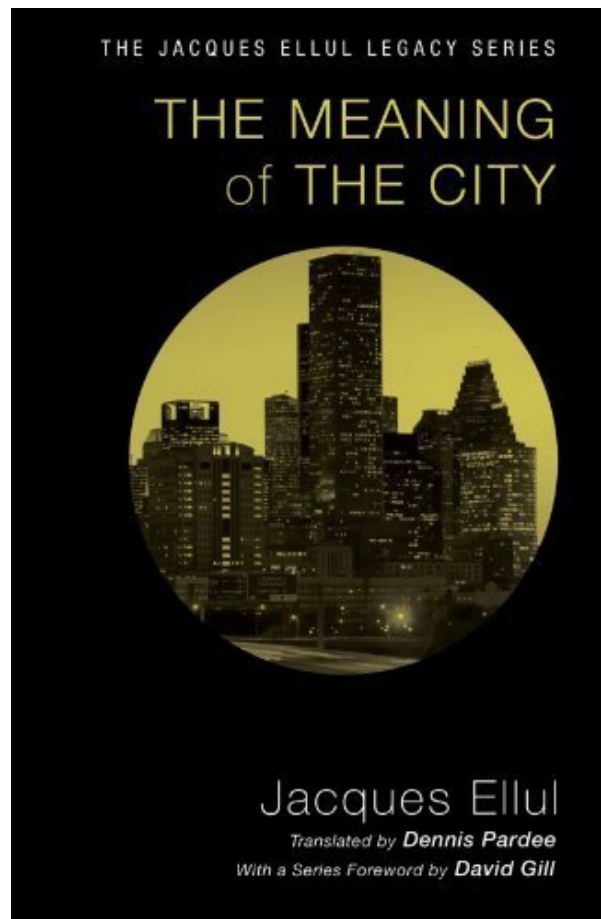


# THE MEANING OF THE CITY: (JACQUES ELLUL LEGACY)



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# THE MEANING of THE CITY



Jacques Ellul

*Translated by Dennis Pardee*

*With a Series Foreword by David Gill*

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- Published on: 1656
- Binding: Paperback

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27 of 28 people found the following review helpful.

Prophetic and Compelling

By Terry Cornett

In this remarkable piece of original theology, Ellul convincingly argues that the city exists as a theological category in Biblical thought. True to his own dialectical approach, he contends that the city is simultaneously an instrument of human rebellion and also a Divinely elected instrument of hope for humanity. This is a prophetic, compelling and ultimately hopeful foundation for a theology with which to engage the modern phenomena of urbanization.

25 of 26 people found the following review helpful.

The "Shout (that) Re-echoes Through Scripture From Beginning to End"-Jacques Ellul

By Scamp Lumm

"COME OUT OF BABYLON (Rome), MY PEOPLE". Revelation 18, Daniel 2

This book is so beautiful. It's the first book I've read by Jacques Ellul. If all of his other books are similarly written, I'm totally sold on them. This book is the best book I've ever read by a christian author. It's very substantive, and you can tell throughout each and every page, that the author is steeped in biblical understanding and wisdom. Babylon doesn't exist anymore, though within 100 miles from Baghdad, Babylon is a symbol for all that is wrong with human civilization. So what does Babylon symbolize? What is it about this type of city that G-d despises, and how can the city please G-d? The leaving of the city is also symbolic; getting out of the mob is no easy matter, though physically still in the city, one's previously good mob friends will more than likely kill you when you get out (my thoughts). So the leaving I believe, though Ellul does not directly say it is spiritual, symbolic.

My favorite chapter is the first, "The Builders", where Ellul speaks mostly about the first half dozen chapters of Genesis and how the first city was built by the first murderer, Cain, who killed his brother Abel. G-d told Cain that his brother's cries were heard by Him. Once Cain realizes his grave wrongdoing, G-d offers him protection by 'setting a mark' on him. Yet Cain seemingly takes no stock of this act of grace by G-d, and determined to secure eternity for himself, builds a city, and begets children. The city without G-d's presence and without citizens who acknowledge His sovereignty has a spiritual power of its own which draws people into everything the city has to offer, all of which is destructive and becomes a place, as Nahum, the Hebrew prophet cries, 'a bloody city, full of lies and distortions, no end of victims'. Yet G-d sanctified Jerusalem, an ordinary pagan city, by His presence, when King David captured the city for the jews. And this was the place where G-d redeemed mankind for all of our sins, potentially, if one truly gets out of these evil networks found among people who inhabit cities. The last chapters deal with the New Jerusalem described in books

like Revelation and Ezekiel. This book, I believe, sounds the warning found in Ezekiel 33 from the watchman who sees the enemy coming and must alert the cities' inhabitants of G-d's coming judgment because it is clear from scripture that He will punish those (maybe not in this lifetime, but surely in the life to come) who twist the truth, who exalt themselves, who trample upon the livelihood of people, and those who foster all manner of deceivableness. This is a book that I got from the library, and is long overdue. One day I will buy this book to have on hand, its contents very valuable.

Jacques Ellul is a French protestant lawyer and sociologist by profession, protestant christian by faith. His life, I'm discovering, unique. He was involved with the French underground during WWII and after the war defended in court people who would have killed him because they were treated so mercilessly afterwards in breach of law. He's written many books in his lifetime. He died in 1994 at the age of 82, his life spanning both world wars in France. Once he became a christian in his twenties, he became enamored with Karl Barth's writings/theology and became a member of the Reformed Church. I'd love to read a biography about him. This book, I absolutely adore. He dedicated this book to his son Simon who died while he was writing it.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Unsurpassed biblical theology of the city!

By dvlanko

Jacques Ellul's book *The Meaning of the City* was both a great surprise and an exciting read. A sociologist and a "lay" theologian, Jacques Ellul was able to see both the city and God from a unique perspective. It is amazing to learn that he was more popular among non-Christians due to his sharp criticism of the modern, technological society, than among Christians for his theology.

Starting with Genesis and finishing with Revelation, Ellul presents an amazingly comprehensive theology of the city. He points to the repeating patterns of human sin and rebellion exemplified in man's conscious self-alienation from God that culminates in creation of the city - an alternative environment of false security and temporal support for himself. Ellul follows this attitude as it grows and becomes a symbol of wickedness and a sign of divine judgment epitomized in the autonomous world system that became known as 'Babylon, the Great.' Paradoxically, God adopts the city and changes her meaning as a place for His people to live and as an arena of His salvific activity. But human creation is inherently and ultimately seducing and inadequate, and therefore doomed to the eschatological fall. Still, God in His loving mercy and through His grace will reconcile and rebuild everything in the end. Both the city of human aspirations, this time of divine creation, and the paradise of God will coexist together as a fulfillment of God's purposes and a pinnacle of His intentions: His abiding presence with man.

Ellul's vision of the city at the present age is pessimistic. The city is a "concentration of all condemned activities" (page 48), a "repository of sin" (page 52) that can not be reformed since "applying the balm of Gilead won't help" (page 57). She has life, spirit and mind of her own and follows her own logic of power, economy and creativity. She devours her inhabitants throwing them in poverty, despair and anonymity while constantly demanding more human flesh. In this regard, Ellul differs considerably from others, like Bekke, who think that problem is in people and that by changing them the city will be changed. Ellul's opinion is that the inherent autonomous nature of the city is the issue and that repentance, though able to amend social sin does not touch the essence of the city. Therefore, we are called not to build the city, but to live in her (page 74), our participation is one humor not seriousness (page 181). As Abraham once saved Sodom (page 182), we should pray for the welfare of the city. But, when the time comes we should obey the voice that calls, "Come out of her, my people!" Only New Jerusalem will be place of tranquility and perfect communication with God (page 192).

Ellul did not use the Scriptures as a springboard to make a theological pie in the sky of preferred and selective reading. Instead he allowed the Bible to talk to him. He moved on armed with two important premises. First, that the Scripture is an essential unity, and second that paradoxically its text is both economical in expression and extremely rich in meaning. Therefore, Ellul is not easy to read. His every sentence is very dense and heavy loaded with deep reflection. In a painstaking manner, he does not leave any word of the biblical narrative unturned until all significance is explored and every meaning considered. And he does it covering a wide ground without slipping into allegorization or nonsense. While others might not be able to observe more than bare words and contradictions in the Bible, Ellul is a profound thinker who knows his text and can see in it wholeness, harmony and substance. Being so passionate in his exploration and exposition he speaks with powerful convictions and at times sounds like a prophet.

*The Meaning of the City* is a work of serious biblical scholarship. I find Ellul's method and premises compelling; and, therefore, essentially agree with his conclusions. The missing point though, in his approach is the lack of elaboration on the connection between Adam's sin and Cain's rebellion. It is obvious that sin and rebellion are not two separate issues, yet at the same time they can not be reduced to two different aspects of an essentially singular problem. Rather, they are steps or stages in a process or evolution of the initial disobedience. In the background of both is death: in Adam and Eves' case a "suicide," and in Cain's case the murder of Abel. The consequence of the first was lost communion with God, the consequence of the second was a conscious rejection of the communion with God. Adam lives as a peasant in the vicinity of Eden, Cain moves away and builds a city. With Adam the sickness begins, and with Cain it is already an acute disease. Therefore, the city is both the symptom and the chronic stage of the progressively sinful human state that only God can rectify.

*The Meaning of the City* is a book that raises some troubling issues apart from its message for several reasons. John Wilkinson in his introduction gives almost a wholesale apology for Ellul's holistic approach to the Scriptures. This attitude can indeed be found later on in Ellul's words referring to the same point. His embarrassment for taking the text of the Bible as a consistent and coherent historical, though theological message is obvious. The fact that forty years ago, when the book was written, the winds of theological liberalism were still present and probably strong enough to compel one to take a distance vis-à-vis the Scriptures still does not justify need for self-flagellation. Especially so, since Ellul does not waver in his holistic approach.

Related to this is the treatment of Ellul as essentially a "lay" theologian, or a fossilized remnant of the ages past. Considering that *The Meaning of the City* is a comprehensive and coherent theological book it raises questions concerning its intended audience and nature of the theology itself. The answer to the first question is related to the policies of the publisher, who obviously struggled with how to classify Ellul, thus the choice of Wilkinson and his words. But, the question what is theology, or how to do theology is beyond Wilkinson's judgment.

The third and most disturbing issue related to the book is the quiet disregard of its content by the evangelical theologians. Ellul has sufficiently demonstrated that a consistent concept of the city can be found throughout the Bible regardless of the genre and date of a particular book. The place, validity and value of his ideas can be and should be discussed, but they deserve more than to be ignored by those to whom they should be relevant. The problematic that he so eloquently touched is not treated either in dogmatic theology or works on urban theology per se. Sadly, the silence surrounding Ellul's observations, conclusions and suggested solutions is deafening. As for me, his book will definitely hold a respectful place in my library.

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