

Images of Stories from Scripture

Scenes obviously based upon scriptural texts are often the only clue that a catacomb is Christian. As we have seen, non-narrative funerary imagery offered few clues as to whether we were in a pagan or Christian catacomb. Not only did the images look remarkably the same but their meanings, on a basic level, were the same. Scriptural scenes, however, would not be found in pagan funerary art. That scriptural scenes appear with non-narrative images in a specific location is the determining evidence identifying a burial location as Christian. Beyond that it is fascinating work attempting to understand the reasons behind the selection of the scriptural stories chosen for representation in the catacombs. What was the thinking of those responsible for the decoration in the catacombs?

18 Moses Strikes the Rock in the Wilderness.

<www.catholic-convert.com/Portals/0/Moses-Peter%20sm.jpg>



Hebrew scripture stories dominate

The most common Old Testament stories represented in the catacombs and on early Christian sarcophagi included *Jonah and the Whale*,²² *Noah*,²³ *Moses Striking the Rock in the Wilderness*[18],²⁴ *Abraham Offering Isaac*,²⁵ *Adam and Eve*,²⁶ *Daniel in the Lions' Den*,²⁷ the *Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace*,²⁸ and the story of *Susanna and the Elders*.²⁹ The story of Jonah was by far the most popular. The New Testament stories were less numerous. The most often represented of these included the *Baptism of Christ*,³⁰ the *Raising of Lazarus*[19],³¹ the *Woman at the Well*,³²

19 The Raising of Lazarus.



the *Healing of the Paralytic*,³³ and the *Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish*. The *Baptism of Christ*[20] was the most popular of the New Testament texts referenced.

20 Baptism of Christ.

In these early catacomb paintings of Christ's baptism, Jesus is always depicted smaller than the John.

<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catacombs_of_Rome>



From the second through the fourth centuries the Old Testament scenes are far more numerous than the New Testament ones. The predominance of Old Testament narrative scenes probably owes to the fact that the gospels and other New Testament writings, in the first few centuries of Christianity, only gradually became grouped into anything resembling scripture.³⁴ It wasn't until after ca. 180 that Christian writers began even quoting New Testament or Apostolic writings as Scripture. Prior to that it was the Jewish scriptures alone –the Old Testament—that the early Christians meant when they referred to “Scripture”.

Also, Christian theologians and teachers were eager to demonstrate

21 *Jonah Sarcophagus.*

Among other stories on a this side of a sarcophagus is the main story of Jonah: 1) Jonah is tossed overboard to be swallowed by the sea monster; 2) Jonah is disgorged by the monster onto the beach; 3) Jonah rests under a vine.

<www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rsar/ho_47.100.4.htm (April 2007)>



that the Hebrew texts contained ‘figures’ and ‘types’ that prophesied the coming of Jesus and so they stressed the Old Testament stories. “...*the early Church does not see the Old Testament as talking about something different from Christ, but rather sees it in relationship to him. What appear to us to be separate themes and events in the Old Testament, appear to the New Testament writers as so many spokes on a wheel all connected to the Hub who is Christ.*”³⁵ For example, the story of Jonah is a type prefiguring the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Abraham’s offering of Isaac prefigured Christ’s sacrifice. This emphasis was logical as the target audience was primarily gentiles who were already familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, the so-called “God-fearers.” These were gentiles who believed in the one God of the Jews. They attended the synagogue and followed some Jewish laws and studied the Torah. What they had not done, yet, was be circumcised. It was from this group that the early Christian church gained converts and not from the gentile population at large. The church was in direct competition with the Jews in seeking converts from this group and so was anxious to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is no wonder then that the imagery on the walls and ceilings of the catacombs would be dominated by scenes from the Hebrew scriptures.

Selection criteria

There are several scriptural stories that are surprisingly absent in the catacombs until fairly late. For example, there are no Old Testament scenes of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea,³⁶ or images of such biblical heavyweights as King David or Joshua. New Testament stories that, to our modern minds, seem central to the story of Christianity also do not appear until very late: the nativity of Jesus,³⁷ his transfiguration,³⁸ passion, death, and resurrection.³⁹

That some stories from the bible were represented and other “important” stories were not is an interesting fact worth exploring further.

It is not likely the art in the catacombs was meant to be didactic. It does not seem in any way to have been created in order to teach the basic stories or truths of the Christian faith. Individuals or families visited the dark catacombs infrequently. We therefore have to look for a meaning that goes beyond the simple, literal depiction of stories.

The funerary context certainly presents us with a primary criterion for

the selection of certain images over others. Death and the basic hope for life beyond the grave would certainly have been a determining factor in selecting stories for use in both pagan and Christian catacombs. Add to that the Christian hope for spiritual salvation and bodily resurrection through Jesus Christ and we can begin to see the selection criteria coming into sharp focus for why certain stories were used and others were not.

Most of the stories selected for the walls and ceilings of the catacombs and for the sides of sarcophagi involve deliverance from danger. The common theme is salvation from evil and victory over death. Jonah, for example, was delivered from the belly of the sea monster. Noah and his family were saved from the flood which God had sent to destroy a sinful world (the “just” are saved). The three Hebrew youths who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s idols were protected from the all-consuming fire of his furnace[22]. *Daniel in the Lions’ Den* is another story of deliverance and salvation.

A basic appreciation of Christian art and probably a factor in the selection of images for the catacombs involves an understanding that a ‘Christian’ image can seldom be viewed as only literal; a lamb is not just

22 The Three Hebrews in the Furnace.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fiery_furnace_01.jpg>



a lamb, a man swallowed by a big fish is not just an account from the life of a prophet.⁴⁰ Christian images, as the scriptural stories they represent, always have a deeper, hidden meaning. The visual presentation of the story of Jonah, for example, represents not only the story line conveyed in the biblical text but also the deeper meaning of the foreshadowing of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. Jonah was tossed overboard into the deep sea; Jesus was overcome by death in his crucifixion. Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days; Jesus was in the tomb for three days. Jonah was disgorged by the sea monster onto dry land; Christ rose from the tomb on the third day. Likewise, the New Testament story of the raising of Lazarus was seen, in hindsight, as an allegory of Christ’s own death and resurrection.

23 Abraham’s Offering of Isaac.

<www.ferrum.edu/~abe_site/christian_art.htm>



The Old Testament account of Abraham’s offering of Isaac was viewed as a prefigure of Christ’s sacrifice[23].

Stories, then, were probably selected based upon their power to com-

municate the Christian understanding of death in the context of salvation through Jesus Christ. Their use in the catacombs was an expression (prayer?) of hope as well as faith

Another criterion for selection may have been the power of certain images to express the way salvation is attained, namely, through the church's sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist. Many of the frescoes and sarcophagi carvings in the catacombs with their emphasis on

24 *The Woman at the Well.*

<campus.belmont.edu/honors/CatPix/CatPix.html >



as symbolic of the sacrament of Baptism. Any scriptural story, in fact, with water playing a part can be viewed as referring to Baptism;⁴¹ that Jonah "dies" in the water of the sea but is then "reborn" from the water can be understood as analogous to the "death" and "rebirth" experienced through the ritual use of water in the sacrament. In the Noah story, Noah, his family, and the animals are saved through trial by water. Other possible references to Baptism include Moses striking the rock in the wilderness from which water then flowed to quench the thirst of the Israelites. Likewise,

25 *Multiplication of Loaves and Fish.*

Just as the loaves and fish miraculously multiplied to satisfy the needs of the five thousand, so in the miracle of the Eucharist can an unlimited number of people through time feed on the sacramental body of Christ.

<www.wanderingheretic.com/.../ >



the woman at the well is offered life-giving water[24]. And so on. The sacrament of the Eucharist ("he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."⁴²) is prefigured in several stories including the story of the wedding at Cana⁴³ (because of the central role of wine in the story) and is prefigured in the multiplication of the loaves and fish[25] (the Lord's body is limitless and its power to save boundless).

In summary then we can probably attribute the criteria for the selection of stories in the catacombs and on sarcophagi to the funerary context in which they were to be used. In addition, stories were chosen for inclusion that clearly presented the Christian understanding of death in the context of salvation through Jesus Christ, as administered through the church's sacraments.

Design, composition, and rendering

Interesting is the use, sometimes, of pre-existing pagan compositions to illustrate a particular episode from a bible story. It was as if artisans, in planning the illustration of a bible story for a catacomb fresco, were to realize that they could use a pagan design that was already a part of the available artistic repertoire. There was no need to go through the work of making up a new composition. The story of *Jonah and the Whale*[21] illustrates this point. It was often depicted in two or three scenes: Jonah thrown overboard and swallowed by the sea monster; next, Jonah dis-

26 Endymion Sarcophagus, Mid-Imperial, Severan, early third century A.D.

Compare this image of the pagan Endymion with the image of Jonah resting under the vine (#3) in number 19 above.

<www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rsar/ho_47.100.4.htm (April 2007)>



gorged by the sea monster; and then, the nude Jonah relaxing under a trellised gourd vine. That last frame –Jonah resting nude under the vine—was a direct copy of the pagan representation of an Endymion sleeping the eternally blissful sleep granted by Zeus[22].

A single image or frame sometimes represented an entire story. For example, just one frame of the Jonah story would be enough for most people to recall the whole story. Jonah relaxing under the gourd vine might be the only image necessary to call to mind the story.

27 Noah in His Ark.

The catacomb images make use of minimum detail to communicate. The stories were apparently well known and so the abbreviated images were probably simple reminders of theological or sacramental concepts. In this case the viewer is reminded that, like Noah, God can be trusted to save the just. Also, like Noah, the Christian undergoes a trial by water in Baptism.

<http://www.artbible.net/1T/Gen0601_Noah_flood/pages>



Yet another interesting aspect of most of the paintings and sarcophagi carvings from the catacombs is the abbreviated nature of the representations. Very few props are used and they are often reduced to only a couple of basic figures and shapes. The story of Noah, for example, is often represented with the single image of Noah[23] as an orant figure standing in a box representing the ark --no animals, no family of Noah, and perhaps without any indication of water. The stories alluded to by such abbreviated images must have been well known to believers and so only the most basic of images were needed to suggest the story.

²² Jonah 1:3 - 4:6

²³ Genesis 6:8 - 8:22

²⁴ Exodus 17:1-6b

²⁵ Genesis 22:1-14

²⁶ Genesis 3

²⁷ Daniel 6:17-24

²⁸ Daniel 3

²⁹ Daniel 13

³⁰ Matthew 3:13, Mark 1:9

³¹ John 11:38-44

³² John 4:7

³³ Matthew 9:6

³⁴ Jensen 71

³⁵ Mark P. Shea, *Making Senses Out of Scripture*, (San Diego, Basilica Press 2001) p 186

³⁶ Exodus 14

³⁷ Luke 2:1-20

³⁸ Matthew 17:1-3, Mark 9:2

³⁹ Matthew 26:36 – 27:50, Mark 14:32 –37, Luke 23:39 –46, John 18:1 – 30

⁴⁰ John Pfordresher, *Jesus and the emergence of a Catholic Imagination, An Illustrated journey*, (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press 2008) p 136

⁴¹ Jensen 85

⁴² John 6:54

⁴³ John 2:1-11