



The City in Biblical Perspective: Failed and Possible*

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THE CITY IS NOT A PRIMAL OR INTENTIONAL THEME IN THE BIBLE. IT IS AN INCIDENTAL theme that surfaces only as a byproduct of other issues. Moreover, it is not likely that what is said about any ancient city, concrete or anticipatory, is directly pertinent to our urban issues. More specifically, the Bible finally cares only about Jerusalem. In order to make the linkage to our own issues, then, it is necessary to take “Jerusalem” as a free-ranging metaphor for all of our cities.¹

I.

At the outset, the city in the Bible is a Canaanite phenomenon, looked upon resentfully and fearfully by the Israelites who are a peasant, hill-country enterprise. The

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¹The issues concerning the early history of Israel are exceedingly vexed and unclear. This essay is an exercise in theological exposition that operates with the “constructed” version of history that became canonical and normative for Israel. While not unaware of the historical questions, my exposition concerns Israel’s normative self-understanding, which may in turn contribute to our self-understanding as a community attendant to that normative act of imagination.

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Old Testament Jerusalem is a metaphor for the concentration of power and meaning that marks our own cities. Jerusalem failed, committed to a false ideology, just as our cities are failing. The prophets provide a voice and a program of hope.

term “Canaanite” is not an ethnic one, but it is an ideological term referring to those adversarial to Israel’s covenantal faith and communitarian social practice (Num 13:27-28; Josh 6:16-21, 26; 12:7-24). The Israelite commission is to destroy the Canaanite city kings and their cities, and the socio-economic systems they support.

If we enquire about this profound antipathy toward cities, we must do a bit of social analysis. While the following categories are no doubt imposed anachronistically, they surely are broadly correct. The city is a place of:

- division of labor, with different social roles and consequently different social classes
- stratification of power, with kings and their entourages on top of the heap
- surplus value, in which the “upper class” urban elites lived off the produce of the peasants who themselves lived hand-to-mouth, produce taken either by shrewd commercial transactions or by imposed, coercive taxation. The economy of the city was no longer aimed at use value, but at surplus that provided a cushion from the vagaries of life—a cushion for some, produced by the labor of others.

The city-king system dominated the landscape, so that power was arranged in concentric circles with a fortified city at the center, administering peasant lands as far as a sphere of influence could be extended and sustained. The city was at the pinnacle of a monopolizing system. Israel had framed its primal narrative such that its initial experience in Egypt was not different from its experience in the land:

Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exod 1:11-14)

The Exodus narrative is about the monopolistic practices of Egypt with pharaoh as the effective and symbolic administrator. Thus, Israel’s founding story concerns emancipation from urban practices of exploitation. The move from Egypt to Palestine, from Moses to Joshua, moreover, is only a change in venue, from Egyptian city to Canaanite city; it is all the same when seen from the underside.

The perspective of resentment is termed by a number of scholars (not without dispute) a “peasant movement,” a claim that receives important but ambiguous archaeological and demographic support.² That peasant perspective was at least communitarian and to some extent egalitarian (even though we must not romanticize). That is, the goods belonged to and were shared by the entire commu-

²The classic presentations of the hypothesis are by George E. Mendenhall, “The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine,” *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* 3, ed. Edward F. Campbell Jr. and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1970) 100-120, and Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).

nity, with a minimum of social stratification, only modest division of labor, and certainly no surplus value. The only economic value was the immediate use value that is characteristic of every peasant economy.

Thus, the origin of the social conflict of the Old Testament, seen in this context, is a clash of systems, urban and peasant, in which the peasants knew themselves to be endlessly exploited by urban centers. It is suggested, notably by George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald, that the Bible originated in the midst of a peasant revolt of tribes. The revolt was fueled and evoked by Yahweh, who urged the peasants to withdraw from the urban economy they supported but from which they profited very little, in order to reconfigure their own social power and social relationship in very different ways.

II.

Out of the work of Joshua, Samuel, and the judges, the tribal apparatus of Israel gained genuine freedom and considerable stability. As the movement evolved, however, the peasant arrangement was felt by some to be less than adequate and too much *ad hoc*; hence, the question of kingship, that is, the establishment of a permanent urban leadership in order to give Israel stability.³

The dispute about kingship (a cipher for an urban power structure) is highly visible in 1 Samuel 7-15. The key resistance to monarchy is found in 1 Sam 8:11-17, which asserts that kings are “takers” who will tax you to death; and so there is resistance. As it turned out, David became a transitional figure—not a king but a chief—a genius who managed to hold things together in this disputatious and unsettled agenda.⁴

David managed that tension in many brilliant stratagems, but here I will mention only one. He had two priests! A priest, in a royal apparatus, is primarily a carrier of legitimating theological-ideological tradition. It is like keeping Billy Graham permanently in the White House. One priest was Abiathar (1 Sam 21:1-6; 22:14-23). His father, Ahimelech, and the entire priestly family was slaughtered by Saul. But David protected the only one of the family, Abiathar, who fled for his life (1 Sam 22:22). Abiathar, it is clear, represents and embodies the old tribal configuration, the old peasant, communitarian tradition that, when attached to Yahwism, becomes the covenantal tradition of Sinai and the prophets.

The second priest of David, Zadok, is not so easy to understand. He is abruptly listed as one of the royal bureaucrats. Unlike Abiathar, there is no narrative about how he got there. He is simply there in prominence. Such a silence about origin gives scholars room for speculation. A dominant hypothesis is that Zadok

³See Frank S. Frick, *The Formation of the State of Ancient Israel*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series 4 (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), and David Noel Freedman and David Frank Graf, *Palestine in Transition: The Emergence of Ancient Israel*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series 2 (Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

⁴See the definitive study by James W. Flanagan, *David's Social Drama: A Hologram of Israel's Early Iron Age*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series 7 (Sheffield: Almond, 1988).

was a Canaanite priest in the old shrine of Jebus that became the city of David, i.e., Jerusalem.⁵ When David conquered that city, Zadok was already there as an established priest of the Canaanite religious apparatus. According to the hypothesis, David did not disrupt the city or its shrine, but became its king, i.e., king of a Canaanite city, a Canaanite city king. So it is proposed that David exercised two different roles, king over the Israelite tribes and king over a Canaanite city state, that dual role signalled in the dual priesthood of Abiathar and Zadok.⁶ David is a charismatic figure and provider of protection, and so keeps it all in balance.

We know less than we would like to know about these two priests. Without any precision, we may in any case take the two priests of David as symbols and metaphors of public power: Abiathar as the voice of Torah neighborliness, Zadok as the voice of palace and dynasty privilege. David was an agile juggler, the kind of juggler that effective public power must always require.

III.

The balance between Abiathar and Zadok, between Torah neighborliness and pragmatic aggrandizement, could not be maintained in Israel beyond David. When he died, deep conflict arose, requiring that new decisions be made. Two of his sons, Adonijah and Solomon, competed for succession to the throne; Solomon won and the rest of the story of Jerusalem is history. The competition was not just between two brothers who wanted power, but between two parties, two bodies of opinions, two visions of urban reality. Allied with Adonijah were Joab the military man and Abiathar the priest. Adonijah lost. Allied with Solomon were Benaiah, the number-two military man, Nathan the prophet, and Zadok the priest. Solomon won. He immediately killed his brother Adonijah and Joab (1 Kings 2:28-35). You cannot kill a priest, so he banished Abiathar to his home village of Anathoth, and there kept him under surveillance (1 Kings 2:26-27). Zadok (along with Solomon) won and monopolized the priesthood, the high priest of urban pragmatism. I propose, speaking metaphorically, that the banishment of Abiathar, the voice of Torah conscience, was the decisive twist in the future of the city, for a city without the voice of Torah conscience will pursue its own way to its own self-destruction.

The story of Solomon is well known. He was a big operator—big triumph, big harem (300 wives and 700 concubines), big military apparatus, big commercial enterprise, big wisdom, big money, big power (1 Kings 4:20-21). The queen of Sheba said of him in admiration: “Happy are your wives! Happy are your servants, who

⁵See George W. Ramsey, “Zadok,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6:1034-1036, who cites the two quite old but influential articles by H. H. Rowley.

⁶This notion goes back to the old hypothesis of Albrecht Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966) 171-259.

continually attend you and hear your wisdom” (1 Kings 10:8). Big happiness. And we may presume that the priest—Zadok—never said a mumbling word!

But the story of Solomon’s Jerusalem is not only one of success. Its ending is told theologically three times:

- in 1 Kings 11:29 an unknown prophet, Ahijah, appears and dramatically announces that the king’s family would lose its royal territory because it had not kept Torah
- in 1 Kings 12, things fall apart in a labor dispute, for the peasant people were weary of owing their lives to the urban elite
- in 1 Kings 12:10, Rehoboam is urged on by his “young men” to make even heavier tax demands on the peasants for the sake of their own ease and comfort, indicating that the dynasty had remembered little and had learned nothing.

The text subtly suggests that Jerusalem, under Solomon, kept up its appearances. But all around the edges, for those who noticed, there were ominous hints of inadequacy, failure, and subversion.

IV.

The city, along with its monarchy and temple, continued four hundred years—a very long time by modern standards—as an enterprise of privileged urban elites. For that four hundred years, the Zadokite priests of pragmatic utilitarianism presided over *pro forma* success, imagining all the time that this beloved city would be safe forever. The entire long period of the Davidic dynasty focused on the city and the administration of the countryside in order to sustain the urban enterprise. That city was remarkable:

- it possessed the governance where messianism was seeded
- it possessed the temple that offered Yahweh’s guaranteed presence
- it possessed an ideology of king and temple that made it immune to the vagaries of history
- it monopolized Israel’s imagination and faith, so that those who wanted to thank and trust Yahweh had to thank and trust Jerusalem.

These marvelous claims for the city were profoundly reenforced in 701 B.C. when the city was miraculously rescued from Assyrian assault, “for the sake of my servant David” (Isa 37:35). Nothing bad could ever happen here!

But the city, for all its persuasive power, could never silence the arrested voice of Abiathar, expelled to village life in Anathoth. What Abiathar represented inside, which was then excluded, is reiterated outside by the prophets, those deeply subversive voices amid the ideological claims of the city.

Two instances of this ancient and definitional voice of Torah conscience are worthy of particular mention.

A. About 715, Micah, a villager from Gath, a voice of the peasants, came to the city and delivered a poetic threat.⁷ He contributed to the danger of the urban elites in several ways:

1. He assaulted the norms of acquisitiveness that violated the tenth commandment:

Alas for those who devise wickedness
and evil deeds on their beds!...
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away....
Therefore thus says the Lord:
Now, I am devising against this family an evil
from which you cannot remove your necks;
and you shall not walk haughtily,
for it will be an evil time. (Mic 2:1-2)

Micah saw clearly that when acquisitiveness displaces neighborliness, bad things happen. It invites an evil time.

2. He spelled out the future of the city. He did not say, “I have a dream...”; he said, “I have a nightmare”:

Therefore, because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Mic 3:12)

The city stands under this massive, irresistible “therefore” of Yahweh, anticipating that the city will be void of habitation.

3. He imagined new village leadership that was not inured to expansive urban living. Significantly, the new leader will come from Gath or Bethlehem or some such place with communitarian tradition:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel....
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord....
And they shall live secure. (Mic 5:2-4)

The village leader, so says the village poet, will withstand even the threat of Assyria.

B. A hundred years later comes Jeremiah. He, too, is an outsider who is regarded as a traitor to the city who undermines the war effort. In his most famous comment, he dared to assert that the jingoism of urban propaganda—royal or

⁷The sociological background of Micah in his village context has been articulated by Hans Walter Wolff, “Micah the Moreshite—The Prophet and His Background,” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. John G. Gammie et al. (Missoula: Scholars, 1978) 77-84. See also Itumeleng J. Mosala, “A Materialist Reading of Micah,” in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 264-91.

temple—would never succeed. Security would come only from the ancient Torah practices of neighborliness:

Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. (Jer 7:3-7)

Jeremiah asserts a huge “if” over the future of the city, an “if” he had learned from Moses, the “if” of aliens, orphans, and widows. His daring comments got him arrested. He was put on trial, in a scene that anticipates the trial of Jesus. He was opposed in the trial by the entire power structure of the city, especially the religious types, and was about to receive a death sentence. However, the civil leadership resisted the aggressive religious leadership that was surely derived from Zadok the pragmatist. The issue was turned when some “elders of the land,” some of the leaders of village life who had come to the city for the occasion, with their odd perspective reminded the assembly of Micah’s denunciation (26:17-18).⁸ The village leaders saved his life because they cited the poet Micah. They remembered that prophets must be heard and honored when they care about the city.

Surely the Zadokites, wanting to execute him, did not welcome such a disruption of court by appeal to old village tradition. Their distaste for the intrusion of “the elders” must have been acute, for we notice that Jeremiah, the one who spoke of the deathly future of the city, is “of the priests of Anathoth in the land of Benjamin” (1:1). He comes from Anathoth from a priestly family. He belongs to the line of Abiathar. Abiathar had been banished, but his voice could not be silenced. And now, Abiathar speaks yet again, against the self-deceiving arrangements of an urban elite that neglects the neighbor commands of the Torah. The city is not safe when it denies the demands of the neighbor.

V.

Eventually the city failed. The Jerusalem establishment of temple and monarchy and the ideology of self-importance and self-sufficiency and self-security turned out to be false. It may have fallen because of the external pressure of Babylon, or because of the internal failure of bad leadership (see Ezekiel 34), or because of the spent quality of Yahweh’s love and patience, exhausted by the endless recalcitrance of the city. But for whatever reason, the city failed.

As an aside, in my opinion this is the same pregnant moment in which we find ourselves in urban America. I speak of course metaphorically and imagina-

⁸The connection is important between the *remembered* elder Micah and the *present* elders who protest on the basis of him. The elders, remembered and present, offer a memory and a social vision that stand outside the horizon of the urban consciousness of the power players in Jerusalem.

tively, but here, too, the royal city that specializes in acquisitiveness, that has banished the countervoice of Abiathar, has failed. The failure of communal relations and the failure of consensus meaning are evident. The power of acquisitiveness can sustain itself only for a while, perhaps a long while; but it does so without moral credibility. And so I suggest that in its public imagination, the church and its pastors must situate themselves at this pregnant moment of failure and loss.

This moment is most dramatically expressed in Ezekiel. For reasons that are not clear, Ezekiel has been struck dumb by Yahweh and cannot speak. But God promises that when the city falls, he can speak again (24:25-27). Then:

In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, someone who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has fallen"So my mouth was opened, and I was no longer unable to speak. (33:21-22)

The loss of the city is the moment of the recovery of voice, when those numb with despair are able and dare to tell the truth. Thus there is a deep linkage between the failure of the city and the power of recovered speech.

In this season of loss, I want to identify what I think are three major moves that belong to urban failure.

VI.

First, the lost city must be grieved. We require a public and intentional assertion that the urban world we have treasured is no more. It is gone, and its loss evokes grief, rage, sadness, and hurt. It takes public grief to shatter the numbness and denial that are sponsored by those who want to pretend business as usual.

Two blocks of scripture show displaced Jews in grief. The first is the long collection of five poems in the book of Lamentations. This poetry was likely performed in response to the destruction of Jerusalem. The first four poems are alphabetical acrostics; grief is thereby complete from A to Z. The poetry speaks of a great reversal; at the same time it celebrates what was and it acknowledges how it is now:

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

Tod Linafelt points out that the city is offered as a dying, forlorn widow, not dead, but endlessly dying, vulnerable, exposed, ravaged, raped, abused, and helpless.⁹ She keeps dying in order to keep the pain available, seemingly forever.

⁹Tod Linafelt, "Surviving Lamentations: A Literary-Theological Study of the Afterlife of a Biblical Text" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, Atlanta, GA, 1997).

The refrain is that there is “none to comfort” (Lam 1:2, 9, 17, 21). Yahweh had been a comforter to those who suffered loss, but now Yahweh is not available. Yahweh is no longer interested in the city, and therefore not available, not attentive. Jerusalem is completely bereft of support. And therefore, “Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord” (3:18).

The poetry ends in 5:19-22. These lines move quickly through a doxology (v. 19) and then into a complaint that dares to use the harsh terms “forgotten, forsaken” with reference to Yahweh: “Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?” (v. 20). Israel still has energy for a petition, “Restore us to yourself, O Lord,” but the petition breaks off in wonderment: “unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure” (vv. 21-22). The poet does not know. Nobody knows. It is the moment of deep loss when the faithful do not know. It is an astonishing way to end a book of the Bible; but that is how it is with the failure of the city.

The second cluster of grief poetry is in the songs of communal lament in the Psalter. In these poems of wretchedness, Israel tells the truth to Yahweh about the city. It is the enemies who have done it to the city, but the enemies could only act because Yahweh has been absent or negligent:

Your foes have roared within your holy place
they set up their emblems there.
At the upper entrance they hacked
the wooden trellis with axes.
And then with hatchets and hammers,
they smashed all its carved work.
They set your sanctuary on fire;
they desecrated the dwelling place of your name,
burning it to the ground....
How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Is the enemy to revile your name forever?
Why do you hold back your hand;
Why do you keep your hand in your bosom? (Ps 74:4-7, 10-11)

The poem seeks to get Yahweh to act by a grand doxology, reminding Yahweh about how glorious it used to be (vv. 12-14), but then comes a petition, one that is not yet answered:

Rise up, O God, plead your cause;
remember how the impious
scoff at you all day long.
do not forget the clamor of our foes,
the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually. (vv. 22-23)

Israel can only wait, for in the psalm there is no answer. But in this prayer of protest and petition, Israel has told the truth about the city and about Yahweh, about misery and need.

Of course Psalm 137 is difficult, but it also is about the loss of Jerusalem:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy. (vv. 5-6)

Israel in its loss is fixated on the good old days. Grief that can be starchy piety here moves to rage, and dares to focus bitterness on the proximate cause of the loss. Perhaps Yahweh has abandoned the city in its recalcitrance. But the one we can see—Yahweh as agent being invisible—is Babylon. Grief turns to rage, irrational, unarguable rage. That is what loss does:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock! (vv. 8-9)

I cite these psalms because I believe church and synagogue must practice the liturgy of loss, grief, and rage, in order to relinquish a city that has failed. Israel knew that loss unacknowledged is paralyzing. Conversely, loss voiced emancipates from ancient anger, liberates from cherished rage, and permits new waves of God-given constructive energy. The city cannot afford a loss ungrieved, because loss ungrieved produces fatigue and brutality.

VII.

Suffering produces hope (Rom 5:3-5), but not just any suffering. Suffering that is recognized, admitted, voiced, and enacted produces hope. We do not know why, but it is so. Suffering denied and unarticulated produces numbness and rage irrational. Israel knew that. And so, I propose a second response to the failed city of Jerusalem, second not first. It is a season of rich, exuberant, imaginative hope for a restored, new Jerusalem. But the new one requires the complete relinquishment of the one that is gone.

I make this linkage by two utterances in Second Isaiah, the exotic voice of hope for a new city.

1. In Lam 5:20, Israel had said: “Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?” Second Isaiah picks up this motif and echoes it: “Zion said,” presumably in the liturgy, “The Lord has forsaken me, my lord has forgotten me” (Isa 49:14). The prophet uses the same verbs as Lam 5:20. And then, the poem offers prophetic resolution: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (49:15). The mother God is beyond mothers who

forget. For this mother God attends, remembers, goes back, suckles, so that the lament is embraced, received, and overcome. This God will be the mother of all restorers.

2. The key phrase of Lamentations is “none to comfort” (1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21). There is no prospect of divine intervention. It is precisely in response to that reiterated deficit that we get the well-known words of Isa 40:1-2:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her time,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand,
double for all her sins.

Hope grows out of suffering. Hope answers suffering. Hope turns the lost past toward the expected future.

There is only one moment of hope in the grief of Lamentations. The poet has said, “Gone is my glory, and *all that I had hoped* for from the Lord” (3:18). But then:

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness....
therefore I *will hope* in him. (3:21-24)

Israel remembers the three great words of piety: steadfast love, mercy, compassion. When it breaks the pattern of numbness, silence, and denial, Israel remembers accounts of fidelity from Yahweh that have characterized Israel’s life. Israel in loss dares to turn that inventory of fidelity to the future, to affirm that Yahweh’s fidelity will shape the future in ways the past has never been shaped.

And there is, in exilic Judaism, a flood of promises for a new city. It is as though the canon has gathered together all the candidates for the Martin Luther King award. They have learned to say, in distinct, harmonious tones:

I have a dream,
I have a dream,
I have a dream...
the long nightmare of loss is over.

The loss is real; the city as we know it is defeated and failed. Nobody believes that poverty or homelessness or crime or any of the other maladies can be answered. And indeed, they never will be, given the categories of imagination now operative. There are simply no categories of imagination that can mobilize public will.

It is amazing to me that the great hoppers of the exile did not talk policy.¹⁰ They did not make recommendations. What they offered was poetry that shattered the categories that precluded newness. They reimagined the city, reimagined it in a matrix of exile, in which Yahweh was the key player. Yahweh had been eliminated from that ancient world, even as Yahweh is not at the table in our cities. Yahweh has always and only been present in poetic scenarios.

So Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant rooted in forgiveness (31:31-34), moving then to a vision of rebuilding that includes the whole valley of dead bodies and ashes (31:38-40).

Then this statement of resolve, a resilience not subject to veto:

For I surely know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (29:11-14)

So Ezekiel, once he gets to speak again, proclaims Yahweh as the good shepherd (34:11-16). The text is a welfare program that specializes in neighborliness. He announces an outpouring of generative grace that will heal the contrariness that makes human, urban life impossible:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek 36:24-28)

The poet imagines a new ecological system not any longer marred by war and famine (34:26-27a; 36:29b-30). Restoration will be like an Easter:

I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord. (37:12-14)

¹⁰While the three prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah can be distinguished from each other in important ways, it is equally important for our purposes to see them as a coherent offer of a future to Israel, an act of hope that refused to accept present circumstance as definitive. For the power of that shared testimony, see Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965). See also Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

This is spirit-driven Easter, when all the powers of death are overcome. Back in Psalm 74:22, Israel had prayed, "Rise up, O God." And now there is a rising to Easter faith and Easter imagination.

Second Isaiah, the supreme hoper of ancient Israel, envisions a return home, along a way no longer administered by the categories of scarcity and brutality derived from Babylon. The poet dares to say to the ones who have lost the city, "Fear not" (Isa 41:10, 13, 14; 43:1; 44:1, 8). The basis for the new possibility is the resolve of God:

For my thought are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways,
says the Lord,
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (55:8-9)

And then the possibility: "You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace" (55:12). This is a homecoming, but not to the old city, to a home, an urban home, a city as a true home. It is promised, and therefore it is possible. It is made possible by the lips of poets who have been through grief and rage and loss, the ones who now "sustain the weary with a word" (50:4).

VIII.

Suffering produces hope. And hope does not disappoint. The reason hope does not disappoint is that it issues in determined, resolved action, my third needed response. Poetry does its work, but not on our schedule. So in the Old Testament, the poetry worked until finally it evoked those two great urban redevelopers, Ezra and Nehemiah.

The links between *suffering* and *hope* and *action* are not clear. But consider the amazing scenario in Nehemiah 1. Nehemiah has been a cup bearer among the Persians, a high office. He hears of the debacle of Jerusalem, and he weeps (1:4). He prays that there will be a Persian foundation to give money for urban redevelopment (1:5-11). And then he secures the support of Persia, a mandate to rebuild, with financial backing (2:7-9). He is a shrewd man, driven by a vision.

We can identify four actions that make the new city possible:

1. Ezra does *Torah* (Nehemiah 8). The drama has theological authorization. It is the recovery of a self-conscious identity that gives energy for the new city.

2. Nehemiah institutes severe *financial reform* that pertains to the rich charging interest to the poor (Nehemiah 5). There will be no new city until there is a neighborly form of debt management.

3. Ezra insists on *Sabbath* (Neh 13:15-22). The sabbath observation goes deep to root identity and asserts that the new city is not about acquisitiveness; the community in sabbath is disengaged from the production-consumption game.

4. Ezra condemns *mixed marriages* (13:23-27). Without commending this action, we do need to appreciate the single-minded, disciplined embrace of a dream, large enough to include, concrete enough to enact. Restoration requires discipline.

IX.

I finish with three conclusions:

1. Israel's faith offers an alternative narrative of the city. The conventional narrative of the city is a thin tale of acquisitiveness and scarcity that produces violence. In that tale, there is no break, no going back, no alternative. That tale is a tale so well and so often told that it seems a given. But it is not. It is an ideological construal, grounded in scarcity and brutality, that in principle admits of no alternative tellings of the city. It is the task of church and synagogue to tell an alternative account of the city, that concedes nothing to the claims of an ideological telling that, in light of the gospel, is false. The pastoral task is to wean folk (as well as ourselves) away from that false tale of the city.¹¹

2. This scenario is of course incomplete. The city hoped for is not yet built or given. At the end of the canon (Revelation 21), the faithful still wait and still hope. I suggest that we should not be given to too much long-range hope without attention to more immediate engagement. In the great recital of Hebrews 11, we have a celebration of our ancestors in faith:

If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (vv. 15-16)

They sought a city. But then, in a remarkable bid to the present generation, the chapter concludes:

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (vv. 39-40)

Our ancestors in faith did not receive the promise. Their getting it right depends upon us. "Apart from us," this faith is not complete. While the church has Revelation 21 for the long term, the immediate claim of Hebrews 11 is crucial. Pre-

¹¹For the work of the church, it is important to embrace the task of imagination against the given. Engagement in that process eventually arrives at the awareness that what has been taken as given turns out to be an act of imagination long practiced and honored. For the work of imagination against givenness, see Wesley Kort, *"Take, Read": Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1996), and his focus upon John Calvin's *sicut* ("as if") as the principle for the freedom and authority of scripture. Less directly see also Garrett Green, "The Bible as...: Fictional Narrative and Scriptural Truth," *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 79-96, and Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology & the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989). The emancipated imagination of the church is crucial for revisioning the city. At present, of course, the church is characteristically enthralled by the dominant imagination of the city that appears as a given.

sent action fulfills past faith, an incredible summons to concrete engagement in the hopes of our ancestors.

3. Finally, a parable. I spoke with a Presbyterian layperson in Atlanta about the city. He told me that in growing up, his father had a shop downtown, next to Rich's. After school, he often went to his father's shop, and often the two of them went to Rich's for a CocaCola. It was a wonderful happening, even more wonderful in memory.

But now Rich's is gone, replaced by a bank. The old city that centered in Rich's is no more. And he said, "When I see it or think of it, I am enraged and sad at the loss." We talked about relinquishing a city that is no more. Out of much thought and prayer, he told me, one day he drove down and parked across the street from where Rich's and his father's shop had been. He sat in the car and cried. Cried long, cried bitterly, cried for what was and is not, cried over a city now reduced to banks and exploitative labor, cried a lost shop and a lost family and a lost world.

And then, he told me, he started his car. He drove to his suburban church. And for the first time, he signed up to work the soup kitchen, to contribute modestly to a new urban possibility.

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear! ⊕