

## LORDY LANGUAGE

For the clever seeking to be closer God, language poses a huge obstacle. Why is the language of God so medieval?

Specifically, calling Jesus “Lord.” This poses no difficulty for the good, who have called Jesus Lord so many times they don’t bat an eyelash about it. But for the clever late arrival, it is unnatural and incomprehensible. The word *lord* connotes castles and fiefdoms and a political world so antiquated that there are no modern counterparts except those that are horrible: the closest thing to a lord today is a tinpot dictator, a gang lord, or the living founder of a successful business – not something we want to associate a beloved prophet or savior with.

I want to say, too, that good people don’t balk at the idea of a medieval realm. It’s not inappropriate to use words like lord because they are OK with the 21<sup>st</sup> century being medieval. So biblical words like *lovingkindness*, *vouchsafe*, *magnify*, *verily*, and *apostle* trip off their tongues. Cornerstone honorifics like *redeemer* and *savior* likewise cause problems for the clever. They trip off our tongues too – they trip and then they fall down the stairs.

The great question about *lord* is, isn’t there a better word for the principle of hierarchy, of someone being master of another person? (And don’t even think about it – slavery ruined *master*, too.) There’s *boss*, *supervisor*, *leader*, *CEO*, *chairman* – *generalissimo*? Or, more down to earth and just as biblical, there’s *father*?

I know there is no likelihood of new words replacing the old ones. Nor is it appropriate for a generation of clever persons to take over the language structure of pre-existing religions and force linguistic changes over the chorus of disapproving good persons. Things don’t, and shouldn’t, work that way.

But there is an issue here, a factor that deepens alienation and disbelief among people who are trying to grab hold of something solid and believable. Archaic language just makes Jesus seem like someone from long ago and far away. And since that is the

opposite of the truth, something, hopefully language, will show a little flexibility. I am not calling for an aggiornamento of the Bible into modernspeak. That sounds dreadful, too. But I am suggesting that, in our prayers and conversation with one another, that we encourage language to discuss our spiritual predicament that feels current and alive. It does no harm to the good, and the clever will thank you for it.

Of course, *lord* is just the beginning, the tip of the iceberg. The language issues of the Bible are vast, and buying into the linguistic system, on top of the already challenging need to buy into the theology – well, it's a tall order requiring a major intellectual powerdown.

Here are some others, that I will only touch lightly on. They are ideas of daunting significance. But they come wrapped in terminology and metaphor that sets the clever mind to rout. The concept of “son of God” is one. To the good, calling Jesus the son of God is a no-brainer. Son of God describes the strange relationship between the idea of God as creator and the arrival billions of years later of Jesus, a man like any other men, except for the minor distinction of also being God.

If you believe in Jesus, and that he is still out there today, alive and in charge of things, you need to come up with a way of thinking about this that makes some kind of sense. “Son of God” is what the church fathers came up with, and the reasons are clear. Jesus prayed to God as “Abba” or father, and asked us to do so as well. He referred to God many times in the Gospels as the Father. So, taking our cue from Jesus, we began calling him the Son of God, and the phrase came to be more than a metaphor, but a logical fact, a doctrine. The Nicean Council of 325 AD was all about coming up with a way that Christ could be the “son” of the father without being “born” later in time – because God can't be out of sequence to himself. Thus Jesus is, in the words of the creed, “begotten,” not made, eternal and not an afterthought.

Did ever people labor so mightily or so earnestly to yield such an awkward conclusion?

This is what theology is, by and large – the coming together of learned people to find a way of thinking about logical problems so that we can all go to sleep at night. They had good reasons for doing this – to think otherwise meant undoing the drawstrings of divinity around Christ, a major vein of heresy. But it has a downside as well.

What is lost across all these centuries is the fact that the word “son” implies all sorts of biological things that no one wants to get into, and that good people stay sensibly away from, but which call out to clever people like the Statue of Liberty in a cowboy hat.

The same problem exists for almost all the confabulations of theologians over the centuries. They get together, arrive at a group decision that everyone can live with, and then teach the newly clarified doctrine to the faithful. But over the years, this clarified dogma becomes a Rube Goldberg contraption – incredibly complex and comical when fully explained. To good people it’s water off a duck’s back, the price we pay for orthodoxy. But for clever people it seems the height of foolishness.

Jesus, they reason, didn’t sweat all these fine points. He seemed to understand the truth, that the world of men is fueled by metaphor and paradox. It’s the theologians who are uncomfortable with that truth, and the loose ends it leaves about.

When you look at faith through linguistic lenses, things break down. This is the pattern of all cleverness, which, while it may seek God, wants always to do it on our own terms – literally, in this case. After all, *God* is not even God’s name. It’s a convenience we agree to, something we borrowed from the German and are stuck with now. Jesus is a Greek name; his Aramaic name was Jeshua.

It sometimes seems to me we ought to start over against from scratch and call things what they really are. Think of all the icky history it would allow us to walk away from. By the time the deep-dyed churches (who find a way to stretch Jesus out to four syllables and make the very name a cultural stumbling block for clever souls) figure out how to pronounce the Aramaic name, all us clever souls would be dead and in heaven.

We tell ourselves that we are after accuracy, or clarity, or being right, and we even kid ourselves that that is what god would want, too – if anyone bothered to ask. But

the truth is that we use language as a kind of blind to hide behind. Those who control language control a whole lot. And we all crave control.

The problem becomes plain. If we push this line to the maximum, if we indulge our cleverness, our lust for “truth” that is really just a whiff of our own superiority, we are in the terrible position of losing everything – in order to be right about something that doesn’t even matter – what God’s “real” name is, as if anyone who ever mattered has ever pronounced it.

I don’t know what the answer to the language problem is. Perhaps the most important thing for clever people exploring the fringes of spirit, is to know that it is a problem, and to know in advance that attitudes about language are a great way to wedge newcomers away from God. That language is powerful enough to arouse our passions and trigger our prejudices.

And therefore, we must be on guard, and remember what is our heart’s desire, and that it is not, ultimately, lexicographic.