

A Short Guide to Early Christian Images

Raffaella Fazio Smith

# *Face of Faith*

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Early Christian Images**

by  
Raffaella Fazio Smith



But the Saviour comes in various forms to each man for his profit. For to those who have need of gladness He becomes a Vine; and to those who want to enter in He stands as a Door; and to those who need to offer up their prayers He stands a mediating High Priest. Again, to those who have sins He becomes a Sheep, that He may be sacrificed for them. He is made all things to all men, remaining in His own nature what He is. (...) He adapts Himself to our infirmities, just as some excellent physician or compassionate teacher...

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 10*

The New is in the Old concealed, the Old is in the New revealed.  
AUGUSTINE, *Questions concerning the Heptateuch*

## **PUBLISHING INFORMATION**

### **Face Of Faith: A Short Guide To Early Christian Images**

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Editing, layout & design by Anthony Smith

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ISBN No. 978-1-329-78960-9

eBook edition published in January 2016

Print edition (ISBN No. 978-1-4452-7035-7)

published in December 2011

by Lulu.com

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*Front cover: Traditio Legis – Christ hands the Law to the Apostle Peter, 4th C mosaic, Mausoleum of St Constance, Rome, Italy.*

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# Fides Ex Visu?

**A**fter an initial period of reticence, images started playing a powerful role in Christian life as instruments of proclamation and teaching.

The initial reserve was mainly due to two factors: Christian respect for the image interdiction contained in the Bible (cf. Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 4:15-18), and Christian opposition to the Greco-Roman religious practices which included the worship of images. In his *Octavius* (third-century AD), Marcus Minucius Felix wrote that Christians “would be ashamed of prostrating in front of a block of lifeless matter to which the craftsman was able to give the shape of a god”.

The maturation of Christian faith slowly helped overcome the risk of superstition. Images progressively became an “open book”, a strong support for faith understanding. Their development – from the catacombs or the *domus ecclesiae* to the first great Christian monuments – bears witness to another important aspect: the growth in religious and civil freedom fuelled by the Edicts of religious toleration (311/313 AD) that allowed Christian communities to surface and flourish.

**Face Of Faith** skilfully reveals the cultural and religious “journey” that led to the usage of images in Christian life: the Greco-Roman tradition, the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament and its re-interpretation/reception by Christianity.

This journey is described through a clever selection of images focused on Christ’s message of redemption and resurrection. These images rightly exemplify the combination of classical art – above all funerary production – Old Testament teaching, and the new Christian vision, revolving around the faith in the Risen Lord. ■

Msgr. Eleuterio F. Fortino

Former Under-Secretary, *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*





# A Starting Point

### Why rediscover early Christian art?

Self-awareness is always a good starting point, both for people and cultures. While trying to rediscover our roots, we get to understand who we are, both what is worth treasuring and what is best discarded. The art of the early communities was meant to convey the strong message of a rather “revolutionary” faith, which would use already existing instruments to spread a new vision. This vision helped shape Western civilization. Despite its natural limits, the effort of decoding early Christian art is incredibly rewarding; gaining a deeper insight into the past allows us to enjoy our rich heritage in a more “informed” way.

### Art in Rome

Christian artwork has evolved in style and substance over the course of 2,000 years, yet much of the symbols used in paintings or sculptures can be traced back to the early Christian period, between the third and fifth centuries AD. Rome is unrivalled as a repository of artworks from this period including the sarcophagi, inscriptions and other funerary artefacts (eg, ceramic oil-lamps, bronze work, enamels) in the Vatican Museums and in other museum collections. In addition, the hundreds of frescoes, mosaics and inscriptions *in situ* at the Eternal City’s catacombs, churches and other archaeological sites, are unparalleled.

### The purpose of this guide

This publication is not an academic book but rather a starting point for beginners to help them read some of the most recurrent images of early Christian art as they were originally intended. The images selected come primarily from a funerary context, i.e. sarcophagi sculptures and catacombs frescoes, but many of them are also present in later church decorations (monumental churches started to be built only after the Edicts of toleration, proclaiming religious tolerance in the Roman Empire, by Galerius in 311 and by Constantine and Licinius

in 313). This guidebook is organised in twelve chapters each focused on a key figurative scene, for example The Good Shepherd, Jonah, Abraham and Isaac. Each chapter traces the pagan (Greco-Roman), pre-Christian (Jewish tradition and Old Testament) and early Christian roots of the motifs displayed. It then provides user-friendly tables suggesting possible interpretations of the images. At the end of each section, extracts of early Christian writings by the Church Fathers can be used to better understand the theological/spiritual background of the different representations.

### The novelty of this guide

This publication provides a detailed study of the topic while remaining simple and user-friendly. It focuses on the meaning of images rather than on their style. Furthermore, it presents them in connection with non-Christian traditions. Last but not least it quotes early sources in a systematic and schematic way.

### Bear in mind

a) The comparison between early Christian writings and images is helpful and inspiring. However, it is important to remember that the correspondence between theological works and art production is not always consistent, since Christian art also followed other criteria, such as pre-existing iconographic patterns and non-written traditions.

b) The choice of scenes in this guidebook is not exhaustive but representative. For example, episodes from the New Testament that frequently appear in early Christian art (eg, Christ’s nativity and baptism, Christ’s healings and miracles) are not studied here.

c) For the sake of simplicity, each image is presented as separated from the others. Yet, they should be read together, since they belonged to one all-encompassing message: God’s power of deliverance throughout history, fulfilled in Christ and culminating in the resurrection of all. ■

# Approaching Early Christian Art

**E**arly Christian art was not an expression of personal inspiration but a codified visual support of faith, in a society where the founding values of culture were religion, community, and authority. Thus it is essential to understand what characterised this specific faith and which codes were used by art. The strength of Christian

faith depended both on its universal message and its capacity to adapt. It was shaped by two main cultures – the Jewish and the Greco-Roman – but soon became a culture in itself with an irreversible impact on the realities it encountered. Some key elements of Christian faith are:



### The belief in a Mediator/Saviour of humanity

This belief was present both in the Jewish and in the Greco-Roman religions. However, the most striking difference was that the Jews believed in a Messiah still to come, and that pagans worshipped gods or semi-gods with mythological characteristics. Yet, Christ entered “history” by sharing the destiny of humankind: Christ was not only God but also a real man among men (see below). Furthermore, Christ’s salvation is universal, as opposed to the pagan “elitist” approach (for example, Mithraism addressed a limited number of people – and only men – who had to follow a strict initiation). This universal dimension is reflected, for example, in the very architecture of Christian churches, which were “halls” open to the faithful, as opposed to the small *cella* of Greco-Roman temples containing the statue of the divinity where the faithful were not allowed.

### The belief in Christ as the centre of history and destiny

For Christians, Christ is the centre of everything. All that happened before his coming was a preparation to it. Both Old Testament and some pagan beliefs were interpreted by Christians in the light of Christ’s message. Christ is the fulfilment of the promise that God made to his people and to all humankind. This is why early Christian art represents old prophets and biblical characters (see right) as foreshadowing Christ himself.

### The belief in the resurrection of all

This idea had started appearing among some Jews (the Pharisees, though not the Sadducees), but had not clearly taken shape and was linked to the expectation of a messianic ►►

### Old Testament characters in early Christian art

This presence can also be explained with reference to the prayers of early Christians, such as the “*commendationis animae*” (recommendation of a soul). Christians would ask for God’s help by recalling his intervention in favour of Old Testament righteous people: “*Deliver me, as you delivered (Adam and Eve... Jonah... Daniel... Abraham...)*”. Some Jewish synagogues were also decorated with images of the Fathers of Israel. This corresponds to the rabbinic idea of “*zekhut avot*” (the fathers’ merits), ie, the fact that the descendants receive Yahweh’s blessing on the basis of the righteous actions of their ancestors (especially Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).



### The incarnation of God

God becoming a man gave art a specific dignity: the Jewish interdiction of representing the invisible God (cf. Exodus 20:4-5) was no longer important since God had become visible in Jesus Christ. For example, New Testament reads: “*he (Christ) is the image of the invisible God*” (Colossians 1:15), and “*whoever sees me sees him who sent me*” (John 12:45).

### OPPOSITE PAGE

Christ as the Risen Lord among his disciples, late 4th C. apse mosaic (Basilica of St Pudentiana, Rome)

### ABOVE

Adam and Eve, 4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

► kingdom. Greco-Roman religion, more focused on the present life than on the future, only believed in the deification of some heroes or emperors. Greek philosophy conceived eternity as the immortality of the soul, and considered the body (the matter) as something inferior and ephemeral. Christians believed instead in the resurrection of the flesh into a “glorified” body.

### The belief in a “past-present-future” Kingdom of God

Whereas Jewish hope revolves around a future messianic kingdom still to come, Christian faith focuses on a kingdom of God which has already started in the past with the coming of Jesus, which is always “contemporary” through the church and the sacraments (considered the actual presence of Christ), and which will reach its full completion at the End of Times. This three-fold dimension of Christian faith explains why early Christian art has a deeply symbolic nature. The same image can be a combined reference to a) *an event in the history of salvation* (eg, the de-



### Early Christian architecture

Buildings also reflected the fact that Christians interpreted their faith as a journey towards the fulfillment of time and towards the glory of Christ. As opposed to the pagan basilica (used as a court of law, guildhall or a market) which usually had an entrance on its longer side and several symmetrical apses, the Christian basilica had a main-entrance on its shorter side and one apse at the end of the nave: this gave the faithful a feeling of being drawn towards the far end, which was the focus of the whole structure (hence the altar was situated there). The perspective lines of the ceiling and floor, as well as the alternation of pillars and arches in



the central nave also accentuated the feeling of converging towards that ideal point. As for the decoration of churches, narrative scenes referring to the past (dynamic development of the history of salvation, such as episodes from the Old and New Testament) are to be found mainly along the naves, whereas eschatological scenes (apocalyptic images, “visions”, such as Christ in glory on a throne) are represented in the apse, on the triumphal arch or on main-entrance doors.





liverance of Noah, Jonah, the three youths in the fiery furnace); b) *the sacrament of Baptism* (eg, scenes involving water, light and/or fire) or *Eucharist* (scenes involving food or meals, and wine); c) *the judgement and/or resurrection* (eg, Jonah's rest, the fire of the furnace, the water of the flood).

It is important to remember that Christian faith, in its originality, was able to adopt many elements of the prevailing cultures by giving them new meaning. It implied both change and continuity. Its early visual expressions (especially funerary art, such as the sarcophagi and the fresco paintings in the catacombs) are probably the best examples of that. The closeness to the Jewish tradition is clear in the choice of different episodes from the Old Testament. But also Greco-Roman culture was a shaping factor in Christian art. Both Christian style and patterns are very similar to those used by pagans. Some Christian images, such as the Good Shepherd and the Orant, were direct borrowings from Greco-Roman figures.

This was the strength of early Christian art: its capacity to clothe an existing reality with ►►

## Some texts and sources for understanding early Christian art:

- OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS
- APOCRYPHA
- WRITINGS OF THE CHURCH FATHERS (EARLY CHRISTIAN AUTHORS)
- ANCIENT LITURGICAL PRACTISES AND READINGS
- PAGAN MYTHOLOGY
- PRE-EXISTING ICONOGRAPHY (GRECO-ROMAN AND JEWISH)

## Early Christian authors/writings quoted in this guide

- ◆ JUSTINE MARTYR (c.100-165)
- ◆ MELITO OF SARDIS (?-c.180)
- ◆ IRENAEUS OF LYONS (c.130-c.200)
- ◆ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (?-c.215)
- ◆ TERTULLIAN (c.155-c.212)
- ◆ ORIGEN (c.185-c.254)
- ◆ THE PASSION OF PERPETUA AND FELICITY (3RD CENTURY)
- ◆ CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE (c.200-258)
- ◆ METHODIUS OF OLYMPUS (?-311)
- ◆ APHRAAT (c.280-367)
- ◆ EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN (306-373)
- ◆ CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (c.313-387)
- ◆ GREGORY NAZIANZEN (c.329-c.390)
- ◆ GREGORY OF NYSSA (c.335-394)
- ◆ AMBROSE (c.339-397)
- ◆ JEROME (c.347-420)
- ◆ JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (c.349-407)
- ◆ AUGUSTINE (354-430)
- ◆ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA (c.378-444)
- ◆ MAXIMUS OF TURIN (c.380-465)

### ABOVE

The Good Shepherd and the Orant, 4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

### OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM LEFT

3-D reconstruction of the pagan Basilica of Maxentius/Constantine, "RomeReborn" (UCLA).

### OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM RIGHT

3-D reconstruction of the interior of the Basilica of St Sabine, consecrated in 422 AD (Riches Heures)

► new contents. It was simple in its form and rich in meanings at the same time due to its symbolic character. Its aim was to convey the message of faith throughout different cultures and traditions without fearing “contamination”, but rather trying to “make the most of them”.

### Examples of Early Christian Art

Fine examples of early Christian art can be found throughout the ancient Roman world – in the Middle East, North Africa, Italy,

Spain and France – and in important museum collections beyond.

Rome itself boasts the greatest number of such artefacts. The Vatican Museums’ *Pius-Christian Museum* contains many important sarcophagi, inscriptions and other funerary fragments. The churches of *St Pudentiana* and the *Basilica of St Mary Major* contain important early Christian mosaics. The catacombs of Rome offer the richest and some of the earliest known examples of Christian frescoes; the main ones open to the public

## Sites and collections of early Christian art - IN ROME\*

### Catacombs and Churches

- ◆ VATICAN NECROPOLIS (3RD-4TH C)
- ◆ CATACOMBS OF ST CALLIXTUS (3RD-4TH C)
- ◆ CATACOMBS OF DOMITILLA (2ND-4TH C)
- ◆ CATACOMBS OF PRISCILLA (3RD-4TH C)
- ◆ CATACOMBS OF ST AGNES (3RD-4TH C)
- ◆ CATACOMBS OF MARCELLINUS AND PETER (3RD-4TH C)
- ◆ CATACOMBS OF ST SEBASTIAN (3RD-4TH C)
- ◆ CATACOMB OF VIA LATINA (3RD-4TH C)
  
- ◆ ROMAN DOMUS ON THE CELIO (4TH C)
- ◆ MAUSOLEUM OF ST CONSTANCE (4TH C)
- ◆ BASILICA OF ST PUDENTIANA (4TH/5TH C)
- ◆ BASILICA OF ST MARY MAJOR (5TH C)
- ◆ BASILICA OF ST SABINE (5TH C)
- ◆ SANTA MARIA ANTIQUA (6TH C)



Catacombs of St Callixtus



Basilica of St Mary Major



Pius-Christian Museum  
Vatican Museums

### Museums and Galleries

- ◆ PIUS-CHRISTIAN MUSEUM, VATICAN MUSEUMS - SARCOPHAGI, INSCRIPTIONS AND OTHER ARTEFACTS (3RD-5TH C)
- ◆ NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ROME - PALAZZO MASSIMO
- ◆ MUSEUM OF THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES
- ◆ EXCAVATIONS AND MUSEUM OF OSTIA ANTICA

#### \*From the author:

In compiling these lists of sites I have tried to include the locations of the most important images plus a broad selection from across the former Roman world. The lists, however, are by no means exhaustive hence many sites and/or collections have not been included, mainly due to lack of space. If anyone would like to suggest the inclusion of specific sites, objects or collections for future editions of this guide, please send them to: [faceoffaith.faziosmith@gmail.com](mailto:faceoffaith.faziosmith@gmail.com)

are the catacombs of Priscilla, St Agnes, St Callixtus, St Sebastian, and Domitilla. The Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter may also be visited; however, several important sites such as the Hypogeum of Via Dino Compagni (also called the Catacomb of Via Latina) contain important cycles of frescoes that can only be visited by appointment. ■



**Fresco of the Holy Family, Catacombs of St Gennaro, Naples**

## Sites and collections of early Christian/Jewish art - BEYOND ROME\*

### In Italy

- ◆ AQUILEIA: PATRIARCHAL BASILICA (4TH C), MUSEUM OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITIES, PIAZZA CAPITOLO HOUSES
- ◆ MILAN: BASILICA OF ST LAWRENCE (5TH C), BASILICA OF ST AMBROSE (5TH C)
- ◆ NAPLES: CATACOMBS OF ST GENNARO (4TH C) & SAN SEVERO (5TH C), BAPTISTRY OF ST JOHN IN FONTE (5TH C)
- ◆ RAVENNA: MAUSOLEUM OF GALLA PLACIDIA, BAPTISTRY OF NEON (c. 430AD); ARIAN BAPTISTRY, ARCHIEPISCOPAL CHAPEL, BASILICA OF ST APOLLINARE NUOVO (c. 500AD); BASILICA OF ST VITALE (548AD), BASILICA OF ST APOLLINARE IN CLASSE (549AD)



**Neonian Baptistery, Ravenna**

### In Europe

- ◆ BRITAIN: LONDON (BRITISH MUSEUM, 4TH-6TH C)
- ◆ FRANCE: ARLES (MUSEUM OF CHRISTIAN ART), PARIS (LOUVRE MUSEUM)
- ◆ GERMANY: TRIER (RHEINISCHES LANDESMUSEUM)
- ◆ CROATIA: POREC (BASILICA OF POREC, 6TH C)
- ◆ HUNGARY: PÉCS (NECROPOLIS OF SOPIANAE, 4TH C)
- ◆ GREECE: ATHENS (BYZANTINE MUSEUM, 3RD-6TH C); THESSALONIKA (ROTUNDA OF ST GEORGE - 5TH C, CHURCH OF ST DAVID - 6TH C, BYZANTINE MUSEUM)
- ◆ SPAIN: TARRAGONA (PALEOCHRISTIAN NECROPOLIS, 3RD-6TH C, & MUSEUM)



**Sopianae Necropolis Pécs, Hungary**



**Al-Bagawat Necropolis Kharga, Egypt**

### In the Middle East/North Africa

- ◆ ALGERIA: DJEMILA (BAPTISTRY, 4TH C, & MUSEUM)
- ◆ EGYPT: KHARGA (AL-BAGAWAT), CAIRO (COPTIC MUSEUM)
- ◆ ISRAEL/PALESTINE: JERUSALEM (BIBLE LANDS MUSEUM), CHURCH AT MEGIDDO (3RD-4TH C), BEIT ALPHA SYNAGOGUE (GALILEE) (6TH C), GAZA CITY SYNAGOGUE (508AD)
- ◆ JORDAN: MOUNT NEBO (5TH-6TH C), MADABA (5TH-7TH C)
- ◆ LIBYA: SABRATHA (BASILICA, 6TH C, & MUSEUM)
- ◆ SYRIA: DURA EUROPOS (3RD C), DAMASCUS (DURA SYNAGOGUE)
- ◆ TUNISIA: TUNIS (BRADO MUSEUM)
- ◆ TURKEY: ISTANBUL (ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM)

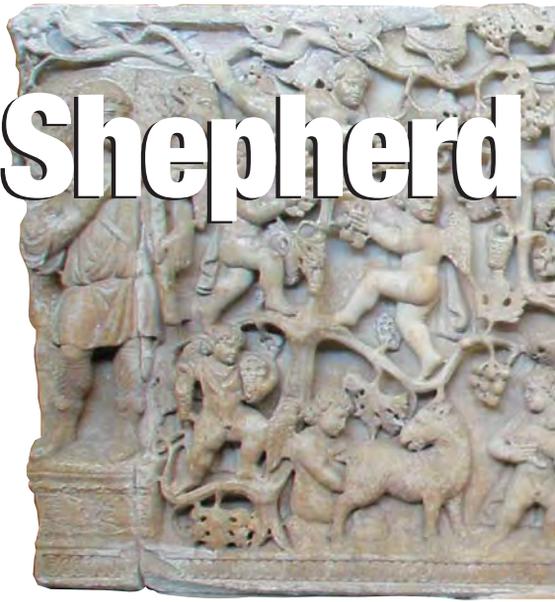
# The Good Shepherd

## Greco-Roman Tradition

The shepherd taking his sheep to pasture was an image of harmony and bliss. In the urbanised Greco-Roman world, it became an idyllic image of plentiful nature and paradisiacal life.

The image of the shepherd carrying a sheep or a ram on his shoulders (*criophore*) also embodied a fundamental virtue related to one's attitude towards one's family and social life: it was understood as the personification of philanthropy, or humanitarian care.

A third interpretation can be added: the ram bearer was sometimes a reference to Hermes, the guide of the souls to the underworld (*psychopomp*).



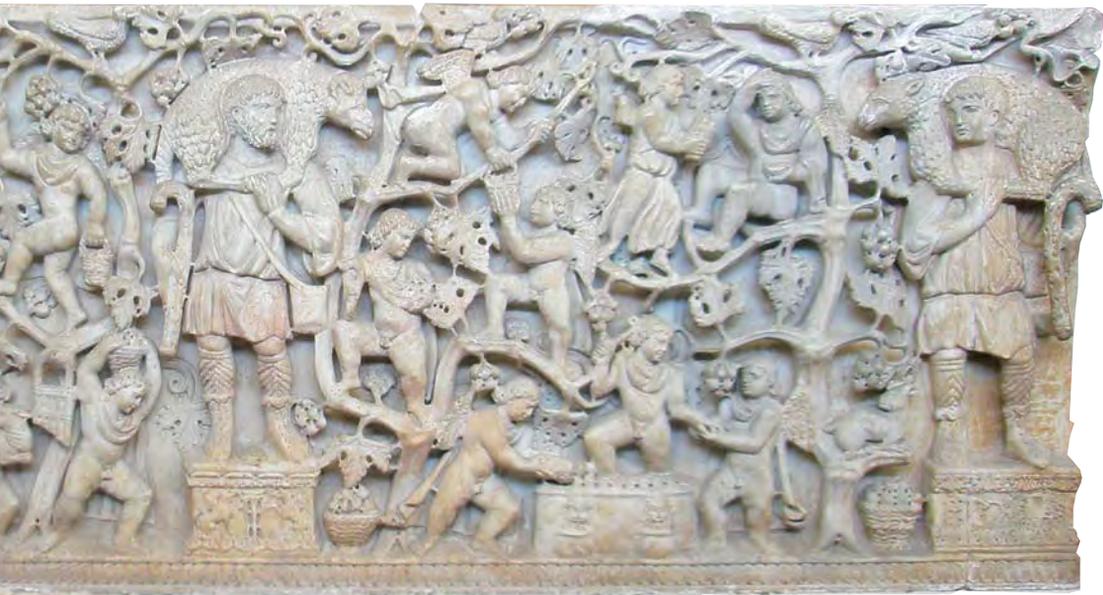
Therefore, in a funerary context, this figure could evoke both the philanthropic virtue of the deceased, and the hope for a blessed afterlife.

## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

In ancient Jewish culture, the relationship between sheep and shepherd was a special one, as we read in 2 Samuel 12:1ff: *...the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him...*

The title of “shepherd” in the Old Testament is given to the rulers of the Jewish people, who included all those who held authority, such as elders, judges, royal officers and kings. However, these shepherds almost always failed to meet their responsibilities and neglected their flock (cf. Jeremiah 2:8; 23:1-2; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:2-10; Isaiah 56:11 ff, etc.). Therefore, Yahweh promised the Israelites shep-





herds to gather the scattered sheep in the messianic times (cf. Jeremiah 3:15; 23:4; Ezekiel 34:23, etc.). Yahweh often presents himself as the only true shepherd who can restore Israel to its pasture (cf. Genesis 49:24; Psalms 23:1-4; 28:9; 95:7; Sirach 18:13; 2Samuel 7:8; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 33:1-4; Ezekiel 34:23; Zechariah 11:16, etc.).

### Christianity

The image of the good shepherd becomes the image of Christ himself. He is represented with a sheep or a ram on his shoulders, sometimes carrying a bucket of milk. He wears a short tunic and boots and is usually youthful and beardless.

In the New Testament, Christ is the loving guide and protector who is willing to give his life to defend his flock. He leaves the 99 sheep to look for the stray one, greatly rejoicing when he finds it (cf. Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7). His arrest and passion leave his disciples like a scattered flock without their guide (cf. Matthew 26:31 f; Mark 14:27 f). He is described as a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats in the final judgement (cf. Matthew 25:32).

In presenting the parables of the Good Shepherd and of the Lost Sheep, the New

Testament creates a connection with the Old Testament. Since Jesus is considered the fulfillment of events narrated in the Old Testament, the Gospels often situate his teaching in the context of Jewish liturgical traditions. John ends the parable of the Good Shepherd (10:1ff) by saying that it was winter, on the feast of the Dedication of the Temple. During the liturgy of this Jewish feast three texts, centred on the theme of the “shepherd”, were read: Genesis 46:28ff (where Joseph instructs his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they and their fathers had always been shepherds); 1 Samuel 17 (where David presents himself to Saul as an intrepid shepherd, who is able to rescue his father’s sheep from lions and bears); and Ezekiel 34:1ff (where the prophet announces that God himself will gather his ►►

#### ABOVE

The Sarcophagus of the Good Shepherd from the Catacomb of Praetextatus, Rome, 390s AD (now located in the Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

#### OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT

The Hermes Kriophoros (*criophore*), early 5th C. BC statue (Barracco Museum, Rome)

► scattered flock “on that day” and heal their wounds and cure their sickness). The figure of the shepherd was very important also in the Christian liturgical context, and was used in baptismal catechesis, ie, during the preparation received by candidates to Baptism. Psalm 23 was learnt by heart and sung by the neophytes during this rite, ac-

### Psalm 23

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever”.

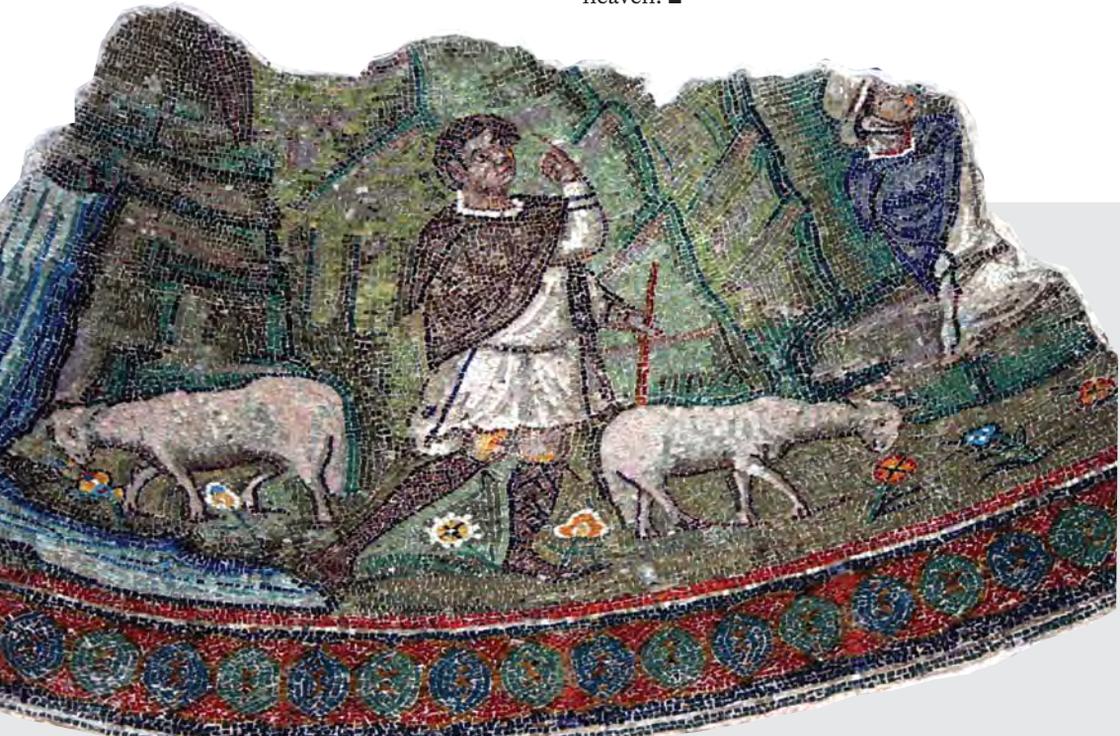
### BOTTOM

Shepherds and sheep from the late 4th C. mosaic of Elijah’s apotheosis (St Lawrence’s Basilica, Milan)(Giovanni Dall’Orto)

### OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM

Good Shepherd, (gold-leaved) relief on 4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

ording to a usage probably dating back to the third century. Catechumens were explained that the “still waters” mentioned in the Psalm corresponded to the baptismal font, the “green pastures” to the Scriptures, and the “oil” to the baptismal anointing; the “overflowing cup” symbolised the Eucharist, received for the first time by the neophytes after their Baptism. Thus, the candidates to baptism were the lambs, and the flock was the Church, all being led to salvation by the Shepherd. Neophytes were given a sign (*sphragis*) during the baptismal rite, just as the sheep were branded by their shepherd. The salvation mentioned during the preparation for Baptism would be fulfilled after death. Therefore, the image of the Shepherd in a funerary context was also an allusion to the Risen Lord bringing humanity to heaven. ■



## Shepherd = Christ

<p><b>Incarnated Son of God</b> The descent of the shepherd from the mount (mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew) is interpreted as the coming of Christ on earth, as Christ “unclothing” of his divine glory and becoming a man among men, through incarnation.</p>	<p><b>Redeemer of humanity</b> The shepherd who looks for the lost sheep, finds it and carries it on his shoulders symbolises Christ who has come to redeem humankind. Carrying the sheep = carrying the sin of the world; Christ’s shoulders = arms of the cross</p>	<p><b>Resurrection + ascension Return to Heaven</b> When represented in a garden, the shepherd evokes Christ’s return to heaven and his bringing redeemed humanity back to its original uncorrupted nature. Carrying the sheep back to the flock = return to heaven</p>
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## Milk = Spiritual food

<p><b>Food of life/Word of God</b> Milk, being one of the most basic ingredients of human nourishment, symbolises the essential food for the soul, namely the Word of God. As milk makes babies grow, the Word makes Christians grow in their faith.</p>	<p><b>Anticipation of heaven (where milk will be overflowing)</b> Milk evokes the promise which will be fulfilled in future life. In the Bible, milk is associated with the promised land (cf. Exodus 3:8: “<i>a land flowing with milk and honey</i>”) and the eschatological kingdom (cf. Joel 3:18: “<i>the hills will flow with milk</i>”). This is why in some baptismal rituals, a cup of milk and honey was offered to neophytes.</p>
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## Sheep = Christians

<p><b>Redeemed Soul</b> Like the sheep that has strayed from the flock, humankind sinned by straying from the presence of God. The sheep on Christ’s shoulders is understood as the redeemed soul.</p>	<p><b>Soul enjoying Eternal Bliss</b> The sheep carried back to its fold symbolises the soul who is welcomed back to heaven. When two or more sheep accompany the shepherd, they represent the saints already enjoying eternal bliss. 100 = the number of the totality of spiritual creatures (angels and men); return to 100 = fulfilment of the history of salvation. The flock of 100 sheep symbolises the totality of spiritual creatures.</p>
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### Desert or mountain

In Luke, the shepherd has his sheepfold in the desert; in Matthew on the mountain. The latter image prevailed.

### On the shoulders

Only Luke 15 (not Matthew) presents the shepherd as carrying the sheep on his shoulders. Luke was of Greek culture; he might have been familiar with the pagan image of the “*criophore shepherd*” (ram carrier).



### Prayer for the dead

An ancient liturgical prayer reads: “We pray God to be merciful to him in judgement, having redeemed him by His death, freed him from sin, and reconciled him with the Father. May He be to him the Good Shepherd and carry him on His shoulders (to the fold). May He receive him in the following of the King, and grant him to participate in eternal joy in the Society of the saints.” (MURATORI, “*Lit. Rom. Vet.*”, I, 751)

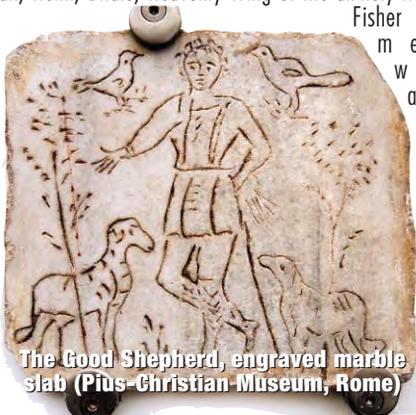
## The Shepherd and the Sheep

1 PET 2:24-25: *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*

IRENEUS, *Against Heresies*: Wherefore also the Lord Himself gave us a sign, in the depth below, and in the height above, which man did not ask for, because he never expected that a virgin could conceive, or that it was possible that one remaining a virgin could bring forth a son, and that what was thus born should be "God with us", and descend to those things which are of the earth beneath, seeking the sheep which had perished, which was indeed His own peculiar handiwork, and ascend to the height above, offering and commending to His Father that human nature (hominem) which had been found, making in His own person the first-fruits of the resurrection of man.

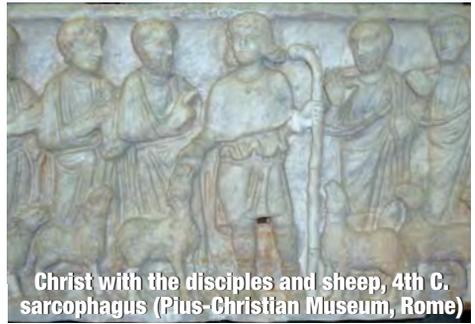
CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *A Hymn to Christ the Saviour*:  
 Bridle of untamed colts, Wing of unwandering birds, sure  
 Helm of babes, Shepherd of royal lambs, assemble Your  
 simple children to praise holily, to hymn guilelessly with in-  
 nocent mouths, Christ the guide of children. O King of  
 saints, all-subduing Word of the most high Father, Ruler of  
 wisdom, Support of sorrows, that rejoices in the ages,  
 Jesus, Saviour of the human race, Shepherd, Husband-  
 man, Helm, Bridle, Heavenly Wing of the all-holy flock,

Fisher of  
 men  
 who  
 are



The Good Shepherd, engraved marble slab (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

saved, catching the chaste fishes with sweet life from the hateful wave of a sea of vices, — Guide (us), Shepherd of rational sheep; guide unharmed children, O holy King, O footsteps of Christ, O heavenly way, perennial Word, immeasurable Age, Eternal Light, Fount of mercy, performer of virtue; noble (is the) life of those who hymn God, O Christ Jesus, heavenly milk of the sweet breasts of the graces of the Bride, pressed out of Your wisdom. Babes nourished with tender mouths, filled



Christ with the disciples and sheep, 4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

with the dewy spirit of the rational pap, let us sing together simple praises, true hymns to Christ (our) King, holy fee for the teaching of life; let us sing in simplicity the powerful Child. O choir of peace, the Christ-begotten, O chaste people, let us sing together the God of peace.

METHODIUS OF OLYMPUS, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*: He is the chief Commander and Shepherd of the heavenly ones, whom all reasonable creatures obey and attend, who tends in order and numbers the multitudes of the blessed angels. For this is the equal and perfect number of immortal creatures, divided according to their races and tribes, man also being here taken into the flock. For he also was created without corruption, that he might honour the king and maker of all things, responding to the shouts of the melodious angels which came from heaven. But when it came to pass that, by transgressing the commandment (of God), he suffered a terrible and destructive fall, being thus reduced to a state of death, for this reason the Lord says that He came from heaven into (a human) life, leaving the ranks and the armies of angels. For the mountains are to be explained by the heavens, and the ninety and nine sheep by the principalities and powers which the Captain and Shepherd left when He went down to seek the lost one. For it remained that man should be included in this catalogue and number, the Lord lifting him up and wrapping him round, that he might not again, as I said, be overflowed and swallowed up by the waves of deceit. For with this purpose the Word assumed the nature of man, that, having overcome the serpent, He might by Himself destroy the condemnation which had come into being along with man's ruin.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 6*: Make your fold with the sheep: flee from the wolves: depart not from the Church... The truth of the Unity of God has been delivered to you: learn to distinguish the pastures of doctrine.

AMBROSE, *On Psalm 118*: Come, our Lord Jesus, come and look for your servant, come and look for the tired sheep, come, shepherd... Come without your stick ►►

► but only with your love and your spirit of sweetness. Do not hesitate to leave your 99 sheep on the mountains, for those who are on the mountains cannot be attacked by the rapacious wolves; in the paradise, the snake was able to harm only once... Come to me, I am surrounded by dangerous wolves. Come to me, I was chased from paradise and have gone astray far from your flock that is up there. You had placed me up there as well, but the wolves of the night have taken me away from the sheepfold. Come and look for me, since I look for you. Find me, take me, carry me... Come and look for your sheep, do not send your servants, do not send your mercenaries, come yourself... Take me in this flesh which has fallen in Adam... Carry me on your cross which is salvation for those who have gone astray, the only rest for those who are tired; for it all who die will live.

**JEROME**, *Against John of Jerusalem*: The Son of God, for the sake of one sick sheep, leaving the 99 on the mountains, endured the buffering, the cross, the scourge... Then will the sheep which was lost, and was wandering in the lower world, be carried whole on the Saviour's shoulders, and the sheep which was sick with sin will be supported by the mercy of the Judge.

## The Milk

**1 PETER 2:2-3**: *Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

**1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3**: *And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?*

**CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA**, *The Instructor*: "I have fed you with milk in Christ"; and after a slight pause, let us add, "as children," that by separating the words in reading we may make out some such sense as this: I have instructed you in Christ with simple, true, and natural nourishment, — namely, that which is spiritual: for such is the nourishing substance of milk swelling out from breasts of love... Thus, the milk which is perfect is perfect nourishment, and brings to that consummation which cannot cease. Wherefore also the same milk and honey were promised in the rest. Rightly, therefore, the Lord again promises milk to the righteous, that the Word may be clearly shown to be both, "the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end"; the Word being figuratively represented as milk. Something like this Homer oracularly declares against his will, when

he calls righteous men milk-fed (galaktofagoi)... "Wherefore also I have given you milk to drink," he says; meaning, I have instilled into you the knowledge which, from instruction, nourishes up to life eternal... For the very same Word is fluid and mild as milk, or solid and compact as meat. And entertaining this view, we may regard the proclamation of the Gospel, which is universally spread, as milk; and as meat, faith, which from instruction is compacted into a foundation, which, being more substantial than hearing, is likened to meat, and assimilates to the soul itself nourishment of this kind... You will certainly find nothing else more nourishing, or sweeter, or whiter than milk. In every respect, accordingly, it is like spiritual nourishment, which is sweet through grace, nourishing as life, bright as the day of Christ... With milk, then, the Lord's nutriment, we are nursed directly we are born; and as soon as we are regenerated, we are honoured by receiving the good news of the hope of rest, even the Jerusalem above, in which it is written that milk and honey fall in showers.



**The Good Shepherd, 4th C. floor mosaic (National Archaeological Museum, Aquileia)**

**THE PASSION OF PERPETUA AND FELICITY**: And I went up, and I saw a very great space of garden, and in the midst a man sitting, white-headed, in shepherd's clothing, tall milking his sheep; and standing around in white were many thousands. And he raised his head and beheld me and said to me: Welcome, child. And he cried to me, and from the curd he had from the milk he gave me as it were a morsel; and I took it with joined hands and ate it up; and all that stood around said, Amen. And at the sound of that word I awoke, yet eating I know not what of sweet. And at once I told my brother, and we knew it should be a passion; and we began to have no hope any longer in this world. ■



# The Orant



## TOP

The Orant, 4th C. fresco inside the *Confessio* (Roman Domus on the Caelian Hill, Rome)

## ABOVE

*Pietas* in the orant pose, 3rd C. Roman coin.

## OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT

Cicero writing his letters (woodcut, 1547)

## OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT

The figures representing the 12 Jewish tribes are depicted in the orant position as Moses performs the Miracle of the Water, 3rd C. fresco (Dura Europas synagogue, Syria)

## Greco-Roman Tradition

A standing female figure shown facing front with outstretched and uplifted hands in a gesture of prayer was frequently represented in Roman funerary art and coinage throughout the second and third centuries. It often appeared on coin reverses next to a flaming altar and – sometimes – a small stork (see below), together with legends such as “*pietas augusta*” or “*pietas publica*”. As the personification of *pietas* (piety), which was one of the most important virtues of Roman life, it was introduced into Roman art together with other deities who, especially from the third century BC, started to symbolise desirable forces and virtues such as Faith, Hope and Concord in anthropo-

**Storks** - in the Greco-Roman world storks were praised for their alleged attitude towards their aged parents and offspring. They were said to care for the old birds and to disgorge the food that they had eaten when they had nothing to give to their young.

morphic forms. Originally “piety” referred to the honour and respect given to members of one’s family, children to parents, children and parents to grandparents, and everyone to one’s ancestors. As time went on, the word gained a wider connotation designating first loyalty and obedience to the laws and traditions of the nation, and then reverence and devotion to the gods. Therefore this concept had both a civic and a cultic dimension. Piety towards the gods was believed to foster a spirit of solidarity and responsibility among citizens, thus ensuring the well-being of the state (see below, “Cicero”).

### Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

Prayers, both individual and (above all) communal, have always been a fundamental element in the Old Testament and Jewish religious practice. The Psalms are the very expression of the prayer of the whole People of God throughout its history. The oldest fixed daily prayer was *Shema* (a prayer aimed at reminding the faithful of their bond of love and service with Yahweh; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41), which was recited morning and night. During the

Babylonian exile (sixth century BC), prayer became a substitute for sacrifice in the Temple. A common basic prayer containing 18 blessings was composed after the exile; one of its names is *Amidah*, which means standing (since the faithful stand while reciting it). As for the position adopted in prayer, we can find general hints in the Old Testament. The gesture of stretching forth the hands as a sign of imploration, common to many cultures, was present also in the Jewish tradition, as we read in many texts, such as Proverbs 1:24: “...because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded”. Similarly, hands are lifted in prayer towards God: “If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread forth our hands to a strange god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart” (Psalm 44:20); “Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord!” (Psalm 134:2); “I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land” (Psalm 143:6); “...whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his ▶▶



### Cicero

*“The wisest men of Greece as well as our own ancestors defined and named many other kinds of god after the great benefits they bestow... a deity is named after a particular quality that contains some powerful force, like Fides and Mens... In the case of all these things, because they have such force that they could not be possibly be controlled except by a god, the quality itself has been designated divine.*



*In all probability, disappearance of piety towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all virtues.”*  
(CICERO, *On the Nature of Gods*)

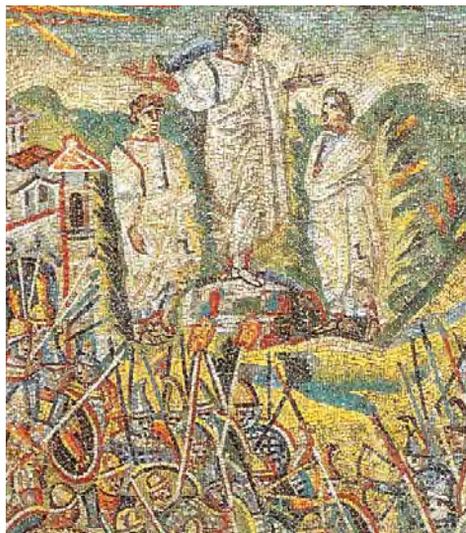
► hands toward this house; then hear you in heaven (...) and forgive...” (1 Kings 8:38-39). Praying with lifted arms is the way in which Moses implored God during the battle against the Amalekites: “Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Am’alek prevailed. But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat upon it, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the going down of the sun” (Exodus 17:11-12).

### Christianity

The importance of prayer is repeatedly stressed in early Christian writings as well. Jesus says: “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22; cf. Mark 11:24), and Paul: “Persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). In the Acts of the Apostles we read about the first community: “All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer” (1:14).

Early Christians also prayed with outstretched arms and uplifted hands, probably both in the privacy of their homes and in public during their assemblies. It is likely that they also stretched out their arms in the form of a cross as a reference to Christ’s redeeming sacrifice.

Christian art adopted the pagan figure of the orant with little or no change in her appearance: shown frontally, standing with raised hands, wearing a dalmatian robe, sometimes veiled and gazing heavenward. The pagan altar and stork were replaced occasionally by scripture rolls and doves. Many orant figures appeared near the Good Shepherd in a bucolic setting. At times they did not present



#### TOP

Moses between Aaron and Hur, the Victory over Amalek, 5th C. mosaic (Basilica of St Mary Major, Rome)

#### MIDDLE

Tomb slab decorated with orant (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

#### OPPOSITE PAGE

Orant-like Crucifixion scene, 5th C. wooden door carving (Basilica of St Sabine, Rome)

generic features but were portrayed with specific facial characteristics. Several Old Testament characters, such as the three youths in the fiery furnace, Daniel, Jonah and Abraham, were also shown in this praying posture, which, by the mid-fourth century, had become widely used for representations of martyrs, saints, bishops and even Mary.

There is no univocal interpretation of the orant figure in early Christian art. It can take on different meanings, typifying more general ideas or portraying specific individuals. The following table indicates some possible ways of understanding it. Whatever its interpretation, the orant always evoked the fact that prayer was the binding element in the relation between the faithful and God; it referred to the Christian attitude of openness, gratitude, trust and service towards God, and to hope in the final resurrection. ■

## The Orant

<b>The soul of the deceased in paradise</b>	The orant is frequently understood as the soul of the deceased already saved and welcomed in heaven.
<b>Filial devotion towards one's new family</b>	This figure could refer to Christians' piety towards their new family, ie, the Church.
<b>The power of prayer for deliverance</b>	Many Old Testament characters are represented in this praying posture, which evokes both a call for deliverance and a thanksgiving prayer for those already granted salvation. In these cases the orant alludes to full trust in God even in the harshest circumstances.
<b>Symbol of the Church</b>	The orant could be seen as the image of the Christian community gathered in prayer.
<b>Intercessory prayer of a saint</b>	This image sometimes portrays specific saints/venerated persons in intercessory prayer.
<b>Reference to Christ's passion</b>	Some authors compared the posture of the orant to the position of Christ on the cross (with outstretched hands)(see below)



## The right Position for Prayer

1 TIMOTHY 2:8: *I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument.*

TERTULLIAN, *On Prayer*: We, however, not only raise our hands, but even expand them; and, taking our model from the Lord's passion, even in prayer we confess to Christ.

ORIGEN, *On Prayer*: Of all the innumerable dispositions of the body that, accompanied by outstretching of the hands and upraising of the eyes, standing is preferred — inasmuch as one thereby wears in the body also the image of the devotional characteristics that become the soul. I say that these things ought to be observed by preference except in any special circumstances, for in special circumstances, by reason of some serious foot disease one may upon occasion quite properly pray sitting, or by reason of fevers or similar illnesses, lying, and indeed owing to circumstances, if, let us say, we are on a voyage or if our business does not permit us to retire to pay our debt of prayer, we may pray without any outward sign of doing so.

## The Power of Prayer

TERTULLIAN, *On Prayer*: For what has God, who exacts it, ever denied to prayer coming from "spirit and truth?" How mighty specimens of its efficacy do we read, and hear, and believe! Old-world prayer, indeed, used to free from fires, and from beasts, and from famine; and yet it had not (then) received its form from Christ. But how far more amply operative is Christian prayer! It does not station the angel of dew in mid-fires, nor muzzle lions, nor transfer to the hungry the rustics' bread; it has no delegated grace to avert any sense of suffering; but it supplies the suffering, and the feeling, and the grieving, with endurance: it amplifies grace by virtue, that faith may know what she obtains from the Lord, understanding what — in God's namesake — she

suffers. But in days gone by, withal prayer used to call down plagues, scatter the armies of foes, withhold the wholesome influences of the showers. Now, however, the prayer of righteousness avers all God's anger, keeps bivouac on behalf of personal enemies, makes supplication on behalf of persecutors. Is it wonder if it knows how to extort the rains of heaven — (prayer) which was once able to procure its fires? Prayer is alone that which vanquishes God. But Christ has willed that it be operative for no evil: He had conferred on it all its virtue in the cause of good. And so it knows nothing save how to recall the souls of the departed from the very path of death, to transform the weak, to restore the sick, to purge the possessed, to open prison-bars, to loose the bonds of the innocent. Likewise it washes away faults, repels temptations, extinguishes persecutions, consoles the faint-spirited, cheers the high-spirited, escorts travellers, appeases waves, makes robbers stand aghast, nourishes the poor, governs the rich, upraises the fallen, arrests the falling, confirms the standing. Prayer is the wall of faith: her arms and missiles against the foe who keeps watch over us on all sides. And, so never walk we unarmed. By day, be we mindful of station; by night, of vigil. Under the arms of prayer guard we the standard of our General; await we in prayer the angel's trump. The angels, likewise, all pray; every creature prays; cattle and wild beasts pray and bend their knees; and when they issue from their layers and lairs, they look up heavenward with no idle mouth, making their breath vibrate after their own manner. Nay, the birds too, rising out of the nest, upraise themselves heavenward, and, instead of hands, expand the cross of their wings, and say somewhat to seem like prayer. What more then, touching the office of prayer? Even the Lord Himself prayed; to whom be honour and virtue unto the ages of the ages!



Orant, 5th C. enamel  
(Vatican Museums)

ORIGEN, *On Prayer*: What need is there to tell the tale of those who, through right prayer, have obtained the greatest of things from God, when it is open to everyone to select any number of them for himself from the Scriptures. (...) It was on being heard that Hananiah and Azariah and Mishaël became worthy to receive a hissing ►►



**Orant, 4th C. sarcophagus  
(Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)**

►► rain and wind which kept the flame of the fire from taking effect. Through Daniel's prayers the lions in the Babylonians' pit were muzzled. Even Jonah, because he did not despair of being heard from the belly of the monster that had swallowed him, was able to quit the monster's belly and complete his interrupted prophet's mission to the Ninevites. And further, how many things could each of us recount should he choose to recall with gratitude the benefits conferred upon him and to offer praise to God for them! (...) How many of our foes have been dispersed, when often countless thousands in the adverse host were wearing us down with intent to sweep us away from the divine faith, and we rejoiced, when their appeal was to chariots and horses but ours to the name of the Lord, to see that in truth deceptive is a horse for safety! (...) What need is there to go on to tell of all who many a time have fallen among temptations hard to overcome, whose burn was sharper than any flame, and have suffered naught under them but emerged from them in every way unscathed, without so much of scathe as the slightest odor of the hostile fire; or again of all the brutes exasperated against us, in the form of wicked spirits or cruel

men, that we have encountered and often muzzled by our prayers, so that they were impotent to fasten their fangs in our members which had become those of Christ. Often in each saint's experience has the Lord dashed together the teeth of lions, and they were brought to nothing, as water flowing by. We know that often fugitives from God's commands who have been swallowed by death, which at the first prevailed against them, have been saved by reason of repentance from so great an evil, because they did not despair of being able to be saved though already overpowered in the belly of death: for death prevailed and swallowed, and again God took away every tear from every face. (...) For in ourselves also we are to strive, hearing the spiritual law with spiritual ears, that barrenness or sterility may not arise, but that we may like Hannah and Hezekiah be heard, being freed from barrenness or sterility, and like Mordecai and Esther and Judith be delivered from plotting enemies — in our case the spiritual powers of evil. Inasmuch as Egypt is an iron furnace and also a symbol of every earthly place, let every one who has escaped from the wickedness of the life of men without having been scorched by sin or having had his heart like an oven full of fire, give thanks no less than the men who experienced rain amid fire... Let him, moreover, who has learned by experience what manner of monster that which swallowed Jonah typified, perceiving that it is of such that Job has spoken, "May He curse it that curses that day, He that is to worst the great monster," if he should ever come by reason of any disobedience to be in the belly of the monster, pray in penitence, and he will come out; and if, after coming out, he abides in obedience to the commands of God, he will be able according to the kindness of the Spirit to be a prophet to perishing Ninevites of today and to become a means to their salvation, without discontent with the kindness of God or desire that He should abide in severity towards penitents. ■



**Orant on the tomb slab of Maximinus  
(Basilica of St Mary in Trastevere, Rome)**

# Orpheus / David

## (playing the lyre)

### Greco-Roman Tradition

**O**rpheus was a very popular mythological figure. The son of the muse Calliope, he was an extremely talented poet and musician, capable of enchanting not only wild animals but also plants and stones with his singing and playing. Legends recount his descent into Hades in order to bring back his beloved dead wife, Eurydice, an attempt which was bound to fail. He was later killed (and his body torn to pieces) during a Dionysiacal celebration by Thracian women, furious about being snubbed by the young widower. Yet, his head kept singing while floating towards Lesbo.

The figure of Orpheus, this mortal being who visited Hades without remaining imprisoned there, gave rise to an important mysticism in the pagan world, as Orphic hymns and prayers show. These prayers were carved on golden leaves and put in tombs next to the deceased. Orpheus playing the lyre was a frequent image with bucolic connotations in the Greco-Roman tradition. Its first representations were on vases. During the Roman period, he was portrayed also in mosaics, coins, gems, mirrors, etc. Strangely enough, however, the theme was rarely present in a funerary context.

### Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

A Jewish tradition interpreted king David, the musician and poet, as the true Orpheus (a Jewish figure of David playing



#### ABOVE

Orpheus surrounded by animals, Roman floor mosaic (Regional Archeological Museum of Palermo) (Giovanni Dall'Orto)

#### OPPOSITE PAGE TOP RIGHT

Christ as Orpheus, 4th C, possibly a funerary stele (Byzantine Museum, Athens)

#### OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM LEFT

King David as Orpheus, floor mosaic, 508-9 AD (Synagogue, Gaza City)

the lyre can be found in the fifth century pavement of a Gaza synagogue). David, who was a shepherd in his youth, became the second and greatest of the kings of Israel. He was promised an eternal dynasty in the oracle of Nathan because he best embodied the ideal of kingship. In 1 Samuel 16:14-23 David plays the lyre before the king Saul to allay the mental disorder from which Saul suffered. Most of the Old Testament Psalms were ascribed to David.

### Christianity

In the Christian tradition, Christ becomes the true Orpheus and the antitype of David (see below). He can tame the sinful instincts of mankind through the melody of his word. Especially in funerary art, Christ is sometimes represented playing a lyre or another string instrument in the guise of Orpheus/David. He wears a Phrygian cap which indicates his oriental (foreign) origin, and a long or short tunic. He is usually portrayed frontally. When the scene shows a bucolic landscape with some sheep gazing calmly at the musician, the figure recalls the one of the Good Shepherd (see bottom). ■

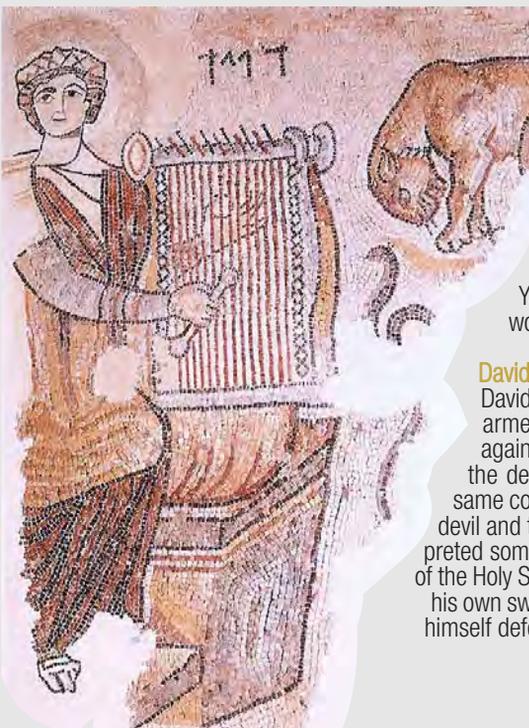


### David's line

Christ was described as David's descendent in the New Testament (cf. Romans 1:3, 2; Timothy 2:8). This highlighted the messianic character of Christ, the eschatological saviour, since the Jews were convinced that the Messiah must be one of David's descendants. The covenant of Yahweh with David would endure until a greater "David" would establish the ideal kingdom of God.

### David the shepherd

David himself was the image of the courageous shepherd who, armed with his faith and hope in God, defended his flock against the attacks of wild animals symbolising the threats of the devil according to Christian interpretation. It is with this same courage that David defeated the giant Goliath (evoking the devil and the evil instincts) with a stone thrown with a sling (interpreted sometimes as the commandment of love or as the teaching of the Holy Spirit/grace active in the Church) and then killed him with his own sword, understood as the power of the Word, and as Christ himself defeating death with his own death on the cross.



## Orpheus/David = Christ

<p><b>Tamer of sinful instincts</b> Orpheus tames wild animals through the spell of his wonderful music. Likewise, Christ tames evil hearts with his word. The image of Christ/Orpheus sometimes entails references to the power of baptism, which is capable of transforming “wild animals” into faithful Christians.</p>	<p><b>Redeemer</b> As Orpheus appeases hearts with his music, Christ soothes souls with the grace of redemption and the promise of resurrection.</p>
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## Music (Instrument) = Salvation

<p><b>Indwelling of the Spirit</b> Music can symbolise the Spirit regenerating the souls of those who receive it.</p>	<p><b>Harmony between Old and New Testaments</b> Sometimes the melody produced by Orpheus is understood as the harmony between the two Testaments in the light of Christ (the Old Testament foreshadowing the New).</p>	<p><b>Passion of Christ</b> The wood of the instrument is interpreted as the wood of the cross. The strings stretched on the wood of the instrument are sometimes understood as the crucified flesh of Christ.</p>	<p><b>Resurrection</b> The soothing and uplifting music of Orpheus is compared to the benefit one derives from God’s forgiveness and Christ’s resurrection. Christ purifies evil hearts so that they are ready for the heavenly journey.</p>
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### The lyre

In Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy the lyre played an important role. It was considered to be a noble instrument, used not only by Orpheus but by Apollo himself. When properly tuned, the strings of the lyre were believed to be in harmony with the music of the heavenly spheres (according to the Pythagorean conception of the universe) thus enabling humankind to catch an echo of the celestial notes. As opposed to the flute (played by Marsyas), which only excited earthly passions, the music of the lyre was inspired by the heavenly abode to which the purified soul would return after the death of the body. In his *Dream of Scipio*, Cicero writes: “Clever men, by imitating these musical effects (the harmony of the spheres) with their stringed instruments and voices, have given themselves the possibility of eventually returning to this place” (5:3).



Orpheus mosaic, 175-200 AD  
(Musée St Romain-en-Gal, Vienne, France)



**Christ as Orpheus, 3rd C. fresco**  
(Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome)

### Christ, the true Orpheus/David

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Instructor*: But man is transformed by the Word, by whom wild beasts are tamed...

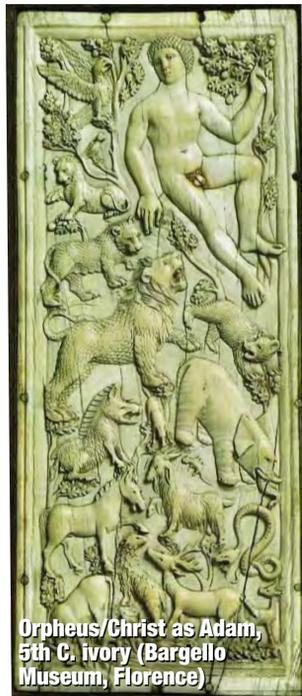
CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Exhortation to the Heathen*: How, let me ask, have you believed vain fables and supposed animals to be charmed by music; while Truth's shining face alone, as would seem, appears to you disguised, and is looked on with incredulous eyes? (...) But let us bring from above out of heaven, Truth, with Wisdom in all its brightness, and the sacred prophetic choir, down to the holy mount of God... What my Eunomos sings is not the measure of Terpander, nor that of Capito, nor the Phrygian, nor Lydian, nor Dorian, but the immortal measure of the new harmony which bears God's name — the new, the Levitical song. "Soother of pain, calmer of wrath, producing forgetfulness of all ills." Sweet and true is the charm of persuasion which blends with this strain. To me, therefore, that Thracian Orpheus, that Theban, and that Methymnæan, — men, and yet unworthy of the name, — seem to have been deceivers... And He who is of

David, and yet before him, the Word of God, despising the lyre and harp, which are but lifeless instruments, and having tuned by the Holy Spirit the universe, and especially man, ... makes melody to God on this instrument of many tones; and to this instrument — I mean man — he sings accordant: "For you are my harp, and pipe, and temple" — a harp for harmony — a pipe by reason of the Spirit — a temple by reason of the word; so that the first may sound, the second breathe, the third contain the Lord. And David the king, the harper whom we mentioned a little above, who exhorted to the truth and dissuaded from idols, was so far from celebrating demons in song, that in reality they were driven away by his music. Thus, when Saul was plagued with a demon, he cured him by merely playing. A beautiful breathing instrument of music the Lord made man, after His own image. And He Himself also, surely, who is the supramundane Wisdom, the celestial Word, is the all-harmonious, melodious, holy instrument of God. What, then, does this instrument — the Word of God, the Lord, the New Song — desire? To open the eyes of the blind, and unstop the ears of the deaf, and to lead the lame or the erring to righteousness, to exhibit God to the foolish, to put a stop to

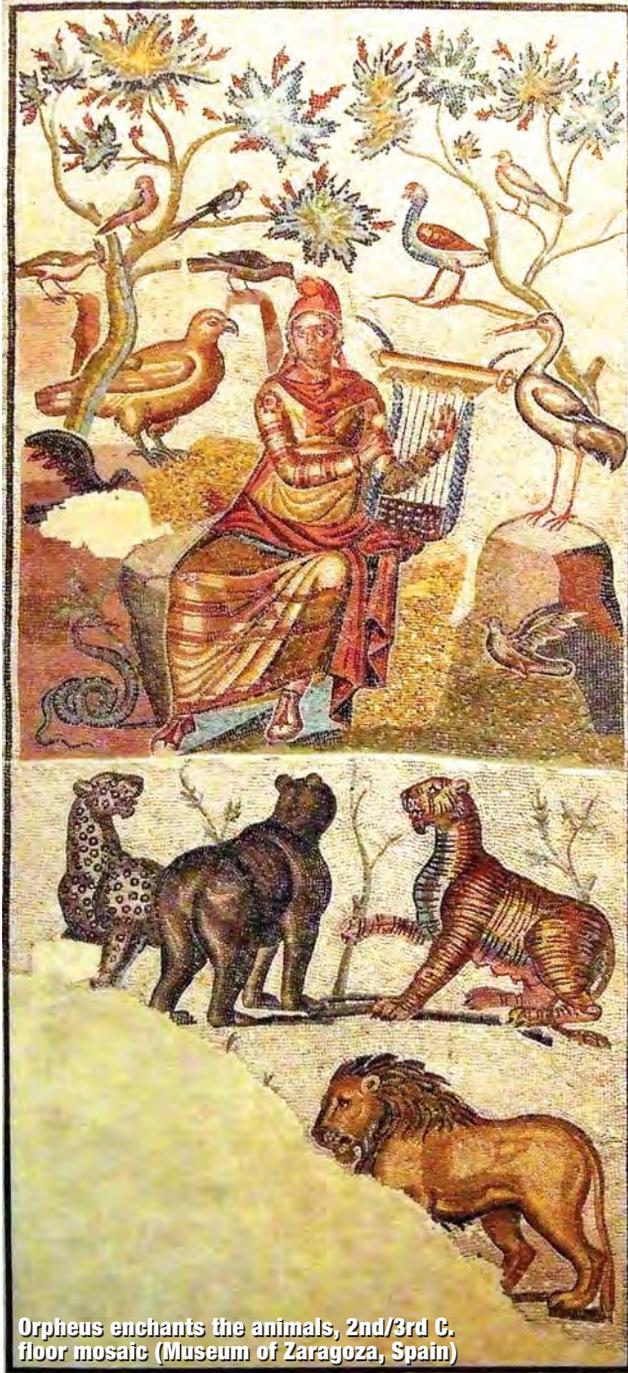
corruption, to conquer death, to reconcile disobedient children to their father. The instrument of God loves mankind. (...) Well, inasmuch as the Word was from the first, He was and is the divine source of all things; but inasmuch as He has now assumed the name Christ, consecrated of old, and worthy of power, he has been called by me the New Song. (...) The Saviour has many tones of voice, and many methods for the salvation of men; by threatening He admonishes, by upbraiding He converts, by bewailing He pities, by the voice of song He cheers.

### Christ's Music/Song

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Instructor*: Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious who are engrossed in idolatry. For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the temperate banquet, being more suitable to beasts than men, and the more ▶



**Orpheus/Christ as Adam,**  
**5th C. ivory (Bargello**  
**Museum, Florence)**



Orpheus enchants the animals, 2nd/3rd C. floor mosaic (Museum of Zaragoza, Spain)

►► irrational portion of mankind. . . The Spirit, distinguishing from such revelry the divine service, sings, "Praise Him with the sound of trumpet"; for with sound of trumpet He will raise the dead. "Praise Him on the psaltery;" for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. "And praise Him on the lyre." By the lyre is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum. "Praise with the timbrel and the dance," refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the dead in the resounding skin. "Praise Him on the chords and organ." Our body He calls an organ, and its nerves are the strings, by which it has received harmonious tension, and when struck by the Spirit, it gives forth human voices. "Praise Him on the clashing cymbals." He calls the tongue the cymbal of the mouth, which resounds with the pulsation of the lips. Therefore He cried to humanity, "Let every breath praise the Lord," because He cares for every breathing thing which He has made. For man is truly a pacific instrument; while other instruments, if you investigate, you will find to be warlike, inflaming to lusts, or kindling up amours, or rousing wrath. . . The one instrument of peace, the Word alone by which we honour God, is what we employ. . . "Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and His Father." This is our thankful revelry. And even if you wish to sing and play to the harp or lyre, there is no blame. You will imitate the righteous Hebrew king in his thanksgiving to God. "Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous; praise is comely to the upright," says the prophecy. "Confess to the Lord on the harp; play to Him on the psaltery of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song." And does not the ten-stringed psaltery indicate the Word Jesus, who is manifested by the element of the decade? ►►

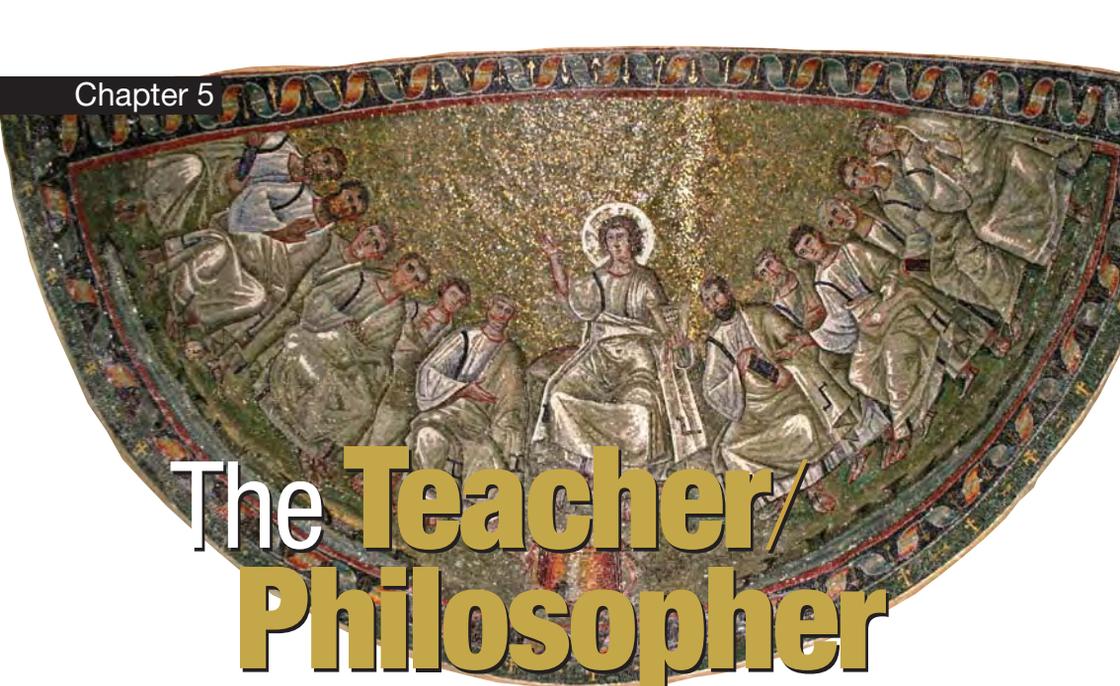


Christ as Orpheus, 4th C. sarcophagus  
(Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

► CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Exhortation to the Heathen*: But not such (as pagan music) is my song, which has come to lose, and that speedily, the bitter bondage of tyrannizing demons; and leading us back to the mild and loving yoke of piety, recalls to heaven those that had been cast prostrate to the earth. It alone has tamed men, the most intractable of animals; the frivolous among them answering to the fowls of the air, deceivers to reptiles, the irascible to lions, the voluptuous to swine, the rapacious to wolves. (...) Others he figuratively calls wolves, clothed in sheep-skins, meaning thereby monsters of rapacity in human form. And so all such most savage beasts (...) the celestial song has transformed into tractable men. (...) Behold the might of the new song! It has made men out of stones, men out of beasts. Those, moreover, that were as dead, not being partakers of the true life, have come to life again, simply by becoming listeners to this song. It also composed the universe into melodious order, and tuned the discord of the elements to harmonious arrangement, so that the whole world might become harmony. (...) This is the New Song, the manifestation of the Word that was in the beginning, and before the beginning. The Saviour, who existed before, has in recent days appeared.

AMBROSE, *On the Holy Spirit*: Therefore the holy prophet David, seeing in the Spirit that we should from wild beasts become like the dwellers in heaven, says, "Rebuke the wild beasts of the wood," evidently signifying, not the wood disturbed by the running of wild beasts, and shaken with the roaring of animals, but that wood of which it is written: "We found it in the fields of the wood." In which, as the prophet said: "The righteous will flourish as the palm-tree, and will be multiplied as the cedar which is in Libanus." (...) We then were wild beasts, and therefore the Lord said: "Beware of false prophets, which come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves." But now, through the Holy Spirit, the rage of lions, the spots of leopards, the craft of foxes, the rapacity of wolves, have passed away from our feelings; great, then, is the grace which has changed earth to heaven, that the conversation of us, who once were wandering as wild beasts in the woods, might be in heaven.

AMBROSE, *On Jacob*: Which song is sweeter, which tunes are more melodious than the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of dead? This is the song that the holy David, the instrument of God's voice and the interpreter of the Lord's words, has sung on the cithara (*a type of lyre — Ed.*) of the Holy Spirit. These are the modulations of grace with which he appeases soul and mind. With this song he has tamed the violence of the world; with this harp he destroyed the terror of death; with the sweetness of his strings he has tread on hell. ■



# The Teacher/ Philosopher

## Greco-Roman Tradition

The importance of the figure of the philosopher in the Greco-Roman world is testified by pagan statues, mosaics and funerary art often representing seated philosophers. The image of a bearded man gazing at a book on his lap occurs frequently on sarcophagi. It probably symbolises the deceased who, during his/her lifetime, had striven to achieve the values that most people ascribed to a philosophical attitude, ie, discipline and self-control, justice and courage in the face of death. These

virtues were engendered by *pietas* towards the gods and *philantropy* towards one's fellow human beings. (Interestingly, on sarcophagi sometimes the bearded man appears between two other figures: the *orant* and the *chriophoros* who exemplified respectively devotion toward the gods and the nation, and philanthropy toward one's fellow man.) In the early years of the Roman Empire philosophy had become particularly popular. Philosophers addressed people in the

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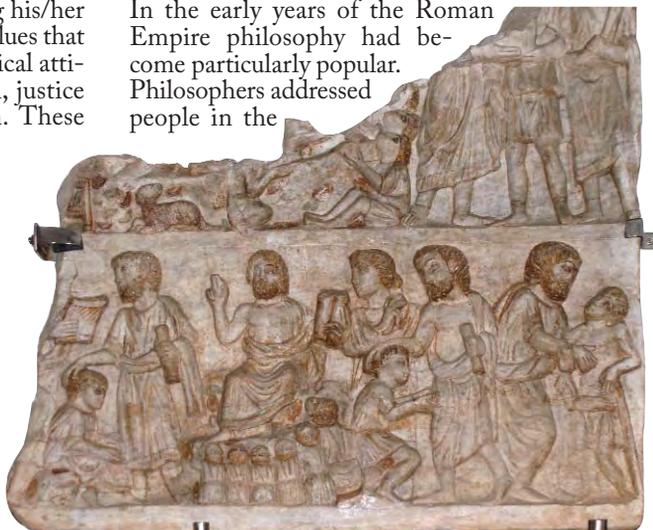
Christ amongst the disciples, 4th C. apse mosaic, once part of a Roman imperial mausoleum (now inside the Sant' Aquilino chapel of St Lawrence's Basilica, Milan) (Giovanni Dall'Orto)

### RIGHT

"The Sermon on the Mount" = Christ as teacher/philosopher, 4th C. polychrom slab (Palazzo Massimo National Roman Museum)

### OPPOSITE PAGE

Plato's Academy, 1st C. floor mosaic from Pompeii (Naples Museum of Archaeology)



streets and tried to convince them of the validity of their teaching. By the second century, philosophy schools, splintered in many competing parties (Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, Pythagoreans, Cynics, Skeptics), were part of public life. They were not merely intellectual schools of thought: they advocated ways of life pursuing moral ideals, such as freedom, courage, love, and peace of mind. In the Greek intellectual tradition, one of the main objectives of philosophy was to do good. In order to do good, however, it was essential to know the truth. Therefore knowledge preceded virtue and the latter could not exist without the first. Moral life started with the knowledge of the nature of things. The wise person, the *sophos*, was both an educated and a good person. Striving towards perfect knowledge led to wisdom, which, in turn, paved the way to immortality. (Many pagan sarcophagi also show the di-

vine patrons of the philosopher: the Muses presiding over learning and creative arts.)

### Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

In the Jewish tradition (especially in pre-exilic times), the sage was not a philosopher concerned with the knowledge of the nature of things but a skilful person capable of mastering daily tasks (cf. Proverbs). He knew that the source of all wisdom was not human reason but Yahweh himself. The righteous trusted completely in the Creator. True wisdom started and ended with awe before the Lord (cf. Proverbs 9:10; 14:26; Psalm 11:10; Job 28:28; Ecclesiastes 5:7; Sirach 1:11-20).

After the exile, wisdom began to appear as a personified female figure (cf. Wisdom; Sirach; Proverbs). The Old Testament refers to wisdom as Yahweh's first creature rejoicing in his mysteries (cf. Proverbs 8:22 ff). As an instrument of Yahweh's revelation, she has a role both in creation and in the history of salvation. Sirach mentions that wisdom pitched her tent, her dwelling in Israel and in the Torah (cf. Sirach 24:8-11.23). Wisdom, however, does not only address the Israelites but issues a call to all people (cf. Proverbs 1:20-23; 8:1 ff), inviting them both to share her delight as part of God's family, and to learn from her what true life is. This call is sometimes expressed as an invitation to a meal (cf. Proverbs 9:5; Sirach 15:2-3; 24:19-21). She is a tree of life (cf. Proverbs 3:18), or, like the rivers of Paradise, gives abundant water (cf. Sirach 24:25 ff). Wisdom seeks and gives true love by gradually creating communion and transforming human beings from within: "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me." (Proverbs 8:17)

### Christianity

Both in catacomb frescoes and sarcophagi, a common type in early Christian art is the teacher/philosopher who often joins the company of the orant and the shepherd, like in pagan funerary art. This male figure is usually portrayed seated, in profile, barefoot, reading from a scroll, and dressed in the philosopher's *exomis* tunic and mantle which shows a partially nude torso. Sometimes a small character is introduced in the scene ►►

"Approach me, you who desire me, and take your fill of my fruits, for memories of me are sweeter than honey, inheriting me is sweeter than the honeycomb. They who eat me will hunger for more, they who drink me will thirst for more."  
(SIRACH, 15:2-3; 24:19-21)



► kneeling or kissing the feet of the seated man. This early philosopher representations were normally meant to symbolise the deceased who embraced the “true philosophy” in his/her lifetime or, more generally, the teaching of the church.

In the mid fourth century a new type began to appear. The figure of the teacher/philosopher was now shown frontally, holding up (rather than reading) a scroll, making a gesture of speech and often surrounded by other men. The central character is identified with the Risen Christ. This scene is known as *Traditio Legis* since the Lord hands over the Law to his disciples, usually Peter and Paul. Christ is either seated on a throne with his feet on the mantle of the sky-god to symbolise his heavenly kingdom, or stands on a mount (see box below) representing both Golgotha and the New Eden (four rivers are often portrayed as flowing from under Christ’s feet). Two palm trees are sometimes introduced on ei-



ther side of the scene as symbols of eternal life. The standing figure of Christ is shown with his right hand making the so-called “gesture of power”, ie, stretching the arm and opening the palm towards the observer (a sign of triumph in the pagan representation both of Roman emperors and gods, such as *Sol Invictus*), and with his left hand holding the scroll. (Peter’s unusual position on Christ’s left-hand side – instead of his traditional place of honour on the right – is due to the fact that Christ makes the “gesture of power” with the right hand thus holding with the left the scroll to be handed over to Peter.)

Christ was represented as a teacher/philosopher because Christians clearly interpreted his teaching as the “true philosophy” compared to Greco-Roman tradition and Jewish wisdom. Christian teaching in fact had things in common with both of these, but also presented a very specific character. Certain classical



### Imperial iconography

Two pagan representations might have inspired this Christian image: the *adlocutio/oratio* (with the emperor standing and addressing the crowds), and the *largitio/liberalitas* (with the emperor seated in the act of granting favours/distributing largesse).

“Those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Hananiah, and Azariah, and Mishael, and Elijah, and many others...” **JUSTIN MARTYR, 1 Apology 46**

philosophers (especially Socrates) and Old Testament figures were considered by some early Christian writers as “proto-Christians” (see below) who lived according to “reason” and, with their teaching, paved the way for Christian revelation.

Like many pagan philosophies, Christianity taught people how to overcome the fear of death and to implement self-restraint, justice, philanthropy (see below). However, there was a major difference: whereas pagan philosophers believed it was impossible to know God and to practise virtue without knowing the laws determining how things are and will always be, Christians believed that Christ himself was the Truth, a mysterious truth that needed to be followed rather than fathomed. Pagan philosophers thought that God was part of nature: he dwelt in a realm above the earth, but did not exist outside the world. The cosmos had its own laws and even God was subject to them (see bottom). For Christians, on the contrary, nothing is impossible to God since God’s categories are very different from human ones: “*what is impossible with men is possible with God*” (Luke 18:27).

In this sense, Christian doctrine is close to

### Pagan authors on “philosophical Christians”

Galen, the famous physician who lived in the latter part of the second century, wrote in his Summary of Plato’s Republic: “Thus we now see people called Christians, though they have drawn their faith from mere allegories, sometimes acting like true philosophers. For their lack of fear of death and of what they will meet thereafter is something we can see everyday, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation. For they include not only men but also women who have refrained from cohabiting all through their lives; and they include people who, in self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of true philosophers.”

### Galen on Moses

“...he believes everything to be possible with God, even should he wish to make a bull or a horse out of ashes. We, however, do not hold this; we say that certain things are impossible by nature and that God does not even attempt such things at all but that he chooses the best out of the possibilities of becoming”  
**GALEN**, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*: (11. 14)

### OPPOSITE PAGE TOP

*Traditio Legis* - Christ hands the Law to St Peter and St Paul, 4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

### OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM

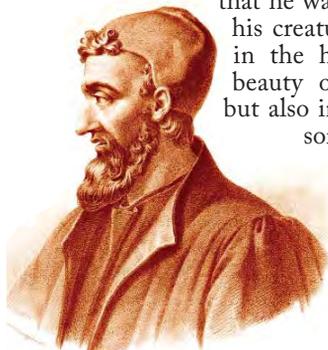
*Largitio* on the north face, right side of the Arch of Constantine (Rome)

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Lithograph of Galen by Pierre Roche Vignerot (Paris, ca. 1865)

Jewish tradition. Both in style and often in substance, Jesus’s words were similar to the words of an Old Testament sage. He taught in the synagogues (cf. Mark 1:21-28; 6:2-6; Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 12:9-14; Luke 12:13-15) and was sometimes called “rabbi” (Mark 9:5; 11:21; 14:45). Like in wisdom teaching, he used ordinary events to reveal the secrets of God’s kingdom (parables) and spurred his listeners to reflect and make up their minds. However, his call had an unprecedented urgency. Christ presented some similarities also with the personified figure of wisdom in the Old Testament. The Gospel of John describes Jesus in terms that were typical of wisdom hymns: glory, light and life descending from heaven. Like wisdom, Jesus participates in God’s creation and dwells with humankind (John says that his tent is pitched among us, rather than in the Torah). He is the vine and provides bread of life and living water; he reveals God and invites everybody to a communion of mutual love. However, to this vision of Christian wisdom Paul added a radical interpretation. He underlined the paradoxical wisdom of the event of the cross, which now became the criterion for knowing God. The crucified Christ established a new bond between divine and human realities.

In him, God showed that he wanted to meet his creatures not only in the harmony and beauty of the world but also in man’s most sorrowful experiences. ■



# The Philosopher/Teacher = Christians/Christ/The Church

<p><b>The virtues of the deceased</b> The early representations of the seated philosopher shown in profile symbolise the Christian deceased who had lived a life of virtue by embracing the “true philosophy”.</p>	<p><b>Christ the True Master</b> The representation of the philosopher/teacher shown facing front is a figure of Christ the true master who calls his disciples (and all humankind) to listen to his words of life and entrusts them with his message.</p>	<p><b>The True Knowledge (the teaching of the Church)</b> The seated philosopher/teacher could also been interpreted as the teaching of the Church which offers the true knowledge, enabling the faithful to understand God and follow the example of Christ, as opposed to the empty teaching of the world.</p>
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## The True Knowledge

1 CORINTHIANS 1:20-24: *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Stromata*: Now we assert that knowledge (*gnosis*) differs from wisdom (*sofia*), which is the result of teaching... God... is the foundation of knowledge. But Christ is both the foundation and the superstructure, by whom are both the beginning and the ends. And the extreme points, the beginning and the end, I mean faith and love, are not taught. But knowledge, conveyed from communication through the grace of God as a deposit, is entrusted to those who show themselves worthy of it; and from it the worth of love beams forth from light to light... to faith, knowledge; and to knowledge, love; and to love, the inheritance... Faith is then, so to speak, a comprehensive knowledge of the essentials; and knowledge is the strong and sure demonstration of what is received by faith, built upon faith by the Lord's teaching, conveying (the soul) on to infallibility, science, and comprehension. And, in my view, the first saving change is that from heathenism to faith, as I said before; and the second, that from faith to knowledge. And the latter terminating in love, thereafter gives the loving to the loved, that which knows to that which is known.

TERTULLIAN, *On the Proscription of Heretics*: For philosophy it is which is the material of the world's wisdom, the

rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy... Unhappy Aristotle! who invented for these men dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down; an art so evasive in its propositions, so far-fetched in its conjectures, so harsh, in its arguments, so productive of contentions, embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing! Whence spring those “fables and endless genealogies,” and “unprofitable questions,” and “words which spread like a cancer?” From all these, when the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names philosophy as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to *The Colossians*, he says, “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost.” He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, while it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon”, who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Jesus Christ, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our primary faith, there is nothing which we ought to believe besides!

TERTULLIAN, *To Nations*: And yet it is the truth, which is so troublesome to the world, that these philosophers pretend to know, but which Christians only possess.



►► **ORIGEN**, *Against Celsus*: And do not suppose that it is not in keeping with the Christian religion for me to have accepted, against Celsus, the opinions of those philosophers who have treated of the immortality or after-duration of the soul; for, holding certain views in common with them, we will more conveniently establish our position, that the future life of blessedness will be for those only who have accepted the religion which is according to Jesus, and that devotion towards the Creator of all things which is pure and sincere, and un-mingled with any created thing whatever... Christ... is the word, and the wisdom, and all virtue; which, according to our view, will be bestowed, by the gift of God, on those who have lived a pure and blameless life, and who have felt a single and undivided love for the God of all things, with that end which is to follow according to the teaching of each philosophic sect, whether it be Greek or Barbarian, or according to the professions of religious mysteries... And let him who likes show that those words which are acknowledged among all men to be human, are superior to those which are proved to be divine, and uttered by inspiration... nothing can be denied which is better than to entrust oneself to the God of all, and yield oneself up to the doctrine which raises us above all created things, and brings us, through the animate and living word, which is also living wisdom and the Son of God, to God who is over all.

**AUGUSTINE**, *The Confessions*: A man who knows that he owns a tree, and gives thanks to you for its fruit, even though he may not know how many cubits high it is or how wide it spreads, is better than one who measures it and counts all its branches, but does not own it and does not know or love its creator. It is thus with the man of faith, to whom the whole rich world belongs, who, by cleaving to you whom all things serve, is as one having nothing yet possessing all things, although he does not know even the circles of the Great Bear. It is folly to doubt that he is far better than one who measures the skies, and counts the stars, and weighs the elements, but neglects you who have "ordered all things in measure, weight, and number".

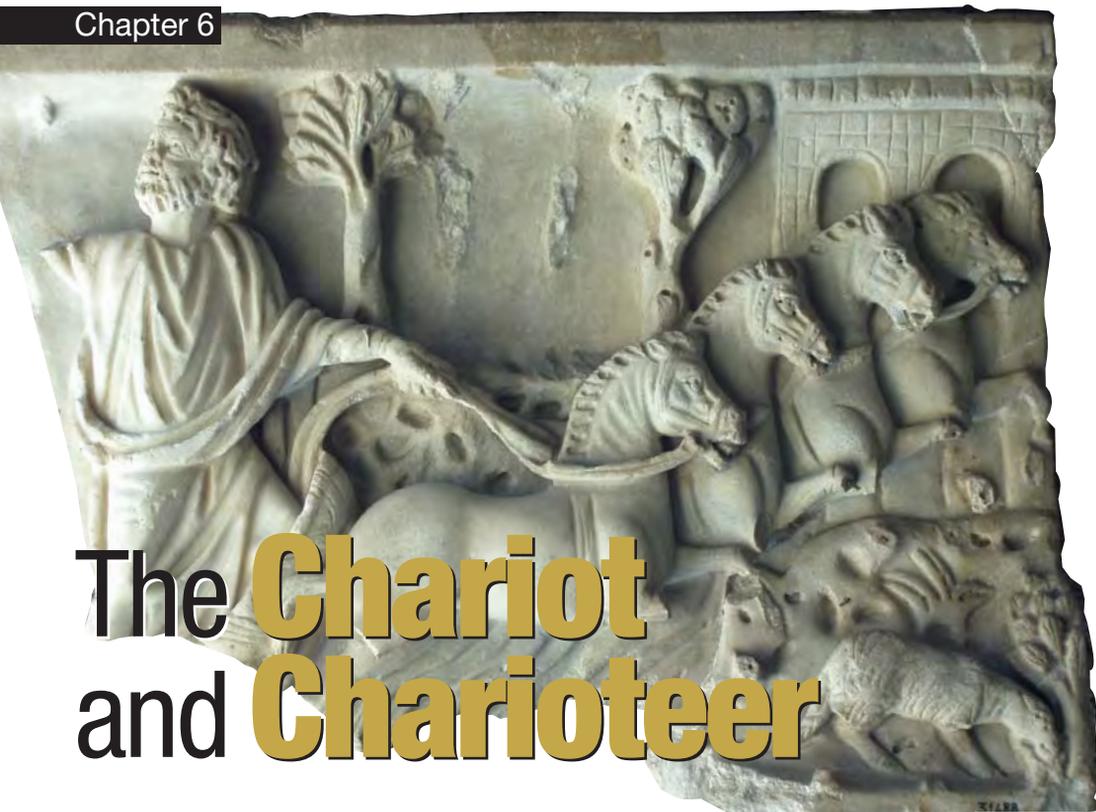


**Traditio Legis, sarcophagus fragment**  
(Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

## Christ the True Master

**JUSTINE MARTYR**, *Second Apology*: Our doctrines, then, appear to be greater than all human teaching; because Christ, who appeared for our sakes, became the whole rational being, both body, and reason, and soul. For I whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. And those who by human birth were more ancient than Christ, when they attempted to consider and prove things by reason, were brought before the tribunals as impious persons and busybodies. And Socrates, who was more zealous in this direction than all of them, was accused of the very same crimes as ourselves. For they said that he was introducing new divinities, and did not consider those to be gods whom the state recognized. But he cast out from the state faithfulness to Homer and the rest of the poets, and taught men to reject the wicked demons and those who did the things which the poets related; and he exhorted them to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by means of the investigation of reason, saying, "That it is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it safe to declare Him to all." But these things our Christ did through His own power. For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person when He was made of like passions, and taught these things); not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death; since He is a power of the ineffable Father, not the mere instrument of human reason.

**CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA**, *The Instructor*: Our superintendence in instruction and discipline is the office of the Word, from whom we learn frugality and humility, and all that pertains to love of truth, love of man, and love of excellence... And now, in truth, it is time for me to cease from my instructions, and for you to listen to the Teacher. And he, receiving you who have been trained up in excellent discipline, will teach you the oracles. To noble purpose has the Church sung, and the Bridegroom also, the only Teacher, the good Counsel, of the good Father, the true Wisdom, the Sanctuary of knowledge. ■



# The Chariot and Charioteer

## Greco-Roman Tradition

The most popular charioteer in classical mythology was probably the Sun god, Helios, who was portrayed as a youth with a radiated crown and a billowing robe. His attributes were a whip and a globe; his sacred animals the cock and the eagle. The Sun cult was widespread in all ancient religions, since the movement of the sun and the other celestial bodies was fundamental for all human activities (not only agriculture, but also war and peace, social organisation, etc.). Romans developed a local Sun cult very early (at least from the first century BC), which was centred on the Quirinal hill. This local cult was replaced in the second century AD by Oriental sun cults, namely Mithraism and *Sol Invictus Elagabalus*. In 274 emperor Aurelian dedicated the 25 December to *Sol Invictus* (the undefeated sun), whose cult, in the meanwhile, had been reformed and “Romanised” in an attempt to unify the various

cults diffused throughout the empire in a kind of religious monotheism.

Emperors were also represented driving chariots as a symbol of triumph. Quadrigas were indeed used in military parades after an important victory, and in public *apotheosis* ceremonies celebrating the divinisation of dead emperors (see below). Chariots would appear both as part of these funeral processions, car-

## The Divinisation of Emperors

Borrowed from the East (suffice to mention Egyptian pharaohs), the practice was introduced in Rome after Julius Caesar’s death, who was the first to be publicly recognised “*divus*” by the Roman state. The Roman senator and historian Cassius Dio described the emperor Pertinax’s apotheosis in 193 AD: “...at the *Campus Martius* a pyre had been built in the form of a tower having three stories and adorned with ivory and gold as well as a number of statues, while on its summit was placed a gilded chariot that Pertinax had been wont to drive in”.

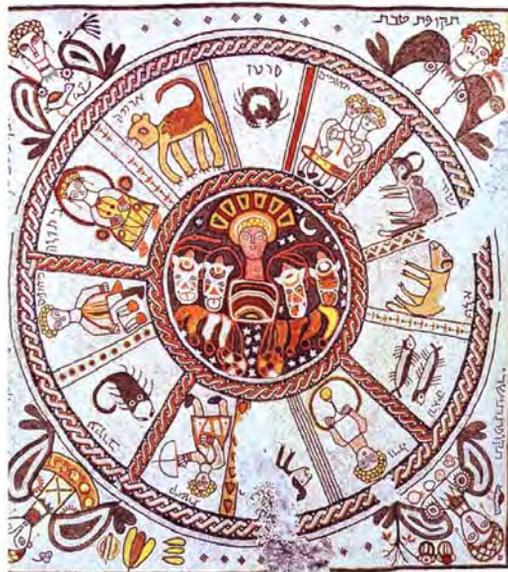
rying effigies (even golden statues) of the dead person, and as “staged” elements/monuments on top of the multi-storeyed pyre where the bier was placed to be set on fire.

Apart from mythology and imperial imagery, the carriage was also a reference to the ideas of body and soul in Greek philosophy. The body was thought to be the “vehicle” of the soul. We read in Plato’s *Timaeus*: “The gods have given the whole body as the vehicle of the soul”. Yet, this earthly body was only the last vehicle that the soul received; its first vehicle was a fiery one. Thus, according to Neo-Platonism, the “vehicle” indicated the astral bodies which the soul put on successively in its journey upwards through the celestial spheres.

### Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

The Old Testament presents the image of God’s throne-chariot, the *merkabah*, consisting in a four-wheeled vehicle driven by four four-winged “living creatures” according to the words of Ezekiel 1:4-26.

Another famous biblical chariot is the one bearing Elijah to heaven. Elijah is one of the five Major Old Testament prophets. Among other things, he resuscitates a dead child by stretching himself three times upon his body and imploring God to return the boy’s soul into the body. This scene appears in the third century Dura Europos synagogue, and the mosaic pavement inside the fifth century Beit Alpha synagogue in Galilee. Elijah is associated with messianic expectations: he announces the coming of the Messiah by blowing his *shofar* (ram’s horn) from the top of Mount Carmel. When he is taken up by God in a chariot with horses of fire, his cloak falls onto Elisha, the prophet’s successor; by striking



the water of the river Jordan, this cloak has the power to divide it to left and right.

### Christianity

The prophet Elijah was a very important figure also among Christians. The New Testament recounts the event of Christ’s transfiguration (cf. Matthew 17:1-8) when Elijah and Moses appear on either side of Jesus. The Gospel tells us also that some believed that Elijah had returned in the person of John the Baptist and even Christ (cf. Matthew 16:13-14). Thus it is not surprising that the prophet was seen as a prefiguration of Jesus himself in many of his acts and events: the raising of the widow’s son foreshadowed Christ’s raising of Lazarus and his own resurrection; Elijah fed by an angel in the wilderness evoked both Jesus’ fast and the Eucharist; his ascension to Heaven in a fiery chariot prefigured the Lord’s ascension. The latter image was therefore a popular subject ▶▶



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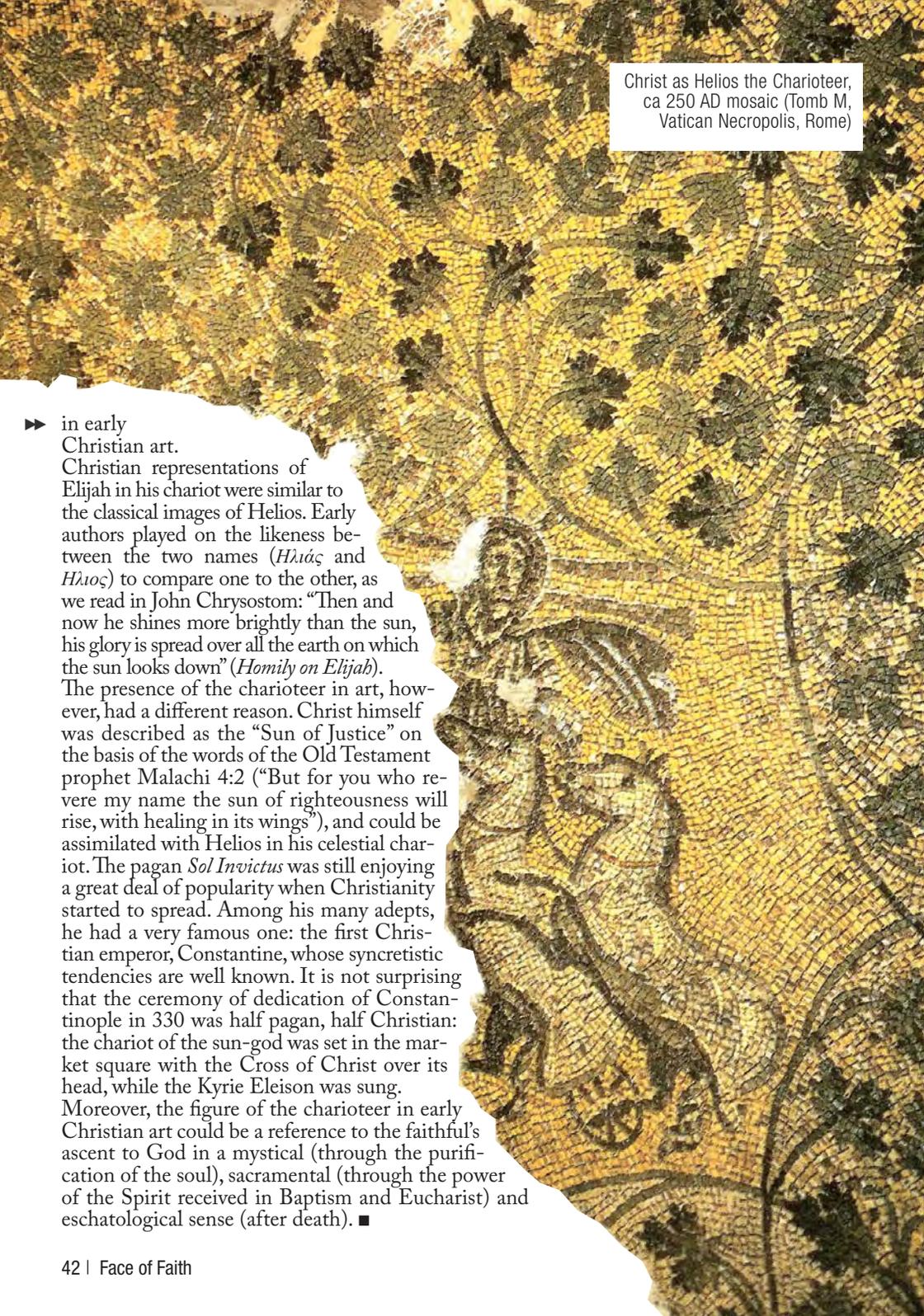
Christ/Elijah on a chariot, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

#### THIS PAGE ABOVE

Apotheosis of Elijah/Helios, early 6th C. “Zodiac” floor mosaic, (Beth Alpha Synagogue, Galilee) (Israel Antiquities Authority)

#### THIS PAGE LEFT

The Julio-Claudian prince Germanicus Caesar atop a quadriga, 31-47AD, a bronze “dupondius” coin



Christ as Helios the Charioteer,  
ca 250 AD mosaic (Tomb M,  
Vatican Necropolis, Rome)

► in early Christian art. Christian representations of Elijah in his chariot were similar to the classical images of Helios. Early authors played on the likeness between the two names (*Ἠλιάς* and *Ἥλιος*) to compare one to the other, as we read in John Chrysostom: “Then and now he shines more brightly than the sun, his glory is spread over all the earth on which the sun looks down” (*Homily on Elijah*). The presence of the charioteer in art, however, had a different reason. Christ himself was described as the “Sun of Justice” on the basis of the words of the Old Testament prophet Malachi 4:2 (“But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness will rise, with healing in its wings”), and could be assimilated with Helios in his celestial chariot. The pagan *Sol Invictus* was still enjoying a great deal of popularity when Christianity started to spread. Among his many adepts, he had a very famous one: the first Christian emperor, Constantine, whose syncretistic tendencies are well known. It is not surprising that the ceremony of dedication of Constantinople in 330 was half pagan, half Christian: the chariot of the sun-god was set in the market square with the Cross of Christ over its head, while the *Kyrie Eleison* was sung. Moreover, the figure of the charioteer in early Christian art could be a reference to the faithful’s ascent to God in a mystical (through the purification of the soul), sacramental (through the power of the Spirit received in Baptism and Eucharist) and eschatological sense (after death). ■

## The Chariot = Means of Salvation

<p><b>Virtuous Nature</b> The chariot can be interpreted as the virtues of the faithful enabling the soul to rise from an earthly life to a spiritual one.</p>	<p><b>Holy Spirit</b> The chariot symbolises the power of the Holy Spirit enabling the ascent to heaven.</p>	<p><b>Baptism</b> Elijah's fiery chariot could also be a reference to baptism, through which Christians start their journey towards God. Indeed Elijah's ascension happened after the prophet had crossed the river Jordan, which was associated with Christ's Baptism and Baptism in general.</p>
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## The Charioteer

<p><b>Elijah/Christ</b> The charioteer evokes Christ's ascent to heaven. Christ is seen both as the "type" of the OT prophet Elijah (who was lifted up to heaven in a fiery chariot), and as the "Sun of Justice".</p>	<p><b>The Faithful</b> Like Elijah and above all Christ, Christians will rise to heaven at the end of time.</p>	<p><b>The Soul</b> This image is a reference to the soul's ascent to God, in a mystical, sacramental and eschatological sense.</p>	<p><b>The Church</b> The charioteer could be seen as a personification of the whole Church, which will be lifted up and enjoy the eternal presence of God (cf. the heavenly Jerusalem) at the end of time.</p>
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## Christ, the Sun of Righteousness

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Exhortation to the Heathen 11*: 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. (...) 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 distills on them the dew of the truth. He has changed sunset into sunrise, and through the cross brought death to life; and having wrenched man from destruction, He has raised him to the skies, transplanting mortality into immortality, and translating earth to heaven.

## The ascension of Christ, of his disciples and of the Church

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 14*: Remember (...) that Elijah was taken up in a chariot of fire; but that the chariots of Christ are ten thousand-fold even thousands upon thousands: and that Elijah was taken up, towards the east of Jordan; but that Christ ascended at the east of the brook Cedron: and that Elijah went as into heaven; but Jesus, into heaven: and that Elijah said that a double portion in the Holy Spirit should be given to his holy disciple; but that Christ granted to His own disciples so great enjoyment of the grace of the Holy Ghost, as not only to have It in themselves, but also, by the laying on of their hands, to impart the fellowship of It to them who believed. (...) For Elijah truly was taken up into heaven; but Peter has the keys of the kingdom of heaven, having received the words, Whatsoever you loose on earth will be lost in heaven. Elijah was taken up only to heaven; but Paul both into heaven, and into paradise (for it warranted that the disciples of Jesus receive more manifold grace), and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for than to utter. But Paul came down again from above not because he was unworthy to abide in the third heaven, but so that after having enjoyed things above man's reach, and descended in honour, and having preached Christ, and died for His sake, he might receive also the crown of martyrdom.

GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Oration 28*: And who was this Elias? The man whom a chariot of fire took up to heaven, signifying the superhuman excellency of the righteous man.

AMBROSE, *On Luke, 2*: It is the city of Jerusalem, the city which appears now upon earth, but will be lifted higher than Elias, higher than Enoch. He indeed was carried aloft, lest his heart be changed through malice; but that Christ loves other, the Church, as his spouse, glorious, holy, immaculate and without spot. And if one man was carried on high, should not the whole body be even more so? Such is the hope of the Church it will indeed be carried on high; it will be lifted up, translated to heaven. In a burning chariot was Elijah taken up; so will it be with the Church.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On 1 Thessalonians, Homily 8*: And upon the coming of an affectionate father, his children indeed, and those who are worthy to be his children, are taken out in a chariot, that they may see and kiss him; but those of the domestics who have offended remain within. We are carried upon the chariot of our Father. For He received Him up in the clouds, and "we will be caught up in the clouds." Do you see how great is the honour? and as He descends, we go forth to meet Him, and, what is more blessed than all, so we will be with Him.

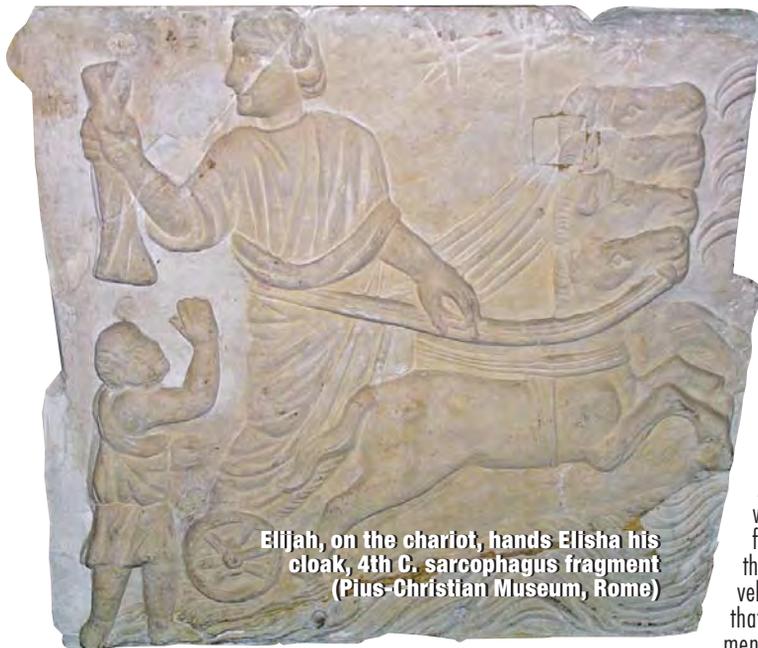
## The ascension of the soul, empowered by the Spirit

METHIDIUS OF OLYMPUS, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*: For this reason, it requires strong and generous natures, such as, vaulting over the stream of pleasure, direct the chariot of the soul upwards from the earth, not turning aside from their aim, until having, by swiftness of thought, lightly bounded above the world, and taken their stand truly upon the vault of heaven, they purely contemplate immortality itself as it springs forth from the undefiled bosom of the Almighty.

GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On Virginity*: How can any one fly up into the heavens, who has not the wings of heaven ►►



Elijah, on the chariot, hands Elisha his cloak, 4th C. sarcophagus (St Ambrose's Basilica, Milan)



**Elijah, on the chariot, hands Elisha his cloak, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)**

righteous will shine forth as the Sun, and God will stand in the midst of them, gods and kings, deciding and distinguishing the ranks of the Blessedness of heaven. Light beside these in a special sense is the illumination of Baptism of which we are now speaking; for it contains a great and marvellous sacrament of our salvation.

**GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Song of Songs*:** There was an unconquerable force bringing destruction on the Egyptians through the marvels concerning the sea, a force that the Scriptures call horsemen... But David makes mention also of God's chariot when he writes: "The chariot of God is more than tens of thousands" including in the number the thousands of drivers. And, too, the Scriptures give the name "horses" to the power which raised the prophet Elijah from earth to the ethereal region... It is not possible to be made like the horsemen which submerged the chariots of the Egyptians in the deep if one has not been freed from slavery to the Enemy by the sacramental water. ■

and is not already buoyant and lofty-minded by reason of a heavenly calling? Few can be such strangers to evangelic mysteries as not to know that there is but one vehicle on which man's soul can mount into the heavens, namely the self-made likeness in himself to the descending Dove, whose wings David the Prophet also longed for. This is the allegorical name used in Scripture for the power of the Holy Spirit.

**GREGORY OF NYSSA, *A Elogy for Basil the Great*:** Scripture has taught us in many places that fire is the Holy Spirit's power... Elijah's ascent by means of fire transcends anything we can say. However, he did not disdain the other earthly form which was taken on high when it was glorified by heaven's lofty citizenship which the Spirit opens up by the chariot of virtues.

### Baptism

**CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 3*:** Elijah is taken up, but not apart from water: for first he crosses the Jordan, then in a chariot mounts the heaven.

**GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Oration 40*:** It was Light that carried up Elijah in the car of fire, and yet did not burn him as it carried him. (...) Light is also the brilliancy of heaven to those who have been purified here, when the



**Leaf disc dedicated to Sol Invictus. 3rd C. (source unknown)**

# Adam and Eve

## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

The narrative of Genesis refers to the very beginning of the human race and its relation with God. Unlike most creation myths, where gods shape man to make him work in their place (eg, the Babylonian *Enuma elish*), Yahweh creates man out of love. The fact that Yahweh puts him into a lavish garden (“Eden” in Jeremiah 51:34 means “delights”) symbolises the extraordinary favours God bestows upon his creature. Among these generous gifts the Bible mentions the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, and the four rivers (4 being a symbolic number describing the four corners of the world, and, therefore, the world itself). In Yahweh’s creation plan, man and woman complement each other (the human being discovers his/her own identity only through contact with the “otherness”) and are given the task of reproducing life (which is one of the highest prerogatives of God himself). The sin of

### TOP

Adam and Eve, possibly 3rd C., tomb slab fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

### RIGHT

Adam and Eve, 4th C. sarcophagus relief (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

Adam and Eve consists in not recognising the generosity of Yahweh and considering the goods received not as gifts but as possessions. Their tempter – the serpent (associated with the god Baal and the goddess Asherah, both fertility deities of the Canaanites) – awakes in their minds the false idea of a jealous and selfish Creator. The arrogance and greed of Adam and Eve are bound to generate self-deceit. As a consequence, the ease of the relation between the human being and God is lost forever. However, Yahweh’s loving protection continues throughout the history of salvation, despite the infidelity of humankind.

## Christianity

Early Christians saw a parallelism between Adam and Christ, who both had a universal impact upon humankind. Adam transmitted sin and therefore death; Christ, through God’s grace, brought eternal life (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:22.45). Adam epitomises disobedience to God and arrogance: he was a man who wanted the same prerogatives as Yahweh. Christ epitomises humility and obedience to the Father: as God, he took on the very nature of man to share man’s destiny and suffering (cf. Philippians 2:6-8). In Christ, who is the perfect Adam, humankind is redeemed and restored to its original likeness to God. Christ becomes man so that man can become God.



## Adam and Eve = Humanity

### Humanity redeemed from Sin/ Creation of a New Humanity

Especially in a funerary context, the figures of Adam and Eve evoked humanity redeemed rather than in sin. Thanks to Christ, humanity is “recreated”: by recovering their likeness to God, human beings regain their primordial purity and access to the tree of life.

This return to original purity is also the result of Baptism, which, like a “new birth”, washes away the sins of the “old creature”.

### Resurrection/Re-establishment of Heaven

Adam and Eve recalled the image of the garden of Eden: they could also symbolise Christians being welcomed in the presence of God after resurrection. Their gesture of “acclamation” toward the tree was not a gesture of sin; it rather expressed hope in a blessed life. The hand stretched toward the fruit may recall the promise of Rev. 2:7: “*To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.*”

## Tree / Tree of Life

### Christ

The tree did not only have a negative connotation as the “tree of sin” but also evoked the tree of life and, as such, Christ in his vivifying presence.

### Cross

In its positive connotation, the tree also recalled the cross of Christ bearing the fruit of redemption. Through his passion and death Christ defeats death and brings life to humankind.

### Doctrine

#### Eucharist/Sacraments

The tree could also be compared to the nourishing Christian teaching as well as to sacraments (especially the Eucharist, ie, the body of Christ) which are a source of life for the faithful.

## Serpent = Evil

### Devil defeated

The serpent represented the devil defeated by Christ. It could also evoke the “exorcisms” against Satan during baptismal rites. The candidates to Baptism had to explicitly renounce Satan: thanks to Christ (the New Adam) they had the power to resist and defeat the old tempter.

### Death defeated

The serpent was interpreted as the power of death defeated by the vivifying power of Christ, who grants resurrection to all. Christ is Life. All humankind already partakes of this life, but will enjoy it in its fullness at the end of time.

► Therefore the images of Adam and Eve in early Christian art evoke, rather than the fallen humanity, the recovery of the original condition of grace and bliss in the presence of God thanks to Jesus’s redemption, and the hope in the eternal life brought by Christ. These images are particularly significant also in a baptismal context. The initiation received by the catechumens, which started on the first Sunday of Lent and ended on Easter Day, symbolised the death of the old Adam

(the sinner) and the birth of the new Adam through Baptism. To become Christians, the candidates had to renounce Satan and welcome Christ. Thus the representations of Adam, Eve and the serpent were also reminders of the conflict with the old tempter (initiation included several “exorcisms” too) that catechumens had to overcome. By receiving Baptism, neophytes were re-admitted to “Paradise” where Satan no longer had power over them. ■

## Adam and Eve, the new Humanity in Christ

1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-22: *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*

JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue with Trypho*: He became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her: wherefore also the Holy Thing begotten of her is the Son of God; and she replied, "Be it unto me according to your word." And by her he has been born, to whom we have proved so many Scriptures refer, and by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him; but works deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe in him.

IRENAEUS OF LYON, *Against Heresies 5*: As the human race was subjected to death through the act of a virgin, so was it saved by a virgin, and thus the disobedience of one virgin was precisely balanced by the obedience of another.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 13*: ...but if by one's trespassing death reigned over the world, how would life not much rather reign by the righteousness of the One? And if because of the tree of food they were then east out of paradise, will believers not now more easily enter into paradise because of the Tree of Jesus? If the first man formed out of the earth brought in universal death, will He who formed him out of the earth not bring in eternal life, being Himself the Life?

GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Baptism of Christ*: You banished us from Paradise, and recalled us; You stripped off the fig-tree leaves, an unseemly covering, and put upon us a costly garment; You opened the prison, and released the condemned; You sprinkled us with clean water, and cleanse us from our filthiness. No longer will Adam be confounded when called by You, nor hide himself, convicted by his conscience, cowering in the thicket of Paradise. Nor will the flaming sword encircle Paradise, and make the entrance inaccessible to those who draw near; but all is turned to joy for us that were the heirs of sin: Paradise, yea, heaven itself may be trodden by man: and the creation, in the world and above the world, that once was at odds with itself, is knit together in friendship: and we men are made to join in the angels' song, offering the worship of their praise to God.

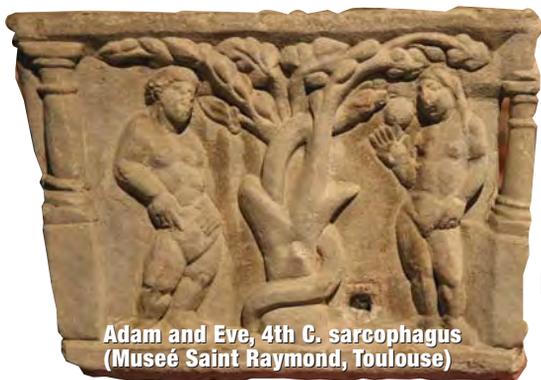
GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Making of Man*: Now the resurrection promises us nothing else than the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state; for the grace we look for is a certain return to the first life, bringing back again to Paradise him who was cast out from it.

GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Address on Religious Instruction*: ...having tasted the poison, that is the fruit, that dissolved our nature, we were necessarily in need of something to reunite it. Such a remedy had to enter into us, so that it might by its counteraction undo the damage the body had already suffered from the poison. And what is this remedy? Nothing but the body that proved itself superior to death and became the source of our life.

JEROME, *Homily 66*: (...) Adam's rib fashioned into a woman signifies... Christ and the church... We have heard about the first Adam; let us come now to the second Adam and see how the church is formed from his side. As the Lord hung on the cross his side was pierced with a lance, and from it there came forth blood and water. Do you wish to know how the church is built up from water and blood? First, through the baptism of water sins are forgiven. Then, the blood of martyrs crowns the building.

JOHN CRYSTOSTOM, *Baptismal Instruction 11*: After stripping you of your cloths, the priest himself leads you down into the flowing waters. But why naked? It reminds you of your former nudity, when you were in paradise and you were not embarrassed.

AUGUSTINE, *On Faith and the Creed*: Through (Christ) a pattern of life has been given us, which is a sure path by which we may come to God. For we who have fallen through pride could only return to God through humility. (...) our Saviour has himself condescended to exemplify in his own person that humility which is the ►►



Adam and Eve, 4th C. sarcophagus (Musée Saint Raymond, Toulouse)



Adam and Eve, 3rd C. fresco (Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome)

► path by which we have to travel on our return to God.

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Catechetical Lecture 1*: Henceforth you are planted in the invisible Paradise. You received a new name, which you did not have before. Before you were a Catechumen, but now you will be called a Believer.

### The Tree

JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue with Trypho*: "Hear, then, how this Man, of whom the Scriptures declare that He will come again in glory after His crucifixion, was symbolized both by the tree of life, which was said to have been planted in paradise, and by those events which should happen to all the just.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 13*: In Paradise was the Fall, and in a Garden was our Salvation. From the Tree came sin, and until the Tree sin lasted. In the evening, when the Lord walked in the Garden, they hid themselves; and in the evening the robber is brought by the Lord into Paradise (. . .) Adam by the Tree fell away; you by the Tree are brought into Paradise. Fear not the serpent; he will not cast you out; for he is fallen from heaven.

GREGORY OF NAZIANZEN, *Oration 29*: He is lifted up and nailed to the Tree, but by the Tree of Life he restores us. Yes, he saves even the thief crucified with him.

### The Serpent

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture, Prologue*: Great is the Baptism that lies before you: a ransom to captives; a remission of offences; a death of sin; a new-birth of the soul; a garment of light; a holy indissoluble seal; a chariot to heaven; the delight of Paradise; a welcome into the kingdom; the gift of adoption! But there is a serpent by the wayside watching those who pass by: beware lest he bite you with unbelief. He sees so many receiving salvation, and is seeking whom he may devour. You are coming in unto the Father of Spirits, but you are going past that serpent. How then can you pass him? Have your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; that even if he bites, he may not hurt you. Have faith in-dwelling, steadfast hope, a strong sandal, that you may pass the enemy, and enter the presence of your Lord. Prepare your own heart for reception of doctrine, for fellowship in holy mysteries. Pray more frequently, that God may make you worthy of the heavenly and immortal mysteries.

IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Against Heresies*: For indeed the enemy would not have been fairly vanquished, unless it had been a man (born) of a woman who conquered him. For it was by means of a woman that he got the advantage over man at first, setting himself up as man's opponent. And therefore the Lord professes Himself to be the Son of man, comprising in Himself that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned, in order that, as our race went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm (of victory) against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death.

AMBROSE, *Paradise*: The serpent is a type of the pleasures of the body. The woman stands for our senses and the man for our minds. Pleasure stirs the senses, which in turn have their effect on the mind. Pleasure, therefore, is the primary source of sin.

AUGUSTINE, *On Nature and Grace*: "Pride is the beginning of all sin", for it was this sin that overthrew the devil, from whom arose the origin of sin and who, through subsequent envy, overturned the man who was standing in the righteousness from which he had fallen. For the serpent, seeking a way to enter, clearly sought the door of pride when he declared, "You will be as gods". ■



# Noah and the Flood



## TOP

Noah reaches for the olive branch carried by the dove, 4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

## ABOVE

Deucalion and Pyrrha after the Flood, 3rd C. pagan sarcophagus (unknown origin)

## Greco-Roman Tradition

The Flood is one of the most widespread myths known to humanity and symbolises the renewal of time. Its appearance in the Greco-Roman world is probably due to Oriental influences. The Greco-Roman tradition recounts the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha. When Zeus, through the Great Deluge, decides to put an end to the Bronze Age because of the impiety of humankind, Deucalion is forewarned of the flood by his father Prometheus. He builds a kind of ark (sometimes described and represented in art as a floating box), which grounds on Mount Parnassus (or other mounts according to the various traditions) when the waters recede after eight days. Deucalion is the only survivor together with his wife Pyrrha.

## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

The Jewish tradition was certainly influenced by Babylonian flood stories (like the one recounted in the *Gilgamesh* epic). However, whereas the Babylonian myths explained the decision of destroying the world as a simple caprice of the selfish gods, the book of Genesis tells us that this was because of human violence. This violence was so extreme that a reversion of the entire cosmos was unavoidable to renew all humankind. God announces the flood and orders Noah to enter the ark together with his family and some animals. After the waters abate, God promises that there will be no more floods (see box right). This shows that, if God is completely just in pun-

ishing wickedness, he is no less merciful in saving the innocent. The word used to indicate the ark, “*tebā*”, is mentioned also elsewhere to describe the basket in which Moses was saved from death (Exodus 2:3.5), thus symbolising both the instrument of salvation of Israel on the one hand, and the instrument of salvation of humankind on the other.

## Christianity

For Christians, the Flood and the salvation of Noah and his companions in the ark evoked the renewed covenant between God and his church. This new relation is established by God as a new Genesis after the victory over sin – accomplished through the cross (death and resurrection) of Christ and the reconciling power of the Spirit. The reference to salvation through water always has baptismal connotations; Baptism allows a new life in Christ.

In Christian iconography, the figure of Noah starts appearing only at the end of the third century. This could depend on the fact that,

### MIDDLE RIGHT

Fresco of Noah's Ark, 5th C.  
(Chapel of the Exodus,  
Al-Bagawat Necropolis, Egypt )

### BOTTOM LEFT

Noah, his family and the animals on the Ark, cast of 4th C. relief (Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier, Germany)

unlike Daniel and Jonah, Noah was not mentioned in the lists of Old Testament characters saved by God that were used in Christian liturgy.

Noah is usually represented half-length, standing inside a box-shaped ark. Whereas frescoes mainly show Noah frontally in the orant position, sculptural reliefs feature the patriarch in profile, with outstretched arms towards a dove which carries an olive twig in its beak. The shape of the ark is probably influenced by the pagan iconography of Deucalion. ■

## The flood story in Genesis

Since the flood story in Genesis is a compilation of two separate traditions, there are some discrepancies in the text. For example, concerning the animals taken into the Ark, the text indicates both a pair of each species (Genesis 6:19-20 and 7:15-16), and seven pairs of the clean animals plus one pair of the unclean (Genesis 7:2). As for the duration of the flood, one tradition mentions 40 days and 40 nights (7:4; 7:12), whereas the other speaks of 150 days (7:24; 8:2a.3b).



### Alternative representations

The fifth-century fresco at al-Bagawāt (above) is the only known exception among the early representations of Noah's ark, showing it as a kind of roofed boat rather than as a box; an oversized dove stands out on the right. The relief from the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Trier (left) is also noteworthy in that it depicts Noah with his family and accompanied by the animals.

# Water (Flood) = the New Chance for Humanity

<b>Destructive Water</b>	<b>Vivifying Water</b>	
<b>Destruction of Sin/ of the “Old Man”</b> The Flood symbolises the washing away of sin. In this water humanity buries its “old self” and gets rid of its sinful past.	<b>New Genesis</b> The Flood is seen as a sign of purification. From the Flood emerges a renewed humankind.	<b>The Soul</b> Giving humankind a chance to be regenerated, the Flood symbolises Baptism transforming the faithful into a “new human being” in Christ. (In Baptismal rites, the water is sanctified by the sign of the cross made by the priest.)

## a) Noah = The Christian

<b>The Righteous Man being redeemed</b> Noah was the only righteous man in a corrupted world. Like Noah, Christians are promised salvation if they hold to their faith. Thanks to this faith Noah believed in the warning of God even when there was no sign of the predicted cataclysm.	<b>The Faithful victorious over the dangers of the world</b> Noah amidst the waves of the flood is the image of the Christian amidst the dangers of the world.	<b>The Preacher</b> Although the Bible does not mention Noah’s preaching activity, many commentators came to the conclusion that, since the construction of the ark took 100 years, Noah must have preached during that time trying to convert his contemporaries.	<b>The Soul of the Deceased after the Judgement</b> Noah after the flood symbolises the soul after the final judgement, ready to enter a new world.
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## b) Noah = (New Adam =) Christ

<b>The Saviour</b> Both Noah and Christ save humanity with Wood (the wood of the ark, and the wood of the cross).	<b>The Head of a renewed Community</b> Noah is the guide of the few who were saved from the flood and who represent the renewed humanity. Christ is the head of the Church, the renewed community of God, through the water of Baptism.
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# Ark = Instrument (and Recipient) of Salvation

<b>Church</b> The ark represents the Church. Eight people were saved in the ark: Moses and seven others. Eight symbolises the eighth day, the first day after the day of Christ’s resurrection on the Sabbath. This day evokes the fulfilment of time and the beginning of the Kingdom of God. Eight (2 <sup>3</sup> ) is also a perfect number representing the perfection of those to be saved by Christ after the final judgement. Seven often symbolises the Church: in the first chapters of the Book of Revelation, seven churches embody the universal Church. As the ark contains a variety of animals, the Church reaches all nations. It also comprises both righteous and sinners. The peace in the ark among predator and prey (eg, the lion and the lamb) evokes the peace of the eschatological Church, symbol of the new paradise, where rapacious man is turned into a religious one.	<b>Cross</b> The ark represents the cross, symbol of salvation. By accepting his death, Christ breaks the vicious circle in which hatred engenders hatred and violence engenders violence.	<b>Sepulchre of Christ (or of Christians)</b> The ark is a symbol of the tomb, from which Christ (and, thanks to him, the Christian) exits after the resurrection to enter the eschatological new world.
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## Pitch of the Ark = Strengthening Element of the Church

<p><b>Defence against Evil</b> The pitch (Genesis 6:14) with which the ark had to be covered symbolises the spiritual protection granted to the faithful against the evil of the world.</p>	<p><b>Righteousness outwardly (appearance) but also inwardly (substance)</b> The pitch covering the ark “inside and out” evokes the fact that Christians should be righteous both outside (in their deeds and appearance) and inside (in their hearts).</p>	<p><b>Unity of the Church through Love</b> The pitch covering all beams of the ark symbolises Christian love binding together the members of the Church.</p>
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## Beams of the Ark = Members of the Church

<p><b>Teachers/Fathers of the Church</b> The squared shape is a symbol of stability. Like the squared beams in the ark, the fathers of the Church contributed to its stability: they strengthened faith and made it stable.</p>	<p><b>Saints</b> The fact that the beams of the ark did not rot away symbolises the holiness of the life of the Saints of the Church.</p>
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## (Return of the) Dove = the New Beginning/Salvation

<p><b>Regenerating Spirit (at the moment of Baptism)</b> The dove returning to the ark evokes the Spirit which takes on the shape of a dove at the moment of Christ’s Baptism. It symbolises the regenerating power of the Spirit in the life of Christians. The dove often opposes the crow who leaves the ark and never returns. The crow was interpreted as sin or heresy. Augustine says that it represents people repeatedly postponing their conversion and croaking “<i>cras, cras!</i>” (“<i>cras</i>” = “tomorrow” in Latin).</p>	<p><b>Peace as a Gift of God; the Forgiveness of Sin</b> The dove with a twig alludes to the end of the flood that evokes God’s mercy and the peace established with humankind through Christ. The dove is therefore the symbol of God’s forgiveness and remission of sins.</p>	<p><b>New Phase (third) of the History of Salvation</b> The dove sent three times is thought to symbolise the three phases of the history of salvation: before the Law (prophets), under the Law (Moses), and, finally, under the grace (Christ). The first return of the dove was sometimes interpreted as the fact that initially the preaching of the Gospel had not been welcomed. Some authors also interpreted the three journeys of the dove as a symbol of the Trinity.</p>
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## Twig of olive tree = New World/Life

<p><b>Forgiveness/Peace</b> The twig of the olive tree carried by the dove evokes the smoothing effect of the oil used on the skin and the wounds, thus symbolising the sweet and relieving effect of God’s forgiveness which offers a renewed life.</p>	<p><b>Baptism</b> The olive twig recalls the oil of the anointing accompanying the baptismal rite and symbolises the consecration to God. It also evokes the oil that was used to light lamps, thus symbolising the light received by the soul through Baptism.</p>	<p><b>Cross</b> The wood of the twig was interpreted as the wood of the cross announcing peace and resurrection at the end of time.</p>
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## Vivifying water

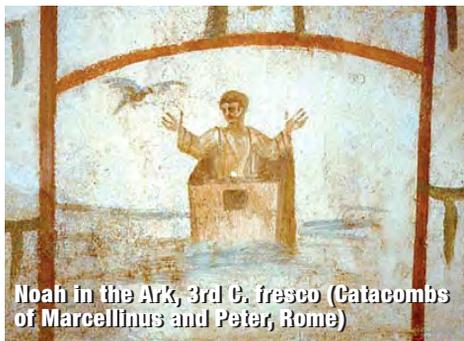
TERTULLIAN, *On Baptism*: ... just as, after the waters of the deluge, by which the old iniquity was purged — after the baptism, so to say, of the world — a dove was the herald which announced to the earth the assuagement of celestial wrath, when she had been sent her way out of the ark, and had returned with the olive-branch, a sign which even among the nations is the fore-token of peace; so by the self-same law of heavenly effect, to earth — that is, to our flesh — as it emerges from the font, after its old sins flies the dove of the Holy Spirit, bringing us the peace of God, sent out from the heavens where is the Church, the typified ark. But the world returned unto sin; at which point baptism would ill be compared to the deluge. And so it is destined to fire; just as is too the man, who after baptism renews his sins: so that this also ought to be accepted as a sign for our admonition.

ORIGEN, *On First Principles*: ... the deluge; of which hope Peter himself thus speaks in his first Epistle: "That Christ, indeed, was put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit, by which He went and preached to the spirits who were kept in prison, who once were unbelievers, when they awaited the long-suffering of God in the days of Noah, when the ark was preparing, in which a few, ie, eight souls, were saved by water. To which also baptism by a like figure now saves you."

MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermon 50*: But let us see where this most sacred number of forty days had its beginning. ... in the time of Noah, when criminal wickedness had seized the whole human race, torrents of water poured forth from the opened floodgates of heaven for just as many days. In a kind of mysterious image of Lent, this inundation of the earth refers not so much to a flood as to baptism. (...) For this reason, then, the Lord has given us 40 days now as well in imitation of that time, so that for this number of days, while the heavens are opened, a heavenly rain of mercy might pour upon us... baptism is a flood to the sinner and a consecration to the faithful; by the Lord's washing, righteousness is preserved and unrighteousness is destroyed.

### The Raven, the Dove, the Olive Branch

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 17*: Of this dove, the dove of Noah, according to some, was in part a figure. For as in his time by means of wood and of water there came salvation to themselves, and the beginning of a new generation, and the dove returned to him towards evening with an olive branch; thus, say they, the Holy Ghost also descended upon the true Noah, the Author of the second birth, who draws together into one the wills of all nations, of whom the various dispositions of the ani-



Noah in the Ark, 3rd C. fresco (Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome)

mals in the ark were a figure: Him at whose coming the spiritual wolves feed with the lambs, in whose Church the calf, and the lion, and the ox, feed in the same pasture, as we behold to this day the rulers of the world guided and taught by Churchmen. The spiritual dove therefore, as some interpret, came down at the season of His baptism, that He might show that it is He who by the wood of the Cross saves them who believe, He who at eventide should grant salvation through His death.

AMBROSE, *On the Mysteries*: God, willing to restore what was lacking, sent the flood and urged Noah to go up into the ark. And he, after having, as the flood was passing off, sent first a raven which did not return, sent a dove which is said to have returned with an olive twig. You see the water, you see the wood (of the ark), you see the dove, and do you hesitate as to the mystery? The water, then, is that in which the flesh is dipped, that all carnal sin may be washed away. All wickedness is there buried. The wood is that on which the Lord Jesus was fastened when He suffered for us. The dove is that in the form of which the Holy Spirit descended, as you have read in the New Testament, Who inspires in you peace of soul and tranquillity of mind. The raven is the figure of sin, which goes forth and does not return, if, in you, too, inwardly and outwardly righteousness be preserved.

AUGUSTINE, *On Psalm 103*: ... there are some who prepare to turn, and yet put it off, and in them cries out the raven's voice, "Cras! Cras!" The raven which was sent from the ark, never returned. God does not seek procrastination in the raven's voice, but confession in the wailing of the dove. The dove, when sent forth, returned. How long, Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Look to your last morrow: since you do not know what is your last morrow, let it suffice that you have lived up to this day a sinner.

AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*: It is easy to understand that perpetual peace is indicated by the olive branch ►►

which the dove brought with it when it returned to the ark. For we know that the smooth touch of olive oil is not easily spoiled by a fluid of another kind, and that the tree itself is an evergreen.

MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermon 64*: Christ is a dove because he commands his holy ones to be like doves when he says, "Be simple as doves." But the prophet speaks of what Christ the dove is when, in his person, he describes his return to heaven after his suffering: "Who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly away and be at rest?". Thus when Christ the Lord initiated the sacraments of the church a dove came down from heaven. (...) For the very dove that once hastened to Noah's ark in the flood now comes to Christ's church in baptism.

## Redemption/ Resurrection

JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue with Trypho*: "You know, then, sirs," I said, "that God has said in Isaiah to Jerusalem: 'I saved thee in the deluge of Noah.'" By this God meant that the mystery of saved men appeared in the deluge. For righteous Noah, along with the other mortals at the deluge, ie, with his own wife, his three sons and their wives, being eight in number, were a symbol of the eighth day, wherein Christ appeared when He rose from the dead, for ever the first in power. For Christ, being the first-born of every creature, became again the chief of another race regenerated by Himself through water, and faith, and wood, containing the mystery of the cross; even as Noah was saved by wood when he rode over the waters with his household. Accordingly, when the prophet says, "I saved you in the times of Noah," as I have already remarked, he addresses the people who are equally faithful to God, and possess the same signs. (...) I mean, that by water, faith, and wood, those who are afore-prepared, and who repent of the sins which they have committed, will escape from the impending judgement of God.

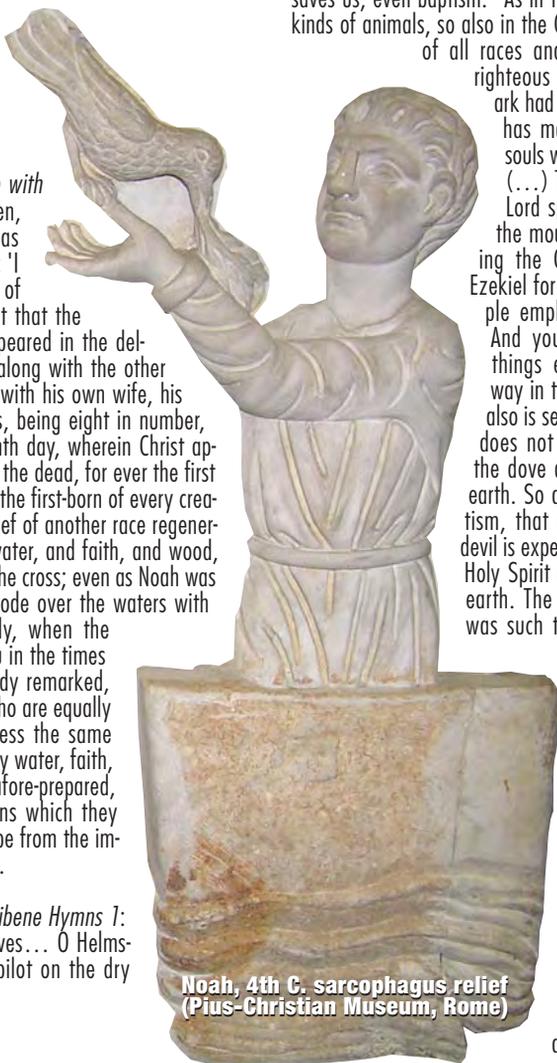
EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN, *Nisibene Hymns 7*: Your love subdued the waves... O Helmsman of that ark, be my pilot on the dry land!

## The Ark

CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE, *On the Unity of the Church*: Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can whoever forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. (...) If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who is outside of the Church.

JEROME, *The Dialogue against the Luciferians*: Noah's ark was a type of the Church, as the Apostle Peter says, "In Noah's ark few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water: which also after a true likeness now saves us, even baptism." As in the ark there were all kinds of animals, so also in the Church there are men of all races and characters..., the righteous and sinners... The ark had its rooms: the Church has many mansions. Eight souls were saved in Noah's ark. (...) The beatitudes which our Lord spoke to his disciples on the mountain, thereby delineating the Church, are eight. And Ezekiel for the building of the temple employs the number eight. And you will find many other things expressed in the same way in the Scriptures. The raven also is sent forth from the ark but does not return, and afterwards the dove announces peace to the earth. So also in the Church's baptism, that most unclean bird, the devil is expelled, and the dove of the Holy Spirit announces peace to our earth. The construction of the ark was such that it began 30 cubits

broad and gradually narrowed to one. Similarly the Church, consisting of many grades, ends in deacons, presbyters, and bishops. The ark was in peril in the flood, the Church is in peril in the world. When Noah left the ark he planted a vineyard, drank from it, and became drunken. Christ also, born in the flesh, planted the Church and suffered. ➔



Noah, 4th C. sarcophagus relief  
(Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

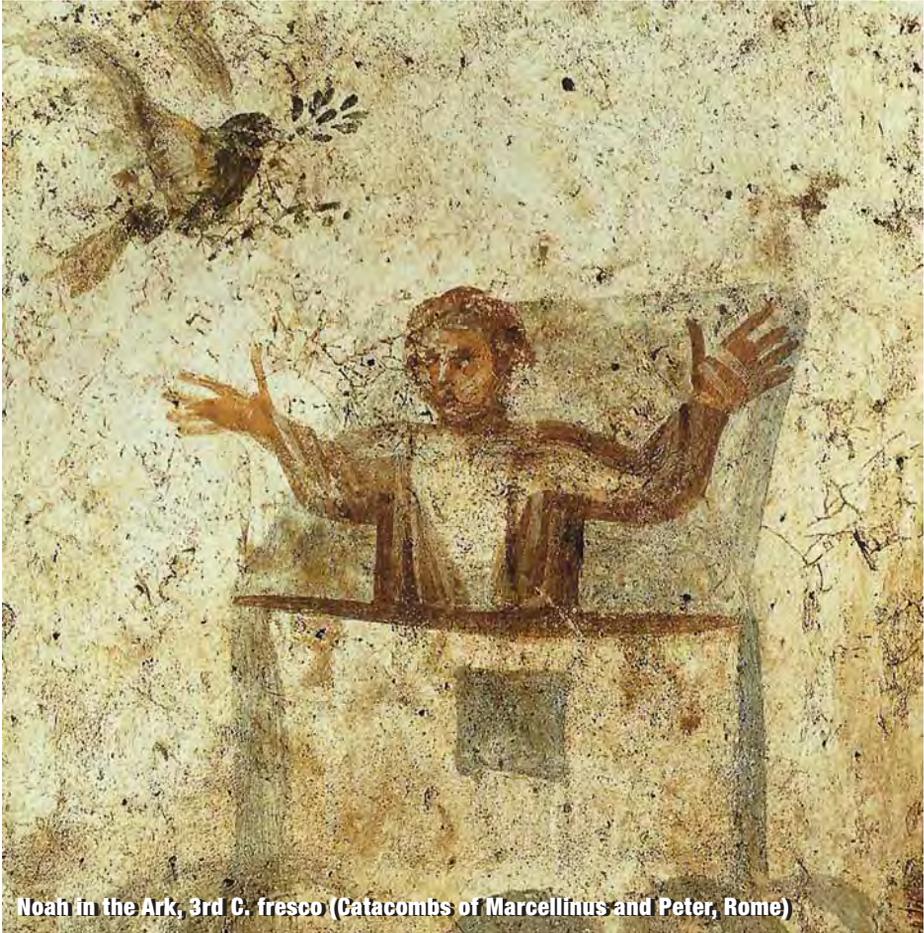
►► AUGUSTINE, *City of God* 15: ...the ark is certainly a figure of the city of God sojourning in this world; that is to say, of the church, which is rescued by the wood on which hung the Mediator of God and men, the man Jesus Christ. For even its very dimensions, in length, breadth, and height, represent the human body in which He came, as it had been foretold. (...) And having a door made in its side certainly signified the wound which was made when the side of the Crucified was pierced with the spear; for by this those who come to Him enter; for which flowed the sacraments by which those who believe are initiated. And the fact that it was ordered to be made of squared timbers, signifies the immovable steadiness of the life of the saints; for however you turn a cube, it still stands. And the other peculiarities of the ark's construction are signs of features of the church. (...) For example, the interpretation I have given in the work against Faustus, of the words, "with lower, second, and third stories will you make it," is, that because the church is gathered out of all nations, it is said to have two stories, to represent the two kinds of men — the circumcision, to wit, and the uncircumcision, or, as the apostle otherwise calls them, Jews and Gentiles; and to have three stories, because all the nations were replenished from the three sons of Noah. Now any one may object to this interpretation, and may give another which harmonizes with the rule of faith. For as the ark was to have rooms not only on the lower, but also on the upper stories, which were called "third stories", that there might be a habitable space on the third floor from the basement, some one may interpret these to mean the three graces commended by the apostle — faith, hope, and charity. Or even more suitably they may be supposed to represent those three harvests in the gospel, thirty-fold, sixty-fold, one hundred-fold — chaste marriage



Noah, 4th C. sarcophagus relief  
(Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

dwelling in the ground floor, chaste widowhood in the upper, and chaste virginity in the top story. Or any better interpretation may be given, so long as the reference to this city is maintained.

AUGUSTINE, *Against Faustus*: That Noah, with his family is saved by water and wood, so the family of Christ is saved by baptism, representing the suffering of the cross. That this ark is made of beams formed in a square, so the Church is constructed of saints prepared unto every good work: for a square stands firm on any side. The length is six times the breadth, and ten times the height, like a human body, to show that Christ appeared in a human body. That the breadth reaches to 50 cubits, as the apostle says, "Our heart is enlarged," that is, with spiritual love... For in the fiftieth day after His resurrection, Christ sent His Holy Spirit to enlarge the hearts of His disciples. That it is 300 cubits long, to make up six times 50, so there are six periods in the history of the world during which Christ has never ceased to be preached, in five foretold by the prophets, and in the sixth proclaimed in the gospel. It is 30 cubits high, a tenth part of the length because Christ is our height, who in his thirtieth year gave His sanction to the doctrine of the gospel, by declaring that He came not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it. Now the ten commandments are to be the heart of the law; and so the length of the ark is ten times 30. Noah himself, too, was the tenth from Adam. That the beams of the ark are fastened within and without with pitch, signifies by compact union the forbearance of love, which keeps the brotherly connection from being impaired, and the bond of peace from being broken by the offences which try the Church either from without or from within. (...) That all kinds of animals are included in the ark, so the Church contains all nations, which was also set forth in the vessel shown to Peter. That clean and unclean animals are in the ark, so good and bad take part in the sacraments of the Church. (...) Noah, counting his family, was the eighth, because the hope of our resurrection appeared in Christ, who rose from the dead on the eighth day, the day after the seventh, or Sabbath day. This day was the third from His passion; but in the ordinary reckoning of days, it is both the eighth and the first. That the whole ark together is finished in a cubit above, so the Church, the body of Christ gathered into unity, is raised to perfection. (...) That the entrance is on the side, so no man enters the Church except by the sacrament of the remission of sins which flowed from Christ's opened side. (...) That the flood came seven days after Noah entered the ark, so we are baptised in the hope of the future rest, which was denoted by the seventh day. (...) That Noah was 500 years old when God told him to make the ark, and 600 when he entered the ark, which shows that the ark was made during 100 years, which seem to correspond to the years of an age of the world. So the ►►

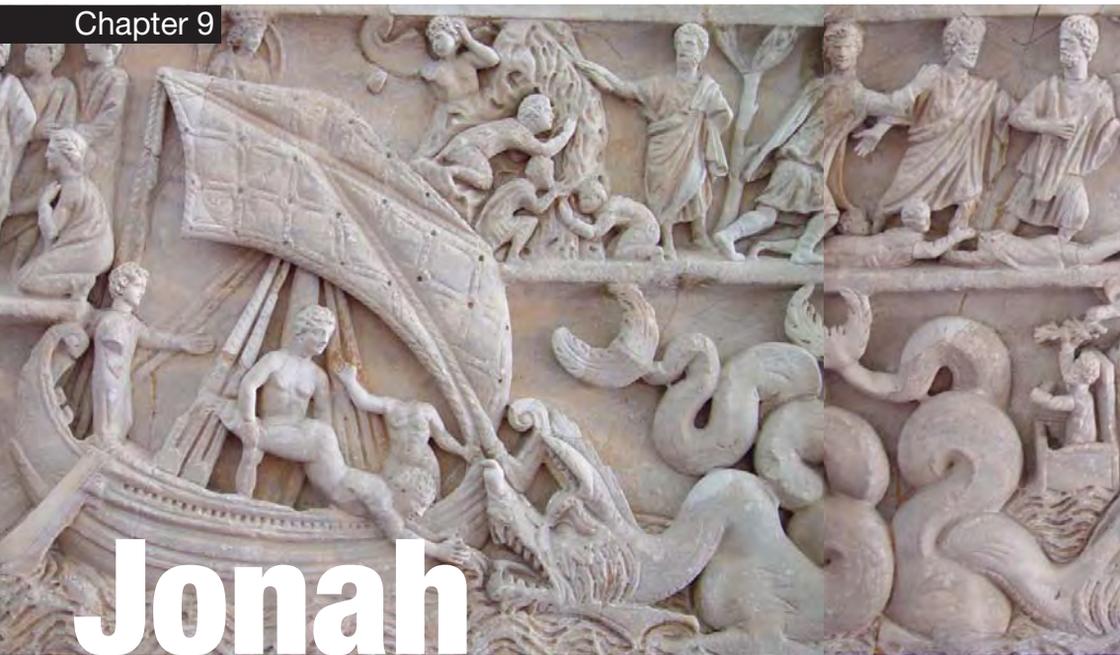


Noah in the Ark, 3rd C. fresco (Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome)

►► sixth age is occupied with the construction of the Church by the preaching of the gospel. (...) In the seventh month the ark rested, reminding us again of the seventh day of rest... For the seventh day of rest is connected with the eighth of resurrection. For when the saints receive again their bodies after the rest of the intermediate state, the rest will not cease, but rather the whole man, body and soul united, renewed in the immortal health, will attain the realization of his hope in the enjoyment of eternal life... That the raven sent out after forty days did not return, being either prevented by the water or attracted by some floating carcass, as men defiled by impure desire... That the dove when sent forth found no rest, and returned, so in the New Testament rest is not promised to the saints in this world. The dove was sent forth after 40 days, a period denoting the length of human life. When again sent forth after seven days, denoting the sevenfold operation of the Spirit, the dove

brought back a fruitful olive branch, as some even who are baptised outside of the Church, if not destitute of the fatness of charity, may come after all, as it were in the evening, and be brought into the one communion by the mouth of the dove in the kiss of peace. That, when again sent forth after seven days, the dove did not return, so, at the end of the world, the rest of the saints will no longer be in the sacrament of hope, as now, while in the communion of the Church, they drink what flowed from the side of Christ, but in the perfection of eternal safety...

AUGUSTINE, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 9*: Christ was represented also in Noah and, in that ark, the whole world. For why were all kinds of animals shut in, in the ark but to signify all nations? (...) He was setting before us a mystery, ... that the world might by the wood be delivered in a figure; because the life of the world was to be nailed on wood. ■



# Jonah

## Greco-Roman Tradition

**T**he reclining figure used by Christians in the final scene of Jonah's story had some precedents in Greco-Roman art.

It was mainly a borrowing of the image of Endymion. In Greek mythology, Endymion was a handsome young shepherd who kept both his beauty and youth forever: the Moon goddess, Selene, who had fallen madly in love with him, had asked Zeus to cast a spell on him and put him into an eternal sleep so that she could visit her beloved mortal every night. In a way, Endymion was associated with the defeat of time, and there-

### TOP

The Jonah sarcophagus, late 3rd C. (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

### OPPOSITE PAGE MIDDLE

The moon-goddess Selene approaches the sleeping Endymion (Bardo Museum, Tunis)

### OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM LEFT

Ariadne laments her abandonment by Theseus, 3rd C. pagan sarcophagus (Rome National Museum of the Baths)

fore of death.

Another popular reclining image in pagan art was the figure of Ariadne. It referred to the moment when Ariadne laments her fate on the island of Naxos, after being abandoned by her beloved Theseus. Some versions of the Greek legend recount that the god Dionysus rescued her and made her his wife. This was another example of union between mortals and gods, which granted humans a kind of "immortality".

The representation of a reclining figure in the Roman world could also have another religious connotation: it was sometimes a reference to dreams inspired by gods as means of access to future events. It was believed that people could thus receive divine signs in their sleep (see box right).

## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

The Old Testament story recounts how God calls upon Jonah to preach repentance in Nineveh, but Jonah tries to avoid his task by embarking on a ship with a different destination. When a storm rises, he admits to the crew that he is the origin of God's wrath and asks to be thrown overboard. Jonah is swallowed by a giant sea creature which spews



him up after three days. He then goes to Nineveh to announce its destruction. Since the inhabitants of the city repent, however, God spares them. The prophet feels let down and resentful towards God. He falls asleep under a gourd, which had grown overnight but is gone by the next day, eaten by a worm. When Jonah wakes up scorched by the sun, he is upset for not having any shelter. God replies: "You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10-11).

The Book of Jonah conveys a message of universalism: God's mercy is not a prerogative of the Chosen People, but is extended to all. Yahweh wants recognition by non-Jews (Nineveh stands for the pagan world) too; he has a providential interest in their well-being and accepts their repentance. Thus a leading thought in the story is Israel's duty to be witness to Yahweh before the other nations. Jonah represented Israel which was to prophesy amongst them. Israel was swallowed by Babylon (the fish) because it shirked this task, but, during the exile, turned to Yahweh and regained its freedom. Besides the universal preaching, there is another underlying message in the Book: Yahweh commands the elements (wind and sea), the beasts and plants because he is the Creator and Lord of all nature, and everything serves his purpose. Thus the Book stresses both God's infinite power and mercy. ➔



### Sulla's dream

This denarius minted in 44 BC depicts Sulla reclining, a Victory with outstretched wings and the Moon holding a staff. The coin, minted long after Sulla's death, refers to his dream in which the goddess offers him victory over his rival Marius. This shows the importance given to the idea that divine signs in dreams marked the lives of great men.



## ► Christianity

The new religion transformed the somehow rebellious character of Jonah into a positive figure, seeing in him a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Christ and of Christians.

The image of Jonah suggested the hope in eternal life, and was a reminder of the importance of Baptism.

The three days spent by Jonah inside the belly of the sea monster corresponded to the time spent by Christ in his tomb (cf. Matthew 12:39 ff.), and to the three immersions of the neophyte during the baptismal rite. Moreover, the sea beast was a more general reference to Evil, which, according to Jewish and early Christian tradition, inhabited the waters. The Jews

spoke of Behemot (cf. Job 40:15 ff); Christians saw in Christ's entering the river Jordan to be baptised the ultimate victory over the "dragon", ie, over death.

The oldest known scenes of Jonah are those of the Roman Catacomb of Callixtus, in the chamber of the sacraments, dating back to the third century. The story of this popular character was usually summarised in a short series of three or four episodes focussing on Jonah's being thrown overboard from the boat and swallowed by the sea creature, re-



emerging on dry land and resting under a plant (often a vine or a gourd vine). In this last scene Jonah, always represented as youthful and beardless, is shown naked and reclining with his right arm lifted above his head and his right leg crossed over his left. As mentioned before, this posture was mainly inspired by the classical figure of Endymion. Both characters evoke the restful sleep of the blessed, with a difference: while Endymion's sleep is eternal, Jonah's rest is only a temporary state before the resurrection. ■

### ABOVE

Jonah is swallowed by the Sea Creature, early 4th C. floor mosaic (Patriarchal Basilica, Aquileia)

### OPPOSITE PAGE

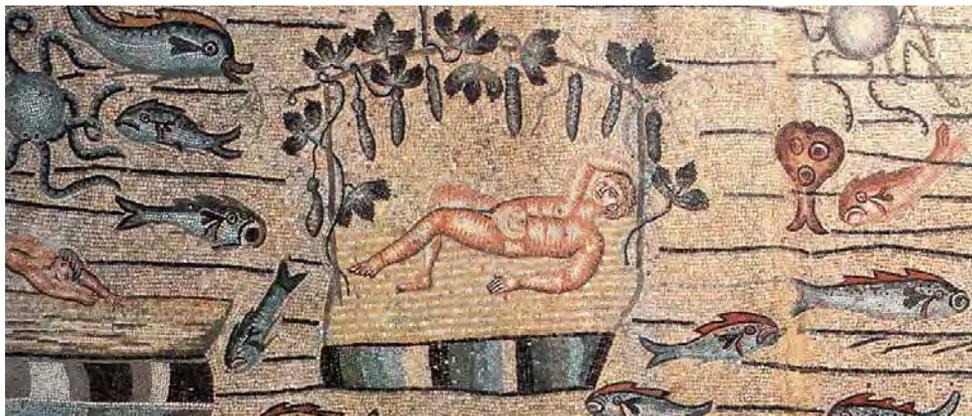
Jonah reclining, early 4th C. floor mosaic (Patriarchal Basilica, Aquileia)

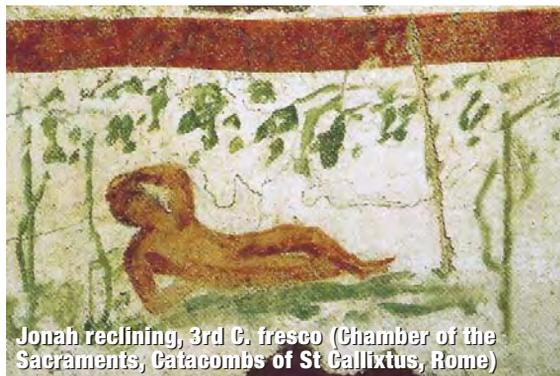
## a) Jonah = the Christian

<b>Man amidst the Dangers of the World</b>	The stormy sea symbolises passions and sin disturbing the serenity of the soul.
<b>The Faithful Praying and Trusting in God</b>	Jonah addressing God in the belly of the sea creature is thought to symbolise the power of prayer, which is answered by God even in the most difficult moments.
<b>The Preacher/Announcer of the Gospel</b>	Jonah preaching and converting Nineveh (the pagan city par excellence) symbolises the announcer of the Gospel who can be successful even in a hostile environment.
<b>The Sinful man Being Redeemed</b>	Jonah refusing to obey the first call of God symbolises man transgressing the commandment and fleeing away from God. But then he repents and is saved by Christ. Man's spiritual re-birth is symbolised by the fish spewing out Jonah.
<b>The Baptised/The New Man</b>	The three days spent by Jonah inside the belly of the fish correspond to the three immersions of the catechumen in the baptismal font.
<b>The Soul of the Deceased</b>	The journey of Jonah is seen as the last journey of the soul. Jonah resting under the plant represents the righteous waiting for the universal resurrection of all humankind on the Day of the Lord.

## b) Jonah = Christ

<b>The Incarnated Son of God</b>	<b>Death and Resurrection</b>
Jonah thrown into the sea is seen as Christ descending unto earth through incarnation.	Jonah thrown into the sea is understood as Christ dying and defeating the power of Hell. Jonah himself asks the sailors to be thrown into the sea. Likewise, Christ's death is a voluntary sacrifice. As Jonah was delivered from the fish after three days, Christ resurrected on the third day.





Jonah reclining, 3rd C. fresco (Chamber of the Sacraments, Catacombs of St Callixtus, Rome)

## Jonah, the Christian

TERTULLIAN, *On Prayer*: God is the hearer not of the voice, but of the heart, just as He is its inspector. (...) Do the ears of God wait for sound? How, then, could Jonah's prayer find way out unto heaven from the depth of the whale's belly, through the entrails of so huge a beast; from the very abysses, through so huge a mass of sea? What superior advantage will they who pray too loudly gain, except that they annoy their neighbours?

TERTULLIAN, *On Flight in Time of Persecution*: But, seeing it is from the Lord you flee, you taunt all runaways with the futility of their purpose. A certain bold prophet also had fled from the Lord... but God found him not on land or on sea but in the belly of a beast, in which he was confined for the space of three days, unable either to find death or even thus escape from God. How much better the conduct of the man who, though he fears the enemy of God, does not flee from, but rather despises him, relying on the protection of the Lord; or... says, "It is the Lord, he is mighty. All things belong to him; wherever I am, I am in his hand: let him do what he will, I will not run away..."

TERTULLIAN, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*: Jonah was swallowed by the monster of the deep, in whose belly whole ships were devoured, and after three days he was vomited out again safe and sound... To what faith do these remarkable events bear witness, if not to that which ought to inspire in us the belief that they are proofs and documents of our own destiny and our completed resurrection? (...) these were "figures of ourselves"... so that we may believe that the Lord is more powerful than all natural laws about the body.

ORIGEN, *On Prayer*: We know that often fugitives from God's commands who have been swallowed by death, which at first prevailed against them, have been saved by reason of repentance from so great an evil, because they did not despair of being saved though already overpowered in the belly of death: for death prevailed and swallowed, and again God

took away every tear from every face... Let him, moreover, who has learned by experience what manner of monster that swallowed Jonah typified, perceiving it is the one Job spoke of, "May He curse it that curses that day, He that is to worst the great monster," if he should ever come by reason of any disobedience to be in the belly of the monster, pray in penitence, and he will come out from there; and if, after coming out, he abides in obedience to the commands of God, he will be able according to the kindness of the Spirit to be a prophet to perishing Ninevites of today and to become a means to their salvation.

JEROME, *On Jonah*: The prophet's flight may also be referred to that of man in general, who, despising God's commands, departed from him and gave himself to the world, where later through the storms of ill and the wreck of the whole world raging against him, he was forced to feel the presence of God and to return to him from whom he had fled.

## Christ as Jonah

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 3*: According to Job, in the waters was the dragon that drew up Jordan into his mouth. Since, therefore, it was necessary to break the heads of the dragon in pieces He went down and bound the strong one in the waters, so we might receive power to tread upon serpents and scorpions. The beast was great and terrible. No fishing-vessel was able to carry one scale of his tail: destruction ran before him, ravaging all that met him. Life encountered him, that the mouth of Death might henceforth be stopped, and all we that are saved might say, O death, where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory? The sting of death is drawn by Baptism. When you go down into the water, bearing your sins, the invocation of grace, having sealed your soul, prevents you from being swallowed up by the terrible dragon. Having gone down dead in sins, you come up quickened in righteousness.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 14*: If we seek in Scripture testimony of such facts, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself supplies it in the Gospels, saying, as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. And when we examine the story of Jonah, the force of the resemblance is great. Jesus was sent to preach repentance; Jonah also: but whereas the one fled, not knowing what should come to pass; the other came willingly, to give repentance unto salvation. Jonah was asleep in the ship, and snoring amidst the stormy sea; while Jesus also slept, the sea, according to God's providence, began to rise, to shew in the sequel the might of Him who slept. To the one they said, Why are you snoring? Arise, call upon ►►

your God, that God may save us; but in the other case they say to the Master, Lord, save us. Then they said, Call upon your God; here they say, save Yourself. But the one says, Take me, and cast me into the sea; so the sea will be calm for you; the other, Himself rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. The one was cast into a whale's belly: but the other of His own accord went down there, where the invisible whale of death is. And He went down of His own accord, that death might cast up those whom he had devoured, according to that which is written, I will ransom them from the power of the grave; and from the hand of death I will redeem them. At this point of our discourse, let us consider whether it is harder, for a man after having been buried to rise again from the earth, or for a man in the belly of a whale, having come into the great heat of a living creature, to escape corruption. For what man does not know, that the heat of the belly is so great, that even bones which have been swallowed moulder away? How then did Jonah, who was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, escape corruption? And, seeing that the nature of all men is such that we cannot live without breathing, as we do, in air, how did he live without a breath of this air for three days? But the Jews answer and say, The power of God descended with Jonah when he was tossed about in hell. Does then the Lord grant life to His own servant, by sending His power with him, and can He not grant it to Himself as well? If that is credible, this is credible also; if this is incredible, that also is incredible. For to me both are alike worthy of credence. I believe that Jonah was preserved, for all things are possible with Gods; I believe that Christ also was raised from the dead; for I bare many testimonies of this, both from the Divine Scriptures, and from the operative power even today of Him who arose, — who descended into hell alone, but ascended with a great company; for He went down to death, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose through Him.

JEROME, *On Joel*: They threw him into the sea not in repugnance; rather, he submitted himself of his own will into their hands. And the sea was appeased because it found what it sought. (...) If we consider the time before the passion of Christ (...) the whole boat of humanity, that is, the creation of the Lord, was in danger. But then, after his passion, we see a world where there is the calm of faith, a world at peace and safe for everyone. We see a turning toward God. In this way we may understand how, after Jonah goes into the sea, the sea is alleviated of its turmoil.

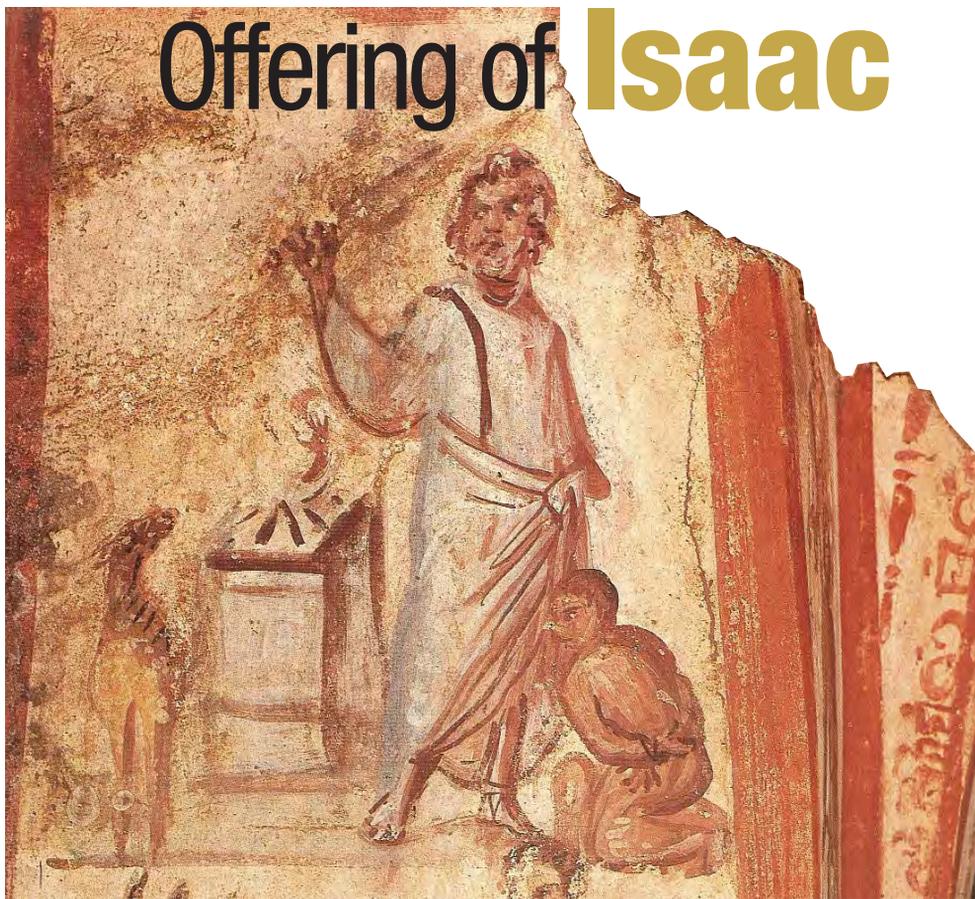
AUGUSTINE, *On Psalm 69*: Thanks to the mercy of him who came into the depth of the sea, and vouchsafed to be swallowed by the sea whale, but was vomited forth the third day. He came into the depth of the sea, in which depth we were thrust down, in which depth we had suffered shipwreck: He came there himself, and the tempest made him sink down: for there he suffered waves, (which are) those very men; tempests, (which are) the voices of men saying, "Crucify, Crucify."

AUGUSTINE, *Letter 102*: ... as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so will the Son of man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. (...) So then, as Jonah went from the ship into the whale's belly, so Christ went from the tree into the tomb, or into the abyss of death. As Jonah was sacrificed for those endangered by the storm, so Christ was offered for those who are drowning in the storm of this world. And as Jonah was first commanded to preach to the Ninevites but his prophecy did not reach them until after the whale had spewed him out, so the prophecy made to the Gentiles did not reach them until after Christ's resurrection. ■



Jonah, late 3rd/early 4th C. tomb slab fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

# Abraham's Offering of Isaac



## ABOVE

Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, 4th C. fresco (Cubiculum C, Catacombs of Via Latina, Rome)

## OPPOSITE PAGE MIDDLE LEFT

Torah Shrine with fresco of Abraham and Isaac mid-3rd C. (top right of niche, Synagogue, Dura Europos)

## OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT

Sacrifice of Isaac, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

## OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM LEFT

Sacrifice of Isaac, early 6th C. floor mosaic (Beth Alpha Synagogue, Galilee) (Israel Antiquities Authority)

## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

**A**braham is the first of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament (cf. Genesis 11–25), the father of the Jewish people and of other nations, since God promised him that his descendants would be as innumerable as the stars. He embodies the absolute faith in Yahweh, and the capacity to change one's life by following God's call whenever and wherever this call takes place. When Isaac, his only son, is still a boy, Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Abraham obeys, lays the wood for the offering on his son's shoulders and goes with him to the place indicated by

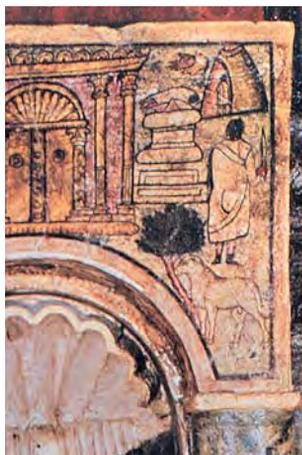
God. At the last moment, he is stopped by an angel and sacrifices a ram instead of Isaac. In Jewish tradition, Genesis 22 (the “binding” of Isaac, called *aqeda*) was a clear symbol of deliverance operated by God’s mercy and was remembered in the liturgy of Passover.

Jewish artistic representations of the scene are to be found at the synagogues of Dura Europos (in Syria) and Beth Alpha (in Israel) (see below).

### Christianity

The scene of Abraham’s offering was very common in

early Christian painting and sculpture. Abraham was usually shown with his arm lifted and emphasis was put on the knife in his hand. Isaac was represented as kneeling in front of his father with his hands bound behind his back; he was never portrayed bound upon an altar until the mid-fourth century. Abraham was considered not only by Jews but also by Christians as their father in faith (cf. Luke 1:72 ff.; Romans 4:1 ff.; Galatians 3:6 ff; Hebrews 11:8 ff; James 2:21 ff.). Early Christians, however, saw his faith both as full trust in God’s power, and as faith in resurrection. According to their interpretation, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son not only because God had asked him to do so but also because he believed that God would resurrect Isaac from the dead (cf. Hebrews 11:17-19). Abraham’s offering was also seen as the foreshadowing of God’s offering of his own Son, and took on Eucharistic connotations (like the sacrifice of Abel and Melchisedek). The figure of Isaac foreshadowed the figure of Christ. Thus Isaac’s deliverance was understood in the light of God’s salvation plan for humankind, and as a prefiguration of the resurrection and redemption from sin. ■



## a) Isaac = Christ

<p><b>The Son offered by the Father</b></p> <p>Isaac, as the beloved son who was going to be offered by his father, foreshadows Christ who is offered by God for the redemption of humankind.</p> <p>Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his shoulders is seen as Christ carrying the cross. Since carrying the wood for the holocaust was the task of a priest, Isaac/Christ is interpreted both as the victim and the priest. The wood of the bush also recalls the wood of the cross.</p> <p>However, unlike Isaac, Christ actually was sacrificed.</p>	<p><b>The Son Resurrected</b></p> <p>As Isaac was spared by God, Christ was resurrected by his Father. Isaac escaping death symbolises Christ coming back to life.</p> <p>The image of Isaac thus recalled the liberating grace of God and its eschatological dimension.</p>	<p><b>The Divine nature of Christ</b></p> <p>Isaac is understood by some authors as embodying the divine nature of Christ. The fact that he was not sacrificed symbolises the immortality of Christ's divine nature.</p> <p>Christ's human nature is rather seen in the figure of the ram that was put to death.</p>	<p><b>The offering of the Eucharist</b></p> <p>The offering of Isaac took on liturgical connotations, symbolising the Eucharist (like other sacrifices, such as Abel's and Melchisedek's).</p>
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## b) Isaac = Humanity

<p><b>Humanity Redeemed from Sin</b></p> <p>Isaac liberated by the hand of God (and unbound) was seen as the foreshadowing of the redemption of humankind from the ties of sin.</p>	<p><b>Humanity resurrected from Death</b></p> <p>The liberation of Isaac was interpreted as the liberation of humanity from the bondage of death by the grace of God through his own Son. It was a symbol of the resurrection promised to all.</p>
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## Ram = Christ

<p><b>The Sacrificial Victim</b></p> <p>The ram put to death clearly recalls the paschal lamb. Caught in the bush, it was understood as Christ with his crown of thorns.</p>	<p><b>The Human Nature of Christ</b></p> <p>The ram was seen as the human nature of Christ suffering passion and death, as opposed to his divine and incorruptible nature represented by Isaac.</p>
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### The sacrifice of Isaac and the Eucharist

Images of Isaac sitting or kneeling on an altar start appearing at the end of the fourth century. In a basilica, they are usually represented close to the altar where the Eucharist is celebrated (such as in this sixth century example in the left lunette above the high altar in the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna).



## Exemplary Faith

IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Against Heresies*: Righteously also the apostles, being of the race of Abraham, left the ship and their father, and followed the Word. Righteously also do we, possessing the same faith as Abraham, and taking up the cross as Isaac did the wood follow Him. For in Abraham man had learned beforehand, and had been accustomed to follow the Word of God. For Abraham, according to his faith, followed the command of the Word of God, and with a ready mind delivered up, as a sacrifice to God, his only-begotten and beloved son, in order that God also might be pleased to offer up for all his seed His own beloved and only-begotten Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 5 (on Faith)*: There is much to tell of faith, and the whole day would not be time sufficient for us to describe it fully. At present let us be content with Abraham only (...). And when, after he had gained his son, he was commanded to offer him up, although he had heard the word, In Isaac will your seed be called, he proceeded to offer up his son, his only son, to God, believing that God is able to raise up even from the dead.

## The Sacrifice of Christ

MELITO OF SARDIS, *Fragments 9-11*: In place of Isaac the just, a ram appeared for slaughter, in order that Isaac might be liberated from his bonds. The slaughter of this animal redeemed Isaac from death. In like manner, the Lord, being slain, saved us; being bound, He loosed us; being sacrificed, He redeemed us... For the Lord was a lamb, like the ram which Abraham saw caught in the bush Sabec. But this bush represented the cross, and that place Jerusalem, and the lamb the Lord bound for slaughter. For as a ram was He bound, says he concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, and as a lamb was He shorn, and as a sheep was He led to the slaughter, and as a lamb was He crucified; and He carried the cross on His shoulders when He was led up to the hill to be slain, as was Isaac by his father. But Christ suffered, and Isaac did not suffer: for he was but a type of Him who should suffer. Yet, even when serving only for a type of Christ, he struck men with astonishment and fear. (...) Isaac on his part is silent, bound like a ram, not opening his mouth, nor uttering a sound with his voice. For, not fearing the knife, nor quailing before the fire, nor troubled by the prospect of suffering, he sustained bravely the character of the type of the Lord. Accordingly there lies Isaac before us, with his feet bound like a ram, his father standing by, with the knife all bare in his hand, not shrinking from shedding the blood of his son... That ram, slain, ransomed Isaac: so also the Lord, slain, saved us... For the Lord was a ram like the ram which Abraham

saw caught in a Sabek-tree. But the tree displayed the cross...

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Instructor*: He is Isaac... , who is a type of the Lord, a child as a son; for he was the son of Abraham, as Christ the Son of God, and a sacrifice as the Lord, but he was not immolated as the Lord. Isaac only bore the wood of the sacrifice, as the Lord the wood of the cross. And he laughed mystically, prophesying that the Lord should fill us with joy, who have been redeemed from corruption by the blood of the Lord. Isaac did everything but suffer, as was right, yielding the precedence in suffering to the Word. Furthermore, there is an intimation of the divinity of the Lord in His not being slain. For Jesus rose again after His burial, having suffered no harm, like Isaac released from sacrifice.

TERTULLIAN, *Against Judaizers*: Isaac, being led by his father to be a victim, and carrying himself the firewood, at that moment was a figure of Christ's death, submitting himself to his father as a victim and logging the wood of his own passion.

TERTULLIAN, *Against Judaizers*: This "wood", again, Isaac the son of Abraham personally carried for his own sacrifice, when God had commended that he should be made a victim to Himself. But, because these had been mysteries which were being kept for perfect fulfilment in the times of Christ, Isaac, on the one hand, with his "wood", was reserved, the ram being offered which was caught by the horns in the bramble; Christ, on the other hand, in His times, carried His "wood" on His own shoulders, adhering to the horns of the cross, with a thorny crown encircling His head. For Him it was necessary to be made a sacrifice on behalf of all Gentiles, who "was led as a sheep for a victim, and, like a lamb voiceless before his shearer, did not open His mouth".

TERTULLIAN, *Against Judaizers*: ...as Saviour; whose "horns" were to be the extremities of the cross. For even in a ship's yard, which is part of a cross, this is the name by which the extremities are called.

AUGUSTINE, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 9*: And who does not see whose figure Abraham's only son was, he who bore the wood for the sacrifice of himself, to that place where he was being led to be offered up? For the Lord bore his own cross, as the Gospel tells us. ■

# Daniel in the Lion's Den



**THIS PAGE:**  
Daniel between two lions with Habakkuk (on the left), 4th C. sarcophagus fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

The book of Daniel in the Old Testament includes both the story of this Jewish prophet and his companions, and Daniel's apocalyptic visions. During the Babylonian captivity, Daniel became an official at the court of Nebuchadnezzar and was asked to interpret his dreams, which he read as warnings to the king. When Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, he issued a decree forbidding prayer to anyone except himself for 30 days. Since Daniel kept praying to Yahweh, he was thrown into a den of lions, but the following day he was found unharmed. The king regretted his command and took him out of the den.

Besides the canonical Old Testament, there are three apocrypha accounts concerning Daniel: "The Song of the Three Holy Children", "The Story of Susanna", and "Bel and the Dragon", underlining its popularity. The story of Daniel highlights the uniqueness of the God of the Israelites and his superiority over all pagan gods. Daniel is a model for prayer. He teaches the faithful to implore God in any place and circumstance.

## Christianity

The figure of Daniel appears in Christian art from the third century onwards. In most scenes he is shown naked, beardless, standing in a frontal position with his arms lifted in prayer like the orant between two lions, who are often represented in a harmless attitude. The character of Daniel takes on different meanings, typifying especially the faith of martyrs and catechumens and the hope in Christ's deliverance. His nakedness, therefore, can be seen as a reference to rebirth both through Baptism and resurrection, although it might also have been influenced by



### ABOVE

The so-called "Capitoline Antinous", or rather a 2nd C. portrait of Hermes, found in Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli (Capitoline Museums, Rome)

### BOTTOM LEFT

Daniel and the lions, 4th C. floor mosaic (Brado Museum, Tunis, Tunisia)

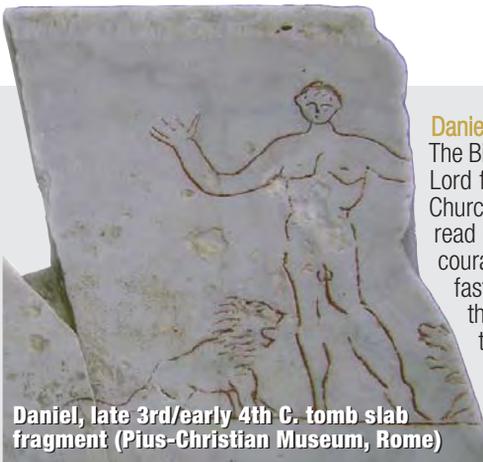
the Greco-Roman iconographic convention of portraying the hero as nude (see above). Another figure starts appearing next to Daniel in the fourth century: a man in a short tunic carrying a loaf of bread (often with a cross on it) on a dish or in a small basket. This is a reference to the prophet Habakkuk who, according to the Bible, was sent by God to help Daniel: "In Judea there was a prophet, Habakkuk; he mixed some bread in a bowl with the stew he had boiled, and was going to bring it to the reapers in the field, when an angel of the Lord told him, 'Take the lunch you have to Daniel in the lions' den at Babylon.' (...) The angel of the Lord seized him by the crown of his head and (...) set him down in Babylon above the den." (Daniel 14:33-36). Habakkuk's bread symbolises the Eucharist and Christ's salvation. ■

### a) Daniel = the Christian

<b>The Faithful praying and trusting in God</b>	Many early Christian authors stressed that it was Daniel's prayer to God that saved him from the lions (see box below). This is why Daniel is often portrayed as a praying figure.
<b>The Faithful fasting</b>	Some authors underline the importance of fasting (Daniel did not eat for six days and was miraculously nourished by God on the seventh day). The Christian who fasts is spiritually nourished by Gods (see box below).
<b>The Faithful receiving the Eucharist</b>	The meal brought by Habakkuk to Daniel in the lion's den is interpreted as the Eucharistic Bread, received by the catechumen after Baptism.
<b>The Baptised</b>	The den is interpreted as the baptismal font. Through Baptism the soul is saved from sin and temptation, as Daniel was saved from the lions.
<b>The Faithful resurrected</b>	Daniel delivered from the den evokes the hope of resurrection in Christ.

### b) Daniel = Christ

<b>Passion and Resurrection</b> Daniel in the den evokes the passion of Christ. Daniel's exit from the den symbolises Christ's resurrection. The den is often seen as the tomb (both are closed by means of a great stone). Daniel's lifted arms are portrayed not only as a sign of prayer but also as a reference to the cross.	<b>Restoration of Paradise</b> Christ brings salvation to the whole of creation. The lions are sometimes represented in a docile attitude. This total lack of aggression symbolises the restoration of Eden, the paradisiac beatitude in which all the universe, including the animals, participates thanks to Christ's salvation.
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Daniel, late 3rd/early 4th C. tomb slab fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

#### Daniel, the lions, the fast

The Bible only mentions a final prayer by Daniel praising the Lord for not forsaking him (cf. Dan 14:38). In the Roman Church – and most likely in others as well – this text was read on Holy Wednesday, during the Lent season, to encourage the faithful to fast. It was also a reference to the fast that candidates preparing for Baptism, together with their relatives, had to observe. Some early Christian authors even mention, with some irony, that Daniel also taught the lions to fast... How could a Christian then be inferior to an irrational animal?

## Faith and Trust in the Lord

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Stromata*: The king of the Babylonians let Daniel down into a pit full of wild beasts; the King of all, the faithful Lord, took him up unharmed. . . . and though shut up with lions, he will tame the wild beasts. . . . He will give his testimony by night; he will testify by day; by word, by life, by conduct, he will testify. Tertullian, *On Fasting*: If to God he was "pitiable", to the lions in the den he was formidable, where, six days fasting, he had breakfast provided him by an angel.

ORIGEN, *On Prayer*: What need is there to tell the tale of those who, through right prayer, have obtained the greatest of things from God, when it is open to everyone to select any number of them for himself from the Scriptures? . . . Through Daniel's prayers the lions in the Babylonians' pit were muzzled. . . . What need is there to go on to tell of all who many a time have fallen among temptations hard to overcome. . . . or again of all the brutes exasperated against us, in the form of wicked spirits or cruel men, that we have encountered and often muzzled by our prayers, so that they were impotent to fasten their fangs in our members which had become those of Christ. Often in each saint's experience the Lord has dashed together the teeth of lions, and they were brought to nothing, as water flowing by.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 2*: (. . .) pray to be forgiven, pray that He may remove from you the burning flames. For confession has power to quench even fire, power to tame even lions.

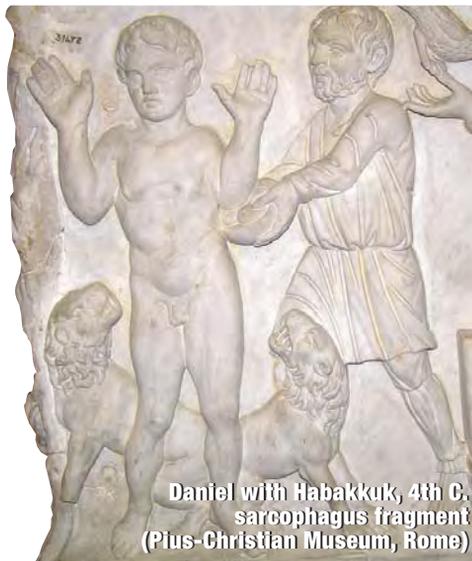
CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 5*: Faith stopped the mouths of lions, as in Daniel's case: for the Scripture says concerning him, that Daniel was brought up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God.

JEROME, *Letter 1*: Let me recall, too, the story of the blessed Daniel, in whose presence, though he was their natural prey, the lions crouched, with fawning tails and frightened mouths.

AUGUSTINE, *On 1 John*: Mark what I say: God, man, beasts: to wit, above you, God; beneath you, the beasts. Acknowledge Him that is above you, that those that are beneath you may acknowledge you. Thus, because Daniel acknowledged God above him, the lions acknowledged him above them.

## Redemption/Resurrection

APHRAATES, *Demonstration 21 (of Persecution)*: Daniel was cast into the pit of lions, and he was delivered and came up out of its midst uninjured; and Jesus was sent down into the pit of the abode of the dead, and He ascended, and death had not dominion over him. Concerning Daniel they expected that when he had fallen into the pit he would not come up again; and concerning Jesus they said, Since He has fallen, He will not rise again. From (harming) Daniel the mouth of the ravenous and destructive lions was closed; and from (harming) Jesus was closed the mouth of death, (though) ravenous and destructive of (living) forms. They sealed the pit of Daniel, and guarded it with diligence; and the grave of Jesus did they guard with diligence, as they said, Set guards to watch at the tomb. When Daniel came up, his accusers were ashamed; and when Jesus rose, all they who had crucified Him were ashamed. (. . .) At the prayer of Daniel, the captivity of his people went up from Babylon; and Jesus by His prayer turned back the captivity of all the nations, Daniel interpreted the visions and dreams of Nebuchadnezzar; and Jesus explained and interpreted the visions of the Law and the Prophets. (. . .) Daniel was led away among the hostages in behalf of his people; and the body of Jesus was a hostage in behalf of all nations. For Daniel's sake the wrath of the King was appeased from the Chaldeans, so that they were not slain; and for Jesus's sake the wrath of His Father was appeased from all nations, so that they were not slain and died not because of their sins. Daniel begged of the king, and he gave his brethren authority over the affairs of the province of Babylon; and Jesus begged of God, and He gave His brethren, His disciples, authority over Satan and his host. ■



Daniel with Habakkuk, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

# The Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace



## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

**T**he Book of Daniel in the Old Testament recounts the story of the three Jewish youths – Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael – who, together with Daniel, were chosen to be trained as officials at the court of Nebuchadnezzar during the Babylonian captivity. When the king set up a golden idol and commanded his subjects to worship it, the three boys refused to do so because of their faith in Yahweh. As a punishment, they were thrown into a fiery furnace, the heat of which was so extreme that it even killed the executioners. Yet, the youths re-

### TOP

Eerily-lit Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus fragment (Pius Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome)

### OPPOSITE PAGE

Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace, late 3rd C. fresco (Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome)

mained unscathed. When the king approached, he was surprised to see four men instead of three: “But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods” (Daniel 3:25). He then commanded the three to come out of the furnace.

The three youths in the fiery furnace were seen as a symbol of Israel’s refusal to worship idols and of the people’s trust in Yahweh’s power.

## Christianity

The image of the three youths in the fiery furnace was used by Christians to symbolise the importance of the witness to Christian faith in the face of persecution. It started appearing both in catacomb paintings (see right) and among sarcophagus reliefs in the third century, when Roman emperors imposed the imperial cult more harshly. The three youths are represented as standing with hands lifted in prayer in a kind of oven or amidst its flames, wearing short tunics and usually Phrygian caps signalling their eastern origins.

## The Three Youths = Christians

<p><b>The Martyrs</b> The three youths refusing to sacrifice to idols were understood as a prefiguration of Christian witnesses to faith. They represented refusal of idolatry, of heresy and, more generally, of the evil values of the world. Their faith was interpreted also as faith in resurrection.</p>	<p><b>The Faithful Praying and Trusting the Lord</b> The image of the three youths suggested that it was essential to address the Lord in any circumstances and underscored the efficacy of communal prayer. Some images showed a fourth character appearing in the background: it could represent Christ himself as a reference to the Gospel's words: "... where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18: 20).</p>	<p><b>The Baptised</b> The youths in the furnace were understood as the faithful who were baptised "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt 3:11). Fire symbolises the destruction of sins. The "moist wind" (Daniel 3:50) was interpreted as the anointing after the baptismal immersion and as the presence of the Spirit. The song of praise sung by the youths evoked the ancient liturgical hymn sung by neophytes after Baptism.</p>	<p><b>The Faithful resurrected</b> The youths who escaped unscathed from the fire evoked the resurrection of the bodies and of the righteous after the final judgement. The refreshing "moist wind" also recalled the <i>refrigerium</i>, ie, the rest of the righteous.</p>
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## The Furnace = The Regeneration of Christians

<p><b>Epiphany of Christ</b> The furnace was seen by some authors as the moment of the epiphany of Christ. Christ manifests himself and rescues whoever invokes him. His presence was sometimes symbolised by a fourth character represented in the background behind the three youths.</p>	<p><b>The Baptismal Font</b> The furnace was interpreted as the baptismal font where the fire of the Spirit would destroy sin and regenerate man.</p>	<p><b>Judgement</b> The furnace was seen as the final judgement of God from which the righteous would exit unscathed to enter paradise. The fire also evokes the voluntary sacrifice of the martyrs.</p>
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This image emphasises the refusal of idolatry and the recognition of the true God. It is often shown in conjunction with the image of the magi (also wearing oriental garments) worshipping the child Jesus. Both scenes are a figurative affirmation of true faith and witness to the divinity of Christ as opposed to false veneration of idols. At the end of the fourth century the image took on a broader symbolic meaning: the faith of the three youths was seen both as resistance to the evil influence of the world, and as faith in the resurrection. Moreover, the three youths, like other Old Testament characters, recalled the importance of prayer and Baptism. The fourth character in the furnace was interpreted as the Angel of the Lord or as Christ himself, who is present amongst those who call his name. ■



## Faith and Trust in the Lord

TERTULLIAN, *On Idolatry*: ...as to what relates to the honours due to kings or emperors, we have a prescript sufficient, that it requires 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 preceded us, who, in other respects obedient toward king Nebuchadnezzar rejected with all constancy the honour to his image, proving that whatever is extolled beyond the measure of human honour, 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.

ORIGEN, *On Prayer*: It was on being heard that Hananiah and Azariah and Mishael became worthy to receive a shining rain and wind which kept the flame of the fire from taking effect... What need is there to go on to tell of all who many a time have fallen among temptations hard to overcome, whose burn was sharper than any flame, and have suffered naught under them but emerged from them in every way unscathed, without so much a scathe as the slightest odour of the hostile fire... Inasmuch as Egypt is an iron furnace and also a symbol of every earthly place, let every one who has escaped from the wickedness of the life of men without having been scorched by sin or having had his heart like an oven full of fire, give thanks no

less than the men who experienced rain amid fire...

APHRAATES, *Demonstration 21 (on Persecution)*: Hananiah also and his brethren were persecuted as Jesus was persecuted... Hananiah and his brethren were cast into the furnace of fire, and it was cold as dew upon the righteous. Jesus also descended to the place of darkness, and burst its gates and brought forth its prisoners... Hananiah and his brethren worshipped not the image of the King of Babylon; and Jesus restrained the nations from the worship of dead images. Because of Hananiah and his brethren, the nations and languages glorified God who had delivered them from the fire and because of Jesus, the nations and all languages will glorify (God) who delivered His Son, so that He saw no corruption. On the garments of Hananiah and his brethren the fire had no power; and on the bodies of the righteous, who have believed in Jesus, the fire will have no power at the end.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 4 of the Homilies concerning the Statues*: Let us then leave to Him the time for the removal of our evils; let us only pray; let us live in piety: for this is our work, to turn to virtue; but to set us free from these evils is God's work! For indeed He is more desirous to quench this fire than you who are tried by it: but He is waiting for your salvation. As tribulation then came of rest, so also after tribulation, rest must be expected. For neither is it always winter, nor always summer; neither are there always waves, nor always a calm; neither always night, nor always day. Thus tribulation is not perpetual, but there will be also repose; only in our tribulation, let us give thanks to God always. For the three youths were cast into the furnace, and did not ▶▶



**The Three Youths and the Angel of the Lord, 3rd/4th C. ceramic lamp (Vatican Museums, Rome)**

even for this forget their piety; neither did the flames of fright them, but more earnestly than men sitting in a chamber, and suffering nothing to alarm them, did they, whilst encircled by the fire, send up to heaven those sacred prayers — therefore the fire became a wall unto them, and the flame a robe; and the furnace was a fountain; and whereas it received them bound, it restored them free. It received bodies that were mortal, but abstained from them as if they had been immortal! It knew their nature, yet it revered their piety! The tyrant bound their feet, and their feet bound the operation of the fire! O marvellous thing! The flame loosed those who were bound, and was itself afterwards bound by those who had been in bonds; for the piety of the youths changed the nature of things; or rather it did not change the nature, but, what was far more wonderful, it stayed the operation of them, even whilst their nature remained. For it did not quench the fire, but though burning, made it powerless. And it was truly marvellous and unaccountable, that this not only happened with respect to the bodies of these saints, but also with respect to their garments, and their shoes. And as it was in the case of the Apostles, the garments of Paul expelled diseases and demons, and the shadow of Peter put death to flight; so indeed also in this case, the shoes of these youths extinguished the power of the fire

## Resurrection

IRENÆUS, *Against Heresies*: ... when Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishaël were cast into the furnace of fire sevenfold heated, they sustained no harm whatever, neither was the smell of fire perceived upon them. As, therefore, the hand of God was present with them, working out marvellous things in their case — (things) impossible (to be accomplished) by man's nature — what wonder was it, if also in the case of those who were translated it performed something wonderful, working in obedience to the will of God, even the Father? Now this is the Son of God, as the Scripture represents Nebuchadnezzar the king as having said, "Did we not cast three men bound into the furnace? and, lo, I do see four walking in the midst of the fire, and the fourth is like the Son of God." Neither the nature of any created thing, therefore, nor the weakness of the flesh, can prevail against the will of God. (...) Wherefore also the Lord declares, "The things which are impossible with men, are possible with God." As, therefore, it might seem to the men of the present day, who are ignorant of God's appointment, to be a thing incredible and impossible that... from the fiery furnace men issued forth unhurt... so also now, although some, not knowing the power and promise of God, may oppose their own salvation, deeming it impossible for God, who raises up the dead; to have power to confer upon them eternal duration, yet the scepticism of men of this stamp will not render the faithfulness of God of no effect.

TERTULLIAN, *On the Resurrection*: that the fires of Babylon injured neither the mitres nor the trousers of the three brethren... to what faith do these notable facts bear witness, if not to that which ought to inspire in us the belief that they are proofs and documents of our own future integrity and perfect resurrection? For, to borrow the apostle's phrase, these were "figures of ourselves"; and they are written that we may believe both that the Lord is more powerful than all natural laws about the body, and that He shows Himself the preserver of the flesh the more emphatically, in that He has preserved for it its very clothes and shoes.

JEROME, *On Daniel*: Let me say again, how wise was the fire and how indescribable the power of God! Their bodies had been bound with chains; those chains were burnt up, whereas the bodies themselves were not burnt. As for the appearance of the fourth man, which he asserts to be like that of a son of God, either we must take him to be an angel, as the Septuagint has rendered it, or indeed, as the majority think, the Lord our Saviour. Yet I do not know how an ungodly king could have merited a vision of the Son of God. On that reasoning one should follow Symmachus, who has thus interpreted it: "But the appearance of the fourth is like unto the sons," not unto the sons of God but unto gods themselves. We are to think of angels here, who after all are very frequently called gods as well as sons of God. So much for the story itself. But as for its typical significance, this angel or son of God foreshadows our Lord Jesus Christ, who descended into the furnace of hell, in which the souls of both sinners and of the righteous were imprisoned, in order that He might without suffering any scorching by fire or injury to His person deliver those who were held imprisoned by chains of death.

## Baptism

EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN, *Hymn on the Epiphany*: The famous Three in Babylon, in the furnace of fire were baptised, and came forth; they went in and bathed in the flood of flame, they were buffeted by the blazing billows. There was sprinkled on them there, the dew that fell from heaven; it loosened off from them there, the bonds of the earthly king. Lo! the famous Three went in and found a fourth in the furnace. That visible fire that triumphed outwardly — pointed to the fire of the Holy Ghost — which is mingled, lo! and hidden in the water. In the flame Baptism is figured, in that blaze of the furnace. Come, enter, be baptised, my brethren, for lo! it looses the bonds; for in it there dwells and is hidden the Daysman of God, who in the furnace was the fourth. ■

# Episodes from the Life of Moses

## Jewish Tradition and Old Testament

In the Old Testament, Moses has four main roles: as leader, the promoter of the religion of Yahweh, lawgiver and moral teacher.

As a resolute leader, he delivers the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt showing them that God is the only source of life and well-being. As the righteous mediator between Yahweh and the Jewish people, he receives Yahweh's revelation and covenant (the Torah), and makes the Israelites aware of their call as the chosen people. As a moral teacher, Moses teaches them to worship the God of their fathers. In their experience of flight from Egypt



and life in the desert, the Israelites discover the omnipotence and mercy of Yahweh who is always willing to forgive them and grant them his constant favour and protection.

All this explains why Moses was seen as the founder of Israel. It is Israel's self-understanding as Yahweh's people that unified it and gave it its specific identity even before the political unification ac-

complished by David (first half of tenth century BC).

The figure of Moses was very popular also in Jewish apocryphal books (eg, Assumption of Moses), which stressed his powers as wonderworker, and in Jewish rabbinical schools, which regarded him as a lawgiver and founder of the oral tradition (ie, the interpretation of the Law). There were also references to his role in messianic eschatology. Some believed that Moses would return, others thought that he might not himself return, but would have a successor, "the prophet like Moses" (Deuteronomy 18:15), the precursor of the Messiah.

## Christianity

Moses representing the Old Covenant was interpreted as





**OPPOSITE PAGE MIDDLE**

Moses and the Burning Bush, mid-3rd C. fresco (Synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria)

**OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM LEFT**

The Exodus/Parting of the Red Sea, mid-3rd C. fresco (Synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria)

**OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM RIGHT**

Moses and the Burning Bush, 5th C. fresco (Chapel of the Exodus, Al-Bagawat Necropolis, Egypt)

**THIS PAGE**

Parting of the Red Sea, early-5th C. mosaic (Basilica of St Mary Major, Rome)

a type of Christ, the founder of the New Covenant (cf. John 1:17), just as Miriam, Moses' sister, often became the prefiguration of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Jesus himself suggested that Moses' words referred implicitly to his own coming and mission (cf. Luke 24:27.44). However, the message of God takes on a universal character with Christ. Whereas Moses calls the Israelites to behave as the Chosen People of Yahweh, Christ calls all hu-

mankind to live like "sons of God". The "*kingdom of priests and holy nation*" of Israel (Exodus 19:6) becomes a type of universal Church, the holy priesthood (cf. 1 Peter 2:5). Moses symbolising the Law (next to Elijah representing the Prophets) is also seen as a foreshadowing of Peter, to whom Christ entrusted the law of the Gospel. The following typologies were applied to Moses in the apostolic writings:

**MOSES**

- 1) HE IS THE MEDIATOR, THE REVEALER, THE FOUNDER OF ISRAEL
- 2) HE GIVES THE LAW
- 3) HE WAS GIVEN MANNA BY GOD IN THE DESERT
- 4) HE LIFTS UP THE SERPENT OF BRASS UPON A POLE SO THAT ISRAEL MIGHT LIVE (NUMBERS 21:8)
- 5) HE RATIFIES THE COVENANT WITH THE BLOOD OF SACRIFICIAL ANIMALS
- 6) HE MUST VEIL HIS FACE BECAUSE, AFTER HIS ENCOUNTER WITH GOD, HIS BRIGHTNESS CANNOT BE LOOKED AT BY THE ISRAELITES

**CHRIST**

- 1) HE IS THE MEDIATOR, THE REVEALER, THE FOUNDER OF THE CHURCH
- 2) HE GIVES THE "NEW LAW"
- 3) HE GIVES THE "BREAD OF LIFE" (I.E. HIMSELF: JOHN 6:32)
- 4) HE LIFTS HIMSELF UP (ON THE CROSS) SO THAT HUMANKIND MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE (JOHN 3:14)
- 5) HE RATIFIES THE NEW COVENANT WITH HIS OWN BLOOD (HEBREWS 9:11-22)
- 6) CHRIST REVEALS THE GLORY OF THE FATHER IN ITS FULLNESS (2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-18).

## a) Moses = Christ

<p><b>The Mediator between God and man</b> Moses is the spokesman of God. Christ is the Word of God.</p>	<p><b>The Deliverer of the people</b> Moses delivers the Jewish people from the slavery of Egypt. Christ delivers humanity from the slavery of sin.</p>	<p><b>The Head of the people</b> Moses is the founder of the Jewish people, since he helps them find their identity in obedience to God. Christ is the founder and the Head of the Church.</p>
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## b) Moses = Peter

<p><b>The Instrument of the Lord</b> Moses is chosen by God to bring the Law to his people. Peter is chosen by Christ to keep his Word alive.</p>	<p><b>The Head of the People</b> Moses is the head of the Jewish people. Peter is the head of the Church of Christ on earth.</p>
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**LEFT**  
Moses makes water flow from the rock, 3rd C. fresco (Catacombs of Callixtus, Rome)

**BELOW**  
The Column of Fire appears in the upper centre of the lunette literally as a column topped by a fire, 3rd C. fresco (Catacomb of Via Latina, Rome)

### Moses's iconographic transformation into Peter

The rock-striking scene (above) in the fourth century is partly linked to the legend recounting Peter's baptizing his jailers with water that gushed forth when he struck the walls of his cell.

### Moses and the cloud

In the Book of Wisdom the cloud (right) is said to represent the wisdom of God (cf. Wisdom 10:17-19; 18:3).





Moses (R) looks on as the Egyptians are caught in the closing waves, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum)

## I. Flight from Egypt

### Crossing of the Red Sea = Death and Rebirth

#### Rebirth after physical death: Resurrection/Harrowing of Hell

The crossing of the sea symbolises the passing of Christ, and of the Christian, from the earthly life to the eternal one.

#### Rebirth after symbolic death: Baptism

The crossing of the sea symbolises the death of sin, and the new life of the Christian through Baptism.

### Egypt/Egyptians = The enemy

#### Ignorance

Egypt/Egyptians represent all that prevents human beings from understanding the call of Christ.

#### Sin/Impure life

Egypt/Egyptians symbolise peoples' slavery to sin and evil instincts.

#### The Devil

Egypt/Egyptians could be also interpreted as the devil himself.

### Column of fire and cloud = Sign of Salvation

#### Christ

The column was sometimes interpreted as Christ who is always present amidst his disciples as the guide of his Church.

#### Double Coming of Christ (Incarnation and Second Coming)

Some authors interpreted the column as the incarnation of Christ, and the fire as his second coming or "parusia".

#### Holy Spirit

The column would also recall the Holy Spirit conferred through Baptism.

## II. Moses striking the Rock in the Desert (and making water flow from it)

### Rock = Dispenser/ Instrument of Salvation

<b>Christ</b>	The rock could symbolise Christ as the source of salvation.
<b>The Church</b>	The rock giving water was seen sometimes as the Church through which the Spirit is dispensed to people.
<b>Preacher/Believer</b>	The rock could also evoke the preacher/believer spreading the Word of salvation.
<b>Peter</b>	The rock symbolised Peter, as the “rock” on which the Church is built.
<b>Tomb</b>	The rock also evoked the tomb from which life gushes out at the moment of resurrection.
<b>Altar for the Eucharist</b>	The altar on which the Eucharist is celebrated is like the rock struck by Moses. The priest touches the altar and the Spirit gushes forth.

### Rod striking the rock = Instrument of Salvation

<b>Spear piercing Jesus’s side</b> (cf. John 19:34) The rock struck by the rod gives water to the thirsty Israelites. Blood and water (representing the Spirit quenching the thirst of the soul) come out from Jesus’s side pierced by the spear of the soldier while he was on the cross.	<b>Cross of Jesus</b> The rod performing miracles was sometimes understood as the cross with its sanctifying power.	<b>Word of God</b> The rod was also interpreted as the Word of God in its capacity to rule the elements and generate life.
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#### Moses striking the rock

*Here, then, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? [...]” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? [...]” The Lord answered Moses, “Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand, as you go, the staff with which you struck the river. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink.” [...] The place was called Massah and Meribah [...]. (Exodus 17:3-7)*

#### The rock of Israel, the rod of God

In the Old Testament, Yahweh is the rock of Israel that supports his people and gives it strength (cf. Psalm 73:26). The rod of Moses is not a magic wand. Jewish tradition underlines that it is the “rod

of God”, created at the origin of the world, cut in a branch from the tree of life or in a zaphire of the throne of God. On this rod the letters of the glorious Name of Yahweh are carved. This is why the rod also represents the Word of God that created the world and has power over the elements. At the time of salvation, it will be again in the hands of the Messiah.

#### Water/blood from the rock

According to Rabbinic tradition, the water from the rock represented: a) the Torah (the Word of God); b) the primordial spring in the garden of Eden (the return to the original condition); c) the waters from the temple of Jerusalem at the end of time (the transformation of the world into a new paradise). Blood gushed forth from the rock when it was struck by Moses’ rod.

## Water from the Rock = Salvation

<b>Holy Spirit</b>	<b>(Blood of the) Eucharist</b>	<b>(Water of) Baptism</b>	<b>Teaching of Christ</b>
Water symbolises the Holy Spirit quenching the thirst of the soul.	Water is sometimes interpreted as the vivifying blood of Christ received by the faithful in the Eucharist as a sign of God's grace.	Water recalls the water of Baptism, which not only purifies the faithful but also quenches their spiritual thirst (a cup of water was given during Baptism to the catechumens).	The spring of water is understood as the teaching of Christ that never runs dry and makes the life of the faithful fertile. The blows to the rock (to make the water gush out) are sometimes seen as the questions asked by Christians trying to understand the Scriptures.



Water gushes from the rock, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)

### Figures drinking the water

Two or three smaller figures drinking the water are often represented in the scenes of Moses striking the rock. These are the faithful dressed like soldiers to symbolise their Baptismal "enlisting". In fact the enlistment in the army entailed an oath called *sacramentum*, like the *sacramentum* of baptism with which the faithful pledged to renounce sin and live according to the teaching of Jesus. For instance, we read "...in every

way make your own soul safe, by fastings, prayers, almsgivings, and reading the oracles of God; that having lived the rest of your life in the flesh in soberness and godly doctrine, you may enjoy the one salvation which flows from Baptism; and thus enrolled in the armies of heaven by God and the Father, may also be deemed worthy of the heavenly crowns, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom be the glory for ever and ever".

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 4*

## The Crossing of the Red Sea

TERTULLIAN, *On Baptism*: How many, therefore, are the pleas of nature, how many the privileges of grace, how many the solemnities of discipline, the figures, the preparations, the prayers, which have ordained the sanctity of water? First, indeed, when the people, set unconditionally free, escaped the violence of the Egyptian king by crossing over through water, it was water that extinguished the king himself, with his entire forces. What figure more manifestly fulfilled in the sacrament of baptism? The nations are set free from the world by means of water, that is: and the devil, their old tyrant, they leave quite behind, overwhelmed in the water.

GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On Baptism*: Again, according to the view of the inspired Paul, the people itself, by passing through the Red Sea, proclaimed the good tidings of salvation by water. The people passed over, and the Egyptian king with his host was engulfed, and by these actions this Sacrament was foretold. For even now, whensoever the people is in the water of regeneration, fleeing from Egypt, from the burden of sin, it is set free and saved; but the devil with his own servants (I mean, of course, the spirits of evil), is choked with grief, and perishes, deeming the salvation of men to be his own misfortune.

AMBROSE, *On the Mysteries*: You observe that even then holy baptism was prefigured in that passage of the Hebrews, wherein the Egyptian perished, the Hebrew escaped. For what else are we daily taught in this sacrament but that guilt is swallowed up and error done away, but that virtue and innocence remain unharmed?

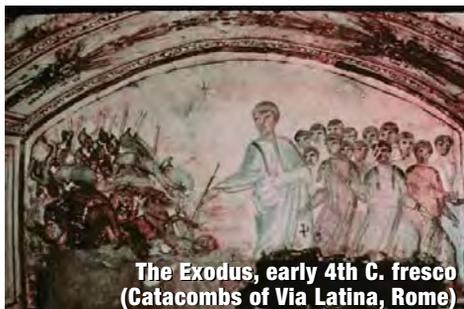
AUGUSTINE, *On Psalm 78*: For He that "did burst open the sea and made them go through, did confine the waters as it were in bottles" (Ver. 13), in order that the water might stand up first as if it were shut in, is able by His grace to restrain the flowing and ebbing tides of carnal desires, when we renounce this world, so that all sins having been thoroughly washed away, as if they were enemies, the people of the faithful may be made to pass through by means of the Sacrament of Baptism.

## The Column of Fire and Cloud

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-2: *I want you to be quite certain, brothers, that our ancestors all had the cloud over them and all passed through the sea. In the cloud and in the sea they were all baptised into Moses; all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink, since they drank from the spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ.*

AUGUSTINE, *On Psalm 78*: He that "led them home in the

cloud of the day, and in the whole of the night in the illumination of fire" (Ver. 14), is able also spiritually to direct goings if faith cries to Him, . . . through Jesus Christ our Lord, whose Sacrament in this world, as it were in the day, is manifest in the flesh, as if in a cloud; but in the Judgement it will be manifest as in a terror by night; for then there will be a great tribulation of the world as if it were fire, and it will shine for the just and burn for the unjust.



The Exodus, early 4th C. fresco (Catacombs of Via Latina, Rome)

## The Rock struck by Moses and the Water from the Rock

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-4: *I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*

JOHN 1:42: *He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter) (rock in Aramaic (Kepha) and Greek (petra)).*

JOHN 4:14: *...but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*

JOHN 7:37-38: *On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart will flow rivers of living water.'"*

JOHN 19:34: *Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.*

MATTHEW 16:18: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.* ►►

JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue with Trypho*: And our hearts are thus circumcised from evil, so that we are happy to die for the name of the good Rock, which causes living water to burst forth for the hearts of those who by Him have loved the Father of all, and which gives those who are willing to drink of the water of life.

TERTULLIAN, *On Baptism*: This is the water which flowed continuously down for the people from the “accompanying rock”; for if Christ is “the Rock”, without doubt we see baptism blessed by the water in Christ.

TERTULLIAN, *On Baptism*: Again, water is restored from its defect of “bitterness” to its native grace of “sweetness” by the tree of Moses. That tree was Christ, restoring, namely, of Himself, the veins of sometime envenomed and bitter nature into the all-salutary waters of baptism. This is the water which flowed continuously down for the people from the “accompanying rock”; for if Christ is “the Rock”, without doubt we see baptism blessed by the water in Christ.

AMBROSE, *On the Mysteries*: Now consider whether the bread of angels be more excellent or the Flesh of Christ, which is indeed the body of life. That manna came from heaven, this is above the heavens; that was of heaven, this is of the Lord of the heavens; that was liable to corruption, if kept a second day, this is far from all corruption, for whosoever will taste it wholly will not be able to feel corruption. For them water flowed from the rock, for you Blood flowed from Christ; water satisfied them for a time, the Blood satiates you for eternity.

AUGUSTINE, *On Psalm 78*: “He that burst open the rock in the desert, and gave them water as in a great deep” (Ver. 15); “and brought out water from the rock, and brought down waters like rivers” (Ver. 16), is surely able upon thirsty faith to pour the gift of the Holy Spirit (...) from the Spiritual Rock that followed, which is Christ: who did stand and cry, “If any is thirsty, let him come to Me”: and, “he that will have drunk of the water which I will give, rivers of living water will flow out of his bosom.” For this He spoke, as is read in the Gospel, to the Spirit, which they were to receive that believed in

Him, unto whom like the rod drew near the wood of the Passion, in order that there might flow forth grace for believers.

AUGUSTINE, *On Psalm 63*: Evil is the desert, horrible, and to be feared: and nevertheless God has pitied us, and has made for us a way in the desert, Himself our Lord Jesus Christ: and has made for us a consolation in the desert, in sending to us preachers of His Word: and has given to us water in the desert, by fulfilling with the Holy Spirit His preachers, in order that there might be created in them a well of water springing up unto life everlasting.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Baptismal Instructions 3*: Moses struck the rock and made streams of water flow; this other Moses (the priest) touches the (Eucharistic) table, striking the spiritual board, and makes the fountains of the Spirit gush forth. Consequently, the table (ie, the altar), like the fountain, lies in the middle, in order that the flocks may surround the fountain on every side and enjoy the benefit of the saving waters.

### Moses's rod

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lecture 13*: On each occasion life comes by means of wood. For in the time of Noah the preservation of life was by an ark of wood. In the time of Moses the sea, on beholding the emblematical rod, was abashed at him who struck it; is then Moses's rod mighty, and is the Cross of the Saviour powerless? But I pass by the greater part of the types, to keep within measure. The wood in Moses's case sweetened the water; and from the side of Jesus the water flowed upon the wood. The beginning of signs under Moses was blood and water; and the last of all Jesus's signs was the same. First, Moses changed the river into blood; and Jesus at the last gave forth from His side water with blood.

AMBROSE, *On the Mysteries*: Marah was a fountain of most bitter water: Moses cast wood into it and it became sweet. For water without the preaching of the Cross of the Lord is of no avail for future salvation, but, after it has been consecrated by the mystery of the saving cross, it is made suitable for the use of the spiritual layer and of the cup of salvation. As, then, Moses, that is, the prophet, cast wood into that fountain, so, too, the priest utters over this font the proclamation of the Lord's cross, and the water is made sweet for the purpose of grace. ■



Water gushes from the rock,  
3rd/4th C. sarcophagus (Pius-Christian Museum, Rome)



### III. Images

Photographs taken by Raffaella Fazio Smith/Anthony Smith unless stated. (PCSA = Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, PD = public domain, or rights holder unknown)

#### 1. Approaching Early Christian Art

(p. 10-15)

Christ as the Risen Lord among his disciples, late 4th C. apse mosaic, Basilica of St Pudentiana, Rome.

Adam and Eve, 4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

The Good Shepherd and the Orant, 4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

3-D reconstruction of the pagan Basilica of Maxentius, "RomeReborn". (UCLA)

3-D reconstruction of the interior of the Basilica of St Sabine, consecrated in 422 AD. (Riches Heures)

Catacombs of St Callixtus, Rome. (PCSA)

Basilica of St Mary Major, Rome. (PD)

Scene from inside the Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Fresco of the Holy Family, Catacombs of St Gennaro, Naples (by AlMare) (WikiMedia Commons).

Neonian Baptistry, Ravenna. (PD)

Sopianae/Pécs Necropolis, Hungary (by uzo19) (WikiMedia Commons).

Al-Bagawat Necropolis, Egypt. (by Rohan Rogers) (Flickr)

#### 2. The Good Shepherd

(p. 16-21)

The Sarcophagus of the Good Shepherd from the Catacomb of Praetextatus, Rome, 390s AD, now in the Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

The Hermes Kriophoros, ram-carrying deity, early 5th C. BC Greek statue, Barracco Museum, Rome. (Musei di Roma)

Shepherds and sheep from the late 4th C. mosaic of Elijah's apotheosis, St Lawrence's Basilica, Milan. (by Giovanni Dall'Orto) (WikiMedia Commons)

Good Shepherd, (gold-leafed) relief on 4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Christ with the disciples and sheep, 4th C.

sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

The Good Shepherd, engraving on marble slab, Epigraphy Museum, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome. (by Kleuske) (WikiMedia Commons)

Good Shepherd, 4th C. floor mosaic, The National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia. (PD)

#### 3. The Orant

(p. 22-27)

The Orant, 4th C. fresco inside the *Confessio*, Roman Domus on the Celio, Rome. (PCSA)

*Pietas* in the orant pose, 3rd C. Roman coin. (PD)

Cicero writing his letters, woodcut, 1547. (PD)

The figures representing the 12 Jewish tribes are depicted in the orant position as Moses performs the Miracle of the Water, 3rd C. fresco Dura Europas synagogue, Syria. (PD)

Moses between Aaron and Hur, the Victory over Amalek, 5th C. mosaic, Basilica of St Mary Major, Rome. (PD)

Tomb slab decorated with orant, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Orant-like Crucifixion scene, 5th C. wooden carving on the doors of the Basilica of St Sabine, Rome.

Orant, 5th C. enamel, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Orant, 4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Orant on the tomb slab of "Maxsiminus", Basilica of St Mary in Trastevere, Rome.

#### 4. Orpheus/David Playing the Lyre

(p. 28-33)

Orpheus surrounded by animals, Roman floor mosaic, Regional Archeological Museum of Palermo. (by Giovanni Dall'Orto) (WikiMedia Commons)

Christ as Orpheus, 4th C., possibly a funerary stele, Byzantine Museum, Athens, Greece. (PD)

King David as Orpheus, floor mosaic, 508-9 AD, the Synagogue near Gaza City, Palestine.

Orpheus mosaic, 175-200 AD, Musée St Romain-en-Gal, Vienne, France. (PD)  
Christ as Orpheus, 3rd C. fresco, Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome. (PCSA)  
Orpheus/Christ as Adam on a 5th C. ivory in the Bargello Museum, Florence. (PD)  
Orpheus enchants the animals, 2nd/3rd C. floor mosaic, Museum of Zaragoza, Spain. (PD)  
Christ as Orpheus, 3th/4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

## 5. The Teacher/Philosopher

(p. 34-39)

Christ amongst the disciples, 4th C. apse mosaic, once part of a Roman imperial mausoleum, now inside the Sant'Aquilino chapel of St Lawrence's Basilica, Milan. (by Giovanni Dall'Orto) (WikiMedia Commons)  
"The Sermon on the Mount"= Christ as teacher/ philosopher, 4th C. polychrom slab, Palazzo Massimo Rome National Museum, Rome.

Plato's Academy, 1st C. floor mosaic from Pompeii, Naples Museum of Archaeology.

*Traditio Legis* - Christ hands the Law to St Peter and St Paul, 4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

*Largitio* on the north face, right side of the Arch of Constantine, Rome. (PD)

Lithograph of Galen by Pierre Roche Vignerot (Paris, ca. 1865). (PD)

*Traditio Legis*, sarcophagus fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

## 6. The Chariot and Charioteer

(p. 40-45)

Christ/Elijah on a chariot, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Apotheosis of Elijah/Helios, early 6th C. "Zodiac" floor mosaic, Beth Alpha Synagogue, Galilee (Israel Antiquities Authority). (PD)

The Julio-Claudian prince Germanicus Caesar atop a quadriga, 31-47AD, a bronze "dupondius" coin. (PD)

Christ as Helios the Charioteer, ca 250 AD mosaic, Tomb M, Vatican Necropolis, Rome. (PCSA)

Elijah, on the chariot, hands Elisha his cloak, 4th C. sarcophagus, St Ambrose's Basilica, Milan. (by Giovanni Dall'Orto)

(WikiMedia Commons)

Elijah, on the chariot, hands Elisha his cloak, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Leaf disc dedicated to Sol Invictus. 3rd C. (by Marie-Lan Nguyen) (WikiMedia Commons)

## 7. Adam and Eve

(p. 46-49)

Adam and Eve, possibly 3rd C., tomb slab fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Adam and Eve, 4th C. sarcophagus relief, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Adam and Eve, 3rd C. fresco, Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome. (PCSA)

Adam and Eve, 4th C. sarcophagus, Musée Saint Raymond, Toulouse, France. (PD)

## 8. Noah and the Flood

(p. 50-57)

Noah reaches for the olive branch carried by the dove, 4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Deucalion and Pyrrha after the Flood, 3rd C. pagan sarcophagus. (unknown origin) (PD)

Fresco of Noah's Ark in the 5th C. Chapel of the Exodus, Al-Bagawat Necropolis, Egypt. (by Isber Melhem/Mahmoud Zibawi)

Noah, his family and the animals on the Ark, cast of 4th C. relief, Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier, Germany. (PD)

Noah in the Ark, 3rd C. fresco, Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome. (PCSA)

Noah, 4th C. sarcophagus relief, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Noah, 4th C. sarcophagus relief, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

Noah in the Ark, 3rd C. fresco, Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome. (PCSA)

## 9. Jonah

(p. 58-63)

The Jonah sarcophagus, late 3rd C., Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

The moon-goddess Selene approaches the sleeping Endymion, Bardo Museum, Tunis, Tunisia. (PD)

Ariadne laments her abandonment by Theseus, 3rd C. pagan sarcophagus, Rome National Museum of the Baths, Rome.

Jonah is swallowed by the Sea Creature, early 4th C floor mosaic, Patriarchal Basilica, Aquileia, Italy. (PD)  
Jonah reclining under a vine, early 4th C. floor mosaic, Patriarchal Basilica, Aquileia, Italy. (PD)  
Jonah reclining, 3rd C. fresco, Chamber of the Sacraments, Catacombs of St Callixtus, Rome. (PCSA)  
Jonah, late 3rd/early 4th C. tomb slab fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

### 10. Abraham's Offering of Isaac

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Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, 4th C. fresco, Cubiculum C, Catacombs of Via Latina, Rome. (PCSA)  
Torah Shrine with Abraham and Isaac on top right above the niche, mid-3rd C. synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria. (PD)  
Sacrifice of Isaac, early 6th C. floor mosaic, Beth Alpha Synagogue, Galilee, Israel. (Israel Antiquities Authority) (PD)  
Sacrifice of Isaac, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.  
Sacrifice of Isaac, 6th C., St Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. (PD)

### 11. Daniel in the Lion's Den

(p. 68-71)

Daniel between two lions with Habakkuk (on the left), 4th C. sarcophagus fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.  
The so-called "Capitoline Antinous", or rather a 2nd C. portrait of Hermes, from Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, Capitoline Museums, Rome.  
Daniel and the lions, 4th C. floor mosaic, Brado Museum, Tunis, Tunisia. (PD)  
Daniel, late 3rd/early 4th C. tomb slab fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.  
Daniel with Habakkuk, 4th C. sarcophagus fragment, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

### 12. The Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace

(p. 72-75)

Eerily-lit Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus fragment, Pius-

Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.  
Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace, late 3rd C. fresco, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome. (PCSA)  
The Three Youths and the Angel of The Lord, 3rd/4th C. ceramic lamp, Vatican Museums, Rome.

### 13. Episodes from the Life of Moses

(p. 76-83)

Moses and the Burning Bush, mid-3rd C. fresco, Synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria. (PD)  
The Exodus/Parting of the Red Sea, mid-3rd C. fresco, Synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria. (PD)  
Moses and the Burning Bush, 5th C. fresco, Chapel of the Exodus, Al-Bagawat Necropolis, Egypt. (PD)  
Parting of the Red Sea, early-5th C. mosaic, Basilica of St Mary Major, Rome. (PD)  
Moses makes water flow from the rock, 3rd C. fresco, Catacombs of Callixtus, Rome. (PCSA)  
The Column of Fire appears in the upper centre of the lunette literally as a column topped by a fire, in this 3rd C fresco from the Catacomb of Via Latina, Rome. (PCSA)  
Moses looks on as the Egyptians are caught in the closing waves, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.  
Water gushes from the rock, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.  
The Exodus, early 4th C. fresco, Catacomb of Via Latina, Rome. (PCSA)  
Water gushes from the rock, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.

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*Traditio Legis* - Christ hands the Law to the Apostle Peter, 4th C mosaic, Mausoleum of St Constance, Rome.  
Orant, 3rd/4th C. sarcophagus relief, Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican Museums, Rome.



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ISBN No. 978-1-329-78960-9  
eBook price: \$0.00

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ISBN 978-1-329-78960-9



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