

RE-PLACING PRIESTLY SPACE:
THE WILDERNESS AS HETEROTOPIA IN THE
DEAD SEA SCROLLS*

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Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.

Simon Schama¹

Human beings are not placed, they bring place into being.

Jonathan Z. Smith²

Landscapes are, in essence, geographies of the human imagination. They, like other spaces, are social constructs, and the desert, or wilderness, was no less so for the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls (*Yahad*).³ Through the language of their texts, the *Yahad* members constructed the desert as a particular imagined space, one that was fashioned out of earlier biblical traditions for their own sectarian ends.

Yet, at least for some *Yahad* members, the desert was the meeting point of literary, *discursive* space as well as *lived* space, raising some questions about how they negotiated the two. What was the relationship between this priestly group who wrote *about* the desert as part of their theological self-understanding and those who potentially *embodied* the space of the Judean Desert? This priestly community understood itself to be a communal substitution for temple sacrifices, but did they consider the site of Qumran to be sacred ground?

This brief study is not about the desert coordinates of Qumran per se. Instead, I borrow from the toolbox of critical spatial theory to offer

* James C. VanderKam has contributed important works on the place of the Judean Desert for the *Yahad*, and it is with great pleasure that I dedicate this essay to him. I am grateful for his sound scholarship, meticulous care for detail, and the extraordinary investment that he makes in his students.

¹ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 61.

² Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (ed. J. Neusner; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. 14.

³ Here I use the English terms “wilderness” and “desert” interchangeably, as they both are legitimate translations of the Hebrew term, מדבר.

some new observations about the ambiguous relationship between sect and land, Qumran and temple, priest and sanctuary (or lack thereof). It is timely to consider new dimensions to the *Yahad* beyond just their literary selves or simply their material culture. Engaging critical spatial analysis proves to be a useful way to uncover how this priestly movement navigated both the desert as conceived and the desert as experienced. In this essay I offer three proposals. (1) In their texts, the *Yahad* members re-inscribed the desert as a new priestly space, both conceptually and, for some, literally. This new desert “camp” functioned as a heterotopia, following Michel Foucault’s epistemology of space. (2) As such, this sectarian space contested the alleged coherence and dominance of the Jerusalem temple, but *did not entirely supersede it*.⁴ (3) The creation of this new social space was a necessary part of cementing their sectarian movement, finalized through their practice, or regimentation, of space.

THEORETICAL “GROUND”ING

Although it is neither necessary nor possible here to review all of the relevant studies on critical spatiality, it is important to outline the two primary theoretical bases upon which this study rests. First, I agree with Henri Lefebvre, who emphasizes that all (social) space is socially produced (*L’espace [social] est un produit [social]*), and I consider the wilderness space to be socially construed through the language and actions of the *Yahad*.⁵ Secondly, social space can be understood in three primary dimensions, following the taxonomy of Lefebvre and others. The first category of analysis is perceived space (*l’espace perçu*), or that which can be seen, touched, or empirically measured. The second category is conceived space (*l’espace conçu*), consisting of mental spaces, or that which is conceptualized through language, maps or blueprints, etc. Finally, we are left with a third category of space as experienced (*l’espace vécu*), or “Thirdspace,” following Edward Soja, a space which is in many ways the intersection of the first two. That is, experienced space reflects the actual encounter with space, lying

⁴ I hope to find a pragmatic center to some of the more extreme arguments that either find the *Yahad* to be wholly pro- or anti-temple, the latter having dominated the conversation during the earliest years of Scrolls scholarship.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l’espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 2000), 35; *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.