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ARCHIE LEE

# The City in the Bible and the City of Hong Kong

**Archie Lee invites us to see the visions of Zechariah, Isaiah and Jeremiah informing the work and aspirations of Hong Kong Chinese Christians. They are working out in the new post-1997 dispensation the relationship between authentic Chinese citizenship and a culturally relevant Christian witness.**

## A City without Walls

The prophet Zechariah saw in one of his visions the future of Jerusalem as a city without walls, an open country with no boundaries.. The vision came at the time when the people were in the midst of fear and despair. The experience of defeat of the nation and destruction of Jerusalem were very much part of the bitter memory. The vision addressed the uncertainty of the return from the exile and diverse models of reconstruction of the nation. One peculiar feature of the vision is the shift of focus from being on the people as a whole to the city of Jerusalem.

Then I looked up – and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand!

I asked, 'Where are you going?' He answered me, 'To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is.'

Then the angel who was speaking to me left, and another angel came to meet him and said to him: 'Run, tell that young man, "Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it.

And I myself will be a wall of fire around it," declares the LORD, "and I will be its glory within.'" (Zechariah 2:1-5, NIV)<sup>1</sup>

The desolate city of Jerusalem is given a vision that transcends the present miserable situation of being humiliated and deserted. A city that was considered disastrously abandoned by God is here greatly motivated, with an image of a city populated by a multitude of people and animals to the extent that a wall is non-existent. Desperation and anxiety will turn into jubilant anticipation. To the people in exile and those who were to remain in Jerusalem during the years of humiliation, the vision was not only a comforting assurance of a future but also a revitalization

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

of the ancient tradition of the divine presence in the city of God: 'I myself will be a wall of fire around it.' It brings back memory of the promise of God's presence in Zion in the Psalms (Pss 46, 48).

According to David Petersen, there are five important claims made in the vision:<sup>2</sup>

1. Jerusalem will exist without walls.
2. Human and animals will populate the city.
3. There will be many humans and animals.
4. Yahweh will be a wall of fire around the city.
5. Yahweh will be inside Jerusalem.

Taking measurement of a restored Jerusalem in terms of breadth and length is described here in Zechariah and in the vision of reconstruction of Jerusalem in the restoration plan in Ezekiel chs 40-48. The major difference between these two texts is that in Ezekiel the city is measured five thousand cubits in breadth and twenty-five thousand cubits in length, while in Zechariah there will not be any physical limit to its breadth and length. Zechariah is unique and launches a new conception of a city. What is being advocated is a different notion of restoration from the understanding of ancient city builders, who would hardly have been able to conceive of a city carrying significant status without walls.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between the two texts illustrates the different approaches to the concept of restoration in the post-exilic period.

It is clearly shown in the passages in Isaiah 56-66 that there were conflicts between the communities left behind in Jerusalem and those taken captive in terms of the scope and nature of reconstruction. Those who remained to stay in diaspora and those who opted for speedy return to the homeland to rebuild the city of Jerusalem did not share the same vision for the future of the people of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of the return of the people of Israel to the homeland there were communities that supported drawing strict boundaries to divide the people of God from other peoples and nations. The demarcation was made along lines that focused on social or racial distinction. Ezekiel, Nehemiah and Ezra advocated this position. Purity had to be kept at the expense of demanding divorce of foreign wives and exclusion of foreigners from the rebuilding plan of the temple of Jerusalem.

The love story of the Book of Ruth, which tells about a Moabite widow coming to be established in the native city of David, is very enlightening in this context. It narrates the incorporation and integration of a foreign woman into the genealogical account of the people of Israel. Ruth becomes the ancestress of David, the most celebrated king in Jewish history. The openness of the attitude of the community that produced and passed on the story is remarkable. It is certain that it did not come easy in the context of the struggle for identity of the returned community. This community faced the threat of foreign elements to its self-definition in a Jerusalem which was by no means an empty, ruined land. How were the people

2 David Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8*, SCM Press, London 1984, p 170.

3 Petersen, *Haggai*, p 171.

4 Archie C. C. Lee, 'Biblical Interpretation of the Return in the Postcolonial Hong Kong', *Biblical Interpretation*, 9, (1999), pp 164-173.

who had returned to the land at the decree of Cyrus with a hybrid identity incorporated into a community already populated with Israelites left behind by the Babylonians and who had not had the experience of the exile?<sup>5</sup> The story of Ruth powerfully conveys the message of the possibility of incorporating foreigners into the community.

The third part of the Book of Isaiah (Chs 56-66) portrays the theological sketch of the returned community in its struggle to make sense of the degree of openness to foreign influence and participation (Isa. 56:6-8).<sup>6</sup>

Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I smote you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you.

Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut; that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. (Isa. 60:10-11)

Zechariah goes a step further than inviting foreigners to build the wall of Jerusalem or keep the gate of the wall open. He simply does away with the concept of a concrete wall built by humans. The Lord will function as a wall of fire around the city. This notion of God as a wall of fire may be derived from the motif of the divine guardian to Eden (Gen. 3:24). It conveys the idea of protection for a seemingly defenceless city.<sup>7</sup>

This article aims to read the passages on the theme of city in the Hebrew Bible in order to understand the social and political reality of Hong Kong as a city. The vision of the city of Jerusalem without walls, resided in by a multitude of people constitutes a powerful and instructive image to our review and assessment of Hong Kong and its Churches in the aftermath of the return to China on 1 July, 1997. The policy of 'one country – two systems' inscribed in the Basic Laws, signed between the British and the Chinese Governments for the operation of the city, has been the working principle for the future of Hong Kong. The departure of the last British Governor, Chris Patten, and the lowering of the Union Jack marked the end of one hundred and fifty-five years of colonial rule on the last day of June 1997. Colonial power had to be brought to an end as it began with a series of the infamous 'unequal treaties' forced on the then Imperial Ching Dynasty of China when the British hailed the victory of the Opium War in 1841.<sup>8</sup>

The world has been concerned with how the city fared after its return to Chinese sovereignty. What has been left behind in Hong Kong after the demise of the colonial rule is the British legacy of freedoms, rights and the rule of the law. The mentality and lifestyle of the Hong Kong community will not allow the present situation to alter radically without real and persistent resistance. The Sino-British

5 Babylon only made captives of and deported the leaders and craftsmen of Israel to exile (2 Kings 25; Jer. 29).

6 The present author has written on these chapters of Isaiah for the context of Hong Kong; see Lee, 'Biblical Interpretation' pp 164-173.

7 According to Petersen, it is not easy to know the answer to the question why the motif of punishment in Genesis is being transformed into one of protection. Petersen, *Haggai*, p 171.

8 On the history of Hong Kong since the Opium War, see G. B. Endicott, *A History of Hong Kong*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong and Oxford 1975.

Agreement and the Basic Laws functioned to guarantee the preservation of the Hong Kong's present economic system and political reality for the next fifty years until 2047. On the other hand, the process of moving closer to the reality of life in the Mainland has started since the signing of the Sino-British Agreement concerning the future of Hong Kong in 1994. The trend has speeded up since 1997.<sup>9</sup> The fundamental controversy since the handover is how Hong Kong could best position itself as a Chinese city as well as an international one. A political commentator puts it succinctly in a recent newspaper feature article: 'Should we be looking northwards or westwards? Should Hong Kong strive to be a Chinese metropolitan city or an international metropolis in China?'<sup>10</sup>

The truth of the matter is that Hong Kong is no doubt a part of China and in this sense it is a Chinese city, but it is not just another Chinese city. On the one hand, we cannot ignore the effect of a century and a half of British rule on the psyche, the mind and the lifestyle of the people of Hong Kong. On the other hand some ninety percent of the seven hundred million Hong Kong citizens are Chinese using the Chinese language and observing Chinese customs. The unique identity of the people of Hong Kong, however, lies in its hybridization;<sup>11</sup> it is both an international city with a British legacy and a modernized Chinese City with a Chinese cultural character. Visitors to Hong Kong are often amazed at how Chinese Hong Kong actually is after over one hundred and fifty years of British colonial government.<sup>12</sup>

### Hong Kong as an International City

Many people are worried that the value and status of Hong Kong as an international city enjoying freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion have constantly been undermined in the past three and a half years since the handover from the British.<sup>13</sup> In the first three months of this year worries intensified at the resignation of the Chief Secretary and the pressure from the central government regarding Falungong.

Confidence took a beating in Hong Kong last week. The biggest blow was the sudden resignation of Chief Secretary Anson Chan, who is widely seen as a brake on Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's eagerness to accommodate

9 See the interdependence of China and Hong Kong in Max J. Skidmore ed. *Hong Kong and China, Pursuing a New Destiny*, Toppan Company, Singapore and Tokyo 1997.

10 Lau Nai-keung, 'Hold on to Our Culture', *South China Morning Post*, Tuesday 1 May 2001, p 12.

11 See the keynote address delivered at the founding of the Congress of Asian Theologians by Wong Wai Ching, *Towards an Asian Theology in a Changing Asia: Towards an Asian Theological Agenda for the 21st Century*, CTC (Commission on Theological Concerns) Bulletin, Vol. 1, November, 1997, pp 30-39.

12 Nai-keung, 'Hold on to Our Culture', p 12.

13 Nai Wang Kwok, *Hong Kong After 1997: The First 1000 Days*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Institute and Asian Human Rights Commission, 2000. Kwok, being a concerned pastor and former Director of the Hong Kong Christian Institute, wrote articles on Christian reflection on Hong Kong's return to China. He authored *Hong Kong 1997, A Christian Perspective*, Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia and Urban Rural Mission, 1991.

Beijing's wishes. The unease was heightened when local immigration officers detained thirteen members of the Falungong spiritual sect, which is outlawed as an 'evil cult' in China but legal in Hong Kong. At stake are the territory's freedoms under 'one country – two systems'.<sup>14</sup>

Critics see the situation of Hong Kong as a story that focuses on the 'clash between the city's traditional international role and its new Chinese identity'.<sup>15</sup> That clash is definitely highlighted by the retirement of Mrs. Anson Chan, who had been the head of the Civil Service when the British Colony handed over its power and had continued to implement the so-called 'Westminster style'. The following words reflect the present dilemma and echo some serious concerns on the integrity of Hong Kong as an open city:

When Chan announced her premature retirement last week, everyone in Hong Kong – from resigned taxi drivers to pro-Beijing tycoons knew it marked the end of an era. Chan, by far Hong Kong's most popular official has resolutely stood for Hong Kong's status as an international city, and all that meant: role of law, transparency, and spirited debate, even democracy. Chan's civil service, known for its professionalism, has earned Hong Kong its reputation as a fair place to do business, a city where officials can't be bought. Before the handover, she promised to protect the Hong Kong way of life and business from China's corruption and *quanxi*-driven dealings and that she would quit if she felt these influences creeping in.<sup>16</sup>

The difficulties in the three years after the handover (besides the Asian-wide economic crisis that has downsized Asia<sup>17</sup> as a whole including in particular Hong Kong's properties market) have been centred on the implementation of the 'one country-two systems' formula. The original proposal of the formula was meant to protect Hong Kong's interest in maintaining its economic set-up and the rule of law for at least fifty years. It was also hoped that this formula would function as model for the solution to the Taiwan issue.

Many of the pro-Beijing part of the community, including the Hong Kong SAR's Chief Executive, Mr. Tung Chu-hwa, have stressed the one-country aspect and advocated nationalism as well as the perspective of the Beijing authorities. They, and they include many of the business community, want to speed up the process of bringing Hong Kong in line with most of the views of the Chinese administration in Beijing even at the expense of the interest of the people of Hong Kong.

Pro-democracy groups, however, emphasize the 'two-systems' side as the 'one country is obvious and a fact' says Margaret Ng, a prominent Legislator. 'It's the two-systems part that you need to defend.'<sup>18</sup> The value of Hong Kong to China is its international outlook and its relative corruption-free market economy in a

14 'Hong Kong's Twin Blows, At Stake is the Erosion of Local Freedoms', *Asiaweek*, No.3, Vol 27, January 26, 2001.

15 D. Elliott, 'Hong Kong's Canary Flies', *Asiaweek* 27.3, 26 January 2001

16 Elliott, 'Hong Kong's Canary'. The term '*quanxi*' characterized the common feature of Chinese way of business. It is the personal relationship that sometimes holds sway over the rule of law.

17 Francois Godement, *The Downsizing of Asia*, Routledge, London and New York 1999.

18 Elliott, 'Hong Kong's Canary'.

socialist country that is opening itself up to the global community and striving for economic prosperity and the well being of its people.

The policy of 'one country – two systems' must be fully implemented for the benefit of the future of both Hong Kong and China. The letter of Jeremiah to the people who were living in the shattering experience of the exile and facing an uncertain future has presented a great motivation to the Christian community of Hong Kong in the years leading up to 1997 and thereafter.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.

Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29: 4-7)

The people of Hong Kong have accepted this invitation of Jeremiah to 'build houses, plant gardens, marry wives and beget sons and daughters' in the past fifty or so years since many of them escaped from Communist rule to Hong Kong as refugees. They have done very well through their hard work and life-seeking spirit to make Hong Kong a prosperous city. They have sought the welfare (*shalom*) of the city with the same understanding that their *shalom* is bound up with the *shalom* of the colonizer and the Chinese Mainland. The fate and future of both Hong Kong as an international city and China as a nation are inter-dependent. The expected admission of China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) will definitely highlight the close link between China and Hong Kong. Though in many ways China can have direct contact with the world, Hong Kong can still play a role as a mediator or a bridge. The experience and expertise of Hong Kong in past years in the world economy are still valuable to the modernization and development of the motherland.

### **Hong Kong as a Chinese City**

To maintain the status and identity of an open international city does not mean giving up local characteristics. On the contrary, the cultural heritage of a city and the local history of a community will no doubt help constitute a city without walls. In the case of Hong Kong the fact that it is a Chinese city entails two aspects, one concerns the affirmation of its relationship to China and the other lies in the recovering of its Chinese cultural history.

Since 1997 there has been increasing interest in claiming local history and recovering local cultural legacies. All of a sudden there are monographs and articles devoted to different aspects of Hong Kong. 'Hong Kong Studies' has become a new intellectual discipline in both popular as well as academic pursuit.

The welfare organizations, voluntary agencies, financial institutions and religious groups have begun to look at their history and roots. Researchers are invited to go through documents, records and archives in order to write up Hong Kong's social, cultural and religious history. In the case of the church, denominational as well as congregational histories of local churches are being drafted. The call to build up archives has been heard again and again both in the Christian communities and the academic circle of scholars working in the field of local studies.

The peculiar position of Hong Kong in the 'one country – two system' framework has encouraged interface both with China and the rest of the world. Universities have special offices for China linkage and international networking. These two aspects of interface do not interfere or undermine one another. They contribute to enlarge and extend the scope of Hong Kong as an international Chinese city at the edge of China. Hong Kong's position provides a threshold to China and a window to the west, a meeting point between cultures of east and west as well as north and south.

One significant way of taking root in the indigenous soil is for the church to construct its theology in the here and now by drawing on the socio-political and religio-cultural resources. There is a recovery of the hidden history of Christian participation in the discourse on traditional undesirable social institutions which were acceptable as Chinese customs but criticized as 'wicked' and even 'evil' in the eyes of missionaries from the west. I refer specifically to the institution of girl-slavery (*mui-tsai*), concubines and foot binding.<sup>19</sup> Where did Chinese Christians in Hong Kong, having been converted to Christian ethical values but still culturally Chinese, place themselves in the discussion on the above social practices? This piece of history is part of the legacy left behind by the Christian communities of the colonial period. To what extent has it shaped Christianity in Hong Kong? Does it still have any meaning in the understanding of Christian social responsibility today and in the future?

## **A City of Righteousness and Faithfulness**

The legal profession was alarmed when Tung invited the People's Congress to reinterpret the Basic Laws in order to overrule the verdict of the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal that affirmed in 1999 the right of Chinese-born children of Hong Kong citizens to live in Hong Kong. As a result of the interpretation of the Chinese authority, many have lost their right of abode in Hong Kong and some have to return to China to apply to come to Hong Kong in turn. It is expected a long wait be installed for them. There is, however, yet another case that has put a lot of pressure on the legal system and put its autonomy in question further; that is, the problem of Falungong in Hong Kong, which has been attracted wide publicity in recent months. The pressure from the China is that Hong Kong should fall in line with the policy in China. Some pro-China groups have demanded of the local authority to bring in legislative procedures to ban the sect as an 'evil cult'.

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19 My colleague, Wong Wai Ching, and I have been working on a research project on the response of the Christian community in Hong Kong on these social issues before 1949.



The Chinese government position on Falungong has been well publicized. They have reiterated again and again that it is 'anti-humane, anti-society and an anti-science evil cult'. Months after the ban and crack down on the Falungong in China, the pressure from Beijing on the Hong Kong government has increased as the group still remains legal under the 'one-country-two systems' policy. The accusation is that Falungong have been in collaboration with hostile western forces to make use of Hong Kong as a subversive base from which to undermine China. So far the group can still legally congregate. But there are worrying signs: some overseas participants were refused permission to enter Hong Kong. How long will Hong Kong continue to tolerate China's banned 'evil cult', whereas the local laws have not condemned it?

Despite criticism and threats from Tung, who has taken a strong view recently, Falungong pressed ahead with its plan to stage a peaceful demonstrate to express their views during President Jiang Zemen's visit in May 2001 to attend the Fortune Global Forum. They wanted to reiterate their protest against the suppression of the sect on the Mainland. Christian groups have come out to express their view that the sect, being an officially registered society and not in breach any of Hong Kong's laws, should be allowed to exist. Mr. Tung has been striving for harmony between the SAR and the central government to the best he could, but many believe that his loyalty to Chinese authorities will eventually lead him to opt for the 'one country' part of the formula. There is an ever-present fear that the liberties and independent legal system may someday be curtailed for reasons beyond the city's control.<sup>20</sup>

The city of Jerusalem has witnessed waves of radical change in the history of the people of Israel as recorded in the Bible. Isaiah, in its very first chapter, lays out the story of destruction as well as that of restoration when God, after punishing people with defeats under foreign enemies restores it to its real essence as a city of righteousness.

How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice!  
Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.

Your silver has become dross; your wine mixed with water.

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.

Therefore the Lord says, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: 'Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.'

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. (Isa. 1: 21-27)

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<sup>20</sup> *South China Morning Post* Editorial, 27 April 2001, p 17.

The passage forms a unit framed by an *inclusio* of city of righteousness and city of faithfulness (vv 21, 26). The lament at the beginning is directed at the city Jerusalem for its loss of justice and righteousness. The target groups of the accusation are the leadership rank, administrative class and those in the judicial system. The image of refining precious metal in the smelting oven to remove the base alloy is used to describe a process of purification of Jerusalem (cf. Ezek 22:18-22).<sup>21</sup> It is noted that the focus of the passage has shifted from the people as a whole to the city Jerusalem. This very feature of restoration beginning with Jerusalem recalls similar notion in the vision of Zechariah.<sup>22</sup> Jerusalem is pictured not only as a city without walls as in Zechariah, but also a city of righteousness and faithfulness. How much we Christians in Hong Kong wish our city to be an open and free place which is also characterized as a city of righteousness and faithfulness in its struggle to implement the 'one country – two systems' ideal.

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21 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39* (The Anchor Bible), New York: Doubleday, 2000, pp 186f.

22 Petersen, *Haggai*, p 170.



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