

WISDOM BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US: PAGAN DREAMS OF THE KING OF KINGS

Annie Crawford on Christian Virtues and
Philosopher-Kings

Of Plato's most ambitious dialogue, the *Republic*, Christian scholar John Mark Reynolds writes, "In all pagan literature it is the single book that never fails to teach something new and wise each time it is read . . . It comes close to the truth, perhaps as close as humans could come before the incarnation."¹ The *Republic* elucidates many universal truths regarding the nature of reality, justice, and the human soul. Plato's brilliant allegory of the cave still shapes the modern imagination two millennia later, but perhaps for the modern Christian, the *Republic's*

¹ John Mark Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 150, Digital edition.

most startling revelation is its description of the philosopher-king. Using the light of reason to search for the ideal human ruler, Plato outlines a character with striking resemblance to Jesus Christ. Although Plato's vision is imperfect, the Platonic philosopher-king foreshadows the goodness of the true King of Kings.

Plato, like modern Westerners, lived in a decaying democracy afflicted by moral chaos. In the *Republic*, Socrates laments that the fickle, adulterous gods of the Delphic religion inspired as much immorality in the Greeks as they did goodness. When the rulers of Athens condemned Socrates to death in 399 B.C., Plato experienced that the will of the people could be every bit as corrupt as the will of a tyrant. Power and not virtue dominated the political dynamics of Athens. Was morality possible? What is goodness, and what would a moral man or society look like? Inspired by Socrates's earnest and sincere love of truth, goodness, and beauty, the *Republic* represents Plato's search for a life truly conformed to the Good.

Understanding that morality is "the property of whole communities as well as of individuals," Plato proposes to discover the true nature of morality by considering the similarities between an ideal *polis*,

or community, and the individual.² Made in the image of the triune God, humans are inherently relational and live within community. Humanity reflects the Trinitarian mystery; we are both *one* and *many*. Therefore, Plato rightly perceived that the morality of the individual will mirror the morality of the community.

Plato observed that immorality brought conflict and discord. Therefore, he reasoned that the moral life must be characterized by unity of purpose and a functional harmony among the various members of either the individual or the community. Virtue in the individual soul is the proper and harmonious functioning of the tripartite human faculties: the physical, the passionate, and the intellectual. In a virtuous man, each faculty would function according to its proper purpose as well as in right relationship with the other faculties. The best and highest faculty is the mind because this is the faculty that discerns truth. The well-formed mind, then, rightly guides the passions and the body in accordance with the good, true, and beautiful. For Plato, the “Good” is the highest level of being, the ideal in which all beings seek to participate. Thus, Plato argues that “when the whole mind accepts the

² Plato, *Republic*, 368e.

leadership of the philosophical part, and there's no internal conflict, then each part can do its own job and be moral in everything it does."³

Likewise, the various individuals of a virtuous community would be unified in purpose and harmonious in their relationships to one another. Plato anticipates the teachings of St. Paul by using the physical body as a symbol of the ideal human community. He observes that in the body,

when someone's finger is hurt, the whole federation, which encompasses body and mind in its span and forms a single organized system under its ruling part, is aware of the pain and feels it, as a whole, along with the injured part.⁴

By this analogy to the human body, Plato argues that "the more closely a community's organization approximates to this situation, the better run that community is."⁵ In a righteous community, the

³ Plato, *Republic*, 586e. Note that for Plato that the "philosophical part" is not merely the logical part that reasons but also the part that perceives truth, analogous to how the eyes simply perceive objects of sight. Therefore, the philosophical part seeks not just logical facts as a modern might be inclined to assume, but seeks wisdom, an intimate, living knowledge of the Good which is the light of truth and the power of beauty.

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 462c.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 462c.

individuals would “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, [and] live in harmony with one another.”⁶ Conformed to the Good, the moral society, like the moral soul, would be perfectly unified in function, desire, and purpose.

This harmonious unity requires a hierarchical ordering. Both the individual and the *polis* are characterized by a hierarchy wherein the lower members are rightly ruled by the highest members. Human society, Plato reasons, is therefore designed to be a kingdom ruled by the best and most noble man, the King. As reason is the ruling faculty of the individual body, so Plato concluded that the philosopher, the one most perfectly ruled by his highest faculty, is the truly virtuous man and rightful ruler of the communal body. Only the best philosopher would fully know and love the Good; therefore, only a philosopher-king could hope to rule the moral community with true justice.

The portrait Plato develops of such a man in the *Republic* is extraordinarily Christ-like. Indeed, Reynolds sees Jesus Christ as fulfilling the Platonic ideal: “A kingdom, Plato notes, is better than any form of government if one can only find a philosopher-king. But where can one find a

⁶ Rom. 12:15-16.

philosopher-king? Christians know the only answer: his kingdom come, his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”⁷ King Jesus — the man perfectly conformed to the good, true, and beautiful — is the rightful ruler of both heaven and earth.

According to Plato, the righteous philosopher-king would not only be led by reason but would also embody complete virtue in each faculty of the tripartite soul — body, passion, and mind. For Plato, physical virtue exists as a real but subordinate good. While the ideal ruler will possess both strength and health, the pursuit of these virtues will not be the moral man’s primary concern. Strength and health are the natural fruits of a body well-disciplined and ruled by wisdom, but if pursued for their own sake, then morality -- the right ordering of the human faculties -- is compromised. The disordered pursuit of physical strength promotes excessive passion while disproportionate concern over one’s health creates anxiety; both these excesses damage one’s ability to pursue wisdom. Socrates explains that the moral man

won’t, in fact, be interested in physical health and he won’t take the pursuit of physical fitness, health, and beauty

⁷ Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem*, 171.

seriously unless they also lead to self-discipline. We'll find him, throughout his life, attuning his body in order to make music with his mind.⁸

Strength of body exists to serve and sustain the higher life of the mind. Just as our bodies exist for the sake of the soul and not for their own sake, so the ruler's strength exists for the sake of his leadership, not for its own sake. Likewise for Plato, the passions do not exist for their own sake, but to strengthen and serve the mind's contemplation of the Good. The passions should be properly subordinate to the mind, helping us to love what is true, good, and beautiful, rather than leading us astray through disordered lusts or fears.

Everywhere reason leads Plato to a vision of the perfect man's moral nature, Jesus both fulfills and surpasses it. Considering first the lowest faculty of the soul, we see that Jesus meets and exceeds Plato's criteria for physical virtue. Although there is little mention of the Messiah's physique, He was clearly a man of health and strength. Before beginning his ministry, Jesus was a craftsman who used his physical strength and skill to make a livelihood. Later, while preaching and healing, he traveled

⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 591d.

extensively, climbed mountains, and demonstrated physical power when cleansing the temple. Beyond this, the true King proved his authority over the whole physical realm itself by healing disease, calming the wind and sea, raising men from the dead, and ultimately in defeating death itself through his own bodily resurrection. When Jesus performed these miracles, he did not do so for material advantage alone, but for the sake of bringing outward realities into accord with the truth of inward realities. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it was not to make Lazarus immortal, for he would need to die again, but “for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”⁹ Where Jesus encountered faith, he performed healing, but where people were inwardly faithless, Christ could not rightly change physical realities to manifest health. To do so, Jesus would participate in the disordering of reality, an action impossible for the man perfectly conformed to the Good. For example, when ministering in His hometown, Jesus could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He “marveled because of their unbelief.”¹⁰ The divine

⁹ John 11:4.

¹⁰ Mark 6:5.

Logos exercised perfect discipline over not only his own body but all bodies.

The ideal ruler would also manifest virtuous passions and rightly ordered emotions. The guardians of the ideal *polis* must be affectionately gentle with their fellow citizens as well as ferocious in battle. In a cosmos clearly at war, both the moral man and the moral community must fight against evil. Therefore, the righteous rulers must be warriors; yet, they cannot be dominated by a passion for war, lest they be unable to foster peace within their community. For a moment Plato wonders, “where are we going to find a character that is simultaneously gentle and high-spirited, when gentleness and passion are opposites? . . . yet if a guardian is deprived of either of them he can’t be a good guardian.”¹¹ Plato finds hope for such a possibility in the nature of a dog, which can be both the friendliest and the most protective of animals. However, the Revelation of Saint John grants us a vision of the true King who surpasses Plato’s expectation by uniting the gentleness of a lamb with the dread power of a lion.¹² The elders in heaven instruct John to “weep no more; behold, the Lion of

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, 375c.

¹² Rev. 5:5-6.

the tribe of Judah,” a warrior worthy to open the scrolls of authority and reign!¹³ Yet when John beholds the Lion of Judah, He appears as a lamb, a lamb who was slain. Christ is both gentle enough to sacrifice Himself in love for His people as well as mighty enough to conquer death itself.

The intellectual virtue of the ideal ruler will make him a man of singular purpose. The best possible sculptor would be a man who has devoted his entire life to the craft of sculpting. So too, the best possible ruler will be wholly devoted to the task of leading the *polis* in conformity to the Good. Repeatedly, Plato argues for this Principle of Specialization: “Whereas an individual can do one job well, he cannot do lots of jobs well, and if he were to try to do so, he would fail to achieve distinction in any occupation.”¹⁴ While the *Republic* takes this principle to the extreme, arguing that a shoemaker should do nothing but make shoes, Jesus affirms the standard of wholehearted devotion in his teachings on the kingdom. He testifies that “no one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and

¹³ Rev. 5:5.

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 394d.

despise the other.”¹⁵ Christ’s own life exemplifies this radical consecration to a single purpose. In the Gospel of John, Jesus claims that His life is perfectly committed to the will of God, His Father: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing.”¹⁶ As Jesus neared the end of his life, he rejoiced with His Father over His completed mission: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.”¹⁷ Jesus made the Good perfectly manifest in human form and, by this accomplishment, opened the way for all men to be transformed into this perfect image of God.

Motivated by a singular devotion to the Good, the virtuous man will not seek the praise, power, or profit that leadership brings. Plato argues that “authority (whether political or non-political), qua authority, considers what is best for nothing except its subjects, its wards.”¹⁸ The best ruler will embody genuine excellence in this function. Therefore, the virtuous king will never consider “his own advantage, but the advantage of his subject, the

¹⁵ Matt. 6:24.

¹⁶ John 5:19.

¹⁷ John 17:4.

¹⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 345c.

person for whom he practices his expertise.”¹⁹ In the *Republic*, Plato takes great pains to describe the rearing, education, and selection of such philosopher-kings. Those warriors who show interest in personal gain are excluded from leadership, for Plato believed that “political power should be in the hands of people who aren’t enamored of it.”²⁰ Reynolds explains that, for Plato,

the pursuit of philosophy was powered by love. The erotic and spirited soul would provide a passion for finding the good, the true, and the beautiful. How could it help it? A beautiful human cannot compare to the beautiful itself.²¹

In contrast to the corrupt politicians of Athens who had condemned the innocent Socrates to death, Plato longed for a ruler who would truly serve the interests of the people out of love for the Good.

Christ’s radical life and teachings affirm this insight into the true nature of authority. One could not imagine a life less motivated by money, power, or fame than the life of Christ. Nothing he did was calculated to bring personal gain, for as Jesus taught,

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 342e.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 521b.

²¹ Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem*, 87.

“what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”²² Before beginning his earthly ministry, Satan tempted Jesus with all the pleasure, power, and glory that the kingdoms of this world can grant. Despite the physical weakness caused by forty days of fasting, Jesus firmly rejected any authority which did not conform to the perfect Good. Although Jesus could at any moment appeal to his Father and command “more than twelve legions of angels,” he exercised his perfect authority in the way that was best for his subjects: enduring death on the cross for the atonement of their sins.²³

One of Plato’s more radical proscriptions for the ideal ruler involves the dissolution of private property. Over the course of the *Republic*, Plato mentions money almost one hundred times and repeatedly discusses the moral benefits that the guardians gain through their total freedom from financial matters. Plato argues that social conflict arises from the separation of interests inherent in personal ownership. Therefore, he postulates that, once private property is abolished,

trials and lawsuits against one another
[will] be almost non-existent, since they’ll

²² Matt. 16:26.

²³ Matt. 23:53.

own nothing except their bodies and share everything else . . . consequently they'll be free of all the conflict that arises when people have money or children and relatives.²⁴

Plato believed that if a ruler possesses private money, his heart will inevitably be distracted and divided from the singular task of leading the people. While Plato incorrectly blames property ownership instead of spiritual sin for the conflicts inherent to a community, still he is right to agree with Jesus that “you cannot serve God and money.”²⁵ The best King would rightly order his wealth, just as he rightly ordered his own body, toward service of the good.

While this ideal seems practically impossible, the life of Christ again bears witness to Plato's profound insight. The separation of political and financial power in the *Republic* echoes Jesus's own radical lifestyle and teaching about money. While preaching the Kingdom of God, Jesus lived as one without private property or income, depending upon the hospitality and support of others as he travelled. In Matthew 8:20, Jesus told a new disciple that “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have

²⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 464d.

²⁵ Matt. 6:24.

necks, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” When training his disciples for kingdom ministry, Jesus prohibited them from taking possessions or receiving payment for their work. He instructed them to “acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff.”²⁶ The early church also reflected this radical principle as “all who believed were together and had all things in common.”²⁷ The life and ministry of Jesus represents a foretaste of the ideal community which he will establish in the New Kingdom through His church. In the *polis* of New Jerusalem, we will not live as individualists nor be given in marriage; we will indeed hold all things in common as we live in perfect intimacy and unity with our King Jesus.

Neither Plato’s Good nor the true God can be loved as a means to another end. Jesus chastised the first-century Jewish leaders for praying and fasting “in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.”²⁸ Outwardly, the Pharisees sought to conform their life to the law of God, but inwardly they sought personal advantage

²⁶ Matt. 10:8.

²⁷ Acts 2:44.

²⁸ Matt. 6:5.

and gain. Unlike Plato's philosopher-kings who are motivated by pure love for the Good, the duplicitous Pharisees were "hypocrites" and "whitewashed tombs" who made their followers "twice as much a child of hell as [themselves]."²⁹ Jesus instructed the citizens of His kingdom to "pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."³⁰ The blessings of relationship with the Good God are fundamentally intrinsic. As Plato endeavored to prove through the *Republic*, a truly moral life is *per se* superior to the immoral life. Morality, "in and of itself, makes anyone who possesses it good, whether or not it is hidden from the eyes of gods and men."³¹ Like Plato, Jesus affirmed the goodness of pleasures, friendship, honor, and other external rewards but only in appropriate subordination to the true Good. If the citizens of Christ's Kingdom "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, [then] all these things will be added."³² The virtuous life was to be lived from the inside out. External benefits are secondary

²⁹ Matt. 23:15.

³⁰ Matt. 6:6.

³¹ Plato, *Republic*, 367d.

³² Matt. 6:33.

goods which cannot be sought for their own sake but only received as the righteous fruit of a virtuous life.

Plato rightly perceives the primary characteristics of the virtuous man and ideal ruler, as well as the great failure of man to live out the moral ideal, yet he has no good answer for how the chasm between divine Good and human sin can be bridged. Working only within the light of reason and general revelation, he cannot foresee the eucatastrophe of the incarnation and atonement. However, Plato rightly intuits that bridging the gap between human sin and moral perfection will involve a kind of violence, either to the man who is truly virtuous or to the society which must be forcibly controlled in order to bring moral order. This may be why he elaborates such radical social policies, such as the abolition of marriage, in an attempt to imagine how man's grievous faults might somehow be remedied. Plato's attempts to imagine the actual establishment of an ideal society are disturbingly authoritarian and inhumane.

The passages of the *Republic* which describe the unjust persecution of the perfectly moral man are profoundly Christological. At the beginning of the dialogue, Glaucon recognizes that the truly moral person "wants genuine goodness rather than merely

an aura of goodness,” yet this means that to be proved moral,

we must deprive him of any such aura, since if others think him moral, this reputation will gain him privileges and rewards, and it will become unclear whether it is morality or the rewards and privileges which might be motivating him to be what he is.³³

In a description that powerfully foreshadows the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah, Glaucon insists that

even though he does no wrong at all, [the virtuous man] must have a colossal reputation for immorality, so that his morality can be tested by seeing whether or not he is impervious to a bad reputation and its consequences; he must unswervingly follow his path until he dies — a saint with a lifelong reputation as a sinner.³⁴

As Isaiah foretold, the true King would indeed have “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” The perfect man would be “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one

³³ Plato, *Republic*, 361b.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 361c.

from whom men hide their faces.” As Plato predicted, when the true King offered himself to his *polis*, “He was despised, and we esteemed him not.”³⁵

Plato knew enough of human evil to foresee that a virtuous man could not dwell peacefully within an immoral community. A corrupt and disordered society would either corrupt or destroy the virtuous man. In pondering the former option, Plato nearly perceives the divinity of the philosopher-king, for Socrates confesses that “you’d be quite right to see God at work when anything does retain its integrity and fulfil its potential within current political systems.”³⁶ If a moral man were to retain his integrity within a corrupt community, it would certainly be only by an act of God. Still, when envisioning this miraculously moral man, Plato predicts that for him “the future holds flogging, torture on the rack, imprisonment in chains, having his eyes burnt out, and every ordeal in the book, up to and including being impaled on a stake.”³⁷ Reynolds translates this last fate as “crucifixion” and affirms the truth of Plato’s prophecy:

³⁵ Is. 53:2-3.

³⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 492e.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 362a.

After all, the thought experiment of Glaucon came to pass on Golgotha. The just person was thought unjust and was tortured and crucified. It happened not just in the Logos (Plato's discussion), but to the Logos (Jesus Christ). The Logos did not stay dead but triumphed, thus making the cross of Christ the ultimate symbol of the just man overcoming the injustice of culture.³⁸

Through reason alone, Plato had no way of knowing that the ideal community could actually be established not by force exerted upon the people but by the transformative sacrifice of the perfect man. The salvation of the world is truly an act of amazing, unforeseeable grace.

Without the blessing of special revelation, Plato was unable to see any plausible way for the ideal to become real. Rational argument cannot reconcile the pure goodness of God with the wretched sin of man. Logic cannot deduce the loving and triune nature of God or His eucatastrophic plan for salvation. Salvation is a gift that must be revealed as an act of grace. While Plato could understand human love for the divine, he could not conceive divine love for sinful man. It is logical for one to love

³⁸ Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem*, 159.

that which is best, but how can that which is best love that which is corrupt? In fact, Plato warns us against “small-mindedness” which would place “much importance on human life.”³⁹ Plato’s ideal ruler needed to be coerced away from contemplation of the Good and forced to return to the cave of practical leadership. Through reason and general revelation alone, Plato could not have apprehended the radical love and condescension of the true King who, although “He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”⁴⁰ Plato could never have imagined that the Logos, the Divine knowledge of the Good, would itself take on flesh and become our true Philosopher-King.

While his understanding of the truth is at best incomplete, the similarities between Plato’s vision of a philosopher-king and the person of Jesus Christ are stunning. Where pagan wisdom, Holy Scripture, and the unexcelled life of Jesus Christ speak together in unison, we would be fools not to pay careful attention. The *Republic* demands that twenty-first century readers ask again, “Who is this man, Jesus,

³⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 486a.

⁴⁰ Phil. 2:6-7.

of whom even the pagans dream?” Plato’s philosophy illuminates the virtues of Christ with fresh radiance so that the truth of His character, which may have worn dull through familiarity or been distorted by false teaching, can be seen anew.

Bibliography

"Wisdom Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us: Pagan Dreams of the King of Kings"

Plato *Republic*.

Reynolds, John Mark. *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought*.
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.