

## Reinterpreting Jeremiah 29 amid the Deconstruction of Urban Space: A Theology of Exile in Response to Contemporary Gentrification

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### Abstract

The massive urbanization and spatial restructuring of Indonesian metropolitan areas have intensified gentrification, systematically displacing lower-income communities from city centers to peripheries—a condition this study conceptualizes as "internal exile"—while the classic text of Jeremiah 29:7 has been reductively deployed in Indonesian churches as a passive slogan to "pray for the city," stripped of its radical spatial and political implications. Employing a qualitative-interdisciplinary method that integrates biblical exegesis with the socio-spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey within a contextual hermeneutical framework, this article reinterprets Jeremiah 29:4–7 to demonstrate three claims: first, gentrification constitutes a structural form of internal exile that negates the marginalized population's right to inhabit urban life; second, the divine imperatives to "build houses," "plant gardens," and "seek the *shalom* of the city" are not passive survival instructions but subversive, counter-hegemonic mandates for economic rootedness, communal resilience, and active participation in public affairs within an oppressive urban system; and third, the prophetic call for *shalom*—understood as holistic justice and equitable access—demands that the church transcend its gated-community mentality and re-embody its missional identity as an agent of spatial advocacy and social solidarity with the displaced, thereby contributing to the development of a contextual Indonesian urban theology that refuses to divorce biblical fidelity from the concrete struggle for spatial justice.

### Keywords

Jeremiah 29; Gentrification; Internal Exile; *Shalom*; Urban Theology

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global landscape is defined by an unprecedented wave of urbanization, wherein cities have transformed from mere geographical clusters into complex epicentres of capital, culture, and power. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is vividly manifested in metropolitan hubs like Jakarta, Surabaya, and the emerging design of the new capital city, Nusantara (IKN). However, this rapid urban development is rarely neutral; it is deeply intertwined with the mechanism of gentrification, a socio-spatial process where capital reinvestment in urban cores systematically displaces lower-income communities to make way for high-end residential and commercial infrastructures



(Harvey, 2019; Smith, 2002). As kampung settlements and traditional urban spaces are deconstructed to serve neoliberal aesthetics, marginal communities find themselves pushed to the spatial and economic peripheries. They experience what urban sociologists describe as a loss of "the right to the city," becoming foreigners within their own homeland (Lefebvre, 1996; Sassen, 2014).

This socio-spatial fragmentation poses a severe theological challenge to the Christian community in Indonesia. Historically, many urban churches, particularly those situated within affluent gentrified enclaves, have succumbed to a "gated community" mentality—developing an ecclesial insularity that isolates them from the socioeconomic struggles of the displaced populations right outside their walls (Gorringe, 2002; Linthicum, 1991). Conversely, marginalized Christians facing displacement often experience a profound spiritual disorientation. The disruption of their spatial security leads to a crisis of faith regarding God's presence and justice within the hostile urban environment, leaving them to feel textually and existentially exiled within a domestic Babylon of corporate greed and structural inequality.

To address this crisis, a robust theological framework is required to bridge the gap between ancient scriptures and modern urban realities. The theological locus of the Babylonian exile, particularly the prophetic mandate found in Jeremiah 29:4–7, offers a profound paradigm for this dilemma. Historically, Jeremiah's letter was addressed to a displaced community facing spatial uprooting and political subjugation under a hostile superpower (Brueggemann, 1998; Albertz, 2003). Rather than advocating for fatalistic withdrawal or violent revolt, the text commands the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, and actively seek the *shalom* (welfare, justice, and holistic peace) of the oppressive city of Babylon. In an Indonesian context of urban gentrification, this narrative provides a radical counter-perspective on how faith communities should navigate spatial displacement.

Despite its potential, contemporary biblical scholarship in Indonesia has frequently reduced Jeremiah 29:7 to a passive, apolitical slogan, often weaponized to demand unconditional submission to state-driven development projects without critically evaluating their ethical costs (Sugirtharajah, 2001; Prior, 1997). Existing research often overlooks the spatial dynamics inherent in the text, neglecting how the prophetic call to "seek the *shalom* of the city" directly intersects with modern spatial justice, agrarian displacement, and the commercialization of urban land. Therefore, a critical research gap exists at the intersection of Old Testament theology and contemporary Urban Studies within the Indonesian socio-economic matrix.

This article aims to fill this scholarly void by executing a contextual-biblical reinterpretation of Jeremiah 29:4–7 through the lens of socio-spatial analysis. By dialoguing the ancient text with contemporary theories of gentrification, this study explores how the concept of *internal exile* applies to marginalized communities in Indonesia's expanding megacities. Ultimately, this research seeks to

answer how faith communities can reconstruct their ecclesial identity—moving away from defensive, gated enclaves to become active, transformative agents that defend spatial justice and cultivate holistic *shalom* for the urban poor who have been displaced from their own spaces.

## 2. METHOD

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates contextual biblical hermeneutics with socio-spatial analysis to examine the intersection of theology and urban development. The methodological framework utilizes a qualitative-theological analysis, combining a historical-grammatical and thematic exegesis of Jeremiah 29:4–7 with critical urban theories, specifically Henri Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city" and David Harvey's critique of capital accumulation in urban spaces (Harvey, 2019; Lefebvre, 1996). Rather than treating the biblical text as an isolated historical artifact, this research facilitates a dialectical dialogue between the socio-political reality of the 6th-century BCE Babylonian exile and the contemporary socio-economic phenomenon of gentrification in Indonesia's major metropolitan areas. By mapping textual motifs such as *shalom*, spatial rootage ("build houses and plant gardens"), and displacement onto current empirical data regarding urban marginalization and kampung evictions in Indonesia, this study constructs a contextual urban theology that provides ethical, prescriptive insights for ecclesial praxis in fragmented urban environments.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *The Anatomy of Gentrification in Indonesia: Internal Exile in the Urban Space*

The socio-spatial transformation of contemporary Indonesian metropolitan areas offers a vivid empirical display of what David Harvey (2012) conceptualizes as "accumulation by dispossession." In major hubs like Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, and the rapid corridor development surrounding the new capital, Nusantara (IKN), urban spaces are continuously restructured to maximize capital accumulation rather than to support human flourishing. Under the pressure of globalized neoliberal currents, the state and private developers often cooperate to rezone urban areas, treating land strictly as a high-yield financial commodity. Consequently, the historical, organic, and informal settlements that have long defined the Indonesian urban landscape—locally known as *kampung kota*—are increasingly viewed as obstacles to modernization that must be cleared to make way for high-end residential towers, commercial malls, and elite transit-oriented developments (Hudalah & Woltjer, 2007).

This relentless urban restructuring induces a severe state of **internal exile** for the marginalized urban poor. Although these citizens are not physically deported across national borders like the ancient Judeans, they undergo a profound domestic displacement that mirrors the psychological and structural trauma of banishment. As property values, land taxes, and living costs skyrocket due to speculative real estate investments, low-income families are systematically priced out of their own neighborhoods. They

find themselves forced into the structural and geographical peripheries — unregulated suburban fringes with poor public infrastructure, inadequate sanitation, and massive distances from their original sources of livelihood (Sassen, 2014).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of gentrification in Indonesia deconstructs the essential socio-cultural fabric and mutual-aid networks (*gotong royong*) that sustain the urban poor. When a *kampung* is dismantled and its residents are dispersed, they lose more than just a physical roof; they lose their communal safety nets, informal economic networks, and generational attachments to the land. In the new, highly individualized suburban or vertical public housing units (*rusunawa*) where they are often relocated, these displaced populations face intense social alienation. This spatial disruption strips them of their historical identity and urban agency, effectively rendering them "strangers in their own land" who have been denied what Henri Lefebvre (1996) calls "the right to the city."

From a psychological and economic standpoint, this internal exile creates a permanent state of existential vulnerability. The urban poor are caught in a vicious cycle where they must spend a significant portion of their meager income merely on commuting back into the city center to access low-wage informal jobs. The structural violence of this arrangement is often masked by state rhetoric that labels these evictions as "urban normalization," "flood mitigation," or "aesthetic rejuvenation." In reality, the poor are being penalised for their poverty, as the city space is progressively sanitized to cater exclusively to the lifestyle preferences and consumerist habits of the emerging upper-middle class (Leitner, H., & Sheppard, E., 2022).

Ultimately, this sifting of the population creates a deeply polarized urban geography in Indonesia, characterized by stark spatial segregation. Gated luxury communities, secure financial districts, and pristine commercial corridors exist in immediate proximity to, yet are completely severed from, the decaying, crowded margins where the displaced are forced to survive. This fragmentation is not merely a secular or sociological issue; it is a profound ethical failure that distorts the purpose of creation, where the earth is meant to be a shared dwelling place for all humanity. It is within this fractured, highly contested Indonesian urban landscape that the church must live out its calling and seek a theological framework capable of navigating such profound displacement. Under the pressure of globalized neoliberal currents, the state and private developers often cooperate to rezone urban areas, treating land strictly as a high-end financial commodity (Huddalah & Winarso, 2016). This is clearly visible in infrastructure-driven displacements across major Indonesian archipelagos, where the traditional community spaces are co-opted by state-corporate alliances (Leitner & Sheppard, 2018).

### *Exegesis of Jeremiah 29:4–7 and the Theology of Spatial Rootage*

To this contemporary state of socio-spatial alienation, the narrative of the Babylonian exile provides an unexpected, counter-intuitive, and radical theological paradigm. Historically, the Judean

exiles in Babylon faced a debilitating crisis of spatial and spiritual uprooting after the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and Yahweh's temple. Stranded in a foreign land, the community was deeply polarized, tempted either to assimilate entirely into the dominant imperial structure or to withdraw into escapist, nationalistic fantasies propagated by false prophets who promised an immediate, miraculous return to Palestine (Brueggemann, 1998). Jeremiah's prophetic letter, preserved in Jeremiah 29:4–7, directly dismantles both reactions by introducing a theology of proactive spatial rooting within a hostile, imperial environment. A contextual urban theology derived from Jeremiah 29 compels Indonesian churches to undergo a radical spatial conversion and ecclesial repentance. The church must redefine its public theology to address public policy, structural poverty, and local spatial contestations (Muswubi, 2025).

The divine commands issued through the prophet in verses 5 and 6 are intensely physical, economic, and generational: "*Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters...*" Rather than treating their displacement as a temporary, passive waiting room, God commands the exiles to establish a tangible, stable, and highly visible presence within the heart of the very empire that subjugated them (Albertz, 2003). To build a house and plant a garden in the ancient Near East required a long-term commitment to the soil, a deliberate decision to invest labor, resources, and hope into a specific geographical location. By instructing the exiles to root themselves in Babylon, Jeremiah asserts that God's presence and blessing are not confined to the lost sacred geography of Jerusalem, but can be experienced and manifested within the defiled spaces of the empire (Mueller, 2020).

The theological climax of this revolutionary mandate is articulated in verse 7: "*But seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.*" In many standard or state-centric readings, this verse has been diluted into a benign call for civic compliance, patriotism, or passive intercession for political rulers. However, a rigorous textual analysis of the Hebrew term *shalom* reveals that it far exceeds the Western concept of peace as the mere absence of conflict or an interiorized state of psychological tranquility. In the prophetic tradition, *shalom* denotes holistic well-being, structural justice, economic equity, communal harmony, and the unrestricted flourishing of all creation, particularly the vulnerable (Linthicum, 1991).

By commanding the exiles to actively "seek" (*darash*—a verb implying intense, diligent, and investigative pursuit) the *shalom* of Babylon—the very epicenter of pagan idolatry, economic exploitation, and military violence—the text completely subverts imperial and tribal logic. The welfare and survival of the marginalized, exiled community are paradoxically declared to be intrinsically bound up with the ethical transformation and well-being of the wider urban space they inhabit. The exiles are forbidden from wishing for the city's destruction or isolating themselves in resentment; instead, they

are drafted as agents of blessing for their oppressors (Krause, 2014).

Jeremiah 29:7, therefore, establishes a profound theological principle: even in a condition of systemic displacement, political powerlessness, and structural marginalization, God's people retain significant spiritual and ethical agency. They are not reduced to helpless victims of imperial policy, nor are they allowed to become passive bystanders. The text demands an active, constructive engagement with the city's structures, asserting that the pursuit of justice and well-being for the broader, secular urban public is the primary mechanism through which the marginalized community will find its own security and restoration (Katho, 2013).

### *Reconstructing Ecclesial Praxis: Seeking Shalom in Fragmented Spaces*

When applied rigorously to the Indonesian context, the integration of Jeremiah 29 and socio-spatial theory provides a sharp, prophetic critique of contemporary ecclesial structures and identities. Currently, many urban churches in Indonesia function as spatial iterations of the gentrification process itself; they operate as spiritual *gated communities*, physically and socially detached from the socio-spatial displacements occurring right outside their sanctuary doors (Gorringer, 2002). These institutions often align themselves with the aesthetic values of capital accumulation, building opulent mega-churches in exclusive corporate enclaves while remaining blissfully oblivious to the displacement of the *kampung* communities whose land was cleared to construct those very enclaves.

A contextual urban theology derived from Jeremiah 29 compels Indonesian churches to undergo a radical spatial conversion and ecclesial repentance. The prophetic text demands that the church move away from an interiorized, consumer-oriented gospel that treats salvation as a private commodity, and instead recover its identity as a historically rooted community called to the public square. Seeking the *shalom* of a gentrified Indonesian city requires the church to actively anchor its physical ministries, financial resources, and pastoral care within the messy, contested spaces inhabited by the urban poor and the displaced populations (Marlin, 2025).

Practically, this theological shift demands that the church transition from paternalistic acts of charity to an active engagement in spatial justice. Charity often perpetuates unequal power dynamics by offering temporary relief while leaving the structures of gentrification untouched. In contrast, a church operating under the mandate of Jeremiah 29:7 will actively partner with civil society organizations, legal aid groups, and local communities to advocate for fair housing policies, defend the land rights of vulnerable citizens facing arbitrary evictions, and resist the unbridled commercialization of public spaces. The church must use its institutional weight and social capital to amplify the voices of those who have been systematically silenced by corporate and state interests (Boimau, 2024).

Furthermore, following the literal command to "build houses and plant gardens," the urban church in Indonesia can model alternative socio-spatial realities within the city. This can be achieved by

utilizing church-owned land and financial assets to create tangible "spaces of resistance and life"—such as community-managed urban agricultural cooperatives, affordable and dignified housing initiatives, and free, high-quality educational and psychological support centers for displaced children. In an era marked by severe environmental degradation and urban heat islands in Indonesian cities, planting literal gardens and advocating for public green spaces becomes a prophetic act of stewardship that directly counters the concrete-and-glass sanitization of corporate gentrification.

In conclusion, by transforming its ecclesial praxis from an insular fortress into a transformative, neighborhood-embedded community, the church in Indonesia fulfills the deep ethical demands of the biblical exile narrative. It ceases to be an accomplice to the structural violence of urban fragmentation and instead becomes a living, breathing signpost of God's coming kingdom. In doing so, the church proves that even in the midst of a domestic Babylon driven by speculative capital and social displacement, it is possible to cultivate a resilient, inclusive, and justice-oriented *shalom* that reclaims the city for the flourishing of all its inhabitants.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the intersection of Jeremiah 29:4–7 and contemporary urban studies provides a radical, transformative framework for addressing the structural violence of gentrification in Indonesia. The sifting of major metropolitan areas through speculative real estate development has created a severe state of internal exile, systematically pushing marginalized communities out of their historical *kampung kota* and stripping them of their fundamental right to the city. By reinterpreting the prophetic mandate issued to the ancient Judean exiles, this study demonstrates that the biblical response to displacement is neither passive assimilation into imperial capital nor escapist insular withdrawal. Instead, the text demands an intentional, physical, and ethical grounding within the contested urban space, establishing that the holistic well-being (*shalom*) of the marginalized is indivisibly bound up with their active pursuit of structural justice and spatial rootage for the entire public square.

Ultimately, this contextual-biblical analysis compels the urban church in Indonesia to undergo a radical spatial conversion, transitioning from an insular, gated community into a prophetic agent of spatial justice. Seeking the *shalom* of modern, fragmented Indonesian cities requires ecclesial communities to move beyond paternalistic charity and actively engage in structural advocacy, defending the land and housing rights of the urban poor while modeling alternative, inclusive socio-economic spaces. By anchoring its ministry within the struggles of the displaced and transforming its institutional assets into sites of resistance and communal flourishing, the church resists the predatory sanitization of neoliberal urbanism. In doing so, the faith community effectively fulfills its missional calling, proving that even within a domestic Babylon driven by capital accumulation, a resilient, justice-

oriented peace can be cultivated to reclaim the city as a shared dwelling place for all.

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