

**Repairers of the Breach:
Implications of Isaiah 58:12 for ethics and urban missiology**
Michael D. Crane © 2014

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Evangelical theology and ethics suffers from blind spots. One such blind spot is our responsibility to take a proactive approach to the transformation of the built environment. The French sociologist/philosopher captures the sentiments of many when he claims: “There is one thing which is not asked of us [in the Bible], and that is to *build* the city. We are to live in the city already existing. But we are asked neither to materially found a new city, nor to participate in spiritual building projects, that is, to share in that which forms the very being of the city.”¹ In this article, I will respond to this statement by examining Isaiah 58:12. I believe this verse challenges us to think afresh our ethical assumptions as well as our role in contributing to the physical environment of our cities.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part will provide a short explanation of the hermeneutical method I used. This will be followed by an exegesis of Isaiah 58:12. The third part will explore the implications of a missiological reading of the verse for ethics and urban missions.

Missional Hermeneutics

As we settle into the “urban century,” some churches are becoming more excited about urban missions and even the transformation of our cities. These churches often resort to proof-texting and risk inadequate reflection on what the Bible says about urban missions. Others have dismissed the claims of an urban theology as playing fast and loose with the Bible. Both interpretive approaches risk arriving at premature conclusions from the biblical text. Anthony Thiselton wisely saw this tendency in biblical interpretation as being governed by expectation leading to “uneventful and bland” conclusions.²

Christopher Wright correctly asserts we need to read the Bible messianically and missionally. We have faithfully read the Bible messianically; we have neglected to do so missionally.³ Even those with an interest in missions have not faithfully read the Bible in that way. Harry Beeby laments that in our rush to do missions “we have lost the missionary canon that makes mission possible.”⁴

¹ Jacques Ellul, “Thunder over the City,” in *Urban Theology: A Reader*, ed. Michael Northcott (London: Cassell, 1998), 97.

² Anthony C Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1992), 8.

³ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 30.

⁴ Harry Daniel Beeby, “A Missional Approach to Renewed Interpretation,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Moller, vol. Vol. 1, Scripture & Hermeneutics Series (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), 277.

A missional hermeneutic understands the Bible as revealed by the God of mission calling his people into mission.⁵ This is in contrast to the historical-critical method of interpretation, which can result in “uneventful and bland” conclusions. Integrating the *missio Dei* (mission of God) into our reading of the Bible provides teleological meaning for our interpretation. In other words, a missional reading of the Bible is critical to understanding the missional purposes of God’s people. Reading the Bible with God’s mission for us in mind helps us make more sense of the interwoven images and narratives of the Bible.⁶ This means that the prophets’ words for the people of God two and a half millennia ago have relevance for us because they give us deeper insight into the purposes of God. Moreover, these prophetic words can uproot some of our static notions of urban missions.

The Text: Isaiah 58:12⁷

The Context of Isaiah 58

This section of Isaiah (chapters 56-66) is set in the context of the Jewish community returning from their exile to the city of Jerusalem. But this was not the Jerusalem sung about in many of the Psalms (i.e. Psalms 46, 48, 107, etc.); it was a “ruinous heap.”⁸ The city wall was destroyed and the once-beautiful temple was reduced to rubble. The city was left destroyed and nearly vacant seventy years before. Since then, vagabonds and even foreign peoples had been squatting on the land so long it felt like their own city. The returnees came back with wealth and a dream of making Jerusalem the shimmering city of God like the one they sang about during the exile (Psalms 137:1-3).

In chapter 58 the people of God were striving to restore their nation through privatized spiritual practices like fasting, praying for God’s righteous judgements, and worshipping with outward signs of humility (vv. 1-3). God sees right through the false motivations behind their actions. They are revealed to be self-righteous, oppressive towards others, and even guilty of trying to manipulate God’s favour (vv. 4-5). God’s penetrating response describes true worship as fighting injustice, freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, and helping the needy (vv. 6-10). To understand God’s message as purely a humanitarian effort misses the point. In 58:11 the work of helping the poor and oppressed is guided and resourced by God.

Isaiah 58:12

The results of relieving oppression, feeding the hungry, and satisfying the needs of the thirsty are described in 58:11-12. Verse 12, in particular, uses the language of urban revitalization to portray the outcome of true concern for all people who are in the city. This verse casts a vision of a city that hints at the city that is to come (chapters 65 and 66). Rebuilding ruins,

⁵ James V Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love: Element of a Missional Hermeneutic.,” *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 330 (July 1994): 232; George R. Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation,” *The Gospel and Our Culture Network*, January 28, 2009, <http://www.gocn.org/resources/articles/proposals-missional-hermeneutic-mapping-conversation>; Wright, *The Mission of God*, 30.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 16.

⁷ This author has chosen to look at Isaiah canonically, thus no effort is made to differentiate between First, Second, or Third Isaiah in this article.

⁸ George Angus Fulton Knight, *The New Israel: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 56-66*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), xii.

raising up foundations, repairing the breaches, and restoring the streets all call up imagery of the built environment of the city.

There are a number of different explanations for this verse. Gary Smith believes the language to be entirely metaphorical continuing the poetic language of verse 11, maintaining that the rebuilding is a reference to people.⁹ This view ignores the stark reality that Jerusalem was so ruinous it brought Nehemiah to tears and mourning (Neh. 1:4).

The opposite view is taken by John Skinner who suggests the intent of the passage is almost entirely related to physical city-building and political prosperity.¹⁰ John Watts proposes that this verse is a fulfilment of commands given to the Persian rulers Cyrus and Darius carried out by Artaxerxes.¹¹ The Persian involvement is really only in a permissive sense; it is the faithful people of God who are doing the rebuilding.¹² Furthermore, both of these theories overlook the strong spiritual theme of the whole chapter. A political reading of the passage does not account for this fact. Spiritual regeneration is foundational to the healthy restoration of the city.¹³ Although some scholars say the chapter has been redacted, the chapter is remarkably cohesive. The cohesiveness of chapter 58 is seen in the interwoven themes by use of repetition.¹⁴ The tight structure of the chapter indicates that the spiritual concerns cannot be divorced from the social and physical implications.

We must avoid the urge to oversimplify the message in this passage. Both salvation and justice are at stake, but they do not relate in a “direct causal chain.”¹⁵ There is a connection between the physical well-being of the people in the city and the righteousness of the returning exiles. Verse 12 offers encouragement and hope to those involved in the holistic restoration of their city.

There is a tendency with conservative interpreters to see the eschatological promises of the new city and full restoration as having no relevance for our lives now.¹⁶ It is relegated entirely to the work of God in the future. But this passage does not permit such a view. The pronouns of chapter 58 shift decisively from being plural to second person singular, “you.”¹⁷ The message of enacting justice is given to a general crowd, but is given personally to individuals challenged to take up responsibility for their city. It is the people of God who are dubbed repairers and restorers. Similar themes are found in 61:3-4 where the people of God, through their display of justice are considered to have helped rebuild and repair their cities.

⁹ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, vol. 15B, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 583.

¹⁰ John Skinner, *The Book of Prophet Isaiah ..* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923).

¹¹ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, vol. 25, 1st Edition, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 276.

¹² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 507.

¹³ James Muilenburg, “The Book Isaiah: 40-66,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 684.

¹⁴ Two examples make this point. “Cry/call” in vv. 1, 5, 9, 12, 13 and “day” in vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 13. Brevard S Childs, *Isaiah*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 476.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 475.

¹⁶ For example, in Köstenberger and O’Brien’s survey of mission in the Bible, implications of eschatology are considered only in spiritual categories. Andreas Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Leicester England ;Downers Grove Ill.: Apollos ;;InterVarsity Press, 2001).

¹⁷ H. G. M. Williamson, “Promises, Promises! Some Exegetical Reflections on Isaiah 58,” *Word & World* XIX, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 157.

If the context of the passage calls us to consider both the spiritual and physical needs in the city and is calling for action from the people of God, then we must seriously consider the need to work for a city that is more just, even in terms of physical environment. Thus we return to our original question of whether or not we are to engage in rebuilding the city in physical terms. As stated earlier, that language in 58:12 and 61:4 uses the language of physical structures or built environment. Nehemiah responded to the news of Jerusalem's spiritual and physical demise by asking the Persian king to rebuild it (Neh. 2:5). Jeremiah 29:5 implores the people of God in exile to contribute positively to the built environment of Babylon. Thus, there is sufficient evidence from scripture to say that the people of God should be concerned about the physical environment of the city.

Implications of this Verse in Ethics and Urban Missiology

The Importance of Place and the Built Environment in Urban Missiology

Urban missionaries have long been drawing on verses in Isaiah as proof of the need for holistic urban transformation.¹⁸ This stands in contrast to the more common belief that we should only be concerned about the soul of the individual. Urban missiologists know that the connection between our spiritual vitality and our physical environment cannot be easily severed. Our physical environment shapes us and impacts us far more than we realize. The need for rebuilding, says Mark Gornik, "is one facing diverse communities around the world."¹⁹ In the disciplines surrounding urban studies, there is increased attention to the importance of place and the built environment.²⁰ Cities thrive only when there is an intentional effort to build the physical structure that is needed to serve the people.²¹ Land control has always been equated with power.²² This has led to what Saskia Sassen calls "spatial inequality" in which injustice is perpetuated through the control of land and the built environment.²³ Examples abound in which the physical environment is a contributing factor to injustice and exploitation.

There is a relationship between the built environment of a city and its moral order.²⁴ Land, place, and the built environment can be used for the good of the city and its citizens, or they can be used to give privilege to a few and oppress others. Post-exilic Jerusalem was a city in ruins partly because it was rife with oppression and exploitation (Is. 1:21-23). Nehemiah 5

¹⁸ Wayne Gordon, "Gentrification: The Good News and the Bad News," in *A Heart for the Community: New Models for Urban and Suburban Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 40.

¹⁹ Mark R. Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 131.

²⁰ Anthony M. Orum and Xiangming Chen, *The World of Cities: Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 15; Michael J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 2; Thomas F. Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 471.

²¹ By way of example, Thomas Lucas describes the fluctuating population of Rome due to changes in the built infrastructure of the city. Thomas Lucas, *Landmarking: City, Church & Jesuit Urban Strategy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), 50.

²² Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History* (New York: Bulfinch, 1991), 52; Hans-Dieter Evers and Rudiger Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism: The Meaning and Power of Social Space* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 19.

²³ Orum and Chen, *The World of Cities*, 122.

²⁴ Philip Bess, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architecture, Urbanism, and the Sacred* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006), 117.

describes how poverty is tied to land control. Nehemiah's solution of building the wall was not only to improve the security of the city, but it provided economic opportunities for the poor to work without being exploited. Isaiah 56 calls for the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs in Israel's social and spiritual life. Foreigners and eunuchs were excluded from having a stake in the land and therefore do not have a part in the social and economic welfare of the city.²⁵

Isaiah, the "great urban document of the Bible,"²⁶ moves from a pronounced judgment on the city of Jerusalem (1:1-31) to its predicted destruction (2:6-4:1), to a beautiful vision of what the city shall become when God is acknowledged, worshipped, and obeyed faithfully.²⁷ Isaiah's vision of a transformed world is introduced in the first chapter (1:26-27) and described more fully in the final two chapters. The New Jerusalem anticipated in Isaiah is the fulfilment of "God's creation blueprint."²⁸ And this New Jerusalem even promises a built environment that reflects God's justice (65:21-22).

The language of Isaiah indicates that the future transformed city is partly the work of human hands (61:4; 65:22). T. D. Alexander summarizes his book *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* by asserting: "While our inheritance still lies in the future, we must claim our citizenship now."²⁹ Alexander's work only hints at the idea that God's people are to actively pursue a life reflective of a just city, but he refrains from any firm conclusions. This is partly because he does not recognize any continuity between our present condition and the New Heavens and New Earth.³⁰ This issue of present-future continuity will be taken up in the next section. Suffice it to say, even without the idea of continuity with the eschaton, there is still a moral imperative to participate in the building of societies and cities that honor and glorify God by demonstrations of justice.

Paradigmatic Ethics and the Eschaton

A quick survey of Christian books on ethics reveals a tendency to focus on whether something is permissible or not. For example, is it permissible for a Christian to run for political office? Or is war ever a justified response to injustice? A consequence of this approach to Christian living is that the focus is always on the boundaries of what we can and cannot do, but not on the ideal or the goal. If a soccer player is only fixated on the boundaries of the soccer pitch, he will be unlikely to score a goal. While the boundaries play an important function, his purpose is to score a goal. In the same manner, our ethics should incorporate our eschatological vision of what we are moving towards.

Ethics, ethics derived from the Old Testament in particular, has ignored or underemphasized the role of eschatology in our ethical theological development. M. Daniel Carroll R. surveys the ways Old Testament scholars have included eschatology in their conclusions. Many

²⁵ Christopher J. H Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Exeter, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ; Paternoster Press, 1990), 110.

²⁶ David W. Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations: Theology for an Urban World* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 165.

²⁷ T. D. Alexander cites D. E. Gowan's listing of forty-three references to a transformed Jerusalem in Isaiah. T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: Exploring God's Plan for Life on Earth* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 59.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

³⁰ Alexander considers the New Jerusalem to be "fully formed" according to Rev. 21:2. *Ibid.*, 175.

scholars relegated eschatology to a form of motivation for the present. Some have developed an “interim ethic” during Israel’s exile. This same ethic has been applied by the church today as they anticipate eschatological fulfilment.³¹ An interim ethic misses the force of a biblical vision of a renewed city that informs the present city. This minimal consideration of eschatology can truncate a more comprehensive ethical vision for our lives today. Carroll suggests we need to allow the more positive prophetic visions to shape our vision and practice.³²

The hope embedded in the promised future informs a way of life that invests in the rebuilding of our cities today. There is a question of continuity between this “not yet” fulfilled stage of the kingdom and the fulfilment stage. Continuity can move the people of God to live in light of the kingdom of God in a way that has lasting value.³³ Oliver O’Donovan puts it more strongly, “The eschatological transformation of the world is neither the mere repetition of the created world nor its negation. It is its fulfilment, its *telos* or end.”³⁴ Referring to the use of the land, Christopher Wright asserts, “An eschatological interpretation of any Old Testament theme, such as the land in this case, rebounds back into the present world with an ethical thrust.”³⁵ These conclusions lead us to consider the ethical implications of the verse in Isaiah 58.

Isaiah 58:12 opens the door for an eschatological ethics by calling on God’s people to rebuild their cities by actively making them better places. The call for ethical action is grounded by the eschatological vision of the chapters 65 and 66. And it is contrasted with the man-made city that will never be rebuilt (25:2). Verse 58:12 in its context is a calling to help build a better city through physical rebuilding, upholding justice for all residents, and calling for this as worship unto God.

Conclusion

By the sixth century after the death of Christ the city of Rome was in a terrible state of ruin. During the zenith of Roman power in the first century, Rome was the most impressive city in the world. It boasted astounding architectural wonders and managed reasonable law and justice. Rome had a population of nearly a million people and, more significantly, developed the infrastructure to provide enough water, food, and economic vitality for this unprecedented population.³⁶ Several centuries later, Rome was a mere shadow of its former glory. The once-grand edifices were in disrepair. The aqueducts were breaking down and failing to deliver enough water to the population, which was by this time only one-tenth of what it once was. Rome was in danger of becoming an uninhabited ruin memorializing the decline of a great empire.³⁷

³¹ M. Daniel Carroll R., “The Power of the Future in the Present: Eschatology and Ethics in O’Donovan and Beyond,” in *A Royal Priesthood? A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al., vol. Vol. 3, Scripture & Hermeneutics Series (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 117–119.

³² *Ibid.*, 127.

³³ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁴ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Apollos ; William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 55.

³⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 186.

³⁶ Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilisation* (Orion Publishing, 2006), 621–656.

³⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty 500 A.D. to 1500 A.D.*, vol. Vol. 2, A History of the Expansion of Christianity (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 61; Lucas, *Landmarking*, 53.

Gregory the Great was born in the midst of Rome's deterioration. After having served as a civil servant, Gregory gave up his wealth and entered the monastic life. His administrative skills did not go unnoticed, and he soon was brought into the public life of the church. He was eventually called, by popular acclaim, to become Bishop of Rome (Pope) in 590 AD. During Gregory's fourteen years as Pope, he "displayed energy, imagination, initiative, devotion, and great administrative capacities. He showed foresight, prudence, tenacity of purpose and ability to rise above difficulties."³⁸ In the void of a functioning political administration, Gregory managed to help restore order to the city and helped rebuild the dilapidating infrastructure. He used revenues from Papal estates to care for the poor and refugees who sought asylum behind the city's walls.³⁹ Gregory's efforts might have preserved Rome from total demise. Moreover, in response to the call for justice among the poor and refugee Gregory became a repairer of a better city, one that more closely mirrors God's justice.

Urban historian, Lewis Mumford pronounced ancient Rome as dead calling it a "Necropolis." He observes the way life returned to Rome through the church:

What is more, the Christian inheritors of Rome, despite their searing memories of the arena and their grievous retreat in the catacombs, chose Rome as the corner-stone on which to build a new urban civilization... and Christians undertook to place their whole life on a new foundation, they beheld in the dying city itself the centre of a new world... From Rome, ultimately, came the Christian brotherhoods that spiritually re-colonized the old Empire [and] thus remained a human reservoir.⁴⁰

This urban revitalization was a by-product of a theology that knew there was a greater city to come. The ensnaring temptation is for the church to build towards a self-glorifying city rather than a city that draws us towards God's glory. Gorringer suggests this lack of transcendence needs to be corrected as Hebrews 13:14 indicates.⁴¹

There is a danger in the church's over-spiritualizing the social and economic responsibilities by interpreting biblical references to the physical as metaphorical. As churches occupy real space in our cities, it cannot ignore the importance of the built environment and its social implications. It is left for the church to consider how it might take up the call to rebuild, repair, and restore our cities in a manner that glorifies God and metes out justice to all who dwell in the cities.

Returning to Isaiah 58:12, it is clear from the surrounding context that our spiritual activity is tied up with our physical activity. Our individual actions cannot be severed from its social implications. The prophet urges the people of God to personally invest in our cities, not for our own glory or the glory of humanity, but as citizens of the renewed age.

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⁴⁰ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1961), 276-7.

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