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## Expectations of Iconographic Symbols in Third Century Christianity

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George Fox Evangelical Seminary

Expectations of Iconographic Symbols in Third Century Christianity

Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of George Fox  
Evangelical Seminary  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Theological Studies

By  
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Portland, Oregon  
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# **Expectations of Iconographic Symbols in Third Century Christianity**

## **Introduction**

Art is the avenue down which one moves to encounter the divine. It is the expression of a person's or groups spiritual experience. Through art the divine and the human meet. Within the framework of art, there are different means of expression. A symbol serves as a pointer, directing the audience towards the divine. Figurative expression depicts scenes from religious history, which carries meaning to the audience about their tradition and their history. Narrative expressions tell a story with significance to the religious community.

Every religion has some type of artistic expression. This is how a religion demonstrates its own spiritual expression to the world around them, but more importantly, it is how they draw themselves towards the sense of the divine. Christianity has had a long history with art. At times, this has been a love/hate relationship based on the idolatrous use of icons. Christian art has always expressed something of the spiritual life of the church and the populace. It is the spiritual expression in art that interests me in this study, especially the relationship between early Christian art and the origins of Christian spirituality.

Christianity of the third and fourth centuries had to distinguish itself from the greater culture in both thought and expression. It accomplished this by transforming themes from the social context as well as inventing new ones. Christian thinkers borrowed themes from pagan philosophy. Christian artists borrowed themes from Greco-Roman art. New themes were also established, which were specifically Christian, such as the Trinity in Christian thought and the creation of a Christian iconographic language or program in art.

Although previously dismissed as heretical, pre-Constantine Christian converts expected art and it held significant symbolic value in expressing spiritual experiences. Previous scholarship has focused primarily on the literary sources and not the archaeological data providing skewed results towards an idea of an aniconic early Church.

Previously it had been believed that the Church Fathers of the Pre-Constantine time were writing against the use of images in the Church. Yet, the early church made great use of images. Scholars up to the present have relegated all Christian artwork before the fourth century to heretical sects of Christianity. This assumption is being challenged by some of today's art historians.

The original assumptions that ancient Christian art is heretical and was officially sanctioned later, rests on two assumptions. First, the Church before Constantine was pure and untainted by its social context, including the idolatrous use of icons. Second, the writings of the Church Fathers and a standard interpretation of them handed down from the iconoclast controversies.



The purity of the ancient church is based on the idea that they maintained an aniconic tradition from the Jews. In addition, they desired to maintain a pure religion removed from the evil pagan society. It would seem that the Ante-Nicene Church Father's wrote strongly against the use of images based on their understanding of the second of the Ten Commandments. They also rooted some of their arguments in comparisons with the pagan worship of idols. These writings became the official position of the Church.

However, the early Christian converts expected a certain amount of artwork to appear in the religious setting. In both the society in which they lived and the religious culture from which they converted, art was widely used. In addition, artwork had a symbolic value. It was very useful in expressing spiritual truths.

A course of study needs to be laid out taking into account both the literary and archaeological evidence in light of the expectation of the use of images in a religious setting and their symbolic value. An examination of the concept of art and the forms of art is in order. An examination of the official position of the Church during this time is also in order. Then from these examinations conclusions about the use of icons as forms of spiritual expression in the pre-Constantine church can be drawn out.

## **Limiting the Scope of Study and Methodology**

The earliest known piece of Christian iconography that can be claimed to be truly Christian dates between 180-200. This date will serve as the beginning date of this study.

A.D. 180 was the date at which the Christian subculture was willing to say to the majority culture that it existed and had a right to exist. Because of that courage, we now may discover those symbols and other remains that

mark the self-conscious of the early Christian Church. From about A.D. 180 to A.D. 313 the early Christian Church gave to the Mediterranean world a religious alternative of considerable depth that was expressed in activities and symbols that were readily understood by that culture. This then, was the period of greatest growth for the early Church.<sup>1</sup>

The late date for the arrival of a Christian iconographic language begs the question: were the first and second century Christians more faithful to the Old Testament command against the use of idols? The question leads into the debate between the uses of textual source verses archeological sources.<sup>2</sup>

The ending date will be the beginning of the rule of Constantine in the early fourth century. A major shift occurred in the Christian church at this time. Constantine ushered in an era of peace never before known by the Church. This peace gave room and position for the Church to develop in unprecedented ways. This development occurred both theologically and iconographically. It takes us beyond the bounds of the questions at hand.

[E]arly Christian archaeology is a relational discipline. It bears upon church history and patristics, upon the secular history of Late Antiquity, and its formal typologies are closely intertwined with cognates in Greek and Roman archaeology and art history... The goal of this discipline, after all, is to add a new dimension to what is already known. It is arguable that our picture of early Christianity is skewed because it is defined exclusively or primarily by literary and documentary sources.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 164.

<sup>2</sup>Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London and New York: Routledge 2000), 9.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Corby Finney, "Early Christian Art and Archaeology II (A.D. 200-500): A Selected Bibliography 1945-1985," *Second Century* 6.4 (1988): 206.

Three limiting definitions are used to study early Christian art. First, the study can be defined in relation to the historical development of Christian thought. Second, the study can be defined in relation to the historical study of late antiquity. Third, it can be defined as a “taxonomic discipline in which the description and comparative classification of monuments in a type sequence is the primary goal,” or the formation of typologies.<sup>4</sup> Each of the three defining points must be balanced to accurately define early Christian art. These three points will help to organize the data into useful pieces and bring first methodological problem, the question of sources.

The question of sources has always vexed the historian. Which sources are valid to use? How do the sources relate to one another? Which source came first and which was a later development? These questions and many more must be taken into consideration when approaching a subject, especially a subject that draws from two disciplines. This study will draw from both text historians, those who primarily study the written texts of a historical period, and from art historians, who examine the archeological evidence of a given time and region.

The dualism in historical scholarship has been resolved in many different ways. The text historians who study what was said and the context in which it was said characterize this dualism, on one side. The text is usually regarded as the official position of the Church. On the other side, art historians study archeological discoveries and attempt to put them into a context. These discoveries are often seen on a popular level, which is always second to the official church. The text historians only refer to them when it supports their position. Art is therefore less than official; it is the popular expression of

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 204-205.

the Church. The attempts to deal with the dualism will be examined in this study. In this study, the text and the archaeological evidence are equals. They should complement each other.

## **Archaeological Origins of Christian Iconography**

### ***Iconographic Language***

Language never develops in a vacuum. Outside influences help to shape its evolution. Words change meanings and connotations through time. Even regions have dialects with specific slang and pronunciation. A similar phenomenon is seen in the development of iconographic language. Iconographic language is a set of symbols, pictures and scenes that are familiar to a specific audience. Through their use, they develop certain meanings with which the audience is familiar. Through time, their meaning can shift. The length of time for a meaning to shift will depend upon the widespread use and acceptance of the icon.

As Christianity developed, it incorporated icons from the surrounding culture. The meanings of the icons were not inherently religious. They were signs of luck, peace, protection and the likes. However, they slowly evolved into specific Christian meanings. They became associated with the works and life of Christ, and eventually took on theological meaning, which was not the intention of the original users. This creates problems for the art historian. When did that shift in meaning take place? What did it mean previously, and what has it come to mean? Results to these questions will depend on the approach to the answer. If one reads post-Constantine theology into pre-

Constantine pieces skewed results occur and a true picture of the early Church cannot emerge. On the other hand, if one does not remove the Christian meaning of the symbol from the social context then no distinction between Christian use and pagan or common use can be understood, again the true picture is skewed.

If we turn to the cultural context of the iconographic language, it can form a backdrop from which Christian meanings can emerge. Some symbols developed in the culture and then were adopted by Christians because of their value to express Christian ideals and values both spiritually and theologically. Grabar states,

...the bases upon which the original Paleo-Christian images were founded: that from its beginnings Christian imagery found expression entirely, almost uniquely, in the general language of the visual arts and with the techniques of imagery commonly practiced within the Roman Empire from the second to the fourth century.<sup>5</sup>

The cultural context becomes central in understanding the origin of Christian iconography. The two most widespread iconic symbols in the early Church were the Good Shepherd and the orante which both had precedents in the Greco-Roman iconic language.

## **Cultural Context of Iconographic Language**

In Late Antiquity there had developed in the Greco-Roman world an expressed canon of iconographic language. Much of this canon dwelt around the pagan gods and their actions in temples and shrines. Another branch of the canon was centered on the Emperor. Coins, statutes and buildings all held the image of the Emperor. Some were

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<sup>5</sup> Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), xliii.

scenes of victory over an enemy; others were scenes of a peaceful rule. There were also iconic symbols for general use. These denoted professions, social position and family heritage. Others were used to ward off evil, bring good luck and other interventions of fate.

In late antiquity, the Roman Empire extended across the Mediterranean as far south as Africa, it held influence as far north as Britain. Westward it was held back by the Atlantic Ocean but Eastwardly it spread into the Tigris-Euphrates river valley. It was largely built upon the ruins of the Hellenistic Empire. It also had a specific style of art that was widely used. In Rome, there were schools, which taught artistic style to painters, sculptures, or other craftsmen. This style has come to be known as Classical Greco-Roman Art in Late Antiquity. Within this style, there was a religious iconographic language. Much of Roman art was based on their Greek predecessors.<sup>6</sup> The Roman artist attempted to copy the great Greek art and sculptures.

By recognizing classical works as exemplary and then copying them, one unconsciously alters their original nature. The sculptures which were now copied owed their form to a unique creative situation; they were the result of a struggle to express a particular spiritual content. They had a religious origin; they were statues of gods or votive offerings. Their perfection resided in the fact that their form was the expression of their very essence, and this perfection cannot be achieved even in the most perfect copy, for the latter can only reproduce the external details. Thus in the copy the emphasis is transferred from meaning to form, and the more exact the copy the greater the danger that it reproduces only external and unimportant details. The copyist is too dependent on the outward appearance of his model and the result of his labours is something merely decorative.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Heinz Kahler, *The Art of Rome and Her Empire* (New York: Graystone, revised 1965),12.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 14

The value of the image lay in the perfection of its style, at least for the art collector. However, for the religious, expressing a spiritual truth, the value lay in the essence of the image. When Rome adopted Greek art, it added little to it. The largest additions to the Greek style by the Romans lay in architecture.<sup>8</sup> So, is this to say that the Romans had no religious art of their own, which carried religious or spiritual truth?

## Religious Iconographic Language

To understand Roman religion one must understand the Roman pantheon of gods. This polytheistic system allowed for many temples established for the worship of one or more gods. Much of the artistic work was conditioned upon its use in the temples. The artists and architects created spaces in which one could encounter the gods and pay homage by using a standard architectural style and idols.

As we will see below, idols are not the main concern of this study. Statues have not been found in the scope of this study, nor an expressed architectural form. The Christians did not adopt the style of the Roman temple and idol. They adopted the more common symbols that had popular meaning and not a specific religious meaning.

Nevertheless, some similarities between the temple and the Christian worship space exist. The use of space in the Roman temple was very specific. They used direction to point the temple participant towards the idol of the god or gods held on a pedestal or in a niche on the raised platform or *cella*.<sup>9</sup> The *naos* was the sanctuary that contained the platform, the *cella* and the covered porch. A vaulted ceiling covered the *cella*. Around the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>9</sup>Ann Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europos* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1973), chap. 2 passim.

*cella* ran a pillared porch, except along the back wall.<sup>10</sup> A similar structure is found in the house church at Dura-Europos discussed below. The *cella* and the niche were the places where the divine action took place, where the worshiper encountered the god.

Until the fourth century and the commissioning of great Basilicas by Constantine, Christian architecture played a limited role in the development of Christian iconography. The place of Christian iconography was largely in the catacombs, in the form of frescos, mosaics and sarcophagi, and in the few house churches that can be dated to a time before Constantine. The main example is the house church of Dura-Europos. The house churches were converted houses, reflect the typical house of the region, and have little importance to the development of Christian architecture. The house church at Dura-Europos contains biblical scenes painted in a room with a baptismal font. The importance of these scenes will be discussed below.

The Christian scenes are not without parallel in pagan and Jewish religions. Inside of the synagogue discovered at Dura, paintings of many scenes from the Hebrew Scriptures helped to change the perspective of both Jewish and Christian iconography. It was previously believed that Judaism was aniconic. In the early twentieth century, evidence began to appear which contradicted this belief. The synagogue at Dura and the work done by Goodenough in Jewish symbolism opened new avenues of connection between Jewish and Christian traditional development.<sup>11</sup> The connections between the house church and the synagogue at Dura are of limited value to this study. No firm

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<sup>10</sup> Kahler, 29.

<sup>11</sup>See E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1953-68).



evidence exists to conclude which came first the synagogue art and the Christians response, or the Christian art and the Jewish response but both are set in a larger context of religious art.

In Dura there are other temples, which contain similar themes and use of icons. Most of the temples were directed toward one or more gods, usually Greek or Roman in origin with Oriental alterations. The temple was developed on a similar style as discussed above. A feature common to the temples of Dura was the use of images behind the sculpture of the god to depict the acts of the god, either against an enemy or in aid of humanity. The form of the picture is consistent with the Durene style common to the temples, Christian building and Jewish Synagogue. Because it is similar in most cases in the city of Dura it serves as a backdrop from which the different themes emerge. The Christians picked biblical themes, as did the Jews, whereas the pagan temples used themes from the mythology of the gods, yet they lacked the traditional Roman and Greek subjects.<sup>12</sup> “The general intent of the mural paintings is in most cases clear. The majority comes from cult buildings and is religious in character. The pagan temples show figures of deities and worshipers participating in adoration or in cult acts.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Christian Development of Iconographic Language**

The origin of Christian iconographic language is in the use and development of neutral signs of the culture. We have hint of this from Clement of Alexander when in reference to the use of signet rings with for a seal they should use neutral symbols. They

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<sup>12</sup> Perkins chap. 3 passim.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.

would not be offensive to the larger cultural context and they could have a second Christian meaning and therefore not be offensive to the Christian community. He lists six symbols that would be appropriate: dove, fish, ship in full sail, musical lyre, anchor, or fisherman.<sup>14</sup> Some of these have continued to be used down the ages and others have fallen away. The ones that have continued to be used have had their meanings shifted to reflect Christian ideas. These signs would be both accepted in the Christian community and in the culture and this poses a problem to the art historian. Jensen states “the establishment of a Christian iconographic language should not be seen as the work of individuals, but rather as apart of the gradually emerging public ‘face’ of a religion that was developing its identity and making it visible.”<sup>15</sup>

The problem is the lack of a clear period in which the meaning became expressly Christian. Between the years 180-200, art developed enough of a Christian meaning and use to distinguish it from the cultural context but before that time it is almost impossible to tell a Christian symbol from a pagan symbol. It is possible that we have countless artifacts from Late Antiquity that Christians used. This means we can never trace Christian iconic language to a specific place and time, unless some magnificent find is waiting to be unearthed.

Christian people of the first two centuries did indeed leave us material remains and archeologists have uncovered them. They simply cannot be distinguished from the remains of the non-Christian culture.... Distinguishable funerary art, inscriptions, letters, symbols, and perhaps buildings surface just at the end of the second century. It took over one

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<sup>14</sup> Clement of Alexandria . *Stromata*, Translated by Simon P. Wood. Vol.85 *The Fathers of the Church*, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1954), 256.

<sup>15</sup> Jensen, 22.

hundred years for a clearly Christian culture to take a form different from that of the social matrix.<sup>16</sup>

We still have a rough starting date where Christian iconographic language began to diverge from the larger cultural context. We also have a very limited iconic language with which to begin this study. Let us turn to the source and natures of Christian art work in the third century.

## Summary

In late antiquity, an iconographic language or program had already been established. It was formed by the Greeks through their development of statues, painting in frescoes and mosaics. The Romans copied and expanded upon this repertoire mainly in the field of architecture. This was the context to which Christianity entered.

Against this background of common repertoire of motifs- the Christian sculptors or painters had only to trace a few new features and details to transform an image of a type common in that period into a Christian image, that is to say, into one that evoked a Christian thought or a historical event charged with Christian meaning. Materially, this specifically Christian additive would be insignificant taking only little space, and appearing only to the informed eye because it was expressed by allusion, not directly. For the Christian of the time, however, as for the image-maker, the detail was revealing: it gave the work its value and, though barely perceptible, was the ground on which the work could be accepted or rejected.<sup>17</sup>

Specific Christian icons had specific meaning and use. Also associated with icons were symbols. Symbols played a large role in the development of Christian iconography. Symbols could be religiously neutral in the larger culture yet take on specific Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Snyder, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Grabar, xlvi.

meaning when used in conjunction with other Christian symbols or images. “All the Christian images that we know had a definite religious purpose...”<sup>18</sup> They became a valuable way to safe guard the Christian message in a hostile environment.

## ***Early Christian Art***

From the section above, it is easy to point to Christian iconographic language as it developed in the Constantine era. Iconographic representation of Christianity before Constantine is sparse and easily categorized. There are two primary sources for Christian art. They are funerary art and *domus ecclesiae*, or house church. From the catalogue of Christian iconography, interpretations of their general context will provide for a clear understanding of their use in the religious setting.

## **Sources for art forms and functions**

Most of what has survived of Christian iconographic expression before the Peace of the church can be easily categorized. Art historians still debate the exact dating of some pieces, most of them have been excluded from this study unless there is good reason they should be included. Within the two categories, icons are constructed with different materials. Frescoes and mosaics are common to both funerary and *domus ecclesiae* and sculpture is found only within funerary art as sarcophagi.

Funerary art is more common then *domus ecclesiae*. This reason may be due to the nature of the work itself and the location of most funerary pieces. Due to their location underground, they had greater chance for preservation. The *domus ecclesiae* are a rare find. The one true example that can be assuredly dated to a pre-Constantine period

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., xlix.

is the house church of Dura-Europa. We will return to this church and its baptistery later.

Let us first look to examples of funerary art.

## **Funerary Art**

“The early Christians had two places of meeting: the *domus ecclesiae* and the cemetery. The function of the two places differed considerably both liturgically and sociologically. In the church they worshiped by praying, singing psalms, reading Scripture, and celebrating the Eucharist of the community through an *αγαπήνιστος* communion. In the cemetery they celebrated their kinship with the Christian special dead and with each other. At the cemetery there was an emphasis on eating together. Provisions were made for eating and the architectural structure itself developed around a nuclear burial site either of a family progenitor, or more likely for the early Christians, the special dead.”<sup>19</sup>

Three types of cemetery structures house the dead of the Christians. Each has features unique to its own structure but they also share in certain features. These features highlight their use as places of gathering for the faithful to share a special meal with the dead.

### *Cemetery Structures: Catacombs, Martyria and Covered Cemeteries*

The most common of the three structures is the catacomb. A catacomb is an underground complex of graves in the soft tufa, a soft volcanic rock. The graves are connected by a series of tunnels. As the catacomb space was filled, they dug deeper layers to expand it, creating multiple layers of graves. In Rome, there are between sixty and ninety miles of catacombs. Many of these catacombs are known to be Christian because of symbols and frescos. The grave is cut into the tufa from the tunnel wall and then sealed with either a cover stone or tile. On the covering, there may appear an

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<sup>19</sup> Snyder, 83.

inscription or symbols representing something about the person buried there.

Occasionally along the wall of the tunnel, a room will be cut out instead of graves. The room contains special features with frescos. The features may include a short table, benches and features for holding plates, cups and vases implying they were used for a communal meal of some sort. Three catacombs that can be given a pre-Constantine date: Catacomb of Priscilla, Catacomb of St. Callixtus, and the Catacomb of Domitilla.<sup>20</sup>

A second type of cemetery structure is the martyria. The cult of the martyr developed above ground at the martyria, not in the catacombs.<sup>21</sup> The martyria were usually built over or near the grave of a known martyr. In the structure, there would be benches or other places to sit and a stand for a bowl or food. They stand-alone and are not connected to covered cemeteries. Only be two such structures can be safely dated before Constantine. The cult of the martyr did not come into full power until after the peace of the church, hence the lack of martyria. The first is located in Bonn, Germany and called Sts. Cassius and Florentius and the second is in Salona, Yugoslavia.<sup>22</sup>

The last type is the covered cemetery. It was common practice after the peace of the church to build basilicas and churches over the graves of martyrs. The original structure was usually left intact or incorporated into the structure of the new building. Even though most of the new construction occurred after Constantine, it is believed that the sites were gathering places in pre-Constantine times and therefore had importance. Due to the changes and the new buildings, it is difficult to tell the form and function of

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 83-87.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 87-92.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 90.

the original sites. Only the original structure of five covered cemeteries can be dated before Constantine. They are: Sta. Agnese, S. Lorenzo fuori mura, SS. Marcellino e Pietro, S. Sebastiano, and St. Peter's.

### *Frescoes*

Frescoes are two-dimensional paintings on a plaster surface such as the wall of a house, public institution or burial rooms. Snyder catalogues five places where frescoes have been used that can be dated prior to Constantine.<sup>23</sup> The most extensive is the baptistery at Dura-Europos in Syria, which will be covered in more detail below. The rest of the frescoes are located the Sacramental chapel at St. Callixtus in Rome, the Double chamber of Lucina in the St. Callixtus Catacomb in Rome, the Flavian Gallery in the Domitilla Catacomb in Rome, and the Capella Greca in the Priscilla Catacomb in Rome. I will refer the reader to table one in the appendix for their content.

### *Mosaics*

Mosaics are common features of the Greco-Roman period. They are pictures composed of small cut tiles, bricks or glass laid into patterns on floors, walls and ceilings. Snyder catalogues two places where mosaics were used in Pre-Constantine Christian iconography.<sup>24</sup> The first is in the Mausoleum M of the Vatican necropolis. It contains scenes of the Good Shepherd, Jonah Cast out of the Boat, and Fishermen. On the ceiling is the figure of Christ in a sun chariot, or Christ Helios. The second is the floor of a

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 32-34.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 34.

church in Aquileia, Italy. It does not have figures and is largely decorative with a few animals and fruits and no clear meaning aside from the decorative nature.

### *Sarcophagi*

There are 129 pre-Constantine Sarcophagi that may be Christian due to the presence of an orante, good shepherd or inscription. Only 48 belong to the Christian community because of the use of biblical scenes. Snyder catalogues 48 of which eleven are still intact; the rest are in fragments. Sarcophagi were used primarily in the Northern Mediterranean area. They were carved of stone, predominantly marble when available. They were kept in family plots to maintain community. The eleven sarcophagi and the fragments are listed in table one located in the appendix.

### **Domus Ecclesiae**

Besides the cemeteries, Christian communities also met in houses. Some of these houses were later converted for the expressed use of the Christian community. In the conversion from private to Christian use alterations occurred.

Besides house churches, neither literary nor archaeological evidence indicates that there are any extant churches that can be confidently dated before Constantine. Consequently, we have no evidence regarding the intentional structure of a Christian meeting place before the peace. Homes were restructured to accommodate the Christian assembly.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 67.



Only one such home can be dated before Constantine and that is the *domus ecclesiae* of Dura-Europos. Due to its uniqueness and importance to this study, an indepth survey of this building is.

### *Dura-Europa*

While on military maneuvers in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley northwest of Baghdad in April 1920, a British patrol ran across some previously unknown ruins. At the command to dig-in they discovered a building that still had pictures and decorative designs preserved on the plaster walls. They immediately called for a team to come in from Baghdad to investigate the ruins and its importance. A team led by Professor James Henry Breasted only had one day to examine and document as much as possible.<sup>26</sup>

Later Breasted identified the ruins by consulting old geography books compiled by Isidore of Charax. It was called “Dura, the city of Nikanor, a Macedonian foundation, which the Greeks called Europos.”<sup>27</sup> The name Dura-Europos was assigned the ruins. Over the next few years, the French gained possession of the area and sent teams in, lead by Belgian scholar Franz Cumont, to excavate the site. In 1926, he published his results and in 1928, a Yale-French team went in together to finish the excavations.

It is most probable that Dura-Europos was founded by the Seleucid Empire in the fourth century B.C.E. When the Roman’s, hundreds of years later, took possession of it, it was a Hellenistic city with remnants of Hellenized architecture. Due to its position on a cliff overlooking the Euphrates River and its massive walls, it probably had some military

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<sup>26</sup>Perkins, chap. 1 passem.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

and strategic importance. Sometime after 128 B.C.E., it was included in the expansion of the Parthian Empire reflected by changes made in some figurative painting, and the presence of Parthian pottery, which came into wide use at that time. In 115, C.E. Trajan was able to take Dura from the Parthians. He could not hold it for long but by 165, it was firmly in the hands of the Roman Empire.<sup>28</sup> Under Roman rule new temples, baths and houses were built. The Roman garrison stationed at Dura was slowly expanded in anticipation of attacks by the Sassanian Army, who was conquering the Parthians and threatening Rome's eastern outposts, including Dura.

As the Sassanian Army was moving against Dura, the garrison at Dura prepared by expanding and strengthening the wall. In order to do this, with rubble and fill dirt they buried the street and first block of houses nearest the wall. Unknowingly, by doing this, they preserved precious archeological information of city life in Dura in the mid-third century. In spite of the strengthened wall and fortified towers, the Sassanian Army was able to mine tunnels under the wall and build a siege ramp to mount a dual attack. In 256, Dura-Europos was taken by the Sassanian Army to never rise again.<sup>29</sup>

We can safely date the fall to 256 because men in full armor were found buried in mines under the wall with fresh coins minted in that year. Due to the lack of skeletons, it is believed that the city probably surrendered to the Sassanian Army after they gained entrance. In the western wall, which was strengthened in the way explained above, two dwellings were preserved that have importance for this study. The first dwelling was a house converted into a Jewish synagogue. Within the synagogue is a plethora of frescoes

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

depicting scenes from the Hebrew Scriptures. The second find, and more important for this study, was a house converted into a Christian building. The specifics of this building will be outlined below. The reasons these finds are so important is that they establish a date for the rise of iconic use in both Judaism and Christianity. Another reason is that the preservation of the figurative pieces are detailed enough to make a study possible of the form and function of the icons.

The houses in the Dura city had a standard pattern.<sup>30</sup> The house opened into a vestibule, which served to obscure the view of the interior of the house from the street. Dura houses did not traditionally have doors. The vestibule opened into a courtyard. Centered in the courtyard was a cesspool and latrine. The house contained a portico for receiving visitors. The house contained five other rooms. Immediately right of the vestibule was a stairwell that led to the roof.<sup>31</sup> The reader can refer to figure 1 in the appendix.

When the Christians adapted the house to fit the needs of the Christian community, they made a few alterations. Comparing figures 1 and 2 in the appendix, we can see these alterations. The cesspool was plugged when the courtyard was tiled. Benches were built around the inside of the courtyard as well as on an outside wall, which was unusual. The wall between rooms 4a and 4b was removed to create a larger assembly hall, which could fit between 65-70 people.<sup>32</sup> New plaster was applied to most of the rooms and a light wash added color to the plaster. Molding was fitted to most of

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<sup>30</sup> Welles, Bradford C., ed. *The Excavations at Dura-Europos Final Report*. Vol. 8, part 2, *The Christian Building*, by Carl Kraeling (New Haven: Dura-Europos Publishing, 1967) 139-141.

<sup>31</sup> Perkins, chap. 2 *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> Welles, 141-145.

the doors. The biggest and most interesting changes occurred in room six, next to the stairwell. The ceiling was lowered, a baptismal font with columned canopy was built against the far wall and figurative paintings were applied to all of the walls. It was the only room with such paintings. The assembly hall was left bare except for a light wash on the walls and a slightly raised platform. The rooms used as a baptistery and the selection of scenes applied to the walls increase our understanding of the development of Christian iconography.<sup>33</sup>

Eight scenes have been preserved in the baptistery. There is adequate room for many other scenes, possible as many as fifteen scenes, but they have not been preserved. The scenes, which have been preserved, seem to be arranged deliberately. The quality of the work is not superb, but it is in keeping with the Durene style. "Scenes are, as it were, slapped against the walls, the intent being clearly the placing of certain subjects before the eyes of the faithful with no concern for visual effect. The themes are clear even though the execution is clumsy."<sup>34</sup>

The Durene style of painting shows a lack of interest in the human body. Most of the figures are clothed with exposed limbs projecting at odd angles with a tubular form. There is a lack of the use of shading and proportions. The figures are always presented frontally with one foot turned. This gives a lack of the sense of movement and expression. Durene art is very rigid and formal.<sup>35</sup> Because of the common Durene style,

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 145-151.

<sup>34</sup>Perkins, 55.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., chap. 3 *passim*.

the importance lies in the scenes portrayed. First a few words about the layout of the room and then we can turn to the placement of the scenes.

The reader can turn to the image of the baptistery in the appendix for a visual aid. The room is rectangular with two entrances along the long inside wall. One entrance opens into the courtyard and the other into room 5. More will be said about room 5 later. Along the wall nearest to room 5, a baptismal font existed. Above the font, a columned canopy stood. The baptismal font is deep enough to be filled to a depth of almost one meter. Between the doors is a small niche placed in the wall above a short table. Along the long wall without the doorways is a bench.<sup>36</sup>

The first scene is on the wall behind the font. It is a scene of the Good Shepherd with a flock of rams or sheep.<sup>37</sup> Its placement behind the font draws attention to the function of the room and canopy. The canopy has equivalents in both the Jewish synagogue and the pagan temples. In the Jewish synagogue, a similar canopy existed around the Torah shrine, which is the central point of the synagogue, and the central reason for coming to the synagogue. In the pagan temples, there is a niche, or *naoe*, where the image of the god of the temple is and around the *naoe*, there is a canopy. Often radiating out from the *naoe* is a series of paintings depicting the god in action. The placement of the Good Shepherd behind the font with the canopy creates the same effect.<sup>38</sup> The central purpose of the room is what takes place under the canopy, and the power comes from the God whose image is portrayed. In this case, the Good Shepherd

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<sup>36</sup>Welles, 145-151.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 156-160.

most probably serves as a symbol for the God of the Christians, Jesus Christ. As mentioned below, the meaning of the Good Shepherd can be interpreted as a symbol of Christ and the salvation and protection he gives to his people. The canopy itself is painted with decorative themes.

The next set of scenes is on the long wall with the bench. The wall has been divided into two registers. Only two scenes have been preserved of the top register. The first is Jesus healing the paralytic. There are three figures in the scene. Jesus is standing in the center and placed slightly above the other two figures. To his left is the paralytic man carrying his bed on his back. On the right of Jesus is the paralytic man lying on his bed. The three figures tell a story in the simplest possible terms. Jesus is pointing to the paralytic on the bed and then the paralytic is shown healed. The second scene, which is only partially preserved, is of Jesus and Peter walking on the water. They are surrounded with waves and behind and slightly above them is the bow of a ship with a few figures peering down at them.<sup>39</sup> The rest of the scenes on the upper register were not saved. From these two scenes, it is clear that they are demonstrating the power of Jesus to save others from physical harm or injury. The saving power of Christ, the Good Shepherd, extends to the present physical world as well as the coming world.

The lower register on the same wall is a continuation of a story that started on the short back wall. What has been preserved shows five women approaching the tomb of Christ. The second scene, below those mentioned above, shows the five women at the

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 180-197.

tomb of Christ. The entire scene has not been preserved but from what remains it can be understood that Christ does not appear with the women.<sup>40</sup>

There are three other scenes in the room. Between the doors is a niche and small table. Between the niche and table, there appears a scene of David and Goliath. David is in a position to strike off the head of Goliath, as Goliath lays helpless on his back.<sup>41</sup> Past the doorway on the same wall, scrunched between the door and corner of the room is a scene of the Samaritan woman at the well. The last scene in the room was a later addition to the wall behind the font and below the good shepherd. It is the scene of Adam and Eve standing by the Tree of Knowledge. How are these three scenes to be understood in the general context of baptism?

As luck would have it, a small scrap of parchment was found during the sixth dig in the year 1933.<sup>42</sup> On this scrap are fourteen lines of text, which reflect the Gospels. After a translation was completed, it was the *Diatessaron* or harmony of the Gospel accounts.<sup>43</sup> The fourteen lines include words and phrases from each of the four Gospels. From this it is possible to extrapolate the background for the pictures in the Dura baptistery. The harmony was written by Tatian in the second century and was the most commonly accepted Gospel text in the East. “Without the *Diatessaron* one could never be

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 180-197.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 195.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 114-119.

<sup>43</sup>Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europo* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1979), 108.

certain at Dura just what Christian tradition the paintings of the Chapel represented, and the fragment is our only witness!”<sup>44</sup>

It seems almost as if the painter of the baptistery were making a special effort also to show the inclusion of each of the Gospels in the paintings. The Marys with other women belong only to Luke; only John relates the story of the woman at the well; the descent of Jesus from David, mentioned only by Mathew, seems indicated in the picture of David and Goliath; and Christ imbued with the Holy Ghost and so performer of miracles as told in Mark seems presented in the healing of the paralytic.<sup>45</sup>

What is missing is any Pauline influence. There has been no evidence to indicate that the letters of Paul were known in Dura or played a part in the formation of the baptistery. But it is obvious that the Gospel, especially in Harmony, were known at Dura and had an influence on the Christian community.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this information. If the Christian community at Dura used the Gospels as represented in the *Diatessaron* then they were not Gnostic.<sup>46</sup> The artwork displayed in the baptistery was chosen from the known life of Christ as portrayed in the text. They did not draw upon scenes which were known only through oral tradition or extra-biblical teaching. The community would have to have been well established with a link to the larger tradition of the Gospels and the teachings held in common. This was a theologically and spiritual mature community.

It may be possible to make some assertions about the use of the rooms and the function of the art in the baptistery. The baptismal font is set against the short west wall.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Welles, 119-121.



On the south wall next to the font is Room 5 with an adjoining door. Room 5 is rather peculiar.<sup>47</sup> During the alterations and decorations made when it was converted to a Christian building Room 5 was left almost completely alone. Kraeling, due to the signs warding against evil spirits, interprets this room to have been used as the initiation room of the new believer, or as an exorcisterium. Once the exorcism is finished, the converts walked into the baptistery and the evil spirits become trapped, because the special signs painted on the doorway between the rooms.

Upon entering the room, the cleansed convert would turn towards the font. On his left would be the scene of the Woman at the Well, which would speak of the life giving water of Christ.<sup>48</sup> The convert would empathize with the woman who is in the act of drawing up the water, just as the convert is in the act of entering the water.

As the convert enters the font, he sees the image of the good shepherd and the later addition of Adam and Eve. The connection between the two is obscure. It is possible they represent fallen humanity and the redeemer of humanity.<sup>49</sup> They may also be scenes of community. The good shepherd with the herd of rams is the Christian community, which the convert is entering. Adam and Eve do not represent fallenness as much as they represent the pastoral or even paradisaal place which all hope to obtain through the community. This is a rougher interpretation but still has merit if taken into account the idea of sin and salvation in the theology of the region.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 151-154.

<sup>48</sup> Hopkins, 110.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 112.

After the baptismal rite, the convert exits the font to the scenes of Christ's healing the paralytic and Christ and Peter walking on water, portrayed on the North wall. There are other scenes, which have been lost to us. We might speculate that they were other scenes of the power of Christ. This affirms to the newly baptized convert the power and protection, which Christ gives to the believer. Under the top register is another register, which contains the scenes of the Many Woman coming to the Tomb of Christ. It continues on to the short East wall, which shows five women approaching a doorway, probably into the tomb. They walk in procession to the tomb, where they find it empty. The convert is taken into the resurrection of Christ and the women witness this resurrection. This is the Christian community and the message they proclaim.<sup>50</sup>

The last scene, David and Goliath, is centered on the South wall under a niche and above a table. Possibly, this place is where the convert first partook of the Eucharist. But that does not fit well with the scene. In the baptismal rite of the East, oil was often used to anoint the baptized. It is a more appropriate interpretation of the scene and the function of the niche and table to represent the unction oil. As David was anointed by Saul to conquer the great giant foe so is the newly baptized. The oil rests possibly in the niche or on the table and is used to anoint the baptized as they finish the rite of baptism.<sup>51</sup>

Hopkins believes that the niche contained a New Testament scroll similar to the niche for the Torah scroll in the Synagogue,<sup>52</sup> since the rite of baptism is done infrequently, traditionally only once a year on Easter. So why would the Christian

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<sup>50</sup>Welles, 180-197.

<sup>51</sup>Hopkins, 115,116.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 116.

community spend so much space, energy and resources to decorate and maintain a room which was used only once a year? The rite of baptism is only one aspect of the room. The table for the Eucharist and the niche to store the New Testament were other more frequent uses of the room. This makes sense to a certain degree, if the size of the room is taken into account, it would not be possible for the whole community to assemble in there at one time, if the size of the assembly hall across the courtyard is an indicator of the size of the Christian community. It is possible that they entered the baptismal room in procession to receive Communion, but there is no precedent for that style in the literature of the region.

### *Summary*

It was common practice to gather as a community in the cemeteries and remember the dead. The cemeteries and especially the catacombs were decorated with symbols and scenes that would remind the community of who they were and why they were meeting. In the house church of Dura, we have an example of a Christian community gathering to celebrate baptism. From the type and quantity of artwork in the Dura church, it is clear that it played an important role in the spiritual life of the community. Therefore, the two known rites of the early church, baptism and communal meal, are also associated with the use of images and symbols. What were those images and why were they important to the spiritual expression of the Christian community? To answer that question we must first examine the symbols adapted from the social context and then survey the biblical scenes commonly used in third century Christian iconography.

## Christian Symbols

The objects from the daily lives of the early Christians give us a direct avenue for entering their rich, intricate culture. It could even be said that material culture provides a better view of the mentality of these individuals than do texts such as the writings of the church fathers, for domestic objects and their imagery provide an insight into the attitudes and artistic concerns of ordinary people, including those who could not read or write. The written materials reflect only the reactions of the educated, who were a small proportion of the total population.<sup>53</sup>

These objects were distinguished from the popular cultural context by certain symbols, which came to represent Christian ideals, virtues and eventually theology. It is made clear that the symbols had value in both Christian and non-Christian contexts. Some of the symbols can only be classified as Christian because they appear next to biblical scenes and seem to have no Christian meaning in and of themselves. This poses a problem for the art historian. Why would Christians choose symbols, which may not have had a Christian meaning?

Let us look at the most relevant symbols, which were used, in the Christian iconographic program of the third century. These are the symbols which can be traced conclusively to pre-Constantine usage: lamb anchor, vase, dove, boat, olive branch, orante, palm, bread, good shepherd, fish and vine and grapes.<sup>54</sup> I will divide the symbols into two classes, the major and the minor symbols. The major symbols occur more frequently and have a wider use in the Christian iconographic program. From this brief

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<sup>53</sup>Eunice Dauterman Maguire and Henry Maguire, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>54</sup>Snyder, 19-20.

survey, it may be possible to draw some conclusions about the function of these symbols in the Christian community.

## Major Symbols

### *Orante*

The word orante was adapted from the Latin word *orans*, which means a praying person. It is a female figure standing with arms raised and head held high.<sup>55</sup> The orante is a popular figure in late antiquity art. In the social context, it can often refer to a personified virtue. On Roman coins, the orante often appears with a stork or altar.<sup>56</sup> The meaning of the symbol on the coin is one of piety, especially of piety of the emperor towards a deceased parent. This filial piety can even extend to the whole state.<sup>57</sup>

Due to its almost exclusive use in funerary art, some interpret the orante to represent the departed soul, especially when considered the soul was usually referred to in feminine terms. The church was also personified as feminine and other scholars interpret the orante to represent the community and the devotion of the believer to their new family, the Church.<sup>58</sup> The orante often appears in the context of the good shepherd.

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<sup>55</sup>Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Dictionary of Christian Art* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 262.

<sup>56</sup>Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1994), 35.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.* 35.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

The two images interpreted together could be the saved and the savior. The saved has already arrived in paradise, the bucolic setting and is giving a prayer of thanksgiving.<sup>59</sup>

The orante also appears in biblical scenes such as Jonah in the Boat, Daniel in the Lions Den, Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace and sometimes in the Resurrection of Lazarus. When the orante portrays a man, it still maintains the same style of posture and dress. It has kept its cultural meaning yet can be used in biblical scenes as male without losing its meaning. These specific scenes, discussed below, use the orante in a specific way. Snyder interprets these scenes as signs of oppression or conflict. The orante represents the Christian community in prayer of expectation or thanksgiving for deliverance from the hostile environment. The orante therefore comes to represent the community facing conflict.<sup>60</sup> Thus Two uses of the orante are clear: first, it appears in a Christian context to represent the soul or the church seeking peace or giving thanks in prayer, second, it appears in a biblical scene as a biblical character, representing the peace of the church as it is delivered from a hostile environment.

### *Good Shepherd*

In Greco-Roman iconography, the good shepherd is Hermes Criophorus. Hermes is the guide to the underworld. He is “associated with hopes for a blessed afterlife and particularly appropriate in a funerary environment.”<sup>61</sup> In late antiquity, it came to represent a more generic meaning of humanitarian care, or philanthropia.<sup>62</sup> The good

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>60</sup>Snyder, 20.

<sup>61</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 37.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 37.

shepherd modern Christian scholarship is interpreted as Jesus the caretaker of the soul, the lamb often on his shoulder.<sup>63</sup>

The sheep on the shoulder of the good shepherd has horns and does not represent Jesus with the lamb adequately. The good shepherd often appears with a flock of sheep and probably linked to the Hermes figure. It may just be a symbol of the humanitarian deeds of the dead one in the sepulcher.<sup>64</sup> Alternatively, it may represent the community from which the dead may belong. “The Christian faith constituted a caring community (Good Shepherd) in which one found kinship peace in times of turbulence (orante).”<sup>65</sup>

The good shepherd was not limited to appearances in funerary art. It also is used in the baptismal font of the house church in Dura. This may have a more direct link to Jesus Christ as the savior, or the shepherd who leads his flocks to still waters (Psalm 23). It is known that the twenty-third psalm was used in baptismal liturgy in Naples,<sup>66</sup> but there is no association with it in Dura. It may be best to refrain from using the liturgy in Naples to interpret the good shepherd in Dura as Jesus. But there are also precedents in the New Testament, which may be more relevant. Jesus is often the shepherd and the church is the sheep. In Dura both the shepherd and the sheep are present. The neophyte entering the water is joining the community of the good shepherd.

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<sup>63</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 147.

<sup>64</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 38.

<sup>65</sup>Snyder, 24.

<sup>66</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 39.

Taken in context with the appearance of the orante interpreted as the soul in paradise, the good shepherd may be best interpreted as the “bucolic bliss and pastoral care of the next world.”<sup>67</sup> This makes sense in its frequent appearance in funerary art.

After Constantine, the use of the good shepherd declined until the Middle Ages. This parallels the shift in Christology after Constantine. Christ came to be the crucified and resurrected savior. In the patristic writing after Constantine, the symbol of the good shepherd was kept but Jesus came to be the shepherd willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The physical images came to be more representative of the person of Christ in full divinity with power and authority,<sup>68</sup> not the Greco-Roman iconic symbol of the shepherd.

### *Bread*

Bread is the symbol of substance of life. In the Old Testament, it is the sign of God’s nurture (Manna). In the New Testament, it symbolizes the Body of Christ.<sup>69</sup> It appears often with fish and a cup of wine. It is usually in a basket with five or seven loaves. Snyder interprets it as a sign of a religious or kinship meal. It may even represent the Eucharist meal, but most likely just a fellowship meal. It has a counterpart in the social matrix prior to Christian use.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>69</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 66.

<sup>70</sup>Snyder, 21-22.



## *Dove*

Modern interpretation of the sign of the dove is that it symbolizes the soul or the Holy Spirit. It characterizes gentle affection and simplicity. In Greco-Roman art, it is a symbol of purity, and in the Old Testament, it is the symbol of peace and ritual purity.<sup>71</sup> The dove often appears with an olive branch. This is the symbol of peace, not of the soul of the dead. This symbol is often used in scenes of conflict to give peace. "If the vase does belong to the 'refrigerium' (meal for the dead) and the dove frequently drinks from the vase, it could be inferred that the peace of the dove does derive from a new sense of family given by God in the faith community."<sup>72</sup> The dove often appears in the Noah cycles, the baptism of Jesus and occasionally with the Young Men in the Fiery Furnace.

## *Lamb*

Modern interpretation of the lamb portrays it as the symbol of purity, innocence, meekness, humility and docility. It is associated with the sign of sacrifice and initiation. It denotes Jesus Christ as prefigured in the Old Testament as the Lamb of God. The lamb can also be a type of the sinful humanity being rescued by Christ as the good shepherd.<sup>73</sup>

Snyder rules out its interpretation as the Lamb of God or any symbolism related to Christ's suffering, death or resurrection. It appears most often with the good shepherd or in context of the good shepherd. The lamb therefore represents the religious person in the community of lambs in the bucolic scene. It represents community and kinship both

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<sup>71</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 113.

<sup>72</sup>Snyder, 18.

<sup>73</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 203.

present and past hence its use on sepulchers. The stress is on deliverance not death and the community is the safe place of protection by the good shepherd.<sup>74</sup>

### *Fish*

Apostolos-Cappadona interprets the fish symbol as representative of Jesus and baptism, Eucharist, Last Supper, resurrection and immortality. It was also associated with baptism and the Apostles (fishers of men).<sup>75</sup>

“The fish... could be anything from a reference to the two miracle stories of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes to a Christological symbol.”<sup>76</sup> It was adapted from the social context and came to mean a plethora of things in the Christian iconographic language: baptism, Eucharist, Christ, and even eschatology. These meaning have been “so merged in the fish symbol that it becomes impossible to factor them out.”<sup>77</sup>

It appears often with other nautical symbols or meal symbols. In association with nautical symbols, it probably represents the person in a hostile environment. In association with meal symbols, it may have represented Christ. There may be connection to Jewish practices. In Asia Minor, it became common practice to eat fish with the Eucharist.<sup>78</sup> After the peace of the church the fish came to represent Christ and the acrostic came into wide spread use.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Snyder, 14.

<sup>75</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 132.

<sup>76</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 47.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 54.

## Minor Symbols

### *Palm or Tree*

The palm in Greco-Roman art is the symbol of military triumph and comes to represent the triumph of Christ. It also symbolizes immortality, divine beings, paradise and resurrection. The palm tree represents immortality and the paradise garden. It can also be seen as the original tree of life. The tree symbolizes the cycle of life, death and resurrection. It also indicates growth, creativity power and immortality. A flowering tree represents life and hope. A withering tree represents negative values and death.<sup>80</sup>

### *Anchor*

Modern scholars interpret the anchor as the symbol of the soul. It can also be used for hope, adherence and steadfastness. With the cross or the Greek letter rho it is used to symbolize hope. It is often found in catacombs and on jewelry.<sup>81</sup>

The anchor as a Christian symbol is abandoned after the peace of the church. This implies that it's meaning was no longer relevant to the situation of the Christian community. Snyder interprets it as a sign of security. It is associated most often with fish, ships and fishing. In social conflict, these things imply security. After the peace of the church, the social conflict ended and therefore the need for symbols of security fell into disuse.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Snyder, 24-26.

<sup>80</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 265.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>82</sup>Snyder, 15.

### *Boat*

Most commonly, the boat is used as the symbol for the church. It has links biblically to Noah's Ark and the stilling of the water by Jesus.<sup>83</sup> It has non-Christian use as a symbol for the departing dead. However, as a Christian symbol that is unlikely. The dead did not leave but remained present as is evident from the practice of eating with the dead. Its use to represent community and security is a more appropriate interpretation. It refers to security in the midst of an alien or hostile environment.<sup>84</sup> It fell into disuse after Constantine adding strength to this interpretation.

### *Olive Branch*

Apostolos-Cappadona defines the olive branch as the symbol of martyrdom, fruit of the church, faith of the just and peace. In the greater Mediterranean area, it was the symbol of peace. In the Old Testament, it is the sign of God's peace and covenant. The dove returning with an olive branch represents a safe journey and the peaceful departure of the soul after death.<sup>85</sup>

### *Vine and Grapes*

The vine is seen as the symbol of peace and plenty. In the Old Testament and New Testament, it represents the relationship of God and his people. It can also symbolize the Church and Eucharist.<sup>86</sup> It has roots in the social matrix as a religious

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<sup>83</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 306.

<sup>84</sup>Snyder, 18.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>86</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 336.

decoration. In Christianity, it has connections to the meal and especially the Eucharist. After the peace, it came to represent Christ with heavy Christological meaning. As it shifted meaning, it was able to survive as a useful symbol.<sup>87</sup>

### *Cross*

The cross has no clear pre-Constantine roots. “Most scholars now agree that the cross, as an artistic reference to the passion event, cannot be found prior to the time of Constantine.”<sup>88</sup> Crypto-crosses and Pre-Constantine crosses have explanations that are more reasonable. It could not develop as a sign of Christ’s passion until he was able to gain the status as having the power of redemption and deliverance from death. Pre-Constantine art, according to Snyder, symbolize victory, peace and security not salvation from death and suffering. The cross could only have meaning if the Christological theology was developed enough to support it, which did not occur until after the peace of the church.<sup>89</sup>

### **Summary of Symbols**

The symbols are all common symbols from the social context with no specific original Christian meaning. They came to be used by the church for their neutrality and because they could portray a Christian meaning. The only way to tell they were Christian is that they appeared near or in Christian biblical scenes.

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<sup>87</sup>Snyder, 26.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 26-29.

## Common Christian Scenes

Besides the symbols, which have been incorporated into Christian iconographic language, there are also a number of scenes that have been adapted from the Bible and the life of Christ. Old Testament scenes are four times more likely to be used in Christian iconography leading up to the fourth century.<sup>90</sup> They are specific to Christian art, or in the case of Old Testament, scenes also share in Jewish iconography. The frequency of the Old Testament scenes to the New Testament causes some interpretive problems. Is it possible that Christian iconography developed from a Jewish predecessor? Goodenough and Weitzmann both propose affirmative answers.<sup>91</sup> The origin of the scenes had particular interest to the Christians. They chose them over others to portray meaning to the community.

The use of biblical themes generally underscores the prominent place scripture stories played in the faith and daily life of Christians, especially in an era when theologians were preoccupied with doctrinal formulation and refutation of heresy, and apologists attempting to give Christianity a philosophical pedigree as well as an intellectual justification.<sup>92</sup>

How one is to approach an interpretation of the scenes will depend upon one's understanding of the scene. It becomes important to understand the scene in its context in relation to other scenes.

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<sup>90</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 68.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 69-71.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 64.

## Jonah Cycle

The Jonah cycle usually consists of three scenes. The first scene is Jonah on the boat or near the boat. Often with Jonah and the boat are two or three figures; one will be rowing, one will be throwing Jonah into the water and the third will be pictured as the orante. The second scene is Jonah and the fish, as either Jonah being swallowed or thrown out. The last scene is Jonah resting, usually under a vine or tree. The Jonah cycle is most often understood as the sign of God's promise of salvation and serves as a fore-type of Christ.<sup>93</sup>

There are five major interpretations of the Jonah cycle.<sup>94</sup> First, if the Jonah cycle is seen as narrative it seems to exclude some very important parts of the story, such as Jonah's call by God, his refusal, his preaching in Ninevah and the repentance of the Ninevites. It does not tell the story very well.

The second interpretation is to bring Jonah into harmony with the New Testament and patristic writers. Jonah is a sign of resurrection. This fits well with the funerary examples. Yet, Jonah is never in the belly of the fish, which would make the most sense to represent death and resurrection. The most common scene is of Jonah at Rest.

Third, Jonah at Rest often shows Jonah in the nude and set in a pastoral scene. This gives rise to the interpretation of Jonah as representing the soul in an in between state. The practice of eating with the dead does not lead one to the idea that the dead have departed to another realm, but remain with the community. The nudity of Jonah comes from the model of Endymion, which was most likely used in the portrayal of Jonah. It is

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<sup>93</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 190.

<sup>94</sup>Snyder, 45-47.

the Jonah at rest equivalent in the social matrix. His nudity is a by-product of the model and too much should not be read into it.

The fourth interpretation derives from the cultic use of the scene. Its appearance in funerary art suggests a connection to the dead, possibly a prayer to the dead.

The fifth portrays Jonah as overcoming the hostile environment. Jonah often appears as an Orante, even in the mouth of the fish. After the peace of the church, the Jonah cycle is no longer used. This demonstrates a connection to the social situation of the church and its use. The Jonah cycle may symbolize the overcoming of the hostile environment.

### **Noah in the Ark**

Noah is depicted as an orante standing in a boxy ark. A dove is common in the scene. "Noah story offered the early Christian artisan an opportunity to express piety and peace in a boat that withstood the alien environment."<sup>95</sup> Modern scholarship views this symbol as a fore-type of Christ and as a sign of salvation and baptism.<sup>96</sup> After the peace of the church, the Noah figure became part of larger narrative scenes. This shifted meaning from Noah as a symbol of peace in a hostile environment to just another link in the story of Christ.

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<sup>95</sup>Snyder, 49.

<sup>96</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 256,257.



### **Daniel in the Lion's Den**

Modern scholars interpret this scene as a fore-type of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, and, taken one step further, to the salvation of Christians.<sup>97</sup> Daniel is often seen as an orante between two lions. Because of the use of the orante, which symbolizes peace and prayer, Snyder claims the “scene represents the peace, which can come from God through the faith community whenever one faces individualized threat from external sources.”<sup>98</sup>

### **Susannah and the Elders**

Modern interpretations make Susannah and Daniel prefigures of Christ and salvation.<sup>99</sup> Clear similarities with Jonah and Daniel exist. Susannah is shown as an orante between two elders who are accusing her of adultery. Again, this can be interpreted as a symbol of peace in the face of harassment.<sup>100</sup> After the peace of the church, Susannah as an orante falls away for the use of Susannah in a larger narrative, adding weight to this interpretation. After the peace of the church, she comes to resemble Mary or Christ.

### **Sacrifice of Isaac**

The most obvious interpretation would be Christological in nature. Yet this scene appears in Jewish as well as Christian art. In Christian art, before the peace of the church,

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>98</sup>Snyder, 49,50.

<sup>99</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 96.

<sup>100</sup>Snyder, 50-51.

Isaac is not on the altar, but appears with Abraham standing or kneeling next to the altar. After the peace of the church, Isaac is regularly shown on the altar with obvious Christological meaning and a central theme in Byzantine art.<sup>101</sup>

In Christian literature, the sacrifice of Isaac becomes the Old Testament counterpart to the sacrifice by God of his only son. However, this is not adequately reflected in the art before Constantine. It is possible to interpret this scene as deliverance from a hostile environment. Often included in the scene is a ram hidden in the bush behind Abraham and Isaac. With this element it demonstrates that Isaac is saved by the ram and Abraham and Isaac are both delivered, hence they appear as orantes.<sup>102</sup>

### **Moses Strikes the Rock**

This symbol prefigures Christian baptism.<sup>103</sup> Moses does not appear as an orante but stands at the rock with his staff in hand in the position to strike. New Testament pictorial representations of Christ often show him healing with a wand or staff. Both the wand and the staff demonstrate power being used to deliver an individual or community from a bad situation (thirst or illness). A similar scene of Peter striking the rock emerges after the peace of the church, which resembles Moses striking the rock. After the peace of the church, scenes of Moses take part of a large narrative context.

Because Moses is not represented as an orante, he may not symbolize peace. Nevertheless, he is in the act of deliverance. It is possible that this scene represents the

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>103</sup>Apostolos-Cappadonia, 246.

deliverance of the community from a hostile situation or possible the deliverance of an individual into the community of the faithful through baptism.<sup>104</sup>

### **Adam and Eve**

Modern interpretations of Adam and Eve scenes make Adam as prefigure of Christ as the second Adam and Eve as fore-type of Mary.<sup>105</sup> Adam and Eve are usually shown standing with the tree between them. The snake may be present but is usually in a harmless position with no clear sign of threat. This may be interpreted as a pastoral scene, possible of paradise, with the snake and tree taking on pastoral meanings. Adam and Eve are not orantes and do not represent peace in a hostile environment.<sup>106</sup>

### **Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace**

Modern scholarship understands the Fiery Furnace to symbolize either Christian salvation or Mary's perpetual virginity.<sup>107</sup> This is a very popular Old Testament scene. All three of the men appear as orantes, occasionally there is a fourth present but not shown as an orante. Sometimes there is a dove present in the scene. Snyder interprets it as a scene of survival in a hostile environment and peace. When it appears with the Susannah cycle it may represent political harassment. After the peace of the church it falls into disuse and only appears in larger narratives and the men no longer appear as orantes.

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<sup>104</sup>Snyder, 52-53.

<sup>105</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 15,16.

<sup>106</sup>Snyder, 54-55.

<sup>107</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 98.

## Summary of Old Testament Scenes

The Old Testament scenes provide the possibility of representing peace by the use of the orante in moments of danger, threat or hostility: Noah and the flood, Jonah and the Sea, Daniel and the Lions, Susannah and the Elders, Three young Men in the Furnace. There are also the occasional scenes of hope and deliverance: Jonah at rest, Adam and Eve (if pastoral in nature and not a symbol of sin), and Moses striking the Rock.<sup>108</sup> If this is an accurate interpretation of these scenes then it becomes obvious that the piety of the church before the peace of the church was looking towards deliverance from the hostile state, remaining true to the faith and possessing a sense of peace even in the face of oppression, hostility and danger.<sup>109</sup> It was not an overly spiritual piety centered in salvation from sin and death, but rather a concern with physical safety and preservation of the community.

Two problems arise with this interpretation. First, it presumes an empire-wide persecution. Christians were persecuted, but had lengthy times of peace and in some regions were not persecuted at all.<sup>110</sup> A second problem with interpreting all the OT scenes as references to salvation from a hostile environment is that it does not adequately take into account their appearance in funerary art. One would assume that art used in cemeteries would emphasize the next world, or the place where the dead are.<sup>111</sup> Neither one of these problems eliminates the validity of this interpretation. If we remember that most of the preserved images are taken from catacombs in Rome, the capital of the

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<sup>108</sup>Snyder, 55.

<sup>109</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 74.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.* 75.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*

Empire, the political meaning is all that more evident. In addition, the frequent meetings of the Christian community in the catacomb add weight to the argument that the images are community oriented in nature

## Jesus

As we turn to scenes from the New Testament the concern centers on the deliverer, Jesus, and not the one being delivered, orante. Jesus does not appear as the orante and only three symbols are frequently used to portray Jesus.<sup>112</sup> It is important to remember that they are figurative symbols and not attempts to portray Jesus in any pictorial sense.

The good shepherd is often used to portray Jesus. Its Christological meaning does not become clear until after Constantine. Before the peace of the church, it may have represented Jesus as the leader of the flock or community of believers.

Another symbol is the *tradito legis*, or seated older man with a scroll in his left hand. This becomes a common theme, especially after the peace of the church. Only after Constantine, Christ comes to represent a figure with authority to hand out power through his teachings.

In the New Testament scenes of Jesus, further explained below, his usual appearance is as a beardless youth. The lack of passion scenes, the youthfulness of Jesus and his appearance as a wonder-worker emphasis Jesus as a deliverer not concerned with death and resurrection.

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<sup>112</sup>Snyder, 55.

Friedrich Gerke has created an outline with dates of the evolution of the depiction of Jesus in Christian iconography.<sup>113</sup>

I. Christus philosophicus	280-310
II. Miraculum Domini: Christ the Wonder Worker	
A. Christus heroicus	300-320
B. The Seasonal Christ	312-340
C. Christus puer	330-360
III. Victoria Christi	340-370
IV. Maiestas Domini	300-410

This outline makes it apparent that the identity of Christ and Christological reflection develops quite rapidly in the fourth century but for thirty years, leading to the fourth century, the identity of Christ remains largely unchanged. Only after the peace of the church is there a move to finalize the identity and meaning of Christ into one orthodox statement. As that statement was still in formation through controversy and council the image of Christ in icons also changed. Let us look at the scenes of Christ and other related scenes from the New Testament to gain better grasp of the iconographic understanding of Christ in the pre-Constantine church.

### **Baptism of Jesus**

These scenes are interpreted as the beginning of Christian baptismal practices. It is used to symbolize Christian baptism and in later works, it is developed into an elaborate theological narrative scene.<sup>114</sup> The scene usually includes a nude Jesus in the water, who is smaller than John the Baptist. John, larger and bearded, usually has his

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>114</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 50,51.

hands on Jesus and a dove is near by. After the peace of the church, the baptism scene usually takes place in the larger narrative context, whereas before the peace it would often stand alone. Jesus is not an orante in the scene and therefore does not represent peace.

Snyder interprets the baptism of Jesus as his first act of wonder working and deliverance. “Jesus delivers from the alien environment, water... the little nude Jesus must be the boyish wonder-worker of the healing scenes, who for his first ‘sign’ heals the water, which represents the environment. The dove then symbolizes the peace achieved, a peace that can be symbolized by the orante, fish, and anchor.”<sup>115</sup>

### **Wise Men**

The wise men are three men in Persian dress usually carrying gifts and moving towards a non-descript object in the earliest examples. The giving of gifts was a common gesture in the social matrix for showing respect to a foreign Emperor. The use of the wise men demonstrate the power of Jesus to deliver the believer (orante) from a hostile political situation (when used in conjunction with Daniel or Susannah), or situation of harassment and gain security and peace. After the peace of the church, the scenes become incorporated into the larger narrative of the life of Christ.<sup>116</sup>

### **Jesus the Healer**

Five scenes of Jesus as healer appear regularly in the pre-Constantine Christian iconography. They are scenes in which Jesus heals the paralytic, the lame man, the

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<sup>115</sup>Snyder, 57,58.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 58-59.

crippled man, the woman with the flow of blood, and delivers the demon-possessed man. They always show Jesus in action as the one doing the delivering. He is in the act of pointing or touching the sick. They can be interpreted together as Jesus was the one with the power to deliver from physical ills.<sup>117</sup>

### **Resurrection of Lazarus**

This is most often understood in modern scholarship as a symbol promising life after death.<sup>118</sup> It is a common scene, especially in funerary art. Jesus is shown standing before a door pointing his finger or a wand towards Lazarus who is laying or standing just inside the doorway. In association with the meal for the dead and the frequency of this scene in funerary art, Snyder would interpret it as Jesus delivering Christians from the dead. It is not an assurance of life after death or end times resurrection. The dead do not depart to another place, but remain in the community at the gravesite.<sup>119</sup>

### **Jesus as Teacher**

This scene portrays a bearded man dressed in the philosopher's tunic, sitting and holding a scroll.<sup>120</sup> In the social context, this was a flattering way to portray the deceased as a scholar or intellectual. The face of the philosopher would be that of the deceased.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>118</sup>Apostolos-Cappadona, 209.

<sup>119</sup>Snyder, 60-61.

<sup>120</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 44.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.



In Christian funerary iconography, this scene is not used as frequently as the scenes of Jesus healing. Jesus is often shown alone, with an unknown audience. He holds the scroll as if to read from it. This may be interpreted in various ways. It could be the symbol for the true philosophy, or Christian teaching. Justin Martyr saw certain philosophers as proto-Christian who paved the way for Christian teachings to the Gentiles.<sup>122</sup>

The philosopher appears in context with the orante and the good shepherd. These three images alone do not make it a Christian context but may only display virtues. In a Christian context, they may show the ministries of the church as prayer, study and pastoral care.<sup>123</sup>

The teacher may have been a symbolic reference to Jesus. The original meaning of the scene may be Jesus as an authority figure mediating revelation. Because the scene changes slightly after the peace of the church, the meaning may have also shifted.<sup>124</sup>

After the peace of the church, Jesus is shown teaching in front of crowds, most often his apostles. He also holds the scroll as if to give it away or share it with others. He is in the act of movement and gesture, as if teaching. The facial features come to be commonly associated with other images of Christ, as healer. He comes to mirror the Emperor with the court officials. Theologically, Christ came to represent the true teaching of the Church after Constantine.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>Snyder, 61-62.

<sup>125</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 46.

## Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes

This scene is often represented with just a few loaves and fishes and Jesus may or may not be present. Snyder interprets it as Jesus delivering the people from hunger.<sup>126</sup> It also is used to represent a meal. It may be the meal with the dead, the Last Supper or another common meal of the church. The discovery of the triclinium, or objects used in funerary meals, made it clear how important the meal with the dead had become for Christians. The larger social matrix also celebrated a similar meal.<sup>127</sup> The placement of the scene of multiplication in funerary art probably represented the meal with the dead. In other contexts, it may have represented other meals of the church, such as the Eucharist.<sup>128</sup>

## Summary

Should these scenes from the OT and NT be interpreted as symbol or as narrative? The only scene with a lengthy cycle, Jonah, composing three panels still does not create a narrative feeling. To tell the story of any of these events, multiple panels with complex scenery would need to be used. I think, due to the lack of this form, it is best to interpret them as symbols. They are symbols rooted in a biblical context, which would be familiar to the audience. What do they symbolize? If the symbols listed above are understood in the context of the biblical scenes, such as the orante or the dove, then a clear picture begins to form of their meaning. Many of the scenes seem to be scenes of deliverance and hope, especially numerous examples of the Jonah cycle. How have these scenes and

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<sup>126</sup>Snyder, 64-65.

<sup>127</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 56.

<sup>128</sup>Snyder, 65.

symbols been interpreted? Since the iconoclast controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries there have been varying ways to interpret the use and value of the icons in the pre-Constantine church. Historical Perspective

## Historical Perspective

### *Iconoclast Controversies*

During the Iconoclast Controversies of the sixth and seventh centuries, each side of the debate assembled support for the defense of their cause from the Patristic writers. Of course there is the element of misuse of the Patristic sources by both the iconodules and iconoclasts. Many of the quotes are out of context and used haphazardly to proof-text a point. It is a beginning point from which to proceed.

In the minds of the opposing Byzantine parties, Christian history before Constantine constituted a crucial *praeparatio iconoclastica*. Both iconoclasts and iconodules appealed to tradition, Scripture and patristic literature (most of it post-Constantine), to justify their conflicting positions. Both factions culled testimonies from earlier documentary traditions and apparently thought they were resuscitating their religion's original attitudes and practices.<sup>129</sup>

After the first round of iconoclastic destruction, the Orthodox accumulated a list of sources to support their position. The list fails to take into account an adequate range of sources from before the fourth century. The only pre-Constantine Father they list is

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<sup>129</sup>Paul Corby Finney, "Antecedents of Byzantine Iconoclasm: Christian Evidence before Constantine." in *The Image and the Word*, ed. Joseph Gutman (Missoula, Montana: Scholars 1977), 30, 31.

Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata*, Book 17. Even this reference had little bearing on the controversy of the time.<sup>130</sup>

After the second round of Iconoclastic destruction a new list of support from the Patristic writers was drawn up by the Council of Paris. This list was a more thorough review of the Patristic sources, but they still only managed to draw out two sources that pre-date Constantine. The first is Origin's *Homilies* on Exodus and Romans. The second is Lactantius, a late third century writer, who composed *The Divine Institutes*, which mentions idols on a number of occasions.<sup>131</sup>

Both sides of the Iconoclast Controversy strove hard to prove their case through Scripture and historical sources. Both were on equal footing and could make little head way against one another through those sources. It finally took the act of a council to decide the outcome. The importance of these on the study at hand is that the textual sources for the origin of Christian iconography are surprisingly absent.

These sources were taken largely from a specific genre and used in inappropriate ways. Every literary genre has specific forms and functions.

Apology was a literature of reconciliation, directed to an upper-class readership, designed to win concessions, recognition, and legitimation for the new sect. The attack on cult images and image worship followed the purpose of the genre by underscoring the conformity of Christian ways to enlightened paganism, always at the expense of the popular religion.<sup>132</sup>

One would expect the Fathers to be writing strongly against or in support of the use of icons in the Church. Before the fourth century, they are largely silent. Why was

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<sup>130</sup>Edward James Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (New York: Macmillan, reprint 1978), 146.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid. 258

<sup>132</sup>Finney, *Antecedents*, 33

this? They spoke against the use of idols. However, nothing in the program of Christian iconography prior to the fourth century served in the Christian community as an idol. Only after the peace of the church do we see the development of icons of specific figures of Christ, Mary and the saints. Before the peace of the church, no graphic representations of specific peoples, especially figures for worship, such as Jesus or Mary, exist. “[T]he documentary record reveals virtually nothing about practice, whether iconic or aniconic, among the earliest generations of the new religion.”<sup>133</sup>

Even though the Fathers are silent on their perspective regarding the use of images in popular piety, they can still contribute to this study. Theologically, they were creating a new religion. Just as they borrowed philosophical ideas and cultural language so they borrowed expressions of piety in graphic form.

## **16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation**

At the time of the Protestant reform, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt produced a pamphlet directed against the use of picture (icons) in the church. The following year, 1523, Ludwig Hatzer based another track upon the work of Karlstadt which was picked up by Huldreich Zwingli. He then used it in the writing of *Answer to Valentin Compar*.<sup>134</sup> This set the stage for the anti-image argument based on tradition and Christian history.

Calvin writing later in the same century developed his own aniconic understanding of the earliest church. Based on the second commandment and patristic sources, which Calvin knew well, he portrayed the church before Chalcedon (451) as a

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<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 5.

pristine and pure church. This implied they were aniconic in practice and iconophobic in theory.<sup>135</sup>

The Protestant reform movement became very iconophobic and even had outbreaks of iconoclasm. This stance is based solely on the patristic sources and the current trend of interpretation of those sources. Archaeology was a much later development, as late as the nineteenth century. Once archaeology was introduced with a new source for data and insight into the early church, new evaluation of the patristic sources had to be made.

### ***Roman School***

It could be said that Christian archeology began with the Roman School.<sup>136</sup> As European Protestants struggled to catch up with the groundbreaking work of Bosio and de Rossi, a bitter fight ensued. The Roman School had defined the subject, but mostly in confessional terms, which the Protestants responded against with their own confessional terms. This greatly limited the advancement of both groups. Only once they moved out of confessional terminology were advances made in finding archeological truth.<sup>137</sup>

The Roman School of Archeology would always turn to the patristic sources first, in order to interpret the archeological evidence. The item in question would be researched in biblical and patristic literature. References from *Liber Pontificalis* and the pilgrim itineraries were accumulated and then used to portray the history of the subject. Then the archeological items and data were inserted into the literary structure. If any discrepancy

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<sup>135</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>136</sup> Finney, *Early Christian Art and Archaeology*, 205.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 205-206.

between the literary and archeological data occurred then the literary would always take precedent.<sup>138</sup>

The Roman School would not distinguish the patristic sources by region or date and presupposed a continuous tradition. They would read theological developments into artifacts that may not support them. This methodological approach lead to skewed results in their interpretations of the origin and use of Christian art and often gave to early a date for the origins of Christian art. The cultural and regional contexts of the artifacts were not considered.<sup>139</sup>

This school of interpretation leads to three assumptions, which have carried into other schools of interpretation. First, it assumes the text accurately represents the historical situation when it may not. Second, it assumes the text speaks with one voice when it may have ignored, repressed or assimilated other voices. Third, it assumes the literature represents the literary level of popular religion when actually literature and practice often stand in tension.<sup>140</sup>

## ***Aniconic***

Working strictly from patristic sources a school of thought emerged which interpreted Christian art as heretical until the third century. “Prominent historians of Christianity have often held either that for nearly two hundred years Christians repudiated visual imagery on religious grounds or that Christians resisted a practice they associated

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<sup>138</sup>Snyder, 3-6.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 164.

with the decadent pagan culture, or both, since the attitudes are not mutually exclusive.”<sup>141</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the predominant view toward the Early Church held that it was a pure church, which stood apart from society. This is based largely on the work of Harnack, Koch, and Klauser. Harnack, in the late nineteenth century established a paradigm of a pure church. “Harnack viewed the earliest form of Christianity as in essence a religion of simple Semites living lives of high moral purpose.”<sup>142</sup> It was only after the Church began to be Hellenized that the pristine church declined. One of those Hellenistic inventions was the use of religion pictures. Working from this framework, Koch compiled the pre-Gregorian patristic and ecclesiastical sources to defend the modern anti-image understanding of the early church.<sup>143</sup> Klauser built on this work by searching for archaeological proof of the aniconic stance of the early church.

According to this position of interpretation, only in the third century did the aniconic stance of the church begin to shift. Pre-third and fourth century use of icons would naturally have been associated with heretical groups. Henry Chadwick sums this position up best when he states:

The second of the Ten Commandments forbade the making of any graven image. Both Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria regarded this prohibition as absolute and binding on Christians. Images and cultic statues belonged to the demonic world of paganism. In fact, the only second-century Christians known to have had images of Christ were radical Gnostics, the followers of the licentious Carpocrates.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup>Jensen, 13.

<sup>142</sup> Finney, *Invisible God*, 8.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>144</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967), 277.



This school of interpretation hinges on the idea that the church was one pure, unified institution. That is a misconception, which Walter Bauer<sup>145</sup> debunked by demonstrating that the early church was not as unified as previously thought. The Church was rather a collection of various Christian expressions living in harmony and existing side by side.

Later writers who wished to portray early Christianity as an orthodoxy speaking with a single voice repressed literature of the 2nd century that represents this heterodoxy. Such suppression accounts for the surprising lack of literature from that time and indicates that 'orthodoxy' did not really exist until one of the varieties of Christianity had gained ascendancy. Heresy was that variety of Christianity that was repressed rather than the factor that eroded pristine orthodoxy.<sup>146</sup>

This debate is evident from the Christological debate between Arius and Athanasius, which prompted Constantine to call the first council of Bishops in Nicea in 325. It was only here that an orthodox theology was expressed in opposition to other forms of Christian expression. However, in the time prior to Constantine the church was in no position to fight amongst itself. It had to let diversity live in order to preserve itself in a hostile culture.

This interpretation of the patristic writings and archeological evidence from the early church held until the mid-twentieth century. During this time, a new interpretation arose in part due to the discovery of many new Christian artifacts from the third century

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<sup>145</sup> See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.ed. by R.A. Kraft and G. Krodel. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

<sup>146</sup>Snyder, 165.

coupled with the rise of more sophisticated archaeological methods. The new interpretation has been named the “Emperor mystique.”

## ***Emperor Mystique***

In the mid-twentieth century, a new school of interpretation developed by Ernst Kantorowicz, Andreas Alföldi, and Andre Grabar.<sup>147</sup> This school saw the origin and development of Christian iconography through the eyes of the Emperor. State iconography centered in the image of the Emperor. Much of it told of the Emperor’s triumphs and victories. This school of interpretation understood the early Church to be attempting to portray Christ as the victor over evil and death. The most natural way was to adopt the Emperor mystique and adapt it to the person of Christ. Fourth and fifth century Christian art certainly bears this out.

They began their interpretation with the presupposition that the early church was aniconic until the third century. It was then that they began to mirror the iconography of the Emperor. Grabar is interested in the origin of Christian iconographic language as it developed from the social context. His study concentrate on those pieces that are in existence and how they compare to the icons of the social context. Christians did not create anything new; they only adapted existing symbols from the culture. Even the biblical scenes are constructed with figures and symbols common to the social context. Therefore, it is clear that every Christian icon has a counterpart in the social context.

In any image that a painter or sculptor makes, the part that is properly his own is minimal. The rest belongs to the vocabulary of the current

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<sup>147</sup> T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), chap. 1, *passim*.

language of the visual arts, either the language in general use or, sometimes, a special technical language already established. It is on this condition that an image-maker is understood by others, the obvious aim of anyone who expresses himself whether it be in images or in words. Christian iconography in late antiquity follows the general rule, and the considerable portion of it that consists of clichés or of less banal but still common forms of the art of the time is particularly evident because all these features can be observed in pagan works, often works earlier than the first Christian images.<sup>148</sup>

However, every language has specialty or technical languages geared for a specific purpose. By comparing the Christian iconographic language to the language already in existence from the cultural context, it is possible to see what technical language the Christians adapted as their own.

Christian iconography in late antiquity shows more specific relationships to certain special areas of contemporary iconography, exactly as a particular technical language can furnish itself with special terms drawn by preference from a certain definite source. It is thus that Christian iconography drew largely on the conventional motifs of the repertory that previously had served the official art of the Roman state and on those of the secondary currents that flowed from this art.<sup>149</sup>

The main problem with this school, however, is that it fails to take into account the major shift in the Church after Constantine. Pre-Constantine Christian art does not adequately develop the theme of Christ victorious to defend this interpretation as part of the origin of Christian iconography.<sup>150</sup> It was a later development.

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<sup>148</sup> Grabar, 31.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>150</sup> Mathews, chap. 2 *passim*

## **Modern**

The first of the modern schools of interpretation can be traced to a groundbreaking work published in 1977 by Sister Mary Charles Murray in *The Journal of Theological Studies*.<sup>151</sup> She puts forth piercing questions to the aniconic understand of the early Church. She traces the idea of a pure church before Constantine to Renan.<sup>152</sup> This idea was developed further by von Dobschutz.<sup>153</sup> Both of these works are based on assumptions of Harnack. From here, the idea of a pure church before Constantine follows the line into common scholarly truth as laid out above. These presuppositions, which began as scholarly opinion and became scholarly truth,<sup>154</sup> are based on two assumptions. The first is the attitude of the early Church Fathers and their use of the Decalogue. The second is an “unbroken link in the matter of attitude of the early Church with the Byzantine Church.”<sup>155</sup> Murray then goes on to demonstrate that the use of the Decalogue by the early church Fathers was neither consistent nor coherent. Later interpretations of the Fathers assumed that they were continuing a tradition based in Judaism, that images of any sort were forbidden. The discovery of Synagogues with painted scenes, such as the one at Dura-Europos, proves that this was not the true attitude of the Jews and therefore not necessarily the attitude of the Church Fathers of the time.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Mary Charles Murray. “Art and the Early Church.” *Journal of Theological Studies*. (No. 28.2 1977)

<sup>152</sup> See E. Renan, *Histoire des origines du christianisme* (Paris, 1891).

<sup>153</sup> See E. Von Dobschutz, *Christusbilder*. (Leipzig, 1899).

<sup>154</sup> Finney, *Invisible God*, 9.

<sup>155</sup> Mary Charles Murray. “*Art and the Early Church*” 307.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

The second problem is easily dismissed once the historical context is taken into consideration. The main point is established by the outbreak of iconoclasm in the eight century. This deals with idol worship, not images as art.<sup>157</sup> The iconoclasts had easy access, therefore, to a tradition, which spoke against idols, but not icons as art. “[N]o protagonist of the hostility theory has yet been able to produce one single clear statement from any early Christian writer which says that non-idolatrous artistic representation is wrong.”<sup>158</sup> Idols were feared in the iconoclast controversy, not artistic images. In the early Church, icons were never in a position to serve as idols. They were not even graphic representations of people, only symbols or narrative. “Clearly the ‘genetic’ theory of a continuously hostile tradition to art which finally erupted into Iconoclasm cannot be maintained, and the linking of discussions of early art to the period of Iconoclasm has been mistaken.”<sup>159</sup>

Murray was able to study the spiritual expression of the early church in artistic forms without falling into heresy or idolatry. The early church did use icons in specific places and for specific purposes. Some of these will be covered in this study. More importantly, she offered a new approach to the interpretation of the early church and the origin of iconography.

Modern interpretation has diverged into a few dominant schools. The first school views Christian iconography as the expression of the believers “from below.” This would include women, the uneducated, culturally outside and any who are oppressed by the

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<sup>157</sup>Ibid., 312.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid., 317.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., 344.

male dominated priestly hierarchy. It breaks the church into two distinct groups; the text speaks for the official group and iconography for the popular group. It is therefore understood that the “official” church had to give in to the uneducated masses by allowing the use of art. Snyder, in his work *Ante Pacem*,<sup>160</sup> interprets most of the symbols of pre-Constantine Christianity as symbols portraying salvation and hope in a hostile environment. The symbol has meaning because of the cultural context or social matrix, not from some mystical or literary source. He completely disconnects the use of symbol in literature and the use of symbol in art. They do not necessarily symbolize the same thing.<sup>161</sup> A problem with this interpretation is that it turns exclusively to the archeological evidence. Textual sources are suspect because they only represent the “official” church and do not relate to the masses. By removing the archeological evidence from its context in a community with both writing and physical expression it ultimately skews the interpretive results

Mathews, in *The Clash of Gods*, puts forth another interpretation. First, he debunks the Emperor Mystique interpretation and then goes on to establish a new look at the evidence.<sup>162</sup> He sees the advent of Christian iconography as a battle between the Christian God and the pagan gods. If the Christian God is to be the truly supreme almighty God, then he must do everything the pagan gods can do only better. He connects most Christian scenes to parallels in the pagan culture. Christ is not an Emperor with limited power, but the divine with unlimited powers. He is the greater God with the

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<sup>160</sup>See Snyder, *Ante Pacem*.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>162</sup> Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*.

most awesome powers. Christ replaces all the older gods and eventually triumphs over them. This is a very interesting and insightful interpretation of the images, but it ignores the developing theology evident from textual sources. His work is centered in fourth century work or later so has limited connection with this study.

A third interpretation sees a parallel development between theology and art. Jensen bypasses the dualism and works to harmonize the art and the theology. The art is not only the popular expression, but also the expression of the entire Christian community. There is an

organic emergence of Christian art in a complex but receptive community of believers who saw art as a legitimate expression of religious faith... Christian believers were never an entirely unified community... the essence of their differences could not be based on whether they were essentially visually or textually oriented.<sup>163</sup>

The official church did not sell out to the popular and often illiterate people of the church. This interpretation has much merit and more work needs to be done to flesh out all aspects of it.

## ***Summary***

Historically, there have been many ways to deal with the early church and its stance on icons. The very first interpreters of the patristic fathers in light of icons, the Iconoclast controversies, were out to make a case and defend their position for or against the use of icons in worship. This created results skewed to their respective side. Neither side was on solid scholarly ground. Again, in the Protestant reformation there was a movement against icons. This scholarship was one-sided, to prove the point that the true

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<sup>163</sup> Jensen, 15.

church needed reform even in its worship. The church needed to return to its pristine state, which existed in the first 500 years of the church. Scholarship made another attempt to define the early church's aniconic stance but this worked from a position, which already presupposed an aniconic, pure church. Evidence assembled by Koch and Klauser would naturally defend this point. There is a shift in research at this point. The archaeological data and the patristic sources are brought into harmony. Since then every art historian has had to find a balanced use of both sources of information. How each of the developing schools used and read these sources would dictate the results of their interpretation. Modern, late twentieth century scholars, are attempting to develop new ways to work with the information, some such as Snyder see the use of the art in the early church in the framework of hostility and oppression towards the Christian. In addition, others such as Jensen see the use of art as a valid expression of the official church. It is along these lines that this study will continue.

### ***Early Church Fathers: Apologists***

If we are going to be true to the scope of the study then we must limit the textual sources to the third century or earlier. A limiting factor will be looking at the Fathers with the intention of fleshing out what they have to say about the use of icons in both secular and Christian realms as well as in private and public use. Most of what they have to say revolves around the use of idols, which goes beyond the scope of this study in general. A word should be said about that aspect of their thought.

Idols were a major source of contention with the Early Church. They were often called atheists in formal arguments because they failed to worship the idols. This use of



icons is very specific. An idol goes beyond the use of images in religious settings. The religious item no longer serves the function of religious decoration and becomes a pointer to the god itself, or may even become the god. Within Christianity, it was firmly held that the God of the Christians could not be portrayed in a visual manner that would be sacrilegious and idolatrous. This limits the use of Christian art to other functions. When debating the pagan philosophers and religions the Christians would often use the idea of idolatry as a sign of superstition and stupidity. How could one worship a god, which one could see or even pick up and use for firewood? It was ridiculous. That is not the only use of icons in the culture and in Christianity. The other uses slowly made their way into the Christian expression.

## **Methodological Problems**

There are a few methodological problems in using the Father's. The first problem is an issue of authority. In the third century, there was not a unified church. Christianity was regional. Geographical regions would have different interpretations of Christian practice and expression based on different religious writers; this led to differences in theology and influence. Constantine, desiring to keep his empire united, made the first moves to unify the church by calling the Council of Nicea in 325. Therefore, when we look to the pre-Constantine church we have to be aware of the regional differences and influences.

A second problem is in interpretation. It follows from the above that there was not a theological consensus. We cannot interpret third century writing through subsequent theological developments. We have to be regionally and historically aware. In some

areas, the idea of Christ's death and resurrection as it relates to salvation and victory was a much later development and we cannot read this type of development into the third century writings.

## Apologists Genre

The apologists had a specific genre with a distinct form and function. If the attacks on art-related work and idols are to be rightly understood then we must understand the form and function of the apologetic genre. The apologetic genre was a well-established literary device by the second and third century. Christians began to use it to defend themselves against attacks, both popular and judicial, to and request sanction and safety by those in power. Christian apologetics came to be a way for the new religion to defend itself from attacks, and to define them as a valid, moral religion.<sup>164</sup>

Within the genre of the apologist, there was a specific way to construct the work according to a set of literary rhetorical forms. There are three participants in the apologist's work: the writer, the addressee, and the enemy. The writer is defending a position or a group of people against the attack, or supposed attacks of the enemy. The writer addressed the apology to an addressee, who is usually someone of rank and authority; on occasion, it may be an open letter. The writer begins the letter with praise for himself, his education and the noble stance he is taking against this enemy. Next, he addresses the reader, or addressee, as a noble and worthy person and uses all types of "rhetorical forms of flattery."<sup>165</sup> The flattery used in respect to the addressee will be similar to that used in respect of the writer. It creates the feeling of the two as "birds of a

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<sup>164</sup>Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol 1 (Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1953), 186-87.

<sup>165</sup>Finney, *Invisible Gods*, 23.

feather” standing against the enemy “bonding in the common cause of defending wisdom, justice, goodness, of upholding everything that is wise and decent and rational.”<sup>166</sup> The enemy is caricatured as an uncouth, superstitious, ignorant buffoon. Thus puts the addressee in the position of either defending the enemy or siding with the writer. To gain the support of the addressee, it is in the interest of the writer to show the enemy as the most worthless and vile thing possible, image worship and idolatry was a common feature to do just that. Image worship is nothing but superstitious mumbo-jumbo.

Five literary characteristics had an affect on the attack on art by the apologists. It is important to remember that the attack is not the issue at hand; rather the goal of the apologist is to show the ignorance and error of the enemy and gain the support of the addressee.

The first category is the appeal to precedents presented in pithy popular maxims that are often satirical. The Greco-Roman literary tradition had a collection of philosophical and literary sources compiled against the use of icons. The Christians only had to borrow from this tradition. If they were responding to Jews, the Christians could easily pull from the already established Jewish rabbinical tradition.

The second category was the “apologists heterogenous and highly eclectic quality.”<sup>167</sup> The Christian writers would pull from any and every source that could be used to defend their position. It was a cut and paste job that ignored genre and history,

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<sup>166</sup>Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>167</sup>Ibid., 27.

“uncritically conceived and hastily executed.”<sup>168</sup> This allowed them to use whatever information was available, often making the attacks very random and formless.

The third category is their widespread use of popular philosophy making it easy reading that the most simple of people could follow. With in the philosophical framework were ample attacks on the use of images in popular worship.

The fourth and fifth categories are closely associated as “the lack of coherent arrangement in the presentation of subjects.”<sup>169</sup> The apologist would wind around a subject, return to it in part later and add more. It makes it rather hard to follow the thread of the argument and to pull together their exact attacks in formal statements.

“The apologists’ attack on Greek art... is not a superfluous addendum. Nor is it literary curiosity. [It is] an integral and essential part of the overall apologetic tactic.”<sup>170</sup> They used it to attack the popular religions of the day and to gain support for their cause from the wise authorities who could see the value of the moral religion of Christianity. The attack served one purpose, to advance the argument.

Apologetics was not the only source of literary sources for the early church. Although it was a widely used literary device, others have insight into the early church’s stance towards art. It is also evident that the apologists were concerned with showing the ignorance and error of their enemy not to put forth a detailed work about the practices and teachings of the Christian religion. They left that to other writers. As to references to Christian art, which is the topic of this study, there is none in apologetics.

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., 30.

## Non-Apologetic Writings

Apologetics was not the only genre used by Christian writers. Other writers employed many different styles of writing, such as homilies, sermons, exhortations, instructional catechism, acts of the martyrs, attacks on heresy, allegory, and many other forms.<sup>171</sup> In these other writings, precious little is said about the use or prohibition of the use of images. Clement makes a remark in passing, as does Tertullian. Those passages are listed below. Other than those two references, images do not come up except in response to pagan idols.

### Clement of Alexandria

Let the seals be of a dove or fish or ship in full sail or of a musical lyre, such as Polycrates used, or of a ship's anchor, like the one Seleucus had engraved in an intaglio; or, if anyone be a fisherman, let him make an image of the Apostles and of the children drawn out of the water. Nor representations of an idol may be impressed on the ring, for we are forbidden to possess such an image, nor may a sword or bow, for we cultivate peace, nor a drinking cup, for we practice temperance.<sup>172</sup>

### Tertullian

Perhaps the shepherd will favor you whom you picture on the chalice, himself a debaucher of the Christian sacrament, worthy to be both an idol of drunkenness and a protector of the adultery which follows upon the cup.<sup>173</sup>

### Summary

It is an error to use these quotes out of context. In context, it is clear that neither Clement nor Tertullian were talking about artwork directly. Clement is instructing

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<sup>171</sup> Quasten, vol 2, 1-4.

<sup>172</sup> Clement of Alexandria, 256.

<sup>173</sup> Tertullian, *On Purity*, Translated by William p. Le Saint. in *Ancient Christian Writers* edited by Johannes Quasten and Walter Burghardt, (New York: Newman 1959), 82.

Christians on what symbols would be appropriate on signet rings, if they have to use them. A signet ring was used as a stamp of approval or seal. It represented the owner of the ring. Christians should not be represented by vulgar or uncouth symbols but should chose something neutral. He was not instructing the Christian believer on the use and meaning of symbols. Tertullian was instructing the Christians on how to remain pure and not accommodate the impure, or adulterers. The Shepherd of Hermes allows for the return of adulterers to the community of faith. Tertullian was using their painted cup as an example of their error, not in painting their cup but in their use of the Shepherd for setting doctrine pertaining to adulterers. Neither one is directly countering the use of images nor are they condoning their use

## **Summary**

It is clear that the early Fathers were not overly concerned with images in an artistic sense. Their attack on pagan idols was a literary device to draw the support of the reader. Because of this attack and their overall silence on the use of icons they have been interpreted as iconophobic. I do not think that this is the best interpretation, especially in light of the archaeological data. Because of their silence, too much should not be read into what they have not said. The social expectation of religious images and symbols will be covered below.

## **Social Context of the Early Church**

In many respects, art is the privilege of the upper classes. It takes a certain amount of wealth and position to afford art. The quality of the art will reflect the position of the

one who has commissioned the piece. It is therefore important to attempt to establish the position of the Christian community in the social context.

Another reason this is important is the idea of survivability. Archeologically speaking, there are few artifacts that remain preserved through the ages, the greater the number of artifacts the greater the chance of survivability. The Christian community had to reach a certain size before the odds of having their artifacts preserved shift in their favor. This may be a reason why there are no artifacts before the third century. The Christian community was not large enough and affluent enough to have pieces of art in places where they had a reasonable chance of surviving. This proves true with the catacombs. For these two reasons it is important to look at Christian converts and their social positions.

### ***Christian Converts***

What can be said about Christian converts in light of this study? By the third century Christianity had a firm following. The Christian church had grown into a cultural phenomenon drawing peoples from all lifestyles. There were the educated, rich as well as the poor, and illiterate. To characterize the church as only one or the other does a disservice to the history of the Church. It is obvious from the archeological evidence that a number of Christians must have been affluent. The cost of carving a sarcophagus is very prohibitive and only the most well off could afford it. The commissioning of painters to decorate the catacombs or even the house church at Dura-Europos would be expensive. These were community affairs and it is possible that the paintings of frescoes

and the installation of mosaics were commissioned by the community and not the wealthy individual.

From a textual perspective, it is evident that the church had a high moral standard, especially in caring for orphans and widows. Both of these groups are usually member of the underclass of a society. It was no different for the Roman society. "Abortion and infanticide, which were decimating pagan society, were forbidden to Christians as the equivalent of murder; in many instances Christians rescued exposed infants, baptized them, and brought them up with the aid of the community fund."<sup>174</sup> They also stressed abstaining from the theater, pagan festivals and public games. This high moral code set the Christians apart from their societal context. It became a point of contention with the pagans. The pagans saw it as a shortcoming and the Christians saw it as strength.

Christianity offered hope to the underprivileged that they might someday partake of the divine paradise where all will be united in love and harmony. To the middle class it offered a sense of community with answers to the questions of meaning and identity. To the upper class of the Roman Empire, it offered a moral standard by which to live that set them apart on a higher plane than their neighbors.<sup>175</sup> It became a faith for all people in all classes and stations of life.

As Christianity drew in new converts, however, there always arose a tension between the new and the old. Christians reared in the church for multiple generations had expectations of moral and ecclesiastical standards. The new converts fresh to the

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<sup>174</sup>Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 3, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 598.

<sup>175</sup>Ibid. 602.



community of Christ would invariably bring their past with them. The new converts were used to the worship style of the pagan temples. They were comfortable with icons and statutes in the worship space. The pagan festivals, feasts and holidays were still part of their social context. How was the church to respond to the incorporation of converts and their social ways? What was the view towards art of these converts?

## ***Cultural view of art***

### **Use and place of art in society**

There was a plethora of art in every Roman city and province. The Romans built their art largely on the style of the Greeks.<sup>176</sup> As they conquered the Greek lands, they incorporated the Hellenistic style into their own dominion. Corinthian and Ionic columns and capitals were made common by the Greeks years before the Roman Empire. The Romans adapted the style of their Greek predecessors and contributed little to its development.<sup>177</sup>

Art and architecture was commonplace. Art was on every street in the form of columns, statutes and fountains. It was in the marketplace as columned porticos. It was in the government buildings called basilica, which the later church buildings of the same name were modeled after. It was in the common homes as paintings and sculptures. It was in the temples. The common person saw art in some form everyday and everywhere, even on the coins with which they bought their daily bread.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup>Ibid., 338.

<sup>177</sup>Ibid., 339.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 339-347.

## Forms and expectations

Sculpture was a widely used artistic form in the Roman Empire. From terra-cotta pottery to elaborate scenes on sarcophagi and in temples, sculptors made a lucrative living. Sculptures gave body to the Roman gods. It provided triumphal arches depicting the Emperor or general in all his glory. Later, senators and Emperors had busts carved to serve as reminders of their greatness. These busts often lined the streets, senate house and even temples of Rome.<sup>179</sup>

Sculpture was not the only source for artistic expression. Another form often used was painting. “The art was practically limited to fresco and tempera. In fresco a freshly plastered wall was painted with water-moistened colors; in tempera the pigments were mixed with an adhesive sizing and laid upon a dry surface.”<sup>180</sup> Painting was used on statues, in temples, as stage scenery and on great linen canvases used in the Forum. It was used mostly widely on walls, either external or internal. “The Romans seldom placed furniture against a wall or hung pictures there; they preferred to use the entire space for one painting, or for a group of related designs. In this way the mural became part of the house, an integral item in the architectural design.”<sup>181</sup> The scenes would often reflect the mythology of the Greek and Roman gods. The homeowner or the one who commissioned the work would pick a favorite scene to be displayed.

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<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 350.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid., 352.

<sup>181</sup>Ibid.

## ***Christian converts view towards art***

The social context from which Christians converted was rife with art and scenes of the gods. How were they to practice their new religion in this context? Unfortunately, the sources are rather silent on this point. From the textual sources there are strong attacks on idols and images, even in some places it is alluded that all pictures are suspect. Yet, there is no evidence in Pre-Constantine church art for the use of idols within the Christian community. These strong assertions are used to distinguish the Christian community from the larger cultural context. Yet, there is a difference between art used for idol worship and art used for narrative or decoration. Textual sources are silent on the latter use of art. So we must turn to the archeological evidence.

As has been established above, art, which is distinguishable as Christian, did not arrive until the end of the second or early third century. It is unlikely that this is the beginning point of the Christian art, just the art used before this time by Christians was not distinguishable from the larger social context. This does imply that the converts had some expectation of artwork within the framework of their new religion. It was commonplace in home and temple before conversion and they would expect it to remain so after conversion. Then there is the radical moral code of the Christian. When one converts to the Christian faith one is stepping out of the social context and entering into something completely different. The question that must be asked is: did this strong moral code carry into the converts' expectations of artwork in the new religion?

I think that the moral code did carry into the expectations of the new converts. They were moving from a culture of idols to one of an invisible and all-powerful God. Christian art never used idols, even sculptures are lacking until the fourth century, with

the exception of the sarcophagi, which were never the center of worship. The moral code forbids the use of idols, not the use of narrative or decorative art. Whether this was a concession to the populace or the official position of the church is hard to distinguish at this time. The expectation of the convert left room for the development of iconographic expression as long as they did not approach the level of the idol. In the scenes listed above only the Good Shepherd at the baptistery in Dura is in a central position. Even the good shepherd is only symbolic and not a direct representation of the image of Christ or God. Worship was not directed towards it or any other pictorial image. It is clear that iconic images were only symbolic or possibly narrative in nature and were never intended for worship. The converts would hold to the moral code of the Christian faith but still have room to express their spirituality through images and symbols.

## ***Summary***

It is likely that, Christian converts maintained some expectation of artistic expression in their new faith. Art was very prevalent in the social context in both the public and private spheres of life. As long as the new converts were willing to abide by the moral and religious prohibitions against the use of idols, artwork would be allowed. The cost of the art displayed in the catacombs and home churches lead one to believe that these communities had some financial resources. Christian sarcophagi and their tremendous cost lead one to believe that there were at least a few rich families in the Christian community. Therefore, peoples from all classes and positions were building the Christian community, those who could afford to commission the artwork and those who were edified by its use as an expression of Christian spirituality, in contrast to the use of the written word.

## Symbolic Meaning in Christian Iconography

What is the nature of a symbol? Danielou has written an excellent study of the literary use of symbols by the Early Church Fathers.<sup>182</sup> From this study, it is easy to conclude that the Fathers of the Early Church were very fluent with the use of symbols to represent a spiritual truth. However, there is not necessarily a direct connection between a literary use and an iconic use for symbols. This does establish the familiarity that the Church had with the use of symbols in some form.

A symbol is often used as a pointer to direct the viewer towards something that cannot be expressed in any concrete or tangible way. The symbol of the good shepherd points to Jesus Christ and the stories told by both him and the Church. It also points to community, the lambs under the protection of the shepherd. It can point to the character of the protector, one willing to give life and limb for the protection of the community. The orante can symbolize prayer. It can also symbolize peace provided by God in a hostile situation, depending on the context, such as when Daniel is portrayed as an orante among the lions. These meanings are evident from both Biblical and patristic uses. These are intentional symbols. Can a biblical scene also serve as a symbol, or is it narrative?

The scenes can be interpreted as either narrative or as symbol. If they are understood to perform a narrative function then they presuppose a more sophisticated theology. Certain stories were chosen because they represented some theological truth.

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<sup>182</sup>Jean Danielou, *Primitive Christian Symbols*, Trans. by Donald Attwater, (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964).

They are associated with other images in the context as a complete program working together to form one theme, so they function as a theological story.<sup>183</sup>

If they interpreted as symbolic then they are lacking theological substance. They were not chosen to portray a theological story or teaching but because they have value as a symbol expressing a greater truth. They function as a pointer, which directs attention to something greater than it does. The community understood the symbolic value as being rooted in the biblical story but moving away from the story into the life of the community as expressing a spiritual truth.

The Old Testament images are not direct narratives but serve as symbols. The artists portrayed just enough of the story to make the symbolic point without elaborate detail, such as in Noah there are no animals or other objects that would be needed to complete the narrative function.<sup>184</sup> The artists only needed enough lines to depict it as a familiar scene to the community.

The New Testament scenes follow the same pattern. Elaborate series of scenes are not used tell the full story. The scenes describe a symbolic meaning, which is rooted in a biblical story. The community is familiar with the biblical story and from there can enter the symbolic meaning. It is in the symbolic meaning that the scene moves from story to spiritual truth.

After Constantine and the peace of the church, a fuller iconographic language is developed which begins to serve a more elaborate narrative function. This is evident from the development of pictorial representations of Jesus and the Apostles. The life of Christ

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<sup>183</sup>Finney, *Invisible God*, 66.

<sup>184</sup>*Ibid.*, 75-76.

begins to fill out with the addition of the nativity, regular appearance of the wise men, baptism, and passion scenes. The symbolic value of the pre-Constantine scenes of Christ used in the narrative function begins to fall away. The Old Testament scenes also begin to be used less frequently. Eventually even the Old Testament scenes begin to assume only a narrative function.

More evidence pointing to the symbolic value of the biblical scenes is the wide use of symbols within the scenes. The orante is often used to portray biblical characters such as Daniel, Moses, Noah, Isaac and Abraham. Even though Jesus is not portrayed as an orante, it is widely held that the Good Shepherd has some symbolic value as a Christ figure. In post-Constantine Christian iconography, these figures come to be represented with standardized figures with faces and body types.

In summary, the biblical scenes had a symbolic value that outweighed their narrative value for the community. The community knew the biblical story and it served as a beginning or background from which the symbolic value moved. With the use of pagan symbols within the biblical scene, the intention was not to accurately tell a story but to hint at the story and reveal the symbol.

## **Conclusion: A Spirituality of Christian Iconography**

### ***Summary of Positions***

Let us begin with a summary of the Church Fathers. The apologists did write against using images and idols. Understood in the context of the genre of apologetics, their attack was for gaining support of the addressee. The enlightened rulers and philosophers saw idol worship as popular superstition. Besides the apologist, little was

said about the use of images. Because of this silence and the attacks on pagan idols, some assumed that the early church was iconophobic in nature and aniconic in practice. This was brought to light by the iconographic controversies of the eighth century. The iconoclasts set a precedent for interpreting the early church as a pure and pristine church until the forces of Hellenization were able to infiltrate the church in the fifth and sixth centuries. This precedent held through the Protestant reform and through the nineteenth century development of archaeology. Only in the last few decades of the twentieth century has this position been challenged.

Let us turn briefly to the archaeological evidence. Prior to the third century there is little evidence that points to Christian material objects, which can be distinguished as such. This compounded the problem of early Church iconography. There are many reasons the early church may have been slow in distinguishing itself with a material culture. It does not necessarily lead to the idea that the early Church was aniconic. Evidence of third century Christian iconography seems to flourish. A plethora of catacombs with frescos exists in Rome. A baptistery is preserved in Dura-Europos. Mosaics and other artifacts begin to appear in throughout the empire. This simultaneous emergence of Christian icons over vast regions demonstrates that it must have been rooted in a deeper tradition, slowly growing into a true Christian form from the early use of pagan symbols endowed with Christian meaning. The emergence of biblical scenes both Old Testament and New Testament with regularity and commonality points to a more complex history. What conclusions can be drawn from about the spirituality of the church both official and popular?



## **Conclusion**

Christianity in the third century was fighting to establish itself as a vital new religion with something positive to contribute to the world. The apologetic genre came into full use in the third century as a means to defend Christianity and to gain support in a hostile environment. Christian communities were meeting together in secret, hence the catacomb rooms set up for communal meals out of sight from the general population. They were also establishing rituals and practices, such as communal meals and baptism. These rites were being developed into meaningful programs of the Christian faith. Along with these rituals rose figurative art highlighting symbols and scenes, which had meaning for the believers. Art became a key component to expressing their spiritual experiences in baptism, communion, liturgy, and even as a community in a hostile environment. This art gave them meaning as a community, which carried into fourth century expressions of icons. The lack of direct figurative art of Christ, the disciples or any saints, demonstrates that the community was more interested in the symbolic value not the pictorial. The limited development of the cycles as incomplete pictures of the actual story limits the interpretation of the biblical scene to symbol and not full narrative. They symbolized something greater than just the story, it had real meaning as a sign to the community not just a narrative teaching a theological point.

The converts coming into this new religion had certain expectations about what should and should not be used in worship. Images were very common, especially in the religious setting of the Greco-Roman world of the third century. The converts would expect some type of images used in or around the religious area of the community. The church took a firm stance against the use of idols, but Christian icons were never used as

idols. The icons always pointed towards an invisible God acting through humans in history. The expectation could easily be fulfilled without ever jeopardizing the second commandment. Archaeological evidence supports this view. The house church at Dura-Europos is a perfect example of the use of icons in the religious setting of the community. In the place where the rites were held, images were used to bring the participants into a deeper sense of divinity and community. In the common rooms and meeting places, no images were displayed. The image was not God.

## ***Potential Problems***

### **Argument from Silence**

The first real problem is attempting to build an argument from silence. The textual sources are silent on many issues covered in this study. The archeological data is lacking in certain key areas of the study of the origin of Christian iconography. It would be wrong to fill that silence with words or images. To do so is embarking into unknowable territory, which is best left unexplored. Silence is often the enemy of good research, the drive to find the answers or pull the answers out of data packs may override our respect for silence.

### **Argument from Generalization**

Another problem arises when one generalizes the data and makes it speak for the whole community. The house church at Dura contained a baptistery. That does not imply that all house churches had baptisteries, or even that any other house church ever had a

baptistery. The baptistery may have been significant just to that Christian community with no relevance anywhere else.

This does have a limiting factor on the study of a subject, which has relatively few sources. Some generalizations may be safe to make. If there is overwhelming evidence that a certain symbol, such as the Good Shepherd, was used across multiply geographic regions then it may be safe to say that the whole church found it significant.

This holds true for written sources as well. There is no evidence that the Christian community at Dura had the Pauline letters. It would be wrong to assume they did and then begin to interpret the baptismal font in exclusively Pauline way.

### **Finding a balanced approach**

Another problem is in balancing the literary sources and the archeological sources. As seen in the introduction there are various ways to bring the two sources together, but finding balance is another matter. There is a bit of subjectivity when interpreting either source. To put all the interpretive weight on one source and then use the other to proof text your results can force the second source to say things it may have never intended to say. However, the problem really shows itself when the two sources do not run parallel but seem to contradict each other. I think that from that point it may be best to leave it in silence, or proceed very cautiously.

## Appendix

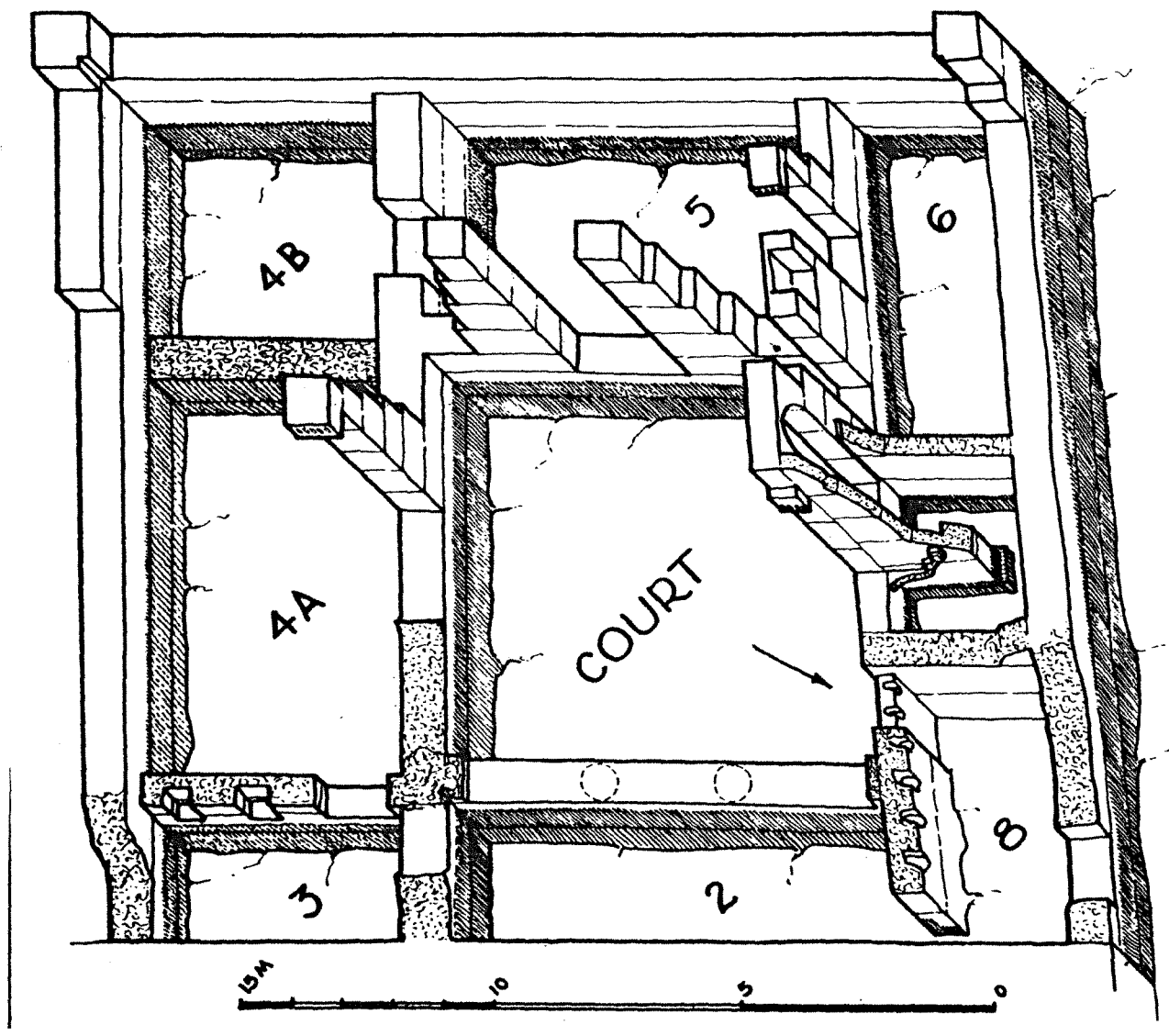
**Table 1. Third Century Biblical Scenes by Source<sup>185</sup>**

Biblical Representation	Fresco	Mosaic	11 Sarc	Roman Frag	Other	Total
1. Giving Life to Eve					1	1
2. Adam and Eve	1		2		1	4
3. Noah and the Ark	3		3	2		8
4. Sacrifice of Isaac	2		1	2		5
5. Harassment of Moses			1			1
6. Moses Striking the Rock	4		1			5
7. Moses and the Bush				1		1
8. Ascension of Elijah				1		1
9. Jonah Cast into the Sea	4	1	8	23	2	38
10. Jonah and the Ketos	1		8	17	2	28
11. Jonah at Rest	5		7	25	5	42
12. Tobit and Fish		1				1
13. Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace	1		3			4
14. Daniel in the Lion's Den	2		2		2	6
15. Susannah and the Elders	3			1		4
16. David and Goliath	1					1
17. Wisemen	1					1
18. Baptism of Jesus	3		1	2		6
19. Jesus Teaching			1	1		2
20. Healing of the Paralytic	2		1			3
21. Healing of the Demon Possessed			1			1
22. Healing of the Lame				1		1
23. Healing of the Crippled				1		1
24. Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes			1	1		2
25. Woman at the Well	2					2
26. Resurrection of Lazarus	2		2	1		5
27. Walking on the Water	1					1
28. Women at the Tomb	1					1
29. Fisherman			1	2		3
30. Woman with Flow of Blood			1			1
31. Christ Helios		1				1

<sup>185</sup>Snyder, 43.

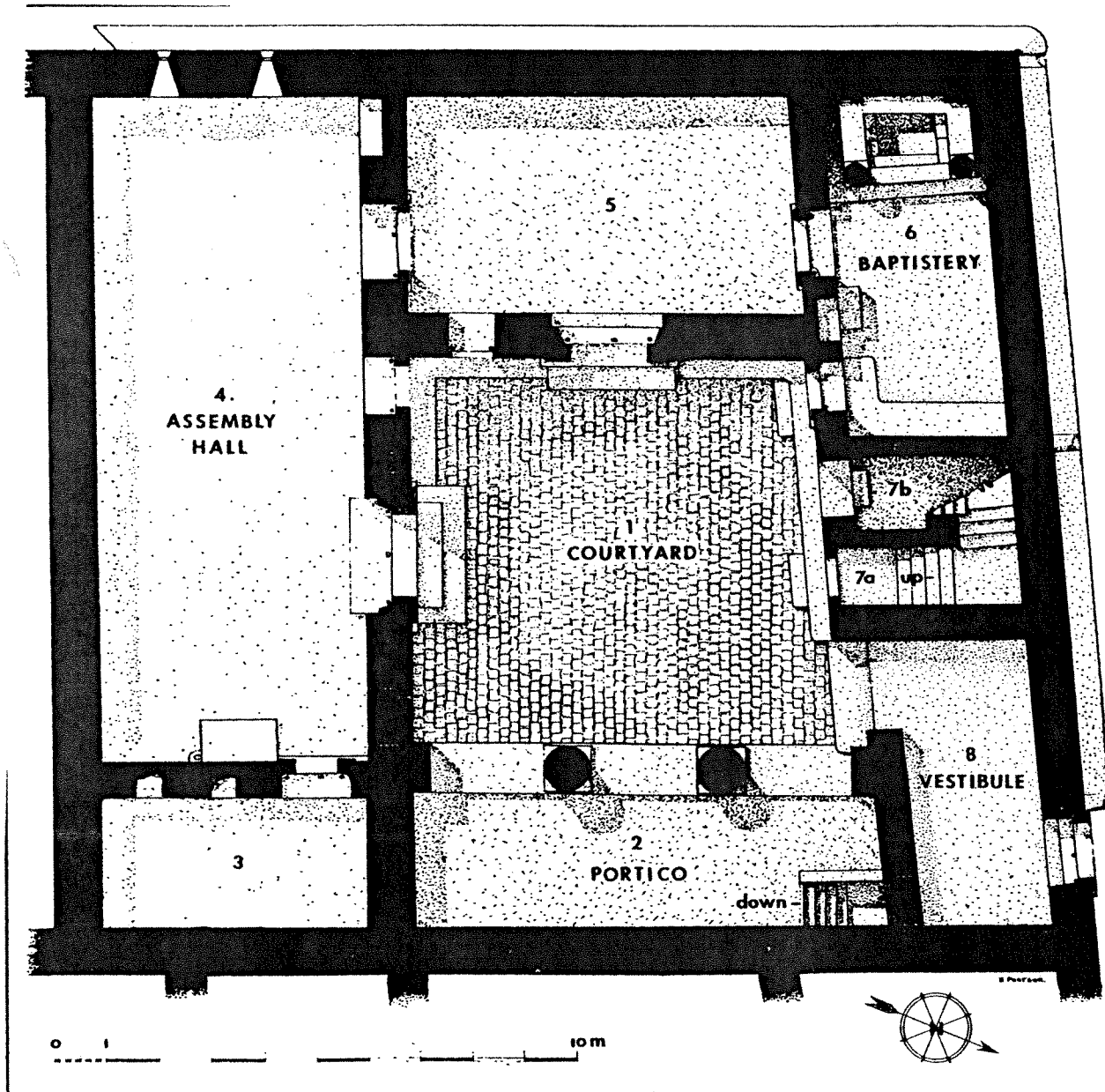
**Figure 1. Durene House**

(Adopted from Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 69.)



**Figure 2. Christian House Church at Dura**

(Adopted from Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 70)



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