

# A Political Theology of the Old and New Testaments

## INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

- ❖ “Politics” comes from the Greek work *politiká*, the root of which is the word *polis* (city)
  - What terms & conditions make life good for a group of people living together in a close environment?
- ❖ We have a challenge in our culture in understanding how Christians should engage in politics.
  - People use Bible verses or passages to support their position.
  - Almost everyone does this.
  - When we do this, two things happen:
    - We’re not actually listening to the Bible; we’re using the Bible.
    - We’re missing the real meaning of God’s Word.
- ❖ As Christians, we cannot let the debates of our age set the categories for thinking about politics.
- ❖ We need to let God’s Word & Spirit transform our minds (Romans 12:2).

## THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A POLITICAL THEOLOGY

- ❖ The Bible has a very specific way of conceiving of humans exercising power (having authority) over one another, which begins on page 1.
- ❖ God is the creator and ruler of all creation (Genesis 1)
  - God asserts his authority and power over creation by bringing order out of the chaotic darkness.
  - God’s rule is characterized by righteousness and justice (Psalm 33:1-7)
    - “Righteousness” – Heb. *tsedeq* = Right relationships
    - “Justice” – Heb. *mishpat* = The things that you do to create *tsedeq*
- ❖ God’s rule over his world *is mediated through his image—humanity*: Genesis 1:26-28.
- ❖ How to think about power based on Genesis 1:
  - God is the ultimate authority who uses his power to create a place where life can flourish.
  - God appoints humans to mimic this by harnessing creation’s potential as the embodiment of God’s authority.

- ❖ Humanity rebels and declares independence to define good and evil on their own terms (Genesis 3), which sets the downward spiral leading to Babylon (Genesis 11).
  - Humans were supposed to rely on God's wisdom in their politics, but they end up in Babylon.
- ❖ Egypt becomes the first detailed depiction of politics gone wrong (Exodus 1-2, 5:1-3).
  - Egypt's rebellion is depicted as a failure to acknowledge the God of Israel as the creator & redeemer.
  - They have chosen to re-define good and evil on their own terms, which always leads to injustice, violence, and death.
- ❖ **The Great Plot Tension of the Bible:**
  - God's purpose and plan was to share his world with humanity.
  - God's rule & authority over creation was to be mediated through humans.
  - But now the nations don't want to submit to God's rule (Babylon, Egypt, etc.: Psalm 2).
- ❖ **The Solution:**
  - God will appoint a new king to bring God's rule over the nations (Psalm 2; Isaiah 11).

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE GOSPELS & ACTS

- ❖ Jesus presents himself as the one in whom this plot conflict finds resolution.
- ❖ Jesus' main message was that God's rule over the nations had arrived in himself.
  - Jesus is the messianic king who brings God's rule & blessing to the nations (Matthew 1).
  - Jesus announced that God's heavenly rule was here (Matthew 4:17, 23; Mark 1:14-15).
  - Jesus' teaching was his manifesto of an upside-down kingdom.
    - The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is a political manifesto.
  - Jesus' death was his enthronement as the Passover Lamb who loved and died for his enemies (Matthew 26-27).
    - This is what it looks like to rule & have authority in Jesus' kingdom.
  - Jesus is the risen king of all nations who are called to live under his rule (Mt. 28:18-20).
  - The larger narrative of Genesis 1 is now complete: We have a human who bears God's image and rules perfectly, but not all nations recognize the Messiah's rule.
- ❖ Jesus commissioned his followers to announce that God's kingdom has arrived in Jesus (Acts).

## THE PERSPECTIVE OF PAUL'S LETTERS

### ❖ Letter to the Romans:

- Romans 1-11: Jews and Gentiles are now one new family in the Messiah.
- Romans 12-13:
  - 12:1 – Christians collectively offer their communal life as an offering to God.
  - 12:3-13 – The many are one body: the Spirit empowers people to use their diverse talents to serve others in love.
  - 12:17-21 – The church's response to hostility: don't seek vigilante justice or revenge, "leave room for God's wrath" ...respond to evil with good.
  - 13:1 – No authority except that has been appointed by God.
  - 13:4 – "the one in authority is the servant of God": a clear reference to Jeremiah 25:9 and 27:5-8 that referred to Nebuchadnezzar as "God's servant"
    - Note: This was not an endorsement of everything this ruler/state did.
    - As Habakkuk protested God's appointment of Babylon, he learned that God's justice would hold Babylon accountable too.
  - 13:4 – "rulers do not bear the sword in vain, it is God's servant for vengeance." A direct connection back to 12:19
    - 12:19 – Don't avenge, leave it to God. *The community of Jesus overcomes evil with good.*
    - 13:4 – The state's sword is God's vengeance. *The state overcomes evil with the sword.*
  - 13:8-10 – Love is the meaning of life and the fulfillment of the Torah. Here Paul is quoting Jesus' teaching about the greatest commandment (see Matthew 22:34-40).

### ❖ Letter to Timothy: 1 Timothy 2:1-4: Pray and seek the well-being of the leaders (Nero?!)

### ❖ Letter to the Philippians: A Theology of Dual Citizenship

## THE REVELATION

- ❖ All human kingdoms eventually become "Babylon" and will come under God's justice (Revelation chs. 13, 17-18).
- ❖ Only the marriage of heaven and earth and the complete arrival of God's kingdom will solve the corruption inherent in human kingdoms.

## SOME OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSIONS

- ❖ The Bible does not offer divine endorsement for any particular political form of organized government. Multiple types of government can honor God's purposes to rule the world through humans.
- ❖ A Christian grounds their true identity as a human bearing God's image and as a child of God in the multi-ethnic, international family of Jesus.
- ❖ A Christian's ultimate loyalty is to the risen king Jesus who is the true Lord over all the nations.
  - Jesus' family is a "Political" body (Greek *polis* = city of gathered people who share common life) whose way of life is shaped by the kingdom teachings of Jesus (see Matthew 5-7).
  - The kingdom ethic is love: to seek the well-being of others above my own (Matthew 5:43-48; 1 Thessalonians 3:12 and 5:15; Romans 12:17).
- ❖ Dual citizenship in the kingdom of God and human kingdoms
  - Christians find themselves in diverse families, nations, and social locations which also shape their unique identity. This is part of God's "calling" (1 Corinthians 7:17-24).
  - They are called to honor the structures of authority because they are an expression of God's authority to promote and sustain good in the world (Genesis 1, Romans 13).
  - If God's people have the opportunity to participate in those authority structures, they are called to leverage them for the well-being of their community and for God's kingdom (Joseph in Egypt, Esther in Persia, Daniel in Babylon; see Romans 12:17).
  - When those authority structures become corrupt and do not sustain the good, God's people are called to non-violent resistance and prophetic critique (Daniel).
  - When those authority structures demand a loyalty that compromises their allegiance to Jesus, they are to humbly disobey and accept the consequences ("We must obey God rather than humans", Peter in Acts 5:29).