The Body of Jesus Outside the Eternal City: Mapping Ritual Space in the Epistle to the Hebrews*

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Introduction

Edward W. Soja opens his book *Thirdspace* by declaring that his objective is to encourage you to think differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent spatiality of human life ... [to] question them in new ways that are aimed at opening up and expanding the scope and critical sensibility of your already established spatial or geographical imaginations.1

This essay takes up the challenge of Soja and other theorists of critical spatiality in the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews. I “observe” the locative and spatial aspects of Hebrews and seek to make sense of the various ways in which these aspects become dimensions of the overall argument of the text. That is, I hope here to organize the strategies with which Hebrews deploys space, the mapping of space, and movement through spaces, with particular attention to how these strategies serve to create a compelling and persuasive set of ends for its audience. Inasmuch as Hebrews configures Jesus and the inscribed audience as making a journey, I examine the spatial mapping of Hebrews in order to understand the semiotically complex topography through which Jesus and the audience travel. My aim is to make an initial foray into describing the spatial poetics of Hebrews and to propose some ways in which these poetics function in relation to the social setting of the text.

I presented an earlier version of this essay in November 2012 at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Chicago. The occasion was a joint session of three program units: Hebrews; Space, Place, and Lived Experience

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* Ellen Aitken died in June 2014, after a short illness. This essay was prepared for publication by Catherine Playoust, who would like to thank Harold W. Attridge, Carly Daniel-Hughes, Gabriella Gelardini, Ian Henderson, Jeffrey Keiser, Bill Porter, Carla Sulzbach, and Meredith Warren for their assistance.

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in Antiquity; and Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement. The principal scope of my assignment was the intersecting concerns and approaches of the first two of these program units, and thus I examine the Epistle to the Hebrews here in terms of how this discourse makes use of space, spatial practices, and spatial representation. Because space in Hebrews is ritual space that thinks with and redefines a set of cultic spaces, some of which contain sacrificial practices, the essay inevitably strays also into the concerns of sacrifice and cult.

A word about my procedure is in order. The first part of this essay explores the spatial poetics of Hebrews, undertaking the task of observing and describing the spatial aspects found in the text. For this, I am much indebted in several respects to the work of Mark K. George in his book Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space, and, indeed, my term “spatial poetics” is derived from his usage. George's argument pertains directly to the use of Israel's tabernacle in Hebrews' argument and illumines Hebrews' transformations of the tabernacle. Additionally, his clear exposition of the critical spatial theories developed by Henri Lefebvre, especially his analytic categories, has stimulated my thinking about Hebrews. Lefebvre writes of la pratique spatiale, les représentations de l'espace, and les espaces de représentation (spatial practice, the representations of space, and the spaces of representation); George's version of this triad is “spatial practice,” “conceptual space,” and “symbolic space.”

I turn then to a series of proposals on space in Hebrews in order to suggest a larger reading of Hebrews in terms of the remapping of ritual space. At this stage, I experiment with the theoretical approaches of Edward Soja and particularly his idea of Thirdspace to see what promise it holds for our understanding of how Hebrews cultivates a particular perspective on Roman imperium on the part of its audience. Soja's trialetics of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace builds on Lefebvre too, especially on his concepts of l'espace perçu, l'espace conçu, and l'espace vécu (perceived space, conceived space, and lived space), which are closely related to the triad mentioned above. Admittedly, my use of Soja is tentative and preliminary. My familiarity with his approach

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2 I am grateful to the members of these program units and especially to my respondents on that occasion, John M. Vonder Bruegge and Christian Eberhart.
3 The term “spatial poetics” is discussed in Mark K. George, Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space (Ancient Israel and Its Literature 2; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 31–41. The chief influences on George's spatial poetics are the critical spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre and the New Historicist literary critic Stephen Greenblatt.
5 Lefebvre, La production de l'espace, 48–49; Soja, Thirdspace, 65–69.