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“Are you the King? Jesus and Pontius Pilate”
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The exchange between Jesus andPontius Pilate contains one of the most famous questions of history. When the Jerusalem priests brought Jesus to Pilate, the first question Pilate asked was, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (Luke 23). All four New Testament gospels have him ask the question in these exact words, and three of them present Jesus as replying, “You say so.”

For centuries, the most common interpretation of Pilate’s question by preachers, Bible scholars, and other readers is that Pilate shows his secular concerns. Confronted with a clearly religious charge against Jesus, he treats it instead as a matter of politics.

Some interpretations have Pilate worried about whether Jesus constitutes an earthly challenge to Roman rule. Will he use a claim to kingship as a basis for raising a revolt, which Pilate will then have to use his army to put down?

Other interpretations see Pilate as already under suspicion of incompetence by the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Pilate thus fears a revolt in Judea led by someone claiming to be king would be blamed on him and he would lose his position and possibly even his head.

By contrast, a historical understanding of the political world in which Pilate lived makes it clear that his question was a religious one. At this time, Romans knew of a number of people who had been identified as divine, as gods, and all of them had been kings of one kind or another. In this light, Pilate’s question was only natural given the charges Jesus faced.

Human kings were long identified as gods in ancient Egypt. Upon their ascension, they became filled with the divine power of kingship from the god Ra. Their role was understood as helping the gods maintain divine order (maat) on earth. Upon their death, each one became a full god and they received worshipped at their mortuary temples.

More important to Pilate, however, was the deification of Roman leaders, especially Caesar Augustus, whose given name was Octavian. After becoming the sole leader of Rome and its empire in 30 BCE, Octavian was given the title “Augustus” in 27 BCE. This religious term means “illustrious one,” and indicated his authority over both humanity and nature.

Augustus also adopted the title “imperator caesar divi filius,” which translates as “Commander Caesar son of the deified one.” It refers to his adopted father, Julius Caesar, who had been deified after his murder and was worshipped at a temple in Rome’s Forum.

During his life, Augustus came to be worshipped as well. Indeed, in 19 BCE, some 33 years before his death in 14 CE, the earliest temple to the living Augustus was erected. His worship spread throughout the Mediterranean lands over the next few decades. At his death, the Senate officially deified him, along with his adopted son Tiberius who had become emperor.

Emperor Tiberius had been a successful general for most of his life and he does not seem to have wanted to rule or be considered divine. He was a stolid military man; what did he want with godly honors? So he dealt with his new position by downplaying his divinity and emphasizing the god-status of his predecessor Caesar Augustus. His promotion of the divine Augustus caused many new temples to him to be built throughout the empire.

Furthermore, Pontius Pilate would have been quite conscious of the Emperor Augustus as a god, for during Augustus’ lifetime King Herod had built a large temple to Augustus to adorn the new harbor at Caesarea Maritima. Pilate’s headquarters were only a few blocks from the temple.

So Pilate’s question “Are you the king of the Jews?” comes from a religious motive. He was daily reminded that any human of divine status was also a king. The two notions could not be separated in Roman minds. Whether the question was respectful or sarcastic, we will never know. But it is clear that divinity and kingship went together in Pilate’s mind.

In later centuries, Christianity would consider Jesus a king, with theologians proclaiming his divine kingship and artists clothing him with elegant robes, gold crowns and other accoutrements of royalty. In so doing, they caused the world to forget that Roman emperors once were considered gods. Today, many Christians think that Jesus is the sole human ever worshipped as divine.

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