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The Paradox of Sacred and Profane Shared Space

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ABSTRACT

Sacred space and profane space are not mutually exclusive. Cognitive science has proven clear, distinct boundaries are not realized between existential categories. The reality of life space is the sacred and profane may exist in the same space with one taking precedence over the other. A space may become sacred to accommodate a sacred action limited to a particular temporal moment even with the profane present. In this way, sacred space becomes utility based for life focused outcomes. This paper explores the reality of the sacred and the profane occupying the same space. Primary examples are taken from 2 Kings 4:32-35 and 1 Kings 17:19-23 in which death (profane) is at the spatial forefront confronting prophetic power (sacred); and 2 Kings 5:9-17 in the story of Naaman confronted with the dirty Jordan river (profane) and divine healing (sacred). In the one case, the profane space is permanently transformed by sacredness. In the other space, the sacred act is momentary, and the profanity of the space remains constant.

Keywords: *sacred, profane, time, space, Old Testament.*

INTRODUCTION

Theorists from religion and anthropology have deemed it possible to divide the human experience into two ontological categories designated as the sacred and the profane (1). Durkheim posited sacred and profane as binary opposites that remain separated. His idea leaned on the argument the sacred is secured in communal ritual. What Durkheim (2) considered sacred are 'the collective ideas represented through religious symbols and metaphors' (p.474-5). Social organization reflects the distinction between sacred and profane (3). The sacred exists independent of the individual and exists to support societal structure. What is sacred is identified by social taboos. The profane is private, trivial, or ordinary with no special sense attached to a profane space. Sacred experience is separate and outside the sphere of the profane in the same way social space is different from individual space. The sacred remains outside of personal use and benefit. The dichotomy structure must be set up this way to avoid any collapse of the sacred into the profane (4).

The notion that which is sacred must be completely set apart from the profane is not supported in cross-cultural studies (5). Granet (6) reported sacred and profane distinctions were not found in his study of Chinese religions. Evans-Pritchard's (7) research among the Azande countermanded Durkheim's position by reporting sacred and profane categories in his field work were interwoven and not easily disentangled. Most significantly, what was sacred and what was profane in Azande world view did not cancel each other out. Stanner's (8) field work among the Australian Aboriginals discredited the argument of the sacred as wholly applied to social systems and social identity. The Aboriginals practiced intermixing among kin groups (moieties) without any sense of a loss of identity. Clearly social organization in this context did not define sacred and profane distinctions. Alas, cultural models reflect differences in the structure of a category (9). In the case of sacred/profane categories, one size most definitely does not fit all.

Early theorists also argued time and space are permanently marked as sacred and consequently become historically special. Eliade (10) wrote, 'Every sacred space represents a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different' (p.26). It is undisputed in pre-exilic Israel that sacredness was thought to reside in the heavens; and whatever was closer to the heavens, especially mountains, was regarded as more sacred (11). Biblical accounts have examples of Israelites encountering Yahweh in a particular location

and at a particular time and commemorating the place with deference. Geo-providence was practiced by Israel marking the covenantal homeland through sacred focal points such as in the form of an altar (12). The Israelite homeland included both public (altars, tabernacle, temple) and private sacred locales (13). Turner (14) would argue the functional purpose of these sacred places was to act 'as centre, meeting point, as microcosm, and as transcendent-immanent presence' (p.141-142). Campbell (15) extended this understanding by noting sacred places must be applied to more than just one center of holiness in the land to recognize a multiplicity of sacred centers.

Classification of Spaces

The sacred is that experience of life one would ordinarily associate with the supernatural or with what is totally other from the earthly realm somehow manifested in human life experience (16). In the context of the Old Testament, the sacred is Yahweh. Yahweh as Supernatural Other approaches humankind in such a way as to make his incorporeal existence known and his transcendent presence felt. The profane, on the other hand, is simply everything not deemed sacred (17). The profane is that which is considered common and ordinary (18).

The difference between sacred 'space' and sacred 'place' needs clarification (19). Sacred places are those fixed places of a supernatural revelation recognized as a cultic site often from a one-time event (20). A space is made sacred by divine intervention in everyday affairs without historical significance. A sacred place is a substantial reckoning in which the sacred has been identified as an unearthly, powerful manifestation of supernatural reality, 'full of ultimate significance' (21: p.5). A sacred place is circumscribed and modified through ritual behavior across time. A sacred space is situational. A space becomes sacred as the temporal moment requires and does not maintain sacred significance.

Sacred space and profane space are not mutually exclusive. Cognitive science has proven clear, distinct boundaries are not realized between existential categories (22-25). The reality of life space is the sacred and profane may exist in the same space with one taking precedence over the other. A space may become sacred to accommodate a sacred action limited to a particular temporal moment even with the profane present. In this way, sacred space becomes utility based for life focused outcomes. Sacred places are socially based for societal outcomes.

This paper explores the reality of the sacred and the profane occupying the same space. Primary examples are taken from 2 Kings 4:32-35 and 1 Kings 17:19-23 in which death (profane) is at the spatial forefront confronting prophetic power (sacred); and 2 Kings 5:9-17 in the story of Naaman confronted with the dirty Jordan river (profane) and divine healing (sacred). In the one case, the profane space is permanently transformed by sacredness. In the other space, the sacred act is momentary, and the profanity of the space remains constant.

Utility of Spaces

The reality of human life experience demands sacred activity service the individual in the context of their profane, everyday life experience. This is true for the dynamic occurrence of sacred spaces in common Hebrew life. Sacred space in the Old Testament is profoundly meaningful precisely because it is personal. There is nothing like personal crisis to motivate one to seek the presence of the supernatural. The covenantal relationship guaranteed Yahweh's presence in common Hebrew life. A space became sacred as Yahweh released his power to address the situation at hand. This extends sacred space beyond the boundaries of carefully defined areas as dwelling places for Yahweh meant to elicit certain behavior by respondents. Biblical sacred space is not 'divinely disconnected space' as Hudson (26: p.89) proposes whose primary aim is to evoke worship. The sacred is a relational interchange between Yahweh and the individual. In the Genesis garden narrative, God walked in the cool of the evening to visit with Adam and Eve; yet, within that sacred place, the serpent entices the couple to break fellowship with God.

The sacred and profane categories are much more dialectical than dichotomous and certainly without a binary framework. Every space has the potential for interactions between sacred and profane (27). Further, agency is not limited to the sacred. Both Yahweh and his people are actively invested in relationship with one another. Granted Israelites were required to be deferential to the sacred but the notion of the sacred as a pop-goes-the-weasel surprise fails to acknowledge the initiative of people striving to place themselves in a position to engage the sacred (28).

Sacred places in Israel were marked such as the building of an altar or remembered by some

natural landmark such as a tree or high place. It is true a sacred time was commemorated by ritual performances and celebrations. Nonetheless, as a matter of pragmatics, this is not a complete picture of sacred revelation in the Old Testament. Sacred space included a common (profane) setting in which there was a manifestation of the sacred. This does not mean the place subsequently became permanently different. Sacred space was a meeting point, but that meeting point with Yahweh was not confined to special altars or places of worship used according to a set calendar.

Yahweh revealed himself to individuals in settings far from formal religious institutions and places set aside for divine communication. Where divine intervention was needed and had been granted, the profane space was allowed to share its boundaries with the sacred or be transformed into sacredness for a limited time. The notion that a space must be 'fit for the gods' presence' and 'is part of the world which shares most fully in the heavenly realm' is inaccurate (14: p.146). More often than not, a space became appropriate by the arrival of divine presence and not preceding it. Earthly life is not ideal but messy. Yahweh accommodated this messiness in his relationship with Israel by interacting with the people at the point of their need.

CONFLUENCE OF SPACES

I agree with Japhet (20) that a sacred place/space is a context where Yahweh is revealed; however, she limits this sacredness to only 'a place where God resides' and sacred spaces operate without this restriction (p.69). Douglas (29) challenged the view that holiness (sacred) and impurity (profane) should be defined as spatial opposites. Even Levy-Bruhl (30) revised his separatist position on the interaction of the sacred with the profane. These scholars went a step further by determining there are purities and impurities in both sacred and domain categories which is a topic for another time. Key for this paper is the recognition the sacred and profane should not be detached from daily life and may indeed be present in the same space (31). The patriarchs and their descendants did not associate sacredness or holiness with any kind of inherent quality of a place, but rather sacredness existed by the presence of Yahweh. God dwelt in the land, thereby the land was sacred (32).

'In ancient Israel, the theology of God's presence was also a theology of God's absence. The Israelites had to deal with two aspects of divine presence. On the one hand, this presence was permanent, stable, and reliable because it was a manifestation of God, who was also reliable, trustworthy, and true to the covenants made with the people. One the other hand, the Israelites themselves recognized that their own experience of God varied' (33: p.126-127).

In the time of the prophets, one assumption was the expectation divine power would move at will and profane space could not limit sacred intervention or restrain sacred presence. From a profane space, the individual sought to evoke a response from Yahweh.

In a crisis event, chaos requires a diffusion of boundaries between sacred and profane. In other words, all the ideals of a sacred place go out the window. Spatial, temporal-providence is the 'othering' of a space by some type of manifestation of divine presence. It is 'the paradox of the transcendent becoming immanent, the omnipresent becoming localized' (34: p.55). Sacred space becomes so despite the constant confluence of the profane. Often, people experience the sacred through mechanisms considered to be profane. In the Catholic context of Santiago de Compostela, religious objects are sold as imbued with sacred power; in Lourdes, containers with regular tap water are sold advertised as containing sacred healing properties (35). The 'sacred' water, of course, is free, the 'profane' containers are not.

No biblical example evinces better than 2 Kings 5:9-17 in the story of Naaman confronted with the dirty Jordan river (profane) as a means of divine healing (sacred). Naaman was upset about the muddy Jordan because it was not recognized as sacred - no inherent supernatural power or prestige - it lacked supernatural significance (36). Here the sacred was truly a non-rational force that ignored social prerequisite. As Berquist (37) has noted, biblical 'space exists…without absolute framework' whether it be sacred or profane (p.17).

Healing in the muddy Jordan was a supernatural dynamic force using the profane space repurposed to be sacred. The Ottoan idea of the sacred as mysterious is amusingly appropriate here (38). Naaman cannot get past the muddy Jordan - the mystery of it being transformed into sacred space was too much for him to overcome. Brueggemann (39) suggests Elisha chose the Jordan because it was within his prophetic boundary outside of royal jurisdiction. Of interest is the verb טבל (tabal) translated 'to

dip.' It is an uncommon term and usually refers to things dipped in blood. It is not considered a synonym for 'washing' (40). This 'dipping' in the dirty water of the Jordan river resulted in his skin becoming as unblemished as a child.

5:9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood in the doorway of Elisha's house. 10Elisha sent out a messenger who told him, 'Go and wash seven times in the Jordan; your skin will be restored and you will be healed.' 11Naaman went away angry. He said, 'Look, I thought for sure he would come out, stand there, invoke the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the area, and cure the skin disease. 12The rivers of Damascus, the Abana and Pharpar, are better than any of the waters of Israel! Could I not wash in them and be healed? So he turned around and went away angry. 13His servants approached and said to him, 'O master, if the prophet had told you to do some difficult task, you would have been will to do it. It seems you should be happy that he simply said, 'Wash and you will be healed.' 14So he went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, as the prophet had instructed. His skin became as smooth as a young child's and he was healed. 15He and his entire entourage returned to the prophet. Naaman came and stood before him. He said, 'For sure I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel! Now, please accept a gift from your servant.' 16But Elisha replied, 'As certainly as the Lord lives (whom I serve), I will take nothing from you.' Naaman insisted that he take it, but he refused. 17Naaman said, 'If not, then please give your servant a load of dirt, enough for a pair of mules to carry, for your servant will never again offer a burnt offering or sacrifice to a god other than the Lord.' (II Kings 5:9-17 NET)

It is indeed curious for Naaman to request promise land dirt. Naaman assigns sacred meaning to the land of Israel. It probably was not viewed as more sacred than dirt in Aram, but rather it was properly sacred for worshipping Yahweh coming from the land of his people. Notions of geo-providence are at work in the entreaty (41). Naaman most likely intended to make an earthen altar to serve as a shrine unto Yahweh (40).

In I Kings 17:19-23, the prophet, Elijah, believed the power of prayer would affect the sacred power of Yahweh. It was common for a servant of God to place their hand on an afflicted person. In this act, the sacred touches the profane and each share the same space. There was no revile or coiling away from the dead body. There was no fear by Elijah or any sense of needing protection from the profanity of the situation. Elijah allowed sacred virtue to be passed to the gravely ill or perhaps deceased son by stretching his body out over the boy. In this profane space, the sacred sought physical contact with the profane.

17:19He said to her, 'Hand me your son.' He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him down on his bed. 20Then he called out to the Lord, 'O Lord, my God, are you also bringing disaster on this widow I am staying with by killing her son?' 21He stretched out over the boy three times and called out to the Lord, 'O Lord, my God, please let this boy's breath return to him.' 22The Lord answered Elijah's prayer; the boy's breath returned to him and he lived. 23Elijah took the boy, brought him down from the upper room to the house, and handed him to his mother. Elijah then said, 'See, your son is alive!' (I Kings 17:19-23 NET)

The space in this context was dissimilar to what was found in formal sacred places in which detailed practices governed rituals, objects, and participants to keep the sacred separated from any profanity (42). Perhaps Lewin's (43: p.26) 'life space' or Shiner's (44: p.429) 'lived space' are applicable in which the physical and sensory allow a person avenues for movement to bring closer to or provide a means of distance from the sacred. Elijah was a conduit of Yahweh. He was commissioned and sanctioned by God, devoted to divine service, and participated in divine character.

The I Kings 17 narrative was played out in a domestic setting familiar with supernatural intervention. Earlier in chapter 17, the prophet used common household food to enact the mercy of Yahweh for the widow and her son during a drought. The miracle of the oil and meal confirmed Elijah's authority as an emissary of Yahweh. And perhaps allowed him to question the role of Yahweh in the lad's welfare. The ongoing plight of the widow continues as her son faces death. The land was parched and profane, the widow's home was consumed by death rattles; and yet, Elijah as the man of Yahweh did not hesitate to enter and bring the sacred presence of God with him. There was a hint of self judgment as the widow asked for what sin she was being punished.

Elijah's immediate response was not hindered by whatever profanity existed in the homeplace. Sweeney (45) argues the behavior of the prophet placing himself over the boy time after time was 'a symbolic action of sympathetic magic in which the prophet takes the illness of the boy into himself. By placing himself face-to-face with the boy, the prophet provides a means by which the illness is transferred from the body of the boy into his own.' Death is absorbed into life, the sacred intentionally brings the profane into sacred space - the sacred space of the man of Yahweh.

The profane spaces in the I Kings 17 and II Kings 4 narratives of mortal illness were not so much chaotic as wanting. The influence experience exerted on the space was key. There was no assumption of a standard to construct sacred space because the actual ways the Israelites experienced the sacred in their lives was not confined to certain types of spaces. Consideration of only formal sacred places is an incomplete reality lacking the witness of informal sacred spaces so central to how the Israelites engaged with the divine. In II Kings 4, the deceased boy was placed in the quarters of Elisha. Commentators disagree on the reason. Possibly the mother wanted to underscore the emotional pain of the situation. Perhaps she was adhering to the custom of closing the door to trap the nepeš (life essence) so it would remain in the space with the physical body. Some scholars note Elisha as the man of Yahweh, carried within him divine rūaḥ (spirit) which may revive the boy (46). The common act of sneezing announces restored life.

4:32When Elisha arrived at the house, there was the child lying dead on his bed. 33He went in by himself and closed the door. Then he prayed to the Lord. 34He got up on the bed and spread his body out over the boy; he put his mouth on the boy's mouth, his eyes over the boy's eyes, and the palms of his hands against the boy's palms. As he bent down across him, the boy's skin grew warm. 35Elisha went back and walked around in the house. Then he got up on the bed again and bent down over him. The child sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. (II Kings 4:32-35)

Concluding Remarks

'The phenomenon of sacred space is the fundamental expression of religiosity in spatial dimension' (47: p.ii). A space becomes sacred in the Old Testament by the presence of Yahweh. The classification of sacred and profane recognizes two types of spatial categories. There are sacred and profane places characterized by substantial encounter. And there are sacred and profane spaces characterized by situational experience. Examples show there is a confluence of spaces in the life experience of the Israelites. Sacred and profane existed in the same space with one taking precedence over the other. Despite the spatial presence of profanity, sacredness entered according to divine will. Sacred action was utility based and centered around life focused behavior. A space may become sacred to accommodate a sacred action limited to a particular temporal moment. Any space in a moment in time became sacred by encompassing the principles of divine justice and divine responsibility and notions of humanness such as identity, worth, value, privilege, and human responsibility.

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