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Enculturation of the Gospel through Image: Influences and Attitudes Surrounding Early Christian Art

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

"The Gospel message, it seems, cannot exist in a “pure” form. It is always mediated through a culture, literary style, historical circumstance or artistic practice. This means that it incorporates influences that are alien to it, though it does so in a critical manner. With regards to the biblical account, such a realization led to the search for the “historical Jesus” which began in the 18th century. This study will take into account the socio-cultural and historical factors that went into the first production of Christian images aimed at communicating something about this recently established faith. For reasons of length and time I will restrict this study to the West in general, Rome in particular, and I will only consider the very beginnings of Christian artistic production without venturing much past the 5th century. The aim of this inquiry is to explore early pagan influences and the doctrinal/apologetic attitudes of Christian image production during the first few centuries of the church in the West. In doing so, I will look at the Jewish roots of Christianity as applies to the prohibition of image making (Ex 20:4). Next I will turn to Christian interaction with the Hellenized world surrounding art and its uses. Then I will explore some of the earliest Christian symbol art and trace its evolution into the forms of iconography that we are familiar with today.”
Enculturation of the Gospel through Image: Influences and Attitudes Surrounding Early Christian Art

The Gospel message, it seems, cannot exist in a “pure” form. It is always mediated through a culture, literary style, historical circumstance or artistic practice. This means that it incorporates influences that are alien to it, though it does so in a critical manner. With regards to the biblical account, such a realization led to the search for the “historical Jesus” which began in the 18th century. This study will take into account the socio-cultural and historical factors that went into the first production of Christian images aimed at communicating something about this recently established faith. For reasons of length and time I will restrict this study to the West in general, Rome in particular, and I will only consider the very beginnings of Christian artistic production without venturing much past the 5th century. The aim of this inquiry is to explore early pagan influences and the doctrinal/apologetic attitudes of Christian image production during the first few centuries of the church in the West. In doing so, I will look at the Jewish roots of Christianity as applies to the prohibition of image making (Ex 20:4). Next I will turn to Christian interaction with the Hellenized world surrounding art and its uses. Then I will explore some of
the earliest Christian symbol art and trace its evolution into the forms of iconography that we are familiar with today.

Emerging out of the Jewish religious matrix, the Christian community spread throughout the Greek speaking Hellenized world of Asia Minor. The Jews, it would appear, maintained a strict ban of images. The second commandment states, “You shall not make for yourself any idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth” (Ex 20:4). Indeed, this was the argument waged against the placement of a Roman imperial statue in Jerusalem by Gaius in 40 C.E. which is attested to in the Antiquities of Josephus. On the other hand, however, five chapters after the prohibition, God commands the Israelites to “[m]ake two cherubim of beaten gold for the two ends of the cover [of the ark]” (Ex 25:18). Thus, without pursuing a full exegesis, the ban on images has more to do with their worship than production. This is to say that it is not so much the images themselves but one’s relationship to them that is the defining factor in Hebrew religious observance. In addition, when one talks about the Judaism present at the time of the early church, one finds it more appropriate to talk about diverse forms of Judaism due to its multiplicity. It is true that the experience of the exile (597 BCE) led to a more rigorous codification of Deuteronomic law but first-century Palestine was now a member of the Hellenized world built by Alexander the Great and not immune to its influences. Joseph Gutmann notes that,

The Jewish attitude toward art reflects not so much…observance or disobedience to a static, biblical divine command; instead it is largely conditioned by a dynamic interaction with the dominant official attitude towards art expressed in the non-Jewish, Greco-Roman and other societies, and by the official treatment accorded Jews in these places of residence.
Thus the interpretation of the second commandment had a certain fluidity that allowed Jews, and then Christians, to take part in artistic production. Gutmann talks about the possibility of an illuminated Septuagint manuscript tradition among the Jews at this time but ultimately labels this trend an *argumentum ex silencio* due to the complete lack of archeological evidence.

An example of Jewish image production from this period is the synagogue at Dura-Europos. Dura was a military and cultural center in Syria during the third century. It was destroyed by the Persian army in 256 C.E. but the building containing worship sites for Jews, Christians and Pagans was preserved. At this site, archeologists uncovered a synagogue covered in painted images from the Hebrew Scriptures. The group of Jews who worshiped here, Gutmann observes, “did not read the bible literally but saw it filtered through the exegetical eyes of the Midrashim and the Targumim.” While it is doubtful that such images had much influence on Christian production or other areas of Judaism, this synagogue stands as evidence that the Jewish image ban found in scripture was not so strictly followed and thus would allow Christians coming out of this culture to think more freely in their ability to use imagery and art.

While representative art was becoming more and more acceptable in the Jewish Near East, Christians needed to distinguish themselves from the idol worship of the pagans who they were attempting to evangelize. In this context many of the early church fathers wrote powerfully against the use of images. Here again, this apparent distrust of artistic representation has more to do with apologetics and right relationship to image qua image than the actual images themselves.
The question of whether or not Christianity should interact with the pagan world finds its answer in the most basic levels of the religion itself. The New Testament is written (with varying degrees of eloquence) in the Greek language, “not the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets, nor the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, nor yet in the Latin of the imperium Romanum, but in the Greek of Socrates and Plato....” Even before the gospels were written, Paul was making converts in the larger Greek speaking world of Asia Minor. The council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-21) determined that only the most basic of Jewish practice needed be maintained by the new converts, thus allowing them, in all other respects, to act in ways that were consistent with their culture that did not directly counter the gospel message. The question still remained, as Tertullian put it, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?”

The debate about the validity of secular education was important. Early theologians like Justin Martyr, who converted from paganism and had a background in classical learning, and the Cappadocian Fathers found value in secular education and were able to use it as an apologetic tool in their defenses of the faith.

Whereas Greek rhetoric and logic found early approval and integration into Christian systems, the case for classic art took more time. “Art on its own,” argues Paul Corby Finney, “is never the subject [of the apologists’ critique].” These first defenders of the faith were not so much concerned about painted walls or carved rock as they were about the “nature of God, true worship, and the ethical life.” Christianity was unique to the religious environment of the time in that it demanded a choice rather than tolerance. Such an approach demanded that people leave their superstitious ways so that they may enter into communion with the one true God. One of the most common charges leveled against Christians was that of atheism. This was
because they did not participate in public worship of idols nor did they have any images of their own. The apologists cleverly used their knowledge of Stoic philosophy to show that their lack of images was in fact evidence of a higher awareness of the reality of God. They argued that they “enjoyed a rational and spiritual awareness of God’s indwelling” that meant that their “religious sense was pure and unsullied by contact with the external paraphernalia of cult.”

Clement uses Platonic argumentation against *mimesis* (the art of visual representation) to say that Christians are not interested in the lie of art but rather in the higher realm of truth. Given the Platonic dualism of ideal and shadow, it was not necessarily the case that pagans always viewed images as actually being the reality they aimed to represent. Hylotheism, the confusion of the reality of divinity with its material representation, cannot be said to have plagued the pagan interlocutors of these Apologists. Finney notes that, “the apologist knew full well that pagan cult images were intended as symbols and that those who worshiped such images saw more in them than just their material properties.” With this in mind, one can see that Christian artistic symbols could easily be appropriated into the contemporary pagan culture without much danger of hylothistic misunderstandings. “The attack on Greek art [, then,] is a purely apologetic device, which serves up an idealized view of the new religionists.”

It should be no surprise to learn that the first Christian images were re-appropriated pagan motifs. It is a common view among scholars that “no distinctively Christian art predates the year 200.” This is based off of our current understandings and archeological evidence but could be amended in time if new discoveries are made. One argument, which is a rather new interpretation and minority opinion, is that such art did exist before 200 C.E. evidenced by some fragments of the gospels. The Greek words for “crucify” (σταυρόω) and “cross” (σταυρός)
can be written with a symbol known as the *tau-rho* which is a super-imposition of the tau (τ) over the rho (ρ) which looks like this ρ̂. Both the Bodmer papyrus p66 (fig. 1) and p75 (fig. 2) are dated around the year 200 C.E. and contain this symbol in the words for “cross” and “crucify.” Larry Hurtado points this out and argues that the *tau-rho* compendium is indeed the earliest form of Christian art because it produces “a pictographic representation of a crucified figure hanging on a cross.” This symbol, however, is not unique to its Christian context. In pervious usage it has appeared to abbreviate words like “thirty” (τριακόντα) and “period of three years” (τριετία). These latter uses make more sense due to the proximity of the letters being abbreviated whereas in both “crucify” and “cross” the letters are separated by an alpha and upsilon. This could be seen as evidence to support Hurtado’s claim to artistic representation in the letter combination. In addition, Hurtado points out that “the staurogram does not refer to any name or title linked with Jesus [as does the *chi-rho* χρ]. It refers only to the crucifixion.”

It is rare that the *tau-rho* should be incorporated in the canon of religious images at this time because, barring in these papyrus manuscripts, “the earliest known images of Jesus crucified date to the early fifth century, and are extremely rare until the seventh.” The reason for its absence is not due to its lack of importance for the early church but rather for some very practical reasons. Robin Jensen lists three possibilities to explain the late arrival of suffering Christ imagery: questions about the visual representation of the deity fear of embarrassment/misunderstanding and the influence of certain Christological controversies of the time. With regards to the last of these three, the soon-to-be heretical “adoptionist” view was popular in second-century Rome which left people uninterested in the salvific power of the
Christ event. Coming out of a classical pagan background Jensen points out that “many early Christians were more enamored of a human wonder-worker and teacher than the Jesus of doctrinal and theological reflection.” She goes on to say that, “art serves in some sense as a corrective mechanism that might give insight into—or serve as a vehicle for—popular faith as opposed to the elitist emphasis of theological speculation.” Here one observes a certain gap between the doctrines of the proto-orthodox bishops and the recently converted of the early church. When the art of this time is understood in terms of a reflection of popular faith, it makes it easier to see the relevance of two of the most popular Christian images: the Good Shepherd and “Jonah and the Whale.”

The Good Shepherd “was by far the most popular representation of Christ in the Church’s first four centuries.” Here one notices a sort of reassignment of meaning to a symbol that pre-existed the church. The Good Shepherd image in the Hellenistic world represented Hermes Kriophoros who bears the sacrificial ram. It was popular in first-century Rome and thus did not draw suspicion. For the Christian observer, the Good Shepherd brought to mind Christ as pastor of the church and its protector. “The Good Shepherd,” remarks Ramsey, “was certainly a kind of defense figure—the protector and guardian of his sheep, of the ‘little flock’ which is given into his care and which must not fall into the hostile hands of ‘the world.’” In this way, the image in question had great significance for the period of persecution which the Christians were enduring. The figure is also “fundamentally an ethical figure, a symbol of love or humanitas, and also a symbol of salvation.”

The second most popular Christian image was that of a man coming out of the mouth of a large fish. This is reminiscent of the Hebrew Scripture tale of Jonah and the Whale but also
has New Testament parallels. “The sign of the prophet Jonas” appears as a resurrection prediction in Mt 12:39-41 and Lk 11:29-32. This first appears in a clay lamp called Wulff 1224 (fig. 3). According to Finney, this is one of “the earliest experiments in the creation of a distinctive Christian picture language....” Engraved in a Roman sarcophagus from the late third century, is an image of Jonah resting under a vine after being spit out by the big fish (fig. 4). Thomas Mathews observes the striking similarity it bears to images of Endymion (fig. 5), a pagan myth that had connotations of repose after death. Both were used in funerary art but the Christianization of the image recalls the hope of resurrection whereas the pagan Endymion only speaks to eternal rest.

It is here interesting to explore further the early Christian’s ability to assign Christian meaning to already existing images. “Culturally,” states Finney, “they were heterogeneous. Christians did not represent themselves as constituting a separate and distinct culture (ethnos), nor did outsiders consider them in this light.” He goes on to point out the need for adaptation as the key to a culture’s survival. Indeed, the first Christians in the West, who started out as Greek immigrants, learned to adapt to their surroundings which were not all that different from their own. In addition, the fact that they made converts out of pagans already living in Rome made it easier for them to fit in given that they were already a member of that cultural milieu. This being the case, Christians, by way of Clement, were advised to “operate within the already-existing repertory of intaglio devices. They should buy within the established market.” They were especially not to go looking for “rare seals” such as a body on a cross as this would draw unwanted attention and would simply be a bizarre request in that time. It was also the case that artisans were not necessarily capable of creating a completely new set of images. Often, as
was the case with the carving of Jonah, they copied known motifs but changed some aspects to meet the needs of their Christian patrons. Another example of this is a sarcophagus with Entry of Christ into Jerusalem scene (fig. 6). After exploring the possibility of this coming out of the imperial *adventus* tradition of imperial Roman custom, Mathews concludes that it is in fact a stretching of “the Roman noblemen going to the hunt.” Because this was not understood as a triumphant entry, the next closest motif the sculptors had to work with was the hunt. This is made clear by the resemblance the young donkey under the donkey Christ is riding has to a hunting dog. Mathews illustrates, “[H]is belly hugs the ground and he runs along sniffing in the dirt like a hunting dog, because in fact the composition...is derived from a composition of a hunter on horseback with his dog beneath.”

To be sure, all the images previously examined have come from earlier contexts and uses and do not change in any substantial way from their classical predecessors. Even when Finney discusses the “earliest manifestations of distinctively Christian art,” in the catacombs of Callistus, he must admit that, “there is no radical break with the past.” This is not to say that the motifs were incorporated uncritically but rather that there were no major formal differences in the images chosen.

The victory of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312 led to a new stage in the production of Christian art. One year after Constantine came to power over the entire Roman Empire he produced the Edict of Milan which legalized Christianity as a legitimate religion in the Empire. The end of persecution brought the church out of the catacombs and into the city above ground. With the new sympathy of the emperor himself, Christian art would
again take on the form of its surroundings thus undergoing a fresh enculturation in Roman society and the imperial court.

Christ, “unlike many historical figures of Antiquity...had no authentic portrait tradition....Images of him may therefore be said to be pure projections in the psychological sense; that is, inventions corresponding to what people needed or wanted from him.” In the earliest Christian art forms, this took the shape of the protective Good Shepherd or the promise of resurrection through Jonah typology. Now, however, the need for such representations has been supplanted by more royal imagery depicting Christ as the ruler of all (παντοκράτωρ). Ramsey makes this apparent in his brief study on the death of the Good Shepherd image tradition in the fifth century. The Good Shepherd simply “no longer corresponded to the mental image of Christ that was prevailing in the Church.” In the last image of the Christ the Good Shepherd in Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Ramsey describes the mosaic as something almost unrecognizable to the earlier representational tradition. He observes, “In his gold tunic, sewn with blue bands, and with purple mantel draped over one shoulder, Christ has become a royal or imperial personage: he is the king of the sheep, rather than their shepherd.”

Replacing former depictions were portrayals of Jesus as a classical philosopher and scenes of Christ seated on his throne holding court surrounded by his saints in the heavenly realm. As a philosopher, recognizable by his longer tunic in comparison to other working class characters in their shorter tunics, it would have “made perfect sense” to the Roman viewer. Such a likeness would signify that Jesus is a gentleman, that he is well off, can afford leisure time and possesses a certain extra-worldly authority characteristic of Late Antiquity’s understanding of the philosophical class. One has come a long way from the frescos of the
catacombs when Jesus is made to look more like contemporary art patrons than his humble beginnings as shepherd/protector.

Likewise, with regards to the imperial influences, “Christian artists did not use theological or Christological images to portray central Christian doctrines, but were concerned to use the images of triumph and power taken over from imperial models.” It is important to realize here that 312 does not stand as the unofficial date commemorating the start of Christendom. That development would not exist until sometime after. In fact, the conversion of the Empire was slow. While Constantine urged citizens to convert, he also made sure that they would not be bothered by Christians and allowed to worship as they saw fit. Barnard notes, “A considerable part of the art and architecture commissioned by the fourth-century Christian Emperors was in fact pagan, not Christian.” Be that as it may, Christian art did continue to develop and take on new forms. This was especially true with the emergence of new above ground buildings where people could gather for the express purpose of communal worship. Based on the basilica style of Roman meeting halls, these churches allowed for “bill-board” sized space within which artists could work. In the apse, the area above and behind the altar, new scenes of the heavenly court were produced for the first time.

Taking St. Pudenziana in Rome as an example (fig. 7) and following the lead of majority scholarship, one can see how this mosaic from 390 C.E. represents the new interpretation of Christ as imperial emperor. There he sits on a throne, signifying both power and authority, surrounded by the apostles and some women holding laurel wreaths, classical symbols of victory. Mathews goes on to argue that this scene does not come out of imperial roots, as others previously thought, but rather finds its influences in pagan motifs of divinity (fig. 8).
Realizing the Christological controversies of the time surrounding the Council of Nicaea (325), there would have been a push to highlight the divinity of Christ as one equal to the Father. Furthermore, he points out that the throne Christ is sitting on does not resemble the imperial throne of the time (fig. 9). If he is correct in his interpretation, early “royal” imagery had more to do with demonstrating Christ’s divinity and position as philosopher than showing him as equal to, or greater than, the earthly powers of the time. This may have come about as a result of the Constantinian tolerance that allowed various groups of religions equal legal status. This apse mosaic, then, conceived of as an apologetic tool, would be aimed at pagans in its underlining of Christ’s divinity and authority as philosopher. Even though the scene is fantastic and other-worldly, Mathews observes, “These figures, unlike those of classical art, seek contact with us from a world beyond….they seek our attention.” Such a change from pagan representations of the gods who had, by this time, largely lost their appeal indicates the victory Christians were enjoying over the unconverted world. After all, “Implicit in such images is the bold claim of Christians to have bested their pagan adversaries in the intellectual realm.”

In conclusion, early Christian art cannot be said to have developed in a vacuum. As we have seen, most of the first images used by Christians were assimilated pagan motifs that had a comforting (Good Shepherd and Jonah and the Whale) or apologetic (Christ in glory) end in mind. These Christians had to make decisions as to their involvement in the world around them and to what extent they would integrate into pagan culture. This took on flesh in questions surrounding classical learning and artistic production. Of course, this was more a question for the Jewish Christians than the converted Gentiles who already participated in the Greco-Roman
world. However, as evidenced by the synagogue at Dura Europos, we cannot be so quick to categorize Jewish custom of this period based only on the image ban in Ex 20:4.

Little by little, the early church found that they could reassign Christological themes to already existent pagan imagery that did not take away from their core beliefs. This was done critically and carefully but eventually caught on. The images of Christ changed with the circumstances of the people and were amended or developed to meet their needs. With the appearance of a sustained Crucifixion tradition sometime in the fifth century, all other art production did not differ in any significant way from contemporary pagan representations. In the final analysis, this period of Christian art evidences the success of the early church due to its ability to enculturate its central themes in then-current cultural motifs. Indeed, it is this ability that has brought the church this far and this ability that will maintain its relevance into the future.

Figure Page

![Fig. 1: Bodmer papyrus P66](image1)

![Fig. 2: Bodmer papyrus P75](image2)
Fig. 3: Engraving of Wulff 1224

Fig. 4: Repose of Jonah
Fig. 5: Repose of Endymion

Fig. 6: Entry into Jerusalem

Fig. 7: Apse of St. Pudenziana, Rome
Fig. 8: Council of the gods

Fig. 9: Roman *Sella Curulis*, the Emperor’s chair
Bibliography


On the corner of via Santa Lucia and via Palazzuolo, is a niche built into the wall and painted with a "Pieta’ with Angels and Saints" dating from the late 15th century. Passers-by would no doubt have drawn strength to face their daily tribulations from contemplating the Virgin’s lamentation over her dead son.

(Photo and Text by Dr. Lucia Falsetti Guarino, St. John Fisher College)