

## The New York Times

# Why Trump Reigns as King Cyrus

The Christian right doesn't like the president only for his judges. They like his style.

**By Katherine Stewart**

Ms. Stewart writes regularly about the political activities of evangelicals and other religious groups.

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The month before the 2018 midterms, a thousand theaters screened “The Trump Prophecy,” a film that tells the story of Mark Taylor, a former firefighter who claims that God told him in 2011 that Donald Trump would be elected president.

At a critical moment in the film, just after the actor representing Mr. Taylor collapses in the flashing light of an epiphany, he picks up a Bible and turns to the 45th chapter of the book of Isaiah, which describes the anointment of King Cyrus by God. In the next scene, we hear Mr. Trump being interviewed on “The 700 Club,” a popular Christian television show.

As Lance Wallnau, an evangelical author and speaker who appears in the film, once said, “I believe the 45th president is meant to be an Isaiah 45 Cyrus,” who will “restore the crumbling walls that separate us from cultural collapse.”

Cyrus, in case you've forgotten, was born in the sixth century B.C.E. and became the first emperor of Persia. Isaiah 45 celebrates Cyrus for freeing a population of Jews who were held captive in Babylon. Cyrus is the model for a nonbeliever appointed by God as a vessel for the purposes of the faithful.

The identification of the 45th president with an ancient Middle Eastern potentate isn't a fringe thing. “The Trump Prophecy” was produced with the help of professors and students at Liberty University, whose president, Jerry Falwell Jr., has been instrumental in rallying evangelical support for Mr. Trump. Jeanine Pirro of Fox News has picked up on the meme, as has Ron Dermer, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, among many others.

As the Trump presidency falls under siege on multiple fronts, it has become increasingly clear that the so-called values voters will be among the last to leave the citadel. A lot of attention has been paid to the supposed paradox of evangelicals backing such an imperfect man, but the real problem is that our idea of Christian nationalism hasn't caught up with the

reality. We still buy the line that the hard core of the Christian right is just an interest group working to protect its values. But what we don't get is that Mr. Trump's supposedly anti-Christian attributes and anti-democratic attributes are a vital part of his attraction.

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Today's Christian nationalists talk a good game about respecting the Constitution and America's founders, but at bottom they sound as if they prefer autocrats to democrats. In fact, what they really want is a king. "It is God that raises up a king," according to Paula White, a prosperity gospel preacher who has advised Mr. Trump.

Ralph Drollinger, who has led weekly Bible study groups in the White House attended by Vice President Mike Pence and many other cabinet members, likes the word "king" so much that he frequently turns it into a verb. "Get ready to king in our future lives," he tells his followers. "Christian believers will — soon, I hope — become the consummate, perfect governing authorities!"

The great thing about kings like Cyrus, as far as today's Christian nationalists are concerned, is that they don't have to follow rules. They are the law. This makes them ideal leaders in paranoid times.

"When are they going to start rolling out the boxcars to start hauling off Christians?" Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council, asked in 2016. If you're hearing those boxcars pulling up in the distance, as it were, you don't merely overlook the antisocial qualities of a prospective leader, you embrace them as virtues.

Mr. Trump himself well understands this longing for the hard hand of the despot. "If you don't mind me saying so, you've gotten soft," he told Mr. Wallnau and other evangelical leaders during the 2016 campaign — much to their delight.

Another important thing to understand about Cyrus is that he is not a queen. In the Christian nationalist world, legitimate political power is largely male power. Mr. Drollinger insists that the Bible describes only "male leadership."

Of course, there are those on the Christian right who have made a show of holding their noses while supporting Mr. Trump to advance their aims of stacking the Supreme Court or ending abortion. But we are kidding ourselves if we think their continuing support for him is purely transactional.

I have attended dozens of Christian nationalist conferences and events over the past two years. And while I have heard plenty of comments casting doubt on the more questionable aspects of Mr. Trump's character, the gist of the proceedings almost always comes down to the belief that he is a miracle sent straight from heaven to bring the nation back to the Lord. I have also learned that resistance to Mr. Trump is tantamount to resistance to God.

This isn't the religious right we thought we knew. The Christian nationalist movement today is authoritarian, paranoid and patriarchal at its core. They aren't fighting a culture war. They're making a direct attack on democracy itself.

They want it all. And in Mr. Trump, they have found a man who does not merely serve their cause, but also satisfies their craving for a certain kind of political leadership.

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