

## BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

# CIVIL GOVERNMENT AND THE NATIONS

*Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World.* By David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020. Pp. 400. \$29.99 (paper); \$19.99 (digital). ISBN: 9780310108849.

KEYWORDS: two kingdoms, covenant theology, political theology, church, nations, empires

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of David VanDrunen's new book, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World*, is to present a Christian political theology that explores the divinely established moral order that underlies civil government. As a work of *political* theology, the book grapples with an array of questions about law and government in the contemporary world. As a work of *political theology*, the book draws deeply on the many and varied passages of the bible that bear on such questions. In this review, I focus on the book's theological dimensions.

VanDrunen argues that the moral order underlying civil government is best understood theologically from the vantage point of a pivotal moment in biblical history: the divine covenant with Noah after the great flood (Genesis 9:1–7). He maintains, consistent with his earlier work, that this covenant marks out a mode of human engagement in the world decidedly different from the primordial paradise described in the early chapters of Genesis and the eschatological consummation of all things described in the closing chapters of the book of Revelation. He argues that the Noachic covenant suggests a way in which the properly secular nature of civil government can be affirmed from a specifically Christian theological point of view.<sup>1</sup>

The centerpiece of VanDrunen's argument is a twofold proposition he claims can be derived from the Noachic covenant: firstly, that civil government is "*legitimate*, but *provisional*" and, secondly, that it is "*common*, but *accountable*" (25). VanDrunen's position is thus neither pacifist nor perfectionist, and neither theocratic nor secularist. Against those who would oppose Christian participation in the coercive activities of the state, he affirms its legitimacy. Contrary to those who would invest the state with a redemptive or eschatological significance, he emphasizes its temporary and pluralistic character. Against those who believe civil government ought to defend religious truth and provide material support to an established church, he insists that the limited task of the state is to secure justice for all human beings without discrimination. And yet VanDrunen also rejects the idea, advanced by some, that there can be such a thing as a morally neutral state, for politics is always value-laden. The state can be limited in this way because it operates alongside a whole array of other temporal institutions, to which it is organically linked. These other institutions

1 VanDrunen avoids using the term *secular* to describe civil government lest it be taken to imply a view that is ostensibly neutral among substantive religious and moral commitments (199, 360, 367–68). I here use the term only to indicate civil government's temporal and mundane—as distinct from eternal and heavenly—significance as VanDrunen understands it.

perform many very vital functions which lie beyond the proper bounds of civil government, such as the care and nurture of children and the provision of food, shelter, and other essential human needs. On VanDrunen's account the limited purpose of civil government is to execute justice, principally in retributive and compensatory terms.

Although in this review I am critical of many of VanDrunen's specific exegetical arguments in favor of these conclusions, I find several of his general conclusions about the nature, purposes, and scope of civil government to be broadly persuasive, not least for their capacity to make sense of the entirety of the biblical corpus. It is VanDrunen's specific arguments about the role of the Noahic covenant that I find less convincing.

There are two steps to VanDrunen's argument. Firstly, he maintains that the Noahic covenant, unlike the other biblical covenants, does not contain any redemptive or eschatological elements. It is not concerned with God's work of salvation but only with the world's preservation. It does not address matters eschatological or eternal but only the temporal and mundane needs of this present world. The second step in his reasoning is to propose that the authorization of civil government is traceable to the Noahic covenant (79).<sup>2</sup> Because civil government is founded on this covenant in particular, the tasks of the state, though morally legitimate, are temporal and not eternal, preservative and not redemptive. The state is limited to matters of common interest and penultimate importance.

This is good as far as it goes. However, there are two difficulties with VanDrunen's argument when considered on its own terms. The first is that there is a considerable distance between the literal words of the Noahic covenant as recorded in the book of Genesis and the far-reaching implications that he draws from it. VanDrunen's interpretation relies on substantial abstraction from the particular language in which the covenant is recorded. One has to wonder whether he is reading into a highly specific text things that are not there or that at best are only vaguely implied. The second difficulty concerns VanDrunen's sharp distinction between the content and purposes of the Noahic covenant and the content and purposes of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants. Such a distinction is driven, in part, by VanDrunen's attachment to two kingdoms theology.<sup>3</sup> It produces an account of the biblical narrative that overlooks important continuities between the covenants and the way in which certain elements of the Noahic covenant unfold, intertwine, and develop throughout the biblical narrative.

#### VANDRUNEN'S INTERPRETATION OF THE NOAHIC COVENANT

It is crucial to VanDrunen's argument to maintain a clear distinction between the redemptive and eschatological purposes of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants in contrast with the merely preservative and temporary horizon of the Noahic covenant. But can such a distinction be maintained, as a matter of biblical exegesis?

VanDrunen describes the three moral requirements of the Noahic covenant in various ways. In some places, he sticks closely to the literal text; elsewhere he describes the requirements at progressively higher levels of abstraction. His reasoning is that the "modest ethic" that "lies on the face of the text" is appropriate to the limited and preservative purposes of the covenant, but that on deeper reflection we discover that the threefold ethic "implies a number of activities beyond

2 For additional references, see pages 100, 122–23, 179–80, 268, 285.

3 See David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010).

what the text says explicitly” (81). Thus, the call to be “fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1)<sup>4</sup> implies the nurturing of children within families so they survive into responsible adulthood and have children of their own, and it requires that human beings spread throughout the world, adapting to new geographic and climatic conditions by developing necessary clothing, housing, tools, and tasks that require creativity and technological innovation (81). Similarly, the giving of plants and animals for humans to eat implies that human beings will need to hunt and forage, and as populations grow and spread, cultivate crops, and domesticate animals (81–82). And the requirement that blood be shed for the shedding of blood is understood as a formulaic and indeed poetic expression of the *lex talionis*, which implies a “general human responsibility to administer proportionate retributive justice in response to the harm that one person inflicts upon another” (82).

VanDrunen’s method is both theological and philosophical. He argues that the unfolding implications of the Noahic covenant are indicated by later passages in the biblical canon (92–99, 103–13), and he argues that the moral requirements of the covenant “resonate with what human beings are by nature” (125) and can therefore be known, in principle, through sound moral reasoning (131). Thus, the threefold ethic of the Noahic covenant implies not only a wide array of human activities, but also an array of moral duties in all three domains. VanDrunen describes the requirements of the Noahic covenant in successively wider degrees of abstraction and generality—and with more and more specific implications. The provision of “every moving thing that lives” as “food for you” (Genesis 9:3) becomes an obligation to “provide for material needs” (182), while the prohibition on eating “flesh with its life-blood” (Genesis 9:4) means that while human beings may “eat widely,” they must also do so “within humane limits” (215). Similarly, the poetic expression, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6) becomes an obligation to “administer proportionate retributive justice in response to the harm that one person inflicts upon another” (82), to “work for justice in collaboration with [one’s] neighbors” (163), and to “enforce justice in the face of violence” (182). Indeed, the unique political authority of the state arises out of the Noahic covenant (329).

All of this involves a considerable abstraction and generalization from what the Noahic text actually says. It is a long stretch from the terms of the Noahic covenant to the particular glosses that VanDrunen places on it. To expand the meaning and implications of the text in these ways VanDrunen has to rely very substantially on many other texts of scripture derived in a manner reminiscent of the seven Noahide Laws within the talmudic tradition.<sup>5</sup> But if these other texts are needed to flesh out VanDrunen’s three propositions, how much weight does the Noahic covenant actually bear in his argument?

While there do seem to be three distinct obligations in the Noahic covenant, the text suggests important connections between them. The passage is especially concerned with what it refers to as the “life-blood” (*dām nepeš*, דַּם בְּנֶפֶשׁ)<sup>6</sup> of both animals and human beings. As regards animals, their flesh may be eaten, but not with the blood still in it, implying that the blood of animals must first be poured on the ground (Genesis 9:4). As regards human beings, if the blood of a man is shed (literally “poured out”) then blood must be shed for blood (Genesis 9:5–6). Here the Noahic text seems not only to look back to the blood of Abel crying out to God from the

4 All biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

5 See David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of the Noahide Law*, 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011); David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 6.

6 The text of Genesis 9:4 literally prohibits the eating of the flesh “with its life, its blood” (דָּמֵהוּ בְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ). My thanks are due to Leigh Trevaskis for assistance with the Hebrew texts discussed in this review.

ground (Genesis 4:10) but also to anticipate the Mosaic requirements regarding the bleeding of meat (Deuteronomy 12:16, 23–25), the pouring out of blood sacrifices (Deuteronomy 12:27, 15:23), and the recompense for the shedding of innocent blood (Numbers 35:33–34; Deuteronomy 19:10–13, 21:7–8). The prohibition on eating blood and the need for blood sacrifice were thus closely intertwined (Leviticus 17:10–12). The Noahic covenant seems to anticipate all of these aspects of the Mosaic law. But while some of them are concerned with the mundane tasks of providing for human needs and executing civil justice, other aspects are integral to the redemptive system of sacrifices established by the Mosaic economy. There are, therefore, important continuities between Noah and Moses. This continuity embraces not only the temporal concerns of the earthly kingdom, but also the ultimately redemptive purposes of the eternal kingdom.

Many of the same themes are developed within the New Testament. These include the idea of a reckoning for all of the righteous blood poured out on the earth (Matthew 23:35, 27:25), the blood of the new covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28), and Jesus's teaching that instead of insisting upon an "eye for an eye" or a "tooth for a tooth" his disciples should not resist an evil person but rather turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38–42). There is also the judgment of the council at Jerusalem releasing the Gentile converts in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia from having to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law, but calling on them to avoid polluting themselves with the blood rites and sexual practices of the pagan temples by abstaining from "things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:20, 29, 21:25)—echoing the connection between idolatrous worship, blood rites, and wanton bloodshed lamented in Ezekiel 33:25. Among these passages, it may remain possible to distinguish the proper domains of the "two kingdoms," as VanDrunen insists, but the point is that the Noahic covenant alludes to important aspects of them both.

For these reasons, it is surely an overstatement to say that the Noahic covenant is a distinct covenant that does not share in the "organic unity" that exists between the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants (72). It is only when the Noahic covenant's particularities are abstracted into much more general propositions (that is, reproducing the human race, providing for human needs, and enforcing human justice) that it appears to be concerned exclusively with such mundane, temporal, and civic affairs.

#### VANDRUNEN'S THEORY OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT

On VanDrunen's account, the Noahic covenant authorizes the formation of a variety of familial, enterprise, and legal institutions operating within the broader community of which they are a part. Civil government is one of these institutions. While probably the most important, it is not the only kind of legal institution that may be established; for it is possible and indeed likely that people will also establish voluntary organizations to mediate and arbitrate disputes in particular fields (183).<sup>7</sup> What distinguishes civil government is its universality and coercive force: it is needed to resolve disputes where at least one of the parties is not willing to submit to the determination of a voluntary adjudicative body (323–24, 332). This gives rise to the question of authority, for unlike the other institutions, civil government "asserts jurisdiction over all people within its geographical bounds and exercises physical coercion against those who resist it" (323).

7 For additional references, see pages 84, 285, 297. VanDrunen defends what he calls a "polycentric" view of law, in which the customary legal order is more fundamental than the law of the state. See, further, chapter 10.

VanDrunen maintains, in apparently unqualified terms, that “legitimate government authority arises out of the Noahic covenant,” *not* out of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, or new covenants (333).<sup>8</sup> Such a statement must be taken carefully, for several related reasons. Firstly, as VanDrunen acknowledges, the Noahic covenant makes no explicit mention of civil government. All it does is require human beings to exact blood vengeance: “[w]hoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6). The text does not stipulate that any particular person, office-holder, or institution is responsible to execute justice. As such, it apparently authorizes any person to exact retaliation, thus giving rise to the figure of the “avenger of blood” (Numbers 35:19–21; Deuteronomy 19:12).<sup>9</sup> However, contrary to the thrust of VanDrunen’s argument, it was under the law of Moses that judges were appointed and cities of refuge were established to protect the accused from the unregulated revenge that might be exacted by the kinsman avenger, especially in cases of accidental killings (Numbers 35:9–34; Deuteronomy 4:41–43).<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is not until later in the biblical canon—in fact in the Mosaic law—that explicit reference is made to the special role of judges in ensuring the just administration of the law against wrongdoers (Exodus 18:13–26; Deuteronomy 1:16–17, 16:18). VanDrunen may be quite correct to emphasize the legitimate but limited functions of civil government, but more than the Noahic covenant is needed to support its assertion of jurisdiction over all people within its territory and its exercise of coercion against those who resist it (323). As VanDrunen appears to accept, Romans 13:1–7 is the *locus classicus* in this respect, as his extended discussion of the text demonstrates.<sup>11</sup>

#### NATIONS AND MULTINATIONAL EMPIRES

An important feature of VanDrunen’s normative account of civil government is its religious tolerance and ethnic inclusiveness (19, 189–97). VanDrunen argues that the principle of religious and ethnic pluralism is established by the Noahic covenant (182–89, 199–203, 365–69). Is that clearly the case?

Immediately following the transmission of the Noahic covenant, the book of Genesis offers an account of Noah’s offspring who, being fruitful, multiplying, and filling the earth, have grown into the many families, clans, tribes and nations of the world, occupying their particular lands, speaking their own languages, and governed by their respective kings and rulers (Genesis 10:5).<sup>12</sup> And before long, each household and nation seems also to have begun to serve its own tribal, national, or territorial gods (Genesis 31:19, 35:2–4).<sup>13</sup> To this point in the biblical narratives there appears to have been a close identity between nation, language, territory, religion, and kingly rule. When nations conquered nations, they subjected them to tribute or slavery; and when they combined, they formed temporary military alliances (Genesis 14:1–12). They did not establish the ethnically pluralistic and religiously diverse regimes that VanDrunen says are implied by the Noahic covenant.

This general picture is continued, and in some ways disrupted, by the calling of Abram to leave his country, his kindred, and his father’s house and go to a land that would be given to him and his descendants (Genesis 12:1). Abram’s calling is in continuity with the ethno-religious homogeneity of the nations in this important respect: Abram, later renamed Abraham, is destined to become the

8 For additional references, see pages 71–72, 88, 91–92, 382.

9 See also Genesis 4:14–15, 23–24.

10 See also Joshua 20:1–9; 2 Samuel 14:11.

11 See pages 32–33, 35, 46–47, 103–13, 260–61, 285–88, 325, 328–29, 331, 336–37, 345, 349–51.

12 See also Genesis 10:10, 20, 31–32, 14:1–2, 20:2, 26:1, 36:31.

13 See also Exodus 12:12, 23:32–33; Numbers 25:1–2; 1 Kings 20:23; Isaiah 36:19–20.

exulted father of many nations and a begetter of kings—a promise that is repeated to his grandson Jacob, the father of the nation of Israel (Genesis 12:2, 35:11–12).<sup>14</sup> Consistent with this promise, we later read that the nation of Israel has grown into a large multitude composed of many families, clans, and tribes, each with its chief or head, and each with its allotted land (Exodus 18:21, 25; Numbers 26:53–56).<sup>15</sup> Much the same can be said of the descendants of Isaac's other son, Esau, who settle in the hill country of Seir, each clan again possessing a particular territory and ruled by its particular chiefs and kings (Genesis 36). VanDrunen is therefore correct to acknowledge that, consistent with the requirements of the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant gave rise to a household that developed into a nation and that the Mosaic covenant established the nation of Israel as a political community (87–92), albeit a community that was established as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6). A nation is a family writ large.

But the matter does not end there.

Abraham's obedience to his calling made him a stranger or alien in the many lands of his sojourn (Genesis 12:10).<sup>16</sup> Abraham and his descendants down to the time of Moses are also said to be foreigners and sojourners who understood themselves to be strangers in a foreign land (Exodus 2:22). While it would be God's intent to deliver the Israelites from Egypt and allow them to inherit the land of Canaan (Exodus 6:2–8), this experience of being sojourners or subject aliens would remain central to their identity. The law reminded the Israelites that they once had been sojourners in Egypt and that they should not oppress the stranger in their midst (Exodus 22:21, 23:9); it also included rules that specially benefited foreigners (Exodus 23:12).<sup>17</sup> Unraveling these provisions in their application to what appear to be the different categories of foreigner (*nokrî*, נכרי), stranger (*tôšāb*, תושב) and sojourner (*gēr*, גר) is a matter for specialists, but what can be said with some confidence is that such peoples were subjected to the law of the nation in which they resided, including its religious laws, and had to be circumcised in order to participate fully in its religious life (Exodus 12:48–49, 20:10).<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding the prophetic insistence on Yahwist monotheism, there is a persistent consciousness within the biblical narrative of the gods of other nations. The Exodus was, after all, a deliverance of the Israelites from under the bondage of Egypt and its gods (Exodus 15:11, 18:10–11). Despite the insistence of the first commandment that “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3), Israel repeatedly succumbed to the temptation to idolatry and religious polytheism. The thrust of the biblical literature is to condemn polytheistic syncretism and to press for religious purity in the nation (Judges 10:10–16).<sup>19</sup> Religious pluralism of a sort certainly existed within Israel, but the prophetic response called for religious faithfulness to the point of enforced uniformity (Judges 6:25–32).<sup>20</sup>

At what stage in the biblical history, then, did the authority exercised by earthly kings over their respective nations begin to correspond to the kind of multireligious or multi-ethnic civil rule that VanDrunen attributes to the Noahic covenant? Immediately following the Flood, the picture seems to be one of the many nations of the world, occupying their particular lands, speaking their own languages, governed by their respective kings, and worshipping their own tribal, national, and territorial gods. It is specifically in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that

14 See also Genesis 17:1–8, 16.

15 See also Numbers 1:4, 16, 18, 7:2, 10:4; Deuteronomy 1:13–15, 31:28.

16 See also Genesis 17:8, 19:9, 20:1, 21:23, 34, 23:4.

17 See also Leviticus 16:29, 19:10, 23:22.

18 See also Leviticus 17:10–16, 18:26, 19:33–34, 20:2, 24:16, 22; Numbers 15:14–16.

19 See also Jeremiah 2; Ezekiel 8; Hosea 1–3.

20 See also 1 Samuel 7:3–4; 2 Kings 11:17–18; 18:3–5; 2 Chronicles 34:3–7.

the idea of a nation within a nation—of sojourners and foreigners—makes its appearance, and it is difficult to see how this development has anything specifically to do with the Noahic covenant. On the contrary, the idea of a pluralistic order in its fuller sense does not begin to arise in the biblical materials until the emergence of the multinational empires of the exilic and post-exilic eras. For it is in Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome that the notion of an earthly “King of kings” (*melek mēlakīm*, מֶלֶךְ מַלְכִּים) ruling over a multiplicity of subject peoples and nations, at last appears (Ezekiel 26:7; Daniel 2:37; Ezra 7:12). Before that, it was only Yahweh who had been called “God of gods” (*ēlōhē hā’ēlōhīm*, אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים) and “Lord of lords” (*’ādōnē hā’ādōnīm*, אֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנִים) (Deuteronomy 10:17).<sup>21</sup>

It is at these later stages in the biblical history that an imperial dominion encompassing a plurality of nations and religions emerges. This is seen especially in the book of Esther, which depicts Ahasuerus reigning over the one hundred and twenty provinces of his empire, issuing his decrees to the subject peoples in his provinces, each in its own script and language (Esther 1:1, 22).<sup>22</sup> However, despite the multinational and multireligious composition of the empire, the king is provoked by a “certain people scattered and dispersed among the people of the provinces” whose “laws are different” and “who do not keep the king’s laws” (Esther 3:8). Haman’s advice to the king is that such a people cannot be permitted to remain and that they must be destroyed (Esther 3:9). The narrative tension in the story is generated by the conflict that results from this policy—which is only resolved when the Jews are able to turn the table on their enemies in a great slaughter (Esther 9:1). The empire was religiously and ethnically plural, but it was hardly a tolerant regime.

Similar themes appear in the account in Daniel of the Hebrew youths, trained in the language, literature, and wisdom of the Chaldeans (Daniel 1:4), refusing to defile themselves with the king’s delicacies in obedience to the Mosaic law (Daniel 1:8). Notably, when Daniel reveals the content and meaning of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream the king’s confession is that Daniel’s God is the “God of gods” and the “Lord of kings” (Daniel 2:47). Likewise, when Nebuchadnezzar commands all of the satraps, administrators, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that he has set up (Daniel 3:2), and when he commands all of the peoples, nations, and languages within his dominion to fall down and worship the image of gold (3:4–5), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego (note their Babylonian divinity names) refuse to serve Nebuchadnezzar’s gods or worship the image he had set up because of their allegiance to their own God (3:12, 16–18, 28). This is again followed by a further acknowledgment by Nebuchadnezzar, issued to “all peoples, nations and languages,” that the God of the Hebrews is the “most high” God who has an everlasting dominion and who does all according to his own will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth (Daniel 4:1–3, 34–35). The book of Daniel is replete with such lessons, including the accounts of Belshazzar, who is depicted as celebrating his conquest of the temple at Jerusalem and then learning that his kingdom is to be given to another (Daniel 5:1, 4, 19, 25–28), and of Darius the Mede, who is seduced by his many and various officials into elevating himself into an object of prayers and petitions above any other “god or man” (6:7).

The tensions created by the existence of a religiously plural society are thus especially associated in the biblical literature with the emergence of multinational empires. This was particularly the situation during the post-exilic and intertestamental eras. Ezra begins with a proclamation of Cyrus in

21 See also Daniel 2:47; Psalms 136:3; 2 Maccabees 13:4.

22 See also Esther 3:12, 8:9.

which his possession of “all the kingdoms of the earth” is recited and the Jews are permitted to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:2–3). Much of the narrative in Ezra-Nehemiah is concerned with the opposition encountered by the Jews and their attempts to secure royal permission and support for their efforts to rebuild the temple, reconstruct the city walls, and reestablish faithful adherence to their religious law (Ezra 5:1–2).<sup>23</sup> Likewise, 1 Maccabees opens with a recitation of Alexander of Macedon’s conquest of many countries, nations, and princes and the oppressive policies of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who required the Jews to give up their national identity and religious customs (1 Maccabees 1:1–4, 41–50).

The New Testament is framed similarly. Luke is careful to tell us that it was during the reign of Caesar Augustus, under the rule of Quirinius governor of Syria, and in the context of an imperial decree that census should be taken of the inhabited world, that Jesus the Christ was born, in the city of David (Luke 2:1–4, 11). Likewise, it is under the rule of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate governor of Judea, and Herod tetrarch of Galilee—and during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—that the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness (Luke 3:1–3). From the beginning, Herod sought to kill the one born to be king of the Jews (Matthew 2:1–2, 13, 16). Jesus, and his followers after him, were accused of being disloyal to the decrees of Caesar (Luke 23:2; Acts 17:7), even though Jesus had counseled that one ought to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s (Luke 20:25). For although the church proclaimed Jesus to be the only potentate, the King of kings and the Lord of lords (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14, 19:16), his was a kingdom that was not of this world (John 18:36). The followers of this Christ were being formed into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in which there is “neither Jew nor Greek” (Galatians 3:28)<sup>24</sup> but rather many nations, tribes, and tongues (Revelation 7:9), whose citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).<sup>25</sup> The citizens of this kingdom do not war according to the flesh, and yet their spiritual weapons are mighty for the pulling down of strongholds (2 Corinthians 6:7, 10:3–5).<sup>26</sup>

It was developments such as these that gave rise to the idea of a nation within a nation, of a community of resident aliens whose religious allegiances might be different to those of the ruling authorities. And it is upon these and other teachings of the New Testament that any “two kingdoms” theology must principally rely.

## POLITICS AND ESCHATOLOGY

What does this imply, then, for the “politics” of the New Testament? VanDrunen suggests that the church’s engagement with civic matters is properly concerned with the pursuit of civil justice, understood in the very mundane and limited sense of finding “articles of peace” on which peoples of diverse comprehensive beliefs can agree (163–65). This may be a wise and prudent way to think about the matter, but does it take sufficient account of how the New Testament envisages the church’s witness to the nations?

In the biblical canon, the nations are conceived as playing an eschatologically significant role. Many of the prophets had foreseen that the servant of the Lord would be a light to the nations and would bring justice and salvation to the many peoples of the earth (e.g., Isaiah 42:1–6,

23 See also Ezra 5:15–17, 6:6–22, 7:11–26; Nehemiah 2:6–9, 8:1–8, 13–18, 9:28–39, 12:44–47, 13:1–31.

24 See also Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 5:10; Romans 10:12.

25 See also Ephesians 2:12, 19.

26 See also Ephesians 6:10–20; Matthew 26:52.



51:4–5). They spoke of a time when all nations and tongues would be gathered together and the kings of the earth would prostrate themselves before the Lord and his anointed (Isaiah 2:2–4).<sup>27</sup> Many of these passages are quoted or alluded to in the New Testament as finding their fulfilment in Jesus Christ through the work of his apostles (Matthew 12:17–21; Acts 13:47–49).<sup>28</sup> For it was intrinsic to the calling of the apostles to “disciple all the nations” (Matthew 28:19, μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη), bearing witness to them and their kings (Matthew 10:18),<sup>29</sup> calling on them to submit to the one given authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18)<sup>30</sup> so that they be numbered among those who bring their glory and honor to the eternal city (Revelation 21:24–26).

As Paul put it in his address to the city of Athens, while each nation had descended from just one man and now occupied its appointed territory, with the advent of Christ all are now called to repent (Acts 17:26, 30). For the eschatological expectation was that every knee would bow and every tongue confess the Lordship of Christ, just as the Roman soldiers had done in jest (Matthew 27:29, Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:9–11). The apostles accordingly addressed their witness to all manner of people: their kings, rulers, and officials (Acts 4:19–20);<sup>31</sup> the inhabitants of entire nations, cities, and villages (Acts 2:14);<sup>32</sup> and entire households within those cities (Acts 16:15)<sup>33</sup>—just as Christ had taught them (Matthew 10:12–14; Luke 19:9). The gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) cut through and brought division within nations, cities, and households, but its message was addressed to them all (Matthew 10:35–36).<sup>34</sup>

The eschatological significance of this witness to the nations—and its Noahic provenance—is underscored in the book of Revelation. For the new song that is sung to the Lamb recalls his work of redemption in precisely these terms: that he was slain and with his blood he purchased for God those “out of every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9, 7:9). The martyrs also cry out from under the altar for just vengeance to be taken for the shedding of their blood, a just judgment that is later visited upon those who had shed the blood of saints and prophets and been given of their blood to drink (Revelation 6:10, 16:6).

This imagery reaches a climax in the rise and fall of Babylon, the great imperial city, positively drunk with the blood of the martyrs and the saints, presiding over many peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues and reigning over the kings of the earth (Revelation 17:6, 15, 18).<sup>35</sup> In this apocalyptic vision, the life-blood has the same twofold significance that appears in the Noahic covenant: there is the sacrifice of the spotless Lamb by whose blood-shedding multitudes of every tribe and nation are redeemed; and there is the final vengeance enacted against those who shed human blood without just cause (Revelation 5:9, 16:6). For at the final judgment all the nations are arrayed before the Son of Man, whose kingly judgment discerns those who shall inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for them since the very foundation of the world (Matthew 25:31–34).

27 See also Isaiah 49:6–7; 66:18–23; Jeremiah 3:17; Micah 4:1–5; Zechariah 8:20–23; Psalms 2:7–12; see also Genesis 49:10.

28 See also Luke 2:29–32; Acts 2:45–46, 4:25–26, 26:23; Revelation 11:18.

29 See also Matthew 24:14; Luke 21:13; Acts 9:15.

30 See also Acts 26:29; see also John 19:11.

31 See also Acts 5:29, 7:51, 8:27.

32 See also Acts 13:16, 17:22, 19:35.

33 See also Acts 16:31, 18:8; Romans 16:10; 1 Corinthians 1:16, 16:15; 1 Timothy 3:4–5, 12, 5:8; 2 Timothy 4:19.

34 See also Matthew 12:25; John 6:64; Acts 14:4, 17:4–5, 12–13, 32–34, 28:24–25.

35 See also Revelation 18:24, 19:2.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Noahic covenant is thus the fountainhead of a great deal. It looks back to many elements of the Adamic covenant and anticipates much in the Mosaic and the new covenant. Is the Noahic covenant the unique origin and pure source of the “earthly kingdom” (29)? That is a proposition more difficult to sustain. For much of what the Noahic covenant requires and entails appears to have a redemptive and eschatological significance as well. The prohibition of the consumption of animal flesh with its lifeblood is not merely a food purity law or an injunction for the humane slaughter of animals. It is associated with and anticipates a system of blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, the requirement of a just response to the shedding of man’s blood not only is a requirement of earthly justice but also looks forward to the final atoning sacrifice that would demonstrate God’s justice while justifying those who have faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:25–26). And the many peoples and nations that have emerged from the loins of their ancestor Noah are not merely artifacts of this present world, but are objects of divine judgment, mercy, and eternal redemptive concern.

If we are to understand by *civil government* an institution that possesses legitimate authority to execute justice in this present world, then we have to look beyond Noah to the institution of the cities of refuge and the establishment of judges and judicial procedures for the determination of guilt that occurred under the Mosaic law. If we are to understand by *civil government* an institution that exercises complete jurisdiction over all people within its geographical bounds no matter what their religion or ethnicity, then we have to look beyond Noah, and even beyond the Mosaic polity, and take into consideration the multinational empires of the exilic and post-exilic eras in which peoples of many nations and faiths were brought together under the one system of rule. And if we are to understand by *civil government* an institution that is common to human beings and does not discriminate on grounds of race or establish a particular religion in its midst, then we have to look beyond Noah to the founding of a kingdom that is not of this world, the earthly servants of which, although they live as exiles at this present time, are ambassadors and heralds of the one who has been proclaimed King of kings and Lord of lords.<sup>36</sup>

Nicholas Aroney

*Professor of Constitutional Law, University of Queensland*

---

36 Oliver O’Donovan observes wisely that “those who have asserted that a conception of Two Kingdoms is fundamental to Christian political thought have spoken truly, though at great risk of distorting the truth if they simply leave it at that. The unity of the kingdoms, we may say, is the heart of the Gospel, their duality is the pericardium. Proclaiming the unity of God’s rule in Christ is the task of Christian witness; understanding the duality is the chief assistance rendered by Christian reflection.” Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82.