Chapter 2 – The kingdom of God 1: Creation and history

Introduction.

The kingdom of God is a major theme in this study and because of its length this theme has been divided into two chapters. The dividing principle used is that in this chapter the themes of creation and history are dealt with; in the next chapter (3) the themes which deal with the present and future fulfilment of the kingdom have been gathered. The purpose of chapter two is to show how God’s rule concerns the whole creation, how it is a trinitarian work, how Van Ruler views the aspects of sin, chaos and reality as well as the relation between the kingdom and revelation. In this chapter also a brief overview of Van Ruler’s view on theocracy is given.

2.1 The kingdom of God and creation.

At the heart of Van Ruler’s theology is his insistence that the creation will be restored through the kingdom of God. For Van Ruler, the creation is the real work of God, which has its own reality beside God. God’s creation is the horizon of his theology. Time and again, he stresses that this world is God’s world, the Messiah came for the redemption of this world and humanity was created for this world.1 The ultimate focus of Van Ruler’s theology is the world, because he believes that the goal of God’s work is the world.2 He states that the creation is good and needs to be valued as the proton, the object of God’s interest. The world is in God’s care. God has created only one cosmos, which is this visible and tangible world. The creation is not divine and, therefore, not a part of God.

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Neither is God dependent on his creation, but since he has made it, he is in charge of it. He cares for it and maintains it. There is no other world; it is in this world that God does his powerful work. He is Lord, busy saving the world in Christ and through the Spirit. This opens the present to its future fulfilment and to the eschaton.

When Van Ruler uses the word ‘world’, he is speaking of the creation. He also uses words like ‘reality’ and ‘existence’. Van Ruler is averse to any ontological dualism. These words refer to the creation, as does the word ‘being’ (zijn). Humans ‘are’ creatures, created beings and they are dust (Gen.3:19). In this way they are identified with the material world, which is also ‘dust’. And dust, says Van Ruler, is the real opposite of God. Humans ‘are’ in the world, they ‘are’ also of the world, of creation. “The creation is really something other than God”. Humans ‘are’ in communion with God, as well as with their neighbours. Yet, Van Ruler does not wish to make a distinction between ‘being’ and creation. For him there is only one reality and that is God’s creation.

Anything else, like the distinction between heaven and earth, would bring about a dualism between this creation of God and a higher or lower creation; this Van Ruler rejects. He insists that there is only one reality:

This visible and tangible reality in which we stand; everything God does, is completely and exclusively directed to this. The backward movement in biblical understanding of theology always proceeds from the end, from the future of God. Irresistibly and speedily it goes back to the beginning, where humankind in all its physicality and - encircling humankind – reality in all its materiality stands. It is always about God and the world, the Creator and creature. Transcendence is the essential idea of the kingdom. It is the core of the doctrine of creation.6

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3 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 38.
5 Van Ruler, ‘Hoe waardeert men de stof?’ 115 ff. Cf. Van Ruler, ‘God heeft een plan met de wereld’
6 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 27.
Van Ruler goes a step further and says that the material world is to be respected because ‘dust’ (the material) is holy.\(^7\) That is why we need to be careful in our use of the word ‘secularisation’, for this word can have a positive, as well as a negative value. Positively, it points to the material reality, meaning creation and kingdom of God, the world in its sanctified material state. But it can also be used in a negative sense. In that case a limitation is meant, namely a refusal to look beyond this world, seeing only this world, no ideology, no faith, no metaphysics, no God and church. In the negative use of secularisation, the idea of eternity and God has been removed and only the material is left. “This secularisation is an enormous devaluation.” Van Ruler says that God’s creation – i.e. ‘dust’ - is good, made and wanted by the Creator and therefore of abiding goodness;\(^8\) all the more reason to enjoy God’s creation and everything that belongs to it.\(^9\)

In the same discussion about the material creation, Van Ruler draws attention to the eschatological aspect of the material creation. “By definition the eschaton is nothing more than the deliverance and glorification of the whole material \textit{(stoffelijke)}, temporal and communal reality. Or rather, it is nothing more than the material reality itself, in its delivered and glorified state.”\(^10\) That is our eschatological expectation, even anticipation. It is the importance of this creation, Van Ruler stresses, not the next, not the mystical or mythical world, but the world as created and intended by God.\(^11\) There seems to be a

\(^7\) Van Ruler, ‘Hoe waardeert men de stof?’, 121.
\(^8\) Van Ruler, ‘Hoe waardeert men de stof?’, 121.
\(^9\) This is an emphatic theme in the theology of Van Ruler, the enjoyment of what God has made and given; it is strongly related to the theme of joy that returns often. Cf. also Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘De zin van ons leven [The purpose of our lives]’ in \textit{Verzameld Werk, Deel 3 [Collected Works, Vol.3]} ed. Dirk van Keulen, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009), 370. Cf. also Van Ruler, ‘De vreugde, in bijbels perspectief’, 430ff.
\(^10\) Van Ruler, ‘Hoe waardeert men de stof?’, 122.
\(^11\) Van den Brom draws attention to this aspect of Van Ruler’s theology and summarises Van Ruler: “God’s kingdom is not another sphere or world, next to our temporal-spacious \textit{(tijd-ruimtelijk)} world.” Van de Brom uses the image of the double decker bus. Van Ruler does not want to know or speak of a dual worldview or a double decker universe. Cf. L J Van den Brom, ‘Koninkrijk Gods in actie: Van Rulers
development in Van Ruler’s theology to which he himself alluded in a radio interview.

He stated: “… more and more I have put the emphasis on the relationship of God the Father and creation (as seen in the first of the twelve Articles), because I stubbornly maintain that the created reality as such is only good, and we cannot criticise it.”

In saying that the world is good, Van Ruler does not deny the presence of evil, but maintains that the original creation was good and therefore worthy of being saved, redeemed and restored. Again and again Van Ruler stresses that this world is God’s world; therefore the world cannot remain the way it is. “The world must be and will be delivered. The snow-plough of God’s judgement will go across the earth. Good and evil will be separated. The world will be swept clean of unrighteousness and power. Righteousness will be victorious. At issue is the kingdom of God!”

So, why did God create? Was it a necessity? Van Keulen summarises a number of reasons for Van Ruler’s teaching about creation. He writes, “Van Ruler emphasises that the creation is no emanation from God. … There was no necessity for God to create the world. God did not need the world. In this way Van Ruler offers a trinitarian ground for creation…. The creation is wanted by God, it is grounded in God’s freedom.” He adds: “God also wanted us to have the joy of being here.” God did not need to create, but once God did create a world He became attached to his creation as the Carer and Maintainer. There can only be one reason why God created, says Van Ruler, and that is love. God so

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12 G C Berkouwer, In Gesprek met Van Ruler [In conversation with Van Ruler] [In Conversation with Van Ruler], ed. Prof. Dr.A.S. van der Woude (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1969), 18.

13 Arnold A Van Ruler, Blij zijn als kinderen [Happy like children], (Kampen: Kok, 1972), 78.


15 Van Keulen, Inleiding Verzameld Werk 3’ 15 .Cf. Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘De mens, de zin van de geschiedenis’ [Humanity, the Purpose of History], in Verzameld Werk, Deel 3 [Collected Work, Vol 3], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 2009), 316.
loved the world, that He created it. And God became bound to the creation, in the sense of connected to it, involved with it. The creation is an expression of God’s love. Van Ruler says it this way at the end of his dissertation: “The last word is love, love for all that the living God has spoken and done on this earth; therefore love for the whole of reality. For in this one word, love, the whole law has been fulfilled.” Yet he also says, “Even higher and more essential than love [is joy]. The Bible could have stated just as well ‘God is joy’ as ‘God is love’.”

Van Ruler does not want to cancel one out for the other, but shows that the purpose of all is the coming of the kingdom of God on earth.

The question could be asked, did God create the world for the kingdom, or the kingdom for the world? Van Ruler would answer without hesitation that the purpose of the kingdom is to restore the proton to its original – and greater - glory. The coming of the kingdom from the future is in order that God, creation and humanity may begin now and continue forever towards a harmonious and perfect relationship, where God is all in all. The creation has a


future. It has a future that comes from the future. Often Van Ruler speaks of ‘future-expectation’ (toekomstverwachting). This is an eschatological term, but he wants to make sure that we do not lose the connection with this earth, this earthly reality, even when we speak of the future and the kingdom. He says: “The biblical expectation of the future is, without a doubt, not exclusively concerned with God, in such a way that all earthly perspective would be lost.” At all times Van Ruler wants to keep the connection with this earthly reality, because that is God’s creation which will be restored to greater glory.

Connected with the concept of the kingdom of God, then, is Van Ruler’s concern for the restoration of creation. Van Ruler, a Reformed theologian, stresses that his main concern is not the ‘salvation’ of this creation and humanity through the work of Christ, but the restoration of the original creation to its increased glory. On this point it is possible to summarise Van Ruler’s view this way: ‘Everything turns on Christ, the reconciler, but the goal is creation’.

Salvation (heil) must not supersede creation. This does not mean that Van Ruler denies the redemptive work of Christ or the salvific action of the triune God, but feels compelled to emphasise the restoration of the world and humanity. The restoration will happen, is already happening; it is not just in the future. It is and will be constituted in the coming of the kingdom of God, coming from the future embracing all we hope for. What we hope for

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20 Cf. H C Van der Sar, ‘Evenwicht of Beweging? Hoofdlijnen in de theologie van Van Ruler’ [Balance or Movement? Main lines in the theology of Van Ruler] (Master's degree thesis, Theological University, 1976), 35. I disagree with Van der Sar’s judgement that with Van Ruler one needs to speak of “an immanent continuity and identity between creation and kingdom”. Van Ruler does establish a relation between the two, but never identifies the creation with the kingdom or vice versa.
22 Van Ruler, 'De verhouding van schepping en verlossing’, 97ff.
is a new heaven and a new earth, but Van Ruler would also immediately state that this will not be by way of a *nova creatio*. It is not as if God will abandon this world and replace it with a new one.\footnote{Neither does Van Ruler want to make a wrong dualism between this world and the spiritual world. He wants to maintain the emphasis on the earthly character of salvation. As he states: “Salvation is not, that we are snatched away from the material essence of this earth and are translated into the spiritual nature of heaven, …” [heil is niet, dat we aan de stoffelijkheid der aarde ontrukt en in de geestelijkheid van de hemel verzet worden, … ]. Arnold A Van Ruler, *Het Duizendjarig Rijk* [The Thousandyear Reign] “[in unpublished, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Kampen: Archive 1942), 2.]}

There will be renewal, a *recreation*, a renewal that will go through difficult and catastrophic epochs, but it will always be this world and not a new creation. God will remain true to his creation and creature.\footnote{Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘De Verhouding van het kosmologische en het eschatologische element in de Christologie’ [The relation between the cosmological and eschatological element in the Christology], in *Verzameld Werk Deel 4a* [Collected Workd Vol.4a]. ed. Dirk van Keulenl, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2011), 146. Cf. also Van Ruler, ‘De andere zijde van de natuurlijke theologie’, 242,243. Cf. Arnold A Van Ruler, *Waarom zou ik naar de kerk gaan?* [Why would I go to Church? ] [Why would I go to church?]. (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1967), 82. Cf. Arnold A Van Ruler, *Gestaltwerdung Christi in der Welt - Über das Verhältnis von Kirche und Kultur* [Christ receiving form in the world - About the relation between Church and Culture] (Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins. Received as a photocopy from the Protestant Theological University of Kampen, 1956), 33.}

### 2.2 The kingdom of God as a trinitarian work.

In his dissertation, *De Vervulling van de Wet* Van Ruler laid the foundation for his theology of the kingdom. The kingdom is God’s rule, breaking powerfully into existence (*existentie*) as the fulfilment of all things. It is a trinitarian work. “The fulfilment is the work of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”.\footnote{Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 23, 118.} The law is a form (*gestalte*) of the kingdom and the Messiah fulfilled the law through his work, death and resurrection and made salvation (*heil*) possible. Salvation has come to the world (existence). The Holy Spirit facilitates the spreading of salvation and makes sure that it permeates through the whole of existence. In this way fulfilment permeates the whole of life. Christ is the source of salvation and the Holy Spirit is the medium by which it reaches humanity and the whole of creation. The Spirit is the fulfilment of the kingdom. The work of the Spirit will be discussed more fully later.
In the same lecture held in Germany in 1956 and 1957 Van Ruler stresses the necessity of a trinitarian theology. Not that he wants to use the Trinity to constrict theology and turn it into an artificial construction. Rather, Van Ruler sees a trinitarian approach giving space to two movements, since the relationships within the Trinity are not static but dynamic. He says: “Typical for this way of thinking is, on the one hand, the movement of bringing into relationship the different theological points of view. On the other hand, there is the equally important movement of making space between these points of view”. On the one hand there is the reciprocity between the three Persons and at the same time the distinction, the communio personarum divinarum of the three Persons.26 This ‘being-in-relationship’ (betrokkenheid) and movement is important for an understanding of the Trinity, but also because it relates to humanity. The way the three Persons work intratrinitarianly illustrates how they work extra-trinitarianly, in relation to humanity. This is conspicuous when Van Ruler emphasises that redemption, grace and renewal come both in Christ and through the Spirit. Van Ruler does not want to work from a single point of view, like creation or Christology, but aims to approach the whole of theology in a trinitarian manner. He says further:

Understood in this way, eschatology creates a lot of space and tension (spankracht) in Christian thought. In any case, it cannot be a christomonist way of thinking; it will have to have a completely trinitarian structure – with room (speelruimte) for creation, humanity, time and history, which accords with this structure. With the help of this trinitarian, eschatological-historical way of thinking we need to rethink all parts of the theological system.27

27 Arnold A Van Ruler, Theologie van het apostolaat [The theology of the apostolate] in Verwachting en voltooiing [Expectation and completion], ed. J.A.van Ruler-Hamelink, (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1978), 104. Cf. also Aart W Van Wilgenburg, ‘God en de geschiedenis: een christologisch dilemma’ [God and history, a christological dilemma] (A dissertation, University, 2008), 289, 290. The Dutch literally means room or space to play. It is a creative way of saying that there is room to move, hence the word ‘room’. 
It is clear that Van Ruler wishes to theologise in an eschatological as well as a trinitarian manner. He does this in the whole of his exposition of the kingdom of God.\(^{28}\)

Jansen draws attention to this and quotes Van Ruler as saying: “… theology must be neither christological nor pneumatological. They are only parts. In its total reach it can only be described as trinitarian theology, as eschatological kingdom theology, …”\(^{29}\)

### 2.3 The kingdom, sin and chaos

In his emphasis on the creation, Van Ruler also deals with the concepts of sin and chaos. Since he makes a distinction between them, they will be discussed separately, first sin and then chaos. According to Van Ruler, the creation needs to be ‘uncovered’ from sin; the creation needs to have the cover of sin removed. Sin has been added to the creation. Sin is secondary and accidental. Sin is like a blanket that covers the creation and needs to be removed. Humans have brought sin into the world. According to Van Ruler, that is quite an achievement and honour; ironically he says, “humans also have created something!”\(^{30}\) Sin is a disturbance and therefore creation can be restored. Creation is basically good and will be brought back from the darkness of sin; the balance of the original creation will be restored. The Kingdom of God is an immanent movement that does not add to the creation

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\(^{29}\) A.J. Janssen, \textit{Kingdom, Office and Church; A study of A.A.van Ruler’s Doctrine of Ecclesiastical Office} (Grand Rapids / Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2006), 43. On the next page Janssen says: “Reduction to one principle is simply not possible for Van Ruler. In a number of places, he will use the image of a skater who must continually move from one leg to another, in order both to maintain balance and to be able to skate.” Cf. Arnold A Van Ruler, \textit{Droom en gestalte; Een discussie over de theologische principes in het vraagstuk van christendom en politiek} [Dream and Form; A discussion about the theological principles in relation to the question Christianity and Politics] [Dreams and Form; A discussion of the theological principles in regard to the relation Christianity and Politics], (Amsterdam: Holland, 1947), 96. Cf. also Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘Christocentriciteit en wetenschappelijkheid in de systematische theologie [Christocentricity and science in systematic theology]’ in \textit{Theologisch Werk Deel 5} [Theological Works Vol.5], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1972), 198 – 213.

\(^{30}\) Van Ruler, ‘De mens als zondaar’, 366. “De mens als schepper van het kwaad, hij heeft het uit niets in het aanzijn geroepen. Dat is om zo te zeggen de eer van de mens.” [The human as creator of evil, he has, so to speak, called forth something out of nothing. That is the honour of the human].
(as we will see later). The topic of sin is probably the most difficult aspect of Van Ruler’s theology and perhaps the one questioned the most. It is not the intention here to give a complete exploration of his views on sin and chaos; an abbreviated version will suffice for our present purpose.

For Van Ruler chaos is a part of the creation, while sin is not. Sin is guilt. Sin is not a substance but a faulty direction of the will. In the eschaton sin will be taken away. Sin is what happens between humankind and God: human beings sin against God. They become guilty in the face of God. It is God who accuses them as guilty and holds them responsible for the wrong done. Due to the relationship with God in which humankind is responsible, God is also involved. God covers the sin and guilt; love covers and encompasses it. Van Ruler does not offer this as an explanation; he makes it clear that he is only posing questions; there are no definite answers, only approximations. He says:

In any case, sin is oriented to God. One could ask whether we should say that it is God who draws us through the waters of sin and guilt and even keeps our head under water (kopje-onder) of guilt. Is not sin included in God’s decree? In other words, are not sin and guilt evident in the utterly precarious situation and relation of the creature vis-à-vis the Creator? Do not Creator and creature come up against each other most intimately in the situation of guilt, as both are shattered (verbrijzeld): the creature in the brokenness of confession and the Creator in the brokenness of atonement? Is it not only then that the situation of God and humankind becomes fully one of love? Only then they find each other completely!

For Van Ruler sin is not fate or tragedy, but guilt. Guilt (and the origin of sin) is the mystery of the human existence. Sin, is a wrong volition and this is forgiven and taken

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33 Van Ruler, ‘De mens als zondaar’, 365.
34 Van Ruler, ‘De zonde in het besluit’, 346.
35 Van Ruler, ‘God en de chaos’, 165.
away in the redemption Christ has obtained for us.\textsuperscript{38} That is why Van Ruler says, in a different context: “In these two – guilt and reconciliation – the puzzle of history is not solved but summed up. History is to be understood as the permanent arrangement (\textit{syntaxis}) of guilt and reconciliation and the cross as the essential form (\textit{levensvorm}) of the kingdom of God in history.\textsuperscript{39}

It needs to be noted that Van Ruler does not offer any answers or solutions; he wants to stimulate the reflection on these matters. At the same time they do touch on his views of the kingdom, for in the kingdom of God, God will reign over both sin and chaos.

Chaos, according to Van Ruler, is different. Nature can cause chaos, but does not sin.

When speaking about chaos, he was most likely thinking of the devastation caused by World War II, which he experienced in person. He believes that humans play an important role in creating chaos, yet he does not want to exclude God as a cause of chaos. Chaos is part of God’s creation and work; God plays with the chaos. Humanity may try to order the chaos, but this does not avoid God turning it back into chaos, disturbing humanity’s efforts.\textsuperscript{40} Van Ruler is therefore of the opinion that God wants humanity to be relaxed and just as playful as God himself is with the chaos. “The purpose of life is praise.”\textsuperscript{41} “This life, the life I am living here and now, has been redeemed; it is therefore

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\textsuperscript{37} Van Ruler, ‘De zin van ons leven’, 36. Also Augustine, who said that sin is located in the will; Cf. Van Ruler, ‘De mens als zondaar’, 368, note 11.
\textsuperscript{38} Van Ruler does not want to overemphasise sin; it is necessary to rejoice in the redemption obtained in Christ. Cf. Van Ruler, ‘Zonnigheden in de zonde’, 361ff.
\textsuperscript{39} Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘Het Koninkrijk Gods en de Geschiedenis [The Kingdom of God and History] ’ in \textit{Verwachting en Voltooiing [Expectation and Completion]}, (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1947), 38. The concise Oxford Dictionary has the word ‘syntax’, but shows that it comes from \textit{syn}, and \textit{taxis} from \textit{tasso} is ‘arrange’; in other words, it needs to be understood as having a permanent relationship with each other.
\textsuperscript{40} Here Van Ruler gives the example of the Tower of Babylon in Gen.11.9.
\textsuperscript{41} Van Ruler, ‘De waardering van het aardse leven’, 415.
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good and to be praised as beautiful.\(^{42}\) When humankind accepts the kingdom of God as a gift, human beings learn to accept and enjoy life and thank God for it.

In a small document called ‘Orde en Chaos’ [Order and Chaos] Van Ruler says that God created, and that also means that He brought order in the chaos. It does not say that God took away the chaos.\(^{43}\) He separates, not in the sense of forming, but of sorting and judging.\(^{44}\) God sometimes thwarts the plans of humans and turns the order into chaos. It means that God does not destroy the chaos, but uses it. God is busy in the chaos. In this way the chaos is a part of the creation. The worst example of God being busy in, and working with, chaos is the cross at Golgotha. In the chaos God creates the order of reconciliation. This order is hidden, irresistible and redemptive.

Van Ruler does not accept the explanation that in this way God ‘allows’ the chaos. This, according to Van Ruler is too passive and indicates an impotent God. No, God uses the chaos, even makes things chaotic at times. Quoting from Psalm 104, “The Lord God has created the Leviathan in order to play with it.”\(^{45}\) Van Ruler points out, God plays with his creation. This is a important statement, for it summarises Van Ruler’s view of God’s work. This work is fun and brings joy, not only for God, but also the human person may accept life with that attitude.\(^{46}\) Nevertheless, in the last mentioned document, Van Ruler goes one step further than in his earlier document about chaos. Here he clearly indicates that God makes the chaos and uses it. The chaos is part of God’s creation. God is the One

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\(^{42}\) Van Ruler, ‘De mens, zin van de geschiedenis’, 389. The theme of ‘joy’ recurs throughout Van Ruler’s writings. Cf. also Van Wilgenburg, [God and history, a christological dilemma ], who wrote a whole section on Van Ruler under the heading: Playing in the presence of God [Spelen voor God’s aangezicht]. Van Wilgenburg stresses that after World War II this theme had become important for Van Ruler.

\(^{43}\) Gen.1:2 ‘a formless void’ (NRSV also translated chaos).

\(^{44}\) Van Ruler, ‘Orde en Chaos’, 146.


\(^{46}\) Cf. also .Van Ruler, ‘De zin van ons leven’, 377ff.
who controls the creation and he does this “... restraining the chaos, ... which at the same
time is also a breaking up of the cosmos.”47 With this Van Ruler means that God
disentangles the chaos, things have to be separated, receive their own ‘place’. He calls
this the ‘order’. “The order is perhaps the middle between chaos and cosmos.” 48

Van Ruler’s position on sin and chaos may leave some dissatisfied, for he does not offer
any answers or solutions. At the same time his statements on sin and chaos touch on his
views of the kingdom, for in the kingdom of God will reign over both sin and chaos.
Christ, in his death and resurrection, has conquered sin, and through the Holy Spirit we
share in the benefits of Christ. It means that humankind receives salvation (heil) and that
the kingdom can come and is coming. Sin and chaos are part of the eschatological horizon,
yet, as will be shown, not in a sense that is removed from the present.

2.4 Kingdom and revelation (and existence)
For Van Ruler, revelation is the way in which God makes himself known. He does this by
the word (dabar), the creative Word. Van Ruler upholds the inspiration of Scripture and
accepts that God reveals himself through the Word.49 Here must be added that he also
accepts Tradition as a valuable addition to that revelation of God throughout time. In the
case of Tradition God does this in partnership with humanity.50 Van Ruler stresses that

47 Van Ruler, ‘God en de chaos’, 160.
49 Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘Openbaring, Schrift, Traditie, de Canon als theologisch probleem [Revelation,
Scripture, Tradition; The Canon as theological problem]’ in Verzameld Werk Deel 2 [Gathered Work Vol.2],
ed. Dirk van Keulen, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2008), 260 – 266. Van Ruler’s views on revelation
would warrant a separate study. It would be incorrect to term Van Ruler as conservative. He did uphold the
Reformed view of scripture, yet he said many things in regard to revelation, the Bible and inspiration which
would have people at that time sit up and ask questions. It is not known whether he upheld or denounced the
historical critical method, but he did make comments like: “No Biblicism!” Or: “God’s business is not
imprisoned in the Bible, but it wants to get out, into the world and life.” “We ought not to exaggerate the
value or meaning of the Bible. It is not our one and all! We need the Bible only for its salvation…. In this
way the Bible has a limited value.” Van Ruler, ‘Vormen van omgang’, 340, 341.
God makes himself known, in various ways, through the law\textsuperscript{51} and in Israel\textsuperscript{52}. Of course, God made and makes himself known most clearly through his Son Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, and through the kingdom which is coming. God reveals himself in history and time.\textsuperscript{53}

The kingdom is one of the many forms in which God reveals himself. A number of times it has been stated that Van Ruler understands the kingdom to be God’s salvific action with the world, coming from the future. It is in these actions – as the dance of God\textsuperscript{54} that God also reveals himself.\textsuperscript{55}

Speaking about revelation, it needs to be noted that Van Ruler places special importance on the Old Testament. In many of his arguments he goes back to Israel and the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the prototype for Van Ruler, for in Israel he sees God at work and building his kingdom. He even calls the Old Testament the ‘real’ Bible and the New Testament the ‘dictionary’ or ‘glossary’ (\textit{woordenlijstje}) of the Old Testament, meaning that in the New Testament we have the explanatory word list, explaining the meaning of the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{56} Even though this could be seen as a provocative statement, it is not to diminish the value of either the Old Testament or the New Testament, but simply because, in his view, the Old Testament needs to be valued better and understood better than is often the case. It certainly fits well with his statement that

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\item \textsuperscript{51} Van Ruler, \textit{De Vervulling van de Wet}, 219; the Law is often called by Van Ruler the medium between revelation and existence (\textit{existentie}) and therefore is to be seen as a form of revelation. God makes himself known through the medium of the law.
\item \textsuperscript{52} One of the reasons why Van Ruler says that the Old Testament is the real Bible.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Cf. sections on history and time below.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Cf. note 118, p.22.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Pannenberg also stresses the relation between revelation and history and deviates from Barth, who termed revelation as God’s self-revelation. Pannenberg speaks of God’s indirect self-revelation through history. Wolfhart Pannenberg, ‘Introduction’ in \textit{Revelation as History}, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), “Indirect communication is distinguished by not having God as the content in any direct manner. Every activity and act of God can indirectly express something about God.”,\textsuperscript{15}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Arnold A Van Ruler, \textit{Religie en Politiek} [Religion and Politics], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1945), 123, 142.
\end{itemize}
the kingdom of God comes from the future. In a backward (retroactive) movement he works from the future back to the Old Testament and states that the Christian existence by way of the ascension has been placed in an Old Testament situation. Van Ruler further adds that the Old Testament ought not to be interpreted christologically, but eschatologically, because

In the Old Testament this original and final element, this faithfulness to the earth and time, is more plainly visible. In my view this means that in this respect we have to speak most emphatically of the greater value of the Old Testament as compared to the New. The Old Testament has a more positive concern with creation and the kingdom, with the first and the last, with the image and the law, with sanctification and humanity, with ethos and culture, with society and marriage, with history and the state.

Van Ruler stresses that it is in this reality, this world, this history and time that God reveals himself as the God who fills history with his action, i.e. with his deeds. Again and again he stresses that this is not an overt revelation, but hidden. God is present and at work in the world in a hidden (verborgen) and veiled manner. Time is ‘filled time’, filled with God’s actions in this present world. Time and history therefore are also revelation, for God’s actions take place in time and history. This revelation is all around us.

2.5. The kingdom and history

In his inaugural lecture at the University of Utrecht in 1947, Van Ruler stated that the theologian cannot work in isolation, but needs to listen and relate to the work of others. The theologian needs to be aware of the interrelation of the various branches of science, and especially of the relation with philosophy. Philosophy and theology often deal with the same metaphysical questions. The other intellectual disciplines ought also to remain

57 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 517. This is a good example of Van Ruler’s provocative style. Cf. also Van der Sar, [Balance or Movement? Main lines in the theology of Van Ruler], 27.
in the focus of the theologian, for their findings may have bearing on theological explanations, as, for instance, with the concept of creation.

Van Ruler does not reserve this breadth of scope for philosophy; he also applies it to history. Our Christian faith is an historical faith and therefore the theologian needs to see history in its widest context.

History is for us, just as much as philosophy and the natural sciences, a form of truth about the world. In order to penetrate, or at least approach, the mystery of reality, particular our human condition: (mens-zijn), we have been given an indispensable help in the phenomenon and discipline of history.\(^6^0\)

**a. The essence of history**

The topic of history held Van Ruler’s interest since early in his career. He had planned to write his dissertation on Troeltsch and history. It remained an important topic for him throughout his life and writings. Its emphasis is important in relation to his notion of the kingdom of God. “God has become history”, says Van Ruler. “The Christian church is lying at anchor (ligt voor anker) in history”. By this Van Ruler means that the most important salvation events have happened. Salvation (heil) has come, redemption is here, the truth regarding humans as sinners has been revealed. Communion with God has been realised. Love as a historical reality has happened in the coming of the kingdom of God.\(^6^1\) Therefore it is possible to speak of ‘the presence of the future’ in the here and now.

History is one of the forms of truth in regard to the world, even if it is not necessarily the form closest to the theologian. Although he or she might have to leave many matters of truth questions to experts in other disciplines, the theologian is nevertheless interested in

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\(^6^0\) Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’, 30.

\(^6^1\) Van Ruler, ‘God en de geschiedenis’, 283. The image of a ship anchored down is often used by Van Ruler. He wants to indicate that we are waiting for the eschaton with its ultimate revelation, the revealing of that which in principle is already with us. Cf. also Van Ruler, ‘Theologia Naturalis’, 145ff. esp. 192 also 339.
their findings. The theologian might also add to the discussion of truth by concentrating in his or her work on the question of purpose and the historical character of human existence. ⁶² Why, for what purpose, does this world exist?

Van Ruler encourages the encounter between theology and other areas of knowledge.

Speaking about the purpose of history he writes:

The difference between theology and philosophical thinking seems to become hazy when we consider the question of the purpose of history. When a theologian is concerned with this, one has to transcend the boundaries of salvation, of Christ, of special revelation, and therefore all boundaries, which would close off our theological activity from philosophical reflection. We strive for to a synthesis of all that is and all that happens. ⁶³

Therefore it is impossible to do without history, for history is the medium of our thinking and speaking. Van Ruler learned from Troeltsch that the whole of our existence and thinking has a historical character. ⁶⁴ He does not mean simply our historical knowledge but rather the incomparability of every new, individual form of historical life. History reveals to us that there are ever new positions and new forms, the contingencies of life. This does not reduce theology to a science of history; neither is it a part of the science of history, but theology needs to be open to reality as a historical phenomenon.

This openness to reality as a historical phenomenon has implications for the idea of the kingdom of God, but also for the understanding of history. For theology, history has its roots in the proclamation as found in the Synoptic Gospels as well as in the Old Testament. Israel believed and hoped for a kingdom of God that would come in time and in which God (Yahweh) would rule. This was a historical expectation. “Israel believed in the unity of the

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⁶³ Van Ruler, ‘De mens, zin van de geschiedenis’, 311.

human race. Israel also discovered history as a coherent, irreversible and purposeful process of free divine acts and responsible human acts.  

The notion of history plays an important role in Van Ruler’s concept of the kingdom of God. Christianity is a historic faith. Salvation is dependent on the historical fact of the resurrection of Christ. This indicates that history has an eschatological goal. This is not to diminish the value of the present world, but to realise that the world has a beginning and an end; everything in between is history. Van Ruler becomes very passionate about history, because he feels that history is being undervalued, even negated. Christians need to be aware of history, for otherwise their faith cannot be understood. It needs to be understood not only in the sense of chronological history, but also theologically. In an explanation of 1 Corinthians 15 Van Ruler says that God created the world and gave it its natural body, its physical nature. In this world God has done historical deeds, God reveals himself in history. This makes our faith an objective faith, which can only be proclaimed objectively and not subjectively. The subjective task is the praise of God; this is the task of the church, which is born of the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel proclamation itself is objective. God recreated the world and gave it its spiritual dimension. This he did in Jesus Christ, particularly through the resurrection. God made a decision in history for humanity. The resurrection of Jesus is a historical and physical fact. The natural is first; it is also the working field. The spiritual has come later and entered the natural; it has redeemed the natural. The natural is first and good, even though evil has arisen in it. Then came the

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65 Arnold A Van Ruler, *Blij zijn als kinderen, Een boek voor volwassenen* [Happy as children, a book for adults] [Happy as children; A book for adults.], (Kampen: Kok, 1972), 78.

66 Arnold A Van Ruler, *De dood wordt overwonnen; 1 Corinthen 15 in morgenwijdingen* [Death is Conquered; 1 Corinthians 15 presented in morning devotions], 2 ed. (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1972), 10. Pannenberg says, "… Christian theology must insist that Christian faith has its basis and presupposition in God’s historical revelation." Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 150. Pannenberg deviates here from Barth, who stressed obedience, 151.

67 There appears to be an allusion here to the rejection of Kierkegaard’s position and probably also a rejection of Schleiermacher and Kant. Van Ruler even states that Kierkegaard is the ‘great enemy of all philosophy of history’. Cf. Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’ 31.
spiritual and it conquered evil in all its forms. That is why the second is more than the first; the end exceeds the beginning. The kingdom of glory excels the creation. All that lies between the two, the beginning and the end, namely history, has meaning. The meaning of the historical process is that all evil is conquered. In Van Ruler’s view, this deep conviction, that it is possible to speak of the purpose and value of a historical process, is remarkable and necessary for the Christian faith. Both the Old Testament and the apostolic gospel have brought this conviction into the world. Augustine and Hegel and other great Christian thinkers lived from this.68 The Christian church has as its task the proclamation of the purpose of history. The goal of history is that the world is progressing; the end will greatly exceed the beginning.69 Van Ruler says that the central message of the kingdom of God creates theological space for history in its widest context. This message is related to the eschatological emphases in the biblical teaching on the one hand and the christological and pneumatological accents on the other hand.

With some caution we can say that in the Bible, including the New Testament, it is not ultimately a matter of the gift of the Messiah or of the Spirit, but the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, however much the coming of Jesus Christ and the work of Holy Spirit are absolutely necessary for this.70

For this reason Van Ruler is of the opinion that the discipline of theology may not be limited to the proclamation of Jesus Christ, but – by implication – includes in its attention the whole of reality, particularly the whole of historical reality. God’s actions are without doubt focussed on this created reality. All of God’s actions make history.71 This is Van Ruler’s view of history: history is God at work; the actions of God constitute history. Not only has God revealed himself in history, but all of his deeds, all of his actions, are the sum of history.

68 It is interesting that here Van Ruler places Hegel and Augustine on the one line. Cf. what is said about Van Ruler and Hegel in the Introduction.
69 Van Ruler, De dood wordt overwonnen, 131,132.
70 Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’, 33.
b. History as God’s self-revelation

The implication of the above for the kingdom of God is that God is seen as the Ruler of history. He has entered the field of reality and makes existence historical. God is portrayed in the Bible as a power in history. This is different from the Greek way of thinking or the modern Western outlook. Referring to Plato, Van Ruler says that God, “…has broken the cycle of nature and pointed reality (werkelijkheid) towards the future; in place of the anamnesis (i.e. remembering the past) has come the expectation (of the future); and in place of process thinking and entelechy have come ‘the new’ (contingencies), which continually breaks through.” 72

Historical understanding is part of the structure of the Christian faith, for this faith is bound to historical facts, which are the deeds of God. The definition of history as the deeds of God does not narrow the confines of history as a concept, but widens the scope of history. The Christian faith has sufficient elasticity to allow it to encompass the phenomenon of history in its widest sense. This is due to the work of the Holy Spirit, who is not bound to biblical history only, but to all the various kinds of history belonging to the human race. In a narrower sense, history is bound up with Jesus Christ as a historical person. The history of the kingdom is closely connected with the person and work of Jesus Christ. History, particularly the history of the kingdom, has a christological foundation. Moltmann puts it this way:

Through his death Jesus became historical. Through his resurrection he became eschatological. He became the coming Lord who mediates the future of God…. A Christian understanding of history in its core must be developed out of Christology, …. we must develop from his identity in the absolute difference of cross and resurrection a Christological concept of history which can come to grips with other experiences of history. 73

72 Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’, 33.
Here Moltmann pleads for a Christian understanding of history, which lies in Jesus Christ himself, because Jesus identified his messianic work with the kingdom of God. He also bases the kingdom and its anticipation on this christological foundation. He adds,

The kingdom of God has identified itself with Jesus in the resurrection of the crucified one. In his words and deeds Jesus has anticipated the kingdom of God and has opened the coming of the kingdom. In the resurrection from the dead God has anticipated in this one his kingdom of “life from the dead”, and has herein, through this one, opened the future of the resurrection and the life.\footnote{Moltmann, \textit{Future of Hope}, 23.}

Van Ruler would not deny what Moltmann says, but he himself does not define history narrowly on the basis of Christology, but more generally on the whole of God’s self-revelation. He declares that the kingdom of God is to be understood as the result of God’s dealings with our worldly reality. This corresponds with the biblical notion of God, namely that he is the living God, to be understood in essence as Will, not an eternally resting being, but the One who makes existence historical.\footnote{The Dutch here is “Dit is immers kenmerkend voor de bijbelse Godsleer, dat zij de levende God naar zijn wezen niet verstaat als eeuwig, in zichzelf rustend Zijn, doch als Wil.” Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’, 33.} He is a historical power.\footnote{Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’, 33. Pannenberg says similarly: “… God is the all determining reality.” Pannenberg, \textit{Systematic Theology}, Vol.1, 159.} In line with this, Van Ruler says: “The kingdom of God is nothing other than the powerful entry of God into history. That is why it has come, is coming and will come.”\footnote{Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’, 35.} “History is to be understood as the enthronement of God in an order (\textit{syntaxis}) of guilt and reconciliation.”\footnote{Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘Christusprediking en Rijksprediking [Preaching Christ and preaching the kingdom of God]’ in \textit{Verwachting en Voltooiing [Expectation and completion] Een bundel theologische opstellen en voordrachten [A collection of theological essays and lectures]} (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1978), 48. Reformed theology would more typically speak of the triumph of reconciliation over sin.}

Van Ruler further adds that the eschatological kingdom not only makes space for the reality of history, but is like a margin around history. The kingdom is the eschaton of history; history has been determined eschatologically. The deeds of God are the purpose
of history. Not that history needs to focus only on God or the future of God, but God’s actions are especially focussed on this created world, this reality. All God’s actions make history, and even though this history is eschatological in nature, Van Ruler says that “the biblical expectation of the future is undoubtedly not concentrated exclusively on God, as if the earthly perspective is no longer important.”

It is God who determines history. The purpose of history is the realisation of the kingdom of God. In this context Van Ruler quotes Herman Bavinck, who said that the kingdom of God – even though much seems to plead against this – is the real content, the kernel and purpose of the entire world history. In Van Ruler’s view, this idea needs to be handled carefully, for theologically we have to have a deep respect for the mystery of God’s existence in the world and for history in particular. This does not mean that the kingdom needs to be seen as a static theocracy, but the kingdom breaks powerfully into this world. History has to be understood as God’s ascension to the throne, which is a celebration and at the same time a struggle.

The final purpose of the kingdom is, on the one hand, that human guilt will be removed (gedelgd wordt) through salvation, and on the other hand, the establishment of God’s reign. The kingdom is both eschatological and soteriological in nature. History is eschatological in nature in that it moves towards the fulfilment of the kingdom. This movement will not always be smooth and easy, but often painful, full of hurt and suffering; nevertheless it will be victorious.

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79 Van Ruler, ‘Bijbelse toekomstverwachting’, 221.
80 Cf. Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, Vol.3, 586. “As the end of history it is also its completion or fulfilment insofar as history is a history of the acts of God but also in relation to our destiny as a theme of history.” Cf. also Vol.1, 230, 231.
81 Van Ruler, ‘Het koninkrijk en geschiedenis’, 37. Van Ruler does not indicate from which of Bavinck’s works he is quoting.
82 Cf. Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 213.
The question remains: what is the purpose of history? In most Reformed theological positions, Christ is the purpose of history (Barth). Over against this, Van Ruler states that humanity is the purpose of history. In answering the question of the purpose of history, he states: “…, we cannot limit ourselves to the question of salvation. We cannot remain purely soteriological. We naturally become also ontological. We ask the question of ‘being’ (zijnsvraag). That implies that we cannot limit ourselves to Christ. We are just as profoundly interested in humanity and the world.\(^{83}\)

But if it is not Christ, what then is the purpose of history? Van Ruler says:

> What is primary and essential? To that we can only answer: us and the world, the fact that we exist and that which we are. It is the creation and created reality … For what are we here? Obviously not just to be saved. That idea, in my view, is a distortion of the biblical message and the gospel. Further, it is an unchristian and unacceptable idea that the creation is in need of deliverance or is a prefiguration of salvation, for example as the conquest of ‘nothingness’, (the nihil, das Nichtige).\(^{84}\)

Van Ruler teaches us to think historically and anthropologically. Humanity is the centre of God’s attention and in this God’s love (the purpose of creation) and his faithfulness can be seen. Christ and his work are the confirmation that God has determined humanity to be the goal and purpose of history. Humankind is the history, humanity makes history, humankind interprets history, humans design new history. “The final purpose in all of these realities is not that we truly (zuiver) contain Christ, but that we ourselves, in our sheer (zuiver) humanity are maintained.”\(^{85}\) It is also possible to say that humanity is the bearer of the image of God and the co-worker with God. This means that all of God’s work receives form in the history of humanity. History is therefore also an eschatological concept, because history leads into the future. Israel and the New Testament show that

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\(^{83}\) Van Ruler, 'De mens, zin van de geschiedenis', 71.

\(^{84}\) Van Ruler, 'De mens, zin van de geschiedenis', 76. Italics mine.

God works in a historical manner. God worked in the past and is working in the present, and both need to be seen in the light of the future. Van Ruler puts it this way:

Future and history, the eschatological and the historical, reciprocally determine each other. Without the eschaton there is no history. The eschaton is the point of attraction, that keeps history moving and draws a line through it. It also gives history its unity and irreversibility, without which it would cease to be history.86

c. History and humanity

In the consideration of history, as will be discussed in the next section, it is also necessary to see the correlation between history and the eschaton. But here it is necessary to stress the importance of the cultural and social aspects of humanity. The human being is not only an eschatological, but also a historical, being. Each person, as a responsible human being, lives in community and adds to society and its history. Each person is part of a truly historical process, says Van Ruler. This means that there is a relation between history and humanity. Humans are responsible beings and are held responsible for their actions, not just as individuals but also in relation to the whole of humanity. They are involved in building community and in building the kingdom. The manner in which human beings are communal and social is important.87 The way people live together and the way our communal living is given form, is the most sensitive and sanctified aspect of Christianity. This is the goal; this is the ultimate image of God. It is the way the kingdom is established, coming from the future. “The communal living of humankind (society) is the heart of history and eschaton”, says Van Ruler.88 Here the lines of righteousness, love, joy come together.89 That is why the eschaton is also crisis, judgement and reward.

87 Van Ruler, 'Eschatologische notities', 229.
88 Van Ruler, 'Eschatologische notities', 229.
89 Cf. Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, Vol 3, 180. “The eternal love of God, however, was not for the individual in isolation but only in relation to the new human fellowship in God’s kingdom that is the goal of the ways of God in the history of his creation.”
Righteousness will make its home on earth. The earth will be swept clean of all injustice, unrighteousness and violence.

Van Ruler says that humanity is taken up in the process of history through the work of the Spirit, through whom humans begin to know the will of God. People are called to service in the world, recognising this world as God’s world, destined to become the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit becomes the equipping power for the eschaton, drawing from the future, drawing the world to its ultimate destiny. In an untiring process the Spirit turns our inner and outer life into a praising service of God. This means that humanity is involved in the process of history. Guided by the Holy Spirit people become realisers and anticipators of the kingdom.

In stressing the role of humankind in history, Van Ruler is not afraid to speak of development and evolution. He even uses the term ‘self deliverance’. These concepts do not deny the salvific work of Christ and the work of the Spirit. Rather, through the salvation received in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, people are enabled to be and to live in such a way that they can contribute to history. Van Ruler states: “There is also the notion that there is progress, change, movement and improvement in the historical process. These are real and fundamental Christian (oerchristelijke) notions. In this the biblical ferment is working.” This brings hope and defeats the notions of pessimism and fatalism.

In summary, the above section concerning the kingdom and history shows that according to Van Ruler God is involved in history, but not at the exclusion of humankind. God

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90 Arnold A Van Ruler, *Ik Geloof; De twaalf artikelen van het geloof in morgenwijdingen* [I Believe; The Twelve Articles of Faith in Devotions], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1968), 128.
91 Van Ruler, ‘Eschatologische notities’, 231.
‘makes’ history, yet humankind has an important and responsible place in history, by way of its communal living. Van Ruler sees history as eschatological in nature; history is a part of the eschaton and the kingdom of God. That kingdom is present and coming in all its fullness.

2.6 The kingdom and theocracy

In Van Ruler’s theology theocracy has an important place. It would be possible to write a separate study covering this subject. It would also be an injustice to pass over in silence the topic of theocracy, because it touches on his concept of the kingdom. His emphasis in the kingdom is that God rules from the future. This same emphasis is also found in his exposition of theocracy. For Van Ruler “Theocracy simply means, that God reigns.” Yet it is not the theocracy that comes from the future, but the kingdom.

We have seen that Van Ruler defines the kingdom as the salvific actions of God, past, present and future. The kingdom of God is to be understood biblically as the final and salvific actions of God in and with this world. The kingdom of God should not be understood in a static-ontological sense as a differentiated space or sphere beside or above our worldly reality, but as God’s action in the world. “The kingdom is God’s grip

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94 In English the word theocracy has a very particular meaning. I will come back to this later, cf. page 57.
95 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 40.
on the world, his struggle with the world, his action in the world.”

God is busy with his world, his cosmos, and his kingdom which is coming from the future.

All of these definitions overlap with Van Ruler’s concept of theocracy. Theocracy is God’s ordering of chaos and our sin. The theocracy is that realm where humanity recognises God’s rule and ordering. It is the acceptance by Christians of the rule of God and the expression of God’s will in the way they live. This is not to be restricted to an ethical sense, but it rather covers every aspect of human existence. This ordering includes all aspects of our present lives and our world: in church, state and culture. “True theocracy is there, where people in obedience to God have realised the reign of God.”

The above helps to understand why there is a strong relationship between theocracy and Van Ruler’s view of the law. In his dissertation Van Ruler wrote that the law is fulfilled. It is not abandoned and does not become superfluous, but the fulfilment of the law is our salvation (heil), it permeates the whole of our existence. The law is an eternal part of the kingdom of God and therefore a sphere of human existence. Where the law has its influence, God’s rule is acknowledged and God’s will is exercised. For Van Ruler this is theocracy. If the kingdom is nothing other than this life set right through God’s salvific action, the same must be said of Van Ruler’s concept of theocracy.

Fries points out that in the early period of his writings van Ruler emphasised theocracy more explicitly than later, but he never abandoned the idea. It is always in the background.

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97 Van Ruler, *Verwachting en voltooiing*, 84.
of his writings. This is remarkable, because even in his own time the idea of theocracy (as the direct rule of God) was not very popular and is even less so today.\footnote{Paul Roy Fries, \textit{Religion and the Hope for a Truly Human Existence. An inquiry into the Theology of F D E Schleiermacher and A. A. Van Ruler with Questions for America} (Utrecht: Dissertation kept at the University Library at Utrecht 1979), 151.}

H W de Knijf drew attention to this in his address delivered at the presentation of the new edition of Van Ruler’s work in September 2007. He said,

\begin{quote}
Van Ruler’s theocratic thinking cannot expect to be met with much acclaim in modernity, reflected in the neutralism in the Netherlands.\footnote{Knijf says in Dutch “\textit{in het modern neutralistische Nederland}”; he probably means “in the modern neutral thinking Netherlands”.} The word ‘theocracy’ alone causes people to shiver, for it is associated with a nostalgia for long lost times, ecclesiastical domination, intolerance, and even terrorism. So it is not easy to defend and to commend Van Ruler in our time. Yet it is prudent to evaluate his interpretation of theocracy as he presents it. It is the lynchpin of his entire thinking, his basic scheme and his great love. ...Van Ruler never tired of protesting against the interpretation of theocracy as a moral adage or as a call for certain praxis. Theocracy does not describe a normative quality of God but serves as a theological explication of God’s action in the world: it is about a theological (i.e. an ontological) condition. Thus theocracy is not a program, and not even an ideal, but – utterly different in his words – the theocratic quality of every situation’. In fact it is a different word for historical thinking; for without history neither humanity nor revelation is imaginable.\footnote{H W de Knijff, ‘Van Ruler, an address held at the presentation of Verzameld Werk Deel 1’, \textit{Kerk en theology [Church and Theology]} nr 2, no. Year 59 (2008), 2, 3.}
\end{quote}

This long quotation is necessary, because it is the comment of someone who is an expert on Van Ruler and who looks at his work from where we are in our own time. In this manner theocracy is not normative, but descriptive; it is an attribute of God. For Van Ruler the idea of theocracy was not a system to put into place over against other systems, but rather a way of understanding God’s actions in the world and in history. Nor does he see theocracy as something that is complete and ready. Rather, God is acting and his actions are fragmentary and haphazard, it is ongoing, it is eschatological.\footnote{Van Ruler, \textit{Droom en gestalte}, 130.} As such it is part of the kingdom, coming from the future. Where God’s will is obeyed and put into action, there theocracy is present already. In theocracy – the way Van Ruler understands it – the future is already present in our midst.
a. The three forms of theocracy

Van Ruler’s concept of theocracy is dynamic and fluid. At times it can clearly be seen and recognised, at other times it is somewhat elusive. He states that there are three particular ways to view theocracy. First, we can see theocracy as giving political form to life. This would be an ordering of church and state. In this way life would be seen as an ellipse with two points or centres, namely church and state or (as Van Ruler puts it) the Lord’s Supper and civilian law.103 Second, theocracy is not a system by which we can explain God’s actions. God’s actions are not finished, they are fragmented.104 “Theologically we know more than theocratically.”105 This way theocracy can be seen as a structure of theological thinking, it is not an ideal that needs to be realised.106 The form it takes is predicative, critical and to be proclaimed.107 Third, we can see theocracy as an all-embracing understanding of life, as an independent “Seinsverständnis”108, i.e. an understanding of ‘being’ or existence. This concept of understanding being (ontology) is to be distinguished from all philosophical or non-Christian understanding of being. The truly biblical Christian ‘understanding of being’ permeates the root of Christian life, so that not a single concept is left which is not touched by this Christian understanding. Here Moses and Aristotle do battle, says Van Ruler. It appears that Van Ruler uses all three interpretations of the concept of theocracy at different times.

103 Van Ruler, Religie en politiek, 153.
104 Van Ruler, Droom en gestalte, 130.
105 Van Ruler, Religie en politiek, 154. Van Ruler opposes a closed system that encompasses God. “God is the enemy of a system in this sense.”
106 Van Ruler, Droom en gestalte, 132.
107 “Christianity is not human duty which we complete, but a divine gift which is donated. The Gospel is not a demand, but a proclamation. … Theocracy must not be seen as an ideal that is to be achieved, but is a reality we live.” Van Ruler, Religie en politiek, 155.
108 Van Ruler, Religie en politiek, 153.
In summary, we can say that Van Ruler sees theocracy as a fundamental truth necessary for understanding, a metaphysical and theological presupposition underlying all other decisions. According to him we cannot escape the matter of ‘theocratic thinking’, for no matter from which metaphysical or religious system we approach the world, whether Buddhism or Islam or Christianity, existence and life form a ‘theocratic way of thinking’. For Van Ruler theocracy means that we acknowledge that God rules.\(^{109}\) As he himself says: “Put briefly: in essence not a single political decision is possible, without a decision in regard to religion.”\(^{110}\) Elsewhere he writes, nowhere can we ignore the reign of God. “The background of everything is theological in essence.\(^{111}\)

\textbf{b. The four main emphases in Van Ruler’s concept of theocracy}

Four main emphases run through Van Ruler’s concept of theocracy. These are: Salvation \textit{(heil)}\(^{112}\); Justice; Service; and Enjoyment.\(^{113}\) These together constitute the theocratic idea. In Salvation we find the origin of theocracy, in Justice the colour, in Sacrifice the reality and in Enjoyment we find the form \textit{(gestalte)} and the playfulness of theocracy.\(^{114}\) The strongest emphasis in his theocracy is salvation. It is salvation in Christ, but it is essentially of an earthly nature. It is not only an individual salvation \textit{(salus)}, but salvation understood as ‘\textit{beatitudo}’ (see Chapter 3). It is the salvation we have received. Therefore theocracy must be understood \textit{not} as an ideal that needs to be pursued or obtained, but as a reality, in and from which we live. Life is the reality, life as God has made it, not what we

\(^{109}\) Van Ruler, ‘Theocratie en tolerantie’, 166. Theocracy literally is \textit{theos} = God and \textit{cracy} = rule or government.


\(^{111}\) Van Ruler, ‘Eschatologische notities’, 220.

\(^{112}\) The Dutch word ‘\textit{heil}’ is translated as ‘salvation’. In the Dutch it can have a more general meaning of ‘well being’. Van Ruler likes using the word ‘\textit{heil}’ and in my opinion this fits with his inclusive approach.

\(^{113}\) Van Ruler, \textit{Religie en politiek} 155. The Dutch word that Van Ruler uses \textit{(spel)} means literally: game or to play. Obviously Van Ruler means the enjoyment that the playing brings. Cf. also Van Wilgenburg, \textit{[God and history, a christological dilemma]}, 237.

\(^{114}\) Van Ruler, \textit{Religie en politiek}, 303.
make of it ourselves in our striving, or ethical struggles. This reality includes the body, marriage, family, vocation, the faith community and civilian life.\textsuperscript{115}

The nature of this reality is a mixture of Christianity and non-Christian elements. Theocracy is never pure and absolute in nature. It is impossible to design a perfect theocratic situation. Theocracy is relativity in itself; it is the relation between revelation and agnosticism, between salvation (\textit{heil}) and existence, between God and humanity. The two are kept in balance by the power of the Holy Spirit, who provides the balance of compromise.\textsuperscript{116} On the other hand, it also needs to be said that all Christianisation (\textit{kerstening}), and therefore theocracy, has a kernel of ‘actual wholeness’ (\textit{heilsfeitelijkheid}), which comes from the revelation of God in Israel and Christ. The Scriptures, as the witness of God’s historical revelation to Israel and in Christ, keep the ‘actual wholeness’ in the process of Christianisation (\textit{kerstening}),\textsuperscript{117} even though it is not possible to move directly from revelation to culture. This means that Christianisation is a work in progress, more to do with God’s presence and his grace than with an application of a particular ethics, outlook or theological system.

It is difficult to state where theocracy for Van Ruler finishes and where the rest of his theology begins. Van Ruler sees the whole of theology not only through the focus of the kingdom of God, but also theocracy. That is why the idea has such great importance for him. How important? For he also says that theocracy should not be taken too far or too seriously. “We should not think too greatly of this theocracy, of this ordering of the life

\textsuperscript{116} Van Ruler, \textit{Gestaltwerdung Christi in der Welt}, 39.
\textsuperscript{117} Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘Kerstening van het voorbereidend hoger en middelbaar onderwijs’ [The Christianisation of education], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1954), 18,19.
through the church, nor expect too much from it”¹¹⁸ The gospel and the law do not intend to give more than certain indications of how life, existence, will be theocratically shaped when it is ordered around the cross. Humans can only use the world, not improve it. The theocracy is not an ideal, but a miracle that is received. After all, it is not God’s intention that the world is to be improved through the church or through Christianity. Rather, God saves the world!¹¹⁹ Humankind cannot control the theocracy, but only live by it.

The idea of the kingdom of God has permeated the whole of Van Ruler’s theology, likewise the concept of theocracy. The difference between theocracy and the kingdom is that the theocracy is a concept of reality (werkelijkheidsbegrip). It states that God is present and acting, therefore it is historical in nature and incomplete, open to the surprising acts of God, the contingencies. “The theocracy is a dynamic-creative reality, initiated by the Word of God and is fruit of God’s historical-eschatological action”, summarises van Wilgenburg. The kingdom is part of theocracy in that it erects the signs of the theocracy. The theocracy can only be approached from the idea of the kingdom, namely from God’s reign, the reign of God’s word come into the flesh. The theocratic idea has a provisional, preserving, incidental and fragmentised character. The theocratic idea in Van Ruler’s theology is one of the means for the coming of the kingdom. Wherever the kingdom is taking form, the theocratic idea is present. Both the theocratic idea and the kingdom concern the actions of God in the world and these actions are not yet completed, but will be so in the future. It is this future completion that is anticipated

¹¹⁸ Van Ruler, Religie en politiek, 34. Cf. also Van Wilgenburg, [God and history, a christological dilemma ], esp. section 4.1.5, 236ff.
¹¹⁹ The sentiments expressed here by Van Ruler seem somewhat one-sided. No doubt he wishes to express that the emphasis lies with God’s actions and his grace. Here it seems to lead to an over-emphasis and undervalues the responsibility of humankind and their involvement in Christian life and the kingdom of God.
in both the kingdom and the theocracy. In its anticipation it is already in a sense with us here and now.