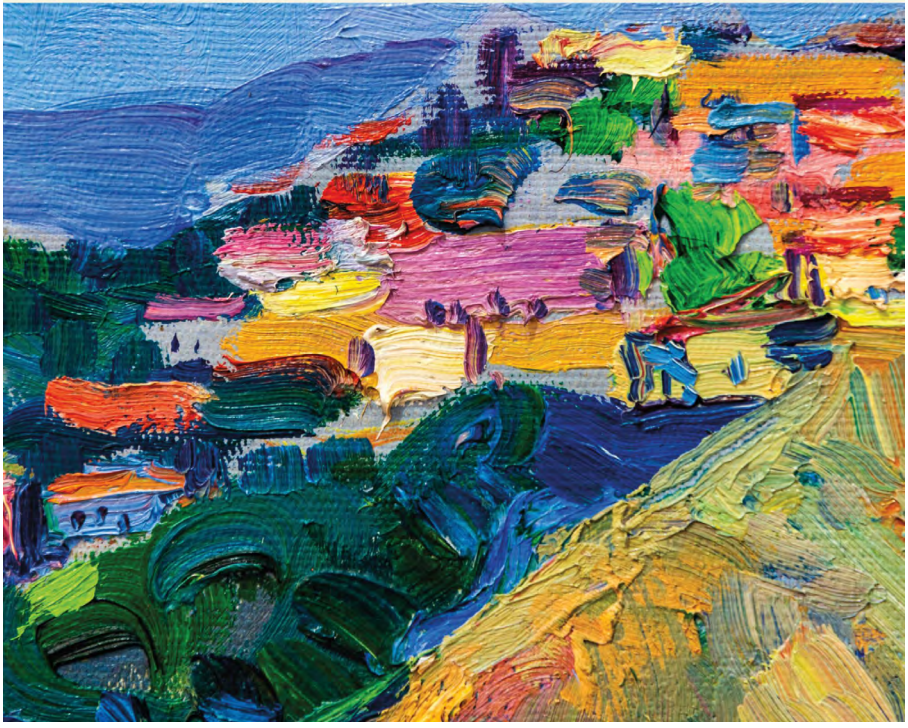
Christ and Covenant in Global Politics

A Christian Introduction to International Relations

ROBERT J. JOUSTRA



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Reading the Bible with International Relations

Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

ISAIAH 60:3

Justice in international relations has a lot of big problems.

In the introduction, we saw that one of the basic problems is that in modern politics we usually see justice as the work of *the state*, which—last I checked—does not exist in international relations. Even failed states, such as Haiti or Somalia, provide some context for justice, for renewal, for power used rightly. But in international relations there is simply no state—only many, many states (at publishing, the United Nations recognizes 206 states, of which 193 are members). Does that also mean there is no justice?

But it gets worse. Sovereign states don't just give force to justice; they also give it a frame. What, after all, is justice? Within the context of a state, such as France or Japan or India, there is usually an attempt to establish coherent and consistent accounts of what we mean by justice. To be sure, there is almost never a stale, unchallenged consensus,

but there are still certain core commitments, often written down and difficult to change, such as constitutions, that will set out a broad but nonetheless fundamental framework for justice. So what happens when very diverse states with foundationally different perspectives on justice begin to relate to each other? Who decides what we mean by justice, what its standards or presuppositions are, and under what conditions we can meaningfully say justice has been done in international relations?

This is the problem this first part takes up.

Returning to John Calvin's two-books metaphor, I want to help us answer this question by putting two revelations together: the book of Scripture and the book of creation—international relations, in this case.

In this chapter I want to lay out a Hebraic orientation to *international* justice, one that—happily—predates the modern problem of sovereignty in international relations and so might offer us some ideas and clues that challenge the problem of justice as we've framed it.

In the international relations of the ancient Near East, the people of Israel, despite their providentially ordered and divinely ordained relationship to the Creator God Yahweh, are not what we would call a superpower. Even during the so-called high point of the kingship of Israel, under David and later Solomon, when the kingdom—and its king—are lauded for its warriors, wealth, and wisdom, the seeds for its syncretic dissolution are already planted. The story of Solomon needs to be heard with those Hebraic ears, to detect the irony and tragedy of Jesus' axiom not to be anxious but to be like the lilies of the field, for "not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these" (Mt 6:29). His was a kingdom that flowered in the day and was thrown into the oven the next.

The Torah and the Prophets contain remarkable testimonies of justice. But, much as they have been read for the work of politics, the modern separation of domestic from international politics means their testimony of justice often falls flat, is dismissed or erased, in international

relations itself.[1] Here, the exceptions prove the rule, such as Scott Thomas's vision of human security in the scrolls of Isaiah.[2] In Isaiah's theology of international relations, Thomas finds a call back to the Creator's order for peace and security, humiliating and subverting the faithless realpolitik of the Assyrians, the Arameans, the Babylonians, oh, and yes, the Israelites too. Just like in 2 Kings 6, the covenant God Yahweh constantly calls his people, like the servant of Elisha, to have their eyes opened, to look and suddenly see "the hills full of horses and chariots of fire" (2 Kings 6:17). And, in the grand Hebraic tradition of repetition to make the point, the Lord then strikes the Arameans blind and has his prophet lead them by the hand to the heart of their enemy, who then prepare them a great feast of food and drink.[3]

This chapter will all too briefly outline this orientation to international relations from within the canon of Christian Scripture, starting with Genesis and ending in Revelation. It will make the main claim that the purpose of political power is justice and that justice—right relationships—is about the proper ordering of loves (*ordo amoris*). This means that to be thinking about justice in international relations as a Christian requires not only specific, textual encounter but also systematic-theological synthesis.[4] I could have, for example, called

[1]Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2011); Craig Bartholomew et al., eds., *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 3 (Zondervan, 2002). One resource I find very useful as a social scientist is Dru Johnson's Centre for Hebraic Thought, including its podcasts and journal, https://hebraicthought.org.

[2]Scott Thomas, "Isaiah's Vision of Human Security: Virtue-Ethics and International Politics in the Ancient Near East," in *Isaiah's Vision of Peace in Biblical and Modern International Relations: Swords into Plowshares*, ed. Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 169-80.

[3]The king first naturally asks whether he should kill them (2 Kings 6:21): "'Do not kill them,' he answered. 'Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.' So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory" (2 Kings 6:22-23 NIV 1984).

[4]The widening chasm between biblical theology and systematic theology strikes me as one of the more unproductive and unhelpful developments in Christian theology in the last century. It has left disciplines such as international relations that depend on their careful and collaborative scholarship much poorer for it.

this a "Calvinist" or "neo-Calvinist" or "Reformed" or even "Protestant" orientation. But, helpful as these systematic labels are, they are relevant and constructive only insofar as they bear full witness to the *good news* of Scripture, from the Hebraic law to the apocalyptic Jewish diaspora, to the Hebrew baby who returns to make all things new. This introduction owes much to those other labels but aims to be true overall to the testimony of Scripture.

Creation and International Justice

One of the major insights of Andy Crouch's popular book *Playing God* is his creation-story rehabilitation of what has for many people become a dirty word: power.[5] But power permeates the creation of the universe and the Creator God who calls it into form. First, God calls light and darkness, then water and sky, land, vegetation, day and night, birds and fish, and land animals of every kind into being. Finally, in his image, God creates human beings—male and female.

God's power we like; it seems to us—in its very definition—incorruptible, righteous, just. But to corruptible (but as yet uncorrupted!) creatures God gifts his image, including power. The NIV uses *rule* in Genesis 1 after Yahweh's command to be fruitful and multiply. The Creator gifts humanity "every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. . . . And it was so" (Gen 1:29-30). Full stop: That's a lot of power; that's a big kingdom.

What this Hebraic account of creation and power tells us is two important things: First, power is not just a problem of sin and evil. Power is an imaged and imitated capacity human beings have *by design*. These are not just commands; this is a royal anointing, and Yahweh specifically reflects that he "saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31). But, second, power is *for something*. In the image of our Creator, that power—including political power—is *for* fruitfulness, increase, stewardship. The medieval Christian political

[5]Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (InterVarsity Press, 2013).

tradition emphasizes that political power is for the restraint of the licentiousness of man, leading some to think that political power exists *only* insofar as sin and evil must be restrained and therefore is itself just a necessary evil. It seems to me the Hebrew testimony would say this is not, in fact, the *primary* purpose of power. Diversity—good, created diversity—positively blossomed, bloomed, and burst in the earliest days of creation. The Creator God puts human beings in a garden of his design and anoints them with power to cultivate it, keep it, rule it, name it. This is what I would call the primary point of political power, its prelapsarian (i.e., before the fall) "very good" design.

The Fall and International Justice

The fall is therefore not only a morally shattering event but a political revolution. What God has created "very good" in right relationship, righteous and just in the grain of God's design, becomes alienated and corrupted. This can seem unfair to modern sensibilities. The collapse of earth's *regents* leads to the corruption of the entire regency, all of creation. It is not just Adam and Eve themselves but their children, their children's children, who suffer the curse. And it is not even just human beings: Creation itself is ruined by the insurrection, from plant cell walls to quasars, from metallurgy to music; everything in the dominion of the anointed regents is cursed.

Hoang and Johnson call the scriptural record of justice one of "right relationship" for *shalom flourishing*.[6] The Hebrew *shalom* is much more than the hug-it-out shorthand for peace and wellness too many (American) Christians have reduced it to. It means more like restored to a right relationship of God's design, and it refers—specifically—to the original created order of how God intended for things to be. This is why Cornelius Plantinga titles his breviary on sin simply *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*.[7] And this is why Augustine calls idolatry *disordered* loves.

[6]Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson, *The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance* (Brazos, 2016).

[7]Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995).

The fall and the curse are not the end, or even the main point, of the Hebraic story of the fall of humankind. Even in God's judgment of his regents, he maintains a covenant with his creation, a constancy of "let there be" or a (common) grace so that, though nothing is untouched by sin, his original creative voice remains, sustaining, maintaining the universe. This is what Calvinists mean by *total* depravity: not a pessimistic prediction of everything being its absolute worst but a confession that no part of the created order has been untouched by this rebellion. Most importantly, that constancy is not simply an active maintenance of the Creator's cosmic design and a restraint of sin and evil but also an active commitment to rescue the rebels themselves. The story of that plan we will come to in a moment.

First, I want to pause and recognize there is a tension here for international justice. The original charge to rule, subdue, to fill is not erased, but it is perverted. There is no longer a simple harmony in relation with God, us, or the creation. And yet that original mandate—a cultural, political, and social mandate—has not been removed. Can the *good* of political power as it was intended to conciliate created diversity survive the *bad* of what politics must now remediate in fallen depravity?

This created-but-fallen tension is an enduring one for questions of justice, and Christian mistakes are usually about accenting one or the other too much.[8] But both persist. The adjudication of good diversity, the public pursuit of some common cultural goods, surrounds us. Whether it is in air-traffic control, treaties on air space or cyberspace, roundabouts, or traffic lights, the work of justice as a conciliation of *good* diversity has not disappeared. It is hardly the sin of pilots or drivers, airplanes or cars, that demands a *fair* structure and a *balanced* system for knowing who goes first, when, and how. Yet there are other laws too, ones that clearly are not only about conciliating created diversity but about the restraint of the fallenness of humankind. How

[8]For theological reflections on this, see Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper* (Eerdmans, 2012), 18-22.

can we know one from the other? And what kind of a guide can we, fallen human beings, possibly have?

Israel and International Justice

Scripture, again, can offer clarity. Creation and the fall take up much of this short introduction, but they are the shorter parts of Scripture. The story of *redemption*, through God's chosen people—Israel—and then through the new Adam, Jesus, and the new Israel, the church, is the remainder.

It is a too-common mistake to sweep past Israel to Jesus, with Israel's sometimes inscrutable history pockmarked with seemingly archaic poetry and law as it is. God calls the people of Israel not only to be a light to the nations but in so doing to model what good justice, right relationships, righteousness *as it was intended* can look like. To use Augustine's language, Israel was to be a model of a society of rightly ordered loves, of justice.

The chosen nation of Israel, in God's pattern, is liberated and then given a gift: the law. We hear words such as *law* wrong in the modern world; it would be better to think of it almost as a *philosophy* or a way of life—something the new Christians will first be called, "followers of the Way."[9] It has a Mandalorian feeling ("This is the Way").

The prophets, poetry, and history of the Hebrew Scriptures are about trying to live in that Way. That Way, that law, is like a cheat sheet to the design of creation. The Creator pulls a subset of his creatures aside and whispers to them again the secrets they've long since willfully forgotten, ones that strangely and gloriously resonate with their deepest identity and being, about how things *really ought to be*. They tell us about justice.

Two common mistakes afflict Christians in dealing with these Hebrew Scriptures. First, we ignore them entirely as so much preamble to the person of Jesus. Second, we dive into them as a literal template for how to imagine politics and law today.

[9]Dru Johnson, *Biblical Philosophy: A Hebraic Approach to the Old and New Testaments* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Scripture itself actually gives the clue on how to take ancient Israel seriously but not always literally. The early church had the same question: How do we deal with all these laws? If this is the path of justice, of right relationship, between God, ourselves, and the creation, should we not adopt them wholesale?

The Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15, while dealing most concretely with circumcision, gives us a template. The laws of the ancient Israelites can be divided into *civil, ceremonial,* and *moral* laws. The moral law, such as the Ten Commandments, is an enduring law that continues to apply (though how, we will get to shortly). The civil and ceremonial laws *may* be observed but are understood as specific and particular to the people of Israel in that time and that place. These laws were concrete cultural and political manifestations of the moral law. They remain the one of the most specific and practical examples of how God intended his created order to be, to live, to work, and to rule. We will turn to the best example in a moment.

We would not, therefore, want to simply bypass the civil and ceremonial laws of ancient Israel as not literally applicable for our day and age. While these laws are particular to a place and time, they are also a clear and concrete revelation of God's creation order and design for justice. We could do much worse, for example, than to go to the laws of the ancient Hebrews to discern moral and political lessons for economics, as in *Practicing the King's Economy*, or refugees, as in *Refuge Reimagined*.[10] We would want to be careful flatly imposing their edicts across time and space but would definitely not want to ignore their commands and examples.

In his mercy, God offers this law as something of a love letter to his lost creation. In the law, the designer of the universe offers some clues on how people should live in it for things to go well for them (though, because of the fall, it is not a guarantee: See Ecclesiastes). Like

[10]Michael Rhodes et al., *Practicing the King's Economy: Honoring Jesus in How We Work, Earn, Spend, Save, and Give* (Baker, 2018); Mark R. Glanville and Luke Glanville, *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics* (IVP Academic, 2021).

disassembled furniture without instructions, some of these rules can seem intuitive (Paul says they are "written on our hearts" in 2 Cor 3:2): Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. But life gets a bit more complicated than IKEA, and there are also some rules not to be missed that would be harder to MacGyver: You shall have no other gods before me; do not misuse the name of the Lord your God; and so on. The people of Israel are chosen to be a people of that law, a chosen nation to model and witness to what life done together right, by creation's design, can look like.

Finally, for those concerned about all this law talk, John Calvin offers us a path for thinking about law that resolves some of the seeming Old Testament–New Testament tensions. In his distillation of the "three uses" of the law, he argues that the law (1) convicts us of our sin, and so drives us to Jesus; (2) acts as a curb and bridle on society and its worst excesses; but finally (3) is a guide for grateful living. This last use he calls the most excellent because it is the one use that will endure. It is the pattern and design of how creation was *intended to be*, and we could do worse to find a picture of justice, of righteousness, in the new heavens and the new earth to see, in the law, how God intended for things to be.

I want to make another brief pause and entertain an emerging but increasingly common complaint. Isn't all this *justice* talk, especially of Israel in the Old Testament, *for Israel*? Wouldn't it be wrong to take laws and ethics intended for a particular people and place in a specifically religious society and try to creatively impose them on pluralist peoples in a secular age?

Yoram Hazony makes a version of this case when he argues in *The Virtue of Nationalism* that justice is a concept rooted in particular people, national identities, stories, and religions.[11] Such things should not be universalized for that reason, in part because of the imperial nature of such universalizing dogmas. Jewish justice should be *Jewish*; it is not French, or Russian, or Chinese. These nations have their own

[11] Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (Basic Books, 2018).

particular stories and traditions of justice and should cultivate their own internal rationale for thinking of and practicing justice as they do. The story of ancient Hebrew law is not and should not be a universal concept of justice. It is for Hebrews.

I may be overstating Hazony's claim here, but it's worth considering all the same. It seems clear to me that the point of God's choosing the people of Israel is not just about how special the people of Israel are. Israel is meant to be an example, an advance guard, a beachhead for the kingdom of God. In Isaiah's picture of the new heavenly city, he sees that "nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Is 60:3; an Epiphany passage), an abundance of wealth poured in from non-Jews, and even the ships of Tarshish make an appearance. What, asks Richard Mouw in his meditation on Isaiah 60, are the ships are Tarshish doing here?[12] These, after all, are not only powerful commercial vessels but almost certainly Phoenician ones, the same Phoenicians whom the Israelites would know as Philistines, the same name adapted in our modern age as Palestinians. "Here come the Palestinians from Gaza with their wealth, wisdom, and wonders!" we might just as well hear from Isaiah, a picture of paradise that might ruffle some feathers in today's Knesset.

Here, into that city on the last day, the "milk of nations" is brought (Is 60:16). Such apocalyptic pluralism does not smell like justice for only the Jews.

Or consider the prophet Jonah and his cranky Jewish nationalism. Perhaps, like Hazony, Jonah is not at all interested in Hebraic universalism (although he does seem quite hot on the judgment part of justice!). Jonah is certainly not interested in bringing a word of repentance and reconciliation to Israel's superpower tyrant, Assyria. But God is. God sends him on to Nineveh, roughly present-day Mosul, and after some aquatic adventures to delight any toddler, Jonah arrives and kind of mails in his prophecy through the city. To his disgust, Nineveh

[12]Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Eerdmans, 2002), 17-42.

repents and God relents. This all proves too much for Jonah, who petulantly storms off in protest of God's compassionate pluralism. God asks, in closing, whether he is wrong to be concerned about Nineveh, "in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (Jon 4:11). It seems to me this Hebraic orientation is in fact a *human* orientation, patterned after the design of creation. The Assyrians are laboriously chronicled as the worst of the worst of the ancient Near East. But that law, that life, that liberation, turns out to be for Assyrians too.

I like God's last bit about the cows, and it makes a final point. Justice as right relationships, as rightly ordered loves, is not just about God and us but also about our sadly deficient regency: the creation. God specifically calls out the cows of Nineveh for mercy. And when the chroniclers record the destruction and exile of the Jews, they also specifically comment on Israel's environmental and economic disobedience; they did not allow the land to rest or the fields to recover. Their judgment for injustice is systematic and total: the worship of other gods, economic and political repression, and finally environmental degradation—God, humanity, creation.

Jesus and International Justice

This gives us an awfully robust place to start talking about justice.[13] So, what about Jesus? After discussing this creation-law-justice blueprint with a friend, he asked me: What difference does Jesus make? Does his life, death, and resurrection have any actual effect on how we think about justice? Is it all just the design of creation-law that we can glean by way of particular and proxy from the Torah? Does Jesus change international relations?

Jesus changes everything. But that change is not a dramatic erasure of creation or Torah but a *fulfillment* of it. We follow Jesus *as he follows the law*, as he shows us in law-patterned obedience what was intended

[13]Part of this section is drawn from Robert J. Joustra, "What Is Public Justice?," *Public Justice Review* 8, no. 2 (2018).

for Adam.[14] Jesus' life, death, and resurrection ushers in not only salvation for *human beings* (the rulers) but an effort to cosmically reclaim *all* that was lost in the regent's rebellion (the realm): creation itself, creation regained.[15]

As I see it, this gives us at least three practical, political effects of the death, resurrection, and kingship of Jesus: (1) he is King, and we are not—a proper definition of sovereignty; (2) he is King, he breaks down barriers between us, calls all cultures and people into himself—a good pluralism; (3) he is King, he reissues the primordial command—the cultural mandate—to fill the world, subdue, discover, wonder, and teach his good designs—a great commission, for not only souls but persons, and for not only persons but powers, systems, and structures.[16]

First, the kingship of Christ establishes a new King, a new Adam, and it moderates any other earthly pretender. In the covenant with Israel, it was the duty and obligation of David's royal lineage to ensure proper worship, to root out disbelief and disobedience to God's law, to cut down the Asherah poles and put to death the priests of Baal. This judgment still rests with the office of King David, but the new King, Jesus Christ, does not empower his regents and stewards at this time to exercise judgment that only rightly belongs to him. Only Christ calls people to himself for salvation. Only Jesus turns hearts to obedience, and no mere earthly steward possesses either the authority or the sovereignty over the human heart to turn it one inch toward Jesus. While the primary effect of sin, religious or directional pluralism, persists, our proximate justice in the here and now is not possessed with the right to resolve it. That right belongs to a day and to a King who waits. This is, among others, a resurrection-and-ascension

[14]Jessica Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer: Law and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*," *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 311-30.

[15]Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2005).

[16]These broadly conform to what Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen call three types of pluralism: (1) directional/religious pluralism, (2) cultural/contextual pluralism, and (3) societal pluriformity/differentiation or structural pluralism. See Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Eerdmans, 1993).

argument for the foundations of restraint for political power and what we will later call *freedom of religion or belief*.

Second, the kingship of Christ opens up the fullness of creation's cultural pluralism. The holiness of God and his judgment on sin mean that the fullness of the races, cultures, and peoples could never be brought into the kingdom of God except in Christ's resurrected reign. In the Old Testament we read of antecedents of Christ's coming, cosmopolitan kingship, in people such as Rahab and Ruth, but they are grafted *into* Israel. Christ the King instead calls all cultures and peoples into himself and his kingdom, *as they are*, what Goudzwaard calls the first truly catholic globalization, the church. Whereas circumcision brought people and culture into conformity with Israel, baptism removes not one single cultural manifestation that cannot be reclaimed and repurposed toward the kingdom of God. Moabites come as Moabites into God's kingdom, Hittites as Hittites, and—yes—even the Dutch as Dutchmen. Christ's kingship opens up cultural pluralism, the lost treasures of creation, brought back and restored to our political and social life by the work of Jesus.

This second aspect of Christ's kingship is a Pentecostal politics. At Babel, humankind is judged for its hubris, for—far from filling the earth and subduing it, culture making and cultivating—consolidating and aggrandizing themselves. God's confusion of humanity with many languages could be misread as suggesting that linguistic and cultural pluralism are a curse. But in Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit with power, that question is put to rest: Pentecost unravels the *curse* of Babel, the fractious disunity of pluralism, but does so without enforcing uniformity. From Acts 2:

> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

> Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because *each one heard their own language being spoken*. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? *Then how is it that each of us hears them in our own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!*" Amazed and perplexed they asked one another, "What does it mean?" (Acts 2:1-12)

What it means, at least in part, is that the resurrected Jesus' Pentecostal politics is *for* the pluralism and diversity of the human race, *for* the culture-making mandate of Yahweh, and now that Pentecostal power is breaking down the barriers of that diversity between humankind, just as Christ's death tore the temple curtain in two, separating God from humankind. That is the kingdom Jesus is building.

Finally, the King's sovereignty, his passion for cultural and social pluralism, and his delight in the unfolding potentials of his created order are not *new* commands but *renewed*, *resurrected* commands regiven and incarnated in Jesus' life and work. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations," Jesus commands, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20). Spread the good news. Christ, the clue to creation, reminds, restores, and resurrects the primordial commands of the Creator God and sends us out in law-patterned obedience to do the same.

Jesus comes not to repristinate a garden but to bring into himself and his kingdom all the creative, cultural, economic, and even political work of humankind, the redemption of the city.

Cities, we sometimes forget, are systems; really, they are a system of systems. Modern cities are actually astonishingly complicated ones. They are systems for organizing considerable human density and diversity. Under most modern city streets run water, electrical, and

sewage systems. Organizing traffic patterns in major cities is a whole field unto itself. And what about zoning, and noise bylaws, and trash pickup days, and water-treatment plants? Municipal politics has a dizzying complexity of interrelated systems.

And yet here is God's revelation of human beings resurrected in glory meeting him and each other in *just such a system*. Does Jesus save systems? He seems to save at least one.

It reminds us, too, of Isaiah 60, where even the ships of Tarshish are broken, not to be discarded but to be remended like *kintsugi* vessels, repurposed, more beautiful in their redemption.[17] The same Yahweh anointing his regents at the beginning of creation reiterates that royal command in the Son—fill the world, make it bold, beautiful, extraordinary; witness to that beauty, teach about the Creator-Redeemer, follow the Way in grateful obedience. And surely—he finishes his ascension homily—"I am with you" (Mt 28:20). The first word of this new politics is that of the angels in Bethlehem, "Do not be afraid" (Lk 2:10), and its last is that of the triumphant Christ in Revelation, "I am making everything new!" (Rev 21:5): not only persons but powers, not only systems but cities.

The Mission of the Church and International Justice

Hazony's complaint that Torah justice is only for the Jews, not an imperial project for the Gentiles, has its analogy in some two-kingdoms theology for Christians. That complaint is that all this talk of justice is right insofar as it goes, that it is for *all* people, not just the Jews, but its prescriptions and commands apply to *the church*, not to *the state*. The garden commands may have been given to all humanity (not a big crowd at that point), but the Great Commission is given to Jesus' disciples, to the church, to Christians. Jesus did not reappear on

[17]"A Kintsugi master mends tea bowls with Japan lacquer and gold in honor of Rikyu. A bowl mended with gold is more valuable than what the original tea bowl was worth before it broke. The Kintsugi tradition offers us a vision for our times in a fragmented world." Makoto Fujimura, "Kintsugi Grace: Prismatic Art Beyond the Rainbow," 2023 Kuyper Prize Acceptance Speech, https://makotofujimura.com/writings/kintsugi-grace-prismatic-art-beyond-the-rainbow.

the Palatine to Caesar to give his command for a new Roman justice, nor did he gather a consortium of international heads of state in a proto–United Nations to establish a new international law. Not even Herod, or—and wouldn't that have been satisfying—Pontius Pilate get a visit. The commission lands on fishermen, failed rebels, and tax collectors—not one of them would get invited to Davos to keynote.

So, just *whose* justice is *international* justice?

Conclusion

I want to lay out some broad conclusions from this chapter without definitively answering this last question. The reason is not only that we'll return to it in a later chapter but also that there is not *one* answer to this question. Church and state, as we will see next, are not universal, transhistorical, or transcultural concepts, and it would be anachronistic and misleading to suddenly pole-vault from the first-century ascension on the Mount of Olives to the motorcades of the G20. Even if we wanted to ignore the intervening millennia of church history (we don't), we definitely cannot ignore the intervening millennia of political history that are needed to even understand the question we are asking in the present day.

The first conclusion is that the church, the body of believers that Jesus commissions to follow in the Way and empowers with his Spirit, *is* given the clue to creation's design. This clue is most concretely visible in Jesus and his example of law-patterned obedience, which drives us back to that law as a guide for grateful living. Jesus' example is in a first-century Roman province. The law is given to a people a millennium before, a rule for the good life, after a liberation. Both are full of justice commentary. But both are also out of our time, in a different place. We must therefore recognize that the meaning and creational norms of *justice*, of right relationships, are in these sacred texts to be found, but they will give us principles and outcomes more than institutional arrangements and political processes. We will learn a great deal about oppressive structures, bribery in the courts, the

oppression of the poor, the rest of the land and deserts of the laborers, honest weights and measures—and that is *thick, substantive* justice content, but it is not immediately apparent whether these things mean Christians should invest in cryptocurrency. What those in possession of the revelation of God have is far from irrelevant; it is the substance and shape of justice. And, in case that were too abstract, Scripture also gives two full, concrete manifestations of how justice could take form in particular times and places—the laws of Israel, whose justice the Israelites so spectacularly failed to keep, and the person of Jesus Christ, who kept the Way perfectly and shows us the law's deeper meanings and purpose.

This leads to a second conclusion that is implicit: Scripture is not a technical, operational, or institutional manual on political power and its exercise. It is *foundational*, but it is not *technical*. This means that modern-day justice advocates need to do some heavy scriptural *and* creational (the two books) exegesis: It is not enough to understand Old Testament land-use laws; you must also understand your municipality's zoning process and its land codes and land-title system. If we are consumed by the injustices laid out in Canada's Truth and Reconciliation report, we can clearly see Scripture's witness against these terrible outcomes, but then we must be driven, with technical excellence and ponderous patience, into the 1876 Indian Act, and its variations thereafter, especially 1951, to uncover *the structural* and *institutional* factors that have conspired to produce such nefarious circumstances. The same could be said for failed states such as Haiti, which has suffered environmental cataclysms and catastrophic collapse in governance. Yes, we should hear the cries of injustice, which should move us to the hard work of developmental economics and governance, to wondering about the roots of systemic change, for just laws, for honest weights and measures, for entrepreneurship and enterprise.

This implies that, although the church (as institute) *could* develop and mandate on the basis of both sets of expertise, in the present day it not only better suits the principles of *justice* as set out in Scripture

(especially pluralist freedom of religion or belief) but also the modern differentiation of society to depend on the church universal (as organism), on experts in these areas of justice, to be formed in the church, and then "as they are going" (Great Commission) to work and act in their areas of competence. This is a complicated and controversial distinction.[18] It also has historically run on a spectrum between greater and lesser direct engagement on the part of the church and its leadership in questions of international justice. When, for example, Constantine became emperor of Rome, his legalization of Christianity (Edict of Milan, AD 313) eventually became an official religion of empire under Theodosius (Edict of Thessalonica, AD 380). For most of the ancient world, as we will see, it was not especially controversial to have an imperial or royal religion. Yet Constantine is often set out as a watchword of *injustice* in today's debates—of Caesaropapism, or theocracy, or worse.

But we can perhaps also sympathize with this model. If, after all, the church has the clue to creation and to justice in political and civil affairs, would it not make sense for some kind of organizational merger between the two? Would this not make for a justice more aligned with God's commands, with the grain of creation, with the way it's supposed to be? This, after all, is not some ancient, archaic debate but the current-day consensus in constitutionally Christian countries such as Zambia or in the explicitly Christian legislating of Uganda. The West may cry foul on a question it deems settled, but the global church, especially in its areas of greatest growth and vitality, considers it anything but.

Here is where I am going to put a pin in this discussion for now. Because before we can answer it, we need to open that other book, the book of creation, and uncover the startling history, origin, and meaning of justice in international relations itself.

[18]The Greek verb in this passage the NIV translates "Therefore go" is a passive verb, so biblical scholars argue a more correct translation could be "as you are going."