THE "THRESHING FLOOR" AS SACRED SPACE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: A SPATIAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE*

Tamara Prosic

For the majority of people in modern Western cultures, threshing floors have become words void of any real content. Replaced by combine harvesters, they have disappeared as physical realities and then gradually also from people's consciousness and cultural memory, leaving only linguistic echoes of their former significance in words such as choir, choral, carol, choreography, or halo, which all relate to Greek words denoting threshing floors.[1] Before the industrial revolution, however, they were one of the most common and most enduring physical elements of the ancient Mediterranean landscape. Almost as if following G. S. Brown's "first Law of Construction"[2] to the letter, their open-air, flattened and usually circular surface, made of paving stones or well-beaten earth, sometimes with a low wall running along its edges, immediately presented itself to the eye as a separate spatial entity, a carefully constructed otherness to the surrounding continuity of the open fields or the natural terrain. But they were not just physically distinct places; they were also culturally meaningful spaces, like spatial vortexes fusing and interlinking a variety of social, political, economical, and religious aspects of ancient agrarian Mediterranean civilizations.

* My gratitude for writing this study is extended to Joseph Blenkinsopp who, during an informal chat on the fringes of the annual meeting of the European Association for Biblical Studies in 2006 in Piliscaba, Hungary, claimed that biblical threshing floors are meeting spaces between the living and the dead.

1. Χώρα and ἅλων, respectively.

2. "Draw a distinction. Call it the first distinction. Call the space in which it is drawn the space severed or cloven by the distinction" (Brown 1971, 3).

1. *Threshing Floors: Only Lived Spaces?*

Old as the first villages and the first attempts at systematic agriculture,[3] as Nicoletta Isar remarks, threshing floors were "literal markings on the land and human consciousness" (Isar 2009, 41). Biblical texts and their space, both in their implied actuality and constructed symbolism, also carry the imprints of the multifaceted significance of threshing floors. They are a source of powerful metaphors; important events take place on or near them; and the most sacred biblical place, Solomon's temple, the first permanent dwelling of Yahweh, the sign that he is indeed unchanging like the physical contours of the land he promised to the people of Israel, is built over a threshing floor. In recent years, following the development of new spatial concepts, most notably by H. Lefebvre (1991), M. Foucault (1986), and E. Soja (1989), and attempts to overcome traditional binarism in thinking about space, there has been a wave of works trying to deal innovatively with biblical space as well.[4] Only one of them, however, has touched upon threshing floors. In "Physical Space, Imagined Space, and 'Lived Space' in Ancient Israel," Victor Matthews (2003) tries to investigate the social and economic aspects of biblical references to threshing floors. Analyzing a variety of stories and individual verses in terms of Lefebvre's "lived space" and Soja's "third space," which he understands in a somewhat reductionist manner as "places in which human occupations and activities occur" (Matthews 2003, 12) and using a pervasively economic conceptual framework, Matthews concludes that the biblical texts mainly reflect threshing floors' utilitarian, practical nature as working sites and centers of grain distribution. According to Matthews, in the Bible they are associated with "economic prosperity, fair dealings under established, customary laws and traditions, and covenantal ties to maintain a just society" (Matthews 2003, 14). So, in connection with Deut 15:12–15[5] we learn that freed debt slaves get a "financial stake from the

3. It is not really known when the first purposeful construction of threshing floors began, but by the third millennium B.C.E. they had become an indispensable part of the agrarian landscape (Avner 1998).

4. See Flanagan 1999; Gunn and McNutt 2002; Berquist and Camp 2008a, 2008b; Boer and Conrad 2003.

5. "(12) If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. (13) And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed; (14) you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press; as the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. (15) You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today."

flock, the threshing floor and the wine press" (Matthews 2003, 13) and in connection with David's purchase of Araunah's threshing floor (2 Sam 24:18–25) we hear about a "business transaction," certain "property rights," the "economic value of the land," and the "formal transfer and legal purposes in connection with future claims" (Matthews 2003, 13–14).

While I can accept the view that biblical threshing floors to some extent reflect economic relations and therefore have social implications, I find it quite difficult to accept their untroubled cultural perception and understanding which Matthews paints: first of all, because threshing floors in the Bible are often places where anxiety, death, and violence lurk in the background. The threshing floor of Atad is a stage for mourning Jacob's death (Gen 50:10–11); the threshing floor of Ruth and Boaz exudes the existential anxiety of widows (Ruth 2–3); pestilence is the backdrop of the story about the purchase of Ornan's threshing floor and an angel with a drawn sword stands next to it (1 Chr 21:15–16); Uzzah dies on the threshing floor of Nacon (2 Sam 6:6–7); Gideon's test of Yahweh on the threshing floor happens in the context of foreign oppression (Judg 6:1–6). Biblical metaphors building on imagery from threshing floors are also mostly about war, violence, and death. The chaff that is blown away when the grain is winnowed on the threshing floor is used to evoke a picture of quick destruction and swift disappearance without a trace (Hos 13:3; Dan 2:35). Job 5:26 compares threshing floors to graves. Israel's enemies will be destroyed as sheaves on the threshing floor.[6] In this respect it is perhaps not without significance that the Hebrew word for "threshing" (דוש), similar to its English translation, has violent associations and means to trample, tread, break, crush, or tear. Rather than social harmony, biblical threshing floors, narratively and metaphorically, seem to spell controversy, trouble, and strife.

The second reason I cannot accept Matthews's views about biblical threshing floors without huge reservations is that he completely ignores the nature of the texts he analyzes, which are not just intensely religious, but also, openly and more frequently implicitly, highly intentional, polemical, and programmatic texts promoting and advancing particular religious ideologies. Had Matthews considered this point then David's purchase of the Jebusite threshing floor would have sounded a rather more intriguing event than the completely legalistic and, to my mind, very twentieth-century procedure he sees in it; threshing floors would have also revealed themselves to be much more captivating spatial concepts than his labor and distribution centers evoking social harmony and a just society. The specific religious preoccupation of the biblical texts simply

6. Judges 8:7; 2 Kgs 13:7; Isa 25:10; 41:15; Jer 51:33; Mic 4:13; Hab 3:12.

has to be taken into consideration, since places, and in particular those that are "lived spaces" in a Lefebvrian sense,[7] are not empty shells void of any meaningful content which the ideology promoted by the texts can incorporate into its own religious referential landscape without attempting to put its own gloss over it. What the texts can and often do with relative ease is to design their own ideologically framed, and therefore idiosyncratic, spatial references. But such spaces are usually only abstractions, or as Lefebvre would call them, "representations of space,"[8] conceived mixtures "of knowledge and ideology" (Lefebvre 1991, 41), places reflecting conception of places by the biblical authors, which can only with the passage of time acquire the quality of being "representational" or "lived spaces," an everyday dynamic reality bearing historical sediments and embodying complex and often coded symbolisms (Lefebvre 1991, 33). There are many such "representations of space" introduced by the Bible. Some of them, like the land whose boundaries are outlined in Num 34:2–12, have remained forever locked in the intellectual as mere denotations of biblical territorial ambitions, while others became real "lived spaces," spaces imbued with connotative dimensions. Perhaps the most ready example of the latter is "the Promised Land" which began its existence as an ideological concept, but which today we witness as "lived space."

2. *Threshing Floors from Lived Space to Sacred Space*

In contrast to the imaginary beginnings of "the Promised Land," threshing floors, however, were not something that the Bible introduced in accordance with its ideological ambitions and theological views and values. They were indeed "lived spaces," spaces that were part of the physical and ideational landscape, which were "directly lived" through associated images, symbols, feelings, practices, and ideas and which already had an established religious language and narratives in which they spoke to the users. In a sense, they were not just lived, but also living

7. "*Representational space*: space as directly *lived*, through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'… Thus, representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal signs and symbols." (Lefebvre 1991, 39).

8. "*Representations of space*: conceptualized space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers…all of which identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived… Conceptions of space tend…towards a system of verbal and (therefore intellectually worked out) signs." (Lefebvre 1991, 38).

spatial realities whose meaning and significance was already bound to a certain religious understanding of the world that quite certainly did not completely agree with the biblical authors' worldview. There are different ways to deal with such spatial competition. Physical destruction is one way, but as the case of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim demonstrates, not necessarily the most effective way to erase their "living space" encoded symbolism. The temple, which was the center of the Samaritan brand of Judaism and in competition with the Jerusalem temple, was destroyed in the second century B.C.E. during the short reign of the Hasmonaeans, although the site itself has not lost its sacred character and is still a focal point of Samaritan worship. A more subtle and at the same time usually more effective way, in particular when it comes to sacred places which, like threshing floors, also have strong utilitarian purpose, is to re-interpret their sacredness and their symbolism, giving them new meanings that grow out of the old, thus providing a sense of continuity, a link with the past to which people can relate, but which, nevertheless, shift the ideational focus into a direction which is more in agreement with the new ideology. And we encounter this tactic in every religion, in particular during the formative period. In the foundations of some of the oldest churches in Rome, such as the Basilica di San Clemente (fourth century C.E.) and Santa Prisca (fourth–fifth century C.E.), are remains of old Mithraic sites[9] and each one of these has its own story regarding how and why the church was built there. According to M. J. T. Lewis, at least eight Romano-Celtic temples in Europe were replaced by Christian churches at the same site (Lewis 1966, 145). Islam's most sacred space, Mecca, was also an old cultic site;[10] its potential to serve as a powerful uniting center was understood only too well by Mohamed, in choosing not to ignore it while designing the new religion's landscape. Contrary to popular understanding, religious conversions are not restricted to people. They also include cultic practice, imagery, symbols, metaphors, and narratives and most definitely, time and space: the two basic dimensions in which every person lives and moves.

So, what the Bible presents as David's purchase of a Jebusite threshing floor, in my view, does not have anything to do with the economic value of the land, legal purposes, or things of that kind. Rather, it is a symbolic act of a religious conversion of a cultic site or, if you prefer, an ideological de-semanticizing and re-semanticizing of a particular "lived space." In other words, what was Jebusite, or rather, what was lived and experienced

9. See Webb 2002, 89; Vermaseren and van Essen 1965.

10. Kaaba, the most revered site in Mecca, was originally dedicated to the moon god Hubal (Armstrong 2000, 11).

as a sacred space of a different religious tradition, as some other god's place, became Yahweh's. It is basically a theological spatial usurpation, which might be expressed in economic terms, but the value of the land is primarily in its cultic significance.

J. M. Lundquist argues (2008, 6) that the circumstances surrounding the purchase of the threshing floor – David's improper conduct, the pestilence and the threat of destroying Jerusalem, the last moment escape from danger, the word that Yahweh sends to David and the angel standing next to the threshing floor – represent a classical case of Eliadean "irruption of the sacred," of a sudden manifestation of the divine in the human world which saturates the otherwise profane place with sacrality (Eliade 1959, 5). However, I would like to argue that the narrative is actually an attempt to provide a justification for the appropriation of a place that was already an established sacred site, and that in this case "irruption of the sacred" is not a genuine "irruption" into the profane, but an attempt by the biblical authors to re-semanticize the site's existing sacrality by representing it as a purely profane space. In other words, the story is an attempt to legitimize theologically the site as Yahweh's, by connecting its sacredness with Yahweh's actions.

One of the indications that this is the case is the alleged private ownership of the threshing floor in question here, which is in stark contrast to the communal ownership of other threshing floors mentioned by the Bible.[11] The majority of them are coupled with a name of a city pointing to the notion that they were also owned collectively by the population of that city. There are threshing floors of Atad, Keilah, Chidon, and even the kings of Israel and Judah have to use the communal threshing floor of Samaria[12] for their meeting. If all the other threshing floors were commonly owned, what makes Araunah/Ornan exceptional so that he can claim ownership rights over the threshing floor that Yahweh wants for his altar? His emphasized Jebusite origin shows that he does not belong to Israel[13] and even more importantly, he most probably does not worship Yahweh and could either be a representative of the god who is residing over the threshing floor (as much as David is representative of Yahweh) or the god himself, disguised as a human.

11. Judging by Palmer (1998), private ownership of threshing floors seems to be a modern development.

12. Genesis 50:10; 1 Sam 23:1; 1 Kgs 22:10; 1 Chr 13:9.

13. Many have suggested that Araunah/Ornan is of non-Semitic origin and that biblical Ornan is a foreigner of Hurrian origin. See the history of suggested linguistic connections and suggested translations from Hurrian in McCarter, Jr. (1984, 512), or more recently Wyatt (1990).

The second indication that the story of David's acquisition of Ornan's threshing floor is nothing more than a Yahwistic gloss over an already established sacred site comes from the story itself, which, on close reading, betrays a very poor structure. It is full of external and internal inconsistencies and contradictions suggesting numerous revisions,[14] and more importantly there is an interplay of conscious intentions and a kind of narrative Freudian slips, ideas that the author(s) consciously omitted, but are unconsciously revealed through the tensions of the text.

The story comes in two slightly different versions (2 Sam 24; 1 Chr 21). The one in 2 Sam 24 is somewhat shorter and lacking in the dramatic details found in 1 Chr 21, such as the description of the angel, who is in this version described as standing next to the threshing floor between heaven and earth with a sword stretched out over Jerusalem; the description of David and his followers when they see the angel (1 Chr 21:16); the fire that Yahweh sends upon the newly erected altar as a sign of acceptance (1 Chr 21:26), as well as the concluding comments which provide justification for David's decision in 1 Chr 22:1 to continue sacrificing at the new altar rather than the tabernacle. Samuel's version lists places where the census was taken, while Chronicles omits them. The name of the threshing floor's owner is also slightly different: in 2 Sam 24 it is Araunah, while in 1 Chr 21 it is Ornan. There is also a discrepancy regarding the character responsible for making David take census of the people, a move that sets into motion a sequence of events which eventually leads to the purchase of the threshing floor. In 2 Sam 24 it is Yahweh who, for no apparent reason, becomes angry, spurs David on to transgress by engaging in tabooed action, namely, in conducting a census (2 Sam 24:1), which he then punishes with pestilence. Chronicles, however, as if trying to correct Yahweh's mystifying behavior from Samuel, introduces an outside element, namely Satan (1 Chr 21:1), who takes over the unsavory role of agent provocateur.

More important than these obvious differences are the internal inconsistencies, regardless of the version. Within the story itself there are actually two parallel and quite distinct themes that the author is attempting to orchestrate and to blend into one, albeit not quite successfully. One is concerned with the establishment of Yahweh as the divine owner of the threshing floor, the other with appeasement; both of them find their resolution through the purchase of the threshing floor.

14. See, for example, all the different threads that McCarter identifies (1984, 514–18).

The theme of establishing Yahweh as the owner is introduced in the second half of the story and suffers from several contradictions. First of all, it is not really clear why David tells the Jebusite that the reason for buying the floor is to avert the plague (2 Sam 24:21; 1 Chr 21:22) since Yahweh stopped it (2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chr 21:15) even before David was ordered to make him an altar on that particular spot (2 Sam 24:18; 1 Chr 21:18). In a more general sense, it is also not clear why David has to purchase this spot at all, since all the land is Yahweh's anyway and, moreover, he has already given Canaan, including the land of the Jebusites, to the Israelites as possession (Gen 15:18–21). Within this context, David's offer of money to Araunah/Ornan for the floor does not seem very logical. Its logic, however, becomes apparent in the context of the second theme, the one that deals with appeasement, and the one with which the whole story begins.

The sequence of events of this second theme, that is, the census which triggers the plague which is finally put to rest by the money business and the animal sacrifice,[15] follows almost to the letter verses from Exod 30:12–16 where we read that whenever a census is taken in order to avert plague everyone who is numbered has to pay ransom money as atonement. This is a curious commandment and I am not really sure why making a census is taboo,[16] but in this context that is not really important. What is important is that these verses and the sequence of events in David's story structurally agree with each other. In both cases we have the same three interdependent elements: census, danger, and ransom from danger. To strip it down to basics, in both cases census, an implied sacred activity and hence inherently dangerous for humans, causes plague unless ransom money is paid to a god. The only, but nevertheless fundamental, difference between the sequence of events implied by the commandment in Exodus and the events in the story about David's purchase of Ornan's threshing floor – which also brings down the biblical edifice of presenting the future site of Yahweh's temple as a profane place with strictly practical purpose and without any existing sanctity – is that the ransom money in the case of David's story does not end up with Yahweh. It ends up in the

15. 2 Samuel 24:1, 15, 24–25; 1 Chr 21:1, 7, 14, 24–26.

16. Census was usually taken for military purposes and it might be that disease outbreaks were common during war times. Military campaigns usually meant imposing a very long siege on a city, which easily might have been the reason for disease outbreaks, both among the besieged and the besiegers, which in turn could be the reason for the belief that census itself brings pestilence and that some particular god (of war, of disease, or even god of death) has to be propitiated in advance.

hands of Araunah/Ornan: it is Ornan and not Yahweh who is appeased by the money and the animal sacrifice.

Araunah/Ornan means "strong"[17] and is perhaps a euphemism, hiding a powerful god who, according to the story, can cause plagues and bring destruction.[18] Gods related to death were feared in ancient times and were often referred to by descriptive names. Hades, the name by which we know the Greek lord of the netherworld, is actually the designation of his realm rather than his personal name and means "unseen" (Rose 1991, 64), which is a curious parallel to Sheol, the biblical world of the dead, which also means "unseen." The implied, unnamed divinity standing in the shadow of the biblical human Ornan is also connected with death and dying, as the plague suggests, and on the other hand, with threshing floors and most certainly with harvest, since Ornan is threshing the grains when David approaches him (1 Chr 21:20).

What we have here is an implied correlation between threshing floors – or in a wider sense, agriculture – and a deity which has death connections, something that was very much part of the religious beliefs and cultic practice of ancient Mediterranean cultures. In Egypt, we find it as part of the cult of Osiris, who is successful at both being the lord of the dead and god of life and fertility, expressed specifically through the idea of growing crops, harvest, and harvesting activities. He was celebrated for bringing agriculture to the people (Myśliwiec 2004, 56) and the myth about his death and revival was ritually expressed in a variety of agrarian associations. His death was commemorated on the first day of sowing, while his revival was symbolically represented by germinating seeds (Myśliwiec 2004, 60). We also find threshing floors as an important ritual space for ceremonies that connected Osiris and Min, the god of harvest. The so-called ritual of the "driving of four calves," a solemn representation of threshing grains, dedicated principally to Min, was depicted as being carried out on a threshing floor. In some texts, though, that space is called "the tomb of Osiris" and Myśliwiec argues that this ritual, among other rituals, might have also accompanied funerary rites (Myśliwiec 2004, 16–17). In Mesopotamia we also find a strong connection between the world of the dead and their gods and agriculture. Nergal, the lord of the underworld and the god of war and pestilence, was also regarded as fertility and vegetation deity (Leick 1998, 128), since he was a son of Ninlil (Leick 1998, 133), the goddess of grain. Ninazu, another

17. According to scholars who claim Hurrian derivation of the word, Ornan means "king," "lord," or "the lord" (e.g. McCarter 1984, 512).

18. Some scholars suggest that a non-Israelite god, such as the plague god Resheph, hides behind the angel of death (e.g. McCarter 1984, 511).

underworld divinity, had the title of "the lord who carries the stretching line over the fields," which makes him also an agrarian deity (Leick 1998, 129). In Greece, we find this mixture of agriculture and ideas about the world of the dead and their divine rulers as part of Demeter worship, the goddess of grain who is inseparably tied to the world of the dead through her daughter Kore, the representation of spring and the emerging grain, but also the wife of Hades, the god of the underworld (Burkert 1987, 159). Demeter's temple in Eleusis, like Yahweh's, seems to have been built on a threshing floor (Vanderpool 1982). In Athens, one of the major festivals, the Haloa festival, which was dedicated to Demeter and Dionysus, another god with strong connections to death, took place between two threshing floors. The procession began at the threshing floor of Athens and finished at the temple of Eleusis. The very name "haloa" means a threshing floor (Simon 1983, 36). Our word "halo" comes from the same root and the circular light surrounding heads of saints reflects not just the shape of threshing floors, but most certainly also the sacred status these spaces enjoyed in antiquity. Threshing floors were also the first performing spaces. Dionysian dithyrambs were sung on them and according to Aristotle this is how and where theatres began (Simon 1982, 3).

3. *Threshing Floors as Liminal Spaces Between Death and Life*

According to Mircea Eliade, the mythological and ritual interaction between agriculture and death, the realm of the dead and their human and divine residents is based on the analogy that the ancient farming societies drew between human existence and the cycle of growing plants (Eliade 1958, 349–54). As in the biblical phrase, from dust to dust, people feed on the fruits that grow from the soil and like seeds thrown back into the soil, in death they return to it; like the seeds buried in the womb of the earth, the dead also hope for their return to life. This idea that humans, like the seeds, have an inherent capacity to return from the realm of the dead gains momentum particularly at times when, as he says, "the vital tension of the whole community is at its height" (Eliade 1958, 350), when the (re)generative powers of nature and humanity are stirred and unleashed to excess, as happens during harvest time. In such times, the dead draw close to the world of the living, attracted by the biological abundance and the organic wealth that compensates for their own impoverished existence (Eliade 1958, 349–54). Threshing floors are in this context indeed special places. Marked by their median position between the life-teeming open fields and the tombs of the granaries, they are spaces where the whole drama of life and death reaches its paradoxical climax, where the death

of the plants becomes life for the people. In a sense, they are openings between the otherwise strictly segregated worlds of the dead and the living, disruptions that reverse and negate the insurmountable binarism between death and life.

In the Bible we also find them in this role, as places with liminal properties with references to death and life. The mourning for Jacob happens on a threshing floor of Atad (Gen 50:10–11) that serves as a meeting ground between the dead and the living. In this case, the interplay between life and death that is associated with and happens on the threshing floors is very subtly orchestrated. It involves the notion of ancestral land and the realm of dead ancestors as the living entities. The true netherworld with all its negative connotations here is Egypt, the foreign land in which Jacob died, while Israel and its soil with its ancestral world of the dead is symbolically the living community. To die in a foreign land means to die twice and Jacob can descend to his fathers only after his body passes through the spatial conductive liminality of a threshing floor.

Another of the biblical threshing floors on which the theme of life and death takes center-stage is the story of Ruth (Ruth 3). Like in the Jacob narrative, the threshing floor is again an opening between the world of the dead and the living, a spatial conduit between these two worlds, but with an important distinction. While in the Jacob narrative it led to the realm of Jacob's dead ancestors, in this case, the direction is the opposite. It is Ruth's dead husband who is to be brought back to the world of the living.

According to the story (Ruth 1–4), Ruth is a widow and the only way to continue the name and the line of her dead husband is through some kind of levirate marriage, which actually happens at the end of the story when she marries Boaz, her husband's close relative. The decisive moment in the story, the nocturnal sexual encounter (Levine 1998) between Ruth and Boaz, takes place on a threshing floor (Ruth 3) which, in contrast to Jacob's story where we have it as a space where mourning rites are performed, here serves as a chamber where marriage rites are consummated. Associated with a typical agrarian space, this marriage is a kind of *hieros gamos*, a sacred marriage ritual, which was in many ancient Mediterranean cultures performed in order to promote and sustain fertility.[19]

In Ruth, the purpose is the same, although it is expressed as a continuation of a particular bloodline that leads to the birth of David, one of the most important figures in biblical ideology, which endows his life with so many extraordinary episodes that even his lineage has to be a miracle

19. See Kramer 1969, 49; Blundell and Williamson 1998, 17–20.

in itself. Namely, Boaz and Ruth become parents to Obad who is David's great grandfather (Ruth 4:13–22). And that miracle of continuing lineage, in other words, of enduring fertility despite death's interference, is actually performed twice. In general outline, the Ruth story is a repetition of the Tamar and Judah story (Gen 38), who are ancestors of Boaz himself.[20] Both women are widows searching to continue the line of their dead husbands by marrying their relatives, and both women achieve their goals by trickery involving sex, which in the end becomes apparent to be the right thing to have done. David's line thus progresses by a sequence of deceptions, which only at first sight appear to be ploys, played on men. What the women actually do is cheat death from stopping the line which leads to David. In a sense, Tamar and Ruth are metaphorical representations of the fertile earth that can perform the miracle of transforming the otherwise sterile and dead seeds into life-generating forces. So, what happens between Tamar and Judah and then Ruth and Boaz concerns maintaining life and fertility, something that was indeed done by the sacred marriage ritual. It is hard to know exactly where rituals of this type were performed in Israel, but the indication that something similar took place on the threshing floors is found in Hos 9:1 where the prophet accuses Israel of enjoying harlot's hire on threshing floors. Is this a metaphor or reference to real practice? We shall probably never know for sure, but the fact that the miracle of bringing a dead man's name back to life in Ruth's story effectively happens on a threshing floor certainly speaks in favor of the later.

In many ways, biblical threshing floors are singular spaces that anthropologists would call liminal following A. Van Gennep's definition (1961) or V. Turner's use (1969) of the same term. They are spaces between two borders, a no man's land between sacred and profane, between life and death, transcendent and immanent, exclusive and egalitarian, where no set of definitive relations exists and which are, because of that quality, spaces in their own right. In modern spatial theory, the power of such places to incorporate, contest, and invert functions and sets of relations associated with them would render them akin to Foucault's places of Otherness, of "heterotopias" (Foucault 1986), in particular because biblical threshing floors serve as a non-intrusive background, as a kind of a stage on which certain events take place. Stages, on the other hand, are places of freedom – where everything is possible – which can simultaneously reveal and hide, be objective and illusionary. And this is their primarily

20. Ruth 4:18, 21. Pharez, the forefather of Boaz, is one of the twin sons of Tamar and Judah (Gen 38:29).

function in the Bible. In the last two stories they were stages on which the blurring of life and death happened, and they assumed a role of a spatial warp zone between the two, where performance of necessary rites of passage, both funerary and marriage, takes place. Its main characters are humans and in these cases threshing floors are places of human concern, as much as death is a human and not a divine concern.

However, the next two narratives in which threshing floors appear are somewhat different. They could actually be summed up under the common title "testing Yahweh on the threshing floor." Apart from humans, the cast also includes Yahweh, which demonstrates that they are also places of divine concern. In these cases the threshing floors serve as an implicit arena in which Yahweh repeatedly proves his divine powers. The stories present the challengers as humans, but given that the events happen on threshing floors, or near them, it is right to ask whether in light of their heterotopic properties, those challenges, even if they are passed on through human agency, actually come from other gods.

The first one among them is the story of Gideon in Judg 6, in which Gideon asks Yahweh to produce dew, first on the fleece which is laid on the threshing floor (6:36–37), and then inversely to make dew on the threshing floor while leaving the fleece dry (6:39–40). The general outline of the story is that Israel had sinned by worshipping other gods (6:7–11) and the land had fallen to Midianites, who in company with some other named and unnamed tribes steal Israel's food, the produce of the soil, as well as sheep and beasts of burden (6:1–5). The Israelites have to do the harvesting in secret rather than on threshing floors; the beating of the grains is carried out in wine vats and this is where Yahweh's messenger approaches Gideon and asks him to lead a rebellion against the invaders (6:11–14). Convinced by the fire that springs from the rock and consumes the offering he brought out to his visitor – the first testing of Yahweh's divine prowess – Gideon builds an altar on the spot and, following Yahweh's instructions, also destroys Baal's and Asherah's altars which he then replaces with an altar to Yahweh (6:17–28). Gideon wants to extend the battle against Midianites as well, but in order to establish whether Yahweh will truly help him on the battlefield as he promised, he asks him to undergo the two tests with the dew. Yahweh obliges (6:34–40).

This is probably one of the very few texts in the Old Testament where Yahweh is asked to prove himself three times in a row without exacting revenge for such an open demonstration of doubt. And, of course, the main question that comes to mind is why he is so ready to oblige Gideon's demands. Or is it that Gideon is not testing Yahweh's powers on their own, but instead in counter position to some other god's powers, since

one of the story's themes is Yahweh's competition with other gods and taking over their cult sites, which is clearly indicated by the destruction of altars dedicated to Baal and Asherah and the re-occupation of the site by Yahweh? Since they are merely well-beaten clearings with a very practical purpose and without any built structures, threshing floors as perceived domains of rival gods cannot be physically destroyed before they are re-claimed by the competing god. In the story about David, Yahweh's authority over the threshing floor of Ornan is established through a purchase. In the story of Gideon, Yahweh's control is established through his successfully passing Gideon's tests. In this context, the major question is who is the god of the threshing floor against whom Yahweh is supposed to demonstrate his omnipotence? Similar to other biblical events that are played out on threshing floors, here as well we find references to death and the world of the dead, although in an implicit manner. According to Isa 26:19, dew, which Gideon asks Yahweh to produce, is a substance that can resurrect the dead: "Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For thy dew is a dew of light, and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall."[21] Yahweh's acceptance of the dew tests could be a move to demonstrate that he is indeed an all powerful god and that his authority extends over the threshing floor as well, that is, over the chthonic god who is in charge of this opening between two worlds. Gideon's challenge might be playing on the idea that the dead, attracted by the abundance of life during harvest, are lurking near this conduit between death and life. And if he was really the powerful god he claims to be then he would be able to prevent them from consuming the dew, which, because of its reviving qualities *par excellence*, they would be unavoidably attracted to.

Perhaps these are all mere speculations, but the same uncertainty about Yahweh's powers when it comes to threshing floors can be found in the story of transporting the ark in 2 Sam 6, and its repetition in 1 Chr 13. Though not in the same open manner as is the case with the Gideon narrative, nevertheless the doubt and the consequent proof to the contrary are still present here. Furthermore, there are again references to death. In the ark story, oxen pulling the cart on which David is transporting the ark stumble when the procession approaches the threshing floor of

21. In post-biblical tradition, the reviving properties of dew became a very important topic in a variety of Haggadic stories involving death and resurrection themes. See for example stories about creation, the bird phoenix, the Torah on Sinai, Messiah and the future resurrection of the dead, treasury of souls and the sixth heaven, in Schwartz (2004).

Nacon.[22] One of the drivers, Uzzah, presumably to prevent the ark from falling over, gets hold of it. The move angers Yahweh and he kills him (2 Sam 6:7; 1 Chr 13:9–10). The traditional explanation regarding this deadly incident is that it is a parable regarding violation of god's commandments. Transporting the ark on a cart violates Yahweh's order that it must be carried by people (Exod 25:14), and Uzzah dies because he violates the commandment not to touch the holy object. But, one could ask, why does Yahweh not intervene at the very outset, and why do the oxen stumble and the ark begin to fall upon reaching the threshing floor? Is it an accident or is it an indication that the party is entering a special area where Yahweh's sphere of influence is diminishing: hence the oxen stumble and the ark, his symbol, begins to fall? Uzzah's attempt to hold the ark to prevent it from falling might be just a hasty, thoughtless movement, but in doing that he is actually treating the most holy of Yahweh's holy objects as a plain, common, thing, void of any sanctity or special powers. Like Gideon's tests, Uzzah's action is implicitly an expression of doubt in Yahweh's rule and it is indicative that, like in the Gideon story, it is the threshing floor that provides the scene on which Yahweh re-asserts his control and puts reservations about his divine powers to rest. Moreover, Yahweh demonstrates his authority in a deadly manner as if proving that he is ruler even over death, something that, according to Isa 25:8, he is yet to conquer.

4. *Concluding Remarks*

Very different stories featuring threshing floors have been discussed here, but there is one common theme, apart from the floors themselves, that is present in all of them. Sometimes explicitly, like in the case of Jacob's mourning rites or Uzzah's demise, more frequently though as only a marginal detail, in all of them we encounter death and ideas associated with it. That idea has two modes in which it appears in the stories: one refers to human death and the other to a chtonic divinity or divinities associated with threshing floors. In "human death" mode, threshing floors seem to be places of a very peculiar nature where the dead and the living meet, while in "divinity mode" they are places where Yahweh's divine hegemony is contested. The Hebrew Bible most often represents threshing floors as seemingly physical, real, spaces, as mere descriptive details supporting the Yahwistic obsession to present events of the story as occasions bounded by real, linear time and real, physical space. However, this role of mere spatial descriptors is undermined by the constant lurking of death

22. Chidon in 1 Chr 13:9.

and contest in the background, an indication that they are metaphorical liminal, heterotopic spaces where things that cannot, or may not, happen are indeed happening. As in Greece, where threshing floors were turned into theatrical stages, into places where everything is possible, where, as Baudrillard says "things can transform themselves, can be played in another way and not at all in their objective determination" (Gane 1993, 61), threshing floors in the Bible are also stages where things are both sacred and profane, revealed and hidden, present and absent.

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