

the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

In This Issue

A few powerful images arise in the essays of this issue of the GOCN newsletter. Darrell Guder sees in Paul's metaphor of the "letter" written by Christ, and about Christ, an image that makes vivid the missionary vocation of the church. He sees the churches as letters written, and letters sent, and recognizes that as the action of God.

Chris Erdman (page 5) shares out of his own journey to discern his pastoral calling a place where he is finding help: monasticism. What might seem a strange image for the church and its missional leadership takes on fresh life in Chris' treatment.

Following the lead of people like Al Roxburgh, Thomas Merton, and Alistair MacIntyre, he sees the "monastic community" as particularly fitting for a time that has striking correspondence to the circumstances under which the first monastic impulses were felt. By opening up his own line of exploration, he invites others of us to wonder with him about the potentials in this way of conceiving ourselves.

*Marv Hoff supplies a helpful introduction to David Myers' recent book, *The American Paradox* (page 3). By introducing the idea of paradox into the attempt to "read" our times, Myers warns against portraits of our culture that derive from partial information. His "best of times, worst of times" approach invites care and balance in interpretation and leads to the framing of questions of meaning and response that allow us to go deeper, to the root of things.*

-the Editor

God's Letters to the World

From a Sermon on 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Darrell L. Guder
Columbia Theological Seminary
Decatur, Georgia

All the documents in the New Testament are written to missionary congregations. Those congregations were all the result of missionary witness, beginning with Pentecost. They were all a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus to his disciples on Ascension Day: When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you

That is what is going on in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. He is grappling with their faithfulness as witnesses to Jesus Christ in Corinth. He is not telling them to get involved in mission. They have no choice about that. That is why they exist. But they need constantly to learn how

**Everything we do as a Christian community
relates in some way to this fundamental task:
that we be written by God as his letter to the world.**

will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The congregations of the first generation did not look upon missions as one activity of many which they sponsored. They understood themselves to be missionary by their very nature. They were there to continue the witness that had brought them to faith and new life. And all the writings of our New Testament address that missionary vocation. They all deal with the way that each of these congregations, in its very particular place and with its very particular challenges, will continue the witness to Jesus.

this translates into their daily living, their actions, their attitudes, their decisions. Their mission is not merely a message they communicate when they use certain terms and tell certain stories. Their mission defines everything they are and say and do.

To help them understand that, Paul uses a remarkable image. It is found in the opening verses of the third chapter: "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not

on tables of stone but on tablets of human hearts." You Corinthians, Paul is saying, are God's letter to the world. This is God's Word not only to the Corinthians but to every Christian community at every time and in every place. That is who we are: God's letters to the world.

In a very few words, the apostle lays out for us the foundational definition of our calling as Christians. He reminds us that we are the result of

The point is that we, as a community of faith, are God's letter. The "you" in this phrase is plural: "all of you" are God's letter to the world. And what God intends for us is what Paul describes with these words, "to be known and read by all." In this very brief phrase, we see the whole missionary vocation of the church.

This definition of God's missionary people as letters to the world raises two basic questions. The first one has

devotes so much time to the way these communities live and how they behave together. If the letter is to be a clear, legible communication of the Gospel, then the communities need to pay attention to how they are living out this good news among themselves. And they need to be sure that God has the freedom and opportunity to write them. They need to look hard at the process of their own formation. God's writing of his letters to the world

Mission is not an option for God's people. Mission defines who we are and what we are for.

God's action. Christian communities do not organize themselves. Oh, they may think that they do. You may think that you chose to be a member of this particular church. But, in fact, you responded to the choice that God was already making. In the formation of God's missionary church, the Holy Spirit is always at work, drawing a community together, shaping a witness for a particular place. The apostolic witness comes first. The apostle says to the Corinthians, "You are yourselves our letter, written on our hearts." Their formation started with the passion for mission that sent the Apostles to them. The message was shared from one person to another, and God used that very human process to call a new missionary church into being. The message reached the Corinthians as it reaches us - through others who have been God's pens, God's messengers to us. Each of us can tell a story about the way God wrote that letter on our hearts: the parents who nurtured us, the Sunday School teacher who taught us, the preacher whose message reached us, the speaker at a camp who brought gospel alive for us, the friend whose invitation and concern began to reveal God's love to us. God has been writing us, making us into his letters to the world in a great variety of ways, as the apostolic witness has continued.

to do with the actual writing of us as God's letter. I would like to suggest to you that the writing of God's letter to the world is Paul's way of describing what we are all about as a congregation that gathers in the name of Christ. Everything we do as a Christian community relates in some way to this fundamental task: that we be written by God as his letter to the world.

That is why the New Testament

doesn't just happen automatically. It is a disciplined and demanding process of composition, of formation, of engraving good news indelibly on our hearts so that we can function as God's letters. How is the writing happening? Is the message really getting written? Are our hearts being re-shaped by the apostles' witness so that we are becoming a very different message to our world? Does the Holy Spirit have

The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter

Editor and Coordinator: George R. Hunsberger

georgeh@westernsem.org

Administrative Assistant: Judy Bos

judy@westernsem.org

Information concerning this publication or the network can be obtained by contacting:

The Gospel and Our Culture Network

at Western Theological Seminary

101 E. 13th Street

Holland, MI 49423-3622

Phone: 616-392-8555

Fax: 616-392-7717

Website: <http://www.gocn.org>

the opportunity to write us? Are we becoming the kind of community which is readable communication by the way it lives differently in this world? These are all crucial issues if we want to take our own mission seriously. These are questions of our time, our priorities, our willingness to be shaped by God's Word, our openness to the changes that this writing process will make in us. Before letters can be sent, they need to be written. That is where mission starts.

The second basic question has to do with the sending of the letters. Letters have to be sent. They are not really working as letters until they are sent, "known and read by all." Now, I often ask people if they can tell me where the word "mission" can be found in the Bible. It's seldom that someone can answer the question. To be fair, it is kind of a trick question. What we need to know, and what we have forgotten, is that the root meaning of "mission" is sending. It's the Latin version of the Greek term for "sending." Remember how Jesus stressed, in John's Gospel, over and over again that the Father had sent him, and that he is sending his disciples as apostles into the world? "As my Father has sent me, so I send you," he says on Easter morning. In Paul, this same basic idea is wrapped up in the term "letter of Christ." Paul is teaching the Corinthians and us that sending is essential to who we are as Christians. We do not exist as a church to be shaped by God's writing on

our hearts, and then to have that message remain inside our boxes and not get sent into the world. What we do in here has fundamentally to do with what God is sending us to be and to do out there. We gather to have this good news written on our hearts. We go out to become the communication, the messengers, the letters that the world can read.

Mission does not start when we cross over our boundaries to go overseas. Mission is not an option for God's people. Mission defines who we are and what we are for. When you hear "mission," think "sending." Think "sender." Think "God is writing letters to the world."

God wants the world to know that there is healing and hope. He wants the world to experience the love that sent Jesus to the cross and raised him from the dead. He wants the world to hear good news and to become part of that good news. And so he prepares communities of Christians to be his letters to the world. He intends that the world should read us and discover the gospel! We, as visible, legible, available communication in our particular parts of the world, are to be known and read by all. ■

[This article is taken from a sermon preached on September 24, 2000 at the Decatur Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia.]

BOOK REVIEW

The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty

David G. Myers, with a foreword by Martin E. Marty. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, 414 pages.

Reviewed by Marvin D. Hoff, Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia
Holland, Michigan

In his new book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in An Age of Plenty*, David Myers shares documented, creative insights on "our culture," the culture to which Christians are committed to bringing the Gospel. Myers is the John Dirk Werkman Professor of Psychology at Hope College.

In his introduction to *Paradox*, Martin E. Marty writes: "...expect in each chapter to get an up-to-date, honest, accurate and fair-minded presentation of a host of indicators that all is not well. Then, when he lets us glimpse the slouchers and the sloughs, Myers says in effect, 'but, on the other hand...' and presents apparently contradictory testimony with which we have to reckon" (p. x).

Myers has been writing college/university psychology textbooks for more than two decades. His *Psychology* and

Social Psychology textbooks are far and away the best selling texts in their fields. He states that he wrote *Paradox* because "When writing psychology textbooks I sometimes come across information so interesting and so humanly significant that I just can't keep it to myself" (p.xi).

In his opening chapter, "Best of Times, Worst of Times," Myers identifies the "American paradox." It is the best of times because in former times:

- Children were exploited.
- Families were often broken—by death.
- The social safety net had gaping holes.
- Most people had limited educational opportunities.
- Women had restricted opportunities.
- Minorities were shunned. (pp. 3, 4)

It is the worst of times:

- The divorce rate has doubled.
- The teen suicide rate has tripled.
- The recorded violent crime rate has quintupled.
- The percentage of babies born to unmarried parents has (excuse the pun) sextupled.
- Cohabitation (a predictor of future divorce has increased seven fold. (p. 5)

The subsequent chapters show the present cultural status of sex, marriage, children, violence, money and misery, individualism and community, and media, minds and the public good. The two concluding chapters are: "Educating for a Moral Compass" and "Faith and Society." Each of the chapters helpfully follow a similar sequence.

In his chapter on marriage, entitled "The Past and Future of Marriage," Myers has sections on "The End of Marriage?" "Trends in Marriage and Misery," "Who Divorces?" "Why Has Divorce Increased?" "Alternatives to No-Fault Divorce," and "The 'New Familism'." Each section presents examples of very helpful social research on the subject matter, and some insightful observations by Myers. Like: "The new chorus of support for the nuclear family does transcend the labels of liberal and conservative. Its voices have included liberal Pat Schroeder and conservative William Bennett, liberal Marian Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund and conservative Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council, liberal Bill Bradley and conservative Jack Kemp, black radical Million Man Marcher Louis Farrakhan and white conservative Promise Keeper Bill McCartney" (p. 59).

In the chapter on "Money and Misery," after several sections in which he provides helpful research and insightful comments on money and life satisfaction,

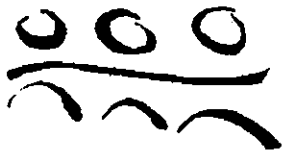
Myers provides these guidelines for a corporation that wishes to strengthen families: "Minimize the uprooting and relocation of families with children." "Provide greater opportunities for parental leave." "Relax the tension between work and family by offering flextime, compressed time, and part-time work schedules." "Create new incentives for a 30-hour work week." "Support the familial and religious roots of virtue by minimizing Sunday work requirements." "Allow increased home work." "Equitably compensate workers and executives." (Pp. 154 to 157.)

Within his chapter "America's Children," Myers presents stimulating research on the effect on children of poverty, divorce, single parent families, and parental influence. He closes the chapter with this observation: "If children's psychological disorders stem more from toxic cultural and peer influences (and yes, genetic influences) than from direct parental influence, what does this tell us?" (p. 95). Please read the book to be inspired by Myers' excellent answers to the question.

Myers has increased the clarity of *Paradox* with numerous, excellent quotations from an extensive range of people. They range from Aristotle to Ronald Reagan, from Charles Dickens to James Dobson, and from Benjamin Franklin to Newt Gingrich. His use of extensive quotations does not clutter his writing, but almost always illumines it.

Paradox, though well-written, is not an easy read. The research Myers presents, and the insights he draws from the research, are very stimulating. I often found myself reflecting on them rather than continuing to read. Having read *Paradox*, you will want to return to it often as a rich reference work on the cultural subjects within it.

If you would like to read introductory portions of *The American Paradox*, they are available on the internet at <http://www.davidmyers.org/paradox/>. ■



ADVANCE NOTICE

GOCN 2001 Consultation

October 18-20

Techny, Illinois

This October's GOCN Consultation on *Missional Systems* will be followed by the 2001 consultation on the theme *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*.

The theme draws its inspiration from the title of Darrell Guder's new book in the GOC Series.

Guder will give the keynote address, and a vision will be forged for "converting patterns" in the church's life.

Re-Visioning the Pastoral Vocation

Chris Erdman
University Presbyterian Church
Fresno, California

Negotiating the turbulence of the present cultural upheaval is the pastor's art. Pastors are those to whom the church has always looked for leadership, and those to whom we look for wisdom today.

Over the past few years I have

and *Liminality*, p. 57).

Some today realize that it may not be sufficient to speak of the renewal of the church. Rather we have entered a period in history so chaotic—perhaps even apocalyptic—that we must seek a *re-founding* of the church. But if a

1:23). It is through John the Baptist that the Johannine tradition, at least, introduces us to its ecclesiology. The church is essentially a witness to the inbreaking reign of God in Jesus Christ: "He himself was not the light, he came only to testify to the light"

Some today realize that it may not be sufficient
to speak of the renewal of the church.
We must seek a *re-founding* of the church.

been wondering if those of us called by the church to this crucial task have what it takes for leadership in times like these. I've found all too few examples of men and women I want to follow through the crisis. The few I have found are men and women formed more by an ancient tradition than by the vicissitudes of a culture in transition. They are those who are not enamored by the popular, intoxicated by the latest trend, dazzled by the so-called expert. In fact they seem unmoved by it all. It's not that they are ignorant of the world around them. On the contrary, they are often some of the best observers of the world. They are simply anchored firmly in an alternative reality. And when they speak, theirs is a voice that comes from the edge—that is, they speak for God and live out the gospel from the margins of society.

They are those who recognize the massive culture upheaval of our day, and celebrate this potent experience of liminality—a context that "requires a different kind of leader if congregations are to be encountered by and encounter our culture with the gospel." (Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership*

re-founding is to occur, the church must listen to voices from the edge. It must seek out the apostle, the prophet, and the poet. In what follows I do not intend to offer an exposition of this leadership triad. Al Roxburgh and others have done this better than I can. My purpose here is to begin an exploration of the ancient and often strange phenomenon of monasticism, and suggest a re-visioning of the contemporary pastoral vocation in the monastic light—a phenomenon that has given birth to apostolic, prophetic, and poetic leadership amid moments of cultural upheaval in the past. It is in Christian monks—the vocation of the "holy man," the "holy woman" in our midst—that God has periodically given the church gifted and gounded leaders who have proven to understand the gospel well, and have shaped vibrant communities capable of advancing its mission in the turbulent places they have made their home.

The Wisdom of the Desert

For the Gospel writers, John the Baptist is the paradigmatic witness to the gospel. He knows who he is not: "I am not the Christ" (John 1:20). And he knows who he is: "I am a voice" (John

(John 1:8). Whatever else the church may do and be, it cannot forget this foundational definition of its vocational identity. Should it do so, it will be rendered faithless, and no matter how relevant it becomes to the world, it will be irrelevant to God.

I've had the occasion to preach in African-American churches, and am always struck by the prayer prayed prior to my sermon. This prayer is very different from the prayers I've heard prayed in European-American Protestant pulpits. In these black churches they understand the pulpit ministry as an extension of the ministry of John the Baptist. The prayer generally includes some kind of reference to the "one who will now stand in the place of John the Baptist." Maybe the black churches understand better than my tradition does just what it is that the Fourth Gospel wants to teach the church: John the Baptist is not only a first century prophet, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, but he epitomizes the church itself as a witness to God's self-revelation—God's present and coming reign—in and through Jesus Christ. The black churches have always voiced the gospel from the edge, marginalized from the dominant

culture. They are a people who have celebrated apostles, prophets, and poets in their midst, and they have been more intentional about nurturing community life within an often hostile culture. Not only have they identified their preachers with the Baptizer who ministered in the wilderness, but they have identified their people with the Hebrew slaves liberated from Pharaoh's domination. They are a people on the way, through the desert, to the Promised Land. These are some of the voices the church must heed today. But there are others.

The desert is the place where the wise have always gone to meet God, to find themselves, to be handed a mission. It is a furnace for transformation. Beginning in the fourth century C.E., and throughout the epoch in which the

always dangerous to draw too close a parallel between one period in history and another. This is certainly true about parallels drawn between the Western world today and the period of the Roman Empire's demise. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned from that history. It too was a liminal moment, a period of enormous cultural upheaval. It was a time, MacIntyre says, when:

men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead—

**The monastic village is a promising model
for the church in the coming years
when we will be forced to learn again
a mode of being the people of God
in a strange land.**

Roman Empire descended into the Dark Ages, the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, and Persia became home to Christians fleeing the cities of the ancient world to live in solitude. They sought salvation, and believed that the culture of the Roman Empire was a "shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life.... These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster." The Emperor himself was now a Christian and the Cross was now identified with social and political power. This Constantinian synthesis only assured them that the gospel was now so irreparably domesticated that the only way to be authentically Christian within culture was through an active resistance to such a culture. They did not intend to flee the world only to save themselves—that is an ugly and misinformed caricature. No, "they knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they foundered about in the wreckage," wrote Thomas Merton. They sought only to gain a foothold on solid ground. From this rocky outcrop they "had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them" (*The Wisdom of the Desert*, pp. 3, 34.) The monastic flight into the desert was not an escape from the world; rather it was a flight *toward* God in order to live out the mission of God *in* the world.

Alastair MacIntyre in his celebrated and controversial critique of modern moral philosophy wisely warns that it is

often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite sometime. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict. (*After Virtue*, p. 263)

At its best, monasticism has consciously recognized our predicament when others who should have, turned a blind eye. I'm willing to wager that those pastors who will best construct "local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages" will be much more like the holy men and women of old—Benedict, Teresa, and others—than much of what passes for pastoral leadership today.

Apostle of the Emerald Isle

In many ways MacIntyre was right to steer us toward St. Benedict. Benedict was one of the greatest leaders in church history. But he still operated squarely from within Christendom. Surely he has much to teach us, but in our present situation there's another holy man who may do more for us than St. Benedict can. For me, St. Patrick of Ireland is a far more compelling figure. Patrick was first and foremost a missionary, the great Apostle to the Irish, a feisty evangelist and shaper of missional communities or monastic villages that became outposts of the *missio dei* in Ireland.

Born into a Christian family, at the end of the fourth century, somewhere along the northwest coast of England, Patrick was kidnapped by Irish slave-raiders at the age of sixteen. For six years he served his master—an Iron Age Irish warrior/king—as a shepherd boy among the bleak wind-swept hills of Ireland. The life of a shepherd-slave could not have been easy. Your life is in the hands of a man who values it little. You spend long periods isolated from contact with other human beings, and those contacts you do have can be filled with danger. We can imagine Patrick, an evidently resourceful young man, learning the customs and language and land of these strange people of his exile. We can also imagine him remembering the strength of the faith pressed upon him by his believing parents. His only real companions were the earth and sky, birds, deer, sheep, and of course hunger and the cold. But above him and beneath him—through it all—he discerned the presence of the holy Trinity, whom he learned to hear, adore, and obey. Here, in these years, is the making of the evangelizing monk, Patrick the apostle, prophet, and poet who looked and acted very much like the bards and druid priests the Irish knew, loved, and respected so well.

The Celtic monasticism inspired by Patrick (of course there were others like Bridget, second only to Patrick as the patron saint of Ireland; Celtic Christianity, true to its pagan roots was never exclusively male in leadership) was characterized by the "monastic village." These monks included men and women, married and single. Whole families were part of the community. Paradoxically these villages were "often built 'on the edge,' that is, in remote places, but at the same time seemed to be accessible and near crossroads of trade routes" (Timothy Joyce, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 38). They were centers for trade, agriculture, recreation, education, worship, and evangelical mission to the surrounding clans that had not yet accepted the gospel.

The monastic village is a promising model for the church

in the coming years when we will be forced to learn again a mode of being the people of God in a strange land. And the Patrick-like monastic missionary, leader of apostolic bands and missional communities, is a promising model of pastoral leadership. Patrick's genius was the way he was able to lead whole communities that genuinely *earthed* the gospel into the culture of the Irish without carrying along all the accompanying socio-political baggage of the Greco-Roman world—a world that was, for all intents and purposes, dying. This, I think, is the gift of a missional monasticism: when men, women, and children recognize "the coming ages of barbarism and darkness" (MacIntyre), and refuse to "flounder about in the wreckage" (Merton). Instead, they gather themselves together and become a sign, foretaste, and agent of the present and coming reign of God—penetrating, translating, critiquing, converting—leaving no stone unturned as they engage the world around them as an indigenously authentic hermeneutic of the gospel.

Aware of MacIntyre's warning that it is dangerous to draw too close a parallel from one epoch in history to another, I nevertheless think it is entirely appropriate to note the striking similarities between the breakdown of the Roman Empire and its loosening control over Britain in the fourth and fifth centuries and the collapse of Christendom and the unraveling of modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth. Then, the West was descending into the Dark Ages. Today, as MacIntyre prophesies, a new dark age may already be upon us.

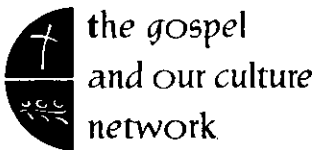
Romans or Saints?

I conclude with what I consider a poignant and profound vision for leadership in these turbulent times. Thomas Cahill's best-selling book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, won't be found on the bed-stands of those who most need to read it. It's not billed as a leadership tract for our time; I'm not sure Cahill knew he was writing such a book. But he was. As the New York Times puts it, Cahill's book is "an entirely engaging, delectable voyage" into the untold story of Ireland's heroic role from the fall of Rome to the rise of medieval Europe. By retelling this hidden story, Cahill directs attentive readers toward the form of leadership I've been describing, the one I think most able not only to endure the turbulence of today's world, but to lead us redemptively through it.

As we, the people of the First World, the Romans of the twentieth century, look out across the Earth, we see some signs of hope, many more for despair.... What will be lost, and what saved, of our civilization probably lies beyond our powers to decide. That future may be germinating today not in a board room in London or an office in Washington or a bank in Tokyo, but in some antic outpost or other—a kindly British orphanage in the grim foothills of Peru, a house for the dying in a back street of Calcutta run by a fiercely single-minded Albanian nun, an easygoing French medical team at the

Western Theological Seminary
101 E. 13th Street
Holland, MI 49423-3622

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
HOLLAND, MI 49423
PERMIT NO. 120



starving edge of the Sahel, a mission to Somalia by Irish social workers who remember their own Great Hunger, a nursery program to assist convict mothers at a New York prison—in some unheralded corner where a great-hearted human being is committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way.

Perhaps history is always divided into Romans and Catholics—or, better, catholics. The Romans are the rich and powerful who run things their way and must always accrue more because they instinctively believe that there will never be enough to go around; the Catholics, as their name implies, are universalists who instinctively believe that all humanity makes one family, that every human being is an equal child of God, and that God will provide. The twenty-first century, prophesied Malraux, will be spiritual or it will not be. If our civilization is to be saved—forget about our civilization, which as Patrick would say, may pass “in a moment like a cloud or smoke that is scattered by the wind”—if we are to be saved, it will not be by Romans but by saints. (Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, pp. 216-218.) ■

