

A Spatial Reading of Obadiah on the Vertical Axis of the Ancient Near Eastern Cosmic Geography

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, biblical studies have experienced a “spatial turn,” giving rise to an emphasis on a variety of approaches to the spatial analysis of biblical texts. Space is something that is constructed, produced, and represented by means of words. It is thus possible for the associations and memories of spaces to change. This study’s purpose is threefold: (1) to provide a short overview of the significance of studying space and memory together; (2) to provide an overview of ancient Near Eastern cosmic geography to contextualise our study’s reference to vertical spatial orientation; and (3) to illustrate how such a vertical spatial reading can aid us in better understanding the text of Obadiah, which deals predominantly with space in terms of land and sacred space.

Keywords: Obadiah; cosmic geography; vertical axis; spatiality; land; Edom; Esau

Introduction

Since the 1970s, biblical studies have experienced a “spatial turn,” giving rise to an emphasis on a variety of approaches to the spatial analysis of biblical texts (cf. Prinsloo 2013, 4).¹ According to Prinsloo (2013, 5), “space is constructed, produced or represented by means of words.”² It should be emphasised “that notions of time and space are culturally learned. They are not simple ‘givens’ of our biological constitution” (Wyatt 2001, 3; cf. Schäder 2010, 131). As a result, “Different cultures will understand space differently” (Schäder 2010, 131). It then becomes difficult to grasp the full meaning of spaces mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (HB) due to the great temporal and geographical distance between “us” and “them” (Schäder 2010, 131).

This study’s purpose is threefold: (1) to provide a short overview of the significance of studying space and memory together; (2) to provide an overview of ancient Near Eastern cosmic geography to contextualise our study’s reference to vertical spatial orientation; and (3) to illustrate how such a vertical spatial reading can aid us in better understanding the text of Obadiah in terms of land and sacred space with emphasis on the dichotomy of space and the movement along the vertical axis. This study will focus on the “final” (synchronic) text of Obadiah that is present in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1967–68, Fifth Edition) edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph and based on Codex Leningradensis B19a (ca. 1008/10 CE). The text will thus be read as “a unified and coherent whole” (Jensen 2008, 6).

Space and Memory

Victor H. Matthews (2013, 61) wrote the following regarding memory and mental maps:

Memory lingers. It attaches itself to events, persons, and places creating a mental map that guides, consciously or unconsciously, much of our everyday activities and also allows us to make a virtual journey back in time. In the process of building spatial

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- 1 I have known Prof Gert T. M. Prinsloo in many capacities: lecturer, supervisor, colleague, and mentor. Prof. Prinsloo has contributed significantly to the field of Old Testament scholarship and the study of the Hebrew Bible throughout his long career at the University of Pretoria. Prof. Prinsloo has many accolades, too many to mention here. Some of his academic contributions were not only to the study of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, but particularly to the study of the book of Habakkuk; various studies on the Psalter; the application of various approaches to the Hebrew Bible, including unit delimitation, social-scientific criticism, and critical spatiality. It is my pleasure to be able to dedicate this study in his honour. Any errors in this study are purely my own and have no reflection on Prof. Prinsloo.
 - 2 At the outset, a distinction between place and space must be pointed out. Gerda de Villiers (2013, 143–44) wrote that “whereas ‘place’ may be conceived of as a physical location, ‘space’ is more abstract, carrying emotional undertones and is present in every narrative, even if ‘place’ is not named at all.”

associations every culture accumulates a mental and physical set of landmarks associated with repetitive events, mundane and momentous.

Henri Lefebvre (1991, *passim*; cf. Matthews 2013, 68) refers to memory as being “spaces of representation” whereby space obtains its significance. Spaces can be (re)produced, (re)presented, and adopted (cf. Matthews 2013, 61). However, memories or aspects of it can be manipulated, for instance, to serve multiple purposes during different periods of time (Matthews 2013, 61). This can lead to the “reformulation of space,” where it is “either subsumed or melded into a new set of events and social imagery” (Matthews 2013, 68). Thus “space can be adopted for other uses or identities while, in some cases, maintaining a cultural link to past associations” (Matthews 2013, 71).

It is possible to transport oneself mentally into the past, regardless of what is currently associated with or even occurring in a given space. In this manner, memory can be accessed by recalling a word, image, or a ritual. However, the past and associated space cannot precisely be reproduced. Memory of a given space “has been superseded by new uses or events” (Matthews 2013, 74). Nevertheless, memories produced through social interaction leave behind some residue or remembrance of one’s experience of a particular space (Matthews 2013, 74). Some memories transform an “ever-repeated memory into epic and myth, by which time it will have lost its historical anchorage” (Wyatt 2001, 38).

Turning to the HB, we know that some biblical authors could, almost verbatim, repeat texts or traditions that were in circulation during their lifetime or which were already considered authoritative.³ This is especially the case with prophetic books as they were often penned to be circulated and read, usually in public, during ancient times (cf. Ben Zvi 1996, 3).⁴ Ehud Ben Zvi (1996, 5) adds to this that the initial audience for whom texts were penned were “well trained, sophisticated (re)readers. As such, one has to assume that they have (re)read many of the texts included in the repertoire of their own community” (Ben Zvi 1996, 149).⁵

Pertaining to Obadiah specifically, the function of the introduction of the book was likely meant “to evoke the rereaders of the book’s memory” (Ben Zvi 1996, 10). Ben Zvi (1996, 81) indicates that the question that the (re)readers of the book must have posed to Obadiah is as follows: “Is the prophecy concerning Edom’s devastation to be understood as fulfilled, as yet to be fulfilled, as both, at different levels?” Part of the

3 Cf. Ben Zvi (1996, 76). It becomes the task of the (historical-critical) reader to “identify the traditions assumed to be known by the audience” (Ben Zvi 1996, 5).

4 “Prophetic books were not composed to be read once and then be discarded or forgotten, but were written to be read again and again, to be studied and reflected upon by a community or communities or readers (cf. Hos 14:10)” (Ben Zvi 1996, 3).

5 The HB was (is) considered a gateway to divine knowledge. It was (is) then the function of the educated literati to serve as “brokers of the divine” (Ben Zvi 1996, 5).

problem in this regard is the supposed use of the so-called *prophetic perfect* in Obadiah. It is a perfect form of the verb used by author(s) to announce a revelation that they believed would still take place but was written as if it had already occurred (Mason 1991, 98). It is the assertion of this author that this technique was consciously used as it would be in keeping with the ambiguous nature of the book of Obadiah.

The backstory to the prophecy of Obadiah is the (possibly etiological?) patriarchal tales of the origins of the tension between the brothers/nations Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom).⁶ In terms of space and memory in Obadiah, we need to take cognisance that Edom was associated with Esau, and Jacob was associated with Israel. This implies that the (re)readers must have been acquainted with the patriarchal traditions, at the very least those which pertained to the conflict between these two groups, activating the memory of these traditions by rereading the book (see, for instance, Obadiah 6, 8–10).

Ancient Near Eastern Cosmic Geography

A pitfall or fallacy in the study of any (ancient) culture is that it can be reductionist in nature, causing the researcher to err when attempting to reconstruct and represent another culture's worldview (cf. Schäder 2010, 134). That is why a discussion on ancient cosmic geography (also known as *cosmology* or *worldview*) is necessary—to serve as a framework and even countermeasure to prevent oversimplified deductions on ancient spatiality. It also prevents the (post-)modern reader from inferring into the text meanings and associations of space which would not do it justice, as the cosmic geography of the ancient Near East is in essence pre-modern and prescientific (Prinsloo 2006, 741–42; 2013, 9).⁷

Izak Cornelius (1994, 200) wrote, “there was no single systemized uniform view of the world in the ancient Near East.” Prinsloo (2013, 9) agrees and cautions that one of the challenges in studying ancient cosmic geographies is that “ancient Near Eastern literature contains no systematic description of the cosmos.” Various ancient Near Eastern worldviews co-existed simultaneously (Prinsloo 2013, 9). Fortunately, ancient Near Eastern sources—literary and/or iconographic—supply the researcher with material with which to study and understand it with a cautionary *emic* (insider) perspective of that of the ancients themselves.⁸

6 Passages that deal with the brotherhood of Edom and Israel apart from Obadiah are sections from Genesis 25, 27, and 36; Numbers 20:14–21; Deuteronomy 2:4–8, 23:7; Jeremiah 49:7–11; Amos 1:11–12; and Malachi 1:2–4 (Coggins and Re’emi 1985, 70).

7 One soon comes to realise that it is much different from the Copernican, heliocentric cosmic geography we are familiar with (de Villiers 2013, 148).

8 See Cornelius (1994, 193) on the significance of the use of iconography as a source for reconstructing an ancient Near Eastern cosmic geography.

As Palestine formed the crossroad between Egypt in the south and Mesopotamia in the east, and Anatolia in the north in terms of communication and trade, it stands to argue that because of their location, they ended up sharing some “geopolitical factors” as well as absorbing influence and a world of ideas from the countries/areas they were connected to throughout its history (Cornelius 1994, 195). The HB was not formed in isolation but within the greater ancient Near Eastern world (see Cornelius 1994, 195).⁹

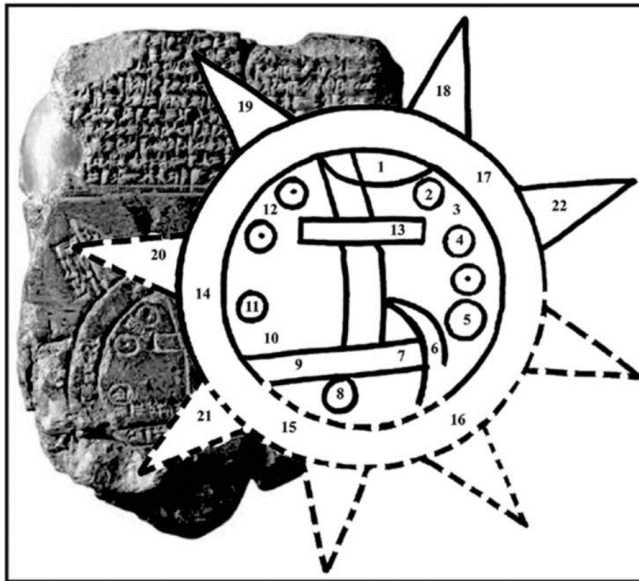


Figure 1: Tablet with the imprint of the Babylonian world map or *Mappa Mundi*. Artist unknown (sixth century BCE). Clay, 12,2 cm × 8,2 cm. British Museum (BM 92687), London. Source: de Hulster (2021, 193; fig. 4).

In light of ancient Near Eastern literary and/or iconographic sources—based also on the likes of the Babylonian World Map (the *Mappa Mundi*) (see Figure 1 above)—the ancient Near Eastern cosmic geography can be reconstructed or imagined as follows (see Figure 2 below): The earth was a flat round disc. It rested on and was surrounded by the cosmic ocean. At the far ends of creation there were pillars in the form of mountains that reached below the cosmic waters and those that extended to the heavens at the far ends of the cosmos. It is between these mountains that the sun rose in the east and set in the west every day. A (holy) city was considered to be at the centre of creation and at the centre of the city was the cosmic mountain upon which stood the temple to a particular or a handful of deities. Where there were no natural mountains, structures like *ziggurats* were built to mimic the height of the temple reaching towards the heavens. In

⁹ The Israelites and later Yehudites were children of their time, and their worldview was “pre-modern (i.e., primitive)” which is in a measure comparable to that of their neighbours (Cornelius 1994, 204).

the holiest part of the temple, the earth and heavens (the divine sphere) met. The city was meant to be a place of security and safety where the world was maintained through rituals and offerings to the divine. Therefore, great effort would have been made to defend and fortify cities to prevent attack (cf. Wyatt 2001, *passim*; de Villiers 2013, 148).

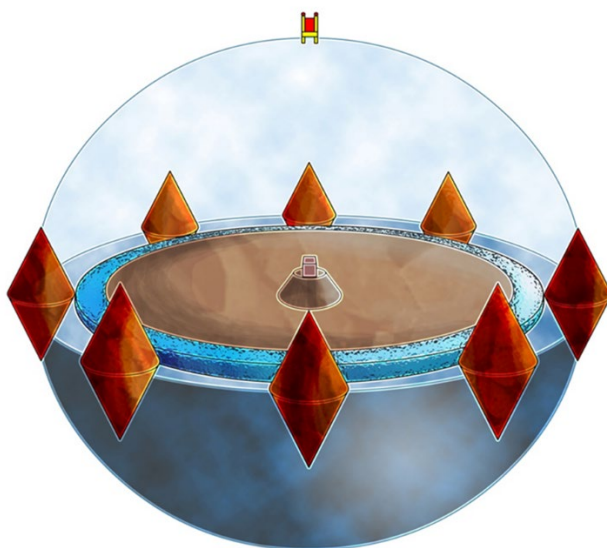


Figure 2: A three-dimensional representation of the cosmic geography of the HB
Artist: Paul S. Prinsloo (2022). Source and copyright holder: Gert T. M. Prinsloo¹⁰

From the description and illustration above (Figure 2), it is clear that the HB uses similar concepts and cosmic geography to that of its ancient Near Eastern neighbours. The sun would be represented as a winged sun disc travelling through the sky during the day. The waters surrounding the flat horizontal earth disc would engulf the entire system of creation above the heavens and below the underworld. These are waters associated with chaos and a monster (in the HB Leviathan is an example, whereas Yam is a Canaanite one). These waters were also associated with fertility and life. It is from the separation of these waters that creation took place. Many aspects of this cosmos was “demythologised” in the HB’s conceptualisation of the cosmos (cf. Cornelius 1994, 202; Wyatt 2001, *passim*). The heavens and the primeval or cosmic ocean were not considered to be deities themselves, but creations of YHWH (Cornelius 1994, 202).¹¹

¹⁰ I have graciously been granted permission by Prof. Gert T. M. Prinsloo, copyright holder of the image, to use it in this study (personal electronic communication, 24 September 2022).

¹¹ “YHWH is the one who upholds the pillars of the earth; he alone created the heaven and stars and can decide on who goes to the underworld and leave it. The biggest difference lies in the fact that

At the centre of the universe was situated “the self” (de Villiers 2013, 148). The temple and/or mountain was situated at the centre of creation—namely the *axis mundi*—where the heavens, earth, and the underworld met (Cornelius 1994, 201). Therefore, the temple in Jerusalem on Mount Zion “becomes the meeting point between the human (concrete) world and the divine (mythological) world” (Prinsloo 2005, 461). It is the location where YHWH is physically present on earth as well as in the highest heaven.

The HB is concerned with a dialogue between the divine and humans. As a result, humankind can be represented either at-centre or off-centre (Prinsloo 2005, 460). To be at-centre is positive, as one experiences “harmony, health, peace, reconciliation, to live in the presence of YHWH and in harmony with the community of the faithful” (Prinsloo 2005, 461). To be off-centre is to be in negative space where one experiences “distress, illness, persecution, moral failure, divine judgment, to live in the presence of enemies, even in the face of death, far from the presence of YHWH” (Prinsloo 2005, 461)

Izaak J. de Hulster (2015, 48) pointed out that this cosmos has long been perceived along two axes in ancient Near Eastern scholarship, namely a horizontal axis “which consists of topographical and geophysical features of the earth,” and a vertical axis “which reflects the tripartite division of the heavens, the earth, and the netherworld.” These two axes represent a “multi-dimensional layout of cosmic geography” (de Hulster 2015, 48). According to de Hulster (2015, 48) this is a “thought picture” representing an ideological view of the ancient Near Eastern world.

Spatial Orientation on the Vertical Axis

The peoples of the ancient Near East considered the cosmos to be “geocentric” (Wyatt 2001, 55; Prinsloo 2006, 742). In the HB, on the horizontal and vertical plane, and within the covenantal community, Jerusalem is the spatial centre of the cosmos where one experiences peace and life. In this centre stands a mountain representing the most holy part of creation and which was the first element to be created. On this mountain stood the holy temple of the high deity. Anything outside of this world or the city is considered unholy and dangerous (e.g., the steppe or wilderness). It is the meeting space between the divine and human realms (de Villiers 2013, 150).

The temple is the place on earth where the distinction between this realm (earth) and that of the heavens becomes eliminated (de Hulster 2015, 50). Although the holiest part of the temple is the *axis mundi*, the HB says fairly little about the nature of the underworld (cf. de Hulster 2015, 54).¹² In turn, to move “far” from the temple has the

according to ancient Hebrew thought, YHWH established the earth through wisdom (Ps 104:24; Prov 3:19–20)” (Cornelius 1994, 203).

12 According to Othmar Keel (1997, 62–78), spheres that represented death in the ancient Near East are the following: the grave; prisons, cisterns, and pitfalls; torrents and the sea; the dessert; and the night. What they all, and ultimately Sheol as well, had in common was that they were deep, dark,

same effect of distancing one from YHWH, whereas to be “near” is in turn positive and closer to YHWH (Prinsloo 2005, 461; 2006, 743).¹³ On the vertical axis, the heavens are considered as positive and associated with being physically closer to YHWH. Descending, in turn, is negative as it represents a movement away from YHWH and his deliverance, and movement into Sheol (the Hebrew underworld) (Prinsloo 2013, 10; see Wyatt 2001, 39, 40, 55).

The human body and the sacred serves as the centre of the cosmic geography (cf. Wyatt 2001, 39). Reality is where the self is at-centre, where holiness is expressed, and temples are places of “reality” due to their sacred nature. Temples were then the homes of the gods and were modelled on that of human houses. Temples are nonetheless places of “reality” and of “sacredness” (Wyatt 2001, 39; cf. Prinsloo 2006, 742). Whereas Jerusalem is at-centre, movement away from this centre of creation results in concentric circles decreasing in holiness throughout as one moves off-centre. On the periphery is “the realm of chaos and death” (Prinsloo 2013, 10; cf. Wyatt 2001, 147; Prinsloo 2006, 743).¹⁴ The concept of “boundaries” is the result of the notion of *far/near* and *ascend/descend* (Prinsloo 2013, 10–11). The further one moves from the sacred, the closer one moves to “the ends of the world,” where reality and memory breaks down (Wyatt 2001, 39; see Prinsloo 2006, 742; 2013, 9). According to Wyatt (2001, 38–39),

Things nearby are important, either because they are my territory, my possessions, my family (we speak of relatives and friends as “near”). Things or people that are more distant are of less consequence. A graduation can be observed: something is valued in direct proportion to proximity.

Regarding the realm in which YHWH lives, there are different perspectives within the HB itself. These conceptions do not necessarily tend to “synthesize together”: “Although heaven can be taken as God’s domain, it is hard to locate” (de Hulster 2015, 56). According to de Hulster, the activities of YHWH can be said to extend beyond creation itself within a spatial sense.

accumulated dust and decay, were silent, and characterised by forgetfulness (cf. Psalm 107; Keel 1997, 63). Paul A. Kruger (2005, 398) refers to the underworld as an inversion of the reality we know, a “topsy-turvy world,” as the *mundus inversus*. The nature of the ancient Near Eastern realm of death can then be compared to the sphere of life as follows: (1) the underworld is “below” whereas the world of the living is “above”; (2) the underworld is “dark,” instead of the realm above which receives “light”; (3) misery replaces normal life; and (4) the underworld is an inverted mirror image of the realm of the living (Kruger 2005, 401). Contaminated food also replaces normal food, and freedom of movement becomes restricted. It is eerily silent and joyless (Kruger 2005, 403–8).

- 13 “Concepts such as inside/outside, high/low, far/near, clean/unclean, holy/unholy contribute towards the psychological, ideological and moral perspective of the text. They define lived space as safe or unsafe; comfortable or uncomfortable; acceptable or unacceptable” (Prinsloo 2005, 461).
- 14 “Approaching the temple, one traverses increasingly holy ground. An unclean person cannot enter the holy space before partaking in cleansing rituals” (Prinsloo 2013, 11).

The Significance of Jerusalem and Mount Zion in Obadiah

In this section the first, and most significant, spaces to be discussed will be Jerusalem and Mount Zion as they are the spaces where many of the events described in Obadiah took place.

The choice of the site of Jerusalem has been motivated by some scholars in that it is a central location between the north, Israel, and the south, Judah. However, it was not located along major trade routes, implying an isolation from influence upon it, and that it was not easily accessible (Berquist 2008, 42). It is generally considered that elevated spaces were strategic positions, providing “objective, military logistical advantages” (Berquist 2008, 43).

The Jerusalem temple was considered to be the navel (Greek *omphalos*) of the ancient Israelite cosmic geography (Schäder 2010, 135, 137). “The temple achieved its status as cosmological centre and meeting place of different realms during creation or other mythological formative moments in its history” (Schäder 2010, 136). “Holiness was a central concept in Israel’s life and it was the means by which everything in the world was structured and classified” (Schäder 2010, 140). Holiness recedes concentrically, from the holiest part of the temple to the countries inhabited by foreigners, which would be considered profane. Therefore, holiness decreases from at-centre to off-centre gradually in grades (Schäder 2010, 140).¹⁵

Even though mention of Zion is already made in early texts, it is likely that the Zion theology functioned as an explanation for Jerusalem’s importance during Davidic and later times (Berquist 2008, 44). It is likely that texts that focus on Zion are writings from the Persian period. That could imply that Zion imagery served as later interpretations of the significance of Jerusalem. “The height of Jerusalem appears to be a later trope, perhaps having more to do with the re-settlement of Jerusalem in the Persian period than in any older traditions” (Berquist 2008, 44).

15 In a previous article I summarised Lori McCullough’s (2007, 11) typical ancient Near Eastern temple “vocabulary” and characteristic features as follows: “(1) Temples were the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain; (2) the cosmic mountain represented the primordial hillock; (3) temples were associated with the ‘waters of life;’ (4) temples were built on sacred, set-apart space; (5) they were oriented toward the four world regions; (6) successive ascension toward heaven was implied in their architecture; (7) their plan and measurement were divinely revealed to the king; (8) temples were the central, organizing, and unifying institution of Ancient Near Eastern society and its destruction or loss was calamitous to the community; (9) the temple facilitated daily rituals of washing, clothing, anointing, feeding, etc. of the cult image or supplicants; (10) temples were associated with the realm of the dead; (11) they were the site of sacred, communal meals; (12) temples contain the ‘tablets of destiny;’ (13) the temple was closely associated with law and justice; (14) they were the place of sacrifice; (15) the ritual of the temple was enshrouded in secrecy; (16) divine word was revealed through the temple; (17) temples played an important economic role in Ancient Near Eastern society; and (18) temples were an instrument of political influence” (Schäder 2010, 140–41).

According to Berquist (2008, 46–47), there are three ways in which people thought about and used Jerusalem differently than any other settlements and cities in the surrounding countryside: (1) It functioned as a non-agrarian society, with agriculture being practiced mainly at the outskirts of the city or area of habitation. Only during the Persian period and later would it become an imperial hub (Berquist 2008, 46); (2) It would historically have had some sort of political symbolism and held a measure of power which would be evident in the display of “palaces and other landmarks” (Berquist 2008, 46); (3) It was a place of worship. As such it is/was a space for “celebrations and gatherings” (Berquist 2008, 46–47). During the Persian period, it would become a site of religious pilgrimage (Berquist 2008, 48). Especially the religious connotation of Jerusalem and Zion and pilgrimages made it a space where (religious) identity could be (re)shaped (Berquist 2008, 50).

A Spatial Reading of Obadiah

In this section a selection of verses and units from Obadiah will be read in light of the vertical spatial axis of the ancient Near Eastern cosmic geography in order to better understand the dynamics of space and its contribution to the meaning of the book of Obadiah. The sections that will be focussed on are Obadiah 2–4, 7–9, 11, 15–17, and 19–21. In each section, a demarcation of the cola of each verse and an accompanying (literal) translation is provided. This will be followed by a discussion of each section individually.

Verses 2–4

הִגֵּה קִטּוֹן נַתְחִיף בַּגּוֹיִם	2a	“Behold! I have made you small amongst the nations;
בְּצוּי אַתָּה מְאֹד:	2b	you are utterly despised.
וְדוֹן לִבְךָ הַשִּׁיאֵךְ	3a	The pride of your heart has deceived you, ¹⁶
שֹׁכֵן בְּחַגְגֵי-סֵלַע	3b	you who dwell in the clefts of Sela/rock,
מְרוֹם שְׁבִתּוֹ		a high place <i>is</i> his dwelling
אִמַּר בְּלִבּוֹ	3c	who says in his heart:
מִי יוֹרֵדְנִי אֶרֶץ:		‘Who will bring me down to earth?’
אִם-תִּגְבֹּהַּ כְּעֹשֶׂר	4a	Though you are high like the eagle,
וְאִם-תִּבְנֶה כְּכֹכְבֵי שָׁמַיִם קִנְיָךְ		and though your nest is set amongst the stars,
מִשָּׁם אֶרְדְּךָ	4b	from there I will bring you down,”
נְאֻם-יְהוָה:		declares YHWH.

16 This cola means something like “the insolence of your mind has deceived you” (Ben Zvi 1996, 54). Wolff (1986, 34) points out that “heart” here is referring to “the total personality, with its self-awareness” of an individual.

Pertaining to verses 2–4, Potgieter (2003, 659) wrote that the most important poetic stratagem employed in them are parallelism, which especially plays on the antitheses between high and low. “A whole series of words from the semantic fields of ‘high’ and ‘arrogant’ is contrasted with ‘down’ and ‘despised’” (Potgieter 2003, 659). Potgieter (2003, 659) identified them as being the following:

Table 1: Words of differing semantic fields in verses 2–4¹⁷

Hebrew	Translation	Hebrew	Translation
קטן נַתַּתִּיךָ	I have made you small (v. 2a)	זָדוֹן לִבְךָ	the pride of your heart (v. 3a)
בְּזוּי אַתָּה מְאֹד	you are utterly despised (v. 2b)	בְּחַגְגֵי-סֵלַע	in the clefts of rock (Sela) (v. 3b)
מִי יוֹרֵדֵנִי	who will bring me down (v. 3c)	מְרוֹם	a high place (v. 3b)
אוֹרִידְךָ	I will bring you down (v. 4b)	אֹמֵר בְּלִבּוֹ	who says in his heart (v. 3c)
		תַּגְבִּייהַ כַּנְּשֹׁר	you are high like the eagle (v. 4a)
		בֵּין כּוֹכְבֵי שָׁמַיִם	your nest is set amongst the stars
		קִנְיָךְ	(v. 4a)

מְרוֹם שְׁבִתּוֹ is often considered the place where YHWH “dwells” (for שָׁכַן in the *qal* see Isaiah 33:5, 16; cf., for instance, Jeremiah 25:30; Psalms 93:4; 102:20), or as place that belongs to God (see Job 25:2), or where God's army dwells (e.g., Isaiah 24:21; cf. Psalm 148:1). מְרוֹם is also associated with God's holy mountain (e.g., Ezekiel 20:40). These are examples of some of the mental associations that the term מְרוֹם could likely have evoked in the communities of readers of Obadiah (Ben Zvi 1996, 56).

Edom has historically had a natural geographical advantage in terms of its fortification and accessibility. Edom thinks of herself as “unchallengeable,” however, “the ultimate arbiter of high and low is the God of Israel (Gen 11:1–9; Isa 2:11–15)” (Jensen 2008, 12). Not only is Edom known for her mountainous regions (v. 3), associated with her is the “the evocative metaphor of a high-flying eagle who fears no one (v. 4a)” (Jensen 2008, 12). This takes on mythological overtones (see verse 4b) (Jensen 2008, 12). Height is metaphorically associated with pride (cf. Job 41:34; Psalm 138:6; Isaiah 2:12; Ezekiel 31:10) (Jensen 2008, 12). Edom was blinded to the threat which is YHWH who is called “God the Most High” (cf. Amos 9:2). He is not only the God of Israel, but also “raises up and lays low cities and nations (Isa 26:5; Luke 1:52)” (Jensen 2008, 12). YHWH is the highest enthroned deity in the Hebrew Bible (see Psalm 97:10). Naturally,

17 This is my own adaptation of the table that occurs in Potgieter (2003, 259). Two additions that I made are the inclusion of the Hebrew phrases and cola numbers which differ from Potgieter's.

because of his sovereignty he can also invert that which is high (including the mythological) (Jensen 2008, 12).

What verse 4 highlights is that there is no security against the wrath of YHWH, especially for human hubris, even within the highest fortifications, be it even situated amongst the stars (cf. Wolff 1986, 49). Richard J. Coggins formulates the theme of Obadiah in light of the first four verses of the book as being “the effectiveness of Yahweh’s power is asserted despite all false claims to sovereignty” (Coggins and Re’emi 1985, 79).

Verses 7–9

עַד־הַגְּבוּל שְׁלֹזוּךְ	7a	As far as the mountain, ¹⁸ they sent you,
כָּל אֲנָשֵׁי בְרִיתְךָ		all of the men of your covenant, ¹⁹
הַשִּׁיאֶוּךָ	7b	they have deceived you;
יִכְלְוּ לָךְ		they have held steadfast
אֲנָשֵׁי שְׁלֵמָה		against your treaty partners. ²⁰
לְחֶמְךָ	7c	Those that ate with you, ²¹
יַשְׁימוּ מְזוֹר תַּחְתֶּיךָ		they will set a trap under you
אֵין תְּבוּנָה בּוֹ:	7d	without you understanding it.
הֲלוֹא בַיּוֹם הַהוּא	8a	“Will it not be on that day”
נֹאֵם יְהוָה		– declares YHWH –
וְהִאַבְדֹתִי חֲכָמִים	8b	“that I shall destroy the wise from Edom,
מֵאֵדוֹם		
וְתְבוּנָה מִהַר עֵשָׂו:	8c	and the understanding ²² from the mountain of Esau?
וְחַיְתוּ גִבּוֹרֶיךָ תִּימָן	9a	And your mighty men ²³ will be battered, Teman, ²⁴
לְמַעַן יִכָּרֵת־אִישׁ	9b	so that he will be destroyed each man
מִהַר עֵשָׂו מִקְהָטָל:		from the mountain of Esau because of murder. ²⁵

Verse 7 explains one of the ways in which judgement will befall Edom. They will become displaced from the centre. They will become displaced from their own territory by either the nations or a coalition of nations as their covenant partners or allies drive

18 Alternatively, “the border.”

19 Alternatively, “all your allies.”

20 Alternatively, “confederates.”

21 It can be translated literally to mean “Those that ate your bread.”

22 Alternatively, “insightful.”

23 By implication “warriors.”

24 The word “teman” (תִּימָן) can also be translated as “south.”

25 Alternatively, “slaughter.”

them to the borders of their homeland (verse 7a) (see verse 1's call to the Israelites and/or nations to arise).

“On that day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא) in verse 8 is generally considered to be the day of YHWH's judgment against Edom, where the wise will be destroyed. It anticipates the (near universal) judgement in verse 15, against Edom, famed for her wisdom (see verse 8b–c), and Teman, famed for its mighty men (see verse 9a) (cf. Jeremiah 49:7; Job 2:11). Edom's wisdom is considered to be a by-product of her being a trading centre and the recipient of lore and knowledge from the East (Baruch 3:23). “Wisdom can refer to the general qualities of intelligence and skill that bring success in every area of life. Here, the repetition of ‘understanding’ from the previous verse may suggest a particular focus on failure of political and diplomatic skills” (Jensen 2008, 17; cf. Ben Zvi 1996, 121). Verse 8, in turn, has the overthrow of Edom's wisdom at the core of its meaning (cf. Coggins and Re'em 1985, 83).²⁶

The reference to “the mountain of Esau”²⁷ in verses 8c and 9b foreshadows the contrasting reference of Mount Esau versus Mount Zion, just like the use of “brotherly” in verse 6 foreshadows the contrast between Esau and Jacob (Ben Zvi 1996, 121). Verse 9 anticipates the coming or impending fall of Mount Esau. It is because of bloodshed of their “brothers” that Esau will befall this fate. Even strength cannot save Edom/Esau from the (eschatological?) יוֹם־יְהוָה (“day of the YHWH”).

Verse 11

בַּיּוֹם עֲמַדְךָ מִנִּגַד	11a	On the day you stood aloof,
בַּיּוֹם שָׁבוֹת זָרִים חֵילוֹ	11b	on the day when strangers captured his booty, ²⁸
[שַׁעְרָיו ³⁰] וְנִכְרְיִים בָּאוּ (שַׁעְרוֹ) ²⁹	11c	and foreigners entered into his gates,
וְעַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם יָדוּ גוֹזְלִים	11d	and cast lots over Jerusalem;
גַּם־אַתָּה בָּאֲתָד מִקֵּהֶם:	11e	even you <i>became</i> like one of them.

As the strangers and foreigners entered the gates of Jerusalem, Edom might just as well have been one of them by standing aloof and observing the pillage of the holy city. Their inaction is akin to complicity. The strangers and foreigners' mere presence in Jerusalem, capturing her booty, defiles the holy city. It implies the ransacking of the temple as well, implying its defilement as no purification rituals were performed upon their entrance to

26 The “wise men” of v. 8 are not to be taken out of context; rather, they are to be seen in parallel with “mighty men” here. Once again we have a warning against hubris or human insolence; all who trust in human military might will themselves be slaughtered (Coggins and Re'em 1985, 83).

27 The phrase “Mount Esau” is found only in Obadiah (Coggins and Re'em 1985, 83).

28 Ben Zvi (1996, 133, 134) asks whether this could refer to the upper social stratum of a city.

29 *Kethib* variant.

30 *Qere* variant.

the temple. In this manner Jerusalem and Mount Zion/the temple become off-centre sites because of this defilement and the stripping of their honour and the displaying of their naked shame. As a result, Edom would share this same fate when YHWH intervenes when shame covers Edom in verse 10a (cf. verse 15 where reference is made to the *lex talionis* that would become applicable to Edom also).

Verses 15–17

כִּי־קָרֹב	15a	Indeed, near <i>is</i>
יוֹם־יְהוָה		the day of YHWH
עַל־כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם		against all of the nations.
כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ	15b	As you have done,
יַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ		it will be done to you.
גְּמֻלָּתְךָ יָשׁוּב בְּרֹאשְׁךָ:	15c	Your deeds ³¹ will return on your own head.
כִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁתִיתֶם עַל־הַר	16a	For just as you have drunk on my holy mountain,
קִדְשִׁי		
יִשְׁתּוּ כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם תָּמִיד	16b	all the nations will drink continually; ³²
וְשָׁתוּ	16c	and they will drink
וְלָעוּ		and they will swallow ³³
וְהָיוּ כְּלוֹא הָיוּ:		and they will be as if they have never been.
וּבְהַר צִיּוֹן תִּהְיֶה פְּלִיטָה	17a	But on the mountain of Zion there will be deliverance,
וְהָיָה קֹדֶשׁ		and it will be holy (pf);
וַיִּרְשׁוּ בַּיִת יַעֲקֹב	17b	and the house of Jacob will possess
אֶת מוֹרְשֵׁיהֶם:	17c	their possessions.

In Obadiah 15, we read how justice will pervade on the day of YHWH through the golden rule, the *lex talionis*, that “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:21–23; Leviticus 24:19–20; Deuteronomy 19:21) underlies the rest of Obadiah’s prophecy (cf. Jensen 2008, 8). Edom will become just like the pillaged Jerusalem and ransacked Mount Zion. In verse 15 the lines of distinction between Edom and the strangers and foreigners (see verse 11) become blurred (cf. Coggins and Re’emi 1985, 90).

In verse 16c, the Edomites, along with the strangers and foreigners, drink of the cup of judgement of YHWH. However, when Israel in turn drank on YHWH’s holy mountain,

31 Alternatively, “conduct.”

32 By implication “until full.”

33 The Hebrew is an intensive, so the meaning is closer to “choke” than to “swallow.”

they drank due to the loss of the temple, out of grief “of the succeeding lament ceremonies among the ruins” (Wolff 1986, 65).

In verse 17 we read of the deliverance of Zion and the house of Israel (Jacob in verse 17b). The repossession of Mount Zion and Jerusalem is announced. This implies that the territory of Israel, its holy mountain and holy city will be at-centre again as YHWH will occupy the site, especially the Mount Zion once more. The future settlement and possession of territory “is *not* seen as humanly-ordained but as a reflection of the authoritative will of YHWH” (Ben Zvi 1996, 198). The house which possessed those in the northern and southern kingdoms will be (re)possessed (cf. Wolff 1986, 65).

Verses 19–21

וַיִּרְשׁוּ הַנֶּגֶב אֶת-הַר עֵשָׂו	19a	And the people of the Negev ³⁴ will possess (pf.) the mountain of Esau,
וְהַשְּׁפֵלָה אֶת-פְּלִשְׁתִּים	19b	and the Shephelah ³⁵ (<i>will possess—no verb</i>) the Philistines;
וַיִּרְשׁוּ אֶת-שָׂדֵה אֶפְרַיִם	19c	and they will possess (pf.) the field of Ephraim,
וְאֶת שָׂדֵה שַׁמְרוֹן	19d	and (<i>they will possess—no verb</i>) the field of Samaria,
וּבְנֵימֵן אֶת-הַגִּלְעָד:	19e	and Benjamin (<i>will possess—no verb</i>) Gilead.
וַגְּלוֹת הַחַיִּל-הַזֶּה לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל	20a	And the exiles from this fortress of the sons of Israel –
אֲשֶׁר-כְּנַעֲנִים עַד-צָרְפָּת		which (<i>possess—no verb</i>) the Canaanites as far as Zarephath, ³⁶
וַגְּלוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם	20b	and the exiles of Jerusalem –
אֲשֶׁר בְּשֶׁפְרָד		which/that <i>are (no verb)</i> in Shepharad –
יִרְשׁוּ אֶת עָרֵי הַנֶּגֶב:	20c	they will possess the cities of the Negev. ³⁷
וְעֹלֵי מוֹשָׁעִים בָּהַר צִיּוֹן	21a	And saviours will go up to the mountain of Zion
לְשַׁפֵּט אֶת-הַר עֵשָׂו	21b	to judge ³⁸ the mountain of Esau
וְהָיְתָה לְיְהוָה הַמְּלוּכָה:	21c	and she will become the kingdom of YHWH.

At the core of verses 19–21 is the (re)possession of the Promised Land. Ben Zvi (1996, 211) asks, “Why is this relatively precise, Utopian, ‘geography of the settlement’ so significant?” (Ben Zvi 1996, 211). Not only is Edom possessed by Israel in verses 19–

34 The Negev is also known as the Southern Land.

35 The Lowland.

36 This colon can also be translated as follows: “... who are among the Canaanites (*will possess—no verb*) as far as Zarephath ...”

37 See footnote 33 above.

38 Alternatively, “rule.”

20, but so also the territory of other nations. The exiles retake what reconstitutes the idealised borders of the kingdom of David, with Jerusalem situated in the centre (Nogalski 2017, 123). There is then a return in the description of the conquest back to the Negev which was mentioned in both the beginning of verse 19 and the end of verse 20 in the form of an *inclusio* (cf. Coggins and Re’emi 1985, 98; Potgieter 2003, 665).

The repossession in verses 19–20 fan out in four directions, namely the inhabitants of the Negev occupy the south (and east), the inhabitants of the Shephelah the west, the inhabitants of the central or main part of Judah will occupy the north, and the inhabitants of Benjamin will occupy the east. Zarephath is likely a city on the far northwest coast (representing the Phoenicians?) which emphasises their occupation of the north. Wherever the location of Sepharad, it implies that Jerusalemites or exiles will occupy the furthest regions in the restoration of Israel.³⁹ In these verses the repossession of the land of Israel is represented in an idyllic manner.

According to the first half of verse 21, “saviours” shall go up to Mount Zion (and indirectly, to YHWH) in order to (or, so that they may) “judge” Mount Esau. According to the second half, the kingship, with no qualifications, shall be YHWH’s or that YHWH’s kingship will be manifested (Ben Zvi 1996, 226). The “going up” in verse 20 links with the “rise up” in verse 1 (cf. Wolff 1986, 69).

In this section a spatial reading of excerpts from Obadiah in the light of the vertical spatial axis of ancient Near Eastern cosmic geography has been done in order to better understand the dynamics of space and its contribution to the meaning of the book of Obadiah.

Summary and Conclusion

“In Obadiah we see one of the cultic prophets who gave the broken and dejected congregation on Zion the assurance that its prayers had been heard—an assurance in the form especially of a threat of judgment on its enemies” (Wolff 1986, 19). The threats and promises of vengeance against Edom and all the nations in Obadiah has been described by some as xenophobic or even representing a “damn-Edom theology” that has been attributed to a form of nationalism underlying this book (cf. Jensen 2008, 8). “If we subject Obadiah’s sayings to the moral judgment of a superior idealistic or materialistic stance, what we find is pure, primitive hate” (Wolff 1986, 22). This hate is based on memory of historical conflict and trauma.

The introductory phrase of Obadiah was most likely meant to recall the memories underlying the book (cf. Ben Zvi 1996, 10). Obadiah, much like other prophetic books,

39 One must note that the boundaries between lands and inhabitants in ancient times, and even in the instances mentioned in Obadiah 19–20, were porous.

was not composed with the intent to be read once and then to be discarded and forgotten. Many communities were meant to be addressed via (re)readings of the text over time (cf. Ben Zvi 1996, 3). The memory being evoked by the author was the patriarchal tales of the origins of the tension between the brothers/nations Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom). These were the patriarchal traditions that the (re)readers must have been acquainted with. It is against this backdrop, and that of ancient Near Eastern cosmic geography, that the spatial reading of Obadiah in this study is to be understood.

De Hulster (2015, 48) pointed out that this cosmos has long been perceived along two axes in ancient Near Eastern scholarship, namely a horizontal and a vertical axis. Concerning the vertical axis, the so-called “tripartite division,” the temple and/or mountain, was considered to be situated at the centre of creation—where the heavens, earth, and the underworld met (Cornelius 1994, 201). Therefore, the temple in Jerusalem on Mount Zion was the meeting point between the concrete human realm and the mythological realm of the divine (cf. Prinsloo 2005, 461).

The temple is the place on earth where the distinction between this realm (earth) and that of the heavens becomes eliminated (de Hulster 2015, 50). To move “far” from the temple (holy mountain) was understood to have had the same effect as distancing one from YHWH, whereas to be “near” is in turn positive and closer to YHWH (Prinsloo 2005, 461, 2006, 743). Whereas Jerusalem is at-centre, movement away from this centre of creation results in concentric circles decreasing in holiness throughout as one moves off-centre. Therefore, holiness decreases from at-centre to off-centre gradually in grades (Schäder 2010, 140).

A spatial reading of Obadiah on the vertical axis reveals a dichotomy of space between Edom (mount Esau) and Israel (Jerusalem and Mount Zion) as well as movement along the vertical axis. This is evident in relation to the following: (1) The antithesis of high and low (cf. Obadiah verses 2–4), where Edom the metaphorical high-flying eagle (v. 4a) would be brought down (v. 4b) from their geographical and metaphorical heights by the YHWH. (2) The description of the judgment that would befall Edom (v. 7–9). The prophecy to be understood here as fulfilled, and yet to be fulfilled, on both levels (Ben Zvi 1996, 81). At the heart of this judgement lies the threat—a displacement from the centre, namely their territory, and away from Mount Esau. Verse 9 anticipates the impending fall of Mount Esau. It is because of the bloodshed of their “brothers” that Esau would befall this fate. (3) Verse 11 elaborates on the concept of the “centre” and movement along the vertical axis (near-far) (centre- and off-centre) (good-bad; brothers-strangers), by comparing Edom to the strangers and the foreigners that desecrated the holy city. Just like Jerusalem and Mount Zion/the temple became off-centre, due to its defilement, so Edom and Mount Esau would be displaced off-centre in the end. (4) In verses 15–17, where the lines of distinction between Edom and the strangers become blurred, the Edomites become just like the foreigners and strangers, whilst the repossession of Mount Zion and Jerusalem is announced (re-centred). (5) In

verses 19–21 the exiles are considered to retake what constituted the idealised borders of the kingdom of David, with Jerusalem (again) situated at its centre.

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