

LIVING FROM THE FUTURE: The Missional Implication of Biblical “Utopias”

Purpose & Scope

This paper (1) briefly reviews the concept of “utopia”; (2) notes some of the utopian descriptions in Scripture; (3) suggests three reasons for their canonical presence: (a) for the comfort and hope of believers; (b) to adorn the gospel by revealing and concretizing the longings of the human heart; (c) to reveal the purposes of God); and (4) briefly considers two or three [depending on time] utopian passages (Is 11.1-9; 65.17-25; Rv 21.10-22.5), in order to ask what they reveal about the work of God, and what that revelation implies for the Church.

I shall not survey the bibliography of biblical and systematic theology in order to establish the point that theology’s interest in such passages has traditionally been analytical, descriptive, and harmonizing, attempting to solve such apparent conundrums as, for example, the function of an altar in Ezekiel’s [millennial] temple. I trust that there is no need to belabour this point (which is more applicable to some theological systems than to others).

Nor shall I address eschatological schemas (e.g., millennial or tribulational issues), or such eschatological concerns as continuity and discontinuity between this world and the “next”. All such issues are not only beyond my competence, but rather beside the point of this discussion.

Utopia: The ‘Place that is Not’

In 1516, Sir Thomas More, then Lord Chancellor of England, wrote a book titled *Utopia*¹, in which a traveler named “Raphael” described a civilization that he had discovered upon a remote, island, a civilization in which the social order, indeed all of life, was based solely on reason.² The irony of the book’s title would have been immediately obvious to anyone with a classical education, since “*utopia*” means “no place” in Greek—More’s ideal culture, in fact, did not exist.

More has had many imitators, such as Sir Francis Bacon’s tantalizing fragment titled *New Atlantis* (1624), describing another intellectual and scientific utopia, and Lemuel Gulliver’s report of his visit to a land ruled by the eminently reasonable Houynhnhnms (horses) and infested with a race

¹Written in Latin (with the same [Greek] title), it was translated into and published in English in 1551.

²And a civilization that ended up sounding a lot like an idealized England!

of unreasoning beasts known as Yahoos (Swift 1726). In 1872, Samuel Butler published *Erewhon*,³ a biting satire on social injustice in which crime is a virtue, illness and ugliness crimes, and emotional upset a disease.

We could perhaps even credit every fairytale or story that ends with “and they lived happily ever after” with the same utopian impulse—the hope for and dream of a life of perfect love and happiness—bliss and harmony—without end.

Utopianism is not limited to literature. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and *Das Kapital* (1867, 1885, 1894), Karl Marx developed the Hegelian concept of the world process and logical historical inevitability, using economic force to counter the idea of a perfect society ordered on reason with one based on the inexorable forces of history.

In architecture, the Bauhaus movement, led and typified by Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, *i.a.*, was to foster a perfect society—a new world order—through architecture, by constructing what Gropius called “machines for living [in]” (*Wohnmaschinen*; Jones 1995, 40).⁴ Much earlier, the architectural ideals of Andrea di Pietro (1508-1580), known to history as Palladio, followed by Inigo Jones and Sir Christopher Wren (*i.a.*) attempted to realize and establish the ideals of Classical architecture as a means to a more perfect society.⁵

The twentieth century, perhaps more cynical (or disheartened) regarding the human tendency toward disaster, has seen the rise of a genre that might be called “apparent” or “deceitful” utopias—“perfect” communities that conceal a tragic flaw, or that function only by the machinations of a gubernatorial elite. In, e.g., *Lost Horizon* (Hilton 1933) the valley of eternal life turns out to be a prison, much like General Woundwort’s warren of Efrafa (Adams 19??, ??).⁶ Westerfeld’s popular series begun in *Uglies* and continued in *Pretties* (2005)⁷ is another portrait of a society that is perfect only in appearance (no doubt an intentionally ironic effect, given the series’ focus on external appearance).

³Inverting the book’s title yields “nohwere”, with the archaic “hw-” form of “where”. He also wrote *Erewhon Revisited* (1901).

⁴Unlike More and his many literary imitators, both dialectical materialism (Marxism) and the Bauhaus movement have actually tried to remake the world according to their vision. Their particular visions are, in fact, so closely linked, that many Communist governments adopted the architectural results, if not the underlying philosophy, of the Bauhaus movement (Jones 1995).

⁵A famous Renaissance painting, “A Perfect City” (??, 1????), dramatic represents this vision.

⁶Other examples include *Brave New World* (Huxley 1932), *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1946), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1949), and *The “Lomokome” Papers* (Wouk 1956; “Lomokome” is Hebrew for “no place”, a literal translation of “utopia”). In the story underlying the Broadway musical *Lorna Doone* the villagers have near-eternal life, but only because they live only one day every (??) years.

⁷The trilogy awaits completion in *Specials* (Westerfeld [forthcoming]).

This fictional genre closely overlaps that of the dystopia (“worst-case scenario”), perhaps most familiar from science fiction (e.g., many stories by Bradbury, Asimov, Kafka, *et al.*) and films—far too many to count—such as, e.g., the *Mad Max* series, *Ryan’s Run* (198??, which closely parallels the young adult novella *The Giver* (19????)), and, quite recently, the disintegrating world of Gotham in *Batman begins* (2005).

Utopias are often discussed as though Sir Thomas More had invented the concept (he did coin the term, as far as I know), but his ideal world had already been anticipated by, and was most certainly intended to reflect or even evoke, the world of the *Republic*—Plato’s description of a society ruled by reason, society that could guarantee justice for its citizens. His “republic” was a sort of “enlightened socialism” in which every person had his or her⁸ rôle, ruled over by the class of “philosopher-kings” (post-387 BCE).

Not even Plato, however, was the fount of utopianism.

Hundreds of years earlier, in words and visions vouchsafed to them by their god, men who came to be called “prophets” claimed that a new world order was coming, and would indeed be established by the irruption of a divine kingdom into this world, a kingdom in which wrongs would be righted, true justice realized, peace established, sorrow forgot, and the creational plan fully accomplished. Plato was probably unaware of those far earlier biblical descriptions of an ideal society, if only because of their cultural distance from his world of fourth-century Attic Greece.⁹ About a thousand years before he produced *The Republic*, the people of Israel had received a body of divinely ordained cultic, moral, and political legislation outlining a society that—had it been realized—would have widened the eyes and aroused the envy of the surrounding world.

It is today a commonplace to speak of “the already and the not yet”, to see Pauline morality as incarnating the life of the eschaton, and even to understand the centripetal force of obedience to the Scripture.¹⁰ These perspectives help us understand biblical teaching about the Kingdom of God, but another vast resource for understanding that Kingdom goes neglected and untapped—a source that we may call “biblical utopias”.¹¹

⁸Unlike his student Aristotle, Plato believed strongly in equal rights for women.

⁹Some argue that Mosaic ideas were known in classical Greece (as indeed they could have been, since the alphabet probably moved from the western Levant to Greece long after Moses).

¹⁰Cf., e.g., Bartholomew & Goheen (2004, 192-213).

¹¹Using the term “utopia” in its popular sense, not etymologically.

Biblical Utopias: The Place that Was & that Shall Yet Be

Near the beginning of the book of **Deuteronomy**, the prophet Moses told the people of Israel:

See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as YHWH my God commanded me to do, so that [you] might act in this way in the land into which you are going to take possession of it. Observe [them] and do [them], for that will be your wisdom and your insight in the sight of the peoples who hear all these statutes; they will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people.' For who is a great nation that has gods near to it like YHWH our God whenever we call on Him? Or who is a great nation that has just/righteous statutes and judgments, like all of this teaching which I am putting before you today? (Dt 4.5-8)¹²

Had Israel fulfilled the terms of the covenant by obeying its laws,¹³ the ANE would have seen a society to be envied and emulated, the Kingdom truly come on earth. Having seen, and recognized the superiority of Israelite life, they would have sought the source of Israel's wisdom, and found it in the same covenantal relationship with YHWH. One result of the covenant—and, we might conclude, one of its purposes—was centripetal evangelism (whether fostered by admiration or jealousy—or both!). The beauty of Israel's obedience would draw the nations to YHWH her god.¹⁴

The divine purposes for the covenant went far beyond merely benefiting individual Israelites, or even the nation as a whole (although it outlines and promises specific individual, familial, and national blessings).¹⁵ Its benefits would eventually bless the entire human race. When Israel's immediate neighbours saw her obedience and joined themselves to that covenant, they too would fall under both its obligations and promises, so that their obedience would in turn influence *their* neighbours, &c.; the covenant was the proverbial pebble—obedience would ripple to the ends of the earth, until “the world was filled with the knowledge of YHWH as the waters fill the sea” (Is 11.9; Hb 2.14).

The Kingdom was to be universal, a society in which each individual, household, and institution lived in obedience to and fulfillment of the covenantal statutes—extending the truly utopian theocratic society around the globe.

The book of **Proverbs** is often read as though it comprised a set of precepts for personal morality. This understanding of the book is not completely inaccurate, in that the individual proverbs

¹²Unless indicated otherwise, all translations and emphases are my own.

¹³This distinction between “laws” and “covenant” is deliberate—the term “law” refers to the specific statutes, &c. are contained within the covenant—they are not the covenant, although they are an important part of the covenant.

¹⁴Other pieces of this “covenantal utopia” are the laws of Ex 20-23; Lv (*passim*); Nu (*passim*); Dt 4-26.

¹⁵These promises are both “incidental”, made *passim*, so to speak (e.g., Ex 20.12; Lv 18.28), but are especially focused in the great “blessings and curses” of Lv 26.3-13 and Dt 28.1-14.

do (explicitly or implicitly) describe, prescribe, or prohibit particular behaviours. It is a misleading interpretation, however, since the ultimate purposes of the book, which depend on reading it in light of its original purpose and addressees, are the preservation and welfare of the covenantal state of Israel (Putnam 1996).

Solomon's¹⁶ purpose in composing the book that we know as "Proverbs" was to set forth a covenantally-based description of and standard for leadership that would have transformed Israel from a militarily and commercially successful nation (the former under David, the latter under Solomon his son) into a society whose throne was founded upon true justice (cf., e.g., Pr 16.12; 20.8, 28; 25.5; 29.14) that would have been the envy of the watching world—as, for a brief moment under Solomon, its wisdom and justice were (1 Kgs 3.16-28; 4.29-34; 10.1-10, 23-24).

As with the covenantal texts, the truly genuine individual and familial benefits of obedience to Wisdom are [merely] intermediate ends that serve the far greater good of the community. The result of this type of leadership would have had the same effect as obedience to the covenant: the transformation of the world through the beauty of Israel's example.

Eventually, Israel's persistent failure to realize the standards set down in her own religious texts completely subverted the lesser and greater purposes of the god whose gift those standards had been, to the extent that Israel indeed became proverbial throughout the ANE, but as a byword for the consequences of covenantal disobedience, rather than out of the admiration and envy suggested by Dt 4. Divine messengers—YHWH's **prophets**, or "mouthpieces"—warned again and again over a period of several centuries that Jerusalem would become such a heap and a ruin that all who passed by would exclaim in wonder over its destruction, and that the Israelites themselves—scattered throughout the known world—would draw the same response (e.g., Jr 24.9; Jl 2.17; Mi 2.3), a consequence that indeed came to pass in their exiles to Assyria and Babylonia.

But some of these same prophets also told of a future that was nigh-inconceivably positive, one in which the order of existence would be turned upside down, in which predators, prey, and even children would live in peace (Is 11.6-9; 65.20), one in which the Davidic king would not only have the wisdom and understanding of Solomon (at least), but who would uphold justice for even the poor and powerless, and whose character would be above reproach or even question (cf. Is 11.1-5).¹⁷ In fact, that coming world will be filled with joy (Is 65.13-19), because there will be no reason to weep or

¹⁶On the Solomonic origin of much of the book of Proverbs, see Kitchen 1977.

¹⁷We might be tempted to ask why a system of justice—or at least a judge—would be needed in such a world, but this too is probably a metaphor, intended to show us the perfections of that world by what we know in and of this life.

mourn (Is 65.20-23). All tears will be wiped away (Rv 7.16-17; 21.4) nor will there be any death (Rv 21.4), so that everyone who builds a house will live in it, all who plant gardens or grapevines will eat and drink from what they planted and grew. In fact, people will live so long that death at the age of one hundred will be viewed as the death of an infant is today (Is 65.18-24).

In this world, where all has been renewed (Rv 21.5), the world of the “new” heaven and earth, and of the new Jerusalem of God, God himself dwells with his people (Rv 21.3-4). This is the true “utopia” toward which God is moving all things by means of the atonement accomplished by and through his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁸

And this has been and remains the great comfort and hope of every believer.

Purpose

These passages have provided much hope to believers through the ages—especially those suffering persecution, those in the trials of life, and those near death. And that is doubtless one facet of the Lord’s purpose in revealing these things through his servants the prophets.

When we read texts, or listen to others speak, however, we must often distinguish between the *content* of the words and their *intent*.¹⁹ For example, the statement “That’s the phone” may be a veiled request for someone else to answer the telephone, just as the response “I’m busy” may mean “No, *you* get it”.

This distinction between content and intent helps us understand a number of passages in Scripture. When Elijah confronted Ahab after Naboth’s death, his entire prophetic message was one of condemnation with no hint of the possibility of reprieve (1 Kgs 21.18-24). When Ahab repented (21.27), however, YHWH told Elijah to comfort him with the message that the judgment would not fall upon him, but upon his son (perhaps hinting that that later judgment could also have been averted). A message of judgment apparently meant more than mere condemnation—it was redemptively intended.

¹⁸This interpretation also transforms such passages as Mt 25 and Is 58; they too set forth eternal ethical values that will be realized fully and perfectly in the renewal of all things. This way reading or applying the text applies equally to the parables of Christ, to the book of Proverbs, to the covenantal stipulations, and to such descriptions in the Psalter as the righteous person (Pss 1, 15) and the divine city (Ps 46). It applies, as has long been realized, to the behavioural content of the epistles, but that has been over-emphasized to the point of making those values purely personal and internal, rather than societal, eternal, and divine.

¹⁹The distinction is between a “locution” (the words themselves) and its “illocution” (commonly regarded as the purpose for which they were spoken or written, but originally [and technically] an “illocution” or “illocutionary act” is a speech event that accomplishes what it says, as in “I promise ...” or “I hereby pronounce you guilty”). Linguists also speak of “perlocution”—the effect that words have on the hearer or reader (cf. advertising).

The book of Jonah contains a well-known parallel. As recorded, Jonah's message was stark: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jon 3.4). Whatever *we* may think of the validity and sincerity of the Ninevite repentance, YHWH turned from his announced judgment (Jon 3.10), and the city of Nineveh lasted for well over another century.

Both of these examples (there are others)²⁰ suggest the possibility of multiple purposes in divine revelation. It conveys content, of course, but the content may not be even the primary purpose of any given instance of divine communication. God *never* communicates merely for the sake of the content, or just to satisfy our curiosity, but instead always sets forth a vision of what was meant to be as it shall be, and at least partially to galvanize his people into action.

In his *Defence of Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney defended poets against Plato's view (common in his own day) that poets were liars.²¹ Sidney claimed, on the contrary, that authors ("poets") create "golden worlds" which the reader is invited to enter (1595), an insight later developed by Shelley in the early nineteenth century, and more recently popularized in, e.g., the works of Walter Brueggeman (2001; cf. Mays 1993). The poet's golden world is meant to draw the reader into another way of thinking and seeing, to enable him or her to consider life from another vantage point, and to suggest a new way of understanding his or her own existence.

This remains true today. A well-written novel can captivate our imagination so that we find it difficult to "return to reality", even though we have not "gone" anywhere—we have actually "gone" into the world of the author's creation.

Together, these ideas—the linguist's discrimination between content and intent on the one hand, Sidney's "golden worlds" on the other—suggest that biblical "utopias" are recorded and preserved for some purpose beyond merely providing a hope to be fulfilled someday. In other words, the golden world of the utopia invites us to suspend our judgment and enter its view of reality (or, better, to submit our judgment to its view of existence), and the two "layers" of linguistic messages suggest that visions of hope and comfort may also have a beyond conveying information or a picture.²² Speaking of Isaiah 65.17-23, Raymond Fung (1992, 6) says:

[The promises of these verses] constitute part of God's eternal will, testified to in Isaiah 65, but also throughout scripture. To work

²⁰Cf. Jr 18, which suggests that YHWH warns a nation so that it will repent (cf. Ezk 18.23, 30-32).

²¹This was Plato's reason for excluding poets (and playwrights) from his republic. In a number of ironic passages, Sidney's contemporary William Shakespeare has characters in his plays identify poetry with lies and poets as liars.

²²Cf., e.g., Is 2.1-4; 8.23-9.6 [ET 9.1-7]; 11-12; 33.17-24; 61; 65.17-25; Ezk 40-48; Rv 21-22.

towards these ends is to do God's will. To work for the Isaiah Agenda²³ is to help make God known to the world.

In other words, while they trumpet good news to encourage the hearts of the faithful, they are also compasses orienting the Church to those divine and telic values that underlie the renewed universe which God is in Christ now creating, and which he longs to create not only in and among, but also through his people. They thus provide the Church universal (and individual churches) with an agenda for life within the Gospel of Christ that will attract the world (cf., e.g., Dt 4.5-8 (above); Mt 5.14-16; John 17.22-23; Php 2.14-15), and that will engage the world with that Gospel.

To the extent that these prophetic passages set forth an "ideal" and redeemed world, they show us the goal(s) of God himself. Rather than ask Plato, Sir Thomas More, or anyone else to draft a picture of the perfect society, we can turn to these passages to ask what values characterize and underlie the world that they set forth, because that world is there set forth *for us to emulate*.

They therefore illustrate what it means to be a "city on a hill" and a "lamp on a stand" (Mt 5.14-16), explaining what aspects of the church's life will attract the attention and envy and appreciation of the surrounding world.²⁴ These pictures also suggest what it means to be the "salt of the earth" (Mt 5.13), or the yeast in the flour (Mt 13.33).

Furthermore, the ethics of these utopias had long been *fully* present in the laws and requirements of the covenant (cf., e.g., Ex 20-23; Lv 18-20, 27; Nu 5, 27, 30, 35,-36; Dt 4-26), with which they are one. That is, since all of these ethical standards and goals have the same divine source, and since YHWH always acts and speaks in ways that are consistent with his person, we should expect the standards that applied to the first order of the original creation also to appear in the second, renewed creation.

²³The phrase "The Isaiah Agenda" refers to Fung's summary of the import of these vv. (1992, 5): It "describes what God wants to see happen in every community. It is a community in which: children do not die; old people live in dignity; people who build houses live in them; and those who plant vineyards eat the fruit (Isaiah 65.20-23). Fung's reading of these vv. may be open to some question (is, e.g., the point that people live in houses that they build (as he claims), or that they outlive the houses that they build and the vineyards that they plant?), but the larger principle is the burden of this paper, an understanding to which I was first pointed by George Hunsberger (see the bibliography), who also directed me to Fung's book, and a perspective for which I am deeply thankful.

²⁴Cities in the ancient world were always built on or near hills, for two primary reasons. Sites that drew one group of settlers continued to attract successive generations, so that even when a city was destroyed by natural or human means, such as earthquake or conquest or raid, the water source, trade route, and place of [relative] safety, a new generation would tend to build on top of the ruins, reusing what they could, and leveling the rest. Thus the near east is dotted with *tels*, or "city-mounds", many with modern villages still on or near them, and nearly every city would have been highly visible from a distance. As Ireneus noted in his *Apologia*, the testimony of the early Christians was "See how they love each other!" (cf. John 17.20-23).

These covenantal²⁵ and eschatological utopias describe a world in which the frustrations and fears caused by human failures and offenses will no longer exist; negative motivations, actions, and emotions shall have been redeemed. Nor will our proverbial principles derived from the general experience of fallen humanity—e.g., that we reap what we sow, and “What can go wrong, will”—any longer function to our sorrow and grief.²⁶ They describe what the world will be like when God has in Christ realigned all things with his own nature, by renewing everything that is out of harmony with who he is.²⁷

If these things are of such great concern to God that he has revealed them as his goals for his redeemed and renewed creation, then they ought to be our concern as well (cf. Fung), and—important as they may be for individual believers and for the life of the Church—they are just as important to the non-believing men, women, children, households, businesses, governmental and civic structures, and societies among whom and in which we all live and move and have our being. And they are important to them because they, too, are fully human.

Human Longing & the Divine Purpose

Realizing that many factors affect how any one of us evaluates a particular utopian vision, most people will nonetheless respond positively to the idea of a world in which the theological and cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love, and self-control, fortitude, wisdom, and justice prevail. I think it not unreasonable to assume that every person at one time or another imagines life in a better world. Where does this apparently universal human dream of a “better place” come from, and what does it mean? What do these visions—both positive and negative—suggest?

In a brief essay titled “Learning in Wartime”, C. S. Lewis explains that

[a]n appetite for [knowledge and beauty] exists in the human mind and *God makes no appetite in vain*. We can therefore pursue knowledge as such, and beauty as such, in the sure confidence that by so doing we

²⁵The phrase “covenantal utopias” refers to the [primarily civil] standards set forth in, e.g., the covenantal regulations of Ex 20-23, Lv, Dt, and Pr. Many more biblical passages can be given this title, since every statement that prescribes or prohibits a behaviour or attitudes, or that describes such a society or world is paradigmatically linked to the character (the behaviour and attitudes) of God himself. Matthew 25.31-46, for instance, shows that in mercy, too, we are to imitate the God who watches over and provides for each of his creatures, either by miracle (e.g., Mt 14.13-21), by natural processes (e.g., Mt 7.26-30), or through human beings (as this description of the judgment shows).

²⁶This does not mean that they will not function at all—as far as we know, all thoughts, feelings, and actions have consequences. The negativity associated with the concept of “failure” arises out of our imperfect (and often inappropriate, disproportionate, and otherwise skewed) response to non-achievement.

²⁷In other words, he strengthens, purifies, and increases those things that are in line with his own character, and prohibits, renews, or rejects whatever is not, and thus fulfills his creational design. The issue of whether or not (and how) God deals with those things that will not (cannot?) be renewed is outside the scope of this paper.

are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so (Lewis, "Learning in Wartime" in *The Weight of Glory*; emphasis added).

Augustine says that anything common to all human beings is good (*Confessions*, Book X). Lewis, perhaps following Augustine (*et al.*), says that any appetite that is human—i.e., common to all members of the race—is good in and of itself because by virtue of that commonality it is a need created by God.²⁸ Such things therefore reflect not only human desires, but genuine needs²⁹—a desire to know and understand, a thirst for that which is good, true, and beautiful, as well as that which is righteous, just, and merciful. These qualities are fully consonant with the ethics of the Kingdom of God and of his Christ, values upon which even the divine throne is established (e.g., Ps 89.15; 97.2 (contrast Ps 94.20)), and toward which he is moving all things in heaven and earth.

Since they are human desires, they are common to believer and non-believer alike without distinction. And since they are realities for which we are created, they are equally important to and valid for all men, women, and children, as well as for our relationship to and treatment of the entire creation of God.

Universal human needs are universal because they reflect our creation in the image of God. They are thus also divine ordinations and intentions for human existence that will be finally realized in God's eschatological renewal. Their fulfillment is portrayed in these eschatological pictures so that we might long to see them realized. They are not merely "pies in the skies", nor are they a carrot on a stick. They instead reveal the very heart of God for our comfort and consolation *and* for our normal life in the Kingdom of Christ. They are a vision cast by God, in which he sets before his people that which we could not see or imagine for ourselves.

In a short story called "The Blue Flower" (van Dyke), the narrator describes a flower that he saw in a dream, a blue flower so beautiful that he spent the rest of his life seeking it. Christ himself described a pearl and a hidden treasure so desirable that a merchant and a property owner gave up everything to possess them (Mt 13.44-46). In these biblical utopias, God through his prophets from

²⁸This viewpoint is closely related to that of the Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus, whose *Encheiridion* begins by counseling the one who seeks a life of peace to learn to distinguish those things that one cannot control (i.e., whatever happens outside oneself) from those that one can (i.e., one's response to those events). As Charles Williams suggests in *Descent into Hell*, whatever is of necessity, is perforce good.

²⁹The pursuit that Lewis advocates clearly extends far beyond the appetite for knowledge and beauty, to, e.g., the desire for justice, peace, safety, hope, joy.

Moses to John pictures golden worlds that ought to make us heartsick, for which we should long,³⁰ and which we should seek to realize for the good of humankind.

Christians have long excelled at parsing and analyzing and comparing these pictures, debating what is literal or figurative, seeking coherence in apparent disparity. What we have not done well is to ask how we might make that world winsome and desirable to our neighbours. Blaise Pascal said:

Order. Men despise religion.³¹ They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence or respect.

Next to *make it attractive*, make good men *wish it were true*, and then show that it is.

Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature.

Attractive because it promises true good (emphasis added).³²

According to Pascal, our first responsibility is not to argue the truth of the gospel (although he does a lot of arguing in the *Pensées!*), but to describe (live, sing, dance, celebrate, love) its truth so that those around us *cannot but be attracted* to its power in our lives. This is only possible because these values are truly human—they transcend differences of gender, race, and culture because all human beings are ultimately driven by the same needs and desires, whether or not they realize it. Here Pascal reflects Moses (Dt 4.5-8) and Jesus (John 17.21), and even the descriptions of the redemption of creation in the Apocalypse (e.g., 21-22). It is ultimately the beauty of truth realized that makes it attractive and compelling.

Popular pictures of eternity in our culture are largely limited to angels in white sheets, halos, harps, and clouds. Nor does our larger culture see much in these things beyond their comedic value.

On the other hand, biblical pictures of the eschaton promise “true good”, and do so in a way that is so “attractive” that men and women will “wish it were true”, but they cannot do so unless they see the world that is actually portrayed. That is one reason for these visions in Scripture—that they, being held forth and realized in the life of the Church, might seize upon and capture the imagination of their hearers. Who would not want to live in such a community?³³

³⁰Cf. Lewis’s use of the concept of “melancholy longing” (*Sehnsucht*) in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*.

³¹By “religion” (French *religion*) Pascal means “Christianity”.

³²This is *pensée* #12 in Krailshamer (1966, 34).

³³Those, perhaps, whose only concern is their own power and glory. But if even they were redeemed, so that their motives and attitudes began to grow toward those of, e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, would they not also want to be part of such a world?

Our reading of eschatology should begin by reading these pictures as *pictures*, seeking to visualize what they portray, making their world as real to our eyes and hearts as possible. Then we are ready to ask what values they reveal, and how we can promote those in our own lives and (especially) in the world around us.

This paper examines one of these passages, in order to demonstrate this process.

Isaiah 11.1-9: Justice & Peace

And a shoot will go out from Jesse's stem,
And a sprout from his roots will be fruitful;
And YHWH's spirit rests upon him:
A spirit of wisdom and insight,
A spirit of counsel and strength,
A spirit of knowledge and of the fear of YHWH.
And he _____³⁴ in/by/with the fear of YHWH.
And not by his eyes' seeing does he judge,
And not by his ears' hearing does he decide.
And he judges with righteousness the poor,
And he decides with uprightness for the afflicted of the land
And he strikes the land with the rod of his mouth;
And with the breath of his lips he puts to death the wicked.
And righteousness is be the belt of his loins,
And faithfulness the belt of his waist.

And a wolf sojourns with a lamb,
And a leopard with a kid lies down,
And a calf and a young lion and a fatling together,
And a young man drives them [along].
And a cow and a bear pasture together,
And their young lie down,
And a lion like the cattle eats straw;
And a nursing child plays at an adder's hole,
And at a poisonous snake's hole a weaned child stretches his hand
And they injure not, and they destroy not in all my holy mountain
For the earth is full of knowing YHWH as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah describes a world made familiar by the "Peaceable Kingdom" paintings of the Quaker artist Edward Hicks (1780-1849), local to southeastern Pennsylvania. In many of those paintings, William Penn is making his treaty with the Indians in the background while a child in the foreground

³⁴There is little or no agreement regarding the function of this form (H NC of).

sits surrounded by wild animals with wide glowing eyes. Hicks viewed Penn's peaceful cooperation with the natives as a hopeful sign that the "peaceable kingdom" had arrived, or at least commenced.

To reiterate Raymond Fung's suggestion (above): this vision announces the will and intention of God—the *telos* toward which he is redeeming the entire world. And, to the extent that the people of God want to move in the same direction that God himself is moving them and all things, then they need to adopt these as their *teloi* as well. What are these *teloi*?

Isaiah 11.1-9 identifies two divine ends: *justice* (vv. 1-5) and *peace*, or *safety* (vv. 6-9).

*Justice*³⁵

The biblical demand for, and promise of, absolute justice is very nearly ubiquitous, even though a passage like Micah 5.5-25 is quoted so often in this connection that we may be forgiven for thinking it the only text that addresses this concern. What would such a world be like—a world in which justice was always and only just, a world without strife?³⁶

Imagine a legal system in which everyone—every single person, from judge to clerk, from lawyers to the accused—knew for certain that everything that happened would be only good and right, and that [true] justice would be fully and perfectly realized in every case. Imagine with me what that might look like for the various parties involved.

This imagining entails at least two assumptions, both of which are under attack in the early twenty-first century: (1) that *justice is creational*, part of the warp and woof of the original creative work of God, not merely a social construct; and (2) that it can therefore be *identified*.

The *law itself* is perfect, its content, intent, and meaning known by and to all; it is not the product of, nor open to, human manipulation, so that, for example, charges could not be reduced in exchange for cooperation, or "pleaded down". The *accuser* is motivated by a genuine desire for justice, with no taint of personal vengeance, hatred, greed, or some other nefarious motive. The *accused* always faces his or her accusers, knowing that his or her innocence and guilt will be established (the guilty knows going in that condemnation will be the outcome, just as the innocent knows what he or

³⁵Literally scores of passages assert justice as a primary covenantal value, and that remind Israel again and again that they are to ensure justice for the orphan, the widow, and the alien (e.g., Ex 22.21; Dt 24.17; 27.19; cf. Jb 22.9 in which Eliphaz accuses Job (cf. Jb 24.3, 21; 31.16-18; Ps 94.6)); in fact, YHWH himself guarantees justice for them (e.g., Dt 10.18; Ps 68.6; 146.9; Pr 15.25).

³⁶I am sidestepping questions about the time, place, and manner of the fulfillment of this vision, and commend the many commentaries and theologies to those interested in that discussion. I also ignore the logical question about the need for justice in a perfect world of universal peace (i.e., why justice is necessary in a world without conflict). These questions are not unimportant, merely beside the point of this paper.

she has absolutely nothing to fear, that justice cannot miscarry in this court. The *victim* is confident of proper, appropriate, and timely compensation. The *testimony* of all witnesses would be accurate and true, not partial, flawed by error or bias (or, malicious or mistaken testimony would not pervert the judge's decision). The *verdict* will be correct and the *sentence* just and fitting, neither prejudiced by the weaknesses (or weariness) of the jury, or swayed by the skill of advocates. The *judge* is unaffected by, e.g., political pressure or leanings, upcoming election(s), or self-image, or even by the appearance or social status of the defendant. And the entire *process* is quick, fair, and impartial; not affected by the appearance, gender, race, social status, education, or vocation of any participant in the case, biased toward neither rich nor poor, nor toward the famous, infamous, or unknown.

Our nation alone spends billions of dollars on multiple series of county, state, and federal systems of justice that are designed to protect the rights of citizens, as well as to ensure justice for the accused (whether innocent or guilty). Even the scantiest attention to the news media, however, demonstrates that justice can be perverted at any level or parameter, and for any number of reasons in the public or civic court system. But such a system does not exist and never has existed. In fact, even this attempt at describing such a system sounds impossible, if not ludicrous. And yet one standard of the Kingdom is perfect justice.

Can justice be realized outside the renewed creation? Of course not.

But that is not our concern.

Our responsibility as followers of Christ, the true King and Judge, is to seek and to promote justice whenever and wherever we find it (cf., e.g., Am 5.4-24), *and* to encourage all who seek it, *whether or not* they share our theological convictions—or indeed have *any* theological interest or concern. If the need is for justice within the Church, the household of God, then let us pursue justice with all the wisdom and insight that God grants; if (as will always be true) for justice in the world's systems, then—if the cause is to further the ends of God—we need to ask how we may most effectively, most efficiently, most faithfully accomplish or help to realize those ends.

In the description given above, three factors can be influenced by the Church: the law itself, the judge, and the legal process. Who is working toward laws that promote true justice, at every level of society, whether laws against discrimination, employment, or family, from tax law to social legislation? Which judges render just and fair verdicts and hand down fair and appropriate sentences? What organizations—even those that operate in complete ignorance of divine concerns—nevertheless promote the ends of God, and how can the Church encourage and strengthen their ministries? To do

so is to promote the ends of God, since righteousness and justice are the foundation of the throne of God (Pss 87.14; 97.2).³⁷

These passages demonstrate, however, that the biblical authors did not view or understand justice as an abstract quality or goal. Nor was it an end in itself.

First, that it was not an abstract “given” or “ideal”. Justice throughout Scripture is tied to the person and nature of God himself. It does not exist as something separate from him or his revelation or wisdom. Wisdom herself says that she is the means by which justice is realized (Pr 8.15-16) before going on to identify her origins as from before the foundation of the world (Pr 8.22ff).

Justice is not whatever we can dream up as a solution to whatever problem(s) happen to face or discomfort us.

It is instead that set of behaviours that lead a society into conformity to the person and covenant of Yahweh himself. Its parameters are far broader than we can begin to address in this brief paper; the point is that it begins by seeking to know and follow [emulate] the Lord.

Secondly, the biblical writers did not consider justice an end in itself. This is seen most clearly in the covenantal materials in Deuteronomy, when Moses tells the people that their obedience to the covenant—the community that would result from their obedience to its laws and strictures—would be a testimony in the eyes of the nations that YHWH was a great and wise god (Dt 4.5ff). Justice serves several purposes: (1) it confirms and establishes the king on his throne (e.g., 1 Kg 3.??; Pr 29.??); (2) it fosters a society of peace, free from fear; (3) it results in a society that testifies to the nations; (4) it furthers the purposes of God for creation; (5) it anticipates, and to that extent begins to bring in, the Kingdom.

***Peace & Safety* (Isaiah 11.6-9; Revelation 21.10b-22.5)**

Is 11.6-9 describes a world in which wolves, lambs, leopards, kids, calves, young lions, cows, and bears—a dinner party of carnivores and their normal dinner of herbivores—eat and sleep quietly together, herded by young men. Little children will play near poisonous snakes without fear and without harm.

Here in eastern Pennsylvania we rarely warn our children against playing with wild beasts—no large carnivores lurk in our urban and suburban yards. “Lions and tigers and bears (oh my)!” are restricted to zoos and fantasies. We do, however, warn them about accepting candy or rides from

³⁷This is at least one aspect of the Kingdom addressed by Augustine in *The City of God* (cf. Boice 1996).

strangers, against petting strange dogs, and—if we have many bushes or shrubs in our yard—we may teach them to check for ticks (and not to play with them!).

A few chapters earlier in Isaiah, YHWH announced a coming time when no one would understand war any longer, when there be no weapons because there will be no fighting; weapons will instead become tools for farmers (Is 2.4 = Mi 4.3). Everyone will live on his own plot of ground, in peace and without fear (Is 2.5 = Mi 4.4).

In other passages, we find visions of mighty cities (e.g., Ps 46; Rv 21-22), including one with unfathomably huge walls—1400 miles square and 1400 miles tall (Rv 21.16). At that length, most of each wall would be invisible over the horizon if it were not so tall (1400 miles), just as its top would be invisible to the naked eye. [1400 miles southwest of Philadelphia is Dallas, TX; 1400 miles northwest is I-94 midway between Fargo and Bismarck, ND.]

When I recently asked a class why the walls were so big, a student immediately said “Because in those days, that would have meant they were safe”. I am fairly confident that walls that large would still make us safe today.

This helps explain the notion of peace—those who are completely secure can relax without fear; they are safe. This peace and security is also closely tied to justice. In a world of perfect justice, where criminals were always caught, and punishment always meted out to fit the crime, where none could escape, the crime rate would drop and ordinary people could live in peace without fear. The sequence in this passage—justice (vv. 1-5) and peace (vv. 6-9)—is necessary, not coincidental.

The prophet portrays a world with no conflict, which suggests quite strongly that peace is not only a present work of God, but an aspect of his Kingdom that the Church should seek to establish both internally and in the world.

There ought to be neither fear nor danger within the household of God. There we ought to be safe from anything and anyone that would harm us—as in the medieval tradition of “sanctuary”. This, incidentally, is one of the Kingdom’s standards that make clergy sexual abuse so heinous (in addition to the prohibitions against lust and the abuse of power, the restriction of sexual activity to the marital relationship, and the demand for marital fidelity). The church ought to be an absolutely safe, just, and peaceful place, filled with people who work to promote safety, justice, and peace wherever they are lacking.³⁸

³⁸Just as—and because—he himself is described as a safe place, as in the foundational metaphor GOD IS A SAFE PLACE, as seen in the metaphors of YHWH as a fortress, cliff, stronghold, &c. (e.g., Ps 18.3).

Nor should we restrict this to military peace or criminal justice. Who is working at defeating racial conflict? What organizations address labour relations? Where do battered women find shelter? Those dying of AIDS? abused children? those persecuted because of their religion, ethnicity, gender, caste, or for *any* reason? The International Justice Mission, for example, was founded by Christians to fight sexual slavery through both legislation and by direct intervention, rescuing [mainly] girls from horrific degradation and suffering.³⁹ They work to establish justice, peace, and righteousness, and to bring peace, safety, and hope to those who have none.⁴⁰

And so should we all.

Conclusion

In closing, I note merely that this way of reading these Biblical utopias raises new challenges for the church's life and mission. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

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³⁹As in medical care, this also distances the Gospel of Christ from other religious traditions, especially the great Oriental religions that essentially see whatever happens as the decree of the gods or of fate, or the divine recompense for sins committed in a former existence, and therefore something not to be challenged or changed.

⁴⁰Fung strongly advocates working with anyone or any group that promotes these values. In his view their realization of the vision is the paramount requirement for cooperation.

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LIVING FROM THE FUTURE

Implications of Biblical Utopias

ecce nova facio omnia
(Rv 21.5)

Summary

Systematic and biblical theologies tend to imply that Scripture records eschatological visions of a new and perfect world (e.g., Isa 11.1-9; 65.17-25; Ezk 40-48; Rev 21-22) for two primary reasons: (1) to encourage readers; and (2) to construct models of the future. Is this their purpose?

Sir Philip Sidney's insight that an author (a "poet" in Sidney's language) "creates" a "golden world" (1595) which the reader is invited to enter—an insight developed by Shelley *et al.*, and more recently popularized by Walter Brueggeman, *i.al.* (2001; cf. also Mays 1993)—suggests that perhaps these biblical "utopias" have been recorded and preserved in order to provide a touchstone for the Church *now*, rather than merely hold out a hope to be fulfilled *then*.

In other words, while these messages are clearly intended to encourage believers, they also have another purpose: to set before the people of God a vision of those telic values toward which God is in Christ moving all things. They therefore provide the citizens of the Kingdom of God, severally and jointly, with an agenda for engaging the world with the Gospel of Christ, the hope of true redemption and renewal.

Introduction

Utopia: The 'Place that is Not'

Biblical Utopias: The Place that Was & that Shall Yet Be (Deuteronomy, Proverbs, Prophets)
Purpose

Human Longing & the Divine Purpose (C. S. Lewis, "On Learning in Wartime"; Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*)

Isaiah 11.1-9

Justice

Peace

Conclusion

Appendix A: Creation, Desire, & *Imago Dei*

A Covenantal Nation

Proverbs: The Need for Wise Leaders

Psalms: Covenantal Life

Isaiah & Revelation: The [Re-]New[ed] World⁴¹

(Rv 21.5)

⁴¹In all ten of its biblical occurrences, the verb based on the root *hdš* (usually glossed as "new") describes the *renewal*, *renovation*, *repair*, or *restoration* of something already present (1 Sam 11.14; 2 Chr 15.8; 24.4, 12; Jb 10.17; Ps 51.12; 103.5; 104.30; Is 61.4; La 5.21). It does not refer to something formerly unknown or non-existent. The adjective based on this root likewise refers to a "renewed" thing. Its occurrence in, e.g., Ex 1.8 ("A *new* king arose over Egypt ...") shows that the particular man is new to the office, but he merely entered an office or rôle that had been long established.