

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 16

Volume 16 • Number 3 • July 1992

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



God's Agenda for the City: Some Biblical Perspectives

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From the Garden of Eden to the Holy City, the New Jerusalem: such is the direction of biblical account of the journey of God and humanity. Along the way there are many other cities: Enoch, the city built by Cain; Babel (or the more familiar English name, Babylon); Jericho; Jerusalem, the city of David; Samaria; Nineveh; Antioch; Rome. Each biblical city brings with it different features that help us to reflect on our life and mission in cities today.

A PLACE OF PROTECTION

From the city built by Cain to the city-states of the Canaanites there are many places in the Old Testament called a 'city'. The most general sense of the word is 'a fixed settlement which is rendered inaccessible to assailants by a wall and/or other defence works' (Frick 1977, 30). Further, 'to build a city' is to 'fortify' (e.g., [1 Kings 16:24](#)). Jerusalem is where it is because its topography and water supply meant easier defence.

And here is ambiguity. Nehemiah can seek God's aid to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and when they are completed 'all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realised that this work had been done with the help of our God' ([Neh. 6:16](#)). And yet the massive walls of Canaanite cities are no security against the Israelites, and the Jewish king Hezekiah is criticised because, in the face of Assyrian threat, 'you counted the buildings in Jerusalem and tore down houses to strengthen the wall ... but you did not look to the Maker of it all' ([Is. 22:11](#)). The new city of Jerusalem has its walls too, but its gates are never shut. Furthermore, unlike the ancient cities which hid their water supply from outsiders, the new city has a river that flows out to the nations. The biblical references to walls reflect the persistent warning not to rely on horses but to be faithful to God and to do what is right and just. [p. 285](#)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT

The story of the Tower of Babel is often spoken of as a human attempt to reach God. I find it significant that the biblical statement by the builders is, 'Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth' ([Gen. 11:4](#)). It was common in the ancient Near East to speak of the fame of a city due to its great buildings, and the later Wisdom of Ben Sirach recognises that 'children and the building of a city establish a man's

name' ([40:19](#)). Nevertheless, 'the danger of presumption and over-reaching oneself is close at hand' (Westermann 1984, 549). Westermann goes on to point to the impressive prophecy of [Isaiah 2:12-15](#):

The LORD Almighty has a day in store
for all the proud and lofty, ...
for every lofty tower
and every fortified wall,
for every trading ship
and every stately vessel.
The arrogance of man will be brought low
and the pride of men humbled;
the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

Is it that God is against magnificent buildings? One might think of the magnificent temples of Solomon, and then of Herod. And yet these are also seen eventually to be destroyed by God. There is a recognition of God-given crafts used to the glory of God (e.g., [Ex. 31:1-6](#)), and certainly the New Jerusalem is described as a place of beauty and grandeur. And yet human values always are paramount, as in Jeremiah's condemnation of King Jehoahaz ([Jer. 22:13-17](#)):

Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness,
his upper rooms by injustice,
making his countrymen work for nothing,
not paying them for their labour.
He says, 'I will build myself a great palace
with spacious upper rooms.'
So he makes large windows in it,
panels it with cedar
and decorates it in red.

Does it make you a king
to have more and more cedar?
Did not your father have food and drink?
He did what was right and just, [p. 286](#)
so all went well with him.
He defended the cause of the poor and needy,
and so all went well.
Is not that what it means to know me?
declares the LORD.

A consistent biblical motif is that God's people are to be famous not for their buildings, but for doing what is right and just. But more of that later.

More could be said about other aspects of human culture that often reach their heights because of the resources of city life. One can think of music and entertainment, of crafts expressed in jewelry. Again there is ambiguity—the use of music in all areas of life is affirmed, the diversity of jewellery is praised as part of the wonders of God's creation, and human craftsmanship and technology is seen to be Godgiven. There is no praise of ugliness or of plainness. Yet when such pursuits take precedence over human needs, there is nothing but criticism. The city of Samaria at the time of Jeroboam II benefited from the control of trade routes. Those in the right occupations and with the right connections were able to enjoy the culture money can provide—they could afford to go to the concerts,

eat at the best restaurants, and buy imported furniture! To them came Amos's words ([6:4–6](#)):

You lie on beds inlaid in ivory
and lounge on your couches.
You dine on choice lambs
and fattened calves.
You strum away on your harps like David
and improvise on musical instruments ...
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.

I do not believe there is criticism of the furniture, food, and fun of itself—although I believe the whole tenor of Scripture is a warning against their seductiveness in leading to pride of human achievement that draws one away from recognition of God and his requirements of doing what is just and right. I need only refer to Deuteronomy with its promise of material and social blessings, along with warnings against pride and selfishness; or in the New Testament, the affirmations of [1 Timothy 4:1–4](#) concerning enjoying all that God gives 'with thanksgiving'.

A CENTRE OF TRADE

Any city that controlled trade routes, or that had a number of client states, and that enjoyed peace (commonly through military supremacy), [P. 287](#) was in a position to become prosperous, then as today! Certainly this was true of Jerusalem in the time of Solomon, building on the work of David. As mentioned earlier, it was also the case for Samaria in the eighth century BC.

But in the Bible, the greatest descriptions are given of Babylon. In his 1930s oratorio, *Belshazzar's Feast*, William Walton made use of the lengthy description of Babylon in [Revelation 18](#). While it may well be that in Revelation Babylon is a symbol of Rome, yet throughout the Bible Babylon is the wealthy, powerful city *par excellence*. Rome carries on in that tradition, as do all subsequent similar cities. Look at the description in verses [11](#) following—a rich listing of trade, and of the people who profited from that trade, a listing which ends with 'and bodies and souls of men' (NIV), or to follow the Good News Bible, 'slaves, and even human lives'. It is a trade that exploits others and benefits from their weakness.

As we reflect on our own reactions to the modern Babylons, Caird's comments on this passage in Revelation are helpful:

There is a sense in which the spectators speak for the author as well as themselves. He has had to be told not to stare in wonder at the great whore (xvii. 607), for he too was able to appreciate the glamour and brilliance, however deeply aware he might be of their dangers. He was no Manichaean or eremite, contemptuous of the beauties and amenities of the civilized world. The cry, 'Was there ever a city like the great city?' is wrung from his own heart as he contemplates the obliteration of the grandeur that was Rome.... There was nothing sinful about the commodities which made up Rome's luxury trade, until the great whore used them to seduce mankind into utter materialism. Every object of worth ... belonged to the order of God's creation which must be redeemed by the overthrow of Babylon, and would find its place in the new Jerusalem. (Caird 1966, 227)

So again, there is ambiguity. Trade may exploit and seduce, but it is not condemned in itself. For in the New Jerusalem we see people bringing their splendour to the city ([Rev. 21:24, 26](#))—but from this city flows a river on whose banks are the tree of life, whose

'leaves are for the healing of the nations.' Or to go back to the passage that Revelation builds on, namely; [Isaiah 65–66](#), there the nations come and are able to be full participants in the blessings and worship of the New Jerusalem.

A CENTRE OF POWER

As one thinks of Nineveh and Babylon, there are images of world powers that control large territories. Especially for Nineveh, the capital [P. 288](#) of Assyria, as later for Rome, there is an image of rule by awesome, frightening, military might that would allow no opposition. Images of rule by might continue to dominate human society—whether it be military or economic might. It is believed that might gives the right to rule. Furthermore, such rule is usually exercised in a way that benefits the rulers. Yet again, rule over others is not in itself condemned. Indeed, a central biblical theme is that of the Davidic kingship and of its subsequent fulfilment in the reign of the Messiah. Yet how different is the pattern of the rule.

Important comparative data have come from studies of kingship and royal decrees in the ancient Near East, and understanding of words related to the Hebrew *sedeq/sedaqah* (traditionally translated as 'righteousness') (e.g., Schmid 1984/1973; Weinfeld 1985; Epsztein 1986; Lohfink 1987; Olley 1987). The following features are relevant to our topic:

1. There is a cosmic ordering whose continuity is maintained through ritual, in which the king has a central role. A close link is perceived between the actions of the king and the maintaining of order and harmony in society and in nature. While the actual 'theology' may vary from culture to culture, yet in some way the king is seen to be appointed by the gods to bring a good and happy life for all his subjects.

2. The representative role of the king in maintaining order is not only in ritual, but more importantly he is responsible for upholding justice, especially for the powerless (poor, widows, fatherless). For example, (Hammurabi of Babylon (ca. 1750 BC) describes himself as 'the shepherd bringing salvation' and legislating 'to bring the orphans and widows their rights' (Epsztein 1986, 10). 'Righteousness'—or better, 'what is right and harmonious' in all aspects of life—depends upon his actions (cf. [Psalm 72](#), where, incidentally, economic prosperity is a consequence of the practice of justice).

3. His decrees as a ruler who does 'what is right' may involve remission of debts, freeing of slaves, reduction of forced labour and release of land. There is hence a close association of 'doing right' with ideas of 'generosity', 'mercy', 'compassion', and 'setting free' (compare [Jer. 9:24](#), [Hos. 2:21](#), [Psa. 89:14–17](#)).

4. There are thus brought together concepts of provision for the continuity of life and of society ('sustaining'), justice, and setting free from those things which hinder enjoyment of life ('delivering'). All are brought together as responsibilities of the king for harmonious order, 'aspects of one comprehensive order of creation' (Schmid 1984, 105).

While it can be questioned how much this ideal was realised in the [p. 289](#) ancient Near East, it is important to see how these same concepts are intertwined within and are assumed by the Old Testament. This is part of the milieu in which Israel became a nation and in which her faith was shaped. She too shared understandings of cosmic order and the role of the king, although her faith was to be expressed in distinctive ways. Israel shared a model of rule that was exercised for the benefit of the ruled, especially for the weak and powerless.

The Scriptures are only too painfully aware of how far short the kings of Israel and Judah fell of this pattern, but it is the pattern of the coming King. He will truly be the one who will bring justice and harmony for all ([Is. 11:1–9](#)). Not only in name but in deed he

will be 'The LORD [who] brings about what is right (*sedeq*)' ([Jer. 23:5–6](#); contrast 'Zedekiah' whose deed did not follow his name). That king will rule from the Holy City and bring peace to all the nations of the earth; all are blessed by his rule. And that city will be one where all enjoy justice. To quote the vision of the New Jerusalem in [Isaiah 65:17–25](#):

... the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years....
They will build houses and dwell in them;
They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit;
No longer will they build houses and others dwell in them,
or plant and others eat....
They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune.
Before they call I will answer.

One sees obvious contrasts with the cities of today, where so many people work hard—but do not have adequate food and clothing, and may not enjoy a relationship with God.

TWO TYPES OF CITIES

As we have considered these various aspects of cities, there have been both negative and positive features; tragically, so often positive possibility but negative reality. We will summarise by giving the vision of the possibility: a city where there is security, but without the huge expenditure on defence that comes from relying on might; a city where there is joy in human achievement that benefits the whole community (or should I rather say the whole world), human achievement that is **P. 290** received as a gift of God to be used in a way commensurate with God's values; a city where there is justice and peace for all, where justice for the poor precedes a desire to be famous, where worship and life are integrated. It is a city which has the delights of a garden.

GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE CITY

The incident of the city of Babel, actions by people seeking to guarantee their future, is followed by God's actions that are to lead to a future of blessing. The scattering of the people who sought to be secure is followed by a call to Abraham to leave the city with the goal that through his descendants 'all the families of the earth might find blessing' ([Gen. 12:3](#)). That blessing would come as Abraham 'will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just' ([18:18–19](#)).

We could go on to consider the events of the Exodus and the covenant at Sinai, but we jump to the later theology of Zion, the city of David, the City of God. There appears to have been a tendency for people to view the Davidic covenant and the temple as some kind of guarantee for the future, to view the royal cult and structure as entities separate from the Mosaic covenant. Against that, the prophets brought the two together. Out of the prophetic messages, the actual life of Israel, and some New Testament input, the following points have relevance to our topic.

JERUSALEM, A CITY WITH A DIFFERENCE

The Mosaic covenant with its laws portrays a people whose life as a people was to be different from the surrounding society in its worship and its socioeconomic relationships. There were laws to maintain the (extended) family as a viable unit for religious and social life. Lohfink (1987) highlights the significance. While the responsibility of Israel's kings to do what was just and right, especially for those who lack social resources, was similar to that of all rulers in the ancient Near East, a distinctive feature in Israel was the responsibility of *all people* to do 'justice and righteousness'. Other kings merely ameliorated the status quo; God's purpose was to work through a differently-structured community. In this connection, it may also be noted that, whereas in the ancient world it was kings who were 'in the image of God', for Israel it is all humans, 'male and female'. Further, 'rich and poor have this in common: the LORD is the Maker of them all' ([Pro. 22:2](#)). Hence, 'he who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but **P. 291** whoever is kind to the needy honours God' ([Pro. 14:31](#)). Furthermore, this new community was to remember that they were slaves, foreigners, poor, and weak, and God was generous to them. So now they are to be generous to slaves, foreigners, the poor, and the weak.

That purpose for God's people is now focused in Jerusalem, for a city is people who regard that city as their focus. Jerusalem is intended to be a city faithful to God and exemplifying justice and righteousness, along with the worship. Tragically the city was active in worship but deficient in justice. And so God orders them to stop their worship. Worship without justice is worse than no worship! Within the city he looked for justice (*mishpat*), but all he found was bloodshed (*mishpah*); he looked for righteousness (*sedāqa*) but instead there were cries of distress (*sēaqa*) ([Is. 5:7](#)). The city that was meant to be a focus of blessing to others was herself riddled with un-blessing to her own citizens. We need to remember that the prophets' words concerning the doing of what is just and right were initially addressed to God's people. This is the perspective portrayed in detail in [Isaiah 1](#).

God, however, does not give up on his people, his city. He is going to act. There will be purifying judgment, Jerusalem will become 'the City of Righteousness' ([Is. 1:26](#)), and there is the magnificent vision of the future:

In the last days

the mountains of the LORD'S temple will be established
as chief among the mountains ...
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,
'Come let us go to the mountain of the LORD, ...
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths ...'.
He will judge between the nations ...
They will beat their swords into ploughshares. ([Is. 2:2-4](#))

Much in the whole Book of Isaiah is a vision of the future Jerusalem to which the restored people of God come, where there is true worship of God that is linked with a life of justice for all. She was to be a 'light' to nations, drawing the nations. Even eunuchs and foreigners will be able to worship in the temple. All cultures and peoples are welcome. God's answer to the chaos and arrogance of the world's cities is to form his own city,

Jerusalem, to which all are welcome. There is also the destruction of other cities that are testimonies to human pride.

That vision is a challenge to the people of Israel to live that life now: 'Come, O house of Jacob let us walk in the light of the LORD' ([2:5](#)). Was [p. 292](#) it Jeremiah's experience of the failure of Josiah's reforms that helped him to see clearly that the only hope was for the people to be given a 'new covenant ... put in their minds and written on their hearts' ([Jer. 31:31-34](#))? Ezekiel saw the necessity of 'a new heart ... and a new spirit ... I will put my Spirit in you' (Ez. [36:26-27](#); [37:14](#)).

As we move to the New Testament there is a transformation of the imagery. Again the physical city of Jerusalem becomes a place for the rejection of God. The city with its temple faces destruction. Now there is a new City, a new Temple. I find it significant that when Jesus speaks to the group of disciples he says, 'You (plural) are the Light (singular) of the world'. Immediately follows the imagery of 'a city on a hill'. The light that is to shine shines through the quality of life of the new community, the citizens of the New Jerusalem ([Matt. 5:14-16](#); [Gal. 4:26](#)). This same community is also the new Temple ([John 2:19-21](#); [2 Cor. 6:16](#)). Now we are called to live, not as citizens of an earthly city, but corporately as citizens of the city that is to come ([Heb. 13:14](#)). We live in the cities of the world, but our scattered communities are to bear witness to a different set of values, a life of hope.

LIVING IN BABYLON

What does it mean now to live in the modern Babylons as citizens of the New Jerusalem? An off-quoted, relevant passage is Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon (chapter [29](#)):

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce ... Also, seek the *shalom* ['peace, well-being and prosperity'] of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because in its *shalom* you will have *shalom*. (vss. 5-7)

This attitude is expressed in detail in the stories of Daniel and his friends as also in the story of Joseph. Here is a pattern for all. In the New Testament, mention could be made of the exhortation to 'pray for kings and all in authority, that we might live peaceful and quiet lives' ([1 Tim. 2:1-2](#)), to respect people in authority ([Rom. 13:1-7](#)). There are also the occasional references to people with some secular authority. In the main however, the call of the New Testament is for the Christian community to live lives of love and service, bearing witness to Christ by a different lifestyle.

THE SEDUCTION OF THE CITY

Within each of these situations—the exiles in Babylon, Daniel and his friends, Joseph, and the young Christian community—there are also [p. 293](#) warnings and illustrations relating to the seductiveness of the lifestyle of the city.

The story of Joseph has its account of the seduction by Potiphar's wife. Joseph's resistance did not help his immediate job prospects! The account of Daniel from beginning to end involves temptations to compromise—'when in Rome do as in Rome,' 'business is business, politics is politics'. Both accounts deserve close attention for grappling with issues of serving the city with integrity.

For the Jews in exile, the pressures were real. The familiar [Isaiah 55](#), with its call to 'Come, buy wine and milk' is a challenge to the exiles to leave the comforts of Babylon and participate in the return to Jerusalem. It is a challenge to reassess what one is spending energy and money on (verse 2: 'Why do you spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?'). It is evident that the exiles had taken Jeremiah's words

to heart and enjoyed the benefits! Now the danger is that those same benefits will prevent involvement in God's greater purposes for his world through his people, citizens of the new Jerusalem. The mocking of Babylon's gods and the magnificent spectacle of the annual New Year celebrations also suggest that those ceremonies had their attraction. The buildings and celebrations were far more spectacular than anything Jerusalem could produce.

The earlier quote from Caird referred to the dangers of the attraction of the great whore, and the New Testament has its sad record of those who are drawn aside by 'the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things' ([Mark 4:19](#)). The New Testament has much to say about the seduction of material possessions—and the modern city survives and thrives through people buying more!

THE CITIZENS OF THE NEW JERUSALEM

God chooses to redeem the world, the cities of the world, through a community, a city, he brings into being. Look at the people he chooses.

When he starts with Israel, he starts with slaves, an insignificant ethnic group, people who are poor and small. Indeed, he specifically tells that he did not 'choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples' ([Deut. 7:7](#)). The city of Jerusalem starts with the choice of the youngest brother who at first was not even considered a candidate. (And remember it was Saul who stood out head and shoulders above others! [1 Sam. [p. 294 10:2](#)]) And David's army had been a bunch of renegades and malcontents.

When God turns to the exiles in Babylon to return to rebuild Jerusalem, they are poor, 'blind and deaf servants' with no political status. When Jesus starts to build the New Jerusalem, look at the disciples he chose. Were any from the power structures of Jerusalem? God's model community begins with people the world regards as insignificant, of little value, and even a nuisance. And these are the people chosen to go into the cities with the good news that Christ has died and is risen. Here we might allude to Antioch, a city which became a centre for mission to the cities of the Roman Empire. There is both judgment with a call to repentance, and a promise of forgiveness and a future, for the arrogance injustice of city-dwellers. There is a message that our hope is not in the present, but in the new creation God is to bring about. In the meantime he calls people, yes, and as his co-workers we too call people, to be disciples, to live as citizens of the New Jerusalem. So there is a ministry of calling people to repentance, of offering forgiveness and citizenship in the New Jerusalem, and of living now in the power of the Spirit of life of love and service, seeking what is just and right, for these are the values of God's city.

HOPE FOR THE CITY

Here is our hope as we work in Babylon as citizens of the New Jerusalem. God does have a purpose for the world, for cities. That purpose is to be most clearly seen through the communities he brings into being, communities of the poor and weak, but people who have a vision of the values of the New Jerusalem, even when the values of Babylon are so powerful and seductive. We live as pointers and models of the new. For Babylon is to be destroyed. God is going to bring the New Jerusalem down to earth.

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The Church's Witness in Evangelism and Social Praxis

Nigel Biggar

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This carefully worded and tightly packed argument is worthy of careful study. The author's call for a balanced and coherent commitment to the understanding and praxis of the Church in mission demands both our individual and church-in-community response.

Editor

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S MISSION?

A major focus of conflict in the Church of England was recently highlighted in a report on industrial mission.¹ On the one hand, it observed, there are those engaged in industrial

¹ *Industrial Mission—An Appraisal*, The Report of a working party commissioned by the Industrial and Economic Affairs Committee of the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility, BSR, London 1988.