

**“Cities and Self-Aggrandisement:
The Civic and the Nomadic in the Hebrew Bible”**

Abstract for paper for COV&R 2010

Come-now! Let us build ourselves a city!

Genesis 11:3 (Fox translation)

The writers of the Hebrew Bible are profoundly distrustful of cities and the regions in which they occur. Think of the big names outside of the communities of Israel and Judah: the Egyptians to the southwest, the Assyrians to the north, the Babylonians to the east, and constant interaction with the Canaanites. All these regions are at one point or another engaged in hostilities with the Israelites. And when cities are specifically mentioned—Ninevah in the story of Jonah, Sodom and Gomorrah in the patriarchal histories, the story of Babel, and of the city built by Kayin and/or his son Hanoah in the pre-patriarchal narratives of Genesis—all are negative in one way or another.

Why is that? Cities are places of violence, places where mutually exclusive sacrificial systems meet and people are forced to live together without killing one another. They are places of great creative energy that may also be expressed as great destructive energy. Jews have preferred to live in the desert and to recognize their God in rejection of the idolatrous investments of other cultures. The Hebrews conceive of themselves (throughout most of their early history) as a nomadic people, a people whose thought is *la pensée du dehors* (“the thought of the outside”) as Blanchot has said a thought always on the move, drawing the consequence of the present circumstances. Even when Judaism is to be found as a prominent part of other cultures (as it is after the *Haskalah*), Judaism has remained alive *within* but not necessarily *of* the variety of cultural settings in which it is to be found.

In the paper that follows, I would like to examine two examples of such anti-civic narrative in Torah, to offer a sense of just how ill at ease the idea of the city makes the Biblical writers, a malaise that Girardians would recognize as sacrificial crisis. I will turn first to the story of Hanoah and Lemech in the famous *toldot* section of chapter 4, and then I will turn to the short opening section of chapter 11 where the story of the tower of Babel is narrated. Each narrative will have something different to say to us about cities, although in neither case is the news good, nor the lesson an encouraging one.