

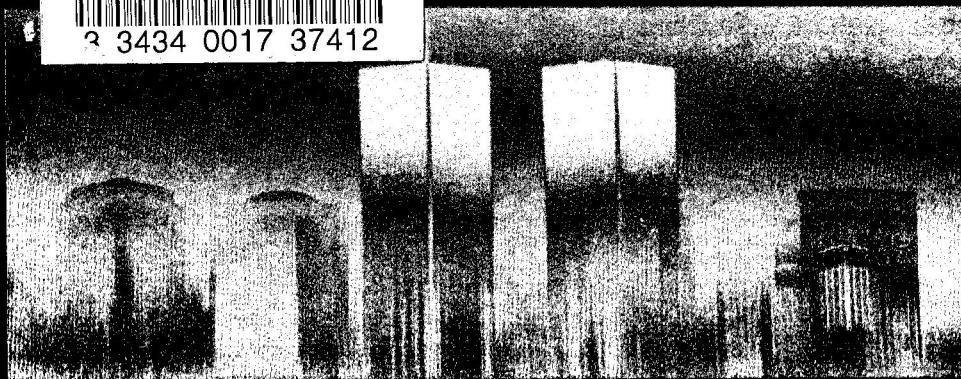
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# DISCIPLINING THE CITY

**A Comprehensive Approach  
to Urban Mission**

# I

## GENESIS AS URBAN PROLOGUE

*Harvie M. Conn*

Looking at Genesis to learn about cities may seem strange to some readers. Those used to thinking of cities as modern industrial centers with tremendous size and population are bound to be disappointed.

The towns and cities of Genesis are closer to those of the most ancient East that arose as cultic and market centers for farmers and herdsmen. Long after the fall of such cities elsewhere, they remained. Amalgams of religion-ritual-government-business, they did not benefit from a large merchant fleet, as did the seafaring Greek cities. Palestine's geography, with its spine of mountains from north to south, provided little room for large population centers.<sup>1</sup>

Other factors also hinder this kind of study. Anti-urban negativism has, in my judgment, stalled research. One wing of biblical scholarship has spent much time in a continuing search for an anti-urban, nomadic bias in the so-called sources of Genesis.<sup>2</sup> Jacques Ellul's 1970 study *The Meaning of the City* set the pace for this negativism. Ellul looked at the city as a symbol of the technology he fears. That controlling perspective, reinforced by his Barthian dialectic, left him little room to see the city as anything but a citadel of sin. Its redemption was left to a radically futuristic eschatology.

Another hindrance to study has been the spotty and sometimes eccentric character of biblical study. Some try to handle the overall thrust of the Bible with a concentration on the history of several cities—Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, Babylon, and Jerusalem. Antioch becomes a model from which to draw strategic principles for contemporary urban church planting and growth.

Using such urban centers for framing biblical constructions has its obvious advantages; they are, after all, the objects of a study like this. But it also has its dangers. The temptation is strong to make restricted biblical passages on the city say more than they do. Hermeneutical carelessness can miss larger biblical themes into which urban concerns are gathered. An urban typology can emerge that is artificially imposed on passages chosen for emphasis. Modern readers' interests can divorce the text from the intentions of its divinely inspired author.

Despite all these potential handicaps, this chapter attempts to trace something of the sweep of urban interests in Genesis. The book's history is seen as the foundation of the Old Testament narrative as a whole. For that reason, we will also provide hints of the wider impact of its narrative on passages throughout the Bible.

Our discussion centers on biblical theology, "the history of special revelation."<sup>3</sup> As general guidelines, we carry on our discussions around the themes of creation, sin and the fall, redemption, and consummation. Will we fall into yet another form of eccentricity? Let the reader decide.

## **Creation: God's Original Design for the City**

More than one preacher in the city has summarized the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation with the words, "The Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city." As a one-sentence description of the biblical history, the assertion works well.

The Eden of Genesis 2, the garden of God (Ezek. 28:13; 31:8–9), is a pastoral paradise. Here God places the first man and woman, tenant-farmers at home in the dwelling place of the Lord. They are regents called to rule over a world whose imagery appears uniformly agricultural (Gen. 1:26–28). In naming the animal creation, the man demonstrates his rule, and the Genesis record underlines that he will not do his task alone (Gen. 2:19–20).

The object of the man's and the woman's testing is the fruit from a tree (Gen. 2:9, 17), and the promise of reward for resisting temptation is the fruit from another tree (Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24). The land is their calling, their

blessing (Gen. 1:29–30), and, after their sin, becomes part of their curse (Gen. 3:17–19). From the earth Adam comes by creative act (Gen. 2:7); to it he returns by divine curse (Gen. 3:19).

### *God's Urban Intention*

Yet there is more to this historical narrative than merely a record, accurate as it is, of the pastoral origins of humanity. The cultural mandate given to Adam and Eve in the garden to fill, rule, and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28) was nothing more than a mandate to build the city. Human culture to follow them was to take city form.

The couple in the garden was to multiply, so providing the citizens of the city. Their cultivation of earth's resources as they extended their control over their territorial environment through the fabrication of sheltering structures would produce the physical architecture of the city. And the authority structure of the human family engaged in the cultural process would constitute the centralized government by which the life and functioning of the city, would be organized, under God. The cultural mandate given at creation was thus a mandate to build the city, and it would be through the blessing of God on man's faithfulness in the covenanted task that the construction of the city would be completed.<sup>4</sup>

Urban culture, built in perfect obedience to God, would typify our hope in Jehovah.

### *God's Urban Apologetic*

There is still another urban dimension to these opening chapters of Genesis. The author supplies it by using the original history of the creation to engage in missionary encounter with the urban theopolitics of his day.

When Genesis was written, the cities of the ancient Near East were already in place. How long they had been there is difficult to say, as difficult as trying to define the nature of a city then and now.<sup>5</sup> What is important for our study is their theological or religious significance.

Large or small, not sharply divided from the rural world, the city was a community drawn together by a common religious commitment. It was that territory, generally on an elevated position and surrounded by a protective wall, dedicated to the service of a local deity.

The Canaanite religion, a central concern in the Pentateuch as a whole, illustrates this. The Baal god was a local territorial deity. Each city bore the name of its particular "lord" or "master"—Baal-Gad (Josh. 11:17), Baal-Meon (Num. 32:38), Baal-Per (Num. 25:3), Baal-Zephon (Exod. 14:2).

The city as a whole was the estate of the city-god. Its “king” or ruler had a threefold duty: “the interpretation of the will of the gods; the representation of his people before the gods; and the administration of the realm.”<sup>6</sup> Believed to have been chosen by the gods, the king was responsible to them for the behavior of his subjects. The city was seen as a microcosm, an integration of nature, society, and the divine. Urbanism became a divine activity of the gods.<sup>7</sup>

In this union, cities appeared as the wives of various gods. Many cities carried the feminine form of the god-husband’s name, for example, Baalah (Josh. 15:9) and Ashtaroth (Josh. 9:10). The metaphor of the city-as-a-woman became a shared vocabulary. Old Testament terms reflect this. Prominent cities were “mothers” and towns within their sphere of influence were “daughters” (Num. 21:25; 32:42; Josh. 15:45).<sup>8</sup>

Intimately linked to the religion of the city was agriculture. This is reflected even in Old Testament vocabulary. Frequently the Hebrew term *eretz* (land, earth) appears as virtually a synonym for the city (Gen. 11:28; 34:2 [cf. 33:18]; 1 Kings 8:37; 22:36).

In the world of the Ancient Near East, urban worship was concerned with good crops and the productivity of the land. The Canaanite religion in its various rites illustrates the preoccupation of urban worship with the fertility of nature.

Still another literary motif in the ancient Near East helpful in understanding the city is its mythological creation accounts. Perhaps the best known is the *Enuma Elish*, conventionally known as the “Babylonian Creation Myth.” That English title, however, may be misleading. Its central theme is not creation (either cosmic or human) but the justification of the supremacy of Marduk and his city Babylon. *Enuma Elish* was a conscious creation for an urban religiopolitical end, a mythological commemoration of city building. Babylon, its argument goes, was built by the gods in primeval times.<sup>9</sup>

Could the Genesis account of creation be intended as a historical counteractive to these literary traditions of mythic creation commonly known in the ancient urban world? Has Moses demythologized these literary traditions in his apologetic against urban mythology? If so, then the parallels between the literary traditions and the biblical account represent urban points of contact that are ultimately urban points of confrontation.

Against this urban background, the pastoral sounds of Genesis 1–3 take on pronounced city hues and undertones. Nature is not deified, and God is not urbanized. The God who enters into covenant with his creation is not

a local urban deity like the Baalim. He is the cosmic sovereign who has made the creation his house-city. He is not embodied in or limited in authority to a single city or place. The heavens and the earth are his dwelling place by virtue of his creative act (Ps. 24:1-2). Cities like Jericho fall before him "who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Josh. 2:10-11). Nineveh must bow in worship before Jonah's Lord, "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jon. 1:9).

Even the Edenic garden takes on new urban significance in this light. It too had its ancient parallels that would not have been unfamiliar to the first readers. Ancient Near Eastern mythology related the king-god to a role as caretaker in the sacred gardens. G. Widegren argues that it was probably customary for the Mesopotamian temple to have a garden or grove of some sort associated with it. The king was its builder, the owner and caretaker, a symbol of his connection with the divine. In the myths, these gardens are described as the habitation of the gods.<sup>10</sup>

In apologetic response to these myths of a corrupted covenant, Genesis sees creation itself and its microcosm in the garden as the dwelling place of the Lord. Creation is the cosmic house of God, the seal of God's victory over chaos. On the seventh day he sits as king in the archetypal house of his rest (Isa. 66:1). He gives fertility to the earth and its creatures (Gen. 1:22, 24). No earthly king is his representation; all human beings, male and female, are representatives of his image-glory (Gen. 1:27). Our life, our security, lies not in the city but in our covenant attachment to him.

This urban flavor to the *shalom* of paradise was not forgotten in the rest of the Scriptures. Isaiah 40-55, for example, uses the language of the *Enuma Elish* in its counterclaims to the ideology of Babylon the city. Jehovah is the true victor in creation (43:15-16). He emerges triumphant in combat with Rahab as dragon, sea, and great deep (51:9-10). And intertwined with this creation language are the urban metaphors pitting Babylon against Jerusalem. A rebuilt Jerusalem (44:26, 28; 45:13; 52:9), in contrast with a doomed Babylon (47:1, 5; 52:2), becomes the equivalent of God's primeval Eden (51:3), an Eden no longer localized but gathering the nations of the world to itself (2:2-4; 45:14, 22-24; 49:23; 54:3).

Isaiah 65:17-25 gathers all these themes together in its eschatological vision of the coming *shalom*, painted now in terms of the restoration of the urban paradise of the Messiah. The vision is prefaced by a recollection of the language of Genesis 1:1. The new heavens and the new earth are to be an urban re-creation.

Preeminently these eschatological connections between creation and city are drawn in the Book of Revelation. The Edenic features of the presence of God in the garden, of rivers and the tree of life, are intensified in Revelation 21–22 and its vision of the Holy City, and all of this is prefaced again by the Genesis language that introduces the heavenly vision as an urban vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1–2).

Security was the hallmark of the city in the Old Testament. In fact, the most common word for city in the Old Testament, *ir*, found some 1090 times, gives the general sense of “a fixed settlement which is rendered inaccessible to assailants by a wall and/or other defense works.”<sup>11</sup> That security, exemplified in the eschatological *shalom* of an urban paradise with open gates (Isa. 26:2; 60:11; Rev. 21:25), stands as the heart of the Genesis Eden. God’s urban house is the creation itself, and we live in it in the security of *shalom*.

## The Fall and Urban Rebellion

That security was shattered by the fall of Adam and Eve, recorded in Genesis 3. In rebellion, the image of God seeks more; creature seeks to become Creator (Gen. 3:22). Up-reaching pride breaks the covenant solidarity between God and the first family and between humanity and the creation.

Against this background of rebellious dislocation we are introduced to the Bible’s first named city and its creation by the first murderer, Cain (Gen. 4:17). Sentenced to wander as a fugitive, Cain builds a city to bear his son’s name, Enoch.

### *Cain, Enoch, and the First City*

Must we see this history as an indictment of the city as opposed to the Garden of Eden? Was Cain, as Ellul has argued, trying to make the world over again?<sup>12</sup>

Several clues point in that direction. For one thing, Cain had been cursed by God to wander (Gen. 4:12). His building of the city, a metaphor of a stronghold refuge against one’s enemies (Pss. 46, 48), appears on the surface to be resistance to that curse. He seeks to find alone the remedy for a situation he created.

Another hint is that this story of the first city falls in the chronology of the line of Cain (4:17–24), not that of the godly line of Seth (5:3–32). Seth’s line begins “to call upon the name of the Lord” (4:26). By intended literary contrast, Cain perpetuates his own name in the self-sustaining security of

the city. And concluding the chronology of Cain's seed is the proud violence of Lamech (4:23–24), "hinting at the fact that the city is a place where violence flourishes, not least family violence."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, there are hints of a more positive view of the city. Genesis is doing more here than simply playing off city versus country. The city that flows from the line of Cain is also the place of human achievement, the center of civilization. Art and technology (the invention of harp and flute, the forging of bronze and iron tools) arise within its walls (4:20–22).

Cities, the Genesis record seems to imply, are provisions of God's common grace; they play a remedial role in human life. Through them God restrains the development of evil, blesses his fallen creatures, and works out his sovereign purpose in both judgment and grace.<sup>14</sup> They evidence God's preserving and preventative grace.

Man may turn the city into something more dreadful than the howling wilderness, but that is another matter. As the provision of God's common grace, the city is a benefit, serving mankind as at least a partial, interim refuge from the wilderness condition into which the fallen race, exiled from paradise, has been driven. . . . Functions that would have been performed by the city apart from the Fall are now modified by being turned to the new purpose of offsetting, to an extent, the evils arising through man's sinfulness and as a result of the common curse on the race.<sup>15</sup>

In all this, the double-edged character of the city is apparent. It is a sign of both God's gracious concern for his fallen creation and rebellious humanity's quest for security apart from God.

### *Nimrod, the City, and the Tower of Babel*

We next meet the negative side of the city in the history of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). We are prepared for this by the introduction in Genesis 10:8–12 of its builder, Nimrod, the verb form of whose name may mean "let us revolt." "The world's first great conqueror" (Gen. 10:8 TEV), he leaves a trail of urban civilizations in his wandering—Erech, Accad, Calneh, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, Resen, and, preeminently, Babel/Babylon.

The Babel story is a dialectic of centripetal and centrifugal movements. Humanity seeks to rise up to God, God descends to curse humanity's pride. Humanity strives to maintain unity, God divides and disperses the race. Humanity seeks for a self-center, God counters with divine scattering.<sup>16</sup>



Linked to the dispersion motif of earlier chapters (4:12; 9:19; 10:18), the history of the city and tower of Babel centers on its builders' proud efforts to avoid scattering (11:4, 8, 9) and to make for humanity a name that would defy heaven (11:4).<sup>17</sup> Like Cain's city, Babel is to become a refuge from the insecurity of an open world and the destiny willed for them by God. "They were supposed to fill the world, and the previous chapter has described the scattering of peoples as part of humanity's filling the world after the flood; but these people resist that destiny. They want to stop in one place, and find a unity grounded in . . . excluding God."<sup>18</sup>

This divine dispersion theme continues throughout the Bible. The testing of Abraham's faith in the covenant promise of land is reflected in his wandering, homeless life. The slavery of Jacob's jealous children, exiled in Egypt, parallels the Babel narrative, for like Nimrod and his compatriots, the oppressed Hebrews build cities (Exod. 1:11) with bitumen (Exod. 1:14; cf. Gen. 11:3). The wilderness wandering as a judgment on the spies' lack of faith (Num. 14:20–24), the dispersal of the ten tribes and the Babylonian exile of the remaining two—all these repeat the themes of scattering begun in the enforced departure of Adam and Eve from the garden. The cities of the world are only temporary stops for a people who must learn that security is in residing in the mountain-city of Jehovah and keeping his covenant (Deut. 6:10–12; Ps. 43:1–3).

The city and the tower/ziggurat also had a special and extended significance well known in Mesopotamia. In places like ancient Uruk (in the Bible, Erech; Gen. 10:10) in Sumeria, ziggurats were artificial world mountains of mud-brick and bitumen; like Uruk, they were associated with temples where the priest held his briefing sessions with the city god.<sup>19</sup> They were cosmic mountains, links between heaven and earth.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the Hebrew designation *Babel* (confusion) could very well be an apologetic word play on the extrabiblical designation for the city, *babili(m)*, "gate of the gods."

The biblical Babel narrative, however, "is no mere adaptation of the Mesopotamian ziggurat tradition, lacking in historical facticity. On the contrary, Genesis 11:1–9 is the record of an actual event."<sup>21</sup> The ziggurat ideology of the ancient Near East originated in the event recorded in Genesis 11. But it suffers from radical distortion by mythologization, a guilty suppression of the creature's violation of the Creator's covenant. Genesis brings us face to face with the reality of human autonomy in its flight from God.

Later biblical literature picks up the image of sinful rebellion in lofty towers and, in polemical language, repeats God's rebuke against human pride uttered at Babel. The cities Israel dispossesses by conquest are "great

and fortified up to heaven" (Deut. 1:28), but God casts them down. High towers symbolizing human strength are brought low by divine power (Isa. 2:12-17; 25:2-3; 30:25; 33:18; Jer. 51:53).<sup>22</sup>

In apologetic contrast to these idolatrous images of world mountains portraying the dwelling of the gods, Jehovah is pictured as dwelling on the urban mountain citadel (Pss. 87:1-3; 125:1-2). "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, in His holy mountain" (Ps. 48:1-2). Jerusalem, the citadel on Mount Zion, becomes the dwelling place of the Lord (Isa. 60:14), "the city of our God" (Pss. 48:3; 74:2; 84:7; Isa. 18:7).<sup>23</sup> The prophets expectantly await the coming day when the Edenic river of life will flow from the Lord's house (Ezek. 47:1-12; Joel 3:18) and the Lord reigns as king over the whole earth (Zech. 14:8).<sup>24</sup>

### *Abraham, Sodom, and Gomorrah*

In narrating the transition from the history of the city and tower of Babel in Genesis 11 to the life of Abraham beginning in Genesis 12, the author paints an intentional contrast. The city builders of Babel express contempt for God by attempting to settle in a city. Abraham expresses his faith in God by following the Lord out of his city (11:31-12:5). The tower builders rebelliously refuse to wander anymore; Abraham wanders faithfully, "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose builder and architect is God" (Heb. 11:9-10). The planners of Babel seek to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4); God promises to make Abraham's name great (12:2).<sup>25</sup>

Looking at Abraham's links to the city may sound strange to some. Countless sermons give his wandering an almost rural coloring. Significant biblical scholarship characterizes him as a semi-nomad.<sup>26</sup> But seeing him more as a traveling merchant prince may come closer to the truth.<sup>27</sup> His life of faith and the testing of his faith repeatedly were linked to the city. Out of Ur, the greatest trading city the world then knew, he came. In an urban world whose walls were under the protection of deities, "he lived like a stranger in a foreign country" (Heb. 11:9). He went from city to city along heavily traveled urban trade routes.<sup>28</sup> In covenant commitment to God, he left Haran, the "Caravan City" (Gen. 12:4). In covenant devotion he built an altar near Luz (12:8; 13:3), which—perhaps in anticipation of its later urban history—Genesis names Bethel (35:6-7).

Abraham's urban concerns and faith shine most brightly in the extended history of Sodom and Gomorrah and his dialogue with the Lord over their fate. God promises to judge the wicked cities (13:13) as he judged the city and tower of Babel. The same "outcry" that spoke from the earth when

Cain spilt Abel's blood (4:10) speaks now of the rampant oppression in the twin cities (18:20–21; 19:13). The city, intended for refuge and safety, threatens to transform even Lot's hospitality (19:1–3) into perversion (19:6–8), restrained only by God's direct intervention (19:10–12).

The erotic and orgiastic depravity of Sodom, characteristic of the Canaanite fertility cult of Baal and Astarte (Lev. 18:22–25; 20:13–23), is striking. But there are hints of other twistedness in the city. The weak Lot had chosen it because it promised wealth and ease (Gen. 13:10–12). Abraham had refused the wealth its king wanted to shower on him for defeating the four marauding kings (14:22–23). Ezekiel later condemned the people of Sodom for “pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease; they did not help the poor and needy” (Ezek. 16:49).

The Sodomites' violence and oppression toward the angel-strangers (cf. Heb. 13:2) was no isolated incident. Lot's urgent insistence that they spend the night inside his home (Gen. 19:3) hints that he expected what followed; it was but a sample of a regular pattern. This suggestion “is in keeping with the rationale that Genesis gives for Yahweh's revealing to Abraham his intention for Sodom—that Abraham's vocation is to do with ‘what is right and just’ (18:19)—the classic double priority to which the prophets keep returning.”<sup>29</sup> The prophets later speak to this barbarity and injustice in connection with the cities (Isa. 1:10; 3:9).

But God did not write off the city easily—not before listening carefully to Abraham's impassioned plea on its behalf. God responded that he would spare the city if ten righteous people could be found in it (Gen. 18:23–32). He had promised that “all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through” Abraham (12:3). Here Abraham put God's covenant commitment to the test of prayer.

Later Scripture points preeminently to Sodom and Gomorrah as symbols of God's judgment against wickedness (Deut. 29:23; Jer. 49:18; Amos 4:11; Luke 17:29). But God's promise of grace is not forgotten, either. To an Israel likened to Sodom, God promises restoration and comfort (Ezek. 16:53–55). Lot and his family, rescued from Sodom, are reminders of the remnant of grace (2 Pet. 2:6–9).

## Urban Redemption and the Blessing of Grace

Alongside this dark picture of the city in Genesis is the theme of the city's part in the redemptive purposes of God, an exhibition place for God's grace. This redemptive/eschatological strand repeatedly ties the condition

of the city to the mercies of Jehovah. The image that brings them all together is the covenant.

Covenant language, particularly the Hittite vassal treaties, had a long ancestry in the cities of the ancient Near East.<sup>30</sup> Urban legal documents—theopolitical affirmations—were shaped by it. Any single treaty might vary from another—an element might be omitted, or the order might differ—but the basic pattern of a covenant treaty between one major power, the suzerain, and his subordinate vassal was uniform.

Genesis, like the rest of the Pentateuch, is embroidered in this language. Shorn of Near Eastern mythology, it underlies much of the material we have examined already. The creation history and the Garden of Eden narrative are good examples.

In Genesis 1, the preamble of the covenant, we meet God, the emperor of the creation. He appears “not as a king among kings for whom the Canaanite term *melek* was proper, but as ‘Suzerain,’ a technical term in political science for a monarch who acknowledged no other power the equal of his own. In his sphere all power was derivative from him.”<sup>31</sup> The royalty of the sovereign Lord of creation is antithetical to that of the local city-kings. He but speaks, and the world comes into being!

Consistent with the pattern of the suzerainty treaties, a historical prologue tells the basis of the relationship of suzerain and vassal. Can we not see here the significance of the repeated history of Genesis 2, this time focusing on Adam and Eve and their covenant responsibility in the garden? Similar to the treaty forms, it is a most unlegal document in the reading. In the free storytelling form of the covenant style, the suzerain God identifies himself as the owner of the garden in which he has graciously placed the man and woman (Gen. 2:8). The context of the whole is the suzerain’s goodness, which demands obedient response from the grateful vassal.

Like the treaties, Genesis then tells the vassal’s obligations under the covenant to obey the suzerain (2:16–17; 3:2–3) and pronounces a curse on infidelity (2:17) and a promise of blessing on fidelity: access to the tree of life (2:9), from which, however, sin bars the fallen man and woman (3:24).

Genesis also presents a new note: the promise of salvation not by the covenant breaker’s own effort but by the suzerain’s act of divine sovereign intrusion (3:15). Despite the curse of sin and the violation of the covenant, humanity’s urban cultural calling will be fulfilled: Adam’s painful labor will subdue the earth, Eve’s travail will fill it. All this is by God’s sovereign, saving disposition and the covenant victory of the seed of the woman over the serpent.

### *Covenant Grace and Urban Rebellion*

In keeping with the gracious promises of God in the covenant, Genesis then records the effect of divine grace on each of the urban scenes of rebellion we have drawn. Even in the curse on Cain, God promises blessing. He sets his mark on Cain to spare his life (4:15–16), and Cain's building the city (4:17) reminds us not only of human efforts to escape the divine curse of wandering but also of the divine provision of urban security for wanderers.

The cultural achievements of the line of Cain reinforce this hint of grace promised to the city. Music, forging metals, and building cities—all are samples of God's common grace and patience toward his fallen, broken creation.

We must look at the scattering of the urban builders at Babel in this same light. It did more than merely demonstrate God's wrath against the builders' impious spirit. It also pointed to God's redemptive, covenant purposes for the city. In faithfulness to his promise after the flood (9:11, 15), he does not allow humanity's sinful activity to reach such a scale as to demand another catastrophe on the same scale. "If the whole of humanity had remained concentrated, the power of sin would likewise have remained united, and doubtless soon again have reached stupendous proportions."<sup>32</sup> The very real mercies of common grace provide the field of operation for redemptive grace.<sup>33</sup> By breaking up the city, God saves the cities.

This same theme of God's gracious intervention also explains why the author of Genesis placed the so-called Table of Nations (Gen. 10) not after the Babel narrative, where it belongs chronologically, but before it. "If the material of ch[apter] 10 had followed the Babel story, the whole Table of Nations would have to be read under the sign of judgment; where it stands it functions as the fulfillment of the divine command of 9:1, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth', which looks back in its turn to 1:28."<sup>34</sup> The arrangement of the material reminds us that the dispersal of the nations at Babel tokens both the divine judgment and the divine blessing (9:1) of grace.

### *Covenant Grace, the City, and the Patriarchs*

In this same spirit, the covenant blessing on Abraham includes the peoples and their cities (12:3; 18:18; 22:18). Repeatedly his life touches the cities and, true to God's covenant promise, his name is made great and he is a blessing (12:2–3).

In support of the alliance of the five urban rulers, he recovers the wealth of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (14:1–16). Jerusalem finds its first

biblical mention when Melchizedek, its priest/king, receives a tithe from Abraham (14:18–20). At Abraham's intercession and for the sake of only ten righteous, the Lord would have spared the cities of the plain (18:22–32). The city of Gerar, through Abimelech its king, pays tribute to Abraham: "My land is before you; live wherever you like" (20:15). The sons of Heth acknowledge him as "a mighty prince among us" (23:6).

The same pattern continues in the lives of the patriarchs who follow Abraham. From the city of Nahor (24:10) come a wife for Isaac and a prediction of urban blessing and rule for her descendants: "may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies" (24:60). Isaac's own encounter and treaty making with Abimelech in the Philistine city of Gerar (26:18–33) parallel his father's history (21:22–34).

The cities and God's covenant promise of blessing meet again in Jacob's life. Where God appears to Jacob during his flight from Esau, the city of Bethel, "the house of God" (28:16–19), springs up. During his return to meet Esau, he encounters the Lord again, and another city, Peniel, "Face of God," grows up to commemorate the event (32:22–30; cf. Judg. 8:8). As they often did in the lives of Abraham (Gen. 13:3–4) and Isaac (26:1–2, 23–25), altars frequently become urban memorials of God's presence, to which the patriarch returns (35:1–7).

Events reminiscent of Abraham's urban experiences occur in Jacob's life as well. As Abraham bought real estate in Hebron (23:17–20), so Jacob buys land from the citizens of Shechem (33:18–19). Just as Abraham's presence was acknowledged as a blessing by the city, so too Jacob's presence is commended (34:20–24). Not intimidated but awed by God's protection of Jacob when he returned to Bethel, the people of the surrounding cities sense "the terror of God . . . so that no one pursue[s]" him (35:5).<sup>35</sup>

The concluding chapters of Genesis (37–50) focus on Joseph. Again the cities of the Gentiles reap blessing from the presence of Abraham's seed. Potiphar's house is blessed "for Joseph's sake" (39:5; cf. 12:3; 28:14). By making use of Egypt's cities as store houses for grain (41:35, 48), Joseph averts a universal famine. His relief program saves not only Egypt but also the children of Jacob.

The Joseph narrative is a bridge to the remainder of the Pentateuch. It explains the presence of Jacob's children in Egypt and prepares us for the history of their slavery and deliverance in the Book of Exodus. At the same time, it is a foil to the history of Genesis 1–11, linking the end of the book with its beginning.

Some verbal and literary parallels have been interpreted in this way.<sup>36</sup> Does Joseph's response to his brothers, "Fear not, for am I in the place of God?" (50:19) recall the phrase from Eden, "you will be like God" (3:5)? Does he allude to the serpent's words "you will not die" (Gen. 3:4) when he acknowledges God's beneficent purpose as "the saving of many lives" (50:20)? Is it by design that the creation formula "and it was good" occurs again in the Joseph cycle (40:16; 49:15), but nowhere else in Genesis?

In similar fashion, "Joseph's expulsion from Canaan parallels the expulsion from Eden, but the movement away from life is reversed in his being sent by God into Egypt 'to preserve life' (45:5-8). The universal famine of the Joseph story is a counterpart to the primeval universal deluge; the strife between Joseph and his brothers, which is resolved in reconciliation, brings to a happy conclusion the fraternal rivalry that begins with Cain and Abel and runs throughout the patriarchal stories."<sup>37</sup>

Most strikingly for our purposes, can we see here allusions, even parallels, to the urban history of Genesis 1-11 and its conclusion in the history of the city and tower of Babel? The Babel narrative tells how God in judgment thwarted humanity's sinful pride to save the earth's cities and his people. That judgment, we have argued, also contained the promise of grace. Joseph's story tells how God thwarted the brothers' jealousy to save the earth's cities and his people. Again, judgment carries the purposes of grace.<sup>38</sup>

As we move beyond Genesis, these themes of covenant redemption and grace revolving around cities enlarge. Cities the Israelites occupy on entering the promised land are gifts from God (Deut. 6:10-11; Ps. 107:36). No human achievements win them (Deut. 8:17); the same divine hand that delivers from Egypt gives them freely (Deut. 7:17-19).

The Mosaic legislation designates cities of refuge as symbols of divine, not self, protection for those guilty of involuntary manslaughter (Num. 35:9-34). So Joshua consecrates six locations immediately after the exodus (Josh. 20:1-9). They are the firstfruits of the redemption of the divine kinsman (Job 19:25; Isa. 41:14; 44:21-22).

Preeminently, however, the themes of redemption and the Edenic return to peace in God's dwelling place focus, in the Old Testament, on Jerusalem. She becomes a sign, a witness to God's work of gracious adoption. Her pagan origins are never forgotten. Like an unwanted child, aborted and abandoned, she lay exposed, struggling in her own blood till the Lord came and called, "Live!" (Ezek. 16:3-6). When she was naked, God, her lover, covered her (16:7-8).

Jerusalem was to stand as a testimony to the world's cities of the unity and peace possible under God's covenant (Ps. 122:6-9). "The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel" (Ps. 147:2). David's capturing Jerusalem from the Jebusites finally united all the tribes of Israel, not merely Judah, under his reign. Fearing that the Israelites' attraction to Jerusalem as the center of worship would lead to reunification of the divided kingdom, Jeroboam erected shrines at Bethel and Dan as substitutes (1 Kings 12:26-30).

Throughout the prophetic literature, Jerusalem also takes on eschatological significance as a sign of adoption. The blessing of the patriarchs to the Gentile cities finds its full meaning as the city of Melchizedek one day becomes the mother of all nations (Ps. 87). Hiram, king of Tyre, helps build her (2 Sam. 5:11); Cyrus, king of Persia and God's messiah (Isa. 45:1), rebuilds a house for God in her (Ezra 1:2-3). Nations will flow to her, remolding tools of war into those of covenant peace (Isa. 2:2-4).

One day Jerusalem will fulfill her role as "the joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 48:2; cf. 68:31; 86:9; 137:1-2, 5-6). At the coronation ceremony of her divine king, Gentiles also will participate in her messianic feast (Ps. 72:10-11, 15, 17, 19). Jerusalem's pilgrims will include the cities of the world (Isa. 60:3). She will be set by God "in the center of the nations, with countries round about her" (Ezek. 5:5).

But even this exaltation for Jerusalem will not be humanly won. Grace must fashion its urban victories in Jerusalem, just as in any other city. The prophets condemn her covenant breaking, her desire to be like the other cities, her injustice to the poor (Isa. 10:1-2). Assyria, "the land of Nimrod," will one day be shepherded with a sword, not a staff (Mic. 5:6). And, like her, the cities of Israel will be demolished (Mic. 5:11, 14). Babylon, "overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah" (Isa. 13:19), will experience a new urban immigration—of jackals, owls, and wild goats (13:21-22; Jer. 50:39-40). Jerusalem's streets will welcome the same populace (Isa. 34:12-15). Like the heap of ruins that was once Damascus (17:1-3), she too will stand desolate, forsaken like the desert (27:10). The joy of the whole earth will be "the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks" (32:14). Using the imagery of the Genesis flood, Isaiah pictures her as a ruined city in a watery waste (24:1-12).

But God will not forget his covenant of grace with either Jerusalem or the Gentile cities. Once again covenant blessing will touch them all; they will be included in the circle of grace. Mercy will rebuild what justice broke down. From the purification of judgment will emerge a new day for the



city, and a new citizenship. The day is coming, the Old Testament concludes, when the registry of Zion will include the cities of Philistia, Tyre, and Cush (Ps. 87:4–5; Isa. 56:3–8). Egypt and Assyria will worship the Lord with Israel (Isa. 19:19–24). “In that day five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD Almighty” (Isa. 19:18). Even Babylon, the great archetypal urban foe of Jerusalem (Jer. 50–51), will have all the birth certificates of her citizens stamped with the Lord’s affirmation, “This one was born in Zion” (Ps. 87:6).

## The Consummation and Calling of Urban Grace

These prophetic visions of the future of the city are not without their hints in the Genesis record. Not so specifically eschatological, there are still reminders that what the cities experienced of grace, directly or indirectly, is still incomplete without a future fullness and consummation. The blessings of grace are still incomplete; promises await further fulfillments.

The lives of the patriarchs exemplify this incompleteness. The fulfillment of the promise to Abraham to bless all the peoples of the earth through him remains mixed throughout the record. Through his intervention the five urban kings are blessed, but at the expense of the judgment of war and devastation on the kings of the four other cities (Gen. 14:8–16). Despite Abraham’s intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah, God destroys those cities. His deceptions about Sarah twice bring divine judgment on his hosts: disease in Pharaoh’s household (12:17–20), and infertility in Abimelech’s (20:17–18).

Conflicts occur repeatedly in the history. Abraham and Lot’s possessions require their separation (13:1–9). The city of Beersheba takes its name from the site of a treaty demanded by Abimelech, who fears that Abraham will not show kindness to him (21:22–31). Isaac’s wells provoke conflict with the same Abimelech (26:12–20). Jacob’s encounter with God and his raising altars at Bethel and Peniel are occasioned by his conflicts with Esau and his fears of their outcome. At Bethel, the Abrahamic promise of blessing “all peoples on earth” through Jacob must be renewed (28:14). In retribution for the rape of their sister Dinah, Jacob’s sons kill all the males in Shechem and carry off the city’s wealth, women, and children (Gen. 34).

The end of Genesis underlines, in the deaths of Jacob and Joseph, this perception of promise still unfulfilled. Jacob, bearer of the promise, is buried not in Egypt, where he died, but in the land of promise not yet

possessed (50:12-14). Joseph, confident of the same promise (50:24-25), arranges for his burial in that same land (Exod. 13:19; Heb. 11:22).<sup>39</sup>

Where will we find the final fulfillment of this consummation promise? What links the images of city and house, king and creation, grace and covenant in Genesis? To whom will we look in that day when Zion lifts up its voice as the bearer of good news and says "to the cities of Judah, Behold your God!" (Isa. 40:9-10)?

The good news of the New Testament is that in Jesus the redemptive expectations of the city are fulfilled. In closing we will try to demonstrate this, using themes, motifs, and images from the Gospels especially.

### *Jesus the Diaspora Pilgrim*

The patriarchal wandering theme of Genesis arises again in the ministry of Jesus. The only period when he was settled—growing up in Nazareth—is passed over in silence. Luke's introduction to Jesus' life takes him from Nazareth to Bethlehem in his mother's womb. Matthew records his early flight into and exile in Egypt, the place of Genesis's conclusion (Matt. 2:14-15). His public ministry takes him from city to city, but he settles in none. He is not deterred by their urban pleas to settle down (Luke 4:42-43).

Could there be a reflection here of Jesus not only as the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) but also as the last Cain? "Cain was placed under a curse and told he would be a wanderer, but he refused to accept this and built a city instead. Jesus, who came to undo every curse on humankind, took Cain's place and accepted a life of wandering, trusting as Cain failed to do in the promise of his Father's protection and provision. In doing this he declares his freedom from the city and breaks the hold of the city and its false security that has beguiled the human race."<sup>40</sup>

In his work as Savior of the city, Jesus moves as a pilgrim wanderer, calling the cities to follow him. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Not in complaint but in recognition of the divine curse on the sins of the city, Jesus bears the curse of wandering that Cain and the Babel tower builders had sought to escape. What theologians will later call Christ's active obedience is capsulized in his acceptance of perpetual flight to remove the curse from humanity. In his resistance to the tempting allure of the glory of the world's cities (Luke 4:5-8), he learns obedience and builds the heavenly city where we may, through his atoning work, find that only legitimate place to end our running.

### *Jesus the Bearer of Grace and Judgment*

As he wanders, like the patriarchs, his presence signals both grace and judgment for the cities and their people. Simeon in the temple/house of the Lord in Jerusalem gazes at the baby Jesus and, in thanksgiving to God, announces, "My eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:30). Jesus raises the widow's only son from the dead in the city of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). A prostitute "from the city" (Luke 7:37) receives his forgiveness of sins. To the cities he sends his disciples, empowered to heal the sick and announce the approach of the kingdom in the approach of Jesus (Luke 10:1, 9, 17). And, at Calvary, "outside the gate" of the city, he suffers "to make the people holy through his own blood" (Heb. 13:12).<sup>41</sup>

But the response to grace is not always repentance and obedience. In the region of the Gadarenes, he drives out demons. But "the whole city" responds by pleading "with him to leave the region" (Matt. 8:34). "The cities in which most of his miracles had been performed" reject him (Matt. 11:20). He warns his disciples about cities where the gospel's good news will not be received (Luke 10:14-15). Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum will fare worse in the judgment day than Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 10:10-12; cf. Matt. 10:15; 11:24). They have tasted, in the miracles and words of Christ, the redemptive power of the kingdom of God. They have seen the signs pointing to the coming of God in Christ. But they have rejected God in rejecting Christ.

### *Jesus the Kingdom/City/House Builder*

Genesis, in introducing Jehovah's relationship to the city, wove together a number of images. Motifs like house, city, mountain, and garden flow together repeatedly in the descriptions of creation and humanity's search for security after the fall.

Later parts of the Old Testament, we have argued, repeat them in a variety of ways. Isaiah describes Israel first as a house shelter in a garden, then suddenly switches the metaphor in the same passage to a city under siege (1:8). A prophecy of the coming of the Messiah speaks of going to the Lord as going to the city of God, and that, in turn, becomes going to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob (Isa. 2:2-3). Entering into the security of the Lord becomes entering into his urban fortress (Ps. 46:4, 7; 91:2, 9). His coming reign will be urban (Isa. 24:23; Zech. 14:16-17; Mic. 4:7). David's desire to commemorate the reign of God by building a house for the Lord in the city is rejected; instead, the Lord will build a house for David and establish his house and kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:11-16).

In the New Testament these interwoven motifs emerge again, now in announcing the arrival of that eternal Davidic kingdom of God in Jesus' arrival. The redeeming reign of promise, the royal power of God, is visible in the word and works of Jesus.

To describe that coming of the kingdom of God, our Lord uses many of these Old Testament metaphorical synonyms. Particularly striking is his understanding of the kingdom as the house of God.<sup>42</sup> Thus we "enter (into)" the kingdom as into a city or a house (Matt. 5:20; Mark 9:47; 10:23). Those entrusted with the gifts of the kingdom are house stewards (Matt. 25:21, 23). Teachers instructed about the kingdom of heaven are like house owners in the care of great wealth (Matt. 13:52).

The joy of the kingdom of God as the epiphany of God himself, as king in power and glory, is pictured as a royal banquet feast or supper in a home (Matt. 8:11; 22:1-14; Luke 14:15). We "enter (into)" the feast (Matt. 25:21, 23), and the unworthy are thrown out into the dark (Matt. 8:12; 22:13) or not let in at all (Matt. 25:11; Luke 13:25, 27).

Similarly, the urban metaphor appears in Jesus' teaching, though less overtly. City and house are interchangeable in describing the kingdom defeat of Satan and Jesus' self-defense of his ministry: "No city or house divided against itself will stand; and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?" (Matt. 12:25-26). From "the streets and alleys of the city" the kingdom feast will call its banqueters (Luke 14:21). A widow "in the city" illustrates the kingdom power of persistent prayer (Luke 18:1-3).

There may be a reason, however, for this minimizing of general materials on the city and kingdom in the Gospels. Their focus turns particularly to one city in its orientation of the ministry of Jesus. That city is Jerusalem.

### *Jesus and Jerusalem*

Jerusalem stands as a prophetic sign of the coming reign of God, an urban theocracy. In Jesus, the theocratic reality of the kingdom reign of grace appears. Jerusalem's place as the promise of God then recedes in the face of the promise's fulfillment in Christ. The God-with-us role typified by Jerusalem in the Old Testament becomes incarnate in Jesus-Immanuel.

In keeping with these connections, the Gospels emphasize the place of Jerusalem as the goal and fulfillment of the ministry of Jesus. In fulfillment of his messianic work of redemption, he "sets his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Here his suffering, death, and resurrection inaugurate the kingdom of God (Luke 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 18:32; 23:42, 43). The

“city of the great King” (Matt. 5:35) stands before him in terms of the messianic fulfillment of the kingdom plan of salvation. His death and resurrection here are the goal of his urban wandering, the surety of the promise that a new Jerusalem is coming.<sup>43</sup>

Thus even in the gospel message of fulfillment, as in Genesis, Jesus himself reminds us that the redemption of the cities is still incomplete, still awaiting its final consummation. Though Jerusalem’s earthly temple one day will be waste (Matt. 25:2), he will come again in glory as the temple incarnate (John 2:19–22) for the final renovation of the heavens and the earth. Then he will bring with him the full inheritance of the people of God, “the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matt. 25:34).

For his disciples, living stones in the new temple (1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16), citizens of the new Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26), there awaits the final city-temple (Rev. 21:22), the new creation (Rev. 21:1–2), the restored Garden of Eden (Rev. 22:1–3). There the divine badge of protection for wandering Cain (Gen. 4:15) becomes his name on their foreheads (Rev. 22:4). No longer driven from his presence, we see his face.

### *Jesus’ People and Their Consummation Calling*

The Genesis history offers no picture of a passive community of faith waiting in abstraction from the city. The patriarchs were active participants in the economic and political life of the cities. Urban royalty from Pharaoh to Abimelech were touched by their influence. Cities grew up from their altars of devotion. An urban world of famine was saved by their wisdom.

They lived in cities of violence and injustice, flowing from the arbitrary wills of urban kings, representations of the arbitrary gods they worshiped. Cain’s path of willfulness and Lamech’s excess (Gen. 4:24) were duplicated again and again in cities like Sodom and Shechem. And, against this pattern, the people of God were called to display their faith in covenant through “doing what is right and just” (Gen. 18:19). Establishing justice and peace for the cities of the earth was to be their mission (Ezek. 18:5–9; 2 Pet. 2:4–10). Their prayer was for righteousness (Gen. 4:26; 18:22–33).

As we, like the Genesis saints, await the final consummation, the same calling makes its demands of us. Covetousness and ruthless greed belong to the old age (Col. 3:5). Moderation is the quality of life that says to everyone, “The Lord is near” (Phil. 4:5). The tyranny of self-assertion that marked the cities of Cain and Babel is to be swallowed up in the awareness that the

new day of the kingdom has come in Christ. We live in the cities now, conscious of our covenant accountability for the whole creation under the lordship of Christ (1 Tim. 3:3; 2 Cor. 7:2). The life centered in Christ must manifest the wholeness, the *shalom*, of the restoration work begun by Christ in his new creation. An urban faith without works is as dead in San Francisco and Singapore as it was in Sodom (James 2:17).

## Discussion Questions

1. Identify some of the factors that have hindered scholars from recognizing the urban dimensions of Scripture.
2. What is the connection between the cultural mandate given to Adam and Eve and the development of urban life?
3. How is common grace evidenced in the city?
4. Discuss God's covenant of grace and redemption in relation to urban life.
5. Explain what Conn means by *urban grace*.
6. How should disciples of Christ express *shalom* in Christ in modern cities?