KLEBER D. GONÇALVES

# The Meaning of the City: An Urban Missional Approach to the Use of City Imagery in Revelation

## Introduction

"Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication'" (Rev 14:8 NRSV).

At the heart of the second angel's message is the term Babylon and its prophetic interpretation. In Rev 14:8, the word Babylon is introduced in John's Apocalypse and reoccurs five more times in the subsequent chapters (16:19, 17:5, 18:2, 10, 21).

Although the subject of Babylon may be approached in distinctive ways (i.e., history, archeology, or eschatology), in the book of Revelation it plays a significant role as it uncovers the climax of human history. Besides all other cities cited in the book of Revelation—such as the seven city churches to which the book is addressed (Rev 1:4; 2; 3)—Babylon and the New Jerusalem have a vital role in the unfolding of humankind's final destiny. Beasley-Murray says, "Revelation as a whole may be characterized as *A Tale of Two Cities*" with the sub-title, *The Harlot and the Bride*" (1974:315; emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, the main focus of this article goes beyond the possible prophetic interpretations of the term Babylon. Instead this article focuses on the fact that from all the available images that could have been used to expose the control of the evil power, God chose a city. What are the connections between the use of the city as a symbol, and the tension portrayed between the Mother of Harlots (Rev 17:5) and the Bride (Rev 21:2)? What are some of the implications of this relationship and the urban mission of the church? The purpose of this article is, as Redford asserts, "to read

Scripture with a missional perspective" (2012:234) by examining the relationship between the use of the city imagery in the book of Revelation and some of its implications to urban missiology.

## The Meaning of the City

Cities are not a contemporary phenomenon. From the beginning of human history a city became a way to protect and create solutions to the most pressing felt needs of the very first generations (Keller 2012:136; Murray 1990:21). According to the biblical narrative, after Adam and Eve had been expelled from the garden, their son Cain established a town, thus becoming the first builder of a city.

There are, however, different ideas regarding the very existence of cities. Were they planned and intended by God before the creation of humankind? Or were they merely human creations?

### The Conceptualization of the City

In the search to fully understand the origin and the concepts behind the existence of the city some crucial questions arise. What is a city? How did it start in first place? What purposes does it fulfill? What processes does it develop? How can it in fact be defined? Lewis Mumford points out:

> No single definition will apply to all its manifestations and no single description will cover all its transformations, from the embryonic social nucleus to the complex forms of its maturity and the corporeal disintegration of its old age. The origins of the cities are obscure, a large part of its past buried or effaced beyond recovery, and its further prospects are difficult to weigh. (1961:3)

We could partly agree with Mumford's declaration when he affirms that no single definition applies to the city. However, this is not the case regarding the origin of the city. There are at least two main propositions about the conceptualization of the city.

On the one hand, there are those who believe that God intentionally designed the city. Urban missiologists Raymond Bakke (1987), Harvie Conn (1987), and Manuel Ortiz (2001), for instance, believe that it was God's purpose to gather his creation in communities that would further develop into an urbanized world. Floyd McClung defends the same concept: "God planned the cities. We can know with certainty that He wanted us to gather in city-communities because He created us for togetherness" (1991:63). This thought mainly comes from God's mandate

to the first couple: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28). Greenway and Monsma go even further by supporting the idea that this cultural mandate "implied, even required, city building" (2000:3). John Dawson, in turn, affirms that "cities have the mark of God's sovereign purpose upon them" (2002:19). These facts are thus presented as biblical frames of reference for understanding that cites were part of God's ideal for humanity.

The second position, on the other hand, adopts the view that the city was entirely a human conception, marked by sinful and selfish attitudes. This view is grounded in the fact that Cain—the world's first murderer—was the founder the world's first city. Cain is described as "a perversely impenitent individual whose life, wholly and hopelessly dedicated to evil, [was] spent in defiance of God" (Nichol 1989:242). Cain's attitude somehow demonstrates what was behind his decision to build the first city. Among scholars who hold this view, French sociologist Jacques Ellul, points out that Cain's decision to build the first city, affirms that "for God's Eden he substitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself—just as he substitutes his own security for God's. Such is the act by which Cain takes his destiny on his own shoulders, refusing the hand of God in his life" (2011:5).

Another noteworthy aspect supporting this view is the meaning of the name given to the city built by Cain: Enoch, which means "initiation" or "dedication" (*chanakh*: to dedicate, inaugurate, initiate). Most probably, Cain's decision was centered in his purpose to create a city in contrast to the Garden of Eden. The city Cain named after his son indicated his intention on living his life on his own terms, as he pleased. Therefore, the city of Enoch was built as the initiation of a new beginning to Cain's life, in opposition to God's creation. This attitude widened and enlarged the gap between Cain and God in his search for solutions to the problems he had created (Ellul 2011:6).

The context of Gen 4:17, nonetheless, suggests that building a city was a further act of insubordination, insolence, and incredulity (Murray 1990:24). Through this action, Cain demonstrated that he was not comfortable with God's assurance of protection placed upon him (Gen 4:15), so he built a very visible place of refuge for himself. The future Cain had in mind was connected with the city he was building, a concrete symbol of self-reliance and ultimate independency from God.

At a time when the Bible tells that "men began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26), "by intended literary contrast, Cain perpetuates his own name in the self-sustaining security of the city" (Conn 2000:18–19). Building a city was therefore an intentional attempt to create a present and

future safeguarded space where God no longer would have any influence or authority.

These two possible views on the conception of urban life contrast the dual nature of the city—a place where God's gracious concern for his fallen creation and rebellious children is demonstrated while at the same time living in a city can be a way to seek security and self-gratification apart from God's presence and guidance.

## The Biblical Use of the Term "City"

When Scripture mentions a "city"—besides the common definition implied in the word itself—there are at least four main meanings in its utilization and importance (Murray 1990:22–23). First, cities, especially capital cities, are often regarded as representing nations. This is clearly seen in Jesus' words: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matt 23:37). Jerusalem is referred to not only as a unique geographical location but also as a symbol of the whole Jewish nation.

Second, cities are regarded as corporate personalities, representing in different ways much more than a mere collection of individuals. In other words, the corporate personality of a city is an important aspect of the biblical meaning of a city.

A third use of the term city in the Bible is found in its use as an institution or spiritual reality. For instance, in the book of Revelation, Babylon "stands for the world without God, [a] secular culture, the exclusion of moral and spiritual absolutes" (Murray 1990:22). The city imagery is used in this way to describe the worldliness of human life in its ultimate form.

Finally, a fourth use of "city" in the Scriptures symbolizes the conflict between good and evil, where the great battle for human hearts and minds develops within its boundaries. Naturally, according to the Bible, "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). "Sin is present everywhere, but it is concentrated and reaches its most virulent form in the city. The cities are spiritual focal points where the key spiritual battles are fought" (Murray 1990:23). Evil and its malignant influence are found in all corners of this planet, but apparently—mainly because of the systems that control human life—its headquarters is located in the city.

The controversy between God and Satan for the control of the city is expressed throughout Scriptures. However, there is a particularly intriguing way in which this conflict manifests itself in the contrast drawn between the cities of Babylon and Jerusalem.

## The Great Conflict in the City

In the Bible there is an alternating pattern of reproof of the city in which the ideal Jerusalem never became a full reality, and Babylon, the central and intentional power aligned against God and his people. Both are presented as types in the great conflict between good and evil. The whole world thus is in constant war whereas the "greatest battle goes on inside our cities; the battle between God and Satan" (Linthicum 1991:23). However, the fullest description of this inevitable conflict between Babylon and Jerusalem—between good and evil—is emphatically presented as one of the basic themes in the Book of Revelation.

### The City as Babylon

Babylon is one of the dominant themes in the Bible. The city is first introduced in Genesis 10 in humanity's decision to build the city of Babel. The history of the city and the tower of Babel is intimately connected with its builders' proud attempts to avoid scattering (Gen 11:4, 8, 9), and to make a name for humanity that would defy heaven (Gen 11:4). The people in Babel were instructed to fill the world, but instead they resisted God's mandate by staying in one place in their attempt to be unified and exclude God from their lives (Goldingay 1989:8, 9). Babylon is, therefore, portrayed as a symbol of a city fully given to Satan and controlled by evil powers. From Genesis to Revelation Babylon represents the dark side of life and the evil existence found in cities in the past and continuing today. Commenting on the oppression and persecution enforced by Babylon upon the Jewish nation of the past, Wheeler asserts:

> The Jews would never forget their suffering under Babylon, nor the Babylonian empire's hostility to the people of God. . . . [Babylon] grew in the minds of the Jewish people into a symbol of all persecution and oppression. . . . [The Jews] began to use its name as a symbol, a code word. By the time of Christ, Babylon had become a code name for Rome the new world power that now occupied Palestine. . . . The Christian church, developing out of the Jewish faith, was familiar with this tradition of using Babylon as a symbol of the forces of evil. (Wheeler 1981:12)

The "Babylon theme," however, reaches its climax in the book of Revelation. John's vision of the "fallen Babylon" (14:8) was probably seen as real comfort to him and his readers, personifying the deliverance from the evil powers of Satan while introducing the eternal victory of God.

## The City as Jerusalem

In contrast to Babylon, Jerusalem, in its idealized form is portrayed in Scripture as the city fully dedicated to God, the holy city that was intended to be a symbol of God's presence and power in the world (Neh 11:1; Jer 3:17; 29) and intrinsically connected to salvation history (Isa 40–66; Zac 14). In the Old Testament, "Jerusalem and the temple are presented as the place where God chose to establish his special redemptive-revelational relationship with His people. In the New Testament Jerusalem is based on the high evaluation of the city in the Old Testament" (DeYoung 1960:28).

Jerusalem was the city chosen by God to represent himself on earth; nevertheless, it was still identified with the same debilities and shortcomings of any other city. "She never escapes from all the characteristics of the city, as is indicated by the accusations constantly aimed at her, aimed at the sins she never ceases falling into anew. Her sins are those of other cities; she acts like them and is condemned like them" (Ellul 2011:97). Because Jerusalem rejected God's plan when the nation rejected the Messiah, it was condemned to be destroyed (Matt 23:37–39; 24:2)—yet it remains as a type of the future New Jerusalem (Gal 4:24–25).

Therefore, Jerusalem served as a witness city because it existed to demonstrate God's actions to human beings. But in the end, in order to fulfill his purposes God goes even further in his eternal adoption of humanity: he becomes the builder of a heavenly city.

> The consummation of this pilgrimage to the heavenly city is the New Jerusalem portrayed in the Book of Revelation, the definitive fatherland of all the redeemed, the city as redemption symbol par excellence. All the Old Testament imagery of divine victory and consequent house building is repeated in the history of the New Jerusalem, the restored and consummated paradise of God. (Conn 1979:246)

The New Jerusalem apparently depicts a reversal. The city—originally conceptualized as the center of rebellion—now becomes a center of reconciliation because of God's mercy and grace (Badenas 1988:16). In the beginning at Creation God gave the first couple a garden as their home. In the re-creation God gives redeemed humanity a city as their home. Both the garden and the city function as centers of worship—a sanctuary—the center of God's presence (Davidson 1997). The New Jerusalem comes into existence only because of God's actions, not human action. In addition, at the end of the age there is no place for what both Babylon and Jerusalem represent.

## The Urban Challenge

In the light of the great controversy between Christ and Satan as seen in the conflict between Jerusalem and Babylon, this article proposes at least two crucial themes revolving around the city: rebellion and redemption. Understanding these themes becomes fundamental in the development of models for urban missiology.

## The Rebellion in the City

Rebellious and dislocation are part of the effects of Adam's sin on human culture and things that are often found in the cities of the world. Cain the murderer and first city builder defied the curse by putting down roots in a city he intended as a new beginning, his new creation. The city has, then, "a spiritual influence. It is capable of directing and changing a man's spiritual life" (Ellul 2011:9). Thus, the first human decision to build a city was clearly a decision to oppose God and his purposes for humanity. That rebellious act went beyond an individual sin, for too often the sins in a city becomes "systemic and corporate" (Bakke 1997:62), infiltrating every urban system with corruption, oppression, and injustice (Linthicum 1991:46).

This perspective makes it possible to recognize the essential nature of the religious conflicts that such rebellion generates and that take place in all the world's cities. In the battle between what Babylon and Jerusalem represent is found the type of spiritual warfare that embraces every city. This is why, as Greenway and Monsma point out, there are "two cities within every single city. There are Babylon with its citizens and Jerusalem with its citizens. These two are essentially at odds, for they serve different masters and live by different standards" (2000:7). The master of one is Christ; the master of the other is Satan.

Those who live and work in cities may be very realistic about the city's essential nature and the cause of the constant disappointments that happen when people attempt to ameliorate life in the city. The root of the problem is the insubordination, independence, and indifference left as Cain's legacy. No human action can change the nature of the world's cities. "These cities are temporary, under the curse, and someday will be removed to make a way for the heavenly city, which the Scriptures promise. A clear understanding of this fact is extremely important for urban workers. Naive utopianism should find no place in urban missiology, for it is as self-defeating as it is unbiblical" (Greenway and Monsma 2000:8).

However, if the nature and essence of the city are evil why would God use it in his redemptive purposes? Why would God, apparently, give his stamp of approval on a purely human idea?

## The Redemption in the City

The city that comes down from heaven, however, is fundamentally distinct from any earthly one. It is a perfect new creation, readied to be the dwelling place of newly transformed humanity. The New Jerusalem becomes then an eternal indication that God does not eradicate human history, but somehow transforms and embraces it (Badenas 1988:15). Out of a flawed purpose, God creates a perfect work.

According to this perspective God makes the best of a bad situation (Casey 1991:47). And amazing as it may seem, from all the available images and symbols God uses to portray an eternal home for fallen (but redeemed) humanity, God chooses a city. He "graciously takes up the idea of the city, the creation of humankind after the Fall, and redeems it" (48). The same redemptive reality should constantly be present in the mission God's people seek to fulfill in the cities around the world.

> In cities the fiercest battles for human minds and hearts take place. For that reason, cities are center stage for the Christian mission, the great drama of redemption. Understanding this, *Christians ought not to flee the urban battlefield, but rather they should purposely choose to be in the city and occupy all the corners of urban life*, bearing the light, salt, and leaven of the gospel. (Greenway and Monsma 2000:8; emphasis supplied)

This redemptive perspective was incorporated in all the covenants portrayed in Scriptures, where Jerusalem became a sign, a witness to God's work of grace, which will be consummated in the heavenly city—the New Jerusalem. The redemptive victory of Christ is finally celebrated over Babylon, the great enemy in John's Revelation. Now in the New Jerusalem, "all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord" (Jer 3:17). In God's city will be consummated the redemption of the city systems—religious, economic, and political, becoming transformed systems centered in the worship of the Lamb (Rev 21:22) and not self-centered as was Cain's objective when the first city was built.

## Conclusion

A continuing battle between God and Satan is represented in the comparison drawn between the city imagery portrayed through the conflict between the ancient cities of Babylon and Jerusalem. This conflict is depicted in the post-fall period through the actions taken by Cain. By building a city Cain sought to recreate God's creation, giving it his own form. The decision to build the first city was centered in the false perception of security apart from God. This sad reality of explicit rebellion, found its

prominent expression in the decision taken by Cain's descendants to build the tower of Babel, but that decision only resulted in more confusion and alienation. In contrast, God chose another city, Jerusalem, to represent his redemptive power in the midst of disorder and rupture.

In order to achieve the final victory and implement God's solution—the eternal city, the New Jerusalem—it is first necessary for all evil powers represented by Babylon to be completely destroyed and annihilated. For the New Jerusalem to arise it is necessary for Babylon to fall, because when sin's history ends there is no longer any place for the reality of what has been since the Fall—conflict between two powers for the hearts and minds of people on this planet. At the end, only one power will be victorious, as John's Revelation clearly describes the final redemptive actions leading up to the establishment of God's eternal presence in the city "whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:10).

The use of city imagery found in Revelation suggests that every city has both good and evil, for every city is the battlefield between the god of Babylon and the God of Jerusalem seeking influence and control over peoples' minds and allegiance. The message this suggests to all Christians is to recognize the nature of urban life and the impossibility of a complete regeneration of its systems. Nevertheless, God's people must pray for the city's welfare and promote its true good, for the city's deepest struggle is spiritual. In addition, because of God's redemptive intervention in history Christians should not flee from the city, for the Spirit of Christ can empower his people in their mission of salvation that must be proclaimed on the streets of all the cities of the world.

## Works Cited

Badenas, Roberto D. 1988. New Jerusalem—The Holy City: An Interpretation of Rev 21–22. A manuscript presented to the Daniel and Revelation Committee at Newbold College, Bracknell, England, March.

Bakke, Raymond J. 1987. *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

_____. 1997. *A Theology as Big as the City*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Beasley-Murray, G. R. 1974. *The Book of Revelation*. London: Oliphants.

Casey, Barry L. 1991. The City in Modern Apocalyptic. *Spectrum* 20, no. 2 (May): 42–48.

Conn, Harvie M. 1979. Christ and the City: Biblical Themes for Building Urban Theology Models. In *Discipling the City: Theological Reflections on Urban Mission*, edited by Roger S. Greenway, 222–286. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

_____. 1987. *A Clarified Vision for Urban Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

_____. 2000. Genesis as Urban Prologue. In *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Mission*, edited by Roger S. Greenway, 13–34. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz. 2001. *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Davidson, Richard M. 1997. The Garden of Eden a Sanctuary. Class manuscript prepared at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, December.

Dawson, John. 2002. *Taking Our Cities for God: How to Break Spiritual Strongholds*. Lake Mary, FL: Charisma.

DeYoung, James C. 1960. *Jerusalem in the New Testament*. Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok.

Ellul, Jacques. 2011. *The Meaning of the City*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

Goldingay, John. 1989. The Bible in the City. *Theology* 92, no. 745:5–15.

Greenway, Roger S., and Timothy M. Monsma. 2000. *Cities: Mission's New Frontier*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

Keller, Timothy. 2012. *Center Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Linthicum, Robert C. 1991. *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

McClung, Floyd. 1991. *Seeing the City with the Eyes of God: How Christians Can Rise to the Urban Challenge*. Tarrytown, NY: Chosen Books.

Mumford, Lewis. 1961. *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

Murray, Stuart. 1990. *City Vision: A Biblical View*. London: Daybreak, Darton, Longman and Todd.

Nichol, Francis D. 1989. Genesis to Deuteronomy. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. Vol. 1. Washington, DC: Review and Herald.

Redford, Shawn B. 2012. *Missiological Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation for the Global Church*. American Society of Missiology Monograph Series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.

Wheeler, Gerald. 1981. City of Evil. *Liberty* (March–April): 4–16.

Born in Brazil, Kleber D. Gonçalves has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the areas of publishing work, church planting, teaching, and pastoral ministry. He joined the World Mission Department faculty at the SDATS in 2015. He is the newly appointed director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and also serves the world church as the director of the Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies at the General Conference. He is married to Nereida C. Gonçalves and have three children: Isabella, Nichollas, and Gabriella.