Habakkuk 2:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

> Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!

Analysis

Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity! The third woe directly addresses violent urbanization. **Buildeth a town with blood** (בֹּנֶה עִיר בְּדָמִים/boneh ir bedamim)—constructing a city through bloodshed. דָּמִים (damim) is the plural of blood, emphasizing multiplied murders. **And stablisheth a city by iniquity** (וְכוֹנֵן קִרְיָה בְּעַוְלָה/vekonen qiryah be'avlah)—founding it on injustice. The verb כּון (kun) means to establish firmly, make secure. עַוְלָה (avlah) means iniquity, unrighteousness, perversion of justice.

This indicts the entire process of imperial expansion: conquest requires bloodshed, occupation requires ongoing injustice. Cities don't simply exist—they're built through specific processes involving resources, labor, and power. When these processes involve violence and exploitation, the resulting city rests on a foundation of sin. Psalm 127:1 warns that unless the LORD builds the house, laborers work in vain. Cities built on blood and iniquity, regardless of their magnificence, cannot stand. This woe challenges all forms of development—urban, corporate, national—that prioritize growth through exploitation rather than justice. The question isn't whether to build but how to build ethically.

Historical Context

Babylon exemplified this woe. Nebuchadnezzar rebuilt Babylon into the ancient world's largest city through conquest, slave labor, and plunder. His inscriptions boast of his building projects but omit mention of the cost in human suffering.

When Babylon fell, its magnificent buildings stood empty—monuments to injustice rather than civilization. The pattern repeats: cities built on slave labor (ancient Rome, antebellum American South), colonial capitals built on exploitation (European colonial cities), modern cities built through displacement of indigenous peoples. Psalm 107:33-34 describes God's judgment: He turns fruitful land into salt waste because of inhabitants' wickedness. Cities founded on blood eventually fall or transform, their injustice eventually exposed and judged.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How can development, progress, and building be pursued ethically rather than through exploitation and violence?
2. What questions should believers ask about the foundations—literal and ethical—of the communities, organizations, and systems they participate in?
3. How does this woe challenge triumphalist narratives about civilization and progress that ignore the bloodshed involved?

Interlinear Text

הֹ֣וי	בֹּנֶ֥ה	עִ֖יר	בְּדָמִ֑ים	וְכֹונֵ֥ן	קִרְיָ֖ה
Woe	**to him that buildeth**	**a town**	**with blood**	**and stablisheth**	**a city**
H1945	H1129	H5892	H1818	H3559	H7151

בְּעַוְלָה׃
by iniquity
H5766

Additional Cross-References

Micah 3:10 (Sin): They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity.

Nahum 3:1 (Blood): Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not;

Revelation 17:6 (Blood): And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.

Joshua 6:26 (Parallel theme): And Joshua adjured them at that time, saying, Cursed be the man before the LORD, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho: he shall lay the foundation thereof in his firstborn, and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it.

Ezekiel 24:9 (Blood): Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Woe to the bloody city! I will even make the pile for fire great.

1 Kings 16:34 (Parallel theme): In his days did Hiel the Beth-elite build Jericho: he laid the foundation thereof in Abiram his firstborn, and set up the gates thereof in his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Joshua the son of Nun.