

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 21

Article 11

2014

SACRED SPACE

Michael Rotenberg-Schwartz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty>



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Michael Rotenberg-Schwartz (2014) "SACRED SPACE," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 21, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol21/iss1/11>

SPECIAL FEATURE

On Sacred Space

SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION

SACRED SPACE

Michael Rotenberg-Schwartz

Writing about his visit to the Tower of London in 1755, Haim Joseph David Azulai, a *shaliah* (emissary) from Hebron, depicts a religious experience. After an admiring catalogue of curiosities and their display—including, for example, a “plenitude of weapons of war, in their thousands, tens of thousands and milliards and the beauty of their order and arrangement ‘according to their character and their stature’”—Azulai turns to messianic prophecy and prayer when he reflects on the Crown Jewels:

In one darkened room there is a separating barrier of iron, and within they showed us the royal crown and the crown jewels “full

of sparkle, flashing with light”—glowing like the lightning; and the golden chalice with which they anoint the king, and similar precious vessels and kingly treasures of gems and pearls. Behold, all these have mine eyes seen “peering out from the embrasures,” sorrowful and joyful—“if thus to those who transgress his word, then to the doers of His will how much more so!” Behold, days are coming “of desire and of glory,” of the saving of the House of Israel, and our eyes will see “the breath of our nostrils,” the Messiah of the Lord, lighting up and illuminating like the sun seventyfold, crowned with the crown of crowns, “holy of holies is he to the Lord.” May thus be His will.¹

Seeing in their brilliance something like the angelic luminescence described in the *piyut* (liturgical poem) “El Adon” (“God, the Lord”), an ancient text of *merkavah* (chariot) mysticism, here Azulai reacts to the jewels as Rabbi Akiva is said in *Tractate Makkot* 24a to react to the sound of crowds in a Roman plaza approximately seventy miles away. Where Akiva’s traveling companions, Rabbis Gamliel, Elazar ben Azariah and Yehoshua, weep at what they hear, Akiva smiles:

They asked him: For what reason are you smiling? He replied to them: And you, for what reason are you weeping? They answered him: These heathens who bow down to idols and burn incense to idolatry live in security and in calm, and as for us, the house which is the footstool of our God is consumed in fire, should we not weep? He said to them: For this very reason I am smiling! For if such is the reward for those who transgress his will, then for those who do his will, how much more so.²

Rather than despair like his companions, Akiva optimistically interprets signs of foreign power as signifying more than present Jewish subjugation; so too, Azulai turns from the jewels and the temporal power they symbolize to the promise of Israel’s redeemer—who shines like the sun by a factor

¹ Chaim Yosef David Azulai, *The Diaries of Rabbi Ha'im Yosef David Azulai* (“Ma’agal Tov”—the Good Journey), trans. Benjamin Cymerman (Jerusalem: The Bnei Issakhar Institute, 1997), 106–7. The Hebrew version of this letter is included in Eisenstein, *Ozar*, 230–31.

² *Talmud Bavli, The Scottenstein Daf Yomi Edition: Tractate Makkos* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1990).

of seventy, the rabbinic number for the other nations of the world. With textual allusion, moreover, Azulai rhetorically enacts the reversal of fortune he foresees. Where Jeremiah cries in Lamentations 4:20 over the exile of "the breath of our nostrils" in whose shade he expected to dwell, here Azulai anticipates a messiah whose glory will outshine the jewels on which he has gazed, like the lover in Song of Songs 2:9, "from the embrasures"—though there the verse is spoken by a beloved (Israel, allegorically speaking) about a lover (God) she knows is watching through the garden lattice.³ The transposition of the person at prayer and God here effected recurs in a drawing of the Western Wall printed in Judah Poliastro's prayerbook for Jewish travelers to the Holy Land (1743).⁴ Above the simple drawing, a caption from I Kings 9:3 reads: "Mine eyes and mine heart shall be there perpetually." Quoting God's promise to Solomon at the consecration of the Temple serves to remind the reader not only of God's esteem for the Temple but also of the place the Western Wall should have within each Jewish mind. Azulai in London lives true to the scriptural word.

I refer to Azulai here for two reasons. One is to show the way in which allusive biblical writing can enable spiritual fervor, notwithstanding the claims of some who argue that it either deadens experience or prevents one from seeing the world as it is.⁵ The second is to suggest that sacred and secular spaces can be multiple and simultaneously resonant. Azulai's spirited response to the Crown Jewels may be unlike the responses of Christian visitors (I have not come across another passage like his), but it is worth asking whether and when eighteenth-century spaces evoke religious feelings. In Samuel Johnson's "London," for example, the speaker and Thales are disappointed by the corruptions of the city and public life, but the sight of Elizabeth's birthplace causes both to "kneel, and kiss the consecrated Earth." Their feelings may be charged by the historical

³ Azulai's hopefulness in London meets its necessary march in the pessimistic frustration of a midnight prayer included in his *Moreh B'Etzba*: "Each generation in which the Temple has not been rebuilt is like a generation in which the Temple has been destroyed." The *kinah* (elegiac poem) is included in Yisrael Yosef Bronstein, *Tefilos Hakosel* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Books, 2009), 375.

⁴ Reprinted in Zev Vilnay, *Legends of Jerusalem (The Sacred Land Vol. I)* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 160.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of this, see: Rotenberg-Schwartz, Michael, "Holy Land Travel and the Representation of Prayer in the Enlightenment," *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment* 2 (2010): 177–208.

significance of a temporal power, but the ascription of a consecrated nature to her point of origin makes Elizabeth something of a secular saint. This gesture significantly contrasts the sentiment in Juvenal's original Satire III: there the speaker and Umbritius lament how former sacred spots are rented to Jews and the muses have been expelled from their groves. It may not inhere in the land itself, but here some part of London retains a kind of holiness.

A place does not have to be generically sacred to evoke sacred thoughts. This is worth remembering because all too often the tendency when reading eighteenth-century texts is to minimize the sacred. In the opening pages of *Making Waste*, for example, Sophie Gee makes much of a seeming juxtaposition of sacred and profane in a description of the dirtiness of London streets from Pierre Jean Grosley's *Tour to London; or, New Observations on England and its Inhabitants*. "This visitor starts describing one of the most beautiful ecclesiastical monuments in London, St. Clement's Church," she writes, "but he is diverted by the filth that surrounds it. . . . In a contest between the divine splendor and abject surplus, abjection wins out . . . in a passage where a description of secular defilement and purification takes over from that of a sacred monument."⁶⁶ Her characterization is slightly misleading. While Grosley refers to a part of the Strand "near St. Clement's church," he does not say the dirt "coats the church," as Gee claims, but only that it "bedaub[s] all the lower parts of such houses as are exposed to it." Moreover, Grosley's intention is not at all "diverted" here; the context of the passage is not at all about St. Clement's, nor the divine, but about the narrowness, irregularity, and dirtiness of Old London's streets.⁷⁷ Though in general Gee offers many useful (if sometimes inconsistent) insights on the overlap of sacred and secular space in the eighteenth century, here she emphasizes the sacred simply to diminish it. Her move is symptomatic of a general attitude in our field. The eighteenth century is certainly a period in which secular spaces proliferated and even became dominant. But in studying these spaces, eighteenth-century scholarship has too quickly assumed the unimportance or even disappearance of sacred space.

⁶⁶ Sophie Gee, *Making Waste: Leftovers and the Eighteenth-Century Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1–2.

⁷⁷ Pierre Jean Grosley, *Tour to London; or, New Observations on England and its Inhabitants*, Vol. I (Dublin: 1772), 36.

The following five essays seek to redress this. Collectively, they show that sacred space retains relevance in Europe throughout the period. Moreover, they suggest that what makes sacred space interesting is its multiplicity. What makes a place "sacred" differs over time and from person to person. Thus, while Hilary Teynor Donatini's "The Holy House of Loreto: Politics and Idolatry in the Long Eighteenth Century" discusses how anti-Jacobite and travel writers deploy images of the Holy House of Loreto to attack Stuart sympathizers and Catholicism in general as well as to establish a myth of a purely Protestant English identity, Chris Mounsey's "A True-Born English Sacred Space: Multiple Metaphors of Hawksmoor's Steeples in Early Eighteenth-Century London" argues that the success of Hawksmoor's idiosyncratic churches lies in their ability to appeal to the many different sensibilities not only of political opponents but of seeming allies who nonetheless espoused different beliefs about the Established Church. Mounsey's sense that a single church could be read from very different perspectives and with very different results is echoed in William Stargard's "Display and Contemplation of Clarissan Spirituality: Bernardo Vittone at Santa Chiara in Turin," which outlines how church space might simultaneously unite a congregation but also reflect some significant differences between the Italian public's and nuns' understanding and experience of Clarissan spirituality. Where the aforementioned essays focus mainly on church spaces, the final two essays of this section consider the interrelated functions of the sacred and the secular. In "Parisian Sacred Space in L-S. Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*," Michael Mulryan shows how Mercier's utilitarian sense of the sacred led him to believe in the theater as a new church which might alleviate social ills in Paris. Finally, in "Religious Exchanges: Solomon's Temple, Holy Land Travel, and a Georgics of Sacred Space in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century English Writing," I suggest that in texts about sites such as the Royal Exchange and the Holy Land, especially Solomon's Temple, English writers in the long eighteenth century indicate that the sacred and the secular share ideas about the systematic relation of things within space and an interest in the uses of those things.

If these essays succeed in showing the persistence and even dynamism of the sacred throughout the period, it is to be hoped that others will fill in what a special section of limited space could not include. While much work has been done on sacred spaces in the American colonies, less has been written on such spaces in South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia,

especially as it pertains to the European eighteenth century. Studies of not only what European travelers and proto-anthropologists thought about the religious spaces of other cultures, but also of what these spaces meant to their own people would illuminate the considerations offered here of sacred space in the European context.