

Book Reviews

GEORGE, MARK, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*. Ancient Israel and Its Literature, vol. 2. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009. xiv+233 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

The work under consideration, one of the first monographs to emerge from the circle of biblical scholars engaged in critical spatial studies, is an important statement in the resurgent conversation about the role of the tabernacle in the Priestly document (P) of the Pentateuch. Mark George proposes to solve the problem of the function of the tabernacle plan-and-execution narratives in Exodus by an appeal to critical spatial theory, most prominently that of Henri Lefebvre, whose tripartite conceptualization of the social production of space provides the framework for George's investigation. After orienting the reader to the scope and objectives of his theoretical approach, George discusses the tabernacle in light of Lefebvre's triad, retranslated as "spatial practice," "conceptual space," and "symbolic space." Aspects of tabernacle *spatial practice* include the processes of material procurement, inventory, transport, and orientation. Such aspects encoded social meaning and "together shaped Israel's understanding of self" (85). *Conceptual space* in tabernacle texts is not, as conventionally understood, governed by a notion of "graded holiness" but rather a social taxonomic model that generates the spatial boundaries. Community membership, descent, and hereditary succession thus define tabernacle zones instead of a progressively holy proximity to the divine. *Symbolic space* induces the circulation of "social energies" by an appropriation and adaptation of cultural texts and practices. Through creative reuse of monumental royal inscriptions and foundation deposits, to take George's primary example, P redistributes erstwhile royal duties between Yahweh and his people (166–67). George concludes that through the creation of a new social space in the tabernacle texts, P provided the means for a reconstitution of Israel, an answer to the new and problematic social order of the exile.

Central to the argument are his views on the *Sitz im Leben* of P that he helpfully spells out in his introduction (9–14) and that inform the entire analysis. George assumes, as do many, that the absence of royal gravitas in P is a direct reflection of its context. He wonders "what monarch would permit himself and his office to be removed, either implicitly or explicitly, from a royal building project narrative [viz. the tabernacle texts]? . . . In the exilic period, this issue is moot" (164). Not only is there no evidence showing that P was ever subject to royal approval—as Menahem Haran argued, it more likely circulated exclusively among priests initially—but the idea also contradicts the literary animus of P, in which contemporary institutions are not transparently represented (as is more the case in D). Further, if the logic of transparency were applied consistently, it would force one to conclude that the exiles carried on an elaborate tent cult in Babylon! Instead, for George, the tabernacle is a fiction that "enabled Israel to create and re-create its social space, and therefore its social identity . . . in the new wilderness of the exile" (194). Yet, for an exilic audience, would not

The Journal of Religion

the material impossibility of the shrine in the exile threaten the envisioned social formulation of P and obstruct Israel's reconstitution? The origins of P might better be traced to a different social crisis: the decline of the northern Israelite state and subsequent influx of cult functionaries into Judah. The competing architectural traditions and priesthoods in pre-exilic Jerusalem brought the histories of the tabernacle and Jerusalem temple into conversation with each other, and the resultant blend of temple furnishings and imagery with the structural elements of the tent was thus perhaps an effort to subordinate competing cultic claims. Even though this setting would change George's conclusions dramatically, many of his points about the social role of space would still obtain.

George most moves the conversation forward when, in several places, informed by the New Historicists, he expounds the idea that not only do conceptual forms inscribe themselves *onto* space but also that space asserts itself and can shape society and thought (e.g., 14, 32–33, 47). At the same time, however, it also becomes apparent that escaping the tendency to privilege thought over space—and therefore to mitigate the reciprocity—is difficult. Thus (to choose a few of many examples), the tabernacle “reflect[s] Priestly ideas” (56); “ideas and cognitive systems . . . organize [tabernacle space]” (71); and, especially, “tabernacle space results from Israel's conceptual space” (87). Recent critiques of the priority of intent in art and ritual show the faulty results of dichotomizing thought and action, and this also applies to space. Space is not primarily an empty vessel into which ideas are poured; it is an active participant in a dialogue, exerting influence on reason and emotion as much as it is the product thereof. How did the models, memories, and materials out of which the tabernacle narratives were fashioned shape the ideals of the Priestly school? Asked thus, one discerns the possibility that a spatial hermeneutics *suggested to* or even *imposed upon* the authors of P a division of the tabernacle into zones of graded holiness, becoming a space onto which society and even creation could be mapped. This practice of boundary making strikes one as architecturally informed, if not motivated—not in the sense that architecture was simply a vehicle for the *expression of* ideas but rather a heuristic device, a *means of* thought that exerted force on the Priestly formulation of “conceptual space.” It may be possible that even if George is correct about the prominence of social taxa in the logic of tabernacle space, it is a system that was arrived at through a spatial dialectic, one that might be drawn out by looking to historical antecedents. With this adjustment to George's work, room would be made for the incorporation of the numerous studies of tabernacle analogues in the historical-cultural appreciation of tabernacle space.

As these concerns ultimately show, Mark George has provided the reader a provocative and useful means of revisiting an old question. He is to be commended for his sustained yet accessible cultural-critical approach and his constant attention to social dimensions of (even narrated) sacred architecture. The issues raised here notwithstanding, George's work remains one from which students of Israelite religion and society stand to profit.

CORY DANIEL CRAWFORD, *Ohio University*.