

Threshing Floors as Sacred Space

Commentary for July 15, 2018 — The Temple Was Not Unique

The threshing floor where the Temple in Jerusalem was built was not chosen simply because it was convenient. Threshing floors were considered sacred places. One Jerusalem threshing floor became even more sacred as the place of the Israelite Temples, all on the site God chose on the threshing floor above and west of the Gihon Spring. King David of Israel purchased that threshing floor¹ and Solomon built the first Temple to YHWH upon it.

An interesting 2015 book by Jaime Waters presents strong evidence that threshing floors in the Bible were not only sacred locations but also held ritual significance, as in many ancient agricultural societies. The book is *Threshing Floors in Ancient Israel: Their Ritual and Symbolic Significance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). Ms. Waters explains:

“As sites where crops are processed, threshing floors are spaces essential for survival in agrarian societies, and as such, inhabitants of ancient Israel surely used threshing floors for these vital operations. Because threshing and winnowing were ubiquitous practices in ancient Israel, it is likely that everyone had access to a threshing floor, whether privately owned or shared. The Hebrew Bible attests both privately owned (2 Sam. 6:6 //1 Chron. 13:9; 2 Sam. 24:16 //1 Chron. 21:15) and communal (1 Sam. 23:1; 1 Kgs. 22:10 //2 Chron. 18:9) threshing floors.”

• **Waters, Threshing Floors, 11.**

Ornan was threshing at the time King David approached him to purchase his threshing floor (1 Chronicles 21:20). Threshing floors were seasonally used. **“Mourning rites, divination rituals, cultic processions, and sacrifices all happen on threshing floors”** (Waters, 12). When not processing crops threshing floors were used for communal events because they were convenient open spaces where many people could gather (Waters, 12–13).

Sacred and Ritual Uses of Threshing Floors

Note what King David did and how God responded:

“So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold by weight. And David built there an altar unto YHWH, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called upon YHWH; and he answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt offering.”

• **1 Chronicles 21:25–26**

Waters’ analysis of biblical accounts concludes:

“Nearly all of the narratives that occur on threshing floors in the Hebrew Bible include an overt connection to the divine. ... the Hebrew Bible provides clear evidence that these spaces were regarded as more than agricultural spaces; they were considered sacred spaces. In addition to narratives on threshing floors,

¹ Ornan the Jebusite owned the threshing floor according to 1 Chronicles 21:15, 18, 20–25; 28; and 2 Chronicles 3:1. Ornan was called Araunah in 2 Samuel 24:16, 18, 20–24.

there are also prophetic and legal texts which provide clear examples of divine control over threshing floors and divine blessing of these spaces. ... Yahweh was considered intimately connected to threshing floors because of the essential life-sustaining activities that happen at these locations.”

• *Waters, Threshing Floors, 14*

Here are some biblical events occurring at threshing floors (Waters, 12–13):

- **Genesis 50:10–11**. Joseph, his brethren and Egyptian officials traveled with a huge entourage from Egypt to a place east of the Jordan River to perform mourning rites for Joseph’s father Jacob. The group, including nearby Canaanites, performed the rites at a threshing floor and they all gathered to pray and lament.
- **Judges 6:37–40**. The dew and fleece ritual that Gideon performed to learn if his military battle would be successful took place on a threshing floor, a place for human-divine contact. Twice divine answers were given to Gideon.
- **Ruth chapter 3**. The defining events of the narrative occur near to a “floor,” which in Hebrew is the common term for threshing floor. See most any modern translation.
- **2 Samuel 6:6–7** and **1 Chronicles 13:10–11**. David and a large group make a sacred procession to bring the ark to Jerusalem. They stop at the threshing floor of Nachan where a divine manifestation occurred and killed Uzziah because of ritual disobedience.
- **2 Samuel 24:15–25** and **1 Chronicles 21:14–27**. David, Gad, Ornan the Jebusite, and an angel of the Lord interacted at Ornan’s threshing floor.
- **2 Chronicles 3:1**. An altar and later a Temple were built on the threshing floor bought by David, making it a sacred site. It ceased to be an agricultural site.
- **1 Kings 22:10** and **2 Chronicles 18:9**. Kings of Israel and Judah gathered to consult pagan prophets and God’s prophet Micaiah outside Israel’s capital city of Samaria. They gathered at the threshing floor² outside the gate of the city. The kings asked the prophets if their war against Syria would be successful. The threshing floor again served as a place to consult Yahweh and a prophetic vision was given (Waters, 13. See also **1 Kings 22:19–22**; **2 Chronicles 18:18–22**).

Old Testament prophecies use threshing floor imagery in Isaiah 21:10, Micah 4:12–13, and Jeremiah 51:33 (analyzed by Waters, 52–59). The image in Daniel 2:35 is destroyed, pulverized, and the dust “became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors.” Other verses are Isaiah 28:27–28, 41:15; Hosea 9:1–2 (where *floor* is *threshing floor* in Hebrew); Amos 1:3; and Habakkuk 3:12. New Testament threshing floor imagery occurs in Matthew 3:11–12; Luke 3:16–17, 1 Corinthians 9:9–10, and 1 Timothy 5:18. More on this subject later.

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² The King James Version uses the phrase “**a void place**” in these two verses. Most modern translations render the phrase “**threshing floor**” for Hebrew term *goren*, as in most all its 36 occurrences.