

In chapter 4 Neyrey examines the biblical theme of God's uniqueness, particularly in texts where God is said to be "first," "only," and that there is "no one else" like him. These expressions serve to highlight the honor of God in extolling and attributing uniqueness to him. In the ancient world, this language was employed to express greatness and supremacy. In the social-cultural world of the Bible, Neyrey notes that this language was usually used to express God's uniqueness and supremacy in polemical texts where other gods were denounced. In addition to this exclusive language, Neyrey also addresses the unique ontological attributes usually referred to by theologians as the "incommunicable attributes," such as invisibility, being imperishable, immortal, incorruptible, to temporal terms such as eternal ("forever and ever"), to the use of superlatives to describe the deity ("King of kings," "Lord of lords").

In chapters 5–6 Neyrey expands his study in first observing worship from a broad angle and appropriating cultural models. He treats some of the distinguishing marks of early Christian worship: there were no fixed places of worship, since it could be practiced anywhere, and the central forms of worship were verbal. He also deals with the early Christian practice of praying through Jesus, where Jesus functions as the broker between the patron and his client(s). In chapter 6 Neyrey examines worship in the Fourth Gospel by applying a cultural interpretation to the farewell address in John 14–17. These passages

abound, according to Neyrey, with prayer language (“ask me,” “ask the Father in my name”) and climax with Jesus’ own prayer to the Father in John 17. Neyrey discusses the petitionary prayer found in John 14–16 where Jesus as the broker between the patron (God the Father) and client (his disciples), encourages petitions to be made in his name (14:13–14, 15–16; 15:7, 16b; 16:23–24, 26). In John 17 Neyrey investigates what he terms Jesus’ “multipurposed prayer” (173).

In chapter 7 Neyrey moves into the patristic literature and examines the descriptions of worship as seen in the Didache and Justin Martyr’s *1 Apology*, treating them individually while also applying the cultural models. The theme of kinship is very apparent in these patristic writers as they seek to delineate the insiders (Christian believers) from the outsider (unbelievers), and such kinship is shared and expressed in the “holy kiss” and the eucharistic meal of believers, both of which denote family ties. In the conclusion, Neyrey briefly summarizes his arguments; he also provides a very good and well-balanced bibliography.

Neyrey presents a very interesting study in this book, one that brings a fresh perspective to the study of the biblical texts. His approach and application of the social-cultural method to the biblical texts is welcome. Neyrey acknowledges the importance of various methodologies for reading biblical texts and does not seek to trump his method over others, but calls attention rather to a much-neglected tool. In a field that has all too often focused on the historical-critical method, usually at the expense of neglecting the social-cultural method, one would do well to take note of Neyrey’s important study.