

*Claude Rochon, November 22, 2015*  
**A king is a king is a king... or is it?**

We've all heard or read that Jesus is (or will be) a King – King of kings, even. Today, I would like to reflect on His kingship. More precisely, to what extent is Jesus like a human king and to what extent is He not?

**Webster's Definition**

- *1a*: a male monarch of a major territorial unit; *especially*: one whose position is hereditary and who rules for life
  - Male: Jesus, obviously; but as a spiritual being, God is neither male nor female
  - Major territorial unit: I guess the universe qualifies
  - Hereditary: as the Son of God, that applies also (metaphorically)
  - Rules for life: for eternal life, as a matter of fact
- So in all these aspects, I guess Jesus is a King, and He is “like” a human king

**But are there differences?**

We can think of some obvious differences between Jesus and human kings. For instance, in the Old Testament, we could look at examples of good and bad kings in the books of Kings and Chronicles. Throughout those books, there are judgments on kings, whether they were “good” kings or “bad” kings. So we could make a list of good and bad things done by human kings throughout the Bible, and say that Jesus is the kind of king that would only do the good things and none of the bad things. But would that be enough, or is there more to it than that?

**Jesus is a king, but not a king as per Webster's definition**

If we were to look throughout the Gospels where a king is mentioned, we would find three main characteristics of kingship: kings have power; kings have wealth; and kings use violence to get their way. Is it so with Jesus? Let's first look at his life on earth.

*Power*

- One day, James and John came to Jesus to ask for the first place in his kingdom. They were thinking in terms of a human kingdom; they want to be at his right hand and his left hand. Not only did Jesus rebuke them, but he gathered all the disciples around him and he told them: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mk 10:42b-44)
- Moreover, at the Last Supper, Jesus knelt down in front of each disciple and washed his feet. He was taking the role of a servant, of a slave. Because it was the servant's job, the slave's job to wash the guest's feet. That's not how human kings behave.
- Of course, Jesus used his divine power in a number of instances, but many times he was hesitant about doing so (think about the changing of water into wine at Cana). And when He did, it was always to benefit somebody else – not Himself. He used his power as a servant, not as a king.

## Wealth

- Kings are wealthy. They draw money from their subjects and build up their own wealth. But what about Jesus?
- One day, a rich young man came to Jesus and asked how he could gain eternal life? And Jesus answered: “Go, sell everything you have, and give it to the poor. Then come and follow me.” As we know, the young man went away sad because he had great possessions.
- Jesus himself once said that “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20)
- So the accumulation of wealth doesn’t seem to be a high priority for Jesus.

## Violence

- Kings use violence. Kings – and nowadays presidents and prime ministers – go to war to get their ways.
- But when Jesus was arrested in the Garden, and his disciples wanted to fight to protect him, Jesus said: “Put away your sword.” In other words: don't use violence. “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Violence begets violence – and oftentimes, greater violence.
- During His life on earth, Jesus rejected violence. Of course, there is the incident at the Temple where he chased away the merchants and the money-changers. But note that he did not harm a single human being – at that time or anywhere else in the Gospels
- Not only did Jesus reject violence, He chose the way of the suffering and death. He manifested His love towards those who were inflicting suffering and death upon him. He was willing to suffer rather than to inflict suffering, willing to be killed rather than to kill; because He knew that the way of active love is the only way to transform our world into the Kingdom of God.

So it seems that, during his time on earth, Jesus did not display any of the characteristics of human kings. Just the opposite, as a matter of fact. Of course, this was during his human life, and he is called a “King” in other settings (in the book of Revelation, for instance). So let’s go to our text in Revelation.

### Revelation 1:4b-8

- In the book of Revelation, Jesus is crowned King of kings after a long series of violent events
  - Illustration: *Lord of the Rings* (third movie: *The Return of the King*)
- It has been said that the book of Revelation stands out as an embarrassment to Christianity. The famed atheist Friedrich Nietzsche described the book as “the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history.” Historian James Carroll said, “In no text of the entire Bible is God’s violence, and the violence of Christ himself, more powerfully on display than in the ... book of Revelation.”
- However, we should first note that the Book of Revelation is the most metaphorical book in the Bible. It is a vision of John on the Island of Patmos. And when dealing with visions, one must be careful not to confuse symbols with reality.
  - Example: Joseph’s vision in Genesis; 7 lean cows and 7 fat cows
- So we should ask ourselves whether any given passage must be interpreted literally or metaphorically. And I would say that most of Revelation should be seen metaphorically... including most if not all its violent passages

- Secondly, although there's a lot of violence in Revelation, it is mostly Christ and His followers who are on the receiving end – not His enemies.
- In fact, it could be said that Revelation supports Christian nonviolence more than any other biblical book. Nowhere does Revelation encourage the church to act violently. And human violence is always condemned.
- When Jesus defeats his enemies, He does so with a sword, yes... but the sword comes from his mouth, not from His hand (19:15, 21). And when the sword comes from the mouth, it symbolically refers to a word of judgment. So Jesus doesn't need to do anything violent; He just has to declare with full authority that He has already won. He has conquered by his death on the cross and his resurrection.
- Finally, if any violence is to be taken literally in this book, we should do well to heed the words of Barbara Reid: "God does not actively mete out cruel punishment, but those who refuse to imitate the gratuitous, unearned love of God choose instead to fuel the cycles of violence, and thus, by their choice, become victims of this violence themselves."<sup>1</sup>
- So it is not the King of kings who acts violently, but those who choose not to enter God's peaceful Kingdom of love. They fight by the sword... they perish by the sword.

### **John 18:33-37**

- It is interesting to note that, in all four gospels, Pilate begins with the same question: "Are you the King of the Jews?"
- Regarding that question, Warren Carter points out that: "Hence in asking Jesus if his title is 'King of the Jews', Pilate asks Jesus, 'Are you the head of the [Jewish] resistance [against the Roman Empire]?' The title charges Jesus with sedition against the empire and Caesar. The title encapsulates challenge, threat, conflict. Moreover, the term highlights the vast differences between Jesus and Pilate over notions of empire that have appeared in Jesus' teaching and praxis."<sup>2</sup>
- Thus, it is not easy for Jesus to answer because he knows that Pilate and he have very different concepts of kingship. The Kingdom of God that Jesus is talking about is very different than the kingdoms that Pilate has in mind.
- Carter continues: "As a king, Jesus rejects imperial staples such as violence ([Matthew] 5:38-42; 26:52) and domination (20:25-28). He rejects the exploitation and oppressive ways of kings (6:29) and the hoarding of wealth (6:24-34). He rejects triumphant celebrations of domination through military subjugation (21:1-11). Rather he prefers the way of meekness (21:3), service (20:28), and prayer for God's alternative empire marked by bread and forgiveness of debt (6:9-13). The empire that his words and actions have attested [the Kingdom of God] differs significantly from Rome's in demonstrating inclusiveness not elite privilege, mercy not force, service not domination, wholeness not deprivation."<sup>3</sup>
- That's the underlying context to Pilate's question. And Jesus answers: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."
- So Jesus agrees that he has a kingdom, but emphasizes that it is not the kind of kingdom that has soldiers fighting for it. It was not built, nor is it maintained by military might.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Reid, *Matthew's Nonviolent Jesus and Violent Parables*, Institute for Faith and Learning, Baylor University, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> W. Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*, 2001, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

- As Charles McCollough puts it: “Clearly, Jesus’ world is one where fighting and violence have been overcome. It is a world that Pilate cannot begin to understand, and Jesus knows there is no way to make him do so. Jesus is ‘letting go’ of the impossible. Yet he does not try to save himself or ask for mercy. He refuses to accept any of Pilate’s assumptions or taunts. He does not buy into any of the Roman rule of violence and fear.”<sup>4</sup>

**To summarize**

1. Jesus is King, but on a metaphorical plane: he displays some, but not all, of the characteristics of human kings
2. More specifically, Jesus – during his human life – demonstrated a very different attitude than kings as to power, wealth and violence
3. As for the violence in the book of Revelation, where Jesus is crowned as King of kings, it is also to be taken metaphorically – most of it or maybe even all of it
  - a. And that metaphor symbolizes God’s justice. He is a God of love (he IS love), but also a God of justice. Eventually, justice must be done. But does justice have to be brought about violently?
  - b. If any violence is to be taken literally in Revelation, it refers to the part of mankind that refuses to enter God’s peaceful Kingdom of love.
4. Finally, Jesus’ conversation with Pilate shows that, even though Jesus eventually answers that he is a king, Pilate and him have very different concepts of what is a king.

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<sup>4</sup> C. McCollough, *The Non-Violent Radical: Seeing and Living the Wisdom of Jesus*, 2006, p. 109.