

If You Will Confess "Jesus is Lord!"

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There is in the New Testament a great significance to the various titles used to designate or identify Jesus of Nazareth. In advanced Biblical studies these designations are called "Christological or Messianic titles." For our purposes, they are simply the names or titles of Christ. Most of these titles are found in confessional statements with reference to who certain New Testament personalities believed Jesus to be. He is called by the Hebrew title "Messiah" (John 1:41) and its Greek equivalent, "Christ" (Matt 16:16). He is called "the Son of God" (Matt 16:16), "the Savior" (John 4:42), and in over eighty occurrences identifies himself as "the Son of Man" (cf. Matt 16:13). But there is no title so important to our understanding of what our relationship to Jesus is to be than the title "Lord." In that the New Testament is filled with references to Jesus as Lord, it is essential that we adequately understand the term and its significance as it was used in the first century Mediterranean world.

The Title Lord in the First Century World

In the Greek-speaking world of the first century, the term *kurios* (pronounced Koo' ree os) was a title rich in meaning and weighty in significance.

A Title for One in Authority

In the Greek-speaking world of the first century, a "lord" (*kurios*) was an authoritative figure, a master, a lawful owner of slaves, a lord of subject peoples. The idea of ownership is implied in its usage in Classical Greek. It was used in the common (*koine*) Greek of the first

century period in the same sense; however, it also carried a lesser sense as a term of respect for officials, teachers, husbands, etc., especially in the vocative case (i.e., the case of address).

It Was Used as a Majesty Title

The title lord (*kurios*) was used as the formal designation for emperors or kings, especially so of the Greek and Egyptian rulers and the Caesar of Rome. In fact, the adjective *kuriakos* (of the lord) was used for anything associated with a monarch (esp. a Caesar). It conveyed the idea of "imperial," and is often translated that way. In first century documents we read of the imperial court, the imperial throne, an imperial edict, all of which literally read in Greek, the court, throne, edict of the Lord Caesar (i.e., *Kurios Kaisar*). So also in the New Testament we read of the Lord's day, the Lord's supper, the Lord's church; things associated with Jesus as the Lord of his community of believers.

A Title for Deity Figures

The gods and goddesses of the Hellenistic world, by virtue of their supernatural power, were esteemed as "Lords" in the absolute sense (i.e., ones in authority over all those upon the earth). The title "Lord" was used throughout the Mediterranean world as a confessional title ascribed to the deity in whom one placed his/her belief. Many emperors demanded worship from their subjects as gods. The title by which they were addressed as gods was the Greek *kurios*. In fact, the earliest Christians martyrs were executed for their refusal to confess Caesar as Lord. They were brought before Caesar and forced to bow before him and confess, "*Kaisar estin Kurion*" (Caesar is Lord). Those Christians who were faithful to Christ would confess "*Iesous estin Kurion*" (Jesus is Lord), and they would die for their confession. The Greek word from which martyr is derived is *martureo*, which means, "to confess or testify."

This Greek title *kurios* (lord), in common usage in the Greco-Roman world, had a somewhat multicolored function; but its greatest significance for New Testament studies is its usage by first century

Judaism as a title for, and to a great extent, a translation of, the Hebrew *Yahweh*, the personal name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Name for the God of Israel

In the Hebrew Scriptures the personal name of God is *Yahweh*. The Jews considered this name so sacred they would not utter it. When the Jew saw the name in Scripture, he substituted the Hebrew *adonai* (my lord). Of great significance is the fact that in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, called the Septuagint (because it was translated by seventy Hebrew scribes), as is evidenced in Septuagint manuscripts dating from the first century BC onward, we find the name for God (*Yahweh*) regularly represented by the Greek *kurios*. One very important scholarly source for the study of the New Testament makes the following comment:

The word *kurios*, 'lord,' as a name for God in the LXX [the Septuagint] is a strict translation only in cases where it is used for *adon* and *adonai* [i.e. 'lord' and 'my lord'] . . . As a rule, however, it is used as an expository equivalent for the divine name *YHWH* [*Yahweh*]. It is thus meant to express what the name, or the use of the name, signifies in the original. . . . In the religious sphere, then, *kurios* or *ho kurios* is reserved for the true God, and, apart from unimportant periphrases of the name in figurative speech, it is used regularly, i.e., some 6,156 times, for the proper name *YHWH* in all its pointings . . . (cf. "*Kurios*," in *The Theological of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, 3:1058-59).

In addition to the Septuagint, the Hebrew Scholar and translator of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Geza Vermes, found that in the Dead Sea Scrolls collection this same practice is found. Vermes states:

In regard to contemporary Hebrew style, the Qumran writings [i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls] confirm that in the Inter-Testamental period the worshipper thought of God almost instinctively as 'Lord;' in the psalms composed by the sectaries [i.e., the Dead Sea scribes], the Thanksgiving Hymns [a book from the Dead

Sea collection], he is most frequently addressed as *Adonai*. Furthermore, in addition to Aramaic and Hebrew, the Jewish Greek usage points in the same direction. (Cf. Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, p 113.)

There can be little doubt that within first century Judaism, the title "Lord" (whether the Hebrew *Adonai*, the Aramaic *Marah*, or the Greek *Kurios*) was used to identify the Hebrew God, *Yahweh*.

New Testament Affirmation That Jesus Is Lord

Jesus as Lord in the Gospels

In Luke's Gospel the angels announced Jesus' birth with the words, "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, **who is Christ the Lord**," (Luke 2:11). John the Baptist is described as the prophetic, "voice of one crying in the wilderness," who was sent to, "make ready **the way of the Lord**," (Matt 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4).

In John 13:13 he acknowledged the title as applicable to him; he says to his disciples, "**You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.**" And in Luke 6:46 he asks, "**Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not the things which I say?**" It is clear that he received this title as legitimately applied to him and expected those who designated him by that title to honor him as one who was truly a lord. In Matt 12:8 he declared himself "Lord of the Sabbath," the day holy unto God. After his resurrection from death the report was that, "**The Lord has risen** indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" (Luke 24:34).

When the risen Jesus appeared to Thomas, one of the twelve, he confessed him as lord:

Then he [Jesus] said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:27-28)

Jesus as Lord in the Apostolic Message

*The first apostolic proclamation of the gospel concluded with the words: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that **God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified,**" (Acts 2:36). The heart of the apostolic proclamation, as expressed by the apostle Paul, was, "If you confess with your lips that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom 10:9).*

The most significant text expressing this apostolic doctrine, however, is Phil 2:5-11. The significant point of this "Christ hymn" for Paul is found in the last line - that this one who existed in the form of God, who emptied himself of the absolute exercise of his lordship as God in order to experience human existence, even death on a cross, has been restored to his position of "Lord absolute" of heaven and earth. Paul's crescendo to this hymn is that, because he is who he is,

*. . . at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue **confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,** to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11).*

From all this it should appear obvious that the title Lord looms large in significance as a title of Jesus in the New Testament writings. With the significance this title carries in the New Testament testimony to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, it appears essential that we have an adequate understanding of the meaning of this designation.

Implications of Belief That Jesus Is Lord

Implicitly, throughout his Messianic ministry Jesus' lordly identity is evidenced. He has power and authority over the powers of evil, over disease and death, and even over the forces of nature. In Mark 2:1-12 he reveals his authority to forgive sins. He says, ". . . that you may know the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," (2:5, 10-11), "but only God can forgive sin," is the reply of the Jews (2:7). Exactly, and that is to point to be seen.

It is in his resurrection, however, that his lordly majesty fully dawns upon his followers. It is, in fact, in his resurrection that his lordship over all principalities and powers (even his own death) is declared (cf., Mark 28:6; Luke 24:34; John 20:28; Rom 10:9-10).

Jesus as Messiah and Lord Absolute

After his resurrection from death Jesus appeared to his disciples and announced, "All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth," (Matt 28:18). The title *kurios* (Lord) implies authority and this verse ascribes to him "all authority in heaven and on earth;" hence, his authority is absolute and universal. He is Lord of heaven and earth (i.e., the universe - this space-time realm of existence). He is Lord of heaven and earth, and all men are amenable to his authority or lordship. This was the proclamation of the first apostolic speech of Peter in Acts of Apostles, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:36)

Likewise, to the Gentiles of the house of Cornelius, Peter proclaimed Jesus as "Lord of all," (Acts 10:36). All Jews and Gentiles (i.e., "all men") must acknowledge him as Lord: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him (Rom 10:12).

In the message of the apostles, that Jesus was Lord of heaven and earth was the fact all men must come to see. He was not simply some cultic deity of Greek mythology, or a deified human figure after the order of the emperor religions (1 Cor 8:5-7), nor was he believed in as simply the king of the Jews or a Messianic figure who was to be believed by all of Judaism; rather, he was proclaimed as the one which whom all men everywhere must reckon. He was Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom 14:8), the one before whose judgment seat all must stand (2 Cor 5:10), the one to whom every knee must bow, and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil 2:10-11; Rom 10:9-10; 14:9-12). He is the one whom God has raised from the dead made,

. . . and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come (Eph 20b-21).

Similarly, Paul writes in Phil 2:8-11,

*And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him **the name which is above every name**, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and **every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father.*

In Col 2:9-10 Paul again takes up this theme, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority." And in 3:1, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God [i.e., the seat of divine authority]."

In like manner, the writer of Hebrews portrays him as reigning at the right hand of God (cf. Heb 1:2-9; 8:1; 12:2); and Peter, in 1 Peter 3:22, speaks of Jesus as the one, ". . . who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him."

From this collection of New Testament teaching it is evident that Jesus, as Messiah and Lord absolute, is seated on the throne of God and reigns as one who has authority over heaven and earth. He is not simply a territorial king or cultic deity who reigns only over the hearts of those who have entered into a covenant with him; rather, he is the Holy One with whom all men everywhere must reckon.

Confessing Jesus as Lord

The most common confession in the New Testament is "Jesus is Lord" (and its various forms: "Lord Jesus Christ," "Jesus the Lord,"

etc.). In fact, there are over one hundred and thirty occurrences of this confessional title in the New Testament, ninety-three of which are in the writings of Paul.

Paul writes in Phil 2:9-11 that this name/title (i.e., *kurios*/Lord) is above every name and is the name to be used in confession of Jesus (i.e., that he is Lord). Oscar Cullmann, a scholar whose book on Christology is considered a classic, says concerning this name which is above every name:

Christ's exaltation to equality with God manifests itself in the fact that God now gives him the name above every name, the name *kurios*. Why is this a name which cannot be surpassed? It is the name of God himself; *Kurios* is the translation of the Hebrew *Adonai*. It is quite clear at this point that we have to think of the Hebrew equivalent of the *Kurios* title [i.e., *Yahweh*] . . . The bestowal of the divine name, however, does not refer only to the name itself. In Judaism, as in all ancient religions, a name represents also a power. To say that God confers upon Jesus his own name is to say that he confers upon him his whole lordship (Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, pp 217-18).

The significance of this title, as applied to Jesus in the New Testament, cannot be overstressed. It is not simply a matter of ascribing a title of respect to Jesus, but the whole of the concepts associated with it. It does not seem likely that the title *Kurios* would have been applied to Jesus in a confessional sense in the New Testament unless it was the case that he was believed in as one who was a Lord in the absolute sense; i.e., he was "the Lord" (*Kurios*) in the same sense that God was "the Lord" (*Kurios*). The conclusion to which all this leads may be summed up, again, in the words of Cullmann:

The designation of Jesus as *Kurios* has the further consequence that actually all the titles of honor for God himself (with the exception of 'Father') may be transferred to Jesus. Once he was given the 'name which is above every name,' God's own name ('Lord,' *Adonai*, *Kurios*), then no limitations at all could be set

for the transfer of divine attributes to him. Thus in connection with the *Kurios* title we could already speak of the occasional use in early Christianity of the name 'God' (*Theos*) for Jesus, for this name by no means indicates, as we are inclined to think, a higher dignity than the unsurpassable *Kurios* designation. (Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, pp 236-37.)

Conclusion

Who was this person Jesus of Nazareth? This has been the consuming question of this whole study. "Who do men say that I am?" was his question to his disciples in Matt 16:13. Other questions have presented themselves in this study: "Who did he say he was?" and "Who did his disciples or the early Christians believe him to be?" and "Who does the New Testament say he is?" To all of these questions we have attempted in part to an answer. The most important question, however, is the one each of us must give concerning the identity of this person Jesus of Nazareth. Who do you believe he was and who do you believe he is?

Our belief that he was "one of us" is of great significance in teaching us what we as beings created in the image of God should be. Likewise, our belief that he was "God with us" is equally important in teaching us what God himself is like. But more must be seen in this person Jesus of Nazareth than what he taught us about who God is, who we are, and who we should be. The earliest Christians confessed belief in him as the Christ. To them the Christ or Messiah was a redeemer figure, a deliverer or savior. As we have seen in this lesson, the early Christians also believed Jesus to be their Lord. There is a significant connection here. If the role of Messiah Jesus portrays in the New Testament is that of both a Savior and a Lord, then our acceptance of him must be that of a Savior and a Lord. But unless we are willing to accept him as Lord, we cannot have him as our Savior.

This is the point most of Christendom, down through the centuries, has seemingly missed. People have always been willing to acknowledge Jesus as a savior figure and willingly accept his salvation, but they are not so willing to acknowledge him as their

Lord and accept his authority over their lives. But the message of the New Testament is clear on this point. Being a Christian demands belief in the Messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth, and those claims involve his identity as Lord and his identity as Savior. Belief in him requires the acceptance of the whole of his Messianic claims. Unless we are willing to believe in him as Lord, there is little point in believing in him as Savior, and unless we allow him to become our Lord, there is no promise that he will become our Savior.

MWLIII

Questions For Discussion

1. What do you understand by the term "lord"?
2. How do you understand the concept of lordship, especially as it relates to the idea of servanthood?
3. What does confessing someone as "Lord" imply in terms of what is believed about the one confessed by the one making the confession?
4. What is significant about the fact that the New Testament so often identifies Jesus as Lord?
5. How does the usage of the term Lord in first century Judaism inform us as to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth in the minds of the people calling him Lord in the New Testament?
6. If *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, was addressed by the title Lord and this title itself was used as a name of God, what does the designation of Jesus as Lord say about what was believed about him by the people of the New Testament?
7. In what way does the authority given Jesus in the New Testament support the view that he is Lord in the absolute sense that God is Lord (see Matt 28:18)?
8. Must one confess, "Jesus is Lord," in order to experience conversion

to Christ? May one be converted to Christ without accepting him as Lord?

9. May one accept Jesus as Savior without accepting him as Lord? If so, why?

10. Is belief in him as Lord essential to accepting him as our Savior? If so, why?

11. Do you think that Christendom, through the centuries, has been faithful to the New Testament portrayal of Jesus as Lord?

12. Do you think that contemporary Christendom adequately understands the essentiality of accepting Jesus as Lord in order to have him as Savior? Give examples to support your answer?