

THEME SECTION / SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

*The Apocalyptic Imagination  
of Space and Sacred Place  
at Qumran*

Giulio Mariotti (ed.)



## INTRODUCTION

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Space constitutes one of the most powerful and dynamic symbolic categories within the apocalyptic imagination of Second Temple Judaism. Far from serving a merely descriptive or topographical function, space emerges as a theological *locus*, a revelatory device, and a fundamental instrument in the reshaping of communal identity. Within the apocalyptic framework, places are not simply the ‘settings’ of revelation; they often become themselves the very content of revelation: transfigured spaces, celestial counterparts, initiatory deserts, eschatological cities, and sanctuaries. It is within this perspective that the present thematic section is situated, investigating the processes through which apocalyptic and para-apocalyptic texts reconfigure real, historical spaces in light of heavenly models and eschatological expectations. The contributions included in this monographic section stem from and further elaborate on a panel presented at the *European Association for Jewish Studies* conference, *Jewish Literatures: Places and Heritage*, held on November 21, 2024. The conference was hosted by *Ayn-T, Cultural Association for the Study of Jewish-German Culture* (Rome), and organized by Roberta Ascarelli, Myriam Silvera, Carsten Wilke, and Federico Bossone.

The shared theoretical premise underpinning the contributions collected here is that, within apocalyptic thought, the *nistarot*, the “hidden things,” concern not only the dimension of the end time but also a transformed conception of sacred space. As outlined in the framework of this section, apocalyptic imagination tends to remodel concrete places – deserts, cities, temples – according to revealed archetypes, often preserved on heavenly tablets or transmitted through angelic mediation. In the tension between earthly space and revealed space, decisive theological, cultic, and identity-related issues are worked out.

The contribution by Giovanni Ibba offers a comparative reading of the great temple vision of Ezekiel 40–48 and the Qumranic text of the *New Jerusalem*, showing how, from a shared priestly matrix, two distinct eschatological models emerge. Whereas in Ezekiel the restoration still significantly involves the historical and cultic responsibility of Israel, in the Qumranic *New Jerusalem* salvation assumes fully apocalyptic traits, entrusted exclusively to divine intervention. The hypertrophic description of the city’s and temple’s measurements, the emphasis on the eschatological battle, and the return of the tribes demonstrate how future space is conceived as the definitive theatre of divine victory and cultic reestablishment.

Within this same eschatological landscape, Andrea Ravasco’s study is devoted to the wilderness as the place of the (re)birth of the Qumran community. The *midbar* is not merely a physical refuge but becomes the theo-

logical backdrop of the community's vocation, reinterpreted in light of Isaiah 40:3 as the place where the 'way' is prepared through the radical study of the Torah. The desert thus appears as a liminal space: on the one hand marked by negativity, trial, and separation; on the other, endowed with a generative function as the symbolic womb of a new holy community. In this rereading, spatial migration becomes inseparable from a process of identity and theological transformation.

Complementary to this dynamic is Giulio Mariotti's contribution – *An Absent Temple. Reimagining Sacred Space in the Širot 'olat ha-šabbat* – which analyses the transformation of the Temple into a celestial and imagined liturgical space. In the absence of legitimate access to the Jerusalem sanctuary, the Temple is transposed into the visionary and temporal dimension of the Sabbath, where the community gains access – through liturgy – to communion with the angelic cult. Sacred space is no longer guaranteed by material architecture but by proper inscription within cosmic time and participation in heavenly worship. In this sense, the 'absence' of the Temple paradoxically becomes the driving force behind its most radical symbolic reconfiguration. The Temple, although not yet destroyed, is nonetheless regarded as absent, and through the *Širot* it enables a transition from sacred space to sacred time.

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that the apocalyptic imagination does not simply produce 'spatial utopias,' but elaborates concrete responses to historical, political, and cultic crises: the usurpation of the priesthood, the corruption of the Temple, and the experience of exile and separation. The wilderness, the New Jerusalem, and the celestial Temple are thus not mere metaphors, but genuine theological dispositifs through which communities reread their own history and project their life in the light of revelation.

This thematic section therefore aims to offer a coherent contribution to the study of space in Jewish apocalypticism at Qumran, showing how the reshaping of sacred places is inseparable from a reconfiguration of time, worship, and identity. Far from being marginal, space emerges here as one of the structural cores of apocalyptic imagination and as a privileged key for understanding the complex interplay between history, revelation, and eschatological hope in Second Temple Judaism.