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The Hebrew Bible begins with a description of space. Lacking form, empty, void, תוהו ובוהו was the earth, with darkness and wind and chaotic waters—a description that captures some of the essence of space as a concept. Space is empty but it contains things. It lacks filling but carries the possibility of being filled. It is void but one has to move through it to get somewhere. In Genesis, God makes space. Or more precisely, he reconfigures space in order to make the space of the cosmos, with all the things it contains, as we know it. But space is not stable of course. It is ever shifting and being reconfigured. God constructs space in the opening verses of Genesis, and then his created order itself continually reconstructs space throughout the Bible’s texts. Space is never constant, its boundaries never fixed. Its boundaries, moreover, are not always agreed upon. The limits of space (and its conceptual cousin, time) depend on human perception and position.

Although scholars of the Bible have always been concerned with space to some extent (indeed, given a text like Genesis 1, how could we not be concerned with it?), in recent years it has become an especially productive conceptual category within biblical scholarship. The American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature jointly hosted the Constructions of Ancient Space Seminar at their annual meetings from 2000 to 2005. Then the European Association of Biblical Studies began its own
A seminar devoted to space, entitled Bible and Sacred Space, a research program that went on for more than a decade. These scholarly efforts have produced no less than five volumes of essays to date, and many of the seminar participants have also written monographs related to their research. There has been, too, an increase in scholarly attention to certain types of spaces, the city for example—mainly Jerusalem—with its various conceptualizations and quarters. One can map this recent trend in biblical studies onto a larger spatial trend in the humanities. And because space, as a concept to think with, is so broad and touches on every aspect of human life in one way or another, it can serve as a central talking point that successfully brings together academic study of the Bible with other fields of research.

The two volumes under review aim to do just that. The edited volume *Constructions of Space III* and the monograph *The King and the Land* explore conceptualizations of space in the Bible, interacting with scholarship from the fields of geography, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and others. Each book is to be commended for its attention to questions that have not often been asked of the Bible’s texts. How is space “made sacred” in biblical texts, and how does the making of sacred space relate to other social constructions in the literature (Økland, de Vos, and Wenell, p. xvi)? In the texts, how is political power—especially royal power, with all its ties to divinity and sacredness—formed in space, and how does space inform power (Russell, pp. 1–3)? Moreover, how does one take into

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2. For example, with regard to the Hebrew Bible, J. C. de Vos, *Das Los Judas: Über Entstehung und Ziele der Landbeschreibung in Josua 15* (VTSup 95; Leiden: Brill, 2003); M. K. George, *Israel’s Tabernacle as Social Space* (SBLAIL 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); C. Meredith, *Journeys in the Songscape: Space and the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), among others.


account the textuality of this making and unmaking of sacred and political space? Indeed, “spatial-critical approaches have provided a vocabulary through which the ancient texts are allowed to speak in new ways and also to address modern people in new ways” (Økland, de Vos, and Wenell, p. xvii). As a driver of research, the concept of space can take biblical scholarship into new territories. In asking new questions, of course, the challenge that researchers face is to provide answers that continue pushing the limits of our knowledge, instead of retreating back into the same old comfortable ideas. For the most part, the editors and authors of these works succeed in both asking new questions and providing ground-breaking answers. And even at points where they are less successful in their endeavors, where they struggle to leave behind the comforts of familiar scholarly territory, they nevertheless provide sightlines into new realms of thought.

1. SACRED SPACE

Constructions of Space III focuses in particular on “the sacred” as it relates to space. The volume contains two main parts: “Hebrew Bible” (part 1); and “New Testament and Intertestamental Literature” (part 2). It also includes an introduction by the editors (pp. xiii–xxii); a concluding “Outlook” by David Jasper, entitled “The Space of Liturgical Being” (pp. 217–226), which is a personal and theological reflection on researching and writing in space; and indices of references and authors. In their introductory comments, the editors explain that they felt it necessary to take a kind of post-theory approach. These days, they argue, there is no need to defend the usefulness of spatial theory, and so they focus mainly on analyses of primary texts. Their volume provides “close, sensitive readings of sacred spaces” that do not always draw on the major spatial theorists (p. xvi), although those theorists and their questions are nonetheless present in the essays, as I discuss below.

In the volume’s first contribution, “Holy Men in Space” (pp. 3–22), Stuart Lasine asks: why, in 2 Kgs 4:9, does the woman from Shunem refer to Elisha as a “holy man of God” (אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים קָדוֹשׁ)? No other person in the biblical texts is described in this way. Moreover, how is he holy and how does his holiness relate to the spaces in which he acts? For Lasine, this question is a starting point for asking bigger questions about how we, as readers, perceive supposedly holy characters—including God himself—in relation to their movements through and actions within space.
Since the story does not give direct insights into the motivations of the characters, readers are left to interpret the text based on preformed understandings of holiness and its functions. Why, for example, does the Shunammite build a special room for the holy man Elisha? Is it to make her home holy by bringing him into the general space? Is it to protect his holy status by keeping him separate from the rest of the home? Throughout the Elisha narratives there is a special emphasis on so-called “private” space, the closing of doors at certain moments (e.g., 2 Kgs 4:4, 21, 33), and it appears that entering the doorway of Elisha’s room can play a part in miraculous happenings (cf. 2 Kgs 4:15–17), suggesting that his holiness is somewhat “contagious” (cf. also the supposed power of his staff; 2 Kgs 4:29). But the text itself does not clarify these issues, leaving it up to the reader to infer the nature of the interplay between Elisha’s holiness and the space that it does, or does not, inhabit. To clear things up, Lasine points to the holiness of Yahweh and to the deity’s role as king of his chosen people. Yahweh’s rule requires the people to “negotiate zones of holiness and impurity” (p. 17), so as not to offend him and bring punishment upon themselves. A “man of God” like Elisha, Lasine argues, mirrors the deity’s power. Holiness is, thus, conceptually linked to divine power, first and foremost, and has strong ties to power over and within certain space. In this case, holiness is not necessarily about morals or ethics, about doing the right thing as it were—many of Elisha’s actions are morally suspect, including his granting the Shunammite a child she never asked for, which leads to great trauma in her life. Holiness is, instead, about miraculous ability and properly navigating the spaces in which such ability is on display.

The title of the volume’s next piece—Roland Boer’s “Egypt as a Space of Fear and a Space of Hope” (pp. 23–36)—sums up its contribution nicely. Boer argues that the Bible’s representation of Egypt is ambivalent, even contradictory. Egypt makes an outstanding case study of spatial construction because it “saturates the biblical text” (p. 23). Indeed, Boer demonstrates this saturation by listing and categorizing all 671 references to the locale in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. If a reader were not sure about Egypt’s ubiquity in the Bible, one is well aware of it after scanning the opening pages of this essay. Following his exhaustive taxonomy of Egypt, Boer makes the case that the land of the Nile—within the Bible’s literature—functions as utopia and dystopia; it is a space constructed on the edge of the known world, a liminal zone ready to be invested with
hopes and fears alike. The status of this literary topos, as utopian or dystopian, depends on the space’s openness. As an open land, it serves as utopia; closed, it is dystopia. Genesis 47 is a paradigmatic text for Boer’s understanding of Egypt. In this passage Pharaoh’s land is open at first (v. 6), but with Joseph’s enactment of debt-slavery (v. 19) “utopia has become dystopia, a space of fear through an act of authoritarian closure” (p. 29).

This ambivalent representation of Egypt is directly related to what Boer has called the “sacred economy” of ancient Southwest Asia, an economy based on logistics of allocation and extraction and tension between the two. Boer makes this economic argument at greater length in a recent monograph. The closing pages of this particular essay offer a good summary of his book-length work. Without having read Boer’s monograph, however, a reader might wonder what exactly is “sacred” about this economy, which he refers to as the “real historical conditions” of Egypt’s ambivalent textual representation. Is the economy “sacred” simply because divinity, or some supposed aspect of human-divine interrelationship, is tied up in its logistics of allocation, extraction, hope, and fear? If so, how precisely does the deity function as part of the larger economic structure, and why is that important for the spatial construction of Egypt in biblical texts? Or does the deity’s role even really matter? These sorts of questions are not addressed directly in Boer’s essay, but they are worth considering as they relate to our interpretations of space and “the sacred” in biblical literature.

In these first two essays of the volume, a central theme emerges: that which is considered sacred (or holy) in the Bible’s literature is first and foremost powerful. A certain man is holy, and the space he inhabits is holy, because of his power to perform superhuman acts that affect human lives, regardless of the morals or ethics of such actions. A certain economy is sacred because of its power to elicit human hopes and fears in the processes of material exchange. But the nature and function of “sacred” power itself, as it is talked about in the texts, remain mostly unexplored in the essays. Is its source rooted in material needs and modes of production (cf. Karl Marx), in social formation and maintenance (cf. Émile Durkheim), in some other reality that manifests itself within and orients human life (cf. Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade)? And how do the positions


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of scholars themselves contribute to such notions of power, as we understand them in the texts (cf. J. Z. Smith)? Without always making these issues conspicuous, the essays in Constructions of Space III successfully encourage the reader to grapple with their implications for scholarly theories of both space and “the sacred” in relation to power.

The editors state that the volume’s approach to the sacred is “constructivist,” in that it takes into account various conceptions of the term and scholarly approaches to it (cultural-anthropological, psychoanalytical, and so on; Økland, de Vos, and Wenell, p. xvi). Later they state their hope that readers will encounter “a touch of the sacred” by engaging with the volume (p. xxi), a statement that hints at a preference for Eliade in particular.6 The editors’ apparent Eliadean leaning notwithstanding, it is important to emphasize that a constructivist stance allows for the concept to be formed in different ways, with different methods and ideas. A great strength of the volume is its juxtaposition of different readings of texts in relation to various constructions of space, sacredness, and power—even when the essays themselves do not overtly question such constructions.

“Mythical Space and Mythical Time: Jerusalem as the Site of the Last Judgment” (pp. 37–57) is Klaus Bieberstein’s contribution. Unlike the essays that go before it, Bieberstein’s provides some explicit theoretical orientation before venturing into any biblical texts or locales. Immanuel Kant, Ernst Cassirer, Maurice Halbwachs, and Mircea Eliade all feature prominently in the first half of his essay. Drawing on these thinkers, and a number of others too, Bieberstein works to map Jerusalem as mythical space. He argues that, in general, there are “three modes of semiotization (purely verbal connotation, temporary visualization, and permanent monumentalization) and…three basic forms of spatialization (axial, concentric, and contingent)” (pp. 44–45), each of which contributes to how space is remembered and imagined collectively in a community. Since he works primarily with written texts—mostly Hebrew sources but some Greek, Latin, and Arabic as well—his discussion focuses on verbal semiotics. Archaeology is not a major concern here, though archaeological work does inform his knowledge of the ancient city and its features vis-à-vis the texts (e.g., tombs on the city’s western side). In discourse about Jerusalem as the site of divine judgment, Bieberstein observes, first of all,

a concentric understanding of the city. The temple is its all-important center, and its peripheral zones are associated with chaos and death. The further one gets from the center, the more chaotic and deadly the space is understood to be.

This observation of Jerusalem’s mythic landscape (which applies to the mythic landscapes of other cities too) is not unique to Bieberstein, of course, but he supplements it with what he sees in the texts as a prominent axial understanding of the space. To the west (and south) there is the Hinnom Valley, with its literal and metaphorical associations with judgment and death, associations that are prominent especially in earlier periods of antiquity. Later, argues Bieberstein, these associations moved to the east, to the Kidron Valley and Mount of Olives. This axial shift is observable in biblical texts: the eastern periphery is the place to which Yahweh retreats in his act of exilic judgment (Ezekiel 9–11), and it is also the direction from which the deity would return when the city is renewed (Ezekiel 40–48). And the eastern periphery remained the focus of such discourse in later periods: in ancient Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources alike the Kidron Valley serves as the locale for eschatological divine judgment. Bieberstein’s work here is largely descriptive. It offers little historical interpretation or analysis of this apparent spatial shift. However, read in conjunction with the volume’s other contributions, Bieberstein’s essay will push readers to consider the interrelated questions of space, sacredness, and power I have noted above. In this way, his piece provides data and talking points that can move research forward along these lines.

The volume’s next contribution is Tamara Prosic’s “The ‘Threshing Floor’ as Sacred Space in the Hebrew Bible: A Spatial and Anthropological Perspective” (pp. 58–74). Prosic begins by arguing that, despite the uptick in spatial studies in the past few decades, threshing floors have not received due attention. She notes only one other work in biblical studies that has examined threshing floors from a spatial-critical perspective: an article by Victor Matthews.7 Since the time of Prosic’s writing, however, several other significant pieces have appeared that scholars will want to consider alongside her study and Matthews’ article. These include

a chapter in Stephen Russell’s monograph, which I discuss below, and a perceptive essay by Francis Landy.\(^8\)

In any case, Prosic builds her work on a critique of Matthews’ study, taking issue with his emphasis on the socioeconomic implications of space. She suggests that he overemphasizes socioeconomics to the detriment of associated cultural meanings and ideological contexts. Threshing floors, argues Prosic, were not simply places of practical dealings and social interaction, even though they may have served such functions historically. In biblical texts—which were meant to advance particular religious ideologies—threshing floors are spaces linked metaphorically and imaginatively with war, violence, and death; with controversy, trouble, and strife (p. 60). The space of a threshing floor is symbolically complex and liminal, in that it represents aspects of both death and life and can function as a threshold between the two. The threshing floor is “a spatial conduit between [the world of the dead and the living]” (p. 68). It is a space for mourning death (e.g., Gen 50:10–11) and for leaving the dead behind to start anew (e.g., Ruth 3).

Prosic’s essay comments on several texts that feature threshing floors, all of which contribute to her overarching thesis concerning the cultural significance of this sort of space. But her most detailed and intriguing thoughts are reserved for David’s purchase of the Jebusite’s threshing floor in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. David’s purchase assuages divine anger, of course, ending the pestilence brought on by David’s census. But she takes the argument further than that. The purchase, in her reading, ultimately serves to convert a Jebusite space to Yahwism, so to speak. “Contrary to popular understanding,” Prosic asserts, “religious conversions are not restricted to people” (p. 62). In this way, the sacred space is not made so much as it is *remade* in relation to a different deity. What once belonged to Jebusite divinity now belongs to Yahweh. The space has been religiously transferred and thus transformed.

In her discussion of threshing floors, Prosic cites the classic work of Henri Lefebvre as inspiration, as does Matthews in his spatial-critical study.\(^9\) Indeed, Lefebvre’s scholarship has been a common touchpoint in biblical studies of space, at least since the Constructions of Ancient Space

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Seminar began meeting in 2000. Lefebvre’s 1974 opus *La production de l’espace* brought modern discussions of space—which had generally taken place within the realms of geometry, landscaping, architectural design, and the like—into the realms of sociology, cultural studies, and historical discourse. It is a work that, like Prosic’s, focuses on cultural meaning and significance and ideology, but it is equally concerned with socioeconomics, interaction, and exchange, like Matthew’s article. Lefebvre’s book—though it dialogues with Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, George Bataille, and a range of other thinkers—is thoroughly Marxist in orientation, hence the “production” of its title. Both Prosic and Matthews have made important contributions to our knowledge of ancient Israel’s culture and society, to be sure, but it seems each under-appreciates Lefebvre as an interlocutor for studying threshing floors as social space.

According to Christopher Meredith, Prosic and Matthews are in good company. His essay, “Taking Issue with Thirdspace: Reading Soja, Lefebvre and the Bible” (pp. 75–103), makes the case that Lefebvre’s work is frequently misapplied in biblical studies. The first issue Meredith raises is the supposed theoretical affinity between Lefebvre’s research and the political geography of Edward Soja. Biblical scholars often conflate these two spatial studies pioneers because of their similarities. Soja interacts with Lefebvre, and both take a “trialectic” approach to thinking about space. Soja employs the terms first, second, and third space, which are meant to be comparable to Lefebvre’s perceived, conceived, and lived space. For each of these scholars, the trialectic serves to inform the interplay of space’s physical, ideological, and experiential aspects. But for Soja in particular, the trialectic is programmatic; it is the central principle of his method, and his goal is to highlight thirdspace as a place of revolutionary political praxis. Lefebvre, however, introduces trialectic principles (note the plural—he actually discusses several theoretical triads) in service of a rather different agenda. Lefebvre’s major concern is Marxist periodization, identifying and analyzing shifts in the social production of space through time. Delving into the works of Soja and Lefebvre, and into biblical studies that have employed them, Meredith convincingly shows

10. Browsing the five *Constructions of Space* volumes, for example, readers will find references to Lefebvre in most of the essays.
how scholars of the Bible have read Lefebvre with Sojan lenses, thus obscuring Lefebvre’s uniqueness.

This blurred reading of Lefebvre, Meredith argues, points to a larger, more general issue with biblical studies of space: “applying ‘space’ as a critical designation to the Bible is never methodologically straightforward, since the Bible is rolled into the formation of Western space itself and into the formation of critical discussions on ‘space,’” Lefebvre’s included” (pp. 89–90; cf. 99). Scholars have read and applied modern theories of space to the Bible, it seems, without taking into account the Bible’s own influence on the shaping of such theories in the first place.

Meredith supports this thesis with a deft study of Bernard of Clairvaux, reading Bernard’s sermons alongside Lefebvre’s own spatial-critical analysis of Bernard’s contributions to European society. Lefebvre situates the abbot Bernard as a key figure in the emergence of early market capitalism in the urban landscape—the rise of cathedrals and verticality in the medieval city were, according to Lefebvre, signs of the Church’s visible irruption into the everyday world. Meredith then links Lefebvre’s understanding of Bernard with the abbot’s own written sermons on the Song of Songs. Meredith shows how, on account of the Song’s fuzzy picture of space—its representation of a “fluid and distorted environment” (p. 95)—Bernard was able to imagine the Song as referring to the space of Clairvaux’s monastery (and thus to Cistercian architecture in general). Bernard’s imagining of space in the biblical Song, therefore, influenced discourse about emerging medieval architecture, which in turn informed Lefebvre’s modern theorizing and analysis of social space.

Meredith’s research here is truly novel. Because of its particular theoretical focus, however, it perhaps loses sight of key issues that are more clearly central to the other contributions in Constructions of Space III. Analysis of “the sacred,” of its construction in the Song and in relation to Cistercian space, is not overtly present in Meredith’s essay (though keen readers will find he provides much fodder for thought on these issues). Nonetheless, of all the volume’s contributions, Meredith’s is the most theoretically informative, in that it asks us outright to consider carefully our positions as scholars and the position of the Bible in the history of scholarship and society at large. It is a fitting conclusion to part 1 of the volume.

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Part 2 then contains essays on “New Testament and Intertestamental Literature,” most of which do not examine Hebrew language and literature per se. But I will comment briefly on two essays that do. The first is Liv Ingeborg Lied’s “What Happened to the Heavenly World when the Righteous Finally Arrived? Transformation, Space and Redemption in 2 Baruch 51” (pp. 107–122). Interpretations of 2 Bar. 51:1–13 usually focus on anthropological transformation in the text, but Lied argues that spatial transformation is key too. The elevation of the righteous to a position under God’s throne transforms the social hierarchy of heavenly space (humans gain status in the realm of heavenly beings), it transforms the function of that space (from a site of judgment to a site of worshipful assembly), and it reifies the space in human experience (what was once imaginary is made real).

The other piece relevant to Hebrew studies is Nóra Dávid’s “Death, Burial, and Sacred Space in the Temple Scroll” (pp. 123–134). Dávid examines how space is set apart (i.e., made sacred) vis-à-vis the human corpse, which is “the highest source of impurity [in the Qumran scrolls]” (p. 123). She observes two different concentric-spatial systems: one centered on the dead human body, with the center being absolutely impure; and another centered on the temple, with the center being the epitome of purity. And each system requires certain human actions and ethics to form and maintain the quality of space. “Sacred space,” therefore argues Dávid, “is formed by the exclusion of certain things that are considered to be polluting” (p. 132).

As with others in the volume, these two contributions in part 2 focus on textual analysis and close reading at the expense of detailed theorization of concepts. Of course, this does not mean that theorizing is totally absent from the essays. For example, with regard to sacredness, Dávid understands spatial construction mainly in negative terms. That which is sacred lacks impurity. Thus she leaves open the question of positive formations; that is, precisely how the “active force” or “divine energy” of holiness (קדשה; p. 125) contributes to formations of sacred and pure space within the concentric systems that she has observed in the Temple Scroll. To be clear, this critique is not a criticism. In the context of the volume,

these essays work very well with the others in their demonstrations of careful, spatial-critical analysis—analysis that is informed by certain theoretical approaches to space, but that also brings forth possibilities for further refinement of such theory. The volume’s many sharp and close readings of specific texts, combined with Meredith’s thoughtful theoretical reflection on Lefebvre and biblical studies, make it an engaging and thought-provoking read.

2. Kingly Space

The same can be said of Stephen Russell’s volume, The King and the Land. It is equally engaging and thought-provoking in its questioning of space and spatial constructions of power, even if the way it answers those questions are sometimes less than novel. Russell’s work is classically historical-critical in its study of the Bible. It seeks to provide insights into the biblical texts’ original contexts and purposes in antiquity. He recognizes that the Bible’s books are ultimately post-monarchic compositions (i.e., as we know them, they came together in the Neo-Babylonian, Persian, and even later periods), but underlying these compositions there is textual material dating to the Iron Age, the era of Israel’s and Judah’s monarchies. And so, he argues, biblical books may serve as sources for understanding “the spatial foundations of monarchic legitimacy” in the Iron Age Levant (p. 1). To find monarchical-era texts in post-monarchic literature he: (a) looks for language that appears to be from the Iron Age; (b) argues that the conditions of possibility for the emergence of Hebrew vernacular prose lie in the Iron Age; and (c) compares the social world represented in the texts with what we know about actual social life in the Iron Age. These methodological lines of approach are, of course, well established in biblical scholarship and well utilized today. Biblical scholars that have influenced Russell’s work here include Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, Avi Hurvitz and Gary Rendsburg, Seth L. Sanders and Daniel E. Fleming, among others. Developments in spatial theory—Eliade, Lefebvre, and so on—have inspired Russell’s study of the texts, while the study itself relies on well-worn historical-critical methods.

In The King and the Land’s opening chapter, Russell introduces his questions and his approach to answering them. The biblical account of Solomon’s building projects (1 Kgs 5:14–8:50) provides a gateway into the study. The Temple is built with Phoenician materials and labor, and its described style matches typical northern Levantine design. “Why,”
asks Russell, “does the literary account of Solomon’s construction of the palace and temple emphasize the use of foreign architecture?” (p. 2). He answers, because it expresses a certain politics. The Temple’s Phoenician connections point to an “exclusionary strategy” of power, one that “depends on control over relationships between the group and external networks” (pp. 3, 7). Questions of the social interplay between space, power, and kingship are thus the impetuses for textual study. In terms of spatial theory, Russell acknowledges a general indebtedness to Lefebvre but avoids an overly schematic application of the French scholar’s insights. Thus he avoids some of the spatial-theoretical pitfalls pointed out by Christopher Meredith (see above).

In terms of power, he draws on sociological research that emphasizes “the complex interactions between a variety of social actors” within social structures (p. 6). In his investigations of this social interplay in different texts, Russell aims, ultimately, to contribute to theoretical discussions of power by examining social constructions of space. Indeed, power will be a common talking point for readers of the two volumes under review. As discussed above, the theme of power is central to the contributions in Constructions of Space III, although readers will have to infer its import at different points in those essays. In The King and the Land, the power theme is more overt. But it is overt only as an analytical starting point. The sociological and anthropological works cited in chapter 1 of The King and the Land—works by Michael Mann, Anthony Giddens, and Richard Blanton, for example—are not so much interlocutors as they are occasions to critique the biblical texts with certain issues in mind. In his introductory comments, Russell states more than once that he wants his readings of the ancient texts (and other evidence) to inform theory and not vice versa. In this way, both volumes are founded on similar methodological ideals, in that they tend to privilege textual analysis instead of extended theoretical reflection.

Following the introductory chapter, chapters 2–5 present case studies of space and power in biblical texts that are concerned with monarchy. The volume’s sixth and concluding chapter is a very brief summary of the entire work. Also included are ninety-four pages of endnotes, a bibliography, and indices of ancient sources and subjects.

The first case study, in chapter 2, takes up the issue of the threshing floor in 2 Samuel 24. Russell’s work here makes an excellent companion to Prosic’s essay in Constructions of Space III (see above). Russell shares Prosic’s interest in the religious and ideological function of the threshing
floor, as represented in the text, and his piece offers additional insights into why those functions are so important for understanding the text as a cultural and historical artifact. The text presents a number of interpretive difficulties concerning the necessity of David’s purchase of the land. Exodus 30:11–16 indicates that census-taking requires ritual expiation, and so the purchase of Araunah’s oxen makes some sense. But why purchase the threshing floor too? Surveying a variety of other biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts, Russell shows that the land purchase is necessary, in the cultural world of the text, in order to protect the king against any future claims on the land. David’s purchase is an act of devotion, and to genuinely devote the land to his deity Yahweh, he needs legal and ongoing right to the land. As far as I know, Russell and Prosic were not aware of each other’s work—they were researching at roughly the same time, on opposite sides of the globe. But the two pieces go well together. Russell’s research complements Prosic’s emphasis on the land’s religious “conversion” to Yahwism, providing additional cultural and historical data that relates to her thesis.

The King and the Land’s third chapter takes a close look at Jehu’s “dung heap” (מַחֲרָオー, 2 Kgs 10:27). The king’s remaking of Samaria’s temple into a waste-site, argues Russell, serves as an exemplar of “destructive royal power” in relation to religious space (p. 40). This basic point is well taken and contributes to Russell’s major argument about the social interplay of space and power. But the bulk of the chapter is devoted to questions of 2 Kgs 10:18–28’s compositional history. A number of scholars have seen this passage as the work of a single scribe, part of a longer text about Jehu that eventually became the foundation of 2 Kings 9–10. Russell argues, instead, that 2 Kgs 10:18–28 was based on a single, independent account that was substantially revised before being incorporated into a larger narrative. In the text, Russell sees evidence of two compositional layers, which he labels simply “A” and “B.” Layer A has affinities with Priestly tradition while Layer B has Deuteronomistic ties.15 “Layer A,” he argues, “depicts the murder of cultic personnel associated with one temple of Baal” but “does not appear to describe a national religious purge” (p. 61). Only with the composition of Layer B—which he argues was editorial and probably never an independent, coherent

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account—would Jehu’s actions take on national and permanent significance; and only with Layer B would Jehu’s religious motivations (i.e., his Yahwism) become a central part of the discourse.

Detailing this reconstruction, Russell comments on representations of Israelite royal power in relation to Priestly and Deuteronomistic ideologies, and he concludes the chapter by discussing comparable acts of royal power represented in Mesopotamian texts (e.g., Sennacherib’s Bavian rock inscription, which describes the Assyrian king desecrating Babylon’s temples). In the chapter’s closing pages, he observes similarity across the ancient Near Eastern world: in that context, “royal power could be expressed through the decommissioning of cultic space” (p. 65). But he also observes an important difference between the Mesopotamian exemplars and “the earliest biblical portrait of Jehu’s massacre, Layer A”: while Mesopotamian kings utilize their extensive military resources and might for such tasks, Jehu utilizes cunningness, luring the priests of Baal into assembly only to execute them; Jehu’s royal power is, thus, “more limited” than the power of Mesopotamian kings (p. 66). Russell’s emphasis on both similarities and differences in his comparative analysis is commendable. But readers may find this comparative work to be moot because it is based on a debatable reconstruction of textual origins and layers. The argument relies on a rather fine slicing of material within just a handful of verses. Russell qualifies his reconstruction by identifying parts of it that are “less certain” and “even less certain” (p. 58), but his conclusions nonetheless require the specific details to be correct.

Such textual reconstruction and argumentation features prominently in Russell’s work. Because of its keen interest in classic historical-critical issues, the volume’s contributions to scholarship—which are no doubt significant—sometimes have more to do with textual dating and development than they do with ancient social constructions and representations of space. This is certainly true of chapter 3. Deep in the weeds of source- and redaction-critical hypotheses, in most of this chapter readers will find themselves far removed from the discussions of spatial and social theory that opened the volume. The chapter’s modest proposal concerning space—that kings would destroy cultic space, socially and physically and otherwise, as a means to power—is overshadowed by its close focus on literary composition. Its major contribution, indeed, is a “new editorial history for the narrative of Jehu’s coup” (p. 64). As stated, Russell’s method in the volume prioritizes classic historical-critical analysis at the expense of detailed theoretical elaboration in relation to the composite
texts themselves. This sometimes detracts from the volume’s spatial-critical insights. Several times in the volume Russell asserts that biblical texts and ideas were “not merely invented by scribes in the post-monarchic period” (p. 13; cf. pp. 8, 14, 40, 47), a statement that very few scholars would disagree with. But by situating himself “within a scholarly tradition that seeks to recover monarchic-era content in this post-monarchic collection [i.e., the Hebrew Bible]” (p. 8), Russell is forced to work with data that he has to abstract. And so he mostly sets aside questions that involve the post-monarchic texts as we know them and how those texts might relate to overarching spatial-political concerns of their day.

To be clear, I agree that 2 Kgs 10:18–28 contains both Priestly and Deuteronomistic features, and Russell’s discussion of the features is learned and interesting. But what if, instead of working to disentangle such features, we pay more attention to what spatial meanings they would produce synchronically, for readers of the composite literature? Why and how would reading this account of Jehu’s destructive acts matter, in terms of space, for tradents of the post-monarchic book of Kings? Questions like these, which come at the texts from the opposite chronological direction, so to speak, allow us to work with more robust evidence and broaden the possibilities for discussions of space and power in the Bible. Russell’s work is most effective when he invites readers to consider these sorts of issues, paying less attention to reconstructing editorial histories.

In that regard, chapter 4 is a model. It explores “political support at the level of the town…the relationship between centralized and collective strategies of political action” (p. 68). Here, Absalom’s interactions at city gates in 2 Sam 15:1–6 serve as an example of the “collective politics of towns and tribes” (p. 69). David’s son inserts himself into the space and dealings of city gates in order to appear as a just king who participates in local political norms. In this case, written textual evidence and archaeological evidence nicely align to support Russell’s thesis. City gates in the southern Levant often contained significantly open space, with benches and basins and relatively large chambers, suggesting that the gates served civic functions. Stelae and monumental inscriptions, too, had their homes in gates. Absalom’s hanging out at such locales reflects knowledge of and an attempt to take advantage of this political structure. It ironically contrasts him with David, the king who was divinely chosen but who apparently does not meet the local needs of his people. Absalom’s intra-
group politicking also contrasts him with Solomon, who enacts an “exclu-
sionary strategy of power” that focuses on extra-group relations (p. 83; cf.
pp. 3, 7). Other scholars have read 2 Samuel 15 in this way, contrasting
Absalom’s political strategy with David’s especially, but Russell’s work
here is unique in its attentiveness to extra-biblical data from the Levant
and from Mesopotamia too. It illuminates the importance of collective
town politics throughout the ancient Near East, which makes Absalom’s
political moves in 2 Samuel all the more striking.

The final case study, in the volume’s fifth chapter, focuses on
“Hezekiah’s Tunnel” in Jerusalem. The chapter discusses the archaeology
of the Siloam tunnel, bringing readers up-to-date in the debate over its
origins and purposes. But chapter 5’s main concern is the Bible’s represen-
tations of Hezekiah as a water-worker. Here, as in chapter 3, Russell
ventures into compositional history as a way to flesh out his spatial-critical
interests. He argues that 2 Kgs 20:20 and 2 Chr 32:3–4, each of which
mention water-related building projects of Hezekiah, are not literarily de-
pendent on one another; and that 2 Chr 32:30, another mention of
Hezekiah’s water-working, is a later gloss. Russell states, the texts “make
independent claims about Hezekiah’s power to shape Jerusalem’s lands-
scape” (p. 85); they “make distinct historical claims, which should be
evaluated separately” (p. 99). In his historical-critical evaluations of the
Hezekiah narratives, Russell again makes good use of comparable data
from Mesopotamia and from Israel’s/Judah’s Levantine neighbors. He
finds two types of royal waterworks in the ancient Near East: (1) efforts
to secure water and agricultural abundance for the people, a sign of the
gods’ favor; and (2) manipulation of water supply as a military tactic (e.g.,
in siege warfare). Second Kings 20:20 falls into the former category, 2
Chr 32:3–4 into the latter. The additional statement in 2 Chr 32:30, con-
tends Russell, “assembles the separate notices about Hezekiah’s reshaping
of Jerusalem’s water supply system in 2 Chr 32:3–4 and 2 Kgs 20:20 into
a geographically and architecturally coherent picture” (p. 91).

In the final paragraph of chapter 5, Russell asks what I think is a key
question for this kind of study: “What literary effect do the notices about
Hezekiah’s reshaping of Jerusalem’s water supply have in their contexts
in Kings and Chronicles?” (p. 105). He states simply that the notices con-
tribute to the narratives’ general conceptions of Hezekiah as a good king.

16. For example, J. Baden, The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero (New
Although his analysis of 2 Chr 32:30 suggests that ancient literati had multiple narratives and were considering them carefully in relation to one another, he does not tease out the implications of this analysis—perhaps because he prioritizes questions of textual composition over questions of textual reception and reading. Russell, thus, only gestures at an answer to his question about literary effect. In so doing, however, he has effectively prepped the field for future research along this line. A more thorough spatial-critical examination of the Bible’s historiographical literature, one that focuses on the cultural import of these composite texts among their tradents, is now in order for biblical scholars.

3. TO CONCLUDE

With issues of literary effect in mind, scholars could productively expand on the insights of both Constructions of Space III and The King and the Land. For example, how does Hezekiah’s relationship with and manipulation of space relate to understandings of sacredness in the texts, and what do such understandings say about possible interpretations of relative and absolute power in relation to monarchy, in a post-monarchic context? Hezekiah is able to keep Sennacherib out, but he allows Merodach Baladan in. How would these inter-kingdom relations impact Jerusalem’s overall construction as a sacred space, in the literature, for readers of the book of Kings? And of course there is also the issue of the divine king, Yahweh, and his contributions to the concepts of space, sacredness, and power in these ancient textual constructions. Neither of the volumes directly addresses that particular issue. The two works, however, even where they do not go into such territories, invite these kinds of further explorations. Researchers interested in pushing the spatial boundaries of biblical studies will want to consult both volumes carefully and repeatedly. In our sometimes insular quarter of the humanities, they have opened up space for new thought and for innovative interactions.