



# REDEEMING POWER

What John's portrayal of Christ's kingship means for politics today

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- Christ's *threefold office*: priest, prophet, king.
- Maybe the “king” stuff is scary for those of us who are citizens of a liberal Western democracy.
- But these concerns might be assuaged by thinking about Christ's kingship as it is portrayed in John.
- John's portrayal of Christ as king is ambiguous: kingship in John entails both Jesus' elevation and his scourging.

I SAMUEL 8-12: “WE WANT A KING!”

- The judges model (Ex. 18:13-27): a loose confederation of tribes ruled by judges (שופטים).
- There is a pattern in the Book of Judges: 1) the Hebrews forsake their God; 2) they are oppressed by foreign nations; 3) they cry out to God; and 4) they are delivered when God raises up a military leader to vanquish their oppressors. The Hebrews get tired of this.
- In I Samuel 8, the Hebrew nation demands their judge, Samuel, give them a king: “so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles” (I Sam. 8:19-20). They wanted the security that can only be ensured with sovereignty. Other nations had kings, and the Hebrews thought if they *also* had a king, they might not be so oppressed.
- But only God is supposed to be king. (See what Gideon says in Jg. 8:22-23)
- I want to argue that *this was a defining moment in the life of the Hebrew people, a sort of second, communal fall*. In demanding a king, the Hebrews rejected God—not only in that moment, but indefinitely. They wanted a monarchy to provide the security God's people should only receive from the Lord.
- (Samuel says the Hebrews' act was one of “great evil” (רַעַתְּכֶם רָבָה) in a phrase that recalls the “great evil” (רַבָּה רַעַת) which God wants to wipe out with the flood in Gen. 6:5.)
- Nevertheless, *Samuel praised God's generosity in conceding to the nation the sovereign leader they desired*. Referring to Saul, Samuel declared to the Hebrews, “*behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the LORD has set a king over you*” (I Sam. 12:13).

- Then, the Hebrews are subjected to a series of kings: mostly bad ones. Then, in 587, the Israelites were conquered by the Babylonians and sent into exile—which is interpreted as in part because of the unrighteousness of their kings. In that context, the Hebrew prophets pine for (and prophesy) the restoration of the united kingdom (Amos 9:11–15, Daniel 9, Ezekiel 37:24–29, Hosea 3:5, Isaiah 11, Jeremiah 30:9, Zechariah 12:10).
- The restored kingdom would be united by a descendent of David, who would be anointed, as was Saul, and so this figure came to be known as the messiah (מָשִׁיחַ), Hebrew for “anointed one”, translated into Greek as Χριστός, or “Christ.”
- I find it stunning that, given the misery wrought by the Hebrews’ demand for a king, the Hebrews still imagined their reprieve from foreign tyranny would come in the form of yet another king. Again, *the demand for a king looks like a second fall*. There is no way to return to a pre-monarchical community. The solution is to establish a king that would exceed even David in holiness.

#### JOHN’S GOSPEL: “COULD HE BE THE MESSIAH?”

- The “messianic expectation” intensifies in Second Temple Judaism. The Book of Daniel envisions, a messiah is enthroned by God and given all authority over heaven and earth, ending all other empires (Dn. 7:13–27).
- At a well in Samaria, a woman tells a stranger: “I know that the Messiah is coming.” The stranger, Jesus, responds: “I am he” (Jn. 4:29). Local townspeople hear about this and flock to hear him speak, and proclaimed him the “Savior of the world” (Jn. 4:42).
- Then, in the presence of Jewish bureaucrats, Jesus dared to profess that God had given him ἐξουσία, a Greek word for “authority” which evokes not only religious authority, but political sovereignty. Jesus boldly announced he had received this authority because he was the “Son of Man”—evoking Daniel (Jn. 5:27).
- Yet, he did not appear to intend to organize a political movement. Jesus employed the language of messianic hope, but did not capitalize on it in order to incite rebellion.

- Whether Jesus is the Messiah is the paramount question throughout the Gospel of John. The evangelist himself notes that it is belief in Jesus’ kingship that motivates the composition of the gospel: it is written *that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah* (Jn. 20:31).

#### JOHN 18-19: “BEHOLD, YOUR KING”

- Jesus’ trial before Pilate brings this question of the Jesus’ kingship to the fore.
- There, Jesus is brought to the praetorium, the quarters of the Roman prefect, to face charges of sedition. In a climactic scene, the most powerful man in Judea finally has the occasion to ask Jesus the question that motivates much of the fourth Gospel: “are you the King of the Jews?” (Jn. 18:33).
- Pilate comes up with a strategy to acquit the man: he’ll let Jesus go free, while maintaining Barabbas in the prison. But he is unable to render judgment. The crowd insists that failing to crucify Jesus would mean Pilate is disloyal to the emperor.
- Jesus is brought out to the judgment seat (βῆμα) at Gabbatha, a courtyard before the praetorium where the Roman prefect rendered judgment. Due to a remarkable ambiguity in the Greek, it is unclear who sits on the judgment seat: either Pilate takes the bench, or places Jesus on the bench (Jn. 19:13). Many Biblical scholars argue that we ought to read it as the latter.
- Jesus is wearing the imperial purple robe and laurel, sitting on the judgment throne. Then Pilate declares: “*Behold your king*” (Jn. 19:14).
- When Pilate makes this declaration to the Hebrews (“Ἴδε ὁ βασιλεὺς ὑμῶν”), he says nearly the same thing Samuel, referring to Saul: מֶלֶךְ הַגֵּזַר (LXX: καὶ νῦν ἰδοὺ ὁ βασιλεύς).
- The crowd rejects Jesus, shouts that their king is Caesar, and demands his crucifixion. In so doing, the crowd reprises their rejection of God as king as they had in I Samuel.
- Furthermore, many of the details concerning Jesus’ crucifixion can be compared to the Roman *triumphus*, a celebratory parade often performed in

coordination with a coronation. This procedure includes the triumphator: being brought to the praetorium; receiving purple robe and diadem; receiving kisses and gifts and salutations; being paraded to a sacrifice on a high hill until the evening.

- Suetonius' description of Nero's coronation of Tiridates (AD 66): resembles the Johannine coronation motif even more closely.
- There is a relationship between truth and authority. Jesus could never perform the speech-service of Tiridates to Nero; that would simply not be testifying to the truth.
- Pilate's last-ditch effort performs the farce. He enthrones the scourged political prisoner at Gabbatha and declares to the crowd with all of his authority: "*Behold your king!*"
- Any hope for the Hebrews' loyalty to God is lost as they cry out to Pilate: "We have no king but Caesar" (Jn. 19:15).

#### THE TWO-STOREY STORY

- Johannine scholarship has highlighted the way the lawsuit motif in the fourth gospel generates a "two-storey story": not Jesus but the crowd is on trial at Gabbatha. Jesus' goes from being the defendant to being the judge.
- But the first "layer" never disappears.
- I argue that there is a similar two-storey story in the kingship of Christ. Given the equivocality of the Hebrews' demand for a king in I Samuel 8, it is essential that we preserve and consider *both* levels of the story.
- On the one "storey," so to speak, we might say that in this scene we witness the very act of Jesus' enthronement.
- Finally, the Hebrews witness the vision dreamed of in the psalms: "The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!" (Ps. 99:1) The scene at Gabbatha is the fulfillment of the centuries-long hope, in which he Messiah is appointed by the pagan king, enthroned, crowned, lifted up.

- Meanwhile, the pagan king is rendered powerless. Even as Pilate claims authority over the proceeding, he is a mere instrument for God's purpose.
- God finally takes his rightful place on the throne in the midst of Israel. These acts effect that which was desired for so long: the restoration of God's sovereignty in religious and political communities.
- At the same time, we have to keep in mind the other "storey." We shouldn't interpret this episode as the straightforward, unironic ordination of God's Anointed to the throne.
- Jesus undergoes the most brutal death. His people reject him, even when given the opportunity to rescue him. None of his friends are present at his crucifixion. Furthermore, thereafter, the Romans torture many thousands to death on Jerusalem's hills.
- If Pilate's "behold your king" echoes Samuel's from I Sam. 12, here we might hear Samuel's rebuke to those who clamored for their sovereign king: "you have certainly done evil."
- Yet, even such judgment in John is open-ended. There is yet space for the Spirit to do his gracious work. Jesus' enthronement in his last hours also speaks to those of us frail humans that identify with the Hebrew crowd's desire for security in I Samuel 8. We need not fear, this king tells us, for our security and well-being.
- As we behold our king, we see the grace of a God who cares for his people so much that he would take on human flesh, live among us, and endure the torment of the praetorium and the cross, on our behalf.

#### CHRIST, OUR KING

- What does Christ's coronation-crucifixion make of human sovereignty today, in the time before the eschaton?
- I venture two preliminary proposals. Both are amenable to liberal political commitments, even if they appear at first blush not to be.
- *First*, Christ models a form of leadership—servant-kingship. This shows that any human's

exercise of power must acknowledge its limitations and the virtuous ends toward which it ought to be ordered.

- Christ's kingship reverses Samuel's cautionary tale about what a human king might do to his people.
- Furthermore, he instructs that his servant-kingship be the model for anyone who would wish to be a leader (Luke 22:26-27). The human exercise of power here is to be oriented toward the end of service, and constrained by that end.
- Second, given that Christ continues to sit on his cosmic throne today, all human rulers must acknowledge that their power is derivative and obtains only insofar as they remain obedient to Christ.
- A *theological* commitment to theocracy necessitates that the human exercise of power always be limited.
- What this means in practice has been the subject of centuries of debate within the Christian tradition. How exactly a sovereign's power is to be curbed is not clear.
- (In fact, that it was the people's will to reject God's kingship in both I Samuel 8 and at Gabbatha in John 19 casts a shadow on our confidence that the *vox populi* in any way might represent the *vox dei*.)
- But we can be sure of this: no Christian can, with integrity, accord unlimited power to any sovereign, given Christ's coronation as we see it in the fourth gospel. For it is in him alone that we are to behold our king.

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