



The City in the Bible: Implications for Urban Ministry

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THE CITY—"GLORIOUS THINGS OF THEE ARE SPOKEN" (PS 87:3)! WELL, BY SOME, perhaps, but not by all. In fact, in some circles, the Bible is characterized as anti-city. The city, over against the wilderness of devoted nomads or the rural landscape of faithful peasants, is said by some to be the center of wickedness, the haven of apostasy and self-reliance, the den of social inequity and royal privilege.¹ The city is scripture's evil place where sin is rampant; all cities are, in their core, Babylon.

On the other hand, glorious things have been spoken of the biblical city. The city is described as the beacon of hope, the place of protection, the home of invention and religion, law and royal promise, the place of the written word that birthed and formed our scriptures, new and old, and thus made possible God's ongoing proclamation. All cities, in this scenario, are seen as Jerusalem.

To an extent, both these visions of the city are true to scripture, though, in fact, neither extreme cuts to the core. For the city in the Bible is finally a world of stark reality that houses a population of simultaneous saints and sinners. In the city, complete with temptation and promise, sin and grace, reality is one's ever present companion. For though the biblical journey begins in the garden, it moves

¹So Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). For a survey and evaluation of this negative characterization, see Robert R. Wilson, "The City in the Old Testament," in *Civitas: Religious Interpretations of the City*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1986) 4-6, and Don C. Benjamin, *Deuteronomy and City Life* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983) 39ff.

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quickly to the city and remains there, moving back and forth from city to city, until finally one rests in the heavenly garden transformed into a city. The biblical drama, with its unrelentingly human face, is played out largely within city walls.

I. THE AMBIGUITY OF THE CITY

The ambiguity of the biblical portrait of the city is apparent from the start. The first city is established by Cain and is named after his son, Enoch (Gen 4:17). The city, thus, can hardly claim saintly parentage.² Its father's violence is matched and raised by its early descendent, Lamech, so that violence marks the city from the start. But the city also sires the parents of commerce and music and industry, Jabal and Jubal and Tubul-cain.³ And in the midst of this double-edged progress, "people began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26) – religion too is given birth. These beginning stories, moving through the creation of families and nations and several more cities (Gen 10:10-12), culminate with the building of the city of Babel with its tower reaching toward heaven (Genesis 11). Here humanity tries to establish its identity and strength through building its own security, through the hubris of self-reliance – the ever-present danger and temptation for the city. The other danger of the city is amply represented by Sodom and Gomorrah, corrupt to the core and filled with evil men who seek only their own pleasure and disregard the welfare of the stranger.

Yet, in the wake of Babel it is worth noting something other than urban corruption. Many of the cities highlighted in the Pentateuch are not built by their eventual inhabitants. The cities are thus conceived as pure gifts of God (cf. Ps 107:4-9). Abraham and Jacob happen upon the previously established cities of Bethel (Ai) and Shechem, and there they build altars, recognize God's presence, and call upon the name of the Lord (Gen 12:6-8; 13:3-4; 28:18-19; 33:18-20). Deut 6:10ff. also marks this reality:

And when the LORD your God brings you into the land which he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you, with great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, then take heed lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name.

So also the Lord provides for cities of refuge (Num 35:6, 11-15; Deut 4:41-43, 19:1-10) which stand in stark contrast to those cities which, like Babel, deem their own walls and towers sufficient refuge and security.

²Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 326-328, speculates that Enoch, not Cain, named the city, and thus the city here escapes negative valuation.

³Jabal, as "the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock," is normally identified as the father of nomads rather than the father of commerce, but Frank S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel* (Missoula: Scholar's Press, 1977) 205-206, following Gerhard Wallis, identifies this group as a guild of "professional cattle-breeders and herders who lived near the city where they were in charge of the herds of their urban patrons."

From the beginning, then, the city stands between the extremes of hubris and divine gift, corruption and promise. The portrait of the city in the New Testament is equally ambiguous. The narrative moves from the rural ministry of Jesus that skirts the cities with some degree of intentionality to the ministry of Paul and the growth of the church, in which the gospel is spread throughout the empire from city to city until the final entry into Rome itself.⁴ And always, at the center of the image of the city, in Old Testament and New, stands Jerusalem.

II. BIBLICAL JERUSALEM

Like other principal cities throughout history, Jerusalem looms on the horizon with mythic proportions:

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.
Within its citadels God
has shown himself a sure defense...
As we have heard, so have we seen
in the city of the LORD of hosts,
in the city of our God,
which God establishes for ever...
Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth. (Ps 48:1-3, 8; 50:2)⁵

Jerusalem—Zion—is the city of God, perfect and holy. But even within the mythic tradition of Zion the reality of the city is present. For in Israel, unlike other Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, the capital city does not drop from heaven nor is it pictured as the navel of the earth, though some such symbolism may have accrued. No, the story of Jerusalem, the capital city, is told within history, replete with political intrigue.

Jerusalem, Salem, was a Canaanite city with its own history (Genesis 14; Josh 10:1-5; 12:10; 15:63; Judg 1:8, 21). The city was captured by David and, for any number of politically wise reasons, proclaimed to be his capital, David's city (2 Sam 5:6-10). To Jerusalem David brings the ark (2 Samuel 6), and so God comes to dwell in Jerusalem, first in the ark and subsequently in Solomon's temple. Mythic dimensions are present in the telling, but always through infusion into the concrete reality. Jerusalem remains a flesh and blood city. Like the cities in Genesis and Deuteronomy, Jerusalem is adopted by God into the promise, and through adoption is transformed into Zion. Like David, a fallible king, Jerusalem is a fallible city. And that fallibility has a certain flavor that keeps the eternal promise to the city in

⁴See John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 52-54.

⁵Cf. Psalms of Zion: 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122.

constant tension with the eternal demands for justice and righteousness, loyalty and devotion.

The principal guardians of both the demands and the promises were the prophets. Time and again, they chided Jerusalem for its iniquities and spoke of the city's impending doom:

How the faithful city
has become a whore!
She that was full of justice,
righteousness lodged in her –
but now murderers!
Your silver has become dross,
your wine is mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.
Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:
Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies,
and avenge myself on my foes!
I will turn my hand against you;
I will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy. (Isa 1:21-25)

Jeremiah would not allow the citizens of Jerusalem to hide their iniquities behind the presumed invincibility of the city:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."...Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" – only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jer 7:3-4, 8-10)

The prophets do not condemn the city out of hand, simply on the assumption that all cities are corrupt; rather, the prophets condemn the city specifically because its inhabitants abuse power, ignore the demands of social justice and the law, practice idolatry, and fail to repent and turn back to the Lord. So likewise Jesus denounced the cities of Corazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt 11:20-24).

Yet, at the same time, the prophets did not leave Jerusalem without hope:

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isa 2:2-3; cf. Mic 4:1-3)

Throughout Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, the promise is delivered with all its mythic power:

They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent — its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. (Isa 65:23-25)

The promise is not a refuge from the realities of sin and unfaithfulness; the promise stands as a vision on the other side of human repentance and divine forgiveness. Still and all, the promise does have the final word. For the story of Jerusalem continues into the New Testament.

In the Gospels, the lure of Jerusalem sounds like the call of a siren, beckoning Jesus to his inevitable death. In that death, the sin of Jerusalem finds its fullest expression. Yet that very sin is gathered up with all such sins by Christ's death on the cross, and Jerusalem is transformed in the process. The disciples return rejoicing to Jerusalem to wait and pray (Luke 24:52), and in Acts the word goes forth from Zion. Jerusalem then becomes a different sort of beacon, as the heavenly city of promise sought for in faith (Heb 11:10-16; 13:14) and present at the end of time (Rev 21:1-22:5). In the end, Jerusalem stands over against Babylon, heavenly city of promise over against the earthly city of corruption. We reverse the process from where we began our biblical journey and are drawn back to the garden, on the other side of where we live as saint and sinner.

Then the angel showed me the river of water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev 22:1-5)

III. THE CITY IN GOSPEL VISION

So where does this biblical picture of the city leave those of us who live and breathe and have our being in such places? Are we left to think of the earthly city only as Babylon? We are often tempted to dwell prophet-like on the sins of the city. Conservative or liberal, we all know that sin, individual and corporate, exists here aplenty — social, economic, political, and religious. Surely, at times, we are called upon to name these sins and call for repentance in the name of the Lord. Or, in our more compassionate moments, we lament with Jeremiah:

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations! (Lam 1:1)

Or weep with Jesus over our beloved city gone awry (Luke 19:41). But even in these modes of lamentation and naming sin, we are, perhaps, in for some surprises.

For as the Lord tells us through Jeremiah, even in Babylon we are to “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” We are to marry and have children and “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer 29:4-7). We might discover, as did the prophet Jonah, that those we thought were godless might recognize the presence of the Lord more readily than we ourselves, and those whose sins we deemed unforgivable might repent and embrace God’s grace despite our own preference for divine condemnation over divine compassion. We are in partnership with our cities; the cities are our realities, and the gospel calls us to something more than condemnation.

A substantial part of our job, in proclaiming the gospel, is calling the contemporary city to live in the light of the more positive biblical vision of the city. We thereby enter the gospel business of transforming urban culture through vision and service, of bringing the “not yet” into the “already.” We participate in the transformation by recognizing together the possibilities and the promise of the future city taking root in the real city of the present. In the light of the gospel, we can envision the city as a multi-faceted gift of God where we thrive on creativity, we treat the stranger with hospitality, we live under law grounded in justice and equality, we cooperate as community, and we worship in joyful recognition of God as our refuge and Christ at our center.⁶

The city defined by gospel vision is a place of creativity in its industry and in its arts, the heir of Enoch’s progeny. Without the work of the hands, the city languishes; without Jubal’s lyre, vision fails, and the city cannot grow and change.

The city defined by gospel vision is a place of hospitality and divine refuge, the opposite of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the light of the vision, we issue open invitation to the one who is other, the alien and stranger; we open our homes and churches because we were once strangers in Egypt or in Jerusalem. In seeking to understand and include the other, we are ourselves transformed, much like Paul who becomes “all things to all people...for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:22-23).

The city defined by gospel vision is a place of law,⁷ justice,⁸ and equality,⁹ where vision transforms both us and the stranger into neighbors. Being neighbors involves charity, service, and a vision of equality; as neighbors, though we support

⁶See also the summary of John Goldingay, “The Bible in the City,” *Theology* 92 (1989) 14.

⁷So Deuteronomy which is preeminently an urban law code. See Goldingay, “The Bible in the City,” 5-8, and Benjamin, *Deuteronomy and City Life*.

⁸So the prophets.

⁹So Paul, Gal 3:28.

preferential treatment for the poor, we also make no distinctions among peoples. As neighbors, we care for those who cannot care for themselves. As neighbors, we work towards creating a city where “justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24). And as neighbors, we recognize rich and poor, male and female, all persons of all races, to be subject to the same laws, with the same expectations and privileges.

The city defined by gospel vision is a place of cooperative community. Our community is a motley collection of strangers gathered around a common table, not a community defined by preordained structures and preexistent ties. We are a community bound by a common Creator, Redeemer, and Host. In community, we discern the workings of the Spirit. When we look at our cities, our Babels, with their competing, hostile, and self-destructive ways, they are transformed through proclamation into Jerusalem at Pentecost where, together in the Spirit, we listen, communicate, gather together, and go forth. Once we were not a people, but now we are God’s people; once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy (1 Pet 2:10).

Finally, the city defined by gospel vision is a place of worship in which we proclaim God’s presence and Christ’s reign:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
Say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!” (Isa 40:9)

From the Old Jerusalem to the New Jerusalem, this vision of the city as the center of worship and proclamation remains central. Adopted by God, defined by hope, transformed by promise, the city flourishes only as a gift of God, who enables its continued life through forgiveness, grace, and presence. Without the reality of God’s past fulfillment of promise and the hope for the future, and without the reality of God’s continuing presence, claiming and living within the positive vision is impossible. With the vision incarnate within our communities, we respond through worship with confession and adoration — our lamentation transformed into celebration.

In the words of Psalm 126:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced!