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ΚΥΡΙΟΣ as a Title for Christ

SHIRLEY J. CASE, PH.D.

COBB DIVINITY SCHOOL, LEWISTON, MAINE

HOW came Christ to be called the "Lord"? Tradition has left only an occasional hint at the answer to this question (Mk. 12 37 Ac. 2 36 Phil. 2 9-11). Moreover, the problem is complicated by a linguistic difficulty, for even the most ardent advocates of Greek as the literary language of early Christendom admit that the early Palestinians would employ Aramaic within their own circle.¹ Is there, then, an Aramaic usage antedating that of the Greek? The present discussion aims (1) to trace the title to its source, and (2) to ascertain its significance.

The early date of Paul and his manifest habit of entitling Jesus "Lord" make his writings a proper starting point for this study. Unfortunately he does not say whence he obtained this designation or why he uses it, but when he writes *μαρναθα* to the Corinthians it is perfectly plain that he is passing along a phrase which originated with Aramaic-speaking Christians. Whatever its exact significance may be thought to be, the first part certainly means "our Lord," to which, it will be noticed, the peculiar form of Paul's familiar *ὁ Κύριος ἡμῶν* exactly corresponds. Of the 61 occurrences of "Lord Jesus Christ" in the writings usually assigned to Paul, 43 have the attached pronoun (usually "our") and it occurs frequently with other uses of "Lord." One needs only to glance at a page of the Syriac version (particularly Sin. or Cur.), noting how frequently the simple *Kýrios* of the Greek when used of Jesus is rendered ܕܢܝܨܐܘܪ, to appreciate the Semitic feeling behind Paul's phrase. There is

¹ J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of N. T. Greek*, vol. 1. p. 8.

also a marked tendency to lose the possessive in post-Pauline times as tradition becomes a step further removed from the Aramaic. For example, Clement of Rome, although much of his phraseology is modeled on Paul's, uses "our Lord" in various connections only 9 times out of nearly 50 occasions on which he refers to Christ; while Ignatius, though he mentions Christ much oftener than Clement does, has styled him "our Lord" scarcely half a dozen times, notwithstanding his full appreciation of the fact that Christ is the peculiar possession of the Christian — "our God," "our Saviour," "our hope," "our true life" and the like. And other Christian Greek of the early period shows a similar inclination to forsake the Pauline idiom — an unnatural phenomenon had the expression been originally distinctively Greek.

This formal characteristic of Paul's language and his use of *Kύριος* governing the genitive (Rom. 10 12 1 Cor. 2 8 2 Thes. 3 16) are not in accord with the usual theory which gives his phraseology a relation to that of the Old Testament. It will be granted that he was familiar with both the Hebrew and the Greek Bible of his day and that he probably introduced the latter among his Greek converts. He would also be fully conscious that *Kύριος* was the Septuagint equivalent for יהוה; but this neither stood in the construct state nor took a possessive suffix. Nor is the common surrogate יהוה likely to have been Paul's model (as Cremer supposed). On the basis of the Greek there is no distinction between יהוה and יהוה, for the suffix in the latter is regularly overlooked in translation. Indeed it is sometimes so far disregarded that one of another person is written instead (2 Kg. 19 23); and when the Greek does add a possessive it seems to have been the context rather than the form of יהוה that suggested the pronoun (Jg. 6 15 Ps. 16 2 85 23). On the other hand occasionally the parallel phrase "my God" seems to make clear the force of the suffix in יהוה, yet the Greek renders by the simple *Kύριος* (Ps. 88 16; 86 12). It is doubtful whether the suffix even in the Hebrew retained any conscious force (but see Dalman, *Der Gottesname Adonj*), and certainly for the Septuagint translators it had no significance,

much less would it be likely to have in Paul's day; and no trace of it would be discernible in his Greek Bible.

According to Wernle the use of *Kýrios* as a title for Jesus originated with Paul out of deference to the needs of his proselytes. The word *χριστός* had a strange sound for Greek ears, and on that account Paul used *Kýrios* instead, introducing it "as an equivalent for Messiah into the official formula used at baptism; Jesus the Lord, no longer Jesus the Christ."² But this opinion, when placed beside the few passages in which the apostle mentions baptism, does not stand approved. Gal. 3 27 addresses "as many of you as were baptized into Christ," and 1 Cor. 1 13 says, "Is Christ divided? . . . were ye baptized into the name of Paul?" 1 Cor. 10 2 reads, "all were baptized into Moses," and the figure has for its application "the rock was Christ." Again in 12 13 it is said, "we were all baptized into one body," that is, *ὁ χριστός* of the previous verse. Rom. 6 3 refers to those "who were baptized into Christ Jesus," and Col. 2 12 has the phrase "having been buried with him (*τοῦ χριστοῦ*) in baptism." Thus it appears that in not a single instance does "Jesus the Lord" instead of "Jesus the Christ" seem to have been the underlying formal thought. And so far as the quantum of Paul's usage goes, instead of showing a preference for *Kýrios* over *χριστός* quite the opposite is the case — against about 215 uses of *Kýrios* applied to Jesus must be set nearly 350 occurrences of *χριστός*. The latter as a mere word will no doubt have been obscure to many Greeks (cf. Justin, *Apol.* i. 4; Tertullian, *Apol.* iii), nevertheless it gained wide currency in Christian circles as a designation for the heavenly Jesus.

Still another possibility needs to be mentioned. May not Paul have taken the word *Kýrios* from common Greek speech as a means of making his teaching regarding Christ's supremacy more readily comprehensible to his converts? He, and the early Christian missionaries generally, would seek to use intelligible terms and choose their vocabulary, in so far as a choice was possible, with a view to contemporary usage.

² *Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. i. pp. 247 f.

Deissmann has amply demonstrated that the religious vocabulary of early Greek Christianity incorporated many terms already in use among the heathen. But even if it be allowed that in those passages where Paul emphasizes the importance of confessing Jesus' lordship there is "a tacit protest against other 'Lords,' or even against the 'Lord' as the Roman emperor was beginning to be called,"³ significant as the fact may be for a study of the term's meaning, it would be no proof that the Aramaic-speaking Christians, who were certainly the first to use the phrase *μαρναθα*, were not in the habit of designating Jesus *מרן* or *מרנא* (= *ὁ Κύριος ἡμῶν*). It will be generally conceded that the thought of Jesus' lordship was central in Paul's faith, but this is no proof that the idea was original with him, or even that he was the first to make it central in the Christian confession. Jesus is Lord because he is on the right hand of God (Rom. 8 34), and from this fundamental conception all his attributes as Lord were readily derived; but this appropriation of Psalm 110 need not be thought original with Paul, especially since its application to Jesus is found uniformly attested in the synoptic gospels, and the idea of an exalted Christ is persistently present in the early part of Acts. Moreover, the very vehemence of Paul's persecution may imply that Jesus' lordship—the true nature of which he did not then understand of course—was already a stress point among the disciples before his own conversion (cf. Dt. 13 12-15). At any rate Paul never sets forth his confidence in the dignity of Christ's position as though it were a discovery of his own, or still a matter in debate, but everywhere asserts it as a settled tenet of common faith. And since he took pains to teach the Aramaic phrase to his Greek converts, he would thus seem to have shared with his predecessors not only the idea but the characteristic language by which it was expressed. He also has a suggestive way of using *Κύριος* in passages referring more distinctly to the earthly Jesus or to tradition received from him through the medium of the primitive community.⁴

³ Deissmann, *Expository Times*, February, 1907, p. 206.

⁴ 1 Thea. 1 e 2 15 4 15 Gal. 1 19 1 Cor. 6 16 7 10. 12. 26 9 14 11 28 Rom. 4 24;

It may help to emphasize the probability of a pre-Pauline usage, and also prepare the way for a study of its significance, if we notice how generally the term "lord" was used among Semitic peoples, and of what varied applications it was capable. For example, Hammurabi calls Marduk "his lord" (be-li-šu) and "my lord" (be-li-ia), and Zarpanit "my lady" (be-el-ti-ia). Bel is "lord of heaven and earth" or simply "the lord"; Shamash is also "the lord" and Sin "the lord of heaven." Hammurabi himself, in the exercise of his kingly functions, is "the lord"; the husband of the woman is be-el aš-ša-tim, and the owner of a house (as of other property) be-el bîtim. The Phœnician governor of Carthage in Cyprus calls the Ba'al of Lebanon "his lord" (אדני); the Eshmun-azar and Ma'sub inscriptions entitle Ptolemy אדן מלכום. In the Aramaic inscriptions from Zenjirli Bar-rekub speaks of Tiglathpileser as "lord of the four parts of the earth," and both Rekub-el and Tiglathpileser are alike "my lord" (מרא). The Nabateans in the first half of the first century A.D. refer to King Aretas as מראנא (*CIS*, II. 206), and this does not seem to be a deification of the king, for Dushara is called אלה מראנא (*CIS*, II. 199). The inhabitants of Palmyra about a century later address an honorary inscription to Ba'al-Shamin, "lord of eternity" (cf. the Arabic رب العالمين); and in the next century their much esteemed local prince, Septimius Odainath, and his wife are respectively "their lord" and "their lady," and the Roman emperor is קסר מרן. In Old Testament usage foreign rulers who have had dominion over Israel are אדנים וולתך (Isa. 26 13), and Yahweh is אדני האדנים (Dt. 10 17 Ps. 136 3). In the Aramaic of Daniel God is מרה מלכין (2 47; cf. the Ptolemaic title) and מרא שמיא (5 23), and Daniel addresses the king as מרא (4 18. 21). In the Targum of Onkelos בעל and איש, in the sense of owner or master, are rendered by מר; and Syr-sin. applies it to Jesus as well as to ordinary

and κυριος δεσποτης in 1 Cor. 11 20. Further notes on Paul's contact with primitive tradition may be seen in an article by the present writer in the *American Journal of Theology* for April, 1907.

men (Mt. 27 63 Jn. 12 21), and to God in his capacity of ruler (Mt. 11 28).

It appears altogether probable that the early Christians in Palestine spoke of Jesus as "our Lord," and passed the title on to their successors. The ease with which the Semite applied the term to any individual who seemed worthy of special honor, the appearance in tradition of the Aramaic phrase *μαρναβα* (1 Cor. 16 22 Did. 10), and the characteristics of Paul's usage all point in the direction of this conclusion. But the mere word *בר* in their speech could have had no very extraordinary content. It was not at the time a customary designation for God, nor was it a current surrogate for *יהוה*. It was applicable to God to indicate his rulership, but served equally well to indicate similar functions with respect to men. If, then, any special significance associates with the word when applied to Jesus, it is his person rather than the word itself in which the special meaning inheres. In the form *ברִי*, or *ברִן* when a disciple spoke for the entire company, it may have been no more than a respectful designation for the teacher.⁵ With Jesus' resurrection and exaltation, however, the meaning of the term would have been elevated in proportion as the heavenly Christ transcended in significance the earthly Jesus; but we are not to assume that even at this point the identification of Christ with God was complete.

It is true that two important practices seem to have been current among the early believers, namely, the address of prayer to Jesus and the application to him of Scripture that originally referred to God; but these should not be given undue significance. It would not be at all strange for the first disciples to call upon the name of their exalted Lord to

⁵ Perhaps this is the source of the familiar *κύριε*, which the present discussion omits, because the word in Greek is merely a colorless form of address. Commentators sometimes remark on the change from *ἐπιστάτα* to *κύριε* in Lk. 5 27 that the latter indicates a feeling of greater reverence on Peter's part, but there is scanty evidence for the view. Indeed, *κύριε* is used with much greater freedom than *ἐπιστάτα*, and appears in address to others quite as freely as to Jesus (Lk. 13 25 19 16. 17. 20. 25 Mt. 21 20 27 63; cf. Mk. 12 9 13 28).

whom the Almighty had given special favor, but this would not prove that they deified him outright. It would imply that God and Christ have similar positions in *relation to men*, and that is as far as the practice could warrant any inference. Moreover, it was not the custom of the Hebrews, as it was of some other peoples, to deify their heaven-exalted saints and heroes. Enoch, Moses, Elijah, Jesus, all occupied prominent positions in the supra-mundane sphere (and Jesus the highest), but the recognition of this fact was not an acknowledgment of deity. The Hebrew mind was too vitally monotheistic for this.

But could Old Testament language spoken of Yahweh be transferred to Christ without first placing him on full equality with God? It was not, however, any similarity of usage between יהוה and מר that led to the custom, for in Aramaic this did not exist; but the practice was due to an apologetic necessity on the part of those who claimed that God had exalted their Messiah to a place of heavenly lordship. Moreover, the *locus classicus*⁶ in defense of the argument involved no ambiguity of terms in Aramaic, for "the Lord said to my Lord" would have been אמר לימר in which the tetragrammaton was probably pronounced אדני.⁷ Here it was מר that furnished the point of application to Christ. And even if some quotations were used in such a way that the מרן of the community did replace the tetragrammaton,⁸ it would not be proof that they considered it

⁶ Ps. 110, cited in Mt. 22 44 Mk. 12 35 Lk. 20 42 44 Ac. 2 34 35; cf. Rom. 8 34 Eph. 1 20 Col. 3 1.

⁷ While this was the custom in the synagogue reading, Dalman thinks it would have been avoided in ordinary citation, and the "name" used instead, yet he finds no trace of this in the gospels (*Words of Jesus*, p. 188). He also believes אמר would have been similarly avoided by Jesus. But it is not certain that Jesus and his followers would have felt so much restraint along these lines as did the Rabbis.

⁸ Possibly אדני was sometimes taken in a less technical sense and given more of its primary meaning, in which case it would be akin to מר. The Targums rendered אדן in its ordinary sense by רבן (but אדן by the tetragrammaton), but מר could convey the same idea with respect to God just as Jesus probably said מר רבנא אמרנא if he used the words recorded in Mt. 11 25 Lk. 10 21.

proper to apply the divine name to Jesus, though he was now heavenly. When they began to use Scripture for proof texts, they appropriated language that fitted Christ's exalted condition though in its original use it might apply to God, who was not only exalted but possessed other attributes which they never thought of ascribing to Christ. The language was familiar, appropriate for religious effect, and perhaps in some cases proverbial, and so furnished a suitable phrase for popular use, the literalness of whose meaning must not be pressed.

Kύριος in the Greek speech of Christian missionaries was evidently intended to have a similar thought content. It was not easy, however, for the Greek language to distinguish יהוה, אדני, and מר — *Kύριος* sufficed for all three. Hence a certain ambiguity in its use was inevitable, especially when the custom of the primitive Christians in applying Old Testament language to Christ was followed. Take, for example, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians as an instance of early usage. It is often difficult to decide whether *Kύριος* means Christ or God, but the fact is of comparatively little moment when it is observed that behind this ambiguity there is, in nearly every instance, the coloring of some familiar Old Testament phrase. Moreover, the New Testament writers show an unmistakable tendency to reserve *Kύριος* for Christ and Θεός for God. While Paul may have referred *Kύριος* to God a half dozen times in the epistle just cited, he uses Θεός three times as often, and in his later letters the tendency to reserve *Kύριος* for Christ is more clearly marked. The same tendency appears also in the synoptic gospels. Isa. 40 3 is cited as an introduction to the work of John the Baptist in preparation for Jesus' public ministry: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mk. 1 3 and parallels). At some stage in the tradition the original of both Hebrew and Septuagint was altered, "paths of our God" to "his paths," which of course was to avoid calling Jesus Θεός, but the same hesitation was not felt in retaining "Lord." On another occasion the evangelists seem to approve the idea that Jesus is David's "Lord" (Mk. 12 38 1. and parallels),

and thus recognize in him lordship superior to that of their ideal prince; still the distinction between God and Christ is perfectly clear. And as for the New Testament use in general, while exact statistics are impossible, because *Kýpios* is used ambiguously, yet apart from direct address—always colorless in meaning—it appears about 600 times. Eliminating references to Christ (perhaps 400) and the occurrences in Old Testament citations, there is left a relatively small quantum of usage referring to God to place beside *Θεός* which the New Testament applies to God upwards of 1300 times.⁹

Kýpios of the Septuagint doubtless exerted some influence upon the interpretation of the term in Christian usage. When Paul, in the latter part of his life, breaks forth in the rapturous language of Phil. 2 9 ff., he may be attempting to turn to practical account¹⁰ the fact that *Kýpios* was used of Christ and was also the Old Testament term for Yahweh; but this could scarcely be trusted as a definition of the term's origin, especially in view of Paul's tendency to emphasize coincidences. Not only is the exegesis of the section somewhat uncertain, but, as already observed, Paul's confidence in Jesus' lordship is primarily based upon the fact of exaltation, and in general he gives Christ only a mediate position, particularly in respect to the new creation, and he in no sense supplants God, who is always the one and only true Deity (1 Cor. 8 6).

It is not at all probable that *Kýpios*, in the first instance, was appropriated to Jesus with any deliberate intention of assigning to him the revered and unspeakable name of

⁹ Ignatius seems to have been the first who deliberately calls Jesus *Θεός*. Regarding Rom. 9 5 opinions differ, and the phrase in Jn. 20 28 possibly is modeled on Ps. 85 2a. Ac. 20 28 in some Mss. and Clem. R. 2. 1 indirectly refer to Jesus as "God." Some infer that Christ is God in Jn. 1 1 Tit. 2 13 Heb. 1 8, but on insufficient grounds.

¹⁰ The pragmatic import of the section is liable to over-emphasis, thus obscuring the practical. If the context be taken properly into the account (vs. 5), it will be seen that Paul's emphasis is manward rather than Christward. He says substantially only this: What Jesus forsook was eminence, what he exemplified was humility, what he received as a reward was pre-eminence; let men emulate his example.

Yahweh. Even Justin (*Apol.* i. 61) knows and respects the tradition of the sanctity of the divine name יהוה, which would thus seem to have received recognition in the Greek church as well as in the Palestinian; and the Septuagint readers certainly knew that *Kύριος* was not itself the actual name of Yahweh but was merely an expedient of the translator. Moreover, no special sanctity could be attached to it as a mere word, for it was used in the Greek Bible variously of God, kings, and ordinary men. The real appropriateness of its application to Christ, as well as to God, lay in the fact that it was not essentially a proper name but a descriptive term, and so capable of varying degrees of title significance. This was doubtless its force in current usage when applied to local rulers (*e.g.* Aretas iv.) or even to the Roman emperor. The individual was "Lord" because he possessed authority, but whether this authority was essentially human or divine the mere word *Kύριος* alone would not determine—that would have to be decided by the general estimate of the individual's personality.

The actual situation then is this: *Kύριος* does not imply that Christ is elevated to the place of Yahweh, but is descriptive of his heavenly authority over the community in the spiritual sphere; and to avoid confusing Christ with God the Septuagint use of *Kύριος* gradually disappears in the New Testament literature, *Θεός* taking its place. And if it be assumed that the Septuagint readers ever regarded the Greek word itself with special reverence as the specific name of Yahweh, it will have to be granted that the New Testament fashion of applying it to Christ is really a toning down of the term. Furthermore, there is evidence that the term in Greek usage early became little more than a mere proper name in its specific application to Christ, and so was employed in referring to him in his earthly career with no more heightened sense than was attached to the name "Jesus." This, too, was in a sense a toning down of יהוה of the first community—it implied, however, no lessening of the significance of Christ's person—natural to Greek, and it showed itself as early as Paul's day (see note 4). The same trait

appears in Luke. *Kύριος* occurs six times where the parallel sections of Mt. and Mk. have no form of designation, once where they have "Jesus," but 11 times in material peculiar to Lk. In all of these the title is employed with no effort at dignity, but in simple narrative just as "Jesus" might have been used. While Dalman thinks this is meant to indicate that Jesus is "the true 'divine Lord' in opposition to the 'God and Lord' on the imperial throne of Rome" (*Ibid.* p. 330), there is no expressed or implied indication of it in the gospel. Of course when the circumstances of the Christians brought their allegiance to Christ into conflict with their relations to Cæsar, Jesus' lordship would be regarded superior to Cæsar's, but this would not imply a denial of Cæsar's right to the title *Kύριος*. The Christians recognized that this term was legitimately capable of wide application (1 Cor. 8 5 Lk. 22 25 ff.). When Polycarp, on pain of death, refuses to say "Cæsar is Lord," we are not at all certain that he discredits Cæsar's right to the title, but he does refuse to recognize the supremacy of Cæsar as compared with the loyalty due to Christ.

In conclusion: (1) We may believe that Jesus was called "Lord" even during his earthly life; but the term took on its real title force when the community, after his resurrection, came to a fuller realization of his lordship and spoke of him as *κύριος*.

(2) Paul, who had persecuted the believers for their loyalty to Christ instead of to the law, through his conversion became convinced that Christ's authority was superior to that of the law, and henceforth he, too, could say, "Jesus Christ, our Lord." It meant to Paul the recognition of Christ's unique authority in the realm of the spirit.

(3) Among Greeks the peculiar title significance of "our Lord" was not so easily felt, consequently the simpler form *Kύριος* became the current expression, and its use as a mere name tended to supplant its distinctively title import. This, however, was no lowering of the estimate of Christ's person; but when the necessity of emphasizing his divinity was felt, other means were employed for its accomplishment.