
Review of Mark K. George, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*. Ancient Israel and Its Literature 2. Atlanta and Leiden: SBL and Brill, 2009.

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Every now and then you come across a book that is thoroughly engrossing, insightful and original. Mark George's *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space* is one of those books. To be sure, George has a tendency to cite everything he can lay his hands on for even tangential topics and he can get bogged down in tracts of turgid prose. But these are as much the outcomes of years of being trained in academic institutions to write badly and to become citation-neurotic – all as signs of serious, scientific scholarship – than it is George's own style. Thankfully he escapes such strictures often enough, letting himself go and writing very well indeed.

The subject matter is the tabernacle, the construction and transport of which covers vast reams of the Pentateuch. That great tent has not fared well in scholarship, being the topic of dry and dusty tomes or simply ignored as so much priestly verbiage. Given that it is one of the most extraordinary ancient texts concerning interior decoration and that it is actually the main reason Moses goes up onto Sinai to chinwag with Yahweh, such neglect is unconscionable. George's agenda is to arrest this neglect and bring the tabernacle into the limelight of biblical scholarship. He does so by making one of the most extensive uses – in biblical studies – of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, a Hegelian Marxist study of space that has deeply influenced architecture, art, cultural production, social science, literature and its criticism.

Lefebvre was one of the main critics utilised in the Constructions of Ancient Space Seminar at the *Society of Biblical Literature*, of which George (and I for a time) was a member. But in that seminar Lefebvre tended to be mediated by Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* from 1996. George goes back to Lefebvre, who distinguishes between spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation. While the first designates the actual, physical negotiation of space that we undergo on a day to day basis, the second concerns the conceptual understanding of space. These concepts are overt, mapped, drawn, debated and discussed. They are the stuff of architectural blueprints, town plans, rural allotments, maps of all descriptions and so on. However, the third is the most intriguing, for here Lefebvre is interested in what is covert, partially hidden and has the potential to overturn the established practices and representations of space (hence the inversion of the name of this third type of space). How do people negotiate space? How do they imagine alternatives? What are the utopian possibilities of such imagination and the acts that flow from it?

As George stresses, these spaces are not givens; they are produced by social and economic forces and through human agency. I have presented these three spaces in some detail, since the structure of George's book turns around them. So, after introducing the tabernacle (chapter 1) and then arguing that it is indeed social space in the sense that Lefebvre argues (chapter 2), George deals with the tabernacle in terms of the three productions of space – as spatial practice (chapter 3), conceptual space (chapter 4) and symbolic space (chapter 5). The reader may have noticed a slight shift in terminology with these three spaces, especially the third one: it becomes in George's hands "symbolic space" rather than "spaces of representation". To be fair, Lefebvre's terminology has confused more than one reader, but he has a reason for using it. I will return to this matter below, for it marks an abandonment of Lefebvre at a crucial point.

Let us see what George does with each of these spaces. The discussion of spatial practice appears in chapter 3, where the empirical reality of the tabernacle meets Israelite society: building materials and social mechanisms meet in the materials, building practices and assemblage of the tabernacle

itself. George stresses that everything about the detailed description of the tabernacle points to its portability and orientation (cardinal in terms of the compass points and relative in terms of how items are arranged within). However, as I worked my way through this section I was perpetually puzzled by a simple problem: the tabernacle as described never existed; it is a literary creation, a piece of elaborate and imaginative fiction – all of which George explicitly recognises. How then can it be described in terms of spatial practice, which involves the real, everyday productions, the experiences and negotiations of space? With a text like this, in which we find a narrative description, we are already at one remove from such practice, slipping into the other two categories of space. It does not help matters that George uses as a comparative example the deed of transfer of possession of a house in Nemed-Ishtar, c. 663 BCE in Neo-Assyria (pp. 48-56). All of this is extraordinarily useful information for anyone wanting to study ancient Near Eastern economics, but it produces a sleight of hand in this chapter, for the example of Nemed-Ishtar comes from a real world exchange, whereas the tabernacle does not.

George continues this pattern, using at each level a comparative example to shed light on the biblical text. So in the chapter on conceptual space (or representations of space), George makes use of the famous Gezer Calendar (pp. 94-102) in order to highlight the way rational systems work to classify and organise space. But the trick is to use such systems not as givens but as keys to the social systems that produced them. The system that supports the tabernacle is not so much holiness as the priestly cosmology (here he wholeheartedly accepts the P hypothesis for this material) and priestly interpretations of the social structures. These turn out to be “horizontal” (evincing threat and the need to deal with such threat) and present an alternative to the temple blueprint of Ezekiel 40-48 with its vertical structures. This section of the book, where the tabernacle and Ezekiel turn out to be competing priestly conceptions of social space in a post-exilic situation, is one of the most fruitful and productive of the book.

With this sense of satisfaction and interest I turned to the final chapter, the symbolic space of the tabernacle, but here I was to be puzzled and perplexed. At this point George diverges sharply from Lefebvre, drawing upon Stephen Greenblatt’s argument concerning social energy to offer a constructive reading of the tabernacle. George argues that the priestly writers, facing the trauma of exile, drew into their orbit the foundational myths and beliefs of their oppressors, the Babylonians, and turned them into something very different: a system of thought and belief and space that placed Israel and Yahweh at the centre. The imaginative creation of the tabernacle narratives are therefore ones of social reconstruction, imaginative recasting for a distressed people and (although George does not make this conclusion), a distinct nationalism and religious exclusivism.

That conclusion must be made, however, for it reveals what has happened to the subversive core of Lefebvre’s spaces of representation. What resistance is left has become the resistance of Israel against Babylon, albeit with the same nation-building project in mind. But gone are the interstitial subversives, the covert operations of insurrection, the hints of a new utopian world. In its place is a rather conservative agenda of social healing and restoration. On this score it is telling that on this third level Greenblatt’s “social energy” replaces Lefebvre’s “spaces of representation”, for in the process the covert subversion of Lefebvre’s third category has disappeared.

Despite my criticisms, which really show how engaging the book is, overall it is a sumptuous, thought-provoking book, well endowed with three indices (ancient sources, subject and name) and a high level of production.