

2. The Protestant Town

I

If this chapter, like a sermon, required a text, it could be supplied from Psalm 122: 'Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity in itself' (in the words of the English Psalter) or (as the Geneva Bible [1560] has it) 'that is compact together in itself'. The force of the original Hebrew depicts the crowded, even slumlike character of the city, as if it were the 'Great Wen' of London of which King James I and William Cobbett in their generations complained, or some human catastrophe of the modern Third World. It is indicative of the positive evaluation of civic life in early modern Europe that the translators and exegetes of Psalm 122 altered this meaning to celebrate the city as embodying a dreamlike model of human society in a state of perfection, while implying that the condition of realising such perfection was the moral resource of principled consensus.

Not only this text but also the frequent attention paid in Scripture to Jerusalem, the embodiment of the people of Israel in an especially intensified and apprehensible form, encouraged townspeople, who were in any case disposed to take themselves seriously, to suppose that their own civic community was possessed of ideal and admirable qualities. This town, our city, is to be compared, even identified, with God's own metropolis of Jerusalem. So it was with many a town and city in Reformation Europe. Medieval towns and the social groups and divisions which they contained shared many patrons. In Canterbury St Thomas competed with St George. There were implied ideological distinctions between the proud prelate who had died defending the liberties of the Church against the Crown and England's ghostly champion who had secured victories for her kings in the field. One could choose between one and another idealised personification of the city's identity. Or perhaps the choice would be made for the citizen, by the parish in which he was born and baptised or the fraternity to which he was committed in membership. But now there was but one patron, God.

Like other ideas and institutions explored in this book, the idealised identification of the city – almost any city – with Jerusalem was not a totally novel consequence of the Protestant Reformation. When King Richard II was reconciled with the city of London in 1392 the accompanying pageantry proclaimed that it was with a new manifestation of Jerusalem that this successor (or impersonator) of Jesus Christ came to terms. A late fifteenth-century town clerk of Bristol, Robert Ricart, drew a map of his city which represented it as 'the navel of the world', a cross within a circle, representing a heavenly Jerusalem divided into four quarters defined by its four principal streets: a little model of the world. (Would Ricart have been as scandalised as orthodox Christians of the 1650s when the Quaker James Nayler made his 'blasphemous' entry into Bristol, seated like Christ on Palm Sunday on a donkey, a parody of such civic traditions?) The saints who served as patrons of the medieval civic community represented it in heavenly intercessions which imparted to the social body a holy distinction, making it a 'microcosm of the world' in its harmonious wholeness. But this wholeness was – or should have been – greatly enhanced by the substitution of a single God for a whole panoply of proprietary saints. For the city now stood before God, the one, as a seamless whole, containing no rival loyalties to various sub-deities, no rival jurisdictions, no religious liberties or enclaves which were no-go areas for the civic authorities. 'Now the command of the Mayor and his brethren was efficacious in every quarter of the city, and every inhabitant, burgess or stranger, was equally subject to their rule.' #1

And for God there was only one city, Jerusalem. Even if a passing interest was taken in Nineveh, this was not so much for Nineveh's sake as to teach Jerusalem a lesson, through the fable of the prophet Jonah. In the New Testament God's Apostle, St Paul, travelled the length of the Eastern Mediterranean, but when he communicated by letter with the cities which he had visited it was to the Christians in the cities, not to the cities themselves, that he wrote. As strangers and pilgrims Christians had here no continuing city. And when in the Book of Revelation St John the Divine wrote to the seven churches which were in Asia they were located in famous cities, but it was not to the cities that he conveyed the message of the Spirit. There was only one Jerusalem. But now there were many Christian cities for which Jerusalem stood as model and paradigm, and for Englishmen Jerusalem was naturally London. Delivering his first sermon as Bishop of London at the great open-air preaching place of Paul's Cross, Edwin Sandys exclaimed: 'Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, ... casting his eyes toward the city of Jerusalem, bewailed the lamentable estate thereof, and that with tears. The like effect ... I find in myself, beholding this Jerusalem of ours, this famous city.' Another preacher in the same place echoed the bishop: 'Our Saviour Christ, if he were here, should be moved to weep over England as he hath wept over Jerusalem'. In fact it was to become a vulgar commonplace. A ballad-monger joins in:

O London, London, Jerusalem I may thee call,
For why? thy conversation agreeth thereto now:
They would take no warning before the plague did fall
And at this present day O LONDON no more dost thou.

A Jacobean preacher coming out of Kent to a prominent London pulpit spoke of the city as 'the very ark of the presence of God, above all other places of this land'. 'Oh London, London, excellent things are spoken of thee, thou city of God.' #2

If London was Jerusalem, Canterbury, according to the Jacobean preacher James Cleland, was Sychar, the Judean city where the patriarch Jacob (in his very name the precursor of King James) had sunk a famous well, and where Jesus converted the Samaritan woman. For Archbishop Abbot 'on his second coming into Kent' had made a well, or conduit, in Canterbury, a city 'buildd in the sweetest air, between two little hills, ... in the best place of the chiefest shire of this country, even in Canterbury, the Metropolis or Head Town of Kent, if not of all England' #3

Thither, we read elsewhere in the Psalms, the tribes go up. So a related theme was that of the city set on a hill, either Jerusalem as the crown of the hill country of Judea, or that city of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 5:14, 'A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid'. Colchester in the 1550s was so regarded: 'The ancient and famous city of Colchester . . . became like unto the city upon a hill; or a candle upon a candlestick'. Colchester is indeed sited on a steep hill, which may have made the identification more plausible. And so was Rye, in Sussex. A hundred years after Colchester had discovered itself in the Gospel, Rye's inhabitants were told (in 1652): 'You are as a city set on an hill, labour to hold forth an holy life, lest it be said what do you more than others?' But Gloucester too, for all its level, riverain topography, was equally identified with the biblical motif, as were several towns of the West Riding of Yorkshire and, most famously of all, Boston in Massachusetts.