

**“When Lords and Kings are Known No More”:
Problems in the Language of Prayer, Praise, and Song**
by Brian Wren

As divine titles, “Lord” and “King” are problematic. This article explains why, and offers ways forward. It was originally published in the *Australian Journal of Liturgy*.

“Give to the Lord of lords renown,
the King of kings with glory crown:
his mercies ever shall endure
when lords and kings are known no more.”

Isaac Watts , “Give to our God immortal praise”

Our brain stores music and words together, differently from speech alone. Stroke sufferers who lose the ability to speak often retain the ability to sing. When a song has been heard and sung many times, its tune becomes a mnemonic; singing the tune helps us recall the words that go with it. Words and music stored in memory help to shape our beliefs, attitudes, and awareness of God.

With this in mind, consider two titles of God frequently used in worship: “Lord” and “King.” The title “Lord” is common, especially in “liturgical” traditions (because the biblical Psalms are so often chanted or spoken) and in traditions singing praise choruses. The title “King” is less common in the former, but frequent in the latter.

The Story of “Lord”

In English versions of the Bible, “Lord” renders meanings from two sources. In Christian Scripture (the New Testament), “Lord” (lower case, initial capital L), is a title given sometimes to God, but mostly to Jesus Christ. It translates the Greek word, *kyrios*, whose meanings range, roughly, from “mister” to “master,” with a specifically male reference.

Sometimes *kyrios* is a polite greeting to a man (not a woman) whom one respects, but does not know well. More frequently, it acclaims the risen Christ as next to God in heaven, and the only One, anywhere, who deserves our worship. To say *Kyrios Yesous!* (“Jesus is Lord!” - 1 Cor. 12:3) meant that Jesus Christ has our loyalty, in contrast with everyone else who claimed the title, including the emperor of Rome. Thus, *Kyrios Yesous!* or *Kyrios Yesous Christos!* (“Jesus Christ is Lord” - Philippians 2:11) had a wider, politically riskier, meaning than the personal, private, “I love you, Lord” in today’s hymns and choruses.

In English versions of Hebrew Scripture (the “Old” or First Testament of the Christian Bible) the story is more complex. Sometimes “Lord” translates Hebrew *Adonai*, a plural form used to intensify the rank of an individual, and sometimes applied to God. Its meanings (all male) include “master,” “proprietor,” “governor,” “husband,” and “king.”

Mostly, however, “lord” is capitalized (“LORD / the LORD”). Though it also refers to God, the circumstances are different, because *Adonai* (which it translates) *is not the word written in the Hebrew text*. The Hebrew text has a different word, which we may render as “yhwh”, or (with spaces for vowel sounds) *Y~hw~h*. It is God’s mysterious name, probably pronounced “Yahweh” [YAH-way]. Ancient Hebrew did not have written vowels, but speakers knew which vowels were meant (as we would, if confronted with, “W gthr t wrshp gd, nd prs gd’s hly nm.”). The rendering, *Y~hw~h*, transliterates the Hebrew consonants into their rough English equivalents, and leaves space for the vowels which English could supply, if we knew for certain what they were.

The divine name *Y~hw~h* was in use before 1300 BCE. It is the name given to Moses when he is summoned by divine presence in the burning bush (Exodus 3). Unlike “God,” “Creator,” “Saviour,” and “Lord,” *Y~hw~h* is a name, as well as a title (Exodus 3:15: “This is my name forever, and my title for all generations”). Because God is God, *Y~hw~h* is not a name Moses invents, but what God discloses. *Y~hw~h* is, as it were, God’s “self-given,” “proper” name.

Though there is no certainty as to what *Y~hw~h* originally meant, the Exodus narrative connects it with the verb, “to be.” The name is not announced directly. When Moses asks God’s name, the reply is not, “my name *is Y~hw~h*,” but two statements, positive, yet enigmatic. The second is usually translated as, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM’ has sent me to you,” but the Hebrew could also be translated as, “I WILL BE.” For the first, and longer statement, there is no one exact translation. English verbs come with tenses, identifying an action as past, present, or future, and the customary English rendering is the present tense, “I am what I am.” Hebrew verbs, however, do not by themselves mark past, present or future; context and other parts of speech give those indications. The verbs simply designate an incomplete action. “I am what I am” is one translation. Equally possible is the NRSV’s marginal note, “I will be what I will be.” More intriguing, and as accurate, would be, “I am what I will be,” or, “I will be what I am.”

At first, the Name was spoken freely. Psalm singers cried out, “*Y~hw~h!*” Later, it began to be avoided, perhaps because saying someone’s name was believed to give the power of summoning them, and the Living God can never be commanded to appear. In its place, people said or sang *Adonai*. First century Aramaic-speaking Samaritans said *shema* (“the name”). Many Jews today say *hashshem* (Hebrew: “the name”).

By the time of Jesus, thousands of Jews lived outside Judaea. Because many no longer knew Hebrew, but spoke colloquial Greek as first or second language, their scriptures were translated into Greek. A word had to be found for *Y~hw~h* but the Name itself could not be spoken or translated. Instead, the translators rendered *Adonai*, the word usually *substituted*, as *kyrios*.

In Christianity the histories of *kyrios* came together. From Judaism, *it stood in place of, but did not translate*, the enigmatic, personal, name of the Living God - a name without reference to human gender. In Christian experience, it was also a title of the Living Christ, the *kyrios*; once crucified by earthly *kyrioi*; now over and above them all.

Powerful and Problematic

In worship, “Lord” has a twofold value. It is a traditional title, made familiar by repetition. And it verbally connects Christ with God: “Jesus is Lord, and God is Lord.”

As an historic confession of faith in Jesus Christ, “Lord” remains valid, provided its “Caesar-defying” origin is remembered. For Christians scarred by oppression and discrimination, the acclamation, “Jesus is Lord,” retains its liberating power. “If Jesus is my Lord and master,” says one African-American pastor, “then nobody else is. It subverts every other power structure and authority in the world and keeps me free.”

As a title for God, however, “Lord” is problematic. It suggests that God, beyond human gender, is male, and relates to humankind in a domineering way. This is true even in the United States, which supposedly dispensed with feudalism in 1776. When I invite Americans to brainstorm their associations of the word, its liturgical meanings surface immediately, followed by current U.S. dictionary definitions: master and ruler; someone with authority, control or power over others; a feudal superior; lord of the manor; titled nobleman; and House of Lords.

Thus, even today “lord” denotes a man with authority, control, and power over others. Though God is not male, and divine sovereignty is not based on coercive domination, LORD has indelible meanings of maleness and dominance. Spoken liturgically, it projects these meanings

onto God. Because the Psalms are peppered with the divine name, LORD is said or sung repeatedly, over and over and over again. The result is that the enigmatic, ungendered, liberating One is ousted by a masculinized deity clad in feudal authority.

Some argue that, if worshippers experience LORD incorrectly, the solution is to teach them its “real meaning.” If we let ourselves be guided by the way people experience the word, they say, we are projecting our own experience onto God, not listening to what God has revealed. One problem is that LORD makes precisely this kind of false projection. Another is that, linguistically, usage determines meaning. Day by day, people cast their vote on word meanings by the way they use them. Pronouncements from “lordly” authorities cut no ice: majority meanings rule. Finally, from Pentecost onwards, Christianity has been a religion of translation, recognizing that people need to hear the good news in their own language and thought forms. By analogy, if LORD now ‘mistranslates’ God’s name and nature, those who seek alternatives are following that tradition; the “real meaning” school is outside it.

Alternatives to LORD

When a psalm is read to a congregation, it comes to our culture from its own. If it curses enemies, or applauds those who kill Babylon’s children (e.g. Psalm 137), we can say, “that was then, and this is now.” We can hear it, without ourselves having to pray it. When we ourselves pray or sing a psalm, it must meet a different standard: is it an appropriate vehicle for our worship? From Isaac Watts onwards, Christians have modified psalm texts, to make them appropriate for Christian worship. Finding an alternative to LORD is an extension of that tradition.

Sometimes, “LORD” can be avoided by changing from third-person to second-person speech; from “The LORD is great, and greatly to be praised” to “You are great, and greatly to be praised. This procedure also avoids masculine pronouns for God, which are more gender-laden in English than in Hebrew. But it has limitations. Because pronouns require an antecedent noun, an altered psalm must retain at least one “LORD”, “God,” or equivalent, so that it can say, “O God/LORD, you. . .”. And the syntax of some Psalms resists alteration.

Sometimes, “LORD” can be replaced by “God.” This is an improvement, but far from ideal. A generic noun, “God” calls up an array of religious longings, but cannot specify which “god” is being addressed. Replacing “LORD” with “God” is, at best, a stopgap measure.

Another possibility, popularized by the *Jerusalem Bible*, is to say “Yahweh,” assuming it was the original pronunciation. Advantage: it is clearly a name. Disadvantage: speaking God’s Name is offensive to devout Jews. Additional Disadvantage: in English it sounds like a sheep’s bleat. Conclusion: “Yahweh” is not an option.

Why not “Adonai,” the ancient substitution for *Y~hw~h*? Popularized by songs like Amy Grant’s “El Shaddai” it is widely known, and recognizably “biblical.” Because its Hebrew meaning is not, I suspect, transparent to most English speakers, it probably sounds more like a name than a title.

A radical reminder that the God of Moses has a Name would be to print “(NAME)*” wherever *Y~hw~h* occurs, with a footnote saying: “*God’s Name is not spoken: use “Adonai,” “El Shaddai,” “Living One,” or another reverent substitution.” If worshippers and worship leaders have to choose a substitution, they are more likely to remember what “LORD” fails to convey.

“Living One” is Gail Ramshaw’s proposal (in *God Beyond Gender* (Augsburg Fortress, 1995). In Hebrew scripture, it points to a key theme: God *is*, God lives, God is active now and will be in the future. For Christians, Christ is also “the Living One,” risen from the dead, the same yesterday, today, and for ever. If carefully varied grammatically, “(the) Living One” could substitute for *Y~hw~h* and identify Jesus Christ, linking the two as effectively as “LORD/Lord.”

The Kingship Story

Several biblical psalms address God as “king,” and Christian scripture celebrates the risen Christ, sitting in regal state at the right hand of God. Yet language that what was truthful in biblical times is not necessarily truthful in ours.

The notion of divine kingship goes back three thousand years, to the city-states of the ancient near East: Sumer, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. As settled societies developed an excess of food and goods, better transportation and communication, and a sophisticated division of labor, their social order changed, and took the form of a pyramid. At the top was the monarch, almost invariably male, ruling from the central city. Power and authority devolved downwards. Society was perceived as a unit; the concept of individual rights was centuries in the future. Stepping outside one’s place endangered the community. Offenders were executed or exiled.

Like all social orders the royal pyramid needed stories to explain its legitimacy. The stories had a common pattern. In its original state, the world (the earth, and the “world” of the

city-state) had been chaotic, filled with disaster and uncertainty. A deity, usually a god, had brought order out of chaos, often by slaying the chaos-monster. To keep chaos from returning, and guarantee everything from civil peace to good harvests, the deity established the city-state's monarchy. The original king, and each successor, was designated as the "son" of the city-state's god. As god's representative, he made laws, upheld justice, ensured the fertility of land and people, and personified the power of divine good over the disorder and evil lurking on the edges of the community. As god's representative, the king should be revered and obeyed.

In all its variations, this story gave meaning to the universe, society, the family, and individual human life. It was - and in its modern variants still is - persuasive, and perceived as true. Its benefits include order, food, shelter, protection, and community organization. Its costs include abuse of the weak by the strong; the diminished humanity inherent in master/servant and master/slave relationships; and the recurrent threat of corruption and tyranny.

Israel adopted the notion of divine kingship. Several psalms sing of Israel's king as God's "son," appointed to rule in Zion, and commanded to rule justly by defending the cause of the poor and needy (e.g. See 2, 47, 73, and 89). When the nation ceased to have kings, kingship was projected forward: one day God would anoint another kingly figure, who would establish divine peace, justice, and wellbeing, through Israel, over all nations.

In early Christianity, Jesus Christ was acclaimed as "king," but in the most contradictory way possible. The "King of the Jews" was not victorious in battle, but asphyxiated on a cross; not acclaimed at a coronation, but killed naked, his head bleeding from the piercing sarcasm of a "coronet" of thorns. Originally, calling Jesus a "crucified king" had the shock of the unexpected. A crucified Messiah was a stumbling block to Jews and an absurdity to Greeks, which is why Paul talks about the foolishness of the cross (1 Corinthians 1).

Such radical reinterpretations were not easily absorbed. Again and again, when the shock wore off, the "earthly" meaning of kingship reasserted itself. When Christianity won the Roman Emperor's recognition, its kingship vocabulary served imperial interests. As God was to the universe, so the emperor was to the empire. Emperor-worship was refocused on Christ, who crowned the Emperor as his earthly deputy and validated his rule. Paintings of Christ in majesty show him sitting on a jewel-encrusted throne, with all the marks of Roman imperial rank: rich robes, purple cushions, and the royal halo, surrounded by a heavenly council of palace officials; a world away from Golgotha.

Later centuries saw a tussle between imperial and egalitarian interpretations of divine kingship. The imperial argument ran like this: since God is the *king of kings*, God rules (but also appoints) the earthly monarch, and our role is to be that monarch's obedient subjects. Thus, for King James I of England (James VI of Scotland), "Kings are justly called gods, for they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power on earth." Against this ran an argument more in tune with Christ's "kingship": if God is the *only* king, earthly society should be a king-less Republic. Thus, for Quakers like James Parnel, a contemporary of James I, "amongst us there are no superiors after the flesh, but Christ is the head... Here God alone is the king and he alone is honored, exalted and worshipped."

As we know, the egalitarian interpretation won the day. Today's constitutional monarchs have lost most of their power, and much of their glamour. Societies with despotic leaders are seen as aberrations. Societies with ruling monarchs are anachronisms, not models for imitation.

Problems with Kingship Language

Since Christianity arose in monarchical societies, it is not surprising that the notion of divine kinship ("sovereignty") pervades the language of doctrine, liturgical language, and congregational song. Today, it has severe limitations.

When first used, the language of God as ruling king was in harmony with commonsense observation of the universe. Earth was flat, the dead were in the land of shades below it, and God was enthroned in heaven, high above. Nowadays, we live in a vast, expanding universe, a seamless web of space/time, "finite, yet unbounded" (Stephen Hawking). Because there is nowhere for a king to sit, we struggle to describe how God can credibly be active in the universe's development. The language of God-as-King-of-the-Universe has become an increasingly tenuous metaphor. It is colorful, yet uninformative.

The language of divine kingship also originally explained how human societies ought to work, and how people should behave within them. As long as monarchy was the norm, images of "God-as-King" and "Christ-the-King" gave guidelines for public life. Though royalists and republicans drew opposite conclusions, divine kingship was for both a living, meaningful symbol, with clear and direct application in society.

In today's democracies, calling God "King" gives no clues about how to vote, what causes to support, and how to behave in a society whose corporate institutions crave power and need to be held accountable. Because divine kingship language has no meaning for public life, it

puts us at a distance from our society. Personal, family, and church life become the only sphere where God can be worshipped as king. Thus, divine “kingship” feeds nostalgia, but gives no direction to discipleship.

God-as-King language retains its ambiguity. In Christian history, the contradictory nature of Jesus’ “kingship” has almost invariably been overwhelmed by the fundamental, built-in, earthly meanings of earthly monarch: *authority, command, the glamour of power, control, submission and obedience*. To use it emphatically is dangerous. If we bow before God in unquestioning submission, we are more likely to submit uncritically to God’s human servants.

Ways Forward

How can today’s liturgies love God and respect the Bible? Some ideas and images are best avoided. Songs, pictures, and stained glass windows should not represent God as a crowned and bearded male monarch. Crosses, song-lyrics, and other media should not portray Jesus Christ as a robed and crowned figure. Why? Because Jesus not a Jewish Prince or Roman Emperor who was overthrown and crucified. *What was crucified was kingship itself*. To portray Christ as a royal figure is to negate that discovery.

Thus, “the Reign of Christ,” or “Christ the King,” should be celebrated, if at all, with an emphasis on Christ crucified, emphasizing that Jesus refused kingship and its corollaries: battle, war, and conquest.

How can we speak of God’s “sovereignty” without using the language of kingship? We need to speak of God’s liberating sovereignty, to counter the empty belief that we are self-sufficient, accountable to no-one, and sovereign over ourselves. In contemporary English, some terms “work” better than others. “May your sovereignty be acclaimed” has a better ring to it, perhaps, than “O God our Sovereign.”

Perhaps the safest way forward is in terms of the relationship between Creator and created. Besides being biblically familiar, “Creator” locates us as created beings, accountable to the One who brought us into being. The Creator-Created relationship also makes us responsible for the way we treat other creatures, and our planetary home.

How can we praise and thank God in language that maps appropriate behavior for citizens in a democracy? A good starting point is Paul’s strategy on his first visit to Corinth: “I resolved that while I was with you I would not claim to know anything but Jesus Christ - Christ nailed to the cross.” (1 Cor. 2:2, Revised English Bible).

Even in a democracy, Christian citizens never forget that Jesus was crucified by the governing powers. Though our institutions are distant from Imperial Rome, they are equally unable to hear the good news of God's sovereignty through Jesus Christ. They too are judged, disarmed, and put in their proper place by the resurrection. The risen Christ punctures their pretensions, demagnetizes their glamour, and makes their most absolute claims provisional and negotiable.

Another clue for citizenship is that in Christ all things cohere. (Colossians 1:17-20 and 2:14-15). As followers of Christ, we are on a journey. Alive among us, Christ leads and accompanies us, in public as well as private life. Though the record of Christ's earthly life provides no political program, it is the best reference point for our social, political and economic priorities.

As we journey on, Christ meets us through strangers, neighbors, enemies, and outcasts. The Spirit of Christ breathes through every hope and struggle for peace and social justice, whether or not it is consciously Christian. In the church, Christ presides at a table where all are fed, all are welcome, all are honored, and no-one is turned away. Christ also presides over the church as a commonwealth community, where the Spirit is given through all, and for all.

I conclude with a hymn:

Praise the God who changes places,
 leaves the lofty seat,
 welcomes us with warm embraces,
 stoops to wash our feet.
 Friends, be strong!
 Hold your heads high!
 Freedom is our song!
 Alleluia!

Praise the Rabbi, speaking, doing
 all that God intends,
 dying, rising, faith renewing,
 calling us his friends.
 Friends, be strong!

Hold your heads high!
Freedom is our song!
Alleluia!

Praise the Breath of Love, whose freedom
spreads our waking wings,
lifting every blight and burden
till our spirit sings:
Friends, be strong!
Hold your heads high!
Freedom is our song!
Alleluia!

Praise, until we join the singing
far beyond our sight,
with the Ending - and - Beginning,
dancing in the light.
Friends, be strong!
Hold your heads high!
Freedom is our song!
Alleluia!

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