# The Bible and Christian Political Vision

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In these remarks about Christian political vision, I will concentrate on three central segments of the Christian Bible. First, I will examine the constitution of the children of Israel into a nation as it is described in Exodus. Second, I will highlight political aspects of the final purpose of God with creation as portrayed in the vision of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. Third, I will turn to Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of everything that can be called properly Christian, and inquire about how his mission relates to the world of politics.

## Exodus[1]

When we search for a Biblical vision for nation-building and peoplehood, the main text we need to look at is Exodus. In the "Introduction" to his *Founding of God's Nation*, Leon Kass writes:

> Beginning with the Children of Israel enslaved in Egypt, Exodus is mainly about the founding of the Israelite nation through three decisive events: their deliverance from bondage, their receipt of the Law at Sinai, and their building of the Tabernacle as a Tent of Meeting with their God.[2]

For an understanding of the politics of nation building, the most fundamental is the second step. What made the Israelites into a people is that YHWH established a covenant with them and gave them the law as a communal rule of life. Those who had lived for many years in the "house of bondage" needed a code of

[1] This present section and the next one lean heavily on Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything* (Brazos, 2022).

[2] Leon Kass, *Founding of God's Nation: Reading Exodus* (Yale UP, 2021), 6.

freedom to become and to live in God's home as God's "priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6).

### *A New Type of Covenant*

The way God established the covenant with Israel presents an innovation in the ancient world, with effects that reach all the way to contemporary political thought and practice. Jan Assmann, an Egyptologist, summarizes two innovations this way [in *Exodus: A Revolution of the Ancient World*]:

> First, God does not make this treaty with the king, in his capacity as the people's representative before the gods, but directly with the people themselves; and second, the loyalty clauses are not between the people and the king, in his capacity as the gods' representative before people, but between the people and God.[3]

Exodus dispenses with intermediaries between God and the people. In establishing the covenant, God addresses the people directly, with Moses serving only as a messenger (19:4–6).

A third novel feature of the covenant is that God *offers it* to the people. The covenant is not imposed on them, and it will not be in force without the people's consent. Seeking to legitimize his own ideal form of government, Spinoza noted that the Israelites "freely surrendered their natural right and transferred it to God, without being compelled by force or terrified by threats."[4] "Freely" is correct in a philosophical sense, but theirs is not the freedom of an equal and fully independent partner, for they owed their existence to God both in that God had freed them from slavery and in that God was the sole source of their sustenance in the wilderness (16:1–35). Jon Levenson puts the matter starkly and more

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[3] Jan Assmann, *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus*, transl. Robert Savage (Princeton UP, 2018), 205.

[4] Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2016), 302.

generally: "Who in the Bible ever declined an offer of covenant with God and lived to tell of it?"[5] Even so, the people's consent is indispensable, and they give it "as one" (19:8). Functioning again as mere messenger, Moses takes their response back to God: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do" (19:8; cf. 24:3,7).

With the people agreeing to the covenant in "the role of a sovereign partner," the nation of Israel is born—and with it a new "and to **some extent** 'democratic' conception of the people," writes Assmann.[6]

## *A Theo-political Vision*

"To some extent" is an important qualifier with respect to the democratic conception of the people. At Sinai, we see that when God says, "I have come down" (3:8) and "I have brought you to myself" (19:4), God intends to constitute the house of Jacob into *God's* people. The covenant binds the children of Israel to their God and thereby unites them "into a people."[7] The tabernacle, which Moses is to build as God's abode, will not just be a shrine to which people come, but a royal palace, with the Ark of the Covenant serving as the throne, from which God rules. The tabernacle makes Israel into "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:6) and thus also into God's household (cf. Num. 12:7). "Democratic" here then refers to the initial consent of the people – to be ruled by God.

Israel was established as a theocracy. The anti-pharaonism of Exodus pushes against the interposition of the monarch between the people and God (cf. 1 Sam. 10:19) and insists on the people's immediacy to God. On account of the pre-existing, unilateral, and unconditional covenant with Abraham, the God to whom the whole earth belongs says to Israel: "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" so that out of all people "you shall be my treasured possession" (Exod. 19:4–5).

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[5] Jon D. Levenson, "Covenant and Consent," *The Judeo-Christian Tradition and the U.S. Constitution* (Annenberg Research Institute, 1989), 77.

[6] Assmann, *Invention*, 205.

[7] Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (Humanity Books, 1988), 66.

In contrast to the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant at Sinai is conditional—"if you obey" (19:5)—but, like the Abrahamic covenant, it is "an assumption into a life-relationship" with God "comprehending the entire life."[8] As a consequence, Exodus's vision is theo-political, uniting in God all spheres of life and precluding any functional differentiation into distinct and largely autonomous social fields that characterizes modernity.

Exodus's vision is not only theo-political, but also "utopian" – and could never become a historical reality.[9] For the Hebrew prophets, as later for the book of Revelation, the realization of the vision is an eschatological hope dependent on two things: (1) a fundamental transformation of the world and (2) the *de facto* actual immediacy of God to each person and the entire set of social and material relations. The trajectory in the prophetic and apocalyptic direction is set with the paradoxical role of Moses in Exodus: as a legislator and leader, he is to make possible the immediacy of God to the people. He has to resist the temptation to interpose himself, as ancient royals did, as an indispensable link between the people and God. But the moment a theo-political vision is made into a historical project, the threat arises that it will acquire the dystopian features of a "total religion."[10] In the violence after the apostasy (Exod. 33), we get a glimpse of this dystopian potential.

## Revelation

All ancient kingdoms had a palace, but in the New Jerusalem there is no palace where the king may live separated from the people and no throne room from which, seated on the throne, the king rules. That fact of urban geography reflects a radical political vision.

### *Shared Rule*

[8] Buber, *Moses*, 103.

[9] The term "utopian" with regard to theocratic vision is Levenson's ("Covenant," 75).

[10] For a critique of total religion, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Schatten des Sinai: Fußnote über Ursprünge und Wandlungen totaler Mitgliedschaft* (Suhrkamp, 2013); Jan Assmann, *Totale Religion: Ursprünge und Formen puritnischer Verschärfung* (Picus, 2016).

No palace and no throne *room* in the New Jerusalem, but still there is a throne. It is not the throne of a king as God's representative, but the throne of "God and the Lamb" (22:3). As is well known, there is no temple in the New Jerusalem (the New Jerusalem is *in* the temple: "God and the Lamb" being the temple) to serve as God's house, and everyone is a "high priest." The politics of the New Jerusalem fits its "religion." The holy of holies, which is the entire city, has no Ark of the Covenant as God's throne, which features prominently in the theo-political imagination of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 4:4). Now the entire population of the New Jerusalem is composed of servants of God (Rev. 22:3), but precisely as servants of *this* God and *this* Lamb, they are all also kings and queens, and all "reign together" with God and the Lamb (cf. 5:10; 20:4,6; 22:5).

Speaking to the church in Laodicea, Jesus Christ, described as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation," says: "To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (3:14,21). **How many can sit on one throne?** Generally, only one, the royal potentate. How many can sit on the throne of "God and the Lamb"? The *obvious* answer would be the indissolubly united Two-that-are-One. But the revolutionary claim of Revelation is that *the entire population of the New Jerusalem* sits on God's throne. This is an altered echo of Jeremiah's prophecy, shortly after the burning of the First Temple, that "Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD" (Jer. 3:17). The difference? Now Jerusalem has become the entire inhabited earth so that everyone participates in God's rule. Importantly, the throne is "dispersed" throughout the city. To use a metaphor from John's Gospel: the servants of this Lord are all his friends (John 15:15).

In Revelation, Leviathan rules over (*epi*) people and insists on exclusive rule (17:18). In contrast God shares God's throne and rules with (*meta*) people (22:5; cf. 20:4,6). Sacral kingship, which treats the state as a religious category (a dominant political form in the ancient Near East), gives way not to democracy, which tends to treat the nation as a religious category (a dominant political form during the rise of nationalisms),[11] but to the vision of all peoples of the earth participating in God's rule. In its

[11] On this shift, see Assmann, *Invention*, 333–35.

ultimate fulfillment, the promise to David that his offspring will be in a filial relation with God (2 Sam. 7:14) includes the entire population. The immediacy of all people to God in Exodus 19:6 and God's rule over them (~~see chapter 2~~)[12] has given way to people's rule with God.

Shared rule is an alternative not just to sovereign individuals governing themselves (autonomy), but to individuals governed by a ruler set over them (heteronomy). God is the ruler of all (*pantokrator*), as Revelation insists repeatedly (e.g., Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 16:3), but just as such, God is in each person and all are in God (cf. Rev. 21:22). The New Jerusalem is closer to **anarchy**—in the technical sense of non-domination rather than non-recognition of any authority[13]—than it is to being strictly the kingdom of God.[14] God has now made the world such that God does not need to rule *over* anyone.

### *Religion and Politics*

In the New Jerusalem as the holy of holies, God's presence suffuses everything; everything is holy and nothing is common, and each person wears high-priestly vestments. In the New Jerusalem as the dispersed throne of God, God shares rule with everyone; all are rulers and none is ruled over, and each person wears a royal crown—which also means that none rules and all serve and are served, and all love and are loved.

When Ezekiel saw the glory of YHWH returning and filling the temple, he heard "Someone" speak to him: "Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever" (Ezek. 43:5–7). In his vision, the throne and the holy of holies were one and the same, and both were separated from the city and the land. In the New Jerusalem, there is no separation. *The entire city is the throne and the holy of holies in one.*

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[12] So Buber, *Moses*, 106.

[13] See Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Wipf & Stock, 1991).

[14] I use here "the kingdom of God" in the political sense in which, among others, Buber used it—a nation which has dedicated itself to YHWH as its Lord "with all its substance and all its foundation, with legal forms and institutions, with the whole organization of its internal and external relationships" (Buber, *Moses*, 107).

The overlapping identities as priests and kings echo God's speech to the house of Jacob assembled at Sinai. Before giving the instructions and making the covenant through which they became God's people for God to dwell with, God said to them: "If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant ... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). And now, at the end of the story of everything, the condition of obedience has been fully and unalterably met. God has come down to dwell in the city on the mountain which is the whole world.

In Exodus 19:5, the promise of being a priestly kingdom is given to Israel. Israel is "a holy nation" and God's "treasured possession out of all peoples." One might be tempted to say that in Revelation the promise is given to each person and to the entire undifferentiated population of the world. Revelation clearly places stress on individuals and their actions: each thirsts (and gets to drink just for being thirsty), each conquers, each has three names, each sits on the throne, each wears high-priestly vestments. At the same time, John of Patmos sees tribes, nations, peoples, and "languages" (Rev. 2:26; 7:9; 11:9; 15:3–4). In the New Jerusalem, the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of nations, and nations "walk in its light" and their kings bring "the glory and the honor of the nations" into it (21:23–26). Through the triumph of Jesus, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (5:5), all peoples have become God's "treasured possessions," as Israel was and remains.

This is the vision of the New Jerusalem as the home of God, in fact the home of homes.

## Jesus[15]

Jesus Christ must be the center and norm for Christian public engagement because Christ and his Spirit aren't just at work in our hearts, families, and churches, but also in our nations and the entire world.

At first glance, Jesus Christ seems a remarkably odd choice for the role of determining the shape of our political lives. He calls "blessed" those who are meek, the pure of heart, and the persecuted (Mat

[15] This section draws heavily on *Public Faith in Action: How to Engage with Commitment, Conviction, and Courage* (Brazos, 2016) that I wrote together with Ryan McAnnally-Linz.

5:5,8-10). He stoops down to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). He often shies away from public attention (e.g., Matt. 8:13; Mark 1:43-45), and he rebukes his followers for trying to use the sword (the classic symbol of political power) to rescue him from an unjust arrest (Matt. 26:52; Luke 22:51; John 18:11). His whole way of speaking, his bearing, and his mannerisms often seem unworldly, more saintly than kingly. And his message seems, frankly, too radical to apply to political life. "Turn the other cheek," he says (Matt. 5:39). "Do not judge" (Matt. 7:1). "Love your enemies!" (Matt. 5:44). How could any of that possibly have something relevant to say to the rough-and-tumble, publicity-seeking, deal-making world of public life and engagement?

On closer examination, however, Jesus's life and message are unmistakably public, even political, though not in the usual sense of the term. After all, the core of Jesus's preaching is that "the kingdom of God has come near" (Matt. 4:16; Mark 1:15). Whatever else it might be, "kingdom" is surely a political term.

### *Conflict with the Powers*

As Jürgen Moltmann has argued in *The Crucified God*, Jesus's "way to the cross" was a path of conflict with the religious and political rulers of his day. They saw his teaching, his ministry, and his very life as a threat.[16] From Herod's desperate attempt to kill the infant Christ to the Romans who crucified him for insurrection under the mocking sign, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:37), the powers that be considered him a problem to be dealt with, violently if need be. Expanding on Moltmann's thesis, Michael Welker has shown that Christ was crucified under the auspices of a broader set of public institutions and agents—not just religion and politics, but also law and public opinion.[17] Their role in the crucifixion reveals just how susceptible to corruption these structures of human life are. Christ enters the conflict with them, makes the conflict part of his mission, and engages in it in his own way marked by

[16] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Fortress, 1993), 126-45.

[17] See Michael Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology*, transl. Douglas W. Scott (Eerdmans, 2013), 192-97, 261.

non-violence. He thereby brings the corruption of the public structures of human life under God's judgment.

The kingdom that Jesus brought near is radically different from run-of-the- mill political regimes. It wasn't established as one more kingdom alongside others in the way that Rome was founded in 753 B.C. and then struggled for supremacy with Carthage and other political powers. Nor did it succeed other regimes in the way that one government administration follows another. Christ's kingdom is the fulfillment to which everything is being drawn. It is the indescribable future when God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). This kingdom is not only final (it can never be undone) and universal (it will extend across all times and places) but is also all-encompassing. It *includes* but also far *exceeds* all that we usually classify as "public," its reach extending from our most intimate desires to the fate of the entire cosmos. The scope of God's kingdom is a reminder that politics and other domains of life concerned with the common good are intertwined with both our private lives and our natural habitat.

*Church Community and Political Community*

All this is not to say, however, that there is no difference between Christ's work in the church and in the wider world. Karl Barth provides a helpful image for understanding what the universal work of Christ means for the relationship between Christians, the church, and political societies. Christ, he says, is like the center of two concentric circles. The smaller circle is the Christian community, which knows that Christ is the center and aims to live in light of that knowledge. The larger circle is the civil community, which has Christ as its center even though it may not know it. Christ's rule in the outer circle is neither identical with nor completely different from his rule in the inner circle, but analogous to it.[18] As a *community*, the church as such is of major public significance, a point many theologians have made in recent decades. But the edges of the church are not the limits of Christian public engagement. As participants in the civil community, Christians strive to bring it into greater conformity to the character and rule of Christ.

[18] Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," in *Community, Church, and State: Three Essays* (Wipf & Stock, 2004), 149-89.

Christians ought to be active in the "outer circle" because *Christ calls us to follow him in our whole lives and to work in the power of the Spirit wherever he is at work*. Throughout the gospel stories of his life, Jesus calls people to follow him, to orient their lives around him, in ways that leave no part of their lives untouched. Discipleship affects family life (Matt. 10:37). It affects relationships with wealth and possessions (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). It affects work (Mark 1:16-17). It affects social life (Matt. 5:42-48). And so on. The point is: if we are committed to following Jesus in the power of the Spirit, we are committed to letting him determine the character of our whole lives—no exceptions. In our judgments, words, and deeds that affect the common good, we are his disciples, just as we are in every other aspect of our lives.

### *The Self-Consistency of Christ*

Commitment to public engagement as Christ's disciples draws us to scripture as the touchstone for discerning Christ at work. Christ in the world cannot be different from Christ in the scriptures. For *Christ always remains true to himself*: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). His character as we see it in scripture is true to his character always and everywhere. Granted, we should expect Christ to surprise us—not just because we can never fully comprehend him, but also because the situations in which he is at work are changing. Nevertheless, we can be confident that Christ will never turn on a dime and become someone antithetical to whom we see him to be in scripture. For example, in market economies, he won't command acquisitiveness instead of generosity; in bureaucratized social service systems, he won't tell us that compassion is obsolete; and to citizens under threat from Islamic extremists, he won't say that it is just fine to hate those enemies instead of loving them.

Putting all of these observations about Jesus and politics together results in the following line of thought. Since Christ is working everywhere bringing about anticipations of the kingdom of God, since ~~(b)~~ we are called to follow wherever Christ is working, and since the character of Christ as testified to in scriptures faithfully expresses his character as it is always and everywhere, *the person of Jesus as we*

*encounter him in scripture and discern him at work today through the Spirit is the norm for our public engagement.*