
Review of J. W. Rogerson and John Vincent, *The City in Biblical Perspective*. London/Oakville: Equinox, 2009.

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This accessibly written monograph explores the archaeological and social backgrounds to cities in the biblical world, deliberately drawing out ambiguities in the text, to ask whether the Bible can offer anything for the cities in today's world in which the majority of the earth's human population now reside. It consists of two independently authored sections that cover both the Old and New Testaments, written by John Rogerson and John Vincent respectively.

While the term "city" is often employed to denote a number of different kinds of human settlement, Rogerson defines cities as "places where power and resources are concentrated" (p. 4). He suggests that like modern cities, Israelite cities were also places where power and resources were concentrated. Although most people in ancient Israel did not live within a city, they played a central role in administrative, commercial, judicial, and military tasks. Rogerson does a helpful job here of determining some of the differences and similarities between working definitions of "cities" now and then.

His next chapter discusses some of the history and archaeology that might inform a study of the ancient Israelite city. The evidence suggests that Israelite cities took over and rebuilt existing cities and were usually smaller than other cities in the ancient Near East. He notes, however, that the distinctively Israelite contribution to ancient urbanization was the prophetic critique of cities and city life stemming from belief in a God of justice. Because cities exhibit concentrated power and wealth, they became places of questioning such power. Rogerson points out that these centres were likely to become prime targets in human conflict: to control a city is to control the people who depend on them.

After this, Rogerson looks at a number of Old Testament texts in an attempt to determine how the "city" is portrayed within the ideology and perspectives of its ancient authors. Starting with the founding of the first city by Cain in Genesis 4, Rogerson covers a few more texts in Israel's primordial history. He then addresses the city and the country in the Song of Songs, and the city as a battleground for justice and honesty in the Psalms, before concluding with the prophet Micah's take on the city as a symbol of universal peace and justice.

Part two of the book begins by introducing the political situation during the time of the New Testament's production. Vincent focuses on the widespread Roman imperial occupation of the Near East that undoubtedly shaped much of the political and social atmosphere.

Vincent then explores what the city meant for the world of Jesus by outlining the structures and strictures that determined the lives of ancient populations. After comparing some of the physical similarities between city features in the Old and New Testaments (walls and gates for larger cities, two-story houses, the dependence on water) he briefly defines the six Greek terms in the gospels that refer to different levels of human population: *polis*, *komopolis*, *komé*, *chora*, *agros*, and *eremos* (pp. 56-57). Focusing mostly on Mark's gospel, he explores the various ways in which Jesus interacted with the city, its class structures, and the Kingdom of God as a counter-cultural alternative to the imperial city. Because Jerusalem is the only actual "city" that Jesus enters during his ministry, Vincent describes its functional significance and Jesus' interaction with it, which leads him to argue that for Jesus, "God's Alternative City" replaces Jerusalem (p. 71). The chapter concludes by "making connections" between the issues highlighted within each gospel, and a situation analysis of our contemporary context.

The next chapter explores what the city meant for the first Christians. As a growing movement within the first century, early Christianity became an increasingly urbanized phenomenon with a “mission to the cities” (p. 82). Vincent relies on Acts and the Pauline epistles to sketch this picture of emerging Christianity with reference to some of the issues facing urban Christians and the implications of an urbanized Christianity. This includes how the common architecture of urban houses would have affected their community and worship, but also how the gospel teachings that called for communal equality and the relegating of authority, often conflicted with the dominant practices of city life. The chapter ends on a strong anti-imperial note: the New Testament paints a world in which Roman power is highly temporary and will be replaced imminently by God’s coming Kingdom.

The book concludes with an epilogue that recapitulates the goal of connecting the Bible to our contemporary context by providing a step by step method for making potentially transformative connections between the two worlds. For this reason, the book would function well as a springboard to further discussion among small groups of general readers. By itself, however, the book does not really live up to suggested promises of constructing a clear and sustained argument as to whether and/or how the Bible can provide resources for the city today, perhaps assuming it is self-evident within the textual analysis itself. Moreover, by surveying the complex subject of the “city” in as little as forty pages per testament, one feels that many of the discussions are really only scratching the surface. Rogerson, for example, tackles the four main instances of cities in Genesis (Enoch, Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah) in just two pages each, which is hardly enough room to permit sustained engagement with the biblical text.

Most disappointingly and along the same line, however, is Rogerson’s two-page chapter “Making Connections” that does not really make any meaningful connections at all, but rather identifies an echo between the dystopian vision of Theodor Adorno with the overall negative construction of the city in the Old Testament (pp. 42-43). Vincent’s connections, however, are a little more integrated into his analysis of the text itself, and, additionally, seem to be strategically moulded around a practical outworking of Christian discipleship. Taken together, then, the book presents a useful analysis of the “city” in biblical perspective, which will function as a valuable introductory text for those engaging in a study of the city, or for those wanting to further develop a theology of the city that draws from biblical perspectives.