

Book Reviews

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Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World.
By Mark S. Smith. Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2016. Pp. xxii + 226. \$75.

In the ancient Near East, sacred spaces were theological constructions that explored the boundary between human and divine. Sacred space employed anthropomorphism as a symbolic language to offer “ways for people to process, categorize, and gain insight into nonhuman aspects of the world” (8). Anthropomorphic ideas influenced the size, shape, furnishings, and rituals of sacred space, and thereby conveyed information about the deity. This information made divinity available to human communities. Sacred space described Yahweh’s body, organized representations of his power, and related specific sites to his presence, which informed urban identities and lent them prestige. In short, Smith states, “human spaces make divinity possible for human communities” (111).

S. is the Helena Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary. His research focuses on both Ugaritic and Israelite religious literature, which, according to S., are rightly compared as they represent the same cultural matrix. In addition to primary sources from throughout the ancient Near East, S. draws on the full range of modern scholarship. This book reveals a masterful knowledge of the field and its ongoing conversations.

This knowledge underlies a strong and innovative series of arguments. In the first section of his book, S. demonstrates that sacred space modeled those qualities humans and deities shared as well as those to which humans could only aspire. For example, humans had a type of power over their environment and destiny, but suffering and evil often attenuated it. West Semitic deities like Yahweh, by contrast, possessed unlimited power. Their omnipotence manifested itself through superhuman size and acts of strength. Temples, with their own grand size and massive construction, made these qualities of divinity available to humans through worship at the site. S. draws on a wide array of ritual and narrative sources to list divine qualities that temples epitomized and the way humans participated in those qualities through ritual. His argument aptly demonstrates the way that sacred space made qualities of divinity available.

The second section, S.’s most innovative, traces the way that cult symbols made divinity accessible. Religious texts attribute human characteristics to many deities.

Baal has a house, for example; Yahweh eats and bathes; and Kothar wields a bow and arrows. Texts also use simile and metaphor to attribute human, animal, vegetable, and even natural qualities to deities. Many of these comparisons are aspirational, and point out “what humans are not, but might wish to be” (50). A statement like “Baal sits (enthroned) like the sitting of a mountain,” for example, attributes to Baal qualities of size, majesty, and solidity that worshippers could themselves receive (54). Similarly, the golden calves of Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12: 28–29) are more than simple throne-pedestals. They are metaphors for Yahweh’s martial power. S. makes a cogent case for this claim, using comparative iconography to show that many cultures associated storm deities and bovinds. Cultic interactions with the calf icons allowed martial worshippers to receive the power symbolized in them.

S. ends his study with an investigation of cities, which, he claims, were “temples writ large.” He traces the way that urban shrines take on to themselves the prestige of older, usually rural, shrines. S. demonstrates from sources as various as liturgical texts and treatises that this relationship existed between the cults of Baal in Ugarit and Sapon, as well as the shrines of Yahweh in Zion and in Hebron and Teman. These earlier shrines had prestige because they were anthropomorphic “houses” of the deity; similarly, whole cities became the god’s house when they inherited the prestige.

S. ties his reflections together with his final thoughts on the personification of Jerusalem. Cities, as human communities and loci of ritual activity, represent the human before the anthropomorphized divine. Jerusalem’s personification, therefore, is a consequence of Yahweh’s anthropomorphic qualities. Jerusalem is Yahweh’s “female counterpart,” that mediates his presence and nature, an idea found both in Revelation 21: 2, 9–27, and Augustine’s *City of God*.

S. thoroughly demonstrates his claim that sacred spaces make divinity available for human communities. Not only do they illustrate claims about divine nature, they make participation in it available through worship. S.’s encyclopedic knowledge of primary sources coupled with his insights on the anthropomorphism provide new insights on ancient ritual practice and divine ideology. This book belongs in the library or on the syllabus of anyone interested in the religion of ancient Israel.

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Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaisms of the First Century: The Search for the Wider Context of the Johannine Literature and Why It Matters. By Urban C. von Wahle. Library of New Testament Studies 517. New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. Pp. xix + 229. \$112.

“. . . The present approach shows that the background of the Gospel can be understood much more fully and more precisely when viewed within the context of the compositional history of the Gospel and Letters” (xviii). The history shows that the development was far from homogeneous. “Rather the tradition was rocked again and again by