

○ THE FALLEN TOWERS

PRIDE, ENVY AND JUDGEMENT IN THE MODERN CITY

Professor Graeme Davison, School of Historical Studies, Monash University

Graeme Davison, a Sir John Monash Distinguished Professor, teaches history in the School of Historical Studies at Monash University. His main interest is the history of cities, especially in Australia. Previous publications include The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne (1978, new edition 2004), Car Wars: How the Car Won our Hearts and Conquered our Cities (2003), and The Use and Abuse of Australian History (2000).

The Genesis narrative of the fall of the Tower of Babel links worldly pride to the rise and catastrophic fall of an imperial city. From Renaissance Florence to nineteenth century Melbourne, urban pride often seemed to presage a fall. The 1755 earthquake, which destroyed the city of Lisbon, provoked a vigorous debate among Enlightenment philosophers about the influence of divine judgment on the fortunes of the city, prefiguring the instant reactions of some commentators, in the United States and elsewhere, to the terrorist attacks on the New York World Trade Center in 2001. In these diverse responses to 9/11, and their recurrent allusions to the Babel narrative, we gain a glimpse of the moral vulnerability of an imperial city.

Since ancient times – indeed especially *in* ancient times – great cities have aroused pride among their citizens and envy among their rivals.¹ Everyone knows the story of the tower of Babel, a cosmopolis brought down by excessive pride. At one time, the Genesis narrative goes, the whole earth had one language. The sons of Noah migrated to the Tigris-Euphrates basin and settled on a plain. ‘And they said to one another, “Come let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad on the face of the earth”’ (Gen. 11:1-9). The city, so far as it has any specific historical reference, is of course the city of Babylon, forerunner of the modern city of Baghdad, and the tower was probably the famous ziggurat or pyramid, characteristic of Mesopotamian culture. The pride of these city-dwellers, so the story goes, leads to a great fall. God, noticing that they had got above themselves, decides to sow linguistic confusion among them, they leave off building their tower and are scattered to the ends of the earth. It’s not being city-dwellers, so much as trying to play God, that gets the people of Babel into trouble. The rest of the Old Testament is full of stories about other proud and wicked cities – Ninevah, Sodom, Gomorrah – that come in for the judgement, and often the punishment, of God.²

The people of Israel were a nomadic and agricultural people before they became, with the building of Jerusalem and the Temple under the Kings David and Solomon, a city-dwelling people. Cities like Babylon may have attained populations as large as 350,000 under Nebucadrezzar II in the sixth century BC – almost half the size of ancient Rome at its peak. The ancient city was, above all, a centre of priestly and kingly power, its architecture and ceremonial spaces designed to project the might and dignity of its rulers and gods (Jones 1990, ch. 2). In modern times, we have tended to regard urbanisation primarily from an economic point of view: cities were machines for the generation of economic wealth. Now we sometimes contrast the functional utility of the industrial city with the post-industrial city of spectacle, leisure and display. In the global competition for tourism and investment cities are judged by how well they manage to project an image of their power and success. A city that is not proud of itself is not likely to attract the confidence

of others. But long before the emergence of the post-modern city, the cities of the ancient world had learned the same lesson.

These days there is whole tribe of professionals – in journalism, tourism, public relations, major events management, and advertising – whose mission it is to monitor and promote the city's image. Half coach, half image-consultant, the city booster has been a familiar figure in urban life for at least a century and half. For much of the history of mankind it was a role often performed by my own profession, the historians. Remember it was the historian Thucydides who gave Pericles that great speech glorifying his native city of Athens. In magnifying the city, he says, he was magnifying the men who made it. Centuries later Giovanni Villani begins his great chronicle of Renaissance Florence by frankly acknowledging his desire to boost its reputation. 'Rome is sinking; my native city is rising, and ready to achieve great things, and therefore I wish to relate its past history, and hope to continue the story to the present time, and as long as my life shall last' (cited in Burckhardt 1960, p. 48). By narrating the city's rise, the chronicler invested its future prospects with a sense of historical destiny. Just over a century ago, Alexander Sutherland, schoolteacher and historian, was performing a similar role in 'Marvellous Melbourne'. 'The past lies all behind us', he begins the last chapter of his 500 page survey of *Victoria and its Metropolis* (Sutherland 1888). Now the city was twenty-fifth in the world and occupied an area greater even than 'the world's leviathan, London'. Once, he admits, it had the rawness of a newly founded frontier town but now it had acquired all the attributes that 'which form the charm of city life. Melbourne in short is not only a city, but most distinctly a metropolis' (p. 576).

'Rome is falling; my native city is rising', says Villani. Boosting is the characteristic preoccupation of the rising city, seeking to overtake its larger and more powerful rival: Rome vs Florence, Paris vs London (the 'two cities' of Dickens famous novel), Chicago vs New York (or perhaps it is now New York and Los Angeles); Melbourne vs Sydney. In the 1880s when Melbourne was in front, it was common to contrast its invincible energy and enterprise with Sydney's lethargy. 'There is a bustle and life about Melbourne that you altogether miss in Sydney', observed Richard Twopeny (1883 p. 2). A century later, as the Sydney Olympics approached, the two cities seemed to have swapped identities. 'Sydney is quite simply the most exciting city in the world' begins the blurb of *Surface City* (Murphy and Watson 1997). Sydney, they note, is constructed in relation to Melbourne, its denigrated 'other'. 'Melbourne is dull, Melbourne is serious, Melbourne is full of wowsers, in Melbourne it rains all the time. The two construct each other' (p. 1). No sooner were the Olympics over, however, than the city's self-confidence seemed to collapse. In July 2003 Joe Hockey, federal minister for tourism, considered that his hometown had become 'tired and complacent' and had nothing to offer the international tourist. 'Where are the regular events in Sydney – the Formula One Grand Prix, or the equivalent of the Melbourne Cup?' Hockey asked (*Australian* 10 July, 2003). Premier Bob Carr was predictably outraged, but Melbourne newspapers had a field-day, with the *Sun Herald* (10 July 2003) helpfully contributing a list of five reasons to visit Melbourne, and five reasons to avoid the northern capital:

Five reasons to visit Melbourne

1. World-class sporting events such as the Melbourne Cup, Australian Open and Grand Prix
2. Beautiful parks and gardens
3. Trams
4. Renowned for eateries
5. The world's greatest football code

Five reasons to avoid Sydney

1. Terrible traffic
2. Rude service
3. Drab suburbs
4. Too expensive
5. They play rugby league.

City boosting, as the example suggests, is an activity that carries within it a self-correcting mechanism, as claims and counter-claims cancel each other out.

On a horizontal axis, the relationship between the city and its rivals, pride is opposed to envy. On the vertical axis of the city's own fluctuating fortunes, pride is counterposed to fear, anxiety and despair. 'Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall', said the proverb. The Greeks had a similar conviction: *hubris* would inevitably lead to *nemesis*. In this respect, even the great cities with little to fear from their rivals, can be exposed to the shock of catastrophe or decline. In the classical tradition a kind of pride in one's city or country was considered a great virtue. *Civis Romanus Sum* ('I am a citizen of Rome') was an affirmation of just such an appropriate sense of pride. It was when pride became excessive or overweening, either in the person or the community, that danger ensued. This conviction, of a kind of cosmic principle of justice, that visits the proud with punishment, has waxed and waned in the history of the West over the past two thousand years, often in an intermittent conversation with a more optimistic spirit, born of the Enlightenment, that affirmed urban values more confidently, and regarded the idea of divine retribution more sceptically.

One of the most telling episodes in this history was the reaction of European intellectuals, in the mid-eighteenth century, to the most appalling urban catastrophe of the era, the Lisbon earthquake of November 1755. Estimated to have been around nine on the modern Richter scale, the quake opened great fissures in the earth, swallowing up hapless residents of the city. Fires broke out before the city was engulfed by a huge tsunami. More than 90,000 of the city's 250,000 people were killed, and 85 percent of the city's buildings were destroyed (see Kendrick 1956). Many of the survivors testified to a sense of apocalyptic doom, regarding the catastrophe as a punishment for the pride and licentiousness of the city. Moralists and preachers all over Europe debated what sins among the unfortunate Portuguese had brought this solemn visitation upon them. Some pointed to the behaviour of members of the court and the spiritual slackness of the religious orders, especially the Jesuits. Others, especially in Protestant countries, saw the catastrophe as recompense for the evils of the Inquisition. Among Enlightenment philosophers it set off a vigorous debate about the moral foundations of the universe. In a poem reflecting on the disaster Voltaire (2000) posed a piercing rhetorical question:

Will you say: 'This is result of eternal laws
Directing the acts of a free and good God?'
Did Lisbon, which is no more, have more vices
Than London and Paris immersed in their pleasures?
Lisbon is destroyed, and they dance in Paris!

He was questioning the complacent optimism of contemporary philosophers like Leibnitz. Jean-Jacques Rousseau taxed Voltaire with succumbing to an even more dangerous pessimism. 'If the

problem of the origin of evil drives you to challenge God's perfection, why uphold His powerful-ness at the cost of His goodness? If one is an error, I prefer it to be the first... I do not see how one can search for the source of moral evil anywhere but in man's freedom and perfection—which are also his corruption' (Rousseau 1967). The calamities of the earthquake, Rousseau maintained, were not only of nature's making; they were compounded by human decisions. God could not be blamed for where and how the city had been built.

Man's hand was even more apparent in some other urban disasters, such as economic collapses. The rise of 'Marvellous Melbourne' came to a sudden end in the building society failures and bank crash of the early 1890s. In 1892, just as first shocks were being felt a 29 year-old classical scholar and aspiring poet Henry Lingham, published a satirical attack on the city. Lingham called himself 'The Melbourne Juvenal' after the famous satirist of Nero's Rome. Like Rome, he suggested, 'Marvellous Melbourne' was a victim of its overweening pride and avarice. In the history of the young colonial metropolis he already detected a narrative pattern reminiscent of the rise and fall of the great cities of antiquity:

Ours is a city ever in extremes
Or in a nightmare or in golden dreams (Lingham 1892).

The city's mood was now one of contrition for the sins of its booming heyday:

We may read of wealthy cities on the books we chance to scan;
We may read of fall'n empires and the fall'n state of man;
We may picture in our fancies golden treasures in our path;
But they change as does the weather, or like love, will turn to wrath.

Melbourne once was in its glory; revelled in its golden lore;
But that glory fast is fading, perhaps to see it never more.

...

This is Melbourne, Marvellous Melbourne; what an empty boast of pride,
While its poverty is swelling like a mighty ocean tide (Willoughby 1892).

In 1893 the Anglican Bishop Dr Field Flowers Goe held a special day of humiliation and prayer in which Melburnians were invited to repent the pride and avarice that had brought them low. There was little consensus, however, on precisely what should be repented, or how their punishment was linked to the crime. 'In times like the cholera or the cattle plague' Dr Goe observed:

they knew what to pray for, but their troubles now arose out of the complex forms of modern civilization, and made the petition more difficult. We knew the cause of our troubles to be covetousness, extravagance, selfishness and forgetfulness of God (see Davison 1978: 249–250).

Over the past century, the conviction that great disasters should be seen as acts of divine punishment has steadily receded throughout the West. That's how it seemed, at least until 9/11 and the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, an event which produced a wave of apocalyptic visions across the world, including in America. In the Islamic world, indeed through much of the Third World, the secularising, relativising spirit was much less evident. The evils of the western city – its luxury, waste, licentiousness and pride – are now, thanks to the

satellite and the internet, visible for all to see. It is the particular conjuncture of three factors – the massive concentration of power and wealth in the financial capitals of the West, its increased visibility throughout the rest of the world, and the renewed vitality of fundamentalist religion, including a conviction that pride invites divine retribution – that underlies the new sense of vulnerability experienced by many city-dwellers in the wake of 9/11. It's not just that the new weapons of terror, which are themselves in part a product of globalisation, render the cities more vulnerable to attack – though they certainly do – but that in the eyes of the rest of the world, and even sometimes in their own eyes, their manifest pride and power makes them morally vulnerable.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers, a striking number of commentators, both in the West and elsewhere, reaching for language to describe their cosmic import, invoked biblical metaphors of divine punishment, especially the story of the Tower of Babel.³ In the pattern of its appearance in the world media in the days following 9/11, the Babel metaphor acts as a kind of trace exposing the cracks and rifts appearing in the façade of American pride. Three days after the attacks tele-evangelist and Right -wing political commentator Jerry Falwell, was engaged in a television discussion with fellow evangelist Pat Robertson. 'What we saw on Tuesday, as terrible as it is, could be minuscule if, in fact, God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve', Falwell declared. Robertson agreed. Falwell continued:

The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the A.C.L.U., People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen' (*New York Times* 14 Sept, 2001).

Another evangelist, James Robison agreed that God was punishing America, though he proposed a different catalogue of sins: 'arrogance in relationships with Third World and foreign countries, plundering other countries for resources while supporting their despots, and indifference to others' poverty and pain'. This was steering uncomfortably close to a moral equation between the Twin Towers and the Tower of Babel, between the pride and arrogance of the modern superpower and that of its ancient counterpart.

The suggestion that America had actually brought the calamity upon its self, however, was more than most Americans could stomach. President Bush, who had often sought the counsel and support of Falwell and Robertson, immediately repudiated them. Within hours Falwell himself retracted his opinion. 'Despite the impression some may have from news reports today, I hold no one other than the terrorists and the people and nations who have enabled and harboured them responsible for Tuesday's attacks on this nation.'

The truth, of course, was that there *was* an unspoken affinity between the world-view of the terrorists and that of their strongest opponents, the political and religious fundamentalists of the United States. Their adversaries were even the same – the kind of secular, sexually liberated, free-thinking, ethnically diverse society most spectacularly on show in Manhattan. Among many of

the Christian Right New York was also a symbol of the very confusion of tongues prophesied in the biblical story. Another stalwart of the religious right, Patrick Buchanan, warned that: 'If by 2050 the America we grew up in has become a Tower of Babel of squabbling minorities that is falling apart, it will because of the treason of the elites and our lack of will to overthrow them' (*WorldNetDaily*, 24 March 2004).

The horrific television footage of the collapse of the Twin Towers, played over and over again in the hours and days following the tragedy, seems to have tapped a kind of repressed memory, awakening images of all those previous urban disasters – from Sodom and Babel to Lisbon and Hiroshima – that threatened the very idea of urban civilisation. In those images of masonry collapsing amidst fire and dust, of people running down canyon-streets as debris rains from the sky, there were echoes of other images of disaster, the flight from Pompei, Peter Breugel's famous painting of the Tower of Babel, or Albrecht Durer's painting of Lot's flight from the doomed city of Sodom.

With their conscious minds Americans repudiated the link between Babel and the Twin Towers. Biologist Stephen J. Gould, like a modern Voltaire, urged his fellow Americans to resist theological interpretations of the disaster (*New York Times*, 26 September 2001). *Washington Times* columnist Susan Fields strongly objected to the idea (presumably held by the terrorists themselves) that the WTC was a symbol of the link between America and Israel:

The twin towers of the World Trade Center were not symbols of Zionism but of modernity. They celebrated the aspirations of free men and women of all classes and attitudes, multicultural in the best sense. There were many differences among the people who went to work every morning in the offices, shops and restaurants of the World Trade Center, but it was no Tower of Babel. They spoke the same language of civil commerce, a common bond linking them in diversity and the sharing of ideas. They rode elevators not to heaven (it sometimes seemed that they would go that far) but to secular opportunity and it was that opportunity that the terrorists hated (*Washington Times*, 27 September 2001).

In so vigorously repudiating the metaphor of Babel, Field was simultaneously acknowledging its plausibility and reasserting the Enlightenment ideals of secular progress, pluralism and free enterprise.

One of the most immediate responses to the collapse of the Twin Towers was to question both the structural integrity of the skyscraper, and, sometimes, the very values that it seemed to represent. Architects, now forced to justify their creations, often recognised the resemblance between the modern skyscraper and the ancient Tower of Babel, but were undaunted by its moral implications. 'The desire to reach for the sky runs very deep in our human psyche', said Cesar Belli, architect of the world's tallest building, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. 'Since the Tower of Babel there is this desire to put up a marker in the sky'. To stop building tall buildings would be 'like New York knuckling under' (*New York Times*, 19 September 2001). The English architect Norman Foster had actually arrived in New York on the very eve of the attack to discuss the design for a new skyscraper Hearst Tower on Eight Avenue. The meeting was cancelled but Foster, who would later submit one of the short-listed designs for a new World

Trade Centre, was emphatic that, despite the catastrophe, skyscrapers were here to stay. 'Skyscrapers are as much a reality as urbanisation itself... They are not going to go away'. Ironically, the man who might have been regarded as having most to defend, the architect of the Twin Towers, Minoru Yamasaki, was more reflective. Now in his mid-eighties, and living in a lightly-built low rise Japanese house, he had seemingly turned his back on the values represented by the World Trade Centre. 'Buildings should not awe and impress, but rather serve as a thoughtful background for the activities of civilised man' (*Guardian*, 15 Sept. 2001). When the World Trade Centre had opened in 1973, architect and conceptual artist Alan Wexler had been one of its most ardent defenders. Early in 2001 he was still defending it: 'I always saw it as a sort of Tower of Babel or Jacob's Ladder, an attempt to penetrate through the cloud layer and attempt enlightenment.' After its destruction, he was philosophical. He used to tell his students that it was 'the urban stage of the world'. 'People used it as a forum, and now, unfortunately, politically as well.' But now, as a monument, its power was even stronger. 'We'll never forget it. It will live in our memories. It's like the grassy knoll'. (*New York Times*, 30 Sept. 2001).

In the United States, ideas of cosmic retribution were largely a preoccupation of the religious right, both Christian and Jewish. But outside the United States, in Europe as well as the Third World, the Tower of Babel was an image invoked by many commentators, including non-religious ones, in the days following September 11. 'The first world war of the third millennium features America, the modern Tower of Babel, against Afghanistan and its caves', observed the Italian daily *La Repubblica* (quoted in *Washington Times*, 6 Oct. 2001). 'When I recall the collapse of the two giant towers of the World Trade Center, I am reminded of the biblical narrative of the proud and pretentious Tower of Babel', wrote Louis-Marie Nindorera, a Frenchman of African descent in the leftist newspaper *Libération* (3 Oct. 2001). In Nigeria, the head of a Christian Bible Mission, Apostle Emeka emerged from a retreat declaring that he had a revelation from God that He wanted to 'use the recent destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to remove the pride and power base of America and remind the world that He is mighty and invincible'. Quoting from the Bible, Apostle Emeka said that the WTC... was regarded as by God as the same as the Biblical Tower of Babel which God was not happy with and therefore destroyed' (*Africa News*, 16 Oct. 2001). Even in Israel ultra-Orthodox Jews wondered, like their Christian counterparts, whether God was punishing America 'for the decadent age we're living in'. The newspaper *Hashavuah Biyerushalayim* (*This Week in Jerusalem*) carried an article entitled 'The Tower of Babel 2001' drawing a comparison between the World Trade Center and the doomed Biblical tower:

The Babylonians too imagined themselves to be the great superpower of the ancient era... and were so mesmerised by their own power until they decided to conquer the sky and climb to the heavens and rule the world. They thought that they had conquered the whole world with their intelligence and demanded that all inhabitants speak in the one tongue... like the English language of today's American people (quoted in *The Jerusalem Report*, 19 Nov. 2001).

In the biblical story, the fall of the Tower of Babel results in the dispersion of its people and the multiplication of tongues. By contrast, as Saskia Sassen (2000; see also 2003) and other writers have argued, while globalisation disperses the sites of production and consumption, it

centralises financial power in a few very large cities, of which New York is the most powerful. While the global city is characterised by ethnic and cultural diversity, and possibly owes some of its creativity to the social tolerance produced by its pluralism (Florida 2002), its command over the electronic superhighway actually tends, as the Israeli newspaper observed, towards a linguistic homogeneity, the world-wide hegemony of the English language. In this respect it is perhaps the World Wide Web, not the World Trade Centre, that is the new Tower of Babel. (Of course it's only because I live within that tower, with access to Google and Lexis-Nexis, that I have been able to discover the convergence of commentators post 9/11 on the metaphorical implications of the Babel myth).

Three years after the collapse of the towers, the world's great superpower is fighting to control the city of Baghdad, modern successor to the ancient city of Babylon. Already it has visited that city with deaths almost ten times those lost in the Twin Towers. New York meanwhile has largely recovered from the aftershocks of 9/11 and plans are already well advanced for the construction of a new skyscraper, the 1776 foot high Freedom Tower, to affirm the determination of the city not to 'knuckle under' to the threat of global terrorism. There had been suggestions in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy that the site should become a memorial park, but such prime Manhattan real estate was unlikely to remain undeveloped. 'We will build it to show the world that freedom will always triumph over terror and that we will face the 21st century and beyond with tremendous confidence', said New York Governor George Pataki unveiling plans for Daniel Liebeskind's new skyscraper, the tallest in the world (CNN 2003, Dec 20).

The soul-searching and moral shock that immediately followed the catastrophe has receded, so much so that we may be in danger of missing some of the things that the crisis revealed. Cities are always something more than themselves, and in their highs and lows are reflected the aspirations and discontents of a whole civilisation. Some of the sense of shock that followed the catastrophe, as I have hinted, was a product of the city's own making: in building the city up, whether it is in the interests of investment, tourism or entertainment, its boosters expose it to the scepticism, envy and moral outrage of their rivals. In our day, global communications have glaringly exposed the differences between rich and poor, though such is the asymmetry of communication and the self-absorption of the American media, that the rest of the world know more about New York than it sometimes seems to know about the rest of the world. In the search for metaphors to describe the moral dimensions of 9/11, and especially in the energetic repudiation of the metaphors that seemed to the rest of the world most apt, but also most unpalatable, we get an insight into alienation of those outside the city gates as well as the new vulnerability of those who dwell proudly inside.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper was originally given to an international symposium, 'The Passionate City' at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology on 27 August 2004 and was previously published in the proceedings of the symposium by Informit Publishing. (EISBN: 0864593317). I am grateful to the convenors of the symposium, Brian Morris and Deb Verhoeven.
- 2 For an analysis of Biblical accounts of the city see Jacques Ellul (1970).
- 3 For an interesting discussion of the metaphorical implications of the fall of the Twin Towers see Hankiss (2002) and Wallerstein (2002).

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