

Jesus is Lord. No political leader is.

Maybe the kingdom of God isn't like a king—maybe it's like those who *resist* a king.

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Last month, “Jesus is Lord” and “Christ is King” emerged as slogans in the US election campaign when anti-abortion protesters shouted the phrases at Kamala Harris while she was speaking about abortion. “You’re at the wrong rally,” the vice president responded to the university students. Immediately “Jesus is Lord” became a wedge issue in the presidential race. Many conservative Christian voters got #JesusIsLord to trend on social media, and JD Vance, now the vice president-elect, even said it from the campaign trail.

The point of this whole exercise wasn’t to echo early Christian rhetoric and proclaim the rule of God. It seems clear that the point was to remind everyone that Republicans are the “Jesus is Lord” people, the voters who are unashamed to acknowledge their Christianity loudly and in public. The slogan has become something of a litmus test for being both a Christian and a Trump supporter. Like going out of your way to respond to “Happy holidays” with a loud “Merry Christmas,” the proclamation is shorthand for announcing which side of the culture war you’re on. And to some Christians, Trump’s victory [proves that they signed up for the right side of the battle](#).

Lordship and *kingship*, of course, are problematic terms. To be lord is to be master, which is to be superior in respect to one’s subjects. In an age when power is so damagingly wielded against one’s enemies, it’s dangerous to bring *lord* into political discussions.

Perhaps this is why the gospels themselves problematize their own lordship discourse. Notably, Jesus warns his followers against desiring to be on top of hierarchies. If you want to be truly great, he says, become a servant, wash people’s feet, don’t overestimate your own goodness. Sure, Jesus refers to the kingdom of God regularly, but he is much less vocal about the kingdom’s *king*. As a Jew, Jesus would’ve held to the notion of God’s kingship proclaimed in the Psalms. Yet he seems more concerned with the citizens’ ethics than the kingdom’s leadership structure.

There are passages in the gospels that apply kingship and lordship rhetoric to Jesus, but not in a straightforward way. The triumphal entry, for instance, depicts Jesus riding into Jerusalem on . . . a donkey? Is this intended as a parody of Roman imperial ceremony? Rather than ride a horse, Jesus rides a lowly donkey. What an unkingly sort of king. This irony is driven home in various crucifixion narratives, in

which Jesus' "kingship" is mocked, either verbally (Matt. 27:29) or in writing (John 19:19).

As if to remind people not to become too attached to kingship, Jesus tells a parable about a "king who gave a wedding banquet for his son" (Matt. 22:1-14). When the invitees don't show up, the king sends his slaves to tell them dinner is ready. They respond by killing the king's messengers, and the king retaliates by having the no-shows' city burned down. He then tells his slaves to forcibly fill the wedding hall; he doesn't want to host a poorly attended party. The king finally gets his way, but then the parable really gets going: the king notices one of the party guests isn't wearing the right clothes, and so the king, who is not known for his diplomacy, has the man killed.

This parable is confusing, because Jesus introduces it the way he introduces many of his other stories: "The kingdom of heaven is like this." So we expect the parable to show us something about God and God's kingdom. But we've got a problem. Is God really like *this* king? Is God's kingdom really like *this* party, where guests need to be terrified that they might show up in the wrong clothes? If we read the story in this way, then we have to conclude "that God is no better than earthly kings who fly into a rage, kill, and burn those deemed unworthy," as New Testament scholar Marianne Blickenstaff notes. But this is at odds, she says, with the way Jesus presents God "elsewhere in the gospel . . . as a loving and providential father."

Maybe Jesus is inviting us to work against our reading habits. Perhaps Jesus doesn't want us to take the easy way out by simply equating God with the main character of the parable. Everything about Jesus' ministry and preaching tells us that Jesus does *not* think God is anything like this murderous, easily triggered tyrant. One reading suggestion, then, might be to follow Jesus' lead and keep an eye out for the powerless person—in this story, the victim. He's killed for showing up in the wrong clothes. Did he purposefully break the dress code? Did he intend to trigger the king, to goad the king into showing his true colors in public, and at a party no less? Maybe the kingdom of God isn't like a king—maybe it's like those who *resist* a king.

The point here isn't to pretend that early Christian communities didn't use lordship and kingship rhetoric to talk about Jesus and his relationship to God and the world. They did, but they didn't do so uncritically. Paul, for example, claims that everyone will eventually come to acknowledge Christ's lordship; in the same breath, however, he confesses Christ's form to be more like a slave than a lord (Phil. 2:5-11). If Jesus'

followers wanted to leave us a straightforward argument in favor of, say, Christian theocracy, they would've done it. What they left us instead is a collection of stories and letters that invite us both to imagine Christ's lordship and to deconstruct it, to hail God as king while simultaneously wondering if the God of the crucified Jesus is a bit unkingly.

There is, however, one sense in which the invocation of Jesus' lordship has been unambiguously clear. To say that "Jesus is Lord" or "Christ is King" was and is to believe that the God who authorizes Jesus' lordship will have the final word on things. It doesn't matter what Caesar is doing. Herod is evil, sure, but God will send him away. Rome itself has a shelf life. But God will act. Every empire will end. The powers of darkness will continue to scream *no* to life and to love, but one day God will swallow up all of these *nos* in one resounding *yes*. "Jesus is Lord" has no meaning apart from the hope that the God who raised him from the dead will eventually interrupt world history with this decisive and final *yes*.

The phrase "Jesus is Lord" should not be used in American politics because rather than validating any party platform, it actually runs counter to the entire political process. It doesn't point to any political party but rather beyond them, to the God who disrupts the political forces of history. To pretend otherwise, to turn the phrase into a political slogan, is to ignore the world-shattering overtones of the credal formula. Those who wish to proclaim Jesus' lordship in the attempt to validate a particular political party would do well to remember Jesus' own comments on lordship: Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" enters God's kingdom (Matt. 7:21).

In the end, the phrase "Jesus is Lord" is a prophetic message reminding us to put our hope not in politicians but in the God who is waiting on standby to dethrone every single one of them.