

# GOSPEL SITES AND 'HOLY PLACES': THE CONTRASTING ATTITUDES OF EUSEBIUS AND CYRIL<sup>1</sup>

P.W.L. Walker

The land of Palestine has seen many upheavals in its time. Of particular interest for Christian scholars are those associated with the year 324/5 when Constantine came to power in the East. Palestine, previously a marginal province, became a central focus for the new Christian empire, Jerusalem, previously known as Aelia Capitolina, gradually became a Christian 'holy city', and the sites associated with the Gospels were soon the objects of intense pilgrim devotion being deemed as 'holy places'.

Inevitably, therefore, it is to the fourth century that both archaeologists, concerned for the authenticity of the Gospel sites, and theologians, wishing to assess a Christian approach to those sites, must turn. In this paper, as we seek to assess both the reliability and the theology of our Christian forbears, it has been deemed simplest to examine and contrast the thought of the two principal Christian spokesmen in Palestine during those years of rapid change, Eusebius of Caesarea and Cyril of Jerusalem.

Both men were involved in this remarkable sequence of events. As metropolitan bishop of Palestine from 313 Eusebius (c. 260–339) played an integral part in those first exciting years after 325;<sup>2</sup> whilst it was Cyril (c. 320–386) who, as bishop of

---

<sup>1</sup>This lecture focuses on some of the issues raised in my forthcoming book, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, June, 1990), itself a much revised version of my Cambridge doctoral thesis; references to the more extended discussion to be found in the book are given in the footnotes (hereafter cited *HPHC*). I would like to take this opportunity of thanking the Tyndale Fellowship not only for the privilege of giving this lecture but also for the encouragement and support of several of its members (especially Colin Hemer, Gerald Bray and Tim Savage) during the course of my research.

<sup>2</sup>Eusebius has been described as the 'most learned man' of his day, see eg. L.I. Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule* (Leiden 1975); known to us chiefly as the writer of the *Ecclesiastical History*, he was also the eulogising biographer of

Jerusalem from before 350, was largely responsible for the subsequent development of a 'Christian Jerusalem', the home of a colourful liturgy and of a host of 'holy places'. Yet it must be asked: were these two bishops at all concerned with the historical authenticity of the places then being associated with the life of Christ? And what religious or theological significance did they give to them?

On both these questions, concerning historical authenticity and theological significance, it has often been presumed that Eusebius and Cyril were agreed.<sup>3</sup> In the following, however, it will be suggested that closer inspection indicates the need to treat them quite separately. Eusebius, with his natural historical bent, is revealed as far more concerned than Cyril with authenticity, whilst Cyril, with his unique role in Jerusalem catering for the increasing tide of pilgrims, is seen to give a much deeper religious significance to these 'holy places' than does Eusebius.

### I. Historical reliability

Those inclined to scepticism concerning the traditional Gospel sites will point to various issues: for example, the unreliability of oral tradition and the over-enthusiastic desire of the fourth-century pilgrims for the 'locus ipsissimus' (the very spot). Our concern here, however, is to focus on one small but important part within this whole process whereby the traditional sites became established. How concerned were Eusebius and Cyril to discern the authentic sites? They may unwittingly have been the recipients of traditions which were already false, but were they historically reliable in their own part of the process? An analysis of their references to all the Gospel sites is offered elsewhere<sup>4</sup> but in this present paper two important examples must suffice to illustrate our thesis: that Eusebius, by instinct

---

Constantine and the implacable enemy of Athanasius. For overviews of his life and thought, see eg. T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA 1981) and D.S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Eusebius of Caesarea* (London, 1960).

<sup>3</sup>See esp., F. L. Cross, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (London 1951) xv, n. 2.

<sup>4</sup>HPHC chs. 5-9.

and reputation a historian,<sup>5</sup> was far more concerned with historical authenticity than was Cyril.

#### a. Mt Tabor

Mt Tabor is a splendid hemispherical hill rising up very suddenly from the plains of the Jezreel valley, ten miles or so to the south-west of Lake Galilee, a hill which Cyril in his Catechetical Lectures (AD 348) stated in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way to be the scene of the Transfiguration.<sup>6</sup> The Gospels do not specify the location of the Transfiguration thus leaving subsequent Christians with a choice of places to select for this event. Yet each of the synoptic writers locates it chronologically as occurring six or eight days after Peter's confession of Christ 'in the region of Caesarea Philippi',<sup>7</sup> a town many miles to the north-east of the lake, at the north end of what today is known as the Golan Heights, close to the foot of Mt Hermon. This fact alone might cause us—just as (I will suggest) it caused Eusebius—to be somewhat sceptical about the identification of the Transfiguration with Mt Tabor, a hill on the geometrically opposite side of the lake. Yet for Cyril this was now an established identification, giving rise to a tradition which continues to this day.

Eusebius, however, never makes this neat identification. Indeed, although he refers to Mt Tabor on many occasions and likewise is speaking frequently of the event of the Transfiguration (perhaps his favourite Gospel event) he never links the two together—except, that is, in one very tentative and peculiar remark made in the final few years of his life, when he refers to both Tabor and Hermon as possible contenders for the scene of the Transfiguration. This remark appears in his commentary on Ps. 89.12—"Tabor and Hermon

---

<sup>5</sup>Hence his earliest work includes not only the Ecclesiastical History but also the Chronicle in which he sought to integrate non-biblical history into the chronology of the Bible. Criticisms have indeed been made, not without justification, of Eusebius' reliability as a historian (see e.g. R. M. Grant, 'The case against Eusebius or "Did the Father of Church History write History?"', *Studia Patristica* 12 (1971) 413–21), yet a more positive conclusion is more fair. See e.g. H. A. Drake, 'Eusebius on the True Cross', *JEH* 36 (1985) 5.

<sup>6</sup>*Catech.* 12.16. For extended discussion of Mt Tabor in Cyril and Eusebius, see *HPHC* 145–55.

<sup>7</sup>Mt. 17.1, Mk. 9.2, Lk. 9.28.

joyously praise thy name'—when he suggests that a Christian exegete might perhaps (οἱμαί γε) see this as referring to Christ's 'marvellous transfigurations' (παράδοξους μεταμορφώσεις) on these two mountains.<sup>8</sup>

It is indeed a confusing comment, hardly designed to help his readers (or ourselves) to identify the one mountain of the one Transfiguration recounted by the Synoptics. Murphy O'Connor, Wilkinson and Abel would all agree with Kopp who concluded that Eusebius clearly had 'no idea which of these two mountains was the scene of the Transfiguration'.<sup>9</sup> Evidently Eusebius was aware of the two different opinions held by Christians (in this respect his words are indeed evidence to the fact that a tentative link had already been made in Christian tradition between the Transfiguration and Mt Tabor), but he himself was committed to a stance of scholarly ambivalence, probably with a preference for Mount Hermon. This marks a stark contrast with Cyril's straightforward identification just fifteen years later of Mt Tabor as the scene of the Transfiguration. What does this teach us about the respective reliability of Eusebius and Cyril within this whole process of identifying Gospel sites?

### (i) Eusebius' Ambivalence

Eusebius' refusal to commit himself to the growing Tabor-tradition was seemingly dependent on three factors: his close reading of the New Testament, his unique knowledge of local history, and his historical and theological capacity to live with uncertainty.

First, with his close reading of the New Testament, Eusebius would have favoured a location somewhere on the Hermon massif near Caesarea Philippi: elsewhere Eusebius comments on Jesus' apparent preference for going to these hills to the east of the lake to escape from the crowds for prayer.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he had also come to the conclusion that when the

<sup>8</sup>*Comm. in Ps.* [LXX 88.13], PG xxiii 1092d. It is probable that Eusebius wrote this towards the very end of his life since it is whilst commenting on the previous psalm [LXX 87.7] that he makes passing reference to the almost completed buildings over the Holy Sepulchre (1064a–b).

<sup>9</sup>K. Kopp, *The Holy Places of the Gospels* (ET Freiburg 1963) 246.

<sup>10</sup>*Dem. Ev.* 3.6.6; *Quaestiones ad Stephanum* 14 (PG xxii 928c).

Evangelists referred, as on this occasion, to 'the mountain' (τὸ ὄρος), they were not necessarily thinking of a free-standing, singular mountain, but rather referring quite loosely to a 'mountainous area'.<sup>11</sup> On this understanding just about anywhere on the Golan Heights or in the foothills of Mt Hermon itself would have been suitable. There was no need for a tidy mountain like Mt Tabor, especially when it lay 60 miles away from Caesarea Philippi on the opposite side of the lake!

Secondly, Eusebius' unique knowledge of local history meant that he was quite familiar with those passages in Josephus' writings where Josephus records that he himself fortified Mt Tabor against the Romans and where he implies that there was a village on the top of the mountain in the first century.<sup>12</sup> Was this really, Eusebius may have asked, the place which Jesus chose in order to make this very private disclosure?

Thirdly, as a theologian Eusebius used the Transfiguration precisely as an event which beckoned the believer to be less concerned with the physical realm and to concentrate instead on the glory of the eternal Logos revealed on this unique occasion. A celebrated example of this tendency in Eusebius of using the Transfiguration to offset any interest in merely physical matters is his Letter to Constantia in which he rebuked the emperor's sister for wanting an icon of Christ when she should have been concentrating instead on the eternal Christ revealed at the time of the Transfiguration.<sup>13</sup> As a result, when confronted with the issue of the location of the Transfiguration, Eusebius would have had prior theological reasons for choosing instead to focus on the meaning of the event and for not being too concerned about its precise location.

Eusebius was thus a careful historian, who was content without final certainty, and a theologian who could argue that such certainty was in any case unnecessary.

<sup>11</sup>See his own usage in e.g. *Onom.* 74.11–15.

<sup>12</sup>Josephus, *BJ* 2.20.6, 4.1.8; *Vita* 37; see K. Kopp, *op. cit.* 244.

<sup>13</sup>*Ep. Const.* (PG xx 1545b–c). The authenticity of this letter was disputed by C. Murray, 'Art and the Early Church', *JTS* n.s. 28 (1977) 303–45, but her arguments were well countered by S. Gero, 'The True Image of Christ: Eusebius' 'Letter to Constantia' Reconsidered', *JTS* n.s. 32 (1981) 460–70.

**(ii) Cyril's certainty**

Cyril's concerns were different. Since there was a growing tradition suggesting the possibility of Mt Tabor as the scene of the Transfiguration and since this suited Cyril's other needs and criteria, he had good reason for endorsing this immediately. What were some of those criteria which influenced Cyril's thinking?

Cyril was catering for a growing tide of pilgrims, and pilgrims need first and foremost a place that seems appropriate. If for a moment we discard the unfortunately strict canons of historical enquiry, then there could surely be no more appropriate place to remember the Transfiguration than Mt Tabor—a beautiful, singular mountain, possessed (as people have thought throughout history) with something of a numinous quality and full of aesthetic beauty.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, pilgrims need practical convenience. Only the die-hard enthusiast would travel all the way to Mt Hermon; Mt Tabor, by contrast, is conveniently en route to Galilee and close to Nazareth. Finally, pilgrims need certainty. Unlike Eusebius Cyril no longer lived in an age when there was the luxury of scholarly indecision. The new influx of pilgrims needed to be satisfied; hence Cyril needed a definite decision, a precise identification.

Seen in this light, the contrasting attitudes of Eusebius and Cyril on the question of Mt Tabor make perfect sense. Cyril was a pilgrim-pastor and was therefore bound to be influenced by criteria other than strict historical accuracy, criteria such as the practical, the convenient, the appropriate, and the need for precision. Eusebius, by contrast, had both the opportunity and the innate qualities to be more of an academic, able to approach such questions with some of the detachment of a trained historian. In answer to the question concerning the reliability of our fourth-century sources, the evidence of Mt Tabor thus suggests that Eusebius is likely to have been far more reliable historically than Cyril.

---

<sup>14</sup>E.g. J. Murphy O'Connor, *The Holy Land* (revised ed., Oxford 1988) 301.

### b. the 'true cross'

#### (i) Its early discovery

A second example, designed to show Eusebius' greater reliability when compared with Cyril, concerns the exciting discovery of what was claimed to be the wood of Jesus' cross made during the excavations around Christ's tomb in the years after 325.

We are right to be reasonably sceptical about the authenticity of this infamous relic, a scepticism which would have been shared by Eusebius. We would not be right, however, to follow the scholarly consensus of until a few years ago, which tended to suggest that this bit of wood was 'invented' or discovered some time well after the building of the Holy Sepulchre and after Eusebius' death.<sup>15</sup> The evidence is now being seen to point quite convincingly to the idea that some wood was indeed discovered during those first excavations on the site after 325 and that this was soon, if not immediately, claimed to be none other than the wood of Christ's cross.

That those early years of excavating would have been the most likely time for such an occurrence seems reasonable enough. Yet for earlier scholars this was all thrown into question because of one perplexing fact: Eusebius, our chief contemporary witness, never mentions this discovery. How could such an important person, the Metropolitan Bishop of Palestine, keep quiet about so important an event?

Now, however, H. A. Drake has done much to overthrow this argument, showing convincingly that Eusebius could well have known about this relic but kept quiet about it for reasons of his own.<sup>16</sup> For example, Eusebius also never mentions the rock of Golgotha in his description of the Holy Sepulchre in the *Life of Constantine*.<sup>17</sup> This is an almost incredible omission, and one which certainly cannot be claimed to be due to Eusebius' ignorance. On this matter at least, Eusebius clearly had some

---

<sup>15</sup>E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1982) 38 summarises well the scholarly opposition to an early date for this relic.

<sup>16</sup>H. A. Drake, 'Eusebius on the True Cross', *JEH* 36 (1985) 263–7.

<sup>17</sup>*V. Const.* 3.25–40.

personal reasons for keeping silence. Could not then the same be true of this alleged relic of the cross?

Moreover, a phrase in Constantine's letter to Macarius, necessarily included by Eusebius in his account in *The Life*, may actually be a hidden reference to this discovery of the cross: Constantine refers to the discovery of 'the sign of his passion' (τὸ γνῶρισμα τοῦ πάθους), a reference which previously, because of Eusebius' carefully provided context, has been presumed to be a reference to the tomb of the Resurrection. Yet, taken at their face value, these words sound more like a reference to something relating closely to Jesus' death: could this be Constantine's way of referring to the wood of the cross?

Finally, and in confirmation of Drake's argument, a detailed comparison of the speech<sup>18</sup> (*On Christ's Sepulchre*) which Eusebius delivered at the Dedication of the Holy Sepulchre in September 335 with his earlier work, the *Theophany*, which he used as a source, reveals that he excised no less than four references to the 'cross'.<sup>19</sup> Could not the reason for this be the discovery of this wood of the cross, a discovery of which Eusebius strongly disapproved?<sup>20</sup>

## (ii) Eusebius' silence

If this is the case, then at least three reasons can immediately be suggested as to why Eusebius pursued this policy of sustained silence. First, ecclesiastically he may justifiably have been concerned with the behaviour of the Jerusalem Church and how it might use the discovery of this relic—as indeed it did very soon—to boost its own ecclesiastical status and power to the detriment of his own see of Caesarea, the traditional metropolitan bishopric of the province.

Secondly and more nobly, he may have been concerned theologically with any over-emphasis of Christ's death to the exclusion of the Resurrection and also with any development of a relic-cult: Eusebius' spirituality, as will be seen below, was

<sup>18</sup>This is the new title which is given by H.A. Drake to the second half (chapters 11-18) of *De Laudibus Constantini* which he now convincingly argues to be instead Eusebius' speech at the Dedication festival: see his *In Praise of Constantine* (Berkeley 1976) 35-45 and *HPHC* 408.

<sup>19</sup>In *Theoph.* 3.42, 61.

<sup>20</sup>See *HPHC* 125-30.



one which emphasized by contrast the spiritual nature of Christian worship which results from Christ's Resurrection and exaltation.

Thirdly, however, and of particular interest for our present purposes, Eusebius may have had some understandable qualms about this 'invention' as a historian. He himself in his account in *The Life* emphasized the great vicissitudes which the area around the tomb had suffered since the days of Christ, especially in the days of Hadrian when the temple of Venus had been built over the site. It was precisely for this reason that Eusebius was so amazed that the tomb had been preserved intact 'beyond their hopes'.<sup>21</sup> But was it really likely that the wood of Jesus' cross would similarly have survived such upheavals? The chances of this object being left on the site were not high and then there was plenty of room for confusion: for, as Eusebius himself notes, the Hadrianic builders had brought in much 'stone and timber' to provide the fill for the temple of Venus.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, even if by some miracle it had survived, how in the light of all this could it ever be confidently identified?

Such questions would automatically have been raised by the historically-minded Eusebius, revealing once again his qualms about over-hasty identifications, however attractive they might appear. Eusebius was evidently concerned about historical authenticity. Not so with Cyril: such an attractive and potent relic was eagerly accepted. He boasted of its having already been distributed 'all over the world' and cited it as one of the most important contemporary witnesses to the truth of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Thus, if we wish to ask which of these two bishops was the more reliable historically, again the verdict comes down decisively in favour of Eusebius.

### (iii) Eusebius' reliability

If correct, this insight into the comparative reliability of Eusebius and Cyril can help us in assessing their comments on other Gospel sites, such as Cana, Tabgha, the church on Mount

---

<sup>21</sup>*V. Const.* 3.28.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.* 3.26.

<sup>23</sup>*Catech.* 4.10, 10.19, 13.4, 13.39; *Ep. Const.* 3.

Sion, the cave on the Mount of Olives and the cave and manger shown to pilgrims at Bethlehem.<sup>24</sup> Most importantly, it means that we should be open to consider positively Eusebius' identification of the tomb uncovered in those excavations as being truly that of Christ. Of course he may have been mistaken. The true tomb may have been either outside the area excavated or destroyed by Hadrian's builders. But in the light of the above discussion, we may say with some confidence that he would not have become so convinced of its genuineness if the tomb they discovered had not conformed to the descriptions in the pages of the Gospels. More generally, earlier in his career he would not have accepted the tradition concerning the tomb lying under the temple of Venus (as he clearly did: hence his comment in the *Onomasticon*) unless there were some good reasons for this.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Garden Tomb serves a useful modern function as an appropriate place in busy Jerusalem for thinking about the Resurrection (just as Mt Tabor does for the Transfiguration), the evidence of the fourth century speaks loudly in favour of the Holy Sepulchre.<sup>26</sup> Protestant critics of the Holy Sepulchre at the end of the last century may have been tempted to see all fourth-century Christians as naively credulous and over-inventive, but the above analysis suggests that such charges cannot be sustained against at least one of them, namely Eusebius.<sup>27</sup> Of course, the traditions which were

---

<sup>24</sup>See respectively *HPHC* 143–5, 148, 282 ff., 199 ff., 174 ff.

<sup>25</sup>Writing in the 290's he describes Golgotha simply as being 'to the north of Mt Sion' (*Onom.* 74 19–21). This suggests a known location but one that was currently inaccessible.

<sup>26</sup>The debate over the authenticity of the tomb has been long and often heated; see *HPHC* 245 ff. The consensus of scholars now affirm the authenticity of the general 'locale' and many would go further, accepting this tomb as indeed the tomb of Christ: see e.g. C. Couasnon, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem* (London 1974) 8–11; J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster 1977) 174; E.D. Hunt, *op. cit.* 2–3; H.A. Drake, 'Eusebius on the True Cross' 4. W.S. McBirnie, *The Search for the Authentic Tomb of Jesus* (California 1975) argues strongly the case for the 'Garden Tomb'.

<sup>27</sup>This is not to say that Eusebius was without his own biases; he loved to highlight the cases of fulfilled prophecy, see *HPHC* 155–61, and to make places such as his 'Triad of caves' fit an overneat theological schema, see *HPHC* 184ff. He was also slightly negative towards both the Jerusalem

already prevalent at that time may have been unknowably false; yet, when archaeologists pose the question of authenticity concerning these sites, even if they are rightly cautious concerning the testimony of Cyril, they would evidently do well to pay close attention to that of Eusebius.

## II. Theological evaluations

But what was for them the religious significance of these places? How did they view them theologically? In what sense did they think of them as 'holy places'?

### a. Modern approaches

Obviously this is a question which we must also ask today of ourselves: how do we view these places theologically? In response Christians with a commitment to scriptural teaching will inevitably move in their thinking to the New Testament to see if they can find there any principles or helpful texts which can begin to answer this question. Are there any suggestions as to how Christians in the New Testament viewed these places associated with the incarnate life of Christ?

An obvious passage with which to commence this quest for scriptural principles is John 4.21–24, in which Jesus teaches the Samaritan woman that worship will henceforth be a spiritual affair, not located in particular places such as Jerusalem and Mt Gerizim, but rather a matter of worshipping in 'spirit and in truth'. Christian worship, one might conclude, is to be universal in scope, not tied to particular places, and spiritual in its manner, not over-concerned with physical entities. Similarly it is interesting to note how two chapters earlier in John's Gospel Jesus identifies his body as the true Temple: 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'.... He spoke of the temple of his body' (John 2.19–21). John is evidently suggesting that the chief 'holy place' of the Old Testament was effectively now redundant, being replaced by the person of the incarnate Christ. Thus we could conclude that John in his opening five chapters was demonstrating that 'holy

places' had been 'christified', that concern with place was now subsumed with devotion to a person, Jesus Christ, who embodied all that 'holy places' previously signified.<sup>28</sup> Christ was now the only meeting-place between God and mankind, a thought paralleled in the theology of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Continuing in John's Gospel, we might note that, according to John, this new 'holy place', Jesus Christ, has for our purposes been re-placed by the Spirit. The historical Jesus was tied to one time and place, but the Spirit is universal and ever-available to those who believe in Christ: Jesus could say that it was to the disciples' advantage that he went away, for otherwise the Spirit would not come.<sup>29</sup> Through the Spirit therefore the believer has direct and unmediated access to Christ. Believers do not need other 'holy places', or momentos of where Christ had once walked in Palestine, to enable them to come closer to Christ: that is the joyful work of the Spirit, who, as Calvin once said, was given to us 'to supply the defects of [Christ's] absence'.<sup>30</sup>

The initial response of those committed to New Testament principles might therefore be to assert that the places where Jesus walked in Palestine are strictly irrelevant theologically and spiritually. Historically they indeed have value for us (as for the Gospel writers themselves) in endorsing the historical framework of the Gospel events, but the Gospel writers never attributed any theological importance to these physical places; any 'holy place' thinking (especially in connection with the Temple) was fulfilled and outmoded with the coming of Christ, and the Holy Spirit has now been given to enable Christians throughout the world an unmediated access to God through his Son, not dependent on physical location or objects.

Such a position could be developed in more detail, and would have much to commend it, embodying as it does some of the essential New Testament convictions concerning Christian worship. However, it now needs to be noted that this has clearly not been the position of the Church throughout much of

---

<sup>28</sup>W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley, 1974) 366-8.

<sup>29</sup>Jn. 16.7.

<sup>30</sup>J. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.26.

its history. Indeed, whenever people have thought about the Gospel sites, there has been a strong temptation to go beyond such New Testament principles and to begin to introduce a more sacramental approach to these places, appealing in particular to the doctrine of the Incarnation for theological support.

Within this alternative system, these unique places do have a distinctive theological function and status, deriving from their involvement in the Incarnation. The Incarnation teaches that God took up physical matter and used it to accomplish his redemptive purpose. Can not this incarnational principle then be extended to suggest that the same God might use these physical places, which alone survive from the era of the Incarnation, similarly to accomplish his purpose in the lives of men and women? Then again, if the Incarnation is the theological model which undergirds a Christian doctrine of the Eucharist, where God again uses physical matter within his spiritual purposes, cannot the same apply to these physical places? Can they not be a sacramental vehicle for God's gracious encounter with his faithful people? If so, these places are surely to be termed 'holy' and to be deemed as continuing to have a special theological status and role in God's sight.

Such ideas may sound strange to those schooled in more Protestant ways of thought, but they do have a logic of their own, even if it is hard sometimes to pin this down more precisely. They are moving in the realm of sacramental mystery and touching on those strong but hard-to-define feelings of association—'This is where Christ died' and therefore, surely, 'this is indeed a holy place'.

What we have uncovered in this cursory glance are in fact two quite different approaches to these Gospel sites. On the one side there is the view that such places are theologically irrelevant; they are mere Gospel sites. On the other, there is the view that such places have an important sacramental function; they are truly 'holy places'. Advocates of the former would like to claim that they are staying close to the understanding of the New Testament; it is a view which would appeal most readily to those who have reacted against the excesses of the Crusades. Advocates of the second, more sacramental view, would probably dispute this Protestant reading of the New Testament, believing that sacramentalism

is integral at least to John's Gospel and in any case asserting that the Incarnation is surely the central New Testament doctrine, the corollaries of which may then legitimately be developed beyond those which were expressly developed by New Testament writers.

There has naturally been a host of other viewpoints in which a balance has been sought between these two poles. Yet where, we may ask, are Eusebius and Cyril to be placed on this spectrum of possible approaches to Gospel sites? By the end of the fourth century it seems clear that a strong sacramental approach, a 'high' doctrine of 'holy places', had become the norm,<sup>31</sup> but was this true of Cyril and Eusebius back in the first half of the fourth century?

Once again there emerges a marked difference between these two bishops, a difference which again has largely been overlooked. Just as some Protestants of a previous generation treated Eusebius and Cyril as being equally unreliable in matters historical, so more catholic-minded scholars have been inclined to see Eusebius and Cyril as speaking unanimously concerning the religious significance of these places. Cyril has been correctly noted to express a high, sacramental approach to these 'holy places', but it has been falsely assumed that the same must therefore have been true of Eusebius. A truer picture, however, reveals by contrast important differences between these two theologians.

#### b. Cyril and 'holy places'

This contrast between Eusebius and Cyril will best be seen if we first look briefly at Cyril's approach to 'holy places', again as revealed in his Catechetical Lectures.<sup>32</sup> For

---

<sup>31</sup>One thinks of the diary of Egeria's pilgrimage in 384, see J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (revised ed. Jerusalem 1981), and of Jerome's dramatic and emotional account of Paula's pilgrimage around the holy sites, Jerome, *Ep.* 108.7–14. There is also the rise of the cult of relics in this period, a parallel phenomenon to the 'holy places': if 'holy places' were for those who could travel, then relics were for those who had to stay at home. The question remains: was this an intrusion of pagan notions into the Church, or was it a legitimate outworking of the sacramental significance of the Incarnation?

<sup>32</sup>The contrast would be even more apparent if we were to include in our presentation of Cyril's thought the evidence of the five Mystagogic Lectures commonly attributed to him. Although their Cyrilline authorship has recently

Cyril the places of Christ were not simply places that had enjoyed a temporary contact with Jesus, or which believers associated historically with the events of the New Testament; rather, they had gained an inherent quality of holiness through that divine association at the time of the Incarnation. Throughout his lectures Cyril described them as 'holy' places,<sup>33</sup> sometimes even as 'all-holy' (παναγίος) or 'blessed' (μακάριος).<sup>34</sup> Thus they possessed something more than a merely significant past. For those with faith they had a certain spiritual potency or even sacramental significance, as places which God might use to convey a special sense of his presence. Furthermore they were inanimate but nevertheless real 'witnesses', which confirmed the truth of the Gospel.<sup>35</sup> As places which sometimes revealed Christ's power<sup>36</sup> and 'all but showed Christ to the eyes of the faithful',<sup>37</sup> they also had the power to 'shame', to 'reprove', and to 'confute' any who were tempted to disbelieve the message of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

However, these 'holy places' did not just confirm facts and inspire faith. They themselves were an appropriate medium for faith, places where the divine had touched the human and the physical, places where through the physical means of touch, of sight, and liturgical action human beings could now in return come close to the divine. As Thomas had once had the unique opportunity to touch the Risen Christ, so pilgrims now had a unique opportunity to 'see and touch' the physical places and objects that had once themselves been in contact with Christ. In this way Christians in Jerusalem could experience a privileged proximity to Christ that was not shared by others. 'Others merely hear', said Cyril to his cate-

---

been well defended by E. J. Yarnold, 'The authorship of the Mystagogic Catarches attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem', *Heythrop Journal* 19 (1978) 143–61, previous writers had made a strong case for their dating to some time after Cyril's death: see e.g. F. L. Cross, *op. cit.*, xx–xxi.

<sup>33</sup>*Catech.* 5.10, 10.19, 13.38–9.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.* 1.1, 13.22, 4.10, 10.19.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.* 10.19, 13.38–9, 14.22–3.

<sup>36</sup>For example, Caiaphas' ruined house or the 'rent rocks' of Golgotha, *ibid.* 13.38.

<sup>37</sup>As the Mount of Olives, *ibid.* 14.23.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.* 4.10, 12.32, 13.4, 13.38.

chumens, 'but we see and touch'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed 'it was for our sake that [Thomas] touched so carefully; for what you, who were not present, would have sought, he who was present did seek'.<sup>40</sup>

Sadly, as Cyril here admits, Christ himself was no longer physically present; but fortunately for Cyril's catechumens and for all pilgrims those places in which Christ had once been *did* survive. The boundaries of time which separated the first century from the fourth, could here begin to collapse. Speaking of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost Cyril hinted that this great event of the past might still be a cause of special blessing for Christians in Jerusalem: 'for we speak not of the blessings of others, but of those amongst us (παρ' ἡμῶν)'.<sup>41</sup> Thus because of the many 'holy places' in Jerusalem and because of God's gracious activity there in the past, those with faith might expect in Cyril's own day to receive a blessing from God. These were places where God had come near; these were places in which his special presence might be found. These Gospel sites were in a true sense 'holy'.

Such an overview may be sufficient to illustrate the strong emphasis that Cyril was placing on 'holy places'. Obviously he was influenced in this by the fact that he was soon to be (if not already) the bishop of Jerusalem; anything which he could do to promote the uniqueness of Jerusalem was bound to have useful results in the ecclesiastical realm.

### c. Eusebius and 'holy places'

But what about Eusebius? Is it not true that on a couple of occasions in the *Life of Constantine*, when describing the discovery of the tomb of Christ, Eusebius also uses the adjective 'holy' to describe this place? Is that not a sign, as scholars have tended to assume, that Eusebius too gave a special sacramental significance to this unique Gospel site?

It is indeed true that he does refer to Christ's tomb as a 'most holy cave' and as 'sacred',<sup>42</sup> but it does not follow that he meant by this once-off use of the word 'holy' everything that

---

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.* 13.22.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.* 13.29.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.* 17.13.

<sup>42</sup>*V. Const.* 3.25, 28.



Cyril would come to mean by it.<sup>43</sup> For this usage in *The Life* needs first to be seen against the background of his overall theology (in this light it will be seen to be exceptional rather than normative) and then secondly within its precise context in *The Life*.

The three aspects of Eusebius' overall theology which provide us with this necessary background and which suggest that Eusebius' approach to these sites was less sacramental than Cyril's are as follows.<sup>44</sup>

First, as seen above, Eusebius was primarily a historian. This historical approach to the Gospel sites can be seen in all his works, but especially in his early gazetteer of biblical place-names, the *Onomasticon*. This early work shows his sense of privilege at living in the very land of the Bible; yet what it does not show is any pilgrim-instinct, any special devotion to the places of the Gospels. In his entry on Bethlehem, he omits to make any reference to the birth of Christ at all!<sup>45</sup> His focus is instead very much on the Old Testament, using his own historical and local interests to further his readers' understanding of the biblical text. As Groh has shown, he was not writing as a 'proto-pilgrim'.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, Eusebius was an apologist who throughout his life was continually seeking to demonstrate that Christianity was an essentially spiritual religion. This too would lead to a comparative downplay of theological interest in the Gospel sites. In contrast to both paganism and Judaism, Christianity was not at all interested in physical places. Taking up various New Testament verses such as that passage in John 4.21–24, Eusebius urged that Christianity was essentially a spiritual religion, not tied to particular places but universal in scope, not interested in physical objects but spiritual in focus.<sup>47</sup> Eusebius thus in his apologetics had come

---

<sup>43</sup>See the detailed discussion in *HPHC* 41–50.

<sup>44</sup>These three aspects are examined in detail in *HPHC* ch. 3.

<sup>45</sup>*Onom.* 42.10–14.

<sup>46</sup>D. E. Groh, 'The Onomastikon of Eusebius and the Rise of Christian Palestine', *Studia Patristica* 18 (1985) 29.

<sup>47</sup>One of Eusebius' most fascinating arguments was to suggest that with the coming of Christ there had been made possible a return to the worship 'in spirit

to define the very essence of Christianity as being spiritual and unconcerned with physical places. The fact that he did so when he was a Christian historian resident in Palestine only makes this commitment to the spiritual thrust of the New Testament all the more impressive.

Thirdly, Eusebius was a theologian who did not give a central place to the theology of the Incarnation. This is not to say that on this score he was unorthodox.<sup>48</sup> The point here is simply that the Incarnation, whilst not denied, did not have that central position within his theological system that it would have for Cyril and for many other fourth-century theologians, such as Athanasius. As a result, some scholars have noted how Eusebius was seemingly unable to integrate the Incarnation properly into his theology.<sup>49</sup>

The relevance of this for our present purposes is that with this comparative disinterest in the Incarnation, Eusebius would have had neither the theological equipment nor the spiritual desire to develop a new focus on the 'holy places' of the Incarnation. The whole purpose of the Incarnation for Eusebius was not to endorse a sacramental approach to the physical but rather to lift fallen mankind from earthly concerns to a contemplation of the pure, heavenly Logos.<sup>50</sup>

For our purposes it is highly significant that this spiritual approach to the faith and to the Incarnation is precisely the theme which Eusebius chose to expound in the sermon which he delivered at the Dedication of the Holy Sepulchre in September 335 (*On Christ's Sepulchre*).<sup>51</sup> It was a unique occasion; yet, contrary to the wishes of those scholars who portray Eusebius as sharing Cyril's sacramentalist approach, Eusebius never refers in this important speech to the

and truth' formerly practised by the Hebrew patriarchs before the more legalistic dispensation introduced by Moses: see eg. *Dem. Ev.* 1.6.42, 64.

<sup>48</sup>Eusebius' well-documented Arian sympathies are strictly a different concern from that currently under discussion.

<sup>49</sup>Eusebius had 'little interest in the Incarnation and none whatsoever in Redemption' and thus he 'robbed Bethlehem and Calvary of their primacy': see T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church*, (Cambridge 1970) 295, and G. H. Williams, 'Christology and Church-State Relations in the Fourth Century', *Church History* 20 (1951) 17.

<sup>50</sup>HPHC 92.

<sup>51</sup>See above n. 18.

tomb of Christ, let alone referring to it as a 'holy place'; instead he emphasises the Resurrection and how this endorses the essentially spiritual nature of the Christian religion.

Having noted these aspects of Eusebius' thinking we are not then surprised that, despite his frequent references after 325 to Gospel sites, he never refers to them as 'holy places' except on this one occasion in the *Life of Constantine*; and we begin to sense that his use of the term 'holy' in that work may actually be for different reasons and mean something rather different.

There are several reasons why Eusebius may have been led into this uncharacteristic expression about the tomb as a 'holy place'.<sup>52</sup> First, as was only natural, he may have been influenced by the unique surprise of that great event—the discovery of none other than the tomb of Christ. However, Eusebius may also have ceded a little to a 'holy place theology' for a more fascinating reason, namely out of deference to the Emperor Constantine; for in his letters, quoted by Eusebius in this very section, Constantine betrays a very developed commitment to the idea of a 'holy place'. If this was the case and it was something of which Eusebius by and large disapproved, then Eusebius may actually have used the idea of a 'holy place' deliberately in order to set this notion within a context more acceptable to himself: in this way the thinking of the (now deceased) emperor could be presented in a manner more in keeping with Eusebius' own opinions. Whether or not this is the case, Wilkinson's comment on this passage in *The Life* remains convincing:

Eusebius. . . was not himself a pilgrim. To him [holy places] are holy first and foremost because they are visible witnesses to the truth of the biblical narrative. The revealing of the monument is wonderful, but rather because it witnesses to the faith than because it stimulates devotion.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup>Again, see HPHC 41–50.

<sup>53</sup>J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* 19f.

As a theologian and as a historian the notion of a 'holy place' would inevitably mean something quite different to Eusebius than it would for later pilgrims.

Eusebius' attitude towards the 'holy places of the Incarnation' was thus quite different from that of Cyril and indeed from that which would become the theological norm by the end of the fourth century. In terms of the spectrum outlined above Cyril is clearly at the sacramentalist pole, but Eusebius would seem by contrast to be close to the opposite end, the 'spiritualizing' pole or perhaps the 'historical' pole. Cyril saw the places as essentially 'holy' and of great spiritual significance. Eusebius, however, even if on one occasion he referred to them as 'holy', was committed to a theology which sought to emphasize that physical places were theologically and spiritually irrelevant.

As has been seen, there is some evidence for a slight shift in Eusebius' position in the exciting years after 325, and no doubt he might have gone much further in that direction if he had been in Cyril's shoes catering for the pilgrims in Jerusalem. Yet the very weight of his lifetime's theology would inevitably have held him back from a wholesale enthusiasm and commitment to 'holy places'. He would never lose either his historical approach nor his emphasis on the spiritual nature of Christianity. Eusebius' views concerning 'holy places' thus need to be considered separately from Cyril's and need to be seen to be quite distinct.

### III. Conclusion

For this author, while Cyril's approach is not without its appeal, that of Eusebius both as a historian and as a theologian has much to commend it. The attempt has been made, on the one hand, to rescue the latter from the accusations of being unhistorical and unreliable, whilst, on the other, to show that he was far from being responsible for the rapid development of the cult of 'holy places' (which in many ways led to some quite unfortunate results both then and since) and that he had sound theological reasons for his more detached and 'spiritual' approach. Though both bishops lived not far apart in time and place, their approaches were in fact quite different.