

Book Review:

The Urbanity of the Bible: Rediscovering the Urban Nature of the Bible

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Main Point and Purpose

Benesh's (2015) main purpose for writing the book is to rediscover and reclaim the Bible's urban roots as a part of God's redemptive plan for humankind all along, from Genesis to Revelation. The assumption often is that the Bible's predominant context is rural, when in actuality, "the trajectory of creation and the *missio Dei* was, is, and continues to be urban in scope, focus, and nature" (Benesh 2015, 24). Cities appear as early as Genesis 4 after the Fall and continue to be central places where both blessings and curses abound. Despite cities being tainted by sin, cities were intended to be places of refuge and redemption, exhibiting the in-breaking reality of the Kingdom of God.

Social Analysis of the Target Urban Context

Our world is becoming more and more urban. An analysis of modern-day urbanization reveals that over half of the world's population currently lives in cities largely due to rural-to-urban migration, higher birth rates, immigration, and the rise of technological advancements. Across all urban revolutions in history – from the Neolithic Revolution to the Industrial Revolution and now the Information Age – "the common denominator...is technological advancements that allowed for agglomeration and density" (Benesh, 2015, 41). For instance, irrigation enabled early urbanites to produce more food to feed larger populations. Beyond agriculture, innovations in architecture, division of labor, and urban planning have led to increasing urban concentration.

Inevitably, there are both positive and negative aspects to the growth of cities. On one hand, cities are associated with decay, economic inequality, poverty, corruption, crime, and desperation. For many rapidly-growing developing cities in the Majority World, the urban infrastructure simply can't keep up with the soaring population which results in the prevalence of slums and squatter settlements, as you might find in Manila or Mumbai. On the other hand, cities have also been viewed as places where inclusivity, hope, job opportunities, diversity, and productivity thrive. Ultimately, "how one views the city—as a city of God or a

city of Satan—a city of light or of darkness—will be influenced by the context of one’s own city” (Benesh, 2015, 49).

Urban Theological Reflection and Formation

Benesh (2015) acknowledges there is a similar duality of cities in Scripture. As a result of the Fall and the inbreaking of individual and systemic sin, there are Old Testament cities notorious for wickedness and rebellion, such as Sodom, Babel, or Babylon. These cities are often equated with darkness, pride, and exploitation; however, they opposed God’s original intention for cities to be places of *blessing* under His reign. Cities were meant to be salvific places of refuge that emphasized justice, liberation from oppression, care for the poor and marginalized, and equity. In fact, “the entrance of sin into the world does not taint the urban trajectory of Genesis 1; it simply means there are now competing values and spiritual forces at play in cities both historically and today” (Benesh, 2015, 43).

He argues, first and foremost, that God’s triune nature demonstrates that He was a relational and interpersonal God from the very beginning. Humankind was created to reflect His communal nature. A biblical view of cities recognizes that not only do cities hold the highest concentration of *imago Dei*, but God’s redemptive plan, or *missio Dei*, is also most impactful in cities because that’s where most humans exist! If we examine Scripture further, it is clear that “the city is central to God’s plan of transformation and redemption of humanity and is therefore the locus of God’s salvation of humanity” (Benesh, 2015, 74).

In Zechariah 8, the prophet Zechariah describes Jerusalem as an “urban sidewalk ballet” where street life is incredibly lively with people of all ages intermingling with each other (Benesh, 2015, 77). Whether Zechariah is referencing his immediate hope for a postexilic Jerusalem or his vision for a far-off, yet-to-be-seen future for Jerusalem, the picture he paints is a Kingdom illustration of life under God’s sovereign rule. This includes safe, livable, populated, and active streets. Moreover, “in the Mosaic Law, we see God laying out explicit instructions for the way cities are to be marked by justice, mercy, and equity”

(Benesh, 2015, 94). If Israel faithfully obeyed God's commandments, they'd experience abundant blessings and prosperity in their cities that would serve as testimonies to other nations. If they disobeyed, they'd experience curses and God's judgment, but God's mission is always to restore, realign, and renew His creation – "cities simply happen to be the center stage where the drama of humanity is played out" and most amplified (Benesh, 2015, 58).

Lastly, Jesus' upbringing and ministry occurred in one of the world's most urbanized places at the time. He was an itinerant preacher who moved from town to town and city to city along major trade routes from Nazareth to Capernaum and eventually Jerusalem. Amid a multicultural, urban world, "the Gospel of Jesus and his Kingdom was able to spread rapidly along the lines of urban development and transportation infrastructure" (Benesh, 2015, 135). The early church, too, had urban origins – the density, proximity, and walkability of cities, all under Roman rule, allowed the gospel to rapidly and organically spread to other nations and people groups. In essence, cities have been and continue to be central to the mission of God.

Theological Implementation Approach and Practice

If "the urbanization process, both historically and today, has divine origins," there are major implications for how the church today is expected to partner with God in cultivating healthy, sustainable, equitable cities that reflect the Kingdom in the here and now (Benesh, 2015, 66). For urban missions today, this means proclaiming and contextualizing the gospel to each culture (Great Commission) and radically loving our neighbors as ourselves (Great Commandment) as ways to usher in shalom in the cities we live in. Just as the early church strived to be ambassadors of Christ in the 1st century, we too are to serve sacrificially and pursue the holistic "welfare, peace, prosperity of the city for the poor and elite and everyone in between, by extending both arms of grace to the city, common grace and saving grace" (Benesh, 2015, 170). In practice, this means not only evangelizing but also caring for the marginalized and fighting for the overall improvement of cities whether in education, policy, or social services – all to demonstrate a redemptive way to live in cities.

Works Cited

Benesh, Sean. *The Urbanity of the Bible: Rediscovering the Urban Nature of the Bible*. Urban Loft Publishers, 2015.