When John Shipherd set out to the town of Elyria, Ohio, in 1831, he carried with him not only vestiges of his New York home, but also his interpretation of a heavenly city, manifested when he converted this growing town in the still-virgin frontier. Two years later, with a failed attempt to convert the town looming in his memory, he successfully founded Oberlin Colony and Collegiate Institute in the interest of creating a representation of God's Kingdom in the region of Northeast Ohio known as the Connecticut Western Reserve.

The town became an example, according to Amy DeRogatis, of a Puritan-inspired attempt to create a New Jerusalem. It flourished in spite of the criticism which the community and college attracted as a result of the radical theological and antislavery leanings of its founders, which fell outside of the realm of “ordinary” Presbyterian and Congregational religious life. Oberlin attracted students from across the country to its seminary, welcomed women and African-Americans, and became a voice on the frontier for the abolition of slavery.

In Moral Geography, DeRogatis seeks to understand how implicit religious meaning was communicated through the geographic organization of the frontier. Using Oberlin's founding as a planned community as an example, DeRogatis recounts the history of other cities and towns in the Western Reserve which were purposefully modeled after settlers’ constructions of an ideal society. These constructions were an earthly representation of what the settlers believed to be God's Kingdom. This guides DeRogatis’ study, which is interested in “the relationship between religion and space,” as she successfully conveys the significance of a moral ideal to geographic modeling. According to DeRogatis, this relationship is at the roots of attempts by 19th century settlers from New England to map new areas. Their constructions of these areas, DeRogatis claims, became reality the moment the decision to settle a given region was made. Upon settlement, missionary labors would be met with physical toil in their attempt to create cities and towns in the West which were as well-founded morally as they were physically attractive.

Generalists or other scholars whose interests fall outside the realm of American religious history will appreciate DeRogatis’ successful attempt to show how less tangible ideas were sometimes subconsciously manifest through the concept of place. It is through this cross-disciplinary approach that DeRogatis successfully makes her case, blending religious history into the study of cultural geography against a backdrop of early American history. Those interested in religious history will appreciate DeRogatis’ new approach to studying an often researched topic. By successfully integrating the concept of place into her thesis, the author examines a different perspective on how these settlers understood not only their earthly existence, but, to use a phrase heavily utilized by Robert Abzug, their “cosmic timelines.”

Some minor criticisms must be voiced, especially DeRogatis’ mention of Charles G. Finney being “Arminian,” reflective of the author's tendency not to delve into the theological and philosophical beliefs of her subjects. While this tendency is understandable and the complaint is minor as it does not form the basis of her thesis, Finney's labeling is questionable, especially considering the large amount of dialogue - and general confusion - in trying to describe exactly who he was as a theologian.

Minor complaints aside, Amy DeRogatis has managed to deliver a startlingly original argument in a well researched field. Perhaps what we can learn most from the author's new
perspective are ways by which we can uncover how "ordinary" people during this period constructed meaning in their lives. An understanding of this will prove beneficial, as it will allow us to further understand the incentives behind the great experimentation which changed not only the religious but the social and political landscapes of early America.

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