

# “Jesus is My King!”

March 29, 2026

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The story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem shows Jesus as an undeniably political figure. We need to unpack some of the details, the symbolism, and the context of this story because what is happening here isn’t a joyful parade, it’s not just people being excited to see Jesus coming to Jerusalem. In this moment of triumphal entry Jesus and the crowd that shouts Hosanna to the Son of David deliberately and courageously challenges Roman power and authority.

Jesus is arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the passover, and many others from the region around the city of Jerusalem would have been doing the very same thing. As the site of the Temple, Jerusalem’s population exploded each year as pilgrims from all over the province would come to observe Passover. So think about this. Every year, a people who had been conquered, occupied and ruled by the Roman Empire, would gather in large numbers for a celebration of their liberation from oppression in Egypt. It was a tense time in the city, not just because of the influx of people visiting, but because the relationship between the Jewish people and the Roman Empire was understandably tense, and Passover is all about God’s liberating power in the face of oppressive tyranny.

As such, it was also the tradition of the Roman governor of the Province, Pontius Pilate to come to Jerusalem, entering from the west, with a military parade bringing soldiers who would provide security during the feast. And what I mean by “provide security,” is not security for the residents of the city, but security for the empire and to put down any hint of insurrection, defiance, or threat to their power.

Jesus enters from Bethpage, on the eastern side of the city. He's riding on a donkey, or in the case of Matthew's gospel- two donkeys- did you catch that? It's the only gospel that describes him riding in on two animals. I could go down a whole rabbit hole just about that but suffice it to say for now the donkey or donkeys point to the passage Matthew references from Zechariah describing the arrival of the king. The donkey is a sign of Jesus' humility, but do not confuse humility with passivity, or weakness. It is a sign of a commitment to non-violence when held up next to the war horse that Pilate likely rides in on, but do not confuse non-violence with timidity or compliance. Because those in the crowd know that the donkey is a symbol of the king, the true king, and the kingdom of God. It is a symbol of a power that Caesar does not have or understand. Pilate demonstrates his power over the Jewish people, his power of domination and subjugation. Jesus' entry is one that empowers the Jewish people to remember who they are, and that Pilate's power comes from a place of fear- fear of them. The people spread their cloaks on the ground and cut palm branches and in doing so they signal that they understand the symbolism of the donkeys. They join in the enactment of welcoming the King using the traditional symbol of victory- palm branches- which were often used in welcoming a victorious King home. And they shout "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

This is coded language. They don't directly call him King- they call him the Son of David. Any Judean, any insider into their culture, knows that Son of David is just another way of saying King, but you'd have to know the story of their people to know that. And the word Hosanna is an Aramaic word. It's written in Aramaic even though the other words are written in Greek, the common language that was shared by people of various different cultures in that region. Aramaic is understood by a smaller portion of the population; it's a more regional language. Hosanna means "Save us!" "Save us King of David, from tyranny, exploitation, from the violence of Roman oppression."

It's also worth noting that it was common for Caesar to be referred to as Savior and Lord. Caesar saved the people from chaos, Caesar brought "peace" through force. When they cry Hosanna to the Son of David, the people are not saying "Hip hip hooray, Jesus is here!" They are saying "Save us, true King, from the powers that exploit us" "Save us, lover of true

peace, from the power of force that would take our lives” “Save us, from death at the hands of those who claim power over us.”

This isn't just something that happens to Jesus. He doesn't just show up as a guy ready to celebrate passover and get greeted with adoring crowds. This is planned; it is defiant. Jesus knows what he's saying, and he knows how dangerous this path is, and he knows what he's doing. Immediately after entering the city he goes to the Temple and overturns the tables of the money changers. It's the week of Passover. What he does is a big deal. Later, children shout "Hosanna to the Son of David" when they see Jesus in the Temple. The chief priests and the scribes become angry when they hear the children saying this, and I think we have a tendency to dismiss their anger as petty jealousy, or they're just Jesus haters, but we need to take them seriously. They are worried for their people, they are worried for the children, who don't know any better and are shouting treasonous slogans. They're worried for their people's safety and well being, because they see that Jesus is upsetting that uneasy relationship they have with the Roman authorities, and they see that if they lose that security, if they lose what passes for peace, their people will pay a terrible cost. And they are not wrong. The Romans destroy the temple; they expel the Jews from the city of Rome. The stakes for these leaders are really high. Jesus knows this, but he also knows that preserving that uneasy false peace will not save the people from the violence of Rome. He knows that true peace will come at a cost- a great cost to him personally, but he works for it anyway.

The stakes are high for us too.

The melding of politics and religion is something we've seen used to wield power and manipulate people both in our past and present. In our present, white Christian nationalism has horribly distorted the message of Christ justifying violence, exploitation, and subjugation of others. In this way Christ becomes a tool of empire and the language of the Christian religion elevates the very powers that Jesus defied on Palm Sunday. When I say that Christ is undeniably a political figure in this story, I do not mean that it is in anyway God's plan for Christianity to rule over others in the way that Rome ruled the ancient world.

Note that Jesus does not go to war with Pontius Pilate, Jesus does not install himself as the new Caesar.

What he does do, is to challenge the whole Roman playbook. Jesus' primary spiritual teaching is to lift up the law from Leviticus that says to love God and love your neighbors as you love yourself. This law is incompatible with the way of the Roman Empire and the cultural attitudes that elevated that empire that might makes right, that those with power and wealth can do whatever they want. It's incompatible with the values demonstrated by the current administration as well.

Jesus challenges the very notion of power and hierarchy. He recharacterizes what strength looks like. He empowers others rather than using his own power to "gain all the kingdoms of the world"- which we know from the story of his temptation that he probably could have done. He is not playing the same game that empires both then and now play. He's doing the work of revealing a new way. A new kingdom not built upon domination and subjugation.

This new way is available to us even now if we are unwilling to accept the lies that powerful people have told for centuries and in our present. Many of you likely attended the No Kings march yesterday. I think it was probably a complete accident that it was planned for the day before Palm Sunday- but what a great accident! When we declare No Kings, we challenge pervasive human habit of believing that a powerful few must have power over others. We make it harder and harder to believe the lies that violence leads to peace, that "others" are a threat, that a diversity of opinions leaves us weak. As we go into Holy Week, and bear witness to Christ's passion, may we see revealed to us anew the way God's power moves in the world and how different that is from earthly powers and kingdoms. May the power of Christ's unending love strengthen us, give us hope, and give us courage to continue the painful and frustrating work of naming abuses of power, and threats to human life and wellbeing. Let us continue in Christ-like defiance.

Would you pray with me.