

BOOK REVIEWS

Ben-Eliyahu, Eyal. *Identity and Territory: Jewish Perceptions of Space in Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 195 pp. Hardcover. USD 95.00.

Spatial theories have gained momentum in religious studies. Since the 1990s religious scholars have appropriated ideas from geographers and spatial theorists such as David Sopher, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Edward W. Soja, trying to produce fresh perspectives about ancient culture. *Identity and Territory* is a recent example of this attempt. In it, Eyal interprets Jewish perception of space found in the literature from biblical times to the Muslim period with an emphasis on Second Temple Judaism to the Talmudic era. His work is a historical reflection on the impact of space in the shaping of identity.

The main claim of the book is that the experience of space in different periods shaped the way Jews articulated their identity. One of the major arguments of social geographers is that space shapes human behavior which, in turn, shapes the landscape. Eyal demonstrates mainly the first dynamic diachronically by evaluating the development of Jewish perception of territory and sacred space found in the literature of antiquity (until the Talmudic period). In doing so, he is able to show how politics, demographics, and biblical interpretation shaped the way Jews identified themselves in relation to the location where they lived. The book has five chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction reviews some works about the land of Israel and Greco-Roman identity, though it does not indicate trajectories of argumentation or contributions of the works mentioned. It also introduces the theoretical framework of the book, but only stresses the notion of collective memory in the experience of space from Maurice Halbwachs and Yi-Fu Tuan, concepts which are also found in the other contemporary writers mentioned above. Eyal follows the suggestion that places become meaningful with lived experiences or memories which evoke emotions. The author, however, does not explain in the book how the concept of collective memory differs from imaginary spaces as articulated by Lefebvre, and how this should be used as a heuristic tool in evaluating spatial descriptions in ancient sources. The closest he comes to explicitly relating collective memory to his analysis is when he demonstrates that Jewish sources depend on the Hebrew Bible (Israelite tradition) in order to create their own territory. After this introduction, the book is organized chronologically in five chapters as summarized below.

The first chapter gives the background of the discussion of space in Jewish thought. It investigates spatially related terms—such as the land of

Israel and Judea—from the Hebrew Bible to the rabbinic literature. Elaborating on the distribution of spatial terminologies, Eyal is able to show the evolution of the conceptualization of Israelite or Jewish space and how it affected the formation of national identity. In his sweep of history reaching the rabbinic literature, he skipped many works produced by Jews, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, which might have affected his conclusions. No reason is given in this chapter for such omission. He does, however, deal with these other works in later chapters. Additionally, Eyal included inscriptions on coins. The conclusion of this analysis is that in the First Temple period the literature used both the words Israel and Judah to describe their territory. In the Second Temple period, Israel is used for both nation and land, while Jews or Judea was mostly used by Gentiles. He infers that the political situation affected the usage of nomenclature and saw a major shift in ideology in the rabbinic literature, one which consistently attempted to refer to Israel as reflecting the ideal of a unified people. In this, the author points out that Scriptures (ancient stories of Israel) became the most important factor of influence on the perception of space in Jewish culture.

Ben-Aliyahu progresses to a more detailed discussion of the literature produced during the Second Temple period in the next two chapters. In chapter two, he performs diachronic research, while in chapter three he is more thematic in his approach. It is here that he clarifies why he excludes some literary works from the discussion of chapter one. The distinguishing mark of the literature under consideration in chapter two is contrasted to the ones in chapter three by the idea that territory was important in the formation of their community identity. But this was also the case in chapter one. So, to me, it is still unclear why he chose the different selections in chapters one to three.

Eyal argues that, for the Jews of 1 Enoch, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Paul and later Christians like Origen and Jerome, God's people could not be limited to a particular land (ch. 3). To some of them, the biblical notion of Israel and its land is expanded to a level that is almost universal. They focus on a "better land" which was not made by human hands, a heavenly one. For the authors of Jubilees, Judith, and 1 Maccabees, the territorial dimension was an integral component of the Jewish constitution as a people and nation (ch. 2), although the territorializing found in this later literature was idealized and not necessarily real during the Greco-Roman period, as Eyal also aptly demonstrates. For example, in Judith, Samaritan land is described as part of Judea and the name Israel is used to denote an ethnicity that excludes the historical Israelites of the north. Thus, biblical nomenclature was adapted to their theological and political motivations, which included more land to the Judeans, while excluding more people from the category Israel.

Using this point of departure, Judith (ch. 2) is not far from some documents in the Dead Sea Scrolls (ch. 3). The same dynamic of expand-

ing and adapting the territorial language of Scripture is found in the literature of chapter three, but with varied implications or applications. By no means can the literature of Qumran be classified as universalist like Paul, but they are included in the same chapter because of the notion of *heavenly* land. Curiously, Eyal's discussion of Paul uses only the book of Acts, and the epistles to the Hebrews and Galatians. This is an insufficient account of the one whom he claims to be the major Jewish figure in history that ignored the terrestrial land as important for identity. Besides, of these, only Galatians is typically regarded as being of Pauline authorship. The inclusion of Acts here is even more strange, and the author recognizes it by stating that "this is a not a Pauline text" (78). But this did not deter Eyal from discussing all of them together as if they all univocally ignored Jerusalem and the land of Israel as important in the plans of God, which I suspect is not the case.

On this subject, I found Eyal's analysis to be lacking in precision. Since he did not deal with the particular texts in detail, as he did with rabbinic literature in chapters four and five, his conclusions sounded to me like a more modern Jewish reaction to the Christian territorializing of biblical lands. I concede to the point that Paul was a major influence on Christian perception of space. What the author seems to underestimate is that the movement of reinterpreting the role of Jerusalem and the land of Israel in God's plan for his people started years before Paul. As Eyal himself points out (60), the expansionist view of the territory of Israel was used by many writers in the Second Temple period. So, the claim that "the process by which the physical land's sublimity is downgraded through the abrogation of territorialism begins in the Pauline epistles" is misleading (79). It is a broader phenomenon that needs a broader treatment alluded to by the author in many instances (e.g., 80) and suggested by the title of chapter three, "From Earthly Land to Holy Land."

Eyal is at his best when he brings into his discussion of Jewish materials the role of the Greek *polis* in the conceptualization of Jerusalem as the space *par excellence*. He is surely right in the evaluation that most literature of the postexilic period emphasized Jerusalem and used it metonymically for the whole territory of God. However, he has missed a golden opportunity to explore the influence on the *polis* in the relationship between Jews and Gentiles during the postexilic period, and show how the city became a catalyst for eschatological thinking and the elaboration of the heavenly *polis*. Placing the Dead Sea Scrolls alongside the same chapter with Paul and the Church Fathers—in respect to perception of territory without nuancing how their different eschatologies played a role in their articulation of space—might create the impression in novice readers that they all had the same perspective about the land. He does recognize the role of eschatological interpretation in the Jewish perception of time (66). However, one finds only a brief mention on a point that might be central to his argument. He is right on the trajectory

of the argument made in chapter three, but his examples require more precision. He did not convince me on all particulars.

In chapters four and five, Eyal deals mainly with rabbinic literature (from the Pharisees) to show how reactive they were to the forces around them in their interpretation of Scriptures. In “The Land of the Sages,” the title of chapter four, he concentrated on the ritual usage of geography. I found the discussion here fascinating and I think I may fall short of adequately summarizing all the details he presented and explained. Mainly, he used the rabbinic application of the biblical law of *omer* and tithing, the agricultural products that should be brought as offerings to God in the temple, to show how the rabbinic sages perceive the biblical territory. As he pointed out in chapter three, the rabbis saw this issue differently than some diasporic Jews like Philo. While Philo (*Spec* 2.162) saw the law applicable to everyone anywhere, the rabbis restricted its applicability to those living in the land of Israel only. In other words, only the produce from the land of Israel should be brought before the Lord. But what is the land of Israel for the rabbis? This is the central point of the chapter that Eyal masterfully explains.

It seems that “rather than cleaving to one of the possible biblical border schemes, the sages saw the boundaries of the areas of Jewish settlement [close to the biblical land of Israel] as determinative of the land’s borders” (104). Thus, for Eyal, demographics played a major role in the pragmatic or “elastic” boundaries of the land set by the rabbis. I would argue further that, in broad strokes, this is the same phenomenon that happened with other Jewish authors like Paul, Philo, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, namely the expansion of the biblical text to suit their particular ideologies. In this respect, Eyal’s work is elucidative because he brings to the fore, in most cases, how the biblical text was used in relation to space by different Jewish groups. In the case of the rabbis, he convincingly makes the point that Roman provinces and demographics influenced the pragmatism of rabbinic territorial halakah.

Finally, in chapter five, Eyal discusses the rabbinic reaction to localized sacred sites of the land of Israel both in popular Judaism and in Christianity. On the first front, the rabbis counter-argue the belief that any biblical site where God appeared or miracles happened should be considered holy and venerated. The major text the author uses for his analysis of this rabbinic reaction is b. Ber. 54a, which states that “if one sees the place of the crossing of the Red Sea, or the fords of Jordan . . . [other examples are given] Lot’s wife, or the wall of Jericho which sank into the ground, for all of these he should give thanksgiving and praise to the Almighty.” The author suggests that this passage needs to be read ironically in light of all the rabbis have to say about the veneration of places outside of Jerusalem. Therefore, if the biblical places could still be identified (which is probably not the case), and in the event of identification, one should just give thanks. According to Eyal, in all other references in rabbinic literature of veneration of places which are

not in Jerusalem, they denigrate the practice. This reaction, of course, attests the Jewish (folk) practice of venerating places and things in those places like Christians (e.g., b. Sanh. 47b, “it was the practice of the people to take earth from Rav’s grave and apply it on the first day of an attack of fever”).

On the other front, but with the same purpose, the rabbis reacted against the Christian veneration of space. Since Eyal recognizes that rabbinical reaction to Christianity is minimally perceived in its literature, he had to come up with a way to find out how they reacted to the Christian veneration of space. So, he selected two foci of comparison, Galilee and the Mount of Olives. He analyzes all the sites of Galilee mentioned in the New Testament, Josephus, and the priestly lists, and contrasts them with rabbinic sources. From a statistical perspective, Eyal aptly demonstrates that Josephus talks specifically about thirty-five Galilean settlements (of which three are Christian and mentioned in the Gospels); the texts of priestly division contain twenty-four sites (two are Christian); and rabbinic literature mentions 130, though only one correlates with a place mentioned in the Gospel, Capernaum. And in this case, the mention crops up in a later passage (*Eccl Rab* 1.8) about a heresy of a certain Hanina. Thus, he rightly concludes that the rabbis minimized the role of Galilean places probably because of Christian veneration. It is the tactic of erasing from the map (in memory) by silence. Eyal could have also argued that, for the rabbis, the silence was easy because Galilee is not an important place in the Hebrew Bible. Conversely, this is not the case with the Mount of Olives. In this last example, Eyal demonstrates how the rabbis transformed Scriptures to the point of going contrary to it by ignoring the importance of this place in prophetic passages such as Ezekiel 11 and Zechariah 14. The main passage which denies any theophany on the Mount of Olives is b. Sukkah 5a.

What Eyal aptly demonstrates, which is a constant in all these Jewish passages about space, is that the territory of Israel was created in the minds and ultimately in the words of these visionaries. Just as God created the world by His words, the definition of religious and national space was at the trained whim of skilled scribes. It is thus of paramount importance to recognize the social, political, and cultural forces that influenced these writers in conceiving a land that it is still holy for many. Overall, Eyal makes a compelling case for the influence of demographics and political exegesis in the conception of space in ancient Judaism. A good read!

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