

Built Environment and Biblical Theology: making connections, discerning relationships

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In the October 1999 edition of *Ministers-at-Work*¹, I summarised the first stage² of what has turned out to be a long but highly rewarding programme of work. My starting point then was that if we claim relevance and authority for the Bible in relation to all areas of life, those of us who are secularly orientated 'Ministers of the Word' need to discover what such relevance actually is for our particular secular fields. In my case, the field is Built Environment. This article continues the story.

My aim for the second stage³ of my self-imposed task has been:

To relate 'Biblical Theology' to 'Built Environment' using specific biblical texts and built environment locations and by means of 'picture' and 'disclosure' models.

I have taken 'Biblical Theology' to mean either the simple biblical text or the complex structures and meanings discerned by scholarship and accessible to users of the biblical text in English. Similarly, I have taken 'Built Environment' to mean either the simple activity of building or the complex stories and meanings embodied in both particular buildings and entities such as villages, towns or rural and lightly-built areas. On the biblical side, I chose, with my supervisor's help, to work mainly with Psalms 8, 19 and 48; Genesis 1-11 linked with the prologue to John's Gospel; the whole of Nehemiah; John 8-9 and 14-16; and Revelation 20-22. These biblical materials were chosen because they dealt with such matters as creation, buildings and structures, cities, light and relationships. On the built environment side, with my other supervisor's help, I chose for detailed study (a) the Borough of Chelmsford where I live, which comprises the town Chelmsford itself, a network of villages, and the 1970's town of South Woodham Ferrers developed from an village, and (b) a fascinating part of north west Tasmania, where my daughter lives and where I was able to spend a six months (unpaid!) study period. This part of Tasmania comprises riverside townships, the City of Devonport and adjoining rural and highland heritage areas. Chelmsford and Tasmania made a good pair as they were alike in some ways but significantly different in others. This very specific materials base in both Biblical theology and Built Environment was widened somewhat to include some general works in, for example, aesthetic, environmental and contextual theologies, and Built Environment themes such as sustainability and the cost/worth/value nexus.

The first major need was to find a heuristic or revelatory way of relating Built Environment and Biblical Theology, the two fields of my life and ministry and basic facets of the life of the world, one of which existed on paper and the other in bricks and mortar. My first realisation was that good material was readily available to enable Built Environment to be treated mainly by means of pre-existing texts. Chelmsford had a substantial Borough history, a Development Plan currently undergoing public consultation and a variety of place-related publications, some of which had been produced to mark the Millennium. Tasmanian material consisted of studies of Aborigine concepts of home and place, reviews of European activity since the mid-nineteenth century, reflections on the Centenary of Australian Federation (1901-2001), and current debates on what should be regarded as valuable heritage. To the textual material I added some observational material of my own. The parallel discovery was that scholarly commentaries on biblical material can be highly relevant to Built Environment. For example, I was able to assemble a set of commentaries on Nehemiah which included those of experts in history, language, archaeology, the personal profiling of Nehemiah, and the symbolic significance of the Jerusalem wall project to the modern world. Commentaries on John's Gospel included substantial works on symbolism and light and on the sociological background.

Relevance and resonance by themselves do not provide a sufficient basis for establishing relationship; I had to find an integrating model. Various musings and much doodling prompted me to think about Sydney Opera House. Its two main auditoria, the Concert Hall and the Opera Theatre, lie side by side, each with its majestic, sail-like superstructure. I wondered, 'Was one of these Built Environment and

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² MPhil Anglia Polytechnic University 1998

³ PhD Anglia Polytechnic University 2003

the other Biblical Theology?’ Delving into the story of the design revealed something much more important and interesting. The architect, Jorn Utzon, had assumed that the concrete sails would be parabolic. Over five years, that presented two insurmountable problems to the engineering design team. First, the structural analysis could not be done and second, each sail would have to be of different shape from all the others, a nightmare to try to build and completely uneconomic. There had to be a seismic change. This came with Utzon’s realisation that he could jettison the variable parabola and substitute a uniform sphere. Each sail then became simply a cut from a sphere of constant diameter. Eureka, the design had been made buildable. Eureka for me was that Built Environment and Building Theology need not be seen as adjoining auditoria but as different cuts from one, single sphere of human knowledge, experience and understanding.

In spite of this breakthrough, what I had was very concrete and static, literally and metaphorically. By coincidence, theological texts I was reading on space, time and light - fundamentals of both creation theology and architecture - were telling me about Robert Grosseteste, the 13th century philosopher, physicist and theologian, who had visualised creation in terms of a spherical world emanating from a single point of light. This, I believed, was it! I could visualise Built Environments at the surface of a living sphere and Biblical Theology at the centre. For practical ‘Ministers of the Word’ like members of CHRISM, Biblical Theology must seek relevance and application. It is like a centrifugal force, throwing out its ideas from a centre to a periphery where they illuminate and relate to what is there. Conversely, Built Environment can be seen as working centripetally, whirring down into a centre to encounter its own depth and meaning in, for example, Biblical Theology. Without doubt, with these complementary centrifugal and centripetal dynamics, this had become a truly dynamic model!

The second and critical need was to find a good way of using this dynamic model to unleash the riches that, I was becoming daily more aware, were inherent in the two millennia of Chelmsford’s story, in the 35,000 year human story in Tasmania and its most recent 150 years, in what my selections from Psalms, Genesis, Nehemiah, John, and Revelation, were bursting to say about Built Environment and in my wider reading in the Biblical Theology and Built Environment fields. After much experimentation, I decided I could create a balanced, back-to-back set of ten detailed studies as follows:

<u>CENTRIFUGAL TRAJECTORIES</u>		<u>CENTRIPETAL TRAJECTORIES</u>	
<i>Biblical text</i>	<i>Built Environment-related theme</i>	<i>Built Environment-related theme</i>	<i>Biblical text</i>
Psalms	Wonder and beauty	Traversing Places and Times	Psalms
Genesis and John 1	Beginning	Resources	Genesis and John 1
Nehemiah	Significance	Types and Purposes	Nehemiah
John’s Gospel	Identity	Cost and Worth	John’s Gospel
Revelation	Becoming	Home	Revelation

These trajectories need brief explanation. Starting with the Bible and the centrifugal dynamic, the Psalms I was studying were pointing me to Wonder and Beauty; I could find that, albeit in a low key way, in Chelmsford and Tasmania and Built Environment discourse generally. Similarly, Genesis and John’s Prologue were talking to me about ‘beginning’; Nehemiah about the highly significant, meaningful wall around Jerusalem ; John about the identity of Jesus, the man born blind and the disciples; and Revelation about the ‘becoming’ of the world. I realised that Chelmsford and Tasmania have ‘beginnings’, their significant, characteristic structures such as bridges, key groups of people such as, in both cases, prisoners, and plans for their ‘becoming’, in Chelmsford’s case plans for growth and in Tasmania’s embryo plans for making sense of story and heritage.

On the centripetal side, some of the Built Environment texts traversed a territory, explaining the stories embodied in the buildings of a street or structures along a canal; the Psalms traversed Jerusalem. Other Built Environment stories were rich in detail about how resources of land, timber for construction and other materials had been acquired and deployed; Genesis speaks of these same resources. In order to understand an English town or a Tasmanian rural area, we create typologies of buildings which can liberate or enclose our thinking; Nehemiah gives similar details of Susa and Jerusalem. Built Environment stories often consider issues of cost and may end with destruction or high continuing worth; those same concepts are part of the underlying substance of John's Gospel. Homes range from isolated homesteads of the rural poor in Tasmania, through Devonport's rise to City status with homes for 25000 people, to Chelmsford's vigorous and contentious ongoing expansion to meet current targets for homes in south east England; in the closing chapters of Revelation, the home of God comes to be with human beings.

This has been a 'bottom up' piece of work. I started with two locations that were fully accessible to me and which are ordinary in nature. Chelmsford has been an ordinary market town, an ordinary industrial town and an ordinary county town, and now is an ordinary commuter town. Its surrounding villages are beautiful in their way but essentially ordinary. The part of Tasmania I studied gave me everyday insights into the sorrows and joys of its ancient origins and its recent colonial history, and enabled me to feel the poignancy of its basic civic questions about the future roles of ports, World Heritage Areas and remote streets that exhibit strange mixes of gothic, classical and Australian vernacular building styles. While Chelmsford and north west Tasmania are highly particular, their ordinariness is typical of many places. Similarly, the work in Biblical Theology was very practical and basic. It required no special language or archaeological skills, merely the ability to discover and relate the accessible work of experts.

It seems to me that, more than anything else, it is this ordinariness that gives generalisability to the work. It seems likely that one could take any coherent set of biblical materials and any reasonably balanced pair of built environments, with relevant texts, and discover similar kinds of centrifugal and centripetal forces at work between them. More widely, it might be possible, using this approach, to relate fields other than Built Environment to Biblical Theology and Built Environment to religious texts other than the Bible, such as the Koran. Both may be able to help move us forward in our single but pluralistic world.

At this point in what is a continuing journey, I am confident that Built Environment and Biblical Theology **do** belong together and that it can be comprehensively demonstrated that this is so. I find this is a measure of vindication of the MSE role and task, particularly the Ministry of the Word in relation to secular contexts.