

The Lordship of Jesus Christ
by Shaun Lewis

Hallelujah! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.
The kingdoms of this world is become the kingdoms of our Lord,
and of His Christ: and He shall reign for ever and ever.
King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

These glorious words hail from Handel's *Messiah*. Charles Jennens, a devout Anglican, wrote the text to challenge the 18th-century rise in Deism.¹ Quoting Scripture from beginning to end, Jennens wanted Ireland to know the Lord God reigns. God has involved Himself in this world, mysteriously working His sovereign will throughout the ages, and one day every kingdom will bow in complete recognition.² Though the concept was growing unpopular, men like Jennens still understood the sovereignty of God and His lordship.

Long before the 18th century, the apostles wrote Scripture under the authority of the Roman Empire. The government they understood functioned like a monarchy.³ Much changed over the next 1,500 years but power remained centralized. Concepts such as sovereignty and lordship were readily understood by any man, woman, or child.

With the rise of nations in the 16th and 17th centuries, empires and old monarchies began to crumble. At present, well over half the world is governed by some form of a republic.⁴ No one reigns or has absolute authority under this form of government. No one inherits power, no one exercises an uncontested will, and no one has a divine right to rule. Power resides with the people who elect leaders to represent their interests. The will of the people is the law of the land.

The divine right of kings shifted to the alleged divine rights of individuals—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, for instance. The founding fathers of America came to believe that King George had violated these rights. Thus, his “contract” with the people was void,⁵ and it was their duty to rebel in order to create a more perfect union. From a monarchy to a republic, America

¹ Richard Lockett, *Handel's Messiah: A Celebration* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1992), 76-77.

² Phil 2:10.

³ The Roman Empire was technically a republic whereby the Senate elected Caesar. Functionally, however, it resembled more of a monarchy. Caesar's power vastly eclipsed the Roman Senate from the time of Augustus (27 B. C).

⁴ www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/498751/republic-as-of-5/31/13. A republic is a “form of government in which a state is ruled by representatives of the citizen body. Modern republics are founded on the idea that sovereignty rests with the people.”

⁵ This writer holds that the foundation of the American Revolution was thoroughly Lockean.

rejected her king in favor of a president with limited powers. The concept of lordship had been rejected, and in time, it was forgotten.

The 18th century also saw a religious transformation in which Calvinism was rejected. Arminianism, with its elevation of the individual, struck a chord in the hearts of those American revolutionaries.⁶ While few Christians would have denied that Jesus is the Lord, the meaning of this statement was changing to fit the democratic spirit of the age.

How was lordship understood in the first century? The Gospels contain a rich trove of verses on the lordship of Jesus Christ, most verses using the term *kurios*. This term will be examined in its historical context and its usage will be observed throughout the Gospels in order to redeem a biblical understanding of Christ's lordship.⁷

I. HISTORICAL SURVEY

Hebrew scribes never pronounced the sacred name of God (*Yahweh*). When they saw it, they said, “*Adonnai*” to avoid the possibility of using God's name in vain. After deportations from the land of Israel and subsequent returns, Gentiles had permeated Jewish culture. Some Jews married Gentiles and others tried to remain ethically pure. Regardless, the Jews found themselves under the dominion of Gentile overlords.

By the third century B. C., many Jews no longer knew Hebrew or could read God's Word. The problem resulted in the creation of a Greek translation of the Scriptures — the Septuagint. Where *Yahweh* or *Adonnai* appeared, Jewish translators selected the term *kurios*.

To Greek-speaking Jews, this term conveyed as accurately as possible the meaning of *Yahweh* or *Adonnai*. It was not an exact equivalent, but the selection of *kurios* indicates it was a term of the highest honor. *Kurios* was originally a title used throughout pagan religions to esteem gods such as Zeus or Helios.⁸ In time, it was applied to civil leaders and household masters to elevate their status.

Choosing *kurios* as the Greek equivalent to *Yahweh* naturally elevated the term in Jewish culture. It acquired the status of God's sacred name, and eventually, Greek-speaking Jews refused to call any man their *kurios*.⁹ Like *Yahweh*, it was a word reserved for God alone.

⁶ Gregg Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 5-6. Eighteenth-century minister, Nathaniel Niles, writes: “Calvinism was being dropped not in response to theological arguments but because it violated the spirit of Revolutionary liberty” (70).

⁷ The New Testament uses *kurios* and its cognates 732 times. The Gospels contain nearly 1/3 of all these, which is more than sufficient to establish the concept of lordship.

⁸ Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2004), 193.

⁹ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.10.1. The Jews refused to call the Roman Emperor their *kurios*.

When the New Testament was penned, Christians regarded *kurios* as the Jews had regarded *Yahweh*. To indicate its importance, they contracted the Greek “KYRIOC” to “KC” when the referent was God or Jesus Christ.¹⁰ *Kurios* had broad usage by the first century. The Roman Empire and pagan religions regularly used this term,¹¹ and it did not always refer to God in the New Testament. Contraction signaled to the reader that *kurios* was being used in a uniquely Christian way.¹² Jesus Christ was not to be thought of as a generic lord on the same level as Caesar or the Roman gods — He is holy and incomparably above all others.

Whether *kurios* was used of pagan deities, civil rulers, or household masters, it always indicated some measure of power, authority, and honor. The term well describes the God of the Bible. He is the sole source of authority, the King who does He consult any man or angel for wisdom. He does as He pleases in heaven and on earth.¹³ According to Scripture, God holds omnipotent power, has unparalleled authority, and supreme honor belongs to Him alone. He is the *kurios*.

Pagan deities allegedly had the right to do as they pleased with man. The lord Zeus hurled bolts of lightning from on high at his adversaries and capriciously involved himself on earth, for instance. Many Roman emperors were regarded as deity, demanded honor, and all maintained tremendous authority.¹⁴ When used of human masters, *kurios* contrasted with *doulos*, meaning “slave” — a word at the opposite end of the societal spectrum.¹⁵ This further defines what was meant by the term.

II. GENERAL USAGE IN THE GOSPELS

The masses gave Jesus the title, *kurios*, due to His authoritative teaching and divine power.¹⁶ Soon the title became synonymous with Jesus Himself, for He is not one lord among many or a person of status. He is “The Lord.”¹⁷ The definite article indicates a position not shared by any other.

Throughout the Gospels, *kurios* indicates the same concepts previously mentioned. When the lesser addressed the greater, it was a common, reverential greeting. For instance, in John 4:11 a

¹⁰ Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 199-204. Other terms such as Jesus, Christ, God, and Spirit were also contracted throughout New Testament manuscripts.

¹¹ Harris, M. J., “Lord”, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. 4 vols. ed. by: Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 3:158.

¹² Comfort, *Manuscripts*, 204.

¹³ Ps 93, 115:3; Is 42:8-9, 45:5-7; Rom 11:34-36.

¹⁴ According to Suetonius, Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) gave himself the title “Lord and God.” He was not the first nor the last emperor to flatter himself with the word *kurios*.

¹⁵ Matt 10:25; Lk 12:43, 45; Jn 15:15.

¹⁶ Harris, “Lord,” 3:158. See: Mk 11:3; 12:35-37; Jn 13:13.

¹⁷ Lk 7:13, 22:61; Jn 20:18.

Samaritan woman said to Jesus, “Sir (*kurios*), you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep.” In this case, the word says nothing about Jesus’ divine power or authority because the woman knew nothing of the sort. She only knew that before her was a man and, culturally, women were expected to show honor as the lesser addressing the greater.

Similarly, would-be followers of Christ addressed Him as *kurios*: “I will follow you, Lord (*kurios*), but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”¹⁸ These followers liked Jesus and addressed Him with great honor, but the greeting meant no more. It was reverential like addressing a judge as “your honor” in a modern courtroom.¹⁹

Though always including honor, *kurios* may also indicate divine power or authority at the same time. When Lazarus died, Martha said to Jesus, “Lord (*kurios*), if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”²⁰ Later she confessed, “Yes, Lord (*kurios*); I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”²¹ It is clear that Martha meant more than a reverential greeting here. She knew that Jesus had been sent from God and that He could have healed Lazarus. Recognizing His divine power, she called Him “Lord.”

In Luke 5:12, a Galilean leper fell on his face before Jesus and begged him saying, “Lord (*kurios*), if you will, you can make me clean.” Bowing before Jesus, the leper pleaded with Him to do a divine work. He may not have understood Jesus’ divinity but the leper did understand that Jesus could do a divine work. Like Martha, it was fitting to address Him as “Lord.”²²

When more is meant than a simple greeting, the concept of authority is commonplace in *kurios*. For instance, a group of Pharisees once confronted Jesus when His disciples plucked the heads of grain on the Sabbath. He justified their actions saying, “For the Son of Man is lord (*kurios*) of the

¹⁸ Lk 9:61.

¹⁹ Other direct instances of *kurios* bestowing honor: Matt 7:21-22, 8:2, 6, 8, 8:19-22, 8:25, 9:28, 13:27, 14:28, 30, 15:22, 25, 27, 17:4, 15, 18:21, 20:30-31, 33, 21:30, 25:11, 20, 22, 24, 37, 26:22, 27:63; Mk 7:28; Luke 5:8, 12, 7:6, 9:54, 59, 61, 10:17, 40, 11:1, 12:41, 13:8, 23, 25; 14:22, 17:37, 18:41, 19:8, 19:16, 18, 20, 25, 22:33, 38, 49, 24:34; Jn 4:11, 15, 19, 49, 5:7, 6:34, 6:68, 8:11, 9:36, 9:38, 11:3, 12, 21, 27, 32, 34, 39, 12:21, 38, 13:6, 9, 25, 36, 37, 14:5, 8, 22, 20:15, 18, 25, 28, 21:7, 15-17, 20, 21. All of these are simple greetings. Most of these are nothing more than the lesser addressing the greater, one showing honor to another. Some indicate honor plus recognition of power or authority.

²⁰ Jn 11:21.

²¹ Jn 11:27.

²² Other instances of *kurios* indicating divine power: Matt 8:2, 6, 8, 25, 28, 14:28, 30, 15:22, 25, 27, 17:15, 20:30-31, 33; Mk 7:28; Luke 5:8, 12, 9:54, 10:17, 18:41, 24:34; John 4:49, 9:38, 11:3, 21, 27, 32, 20:18, 25, 28. All of these verses include an element of honor and some imply divine authority as well. In all these cases, the title was recognition of Jesus’ divine power. The speaker may have meant more by the term (such as honor and authority) but certainly not less.

Sabbath.”²³ Whatever they thought the holy day meant, One who stood above the Sabbath was in their midst. It was a claim to divine authority.

Luke 22:25 states, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship (*kurieusin*) over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.” The verbal root is *kurios* and the verse indicates that to be a lord is to have authority. When *kurios* is used in this formal sense, of a position, authority is bound within the term.²⁴

Furthermore, to a great Judean crowd, Jesus asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ (*kurios, kurios*) and not do what I tell you?”²⁵ The crowd liked Jesus and addressed Him as *kurios* but a discrepancy existed. They saw Jesus as a person of honor but not as One with authority. Since Jesus is One with authority, it was problematic that any would call Him *kurios* without doing what He said. Authority implies obedience.²⁶

Kurios can be used with different nuances emphasizing honor, power, authority, or some mixture of these. A text such as Matthew 8:8-9 indicates all three. To say that “Jesus is Lord” must at least mean that His followers honor Him as one who is greater, recognize His divine power, and understand that He holds authority over their lives.

III. USAGES MORE SPECIFIC TO CHRIST’S LORDSHIP

According to the Gospels, Jesus teaches His servants, shows mercy to them, and rewards their labors. Though other lords may have done these, it is doubtful that many loved their servants or entered into an intimate friendship with them. A *kurios-doulos* relationship with Jesus is without parallel.

On many occasions Jesus spoke of lords who were merciful²⁷, fair, or even generous.²⁸ He utilized concepts familiar to His audience in order to describe the lordship of God. Yet, on other occasions, there were few parallels. For instance, Jesus’ lordship included teaching as when a

²³ Matt 12:8.

²⁴ Other instances of *kurios* indicating authority: Matt 6:24, 7:21, 22, 8:8-9, 14:28, 21:3; Lk 5:12, 6:5, 6:46, 7:6, 9:54, 10:1, 10:17, 39, 40, 11:1, 14:21, 22, 23, 16:5, 13, 18:41, 19:31, 20:13, 22:25; Jn 13:13, 14, 16, 15:20, 20:15, 21:12.

²⁵ Lk 6:46.

²⁶ Matthew 6:24 states, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (parallel passage, Luke 16:13). A slave could not faithfully obey multiple masters. Lordship implies exclusive authority from the lord and undivided submission from the slave.

Furthermore, the longer a slave served his one master, the more he would be identified as property of that master (Matt 7:21-25; Jn 15:20). Respecting his master’s authority naturally resulted in the slave gaining a new identity.

²⁷ Matt 8:22, 15:22, 17:15, 18:23-35, 20:30-31; Mk 5:19, 7:28.

²⁸ Matt 20:8-16, 21:44-47; Lk 12:41-48.

disciple asked, “Lord (*kurios*), teach us to pray.”²⁹ The request did not seem unnatural to Jesus or the other disciples. He regularly taught; they listened and obeyed, for He was their “Lord (*kurios*) and teacher.”³⁰

Though a good relationship might exist between a lord and his servants, love was not the defining feature. Love had nothing to do with *kurios* as used of pagan gods, civil leaders, or household managers. To the contrary, love has everything to do with Jesus as *kurios*. The greatest command placed upon His servants is to “love the Lord (*kurios*), your God.”³¹

Love is the mark of Christ’s lordship. His servants are to love one another, and they are to love Him.³² An intimacy exists in this *kurios-doulos* relationship. A follower of Christ is still a slave and orders are given, but the orders are not unreasonable or beyond a Christian’s ability to obey.³³ The master administers discipline as necessary, but He is not sadistic or cruel.³⁴ Love, not contract, keeps the Lord and His slaves inseparably bound together forever.³⁵

Jesus has a special intimacy with His servants. On the night of His betrayal, He said to the eleven, “No longer do I call you servants (*doulos*), for the servant (*doulos*) does not know what his master (*kurios*) is doing; but I have called you friends (*philous*), for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”³⁶ Christ is the lord of slaves whom He calls friends.

In what sense can a friend be a slave? How can a slave be his master’s friend? *Kurios-doulos* is the fundamental relationship between Christ and His people, and any lord has the right to do as he desires with his slaves. He could treat them well or beat them unmercifully, for instance. Thus, it is the Lord’s right to share intimate details with His slaves. In fact, He has disclosed so much that His slaves have the mind of their Master.³⁷

All who have truly come into Christ’s service love Him. To acknowledge that, “Jesus is Lord” is to understand, “I am His slave.” It is also to rejoice that as a slave, “I am His friend.” Jesus loves His slaves, shares Himself with them, and they desire to please Him. These are some of the unique features of Christ’s lordship.

²⁹ Lk 11:1.

³⁰ Jn 13:13.

³¹ Matt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27.

³² Jn 13:34-35.

³³ 1 Cor 10:12-13.

³⁴ Heb 10:6.

³⁵ Rom 8:37-39.

³⁶ Jn 15:15.

³⁷ 1 Cor 2:16.

CONCLUSION

Kurios may be without any modern-day equivalent, and this makes it tempting to fill the void with something familiar. When America was on the verge of revolution, the lordship of her king was rejected and power shifted to the people. This is not to condemn the American Revolution but to say that this political shift fueled a great religious shift. Christians readily accepted Lockean ideas such as inalienable rights and social contract. These ideas led to a surge in Arminian theology throughout the colonies and a new understanding of Christ's lordship.³⁸ Little has changed.

When Paul opened the epistle to the Romans, he introduced himself as a *Doulos Kristou*.³⁹ Jesus was not His boss, coach, advisor, or pal, but His *kurios*. Like a slave purchased on the market, he did not consent to be bought, but fell in total submission.

To confess, "Jesus as *kurios*"⁴⁰ is to honor Him not as an equal but as God. It is to recognize His divine power and understand His exclusive authority over one's life. Paul became a slave, but love for the Master compelled him to serve.⁴¹ The lordship of Jesus Christ is the creation of a love-driven slave. Anyone may confess Jesus as Lord, but this does not necessarily mean anything. Where a slave who loves to please the Master begins to develop, here is a man truly owned by Christ.

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³⁸ Does Christ call people into His kingdom for His eternal glory or do they consent to His reign upon seeing it is personally advantageous?

³⁹ Rom 1:1.

⁴⁰ Rom 10:9.

⁴¹ 2 Cor 5:14.