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## Christ, Paradise, Trees, and the Cross in the Byzantine Art of Italy

### Abstract

Many religions metaphorically view trees, due to their vertical orientation, as existentially significant *axes mundi*, or life-sustaining 'centers of the world' that connect the heavenly and earthly realms. Christianity is no different in its approach to trees in Eden or paradise, and also to the cross of Jesus Christ. In fact, paradise, trees, and the cross have been artistically represented in the Byzantine art of various Italian churches and other monuments, but nowhere has the concept of *axis mundi*, the 'centre of the world,' as articulated by the renowned historian of religions Mircea Eliade, been consistently applied to



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an analysis of Byzantine art. This article addresses this lacuna by analyzing monuments and churches in Ravenna, Classe, and Torcello - Italian towns that were under Byzantine control and influence until the eighth century AD - that contain some of the best examples of representations of Christ, paradise, trees, and the cross as *axes mundi*, but only insofar as they support the depiction of Christ as the true *axis mundi*. It is, therefore, an interdisciplinary piece, insofar as it integrates Byzantine history, concepts from the history of religions interpreted from a Christian point of view, and theological analysis of Byzantine art based on scriptural, apocryphal, and patristic sources.

### Keywords

tree, cross, paradise, *axis mundi*, *imago mundi*

## 1 Introduction

In the religious perception of human beings in ancient and medieval times, both natural and manufactured objects could be metaphorically considered as mediums for the disclosure of the sacred, what Mircea Eliade termed the “hierophany.”<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of the term ‘hierophany,’ I do not imply the structuralism inherent in Eliade’s approach, which suggests the manifestation of the same sacrality in all religious experiences. However, in treating various objects, including trees and crosses, as *axes mundi* or centres of the world, I use Eliade’s definition of this concept and so, for consistency, at least at the beginning of this paper, I refer to other terms used by him, such as ‘hierophany.’ Below I will use the term ‘theophany,’ meaning ‘manifestation of God,’ which gives a specifically Christian nuance to manifestations of the sacred. Also, my repeated use of the term *axis mundi* is given a Christian nuance throughout.

former included trees and the latter included images of trees and other natural objects in the art and architecture of cities. It is a truism that, in ancient religions, trees (and items fashioned from them), gardens, and flowers, could be associated with manifestations of a sacredness that was homologous with the natural world that was often considered eternal.<sup>2</sup> Trees, which are part of the natural world, could be viewed symbolically as eternal and as dispensing eternal life. However, since in the ancient world nature was neither considered unilaterally sacred nor eternal, it must be determined from the outset what specific conditions accounted for the evident sacredness of some trees and the profane nature of others.

This article presupposes that it is the hierophany itself that accounted for the distinction between sacred and profane trees since this manifestation took place in the former and not in the latter. Moreover, human beings were prompted to inhabit and cosmicise the space around these hierophanies because sacredness could only be experienced in close proximity to the place where it was revealed.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, this cosmicisation often involved the representation or re-creation of the object that revealed the sacred via human means, in a way that was not circumscribed by the place where the hierophany had initially occurred. For example, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, made from a tree and considered as manifesting the sacred, could be represented in any given church and venerated as

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<sup>2</sup> Generally, in paganism the natural world—identified with the cosmos—was considered eternal. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask, new introduction by Jonathan Z. Smith (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 87. See also Katharina Volk, "'Heavenly Steps': Manilius 4.119-121 and its Background,' in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Reflections*, ed. Ra'anan S. Boustán and Anette Yoshiko Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1987), pp. 20-22.

such, without the need to be close to Golgotha - the actual site of the crucifixion - or to procure a relic from the true cross. In any case, since, in the ancient world, the sacred was associated with the realm of supernatural beings, God or the gods, then the hierophany involved the manifestation of the whole cosmic order fashioned by God or the gods. This included, generally speaking, the celestial or heavenly, terrestrial or earthly, and infernal or subterranean realms, making certain hierophanic objects - natural and manufactured- meeting points for the three cosmic tiers, and, thus, *axes mundi* or centers of the world. This was the case especially with trees, which, because of their vertical orientation, were considered as connecting “the earth to the heavens above and the underworld below.”<sup>4</sup> This perception of the orientation of an object such as a tree as intersecting the cosmic tiers - irrespective of how many tiers are represented<sup>5</sup> - has persisted well into modernity.<sup>6</sup> Of course, while all ancient and medieval religions share the above mentioned behavioral characteristics, what is distinct for Christianity is that the sacred is revealed by our Lord Jesus Christ, who discloses the truth concerning the reality of God as tree persons. For this reason, from this point onwards the word ‘theophany’ will be used instead of ‘hierophany’ as more appropriately consistent with the revelation of the Trinitarian God in the Old and New Testaments.

Returning to trees as objects through which the holiness was manifested, in almost all of the cases where the spiritual significance of trees as *axes mundi* can be observed, they appear as such within a context that is likewise spiritual. This context can generally be referred to as ‘paradise,’ from the Greek *parádeisos*, “which derives from the Median *paridaiza*, ‘enclosure,’

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<sup>4</sup> Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. xv.

<sup>5</sup> Often, only heaven and earth were considered as being intersected.

<sup>6</sup> This includes, for example, the persistent representation of the Glastonbury Thorn as an *axis mundi*. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree*, p. xi.

*pari* being ‘around’ and *daiza* ‘wall.’”<sup>7</sup> This is the term that the translators of the Septuagint used for the garden of Eden as it appears in the book of Genesis chapters 2-3, which in Hebrew was simply called *Gan Eden*, ‘gan’ meaning ‘garden.’<sup>8</sup> The *Mishnah* describes paradise as *pardes*, meaning “orchard” in Hebrew,<sup>9</sup> with the flexibility of descriptions suggesting that these terms indicate an experience just as much as they do an actual topos, given that, from a literal point of view, Eden is described in conflicting ways in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament)<sup>10</sup> and Edenic imagery is applied to various temporal and supra-mundane locations in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>11</sup> Thus, unless indicated otherwise, in this article, ‘paradise’ refers to an existential state or experience of the grace of God or Christ, and not necessarily a literal garden named ‘Eden.’ The same, it will be seen, can be said for the following objects: trees, which as *axes mundi*, represent the

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<sup>7</sup> Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> This is the English transliteration of the Hebrew. D. I. Kyrtatas, Παράδεισος, trans. Deborah Whitehouse, in *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, ed. A. F. Christidis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1137.

<sup>9</sup> Shulamit Laderman, *Images of Cosmology in Jewish and Byzantine Art: God's Blueprint of Creation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Eden is presented as a mountain in Ezekiel 28 and a garden in Genesis 2-3. For more information, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, ‘Enoch, Eden, and the Beginnings of Jewish Cosmography,’ in *The Cosmography of Paradise: The Other World from Ancient Mesopotamia to Medieval Europe*, ed. Alessandro Scafi (London: The Warburg Institute, 2016), pp. 67-94, esp. P. 72.

<sup>11</sup> In Ezekiel 43:1, Edenic imagery is applied in relation to the eschatologically restored temple in Jerusalem, which, facing east (Ez 43:1)—the symbolic location of Eden (Genesis 2:8)—became the source for flowing waters (Ez 47:1-20), just like the river flowing from Eden mentioned in Gen 2:10. In the New Testament book of Revelation, the “new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (21:1-2) is described as having Edenic qualities, such as the tree of life that appears within the city (Rev 22:2).

existential experience of the intersection between heaven and earth (and need not be literal trees but merely images); the cross, when spoken of as a symbol and not the actual relic upon which Christ was crucified;<sup>12</sup> and the city of the new Jerusalem, which can alternately be described as paradise, heaven, and God's kingdom.

Mosaics depicting trees and natural forms can be found across the former Byzantine world, especially in contemporary Turkey (particularly in Istanbul, formerly Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire) and Italy. These mosaics include representations of paradise usually taken to be the Garden of Eden mixed with imagery from the book of Revelation; trees, including the tree of life mentioned in Genesis; and the cross of Christ, which was, of course, made from a tree but not exclusively depicted in its wooden form. All of these images -paradisal gardens, trees, and the cross - were employed in relation to various representations of Jesus Christ. While many of these mosaics in Turkey have been destroyed,<sup>13</sup> they can still be easily found across Italy.

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<sup>12</sup> The relic of the true cross was ostensibly discovered by St Helen, the mother of Constantine the Great, in the early fourth century. The ancient Byzantine historian, Socrates Scholasticus, gives one of the earliest accounts of this discovery, which was elaborated upon in medieval literature. See *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* 1.17 trans A. C. Zenos, in Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories, NPNF (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 21-22. For later elaborations, see 'The Coming of the Holy Cross' and the 'Story of the Discovery of the Honourable and Life-giving Cross,' in *Constantine and Christendom: The Oration to the Saints, the Greek and Latin Accounts of the Discovery of the Cross, The Edict of Constantine to Pope Sylvester*, trans. Mark Edwards (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), pp. 63-80 and pp. 81-91 (respectively).

<sup>13</sup> The few images that do survive in Istanbul - in the church of the Holy Saviour in Chora, for instance - are not enough to prove the widespread nature of such images, which do appear frequently in the Byzan-

This article argues that the representations of paradise (including the relevant arboreal imagery such as vines, acanthi, and so on), trees, and the cross of Christ in the Byzantine art of some select churches and monuments in Italy, including the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and the church of San Vitale - both in Ravenna - the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Classe, and the church of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, indicate the paradisaical experience. This is because, in the Byzantine mosaics of these churches, paradise is usually depicted as a garden filled with trees and including the cross.

While trees in the paradisaical landscapes represented in these churches, as well as the cross, constitute *axes mundi* since they intersect the various regions of the cosmos, these images are used only insofar as they help to support the representation of Jesus Christ as the true, and only existentially significant, *axis mundi*, as the eternal saviour who intersects heaven and earth. But before addressing these, it is necessary to point out that despite the loss of Byzantine administrative control in northern Italy from the eighth century onwards, these regions continued to be influenced by Byzantine aesthetics and style, so that the mosaics contained within them - while ranging in provenance from the sixth to twelfth centuries - can nevertheless all be considered Byzantine.

Moreover, I must first outline a Christian approach to trees as *axes mundi*, which can be discerned in the Old and New Testament scriptures, the Apocrypha, and patristic literature. After contextualizing the Christian conception of the tree, and afterward, the cross, as *axes mundi*, it is possible to assess the symbolic significance of the appearance of these motifs in the Byzantine churches of Italy.

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tine art of Italy. This is why I chose to address the latter exclusively in this article.

## 2 Trees as Axes Mundi in Judaism and Christianity

In the second chapter of the book of Genesis, Eden, described as a paradisaal garden,<sup>14</sup> is planted “in the east” (2:8) by God as an abode for Adam and Eve. Adam, whose name means “human,”<sup>15</sup> can be interpreted as the first literal human being, the first to experience the spiritual state,<sup>16</sup> or as representative of “the whole of humanity.”<sup>17</sup> Eve, as the “mother of all humanity,” can also be seen as representative of the whole.<sup>18</sup> God walks in Eden, meaning that the garden - if we are to take it as a literal topos - can be considered an *axis mundi* intersecting heaven (represented by its closer proximity to God) and earth (represented by the garden). Despite this, what is significant is what Eden represents. It is a profound illustration of the existential state of being near to God, to whom Adam and Eve had direct access.

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<sup>14</sup> Paradisaal gardens, such as the Mesopotamian Dilmun and the Greek isle of the Hesperides, are a recurring theme in ancient mythology. For the former, see Samuel Noah Kramer (trans.), ‘Sumerian Myths and Epic Tales,’ in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) pp. 37-38. For the latter, see Apollodorus, *The Library* 2.5.11, trans. James George Frazer (London: William Heinemann, 1921), pp. 219-33.

<sup>15</sup> Adam in Hebrew is the transliteration of the word for “human.” It was translated as the proper name “Adam” in the Septuagint. Susan Brayford, *Genesis* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> This is the case in some authors in the patristic tradition—such as saints Athanasius the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory Palamas, and Silouan the Athonite—who appraise Adam “as the first exemplar in a saintly series and not as an exceptional character.” Doru Costache, ‘Adam’s Holiness in the Alexandrine and Athonite Traditions,’ in *Alexandrian Legacy: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Doru Costache, Philip Kariatlis, and Mario Baghos (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 322-68, esp. p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Shearing and Valarie H. Zeigler, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 398.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 171.



Eden was marked by two trees in the center of the garden, “the tree of life (...) in the midst of the garden” along with “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9). The latter is later also described as being “in the middle of the garden” (Gen 3:3) when Eve recounts to the serpent God’s warning that to eat from the tree of knowledge would mean certain death. Biblical exegetes have surmised that these trees symbolize ‘immortality’ in the case of the tree of life, and ‘wisdom’ in the case of the tree of knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

The ordinance given by God for Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree (Gen 2:17) has been described as a metaphor for knowledge or experience for which they were not ready.<sup>20</sup> The tree of life, since it can be read as intersecting heaven and earth in its vertical axis, can be described as transferring ‘immortality’ from the former to the latter. Since Genesis describes the consequences of Adam’s and Eve’s eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge as “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked” (Gen 3:7), some scholars have focused on this ‘realisation’ as an outcome of sexual intercourse.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, one possible interpretation of the fruit of the tree is as a metaphor for sex, and the argument for this is particularly strong given that, before eating from the tree, “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25).

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<sup>19</sup> Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2-3*, p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> See the interpretation of St Gregory the Theologian who sees the tree of knowledge as a metaphor for spiritual contemplation: “For the tree is contemplation, according to my own contemplation, which is only safe for those of mature disposition to undertake; but it is not good for those still simpler and those greedy in their desire.” St Gregory the Theologian, *Oration 38: On the Nativity of Christ* 12, in: *Festal Orations: St Gregory of Nazianzus*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), p. 164.

Moreover, one of the consequences for Eve's partaking of the tree is to experience pain in childbirth (Gen 3:16).

As mentioned, before partaking of the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve were close to God and, moreover, were called to till and keep the earth; in other words, they were called to work together with God for the cultivation of paradise. The tilling and keeping of the garden can represent either the world at large or, from a mystical point of view, the inner lives of Adam and Eve (for the passage can be read in various ways).<sup>22</sup> Irrespective of which reading one takes, after partaking of the tree of knowledge, Adam's role in 'tilling' and 'keeping' the earth is made difficult, and he, along with Eve, will eventually die (Gen 3:17-19). The latter is symbolized when God exiles them from the garden of Eden, specifically from the *axis mundi* - the tree of life - which was blocked by cherubim "and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way" (Gen 3:24). Since Adam and Eve can be seen as symbolizing all of humanity, then all human beings can be considered either as suffering the consequences of their punishment<sup>23</sup> or as 'Adams' and 'Eves' who easily fall into the same trap as the 'original' couple. The Christian approach to this exile from Eden is relevant, insofar as it denotes that all human beings can be considered as having been cut off from the tree of life, at least, as we shall see below, until Christ's coming.

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<sup>22</sup> St Gregory the Theologian provides a mystical interpretation of 'tilling' related to Adam's inner life: "The human being was a cultivator of immortal plants [i.e. tiller of Eden], that is perhaps divine thoughts, both the simpler and the more complete." St Gregory the Theologian, *Oration 38: On the Nativity of Christ* 12 (Harrison, 69).

<sup>23</sup> This is not original sin which stipulates that all human beings since Adam and Eve have inherited their "guilt and moral stain passed on down through the human race by means of generative concupiscence." This Augustinian position is not accepted by the Orthodox Church which believes that humanity merely "inherited Adam's *punishment* of corruptibility" (emphasis added). John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 218, 262.

It is important to note that the story of the garden of Eden is part of what is known as the J source in the book of Genesis, thought to have been authored during the Davidic monarchy in the eleventh century BC. The first temple in Jerusalem had been planned by David, and it was his son, Solomon, who was responsible for its construction. This temple was constructed in such a way as to symbolize Eden. For example, the monumental pillars Jachin and Boaz stationed at the temple's entrance have been interpreted as the tree of life and the tree of knowledge in Eden because both columns "were topped with capitals bearing floral and arboreal arrangements,"<sup>24</sup> as well as the other related paradisaical symbolism in the temple that was meant to recall Eden.<sup>25</sup> What is important to note here is that the temple reflects an attempt to recreate the circumstances where God dwelt with people before Adam and Eve's fall. It is, therefore, an *imago mundi*, an image of the world, as well as an *axis mundi* since God was considered as dwelling in the temple.

For the Jews, it was David's kingdom, more than any other, that was considered as perennially established by God with its center at the temple in Jerusalem. In 2 Samuel, God informs David through the prophet Nathan that "his kingdom shall be made

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<sup>24</sup> Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, 'YHWH's Exalted House – Aspects of Design and Symbolism of Solomon's Temple,' in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day, pp. 63-110 (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 81, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 73: Solomon's temple contained three elements that call Eden to mind. The first of these is the "molten sea" (1 Kings 7:23) or "round water container" in the forecourt of the temple, made of bronze and which can be understood as the source of the four waters flowing from Eden. The second regards the *debir* or nave of the temple, "which was covered with wood, and the walls carved with fruits, vegetables, and flowers (...) whilst cherubim guard the inner sanctuary of the temple," as they guarded Eden. Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p. 56: And the third is the presence of the monumental pillars Jachin and Boaz stationed at its entrance, meant to symbolise the tree of life and the tree of knowledge addressed above.

sure forever” and that his “throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16).

However, this was not to be: subsequent conquests of the city, including the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586/7 BC, resulted in a re-interpretation of the promises made by God to David regarding the eternal rule of his dynasty. Thus, ever since the Babylonian exile, the Jews expected an eschatological messiah who would re-inaugurate the Davidic line and re-establish the kingdom of Israel, namely from the vantage point of the temple (for example, Ez 40).

Our Lord Jesus Christ was often labeled as this Davidic Messiah (Matthew 1:1, Luke 18:38), although he rejected this title (Mt 22:41-46), opting instead to be described as “Son of Man” in order to recall the figure in the Old Testament book of Daniel—“one like a Son of Man”—who is presented before the Ancient of Days, interpreted by Christians as God the Father, and who is given by his Father “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (Dan 7:13-14). In other words, Christ reframes the promises made by God to Israel to include the whole world. There would, therefore, be no re-establishment of the Davidic monarchy from the vantage point of the temple in Jerusalem with its paradisaal imagery. Christ is presented in the synoptic Gospels as prophesying the destruction of the temple (Mt 24, Mark 13, Lk 21), which occurred when the Romans besieged Jerusalem in AD 70.

Notwithstanding the many references to Christ as the Son of Man and the Son of God,<sup>26</sup> the Gospel writers used many *axis*

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<sup>26</sup> A. J. B. Higgins, *The Son of Man in the Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 3: although the appellation Son of God obviously denotes Christ’s connection with God the Father, the pre-existence, and hence divinity, of Christ is also implied when he is called ‘Son of Man’ insofar as there existed “in pre-Christian apocalyptic Judaism a concept of the eschatological Son of man, a transcendent and pre-existent being whose primary function in the End-time would be that of a judge, delivering the righteous and punishing the wicked.”

*mundi* motifs in order to describe the connection between heaven and earth inaugurated by him. This includes tree or arboreal imagery, which was re-signified in relation to Christ. For instance, in John 15:1-8, Christ compares himself to a vine and his disciples to its branches,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit (...) Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing (Jn 15:1-2, 4-5).

Vines, like trees, are *axes mundi* that - since they can be vertical - connect heaven and earth. This means that Christ, in comparing himself to a vine, transfers the *axis mundi* symbolism of the vine to himself. Here, Christ construes himself as the personal or existential *axis mundi* of his disciples, apart from whom they can accomplish nothing.

In the books of Jeremiah 2:21 and Hosea 10:1, Israel is compared to a vine, and, in Isaiah 5:1-7, 27:2-6, to a vineyard,<sup>27</sup> leading Frederick Dale Bruner to assert that in John 15:1 "Jesus is (...) claiming to be the authentic *Israel*, in person."<sup>28</sup>

In fact, the transference of *axis mundi* symbolism from Israel to Christ reflected here is also described elsewhere in the Gospels,

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This is important to note because, in the ensuing descriptions of Christ as an *axis mundi*, the impression may be given that he intersects heaven and earth because of his origin in the former. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, is beyond both heaven and earth, yet intersects them as their creator and via his incarnation, ministry, ascension into heaven, and his second coming.

<sup>27</sup> As well as in Ezekiel 15:1-6, 17:1-10, and 19:10, where the descriptions of Israel as a vine are related to its judgment.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 878.

where, in alluding to the temple of Jerusalem while referring to his own body, Jesus says: “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again” (Jn 2:19). Moreover, in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33-46, Mk 12:1-12, Lk 20:9-19), Christ contrasts the vineyard symbolizing Israel to the “chief cornerstone” associated with the temple in Jerusalem which, in this parable, indicates—not the temple—but the murdered son of the landowner who planted the vineyard, that is, Christ (the landowner is God the Father).

Christ is thus the “chief cornerstone,” the one whom the builders rejected, taking precedence to the temple of Jerusalem. Related to this, Christ, as we have seen, is depicted as prophesying the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Christ’s crucifixion is even portrayed as signifying this event when, upon his death, the curtain of the temple is torn in two (Mk 15:28, Mt 27:51, and Lk 23:45), rupturing the old center of the world. Since we have seen that the temple was a recapitulation of Eden which intersected heaven and earth, what could the transference of *axis mundi* motifs to Christ signify other than the fact that he is the new *axis mundi*, the new Eden, and the new locus of the theophany since he is God in the flesh?

This latter sentiment is profoundly reflected in the book of Revelation which ends with a description of a new/heavenly and “holy city Jerusalem” (21:10) at the end of the world, the discourse concerning which is known in Christian theology as ‘eschatology,’ from the Greek word τὰ ἔσχατα meaning ‘the last things.’ Using the number twelve and multiplications thereof to signify God’s people, the author described the high wall of the city as measuring 144 cubits, along with its twelve gates that have twelve foundations upon which are “the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev 21:14), that is, Jesus Christ, who is often described as the Lamb of God.

In light of this imagery, this city can only be interpreted as a metaphor for the Church. The translation of the *axis mundi* symbolism of the terrestrial temple to Christ is here finally completed insofar as there is “no temple in the city” (Rev

21:22). Instead, “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22), from whose throne flows “the water of life (...) through the middle of the street of the city” (Rev 22:1). This harkens back to a prophecy in Ezekiel concerning the eschatologically-restored temple that is the source of the four rivers that flowed from the central river in the garden of Eden in Genesis 2:10-14. Here, however, it is God and the Lamb who are the source of these waters (Jn 4:14), flanked by “the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2).

The author of Revelation has here not only used the motif of the tree of life as an *axis mundi*, but has employed it as a hermeneutical device for interpreting the symbolism of the tree’s appearance in Eden which has, along with the Edenic waters, been transferred to the new or heavenly Jerusalem at the centre of which is Christ the Lamb.

Ezekiel 47:12 mentions trees on either side of the paradisaal rivers flowing from the temple which, being everlasting, will “bear fruit every month (...) their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” While Grant R. Osborne,<sup>29</sup> George Eldon Ladd,<sup>30</sup> and J. Massyngberde Ford<sup>31</sup> highlight the literary sources of the tree in the new Jerusalem - including Ezekiel 47:12 and 1 Enoch 25:4-5- they all miss that this tree, which we saw in Genesis was an *axis mundi*, has precisely twelve kinds of fruit, with the number twelve symbolising God’s people or the Church. In other words, the tree can be seen as a metaphor precisely for the participation of the people of God in this tree, whose shade ‘heals the nations.’ Since Revelation speaks about

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<sup>29</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 771-72.

<sup>30</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), p. 287.

<sup>31</sup> J. Massyngberde Ford, *The Anchor Bible: Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 345-46.

both the experience of the Church at the end times and its current experience,<sup>32</sup> then this process of healing would be considered by Christians as ongoing, with its source in God and the Lamb at the center of the new Jerusalem, which is the Church of Christ.

It is God, or Jesus Christ,<sup>33</sup> therefore, who provides access for “those who wash their robes” - the saints - to “the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates” (Rev 22:14). Moreover, it is this tree of life, associated with Christ that is depicted in the Byzantine churches of Italy. However, before addressing the tree and its relationship with Christ in these churches, further discussion of the significance of the cross is needed.

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<sup>32</sup> There are several instances in Revelation that demonstrate that the text speaks about both the current and future experience of the Church. The fall of Satan, described dramatically at the end of the book (Rev 20:7-10), is also placed within the context of Christ’s ascension (Rev 12:1-9), with the author implying that the “first casting down of Satan (...) transpires as a result” of the Christ event. Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 170. Also, the use of Johannine terminology in chapter 21:3, namely, in relation to the “tent of God” having been made “among mortals” (Ἰδοὺ ἡ σκηνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων) who has made “his tent with them” (καὶ σκηνώσει μετ’ αὐτῶν) resonates with the prologue to the Gospel of St John 1:14 which describes the incarnation of Christ as follows: “And the Word became flesh and made his tent among us” (Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν). These aspects, along with the fact that Christ has already defeated the devil, sin and death—and has inaugurated the paradisaal life for believers in his Church—point to the broader Christian belief that whilst Christ has inaugurated the kingdom of God in his person (an inauguration realised in the saints and the Church), it will not be unilaterally distributed until the eschaton, the last things. This is known in scholarship as the already/not yet tension, or, realised eschatology (already) and future eschatology (not yet), respectively.

<sup>33</sup> Considered here to be God, specifically God the Son or the Word (Logos) of God (see Rev 19:13).



### 3 The Cross as an Axis Mundi

The Gospel accounts do not describe the cross at length, other than mentioning that it was carried by Simon of Cyrene (Mt 27:32, Mk 15:21, Lk 23:26), was adorned with a placard (the *titulus crucis*) that described Jesus as “King of the Jews” (Mt 27:27, Mk 15:25, Lk 23:38, Jn 19:19), and that the crucifixion took place on Golgotha, just outside the walls of Jerusalem (Mk 15:22, Mt 27:33, Lk 23:33, Jn 19:17).

The cross itself would not become an object of veneration until its discovery by St Helen, mother of Constantine the Great, on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the fourth century.<sup>34</sup> After that, it would be associated with miracles, healings, and even have a feast day (14 September) dedicated to it in the Orthodox Church. The cross as the main adornment of churches, therefore, dates from this period. In the interim, the apostle Paul acknowledged the “power” and significance of the “message of the cross” in 1 Corinthians: “it is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1:17-18). Here, St Paul was not referring to the power of the actual cross, but to what the cross symbolizes, namely, the death of Christ as the means through which God was made known and has saved “those who believe” (1 Cor 1:21). Thus, the saint exclaims, “we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:22-24).

Here, St Paul placed the emphasis squarely on Christ, through whom God manifested his power and wisdom in the crucifixion. The *Annales* historian, Georges Duby, pertinently summarised the significance that the cross would take in the centuries to come, pointing out its association with the tree: “As a cosmic sign, the intersection of space and time, or a tree of life, it stood for all of creation, and God had chosen it as the place on which

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<sup>34</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* 1.17 (Zenos, 21).

to suffer precisely because of its esoteric values.”<sup>35</sup> According to Meinrad Craighead, the early Church Fathers, upon whom Duby probably based the above assertion, “recognized the world tree” - which was a potent symbol in many ancient cultures - “as the specific symbol of the cross, the true tree of life.”<sup>36</sup> Thus we see that the second-century bishop, St Melito of Sardis, could refer to our Lord as “hanged on a tree” in relation to the crucifixion.<sup>37</sup> St Hippolytus of Rome spoke of the tree of the cross similarly: as a tree that is at the center of the world and encompasses the whole cosmos, binding all its regions together.<sup>38</sup> A similar perception can be found in St Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Great Catechism*, which describes the arms of the cross as reaching out to the four cardinal points of the universe (north, south, east and west) from a central axis.<sup>39</sup>

Returning to Hippolytus’ comments, he continued that it is through the cross that death has been annulled by the “Crucified One,” who opens heaven, destroys hell, and gives life to the universe.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, that Christ defeats death is clear from the very fact of his rising from the dead. However, in Christ’s destruction of hell, we have the development of a theme that is

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<sup>35</sup> Georges Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980-1420*, trans. Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Thompson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Meinrad Craighead, *The Sign of the Tree in Images and Words* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1979), p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> St Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha* 70, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, in *On Pascha: With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), p. 56.

<sup>38</sup> See the translation of St Hippolytus’ *De Pascha Homilia* 6 (PG 59, 743-5), in Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971), p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 32 [i.e. the Catechetical Oration], in *Gregory of Nyssa: Selected Works and Letters*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, NPNF (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 500.

<sup>40</sup> Hippolytus’ *De Pascha Homilia* 6 (PG 59, 743-5) (Rahner, 67-68).

depicted in the New Testament and elaborated upon in apocryphal literature.

For instance, the Gospel according to St Matthew describes Christ's death on Golgotha as being associated with the opening of the nearby tombs, so that "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (27:52). In other words, these saints experienced the resurrection upon Christ's death. That Christ has the power to raise the dead is clear in the story of his raising the young girl (Mt 9:18-26, Mk 5:35-43, Lk 8:40-56), the widow's son at Nain (Lk 11:7-17), and Lazarus (Jn 11:38-44). Indeed, the mysterious concurrence of Christ's death on the cross and his raising of the dead to life (Mt 27:52) was contemplated at length by the earliest Christians who tried to make sense of it in light of what would become known as the descent into Hades motif.

This motif appears in Acts 2:31, in which St Peter describes Christ as not having been abandoned to "the realm of the dead." Also, in 1 Peter 3:19, the Lord is described as having made "proclamation to the spirits in prison" and, in Ephesians 4:9, St Paul remarks that he descended into the "lower parts of the earth." This motif is perhaps best fleshed out in the apocryphal Gospels, such as the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which, though not accepted as canonical scripture, exerted a great influence in the tradition of the Church in both the East and the West. In this apocryphal text, Christ is depicted as descending into the depths of the underworld after his crucifixion. He enters Hades by shattering its gates and barricades. Once there, he binds the devil and raises Adam out of hell.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *The Gospel of Nicodemus, Acts of Pilate and Christ's Descent into Hell* (XXI)-IX(XXV), trans. Felix Scheidweiler, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1: *Gospels and Related Writings*, eds. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson (Louisville, KE: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 524-25. For examples from other apocryphal texts, see the section 'Apocryphal Literature,' in Hilarion Alfeyev's *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: the Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Creastwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), pp. 20-34.

The correlation between Adam and Christ is important for this assessment of Christian approaches toward trees. In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, Satan is mocked by Hades who claims that “all which you gained through the tree of knowledge you have lost through the tree of the cross.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the implication of Hades’ statement is that Satan, in the form of a serpent, used the tree of knowledge to deceive Adam, who lost participation in the paradisaal garden of Eden when he partook of the fruit given to him by Eve, the consequence of which was death (Gen 3:19).

Now, Christ - already described by St Paul as the “last Adam” (1 Cor 15:45)<sup>43</sup> - achieves what the first Adam could not by destroying death with his resurrection from the dead via the new tree, the tree of the cross. The cross is not here to be taken as an *axis mundi* on its own, but only on account of Christ who descends into hell to resurrect Adam whom he takes up to the gates of heaven, which could be considered equivalent to Eden if Eden is understood as an existential state.

Hence, in light of what we have seen in relation to the use of the tree metaphor in Revelation 22:2, 14, and the Adamic imagery utilised by St Paul and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the following picture emerges: the earliest Christians re-construed the paradise narrative in Genesis in light of their experience of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this construal, the following types-antitypes emerge: the old Adam, who failed in Eden, finds his fulfillment in the new, successful Adam—Jesus—who is victorious over death; the tree of knowledge in Eden is overcome by the tree of the cross, and the Edenic tree of life is, in Revelation, used as a positive image for the succor of God’s people in a paradise conditioned by Christ at its center surrounded by the tree of

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<sup>42</sup> *The Gospel of Nicodemus, Acts of Pilate and Christ’s Descent into Hell VII (XXIII)* (Scheidweiler, 525).

<sup>43</sup> Adam also means ‘man.’ Hence, when Christ calls himself ‘Son of Man’ in Hebrew, it would be *ben Adam*, meaning son of Adam and pointing, in this case, to humanity in general.

life. As such, God's people are once again given access to the tree after Adam had been barred from it. In other words, the paradisaal Eden is now read in the light of the new Jerusalem which, having no temple, is conditioned by Christ the *axis mundi*, with the Edenic imagery being retained in the form of the tree growing on either side of the river flowing through the city. This imagery of paradise, the tree of life, and the cross of Christ are symbolically depicted and arranged in the Byzantine art of the churches of Italy. Since not many 'arboreal' images survive from the Byzantine period in the former capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, it is essential to look for Byzantine-inspired images in other places influenced by the Byzantine aesthetic. This includes Italy, the northern parts of which were under the aegis of Byzantium until the eighth century.<sup>44</sup> Such images demonstrate that these motifs, articulated theologically in the Old and New Testament scriptures, the Apocrypha, and patristic tradition, were incorporated into churches inspired by the Byzantine aesthetic in order to create the impression that the ecclesial space is a recapitulation of the paradisaal state with Christ as its focal point.

#### 4 Ravenna

Ravenna had a chequered history in late antiquity. The imperial capital of Western Roman emperors since AD 400, it became the capital of the Ostrogoth invaders from 493-540, until the Byzantines - during the reign of the emperor Justinian - wrested control from them and established a Byzantine exarchate there that lasted until 751.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Much of the south of Italy, from Naples to Reggio, was re-conquered by the Byzantines in the ninth and tenth centuries only to be lost entirely in the eleventh.

<sup>45</sup> Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1.

Ravenna housed several churches and church-related structures that were later appropriated and redesigned by Justinian, including the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (daughter of emperor Theodosius I), the church of San Vitale, and the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, as well as a baptistery. Except for the mausoleum, which was built in the fifth century, all of these buildings date from the beginning-to-middle of the sixth century. The baptistery belonged to the Arians, a group that believed Christ to be subordinate to God the Father, and thus not eternal and divine, but a created being.<sup>46</sup>

Arianism was refuted at the council of Nicaea held in 325, which was the first ecumenical council. This council affirmed the Orthodox doctrine - consistent with the Church's experience from its beginnings - that Christ is of 'one essence' with God the Father and therefore divine and eternal,<sup>47</sup> but Arianism persisted in some areas of the Roman empire, including those populated by the Goths.<sup>48</sup>

Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king of Italy who reigned between 475-526, was an Arian, and he originally dedicated Sant' Apollinare Nuovo to Christ the Redeemer. It was rededicated by Justinian, who was Orthodox (and thus, an adherent of Nicaea), after he had conquered Ravenna, to St Martin of Tours - an opponent of Arianism - before undergoing a third dedication in the ninth century "when the bones of Saint Apollinaris, Ravenna's first bishop, were transferred from their original burial place in Classe, roughly three miles outside of Ravenna, to a crypt constructed especially for them beneath the church of Saint Martin."<sup>49</sup> Hence, the basilica was renamed Sant' Apollina-

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<sup>46</sup> Franz Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*, trans. John Bowden (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130-31.

<sup>49</sup> Joachim Poeschke, *Italian Mosaics, 300-1300*, trans. Russell Stockman (New York and London: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2010), p. 144.

re Nuovo, to distinguish it from Sant' Apollinare in Classe - the original burial place of St Apollinaris - to be addressed below.

In some of the Ravenna churches, such as Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, paradisaic imagery is limited to palm trees, flowers, and grass acting as backgrounds to - and interspersed among - representations of male and female martyrs in procession toward Christ and the Mother of God, respectively.<sup>50</sup> The same is the case with the Arian baptistery that depicts, on the underside of its dome, the apostles surrounding Christ with palm trees interspersed between each of the apostles.<sup>51</sup>

The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, and the church of San Vitale also clearly demonstrate arboreal imagery. The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is in a cruciform shape and, on the underside of the square turret at the center of the structure, depicts the starry firmament with a cross at its center.

The circular pattern of the dome and the concentric pattern of the stars surrounding the cross indicate that the dome is an image of the cosmos.<sup>52</sup> Since the symbol of the cross, as we have seen, intersects the four cardinal points, the cross' placement at the center of the dome of a cruciform building is significant. Both the cross and the circle are here being used concurrently to signify the cosmos and, in the case of the former, the salvation that is inaugurated by Christ in its behalf.

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<sup>50</sup> Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, pp. 141, 147, 149, 158-59. The three Magi offering gifts to the Virgin Mary are also depicted (pp. 169-70).

<sup>51</sup> Ittai Weinryb, 'A Tale of Two Baptistries: Royal and Ecclesiastical Patronage in Ravenna,' *Assaph* 7 (2002), pp. 41-58, esp. p. 41.

<sup>52</sup> Steven Runciman, *Byzantine Art and Civilization* (London: The Folio Society, 1975), p. 18.



Picture 1: The cross on the underside of the dome of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (photo by author).

The lunettes supporting the barrel vaults that constitute the undersides of the arms of the cross contain representations of various saints, including, prominently, St Lawrence, and also a mosaic of Christ as the Good Shepherd. Arboreal motifs adorn the barrel vaults and the lunettes of the eastern and western arms of the mausoleum. Especially, the vaults are infused with the spirals of acanthus plants - from which spring the four evangelists - recalling Christ's words that he is the true vine and his disciples the branches (Jn 15:1).

At the centre of both vaults, acting as the convergence points for the images of the four evangelists, are Christograms - from the *Chi-Rho* or first two letters of the name 'Christ' - as well as the Greek letters alpha (Α) and omega (Ω) that Christ uses to describe himself, in Revelation, as the beginning and the end of



all things (Rev 1:17, 21:6, 22:12). Thus, Christ is the focal point of the orientation of the saints and both the beginning and terminus of the cosmos represented by the cruciform shape of the building, as well as in the mosaic of the cross in its center. On the lunettes formed at the ends of these barrel vaults are further acanthi and deer drinking from small ponds, the latter constituting “symbols of devotion and baptism”<sup>53</sup> since they obediently “drink of the water of salvation.”<sup>54</sup>



Picture 2: Acanthi, deer, and the *Chi-Rho* in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (photo by author).

It is clear from this arboreal imagery - which is also present around the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd that is above the entrance to the mausoleum on the inside - that the building combines paradise and cross symbolism. The cruciform struc-

<sup>53</sup> Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, p. 78.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

ture testifies to this, as well as the depiction of the cross on the underside of the dome. This cosmic cross, which intersects the cardinal points in both the architectonic design and the dome-imagery of the mausoleum, is filled with paradisaal images. It thereby denotes Christ's inauguration, through the cross, of the paradisaal experience for the whole cosmos: this experience being represented by the trees, or in this case, plants (that is, the *acanthi*) of paradise that intersect heaven and earth, along with the cross, as *axes mundi*. All of these images represent Christ - via the cross - as the true vine and locus of this structure.

San Vitale was commissioned by the bishop Ecclesius during the Ostrogothic period in Italy. The church was named after an early Christian martyr - about whom little is known with certainty<sup>55</sup> - and was dedicated by Ecclesius' successor, Maximian, in 547, after the emperor Justinian had conquered Ravenna. Octagonal in shape, with a "domed octagonal core" surrounded by an ambulatory,<sup>56</sup> the church was the outcome of "the most up-to-date architectural ideas from Constantino-ple."<sup>57</sup> It is renowned for the quality of the mosaics in its sanctuary or altar area, which juts out on the eastern side of the church as a high vaulted apse, "polygonal on the exterior and circular on the interior," and moves beyond the building's octagonal frame."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, p. 224: Apart from the fact that St Vitalis is mentioned by St Ambrose as a "soldier of consular rank," who is "martyred in Ravenna after he gives encouragement to a doctor named Ursicinus when the latter is being tortured for his adherence to Christianity."

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.



Picture 3: The vaulted apse and sanctuary at the eastern end of San Vitale (photo by author).

Symbolically, the octagon is often used to refer to the 'eighth day' of God's eschatological kingdom that was reflected upon extensively in patristic writings. St Basil the Great, for example, referred to the 'eighth day' as beyond the seven-day week of recurrent time and as intersecting Sunday whereby it images

“the age to come,” i.e., God’s kingdom.<sup>59</sup> Octagonal churches can be found as early as Constantine’s church of the Nativity in Bethlehem that consisted of an eight-sided structure covering the cave of Christ’s birth and was connected to a basilica.<sup>60</sup> Two centuries later, Justinian’s church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus - which acted as the prototype for his famous Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) - also contained eighth-day symbolism in its dome, which is supported by eight columns that “form an octagon placed inside an irregular square.”<sup>61</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find such octagonal designs repeated in Ravenna, which was the principal Byzantine duchy in Italy until the Lombard King Aistulf conquered it in 751.<sup>62</sup>

The mosaics of San Vitale are rich in paradisal symbolism. Two “panels situated on either side of the altar,” directly beneath the eastern facing apse, “depict two processions, converging on the altar, led by the Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora”<sup>63</sup> who head toward Christ with the Eucharistic gifts, that is, the bread and wine that are turned into the body and blood of Christ during the divine liturgy, in their hands. Related to this, the lunettes that make up the vaults in the sanctuary are also covered with “Old Testament narrative scenes, to be

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<sup>59</sup> St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), p. 106.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine: Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 258. See the church’s design on *ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 203. This design was repeated in Holy Wisdom’s baptistery, which was also octagonal.

<sup>62</sup> Judith Herrin, *Margins and Metropolis: Authority Across the Byzantine Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 224.

<sup>63</sup> Felicity Harley McGowan, ‘Byzantine Art in Italy: Sixth Century Ravenna as a Matrix of Confluence?’ in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, pp. 144-47 (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), p. 145.

interpreted eucharistically.”<sup>64</sup> Of immediate interest to us are the mosaics in the apse itself and the vaulted dome that rises both in front of and above it.



Picture 4: The Lamb of God intersecting the cosmos surrounded by arboreal images on the dome's underside (photo by author).

The vaulted dome is divided into four sections, the apexes of which culminate in a circular depiction of the cosmos with the Lamb of God, a symbol that the book of Revelation associates with Jesus Christ (Rev 21:22), at its center. In John's Gospel, St John the Baptist described Christ as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). This is an allusion to Isaiah 53:7 which tells of the coming of God's intermediary agent who would restore Israel (i.e. God's people), the suffering servant who "was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 146.



sheep before its shearers was silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

In Revelation 13:8, the crucifixion is given a cosmic valence since Christ is described as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” or cosmos. This means that Christ’s sacrifice in behalf of the universe was prefigured at its very beginning. This explains the appearance of the Lamb of God in San Vitale at the center of a circle - a symbol for the cosmos - filled with stars. Also important is the description of Christ as replacing the temple in the New Jerusalem in Revelation, so that “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22), around whom is the tree of life we first saw mentioned in regards to the garden of Eden. If we are to connect Revelation 13:8 to Revelation 21:22, we discern a confluence of protology, the discourse concerning the creation of the world, and teleology or eschatology, the discourse concerning the end of the world or ‘last things’: the Lamb of God is slain from the foundation of the cosmos to inaugurate the paradisaal state metaphorically described as the New or Edenic Jerusalem, the center of which is Christ the Lamb and which will be fully inaugurated at the end of time. However, Christ, the common agent of both protology and eschatology as described here, has already come to earth, meaning that something of the Edenic Jerusalem is available in the here and now, namely in the Church through which Christians can have a foretaste of the paradisaal state.

We have seen that in the New Jerusalem - the Church - this paradisaal state is symbolized by the tree of life, which, having been ‘closed’ to Adam and Eve, is once again made available through Christ’s sacrifice. In Ravenna, the tree of life is expressed by “flower- and fruit-filled plant motifs”<sup>65</sup> circling the Lamb, like the tree of life in Revelation which surrounds God and the Lamb “with its twelve kinds of fruit (...) and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2). As described above,

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<sup>65</sup> Deborah Mausekopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, 248.

the number twelve can symbolize God's people. Moreover, acanthus, floral, and fruit images appear in the decorative bands that distinguish the four sections of the vault with the Lamb at its center. These arboreal images, that also appear in the spaces within these bands, are surrounded by four angels presumably, the four mentioned as standing at the four corners of the earth in Revelation 7:1 - who hold up the cosmos with the Lamb at its center. These motifs symbolize that within the Church generally, and this church building, in particular, the angelic and earthly worlds are intertwined as Christ makes available - through God's paradisal people represented by the trees/plants/fruits- the spiritual fruit necessary for the healing of the cosmos. A realized eschatology - already made clear by the octagonal shape of the building - is therefore manifested in the art and architecture of this church that does not, however, elide the anticipation of the future 'last things.' Rather, it signifies that God's promises in Christ are available in the here and now. As implied by the Eucharistic images throughout the sanctuary, the liturgical rites that took place in this building - culminating in the partaking of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist -were meant to bestow immediate participation in Christ upon the believer.



Picture 5: Christ seated atop the globe with paradisal imagery in the apse of San Vitale (photo by author).

Below the vaulted dome, the half-domed apse depicts a young, beardless Christ, haloed and wearing a purple *chlamys* (a Greek-style cloak), seated on top of a blue globe symbolizing the earth. In his left hand, he holds a scroll marked by seven seals that, in the book of Revelation (6:1-17, 8:1-5), are opened to inflict judgment upon the earth. In his right hand, he extends a crown of martyrdom to St Vitalis. Flanked by two angels and by bishop Ecclesius on his left, the globe upon which Christ is seated is resting upon a paradisaal garden full of flowers through which flow four rivers with their sources beneath Christ.

These rivers are meant to call to mind the four rivers flowing from Eden described in Genesis 2:10-14, as well as the river of life mentioned in connection with the New Jerusalem in Revelation 22:1. Here, once again, the garden of Eden and the eschatological New Jerusalem are conflated, protology and teleology intertwine. Just as the fruits nourish God's people and the nations in the vaulted dome, so too do the rivers of life flow from Christ, the master of the world, who in John's Gospel is described as offering the Samaritan woman the water of eternal life (Jn 4:13-15). Thus, when considered within the broader context of the sanctuary, with its representations of Christ the Lamb at the centre of the world surrounded by arboreal arrangements and the angels above it and the emperor and empress in procession with their retinues heading toward Christ, the image of Christ seated atop the globe is the nexus of the whole arrangement. Christ is, therefore, the true *axis mundi*, the center of the world and its master, and the Church, in San Vitale, deployed the *axis mundi* motif of the vine to support this point and to remind believers that, connected to Christ, they participate in the life of paradise, in the Edenic Jerusalem.

## 5    Classe

Sant'Apollinare in Classe was built upon the tomb of St Apollinaris, who was, according to tradition, the first bishop of Ra-



venna and was buried just outside the city, in Classe, in the first century AD. The sixth-century basilica comprises three main aisles, is columned, and culminates at its easternmost end in a triumphal arch and a large central apse that contains, and is surrounded by, mosaics depicting Christ, paradisaical trees, and the tree of the cross.

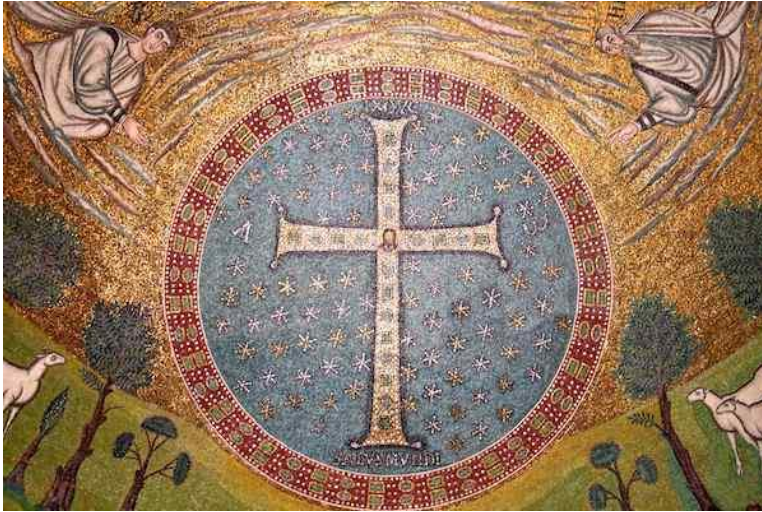


Picture 6: The apse and altar area of Sant' Apollinare in Classe (photo by author).

The arch surrounding the apse is marked by a jeweled medalion of a bearded *Christ Pantokrator* ('ruler of all') at its apex being supplicated by anthropo-zoomorphic representations of the four evangelists.<sup>66</sup> Below this, the arch of the apse has been utilized as a mountain, an *axis mundi*. Repeating a motif that we also find in San Vitale in Ravenna, the mountain has two cities on either side, Jerusalem on the left and Bethlehem on the right. Two processions of six sheep, twelve in all, exit both cities and converge upon the Pantokrator, the number twelve symbolizing

<sup>66</sup> Runciman, *Byzantine Art and Civilization*, p. 43.

either Christ's disciples or the people of God generally. Twelve sheep are also to be found at the base of the apse, six on either side of St Apollinaris, who is depicted in a paradisal field filled with trees, which can be interpreted as *axes mundi*.



Picture 7: The cross intersecting the cosmos (photo by author).

St Apollinaris extends his arms toward heaven (the *orans* position) in supplication to the image above him, which includes the face of Christ at the center of a cross that intersects the cosmos, the latter indicated by a large medallion circling the cross that is filled with stars. On either side of this medallion are the Old Testament prophets Elijah on the left and Moses on the right, both in states of supplication, with the hand of God giving the blessing directly above it. Elijah and Moses appeared at Christ's transfiguration, where he disclosed his divine glory, on Mount Tabor (Mt 17:1-8, Mk 9:2-8, Lk 9:28-36). St Matthew described this transfiguration as follows:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by them-

selves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him ... While [Peter] was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud, a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him, I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead"

(Mt 17:1-3, 5-9).

At face value, it is difficult to see how the image of Christ at the center of a cross intersecting the cosmos could represent the transfiguration. But that it does so is clear from the following: that Elijah and Moses are depicted on either side of the cross; that the hand of God, presumably that of the Father who acclaims his Son in the Gospel passage, appears above it; and, that there are three sheep directly below the cross who symbolize saints Peter, James, and John. The apse itself, in the shape of a mountain, can be interpreted as Mount Tabor. Admittedly, this is a curious depiction of the transfiguration, but that there is a connection between the transfiguration and the crucifixion is clear insofar as Christ informs his disciples not to disclose what had taken place on Tabor "until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (Mt 17:9). Hence, the transfiguration is preached after the crucifixion, which - because it ends in the resurrection - manifests the glory of Christ not just to the disciples, but to the whole universe.

In the church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe *axis mundi* motifs are also utilized in a way that supports the representation of Christ as the real center of the cosmos. In addition to being located at the apex of the arch, Christ is also at the center of the apse embedded into the arch, his face appearing in the center of a cross that symbolizes both his transfiguration and the fact that his

resurrection has cosmic ramifications. The latter is confirmed by the words that appear at the top and bottom of the cross. Directly above the cross' vertical axis is the Greek acronym ΙΧΘΥΣ (*ichthys*), which is based on the first letters of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour." That he is the savior of the cosmos is not just represented by the image of the cross intersecting the cosmos but by the words in Latin at the base of the cross, SALVS MVNDI, meaning "Saviour of the World." On either side of the transverse bar of the cross are the letters alpha and omega, the former on the left and the latter on the right. We have seen above that these letters are used by Christ in Revelation where he describes himself as "Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13). If we are to take the cross at the center of the apse, with the letters alpha and omega on either side of it - as well as the acclamations regarding Christ at the top and bottom and the image of Christ at its center - at face value, then this image not only intersects the cosmos depicted in the medallion, but is itself an image of the world. According to this image, Christ is the center and the circumference of all things. The other *axis mundi* motifs used in this apse mosaic, including the paradisaical trees that surround the cross and the image of St Apollinaris, all converge upon Christ, the true *axis mundi*.

## 6 Torcello

Torcello is one of the northernmost satellite islands of the Venetian lagoon, part of the region known as the Veneto, and predates the settlement of Venice as a commercial center. It grew out of the dispersal of refugees that took place in northern Italy in the sixth century during the invasion of the Lombards.<sup>67</sup> Tor-

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<sup>67</sup> Frederic C. Lane, *Venice, a Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 4.

cello even predates Venice as an important maritime center. Its emporium “fitted well into the Byzantine commercial system as a source of supplies and an outlet for Byzantine wares.”<sup>68</sup> The decline of Byzantine administrative control in northern Italy from the eighth century onwards - marked especially by the capture of the duchy of Ravenna - created the space for the ascendancy and independence of the Veneto.

Nevertheless, the Veneto - including Torcello - continued to be influenced by Byzantine aesthetics regarding art and architecture.<sup>69</sup> Nowhere is this better reflected than in relation to Torcello’s basilica, Santa Maria Assunta, dedicated by the Byzantine exarch of Ravenna during the reign of the emperor Heraclius in 639.<sup>70</sup> The church was rebuilt in 1088, and it is difficult to reconstruct the earlier building. However, the mosaic program of the extant rectangular structure, which culminates in an enormous eastern apse, can still be seen and admired. It houses an eleventh century mosaic of the Mother of God holding the Christ child, beneath which are representations of the twelve apostles and St Heliodorus of Altino, whose relics are housed within the church.<sup>71</sup>

Opposite the apse is a mosaic of the Last Judgment, dating from the eleventh century (but which underwent repairs in the twelfth century), that richly depicts in a series of bands the various interconnected activities of Christ in a way that recalls the New Testament crucifixion and apocalypse scenes, the apocryphal descent into Hades motif analysed above, the entry into paradise, the judgment and condemnation of sinners, and the exaltation of the saints.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas F. Madden, *Venice: A New History* (New York: Viking, 2013), p. 23.





Picture 8: The mosaic wall at the western end of the church of Santa Maria Assunta (photo by author).



Picture 9: The crucified Christ and the descent into Hades, with Christ raising Adam (photo by author).

In the top band, at the apex of the scene, is a depiction of the crucifixion with Christ being lamented over by the Virgin on his right and St John the Evangelist on his left. Beneath the cross is a skull, denoting not only the name of Golgotha - the hill upon which Christ was crucified - as the "Place of the Skull" (Mt 27:33, Mk 15:22, Jn 19:17) but also the skull of Adam. According to Mircea Eliade:

For Christians, Golgotha was situated at the center of the world, since it was the summit of the cosmic mountain and at the same time where Adam had been created and buried. Thus the blood of the Saviour falls upon Adam's skull, buried precisely at the foot of the Cross, and redeems him.<sup>72</sup>

According to this interpretation - which Eliade admitted is preserved only in "folklore"<sup>73</sup> - Golgotha, like Tabor, is an *axis mundi*, the place where Adam was created and interred and the locus from which Christ redeemed him. Thus, the *axis mundi* of the cross and the *axis mundi* of the mountain combine in this portrayal of the crucifixion. The application of this interpretation to this mosaic is confirmed by the second band, directly beneath the crucifixion scene, which is a depiction of what would become known in the West as the 'harrowing of hell,' the descent into Hades which we saw above was hinted at in the New Testament and in apocryphal texts.

In this mosaic, beneath the crucified Jesus is a depiction of him triumphantly holding the cross like a military banner or *labarum*, as he clutches Adam by the hand and ascends from Hades after having destroyed its doors and fetters that are depicted in a disordered pile, along with a defeated Satan, beneath his feet. Eve is next to the kneeling Adam, and both supplicate Christ -

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<sup>72</sup> M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 14.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem: "The belief that Golgotha is situated at the center of the world is preserved in the folklore of the Eastern Christians."

the new Adam - who will also raise Eve out of hell.<sup>74</sup> Christ here succeeds where the old Adam had failed. Hades' proclamation to Satan in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* that "all which you gained through the tree of knowledge you have lost through the tree of the cross"<sup>75</sup> is here represented by Christ who is holding his cross - made from a tree- while trampling Satan underfoot.

In restoring the old Adam along with Eve, Christ redeems all those who had died before his coming. The faithful departed are represented in this mosaic through some saints, such as David, Solomon, John the Baptist, and the three youths from the furnace episode in Daniel (3:23), as well as a host of undesigned figures to Christ's left. According to another apocryphal text that also describes the descent into Hades, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Christ restores this host of saints to Eden, here clearly seen as an image of the paradisaal state.<sup>76</sup>

At the apex of this mosaic, as well as in its second band, the *axis mundi* motif of the cross is used to support the representation of Christ as the agent of the resurrection of Adam and Eve and indeed all of humanity. Directly underneath the descent into Hades is the third band of the mosaic that features Christ at the second coming. He is depicted within a mandorla surrounded by saints who accompany him in his judgment of the earth. In the fourth band, angels 'wind up' the elements of the cosmos and, in the fifth band, a lake of fire that proceeds from the image of Christ in the mandorla above culminates in a judgment scene on the right, whereas on the left (Christ's right-hand side) various saints, including the Mother of God and the thief crucified with Christ (and holding his cross), are depicted in paradise.

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<sup>74</sup> This is not referred to in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* but is part of Orthodox Christian tradition.

<sup>75</sup> *The Gospel of Nicodemus, Acts of Pilate and Christ's Descent into Hell* VII (XXIII) (Scheidweiler, p. 525).

<sup>76</sup> *Testament of Dan 5*, trans. Hilarion Alfeyev in *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), p. 23.





Picture 10: The Mother of God and the thief in paradise (photo by author).

Paradise, as elsewhere, is here indicated with the use of trees, flowers, and other greenery. Interestingly, in this image a cherub is depicted on the door to paradise, perhaps covering the tree of life insofar as there are some branches above the door, giving the impression that there is a tree behind it. We have seen that, in Genesis 3:24, God blocked Eden with a cherub holding “a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.” Here, however, the saints have access to paradise and presumably to the tree of life, on account of the ministry and activity of Christ, both during his earthly sojourn and at his second coming.

## 7 Conclusion

In the Byzantine art of Italy addressed herein, we can discern the material outcomes of serious theological reflection on paradise, trees, and the cross as symbols that are connected to Christ. It is clear that Christ is connected to paradise since he is

the new Adam, the one who inaugurates the paradisaal state or experience - described as Eden - within the Church, the New Jerusalem. Other mosaics in the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, dating from the Norman period (twelfth century), even depict Christ as creating Adam and Eve within Eden. Thus, the Lamb slain "from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8) is the agent of creation, the one who inaugurated the paradisaal state in the beginning, who re-inaugurated it via his resurrection, and who will establish it permanently at his second coming. The conflation of protological and teleological imagery is apparent in San Vitale in Ravenna, where, in the vaulted dome, Christ the Lamb is depicted in the center of the cosmos, beneath which is an image of Christ enthroned upon the globe that utilizes motifs from both Genesis and the book of Revelation.

In any case, Christ's re-inauguration of the paradisaal state, depicted in the mosaics above through arboreal imagery, was accomplished via his crucifixion: the cross constituting an *axis mundi* that transfers Adam, who had perished through a tree, from Hades to heaven. In the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, as well as in Sant' Apollinare in Classe and Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, the cross is depicted in various ways. In the mausoleum and Sant' Apollinare, it intersects the cosmos as an *axis mundi*.

In Santa Maria Assunta, the cross is depicted as a triumphal symbol, the means through which Christ resurrects Adam and all of humanity. However, that the crosses, just like the paradisaal images (including trees) depicted in these mosaics are subordinate to representations of Christ is made clear from his precedence in all of these images. In San Vitale, he is seated upon the world as its master; in Sant' Apollinare, he appears at the center of the cross, with acclamations concerning him marking the outside of each of its four arms; and, in Santa Maria Assunta, he is the agent of resurrection and judgment, *par excellence*.

Christ is, therefore, the personal or existential axis of the cosmos, facilitating participation in the life of heaven. The use of

other *axis mundi* motifs, including the trees in paradise and the cross, merely reinforces this. A final image, from the church of San Clemente in Rome, makes this point abundantly clear. Although created in the twelfth century, at a time when Byzantine administrative control in Italy was over, the mosaic in the apse at the eastern end of this church is nonetheless influenced by Byzantine aesthetics. It depicts the crucifixion with the cross itself rooted in an acanthus.

The Virgin Mary and the beloved disciple, John, flank Christ on either side and the area around them is filled with spiralling vines that encompass various saints and animals, once again indicating paradise. God's people, who are nestled within the acanthi spirals, are represented by twelve doves that adorn the cross, which could indicate either the twelve apostles or the entirety of the people of God, the Church.

A serpent lays dormant at the bottom of the acanthus bush, beneath it and the cross, indicating Christ's defeat of the devil and depicting the latter using Genesis imagery, thus recalling the Garden of Eden.

The combination of the cross and paradisaal motifs in this mosaic is strikingly apt for our assessment. Once again, it is Christ who is the source of the vine, the true conqueror of evil, and the only one who nourishes God's people in the paradise of his Church.

Moreover, thus, we have determined and can conclude with the following: that the examples we have seen from the Byzantine art of Italy depict our Lord Jesus Christ as the focal point - the veritable *axis mundi* - of all things.



Picture 11: The mosaic in the apse of San Clemente (photo by author).