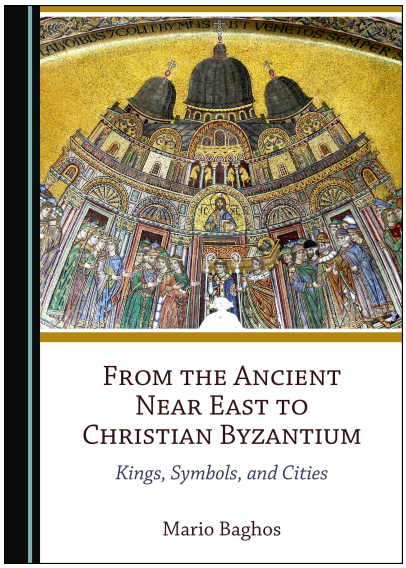
Mario Baghos, *From the Ancient Near East to Christian Byzantium: Kings, Symbols, and Cities*. Reviewed by David Bradshaw



Published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing on March 17, 2021
Language: English
ISBN: 9-781527-566279
Pages: 264

Modern cities are dominated by skyscrapers, fitting symbols of the domination of modern life by commerce and finance. It takes an effort to place oneself mentally in an ancient city, where the lived environment was dominated by temples and public life centered around the worship of the gods.

This work by Mario Baghos, Lecturer in Theology and Church History at St. Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College in Sydney, seeks to help us make that leap. Beginning with the cities of ancient Mesopotamia, it traces the role of sacred space and architecture through Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Israel, culminating in their distinctively Christian adaptation within the New Rome, Constantinople. Sacred space requires as its complement sacred agency, the action of the gods and their human (or human-divine) representatives within that sacred space. Borrowing a term from Ioan Couliano, Baghos refers to this as "ecosystemic agency" to highlight its role in creating and sustaining the world. The book is thus an interlocking study of sacred space and agency within a range of ancient cultures, culminating in their radical transformation by Christianity.

The book begins with the earliest city for which we have firm textual (as opposed to archaeological) evidence, Eridu, a settlement of the fifth millennium B.C. in southern Mesopotamia. Eridu was raised up out of the waters by the god Enki, a belief memorialized in its temple known as the E'engurra or "Sea House." As a ziggurat the E'engurra united the three great realms of the heaven, the earth, and the subterranean depths below. It was thus "both the summation of the cosmos and its point of origin" (4), or, in terms that Baghos borrows from Mircea Eliade, both an *imago mundi* (image of the world) and *axis mundi* (center of the world). This conception of the temple remained constant through the successive civilizations of Sumer, Akkade, and Babylon. The name Babylon, for example, is literally *Bab-ilani*, "gate of the gods," and was formed from the belief that Bablylon had been built over the *Bab apsi*, the "Gate of the Apsu," where the *apsu* are the primordial subterranean waters. The temple of the Babylonian god Marduk (who was born in the *apsu*) was named Etemenanki, the "House where is the foundation of the heavens and earth."

The Egyptian Old Kingdom was founded almost a thousand years after Eridu, so the Egyptians may well have received their understanding of sacred space from Mesopotamia. Ancient writers refer to Egypt as the middle or "pupil" of the earth, "an image of heaven," and "temple of the whole world" (19). A number of Egyptian cities—Hermopolis, Heliopolis, Thebes, Memphis—laid claim to be the primeval hill from which the creator (who was variously identified) fashioned the world. The pyramids were not just elaborate mausoleums, but representations of the primeval hill and "stairways to heaven" whose interior shafts aligned with constellations signifying the gods. Pharaoh

was the ecosystemic agent *par excellence*, an embodiment of Horus who had to ritually defeat the serpent Apophis (representing chaos) to sustain cosmic order.

Egypt and Mesopotamia were in turn major influences on Crete, Mycenae, and Greece. Baghos hits the high points of this complex material: the "peak sanctuaries" of the Minoans dedicated to the Mother goddess and replicated within the royal palace; the introduction by the Mycenaeans of Zeus and the gods of Mount Olympus, further reinforcing the role of mountains as points where heaven meets earth; "sacred Ilion" (Troy), founded where the Palladium, the image of Pallas Athena crafted by Athena herself, fell to the earth; and Delphi, center of the inhabited world and the site where Apollo slew the Python. Yet although the Greeks had a strong sense of sacred space, they attributed less in the way of ecosystemic agency to their kings than did previous civilizations. Baghos suggests, plausibly enough, that this was because their belief in the divinity of kings had been eroded by the political turmoil of the dark ages (c. 1200–800 B.C.).

Rome borrowed freely from the Greeks as it developed its own understanding of sacred space. Roman legend held that the Palladium was stolen from Troy and delivered to Aeneas, coming thereby to Rome where it was kept as a guarantor of the city's security. The temple of Vesta at the center of the city was another element with a Greek antecedent, the *prytaneion* that was at the center of most Greek cities. These too had an eternal flame dedicated to the goddess of the hearth.

Rome's seemingly endless string of military victories gave its sacred flame a sense of permanence not possessed by those of other cities, however. Eventually Rome's seeming invincibility gave rise to the myth of Rome as the "eternal city" developed by authors such as Virgil and Ovid. On a more personal level, Augustus presented himself as a kind of bodily refiguration of Aeneas and Romulus and was widely hailed as having inaugurated a new golden age. As Baghos observes, "thus, within Rome there was believed to have been an idealistic co-incidence of protology and teleology, which means that—however impossible and far from reality and experience—the city was perceived as existing in an instantaneous present (i.e. eternity) insofar as past and future coincided" (76). In the case of Rome, sacred space thus gave birth to a form of sacred time—or rather, of eternity, the transcendence of time achieved through Rome's fulfilment of its divine destiny.

Did pagan conceptions such as these ultimately find a home within Christianity? Baghos answers affirmatively, but only with important qualifications. After all, they were deeply intertwined with idolatry. For Christianity it is Jesus himself who is the *axis mundi*. A wide range of biblical imagery appropriates to Jesus what had earlier been notions associated with sacred space: true vine, cornerstone, ladder to heaven, gate, high priest, judge of the dead, victor over the dragon, conquering hero who enters hell. Christ is thus "the ecosystemic agent without equal" (152). For this reason we find very little city-imagery in the New Testament as compared to pagan religions or even the Old Testament, where Jerusalem has such a central role.

Despite this fundamental difference, one can find traces of ancient conceptions of sacred space within Christian architecture and worship. Hagia Sophia, with its all-encompassing dome and cross-in-square floor plan, is carefully contrived as an *imago mundi*. The Pantokrator and Platytera icons have a similar all-encompassing scope, and other icons (as well as liturgical processions through the city outside) give any Orthodox church, to some extent, a similar sense of embracing the whole world.

More problematically, Constantine sought to endow his New Rome with something of the sacred character of the old Rome, moving there the Palladium and having himself portrayed as Apollo (or Helios) atop a column at the center of the Forum. Baghos rightly observes that these are signs of the transitional character of Constantine's reign. He does not, however, explore the permanent tension thus created within Orthodoxy between the supposed sacredness of Constantinople and the biblical teaching that "we have here no enduring city" (Heb. 13:14). Why has the notion of a sacred city—whether the old Rome or the new—been so enduringly attractive to Christians when it has no biblical foundation? How are we to reconcile such notions with the fundamental conviction that only Christ is the true *axis mundi*?

This informative and original book deserves a wide readership. It is not without its faults; there is such a torrent of names, dates, and facts that one sometimes wishes for less information and more analysis. An index of proper names and technical terms would have been helpful. Nonetheless, the book succeeds in making a large and rather amorphous subject—the transformations of sacred space and sacred agency through some five thousand years of antiquity—interesting and intelligible. Orthodox readers will find it particularly valuable for its focus on Constantinople and the special relationship between the old and the New Rome.

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