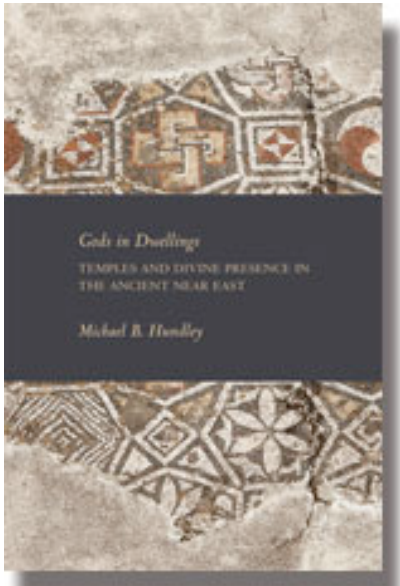


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**Michael B. Hundley**

***Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East***

Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 3

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This well-written book offers a magnificent survey of archaeological and textual evidence from the ancient Near East relating to temples, temple rituals, and divine statues. It is unique in combining a broad overview of this evidence with an exposition of the underlying theological concepts. It describes the different ideas regarding the possibility of the divine to be present on earth and the efforts that humans took to secure the divine presence.

Hundley analyzes data from four geographical regions: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Hittite Anatolia, and Syria-Palestine. He discusses the evidence from each region separately, with the aim of letting each system of thought and practice emerge in its own right. The data from a region are first described without filling gaps with evidence from other regions. For some regions, especially Syria-Palestine, the evidence with regard to certain aspects is quite scant, but even then Hundley finds data that shed some light on regional ideas about the possibility of divine presence in the human world.

Hundley's goal is to do justice to the variety of ideas enacted but also to find out to what degree there is unity in the diversity. At the end of the book he offers a synthesis and draws the conclusion that, despite many differences, there are common traits across the ancient Near East regarding the conceptions of divine presence. The general idea was that

the world of the divine and the earthly world of human mortals are far apart and can encounter each other only when strict conditions are met. The gods were conceived of as humanlike but were thought to exceed the humans in virtually all respects, having larger bodies and greater capacities. Also, most of them were assumed to adopt multiple forms, of humans and animals, but also natural and celestial forms. They were believed to control the elements in nature that were beyond human control. However, none of these gods had unlimited capacities; they were not autonomous but interdependent.

A biblical scholar, Hundley is well aware of the importance of his analyses to biblical studies. However, he consciously refrains from making comparisons to biblical evidence regarding temples, rituals, and the possibility of divine presence. He wants to avoid using the nonbiblical data as “comparative fodder” and prefers to first let them speak for themselves (373). There are a few references to the Hebrew Bible in the discussion of the Syro-Palestinian evidence, but the biblical data have only a marginal role.

The book consists of two parts. In part 1 (chs. 1–6), Hundley discusses the archaeological and textual evidence regarding “Temples in the Ancient Near East”; part 2 (chs. 7–12) describes the ideas about “Divine Presence in Ancient Near Eastern Temples.”

Chapter 1, which introduces part 1, explains the functions of the temples in the ancient Near East. The sanctuaries were built with the intention of providing the gods with suitable abodes on earth. It was necessary to make the temple and temple service as enticing as possible to keep the resident deity satisfied and to prevent it from leaving its earthly abode. Maintaining the divine presence was crucial: if the deity left the temple, the worshipers ran the risk of being ignored.

The architecture of the temples reflects the worshipers’ ideas about what pleases the gods. It shows how the temples and the divine presence were understood. Hundley deduces the assumed prerequisites for divine presence from the design and room distribution of a large number of sanctuaries, especially the official state temples. In addition to being a suitable residence for the deity, the temples were designed to elicit awe as the appropriate emotional response of the observers, who had only limited access to these temples. The divine statue was positioned far from the profane world, and most worshipers were not allowed to approach or see it.

Chapter 2 describes the architecture of ancient Egyptian temples, which are the best preserved of the ancient Near East thanks to the use of stone instead of mud-brick, which was the usual building material in Mesopotamia. Hundley focuses on sanctuaries from the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BCE), especially some better preserved temples in Upper Egypt (e.g., Karnak). Most larger temples were characterized by symmetry and

consisted of an entrance pylon, often with a pair of obelisks before it, a walled open-air forecourt, a roofed hypostyle hall, an offering space, and a temple core that included an enclosed shrine housing the cult image, a bark chapel, and auxiliary rooms such as treasuries and offering chambers. Most walls were richly adorned with colorful reliefs that together with the inscriptions communicate how the spaces were used. The sanctuary was a suitable abode for the deity, with the walls separating the divine sphere from the more mundane spaces around it. Common persons were not allowed to enter the doors leading to the most sacred rooms, but they seem to have had access to the courtyard, at least during festivals.

Especially in the area of the pylon and the courtyard, there were large militaristic representations of the king, showing him as the protector of the divine order in the temple. Priests appear only rarely in the scenes, as the king was the sole mediator between humans and deities, having a decisive role in the cult. Creation was seen as the introduction of order, and the temple represented a similar world of order and harmony, in contrast to the mundane surroundings.

Chapter 3 shows that Mesopotamian temples had a lot in common with their Egyptian counterparts. Many Mesopotamian temples were impressive and inspired awe. Also here walls and portals separated the sacred rooms from the more mundane outer spaces. However, there was more diversity in the architecture of temples than in Egypt. Each Mesopotamian region underwent influences from several sides, and the forms depended not only on the place but also on the time. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some general contours.

In Mesopotamian temples from the second millennium and the first half of the first millennium BCE, there were always a relatively dark inner sanctuary where the deity was present in the form of a cult statue and an outer sanctuary where the priests offered the sacrificial gifts on tables and burnt incense on an altar. There was a vestibule with a gate, sometimes guarded by impressive twin towers, and many temples comprised at least one court with an altar. The sacred precinct was often elevated above the more mundane sphere, with the cult statue commonly far from the outer entrance and raised above the rest of the sanctuary. This reinforced the idea that the deity was virtually unapproachable. The archaeological remains do not show many traces of adornment in the Mesopotamian temples, but the textual evidence suggests that certain temples were lavishly decorated with gold, lapis lazuli, and so on and that the cult statues were made of precious materials.

According to Mesopotamian mythology, the purpose of humanity was to serve the gods. Indeed, the temples were equipped like a household, requiring staff, kitchens, storerooms, and the like, all for the benefit of the deity.

The ziggurats, consisting of massive platforms and having the form of a stepped pyramid, were different from the ground-level temples. The small temples atop the ziggurats enjoyed a privileged status despite their small size. It is uncertain whether the summit temples contained a cult image and whether the same rituals were performed as in the ground-floor temples.

The kings of the gods had only one temple that could not be relocated. Enlil had a single temple in Nippur, Marduk had one in Babylon, and so on. Other gods, however, had many major sanctuaries in different locations.

As mud-brick was the predominant building material, renovations were necessary already in antiquity. The purpose of these renovations was to return a building to its original state, the divinely sanctioned prototype. Mesopotamians even credited the gods with the construction of the original temples, which represented the harmonious world of creation.

Chapter 4 describes the Hittite temples. The archaeological and textual evidence are scant, and generalizations are problematic. However, it is clear that the Hittite temples were characterized by a large open-air courtyard, surrounded by rooms, immediately behind the gate structure. The court was probably used for presenting offerings, purifications, and gatherings. The inner sanctuary was accessed through twists and turns, which shows that the deity preferred to stay far from the mundane sphere. The cult statue was crafted with silver, gold, and semiprecious stones.

Remarkably, some Hittite sanctuaries contained large windows. Illustrations are lacking in the book, but Hundley explains that they allowed light into the inner sanctuaries, which must have been less dark than the Egyptian and Mesopotamian ones. The precise function of the windows remains elusive, but they may have been left open to give the deity access to the outside world. Although the windows may have allowed passersby to see the cult statue, more direct access was limited to the most privileged, and only after purification. Hundley refers to an interesting Hittite oracle text from Alalakh that forbids watching the deity through a window (95). Hittite texts ascribe a decisive role to the gods themselves in the construction of their earthly abodes.

Chapter 5 discusses the relatively scarce Syro-Palestinian evidence. Almost no Aramaean and Phoenician remains have survived, and the textual evidence comes mainly from only two cities, Ugarit and Emar. However, it is clear that even the main city temples, to which Hundley limits his discussion, were relatively small, smaller than the adjacent royal palace. They were symmetrical, whereas the less-official temples inside or outside the city

could have a different arrangement. The direct axis may have allowed visual access to the richly decorated cult image, although it stood in the dark.

The more elaborate temples, such as the 'Ain Dara' temple, comprised a long sanctuary with a separate space for the cult image, a vestibule, and a porch supported by two columns. Unlike temples in other regions, the Syro-Palestinian temples themselves did not include open-air spaces. They were surrounded by a courtyard that was occasionally enclosed by a wall, which marked the temple as distinct. Despite the building's relatively small size, its importance was highlighted not only by its elevated position but often also by animal or hybrid guardians, dressed stones, decorations, and in several cases twin towers that must have been quite high. Giant footprints in the temple of 'Ain Dara' express the conviction that the deity had entered the inner sanctuary. Their size shows that the deity's body was believed to be much larger than human bodies, but also larger than the cult image. As in Hittite Anatolia, there seem to have been windows in several Syro-Palestinian temples, possibly allowing people without access to the sanctuary to offer sacrifices directly to the deity. It is unclear whether there was a conceptual link between the temple and the order of creation.

The synthetic chapter 6 focuses on what ancient Near Eastern temples had in common. All temples were constructed to provide the gods with abodes on earth where they received care and food from humans who hoped for divine blessing in return. The architecture was intended to protect the divine precinct from unwelcome interruptions from the earthly sphere and to show the otherness and sacredness of the sanctuary that housed the divine presence. The cult image dwelled in an isolated and often elevated space to which access was limited. However, despite the attempt to keep the divine and mundane spheres apart, the very function of the temples was to make the gods accessible for humans. All in all, there was remarkable continuity across the ancient Near East as far as the communicated message is concerned, despite the obvious differences. The architecture of the relatively small Syro-Palestinian temples suggests that, despite the need to maintain a safe distance, the gods were approachable.

In chapter 7, the introduction to part 2, Hundley warns that our analytic conceptual background may lead to an unfounded aversion to the—seemingly inconsistent and primitive—ancient Near Eastern descriptions of the divine. According to Hundley, the inconsistencies express the belief that the divine is not bound by limits and restrictions. The chapter describes beautifully to what degree the gods were seen as anthropomorphic and in which respects they were believed to transcend the humans. Hundley shows that the anthropomorphic sides of the gods made them understandable and approachable for humans. He explains that in the following chapters he will analyze the following aspects for the region under discussion:

1) the perceived nature of the gods and their relationship to humanity; 2) the forms and implications of divine cult images; 3) the rituals for installing a cult image and maintaining the divine presence; 4) the relationship of a deity to its statue(s); 5) the relationship between different manifestations of a deity; 6) the consequences of conquest and/or improper divine service; 7) the divine consumption of human offerings. (151)

Chapter 8 shows that the ancient Egyptians did not regard their gods as omnipotent or omniscient but as vulnerable. They assumed that the presence of a deity in its cult statue was semipermanent. Most of the cult statues were rather small, having human forms, animal forms, or mixed forms, with a human body and an animal head. The artists did not have much freedom of expression, since divine representation was marked by a strong conservatism.

It was necessary to perform the so-called Opening of the Mouth ritual on newly formed divine statues before they could house the gods. The most relevant elements of the complex ritual can be reconstructed on the basis of evidence from the funerary sphere. The ritual was assumed to bring the cult statue to life and to charge it with the appropriate divine powers. Of course, artisans were responsible for crafting the divine statues, but hymns and mythological texts suggest that they were divinely created.

After the Opening of the Mouth ritual the divine image was installed in the temple, where the daily cult rituals served to maintain the divine presence. Cult personnel fed, clothed, and purified the deity to keep it satisfied. The feeding of the gods was regarded as obligatory and essential. When the gods were improperly served and malnourished, the risk that they left the statues and “turned their backs” on the land grew considerably. Despite its importance, however, feeding the gods was not deemed necessary for the survival of the deity.

The extensive discussion of the Mesopotamian evidence (ch. 9) demonstrates that the Mesopotamian gods lacked omnipotence and omniscience, just like the Egyptian gods. According to first-millennium Mesopotamian thinking, it was uncommon for the gods to appear to humans outside the temples, so the temples were an indispensable means to approach them. Although some texts suggest that the temples were created by the gods in primordial times, humans bore the responsibility for their upkeep. While the highest gods, such as Enlil and Marduk, had only a single earthly abode, Ishtar and other gods manifested themselves in several local temples at the same time, each manifestation having its own characteristics.

The cult statues were made with valuable materials, with predominantly human-like and symbolic forms. A divine symbol could be as appropriate a terrestrial form of a deity as an anthropomorphic statue. However, the privileged anthropomorphic representations were placed exclusively in the sanctuary of the temple, so the majority of humans were barred from viewing the deity's primary terrestrial forms.

According to the well-known Sippar tablet, a new cult statue for Shamash could only be fashioned after the primeval prototype. Cult statues underwent the Mouth Washing and Mouth Opening rituals that bridged the gap between the statue's crafting in a workshop and its installation in the temple. Hundley discusses the texts referring to these rituals extensively. Unfortunately, many details of the complex rituals are unclear, but the numerous purifications had a decisive role. Also, the rituals enabled the statue to eat, smell, and hear.

Most texts mentioning the Mesopotamian daily cult rituals are late, stemming from the Hellenistic period, but it is beyond doubt that daily care, including feeding, washing, and clothing the gods, was a crucial element of the cult from time immemorial. Hundley describes how the gods were supposed to consume the fine food and drinks that the priests served them.

Chapter 10 analyzes the Hittite evidence and shows that also in Hittite Anatolia the cult served as the primary access point to the divine, evidence of direct contact with the gods outside the temples being rare. Hattusa was the religious capital and the most prominent seat of the official cult. Unlike in Mesopotamia, descriptions of cult images abound in the texts. They were made of precious materials, but many of them were small. The gods could be represented in human-like forms, but also symbolically or theriomorphically. For instance, the weather god could be depicted as a bull and the sun goddesses could be represented as sun disks. Both inside and outside the temples there were *ḫuwaši*-stones, standing stones functioning like a cult statue in a temple. Several gods, especially the weather god, consisted of detachable aspects, local manifestations that could be treated as distinct divinities. Each manifestation of a deity could still possess all the deity's potencies, but it had its own characteristic features and was capable of independent action.

The multiple evocation rites show that the deity's presence in the statue was not taken for granted. Hundley offers an extensive discussion of a ritual text from the region of Kizzuwatna (CTH 481, translation in *COS* 1:173–77), which relates to the establishment of a second temple for the Goddess of the Night. The expansion rituals, in the old temple as well as the new one, ensure that the new temple functions as intended. The numerous purification rites include the use of water and the application of sheep blood to the new

statue, the temple wall, and the deity's equipment. Interestingly, the deity is summoned to take up residence in the new, secondary statue by "splitting" herself.

The Hittite religious texts identify foodstuffs explicitly as divine food. The gods needed nourishment and could leave their terrestrial abodes when they were dissatisfied with the service by the cult personnel.

The discussion of the Syro-Palestinian evidence in chapter 11 is based on scant textual evidence, including from Emar but primarily from Ugarit, and iconographic remains. Hundley admits that the Ugaritic texts may not be exemplary for all ancient Syria-Palestine. However, it is clear that all over Syria-Palestine the gods were regarded as human-like, although far exceeding human capacities. Gods such as Baal could manifest themselves in different ways at the same time. The deportation of a cult statue meant that the direct access to the deity was lost. However, the deity was still somewhere in the cosmos, and it was deemed possible to reestablish its presence by the installation of a new cult statue.

Anthropomorphic statues of the gods were more prominent than theriomorphic, mixed and symbolic representations. The temples were relatively small, but the cult statues were crafted of precious materials. As in Hittite Anatolia, standing stones could also house a deity. Unfortunately, no Syro-Palestinian texts describing installation rituals have been preserved.

At the end of part 2, chapter 12 synthesizes the ancient Near Eastern ideas about divine presence in the temples. The gods only rarely manifested themselves directly to humans, but the temple and the cult image served as the solution, being the terrestrial locus of divine presence. The cult statue made communication with the deity possible. It was not coterminous with the deity but one of its manifestations. In normal circumstances, there was little practical impetus to distinguish the deity from the statue, but when the statue was deported or demolished, the practice of making a new cult statue to house the god shows that the god was assumed to exist apart from the old statue.

The Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Hittites, and possibly the Syro-Palestinians conducted elaborate rituals to make divine presence in the cult statues possible. The original function of part of the rites may have been forgotten, but the totality of rites was assumed to be effective.

The advantage of the primarily anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine was that community with the gods became possible and the gods became more comprehensible. The gods were assumed to have human-like needs. They wanted nourishment and daily



care. It was necessary to satisfy their needs to keep them on earth and to receive divine reward.

Hundley's inspiring analyses provide an excellent basis for further study of the ancient Near Eastern concepts of divine presence. Numerous relevant data now occur in a single, conveniently arranged volume. Thanks to his wide knowledge of the archaeological and textual evidence and his interest in the comparative study of religion, Hundley is able to open up new horizons for archaeologists, theologians, and historians alike. Many temples and sanctuaries must remain unmentioned, for instance, the Great Temple of Aten in el-Amarna (fourteenth century) with its distinctive features or the sacred precinct in Karatepe-Aslantaş with its roughly 2.5-meters-tall statue of the storm god (near Adana, late eighth or early seventh century). Of course, that does not alter the fact that this publication represents a great leap forward in the study of the ancient ideas about the possibility of the divine to be present on earth. I recommend this volume to scholars and students who want to develop a better understanding of the religions of the ancient Near East.