Yet it is this very everydayness or taken-for-granted-ness of place that is one of its most potent characteristics. The familiar physicality of the natural and built environments present the world to us as ‘normal’, ‘common sense’ or even ‘God given’. Yet the same familiarity that enables us to navigate through complex social and spatial landscapes without a second thought also functions to hide from us whole worlds of meaning and power. These worlds – which are effectively hidden in plain sight – may be glimpsed when the taken-for-granted, or normative meanings of place are somehow transgressed. This may happen, for instance, in a moment of personal encounter which opens up a fissure or exposes a ‘wound’ in an otherwise normal everyday experience.

Let me offer a few examples of how such a fissure might bring to light an otherwise hidden world of meaning. Consider the familiar phrase ‘a woman’s place is in the home’. You would I suspect react with indignation on hearing such a phrase. Yet this expression was until recently commonplace and moreover taken as a self-evident truth in relation to the design of government-provided housing of the 1930s to justify a small ‘pantry’ (kitchen) being placed at the rear of the house. The cultural norm was expressed in bricks and mortar and in turn the buildings portrayed the ‘truth of the phrase’ as normative or ‘just the way things are’. Similarly, consider a group of women wearing hijabs walking down a street in the London borough of Newham; they would no doubt go unnoticed. Yet the same group of women hiking in the hills of the Lake District may well attract some attention. The sense of indignation or discomfort in each case is not related to the subjects in view, but is rather to do with where they are placed and how they either conform to or transgress the accepted conventions of the place.

Transgressions of this sort can act as indicators of the many layered and complex sets of meaning and constructions of power which inhabit everyday places. They suggest to us that even the apparently safe and familiar places of home and high street are not as benign as we might suppose but are in fact sites where meaning and power are contested. Neither are the values or truths that seem inherent within a place as static and fixed as the solid features of the built and natural environments would have us believe. As in the example of the 1930s government housing, what appears to be a common-sense interpretation of the built environment to one generation can be an anathema to the next.

FROM EDEN TO CAESAREA

While these associations between place, meaning and power are clearly evidenced within biblical narrative, they remain largely unexplored in mainstream theology. In writing this article I hope to whet the appetite of at least a few readers with the thought that by pursuing a deeper and more thought-through theology of place we might gain significant, helpful insight in relation to the mission of the church in a world where many feel displaced, dislocated and precarious.

The particular theme I will focus on here is the apparent paradigm shift that takes place in the spatial imagination in moving from Old Testament to New Testament narrative, a shift which I am presenting here as a move from Eden to Caesarea. Such a shift should not be surprising to us, given the well-established understanding that the New Testament’s interpretation of the Old involves a simultaneous pattern of both continuity and discontinuity.

I am however suggesting that, on balance, the spatial imaginations (and resultant practices) which currently dominate the church’s mission tend strongly towards

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the Eden end of the spectrum. My hope is that as we understand why the behaviour of Peter and Cornelius at their meeting in Caesarea was so utterly remarkable, we ourselves might also be awakened to a renewed spatial imagination. I will argue that it is this same spatial imagination, first embodied in the life of the church at Caesarea, which is central to the practical outworking of the Kingdom of God and new creation as envisioned within New Testament texts.

THE SPATIAL IMAGINATION OF EDEN

In Where Mortals Dwell, Craig Bartholomew not only takes Eden as a key starting point for his study of place, but argues that Genesis 1-3 is a foundational text for a biblical theology of place. Bartholomew presents a series of key proposals which form the basis of his biblical theology of place; among them are:

- God intends for humans to be at home in, to indwell, their places. Place and implacement is a gift and provides the possibility for imaging God in his creation. Place is thus a dynamic concept evoking the creative engagement of humans with their contexts.

- Place is never fully place without God as co-inhabitant. Place is thus always, in one way or another, a theological concept.

- After Eden the challenge of implacement and the danger of displacement are a constant part of the human condition. Humans remain placed, but displacement is a constant threat.

Bartholomew’s reading of place as a space to be indwelled and co-inhabited with others and with God strikes a deeply evocative note, especially for those who suffer displacement or fear the loss of home. This theological reading of place finds resonance with the work of Walter Brueggemann in his theology of the Promised Land. In an oft quoted paragraph Brueggemann asserts:

> Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, define vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against all the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.

The theologising of place on the basis of Eden and Land lead to two central observations. The first is about the relational nature of place defined by the key relationship of ‘God-people-place’. The second is the imperative of place-making:

> The embodied nature of human beings means that our placedness is always local and particular; so too will be our primary responsibility for placemaking. Just as the first couple is called to tend to Eden, so we are called to tend to the respective places in which we have been put.

These two key ideas find strong resonance in Christian tradition, especially with ideas of sacred places and more recently with practices of place-making and ‘re-neighbouring’ within mission. They are well argued elsewhere and I will not rehearse the arguments again here.

However, serious criticism has been levelled at the spatial imaginations inherent within these Eden- and Land-based theologies. At the risk of oversimplifying the model (but wanting to aid the reader’s own spatial imagination) the spatial constructions of Eden and Land could be represented as a bounded space set apart by walls or rivers which define an ‘inside’ (the territory of the people of God) and conversely an outside (the territory of those who are not the people of God). The identity of the people is based not only on their relationship to God and Land (Brueggemann) but also over-and-against those who are outside. The spatial imagination of Eden and the Land are thus sustained by religious practices of boundary enforcement which both include and exclude.

These ideas were persuasively presented by Mary Douglas in her ground-breaking book Purity and Danger.
Douglas, who worked as an anthropologist in the field of comparative religion and religious beliefs within primitive cultures (including those of ancient Israel), observed that in tribal cultures dirt was not a matter of hygiene or aesthetics but that pollution and taboo were cultural constructs that relate to the imposition of order on society through categorisation and differentiation. Douglas coined the basic definition of ‘dirt as matter out of place’ and argued that the definition of dirt implies two conditions:

(A) set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.14

In a tribal context peoples were categorised and differentiated as pure or impure: those who were impure or polluted were tabooed; they were socially, spatially and representatively expelled from the life of the tribe.

In the 1990s a group of biblical scholars called the ‘Context Group’ drew on the work of Douglas and other social scientists as a frame for reading scripture.15 They argued that the purity laws, as held in the Second Temple period, dominated the spatial imagination in Israel and that for Israel spatial representation was organised around degrees of purity according to proximity to the Temple, which itself stood at the centre of all creation. One of the members of the Context Group, Bruce Malina, argues that “the orientational map of Israel consists of two major category sets: the sacred and profane (exclusive and nonexclusive) and the pure/clean and impure/unclean (in proper place/out of place).”16 Purity laws for Israel prescribed the way of being ‘set apart’ for a God who himself was known as holy, or separate; they defined the ways of moral behaviour required to belong to an exclusive people whose identity was rooted in covenant relationship to an exclusive God. As such, morality in Israel is defined by conformity to purity law – to be moral is to belong.

On this reading, the spatial imagination of Eden and Land are very far from the seemingly benign home-space portrayed by Bartholomew; they are potent geographies of exclusion where those who lack the privilege of birth and commensurate purity are expelled to the outer fringes of the world. Indeed, exclusion is a dominant theme of Eden and Land narratives – Genesis 3 presents us not with a populated garden but with one which is uninhabited by human presence.

At this point I should make a brief qualification. The spatial imagination of Israel was of course much more complex and less ‘fixed’ than has been suggested thus far.17 Other cultural-religious mappings which are evident within biblical texts suggest that the spatial mapping varied within a community and changed through time. Examples of the ways in which meaning imbibed place in this way are in terms of whether a place was ‘civilised’ or not,18 as hierarchical male spaces,19 or as carrying a range of ideological20 and cosmological21 readings.

Despite this complexity however, the key point to notice is that each of these mappings serves to establish identities: they make claims about who ‘we’ are in relation to gods/ God and territory (and in this sense they are ideological) over and against who ‘they’ are. They not only include but they also exclude. Thus when Jesus declared that all foods were clean, he was not simply making an argument about religious practice. He was deconstructing and undoing the spatial imagination of Israel; he was in effect claiming that the world was being changed and that the whole social-spatial infrastructure upon which all power was predicated was being displaced to make room for a new arrangement. More of this later. First, to be properly prepared for a discussion about the shift of spatial imagination from Eden to Caesarea we should be aware of some of the significant work that has been carried out within the social sciences. While we can touch only briefly on the subject here, I hope that it is apparent that this is one of the instances where cross-disciplinary conversation is much needed.

A BRIEF EXCURSION INTO SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC THEORIES OF PLACE

It is sobering to see how far theological studies of place have fallen behind the social sciences and it is essential that theology is conversant with the social sciences in this respect.22 I will reference the work of just two social scientists here which will I hope communicate the sense

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13 Douglas, Purity, p.44.
14 Douglas, Purity, p.44.
17 For a fuller discussion see published PhD dissertation M. Pears, ‘Towards a Theological Engagement with an Area of Multiple Deprivation’ (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2015).
18 Stewart, Gathered.
19 Moxnes, Putting.
of the correlation that exists between some aspects of theology and social sciences.

The first is David Sibley who, in his book Geographies of Exclusion, argues that the primary social arrangements of place are based on exclusion such that ‘others’ (such as women, blacks, children, the old, those with alternative lifestyles, gays, the disabled) are placed as outsiders. 23 Thus, in speaking of the home, he sees it not as a place of secure ‘dwelling’ but rather as an embodiment of inequitable power:

Inside the home and the immediate locality, social and spatial order may be obvious and enduring characteristics of the environment. For those who do not fit, either children whose conceptions of space and time are at variance with those of controlling adults or the homeless, nomadic, or black in a homogeneously white, middle class space, such environments may be inherently exclusionary. 24

A key point we need to notice from Sibley’s argument is that there is no hard and fast separation between the traditional religious ideas of sacred space and modern secular spaces; exclusion is the dominant formative power in all places. So the perception of the “sanctity of space” and the “continuing need for ritual practices” to maintain that sanctity applies not only to religious spaces but to all other places whether they be trendy cafes, shopping malls or railway stations. He asserts:

[These] rituals, as in ancient Israel … are an expression of power relations: they are concerned with domination. Today, however, the guardians of sacred spaces are more likely to be security guards, parents or judges than priests. They are policing the spaces of commerce, public institutions and the home rather than the temple. 25

For Sibley therefore, place is symbolically important in the construction of ‘deviancy’ where defining what is deviant depends on the process of stereotyping ‘others’ (‘othering’) in terms of dirt. Sibley argues that the broad categorisation of individuals or groups in terms of dirt can be presented in a number of key sub-categories, namely disease (‘we might catch something from them’), nature (‘a swarm’), foreigners (‘go back to where they came from’). You only need to read a copy of any tabloid paper to see a generous scattering of such references applied to the unemployed, those who are homeless or people who have to depend on state benefits.

A second social scientist whose work has bearing on the themes we are exploring here is Tim Cresswell. The first point of Cresswell’s that I want to highlight is that he develops the thesis that ‘place’ combines the social with the spatial and that people act ‘in place’ according to their social standing. As an example of this he cites the case of an ordinary office where cleaners, secretaries and executives all act according to their relation to that particular place. 26 A key part of Cresswell’s thinking is that social space is organised to serve the interests of those at the top of hierarchies (it is thus ideological). Actions or activities that do not conform to the accepted meaning of the place are now seen as deviant or ‘out of place’ – judgements are not made about actions per se, but about the action’s relation to its location or place (secretaries would not sit in the executive’s chair).

The second point, which follows closely on the heels of the first, is to recognise that there is a two-way flow of constructive influence between the physical/material and the social aspects of place. This is to criticise the imagined binary that says that society shapes space (or place) but the converse – that space shapes society – is not the case. Cresswell vigorously rejects this position and drawing on other social sciences (including Robert Sack, David Harvey and Edward Soja) argues that space and society are co-constructing:

[T]hey wish to show that space is not simply formed and moulded but plays an active role in the formation of society. Society produces space and space produces society. 27

These arguments make some important points about the spatial imagination of Eden and present significant challenges to any form of mission that is predicated on that set of ideas. Unfortunately there is not room here to expand on these and other key insights from the social sciences in the way that they really deserve. 28 But even

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23 The term ‘outsiders’ is not intended to evoke a simple insider/outsider paradigm. Sibley argues for much more complex and nuanced social arrangement of place and, indeed, the ethnographic research in Chapter 5 of this thesis show that marginalised ‘estate dwellers’ who exclude ‘outsiders’ are also people of power.


25 Sibley, Geographies, p 72. Interestingly Miroslav Volf expresses a not dissimilar view: “As a power of normalization, exclusion reigns through all those institutions that we may associate with inclusionary civilization—through the state apparatus, educational institutions, media, sciences. They all shape ‘normal’ citizens with ‘normal’ knowledge, values, and practices, and thereby either assimilate or eject the ‘abnormal’ other. The modern self … is indirectly constituted through the exclusion of the other” (Volf, Exclusion, p.62).

26 Cresswell, In-Place, p.3.


28 See Paul Cloke and Mike Pears (eds.), Mission in Marginal Places: The Theory (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016) and ---, Mission in Marginal
this very brief snapshot should helpfully prepare the ground for seeing why a shift to the spatial imagination of Caesarea might be so profound. It might help our discussion about Caesarea if, before moving on, I summarise what some of the points are:

- That all geographies, including those of Eden and Land, are exclusionary: power is expressed in the monopolisation of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments.
- That places are invested with meaning and those who do not conform to the dominant meanings of the place are seen as deviant or ‘out of place’.
- That the nature of place causes these meanings to go generally unnoticed; they are regarded as ‘just the way things are’, ‘taken for granted’, or ‘God-given’.
- That social-space is organised to serve the interest of those at the top of hierarchies (it is ideological).
- That place is not fixed, bounded or static. Rather it is dynamic and open. Indeed the material and social are co-constituting, each acting on the other in the production of place.

THE NEW SPATIAL IMAGINATION OF CAESAREA

This brief discussion of place suggests some interesting interpretive approaches to familiar NT texts and consequent practices for mission. In this instance I will focus on Acts 10 and the events at Caesarea which culminate in the face-to-face meeting of Cornelius and Peter.

This is no ordinary meeting. The boundaries (cultural-religious-spatial) which separate these two men and their entourages are formidable. Indeed, for them, the very idea of meeting is inconceivable, taboo. Yet Luke’s narrative has been inexorably moving his readers to this point. That the gospel would be a light to the Gentiles has been a major theme from the very beginning of the text (Luke 2:32, Isaiah 42:6) and Acts 13 could be seen as the much anticipated moment of fulfilment as for the first time Gentiles are actually being included in the early church (coinciding as it does with the completion of Peter’s ministry and the beginning of Paul’s).

Furthermore Luke has already presented Jesus himself as provocatively disregarding the normal Jewish and Roman social-spatial arrangements. He has with impunity transgressed the norms of religious purity, the hierarchical settlement of ‘male-space’ and the Roman hegemonic space of empire. These dramatic cultural-spatial performances suggest that to see Jesus simply as one who radically crosses boundaries falls far short of Luke’s intent. Jesus acts as if the boundaries did not exist and his declaration of the Kingdom seems to be no less than an inauguration of an entirely new spatial imagination accompanied with a host of social-spatial performances that witness to and embody an as-yet-unseen and unknown kind of place – indeed, nothing less than the new creation.

Given all that has been spelled out in Luke’s narrative, the surprise of Acts 10 is that Peter is presented as being so disorientated or unseeing in the face of the momentous meeting that is about to take place. Perhaps this is itself a testimony to the sheer strength of the cultural-religious hegemony of the day that placed such a meeting so far beyond the realms of possibility. As Luke records, Peter “was greatly perplexed” (v.17) and it was only through his eventual encounter with Cornelius that he could say “God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean” (v.28). Peter was not the only one among the Jews who was amazed (v.45) and he certainly had his work cut out convincing the wider church about what had taken place.

The first movement of the story therefore relates to Peter’s own spatial imagination – his own inner sense of how the world worked. This is a fundamental point of departure for those disciples who wish to follow Jesus into the spatial practices of the new creation; the movement away from the exclusionary spatiality of Eden and Land and towards the inclusive spatiality of the new creation start within the self. There should be no surprise in this focus on self as, with the other Gospel writers, Luke presents Jesus as naming these exclusionary practices – and indeed all exclusion of others – as ‘sin’ (note for...
example the speck and the log of Matthew 7:1-5). He was, according to Miroslav Volf’s profound exposition of the practices of exclusion and embrace, “no prophet of ‘inclusion’ for whom the chief virtue was acceptance and the cardinal vice intolerance” (Volf, 72-73). Rather he challenged the belief that the source of evil lies outside of a person, in impure things, and identified it as being “in the impure heart” (Mark 7:15). Thus:

The pursuit of false purity emerges as a central aspect of sin – the enforced purity of a person or a community that sets itself apart from the defiled world in a hypocritical sinlessness and excludes the boundary breaking other from its heart and its world. Sin is here the kind of purity that wants the world cleansed of the other rather than the heart cleansed of the evil that drives people out by calling those who are clean ‘unclean’ and refusing to help make clean those who are unclean. Put more formally, sin is ‘the will to purify’ turned away from the ‘spiritual’ life of the self to the cultural world of the other, transmuted from spirituality into ‘politics’ broadly conceived ...

This seems a final indictment against the social-spatial practices of the purity codes associated with Eden and the Land. No wonder much of the narrative is caught up with Peter’s dramatic inner experience – surely nothing less than a personal conversion. First through his dream (vv.9-16) and then by coming into the ‘Gentile space’ of Cornelius’s house (vv.22-35) Peter turns away from centuries of Jewish tradition as he says “God has shown me that I should not call any person unholy or unclean” (Acts 10:28) and that “God is not one to show partiality” (Acts 10:28, 34).

We should not overlook the significance of who is doing the moving in this story, or of who is the guest and who is the host. It is notable that Peter is the one doing the travelling, it is he who moves out of his own world, beyond the social and geographic boundaries which previously fenced him in, and into the unfamiliar world of the Gentile community. Perhaps reflecting in his own physical journey the movement prophesied by Isaiah that the gospel would be a light to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:46-47, 26:23). This Spirit-initiated movement was not for him a calling of Gentiles into his space, his ‘pure’ God space, so that they could come to know his God as he knew him and participate in his faith traditions. Rather, by moving into the cultural and faith space of the stranger the story focuses on a graphic exposure of the limitations of Peter’s own faith space and how his construction of his religious space made him blind to the humanity of others (‘I too am a man (human)’ and ‘I should not call any person holy or unclean’ (v.26)).

Perhaps one of the most sinister aspects of Peter’s blindness to the humanity of the Gentile-other is the inability to conceive that God is in any way with them (as for example in the judgement of Matthew 25:38-40: ‘When did we see you a stranger … naked … sick … in prison?’). It is the prejudicial conviction that ‘God is with me, but not with you’ that is both a cause and consequence of hard cultural, religious and spatial boundaries such as those around Peter – boundaries which fuel the stereotyping of people such as Cornelius as ‘godless pagan’ (exemplified in the ‘amazement’ of ‘all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter’ 10:45). In moving out of the security of his own cultural space with all its preconceived certainties and into the vulnerability of Cornelius’s home it seems that for the first time Peter’s eyes were being opened to the truth that the God he worshipped might also be found outside of the confines of his own religious tribe (10:34-35).

In his beautiful and persuasive book The Go-Between God, John Taylor describes “the current of communication” between the self and the other as an essential work of the Holy Spirit. He insists that a necessary part of Christian mission is:

[T]he opening of our eyes towards other people. And this also is the gift of the Spirit. A Christian can never be the means of communicating Christ to another until what we might call the current of communication has been switched on. The scales fell from the eyes of the convert in the city of Damascus precisely when he heard one of these whose very lives he had been threatening say: ‘Saul, my brother, the lord Jesus has sent me to you’.

Taylor’s words are as applicable to Peter as they are to Paul. Peter’s journey and the hospitality of Cornelius have dramatically changed the tone of the story. The current of communication has been established. What began as a cultural and geographical distance between the two (a distance which was initially and tentatively bridged by messengers (10:8-9, 17-20)) has moved to an intimate place of face-to-face dialogue where for the first time strangers share personal experiences and stories. As they recognise shared humanity and faith in God each of their lives are changed in ways which just days before had been inconceivable. As Taylor puts it:

This is the gift of the Go-Between God, the Spirit. Just as he opens my eyes in recognition of some other being and generates a current of communication between us, in the same way he can open my

34 Volf, Exclusion, p.74.
MISSION AND THE SPATIAL IMAGINATION

In one sense the actual embodiment of the spatial imagination of Caesarea is so limited to seem at first sight as of little consequence. It is after all only witnessed as a momentary relational space which exists between two men – it is limited in its timeframe as well as in geography. Yet, like the empty tomb on the day of resurrection, once the event has taken place (once the Kingdom has come on earth as in heaven) there is no going back. This is the power of the ‘prophetic imagination’. It is to bring into view that which is not yet seen for in so doing the machinations of the powers are exposed and Lordship of Christ is made known (Colossians 1:13-23).

What then, might we ask, are the practical implications for mission? There is certainly a need for more ‘reflexive space’ within the practices of mission (as with Peter’s experience) and a confession that mission must involve the ongoing conversion of the self as well as the other. There is, I suggest, the need to focus on creative and innovative social, spiritual and spatial practices whose intent is to participate with ‘the Spirit of the Go-Between God’ in opening up ‘new-creational spaces’ in our own mundane, every-day worlds. And finally there is a risky invitation to have the courage to leave behind our safe, self-constructed, Eden-like places and, like Peter, respond to the knock at the door and journey out as a stranger into the social and cultural spaces of others.


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