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# THE CATACOMBS OF ROME: TYPOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF JESUS CHRIST IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

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## The Catacombs of Rome

One can of course speculate as to when Christian art came about, yet archaeological evidence and scholarly debates cannot pinpoint the birth of Christian art. The crystallization of ideas and dogma passed through a preliminary stage to come to the present form in the Christian churches of today. Nonetheless, in order to come to an understanding of the stages of development, a study needs to be performed in the catacombs of Rome, a place that was constructed by Christians and developed over the centuries as Christianity came to complete its corresponding body of beliefs and rituals. Therefore, the catacombs will be examined in this article in order to unearth the influences of existing art standards and practices onto this new form of art referred to as early Christian art.

The catacombs of Rome were used as burial sites from the second through to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. From the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, until the ninth century the sites were no longer used as burial places; instead they were now filled with pilgrims who wanted to visit the graves of the early Christian martyrs. Due to the pilgrimages in the catacombs, the burial practices in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century changed; they started burying the dead in close proximity to the church.

Later, the saints and martyrs whose remains were in the catacombs were moved to new and existing churches that bore their names. Consequently, from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards the catacombs were forgotten. Fortunately, they were re-discovered in 1578 by workers in the Vigna vineyard. This find came at an ideal time. Fighting between the Protestant and the Catholic Church was on the rise due to the Reformation and subsequent Counter-Reformation. The catacomb discovery allowed all to know that the use of icons was not a new addition that the church instated. Icons were used by the first Christians to represent their belief system. Similarly, the discovery allowed the Catholic Church to show that the veneration of the Virgin was something that was introduced by the first Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The re-discovery of these burials is quite fascinating, yet what they are and how they were used is of the greater interest. The catacombs are underground cemeteries that were carved out of the volcanic rock tuff that is found in the area. This rock, which can be found throughout Italy, is a rock that is quite easy to carve yet is solid enough to be used in most Roman constructions once it comes into contact with the air and it

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<sup>1</sup> L.V. Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome: In Search of the Roots of Christianity in the Catacombs of the Eternal City* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 9-13.

hardens. These underground burial tunnels were made up of intricate subterranean galleries that had one of three types of burial forms. The most standard and found throughout the catacombs is the *loculi*. These are simple wall graves, rectangular in shape, that are cut out on both sides of the wall. The *acrosolia* are once again carved into the wall but are surmounted by a semicircular arch. Finally, the *sarcophagus* is a rectangular box made out of stone where the body is placed the actual word means flesh eater. The *acrosolia* and the *sarcophagi* are usually found in burial chambers called *cubicula*, which are highly decorated.<sup>2</sup>

When one is trying to study the catacombs one has to keep in mind that they were constructed over a long period of time. The construction, according to Rutgers, went through four phases. The first phase began when underground burials commenced in the second century. The second phase is when the real catacombs were constructed in the third century. The third phase is when the catacombs were expanded and developed into underground communal cemeteries, and finally, the fourth phase, took place when burial stopped and pilgrimage began.<sup>3</sup> These phases changed and developed the catacombs and burials; therefore, one has to keep in mind that there is a chance that what was there in the beginning of the second century may have changed by the end of the fifth.

Nonetheless, the catacombs, which offer a wealth of images, were well preserved because there was no real climatic change in these underground burials. After close examination of the content of the catacombs, archaeologists realized that not only did the building go through phases but so did the paintings. These

three phases are as follows: phase one corresponds to the beginning of Christian art in the second and third centuries. Phase two, the Old Testament phase, which took place in the third century, and finally, phase three, the New Testament phase, which took place in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Keeping these phases in mind, images that come out of the catacombs along with sarcophagi will be examined to establish the origin of the forms, symbols, and images found.

Christian iconography, in the form existing today in the Orthodox or even Catholic Church, was not born overnight. It took centuries and a lot of modification to come up with the beautiful art symbols use in their worship and venerated today. Not surprisingly, when Christianity appeared there was no Christian art. Christians had to find a way to express themselves artistically. One option was to incorporate existing objects that were currently available to them or to develop an iconography appropriate to them. As it will be shown, later Christians used both of these options to their advantage; they used popular themes from pagan art that suited their beliefs and transformed them in a way to speak to them.<sup>5</sup>

An evolution is apparent in the images that follow. The evolution is found in three stages: first, symbolic images derived from messianic roots and are adapted to pagan-Christian understanding. Second, anecdotal images, which allow the painter and sculptor to extract out of the images spiritual and ecclesiastical messages and not just depict biblical images. Third and final are portraits and figures, which incorporate all the relevant questions on the incarnation of Christ, the church and the empire. According to Tristan it is this last stage that covers the adventures of

<sup>2</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 42-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-84.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

iconography in the first six centuries.<sup>6</sup> Having said this, the first images to be considered correspond to what Tristan calls symbolic images. Nonetheless, before considering the images themselves, some historical background on why these images were accepted and used by early Christians will be presented, starting with Clement of Alexandria and the symbol of the fish.

## SYMBOLIC IMAGES

### *The Fish*

Clement of Alexandria (ca.150-220) was born to a pagan family and later converted to Christianity. Little is known about his life, yet starting at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, his writings began influencing Christianity considerably. One of the ways that Clement was influential when it came to the milieu of representational art can be seen in his work entitled *Paedagogus*. This work, composed of three books, has as its basis Christian ethics and uses Jesus as the teacher/educator.<sup>7</sup> In *Paed.* 3.59.2 line 8 Clement mentions five images that are acceptable for Christians to wear on their rings. These images are the dove, fish, ship, lyre, ship's anchor and finally, if one is a fisherman, he may use an apostle drawing children out of the water.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, it can be understood that these images are accepted by Clement to have Christian significance. The popularity which Clement enjoyed during his lifetime and afterwards, explains why the symbols he proposed became predominant in the first Christian communities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>

centuries. A good example of a Christian ring from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century can be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, Paris. This late 3<sup>rd</sup>-century ring consists of an engraved gem, with the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ and one fish. This can be clearly understood of as a Christian ring not only because of the fish (its significance and meaning will be discussed later), but also because of the Greek word, which translates as "fish", and was used as an acrostic composed of the first letters of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, these images went beyond the use on rings to be placed on gravestones, the catacomb walls, glass bowls, oil lamps, and ornaments.

The fish, one of the images mentioned by Clement, can be seen on the wall of the catacomb of Callixtus in Rome. This image consists of a fish with a basket of five loaves of bread placed on it. This image is mirrored on either side making it two fishes being represented. One can claim, like in a pagan context, that this is just a representation of food with no Christian or theological significance. It is true that in a pagan milieu fish were represented in fresco that evoked associations to the sea and seafood. A good example of this is a mosaic from the first century BCE in Pompeii represented, presumably, on one of the walls of the House of Faun (Figure 11). In this mosaic, however, different kinds of fish, an octopus, squid and other sea animals are represented. It is easy to look at this image and imagine that this alludes to the seafood that the people of Pompeii dined on. Yet this does not necessarily have to be true for a Christian viewer. A Christian, going back to the image in the catacomb of Callixtus (figure 12), may not

<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole à L'icône : II-VI Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 19.

<sup>7</sup> "Clement of Alexandria" in D. Wyrka, ed., *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature* (New York: The Crossroad, 2000), 130-132.

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*. (Trans. Simon P. Wood. Washington: The Catholic University Press, 1954), 246.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian art* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 196.

see in this just a fish; for that Christian it may be a symbol of her belief such as Christ and the apostles as fishers of men, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and finally the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup> Yet the question can be raised, Why did early Christian painters and church fathers consider the fish as an acceptable image for Christian usage? Where did this image come from? Moreover, why was it associated with Christ and the Eucharist?

The answers to these questions can essentially be found in the Bible and more specifically in the Gospel writers. Mk 6:39-45, Mt. 14:15-22, Lk. 9:10-18 and finally Jn. 6:5-16 refer to the miracle of the loaves where two fish and five loaves of bread are divided to feed 5000 people. At first glance, these readings do not appear to have any correlation with a Eucharistic meal, but, upon close examination, the Gospel writers employ terms that were used to describe the Last Supper, which is the quintessential Eucharistic meal. The following main five actions are common in meals: 1) the people or community sits down, 2) one person (head of the table, priest, or teacher) takes the food (bread, fish, wine), 3) blesses the food or gives thanks, 4) breaks and 5) distributes to the people or community.<sup>11</sup> These similarities between a Eucharistic meal and the miracle of the loaves offers an indication of why early Christians saw and represented the bread and fish as part of the Eucharist, which at the same time offered them hope of resurrection and life to come in the messianic age. Nevertheless, what does the fish have to do with the Messiah?

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<sup>10</sup> Jas Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Richard H. Hiers, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist In the Gospels and Early Christian Art," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3 no 1 (Spr 1976): 31.

In order to understand the correlation between the fish and the Messiah, it is important to look back at the Jewish tradition. In Jewish apocalyptic circles the fish was found as the main dish in messianic banquets. This stems from the thought that Bekemoth and Leviathan were fish, which would be food for those who would live in the messianic age.<sup>12</sup> This is clearly stated in 2 Baruch 29:

And it shall come to pass when all is revealed... that the Messiah shall then begin to be revealed. And Behemoth shall be revealed from his place, and Leviathan shall ascend from the sea, those two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation, and shall have kept until that time; and then shall be food for all that are left.

From this and other passages, fish can be seen as something present at the Messianic banquet and the messianic age. Therefore, since this image offered hope of life in the messianic age for the Jews, it is understandable that the early Christians took this to refer to their apocalyptic food, a Eucharistic meal: Jesus distributing "eschatological food sealing the recipient in, the life to come of the coming Kingdom of God."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is easy to understand why the early church fathers, such as Clement, chose the fish to be one of the images that can be represented by Christians.

Nonetheless, a correlation can be found in pagan thought that may have also influenced Christians in associating the fish with Christ the savior and protector. For the ancient Greeks and Romans the *poisson par excellence* was the dolphin. Pliny spoke highly of this amazing creature, which was a remarkable diver who would take on its back castaways and bring them

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<sup>12</sup>Hiers, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist In the Gospels and Early Christian Art," 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

to safety. There was a story of the poet-musician Arion, at the time that mentions that he was thrown in the water by his fellow sailors and was saved by dolphins. The story goes that the dolphins came and fought against whales that were coming to eat Arion. It is easy to see how the dolphins can be associated with Christ. This story can be seen on numerous pagan sarcophagi with an image of a trident or an anchor, which was the symbol of hope and stability for the Greco-Romans.<sup>14</sup>

The symbolic images though could go so far in expressing the belief, intentions and aspirations of the early Christian. Furthermore, during the time of persecution ambiguity and symbolism was the norm, since the expression of the Christian belief was condemned but in time of peace Christian expression flourished. This, therefore, bring us to the second part of Tristan's evolution, the anecdotal images, which allows the painter and sculptor to extract out of images spiritual and ecclesiastical messages and not just stagnant depictions of biblical images.

### **ANECDOTAL IMAGES**

Once in the catacombs the viewer is not only struck by the beauty and mystery that is found there, but also by the vast amount of Old Testament stories represented on the walls of the cubicula. Eusebius, the fourth century bishop of Caesaria in his work *The Proof of the Gospel*, defended Christian use of Jewish scriptures. He states that those Holy Books belong to the Christians and that when they are read properly they offer certain proof that is fulfilled in the Gospels. One example that Eusebius gives, and is found represented in the catacombs, is the account of Abraham's

three visitors at Mamre (Genesis 18:1-8). Yet how does the vision at Mamre fulfill the Gospels? Using a typological interpretation, which sees Old Testament characters and events as prefigurations of New Testament characters and events, both Eusebius and Justin Martyr would assert that it can be seen in the text and in visual representations that Abraham saw the pre-Incarnate Christ, an event that foreshadows Jesus. As Justin Martyr writes: "At this point I asked, 'do you not see, my friends, that one of the three, who is both God and Lord, and ministers to Him who is in Heaven, is Lord of the two angels?'"<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Vision at Mamre***

The vision at Mamre can be seen in Cubiculum B in the Via Latina catacomb. Not surprisingly, this cubiculum is full of Old Testament scenes such as Rahab saving the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:15), Samson slaying the lion (Judges 14:5-9), Noah in his ark, Jacobs Ladder (Genesis 28:10-13) and many more. The vision at Mamre appears to be a new scene in funerary art, in cubiculum B the panel is 38 x 37 inches and is bordered by a 5-inch band of stylized flowers. Abraham is depicted as an old man with long hair and beard. He is wearing a simple tunic with one hand raised in front of him towards the three visitors. Abraham sits on a rock out in the open, which is inferred from the background trees, and greenery; Abraham's tent is not found in this image.

The three men are represented higher up as if on a ledge or floating. The three men, who are referred to as angels by most scholars, are represented as normal men. They are young-looking beardless men with brown hair. All three are dressed in long tunic, mantle, and sandals that are

<sup>14</sup> Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole a L'icône : II-VI Siècle*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Justine Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (Trans. Thomas B. Falls. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 237.

outlined and black.<sup>16</sup> Just like Abraham, the three men have their right arm extended in a gesture that suggests speech or even blessing and their stance is very similar to the Roman *adlocutio*. Out of the three men the one in the middle is depicted smaller than the rest. Robin M. Jensen suggests that this figure is not represented in a way to appear more important than the others, which is the case in other representations of the visit at Mamre.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the middle figures seem to be distinct from the other two, and that could suggest that the three divine persons are represented as the Trinity, while the middle figure symbolizes the Pre-Incarnate Son of God, which may have been the intention of the artist. It is likely that when commenting on the representation of the three men at Mamre, Irenaeus was reflecting some opinion that the artist may have known. In his work *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 44, Irenaeus states:

And again Moses says that the Son of God drew near to exchange speech with Abraham: and God appeared to him at the oak of Mamre at midday, and lifting up his eyes, he saw, and behold, three men were standing over him; and he prostrated himself to the ground and said; Lord, if I have truly found favor before thee; and all the rest of his speech is with the Lord, and the Lord speaks to him. Two, then of the three, were angels, but one the Son of God; and with Him Abraham also spoke pleading for the men of Sodom, that they might not perish, if at least ten just men were found there.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Ferrua. *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*. Trans. Iain Inglis, (Scotland: Geddes and Grossett, 1991), 70.

<sup>17</sup> Robin M. Jensen. "Early Christian Images and Exegesis." *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*. (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 66.

<sup>18</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (Trans. Joseph P. Smith. New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 76.

The next image to be analyzed is once again an Old Testament scene that appears to have the most prominent biblical character, other than the Good Shepherd, to be represented in the catacombs. This is the life of Jonah. According to Goodenough, in the Via Latina alone Jonah is represented twice thrown into the mouth of the monster, three times being vomited by the sea monster, three times sleeping under the arbor and finally two times "aroused" or angry, as Ferrua would suggest. On the left and right wall on top of the arcosolium in cubiculum A the image of Jonah can be seen. On the left-hand wall Jonah is represented being cast into the sea as mentioned in the book of Jonah: "he replied 'take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will calm down for you.... And taking hold of Jonah they threw him into the sea; and the sea stopped raging'"<sup>19</sup>

### *The Life of Jonah*

The image is damaged and faded and for this reason the sails of the ship, the upper bodies of the three sailors and finally the head of the sea monster has been lost. This is found in a panel 30 x 19 ½ inches and is bordered by what appears to be thick reddish brown bands. On the opposite is Jonah disgorged by the sea monster as mentioned in Jonah 2:11. In this 27 ½ x 21 ½ inch panel, Jonah is projected from the monster's mouth with both his arms outstretched in front of him, while his head is lifted backwards. The colors of this panel, like the one mentioned above, is green for the monster and red for everything else. The background is the color of the plaster, and there is no indication of water or ground line.<sup>20</sup> The sea monster that swallows and spits out Jonah is not original to

<sup>19</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Jonah 1:12-16.

<sup>20</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 63.

Christianity. Maritime themes enjoyed great popularity in the Roman world in the first two centuries of the Common Era. Even though it is assumed, in the representation of Jonah, to be the sea monster from the Bible, the monster takes on the form of a dragon that was quite popular in Roman representation.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the explicit representation of a monster and not an actual big fish, according to Tristan, is done so that there will be no confusion between the monster that swallowed Jonah, which represents death, with the dolphin and most importantly with the symbol of ΙΧΘΥΣ.<sup>22</sup>

On the right-hand wall, immediately to the right of Jonah being spit out, Jonah is represented as angry and to the right of this image Jonah is represented lying under the pergola (Jonah 4:5-11).<sup>23</sup> In the first image he is represented sitting on a rock holding his chin with his right arm, in the second image he is reclining on what appears to be a rocky outcrop that has a greenish color with a red outline.<sup>23</sup> Jonah has his right leg bent at the knee while his left leg is straight out in a relaxed position. He has his left arm bent at the elbow, propping up his upper body, while his right arm is bent behind his head. His face is in a frontal pose, while his body is in a three-quarter position as he is seen semi-reclining on the "couch." The pergola is also represented in a green color with vines hanging from it, yet the leaves have been discolored and damaged, and, therefore, are not all visible. What is interesting about this last image is the origin of this sleeping figure.

In classical Greek mythology Endymion, a beautiful young man that had been

submersed into an everlasting sleep by the moon goddess Selene, was represented in the same manner as Jonah. At first sight it appears that there is no differentiation between the representations of Endymion and Jonah. What is represented is a naked young man with the same stance (Roman artists represented a person asleep by showing them reclining on a couch with one hand behind their head). Yet, as Christians did when adopting images, they adapted the image that fit their needs. For this reason, unlike his Roman counterpart, Jonah is represented under a pergola. This imagery brings to mind the "climbing ground" found in the book of Jonah.<sup>24</sup>

Yahweh God then ordained that the castor-oil plant should grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and sooth his ill humor; Jonah was delighted with the castor oil plant.<sup>25</sup>

The question that should be asked is "Why Endymion? Why not just make up a new image?" As mentioned earlier when Christianity appeared, Christian art did not exist, yet what did exist was Greco-Roman art and workshops that dominated the market. Therefore, it would be natural for Christian converts, most of whom were formerly pagan, to seek out something familiar and commonly available. Nonetheless, adopting images and adapting them to make them have Christian significance can be seen as an evolutionary process through which early Christians found their identity.<sup>26</sup>

The story of Jonah is not just mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah in Mt. 12: 38-42:

<sup>21</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 93-94.

<sup>22</sup> Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole a L'icône : II-VI Siècle*, 186.

<sup>23</sup> The cycle of Jonah can also be seen in cubiculum C and cubiculum M.

<sup>23</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Jonah 4: 6-8.

<sup>26</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 103-105.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees spoke up. 'Master,' they said, 'we should like to see a sign from you.' He replied, 'it is an evil and unfaithful generation that asks for a sign! The only sign it will be given is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights...'<sup>27</sup>

and figures such as Irenaeus, and Justine Martyr offer a theological explanation to the story and in turn to the understanding of the images. Justine, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, uses the image of Jonah as a symbol of the resurrection while using three of the four scenes from the pictorial cycle.<sup>28</sup> Justin states:

And these Memoirs also testify to the fact of his resurrection from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion, for it is therein recorded that in answer to the contentious Jews who said to Him, "Show us a sign," He replied, "An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, and no sign shall be given in but the sign of Jonah." Though these words are mysterious, His listener could understand that He would arise from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear that Justin came to an understanding of the story of Jonah as a pre-figuration of the crucifixion of Christ from the Gospel of Matthew. In the Jewish tradition, the story of Jonah was not understood to be a pre-figuration of the Messiah, yet the original meaning must have been ambiguous to the

evangelists, who added several interpretations to the text. One of the interpretations is the reference to the three days Jonah spent inside the sea monster to indicate the time Christ spent in the heart of the earth. It is interesting to note however that the *Di Rossi* version of the *Midrash of Jonah* mentions that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath who was resurrected by the prophet Elijah, the immediate forerunner to the Messiah according to Jewish tradition. Jonah, in the Midrash, is thought to have been physically taken up to heaven, like Elijah, and his task in the messianic age is to bind and bring Leviathan to the righteous in Paradise to be feasted on. Therefore, the Jewish Midrashic images of a messianic Jonah must have been quite strong in the mind of Matthew in order to make such an association. Nonetheless, no matter what the origin, the interpretation of Jonah being spat out of the sea monster as the resurrection of Christ becomes the most popular artistic interpretation in early Christian art.<sup>30</sup>

### *Sacrifice of Isaac*

On the left-hand wall, of room L in cubiculum F, the sacrifice of Isaac is represented.

It happened some time later that God put Abraham to the test. 'Abraham, Abraham!' he called. 'Here I am,' he replied. God said, 'Take your son, your only son, your beloved son Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, where you are to offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall point out to you.' Early next morning Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him his two servants and his son Isaac. He chopped wood for the burnt offering and started on his journey...

<sup>27</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Matt. 12: 38-42.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Cadman Colwell, "The Fourth Gospel and Early Christian Art," *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr. 1935): 194.

<sup>29</sup> Saint Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho." *The Fathers of the Church: Writings of the Saint Justin Martyr* ed. Ludwig Schopp, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 314.

<sup>30</sup> Bezalel Narkiss. "The Sign of Jonah." *Gesta* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1979): 64.

Abraham built an altar there, and arranged the wood. Then he bound his son and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of God called to him...then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the bush. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, the image itself has been quite badly damaged by looters who tried to remove it in 1954.<sup>32</sup> Abraham, in this image, is dressed with a short tunic and a mantle. He is bearded and holds a long sword in his right arm while in his left he presumably holds his son Isaac, who appears to be leaning next to him in a short tunic and sandals. To their left is an altar with burning wood; behind this a ram is visible among small bushes. On the top of the frame, the hand of God is visible coming out of red clouds, representing the divine voice stopping Abraham from killing his son. The same image can also be seen in cubiculum C with minor differences. While the altar appears to be burning, Abraham holds the sword while Isaac is kneeling with his hands tied behind his back; the ram is to the left of the altar. Yet the hand of God in this representation comes out of blue clouds (the hand is not visible in the image for it has been damaged); below the figures of Abraham and Isaac is a servant dressed in a short tunic holding on to a loaded donkey.<sup>33</sup>

This scene is probably the most common representation, other than the Good Shepherd, in catacomb art, oil lamps and sarcophagi. In the book of Genesis, the importance lays in the obedience that Abraham shows to God, yet this does not

explain why this image was represented in funerary art.<sup>34</sup> The Letter to the Hebrews, however, offers an explanation to why this story would be represented in a funerary milieu:

It was by faith that Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He offered to sacrifice his only son even though he had yet to receive what had been promised, and he had been told: Isaac is the one through whom your name will be carried on. He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, it can be understood that this image brought to mind for the ancient viewer a comfort in deliverance and resurrection of the dead. This idea of sacrifice can also be seen in the letter of Paulinus of Nola to Melania the Elder, who left her son in the care of a tutor, a form of sacrifice for a mother to leave her child, in order to follow God's call. Paulinus, however, goes one-step further and compares the ram that replaced Isaac with the lamb that signifies Christ.

Like Melania, father Abraham got back his one son whom he had offered to God, because when the demand was made he readily offered the child. The Lord is content with the perfect sacrifice of heartfelt love, so the angel's hand intervened to stay the father's right arm as it was poised for the blow. The angel snatched up the victim and in its place set a hastily furnished sheep, so that God should not lose his sacrifice, nor the father his son. There was this further reason, that the mystery to be fulfilled in Christ and rehearsed by Isaac (so far as the image of God could rehearse it)

<sup>31</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible, Genesis 22: 1-13.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ferrua, The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art, 127.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid., 82-83.*

<sup>34</sup> *J. Stevenson, The Catacombs: Rediscover Monuments of Early Christianity (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 68.*

<sup>35</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible, Hebrews 11: 17-20.*

could be given shape through the ram. For the lamb which was to be later sacrificed in Egypt to typify the Savior was thus already anticipated by the beast of its own species—the ram which replaced Isaac as victim to prefigure Christ. So the ram was found by Abraham since the highest sacrament was not his due, but it was killed for Him for whom the fulfillment of the sacrament was being preserved.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, it is understood that the sacrifice of Isaac was understood and represented as the iconographic paradigm of Christ's crucifixion. Nonetheless, if this image is a prefiguration of Christ, where are the similarities? Robin M. Jensen, in her article, points out the similarities between Isaac and Christ: 1) Abraham was offering his beloved and only son, as God the Father did with Christ, his Son, 2) both sons were miraculously conceived, 3) it took three days to get to the place of sacrifice or place of resurrection, Christ resurrected in three days, 4) both sons carried the wood for their sacrifice, Isaac the wood to burn on the altar and Christ his cross to Golgotha.<sup>37</sup>

The Letter to the Hebrews points to the representation of the sacrifice as the obedience of Abraham to God, yet Paulinus clearly maintains that Isaac is a prototype to Christ's sacrifice. The problem here lies in the dates, Paulinus wrote his letters in the late fourth and early fifth century. So, this may give credence to Jensen's statement that before 313 CE it cannot be said with certainty that the sacrifice of Isaac was seen as something more than a symbol of deliverance and resurrection since all the literature that talks about the prototype comes from the

fourth century onwards. Even though the original theological significance may be different in the second to the third centuries, the pictorial origins cannot be disputed. The only problem with this is that according to our analysis the answer comes from the written word and not from the image itself. Nonetheless, as Jensen suggests, "homilies and liturgies were the most important source from which early Christian imagery derives meaning from".<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is possible as Kessler suggests that artistic interpretation influenced the written word. This may be the reason why in early representations of the sacrifice of Isaac, Isaac is not represented as bound on the altar.

A good example found in the Catacomb of Callixtus, which dates to the first half of the third century CE where a child like Isaac and Abraham are shown like orants, while a ram proudly stands to the left of Abraham along with an olive tree and the fire wood in the back-ground.

Similarly, in a later third century representation, Isaac is shown as a child carrying the wood while Abraham is pointing to the fire on the altar. On the other hand, in the catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus and Cubiculum F in the Via Latina, Abraham holds a knife in his right hand and the childlike Isaac has his hands bound.<sup>39</sup> What is interesting to note is that, in the Jewish tradition and in the representations of the Sacrifice the Akedah, Isaac is represented and understood as an adult between the ages of 26-36, old enough to get married and carry the heavy burden of the wood of the ultimate sacrifice.

<sup>36</sup> St. Paulinus of Nola, *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola* (Trans. P.G. Walsh. Westminster: The Newman Press, 1967), 111-112.

<sup>37</sup> Robin, M. Jensen. "Isaac as a Christological Symbol in Early Christian Art." *The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 5 no 2 (Winter 1993): 8.

<sup>38</sup> Robin M. Jensen. "The Offering of Isaac in Jewish And Christian Tradition." *Biblical Interpretation* 2, (1994), 105.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 157-159.

In stark contrast to the Sacrifice of Isaac, is the image found on the Torah niche at Dura, where Isaac is clearly represented as a child that appears unbound lying on the altar. Could we conclude from this that the Christian view of Isaac as a child comes from the exegesis that the Dura artist made to the biblical story? In any case, one has to keep in mind that the Dura representation of the Akedah is the closest of all representation to the actual biblical story.<sup>40</sup>

Catacomb construction started, in its first phase, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, yet the earliest remaining images come out of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. Interestingly, a visible evolution can be traced in the catacombs, offering information on what influenced the fencers, painters, and the patrons to depict certain images as they did. Like Dura, the form of representation was rooted in pagan art. The message, though, was Christian in its entirety, even when the depictions came out of the Old Testament. Jonah is a clear prefiguration of Christ, even though he is represented in the form of the well-known Endymion. The symbol of the fish may have just been a marine representation for the pagans, yet for the Jewish community it was the main dish of the Messianic banquet; and finally for the Christians the symbol of Christ.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 166-167.

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