

The City of God

The cities of Nepal mandala

The old cities of the Kathmandu Valley are great examples of compact settlement. This did not happen by chance—they were constructed carefully with a particular approach to settlement. There was a sharp distinction between the inside and outside of the settlement. As the cities developed the outer limits of each settlement were spread ever wider but always with careful planning. A wall that put a strict limit on settlement ringed the medieval Malla cities.

Invading armies, such as those of Doya and Khasa, certainly led the developers of the cities to build in this way. So also the short but devastating raid by the hordes of Samas Ud-din that was faithfully recorded by the writer of the *Gopālarāja Vamshāvali*.

City boundaries

The old Malla cities were walled settlements punctuated at many points by gates. It is possible, to trace the precise location of the old wall today. Place names such as Kwalkhu (Kwālakhu) and Ikhā Lakhu tell of former gates and boundaries going back, in the latter case, to pre-Malla times.

Certain castes, considered to be untouchable, were placed immediately outside the old Malla city gates. In this way it was thought that their polluted presence would protect the city from marauders or evil spirits [*bhut/pret*] which, like the city's inhabitants, would also find them repulsive.

The town is a region that is walled off from the surrounding country. The organised community of the city had to be set apart from the wild, unstructured outside. Hence the Sanskrit *pur* means both 'wall' and 'town'. The wall therefore acted as a boundary between the structured, urbanised inside and the unstructured, wild outside.

Such a concern with boundaries goes back to at least ancient Vedic times. The Vedas made a distinction between *grāma*, ‘settlement’, and *aranya*, ‘wilderness’. The *aranya* was dangerous and full of threats. It was where the uncivilised aborigines and dreaded demons lived. By making boundaries, therefore, the Aryan settlement became a sacred space resembling the Vedic offering ground. In this the ancient Aryans were not alone. Other ancient civilisations were very similar.

The palace at the centre

At the centre of the city of Lalitpur lies the palace area [*lāyaku*] referred to by locals as Mangaḥ. The present palace buildings were built, for the most part, in place of previous palace buildings. The site now occupied by the palace seems to have been the seat of the monarchy from Licchavi times. The adjacent water fountain, the Mangaḥhiti, was built in the fifth century VS and is the oldest known structure in the locality. Local tradition relates that the palace was moved to its present site from a mound at Patuko, one block north and west of Mangaḥ, during Licchavi times. According to this tradition, the Patuko mound was built by the Kirāti kings.

The relocation of the palace to its present site, precisely at the intersection of the two major trade routes was to show that the king was at the centre of the life of the city. The kings built the temples in and in front of the palace to lend legitimacy to their reign. So the overall effect of the location and design of the Palace Square is to demonstrate the unity of the city around and under the rulership of her king. The conquest of Lalitpur by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 888 NS removed the king from the city centre. But the idea of the king at the centre is still strongly expressed *ritually*. A number of festivals show that the idea of the king at the centre is still very important. During Mohani the focus of the *pujā* in Lalitpur, as in all three Newar cities, is the Taleju temple and the sacrifices that are offered to the deity in the palace courtyard. A number of processions, such as Nyaku Jātrā, Krishna Jātrā and Bhimsen Jātrā, take place along the *pradakshinapāṭha* that winds in front of the Golden Window of the Keshav Narayan Cok.

The great Malla kings were, however, not gods. They were men. They made mistakes. Power corrupts even the best of men. The glorious days of the Malla era were to come to

and end, not simply because a ruler from the hills was able to overpower the Valley's rulers. The breakdown of the Valley's high civilisation happened first inside. Greed and pride set one king against another. The story of the Malla cities after Yog Narendra Malla is one of constant intrigue and betrayal. The conqueror from outside had merely to walk in and claim the crown for himself. Opposition was minimal. There was little fight left in the people who had been fighting each other for decades. And so it always is with human kings. They always fail to live up to the expectations of the people. They are, after all, only human. And being human they are, like the rest of us, only sinful and corrupt.

The first builder of a city

The Bible tells us much about the city. The first builder of a city was Cain. After he murdered his brother, Cain was summoned by God and condemned to a life of wandering on the earth.

The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." (Genesis 4:10-12)

Before Cain's murderous act life had gone on, outside the Garden of Eden under the Lord's protection. There was a balance between man and nature. Now that was shattered. Cain could no longer expect any protection from God and fully expected that an avenger would kill him. So God put a mark on Cain. It was a mark of protection. And Cain left the presence of his maker. But Cain did not wander. He could not trust the protection the Lord had given him. And so he spent his life trying to find his own security, struggling against hostile forces, dominating men and nature. The natural world had become a thing of dread. God had made the natural world good.¹ But with the fall of man from his state of innocence and Cain's violence against his brother the natural world was now pitted against him. Wild animals may tear him apart. Diseases may inflict him. And so he built a city.

¹ See Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 & 31.

As I have already demonstrated Cain's city building was like the city building of other peoples. The cities of the Kathmandu Valley were built to protect the citizens from the hostile forces of nature. Society could be organised within the walls. To be expelled from the city was a dreadful fate. Outside was chaos, the unrestrained forces of nature. After the rice-planting season special rituals were performed to expel evil from urban space. The festival of Gathā Mugaḥ Cahre is a ritual of expulsion. The farmers go out into their fields, into the chaotic outside. They return to their houses covered with mud. People think that the evil of the outside clings to them. They think that evil must now be expelled. That is what that festival is all about. Following it are numerous other festivals, which build on that theme of expulsion. In Lalitpur the processions of Matayā and Nyaku Jātrā are performed to recapture urban space and renew the urban order that is expressed in that space. Kathmandu and Bhaktapur have similar procession.

In the Bible story we are told that Cain wandered off east of Eden. The East. The country where the sun rises, the point of departure. Cain was to be ever leaving but never arriving. Never finding his peace with his creator. And so he built a city in stark opposition to the Lord's judgement. The city is the direct consequence of Cain's murderous act and of his refusal to accept God's protection.

Throughout the ages men and women have sought ways by which they can get protection from wild disordered nature. Those ways have been man made. They have not been the way of God but the way of man. They are rebellious. When man seeks his own means of protection without God he is declaring his independence. He has no need of God. He will be fine by himself. This is the ultimate offence to God—Man in his pride declaring that he can do very well without God's help. That, in the end, is what all our religious strivings come to. Whenever we perform rituals that were not given to us to do by God we are declaring our belief in our own efforts to make us right. Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden, we have been alienated, not only from our Creator himself, but also from his creation, from other people, from the natural world, and even from ourselves. Ever since that time men and women have made every effort to make their situation right in their own way. The building of the city is one of those ways. It stands for man in his pride. And urban religion, the rituals that men perform to order

his world against the natural and supernatural forces that are arrayed against him outside the walls, is man made religion.

Nimrod and Babylon

In the Bible, after Cain, the next city builder we read about is Nimrod, whom, we are told, was a “mighty warrior before the Lord” (Genesis 10:9). Nimrod was a descendant of Ham, one of Noah’s sons. Noah had cursed the sons of Ham for Ham’s disrespect towards his father.² This city building was Nimrod’s response to God’s curse. Nimrod built cities not only for protection but also for war. Instead of turning to God in repentance Nimrod turns on his fellow man and makes war against him and oppresses him. And he does that by means of cities. The phrase “before the Lord” emphasises Nimrod’s opposition to God. He is separate from the Lord, at enmity with him. The first centres of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar.³

Babylon (Babel) is particularly significant.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, “Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and bitumen instead of mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why I was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:1-9)

² See Genesis 9: 18-25.

³ See Genesis 10:10.

The point of the story is the problem of the name. The name for the ancient people was very important. God gave a name to the first man.⁴ Man in turn named all the animals.⁵ The act of naming was the sign of dominion. But man did not want to be under God's lordship. He wanted to make a name for himself. So he built a city for himself. And that is how cities always are—a declaration of independence from God.

Israel and the city

The children of Israel had their first experience of building cities while they were still in captivity in Egypt. This is how it happened:

Then a new king, who did not know Joseph, came into power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country."

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Ramases as store cities for Pharaoh. (Exodus 1:8-11)

The Israelites built the cities as slaves, not as an expression of their pride or fear. The city was for them a place of oppression. When they moved into the land of Canaan they ceased their wandering and occupied cities that were already built. As long as they were content with that all was well. But in time the Israelites too began to build cities. The first great building king was Solomon, the son of David. After building a temple for the Lord and a palace for himself we read that this king conscripted a force of slaves to build up the cities they were already occupying as well as a whole lot of new cities including store cities and cities for his chariots and horses.⁶ Solomon forgot his own people's history as slaves in a strange land—slaves who were forced to build cities for power-hungry rulers. So Solomon's own city building became an opportunity for oppression.

⁴ See Genesis 1:26-27.

⁵ See Genesis 2:19.

⁶ See 1 Kings 9:15-19.

The city as an instrument of judgement

The city sometimes appears in history as an instrument or tool of God. God calls the city to act on his behalf. When the people of Israel sinned again and again against the Lord by ignoring his prophets and worshipping idols instead of their creator, the Lord called Babylon to execute judgement.

...Because you have not listened to my words, behold, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring them against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of scorn, and an everlasting ruin. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. (Jeremiah 25:8-11)

The city of Babylon, its king and its army came against Israel and its city Jerusalem. They besieged it and destroyed it, taking the survivors captive to Babylon. When they did that, all the evil that Babylon stood for was unleashed against Jerusalem. There was death in the city.⁷

The city as an instrument of salvation

On their arrival in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, the Israelites were instructed to set aside a number of cities as places of refuge.⁸ If someone killed a person accidentally then he was to flee to one of these cities of refuge and stay there until the death of the high priest. In this way he was safe from the ‘avenger of blood’, a relative of the dead person who wanted to take revenge.

This is the first time the Bible mentions a city in a positive way. Not all the cities of Israel were to be cities of refuge, however. Only certain cities that God had chosen. God commands the people of Israel to set aside these cities.⁹ That is they were to be holy. These cities were to be a place of refuge for the fugitive. If he was found outside the city of refuge then the avenger could kill him. But all the time he stayed inside he was safe.

⁷ See Lamentations 1:19-20.

⁸ See Numbers 35 & Joshua 20.

⁹ See Deuteronomy 19:7.

When the high priest died then he was free to leave the city without fear of revenge. Someone had to die for him to go free. That person must be like the fugitive—a man and not an animal or plant. Only when he had died could the fugitive go free. True freedom from revenge could only be found through the death of a substitute.

So we see here a little of God wants to make of the city. It is to be a place of salvation. This is even more so for Jerusalem.

Jerusalem

When the people of Israel first conquered Canaan one city they left untouched was the city of Jebus, inhabited by the Jebusites. But when David became king he took that city too and made it his capital. When he had established his throne and built his palace he wanted to make his capital the centre of Israel's worship as well. Up to this time the Ark of the Covenant, the gold-covered box in which the two stone tablets of the law were kept, was always in the country, in private homes or in the tent that Moses had made for it. It was only temporarily in the city. Now David wanted to build a temple to make a home for it in Jerusalem. And in making a home for it he was intending to make a house for the Lord. God did not object to that. But David was not to be the one to build the temple. His son Solomon was. But more important than the house that David wanted to build for the Lord was the house the Lord wanted to build for David.

The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. (2 Samuel 7:11-13)

The Lord said that David's house, i.e. his descendants, would be established forever. David would never fail to have a 'son' sit on Israel's throne. David was overwhelmed by God's promise and praised the Lord for the greatness of his word. David prepared for the building of the Lord's temple but it was his son Solomon who actually constructed it.

After the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the temple the Lord demonstrated his approval by filling the temple with a cloud of glory.¹⁰ The City of Jerusalem had become Zion—the City of the Lord.

The rebellion of Jerusalem

But Jerusalem never ceased to be a city just like others—a place of sin and rebellion. With Solomon’s death Jerusalem’s glory days were over. Even though God had made the city holy by choosing it for his special purposes the people of the city grew ever more wicked. The Lord had chosen the city to set his love on. She had become his bride. He had made his home with her. But now she prostituted herself to the gods of the nations around her. The Lord sent his prophets to warn her. To call her back to her first love. To give up her folly and return back to her husband while it was still possible. But still she continued in her rebellious adultery.

Ezekiel was a prophet to whom the word of the Lord came while he was in exile in Babylon:

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices and say, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. No-one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised.

Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, “Live!” I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare.

Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered

¹⁰ See 2 Chronicles 5:13-14.

your nakedness. I gave you a solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.

But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute.

What hope can there be for the fallen city? But then the Lord speaks on further:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will deal with you as you deserve because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant. Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. (Ezekiel 1:1-8, 15, & 59-60)

So Jerusalem is to be an example to all the cities of the world. If Jerusalem can fall under the judgement of God what hope is there for any other city? But it is also an example of God's grace. The city that wanders far from her Lord is the very one with whom He has made a covenant. And he will keep that covenant.

But Jerusalem must come under the judgement of God. So he brings the Babylonian army against it and it is destroyed. A remnant of the people is taken away to exile in Babylon where they have 70 years to reflect on their sin. And at the end of that time the exiles return and rebuild the city with God's blessing.

Under the leadership of Nehemiah the returnees rebuild the walls. The centrepiece of Nehemiah's book is the filling of Jerusalem with her inhabitants. But the mere filling with inhabitants is not the writer's chief concern. The high point of the whole story is the spiritual revival that comes to the city.¹¹ God's covenant with the city is renewed. The people are once again renewed in their worship of the Lord.

The next four hundred years are a period of quiet for the people of Israel. Not politically, for it is a long period of turmoil as the country comes under the yoke of one and another empire. But it is a period of silence from hearing the word of the Lord. No prophetic word is heard. Long the city waits for her Messiah. But will she recognise him when he comes?

¹¹ See Nehemiah 7:73b—12:26.

The Lord Jesus and Jerusalem

The expectations of Israel are now to be fulfilled. The long-awaited Messiah comes to rescue his people. But how does the Messiah come? The first shocking fact we discover is that he is born in Bethlehem, not in Jerusalem. Jesus rejects the city. The great holy city is avoided in favour of a country village. The Lord Jesus will not share his glory with the creation of man. He will not have anyone say that he is important because he was born in the great city. Neither does Jesus grow up in the city but in the small town of Nazareth, far to the north. And hardly any of his earthly ministry is spent in the city. He doesn't try to build up a following among the great political and religious figures of his time. The city does not make the Messiah.

The city rejects her King just as she rejected the prophets before him. Little wonder, then, that her Lord should weep over the city:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” (Matthew 23:37)

The city of Jerusalem is the city that *kills* her Messiah. Why is this so? How can the holy city become so desperately unholy to kill even her King? When the Lord Jesus was incarnated as a man he embodied the fulfilment of all the promises that God had given to the Israelites. The apostle Paul tells us that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 1:15). God himself had become a man in order to reconcile sinful man to him. The City of Jerusalem, therefore, as the place where God chose to make his home, was only a shadow of the one to come. Now in Jesus, we see the fulfilment of that shadow. Jesus is the place of God's dwelling. “For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him...” (Colossians 2:19).

Now that Jesus has come the city is no longer the place of God's habitation. Jerusalem is no longer holy. Like any other city it is simply the creation of man. Figuratively, it is Cain's city. It is Babylon—the city of rebellion. Is it any wonder, then, that she kills the incarnate creator? The City itself does not understand this. She thinks she is still holy,

which is why she sends Jesus to die outside the city walls, on the hill of Golgotha, the place called the Skull.

Flee the city!

Just before his crucifixion the Lord Jesus told his disciples of some of the signs that show us that we are approaching the end of the age. One of those signs is the destruction of Jerusalem.

“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.” (Luke 21:20-21)

Jerusalem was in fact surrounded and destroyed just a few years later by the armies of Rome. But Jesus' words are for all people of these last days. The city is under God's judgement. We are to flee. It is impossible for most of us to flee the city literally. But Jesus is not talking ultimately about a physical flight. It is a flight from the spirit of the city, the attitudes of the city. “Flee the works of man,” we are being told. “Do not trust in your own creation to save you.” Jerusalem's destruction by the armies of Rome was the immediate fulfilment of the Lord Jesus' prophecy. The ultimate fulfilment is yet to come.

One day all man's works will be judged. What are you relying on for your salvation? When you walk the lanes of your city in ritual procession, what are you hoping to achieve? Hope in the city is ultimately futile. It will be destroyed. Will you be destroyed with it? Or will you trust in the one in whom God's fulness dwells? God has come down in the person of Jesus. He is the image of God. When we see Jesus we see God. When we come to know Jesus we come to know God. The city and all man's works stand under God's judgement. But if we trust in Jesus' work of salvation then the judgement that we deserve will not come on us for it has already come on him. When Jesus died on the cross he bore the wrath of God on himself so that it would not be borne by those who trust in him. Flee the city! Come to the Lord Jesus Christ and hide yourself from God's wrath in him.