

ABSTRACT

Idols and Empire: Preludes to Philosophy of Art in Early Christianity

Joseph Clarkson

Director: David Lyle Jeffrey, Ph.D.

Prior to the eruption of the Iconoclastic Controversy in the eighth century, complex traditions of artistic practices and theories had begun to emerge in Christian communities throughout the Roman world. As a minority religious group, Christians initially appropriated and often subverted Roman artistic styles and motifs to negotiate their identity within a polytheistic cultural context. Simultaneously, Christian apologists attacked polytheistic artistic practices as a way of showing the propriety of Christian religious practices. Contemporary scholarship often takes it as a given that Christian artistic practices and theory were at odds with each other from the time that Christians first began producing artworks. However, a careful consideration of the material and documentary evidence from the second century through the fourth century shows a greater harmony between Christian artistic practice and theory than is often assumed. By giving undue epistemic privilege to neither the visible nor the verbal evidence from early Christianity, I attempt to allow Christian images to contribute to our understanding of Christian artistic theory much as texts have done. I do so by examining images of idols in early Christian art and comparing various ways of interpreting these images. I conclude that early Christian artists shared many of the same concerns about images that Christian theologians and philosophers expressed in their writings.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. David Lyle Jeffrey, Honors Program

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

IDOLS AND EMPIRE
PRELUDES TO PHILOSOPHY OF ART IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

By
Joseph Clarkson

Waco, Texas

May 2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Dedication.....	vii
Epigraph.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Roman Images and Identity.....	6
Chapter 2: Christian Images and Identity.....	39
Chapter 3: Art and Idolatry in the First and Second Centuries.....	74
Chapter 4: Art and Idolatry in the Third and Fourth Centuries.....	94
Chapter 5: Towards a Christian Theory of Images.....	115
Bibliography.....	133

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Funerary relief of the Servilius family, Rome, late first century BC, marble, Vatican Museums.

Figure 1.2. Sarcophagus with the myth of Selene and Endymion, early third century AD, marble, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 1.3. Tomb relief of the Gessi, Lazio, late first century BC, marble, Museum of Fine Arts.

Figure 1.4. Tombstone of Insus, Lancaster, early second century AD, Lancaster City Museum.

Figure 1.5. Mosaic of a dog from the House of the Tragic Poet, first century AD, Pompeii.

Figure 1.6. Hunting scenes from the House of the Ceii, first century AD, fresco, Pompeii.

Figure 1.7. *Telemones* from the Forum Baths, first century AD, Pompeii.

Figure 1.8. Carnelian ring stone depicting an artist at work, circa second century AD, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 1.9. Reverse of coin issued by Valerian I, circa 256-58 AD, Bithynia.

Figure 1.10. Artemis of Ephesus, circa 125 AD, marble, Vatican Museums.

Figure 1.11. Marble slab dedicated to Sol Invictus from the barracks of the Equites Singulares, circa 175 AD, Via Tasso, Rome.

Figure 1.12. Lararium of the House of the Vettii, first century AD, fresco, Pompeii.

Figure 1.13. *Isis lactans*, fourth century AD, fresco, Karanis, Egypt.

Figure 1.14. Mithreum of San Clemente, third century AD, Rome.

Figure 1.15. Arch of Titus, circa 82 AD, Rome.

Figure 1.16. Detail of the Arch of Titus showing the spoils from Jerusalem.

Figure 1.17. The Arch of Septimius Severus, 203 AD, Rome.

Figure 1.18. The Arch of Constantine, 315 AD, Rome.

Figure 1.19. Hadrian in military dress, 117-138 AD, Antalya, Turkey, Antalya Museum.

Figure 1.20. The family of Septimius Severus, circa 200 AD, tempera on wood, Egypt.

Figure 1.21. The Tetrarchs, circa 300 AD, porphyry, from Constantinople, now in Venice.

Figure 2.1. Alexamenos graffito, circa 200 AD, the Palatine Hill, Rome.

Figure 2.2. Stele of Licinia Amias, early 3rd century AD, marble, Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.

Figure 2.3. Lamp with the Good Shepherd, Noah's Ark, and Jonah, circa 200 AD, clay, from Rome, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Figure 2.4. Fresco with the Good Shepherd, Jonah, and Orantes, third century AD, Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

Figure 2.5. Epitaph of Severa with Adoration of the Magi, mid-third century AD, Catacomb of Priscilla, Vatican Museums.

Figure 2.6. Sarcophagus from Santa Maria Antiqua, circa 275 AD, marble, Rome.

Figure 2.7. Reconstruction of the baptistery from Dura-Europos, mid-third century, Yale University Art Gallery.

Figure 2.8. Christ as Orpheus, fourth century AD, fresco, Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

Figure 2.9. Christ as Sol, late third century AD, mosaic, Mausoleum M, Vatican Necropolis.

Figure 2.10. Madonna and Child, third century AD, fresco, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome.

Figure 2.11. Old St. Peter's Basilica, 318-360 AD, Rome, cf. Giovanni Ciampini, *De sacris aedificiis a Constantino Magno constructis: synopsis historica*, 1693, p. 33.

Figure 2.12. Apse of Santa Pudenziana, late fourth century AD, mosaic, Rome.

Figure 2.13. Three youths refusing to worship an idol, third century AD, fresco, Catacomb of Marcus and Marcellinus, Rome.

Figure 2.14. Detail of a sarcophagus with three Hebrew youths in the furnace, early fourth century AD, marble, from Rome, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston.

Figure 2.15. Detail of a sarcophagus showing Christ's entry into Jerusalem, early fourth century AD, marble, from Rome, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 2.16. Plaque with an apotheosis scene, circa 400 AD, ivory, from Rome, British Museum, London.

Figure 2.17. Plaque with Christ's ascension, circa 400 AD, ivory, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich.

Figure 2.18. Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, circa 359 AD, marble, Rome, Vatican Museums.

Figure 2.19. *Confessio* of Saints John and Paul, mid-fourth century AD, fresco, Rome.

Figure 5.1. Sarcophagus of Adelpia, mid-fourth century AD, marble, Catacombs of St. John, Syracuse, Sicily.

Figure 5.2. Sarcophagus with three youths refusing to worship an idol, fourth century AD, St. Gilles in Arles, France.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis director, Dr. David Jeffrey, for dedicating so much time and effort to guiding my research, reading my drafts, and suggesting edits. I am especially grateful to him for his willingness to do this while on sabbatical. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to bring this project to fruition under his supervision.

Dr. Ken Jones and Dr. Elizabeth Corey both deserve my gratitude for agreeing to read my final draft, sit on the defense committee, and provide feedback. Their questions and comments have been most helpful for bringing this project to completion. I would like to thank them both for helping make my thesis better than it otherwise would be.

I am indebted to the Department of Classics, particularly Dr. Alden Smith, Dr. Jeff Fish, and Dr. Meghan DiLuzio, who recommended books and discussed topics related to this thesis with me. Likewise, I am grateful to the faculty and staff of the Honors Program, especially Mrs. Diane Haun, without whom I could not have written this thesis. I would also like to thank the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Political Science for helping me think through issues and subjects related to this thesis.

I should also thank several others who have contributed in some way to this thesis. I am thankful to Dr. David Smith for sparking my interest in cultural history and for recommending that I take Dr. Jeffrey's course on philosophy of art. Moreover, I should thank Dr. Heidi Hornik, whose art history surveys introduced me to the various ways of approaching art history. I am also grateful to Dr. David Corey and Dr. Robert Miner for their guidance and mentorship in the last three years.

Finally, I want to thank my friends and family. Sofie specifically provided continuous emotional support, and Emily kept me motivated by working on her thesis alongside me. My parents also deserve special thanks. Their commitment to the flourishing and faith of their children has deeply shaped us all. Without their sacrifices, we would not be who we are today. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for always supporting us.

To my parents, who taught me to seek God

Lord, if you are not here, where shall I seek you, being absent? But if you are everywhere, why do I not see you present? Truly you dwell in unapproachable light. But where is unapproachable light, or how shall I come to it? Or who shall lead me to that light and into it, that I may see you in it? Again, by what marks, under what form, shall I seek you? I have never seen you, O Lord, my God; I do not know your form. What, O most high Lord, shall this man do, an exile far from you? What shall your servant do, anxious in his love of you, and cast out afar from your face? He pants to see you, and your face is too far from him. He longs to come to you, and your dwelling-place is inaccessible. He is eager to find you, and knows not your place. He desires to seek you, and does not know your face.

Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the eruption of the Iconoclastic Controversy in the eighth century, complex traditions of artistic practices and theories had begun to emerge in Christian communities throughout the Roman world. As a minority religious group, Christians initially appropriated and often subverted Roman artistic styles and motifs to negotiate their identity within a polytheistic cultural context. Simultaneously, Christian apologists attacked polytheistic artistic practices as a way of showing the propriety of Christian religious practices. Since no Christian reflections on art as such survive from the first two centuries of Christianity, much of what scholars now know about early Christian attitudes towards art comes from these polemics against polytheistic practices of worship. This has distorted contemporary scholarship because it is easy to mistake attacks on particular Greek and Roman artistic practices as attacks on art in general. Contemporary scholarship often takes it as a given that Christian artistic practices and theory were at odds with each other from the time that Christians first began producing artworks. However, a careful consideration of the material and documentary evidence shows a greater harmony between Christian artistic practice and theory than is often assumed.

Chapter One provides context for the discussion of Christian images by broadly outlining Greco-Roman artistic practices. Within society, Romans used images to define and commemorate their roles as fathers and mothers, citizens and freedmen, civilians and soldiers, and wealthy and poor throughout the Roman Empire. Images also played an important part in Roman religion, whether in the public cults of the gods acknowledged

by the state, in domestic cults usually maintained by the *paterfamilias*, or in the various mystery cults that promised secret knowledge to those initiated into their rites. Likewise, Romans were masters at using images to maintain political power by building monuments to commemorate important victories, distributing portraits of emperors throughout the empire to ensure the recognizability of Roman power, and facilitating the worship of imperial cult images to establish a religious bond between the subjects and their rulers. Images were omnipresent in all parts of the Roman world from public baths, temples, and monuments to private houses and tombs from the center in Rome all the way to the periphery in the far provinces of the empire.

Within this context, Chapter Two explores the ways in which Christians negotiated their own social, religious, and political identities using images. As a small religious minority, the place of Christianity in Roman society was a matter of contention. However, Christians quickly adopted the visual vocabulary of Roman art to demarcate themselves while simultaneously subverting the meaning of the Roman motifs they had appropriated. Although Christian artists borrowed heavily from the Greco-Roman vocabulary in articulating their identity, they rooted their identity in the Jewish scriptures. In so doing, they saw themselves as living in an entirely different past and present from their polytheistic contemporaries. Whereas Roman polytheists interpreted the present in terms of a Greco-Roman mythological history, Christians viewed themselves in terms of the salvific history of the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Christ. Christians also saw themselves as worshippers of the one true God transcending the limited attributes of any of the pagan gods. As a result, Christians sometimes depicted Christ in the guise of the true philosopher, as a successful Orpheus,

or even with the splendor of Sol Invictus. Simultaneously, Christians looked to examples from the Babylonian exile, the lives of Christ and the apostles, and sufferings of the martyrs to understand their role as citizens under earthly rulers. Thus images played an important role in forming Christian social, religious, and political identity during the first centuries of the church.

Turning from material to textual evidence, Chapter Three discusses references to idols and images in writings from the first two centuries of the church. Against the predominant view that the leaders of the church rejected images in theory while the uneducated lay people clung to the pagan practice of image-making, I contend that early Christian artistic theory and practice were largely harmonious. Although the apologists of the church never wrote on art as such, their writings on the nature of God, proper worship, and idolatry reveal a much more nuanced conception of the role of images in faith than is usually supposed. As early as Justin Martyr, the apologists turned the charge of atheism sometimes brought against Christianity on the accusers by arguing that the worshipping of idols was itself a kind of atheism. For Justin and later second-century apologists, the Incarnation was the central event for understanding how finite, visible creatures come to know the invisible, infinite God. Irenaeus held that the incarnation was necessary insofar as God is benevolent, transcendent, and incomprehensible, while we are fallen, finite, and incapable of salvation apart from knowing God. Similarly, Athenagoras attacked Greek and Roman artistic practices which glorify representations rather than the things represented. Around the same time, Clement of Alexandria affirmed the usefulness of images for coming to know God while warning about the power of images to lead one to desire mere signs rather than the things represented by signs. At the end of the second

century, then, Christian apologists and theologians had come to recognize the necessity of rightly orienting oneself towards images for proper worship of the divine.

Chapter Four follows the examination of textual evidence begun in Chapter Three. While the writers of the third- and fourth-century church further articulated the arguments developed in the previous centuries, increased persecution in the second half of the third century and the eventual adoption of a policy of religious tolerance in the early fourth century changed the real-life concerns to which the apologists were responding. As Christianity continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire, polytheists began to feel threatened by the new religion. Some polytheists responded by presenting arguments of their own against the growing religion. The ensuing debates evince the extent to which Christian teaching challenged polytheists to consider the theoretical foundations of their practices. With growing popularity of Christianity in the Roman world, the relationship between viewer and object transformed as viewers began to reconceptualize artworks as objects signifying something beyond themselves.

Finally, Chapter Five synthesizes the material and textual evidence in a new way. By giving undue epistemic privilege to neither the visible nor the verbal evidence from early Christianity, I attempt to allow Christian images to contribute to our understanding of Christian artistic theory just as the texts have contributed to it. I do so by examining images of idols in early Christian art and comparing various ways of interpreting these images. I conclude that Christian artists shared many of the same concerns about images that Christian theologians and philosophers had expressed. Christian artists themselves warned against the tendency to turn images into idols by seeking the transcendent in the immanent world. Likewise, Christian philosophers from Athanasius to Augustine suggest

that images are a means for worshipping the divine that is well suited to the human condition. Because the Christian God surpasses all understanding, we can only comprehend God through images, whether they be the verbal signs employed by the scriptures, visible signs manifested through the deeds of the incarnate Son of God, or images of great beauty that lead the soul to long for union with the source of all beauty. It is only by rightly orienting the soul towards images that one can hope to overcome superficiality and catch a glimpse of profound truth.

CHAPTER ONE

Roman Images and Identity

The Roman world has often been described as a world of images, since artworks were central to the formation and expression of Roman identity.¹ Freedmen, freedwomen, wealthy patrons, soldiers, mothers, fathers, and magistrates built funerary monuments, decorated their houses, and funded public buildings to negotiate their roles within the community, to exhibit their piety to the gods, to define their social statuses, and to proclaim their virtues. Statues of the gods were housed in temples, carried through the streets in processions, dressed and touched by worshippers and suppliants, and offered sacrifices. The emperor ensured that his likeness and authority were recognizable throughout the Empire by representing himself on coins, busts, and statues. In a culture with no revealed scriptures and low levels of literacy, images communicated important cues about what it meant to be a Roman.

However, challenges arise when one attempts to construct a theory to explain the role of images in forming Roman identity. First, the Romans did not themselves conceive of these images as artworks in the modern sense of the word. Although images could be enjoyed aesthetically and were sometimes collected by connoisseurs,² many images were thought to possess powers which go beyond those included in the modern conception of art. Second, the paucity of ancient evidence and the lack of diversity among sources make

¹ For example: Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, p.1-4; Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p.11-14.

² Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, p. 2.

it difficult to know what most Romans thought about artworks, much less to offer a complete explanation of what they meant by what they wrote. Nearly all surviving sources were written by elite men, so it is hard to say how slaves, ordinary and impoverished Romans, women, and the illiterate viewed images. Third, modern terms and distinctions may not directly correspond to the realities of Roman life. For example, the distinction between religion and politics did not exist for the Romans as it does in modernity because Roman religion and politics were inextricably intertwined.

Nonetheless, modern scholars can draw some conclusions about the role of artworks in Roman life from the surviving evidence. Scholars must be aware of the limits of evidence, which necessarily limit knowledge, and they must avoid reading modern values and ideas into ancient evidence. Bearing such concerns in mind, it is possible to sketch an outline of Roman theory and practice concerning images. In this chapter, I attempt to outline the ways in which Romans used images to form Roman identity. Although the themes in this chapter are somewhat artificial insofar as the reality of Roman practice was less stratified than the distinctions here might suggest, the social, religious, and political lenses through which I investigate Roman practice highlight aspects of the evidence that are helpful for this thesis. However, these categories are not comprehensive, and they do not necessarily reflect distinctions fully present in the material and documentary evidence.

Images in Society

Romans used images to negotiate and commemorate identity. Class, citizenship, gender, wealth, and occupation were defined, proclaimed, and memorialized through

artworks,³ and many contemporary scholars have interpreted Roman monuments using such social categories⁴ The Roman historian Tacitus felt it necessary at the end of the *Agricola* to justify why he preferred to write a biography of his father-in-law rather than to commission a bronze or marble portrait in his honor. That this required justification is evidence of how common it was to remember ancestors through images rather than words. Tacitus concludes his biography:

Not that I would say aught against the portraits that are fashioned of marble or of bronze; but these material things are as much subject to the law of decay and death as the features they represent: the soul's image is imperishable, and that you may embody and express not in gross matter, by the craftsman's hand, but in the spiritual nature of your inmost self. All of Agricola that we loved, all that we admired, abides and will abide in the hearts of men, in the endless course of time, in the pages of fame. Many a hero of old has gone down into oblivion like the common herd: the story of Agricola has been transmitted to those who come after, and he shall live.⁵

This quote is remarkable because it contains numerous suggestions for understanding Roman approaches to images. First, Tacitus implies that material images only preserve material features, unlike words which preserve the soul's features. Second, he acknowledges that craftsmen intend for their images to embody something essential about their subjects, but he dismisses their craftsmanship as crude. Third, Tacitus expresses the desire for fame, which requires remembrance and recognition by others. Fourth, Tacitus suggests that memory preserves life. Although Tacitus intended the passage to elevate word over image, he implicitly acknowledges the predominance of images in Roman society for preserving memory.

³ Birk and Poulsen, *Patrons and Viewers in Late Antiquity*, p.9; Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 91.

⁴ Examples include: Bergmann, *Seeing Women in the Villa of Mysteries*; Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*; Erasmo, *Reading Death in Ancient Rome*; Monteserrat, *Reading Gender in the Roman World*; Routman, *Reading the Body*.

⁵ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 46.

In Roman culture, personal reputation had real and far-reaching consequences. Complex social ties between patrons and clients, parents and offspring, and government and household meant that an individual's social standing could increase or decrease the social capital of a much larger group. Romans used recognizable visual forms to negotiate and delimit their standing within the social hierarchy. For instance, epigraphs would sometimes supplement images with more detailed information about patrons and subjects. Modern scholars can learn much from surviving inscriptions. Understanding the purpose of a patron in making a monument is critically important for interpreting Roman art because works often were intended for public self-display or for the expression of emotions or religious devotion.⁶

For example, freedmen and freedwomen would often identify their status as freedpeople by describing themselves as *liberti*,⁷ while celebrating aspects of their involvement in the community.⁸ The funerary relief of the Servilii (Figure 1.1) depicts a father, Quintus Servilius Hilarus, who took his former master's name after being manumitted. Also depicted is his wife Sempronia Eune, who assumed her patron's name after being freed, and their freeborn son Publius Servilius Globulus. The son wears a citizen's toga with a pendant called a *bullae* around his neck, an object worn only by freeborn boys until they reached adulthood. According to Kleiner, "The relief commemorates the progress of the Servilius family from slave to freedman to freeborn citizen, which opened up avenues for advancement for young Publius that were denied to his father (for example, serving in the Roman army and holding higher civic offices)."⁹

⁶ Birk and Poulsen, *Patrons and Viewers in Late Antiquity*, p.7.

⁷ Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History*, p.11.

⁸ Ripat, "Locating the Grapevine in the Late Republic: Freedmen and Communication," p. 27.

⁹ Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art*, p.111.

By describing themselves as *liberti* and depicting themselves with the toga, freedmen used images to define their status within society.

Fig. 1.1. Funerary relief of the Servilius family from Rome, late first century BC. Marble. Vatican Museums.

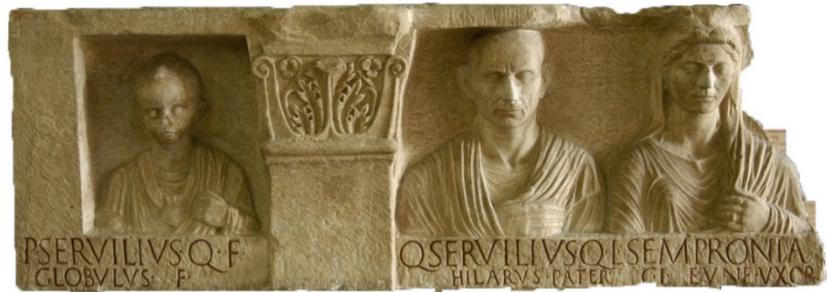


Fig. 1.2. Sarcophagus with the myth of Selene and Endymion, early third century AD. Marble. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Similarly, the sarcophagus of Arria (Figure 1.2) depicts the myth of Selene and Endymion. The inscription in the top center of the lid indicates that Arria was a freedwoman. Her daughter, Aninia Hilara, commissioned the sarcophagus for her burial. To the right of the inscription is a portrait of Arria, whose hairstyle dates the sarcophagus to the reign of Septimius Severus (see Figure 1.20). The sarcophagus is a masterpiece from an excellent workshop that produced several other important surviving works.¹⁰ The work must have been expensive, and the luxurious reliefs, characteristic of the Second Sophistic, may have been intended to show off the accumulated wealth of the woman.¹¹ Indeed, Pliny already complained in his *Natural Histories* that Romans in his day only cared that their images portrayed their wealth.¹² Nonetheless, the Endymion myth was

¹⁰ Matz, "An Endymion Sarcophagus Rediscovered," p.127

¹¹ Zanker, "Reading Images without Texts on Roman Sarcophagi."

¹² Pliny, *Nat.* 35.2.1-6.

highly suitable for a funerary monument, since it portrays in a poetic image the common pagan belief about the life of the soul after death.¹³ The myth of Endymion expressed hope for peace in the afterlife, and Christians would later adopt the iconography of the Endymion myth while imparting new meaning to the story.

A comparison of the relief of the Servilii and the sarcophagus of Arria gives some indication of the extent of the cultural changes which took place between the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the third century AD. On the one hand, the relief of the Servilii emphasizes traditional Roman values and aspirations. The figures appear somber, if not stoic. Since cremation was favored in the first century BC, the relief of the Servilii likely comes from a tomb which would have housed the cremated remains of the deceased. On the other hand, the sarcophagus of Arria would have struck any Roman from the Augustan period as excessively Greek. Indeed, the story of Selene and Endymion comes from Greek mythology, and the style in which it appears harkens back to classical Greek sculpture. The sarcophagus displays its owner's *paideia*, the kind of classical education in grammar, oratory, medicine, mathematics, history, geography, astrology, and mythology that underwent a revival during the Second Sophistic.¹⁴ Additionally, unlike older Roman burial monuments, sarcophagi held whole bodies. Thus, a comparison of the two artefacts gives some indication of the extent to which Roman culture changed between the Augustan and Severan periods.

¹³ Matz, "An Endymion Sarcophagus Rediscovered."

¹⁴ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, pp. 106-113.

Like freedmen, military personnel often used images to proclaim their identities by portraying themselves in uniform or indicating their service through inscriptions. The tomb relief of the Gessi (Figure 1.3) is interesting because it depicts a soldier, a freedman, and a freedwoman. The soldier in the center is Publius Gessius, son of Publius of the Romilian tribe. The woman on the left, Gessia Fausta, and the younger man on the right, Publius Gessius Primus, were both slaves manumitted by Publius, as indicated by the inscriptions. The inscription on the right indicates that Gessia Fausta directed the construction of the monument. Gessia Fausta memorialized Publius Gessius as a high-ranking military officer who served as either Military Tribune or Legatus, as indicated by his costume, a muscle cuirass, under-tunic with pteryges, sword belt worn high-up on the waist symbolizing high rank, and a military cloak on his left shoulder. Moreover, Gessia Fausta had herself depicted as a chaste wife, clutching her tunic tightly to her chest. She presents herself as a traditional Roman woman, despite her former status as a slave. The relief is very similar to the relief of the Servilii insofar as the patrons of both reliefs wished to identify themselves with traditional Roman values and social roles.



Above: Fig. 1.3. Tomb relief of the Gessi, Lazio, late first century BC, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Right: Fig. 1.4. Tombstone of Insus, Lancaster, early second century AD, Lancaster City Museum.



A tombstone (Figure 1.4) from around the beginning of the second century in Britannia also depicts a soldier. The fallen cavalryman is represented as a triumphant rider. Both the rider and the horse appear in formal military dress.¹⁵ In his hand, the cavalryman holds the head of his enemy, as his horse rears above the beheaded body. Although this is a tombstone for the grave of the cavalryman who presumably died in battle or of sickness, he appears triumphant while his enemy perishes. The inscription reads: DIS / MANIBUS INSUS VODULLI / IVS CIVE TREVER EQUES ALAE AUG... / VICTORIS CURATOR DOMITIA, “To the shades of the dead, Insus son of Vodullus, citizen of the Treveri, cavalryman of the Ala Augusta, troop of Victor, Curator Domitia, his heir, had this set up.”¹⁶ Domitia memorialized Insus in a way that may seem strange to modern eyes. The event occurring in the monument likely never took place. Instead, Domitia presents things in an idealized manner, likely in accordance with how she thought Insus would like to be remembered. This work thereby provides a counterpoint to Tacitus’ assertion that craftsmen capture only external characteristics. This monument expresses an idea, rather than physical characteristics or historically accurate events.

It is important to note that the tombstone comes from Britannia and that Insus was not of Roman descent. Although the Roman Empire extended from Britain and Gaul in the north to North Africa in the south and from Spain in the west to Syria in the east, the Roman Empire never fully conquered the British Isles. In this vast domain, there was a diverse collection of languages, customs, religions, and artistic styles. The tombstone from Britannia shows how different images on the periphery could appear from those in

¹⁵ Kramer, “The Roman Riders,” p.72.

¹⁶ Bull, *Triumphant Rider*, p.4.

the center, even while adopting the language of Rome. Roman culture was rarely, if ever, forced on conquered peoples. Instead, they often adopted it for themselves, while retaining aspects of their native identity. Tacitus describes how Agricola enticed the Britanni to adopt Roman customs, writing that “Agricola encouraged individuals and assisted communities to build temples, public squares, and proper houses... The result was that in place of distaste for the Latin language came a passion to command it. In the same way, our national dress came into favor and the toga was everywhere to be seen.”¹⁷ This is consistent with Elsner’s claim that Roman identity was propagated by nothing so much as by the visual culture of Roman art and architecture.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it remained acceptable to assert one’s local identity, so long as one did not resist Roman rule. The tombstone of Insus is evidence of this, since the inscription notes that Insus was from the tribe of the Treveri, who lived in western Germany and eastern France. Similarly, those in the provinces often continued to worship their traditional gods and simply added the imperial cult into their religious practices. Thus, the negotiation of local and Roman identity was a complex endeavor in the provinces.

Although funerary monuments provide some of the most detailed material evidence for issues of identity in Roman society, images were just as common outside of funerary contexts. Excavations in Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ostia, and Dura-Europos provide ample evidence for the importance of images in all strata of Roman life throughout the Roman Empire. Romans often decorated their houses with images, including mosaics and wall paintings. For example, the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii contains a famous floor mosaic in the vestibule (Figure 1.5). A dog on a chain lurches towards the door, and the

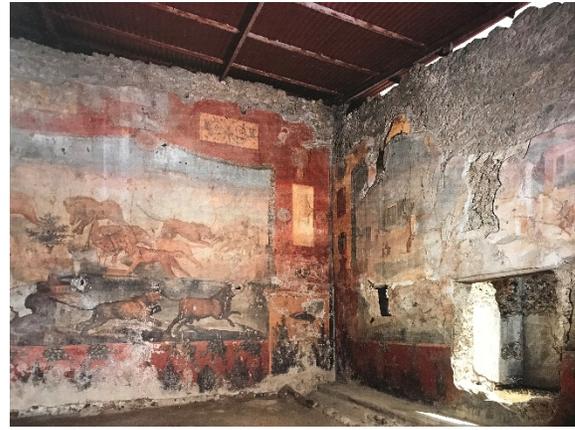
¹⁷ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 21.

¹⁸ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 118.

inscription reads CAVE CANEM, “Beware the dog!”¹⁹ This was likely meant as a joke, warning clients and members of the household to be on guard as they entered the house.



Top Left: Fig. 1.5. Mosaic of a dog from the House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii.



Top Right: Fig. 1.6. Hunting scenes from the House of the Ceii, Pompeii.

Bottom Right: Fig. 1.7. *Telemones* from the Forum Baths, Pompeii.



While most Roman paintings have been lost, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius preserved several frescoes in Pompeii and the surrounding area. The northern wall of the *viridarium* in the House of the Ceii (Figure 1.6) depicts a wild animal hunt. The fresco is typical of the Fourth Style,²⁰ the last style present in Pompeii before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 and which began to develop around AD 50.²¹ The northern wall presents a fictive window into a garden paradise with a lion pursuing a bull, two dogs attacking a boar, and a leopard chasing two rams. This fresco occurs in a larger

¹⁹ Mau and Kelsey, *Pompeii, Its Life and Art*, p.315.

²⁰ Mazzoleni and Pappalardo, *Domus*, p.383.

²¹ Mazzoleni and Pappalardo, p.44.

pictorial program which depicts a view of the Nile, the Nile Valley, and Upper Egypt.

The *viridarium* is at the end of house, so only members of the household could have seen these images. Consequently, the owner of the house would not have intended these images for public viewers, but rather intended them as private decorations for the *domus*. Many houses in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Rome depict similar pastoral scenes, but mythological scenes and illusionistic architectural paintings were also popular subjects of domestic art.

The tepidarium of the Forum Baths in Pompeii (Figure 1.7) includes *telamones* between niches and decorative floral patterns in stucco on the ceiling, likely produced in the restorations following the earthquake of AD 62. These figures add a human element to the architectural supports, and they evince the ubiquity of images in Roman society. One could not bathe without encountering images in Pompeii or in Aphrodisias, for the Hadrianic Baths there had a series of some twenty over-life-sized caryatids, the female equivalents of the *telamones*, dedicated by individual women in the second or third century.²² Baths in Ephesus, Salamis, Aix-les-Bains, and Cherchel also show that statuary was important part of Roman baths through Late Antiquity.²³

Ultimately, art was present in all facets of Roman social life. Monuments and tombstones lined the sides of Roman roads; mosaics and paintings decorated the interiors of Roman houses; statues brought mythological figures into Roman baths. One might think that artists held a prominent place in Roman society. Nonetheless, little is known about Roman artists. Many names of artists which



Fig. 1.8.
Carnelian ring
stone depicting an
artist at work.

²² Stirling, "Patrons, Viewers, and Statues in Late Antique Baths," p.70.

²³ Stirling, p. 69-77.

have survived are Greek names, and it is unclear whether this is because the artists were Greek, or if Roman artists preferred Greek sounding names because of the prestige that Greek art held in Roman culture.²⁴ Artists often appear as simply dressed, bearded figures in surviving depictions, which is the case in a rare carnelian ring stone from between the first and third centuries AD (Figure 1.8). Despite their obscurity, artists played an important role in expressing ideas about citizenship, gender, education, status, and occupation through material forms.

Images in Religion

Images of the gods appeared in public temples, domestic shrines, and mystery cults. Romans referred to images of the gods as *simulacra* and *signa*, which they distinguished from *statae* and *imagines*, the representations of humans.²⁵ These images received sacrifices, prayers, and requests; they were sometimes dressed up, touched, carried in processions, or destroyed in acts of violence.²⁶ Jas Elsner writes, “Underpinning this ritual life of sacred images, was the conviction that the statue did not just represent the deity but was – at least on some level – identical with the god.”²⁷ Although images of the gods were central to Roman religious practice, there was not a unified theory about how the images mediated the relationship between human and divine.²⁸ It seems that what mattered most was that interactions with divine images were appropriate. It was less important what Romans thought about the images or the gods. In the words of Cicero,

²⁴ Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, p.15-21.

²⁵ Stewart, *Statues in Roman Society*, p.186.

²⁶ Weddle, “Touching the Gods,” p.19.

²⁷ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p.205.

²⁸ Weddle, p.35.

“Jupiter is called the best and greatest not because he makes us just or moderate or wise, but because he makes us safe and rich and well supplied”.²⁹ What mattered most was keeping the relationship between gods and men peaceful and benevolent.

Public Cult

In Roman public cult, a temple would normally house the statue of at least one god. Sacrifices of incense, ointments, plants, and animals were offered to the gods in front of temples during religious festivals, and sacrifices lay at the heart of most religious acts.³⁰ Offerings were important because the exchange of gifts between gods and men was the basis for peaceful relations between the human and the divine.



Fig. 1.9. Reverse of coin issued by Valerian I, ca. 256-58 AD, Bithynia.

Although offerings were not usually given directly to the images of the gods, sometimes offerings were placed in the hands or laps of the gods, or left on a sacrificial table that would normally be positioned close to the cult statue.³¹ However, it was more common for the image of the god to watch over the sacrifice from afar, perhaps acting as a focal point for the divine rather than as a divinity itself.³² In figure 1.9, the cult statue of Demeter is visible to the public from within the temple. Each cult statue resided in the *cella* of its temple, where it might be visible to celebrants at the altar through the *pronaos* of the temple.³³ Numerous coins and descriptions show cult statues in temples looking out through the *pronaos*.³⁴ However, it is difficult to establish whether many surviving statues received cult worship because their original contexts have been lost.

²⁹ Cicero, *De Nat. Deor.* 3.87.

³⁰ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p.79.

³¹ Weddle, “Touching the Gods,” p.210.

³² Weddle, p.227.

³³ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p.71.

³⁴ Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, p.130-35; Stewart, *Statues in Roman Society*, p.184-222.

Nonetheless, replicas of original cult statues do survive. Over a hundred reproductions of the cult statue from the temple of Artemis in Ephesus have been identified.³⁵ The famous statue of Artemis from the Vatican Museums (Figure 1.10) is a second-century marble copy of the original cult statue. The original image was made of wood, blackened by repeated anointing with oil, and was barely visible through the mass of robes that had been placed upon her as offerings.³⁶ An inscription from Ephesus records a bequest made by Caius Vibius Salutaris, who dedicated 31 statues to Artemis, mostly of silver and one of gold.³⁷ The inscription dictates that the images were to be carried in procession from the temple of Artemis through the heart of Ephesus to the theater and back again during religious festivals and holidays. Similar processions took place in many other cities throughout the Roman Empire and were an important part of civic religious identity where they occurred.³⁸ Images, then, were fundamental to Roman religious practice both in the sacred space of temples and in the profane world of the public.



Fig. 1.10. Artemis of Ephesus, Marble, ca. AD 125, Vatican Museums.



Fig. 1.11. Marble slab dedicated to Sol Invictus from the barracks of the Equites Singulares, via Tasso, Rome, ca. AD 175.

³⁵ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p.204.
³⁶ Pliny *Nat.* 16.213-4; Philostr. *Her.* 9.6; Paus. 4.31.8.
³⁷ Rogers, *The Sacred Identity of Ephesos*.
³⁸ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p.44.

Change was an accepted part of traditional Roman religion, and Roman religion was open to the adoption of new gods and images. Elagabalus attempted to establish the cult of Baal in Rome during the 220s; Aurelian tried to make Sol Invictus the supreme deity during the 270s; Diocletian transformed the cults of Jove and Hercules during the Tetrarchy; and Julian attempted to revive paganism in the face of Christianity by promulgating Helios-Mithras in the third quarter of the fourth century.³⁹ A dedicatory slab (Figure 1.11) from the barracks of the Equites Singulares depicts Sol Invictus alongside Luna and Jupiter Dolichenus during the period when the cult of Sol Invictus was beginning to reach its highest acclaim. Depictions of Sol Invictus are congruous with preexisting depictions of Sol, and the cult of Sol Invictus was likely seen as continuous with the traditional cult of Sol.⁴⁰ The various attempts of the emperors to change Roman religion give one reason to believe that Roman religion was not static, even though it was traditional. Often tradition itself could become the basis for new cults or practices.

Indeed, the promulgation of the Imperial cult indicates the willingness of Romans to accept new divinities, though this subject is discussed in more detail in the following section. Many Roman historians told etiological stories to justify practices which had not always been a part of Roman religion. For example, the Roman historian Livy thought that many Roman religious practices originated in attempts to control the populace. In one famous example, he writes that Numa “pretended that he was in the habit of meeting the goddess Egeria by night, and that it was her authority which guided him in the establishment of rites as were most acceptable to the gods” in order to “prevent the

³⁹ Elsner, p.202-203.

⁴⁰ Hijmans, “The Sun Which Did Not Rise in the East,” p.115-150.

relaxation of the nation's moral fiber."⁴¹ Regardless of the historical accuracy of Livy's story, such stories provided a precedent for the introduction of new rites, festivals, and gods. Livy, as well as later historians such as Cassius Dio, used rhetoric that justified novel practices through the reinterpretation of historical events. Indeed, Constantine's historian Eusebius writes, "Obviously we must regard the religion proclaimed in recent years to all nations through Christ's teachings as none other than the first, most ancient, and most primitive of all religions."⁴² Change was acceptable in public religion and politics only if it seemed congruous with ancient customs and traditions.

Domestic Cult

In the domestic sphere, the *paterfamilias* oversaw religious rites, just as magistrates oversaw them in the public cult. Each household honored its own Lar, which protected the land where the family lived. Under the Empire, Lares were represented as two dancing young men pouring wine from a jar into a *patera*.⁴³ The communal rooms of homes held *lararia*, the domestic shrines of Lares, where the family would leave offerings at family feasts and during certain religious festivals. Although the Lar was addressed in the singular until the beginning of the common era, the plural form became more common later, perhaps because of the influence of the *Lares Augusti*.⁴⁴ This linguistic transformation was but one change among others within the Roman domestic cult. Depictions of the Lares changed stylistically over time, as did some cult practices within the home.

⁴¹ Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.19-20.

⁴² Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 1.4.10, trans. G.A. Williamson.

⁴³ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p.165.

⁴⁴ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p.165.

Alongside the image of its Lar, a traditional Roman family would honor the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* as well as the Penates. Every being, place, and object had a *genius*, which personified its active force.⁴⁵ The *genius* of the household master often appeared as either a snake or a man dressed in a toga with a horn of plenty or a *paterna*. The household would honor the image of the *genius* on the master's birthday, and members of the household would swear before it on important occasions. Under the Empire it became customary to honor the *Juno* of the mistress of the house. Although each god and goddess possessed a *genius* or *Juno*, it was the *genius* or *Juno* of the master or mistress of the house that mattered within the domestic context. In addition to them, a household would often honor the Penates alongside the Lares. The Penates resided in the innermost parts of the house, and they were somewhat vague deities, varying in number from house to house. The household honored them by throwing bits of food into the fire. The Penates were associated with the health and preservation of the family, and thus were an important part of the domestic cult.

The *lararium* (Figure 1.12) from the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, which provides the most famous example of the Fourth Style,⁴⁶ depicts two Lares on either side of a *genius* figure above a snake. The Lares hold *rhyta* in their hands, and they flank the *genius* spirit who holds a libation bowl and incense box in his hands. The snake below the figures is associated with the *genius* as well as fertility and prosperity. Members of the household



Fig. 1.12. Lararium, ca. 70 AD, House of the Vettii, Pompeii.

⁴⁵ Scheid, p.166.

⁴⁶ Mazzoleni and Pappalardo, *Domus*, p.334.

would have left offerings at the shrine or perhaps said vows before it. The style dates the *lararium* to the third quarter of the first century. Although the first century is somewhat early for the scope of this thesis, the best preserved *lararia* survived because of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. The *lararium* from the House of the Vettii is thus one of the best examples of a *lararium* because it is among the latest of the well-preserved *lararia* at Pompeii.

Finally, each household would remember and honor its dead through funerary rites, in which images played an important role. Whenever a family member died, the father or a son would bury the dead. Cremation was widespread from the first century BC until the second half of the second century AD, but it was customary to bury the remains regardless of whether the body was cremated or simply inhumed.⁴⁷ The funerary ritual transformed the corpse into one of the deceased,⁴⁸ allowing the dead to join the *di manes*. Into the Imperial period, Romans produced wax masks of the dead which preserved the dead within the memory of the family, and funerary portraits represented the dead at funeral banquets and important family or state events.⁴⁹ These masks were stored in the house to be carried out or worn during important events, and all members of the family, including slaves and clients, venerated the images.⁵⁰ Although no wax funerary masks survive, funerary portraits from tombs and sarcophagi remain. Figures 1.1-4 are examples of these kinds of monuments, testifying to the importance of remembrance for Romans from all strata of society. Indeed, Pliny comments that these images served “to furnish

⁴⁷ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p.167.

⁴⁸ A belief common to Greek and Roman religion; for example, see Homer’s *Odyssey*, Book 11, where Elpenor cannot join the spirits of the dead because his body remains unburied.

⁴⁹ Jensen, *Face to Face*. p.45.

⁵⁰ Jensen, p.46.

likenesses to be carried in procession at a funeral in the clan, and always when some member of it passed away the entire company of his house that had ever existed was present.”⁵¹ Funerary portraits thus maintained the presence of departed family members among the living. Images were central facets of Roman funerary practices, serving to preserve the memory of the dead through representation in the world of the living.

Mystery Cult

In addition to the public cults where all Romans could worship, there were also mystery cults that required initiation. These cults were secretive and often met at night. Unlike the public cults, mystery cults did not meet in the open, and it is unclear how they helped to maintain benevolent relations between gods and men. Mystery cults were not a new phenomenon, but rather had existed since at least the sixth century BC in Greece.⁵² A few mystery cults enjoyed periods of popularity during the Roman Empire and into Late Antiquity.⁵³ During this period, mystery cults were direct competitors of Christianity. Two of the most popular mystery cults in the Roman Empire were the cults of Isis and Mithras. In fact, Commodus and Julian the Apostate were both initiated into the cult of Mithras, and Diocletian consecrated a temple to Mithras in 307, just a few years before the Edict of Milan ended the persecution of Christians.

⁵¹ Pliny, *Nat.* 35.2.7.

⁵² Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p. 186.

⁵³ Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, p. 15.

On the one hand, the mysteries of Isis originated in Egypt and began to be celebrated in Rome sometime during the first century. The emperor Vespasian and his son Titus spent the night in a temple of Isis on the Campus Martius in AD 70 before celebrating their victory in the Jewish War.⁵⁴ The temple was rebuilt by Domitian after it burned in a fire in AD 80, and it was restored once under Septimius Severus at the end of the second century.



Fig. 1.13. *Isis lactans*, fourth century AD, Karanis, Egypt.

Unfortunately, little is known about the initiation rituals of the cult, but several temples and artworks associated with it survive. For example, a temple of Isis in Pompeii rebuilt after the earthquake in AD 62 was uncovered by excavations, and the eruption of Mount Vesuvius preserved several paintings there.⁵⁵ However, an image of Isis as house patron from Egypt has received special attention from scholars. Figure 1.13 shows Isis nursing Horus in a manner typical of mother-goddesses. This image type, known as *Isis lactans*, survives not only as a fresco, but also in several statuettes, including a fourth-century limestone statuette from Antinoe now kept at the Dahlem Museum in Berlin. Hans Belting has argued that such images influenced the development of Marian iconography,⁵⁶ and more recent scholarship continues to support this conclusion.⁵⁷ Depictions of Isis, then, must be of interest to anyone attempting to understand early Christian art within its broader cultural context.

⁵⁴ Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, p. 163.

⁵⁵ Bowden, p.162.

⁵⁶ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 36-41.

⁵⁷ Higgins, "Divine Mothers," p. 78.

On the other hand, Mithraism originated in Parthia in the first century AD and soon spread throughout the territory of the Roman Empire. Unlike other mystery cults, no myths or clear accounts to explain what the cult was about have survived, if they existed. Unlike in Roman public cults in which altars were always outside, altars



Fig. 1.14. Mithreum of San Clemente, third century AD, Rome.

were placed within enclosed spaces designed to resemble caves in Mithraism.⁵⁸ Mithraea, the spaces built for cult practices, can be found as far west as Hadrian's Wall in Britain, as far north as Mainz in Germany, and as far east as Dura Europos in Syria. Mithraea were designed to represent the cosmos astrologically through their architecture and decorations, and each contained a cult image of the tauroctony, a representation of Mithras killing a bull, which can be seen on the altar in figure 1.14 from the Mithraeum below the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome.⁵⁹ Perhaps surprisingly, Mithraism has received comparisons to Christianity because both religions required initiation and focused on a communal meal. However, one should not take such comparisons too far. Mithraic iconography makes it clear that Mithraism related to worship of the sun and the changing of the seasons.⁶⁰ It seems less likely that Mithraism was a salvific religion than that it was meant to explain the inner workings of the cosmos to initiates. Indeed, the Mithraeum discovered beneath the basilica of San Clemente existed alongside the

⁵⁸ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p. 70.

⁵⁹ Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, p. 184-188.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Christian church during the fourth century, but it was acquired by Christians near the end of the fourth century. The clergy had it filled in with dirt and added an apse to their church above where the Mithraeum once stood.⁶¹

Consequently, images played a central role in Roman cult practices. In the public cults, images of the gods often received adoration, requests, and sacrifices as though they really were the gods. From an anthropological perspective, the images provided a focal point for rituals and prayers. From a theological perspective, they provided a place where the gods could come face to face with men and tangibly interact with them. In the private sphere, images diachronically united the household, both living and dead. The household gods provided an avenue for families to seek protection and remember the deceased. In the mystery cults, initiates sought privileged relationships and knowledge of the gods. Mystery cults often used images to represent certain gods or to explicate complex mythologies. Many of these cults gained popularity while Christianity was first spreading throughout the Roman Empire.

Images in Politics

Roman imperial art physically embodied the power of the Roman Empire. The Romans were well aware of the relation between appearance and power. Even in war, the visual was an important part of maintaining Roman power. Tacitus writes, “Defeat in battle always begins with the eyes.”⁶² Likewise, Dexippus narrates a time when:

[Aurelian] arranged his army as if for battle, in order to strike terror into the enemy... Behind the emperor were gathered the standards of the army – the golden eagles, the imperial images, the army lists emblazoned in letters of gold – all of these mounted on silver lances. Only when all was arranged in this way, did Aurelian give the order for the embassy of the

⁶¹ Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome*, p. 87-92.

⁶² Tacitus, *Germania*, 43.

Juthungi to approach. Stupefied by the sight, they remained for a long time in silence.⁶³

But images were also crucial for politics in other ways. Within Rome, emperors often constructed triumphal arches to provide a visual reminder of their military successes. The ornamentation of these arches commemorated both the triumph itself as well as the *triumphator*, serving to secure the power and prestige of the victor. Likewise, imperial portraiture ensured that subjects throughout the Empire knew the emperor's likeness, and they also served as a key mode of propaganda. Images were so important for the maintenance of power that sometimes it was necessary to erase all memory of an emperor who had been killed or overthrown through *damnatio memoriae*, in which any image of the emperor would be destroyed and lost to oblivion. However, emperors often received adoration through the cult of the emperor, which blurred the lines between religion and politics. The promulgation of the cult of the emperor in Roman territories suggests that it was an instrument for maintaining political order through religious devotion.

Triumphal arches served as testaments to the military successes of the emperors. The practice of erecting triumphal arches goes back to the Roman Republic and grew in popularity under the Empire. However, only three triumphal arches survive in the Roman Forum. They are the Arch of Titus, the Arch of Septimius Severus, and the Arch of Constantine. These arches served as more than a means of self-congratulation; they addressed contemporary political issues and served as a bid for remembrance in posterity.⁶⁴ However, the iconography of the arches transcends the politics of any one era. The images of the arches identified emperors with the success and power of the Roman state as a continuous entity.

⁶³ Dexippus, as quoted by Elsner in *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 32.

⁶⁴ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p.78-82.

For example, the Arch of Titus (Figure 1.15) was commissioned by Domitian in about AD 81 after the death of his brother Titus to commemorate the victories of Titus and Vespasian in Judea. It is especially famous for its depiction (Figure 1.16) of the spoils taken from the Temple in Jerusalem, during the Siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. One can see the seven-branched Menorah, the Table of Shewbread, and the Gold Trumpets being carried in the triumphal procession. Until their capture by the Romans, these religious artefacts had never been seen by anyone but the Jewish high priests. The panel makes it clear that the Jewish revolt had been quashed and their wealth plundered. This panel in its historical realism contrasts with other parts of the arch which refer to the apotheosis of Titus. In the center of the vault of the arch is an image of Titus being carried to the heavens by an eagle, a reference to the dead emperor's deification.⁶⁵ Likewise, the inscription reads: *Senatus Populusque Romanus divo Tito divi Vespasiani filio Vespasiano Augusto*, "The Roman Senate and People (dedicate this) to the divine Titus Vespasianus Augustus, son of the divine Vespasian."⁶⁶



Above: Fig. 1.15. Arch of Titus, Rome, ca. 82 AD.

Below: Fig. 1.16. Detail of the Arch of Titus showing the spoils from Jerusalem.



⁶⁵ For a discussion of the eagle in apotheoses, see: Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, pp. 291-295.

⁶⁶ *CIL* 6.945

Both the historical and mythical elements of the arch convey a political message. The Empire was victorious and Domitian's lineage divine.

Furthermore, the Arch of Septimius Severus (Figure 1.17) commemorates the victory of Septimius Severus and his two sons, Caracalla and Geta, against the Parthians. The arch resembles the Parthian Arch of Augustus, likely in a visual attempt to link the emperor's victories in Parthia with those of his



Fig. 1.17. The Arch of Septimius Severus, Rome, AD 203.

predecessors.⁶⁷ Severus and Caracalla were ruling jointly when the arch was dedicated in AD 203, and Severus made Geta co-emperor in AD 209. After his father's death in AD 211, Caracalla had his brother Geta assassinated and all his images destroyed in *damnatio memoriae*. Consequently, Geta's likeness and name were removed from the arch.

However, this was not an attempt to make it look as though he had never existed. Ittai Gradel explains:

Roman *damnatio* did not claim that a 'bad' emperor had never existed and ruled; the sheer number of inscriptions surviving with erasures of names...spell out the opposite point: the erasures were, and should be, visible as *exempla* or we might say 'anti-monuments' of damned rulers. Anonymity was to be their conspicuous punishment.⁶⁸

This case makes it clear that a 'bad' emperor might not have done anything wrong, but could simply have fallen on the wrong side of a struggle for power. The animosity and suspicion between Caracalla and Geta ultimately led to the destruction of his honors when his brother gained power. The Arch of Septimius Severus, which was originally a

⁶⁷ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 82.

⁶⁸ Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, p. 287.

testament to the emperor's military prowess, became a testament to the victory of Caracalla over his brother Geta in the struggle for sole rule of the Empire.

Finally, the Roman Senate erected the Arch of Constantine (Figure 1.18) to commemorate the victory of Constantine in AD 312 over Maxentius in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Much of the arch's imagery served to legitimize Constantine's succession to the throne. Jas Elsner argues that it did this



Fig. 1.18. The Arch of Constantine, Rome, 315 AD.

through superimposing Constantine's likeness onto images of the great emperors of the second century.⁶⁹ In this way, Constantine evoked their authority and legitimacy.

Although the sculptures show a change in style from the previous century, the architecture was congruous with older arches. The Arch of Constantine resembles the Arch of Septimius Severus, but without the Parthian allusions. Since Constantine had defeated a domestic foe, rather than a foreign enemy, it is unsurprising that the arch would portray Constantine as the rightful heir to the Empire. The many references to earlier emperors and triumphs, then, make sense as an attempt to promote a historical narrative in which Constantine's power is a logical consequence in the Roman story.

Likewise, imperial portraiture communicated important political messages to citizens and subjects throughout the Empire. Emperors distributed portraits of themselves throughout the Empire to make imperial authority recognizable.⁷⁰ Severan of Gabala writes, "Since an emperor cannot be present to all persons, it is necessary to set up the

⁶⁹ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 81.

⁷⁰ Trentinella, "Roman Portrait Sculpture."

statue of the emperor in law courts, market places, public assemblies, and theatres. In every place, in fact, in which an official acts, the imperial effigy must be present, so that the emperor may thus confirm what takes place. For the emperor is only a human being, and he cannot be present everywhere.”⁷¹ Representations enabled the presence of the emperor to appear where he himself could not be. In this way, the emperor expanded his presence, even into the furthest extremes of the Empire.

Although portraiture in the Republic was known for its realism, the classical heroic portrait gained popularity in the early imperial era. Between the reigns of Augustus and Hadrian, emperors often represented themselves in either the older realistic manner or the later idealizing type depending on whether they wished to emphasize their commitment to traditional values or the continuity of their reigns with the reign of Augustus.⁷² After Nero, who received much criticism for his love of Greek culture, the emperor Hadrian was the first Roman emperor to show himself with a full beard, characterizing himself in the fashion of a Greek philosopher king.⁷³ Subsequent rulers, such as Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, who wished to be regarded as philosophical emperors, continued the trend. However, the Tetrarchs (Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius) discontinued the use of the intellectual image, opting instead to be portrayed as strong soldier types.⁷⁴ Each of these changes corresponded to changing political, religious, and social conditions in the Empire.

⁷¹ Severian of Gabala, *On the Creation of the World*, 5.5, as quoted in Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 54.

⁷² Jensen, *Face to Face*, p. 38-39.

⁷³ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Jensen, p. 40.

On the one hand, Hadrian's adoption of the Greek beard in his portraiture both reflected and catalyzed the growing acceptance of Greek culture in the Roman world. Although Nero had been a lover of Greek culture less than 60 years prior, he had been vilified for moral, sexual, and personal iniquity. Despite its appeal, Greek culture was still un-Roman when Tacitus wrote the *Agricola* in AD 98. Tacitus writes that Agricola went "to school from his very early years at Massilia, a place where Greek refinement and provincial puritanism meet in a happy blend." Tacitus then remarks, "I remember how he would often tell us that in his early manhood he would have drunk deeper of philosophy than a Roman and a senator properly may."⁷⁵

Hadrian, however, received praise for his adoption of Greek culture in the first half of the second century. Unlike Nero, Hadrian adopted Greek imagery at the appropriate time. Jas Elsner writes that during this period "in the most public images of the emperor's portrait and in the most personal themes chosen for one's tomb, there was a persistent affirmation of a *Greek* cultural past and ancestry for Roman subjects all over the Empire."⁷⁶ Figure 1.19, which is from what is now Turkey, shows Hadrian looking very much like a Greek Augustus. Just as Virgil legitimized Augustan rule by tracing his



Fig. 1.19. Hadrian in military dress, AD 117-138, Antalya Museum, Antalya, Turkey.

Fig. 1.20. The family of Septimius Severus, tempera on wood, from Egypt, AD 200.



⁷⁵ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 4.

⁷⁶ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 6.

lineage back to Greek-speaking ancestors, Hadrian legitimized his rule by portraying himself as the inheritor of a long Greco-Roman tradition.

At the beginning of the third century, the Severan emperors portrayed themselves in a similar Greek style. A tondo from Egypt (Figure 1.20) shows how Septimius Severus portrayed himself as ruler alongside his two sons. Septimius Severus is grey-haired, distinguishing him from the younger generation of the imperial family. All three males in the image hold scepters, and it is likely that all three wore golden wreaths. However, the likeness of Geta was removed in *damnatio memoriae*, indicating that the image remained in public into the reign of Caracalla. This image thus served not only to identify the imperial rulers, but also to identify through absence a ruler condemned to obscurity. *Damnatio memoriae* was not confined to Rome, but rather sent a clear message throughout the provinces of the Empire.

On the other hand, the Tetrarchs (Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius) rejected the Greek style, choosing instead to be represented as soldier-emperors (Figure 1.21). Aurelius Victor writes that Diocletian was accused of being “the first to covet, in addition to a gold-brocaded robe, an abundance of silk, purple, and jewels for his sandals...to have himself called ‘lord’ in public, and ‘adored’ and addressed as a god.”⁷⁷ The emperors began to see themselves more and more as living images, as objects to be seen.⁷⁸ Simultaneously, the



Fig. 1.21. The Tetrarchs, porphyry, from Constantinople, AD 300, now in Venice.

⁷⁷ Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39.2-4.

⁷⁸ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, pp. 33-35.

style in which they portrayed themselves grew increasingly abstract and formal. Frontality and symmetry replaced realism, and bold lines and geometry were emphasized, stylistic choices which would influence the portraits of Constantine.⁷⁹

The lack of a clear distinction between religion and politics in the Roman world is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the spread of the so-called imperial cult throughout the provinces of the Empire. The process of deifying emperors began with the deification of Julius Caesar following his assassination in 44 BC, and it became customary to deify emperors as *divi* within a few decades.⁸⁰ Provided that they did not suffer *damnatio memoriae*, emperors and empresses continued to be granted apotheosis until the time of Theodosius.

Under the Empire, the *genius* of the emperor was worshipped, and it became customary to worship the *Lares Augusti*. Scheid argues that Augustus drew on the worship of the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* in the household to symbolize the relation between the citizens and himself.⁸¹ However, Ittai Gradel has made a convincing case that official worship of the *genius* of the emperor was a later development, and the worship of the *genius* of Augustus seems to have been practiced only by slaves and freedmen during the time of Augustus.⁸² She concludes that “it was only in the later second century that the formal constitutional definition of the emperor as absolute head of the state household was finally established.”⁸³ It also became common to deify relatives of emperors after the

⁷⁹ Jensen, *Face to Face*, p. 40-41.

⁸⁰ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, pp.159-165.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, p. 132.

⁸³ Gradel, p. 197.

time of Augustus. Such practices would eventually form the basis for widespread emperor worship, the most universal form of polytheistic religion in Late Antiquity.

As the imperial cult spread, it became an important means for maintaining unity throughout the heterogenous provinces of the Empire. However, the worship of deceased emperors was not always imposed from above; in some cases, it appears to have been freely adopted as a way of showing loyalty to Rome.⁸⁴ Many provincial cities dedicated temples to the goddess Roma, who received zealous worship from the second through the fourth centuries, despite the clear political role that such worship played.⁸⁵ This universalizing imperial cult created a religious bond between the center of the Empire in Rome and the provinces on the periphery of the Empire.⁸⁶ Although the peoples of the provinces could maintain their local identities by worshipping their native gods, the adoption of the imperial cult fostered political unity throughout the Empire through a limited level of religious unity. Consequently, Christians typically came into conflict with polytheism and the political system to which it was attached through the refusal to participate in the practices of the imperial cult.⁸⁷ To Roman polytheists, Christians not only seemed to be atheists for their disbelief in the gods, but also enemies of the Empire.

Thus, Roman politics relied on Roman visual culture in Rome itself and throughout the provinces of the Empire. Triumphal arches provided visual monuments of the emperors' military successes. Imperial portraiture ensured the universal recognizability of the emperor throughout the Empire, while also serving as a means of communicating political messages to far-flung subjects. Images of emperors often received worship in the

⁸⁴ Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, p. 164-165.

⁸⁵ Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, p. 45.

⁸⁶ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, pp. 199-203.

⁸⁷ Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, p. 38.

imperial cult, which was simultaneously religious and political. Given the relatively low levels of literacy in the Roman world, it should be no wonder that Roman politics relied so heavily on the visual. Physical objects made the imperial power known by means of their visibility and permanence.

Conclusion

Roman material culture evinces the pervasiveness of the visual in all aspects of Roman life. Romans used images to negotiate and define identity in all strata of social life. Fathers, mothers, freedmen, citizens, soldiers, the wealthy, and the poor made images of themselves based largely on how they perceived their positions in Roman society and how they hoped to be remembered. These images decorated their houses, baths, and tombs. In religious practice, images were everywhere just as prominent. Cult statues stood in public temples, where they received prayers and requests, as well as offerings of food, wine, and clothing. Within Roman homes, images played a similar role, receiving worship from the members of the household. Other cults were not open to all, but rather one had to be initiated before one could come face to face with the god or learn the secrets behind the cult's iconography. Just as images were central to religious devotion, images were also fundamental to the maintenance of Roman power. Triumphal arches provided massive monuments to the victories of the emperors, gaining them glory and favor. Imperial portraiture ensured that the emperor's likeness was universally known, as his presence was extended throughout the Empire with his representations. Furthermore, the imperial cult promulgated worship of the emperor's image, creating a religious bond between the provinces on the periphery of the Empire with the Empire's center in Rome. This world of images provided the context for the earliest Christian

artworks, and we could hardly understand them without first knowing something about the world from which they came.

CHAPTER TWO

Christian Images and Identity

Although historians have described the Roman world as a world of images, Christians have variously been described as the “People of the Book.”⁸⁸ This phrase, which was first used by Muslims as a negative characterization of Jews and Christians, seems to capture something true about the Christian religion. Certainly, the written word performs a role in Christianity which has no counterpart in Roman religion, largely because Christianity, as a development out of Judaism, has stressed the importance of Scripture since the very beginning. Yet the People of the Book are not without their own images. Since at least the second century,⁸⁹ images have played an important role within Christianity. Indeed, Christian visual culture was a major means by which Christian scriptural identity was formed in Late Antiquity, so the study of Christian visual culture is useful for understanding the development of Christian identity more generally.

Nevertheless, historians face a number of difficulties. Firstly, one must explain the absence of Christian artworks in the first two centuries of Christianity. The lack of Christian artworks during this period has led some historians to conclude that the earliest Christians were aniconic. However, some written accounts testify to the existence of Christian images during the first two centuries. For example, Eusebius writes that “the features of His apostles Paul and Peter, and indeed of Christ Himself, have been preserved in colored portraits which I have examined” (302). Additionally, some scholars

⁸⁸ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, pp. xi-xv.

⁸⁹ All dates beginning here are AD unless otherwise noted.

have suggested other causes for the lack of images during this period. Paul Corby Finney and Jeffrey Spier argue that the reason for the non-appearance of art before 200 was the lack of resources available to Christians up to this point.⁹⁰ As soon as Christians gained access to land and capital, they began to create distinctive forms of art. In addition to a lack of resources, Mary Charles-Murray suggests that Christians were slow to produce artworks because Christian art grew out of a verbal tradition which was still developing during the first two centuries.⁹¹ Indeed, if the earliest Christians really were aniconic, it should be surprising that there are no condemnations of Christian images prior to the fourth century, though Christian images undoubtedly existed in the preceding century. It is more probable that no images survive due to lack of resources, the initial need to develop verbal articulations of the faith, and intermittent persecution during the first two centuries.

Secondly, it can be difficult to identify whether some of the earliest artworks were Christian. Before Constantine instituted the policy of religious tolerance in the early fourth century, Christians experienced periods of persecution, which forced many Christians to identify themselves using esoteric signs such as the *ichthys* or an anchor. Given that many early Christians could only identify themselves using secret symbols, it should not be surprising that some surviving artworks are ambiguously Christian. Some of the ambiguous cases may have been so by design, and there may be no way to determine whether a particular object belonged to a Christian.

⁹⁰ Spier, "The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power," p. 1-4; Finney, *The Invisible God*, p. 108.

⁹¹ Charles-Murray, "The Emergence of Christian Art," p. 57.

Thirdly, scholars typically identify early Christian artworks through their religious subject matter, so it is somewhat artificial to distinguish the social or political aspects of an image from its religious facets. The subject matter is almost always primarily religious. Categorization into other categories thus stems from the need to focus on one aspect of an object for the sake of clarifying a particular point, while the images themselves can often be viewed from multiple perspectives.

In this chapter, I examine material evidence to explicate the role of images in forming Christian identity from the beginnings of Christian artworks in the second century through the end of the fourth century. I begin by looking at the role of images in negotiating the social standing of early Christians. Next, I explain the use of imagery within early Christian religious practices, particularly in contrast with Roman polytheism and with evidence from the catacombs and the development of early churches. Finally, I investigate the political implications suggested by the popularity of a few themes within early Christian artworks, arguing that early Christian art informed Christians about their identity within the Roman imperial political system.

Images in Society

As a religious minority group, Christians found their identity contested and often unwelcome in the Roman world. In fact, what is likely the earliest example of a crucifix is a graffito from the beginning of the third century mocking a Christian for worshipping a crucified ass (Figure 2.1). It is known as the Alexamenos graffito because the crude Greek inscription beneath the images which reads: *Alexamenos sebete theon*, “Alexamenos worships his god.” The graffito corresponds to evidence that Christians and

Jews were often derided for worshipping the head of an ass or a donkey god.⁹² It would have been very ridiculous to an ancient audience that Christians worshipped a crucified deity. Crucifixion was such an abhorrent way to die that Romans would not crucify any Roman citizen.⁹³ They reserved crucifixion for those they thought undeserving of more humane forms of capital punishment. Because of this, some Roman polytheists apparently mocked Christians for Christ's terrible manner of death.

Consequently, Christians found it necessary to define and defend their identity. Christian apologists produced texts explaining and arguing on behalf of their faith. Around the same time, Christians began to produce images which survive in the Christian *coemetaria* or "sleeping places." In these images, Christians portrayed themselves as members of a kingdom that transcends this world. Unlike their pagan contemporaries,

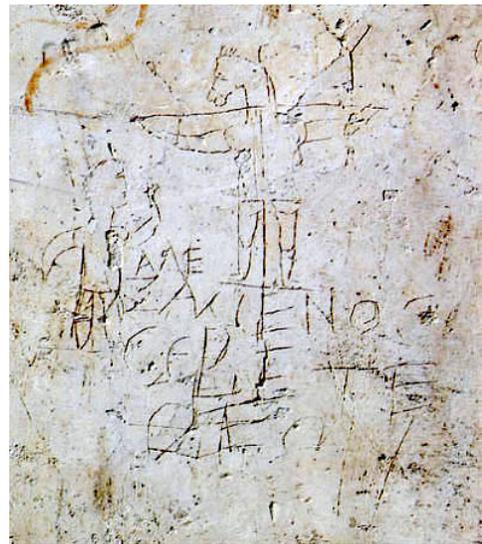


Fig. 2.1. Alexamenos graffito, from the Palatine Hill, Rome, ca. 200.

Christians did not preoccupy themselves with how they would be remembered in this life. Instead, the earliest Christian artworks celebrate the gift of eternal life and the joys promised in the life to come. David Lyle Jeffrey observes that what distinguishes pagan and Christian funerary art in this period "is that the traditional appropriation of beauty to honor the deceased in the eyes of men is in Christian art replaced by a celebration of

⁹² Jensen, *The Cross*, pp. 11-15.

⁹³ Jensen, p. 8.

honor in the eyes of God.”⁹⁴ The hope of the life to come was fundamental to Christian identity in a period of intermittent persecution.

During the earliest period, Christians identified themselves using symbols which only those who had been initiated into Christianity would understand. Fish, anchors, and the palm of victory were among the earliest symbols by which Christians identified themselves. The peacock, dove, and lamb were also very common motifs in the earliest Christian art. Emanuele Castelli finds that in the 64 identifiable figures from the Catacomb of Priscilla, one of the earliest catacombs, “we have: 1 lamb, 3 doves, 5 fish, 10 palms, 45 anchors.”⁹⁵ This is consistent with the claim of the second-century theologian Clement of Alexandria that Christians should choose motifs which could be assigned a Christian meaning:

And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship running with a fair wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship’s anchor, which Seleucus had engraved; and if the seal is a fisherman, it will recall the apostle, and the children drawn out of the water. For we are not to depict the faces of idols, we who are prohibited from attaching ourselves to them, nor a sword, nor a bow, since we follow peace, nor drinking cups, since we are temperate.⁹⁶

Thus, the images used by Christians should in some way recall scripture. Clement does not explain what each symbol means, but he does suggest that images refer to stories which Christians would know. His comments are fully consistent with the material evidence which survives from this period.

As Christians acquired land outside the walls of Rome, they carved underground passages into the soft tufa rock to create the catacombs for burial. They cut out large rooms (*cubicula*) containing burial places (*loculi*), and recessed arched niches

⁹⁴ Jeffrey, *In the Beauty of Holiness*, p. 14.

⁹⁵ Castelli, “The Symbols of Anchor and Fish in the Most Ancient Parts of the Catacomb of Priscilla: Evidence and Questions,” p. 13.

⁹⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 3.59.2-3.60.1.

(*arcosolia*), which were often decorated with frescoes. The acquisition of this land, which according to tradition came into Christian hands through wealthy converts such as Priscilla and Domitilla,⁹⁷ allowed Christians to decorate their burial places as they saw fit. The earliest Christian images emerged both chronologically and formally from the classical tradition.⁹⁸ Although Christians likely hired non-Christian artisans to produce some of their earliest artworks, a guild of Christian workers known as *fossores* (diggers) painted the frescoes of the catacombs, likely under the direction of priests.⁹⁹ These artisans took extant artistic forms from the surrounding culture and repurposed them to serve Christian religious needs while also developing the first distinctly Christian imagery.

For example, the funerary stele of Licinia Amias (Figure 2.2.) provides one of the most ancient examples of a Christian funerary monument.¹⁰⁰ Below a funerary wreath, the inscription begins with the Latin letters *DM*, which stood for *Dis Manibus*, “to the shades of the dead.” This inscription was standard on Roman grave markers, and in fact the tombstone of Insus



Fig. 2.2. Stele of Licinia Amias, marble, early 3rd century, from the Vatican necropolis, Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.

(Figure 1.4) begins with these same words. The Greek phrase *ΙΧΘΥC ΖΩΝΤΩΝ*, “fish of the living,” appears immediately below the acronym. Although *ichthys* is the Greek word

⁹⁷ Spier, “The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power,” p. 6.

⁹⁸ Charles-Murray, “The Emergence of Christian Art,” p. 51.

⁹⁹ Charles-Murray, pp. 55-56.

¹⁰⁰ Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, p. 196.

for fish, it also is an acronym for the phrase Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” The phrase “of the living” may be a reference to Matthew 22:32 and Mark 12:27, “He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” Moreover, the *ichthys* likely was an allusion to the miracle of the fish and the loaves, the parable of drawing in the net, and to Christ’s promise to make his disciples “fishers of men.”¹⁰¹ On the stele, there is a fish on either side of an anchor. The anchor was likely a symbol based on the passage in Hebrews 6:19 that says, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” The anchor, then, is a symbol of the hope of salvation and the life to come which all Christians possess. Below the anchor the inscription reads: LICINIAE AMIATI BENEMERENTI VIXIT, “For Licinia Amias, well-deserving, she lived...” Although the end of the inscription is lost, it would likely have said how many years Licinia lived before her death. The epitaph is one of the earliest identifiably Christian artefacts, and it illustrates how early Christian art emerged in the context of the surrounding culture.

It is important to note that Christians saw themselves as living in an entirely different past and present from their pagan contemporaries. Whereas Roman polytheists interpreted the present in terms of a Greco-Roman mythological history, Christians viewed themselves in terms of the salvific history of the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Christ. This led to the development of a new method known as typological exegesis, through which one could understand the connections between past and present. Old Testament prototypes such as Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice his only son Isaac foreshadowed Christian events such as the crucifixion of

¹⁰¹ Gough, *The Origins of Christian Art*, p. 22.

Jesus. Jas Elsner writes “The results of such complex typological connections were transmitted directly and fluently to (often illiterate) Christian believers in works of art and in sermons.”¹⁰² Moreover, the antiquity of the Jewish scriptures would have given some credibility to Christian religion since Romans tended to be skeptical of new religious practices and respected ancient practices, even when they no longer remembered their origins.¹⁰³ This would shape the development of Christian thought and iconography.

Although Clement of Alexandria did not propose that Christians should invent new symbols, it was not long before they began to develop images which were distinctly Christian. A lamp (Figure 2.3) produced by the Florentius workshop, which operated in Rome during the last years of the second century, provides one of the earliest instances of explicitly Christian imagery. Interestingly, the lamp is the only surviving work from the Florentius workshop that includes Christian imagery, though the workshop was prolific and produced many lamps decorated with pagan images.¹⁰⁴ Early Christians apparently commissioned pagan artisans to produce images according to their needs. On the lamp, the Good



Fig. 2.3. Lamp with the Good Shepherd, Noah’s Ark, and Jonah, clay, from Rome, c. 200, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

¹⁰² Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 8.

¹⁰³ For example, see the destruction of Bacchanalian shrines in Livy, 39.18 “those only excepted where there was an ancient altar or a sacred image.”

¹⁰⁴ Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, p. 5.

Shepherd stands in the center with sun and moon and seven planets depicted above his head. To his left, a dove sits on Noah's ark, and a fish spits Jonah from its mouth. To his right, Jonah sleeps under the gourd vine.

Many of these figures are based on pre-existing pagan image types. For example, the iconography of the Good Shepherd is based on the ancient *criophorus*,¹⁰⁵ which signified paradise in the afterlife on Roman sarcophagi.¹⁰⁶ However, Christians adeptly appropriated this imagery to their own purposes. In John 10:11, Jesus says, "I am the good



Fig. 2.4. Fresco with the Good Shepherd, Jonah, and Orantes, 3rd century, Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Tertullian, the early third-century church father, says that "a 'sheep' properly means a Christian, and the Lord's 'flock' is the people of the Church, and the 'good shepherd' is Christ"¹⁰⁷ Although the imagery on the pot borrows from the visual language of the surrounding culture, the Christians in the third century saw the Good Shepherd in distinctly Christian terms.

Similarly, a fresco (Figure 2.4) from the catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus provides several instances of common themes in the first half of the third century. In the

¹⁰⁵ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁶ Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 7.4.

center stands the Good Shepherd, which would have had Christological significance for Christians of this period. In the surrounding lunettes are scenes from the story of Jonah. On the left, sailors throw Jonah from the boat into the sea, where the great fish awaits. The fish is represented as a Greco-Roman *ketos*, the symbolism of which Christians did not need to redefine.¹⁰⁸ Snyder writes, “They used its extant symbolic meaning to show that the Christian had to enter (live in) the monster, an aquatic symbol for the Roman or non-Christian culture.”¹⁰⁹ On the right, the great fish spits Jonah from its mouth. This scene is likely a reference to Christ’s resurrection, as Jesus says in Matthew 12:20 “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” In Luke 11:29-32, Christ gives the sign of Jonah, and compares his own ministry to Jonah’s journey to Nineveh. Like the Good Shepherd, the story of Jonah would have had Christological significance. At the bottom, Jonah lies beneath the gourd plant. Jensen writes, “Jonah’s consistent and unusual pose, reclining under the gourd vine on his left side with his right leg crossed over his left and his right arm bent over his head, is identical to that of the classic representation of the hero Endymion.”¹¹⁰ Jonah’s pose is identical to the pose of Endymion on the sarcophagus of Arria (Figure 1.2), but for Christians, the blissful sleep of Endymion was symbolic of the eternal bliss which they awaited in the afterlife.

Jonah is also presented as an *orans* or praying figure in the right lunette, and *orantes* stand alternately between the lunettes in which the Jonah story is depicted. The *orans* was one of the most important image types in the earliest Christian art. It appears 158 times in

¹⁰⁸ Spier, “The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power,” p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 54.

¹¹⁰ Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen*, p. 28.

the catacombs of Rome and over 200 times on sarcophagi from Rome and Ostia.¹¹¹ Its association with Roman funerary rites made the *orans* figure appropriate for use in the catacombs. The figure is almost always female, even when inserted into narratives in which the characters were male.¹¹² The appropriation of the figure to the Christian narrative worked because the figure was latent with meaning in surrounding culture. Frequently the inscription *pietas* or *pietas aug* occurred with the *orans* in Roman art.¹¹³ In this original context, the *orans* referred to filial piety. *Pietas* not only required care for one's parents, but also involved care for one's ancestors, often expressed as care for the dead.¹¹⁴ In the context of the Christian catacombs, the *orans* symbolized the Christian's new, adopted family – the church. Matthew 12:50 says, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." For early Roman Christians, newly grafted into the vine (Romans 11:11-31), the *orans* would signify a new kind of filial piety, loyalty to the church and to God. Additionally, the *orans*, with its arms spread wide, may have stood for the crucifixion in a period in which Christians were still uncomfortable using this image.¹¹⁵ The image often occurs alongside other images which signified Christ such as the Good Shepherd. At any rate it signified salvation to some extent as it often appears in the stories of Noah, the Three Youths in the Furnace, Daniel in the Lion's Den, and Jonah, who were all saved from death through divine grace.

Although the catacombs provide evidence that Christians had some resources available to them, the art within the catacombs is neither ostentatious nor luxurious.

¹¹¹ Sutherland, "Prayer and Piety," p. 4.

¹¹² Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 36.

¹¹³ Snyder, p.36.

¹¹⁴ Sutherland, "Prayer and Piety," p. 29.

¹¹⁵ Sutherland, p. 83.

Wealthy patrons provided much of the land where the catacombs were constructed, but most Christians did not have such vast resources. During this period, the church was



Fig. 2.5. Epitaph of Severa with Adoration of the Magi, ca. 250, Catacomb of Priscilla, Pio-Cristiano Museum, Vatican

experiencing rapid growth, but Christianity was viewed as a novel cult and experienced intermittent periods of persecution. Nonetheless, Christians defended the antiquity of their religion, and often highlighted the eastern origins of Christianity.

Old Testament figures who had lived in regions which would become the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire were often depicted wearing distinctively eastern attire, as is the case in the epitaph of Severa (Figure 2.5), which provides one of the earliest depictions of the Magi in Christian art. Severa is depicted on the left with an inscription to her right. The inscription reads: SEVERA IN DEO VIVAS, “Severa shall live in God.” On the right, the three Magi wear Phrygian caps and short tunics, which would have seemed foreign, if not barbarous, to Romans. However, Christianity was not the only mystery religion during this period to highlight its eastern origins, as depictions of Mithras show the Persian god wearing Phrygian attire. Jas Elsner writes that “like Mithraism and other cults, Christians used visual images to proclaim a set of sacred myths, which were foreign to the shared experience and established norms of the Roman world, but which they affirmed as more true than the other mythologies available in Roman culture.”¹¹⁶ In the epitaph of Severa, these foreign figures bear gifts to Jesus, who sits on Mary’s lap. Standing behind the Madonna and Child, a figure points to the star of

¹¹⁶ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, pp. 210-211.

Bethlehem. He is likely the prophet Balaam, who prophesied that “A star shall advance from Jacob” (Numbers 24:17). Although the epitaph of Severa provides one of the earliest depictions of the Adoration of the Magi, some of the other earliest depictions of the theme also come from the catacomb of Priscilla, including a fresco in which the Magi wear Phrygian caps and Persian tunics.



Fig. 2.6. Sarcophagus from Santa Maria Antiqua, marble, ca. 275, Rome

Christians also distinguished themselves from their non-Christian contemporaries insofar as they presented themselves as followers of the true philosophy. A sarcophagus (Figure 2.6) discovered beneath the basilica of Santa Maria Antiqua represents a few Old and New Testament scenes, as well as a philosopher. On the left, one can see the great fish and Jonah, depicted as Endymion, in repose beneath the gourd vine. In the center, a female *orans*, perhaps signifying the Christian soul or the personification of wisdom (cf. Wisdom; Sirach; Proverbs), stands as the philosopher’s muse. The philosopher who holds an open scroll wears the philosopher’s *pallium* and would likely have had a beard if his face had been completed, as was the custom for intellectual types (Figures 1.19 and 1.20). The philosopher may signify Christ as the true philosopher, given that the Good Shepherd appears to the right of him, and the baptism of Christ occurs to the right of the Good Shepherd. However, the fact that his face was never completed may indicate that the face

of the patron was intended for the philosopher. Either way, the sarcophagus presents the Christian as a follower of the true philosophy.

Thus, early Christians used art to define their identity in contradistinction to the surrounding culture. Initially, Christians used esoteric symbols to identify themselves as members of the kingdom of God. However, it was not long before they began to produce distinctly Christian images, drawing on extant iconographic forms while imparting new meaning into them. An otherworldly focus marks early Christian artworks from their polytheistic counterparts. Rather than distinguish themselves from their pagan neighbors according to wealth or social status, early Christians viewed themselves as devotees of true philosophy and cared first and foremost to appear righteous in the eyes of a holy God.

Images in Religion

Whereas images received sacrifices and offerings in Roman polytheism, images played a much different role in early Christianity. The material evidence can tell us something about how Christians saw themselves within the broader culture, but it can also tell us something about how early Christians used images in their religious practice. Although Roman polytheists placed statues of the gods in temples to watch over sacrifices, Christians primarily used symbolic, typological, or allegorical images in their churches. Additionally, Christians used images to subvert the meanings of pagan images and often built churches on former pagan temples to symbolize the triumph of Christianity over paganism.

Prior to the Edict of Milan in 313, Christians typically met in house churches because intermittent periods of persecution prevented the construction of public church buildings. When houses were converted into churches, they needed to be discreet, if not completely secret, as was the case with the house church at Dura-Europos.¹¹⁷ The Dura-



Fig. 2.7. Reconstruction of the baptistery from Dura-Europos, mid-3rd century, Yale University Art Gallery

Europos house church, which was converted to serve the Christian community sometime around 240, is the oldest identified house church.¹¹⁸ Within the house was a baptistery (Figure 2.7) decorated with frescoes, including depictions of the Good Shepherd, Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, the healing of the paralytic, the calming of the storm, the walking on the water, the woman at the well, and the three women arriving at the empty tomb.¹¹⁹ The similarity of these paintings to those in the catacombs, as well as the existence of mosaics and illuminated books of the Bible, has suggested to some scholars that extensive pictorial cycles illustrating the Bible were in existence by the beginning of the third century.¹²⁰ These paintings, which were first uncovered in 1932, provide evidence that early Christian churches were adorned with images, although little documentary evidence speaks about the presence of images in early churches. Interestingly, the house church was only a few blocks from a Jewish synagogue and a *mithreum*, both of which were decorated with images. The discovery of the synagogue at

¹¹⁷ “Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity.”

¹¹⁸ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 128.

¹¹⁹ Jensen, *Face to Face*, pp. 19-20.

¹²⁰ Spier, “The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power,” p. 2.

Dura-Europos was one of many important discoveries in the 20th century that played a major role in overturning the theory that Jews were opposed to images on theological grounds.¹²¹

Around the same time, Christians in Rome were adopting and supplanting the meaning of the imagery of Roman polytheism. Although the mythology and imagery of Orpheus and Sol Invictus must have resonated with a polytheistic audience, Christians would have seen such stories as dim reflections of a higher truth. Indeed, Christians began to appropriate some of the imagery of mythological figures and gods as though to show their false significance. Neither Orpheus nor Sol Invictus captures the splendor of the one true God, though they may dimly express particular attributes of God; thus, one finds depictions of Christ as Orpheus and as Sol Invictus in early Christian art. In the words of Robin Jensen, “An image of Sol Invictus, Apollo, or Orpheus could be adapted to a Christian iconographic purpose in order to relay the idea of Christ as bringer of light into the world or a tamer of souls, without necessarily verging on religious syncretism.”¹²²

Indeed, early Christian writers were aware of the parallels. Justin Martyr writes:

If we assert that the Word of God was born of God in a peculiar manner, different from ordinary generation, let this...be no ordinary thing to you, who say Mercury is the angelic word of God. But if anyone objects that he was crucified, in this also on a par with those reputed sons of Jupiter of yours...and if we affirm that he was born of a virgin, accept this in common with what you accept of Perseus. And in that we say he made whole the lame, the paralytic, and those born blind, we seem to say what is very similar to the deeds said to have been done by Asclepius.¹²³

¹²¹ Spier, “The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power,” p. 2.

¹²² Jensen, “The Emergence and Character of Early Christian Art,” p. 2.

¹²³ Justin, *1 Apology*, 22-23 (trans. *ANF* 1:170-71).



Fig. 2.8. Christ as Orpheus, fresco, 4th century, from the Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

Just as the apologists were aware of the parallels, so artists drew attention to them visually. In the catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Christ appears as Orpheus (Figure 2.8). Orpheus was a figure from pagan mythology who played divinely inspired music which could calm animals, move mountains, and affect the gods of the underworld.¹²⁴ For Jews, the association of music with Orpheus led to his being used to represent King David, who famously sang his praises to God. Additionally, Orpheus purportedly travelled to the underworld to bring his bride Eurydice back to life.¹²⁵ This myth would have resonated with Christians as an allegory for Christ's descent into hell. Although most early Christian art is typological, the reference to the story of Orpheus is allegorical. The myth of Orpheus became an allegory for Christ's victory over death, though Orpheus was not an Old Testament foreshadowing of Christ. For Christians, Christ had similarities to pagan gods and heroes, but he was superior to any of them.

¹²⁴ Apollonius, *Argonautica*, 1.23; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10-11.

¹²⁵ Virgil, *Georgica*, 4.

Similarly, early Christian artists sometimes depicted Christ as the Roman Sol or Greek Helios. One of the most famous of such depictions (Figure 2.9) comes from the Vatican necropolis during the period when the cult of Sol was at its height. In almost all early Christian representations of Christ, the emphasis is on his earthly deeds, as is the case in the healing of the blind or the paralytic.¹²⁶ However, the mosaic



Fig. 2.9. Christ as Sol, mosaic, late 3rd century, Mausoleum M, Vatican Necropolis.

from the Vatican necropolis represents Christ in full splendor. Christ rides through the golden sky in a chariot adorned with a halo, emphasizing his divinity. The context in which the mosaic was found indicates that it is Christ as Sol and not merely a depiction of the pagan god Sol, such as Figure 1.11.¹²⁷ Moreover, such a depiction is consistent with biblical language describing Christ as the light which shines into the darkness (John 1:1-5) and as the light that illumines the children of light (Eph. 5:8-14). At a later date, Clement of Alexandria writes:

Let us... contemplate the only true God, first raising our voice in this hymn of praise: Hail, O light! For in us, buried in darkness, shut up in the shadow of death, light has shone forth from heaven, purer than the sun, sweeter than life here below. That light is eternal life; and whatever partakes of it lives. But night fears the light, and hiding itself in terror, gives place to the day of the Lord. Sleepless light is now over all, and the west has given credence to the east... For “the Sun of Righteousness,” who drives His chariot over all, pervades equally all humanity, like “His Father, who makes His sun to rise on all men,” and distils on them the dew of the truth. He hath changed sunset into sunrise, and through the cross brought death to life; and having wrenched man from destruction, He hath raised him to the skies, transplanting mortality into

¹²⁶ Jensen, *Face to Face*, p. 146.

¹²⁷ Charles-Murray, “The Emergence of Christian Art,” p. 52.

immortality, and translating earth to heaven.¹²⁸

Unlike the polytheists, Christians worshipped the true God. While a pagan might pray to the sun, the Christian worships the true Light of the world. Thus, Christ occurs here as the Light of God, supplanting the pagan god Sol.

However, Christians not only appropriated images of the gods in early depictions of Christ, but also those of goddesses through depictions of Mary. Hans Belting has suggested that depictions of Mary holding Christ borrow from depictions of Isis holding Horus,¹²⁹ such as Figure 1.13, and more recent scholarship continues to support this hypothesis.¹³⁰ Although Isis was primarily an

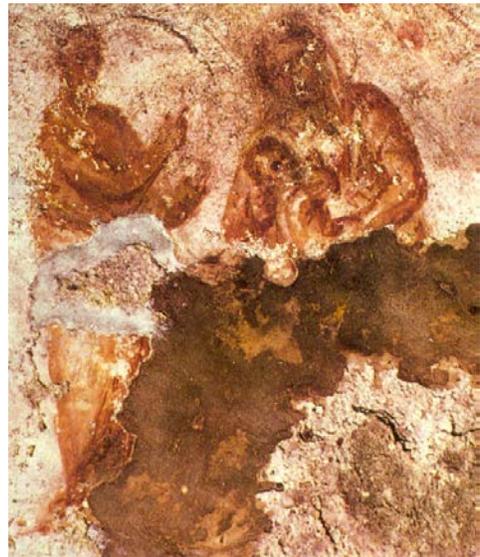


Fig. 2.10. Madonna and Child, fresco, 3rd century, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome.

Egyptian goddess, images of Isis spread throughout the Roman world. What is perhaps the oldest depiction of Mary holding the Christ child without the three Magi present (Figure 2.10) may borrow from this iconography. The fresco comes from the Catacomb of Priscilla and depicts Mary nursing the infant Christ, while the prophet Balaam points to the star of Bethlehem in the background, as in Figure 2.5. Although badly deteriorated, the depiction of Mary resembles frescoes and statuettes of Isis nursing Horus. If this truly is an appropriation of pagan imagery, then early Christian art visually subverts polytheistic iconography to a

¹²⁸ Clement, *Protrepticus*, 11, trans. William Wilson.

¹²⁹ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 36-41.

¹³⁰ Higgins, "Divine Mothers," p. 78.

high degree. This is consistent with the rhetoric of the early church claiming that pagans worship false gods, whereas Christians worship their true counterpart.

Nonetheless, the images and architecture of the church would soon undergo a drastic transformation as Christianity became more tolerated and the resources of the church began to grow. Although churches like the Dura-Europos house church existed prior to it, the Edict of Milan brought about a policy of religious tolerance for Christianity and ordered the restitution of confiscated property, which resulted in a swift increase in the number of churches throughout the Empire. The version recorded by Lactantius says:

And since these Christians are known to have possessed not only those places in which they were accustomed to assemble, but also other property, namely the churches, belonging to them as a corporation and not as individuals, all these things which we have included under the above law, you will order to be restored, without any hesitation or controversy at all, to these Christians.¹³¹

In the following years, ecclesiastical architecture became more conspicuous because Christians no longer needed to fear persecution and the restitution of property, along with an increase in donations from wealthy patrons, greatly increased the resources available to the church. With its many uses as a large meeting hall, the Roman basilica fit the needs of the church, which now wished to demonstrate its official status.

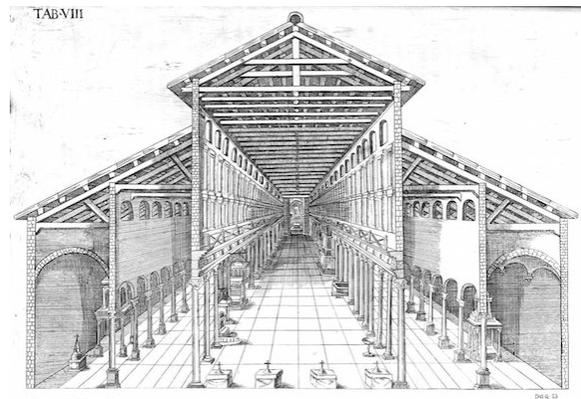


Fig. 2.11. Old St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, 318-360 AD, cf. Giovanni Ciampini, *De sacris aedificiis a Constantino Magno constructis: synopsis historica*, 1693, p. 33

¹³¹ Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.*, ch. 48. opera, ed. O. F. Fritzsche, II, p 288 sq. (Bibl Patr. Ecc. Lat. XI).

Old Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome (Figure 2.11) was among the earliest and grandest churches to use the Roman basilica design. Constantine's architects recognized that the traditional plan of a pagan temple would be inappropriate for Christian worship. Indeed, Vitruvius notes that temples and altars follow a plan designed to "enable those who approach the altar with offerings or sacrifices to face the direction of the sunrise in facing the statue in the temple...and likewise the statues themselves appear to be coming forth out of the east to look upon them as they pray and sacrifice."¹³² Since Christians primarily met indoors, whereas pagans normally performed sacrifices outdoors, the layout of a basilica was more appropriate.

Constantine built the basilica above the necropolis on the Vatican hill in which St. Peter was buried. By the mid-2nd century Christians had set up a shrine above the grave of St. Peter, but during the construction of St. Peter's it was filled in with earth, along with the rest of the necropolis. Constantine continued a long tradition of beneficence in supporting the building of the basilica, as emperors had long financed the construction of temples and other public works to please the people and the gods. Simultaneously, Constantine built churches in the Holy Land, including the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, as well as churches in his newly-constructed capital of Constantinople. Sometime during the same century, the church of San Clemente was converted into a basilica and expanded onto the grounds of the former *mithreum* (Figure 1.14.) on the site. During this period, it became common to build Christian churches on or within pagan sites, particularly *mithrea*. This practice

¹³² Vitruvius, *De Arch.*, 4.5.1 trans. Milford (1914).

would continue into the subsequent centuries when, for instance, the Temple of Minerva near the Pantheon was converted into the church now called *Santa Maria sopra Minerva*.

Just as earlier Christian churches such as the Dura-Europos house church had used images, so Constantinian churches included frescoes and mosaics in their designs. These images draw on early themes in Christian art, but they emphasize the majesty and glory of the Christian



Fig. 2.12. Apse of Santa Pudenziana, mosaic, late fourth century, Rome.

narrative in a way that early art had not. For example, the mosaic from the apse of Santa Pudenziana in Rome (Figure 2.12) represents Christ enthroned. In a Roman civic basilica, a magistrate would sit adjacent to an imperial image in the apse and dispense judgment, or the emperor would sit enthroned in the apse if it was an imperial basilica. However, in the Christian basilica, Christ appears in the apse, taking on the associations with power and authority that would exist in the Roman mind. Christ wears the imperial colors, purple and gold, and proclaims the word in a manner that draws on the *traditio legis* in Roman imperial art. The *crux gemmata* on the hill outside the city behind Christ identifies the city as Jerusalem and the hill as Golgotha. Unlike the cross of the Alexamenos graffito (Figure 2.1), the *crux gemmata* signifies the splendor and glory of the kingdom of God, as in Prudentius' hymn:

Sing the trophy of His passion, sing the Cross triumphant now;
Sing the ensign of Christ's glory, marked on every faithful brow...
Lo! The Victor mounts triumphant to the Father's judgment-seat,
Bringing back to heaven the glory by His passion made complete.
Hail! Thou Judge of souls departed: hail! Of all the living King!
On the Father's right hand enthroned, through His courts Thy praises ring,

Till at last for all offences righteous judgment Thou shalt bring.¹³³

The cross is no longer a sign of shame, but rather has become a symbol for Christ's victory over death. Indeed, the winged man, winged lion, winged ox, and eagle, the symbols for the four evangelists in later Christian art which accompany the Lamb in the Book of Revelation appear in the heavens behind the cross and above Jerusalem, calling to mind the apocalyptic vision of Judgment Day.

Consequently, the use of images in Christian religious contexts changed in important ways after the Edict of Milan. Earlier Christian art had been less ostentatious and triumphant. Nonetheless, it had to a high degree subverted the meaning and use of pagan images, while imparting to them a new Christian significance. With Constantine's policy of religious tolerance, the church acquired the resources to build on a monumental level, decorating the glorious churches of the period with brilliant new artworks. This change altered the course of art in the West for the next millennium.

Images in Politics

Just as early Christian art was instrumental in forming Christian religious identity, so it served to shape the political identity of early Christians. Well into the fourth century, Christians negotiated their roles as Christians and subjects of the Roman Empire in their artworks. During the period of persecution prior to the Edict of Milan, Christians looked to the Old Testament stories of Daniel and the Three Youths as examples for how they should live under rulers who did not believe in God. Christians also subverted Roman political iconography using New Testament themes. For example, representations of Peter and Paul before Nero, as well as representations of the advent of Christ into

¹³³ Prudentius, *Cathemerinon IX*, trans. Loeb classic series.

Jerusalem, negotiated the tensions between the religious and political identities of Christians. In the fourth century, Christians also looked to the examples of the martyrs to understand how they should live as subjects of the Empire. Early Christian art was not only an important means for forming a religious identity based in scripture, but also for delimiting the Christian's political identity.

Since the first century, the place of Christians within the Roman political system had been tenuous. In 64, the Great Fire of Rome occurred. Tacitus records that:

Neither human resources, nor imperial munificence, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated suspicions that the fire had been instigated. To suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats – and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians... First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned – not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies.¹³⁴

Christians in the first century likely suffered because of suspicions that they were enemies of the imperial system. Christians typically came into conflict with polytheism and the political system to which it was attached through the refusal to participate in the imperial cult.¹³⁵ This is perhaps responsible for the view that they were enemies of humanity. Indeed, Tacitus records elsewhere that a Roman knight, Lucius Ennius, was charged with treason for melting down a statue of the emperor for use as silverware.¹³⁶ It is interesting that the charge was treason rather than impiety. Like Lucius Ennius, Christians must have seemed unpatriotic, or even treasonous, for refusing to worship the images of the emperors.

¹³⁴ Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant.

¹³⁵ Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, p. 38.

¹³⁶ Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, 3.69, trans Michael Grant.

Some of the earliest Christian art dealt with this theme. As the author of 1 Peter saw it, many people who openly identified as Christian lived as “aliens and exiles” in an Empire that was not really their own.¹³⁷ In the early third century, depictions of four stories from the Babylonian exile were very popular: the refusal of the three youths to worship an idol, their committal



Fig. 2.13. Three Youths Refusing to Worship an Idol, fresco, third century, Catacomb of Marcus and Marcellinus, Rome.

to the furnace, Daniel in the lion’s den, and the story of Susannah.¹³⁸ A fresco from the catacomb of Marcus and Marcellinus (Figure 2.13) depicts the three youths refusing to worship an idol. The youths Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, also called Ananias, Azarias, and Mischael, appear here wearing Phrygian caps to indicate their eastern origins. As early as the late first century, Christians had identified the three youths as examples for emulation. Clement of Rome asked, “Were Ananias, and Azarias, and Mischael shut up in a furnace of fire by those who observed the great and glorious worship of the Most High? Far from us be such a thought!”¹³⁹ Although the image which the three refused to worship in the Book of Daniel was a larger-than-life representation of Nebuchadnezzar, the image here is a small imperial bust. The official commanding the youths to worship the imperial bust wears Roman military dress. Thus, the artist has reimagined the story within a contemporary political context.

¹³⁷ 1 Peter 2:11.

¹³⁸ Stevenson, *The Catacombs*, p. 78-81.

¹³⁹ Clement of Rome, *1 Clement*, 45.6-7, trans. Roberts-Donaldson.

Indeed, such images were politically meaningful for Christians of the day. After explaining the meaning of Christ's command to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, Tertullian writes:

Therefore, as to what relates to the honors due to kings or emperors, we have a prescript sufficient, that it behooves us to be in all obedience, according to the apostle's precept, "subject to magistrates, and princes, and powers;" but within the limits of discipline, so long as we keep ourselves separate from idolatry. For it is for this reason, too, that that example of the three brethren has forerun us, who, in other respects obedient toward king Nebuchadnezzar rejected with all constancy the honor to his image, proving that whatever is extolled beyond the measure of human honor, unto the resemblance of divine sublimity, is idolatry. So too, Daniel, in all other points submissive to Darius, remained in his duty so long as it was free from danger to his religion; for, to avoid undergoing that danger, he feared the royal lions no more than they the royal fires.¹⁴⁰

Thus, Tertullian looks to Daniel and the three youths as *exempla* for Christians living under a polytheist ruler. Similarly, Hippolytus wrote a commentary on the Book of Daniel, the earliest biblical commentary that survives in full, sometime after 204.

Commenting on Daniel's explanation of Nebuchadnezzar's vision as an image of the empires of the world, Hippolytus writes:

Christ...comes from the heavens as a stone which is cut from a mountain, so that he removes the kingdoms of this world, but also sets up the heavenly kingdom of the saints which will never be destroyed, and the same mountain also became the city of the saints which fills all the earth.¹⁴¹

Hippolytus understands the kingdom of God as supplanting the kingdoms of the world, including the Roman Empire. For him, the believer's identity as a member of the church is more fundamental than one's identity as a subject of the Empire. Indeed, he saw a similarity between his own role as a subject of the Roman Empire and the three Hebrew youths who were cast into the furnace in Babylon. He beseeches Shadrach, Meshach, and

¹⁴⁰ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 15.3.8-10, trans. S. Thelwall.

¹⁴¹ Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*, 2.13.1, trans. T.C. Schmidt.

Abednego, “Tell me, you three boys, remember me, I entreat you, that I also may obtain the same lot of martyrdom with you.”¹⁴² Hippolytus would suffer martyrdom in 235 after being exiled to Sardinia.

While there are a few surviving examples of the three youths refusing to worship the idol, depictions of the three youths in the fiery furnace (Figure 2.14) are more common. One example of the scene comes from the left end of a sarcophagus which is now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The three youths stand in profile above logs burning below them in the furnace. Often such depictions include a fourth person, or a dove, to represent the salvific



Fig. 2.14. Detail of a sarcophagus showing the three Hebrew youths in the furnace, marble, early fourth century, from Rome, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston.

presence described in the Book of Daniel. Such images would have reminded Christians of God’s saving grace, even in martyrdom. This sarcophagus, as well as that of Adelpia, show that well into the fourth century Christians had worries about persecution and emperor worship. Given the historical context, this makes sense. Constantine instituted a policy of tolerance in 313, but there was soon a reaction by defenders of traditional paganism. Julian the Apostate would attempt to revive Roman polytheism into the third quarter of the fourth century. Though he did not pursue a policy of outright persecution, he did implement policies which were meant to harass Christians.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*, 2.30.1, trans. T.C. Schmidt.

¹⁴³ Julian, *Letter 36*, trans. Emily Wilmer Cave Wright.

Christians also looked to the New Testament to understand how to live in the Roman political world. Robin Jensen identifies the adoration of the magi, the entrance into Jerusalem, and the Ascension as three themes in Christian art of the fourth century that may have drawn on Roman imperial imagery while subverting its significance.¹⁴⁴ Early Christians thought that the gifts brought by the magi, such as those in figure 2.5, signified something about Christ's nature. Irenaeus wrote that the myrrh indicated the child would suffer death, the frankincense signified that he was God, and the gold indicated that he was a king over an eternal realm.¹⁴⁵ Later, Clement of Alexandria would say the magi brought Christ a golden gift as symbol of his royalty.¹⁴⁶ The gift of gold often appears as a crown to visually indicate that the gift signifies Christ's royalty.¹⁴⁷

Similarly, images of the entry of Christ into Jerusalem seem to draw on Roman imagery of the imperial *adventus*. Jensen explains that "from the time of Constantine I onward, the ancient triumph celebration appears to have become transformed into an imperial *adventus*, a ceremony that implied triumph but did not incorporate the traditional sacrifices to the Roman gods, thus rendering it a more religiously neutral, if not Christian, kind of imperial ritual."¹⁴⁸ The *adventus* of Constantine into Rome appears in the eastern frieze of the triumphal arch of Constantine (Figure 1.18). The iconography of the imperial *adventus*, which would supplant the triumph, typically depicts the emperor riding on a horse or in a carriage.

¹⁴⁴ Jensen, "Allusions to Imperial Rituals in Fourth-Century Christian Art," 14–47.

¹⁴⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.9.2.

¹⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 2.8.

¹⁴⁷ Jensen, "Allusions to Imperial Rituals in Fourth-Century Christian Art," 23–24.

¹⁴⁸ Jensen, 31.

Depictions of Christ's *adventus* into Jerusalem show Jesus riding on a donkey, as in Figure 2.15. Often, as here, Zacchaeus appears in a tree in the background, though Zacchaeus was not present at Jerusalem in the biblical narrative.¹⁴⁹ The New Testament authors likely intended their account of Christ's entry into Jerusalem to contrast with imperial *adventi*, since the response of the



Fig. 2.15. Detail of a sarcophagus showing Christ's entry into Jerusalem, marble, early fourth century, from Rome, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

crowd seems intentionally like the response of a crowd at an imperial *adventus* (Luke 19:38). Nonetheless, the iconography subverts the Roman prototype. Christ rides a donkey, rather than a horse, and wears a simple tunic, rather than the royal robes of an emperor or king. The Christian story emphasizes Christ's humility. As John Chrysostom would write, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant is he, humble and riding on an ass."¹⁵⁰ When one considers that Jesus, the King of kings, is entering Jerusalem to sacrifice himself for mankind, it becomes even more striking how radically different Christ is from earthly rulers. Thus, Jesus represents an alternative to the earthly ideal embodied in the Roman emperor.

Likewise, scholars have argued that depictions of Christ's Ascension draw on the imagery of the imperial *apotheosis*. The triumphal arch of Titus in Rome makes some use of this iconography (Figures 1.15 and 1.16), but an ivory diptych from the late fourth

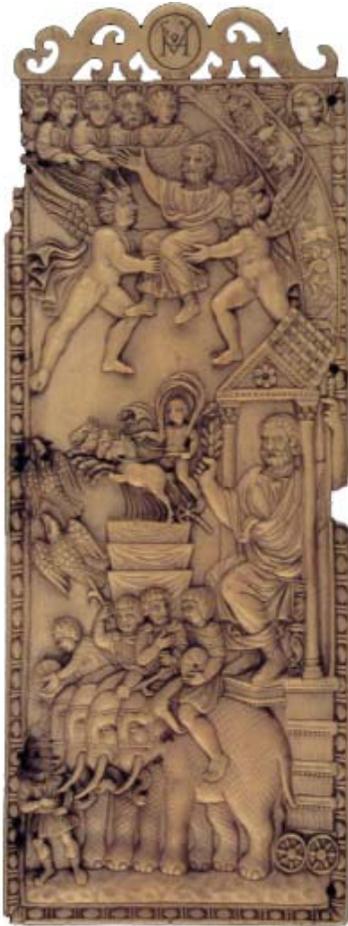
¹⁴⁹ Zacchaeus viewed Jesus' passing through Jericho in Luke 19:1-6.

¹⁵⁰ John Chrysostom, *Zechariah* 9:9.

century (Figure 2.16) provides a better comparison. The bottom part of the ivory shows the statue of a bearded dignitary in procession towards a pyre. Here the pyre is a three-story tower surmounted by a *quadriga* driven by the nude effigy of a man. Eagles, like the one on the arch of Titus, fly up into the sky. Above this scene, personifications of the winds carry the bearded figure into the heavens, where he will dwell as a *divus*. The apotheosis depicted on the diptych is remarkably similar to the apotheosis of Pertinax described by Cassius Dio.¹⁵¹ Jas Elsner notes that the monogram on the scroll at the top of the diptych has been deciphered to read *Symmachorum*, making it very possible that this ivory was cut to commemorate the death of the famous pagan aristocrat, Symmachus, or the death of Julian the Apostate.¹⁵² This diptych provides a good example of Roman polytheistic depictions of an apotheosis for comparison with Christian depictions of the ascension of Christ.

¹⁵¹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 75.4-5.

¹⁵² Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 30–32.



Left: Fig. 2.16. Plaque with an apotheosis scene, ivory, ca. 400, probably from Rome, British Museum, London.



Right: Fig. 2.17. Plaque with Christ's ascension, ivory, ca. 400, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich.

What is likely the earliest surviving depiction of the ascension of Christ occurs on an ivory plaque now in Germany (Figure 3.17). At the bottom, three women approach the empty tomb of Christ, which is guarded by two Roman soldiers in the background. They are greeted by an angel who sits on a pile of rocks before the tomb. The tomb may be a depiction of either the aedicule within the Constantinian Church of the Holy Sepulcher or a chapel built in the 380s at the supposed site of Jesus' ascension.¹⁵³ Above this scene, Christ ascends into heaven as the hand of God reaches down to raise him up. Two men who could be Peter and James crouch in fear at the awesome power of the divine ascension. The composition of the ivory mirrors that of the Symmachus diptych. In other

¹⁵³ Jensen, "Allusions to Imperial Rituals in Fourth-Century Christian Art," 34.

depictions of the Ascension, there are other similarities. For example, in an Ascension scene on a small wood panel from the door of Rome's Basilica of Santa Sabina from the early 430s shows two angels pulling Jesus upwards into the heavens,¹⁵⁴ like the winds pulling the bearded *divus* into the sky. Thus, there are similarities, but there are also differences. Unlike a Roman emperor, Christ was not made divine by decree of the senate. Nor is his Ascension a kind of transmigration of the soul. Instead, Christ ascends into heaven after first descending into hell like Orpheus purportedly did, conquering death, and then experiencing bodily resurrection, signified here by the empty tomb.

Early Christian art not only informed early Christian political identity through depictions of Jesus, but also through representations of the apostles. For the church in Rome, the apostles Peter and Paul had special importance. Augustine remarked on his return from Rome in 388



Fig. 2.18. Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, marble, c. 359, Rome, Vatican Museums.

that representations of Peter and Paul in the presence of Christ could be seen everywhere.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, Peter and Paul have a prominent place in the reliefs of the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, the Christian prefect of Rome who died in 359 (Figure 2.18). The central scene depicts Christ enthroned handing down the law to Peter and Paul. Many of the scenes have political implications. For instance, the sarcophagus depicts Old Testament narratives such as the three youths in the furnace and Daniel in the lion's den and New Testament stories like the entry of Christ into Jerusalem and his

¹⁵⁴ Jensen, 36.

¹⁵⁵ Augustine, *De consensu Evangelistarum libri quatuor*, 1.10.16.

arrest and presentation before Pontius Pilate. It shows the arrests of both Peter and Paul, who would subsequently become martyrs. The scenes from the lives of Peter and Paul mirror the scenes from the life of Christ.¹⁵⁶ As the Romans had crucified Jesus, so they killed Peter and Paul. This sarcophagus is the first to explicitly make this comparison, but Spier notes that an earlier sarcophagus, now in Madrid, depicts the presentation of Peter and Paul before Nero, perhaps imitating the presentation of Christ before Pontius Pilate.¹⁵⁷ For the apostles, their identity in the kingdom of God took precedence over their identity as subjects of Roman rule.

Subsequently, other Christians would follow their example. The *confessio* of Saints John and Paul on the Caelian Hill (Figure 2.19) depicts the martyrdom of Crispus, Crispinianus, and Benedicta. On the left, one can see Roman soldiers leading



Fig. 2.19. *Confessio* of Saints John and Paul, fresco, mid-fourth century, Rome.

the three Christians, the priest Crispus, the cleric Crispinianus, and the *venerabilis femina* Benedicta, who were killed during the reign of Julian the Apostate. On the right, one sees the soldiers beheading them. Tradition holds that the martyrdom of the three occurred in conjunction with the martyrdom of John and Paul, who may be depicted in the upper section of the back wall of the *confessio* in the position of *orantes*. Indeed, the letter “I,” which is the first letter of the Latin spelling of the name *Ioannis*, appears on the garments of the figure on the right. Below these figures is a possible depiction of the resurrected Christ, which would be appropriate

¹⁵⁶ Spier, “The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power,” 14.

¹⁵⁷ Spier, 14.

for a martyrdom shrine. Snyder notes that the martyrium was built sometime during the mid-fourth century, further confirming the identities of the figures.¹⁵⁸ Although outright persecution of Christians during this period was rare, Christians continued to be aware of its possibility. What is more, they looked to the examples of the martyrs to learn how they themselves should act as members of the kingdom of God living under Roman imperial rule.

Consequently, early Christian art played an important role in forming Christian political identity in the Roman Empire. Christians identified as Christians first, and Romans second. Although Christians believed that they should be lawful citizens so far as possible, they were not to be so obedient as to engage in idolatry. In all other regards, Christians acted as the superlative citizens of the Empire. However, Christians were members of a heavenly kingdom first and foremost.

Conclusion

Ultimately, images were an important means for forming Christian identity from the second century onwards. Christians used images to negotiate their place within Roman society, eventually appropriating the very imagery that had been used to mock them. Within early Christian religious practice, images played an important didactic role as is clear in artworks from the Dura-Europos baptistry to the apse of the basilica of Santa Pudenziana. The popularity of scenes from the Babylonian exile, as well as scenes from the lives of Christ, the apostles, and the martyrs within early Christian artworks, evince the importance of Christian art in forming the identity of Christians within the Roman

¹⁵⁸ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 80.

imperial political system. Hence art was crucial for forming a scripturally informed political identity within the early church.

CHAPTER THREE

Art and Idolatry in the First and Second Centuries

Up to this point, I have examined material culture with some reference to documentary evidence to outline the role of images in the Roman Empire and early Christianity. The task now at hand is to see whether the material evidence previously presented can contribute to our understanding of theoretical debates about idolatry in the first few centuries of the church. This will require a more extensive examination of literature from the early church and much less reference to material culture. Against the predominant view that the leaders of the church rejected images in theory while the uneducated lay people clung to the pagan practice of image-making,¹⁵⁹ I contend that early Christian artistic theory and practice were harmonious.

The failure to see the unity of early Christian theory and practice is perhaps due to the limits of the disciplines of those who normally approach the subject. On the one hand, art historians tend to situate their interpretations by reference to literary sources taken out of their original contexts. Since no early Christian texts take art as their primary theme, the comments which early Christians make about art do not occur within the context of art theory. When early Christian authors refer to images, they always do so within the rhetorical confines of some other subject.¹⁶⁰ Without careful attention to the rhetorical ends which govern comments about images in early Christian texts, one cannot develop an accurate picture of how early Christians understood images.

¹⁵⁹ For more on the history of this view, see Finney, *The Invisible God*, 7–10.

¹⁶⁰ Finney, 16.

On the other hand, historians of theology and philosophy tend not to consider the ways in which images can contribute to the theoretical subjects they study. When these historians refer to artworks, it is usually to illustrate how the theories of the theologians and philosophers of the day were visualized for the common folk. Thus, few scholars have given serious consideration to the ways in which images and texts together can contribute to our understanding of early Christianity. If given equal epistemic status and approached with the appropriate method, images and texts from early Christianity can inform interpretations of each other which would be mutually enlightening.

In this chapter and the next, I complete the foundation necessary for such an approach by examining the literary evidence from the first four centuries of the church. I begin by outlining what scripture says about the proper role of art in worship. I then discuss the polemical rhetoric of second century apologists and the relevance of their views on idolatry for our understanding of early Christian attitudes towards images. Once we have both the material and documentary evidence in view, we will be able to see how the material evidence contributes to our understanding of early Christian conceptions of art.

Scriptural Precedents

As a development from Judaism, Christianity stressed the importance of the scriptures for salvation from the beginning. Of course, the term “scripture” originally referred to the Jewish Scriptures and only came to refer to the additional books and letters of the New Testament later. Chapter 28 of the first Epistle of Clement, written around 95, cites these scriptures in the customary Jewish way and chapter 3 of the early Christian sermon known as Clement II, written around 100, provides the first surviving citation of Jesus’

words as scripture.¹⁶¹ During this very early period, Christian discussions of art always occur within the context of condemning Greco-Roman polytheistic practices. Later, Christian apologists would refer to images to illustrate certain points about the nature of God or true worship. However, no unqualified condemnation of art occurs in the New Testament, and the ban on graven images in the decalogue, often taken as a ban on images in general, becomes more complicated when interpreted in light of the narratives of the building of the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Christians began producing artworks as soon as they had the resources and freedom to do so. Accordingly, I concluded there that early Christianity was not aniconic in practice. Christians produced artworks, borrowing from and responding to Roman works such as those discussed in Chapter One that provided the visual vocabulary at the time. As I will argue here, early Christianity was not iconophobic in theory either. Rather, Christians only ever addressed artistic theory on an *ad hoc* basis until artistic practices and the social conditions of the Roman Empire changed in ways that would necessitate a change in theoretical concerns near the end of the fourth century.

Written sometime during the third quarter of the first century, the Gospel of Mark provides what is likely the earliest Christian mention of an image. In Mark 12:13-17, an unfriendly group of Pharisees and Herodians approaches Jesus. After flattering him, they ask him an intentionally loaded question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Understanding their intention, Jesus responds by asking, “Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” They bring him the requested coin, most likely the Tiberian denarius which shows the laureated head of the emperor on its obverse with the

¹⁶¹ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, xii.

inscription: TI CAESAR DIVI AUG AUGUSTUS, “Tiberius Caesar [son of] the divine Augustus.”¹⁶² On the reverse of the coin, a female sits on a throne, diademed and robed, holding a scepter in one hand and an olive branch in the other with the inscription: PONTIF MAXIM, “High Priest.”¹⁶³ After examining the coin, Jesus asks the Pharisees and Herodians, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They answer, “Caesar’s.” Jesus then gives an unexpected reply: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” With these words, Jesus wisely avoids the trap which the Pharisees had hoped to set with their initial question.

At issue in this dialogue is not only the problem of whether Jews, who were then a subject people of the Roman Empire, should pay taxes, but whether it was even permissible for them to use Roman currency, which almost always was imprinted with the graven image of an emperor. Finney explains that “observant Jews detested the coin because its subject embodied idolatry, the secular arrogation of absolute power which belonged exclusively to God.”¹⁶⁴ Mark relates Jesus asking for and then looking at a coin laden with idolatrous subject matter, an act which many observant Jews would have found most objectionable.

However, Jesus’ response is consistent with his insistence in other passages that one must interpret the letter of the law according to its spirit. One thinks of Mark 3:1-6, in which Jesus heals a man with a deformed hand on the Sabbath, when no healing could take place given a literal interpretation of the law. Mark records that “they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.” Then,

¹⁶² Finney, *The Invisible God*, 70.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Jesus asks them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” Unwilling to subordinate their love of the law to the ethical and salvific purposes for which it was given, they went away silent. These passages in Mark reflect a concern in the early church not only for idolatry of the image, but idolatry of scripture. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees suggests that a concern for ethical consistency is central for any theory of visual or verbal meaning, a view which Augustine would further elaborate over three centuries later.¹⁶⁵

Similarly, the author traditionally identified as the Evangelist Luke sometime near the end of the first century recorded the very earliest years of the church in his Acts of the Apostles – first so called by Irenaeus in the late second century. Acts completes the salvation history begun in the Gospel of Luke, so modern scholars often refer to the two works collectively as Luke-Acts. The two works include narratives that follow the style of Greek apologies, often addressed to gentile audiences, but sometimes to Jewish audiences that include gentile converts to Judaism referred to as “God-fearers.”¹⁶⁶

Acts provides another of the earliest Christian discussions of images. Acts 17:16 says, “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” Because of this, Paul begins to reason (*dialegeto*) in the synagogue with Jews and in the marketplace – the same *agora* in which Socrates practiced his dialectic a few centuries earlier – with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Subsequently, Paul delivers an apology of the Christian faith on the Areopagus. He begins:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious (*deisidaimon*). For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with

¹⁶⁵ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 79–89.

¹⁶⁶ Rhoads, Esterline, and Lee, *Luke-Acts and Empire*, 7–12.

this inscription: “To the unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.”

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image (*charagma*) formed by the art (*technē*) and imagination (*enthumēsis*) of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

This speech is noteworthy for a few reasons. First, Paul addresses it to an educated Greek audience and uses Greek rhetorical flourishes. Although Paul often addresses Jewish audiences in his speeches, he speaks with a presumably gentile audience in Athens. The philosophers with whom Paul spoke were the professional academics in one of the most erudite cities in the ancient world. The author of Acts has gone to lengths to convey a sense of learnedness in Paul's speech, as he records Paul quoting Greek poetry and using the language of the philosophers. Some of the Athenians responded to Paul's speech by mocking him, but not everyone did. Acts 17:34 says that “some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.” Thus, Paul's speech was convincing to some of the learned citizens of Athens. Interestingly, a Christian author in the fifth century would adopt the pseudonym Dionysius, writing theological reflections deeply indebted to Greek philosophy on the authority of Dionysius the Areopagite.

Second, Paul's speech is noteworthy because of the claims Paul makes about the nature of God and proper worship. Although natural philosophy may be able to discover the necessity of a being that exceeds the human capacity to know, this same being has made himself known to humankind. Paul describes this God as the first principle of all that is, i.e. the one who made the world, while also contradicting a few Greek religious practices. When Paul claims that God does not live in manmade temples, he contradicts the Greco-Roman practice of referring to the statue of a god as the god itself, which made it common to speak about gods residing in temples even though mythology portrays the gods residing on Olympus. Weddle comments, "That the amalgamation of image and deity can be found not only in poetry, but also in historical, descriptive, and philosophical works suggests that it may be more than literary contrivance."¹⁶⁷ Likewise, when Paul says that God is not served by human hands, he rejects the Greco-Roman practice of dressing, feeding, and providing drink to cult statues which Weddle also discusses in some detail.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, Paul argues that human art or craft cannot make an image that circumscribes the uncircumscribable divinity of God. We should not conceive of God as something circumscribed by gold or silver or stone. Rather, we should recognize that God transcends transitory, contingent objects. Consequently, despite describing the Athenians as "very religious" or, perhaps better translated into English, "very devout," Paul concludes that the Greek mode of worship falls short of the worship due to God. A pious Greco-Roman polytheist is only a *deisidaimon* or devotee, not a *theosebēs* or God-worshipper.

¹⁶⁷ Weddle, "Touching the Gods," 38.

¹⁶⁸ Weddle, 66–70.

Many of the claims which Paul makes in his speech on the Areopagus resonate with passages from the pseudepigraphic Wisdom of Solomon, which was written probably around 50 B.C. and which much of the early church considered authoritative.¹⁶⁹ In the Wisdom of Solomon, Solomon asks to God to grant that wisdom herself descend from God's throne to dwell with Solomon and to guide him as he rules the Jewish people.

Solomon prays:

Thou hast chosen me to be king of thy people and to be judge over thy sons and daughters. Thou hast given command to build a temple on thy holy mountain, and an altar in the city of thy habitation, a copy of the holy tent which thou didst prepare from the beginning. With thee is wisdom, who knows thy works and was present when thou didst make the world, and who understands what is pleasing in thy sight and what is right according to thy commandments. Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of thy glory send her, that she may be with me and toil, and that I may learn what is pleasing to thee (Wisdom 9:7-10).

At first glance, this passage seems to contradict Paul's claim that the Lord does not dwell in temples built by men. Why would God command Solomon to build a temple if he has no need of one? However, such a question reflects a Greco-Roman conception of what a temple does. The Jewish tradition describes the temple as a house for the *name* of God, not the house of God. When we first hear about the plans for the Temple, in 1 Kings 5, Solomon says to Hiram, King of Tyre:

You know that David my father could not build a house for the *name* of the Lord his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the Lord put them under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side. There is neither adversary nor misfortune. And so I intend to build a house for the *name* of the Lord my God, as the Lord said to David my father, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my *name*.'

¹⁶⁹ For example, Eusebius notes that Irenaeus frequently quotes Wisdom in *Hist. Eccl.*, 5.8.9 and that Clement quotes it in his *Miscellanies*, *Hist. Eccl.*, 6.13.7; The Wisdom of Solomon is canonical in the Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions.

When asked his name, God told Moses that he is “I am that I am.” In giving his name, God made himself known in a limited sense. However, neither Moses nor anyone else could fully perceive the substance designated by this name because the names of God only signify aspects of the divine being and cannot impart perfect knowledge of it. As 1 Corinthians 13:12 says, “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Finite language cannot encapsulate infinite being, nor can a finite building such as a temple. Nonetheless, a finite building can house a finite signifier of the divine, e.g. the name of God. Given this, the temple cannot be the house of God in an absolute sense.

Consequently, after construction on the temple had begun, the Lord says to Solomon:

Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel (1 Kings 6:12-13).

In the Wisdom of Solomon, God gives his wisdom to dwell with Solomon. In 1 Kings, God promises that he will dwell among the Israelites. In the Gospel of John, Jesus comes as the fulfillment of God’s promise. Furthermore, just as wisdom was present at the creation of the cosmos accord to Wisdom, so the *logos* or word was present in the beginning according to John. Wisdom maintains that human art should in some way be “a copy of the holy tent which thou didst prepare from the beginning.” Thus, human art is appropriate so long as it mirrors the divine reason that orders the cosmos and causes its beauty. Art becomes idolatrous when it distorts this order.

Reflecting on this tradition, David Jeffrey comments that the Wisdom of Solomon expresses both a Jewish taboo and a Hellenistic norm, i.e., while beauty in art and nature in the biblical account is intended to lead us to acknowledge its source, the divine artist, it

does not always work out this way.¹⁷⁰ We see this most clearly in Wisdom 13:1-5, which I think is worth quoting in full:

For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things men assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if men were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is he who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.

One sees in this passage what one might call Jerusalem engaging Athens. Just as Paul engages in dialogue with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Acts, so the author of Wisdom engages several Greek schools of thought in this passage. For example, he responds to the ideas of the Milesian material monists who thought that the first principle of the world could be traced back to elements such as water or air. One can also detect the influence of Plato, whose ideas influenced Jewish thought during this early period.

Second Century Apologies

Among the sources of anxiety about idolatry in the early church were repeated accusations of atheism against Christians. As Finney notes, the complaint of atheism was legitimate because “the new religionists refused to worship the gods and Caesar, a fact that was evident to all who had eyes to see. Outsiders who observed this behavior might well infer that, practically speaking, Christians were atheists.”¹⁷¹ From the early second century until the reign of Decius, when sporadic persecutions became more frequent and harsh, Christians experienced periods of sporadic persecution, often being accused of

¹⁷⁰ Jeffrey, *In the Beauty of Holiness*, 31.

¹⁷¹ Finney, *The Invisible God*, 18.

atheism, superstition, or sexual misconduct, each of which were preceded and predictable charges given earlier responses to small mystery religions such as the Bacchic rites. Christians typically came into conflict with polytheism and the political system to which it was attached through the refusal to participate in aspects of the imperial cult.¹⁷² The threat of accusations, as well as the need of the nascent religion to spread, led to the growing importance of the *apologia* genre in early Christian literature.

An *apologia* is a speech in defense of something. The genre typically involves a speaker, writer, or advocate who addresses his defense against an opponent to a target audience.¹⁷³ Early Christian apologists wrote defenses of the Christian faith in response to various challenges presented by Greco-Roman polytheists. Finney explains, “The apologists always subordinate art-related subject matter to concerns and issues that loom larger in their horizon, issues such as the nature of God, true worship, and the ethical life... they drew art (painting and sculpture) into the discussion only to illustrate these primary concerns.”¹⁷⁴ Whatever we can learn about art from apologetic texts, we must interpret in light of the rhetorical demands of the genre, keeping the audience, opponent, and charge in mind as we read.

Although charges of superstition and sexual misconduct were primarily slanderous stock charges, the charge of atheism presented a real threat to the new faith because the orthopraxic demands of polytheism and its inextricable ties to the Roman imperial system. What mattered most in Greco-Roman religion was keeping the relationship between gods and men peaceful and benevolent. As Cicero observed, “Jupiter is called

¹⁷² Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 38.

¹⁷³ Finney, *The Invisible God*, 22.

¹⁷⁴ Finney, 16.

the best and greatest not because he makes us just or moderate or wise, but because he makes us safe and rich and well supplied.”¹⁷⁵ From the perspective of orthopraxic religion, Christians appeared atheistic because they refused to perform the rites demanded by traditional religion, whatever their beliefs may have been. Against this backdrop, the apologists were attempting nothing less than the complete turnaround of the political, legal, and social conditions that defined their lives, which threatened to upset the *pax deorum* resulting in occasional conflict between Christians and their polytheistic neighbors.¹⁷⁶

Beginning in the second century, Christian apologists began to represent idolatry as not only a mistaken practice, but an actively dangerous error. Justin Martyr, who lived from 100 to 165, addresses his *First Apology* to the emperor Antoninus Pius on behalf of “on behalf of those of all nations who are unjustly hated and wantonly abused.”¹⁷⁷ As Justin clarifies what Christians hold to be the nature and proper worship of God, he explains to his Roman audience that “neither do we honor with many sacrifices and garlands of flowers such deities as men have formed and set in shrines and called gods; since we see that these are soulless and dead, and have not the form of God...”¹⁷⁸ In other words, the finite stone statues fashioned by craftsmen can never embody the infinite divine substance. Justin presents a caricature of Greco-Roman religious practice, turning the charge of atheism against the polytheists. Unlike the polytheists who worship rocks, Christians worship a God who is greater than the created world.

¹⁷⁵ Cicero, *De. Nat. Deor.* 3.87.

¹⁷⁶ Finney, *The Invisible God*, 17.

¹⁷⁷ Justin, *1 Apol.* 1, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

Moreover, Justin claims that educated men already know that these popular practices are false. He writes, “For why need we tell you who already know, into what forms the craftsmen, carving and cutting, casting and hammering, fashion the materials? And often out of vessels of dishonor, by merely changing the form, and making an image of the requisite shape, they make what they call a god.”¹⁷⁹ Such a claim is consistent with Justin’s attempt to reconcile the doctrines of the philosophers with the teachings of the church. In his writings, Justin maintains that all true teaching belongs to the wisdom of God, regardless of whether an Athenian philosopher or Hebrew prophet discovered it. For example, he says:

For while we say that all things have been produced and arranged into a world by God, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of Plato; and while we say that there will be a burning up of all, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of the Stoics: and while we affirm that the souls of the wicked, being endowed with sensation even after death, are punished, and that those of the good being delivered from punishment spend a blessed existence, we shall seem to say the same things as the poets and philosophers; and while we maintain that men ought not to worship the works of their hands, we say the very things which have been said by the comic poet Menander, and other similar writers, for they have declared that the workman is greater than the work.¹⁸⁰

Justin seems correct in his assertion that some Greek and Roman writers did not believe statues to be divinities. Plutarch, for instance, writes that one can explain reports of statues bleeding or crying by natural causes. He writes, “It is possible also that statues may emit a noise like a moan or a groan, by reason of a fracture or a rupture, which is more violent if it takes place in the interior.”¹⁸¹ Although some educated writers such as Menander or Plutarch doubted the divinity of statues as Justin claims, the confusion of statue and deity which Justin criticizes did occur. In her study of Greek and Roman cult

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸¹ Plutarch, *Cor.* 37-8.

statues, Weddle remarks that members of both the educated and uneducated classes thought cult statues possessed some form of life.¹⁸² Justin correctly points out the lack of wisdom in such a view.

However, Justin's theological commitment to a God who is beyond imagination caused him some difficulties. Justin needed to find a way to reconcile the theophanies of the Jewish Scriptures with this commitment. To this end, Justin interprets the Old Testament theophanies as christological events.¹⁸³ In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin explains to the Jew Trypho and his colleagues:

Moses, then, the blessed and faithful servant of God, declares that He who appeared to Abraham under the oak in Mamre is God, sent with the two angels in His company to judge Sodom by Another who remains ever in the supercelestial places, invisible to all men, holding personal intercourse with none, whom we believe to be Maker and Father of all things; for he speaks thus: "God appeared to him under the oak in Mamre, as he sat at his tent-door at noontide. And lifting up his eyes, he saw, and behold, three men stood before him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the door of his tent; and he bowed himself toward the ground..."¹⁸⁴

According to Justin, one ought to interpret any appearance of God in the Jewish Scriptures as an appearance of the divine through the incarnate person of Jesus. When Trypho fails to see the necessity of a second divine being given God's invisibility and his repeated appearances, Justin calls to mind Gen. 19:24, in which "the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven." Justin calls to attention other passages as well, such as the stories of Moses and the burning bush, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob wrestling the man at Peniel, or the fourth figure who appears in the fiery furnace in Daniel. Jensen concludes that Justin's position is "that all passages

¹⁸² Weddle, "Touching the Gods," 147.

¹⁸³ Jensen, *Face to Face*, 72.

¹⁸⁴ Justin, *Dial.* 56, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith.

of Scripture in which God is said to act, to move, to speak, or even to be seen, refer to the Word rather than the Unbegotten God.”¹⁸⁵ This position is consistent with the kinds of typological exegesis which began to appear in the catacombs only shortly after Justin’s death, such as figures 2.3, 2.4, and 2.6, and it seems to reflect the general stance of the early church. For Justin, the incarnate Word permits the invisible, unchangeable, immaterial, eternal God to interact with the visible, transitory, material, mortal world. Christ, who is both man and God, protects the Creator’s transcendence while allowing interaction with immanent creation. Justin insists that transcendent entered the immanent through the person of Jesus, thus becoming visible.

Likewise, the apologist Irenaeus who lived from 130 to 202 asserts that it was the Word who appeared to Abraham at Mamre, Jacob at Peniel, Moses at Horeb, and the Israelites in the wilderness. However, Irenaeus insists that these appearances of the divine were revelations of the Begotten One who would one day walk among humankind.¹⁸⁶ Irenaeus takes care to avoid implying any subordination between the divine persons. Instead, one should recognize in such appearances the grace of God who provides signs of the coming redemption. He writes:

So then the Father is Lord and the Son is Lord, and the Father is God and the Son is God; for that which is begotten of God is God. And so in the substance and power of His being there is shown forth one God; but there is also according to the economy of our redemption both Son and Father. Because to created things the Father of all is invisible and unapproachable, therefore those who are to draw near to God must have their access to the Father through the Son.¹⁸⁷

For Irenaeus, the incarnation is necessary because God is benevolent, transcendent, and incomprehensible, while we are fallen, finite, and incapable of salvation unless we know

¹⁸⁵ Jensen, *Face to Face*, 73.

¹⁸⁶ Jensen, 77.

¹⁸⁷ Irenaeus, *Epid.* 47, trans. J. Armitage Robinson.

God. Therefore, it followed from God's nature and our fallenness that he would clothe his divinity in human form to make himself knowable to humanity. The Incarnation gives humanity the epistemic capacity to know God. Given his metaphysics, epistemology, and anthropology, Jesus is the only possible way to the Father. According to Irenaeus, the transcendent God becomes visible to mankind through the Son so that we might come to know the Father. Thus, Irenaeus simultaneously responds to the Gnostics who in various ways denied the goodness of the material world and the full divinity of Christ while also explaining the various divine appearances in the Old Testament without subordinating the divine persons.

Responding to the charge of atheism, the late second century apologist Athenagoras who lived from 133 to 190 turns the accusation against the accusers using the example of Diagoras. He then asks:

But to us, who distinguish God from matter, and teach that matter is one thing and God another, and that they are separated by a wide interval (for that the Deity is uncreated and eternal, to be beheld by the understanding and reason alone, while matter is created and perishable), is it not absurd to apply the name of atheism?¹⁸⁸

Athenagoras clarifies that God entered the material world through the *Logos*.

Subsequently, he defends Christianity as the one true philosophy, embracing various parts of Roman and Greek philosophy while completing them in the fullness of truth.

Like the philosophers, Christians maintain that God is one, uncircumscribed, and uncreated. Although Christians believe in the three persons of God, God is still a unity.

Athenagoras explains:

But if... it occurs to you to inquire what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that He is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal mind (*nous*), had the *Logos* in Himself, being from eternity instinct with *Logos* (*logikos*)... The Holy Spirit Himself also...

¹⁸⁸ Athenagoras, *Leg.* 4, trans. B.P. Pratten.

we assert to be an effluence of God, flowing from Him, and returning back again like a beam of the sun. Who, then, would not be astonished to hear men who speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and who declare both their power in union and their distinction in order, called atheists?¹⁸⁹

Thus, Athenagoras responds to the charge of atheism by arguing that Christians believe in the same God that the philosophers seek to find. Greek and Roman philosophers err because they try to find God without the aid of revelation. Only with the help of the Word can anyone come to God, according to Athenagoras.

Moreover, Athenagoras turns the charge of atheism against Christianity's critics by pointing out errors in polytheistic worship. Cult images provide an obvious target, but Athenagoras develops his argument in such a way that he limits his attack on Greek and Roman art to those practices which glorify representations rather than the things represented. He writes:

Because the multitude, who cannot distinguish between matter and God... pray to idols made of matter, are we to come and worship images? If, indeed, matter and God are the same... we are guilty of impiety. But if they are at the greatest possible remove from one another... why are we called to account? For as is the potter and the clay..., so is God, the Framer of the world, and matter, which is subservient to Him for the purposes of His art. But as the clay cannot become vessels of itself without art, so neither did matter, which is capable of taking all forms, receive, apart from God the Framer, distinction and shape and order... if there is anything about them elegant in art we praise the artificer, and it is he who reaps the glory of the vessels: even so with matter and God... So that, if we were to regard the various forms of matter as gods, we should seem to be without any sense of the true God, because we should be putting the things which are dissoluble and perishable on a level with that which is eternal.¹⁹⁰

According to Athenagoras, idolatry stems from a category mistake. When one seeks to satisfy one's desire for the infinite through finite objects, one commits idolatry. Those Greek and Roman artistic practices which appropriated beauty to glorify worldly things

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 10.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 15.

fell into this kind of error because they mistake the immanent for the transcendent. Thus, Athenagoras limits his attack on Greco-Roman art to a subset of artistic practices while also speaking of God as an artist and acknowledging the beauty of the cosmos and works of art.

Consequently, Athenagoras generally has a positive attitude towards art. He suggests that beauty points to something transcendent and worries that art is so powerful that it can easily become a distraction from its transcendent source. As is often the case in ancient thought, Athenagoras thinks there are ethical constraints that limit the proper domain of the subject.¹⁹¹ Although art is a distinct field, it is not an independent field as it fits within the whole of human activities which are themselves subordinate to concerns about human ends and the proper means of obtaining these ends. These concerns fit within a larger understanding of the limits of human reason and humanity's continual longing for the infinite. Within this framework, the begotten but uncreated Word provides the way to the infinite by bridging the gap between the transcendent and the immanent.

Near the end of the second century, the theologian Clement of Alexandria penned his *Protrepticus* (c. 195), followed by the *Paedagogus* (c. 198) and *Stromata* (c. 200). Following Plato, Clement distinguishes reason, the passions, and the appetites as the three parts of the soul. He deals with the first in the *Protrepticus*, where he shows his extensive knowledge of polytheistic theology and Greek and Roman philosophy. Clement builds his own credibility by showing that he is equally or perhaps superiorly versed in poetry, history, and philosophy to any pagan writer while rejecting the religion of these

¹⁹¹ For example, ancient historians often subordinate concerns for objective neutrality to ethical considerations. Livy provides an obvious example of this, though Tacitus, who is the most modern of ancient historians, also subordinates his concern for neutrality to concerns for proper conduct.

thinkers in favor of Christian theology. Quoting the philosopher Heraclitus, Clement remarks, “‘And to these images they pray, with the same result as if one were to talk to the walls of his house.’ For are they not to be wondered at who worship stones, and place them before the doors, as if capable of activity?’”¹⁹² He continues:

The senseless earth is dishonored by the makers of images, who change it by their art from its proper nature and induce men to worship it; and the makers of gods worship not gods and demons, but in my view earth and art, which go to make up images. For, in truth, the image is only dead matter shaped by the craftsman’s hand. But we have no sensible image of sensible matter, but an image that is perceived by the mind alone – God, who alone is truly God.¹⁹³

Notably, Clement’s criticism of art only works in the context of idol-making. For Clement, one falls into idolatry when one worships something inanimate as though it were animate. The folly of Greco-Roman polytheism lies in this mistake. Unlike Christians who worship the supersensible creator, polytheists mistake wood and stone for divinities because they see in works of art something which seems divine. As Callistratus said of a statue of Eros, “Bronze gave expression to him, and as though giving expression to Eros as a great and dominating god, it was itself subdued by Eros; for it could not endure to be bronze only, but it became Eros just as he was.”¹⁹⁴ Beauty begets such longing that it can act as either a powerful impetus to the divine or a strong seduction to idolatry. The artist, then, has a heavy spiritual responsibility for his artworks. Clement does not criticize the art of the house builder, but rather the art of the man who would make statues to place on the door to his house. The art of the first man is an appropriate response to human needs, whereas the art of the second is an inappropriate response to a real human desire. According to Clement, idolatry stems from the disordered pursuit of a

¹⁹² Clement of Alexandria, *Prot.* 4.1, trans. William Wilson.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Callistratus, *Descriptions* 3.1, trans. A. Fairbanks.

real good. One should not respond to one's desire for the transcendent by worshipping objects made by men, which in pointing to something divine might mislead one to mistake the sign for the signified.

Conclusion

Consequently, Christian commentary on the visual arts in the first two centuries always occurs in the context of larger discussions about the true nature of God and proper worship. The scriptural precedents suggest many of the ethical, metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological constraints with the apologists would further delimit. From Justin Martyr to Clement of Alexandria, the apologists agree that fundamental error involved in idolatry is mistaking the immanent for the transcendent. When a work of art fails to point to anything beyond itself, it falls short of the goodness of which it is capable. This was the basic attitude of Christians towards art in the first two centuries. In the next two centuries, this view would receive further articulation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Art and Idolatry in the Third and Fourth Centuries

In the first two centuries of the church, Christian authors directed their energies to refuting the charges of atheism and misconduct that they sometimes faced. One of the rhetorical strategies which the apologists used was to turn these charges against the accusers. Christian thinkers of the third and fourth centuries followed a similar strategy, though the social and political conditions under which they lived were changing in several important ways. In the third century, Christian apologists further developed the ethical, metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological arguments which older apologists such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria had begun to articulate. Increased persecution in the second half of the third century and the eventual adoption of a policy of religious tolerance in the early fourth century changed the real-life concerns to which the apologists were responding. As Christianity began to obtain official recognition in the fourth century, traditional polytheists felt their religion threatened and subsequently responded by presenting apologies for their beliefs. The ensuing debates make it clear that Christian criticisms of idolatry had fundamentally reshaped the ways in which Roman elites thought about images and their role in worship. Discussions of art and idolatry in the third and fourth centuries evince the reorientation of viewer and object which took place with the advent of Christianity as the predominant religion in the Roman world.

Third Century Responses to Polytheism

Near the beginning of the third century, the North African apologist Tertullian who lived from 160 to 220 elucidated and expanded on the account of idolatry which other apologists had put forward in the previous century. Tertullian begins his *De Idolatria* by saying, “The principal crime of the human race... is idolatry. For, although each single fault retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet it is marked off under the general account of idolatry.”¹⁹⁵ Tertullian has moved beyond merely mentioning idols to illustrate the absurdity of polytheism; he addresses the general category mistake which is characteristic of idolatry and looks for similar mistakes in a variety of contexts which have nothing to do with cult images. For example, Tertullian explains how idolatry is analogous to fraud, writing, “The essence of fraud, I take it, is, that any should seize what is another's, or refuse to another his due; and, of course, fraud done toward man is a name of greatest crime. Well, but idolatry does fraud to God, by refusing to Him, and conferring on others, His honors.”¹⁹⁶ Similarly, fornication, concupiscence, lasciviousness, drunkenness, vanity, and mendacity are subsets of the general error of idolatry, according to Tertullian.

However, Tertullian acknowledges that the more general one takes the concept of idolatry to be, the less specificity one's account will have. Consequently, he restricts himself to speaking only of idolatry in the context of idols and idol-making for the first few chapters of his book. In a chapter on the origin and meaning of the word, he writes:

For since even without an idol idolatry is committed, when the idol is there it makes no difference of what kind it be, of what material, or what shape; lest any should think that only to be held an idol which is consecrated in human shape. To establish this point, the interpretation of the word is requisite. *Eidos*, in Greek, signifies form;

¹⁹⁵ Tertullian, *Idol.* 1, trans. S. Thelwall.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

eidolon, derived diminutively from that, by an equivalent process in our language, makes formling. Every form or formling, therefore, claims to be called an idol. Hence idolatry is “all attendance and service about every idol.”¹⁹⁷

Thus, one can think of idolatry as attendance to appearances when attendance to essences would also be appropriate. This helps explain the similarity between idolatry and vanity, since the vain person thinks excessively about appearances to the neglect of substantive things. Given Tertullian’s definition of an idol as a formling, one might worry that man is an idol since he is made in the image of God. This raises the question of what distinguishes an image from an idol, which Tertullian hints at in the subsequent chapter. He says, “All things, therefore, does human error worship, except the Founder of all Himself. The images of those things are idols; the consecration of images is idolatry.” An idol, then, is an image which receives excessive devotion. The difference lies not in the artifact, but in the heart. When one forgets what marble or paint represents or to what a word refers, one turns an image into an idol. Just as Mark suggests that scripture becomes an idol if we forget the spirit of the law when interpreting the letter of the law, so Tertullian suggests that images become idols when we love them for their own sake. Unless we retrace the created world back to its creator, we fall into idolatry. Thus, Tertullian follows much of the tradition that he inherited, even while articulating it in a new way and expanding upon it.

Moreover, Tertullian follows the second-century apologists in insisting that the Incarnation is crucial if we are to avoid idolatry. Tertullian’s primary target was the heretic Marcion who denied the reality of the true Incarnation. Tertullian argues that the qualities of visibility, fleshliness, and materiality which Marcion denied were worthy of

¹⁹⁷ Tertullian, *Idol*. 3.

God because they were necessary for human salvation.¹⁹⁸ Given God's goodness, benevolence, and mercy, it was fitting for the divine to come down to lift us up through the Incarnation. Unless Jesus is fully human and fully divine, he cannot bridge the gap between the transcendent and immanent, so humanity remains disconnected from God, who is invisible, unapproachable, and incomprehensible. Consequently, Tertullian stresses the importance of the incarnation in the history of salvation, since there could be no salvation apart from the unity of the human and the divine in the person of Christ.

Somewhat later in the third century, Tertullian's North African contemporary, Marcus Minucius Felix, who lived between 160 and 250, summarized a likely fictional debate between a Christian named Octavius and a polytheist named Caecilius about the credibility and morality of the Christian faith. Caecilius raises several objections to Christianity which Octavius refutes, leading to the conversion of Caecilius in the end. One of the objections which Caecilius raises has to do with art. He says, "For why do [Christians] endeavor with such pains to conceal and to cloak whatever they worship, since honorable things always rejoice in publicity, while crimes are kept secret? Why have they no altars, no temples, no acknowledged images?"¹⁹⁹ To this, Octavius responds, "But do you think that we conceal what we worship, if we have not temples and altars? And yet what image of God shall I make, since, if you think rightly, man himself is the image of God? What temple shall I build to Him, when this whole world fashioned by His work cannot receive Him?"²⁰⁰ Through these words of Octavius, Minucius Felix suggests the invisibility and inapproachability of God. He continues:

¹⁹⁸ Jensen, *Face to Face*, 78.

¹⁹⁹ Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 10, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

Verily for this reason we believe Him to be God, that we can be conscious of Him, but cannot see Him; for in His works, and in all the movements of the world, we behold His power ever present... we cannot look upon the sun, which is the cause of seeing to all creatures: the pupil of the eye is withdrawn from his rays, the gaze of the beholder is dimmed; and if you look too long, all power of sight is extinguished. What! can you sustain the Architect of the sun Himself, the very source of light?... Do you wish to see God with your carnal eyes, when you are neither able to behold nor to grasp your own soul itself, by which you are enlivened and speak...?²⁰¹

The language which Octavius uses is noticeably influenced by Platonism. In the allegory of the cave, Plato speaks of a man who escapes from the cave where he has spent his whole life to enter the world illuminated by the light of the sun. The man is unable to bear the brightness because his eyes are accustomed to the dim shadows of the cave. According to Octavius, our experience of the divine is much like that of the man from the allegory of the cave. Since God lacks no good property, the idea of God necessarily includes the ideas of existence, omniscience, omnipotence, eternity, and immutability. These ideas are intelligible to the mind, but not visible to the eyes. The Christian notion of a maximally good God – one who is so glorious that mortal minds may only catch glimpses of his radiance – betrays the lowness of the polytheistic gods. However, the loftiness of the Christian conception of God necessitates the Incarnation, since it is through the Incarnation that God becomes comprehensible to human faculties.

By the time Minucius Felix wrote his apology, Christians most certainly were producing their own images, some of which depicted the incarnate God. Finney concludes, “In short, the anti-Christian accusation that Minucius gives to Caecilius does not square with the real-life condition of Christians living in Minucius’ world.”²⁰² Finney is correct that Christians were developing their own religious images during this period.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Finney, *The Invisible God*, 42.

However, we should note that Christians did not attempt to produce images of God the Father during this early period. Instead, they depicted the active grace of God in the world through the incarnate Son, as for example, the good shepherd (Figures 2.3 and 2.4) or the true philosopher (Figure 2.6). Thus, Jensen writes, “Jesus (as the human manifestation of the Word) regularly appears in Christian visual art from the late third century onwards, first as a figure in narrative images...and then – at the end of the fourth century – in a portrait image that showed his face alone.”²⁰³ Accordingly, we find the same emphasis on the knowability of God through the incarnation in early Christian art that we find in the writings of Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and other third century apologists and theologians such as Theophilus and Novatian.

Later in the third century, the prolific theologian Origen, who lived from 184 until dying of injuries sometime after being tortured during the persecution of Decius in 250, followed his younger contemporaries in insisting on the invisibility of God. However, unlike them, Origen maintained that God’s invisibility also applied to the pre-incarnate Word.²⁰⁴ For Origen, the incarnation made it possible for an otherwise invisible and unbearable divine glory to shine on the world. Drawing on Plato’s language in the allegory of the cave, Origen says the human mind cannot bear to look on the glory of God unless there is a mediating light which makes the glory of god visible to humankind. To clarify how this works, Origen writes:

For instance, suppose that there were a statue of so enormous a size as to fill the whole world, and which on that account could be seen by no one; and that another statue were formed altogether resembling it in the shape of the limbs, and in the features of the countenance, and in form and material, but without the same immensity of size, so that those who were unable to behold the one of enormous proportions, should, on seeing the latter, acknowledge that they had seen the former,

²⁰³ Jensen, *Face to Face*, 131.

²⁰⁴ Jensen, 94.

because it preserved all the features of its limbs and countenance, and even the very form and material, so closely, as to be altogether undistinguishable from it; by some such similitude, the Son of God, divesting Himself of His equality with the Father, and showing to us the way to the knowledge of Him, is made the express image of His person: so that we, who were unable to look upon the glory of that marvelous light when placed in the greatness of His Godhead, may, by His being made to us brightness, obtain the means of beholding the divine light by looking upon the brightness.²⁰⁵

Origen warns that this analogy does not describe the subject fully, and, given that statues are not the stated subject, we should be careful not to think that the analogy elucidates a theory of art. For one, Origen states that the statues resemble each other materially, whereas the relation between the incarnate Word and the Godhead is a spiritual resemblance. Origen also warns that it is not the physical appearance, but rather the divine deeds of Christ which reveal the unity of the transcendent and the immanent in the person of Jesus. Origen concludes that we should not understand the language of seeing in a literal sense. Thus, in the case of Moses, he says, “Moses too must be supposed to have seen God, not beholding Him with the bodily eye, but understanding Him with the vision of the heart and the perception of the mind, and that only in some degree.”²⁰⁶ According to Origen, the language of sight works as a metaphor for intellectual perception.

Consequently, the image of God is always an intelligible similitude rather than a visible likeness for Origen. Men and women bear the image of God in their spirits, which were immortal, uncorrupted, and invisible before the fall. Origen clarifies that God created humanity in the image of God, who is Christ, the “exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb. 1:3) and the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Those who perceive

²⁰⁵ Origen, *Princ.* 1.2.8, trans. Frederick Crombie.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.4.3.

the Son with the mind's eye also perceive the Father, since anyone who looks at an image understands the original model. This vision restores the image of God imprinted in men and women at creation, for Origen believes that one becomes like the things one contemplates. Thus, perception of God's image through the person of Christ is necessary for the restoration of the full image of God in humankind, and this perception should have a transformative effect on the ethical life of the individual. Origen, then, provides a different but complementary approach to the metaphysical, epistemic, and ethical concerns articulated by earlier second and third century apologists.

In defending themselves against charges of atheism, superstition, and sexual misconduct, the second- and third-century apologists often attempted to construe things such that their accusers would appear guilty of the very charges they were bringing against the Christians. They often do this by turning the charge of atheism against the polytheists by asserting the invisibility of God, decrying the confusion of image and deity in paganism, and pointing to Christ as the true image of the divine. As Jensen remarks, "Significantly, these first- and second-century writers said almost nothing about *Christian* art, either because there was very little (or none) in their purview or because if there was, they did not see it as problematic."²⁰⁷ Likewise, third-century theologians expanded upon the arguments first brought forward against *non-Christian* art in the preceding centuries. However, this would change in the next century when artistic production would rapidly increase following the restoration of confiscated church property to Christians under Constantine's leadership.

Images and Idols in the Constantinian Era

²⁰⁷ Jensen, *Face to Face*, 14.

Prior to the restitution of confiscated property to the church with Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, the emperor Galerius issued the Edict of Toleration in 311, which ended the harshest period of persecution faced by the early church. Between 250 and 311, Christians suffered several periods of systematic oppression by the Roman imperial government. The Diocletian Persecution, which began in 303 when the emperors Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius (Figure 1.21) issued a series of edicts rescinding Christians' legal rights and demanding that they comply with traditional religious practices, resulted in the deaths of thousands of Christians. However, Galerius rolled back these laws when Christians refused to conform to his intentions.

In the Edict of Toleration, the following reason is given for the implementation of religious tolerance:

Finally, when our law had been promulgated to the effect that they should conform to the *institutes of antiquity*,... most of them persevered in their determination, and we saw that they neither paid the reverence and awe due to the gods nor worshipped the God of the Christians... we thought that we ought to grant our most prompt indulgence also to these, so that they may again be Christians... Wherefore, for this our indulgence, they ought to pray to their God for *our safety*, for *that of the republic*, and for *their own*, that the republic may continue uninjured on every side, and that they may be able to live securely in their homes.²⁰⁸

Like the logic of the Athenians in Acts who dedicated an altar to an unknown god in the hopes that by this they might avoid offending any god whom they failed to worship, the reasoning of the Edict of Toleration is distinctly pagan. For one, the edict defends the worship of the gods on the grounds of the antiquity of such practices. This is consistent with Roman respect for the *mos maiorum*, the ancestral customs. For example, Livy recounts the destruction of Bacchanalian shrines in the second century B.C., of which

²⁰⁸ Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.* 34, ed. O. F. Fritzsche, II, 273.

“those only excepted were those where there was an ancient altar or a sacred image.”²⁰⁹

Unlike the philosophical arguments put forward by the Christian apologists, the arguments of the polytheists often amounted to appeals to custom. Moreover, the Edict of Toleration gives only a pragmatic justification for the change in policy. The concern is that, for neglect of his worship, the God of the Christians may look unfavorably on Rome. If the Christians refuse to worship any god other than their God, then they at least ought to be able to worship their God to incur whatever favor from him that they can. This reasoning is characteristically pagan.

Although many changes favorable to the church took place during the reign of Constantine, the justification for the Edict of Milan in 313 follows pattern of reasoning similar to that of the Edict of Toleration. It begins:

When I, Constantine Augustus, as well as I, Licinius Augustus, fortunately met near Milan, we thought... we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred; *whence any Divinity whatsoever in the seat of the heavens may be propitious and kindly disposed to us and all who are placed under our rule...* And since these Christians are known to have possessed not only those places in which they were accustomed to assemble, but also other property... all these things... you will order to be restored... Let this be done so that... Divine favor towards us... may, for all time, preserve and prosper our successes together with the good of the state.²¹⁰

The Edict of Milan justifies the restoration of property to the Christians in the hopes that doing so might bring prosperity to the state. The reasoning is remarkably like that which Cicero caricatured when he wrote that Romans revere the gods not because they make men good, but because they can make one prosperous.²¹¹ One sees in the Edict of Milan this same lack of concern for ethical considerations. The emperors justify the edict not

²⁰⁹ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*. 39.18.

²¹⁰ Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.*, 48, ed. O. F. Fritzsche.

²¹¹ Cicero, *De. Nat. Deor.* 3.87.

because it is the right policy, but because it might make the Empire more powerful.

Likewise, there is little concern about whether the Christian God exists or is the one true God. Instead, one finds the expression of hope that any divinity who might be in heaven will look favorably on Rome. Thus, the response of the state to Christianity in the early fourth century followed characteristically pagan patterns of thought.

Later in the fourth century, the historian Eusebius who lived from 263 to 339 would use similar justifications to argue for the superiority of Christianity to polytheism. For example, he argues that the historical evidence shows Christianity to be a more ancient religion than Roman polytheism, appealing to the Roman regard for the *mos maiorum*. After discussing the origins of Christianity in the religion of the ancient Hebrews, he concludes, “Obviously we must regard the religion proclaimed in recent years to all nations through Christ’s teachings as none other than the first, most ancient, and most primitive of all religions.”²¹² Eusebius presents Christianity not only as the most ancient religion, but also as triumphant over paganism with the conversion of Constantine. This, for Eusebius, constituted the triumph of the light over darkness in history.

Despite these newer arguments, Eusebius makes many of the same points that earlier generations of Christian writers had propounded. Following thinkers such as Clement, Tertullian, and Origen, he writes that the Word “showing no slackness in His veneration of the Father, made Himself for all mankind the teacher of knowledge of the Father. Thus, the Lord God is stated to have appeared as an ordinary human being to Abraham.”²¹³ According to Eusebius, the invisible God makes himself visible to man through the agency of the Word in the world. Those who venerate visible things as gods

²¹² Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 1.4.10, trans. G.A. Williamson.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.2.6.

thus engage in idolatry because they fail to recognize either the invisible God or the incarnate Word. Eusebius recounts the story of a heretic named Simon in the early days of the church. He says, “From his time to our own those who follow his lead, while pretending to accept that sober Christian philosophy which through purity of life has won universal fame, are as devoted as ever to the idolatrous superstition from which they seem to have escaped: they prostrate themselves before pictures and images of Simon himself and his companion.”²¹⁴ By worshipping the images of Simon and his companion, these nominal Christians give the worship due to God alone to inferior things. Likewise, Eusebius records that during the persecution of Maximinus II Christians “were prepared to endure anything for religion’s sake, rather than give to idols the reverence due to God.”²¹⁵ Although there is reason to doubt the veracity of many details in Eusebius’ history, we can at least learn something about the attitudes of Christians in the fourth century from them. Eusebius’ account gives us reason to believe idolatry remained a grave concern well into the fourth century.

Additionally, Eusebius provides some of the earliest discussions of the role of the visual arts in Christian communities. He claims, for example, to have seen a statue of the healing of the woman with the blood issue with his own eyes:

The woman with a hemorrhage, who as we learn from the holy gospels was cured of her trouble by our Savior, was stated to have come from here [Panaea]. Her house was pointed out in the city, and a wonderful memorial of the benefit the Savior conferred upon her was still there. On a tall stone base at the gates of her house stood a bronze statue of a woman, resting on one knee and resembling a suppliant with arms outstretched. Facing this was another of the same material, an upright figure of a man... This statue, which was said to resemble the features of Jesus, was still there in my own time, so that I saw it with my own eyes.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Ibid, 2.13.6-8.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 8.14.13.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 7.18.2.

Although Eusebius declines to affirm that the statue was of Jesus, preferring instead to say that it resembled his appearance, the statue did at least provide an image of the visible work of God in the world. Images may not be able to fully capture the glory of the transcendent God, but they can show the evidence of his goodness and mercy by depicting instances of acts of goodness and mercy from the history of salvation.

Eusebius also reproduces a speech given by a dignitary of the church, likely Eusebius himself, who had been invited to deliver orations at the consecration of the cathedral of Tyre. The problem Eusebius faced was lack of precedent for the task before him, as there was no tradition for a panegyric on the consecration of a church, nor could he adapt panegyrics for the consecration of temples to his purpose, since the difference in function was too great.²¹⁷ Instead, Eusebius looked to the Hebrew Scriptures for guidance.

Addressing the speech to the bishop Paulinus, the architect of the cathedral, Eusebius reproduces the following from his oration:

Our first and great High Priest tells us that whatever He sees the Father doing, that the Son does likewise. This one looks to the First as to a teacher, with the pure *eyes of the mind*, and whatever he sees Him doing, that he takes as an *archetype and pattern*, and like an artist he has molded its *image*... into the closest *likeness*. In no respect is he inferior to that Bezalel whom God Himself filled with a spirit of wisdom and understanding, and with technical and scientific knowledge, and chose to be architect of the *temples that symbolized the heavenly types*. In the same way [Paulinus], having the whole Christ, the Word, the Wisdom, the Light, impressed upon his soul, has built this magnificent shrine for God Most High, resembling in its essence the pattern of the better one as *the visible resembles the invisible*.²¹⁸

In this oration, Eusebius first characterizes Christ as one who imitates the Father.

Perceiving transcendent realities with the eye of his mind, Christ conforms to the prototype which he has seen. Second, Eusebius compares the skill of Paulinus in

²¹⁷ Smith, "Christian Rhetoric in Eusebius' Panegyric at Tyre," 226.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 10.4.26.

designing the cathedral to the wisdom of Bezalel, who was the chief artisan of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. Bezalel, whose name means “shadow of God,” is described in the Old Testament as having wise-heartedness, the Hebrew term designating artistic creativity.²¹⁹ Because the Word has transformed the soul of Paulinus, he is able to build a cathedral which itself points to a transcendent reality, just as Bezalel’s gift of wise-heartedness enabled him to build a tent that was an image of heavenly things. Thus, to describe the artistic practices of his Christian contemporaries, Eusebius looks to descriptions of artisans in the scriptures.

Later in his oration, Eusebius explains that the soul of the Christian is itself an image of transcendent reality, which the cathedral imitates in its physical form. He writes, “This cathedral is a marvel of beauty... But all marvels pale before... the metaphysical prototypes... of material things – I mean the reestablishment of the divine spiritual edifice in our souls. This edifice the Son of God Himself created in His own image, and... He endowed it with the divine likeness.”²²⁰ By turning to discussing the soul of the believer, Eusebius emphasizes the ethical implications of his theology of images. Through the imitation of Christ, the Christian becomes Christlike, an image of God. This image is a spiritual image imprinted in the soul. It corresponds to the spiritual image “on earth of the vaults beyond the skies,” fashioned by the Word, “so that by the whole creation and by rational beings on earth His Father might be honored and worshipped.”²²¹ Although “these things no mortal can worthily hymn; for indeed eye has not seen and ear

²¹⁹ Jeffrey, *In the Beauty of Holiness*, 21.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.4.56.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.4.68.

has not heard,”²²² Eusebius exhorts the church, “Let us now and for all time to come rekindle the memory of these things; and let the Author... be before the eyes of our mind night and day.”²²³ Because images act as signifiers, they help the believer to remember the divine by pointing beyond themselves to the things they signify. The plan of a cathedral, for example, may act as a reminder of the laws which govern the created order. This theology of images which Eusebius articulates here is clearly the outgrowth of earlier Christian discussions of the incarnation, idolatry, and the theophanies of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Nevertheless, Eusebius recognizes the political uses which images could serve. He records that after Constantine defeated Maxentius in Rome, “fully aware that his help came from God: at once he ordered a trophy of the Savior’s Passion to be set up under the hand of his own statue.”²²⁴ This trophy of the Lord’s Passion was either a cross or the chi-rho, which Constantine’s statue held in its hand with the inscription, “By this saving sign, the true proof of courage, I saved your city from the yoke of a tyrant and set her free.”²²⁵ Constantine wished to make it clear which heavenly being he believed was responsible for his success and for the success of Rome. Following a long tradition of Roman imperial art, Constantine formed a political iconography which linked the worldly success of the Roman Empire with divine favor, in this case, that of the Christian God. Accordingly, explicitly Christian imperial propaganda became widespread in the Constantinian era. This apparent sanction of the church by the Roman government would result in a pagan backlash in the subsequent years.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid, 10.4.69

²²⁴ Ibid, 9.9.10.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Roman Reaction, Christian Response

After the end of the reign of Constantine and his sons, the emperor Julian gained the purple. Julian would rule from 361 to 363, earning the name “Julian the Apostate” from the church for his attempt to revive Hellenistic polytheism. Since previous attempts to root out Christianity through outright persecution had only strengthened the religion, Julian chose instead to pursue policies which mitigated the influence Christians could wield. For instance, Julian banned Christians from teaching Greek and Roman rhetoric, since they refused to worship the gods portrayed in the stories they taught. Julian writes:

Was it not the gods who revealed all their learning to Homer, Hesiod, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Thucydides, Isocrates and Lysias?... I think it is absurd that men who expound the works of these writers should dishonor the gods whom they used to honor... I give them this choice; either not to teach what they do not think admirable, or, if they wish to teach, let them first really persuade their pupils that neither Homer nor Hesiod nor any of these writers whom they expound and have declared to be guilty of impiety, folly and error in regard to the gods, is such as they declare. For since they make a livelihood and receive pay from the works of those writers, they thereby confess that they are most shamefully greedy of gain, and that, for the sake of a few drachmae, they would put up with anything.²²⁶

Although Julian’s ban on Christian education did not constitute outright persecution, it was oppressive. Julian hoped to slow the growth of Christianity by preventing Christians from teaching the traditional subjects which it would have been normal for free Roman citizens to pursue. Julian also deprived Christian clerics of their immunities from public offices which had been conferred on them by Constantine and developed policies meant to pit Jewish and Christian communities against each other to strengthen pagan communities by weakening their competitors.

²²⁶ Julian, *Epist. 36*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright.

Furthermore, Julian attempted to respond to the philosophical arguments against polytheism that the apologists had put forward in the previous centuries. Against Christian criticisms of idolatry, Julian writes, “For our fathers established images and altars... as symbols of the presence of the gods, not that we may regard such things as gods, but that we may worship the gods through them.”²²⁷ Since members of the common and aristocratic classes alike spoke of the images of gods as though they were the gods themselves, Julian felt it necessary to clarify the role of cult statues, if there was to be a rigorous response to the arguments of the Christians.

Indeed, the apologist Arnobius, who died sometime in the early fourth century, had admitted that prior to his conversion to Christianity “If ever I caught sight of a stone anointed and dressed with olive oil, I worshipped it just as if some power resided in it.”²²⁸ Given the emphasis on correct practice above true belief in Roman polytheism, I think we must conclude that most polytheists prior to the rise of Christianity did not think an explanation of the function of statues in cult practice was necessary. Philosophically inclined writers such as Plutarch may have found cult statues problematic, but Julian was certainly one of the first polytheistic thinkers to find it necessary to reconcile the role of images in cult practice with philosophic theory.

Consequently, Julian argues that images merely act as symbols of the gods. We should think neither that the images of gods are merely wood and stone nor that the images contain the gods themselves. Instead, the images act as conduits to the divinities they represent. He explains why it is necessary for polytheists to think this is the case:

For since being in the body it was in bodily wise that we must needs perform our service to the gods also, though they are themselves without bodies... another class of

²²⁷ Julian, *Letter to a Priest*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright.

²²⁸ Arnobius, *Adv. Nat.* 1.39.

images was invented on the earth, and by performing our worship to them we shall make the gods propitious to ourselves. For just as those who make offerings to the statues of the emperors, who are in need of nothing, nevertheless induce goodwill towards themselves thereby, so too those who make offerings to the images of the gods, though the gods need nothing, do nevertheless thereby persuade them to help and to care for them.²²⁹

Julian attempts to explain the role of cult statues by analogy to emperor worship.

However, this analogy fails for several reasons. First, it begs the question, as Christian criticisms of idol worship included criticisms of emperor worship. Second, it presents a false equivalency between the self-sufficiency of the emperor and that of the gods. If nothing else, the emperor needs some level of popular support to maintain power. In fact, this reality was one of the motivations for the production and distribution of imperial propaganda throughout the Empire. The self-sufficiency of the gods was not thought to be like this. Although Julian acknowledges the invisibility of the divine, he nevertheless gives the gods anthropomorphic motivations that are comparable to his own. Even so, Julian presents perhaps the first attempt to articulate a polytheistic theory of images.

After the death of Julian in 363, the aristocrat Symmachus who lived from 340 until 402 continued the defense of polytheism as growing numbers of nobles converted to Christianity. In a letter addressed to the emperors Valentinian, Theodosius, and Arcadius, Symmachus asks, “For to what is it more suitable that we defend the institutions of our ancestors, and the rights and destiny of our country, than to the glory of these times, which is all the greater when you understand that you may not do anything contrary to the custom of your ancestors?”²³⁰ He then states, “We demand then the restoration of that condition of religious affairs which was so long advantageous to the state.”²³¹ Although

²²⁹ Julian, *Letter to a Priest*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright.

²³⁰ Symmachus, *Rel. 3.3.*, trans. R.H. Barrow.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

Symmachus advocates for polytheism in general, he seeks the restoration of the Altar of Victory in Rome in particular. He asks rhetorically, “Who is so friendly with the barbarians as not to require an Altar of Victory?” For Symmachus, it is a sign of the barbarity of his times that men refuse to worship even the name of victory. After asserting that all men desire victory, Symmachus exhorts the emperors to “let no one deny that what he acknowledges is to be desired should also be venerated.”²³² Christians likely would agree with Symmachus that we venerate the things which we desire, but they would have objected to the implicit assumption that victory is unconditionally desirable. The devout Christians must follow the example of Christ, who prayed “not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

One such Christian was Ambrose who responded to the reactionary polytheists with two letters of his own to Valentinian. In the first of the two letters, Ambrose reminds Valentinian, the Christian emperor of the Western Empire, that whoever calls himself a Christian brings to God neither dissimulation nor pretense, “but earnest faith and devotion. And if, in fine, he does not attain to this, at least he ought not to give any countenance to the worship of idols and to profane ceremonies.”²³³ He also reminds the emperor that the very same people who had destroyed churches and killed Christians now “petition you to grant them privileges, who by the last Julian law denied us the common right of speaking and teaching, and those privileges whereby Christians also have often been deceived.”²³⁴ Subsequently, Ambrose beseeches the young Valentinian to remember “the father of your Piety, the Emperor Theodosius,”²³⁵ who wished for the throne to

²³² Ibid, 3.4.

²³³ Ambrose, *Ep.* 17.2, trans. H. de Romestin.

²³⁴ Ibid, 17.4.

²³⁵ Ibid, 17.12.

remain in Christian hands after his death. Counting on the good faith of the young emperor, Ambrose asks him also to send copies of his correspondences with Symmachus.

In his subsequent letter to the emperor, Ambrose responds to the three propositions of Symmachus which he identifies from the correspondence. He writes, “In his first proposition, Rome complains with sad and tearful words, asking, as he says, for the restoration of the rites of her ancient ceremonies.”²³⁶ Ambrose claims that Symmachus is wrong for putting such words into Rome’s mouth. Instead, he says Rome wants to know, “Why do you daily stain me with the useless blood of the harmless herd? Trophies of victory depend not on the entrails of the flocks, but on the strength of those who fight.”²³⁷ Ambrose also points out that the Altar of Victory did not prevent the sack of Rome, nor did the sacrifices of Nero prevent the burning of the city. Thus, Ambrose concludes, “You worship the works of your own hands... And, in fine, your philosophers themselves have ridiculed these things.”²³⁸ Following the example of defenders of the faith such as Eusebius, Tertullian, and Clement, Ambrose insists upon the ridiculousness and inconsistency of the beliefs of polytheists about images. Moreover, Ambrose defends the privileges of the clergy claiming Christian priests do good with their resources, whereas pagan priests squander their resources giving sacrifices to statues.²³⁹ In reply to Symmachus’ defense of the ancient customs, Ambrose puts the question, “If the old rites pleased, why did Rome also take up foreign ones?”²⁴⁰ As contemporary commentators have noted, it was precisely the willingness of Romans to adopt new cults which made it

²³⁶ Ambrose, *Ep.* 18.4, trans. H. de Romestin.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.7.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.8.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.16.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.30.

possible for Christianity to spread so quickly throughout the Roman world.²⁴¹ Through these arguments, Ambrose defends the superiority of Christian religion with its faith in a wholly transcendent God to polytheism with its confusion of images and gods.

Conclusion

Christian authors in the third and fourth centuries followed the ethical, metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological arguments which older apologists such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria had already begun to develop in the preceding centuries. The issuing of the Edict of Milan by Constantine in the early fourth century changed the real-life conditions which Christians were facing. This in turn altered the kinds of problems to which Christian thinkers were responding. As Christianity grew increasingly popular throughout the Roman Empire, polytheists began to feel their religion being threatened. Aristocratic polytheists responded by presenting arguments of their own against the growing religion. Julian, for instance, felt it necessary to develop a theory of images in response to Christian criticisms of idolatry. Likewise, the aristocrat Symmachus argued for the revival of traditional polytheism and its importance for the success of Rome. The ensuing debates show the extent to which Christian doctrines had challenged polytheists to consider the theoretical foundations of their practices. With the advent of Christianity as the predominant religion of the Roman world, the relationship between viewer and object transformed as viewers began to reconceptualize art as something primarily semiotic.

²⁴¹ Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 199–221.

CHAPTER FIVE

Towards a Christian Theory of Images

Having examined historical and archeological materials in the first two chapters and philosophical and theological texts in the third and fourth chapters, we may now see the ways in which the material and documentary evidence mutually enhance our understanding of the problem of images in early Christianity. We have found that Christians were not aniconic in practice, but rather used images in a variety of ways to negotiate their identity as a minority religious group within the Roman Empire, always rooting that identity in the salvific history described in the scriptures. We also discovered that Christians were not iconophobic in theory; instead, they used the language of images to describe the relation of the Son to the Father, as well as the indwelling influence of the Word on the believer, while simultaneously criticizing the confusion of image and deity common in polytheistic religion. Although the project so far has largely been a negative one in that the goal has been to respond to mistaken views about early Christian artistic practice and theory, we now have the foundation to sketch an outline of an early Christian theory of images.

By giving undue epistemic privilege to neither the visible nor the verbal evidence from early Christianity, we allow Christian images to contribute to our understanding of Christian artistic theory just as the texts have contributed to it. There is a danger in such an approach, which is that it could cause one to count one's evidence twice by using a text to interpret an image and then using the image to reinforce one's interpretation of the

text. However, it is possible to avoid this danger by paying careful attention to one's sources. One may, for example, use a text to identify figures within an image and then use the juxtaposition of figures in the image to learn something about the interpretation of the text. Although this is an example of a first order analysis, it may be possible learn something about high order artistic considerations following a similar method.

Moreover, this method allows us to approach early Christian artistic theory and practice as a unified whole. At least by the late fourth century, there was a much closer affinity between Christian artistic theory and practice than is often thought to be the case. This is evident not only from the documentary evidence of the period, but also from a few surviving artworks. The apologists' attacks on Greco-Roman artistic practices in the preceding centuries had reoriented viewer and object in such a way that viewers began to primarily approach images semiotically. In other words, viewers became conscious of their relation to artworks as that of viewer to image. This was a result both of growing disbelief in the power of polytheistic cult objects and of increasing acceptance of Christian teachings on the incomprehensibility and invisibility of the Godhead. The new orientation of viewer and object is apparent in fourth and early fifth century reflections on the incarnation, but it also appears in the artworks of the time.

The Incarnation and the Invisible God

Writing in the first half of the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria expounds upon the Christology described in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. According to Athanasius, the incarnation of the Word was necessary for the salvation of humankind because it renews the image of God in humanity. Athanasius describes the fallen human condition as being like that of a painted panel on which the image is no longer

recognizable because of stains. The incarnation restores the recognizability of the image because Christ embodies the image of the Father. Athanasius writes:

For as, when the likeness painted on a panel has been effaced by stains from without, he whose likeness it is must needs come once more to enable the portrait to be renewed on the same wood...in the same way also the most holy Son of the Father, being the Image of the Father, came to our region to renew man once made in His likeness, and find him, as one lost, by the remission of sins...²⁴²

As was the case in Christian apologetic texts from the second and third centuries, Athanasius understands the incarnation to be necessary due to the metaphysical, epistemic, and ethical condition of humanity.

Metaphysically, the incarnation is necessary because humanity has fallen from the fullness of being. Sin corrupts human nature as it involves the rejection of that which is in favor of that which is not. Because of this, Christ “took pity on our race, and had mercy on our infirmity, and condescended to our corruption, and, unable to bear that death should have the mastery – lest the creature should perish, and His Father's handiwork in men be spent for naught – He takes unto Himself a body, and that of no different sort from ours.”²⁴³ Through his bodily death and resurrection, of which the incarnation was a precondition, Christ atones for the ontological damage which sin causes. By turning from life, mankind opted for death. However, Christ overcomes death by submitting to death without being constrained to do so by sin. To do this, it was necessary for the divine to become fully human by taking on mortal flesh, although this flesh could not circumscribe the divinity. Athanasius clarifies that “He was not, as might be imagined, circumscribed in the body, nor, while present in the body, was He absent elsewhere... but... Word as He

²⁴² Athanasius, *De Incarn.* 14.1-2, trans. Archibald Robertson.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* 8.2.

was, so far from being contained by anything, He rather contained all things Himself...”²⁴⁴

Epistemically, the incarnation was necessary because the human mind sees things only very dimly due to sin. Athanasius observes that three ways lay open to humanity for coming to knowledge of God. First, by looking at the created order, men could come to know the orchestrator of the harmony of the world, the Word of the God. Second, through dialogue with wise men, people could “learn to know God, the Artificer of all things, the Father of Christ, and to recognize the worship of idols as the negation of the truth and full of all impiety.”²⁴⁵ Third, by living according to manifest ethical laws, they could learn to lead a good life, “For the law was not given only for the Jews.”²⁴⁶ Despite these three ways of coming to know God, the epistemic limits of our senses continued to obscure knowledge of supersensible things. Consequently, Athanasius argues:

Men had turned from the contemplation of God above, and were looking for Him in the opposite direction, down among created things and things of sense. The Savior of us all, the Word of God, in His great love took to Himself a body and moved as Man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, half way. He became Himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the works which He, the Word of God, did in the body.²⁴⁷

Because men primarily come to know the world through the senses, God was gracious

enough to become sensible so that humankind might more easily come to know him.

Human sensuousness tempted men to transfer “the honor which is due to God to material

objects such as wood and stone, and to man.”²⁴⁸ By taking on a material body, Christ

²⁴⁴ Ibid. 17.1.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. 3.12.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. 3.15.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 3.11.

mitigates this temptation. Thus, “now all over the world men are forsaking the fear of idols and taking refuge with Christ; and by worshipping Him as God they come through Him to know the Father also, Whom formerly they did not know.”²⁴⁹ Not only does the incarnation make God knowable through the senses, but it also allows the veneration given to the Incarnate Image to transfer to the invisible God.

Ethically, the incarnation was necessary because men become good by acting well, which they learn to do by imitating better men. Athanasius claims that “without a pure mind and a modelling of the life after the saints, a man could not possibly comprehend the words of the saints.”²⁵⁰ By becoming human and performing deeds in the world, Christ provides an example which men can imitate. What was formerly accessible only to the mind is now visible to the eyes. Athanasius gives evidence of this when he says that “if a man should wish to see God, Who is invisible by nature and not seen at all, he may know and apprehend Him from His works: so let him who fails to see Christ with his understanding, at least apprehend Him by the works of His body...”²⁵¹ By imitating the deeds of Christ, the believer will come to see what was formerly invisible to him. For “he that would comprehend the mind of those who speak of God must needs begin by washing and cleansing his soul, by his manner of living...”²⁵² The incarnation makes unity of thought and action possible because the invisible mind of God performs visible deeds in the world through the person of Christ. This ought to have an effect not only on the Christian’s beliefs, but also his actions.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. 8.46.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 57.2.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 54.1.

²⁵² Ibid. 57.3.

Writing later in the fourth century, the Cappadocian fathers followed Athanasius in explaining the incarnation using the language of images. Robin Jensen observes that “Like Athanasius, later fourth-century theologians discussed the matter of divine images at a whole new level, possibly because they felt less threatened by pagan idolatry but also inspired by their debates about the nature and relationship of the Divine Beings of the Trinity...”²⁵³ One example of this that Jensen points to comes from Basil of Caesarea’s treatise *On the Holy Spirit*. Therein Basil explains that there are not multiple Gods despite the distinction of persons in the trinity by way of an analogy to imperial images. He says, “How, then, if one and one, are there not two Gods? Because we speak of a king, and of the king’s image, and not of two kings.”²⁵⁴ At first glance, this analogy may seem untenable because images are obviously not the same as the things which they represent, whereas the persons of the trinity share the same substance.

However, Basil develops his analogy in a way that does not confuse image and prototype. He explains:

The sovereignty and authority over us is one, and so the doxology ascribed by us is not plural but one; because the honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype. Now what in the one case the image is by reason of imitation, that in the other case the Son is by nature; and as in works of art the likeness is dependent on the form, so in the case of the divine and uncompounded nature the union consists in the communion of the Godhead.²⁵⁵

Just as one venerates the emperor when one pays honor to him through his representation in an image because the image points to the thing it signifies, so one worships the Father when one gives honor to the Son because they share the same substance in the Godhead.

Although the relationship between image and emperor is mimetic, the relationship

²⁵³ Jensen, *Face to Face*, 104.

²⁵⁴ Basil, *De Spir. San.* 18.45, trans. Blomfield Jackson.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

between Father and Son is essential. Basil, then, recognizes that there are disanalogous parts in his analogy. His explanation of the ways in which his analogy between image and emperor and Father and Son are disanalogous clarifies the ways in which Christians were coming to understand the nature of images.

Indeed, Basil's slightly younger contemporary, Gregory of Nyssa, developed a somewhat fuller account of the role of images in the life of the believer. Gregory praises the ways in which images can serve as witnesses to the divine in his *Encomium to Saint Theodore*.²⁵⁶ Moreover, Gregory admires the ways in which images can stir our emotions such that we come to love the kinds of things which we ought to love, particularly the sufferings of Christ and the martyrs.

However, Gregory worries that viewers might confuse images and their prototypes. In the *Life of Moses*, Gregory expresses this concern. As Moses climbs up Sinai to the "luminous darkness" that designates God's presence at the summit, the luminous darkness teaches Moses that the Divine must not be likened to any comprehensible image. Gregory explains that there is no "name worthy of the nature thus signified, but all names have equally fallen short of accurate description, both those recognized as insignificant as well as those by which some great insight is indicated."²⁵⁷ The structure of the tabernacle itself signified this. Gregory writes, "The curtains divided the tabernacle into two parts: the one visible and accessible to certain of the priests and the other secret and inaccessible. The name of the front part was the Holy Place and that of the hidden part was the Holy of Holies."²⁵⁸ Later, the temple in Jerusalem would share this same

²⁵⁶ Carnes, "How Love for the Image Cast out Fear of It in Early Christianity."

²⁵⁷ Gregory, *On the Life of Moses*, 176, trans. Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 172.

division. The Romans were surprised to discover what lay inside the Holy of Holies. Tacitus records, “Gnaeus Pompey was the first of the Romans to conquer the Jews and to claim the right to enter their Temple as victor. This is how word got out that...the innermost sanctuary was vacant.”²⁵⁹ For polytheists, the emptiness of the Holy of Holies was a sign of the ridiculousness of Jewish religion. For Jews, this emptiness was spiritually significant because it was an acknowledgement of the invisibility and incomprehensibility of God. In the *Life of Moses*, Gregory sees the relationship of the Holy Place to the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple as analogous to the relationship between the incarnate Son and the invisible Father. Although the Godhead is ultimately invisible, God is willing to take on flesh to make himself known to humanity through the person of Jesus.

Augustine’s Conception of Semiotic Idolatry

Subsequently, the philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo articulated a theory of signs that drew on many of the insights found in Gregory’s *Life of Moses*. Augustine primarily articulates his theory of signs in terms of verbal signifiers, though he at times mentions visible signs for the sake of clarification. In his book *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine begins by distinguishing between signs and things. Although all signs are things in themselves, Augustine only designates as signs those things which are not used for any purpose other than to point beyond themselves to something else.²⁶⁰ He clarifies that “No one uses words except as signs of something else; and hence may be understood what I call signs: those things, to wit, which are used to indicate something else.”²⁶¹ For

²⁵⁹ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.9.

²⁶⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.2.2, trans. James Shaw.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Augustine, use determines whether a thing is merely a thing or also a sign. Among signs, there are two types, i.e. those which are natural and those which are conventional.

Augustine writes, “Natural signs are those which, apart from any intention or desire of using them as signs, do yet lead to the knowledge of something else, as, for example, smoke when it indicates fire.”²⁶² However, Augustine is primarily interested in the ways in which conventional signs function. He defines conventional signs as “those which living beings mutually exchange for the purpose of showing, as well as they can, the feelings of their minds, or their perceptions, or their thoughts. Nor is there any reason for giving a sign except the desire of drawing forth and conveying into another’s mind what the giver of the sign has in his own mind.”²⁶³ It is in this use of signs that Augustine thinks we are to find an analogy which helps us understand the incarnation.

According to Augustine, only one “Word” can transcend the conventionality and asymptotic limitation of language.²⁶⁴ Although human language in its finitude cannot embody the infinite idea of God, as Gregory points out in his comments about the names of God, there is a sense in which the Incarnate Word overcomes this obstacle. Augustine thinks we can grasp “the word made flesh” by imperfect analogy to language. He writes:

Just as when we speak, in order that what we have in our minds may enter through the ear into the mind of the hearer, the word which we have in our hearts becomes an outward sound and is called speech; and yet our thought does not lose itself in the sound, but remains complete in itself, and takes the form of speech without being modified in its own nature by the change: so the Divine Word, though suffering no change of nature, yet became flesh, that He might dwell among us.²⁶⁵

²⁶² Ibid. 2.1.2.

²⁶³ Ibid. 2.2.3.

²⁶⁴ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 6–7.

²⁶⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.13.1.

In its mediation between what is present and what is absent, between the sign and signified, the word is suggestive of the relationship between God and the world. In reference to Augustine's analogy, David Jeffrey comments that "God's Word and the words of men and women are certainly not identical: whereas we speak with words, God speaks with things, persons, and events, preeminently in the event of the Incarnation."²⁶⁶ Likewise, Natalie Carnes reads Augustine as saying that "To deny images is to attempt to deny our creatureliness. God's mercy is to give us different images, which impart virtue and knowledge of God. God's ultimate mercy, of course, is to give the perfect image of Godself in Christ..."²⁶⁷ For a Christian theory of signs, the incarnation of the Word is the central event. Although Jeffrey focuses on comments about verbal signs in Augustine's semiotics, Carnes emphasizes what Augustine says about visual signs.

Indeed, Augustine does acknowledge that visible things sometimes function as signs, much as words do. He says that "actors by movements of all their limbs give certain signs to the initiated, and, so to speak, address their conversation to the eyes: and the military standards and flags convey through the eyes the will of the commanders. And all these signs are as it were a kind of visible words."²⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Augustine focuses primarily on verbal signs. Augustine privileges verbal signs to visible ones on the grounds that one can translate some ideas into words which one could not communicate using visible symbols.²⁶⁹ Augustine's claim that he could in no wise express words using visual signs likely holds true for him. However, the surviving examples of

²⁶⁶ Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 7.

²⁶⁷ Carnes, "How Love for the Image Cast out Fear of It in Early Christianity."

²⁶⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.3.4.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

typological exegesis in early Christian painting discussed in Chapter Two indicate that at least some in the church could communicate in this way.

Moreover, we should be cautious about taking Augustine's privileging of the verbal as a general condemnation of visible signs because Augustine suggests in other passages that God uses visible signs in his salvific plan for humanity. For instance, Augustine writes, "We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made."²⁷⁰ Insofar as they point beyond themselves, visible signs lead us from creation to the Creator. Likewise, in his book *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine exclaims, "O wisdom, the sweetest light of the purified mind! Woe to those who abandon you as their guide and ramble about where you have left your traces, who love the things in which you speak to us instead of loving you and forget what you are telling us."²⁷¹ Augustine thinks that the apparently wise ordering of the cosmos is itself a sign which points to the divine Wisdom. God uses visible things to point to himself, but this power is not limited to God. Artists also create artworks which point beyond themselves to the source of their beauty. Augustine thinks artists use the harmony of number and form to imbue their artworks with beauty, pointing ultimately to the transcendent source of beauty. He writes, "Even the craftsman somehow speaks in the very beauty of his work to the one who sees it, bidding him not to devote all his attention to the appearance of the material object that has been produced, but to look beyond it..."²⁷² The order, symmetry, harmony, and completeness of an artwork, even

²⁷⁰ Ibid. 1.4.4.

²⁷¹ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will* 2.16, trans. Thomas Williams.

²⁷² Ibid.

apart from anything representational in it, then, acts as a sign, pointing to the transcendent.

Idolatry occurs with the viewer fails to recognize the sign for what it is. Augustine takes the confusion of sign and thing to be the root of idolatry. Hence, he writes that “those who love what you make instead of loving you are like people who hear someone speaking wisely and eloquently and listen keenly to the charm of his voice...while ignoring the most important thing: the meaning that his words signified.”²⁷³ Why do humans fall into this error? Humans fall short because they turn from higher goods to lower goods by an act of the will. Augustine says, “What is evil is the turning of the will away from the unchangeable good and toward changeable goods. And since this turning is not coerced, but voluntary, it is justly and deservedly punished with misery.”²⁷⁴ Only God deserves love for his own sake; all other goods deserve love only insofar as they participate in and are ancillary to divine goodness. The distinction between an image and an idol, then, does not lie in the object itself, but rather in the way in which the viewer orients him or herself to the object. When one loves art for its own sake, one falls into idolatry. Only when our will and reason align in recognizing the referential nature of images do we properly approach art, for in doing so we use art as a means to draw closer to God.

Indeed, the distinction between paganism and Christianity, according to Augustine, lies in where the two religions locate ultimate significance. Augustine explains:

And since men are moved by different kinds of pleasures, partly by those which pertain to the bodily senses, partly by those which pertain to the intellect and soul,

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 2.19.

those of them who are in bondage to sense think that either the heavens, or what appears to be most brilliant in the heavens, or the universe itself, is God of gods...²⁷⁵

The defining feature of paganism is the attempt to locate ultimate significance within the world. Whereas paganism locates ultimate significance within the realm of the immanent, Christianity locates ultimate significance in a wholly transcendent God, who, nevertheless, infuses the immanent world with significance through the work of the Word. Thus, Augustine says:

Those, on the other hand, who endeavor by an effort of the intelligence to reach a conception of God, place Him above all visible and bodily natures, and even above all intelligent and spiritual natures that are subject to change.²⁷⁶

In locating ultimate significance outside the immanent world, Christianity surpasses paganism in the sublimity of its conception of God. It follows from this conception, however, that humans can only approach the divine through various kinds of images. The names of God, the beauty of the created world, the harmony of mathematics, the various languages of the world, the human soul, and Christ himself are, in their own ways, images of God. We orient ourselves towards these things properly when we use them to draw closer to God, to catch glimpses of something beyond the immanent world.

Images of Idols

Not only did these ideas have far reaching consequences in philosophy and theology, they also reflect changes in the world of Christian art. As early as the third century, Christian artists had begun to differentiate idols from images of idols, as the previously discussed painting (Figure 2.13) of three youths refusing to worship an imperial cult statue shows. The distinction between idols and images of idols was feasible for

²⁷⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.7.7.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

Christians because of their increasingly semiotic conception of images and their growing understanding of idolatry as a subjective error within the viewer. If Christian artists thought images participated non-referentially in the ontology of the things they represented, then it would have been inconceivable for them to represent idols in their images. Nevertheless, Christian artists did make images representing idols.

One might object at this point that the medium used by Christian artists is of crucial importance. Figure 2.13 is a painting, whereas polytheistic idols were statues. One might conclude that while it is conceivable for Christians to produce paintings of cult statues, it would be impossible for them to make sculptural representations of idols. We cannot know that Christian artists understood what they were doing as a semiotic practice since it is possible that the relevant distinction for them was that between painting and sculpture, not that between sign and thing. Thus, the distinction between media was what mattered for early Christian artists.

However, such an objection fails because the material evidence from the early church contradicts it. Christian artists did in fact produce sculptural representations of idols, as is evident from Figure 5.1. Like Figure 2.13, the



Fig. 5.1. Sarcophagus of Adelfia, marble, mid-fourth century, from the Catacombs of St. John, Syracuse, Sicily.

sarcophagus of Adelfia depicts Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to worship the image of Nebuchadnezzar, though it does so with a few differences. For instance, the bust of the king appears much more provincial than in the fresco from the catacombs, although the youths do still wear Phrygian hats here. The artist has also rendered the

narrative in a more historically accurate manner, depicting Nebuchadnezzar wearing the same kind of crown that Sassanid kings wore during the period when the sarcophagus was made. Because the artist commemorates the three youths for their refusal to worship the graven image of the king, we can conclude that the artist found idolatry objectionable. At the same time, the artist represents the graven image of the king in an engraving on the sarcophagus. We can conclude then that the choice of medium was not the relevant factor for this Christian artist in distinguishing idols from images of idols. Given that other such sculptural images of idols survive, such as a fourth-century sarcophagus relief from St. Gilles, in Arles, France (Figure 5.2), we can also conclude that the artist who made the sarcophagus of Adelpia was not the only early Christian artist for whom this holds true.

Nevertheless, one might object that even if the choice of medium is not the determining factor, the choice of genre could be. While both sarcophagi and cult statues have the same medium insofar as they are sculptural, there is a relevant



Fig. 5.2. Sarcophagus with Three Youths Refusing to Worship an Idol, fourth century, from St. Gilles in Arles, France.

difference of genre within the medium that distinguishes images of idols from the idols themselves. It might be appropriate for a Christian artist to depict an idol in the sculptural program of a sarcophagus, but it would be inappropriate for one to make a bust as a representation of an idol. Thus, it is genre, not medium, which distinguishes an image from an idol.

Like the previous objection, this objection fails because it ignores evidence from the early church. Such an objection attempts to locate the distinction between image and idol

in the object, ignoring the fact that Christians from Justin Martyr to Augustine thought the distinction resided in the subject. Depending on the orientation of the soul towards the object, something which might be an idol for one person can function as an image for another. In fact, Paulinus of Nola, acknowledges this when he writes:

Now I want you to look at the paintings along the portico, with which it is adorned in extended line. Crane your neck till you take in everything with face tilted back. The man who looks at these and acknowledges the truth within these empty figures nurtures his believing mind with an image which for him is not empty.²⁷⁷

When viewers approach objects, their subjectivities bring things to the experience. Some of these things are held in common, such as a language or a set of agreed upon artistic symbols and motifs, and these things make intersubjectivity possible. The objection concerning choice of genre falls flat insofar as it ignores the subjective content which the viewer brings to the encounter with the object. The inappropriateness of the cult statue genre for use by a Christian artist lies not in the object itself, but rather in the attitude towards the object which motivates the genre. In the Greco-Roman world, the genre of the cult statue was established for the making of images that were to be worshipped. Since it would be inappropriate for a Christian artist to approach an image with the intention of making it the object of his or her worship, it would also be inappropriate for a Christian to use the genre characteristic of this intent.

By subverting the polytheistic use of idols through the making of images of idols, early Christian artists show the extent to which early Christian artistic theory and practice formed a unified whole. These images simultaneously express an anxiety about the ways in which images can be abused, becoming substitutes for the transcendent God, while also evincing the usefulness of images for proper worship. In a survey of the theological

²⁷⁷ Paulinus, *Carmen* 27 vv. 511-15.

writings on art, Natalie Carnes traces a tension between the love of images and the fear of them in the early church. She concludes that an appreciation for human creatureliness overcame the fear of images in early Christianity.²⁷⁸ The material evidence corroborates her account. Christian artists, in their willingness to make images, acknowledge the useful power of images for proper worship of the divine, while also expressing concern for the ways in which the power of images can be abused. By making images of idols, early Christian artists materialized the same tension between fear and love of images that the apologists, theologians, and philosophers expressed in their writings.

As Gregory of Nyssa concluded, the beauty of the visible can draw the soul of the believer to seek the invisible. Gregory writes, “Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived.”²⁷⁹ If visible things function as images and do not become idols, they help to rightly order the believer’s soul with pious longing. As Gregory puts it, “the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype.”²⁸⁰ Because images are not themselves the things they signify, they ought to produce a sense of longing in the soul for the source of their beauty. Images thereby have the power to bring the mind of the believer to think on God, though the believer recognizes that the image is not itself God. So long as the believer does not confuse the image for the archetype, encounters with beauty result in a kind of nostalgia for the divine, a desire for a fuller vision of God, which facilitates worship of the transcendent God.

²⁷⁸ Carnes, “How Love for the Image Cast out Fear of It in Early Christianity.”

²⁷⁹ Gregory, *On the Life of Moses*, 231.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

An examination of the material and documentary evidence leads one to conclude that there was a greater unity of artistic theory and practice in early Christianity than has often been assumed. The material evidence indicates that Christians began to make images as soon as they had the resources to do so. They used these images to negotiate their position within society, to form a religious identity rooted in scripture, and to define themselves as lawful citizens of Rome under the higher power of the kingdom of God. Even while they felt compelled to make images to glorify God, Christian artists worried about the potential for images to be misused. In so doing, Christian artists expressed the same concern articulated in the writings of the apologists, theologians, and philosophers of the church. The documentary evidence suggests that images are a means for worshipping the divine that is well suited to the human condition. Because the Christian God surpasses all understanding, we can only comprehend God through images, whether they be the verbal signs employed by the scriptures, visible signs manifested through the deeds of the incarnate Son of God, or images of such beauty that they lead the soul to long for union with the source of all beauty. We fall into idolatry when we confuse these signs for the thing signified. Consequently, the distinction between image and idol resides in the human heart, not in the objects themselves. Only by rightly orienting our souls towards images will we see beyond the superficial to catch a glimpse of the profoundest mystery.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Ancient

Athanasius. *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. Archibald Robertson.

Athenagoras. *Embassy for the Christians*, trans. B.P. Pratten.

Apollonius. *Argonautica*.

Ambrose. *Epistles*, trans. H. de Romestin.

Arnobius. *Against the Pagans*.

Augustine, *On the Harmony of the Evangelists*.

_____. *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. James Shaw.

_____. *On Free Choice of the Will*, Thomas Williams.

Aurelius Victor. *On the Caesars*.

Basil. *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Blomfield Jackson.

Callistratus. *Descriptions*.

Cassius Dio. *Roman History*.

Cicero. *On the Nature of the Gods*.

Clement of Alexandria. *Paedagogus*, trans. William Wilson.

_____. *Protrepticus*, trans. William Wilson.

Clement of Rome. *First Clement*, trans. Roberts-Donaldson.

Dexippus. as quoted by Elsner in *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 32.

Eusebius. *History of the Church*, trans. G.A. Williamson.

Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Life of Moses*, trans. Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe.

Hippolytus. *Commentary on Daniel*, trans. T.C. Schmidt.

Irenaeus. *Against Heresy*.

_____. *Epideixis*, trans. J. Armitage Robinson.

John Chrysostom. *Zechariah*.

Julian. *Letter 36*, trans. Emily Wilmer Cave Wright.

_____. *Letter to a Priest*, trans. Emily Wilmer Cave Wright.

Justin. *First Apology*, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith.

_____. *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith.

Lactantius. *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, trans. O. F. Fritzsche.

Livy. *History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Séincourt.

Minucius Felix. *Octavius*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis.

Origen. *On Beginnings*, trans. Frederick Crombie.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*.

Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen 27*.

Philostratus. *On Heroes*.

Pliny the Elder. *Natural History*.

Plutarch. *Life of Coriolanus*.

Prudentius. *Cathemerinon IX*, trans. Loeb classic series.

Severian of Gabala. *On the Creation of the World*, as quoted in Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 54.

Symmachus. *Relatio*, trans. R.H. Barrow

Tacitus. *Agricola*, trans. K.B. Townsend.

_____. *Germania*, trans. K.B. Townsend.

_____. *Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Cynthia Damon.

_____. *Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley.

Tertullian. *On Chastity*.

_____. *On Idolatry*, trans. S. Thelwall.
Virgil. *Georgics*.

Vitruvius. *On Architecture*.

B. Modern

Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before Theera of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Birk, Stine, and Birte Poulsen, eds. *Patrons and Viewers in Late Antiquity*. Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity (ASMA) 10. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012.

Bowden, Hugh. *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Bull, Stephen. *Triumphant Rider: The Lancaster Roman Cavalry Tombstone*. Preston: Lancashire Museums, 2007.

Carnes, Natalie. "How Love for the Image Cast out Fear of It in Early Christianity." *Religions* 8, no. 2 (February 2017): 20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8020020>.

Castelli, Emanuele. "The Symbols of Anchor and Fish in the Most Ancient Parts of the Catacomb of Priscilla: Evidence and Questions." Edited by Allen Brent and Markus Vinzent. *STUDIA PATRISTICA*, Papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies, LIX (2013). https://www.academia.edu/5758601/The_Symbols_of_Anchor_and_Fish_-_Roman_Catacombs_-_Priscilla.

Charles-Murray, Mary. "The Emergence of Christian Art." In *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, edited by Jeffrey Spier. New Haven : Fort Worth: Yale University Press ; In Association with the Kimbell Art Museum, 2007.

"Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity." Yale University Art Gallery. Accessed October 21, 2018. <http://media.artgallery.yale.edu/duraeuropos/dura.html>.

Elsner, Jas. *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998.

- Finney, Paul Corby. *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Fowden, Garth. *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Gough, Michael. *The Origins of Christian Art*. World of Art Library. History of Art. London: Thames and Hudson, 1973.
- Gradel, Ittai. *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press, 2002.
- Higgins, Sabrina. "Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian Lactans-Iconography." *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 3–4 (January 1, 2012): 71–90.
- Hijmans, Steven E. "The Sun Which Did Not Rise in the East." *BABESCH - Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* 71, no. 0 (December 1, 1996): 115–50. <https://doi.org/10.2143/BAB.71.0.2002277>.
- Jeffrey, David Lyle. *In the Beauty of Holiness: Art and the Bible in Western Culture*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017.
- . *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture*. Grand Rapids, Mich. : Cambridge, U.K: Eerdmans ; Institute for Advanced Christian Studies, 1996.
- Jensen, Robin M. "Allusions to Imperial Rituals in Fourth-Century Christian Art." In *The Art of Empire*, 13–48. Christian Art in Its Imperial Context. Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt155j2k5.6>.
- . "The Emergence and Character of Early Christian Art." In *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, edited by Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison. Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2018. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bayloru/detail.action?docID=5398302>.
- . *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.
- . *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.
- . *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017.

- Kleiner, Fred S. *A History of Roman Art*. Cengage Learning, 2016.
- Kramer, Jessica. "The Roman Riders: Ethnicity and Iconography on Roman Cavalrymen Tombstones." *All Theses and Dissertations*, December 1, 2014. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4343>.
- Matz, Friedrich. "An Endymion Sarcophagus Rediscovered." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 15, no. 5 (1957): 123–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3257726>.
- Mau, August, and Francis W. (Francis Willey) Kelsey. *Pompeii, Its Life and Art*. New York : Macmillan, 1902. <http://archive.org/details/pompeiiitslifear00maua>.
- Mazzoleni, Donatella, and Umberto Pappalardo. *Domus: Wall Painting in the Roman House*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004.
- Petersen, Lauren Hackworth. *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History*. Reprint edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Rhoads, David, David Esterline, and Jae Won Lee. *Luke-Acts and Empire: Essays in Honor of Robert L. Brawley*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011.
- Ripat, Pauline. "Locating the Grapevine in the Late Republic: Freedmen and Communication." In *Free At Last!: The Impact of Freed Slaves on the Roman Empire*, 24. A&C Black, 2014.
- Rogers, Guy MacLean. *The Sacred Identity of Ephesos: Foundation Myths of a Roman City*. London; New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Scheid, John. *An Introduction to Roman Religion*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Bloomington, Ind.; Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Smith, Christine. "Christian Rhetoric in Eusebius' Panegyric at Tyre." *Vigiliae Christianae* 43, no. 3 (1989): 226–47. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1584063>.
- Snyder, Graydon F. *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*. Mercer University Press, 2003.
- Spier, Jeffrey. "The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power." In *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, edited by Jeffrey Spier. New Haven : Fort Worth: Yale University Press ; In Association with the Kimbell Art Museum, 2007.
- Stevenson, James. *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity*. 1st edition. London: W W Norton & Co Inc, 1978.

- Stewart, Peter. *Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . *The Social History of Roman Art*, 2008.
- Stirling, Lea. “Patrons, Viewers, and Statues in Late Antique Baths.” In *Patrons and Viewers in Late Antiquity*, edited by Stine Birk and Birte Poulsen, 67–82. Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity (ASMA) 10. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012.
- Sutherland, Reita J. “Prayer and Piety: The Orans-Figure in the Christian Catacombs of Rome.” M.A., University of Ottawa (Canada), 2013.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1431194495/abstract/7B77C057719747A1PQ/1>.
- Trentinella, Rosemarie. “Roman Portrait Sculpture: Republican through Constantinian.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo/hd_ropo.htm.
- Webb, Matilda. *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome: A Comprehensive Guide*. Brighton ; Portland, Or: Sussex Academic Press, 2001.
- Weddle, Polly. “Touching the Gods: Physical Interaction with Cult Statues in the Roman World.” Doctoral, Durham University, 2010. <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/555/>.
- Zanker, Paul. “Reading Images without Texts on Roman Sarcophagi.” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 61–62 (March 1, 2012): 167–77.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/RESvn1ms23647827>.