

The City in Modern Apocalyptic

The metaphor of the City, in Scripture and in literature, conjures up both evil and good images. Barry L. Casey muses on the City as Babylon and the City as the New Jerusalem.

by Barry L. Casey

CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AMBIVALENT toward cities. We identify oppressive and arrogant behavior by institutions and states as Babylon. We also identify the City with what humanity, thrown out of the Garden, created in the Wilderness. We see the City as an act of defiance toward God: Cain, its founder, the first murderer and builder. Yet, when we read the Book of Revelation, particularly chapter 21, we find the eternal home of God's children positively symbolized by a City, the New Jerusalem.

The condemnation and suspicion of the cities is also ingrained in the American experience, stemming, in part, from the pioneer's love of the open and limitless horizons of the American frontier. In the 19th century, European, Catholic, and Jewish immigrants flooded

into Northeastern cities. In the 20th century, Southern blacks migrated northward. Recoiling, the white, middle-class perceived as a threat the hordes of the Great Unwashed who packed the inner cities. The clash of languages, the bewildering mix of cultures and mores, ethnic and religious groups, made the cities strange and decadent to the circumspect and cautious mind of the WASP.

Adventism has shared Christian and American suspicions of the City. Many Adventists still regard cities only as strongholds of sin to be penetrated, injected with goodness, and then observed from a safe distance. The move of the General Conference headquarters from Washington, D.C. to the suburbs of Silver Spring, Maryland, is indicative of this attitude. Yet, according to a recent survey conducted by the Church Ministries Department of the North American Division,¹ fully 50 percent of North American Adventists are urban.

Thus, it might be helpful to reevaluate this remnant of our 19th-century rural heritage—the conviction that we are country people who make evangelistic forays into the city. The reality, for

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many of us at least, is that we are urban people who make recreational forays into the country.

It is even more critical that Adventists rediscover the city in the rich tradition of apocalyptic. Whether we realize it or not, Adventism's emphasis on apocalyptic and the books of Daniel and Revelation have uniquely equipped us to speak and act powerfully on behalf of the cities. Yet it is popular culture and literature that evokes haunting, searching images of the apocalyptic city. Something we have known but disregarded, others are now speaking to with eloquence and vigor.

If Adventist Christians are to be effective witnesses to God's grace and compassion, they must love the cities. To believe that all cities are demon-possessed, that all inhabitants of cities are sleepwalking through life, having given up their wills to some overpowering force for evil, is simply inimical to the power of grace and forgiveness central to the gospel.

While the first Christians, especially Paul, moved easily within urban settings, they also understood the spiritual and political power structures that made the city an especially dangerous place for outsiders. There is little doubt that hearers of John's Apocalypse understood his references to Babylon as applying to the Rome of their time. It is equally the case that most converts of the early church were urban dwellers who had no intention of leaving their cities unless they were forcibly removed.

The power of apocalyptic, as seen in the Book of Revelation, was a message of encouragement and hope to continue in the good

fight until the end. Far from looking for release by and by, the early Christians were committed to working within the cities, suffering persecution if need be, and rejoicing in the power of the Lamb of God to sustain them until the New Jerusalem supplanted present-day Babylon.

In that respect, the message of Revelation is just as relevant today as it was in the first century A.D. Do not faithful Christians around the world live in Babylon and long for the New Jerusalem? Are we not citizens of both cities—the first by necessity, and the second by choice? Isn't it true that to long for the New

Jerusalem one must love the old Jerusalem, even if it murdered the prophets and killed the faithful, the Jerusalem that Ezekiel and the other prophets dared to call Babylon? And in order to love Babylon, that great city, we must look past the filth and degradation and cruelty, to the heart of the

city—God's gift of the human spirit—and learn to love and cherish it. In the end, God will transform this marvelous, terrible, creative invention of humans into the enduring symbol of the divine-human encounter.

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The City as Babylon

The first image, the City as Babylon, is well covered by Paul Theroux's *O-Zone*,² in which the privileged inhabitants (known as the Owners) of a Manhattan in the not-too-far-distant future, live in walled isolation from the poor (known as the Others), and in dread of the mutants they think live in the radioactive wasteland of the Midwest—the O-Zone. Once

outside the city they are helpless and afraid, completely at odds with the Wilderness. It is also a city beyond redemption, like its biblical counterpart, because its very structure is built on carefully sustained collective illusions of might and power.

Manhattanites are fascinated by the aliens and mutants they suspect live in the heartland of America—the O-Zone of Nebraska and Iowa. There seems to be an unconscious need to project all their fears about the breakdown of their enclosed society onto the sketchy reports and sightings they have received about the Zoners. The Owners are both frightened and fascinated by the Zoners' lives and affect what they imagine to be "the alien look," ragged clothes (very expensively styled, of course!), strange hairpieces, and painted faces.

There are also militant fringe-groups among the Owners who make a sport of hunting the poor and homeless outside the walls of Manhattan from helicopters. Blasting them with thunderous sound, they back them into alleys and corners like rats and shoot them from the air.

Those Owners who find themselves, through encounters with the Zoners, to be at odds with the illusions of their own culture, are no longer comfortable there and become outcasts themselves. They wander outside the city and there, in a movement familiar in American literature and culture, find a more authentic self in the countryside, among an alternate community.

The purity of the country contrasted with evil Babylon is also a common motif in American literature. The farmers are pitted against the merchants; the piety of rustics shows up the hypocrisy and unbelief of city dwellers; the innocence of the country is preferred to the duplicity and cynicism of city life.

These themes are central to Theroux's narrative of an epic journey from the O-Zone to New York City, in which a young Owner becomes first a hostage of the Zoners and then a full-fledged member. Through his struggles to

overcome his prejudice and fear, we are led to compare the richness of the Zoners' lives with the shallowness of the Owners.

American advertising has capitalized with great success on this enduring vision of the bucolic life of the country. What could be more appealing to harried city dwellers than to believe that their favorite cereal was produced by rosy-cheeked maidens and hearty country boys? Nobody wants to think that the din and clash of assembly-line techniques was applied to their Post Toasties.

While there is little direct evidence in the Old Testament of a much later city-versus-country dichotomy, it is true that the fulminations of the prophets are primarily against the cities and against Jerusalem. Amos, the reluctant prophet/shepherd from Tekoa, condemns the wealthy and indolent women of Bashan for oppressing the poor and crushing the needy (Amos 4: 1). Isaiah pictures a sodden Jerusalem, drunk with the wrath of God against her (Isaiah 51), a city gorged on its own iniquity, reveling in the oppression of its own poor, whose priests lead the people into sin (Isaiah 3). But it is Ezekiel who lashes out most virulently, portraying Jerusalem as so wicked even the heathen nations are shocked (Ezekiel 5).

Yet, even though their denunciations of a Jerusalem as harlot are bitter, the prophets consistently ring a note of hope. Jerusalem will also become the ideal City, the Daughter of Zion, and the light to all the nations. The depth



of feeling revealed in the denunciations may indicate that the prophets were not simply passing along the message of Yahweh, but were personally reacting to the injustice and degradation they witnessed. Hell hath no fury like a prophet disregarded. Denunciation of heathen cities for flagrant violations of human rights is one thing—it is part of the prophet's job description—but to have to watch as God's beautiful child deliberately disobeys calls for tough measures.

Throughout the prophetic writings we see an alternating pattern of denunciation of the City—Babylon or Jerusalem—as an unjust status quo and annunciation of Jerusalem as the transformed ideal.

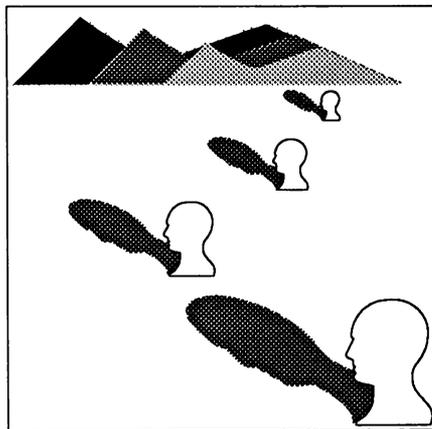
The City as Wilderness

Another theme in contemporary literature is that of the City as Wilderness. Tom Wolfe's bestseller, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*,³ portrays the rise and fall of Sherman McCoy, a junk bond trader who strays from the familiar streets of Manhattan into the Wilderness of the Bronx. McCoy, a smug but insecure "Master of the Universe," feels himself to be invincible until a hit-and-run accident precipitates his fall into awareness.

McCoy is a "once-born" person, to use Francis Newman's phrase; one of those people for whom the world is a beautiful and harmonious place. "Of human sin they know perhaps little in their own hearts and not very much in the world," says Newman.⁴ McCoy's rude awakening to the suffering and tragedy in life is at once a psychic wound and a spiritual crisis.

Wolfe's New York is a psychic and spiritual Wilderness, with almost every character in the book either a self-made victim or a conniving manipulator. Here "Nature, red in tooth and claw," lives within the luxury apartments and the ruined tenements of the city. I suspect this is the experience of many middle-class pro-

fessionals today. The exuberant agendas of the yuppies have come hard against the cruelty and bleakness of the City as Wilderness. The



painful awareness that this *is* life and that it is not going to get better soon, if ever, can be both a terrible shock and a great healer.

Again, a gauzy image of the country provides a convenient fantasy for city people. Sherman McCoy, wallowing in self-doubt and bewilderment, ponders moving to a southern country town where he can fish in a creek, despite the fact he can barely manage to walk the dog two blocks without coming up short of breath and patience.

Isaiah describes the wasteland of Jerusalem, the vineyard that has been trampled because bloodshed has taken the place of justice (Isaiah 5:5-7). Jeremiah speaks of the terror that grips Jerusalem at the news their enemies are coming to wreak destruction (Jeremiah 6:24). Time and again, the prophets speak of the desolation of Jerusalem, likening it to a vineyard stripped and bare, or an orchard decimated (Jeremiah 8:13). The City as Wilderness is a place of psychological destruction as those who are brought low are crushed in spirit (Isaiah 29:4-9). The loneliness of those in a darkened city, under siege from God, is heard in Amos's haunting words:

Why do you long for the day of the Lord?
That day will be darkness, not light.
It will be as though a man fled from a lion
only to meet a bear,
as though he entered his house
and rested his hand on the wall
only to have a snake bite him.

Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not

light—
pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?
(Amos 5:18-20, NIV).

The City as Jerusalem

There is a third theme in contemporary literature—the City as Jerusalem. Not as common as the previous themes, the City as Jerusalem offers us a hope consonant with Christian faith. In Mark Helprin's haunting panegyric to New York City, *Winter's Tale*,⁵ the city is the home of justice and the place of holy dreams—the only real place. Those who travel outside the city to the wilderness of 19th-century upstate New York enter into places which are literally not on the map. While life in the city is influenced by the fluidity of time past, future, and present, human purposes in the wilderness are completely subject to capricious elements. Time stands still in the rough places of the wilderness. In that dark and wintry landscape, those who pit themselves against the cold elements risk life and limb.

Helprin's characters are a full mix of good and evil, always grappling with their temptations and the call to purity and justice. There is Peter Lake, a kind of Moses/Messiah figure, a master mechanic who regards machines as



holy. There is Pearly Soames, the enduring incarnation of evil, who commits heinous crimes in order to possess beautiful things. A man entranced by color, he is a sensualist without sensitivity or moral discrimination; an aes-

thete who raises enjoyment to the status of a religion of the senses. There is Hardesty Maratta, who wants to believe in miracles and is guided by the inscription on a silver platter given him by his wealthy industrialist father. Honesty, courage, sacrifice, patience—these are the virtues Hardesty's father commends to him, along with the inscription on the platter, which reads, "For what can be imagined more beautiful than the sight of a perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone."⁶

Winter's Tale is an ambitious work, spanning a time period from the early 19th century to the dawn of the 21st millennium. It slips from fantasy to reality and back again, from the future to the past, until one realizes that Helprin is writing an epic for our time, of the promise and hope of a beautiful city. In the end, the grand experiment toward which the narrative has been ascending fails amidst the apocalyptic destruction of New York City on the eve of the year 2000. But the next morning, like irrepressible children, the people of the city are clearing away the rubble and preparing to rebuild.

Shining through Halprin's hope in the miraculous and unexpected is the New Jerusalem of John's Apocalypse:

To enter a city intact it is necessary to pass through one of the new gates. They are far more difficult to find than their solid predecessors, for they are tests, mechanism, devices, and implementations of justice. There once was a map, now long gone, one of the ancient charts upon which colorful animals sleep or rage. Those who saw it said that in its illuminations were figures and symbols of the gates. The east gate was that of acceptance of responsibility, the south gate that of the desire to explore, the west gate that of devotion to beauty, and the north gate that of selfless love. But they were not believed. It was said that a city with entryways like these could not exist, because it would be too wonderful. Those who decide such things decided that whoever had seen the map had only imagined it, and the entire matter was forgotten, treated as if it were a dream, and ignored. This, of course, freed it to live forever.⁷

Helprin's imaginative vision comes close to a Christian attitude toward the City. "A great city," he says in the prologue

is nothing more than a portrait of itself, and yet when all is said and done, its arsenals of scenes and images are part of a deeply moving plan. As a book in which to read this plan, New York is unsurpassed. For the whole world has poured its heart into the city by the Palisades, and made it far better than it ever had any right to be.⁸

Just as the Garden of Eden represents God's ordering of beauty out of the chaos and void of unformed matter, so the City is humanity's attempt to structure harmony out of chaos.

In the Bible, the City was always the recipient of God's wrath and tenderest love. Both Ezekiel and Isaiah condemn and idealize Jerusalem. Ezekiel prophesies the direst threats against the city possible: it will become an object lesson to the surrounding nations of what God can do to a people who rebel and flout his commands.

In later chapters Ezekiel lays out a vision of the New Jerusalem that becomes the perfect prototype for Revelation 21. Likewise, the Jerusalem of Isaiah 62 is the City restored, remade by God into a showcase of God's favor and a light to all the nations. Throughout the Scriptures these two views of Jerusalem function as both warning and promise.

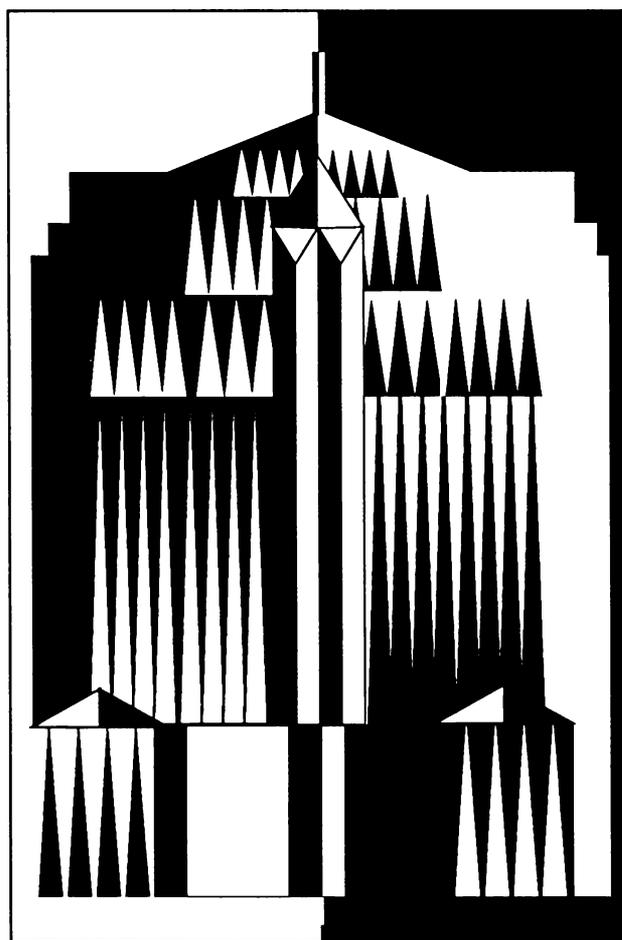
In the end, in the Book of Revelation, Jerusalem and Babylon symbolize all that is beautiful and all that is wretched and cruel about cities. Babylon is the lens through which the nature of humans as idolaters can be scrutinized. Jerusalem is transformed from the prodigal, but much-loved child of God, to the jewel in the crown of the universe. God remakes the city, pouring into it all the order, grace, symmetry, and proportion necessary to make it nothing short of perfect. Jerusalem, the holy city of God, is the pinnacle of dreams and visions, the Garden of Eden transplanted to an urban setting of wonder, justice, and compassion.

Jacques Ellul, a French sociologist and

evangelical Christian writer, says God uses the evil form of the city only because of his compassion for humanity.⁹ We should not take advantage of God's forgiveness for building cities to claim that our actions were right. God, according to this perspective, is gamely trying to make the best of a bad situation.

But if the *form* of the city is inherently evil, why would God ever use it (since it apparently has the power to distort reality). If God could change the form of the city to something more benign, why bother using it in the first place? On the other hand, if the form of the city is not inherently evil, then God's New Jerusalem is the sanctifying of humanity's creative impulse. It is the stamp of approval on humanity's idea.

This is the wonderful thing about the New Jerusalem in Revelation. Among all the images available to portray the eternal home of humankind, God chose the City. Throughout the



prophetic writings, one has the sense that God's denunciations of the cities, Jerusalem especially, are those of a wounded parent rather than a merciless and exacting judge.

Nor do we find God condemning cities as such, insisting that holiness can only be found in the country. Rather, God graciously takes up the idea of the City, the creation of humankind after the Fall, and redeems it. The New Jerusalem of Revelation is the sanctified expression of that wayward city of Isaiah 62, Ezekiel 5, and other chapters, and the rest of the prophetic voices.

The City as the Temple of God

Cities are places of immense suffering and degradation. The City is Babylon on the Hudson, the cruel oppressor of the weak. The

City is also a Wilderness, a place of chaos, the territory of demons. But the City is also Mother Teresa and the hundreds of anonymous people who work with crack babies, the illiterate, and the homeless.

The City is a place of beauty as extraordinary as the Tetons or as gentle as the Shenandoah Valley. The play of morning and afternoon light on the stone of the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., is as entrancing as the sun sweeping over North Dome in Yosemite Park. The explosion of spring colors along the Mall—the heart of this urban capital—is as grand as the profli-gate riot of colors at California's Tuolumne Meadows. The City as Jerusalem is God's re-sounding Yes! to the best and most beautiful things in life, even when they are reflections of human creativity. The City as Jerusalem is the promise of a new thing, the City as holy space without darkness or fear; the City as the temple of God.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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