

How on Earth Could Places Become Holy?: Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places¹

R. A. Markus (bio)

This paper tries to elucidate the way in which the early Christian reluctance to accord holiness to places was overcome in the course of the fourth century. Noting the contrast between the pre-Constantinian and later fourth-century attitudes, it allows for extraneous considerations such as imperial patronage and encouragement of pilgrimage, but seeks the religious roots of this shift in Christian attitudes. The view that the example of Jerusalem and the influence of the Jerusalem liturgy encouraged devotion to sacred places elsewhere is dismissed as inadequate to explain the growth of the cult of holy places and pilgrimage to them. The paper suggests that the new post-Constantinian forms of devotion to the martyrs were an important preparation for the emergence of the idea of holy places. The cult gave place a new significance; it met a felt need to make present in post-Constantinian conditions the past of the persecuted Church. Christianity could not envisage places as intrinsically holy, only derivatively, as the sites of historical events of sacred significance.

An Egyptian sage, sorrowfully foreseeing the time when the ancient cults would be forgotten and their sites deserted, prophesied: "At that time this holiest of lands, the site of shrines and temples, will be filled with the sepulchres of dead men."² Augustine quoted this prophecy in the course of his polemical attack on pagan religion in his *City of God*. "What he [Egyptian Hermes] seems to be lamenting," Augustine says, "is that the memorials of our martyrs would supersede their shrines and their temples." [End Page 257] Augustine was, of course, wise after the event. He was writing in the second decade of the fifth century; what the Egyptian sage had been afraid of had, in large measure, come to pass. But for this to have come about a huge intellectual and spiritual barrier had needed to be surmounted. What I want to try to elucidate is the way this barrier was overcome.

An earlier generation of scholars of religion would not have seen a problem here. Mircea Eliade, to take the best known example, could see holy places wherever he looked on the rich map of religions: "Every kratophany and hierophany whatsoever transforms the place where it

occurs: hitherto profane, it is thenceforward a sacred area."³ Holy places, Eliade thought, are "centres": centres of religious cosmology, centres of the world, and, derivatively, places where the centre is ritually re-enacted: "Every temple or palace, and by extension, every sacred town or royal residence is assimilated to a 'sacred mountain' ['where heaven and earth meet'] and thus becomes a centre."⁴ He took it as self-evident that all religions possessed such places. This assumption caused him to misdescribe observed facts,⁵ as well as to overlook the fact that Christianity originally had no holy places and for some three centuries continued to have none. An approach more historical than Eliade's is needed if we are to come to grips with this paradox.

Robert Wilken's fine new book on the holiness of the land "called holy"⁶ has brought home to us the laborious and tortuous nature of the road which led to the gradual crystallisation of a Christian concept of a "holy land." Although not primarily concerned with the emergence in Christianity of a concept of holy places, his book naturally does touch on this subject. A "Holy Land" could scarcely have come into being had there not already been a scattering of places in the land which were reckoned to be holy. But there is still a need to consider the emergence of the idea, and the resistance to it, of a holy place.

Eusebius thought holy places were what Jews and pagans had; Christians, he thought, knew better. A formidably thorough recent study⁷ has **[End Page 258]** documented Eusebius's extreme reluctance to countenance any talk of "holy places." Moses had promised a holy land to the Jews; Jesus promised to his followers a "much greater land, truly holy and beloved of God, not located in Judaea."⁸...

*How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places*¹

R. A. MARKUS

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1. This paper is based on various earlier versions given at seminars and lectures at the Universities of Cambridge, Chicago, the Catholic University of America, and at the Conference on "Ancient History at a Modern University" in Sydney, July 1995. The last version is to be published in the proceedings of the conference, whose editors I wish to thank for permission to make use of the paper here.

2. *Asclepius*, 24 (cf. Nock & Veslingère, 2.327), quoted by Augustine, *cit.* 8.26.



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