Book Reviews

Mark McEntire, *Not Scattered or Confused: Rethinking the Urban World of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019), ix + 288 pp., ISBN: 978-0664262938, \$40.00, Paperback.

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The relationship of cities to Christianity has always been a complicated one. The conflict in the Book of Revelation between “the great city Babylon, the mighty city” (18:10) and “the holy city, new Jerusalem” (21:2) demonstrates this to be the case in early Christianity. Another case in point is the magisterial patristic work *The City of God*. In this apologetic and philosophical volume, Augustine expounds on a dualism between earthly and heavenly cities while interrogating profound theological themes. This complicated relationship is reflected in modern times as well. On one hand, as conservative theologian Albert Mohler points out, “[In the United States] the closer you get to a city, the more secular and more morally liberal a society becomes”;¹ on the other hand, Christian mission work increasingly emphasises cities as both sites and hubs for mission work (exemplified, for example, in the Redeemer City to City movement² as well as in the Lausanne Movement’s Issue Network on Cities).³

In light of this challenging relationship and the outsized influence that cities exert in the modern world, it is regrettable that there is a relative paucity of scholarly reflection on cities and urbanity in the field of biblical studies. Thus, Mark McEntire’s *Not Scattered or Confused: Rethinking the Urban World of the Hebrew Bible*, which analyzes how selected ancient texts

1 Albert Mohler, *The Briefing*, April 27, 2021, <https://albertmohler.com/2021/04/27/briefing-4-27-21>.

2 “About,” *Redeemer City to City*, <https://redeemercitytocity.com/about>.

3 “Cities,” *Lausanne Movement*, <https://lausanne.org/networks/issues/cities>.

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host a conversation about cities, is a much-needed contribution. “The central question of this volume is how the understanding of cities and urban life in biblical texts shift in response to the changes in the culture that produced those texts” (p. 2). However, given the ubiquity of cities in ancient texts, McEntire acknowledges a need to circumscribe the selection of ancient texts under study, restricting himself to the Old Testament and the Book of Jubilees (which contains a “rewritten” form of parts of Genesis and Exodus). Moreover, he also concedes that he has not attempted “to develop an urban spirituality, or even an urban theology” (219) but is simply trying to demonstrate that these ancient texts host “a critical, contested conversation that may inform our own” (91).

Given the multiplicity of viewpoints presented in the volume, a comprehensive summary of the book will not be attempted here. Instead, this review will focus on chapters 2 and 8, in which McEntire’s contributions are most novel. In chapter 2, McEntire expresses a particular interest in the Primeval Tradition in Genesis 1–11. He applies a source critical method to the text, noting especially the presence of four “odd texts” (32) in the corpus: Gn 4:17-24 (Cain’s genealogy); 6:1-4 (“sons of God” pericope); 10:1-32 (the Table of Nations); and 11:1-9 (Tower of Babel story). He avers that all four pericopes do not fit well into the overall plotline of the final redacted text. For example, he questions the need for and placement of the Cainite genealogy. After all, “since God banished Cain, and his descendants will be wiped out by the flood, why does Cain’s family get any attention in a text that has the ultimate goal of introducing the origins of the people of Israel?” (33). Following the basic tenets of source criticism, he argues that these ostensible inconsistencies are evidence that the four texts were derived from an earlier source. He demonstrates that this earlier source, Yahwist (J) in origin, was anti-urban in nature but was subsequently redacted into its current state by a group of urban (and thus *pro*-urban) scribes.

McEntire argues in chapter 8 that a comparable form of pro-urban redaction was at play in the composition of the Book of Jubilees (typically dated to the second century BCE). According to McEntire, the rewriting of the Genesis/Exodus traditions in Jubilees frequently mitigated tensions by deleting and altering anti-urban elements in the earlier traditions as well as by adding other traditions that minimize the impact of anti-urban polemic in the sources. For example, with regard to the aforementioned

Cainite genealogy, McEntire observes that “Jubilees omits the remainder of the genealogy after Enoch and, with it, the sense of continuing conflict between settled life and nomadic life” (194). Importantly, McEntire reminds us that the presence of both Genesis and Jubilees among the Qumran manuscripts, along with other similar examples of rewriting, means that ancient “reading communities could value and work with multiple, parallel sets of tradition” (190) as they reflected on urbanity in their contexts.

As can be seen from the foregoing, McEntire’s analysis of texts emphasizes their sources as well as the contexts in which the texts were redacted. The discussion is often thoughtful and imaginative. There are, however, two points of concern regarding the method applied in the volume. First, although McEntire acknowledges that “the central question of this book requires a multidisciplinary approach,” the method applied within the book is nonetheless still heavily weighted toward a combination of historical-grammatical and source criticisms. Where works from other disciplines are discussed, such engagement tends toward superficiality, being restricted to the contemporary application section toward the end of each chapter. Instead, one might expect a multidisciplinary approach to integrate methods from other fields into the main textual analysis. In particular, McEntire’s omission of Lefebvre, whom he observes to be “the person who most clearly established a modern field of urban theory” (4), is surprising given the recent influence of Lefebvrian thought on the related field of biblical spatial studies.⁴

Another issue with the analysis concerns the treatment of the categories of “city” and “urban.” Earlier in the book, in chapter 1, McEntire observes that the Bible uses a variety of nouns for various forms of settlement, such as *‘ir* (“city” or “village”), *ḥāṣēr* (“village” or “courtyard”), and *miḥṣar* (“fortified city”). However, in the philological analysis of the later chapters, this distinction is minimalized, with the category of “city”/“urban” becoming increasingly comprehensive. This tendency appears to become, at times, an equation between any form of civilization with urbanity.

These critiques, however, do not obviate the value of McEntire’s work. As a much-needed exploratory study on a salient *topos*, this volume helps to illustrate the complexity of viewpoints regarding cities in the ancient

4 Patrick Schreiner, “Space, Place and Biblical Studies: A Survey of Recent Research in Light of Developing Trends,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 3 (2016): 346-347, 349-451.

world and how they interact over time in diverse contexts. Likewise, Asian theology must also wrestle with a biblically grounded urbanity. As I argued in an article in an earlier volume of this journal, “by 2025 two-thirds of the world’s megacities will be in Asia.... Just as cities in the ancient world were a crucial locus of self-identity in the ancient world, cities will likely also play an increasingly important role in shaping self-identity in Asia.”⁵ As such, the church in Asia must actively explore ways of thinking and conversing about cities. McEntire’s important work reminds us that Scripture, and the intrabiblical conversation within it, continues to be a critical guide in this area for the church moving ahead. I heartily recommend this book to scholars, pastors, seminarians, and students of Scripture who have an interest in such a conversation.

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5 Leow Wen-Pin, “*Ekklēsia* and Civic Discourse in the Rhetoric of Ephesians,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 34, no. 2 (2020): 84.