

The Kingdom and the Powers

Political Context of the Bible – Part One

Define Politics

- from *polis* (city) in ancient Greece
- the total complex of relations between people living in society (Webster)
- The activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power.

Class Objectives

- Make you think with a theo-political lens
- Help you understand your responsibility as a citizen of God's kingdom first
- Challenge your assumptions and political positions

Class Non-Objectives

- Tell you how to vote
- Support one party, candidate, or agenda

Class Outline

1. Political Context of the Bible (Part 1)
2. Political Context of the Bible (Part 2)
3. The Church and Politics
4. The Christian and Politics

Part 1: The Nation of Israel

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine,⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6a)

Kingship – Deuteronomy 17:14-20

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,"¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite.¹⁶ The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again."¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.¹⁸ When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites.¹⁹ It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees²⁰ and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

Militarism – Deuteronomy 20:1-8

When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you. ² When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. ³ He shall say: “Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them. ⁴ For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.” ⁵ The officers shall say to the army: “Has anyone built a new house and not dedicated it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else may dedicate it. ⁶ Has anyone planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else enjoy it. ⁷ Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else marry her.” ⁸ Then the officers shall add, “Is any man afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too.”

Economics – Leviticus 25:13-17

“In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property. ¹⁴ If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other. ¹⁵ You are to buy from your countryman on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. ¹⁶ When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what he is really selling you is the number of crops. ¹⁷ Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God.”

Social justice. Concern for the poor. Economic checks on the rich. Redistribution of wealth. Forgiveness of debt. These aren't liberal or Marxist or “woke” ideals. They're straight out of the Bible. So are other values like small governments, limits on centralized power, and able-bodied people working hard and saving for the future. When Christians think about money and economics, we need to stop letting the rhetoric and categories of Babylon's culture wars shape our values. (Sprinkle, 33)

Social Class and Power – Deuteronomy 16:18-20

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. ¹⁹ Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. ²⁰ Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

Israel's Downfall – 1 Samuel 8:4-20

⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” ⁶ But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. ⁷ And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they

have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.”

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

Part 2: Babylon and Empire

Throughout the Bible, Babylon symbolizes arrogant attempts to rule the world without God through power and oppression. (Sprinkle, 38)

Babel – Genesis 11:4-8

Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. ⁶ The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” ⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.

Exiles in Babylon – Jeremiah 25:8-11

Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: “Because you have not listened to my words, ⁹ I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares the LORD, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. ¹⁰ I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹ This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

Seek the Peace of the City - Jeremiah 29:4-7

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Empire in the Book of Daniel – Daniel 2:31-40, 44

“You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. ³² The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, ³³ its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. ³⁴ While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

³⁶ “This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. ³⁷ You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; ³⁸ in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

³⁹ “After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. ⁴⁰ Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others.

⁴⁴ “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

Recommended Reading

Exiles: The Church in the Shadow of Empire. Preston Sprinkle. David C. Cook, 2024

Jesus and the Powers. N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird. Zondervan, 2024

The Myth of a Christian Nation. Gregory Boyd. Zondervan, 2005

The Politics of Jesus. John Howard Yoder. Eerdmans, 1994

Resident Aliens. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. Abingdon, 2014

Before You Vote. David Platt. DPZ, 2020