

Towards a political theology of nations

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Abstract

This paper distinguishes between an apocalyptic and a messianic perspective on the theology of nations. With reference to the gospel emphasis on Jesus' peripatetic strategy of opening the land to the nations, it proposes that the fullness of expression of a nation manifests when tribes, tongues, and people come together in all their unique variety and chronological history in relationship with a particular geography and pursue a politics of love. It suggests that this is the work of the kingdom of God as distinct from the telos of the nation state, and that enabling this fullness to the uttermost parts of the earth is the messianic calling of the church, now expedited by three new generations of lived experience of the Spirit since the early twentieth century Pentecostal renewal. It concludes that the ecclesia should embark on an integral transformation of ourselves and our ways of living, and open up, utilise, or ignore existing nation state structures and borders and get on with the task. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's prophetic sermon, *The Church and the Kingdom*, (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012), and Monsignor Peter Hocken's final book *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2009), attention is given to the notion of the messianic in these two perspectives. Note is taken of the tendency to identify Israel with the messianic in an apocalyptic view of eschatology in Hocken's work, in contrast to Agamben's alternative identification of the messianic with kingdom life in the penultimate, which I identify as the politics of love, or kenarchy. Predicated on my research in *Church, Gospel and Empire* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), the paper suggests that Hocken's strong rebuttal of the replacement of Israel by the church needs to be applied to an earlier replacement of the kingdom with Israel. In affirmation of this, the two narrative approach to the Hebrew Bible, advocated by theologians such as Walter Brueggemann and Wesley Howard-Brook is outlined. Finally, Orthodox theologian Brad Jersak's Johannine and universal exegesis of Zechariah's "they will look on me whom they have pierced" (Zech 12: 10), and political theorist Warren Magnusson's encouragement to see like a city, are seen to indicate that a truly messianic ecclesia will advance a progressive politics of love in our twenty-first century cities and their hinterlands.

Preface

This essay is predicated on several radical implications of my research thesis. However I am aware that not everyone reading this will have read my book *Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics*

of Sovereignty Impregnated the West which sets these out together with the subsequent related books *The Fall of the Church* and the symposium of essays edited by Julie Tomlin and myself entitled *Discovering Kenarchy*. For the purposes of clarity, while being aware that not all readers will accept these implications, I offer them here in the hope that they will provide a catalyst at least, for thinking about a healthy society. The first of these is that the nation state is a progeny of empire, where power and money ultimately dominate all other considerations. It follows that a nation state is not and never can be a truly peaceful or healthy society. A second implication is that the church has been in partnership with or subsumed by the sovereignty system on which empire and now nation state is based since at least the fourth century and that this has deformed its subsequent theology and practice despite significant radical movements that I describe as the love stream. Consequently, most expressions of church carry and often promote the same unhealthy oppressions as those promulgated by the state. Thirdly and more positively, an incarnational gospel, or Jesus hermeneutic, is a crucial way of recovering an ecclesial counter-politics for healthy human life among the peoples of planet earth. It is with this in mind that the paper proposes a theology of nations that can hopefully enable healing not just of individuals but society and, indeed, the planet as a whole.

Reconceiving time

In his beautiful sermon given before the Bishop of Paris, in Notre Dame in 2010, Giorgio Agamben spells out several crucial distinctions in the way we conceive time. He contrasts chronological time and messianic time. Chronological time is the time that passes by, irrespective of what is happening. He points out that in the Judaic tradition there is a distinction between two times and two worlds; “the *olam hazzeh*, the time stretching from the creation of the world to its end, and the *olam habba*, the time that begins after the end of time.”¹ Messianic time is the time between those two times when time is divided by the messianic event, which he regards as the resurrection but which I would extend to the complete Jesus event from conception to ascension. Agamben also distinguishes between messianic time and apocalyptic time. The latter he views as the end of time, whereas messianic time is the time of the end. This is a most important distinction. The end of time is a moment in chronological time, which has not yet arrived, and although it may have significant aspects to be aware of, it is not yet here. However, the time of the end is here now, and is always here once the decisive messianic event has taken place. This messianic time “pulses and moves

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*. Trans. Leland De La Durantaye. (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012), 8.

within chronological time and transforms chronological time from within.”² To take our eschatological bearing from the end of time is to miss the full import of the messianic event. We are left with a day of judgement for the world and/or a kingdom especially preserved for people such as Israel or the church, instead of a kingdom available as a gift for all peoples within the saeculum, which is the time that remains between the messianic event and the end of time.

Agamben makes a further helpful distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate. The ultimate is the nature of the messianic event, its transcendent character, its expression of the kingdom of God intersecting chronological time. It is summed up by Jesus’ statement in Mark’s gospel that “the kingdom of God is at hand”.³ The Greek word ‘*eggizo*’ used for “at hand” does not mean chronologically soon but physically proximate.⁴ Taken in conjunction with the writer’s identification of Jesus with the Lord that Isaiah announced, Jesus and the kingdom of God are clearly aligned.⁵ While the messianic event is identified with the ultimate, the penultimate refers to each succeeding manifestation of the transforming impact of messianic time among the nations, something that I have referred to elsewhere as the kenarchic rhythm of life⁶ and that the apostle John simply refers to as eternal life.⁷ Chronological time is identified with the endless economic rule of law and state,⁸ which left to its own devices results in the complete juridification and commodification of everything.⁹ In other words, this is the demonic tendency that Jesus exposed, of living by bread alone without any word from the mouth of God.¹⁰ This results, as Agamben puts it, in the confusion between “what we might believe, hope, say and love, and that which we are obliged to do or not do, say or not say,”¹¹ and the resultant crisis loss of creative potential and imagination that ensues. It follows that for any healthy society to function in chronological time there must be a transcendent-immanent inception of messianic life.¹²

² Agamben, 12.

³ Mark 1: 15.

⁴ See G. Abbot-Smith, *Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 127.

⁵ Mark 1: 1-8.

⁶ See “What Are the Politics of Love?” In Roger Haydon Mitchell ed. *Cultivating New Post-secular Political Space* (Routledge, 2019).

⁷ John 17: 3.

⁸ Agamben, 35.

⁹ Agamben, 40.

¹⁰ Matthew 4: 4.

¹¹ Agamben, 40.

¹² Finding the vocabulary suitable to describe the way in which messianic time impinges on chronological time is quite a challenge. I bring together transcendence and immanence here to recognise both the experience of something other to chronological time’s captivity to the domination system of empire and its actual, this-

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Drawing from Agamben's insights and applying an incarnational lens to the Hebrew Scriptures, we can conclude that right from the word go, the nations evolved around a sovereignty system of law and state iterated in chronological time as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and finally Greece and Rome. Following Agamben's crucial distinctions, we can posit that firstly Israel, and now the ecclesia, were configured as a means to the salvation of the *ethnae* of humanity, which the sovereignty system otherwise holds in varying degrees of captivity. In this sense, both Israel and the church were originary messianic initiatives. The calling that Agamben distinguishes as existing between the resurrection and the end of time, viewed in this way actually existed from the calling of Abraham, and so the messianic calling of Israel similarly pulsed and moved within chronological time from within. This pulsing and moving often lost momentum or almost disappeared in chronological history when the people of God embraced the sovereignty system and its accompanying chronological timeframe, and failed to live out their penultimate messianic calling. As a result, the sovereignty system of law and state extended chronological time through centuries of apathy, oppression and conflict among the tribes and nations. This messianic role is not limited to Israel, as on the Hebrew Bible's own terms, Hagar, Zipporah¹³, Job and Nebuchadnezzar, to name but a few, were all non-Jews who experienced outbreaks of the ultimate into chronological history in a way that challenged the captivity of normative social experience.

The advent of Jesus was positioned to fulfil and advance this messianic potential by the *katargēsis* of Israel's stray into law and statehood. *Katargēsis* is the word used by the apostle Paul to refer to the Messiah's capacity to bring to an end, or render inoperative,¹⁴ the captivity of sovereign law and to draw through the originary remnant of the divine intention for humankind that it subsumed. This insight, present in the gospel writers' depiction of Jesus' self-understanding of his fulfilment of the Hebrew law and prophets,¹⁵ is crucial to the practical progress of the messianic in the present. Namely, it renders inoperative the negative consequences of the sovereignty system while at the same time drawing through anything originally messianic within it. This is how it pulsates and moves within chronological time to transform it. The triumphs of those who have lived

worldly grounding in everyday life. I use the word "inception" to indicate its penultimate, not yet complete character, but also its otherworldly origin, as explored imaginatively in the 2010 film of that name.

¹³ See Michael Huffman's article in this volume of *The Kenarchy Journal*.

¹⁴ For a helpful treatment of this see Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains* trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 95-99.

¹⁵ Consider for example Matthew 5: 17-19 with the subsequent example of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" as fulfilled by "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies", 5: 38-44.

out their messianic calling together with their experiences of suffering and rejection through centuries of seeming loss and failure provide example of how faith accesses the messianic in order to achieve this. There is nothing theoretical about their engagement of the ultimate with the penultimate in the midst of chronological time, even though it is partial, something that the Hebrew Scriptures' story is largely about, as we shall consider again later in this paper. As the writer of the book of Hebrews puts it, they are those "of whom the world was not worthy, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect."¹⁶

The nature of the nations

From this perspective, the messianic purpose of Israel was the blessing of all the nations of the earth¹⁷ in order that they too might begin to experience a shalomic society by embracing the one who is God of the whole earth and not just Israel. Again, from the incarnational perspective, this peace, pointed to in the Mosaic covenant, was fulfilled in the life and teaching of Jesus, together with his death, resurrection and ascension, and is now the messianic gift for all the nations of the earth. The ecclesia too, was similarly positioned to *katargēse* the juridical and political systems of this world in penultimate time as a gift for the nations. Thus far, in this paper we have described the nations interchangeably as *ethnae*,¹⁸ tribes, tongues and extended family groupings. This is the assumption of the pre-historic, mythological¹⁹ roots of the world's people from the Biblical perspective.²⁰ For the purposes of this exploratory paper, it is enough, I think, to recognise that the pursuit of economic and environmental peace and security through the sovereignty of law and state, defended or imposed by war and money, came to characterise and shape these various expressions of the human social condition in chronological history. Whether this identification of chronological time with the captivity of the nations to sovereign power is ascribed to a specific temporal fall, or is simply the way things are observed to be, it is clear from an incarnational perspective that our understanding of nations in terms of law and state is a consequence of this. However, it is not their necessary determinative nature.

¹⁶ Hebrews 11: 38-40.

¹⁷ Genesis 12: 3.

¹⁸ Greek for Gentiles

¹⁹ I use these terms pre-historic and mythological without prejudice as to anyone's position on the literal truth or historicity of the Genesis accounts.

²⁰ Genesis 4: 17-22; 5: 1-32; 9: 18-19; 10: 1-32.

In marked contrast, the Christ event sets out a very different view of the nature and role of the nations. Jesus is introduced as a member of one of the tribes of Israel, for the purposes of saving his people from their sins²¹ but clearly not as a ruler, reformer or restorer of the juridical and state structures of the day. Rather, he is located from the start at the socio-political margins, denied shelter in the Bethlehem inn and forced to flee as an immigrant to the land of Egypt.²² On his family's return from exile, he grew up in Nazareth in "Galilee of the nations."²³ His references to being called to the lost sheep of the house of Israel²⁴ recall their loss of messianic role.²⁵ His extensive peripatetic progress through the land of Palestine began in the multi-ethnic margins of Galilee and reached out to include Phoenicia, Caesarea Philippi and the land of the Gerasenes, none of which, arguably, had ever been part of ancient Israel. His encounters with the Samaritan woman, the Roman centurion, Legion, and the Canaanite woman all exemplify his calling to identify with and bless all the families of the earth.²⁶ Finally, the great commission of Matthew's gospel and the Lukan account of his post resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus place him in counterpoint to the expectation of a restored Israel state and contextualise the resurrection as the sign of his orientation to the nations. The telling statement "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem,"²⁷ can only refer to God's admonishment of Israel recorded by Hosea, to return to their calling to bless the nations. "Come, let us return to the Lord. For he has torn us, but he will heal us; he has wounded us, but he will bandage us. He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day that we may live before Him."²⁸ Jesus unequivocally presents himself as the fulfilment of this. All of this unmistakably dislodges the identity of nations away from nation statehood and sovereign empire and towards the messianic fullness of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is expressly introduced by Luke as beginning to "rule" when the law and state of Israel under the Roman occupation was already in place.²⁹ Indeed, all references to kingdom, rule, leadership and the like brought an immediate challenge to the accepted leadership caucus and mores because they expressed an authority distinctly other to the law and state structures of the

²¹ Mtt 1: 21.

²² Lk 1: 48; 2: 7; Mtt 2: 13-15.

²³ Lk 2: 39; cf. Isaiah 9: 1.

²⁴ Mtt 10: 6; 15: 24.

²⁵ Cf. Zechariah 12.

²⁶ Jn 4: 1-42; Mtt 8: 5-13; Mk 5: 1-20; Mtt 15: 22-28.

²⁷ Lk 24:46-47.

²⁸ Hosea 6: 1-3.

²⁹ Cf. Lk 3: 1-2 and 3: 23. Note that *archō* usually translated here, as "began his ministry," is the general word for rule, so can be read legitimately as "began his rule".

day.³⁰ On those rare occasions when the gospel accounts do show Jesus encouraging people to follow the laws of the time³¹ it is in the context of opening up the way for his alternative messianic kingdom to penetrate the existing system more deeply. The roots of this kingdom language arise in the ultimate source of Israel's calling³² as fulfilled in the messianic character of the kingdom of God with respect to the empires of chronological history in the visions of the book of Daniel.³³ Jesus' famous messianic challenge of Pilate's authority is clear and he is crucified precisely because he does not recognise the chronological empire's law and state or that of the Jewish authorities submitted to it. Instead, his death embodies the cruciform, kenotic, life-poured-out loving kenarchy configured by this journal. All the messianic character of the instatement of women, prioritising of children, advocacy for the poor, reintegration of humanity and creation, welcoming of strangers, freeing of prisoners and healing of the sick that summed up his incarnation culminated at the cross. It was then substantiated by the resurrection and carried in the poured-out Spirit of Jesus after the triumph of the ascension for the ecclesia to embrace and impart into the nations of the earth.

The telos of renewal

The academic work of Peter Hocken in tracing and evaluating the twentieth century spiritual renewal movements has been ground breaking.³⁴ For those of us who have lived through and been forever changed by experiences and manifestations of the Holy Spirit and who wish to honour, understand and offer them as gifts for the blessing of the nations, this has been invaluable. Throughout his pioneer role in the Society for Pentecostal Studies, the European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association and the UK Pentecostal and Charismatic Leaders Conference from the nineteen-eighties through to his death in 2017, the impact of his life has embodied the messianic for many of us. His final book *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements: The Tensions of the Spirit* is a typically honest academic attempt to set out and explore the implications of related transcendent initiatives impinging on the twentieth century. I have already dealt at some length with the three outpourings of the Spirit and how they relate to the sovereignty system in *Church, Gospel and Empire*, Chapter 5, "Conduits of Christendom: Biopower

³⁰ For an exploration of the function of authority without sovereignty, see my chapter "Authority Without Sovereignty" in Anthony J. Carroll, Marthe Kerkwijk, Michael Kirwan and James Sweeney eds. *Towards a Kenotic Vision of Authority in the Catholic Church* (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015).

³¹ Mk 1: 44; Mtt 23: 3.

³² Psalm 45: 6.

³³ See for example Daniel 2: 44-45; 4: 34; 7: 13-14.

³⁴ See, for example his three books *The Strategy of the Spirit* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1966); *Streams of Renewal* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986); *The Glory and the Shame* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1994).

and the Century of the Spirit.”³⁵ Many of the relevant sources can be found there and I do not propose to rehearse them here. My purpose, rather, is to explore briefly the contrast between an apocalyptic and a messianic view of time and the consequences for our understanding of these and indeed any other similar movements.

One of Hocken’s great concerns is the lack of coherent unity of these movements across the various expressions of church. As he puts it “the visions of restoration (new church) and renewal (historic church) have hardly ever really met”³⁶ and “the Pentecostal-charismatic-Evangelical world and the Roman Catholic Church tend to operate as though the other is at best irrelevant to God’s purposes and at worst an enemy.”³⁷ My point here is not to oppose the ecumenism that he sees as one of the three most significant initiatives of the past century. It is rather to dig deeper into the primary purpose of the ecclesia and its revival. An apocalyptic understanding of the church and its restoration or renewal tends to see the primary purpose of the church, and indeed the incarnation, as a divine initiative to deposit the human race, or at least as many as possible, into a container ready for the return of Christ at the end of time. While it does not exclude a social ethic as part of that initiative,³⁸ the fullness of the kingdom is clearly confined to the return of Christ. This becomes very clear in the last chapter of Hocken’s book entitled “The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Light of the Second Coming of Christ.”³⁹ Here he addresses “the connection between the movements of the Holy Spirit already examined and the coming of the Lord Jesus in glory to establish the kingdom of God.” He distinguishes two distinct dimensions of this connection, “first, the way in which the movements of the Spirit enhance and restore the blessed hope of the saviour’s return; and secondly, the way in which a strongly eschatological orientation provides the necessary context for bringing together the different currents in the Pentecostal, charismatic and Messianic Jewish movements.”⁴⁰

The problem with this is that it effectively reduces the significance of the families of humanity to a segment of the church waiting in, or at best attempting to accelerate, chronological history for the end of time. This removes the messianic nature of the kingdom of God. Instead of

³⁵ Roger Haydon Mitchell, *Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

³⁶ Peter Hocken, *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements: The Tensions of the Spirit*, (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2009) 80.

³⁷ Hocken, 94.

³⁸ Cf. *The Lausanne Covenant* which states: “Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.” John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant* (Worldwide Publications, 1975).

³⁹ Hocken, Ch. 6.

⁴⁰ Hocken, 117.

seeing it as an incarnational advent of ultimate reality, what Hans Urs von Balthasar describes as a scission in time⁴¹, able to bring blessing to the nations otherwise in thrall to the sovereignty system and lost in chronological history, it is reduced to a future kingdom that comes after the end of chronological time. Of course, this is a huge temptation at times of particularly extreme conflict, confusion, chaos, upheaval and threats of extinction like today. What difference can we make by our seemingly small messianic actions of advocacy for the poor or attempts to reintegrate humanity and the environment? It is not that Hocken ignores the importance of the social impact of the gospel or fails to recognise the evidence that the twentieth century moves of the Spirit had a significant social element. Indeed he pushes back somewhat on the criticism that the charismatic movement has been indifferent to issues of social justice and world development⁴² and draws on Anglican scholar Peter Percy's criticism of the new churches' lack of incarnational, kenotic theology to explain their apparent lack of socio-political impact.⁴³ However, it remains that this is not the primary purpose and outcome of the incarnation as he sees it. It is apocalyptic in purpose and outcome, not messianic.

The problem with apocalyptic views of the contemporary nation state of Israel

Nowhere is this apocalyptic deficit more problematic than when it comes to Hocken's reflection on the Messianic Jewish movements. The difficulty is immediately apparent. The choice of the description "Messianic" demands critical explanation. Now, it is certainly not my intention to question the validity and integrity of communities of Jewish believers in Yeshua, nor the very real experiences of the Holy Spirit among them. However, as Hocken clearly recognises, early twentieth century Christian missions among the Jews were motivated by an apocalyptic interpretation of the place of Israel in the future history of the last days.⁴⁴ Hocken traces the shift of nomenclature from Hebrew Christians to Messianic Jews, to the Jesus movement that broke out in California in the 1960s during which many young Jews came to faith. Given that they identified Yeshua as their messiah, what could be more obvious than to describe themselves and their communities as messianic? It is, after all, a great description of those who have encountered Jesus in the midst of chronological time, and found themselves in the penultimate! The difficulty comes when this truly messianic experience is interpreted apocalyptically. However, Hocken certainly views it that way. He

⁴¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Word and Redemption: Essays in Theology 2*, trans. A.V. Littledale (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 154, n. 3.

⁴² Hocken, 69.

⁴³ Hocken, 84.

⁴⁴ Hocken, 99.

states, “The Messianic movement has an affinity with the prophetic since the reappearance of a Jewish church is itself a prophetic sign.”⁴⁵ This takes us straight to Hocken’s espousal of the popular charismatic rejection of so-called replacement theology, or supercessionism. There is, as I see it, a real tendency from the Council of Nicaea onwards to replace an apocalyptic understanding of Israel with the church, which is understood in a similar way. Although not the intended outcome of all those who have espoused it, this has led to appalling ill treatment of the Jews, including the assimilation of Jewish believers and the attempted destruction of their culture and identity. The resultant anti-Semitism, persecution and pogroms against Jews have stained European history over the centuries to the terrible climax of the Holocaust. Far from having a problem with rejecting this, a truly messianic approach demands that we identify with the perpetrators and repent on their behalf. Something that I, with others, have done publicly many times.⁴⁶ Jesus and his original disciples were all Jews and we owe much of Jewish history and culture respect and honour therefore.

However, the assumption that Israel and the kingdom of God were the same thing had devastating consequences for Israel and their neighbours in Scripture history, and tragically continues to do so today. The more serious theological error is not the replacement of Israel by the church, but the replacement of the kingdom of God by Israel and now following on from it, the confusion of the kingdom of God with the church. The work of God is the blessing of all the families of the earth, and this was Israel’s original messianic calling as we have already considered, and it is now the ecclesia’s. The mistaken apocalyptic understanding of Israel has meant that the re-founding of Israel as a nation state in Palestine in 1948 has been mistakenly regarded as a fulfilment of Hebrew Biblical prophecy and tends to make the new state a symbolic talisman for the imperial West. An emphasis on blessing the current nation state of Israel and praying uncritically for the peace of Jerusalem has generally bereft them of the truly messianic destiny of all nations, which their ordinary calling at times fulfilled. Tragically, its capital is now one of the few contemporary cities where racial cleansing and effective apartheid is officially tolerated. Worse, the confusion of the present nation state of Israel with the fulfilment of the work of the kingdom of God, and the relation to it of Western nation states such as the USA and UK, has displaced the crucial political calling of the ecclesia to bless and transform all the nations of the world.

Two Narratives

⁴⁵ Hocken, 101.

⁴⁶ See Brian Mills and Roger Mitchell, *The Sins of the Fathers* (Tonbridge, Kent: Sovereign World, 1999); Roger and Sue Mitchell, *Target Europe* (Tonbridge, Kent: Sovereign World, 2001), 20-23.

The work of applied theologians Walter Brueggemann and Wesley Howard-Brook is hugely helpful in exposing two distinct narratives within the Hebrew Bible. While employing different language to Agamben, their distinctive insights synchronise with the way in which he uses the words messianic and apocalyptic, which I have extended and applied in the course of this paper. Brueggemann uses the concept of the common good as a paradigm for the messianic, whereas Howard-Brook uses the idea of two religions, the one of creation and the other of empire, which intertwine throughout biblical history. The religion of creation coincides with our use of the messianic. This comparatively brief paper is not the place to set out their theses at length, and nor do I necessarily agree with all the accompanying exegesis. However, the overall principle points towards a consistently incarnational direction for our understanding of the nature and fullness of what Oliver O'Donovan describes as "the desire of the nations."⁴⁷ Beginning with what is seen as Israel's core memory in Egypt, Brueggemann exposes what he calls "Pharaoh's system of paucity" with its economic exploitation, and goes on to set in contrast what he calls "God's offer of abundance," or neighbourhood, which he describes as a covenantal commitment to the common good.⁴⁸ The whole of what he characterises as the Exodus-Sinai-Deuteronomy narrative, is the application of God's offer of neighbourhood for the world. However, he also exposes "a counter-narrative in the biblical tradition that resists the claims of exodus-Sinai-Deuteronomy,"⁴⁹ a narrative that constantly tends back to the world of empire that Israel experienced under Pharaoh. As Howard-Brook puts it, "We can understand one of the Bible's religions to be grounded in *the experience of and ongoing relationship with the Creator God*, leading to a covenantal bond between that God and God's people for the blessing and abundance of *all* people and *all* creation. The other, while sometimes *claiming* to be grounded in that same God, is actually a human invention used to justify and legitimate attitudes and behaviours that provide blessing and abundance for *some* at the *expense of others*."⁵⁰

Brueggemann identifies the beginnings of the counter-narrative in the graded system of holiness in the organisation of holy space. He suggests that this affirmed a similarly graded approach to cultic access, moral ratings and economic possibility⁵¹ and points to its increasing influence at the time of Solomon where he identifies a fresh enthrallment with Egypt and a passion for graded holiness,⁵² which extends throughout the ensuing history of Israel. Howard-Brook harnesses such a

⁴⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 21.

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, 44.

⁵⁰ Wesley Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People!* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2010), 9.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, 45.

⁵² Brueggemann, 46.

mass of data in support of his thesis that it is impossible to do any kind of justice to it here. Suffice it to say, that he sets out compellingly the conflict of kingdoms within the biblical text as the substance of the salvation story. We are left with huge questions to ask of the Hebrew Bible's restoration prophets and histories, which the more conservative of us will find challenging. For my part, I take the gospel testimony of Jesus that he fulfils "every jot and tittle" of the Hebrew Scriptures seriously,⁵³ but am also aware of his extraordinary exegetical approach, as Derek Flood elucidates and I have already alluded to.⁵⁴ What is clear is that a prejudicial and discriminatory attitude to nationhood is directly in conflict with an incarnational position and that recourse to the Hebrew prophets in the attempt to expound such in apocalyptic terms presents a huge problem with the gospel Jesus.

The messianic and the city

Zechariah is the book from the Hebrew Bible most quoted either directly or indirectly by Jesus in the gospel testimony, which is a reason to take it very seriously. Brad Jersak has recently set out a perspective on Zechariah 12 that wonderfully culminates the second part of the book as a perfect example of the messianic character of the Jewish nation and demonstrates its fulfilment in the incarnation and emphatically at the cross. This redresses the tendency among advocates of the apocalyptic perspective that utilise the Hebrew prophets to support the current nation state of Israel and through it the notions of manifest destiny and the like, espoused by some Christians with regard to nation states such as the USA and the UK. The second part of the book begins with Chapter 7, where the writer challenges the people to return to their messianic calling. "Thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'⁵⁵ Chapter 8 then depicts a Jerusalem that is a truly holy city of generational, gender and tribal unity where the divine dwells with humanity with the result that all the nations desire this kind of nationhood.⁵⁶ Chapter 9 begins with the uncompromising statement that commentator Joyce G. Baldwin says is best translated, "For the Lord has his eye on all men as on the tribes of Israel,"⁵⁷ and continues with the radical statement "the Philistines will be ... a remnant for

⁵³ Mtt 5: 17-19 (KJV).

⁵⁴ Derek Flood, "Reading the Bible like Jesus did." In *Disarming Scripture* (San Francisco: Metanoia Books), Ch. 2.

⁵⁵ Zech 7: 9-10.

⁵⁶ Zech 8: 23.

⁵⁷ Joyce G Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Leicester and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 159.

our God, and be like a clan in Judah.⁵⁸ Chapter 10 repositions Israel in their messianic role in contrast to the past and present surrounding empires, while Chapter 11 depicts the end of the sovereignty seeking, fallen state in return for thirty pieces of silver. This is taken up directly by the gospel writer as being fulfilled in Christ's betrayal and death.⁵⁹

Chapter 12 has often been regarded as a notoriously difficult passage to exegete. As Jersak states, "We should note that a strictly literal interpretation of this passage has never been fulfilled. In fact, in literal terms, the very opposite happened many times, and on those terms, Zechariah would need to be regarded as a false prophet."⁶⁰ Jersak proceeds to show how Zechariah's prophecy of a day coming when Jerusalem will be "a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling"⁶¹ positions the text "as a prefigurement of the Passion," and locates the fulfilment of God's victory in the "piercing of Yahweh,"⁶² at sight of which the tribes of Israel mourn. This exegesis is clearly borne out by Matthew's gospel, when the writer shifts from the tribes of Israel mourning, to all the tribes of the earth mourning,⁶³ and the book of Revelation begins with its focus, "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him."⁶⁴ The messianic is here stunningly presented as God's ultimate presence in Jerusalem, the representative city, at the point of collision of the two narratives of empire and cruciform love in chronological time. The fullness of this prophetic vision occurs, not at some future end time, but at the time of the end, the messianic event when the incarnation incises Roman and Jewish imperial history. At which point the Godhead is pierced for all people, letting loose a stream of healing, forgiveness and transformation for the nations of the world. What it means to grasp and live out this calling is the messianic challenge for the ecclesia.

The upshot of this is that it is not in nation states but in cities that the tribes of the earth discover their messianic expression, of which Zechariah's Jerusalem is the harbinger. While the nation state is a structure imposed by war, law and money, a city is the coming together of tribes, tongues and nations in a particular geographical space for the expression of the common good. This is the kind of politics that Luke Bretherton describes as "first and foremost the negotiation of a common life between friends, strangers, enemies and the friendless."⁶⁵ As Agamben makes clear,

⁵⁸ Zech 9: 7.

⁵⁹ Zech 11: 13; Mtt 27:9. (Matthew's memory of the books of the Bible was clearly somewhat awry!)

⁶⁰ Jersak, "Setting the Stage: Verses 12:1-9".

⁶¹ Zech 12: 2 (NIV).

⁶² Zech 12: 10.

⁶³ Matt 24: 30.

⁶⁴ Revelation 1: 7.

⁶⁵ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 47.

cities and their citizens can be dominated by sovereign power, but this is not the necessary nature of city life. As he points out, Peter's First Letter defines the ecclesia's relation to chronological time as "the sojourn of a foreigner."⁶⁶ So instead of settled acceptant captives of the system they will live as sojourners, or as Brueggemann has it, those journeying together to the common good, as in the title of his book.⁶⁷

The configuration of the messianic kingdom in terms of Jerusalem is a familiar one. Its role as a geographical city in chronological time has been frequently tragic and contentious. As already indicated, today's Jerusalem is one of the most troubled cities of the world, where a dire imbalance of power signals the injustice endemic to the nation state system and its capital cities. Its position at the time of the incarnation was representative of all the imperial capitals of the world. As Luke's gospel has it, "When he (Jesus) approached Jerusalem, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes.'"⁶⁸ The apostle Paul makes a striking counter-political distinction between Jerusalem, the geographical city of his day, and the messianic role of the city as a symbol, a living template of all cities in the penultimate. "This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother."⁶⁹

All this lends considerable prescience to the contemporary emphasis on the city as new counter-political space for messianic transformation in preference to the nation state. As London mayor Sadiq Khan replied when asked whether he wished to be a candidate for leader of the Labour party and potentially prime Minister of the British nation state, "I'm quite clear, to paraphrase what a former American mayor said ... the 19th century was all about empires; the 20th century was about nation states; in the 21st century the action is all about cities and mayors."⁷⁰ To see like a city, as political theorist Warren Magnusson puts it, is to recognise that it is "the everyday negotiations of life that enable people who are otherwise strangers to live beside one another as neighbours, to pass each other peacefully on the street, work together, do business with one another, or even come together in joint projects for mutual benefit."⁷¹ In the light of Zechariah's vision, the messianic

⁶⁶ 1 Peter 1: 17. See Agamben, *The Church and The Kingdom*, 2.

⁶⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Journey To The Common Good*.

⁶⁸ Lk 19: 41-42.

⁶⁹ Gal 4: 24-26.

⁷⁰ See George Eaton: "Sadiq Khan Interview, Brexit and Covid are a perfect storm against London" in the *New Statesman* 28th April, 2021.

⁷¹ Warren Magnusson, "Seeing Like a State, Seeing Like a City." (Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC, June 3rd, 2008), 7.

event which birthed the ecclesia, and is now carried by it, has the potential to penetrate everyday life in this way. Mike Love's article, which follows this one, unpacks further what it means to be this kind of ecclesia for the city.

Appendix

I thought that it would be helpful to include two significant observations from peer reviewers of this article because they add significant recognition of the potential standpoints⁷² of you, the readers. They both relate to my observations about the contemporary nation state of Israel.

David Benjamin Blower writes:

"I am always cautious of Christian critiques that seem to draw lines between Jewish religion and the State of Israel. I think apocalyptic religious fervour for the State of Israel seems to be very much a product of the Christian religion (and perhaps messianic Judaism, by extension from its evangelical roots), not so much the Jewish one. Jewish rationale on the subject tends to be far more political and "pragmatic", and quite dissonant with their religious sensibilities (which are of course, many and diverse). Normally when Christian theology explores the matter, it is for the consumption of other Christians. Both at Nicaea and through the reformation, the Jewish religion (which was never in the room) got scapegoated for certain ills. In my view, the root of the tragedies emanating from the State of Israel go back to the imperial sovereignty of Christian Europe, and not to tenants of the Jewish religion - not that the Hebrew Bible is free of alarming material, but only that Jewish sensibilities seem better at holding the complexity than the mono-istic tendencies of much Christian interpretation. Religious rationale for the State of Israel is, I think, more a Christian thing, than a Jewish one. All this is to say that I sense this essay is talking more about Christian interpretations of Jewish sacred texts, than about Jewish sacred texts, or Jewish faith itself. That kind of distinction can mean a lot.

I should say, this essay is not without awareness of what I've sketched above. I've pointed out a few aspects where I had queries."

⁷² I use the word 'standpoint' here in the manner adopted by Graham Ward in his standpoint theology. Cf. Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 73-77.

Hugh Osgood writes:

“There are many things that distract the church from its Abrahamic calling to be a blessing to the nations. These include the present role of Israel, confusion over the nature of nation states, and a tendency to see the ‘church age’ as primarily a waiting period prior to an apocalyptic conclusion. For many, an important part of that apocalyptic conclusion is a widespread turning to Christ from within the Jewish community. This in itself is an exciting prospect and the writer cites a recent author, whom he respects, who writes of such a movement but interprets it within an apocalyptic framework. The paper argues that there are other ways in which Messianic Judaism, as it has become known, can be understood and better incorporated into God’s present plans and purposes, and details why such a reassessment is important if we are to see the messianic age in which we live bring blessing to the nations in the way God intends.

I appreciate that there is much more to the paper than this and value its wider reach, but nonetheless felt I should reassure on the Messianic Judaism point in particular.”

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