

Art & Religion

EASTER HOPE

IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

AMONG THE FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS THAT HAVE SHAPED CULTURES THROUGHOUT TIME IS CERTAINLY THE HOPE IN A LIFE AFTER DEATH. SINCE THE VERY BEGINNING CHRISTIANS HAVE CENTRED THEIR MESSAGE AROUND SUCH A HOPE BY PROCLAIMING TO THE WORLD: "CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD, AS THE FIRST-FRUITS OF ALL WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP" (1 CORINTHIANS 15:20). THIS TRUSTING EXPECTATION IS THE CORE OF THE EASTER MYSTERY, WHICH CELEBRATES CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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While the hope in a 'further' existence after an earthly life was shared by many cultures,

Christian faith was original for two main reasons. In contrast with some Hellenistic philosophical schools and Gnostic groups, Christians did not simply believe in the immortality of the soul as a way of escaping the prison of a perishable body, but proclaimed the resurrection of the flesh, ie, of the whole human being, body and soul together. Furthermore, according to them, life after death was neither a blurred continuation of their current existence through

the extinction of vital forces in a barren kingdom of shadows (such as the *Sheol* of

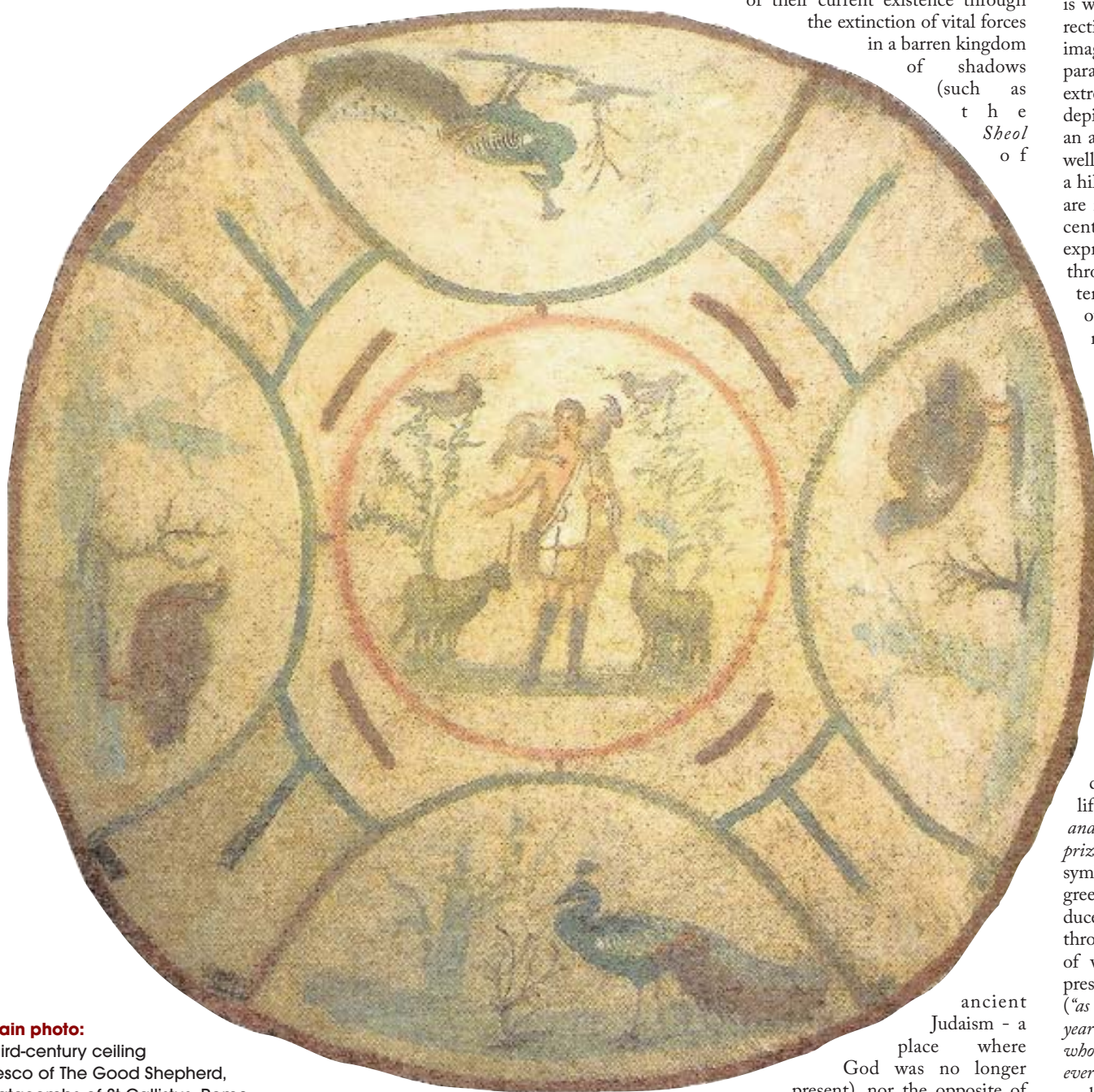
announced an everlasting life as a fulfilment of time, ie, the fulfilment of something that had already started. This something is the kingdom of God, which Jesus brought to the world and which is always present thanks to the vivifying work of the Spirit and the sacraments. This is why past, present and future are always strictly bound in the Christian eschatological vision.

EARLY CHRISTIAN ART'S SYMBOLIC CHARACTER

This hope in the resurrection was the underlying message of early Christian art (we usually speak of a period starting from the third century), which was mainly funerary (catacomb frescoes and sarcophagi) and, therefore, particularly appropriate to convey such a vision. However, it is worth noting that references to resurrection used symbolic rather than explicit images. Actual representations either of paradise or the last judgement are indeed extremely rare in early Christian art. And depictions of the empty tomb guarded by an angel and/or visited by the women as well as representations of Christ climbing a hill to heaven (signifying his ascension) are relatively late, beginning in the fifth century. The most common way of expressing Easter hope was either through typologies, ie, Biblical characters/episodes foreshadowing Christ's own mystery, or emblematic elements/scenes.

TYPICAL SCENES AND MOTIFS

Among the latter, to mention just a few, we often find mealy scenes anticipating the heavenly banquets prepared by the Lord for the righteous ("many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the kingdom of Heaven": Matthew 8:11; "you will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom": Luke 22:30); bucolic motifs/landscapes evoking the peace of a blessed afterlife in accordance with the original harmony of God's creation; crowns of leaves as a reference to a special kind of victory, namely the victory over death and the reward for a virtuous life ("even if you have to die, keep faithful, and I will give you the crown of life for your prize": Revelation 2:10); palm trees as symbols of eternity because of their ever-green leaves and the fact that they reproduce from their own scions and not through seeds; deer approaching streams of water alluding to Christ's vivifying presence as the source of everlasting life ("as a deer yearns for running streams, so I yearn for you, my God": Psalm 42:1; "no one who drinks the water that I shall give will ever be thirsty again": John 4:14); the peacock, the flesh of which was thought to be incorruptible, also suggesting the stars with its tail full of "eyes", as well as con-



Main photo: Third-century ceiling fresco of The Good Shepherd, Catacombs of St Callistus, Rome

ancient Judaism - a place where God was no longer present), nor the opposite of their earthly existence in a totally disconnected dimension. Christians



templation; the phoenix that was believed to raise from its own ashes and flames (*"But the Greeks ask for a resurrection of the dead still manifest [...] and they require to see distinctly some creature rise again after complete decay. God knew men's unbelief; and provided for this purpose a bird, called a Phoenix [...] Has then a resurrection from the dead been given to this irrational creature which knows not its Maker, and to us who ascribe glory to God and keep His commandments, shall there no resurrection be granted?"*: Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 18).

KEYS TO BIBLICAL SCENES

As for the biblical scenes symbolising resurrection, we find typologies both from the Old and the New Testaments. Before describing some of them, I wish to recall something I mentioned in a previous article (see *TRF issue 7/06, November 2006*), namely the fact that Christian images had a three-fold dimension: 1) the dimension of the past, as reminders of events in the history of salvation; 2) the dimension of the present, as references to the sacraments of baptism and/or Eucharist characterising the life of the faithful; 3) the dimension of the future, as allusions to the judgement and/or resurrection. Therefore, while I will focus here only on this third facet, it is worth bearing in mind that each image also encompassed the other two: as we said before, the fulfilment of time is thought to be the fulfilment of God's kingdom that has already started in Christ, and Christ's mystery has already been foreshadowed in pre-Christian times.

Let's start with one of the most recurrent images: the good shepherd. This figure was usually represented as a beardless youth with a sheep or ram on his shoulders (sometimes carrying a bucket of milk), wearing a short tunic and boots. When it was in a garden or bucolic landscape, it was understood as Christ returning to heaven and bringing the redeemed humanity (the lost sheep) back to its original uncorrupted nature. Thus the sheep carried back to its fold alludes to the soul who is welcomed in heaven. The flock made out of 100 sheep (*"suppose a man has a hundred sheep and one of them strays; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray?"*: Matthew 18:12) was interpreted by some authors as the totality of the spiritual creatures (human beings and angels) or/and the fulfilment of the history of salvation.

With an even stronger eschatological connotation, the image of Jonah suggested the hope in the eternal life. The oldest known scenes are the frescoes in the Roman Catacomb of Callistus, in the chamber of the sacra-

Top left

Reclining Jonah in Aquatic Scene, 4th century floor mosaic, Basilica of Aquileia

Middle right

Sacrifice of Isaac, 3rd century fresco, Hypogaeum of Via Latina, Rome

Bottom right

Three boys in the fiery furnace, 4th century sarcophagus, Vatican Museums, Rome

ments, dating back to the third century. The story of this Old Testament prophet was usually summarised in a series of three or four episodes focussing on Jonah's being thrown overboard and swallowed by a 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. This posture was inspired by the classical figure of Endymion, the handsome shepherd who kept both beauty and youth forever, since 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 him every night. Both Endymion and Jonah 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. This latter character was interpreted both as Christ and the Christian. Jonah thrown into the sea was understood as Christ dying and defeating the power of Hell. As Jonah himself asked the sailors to be thrown into the sea, likewise Christ's death was a voluntary sacrifice. As Jonah was delivered from the sea creature after three days, Christ resurrected on the third day. But Jonah's journey was also seen as the last journey of the soul after death. Jonah resting under the plant represented the righteous waiting for the universal resurrection of all humankind in the Day of the Lord.

Early Christian art also included another typological image which was not only a clear reference to God's delivery action but also an allusion to Christ's resurrection. It was the scene of Abraham's offering of his son Isaac. Abraham was usually shown with his arm lifted, and emphasis put on the knife in his hand. Isaac was represented as kneeling in front of his father with his hands bound behind his back. Abraham was considered both by Jews and Christians as their father in faith. Early Christians, however, interpreted his faith not only as full trust in God's mercy and power, but also as faith in the resurrection: Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son not only because God had asked him to do so but also because he believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead. The very deliverance of Isaac was understood as a foreshadowing of Christ's resurrection. As Isaac was spared by God, Christ was resurrected by His Father. More specifically, Isaac was seen by some authors as a reference to the divine nature of Christ, which is immortal, whereas Christ's human nature was thought to be symbolised by the figure of the ram that was put to death.

The figure of Daniel, which appeared in Christian art in the third century, also evoked the faith in a life after death. In most scenes he was shown naked, beardless, standing in a frontal position with his arms lifted in prayer between two lions often represented in a harmless attitude. His nakedness could be seen as a reference to rebirth both through baptism and resurrection, although it might also have been influenced by the Greco-Roman iconographic convention of portraying the hero as nude. Daniel in the den typifies the passion of Christ (his lifted arms are a sign of prayer but also an allusion to the cross); the den foreshadows the tomb (both are closed by means of a great stone). Daniel's exit

from the den symbolises Christ's resurrection. The docile attitude of the two lions is also a reference to the restoration of paradise entailing the whole creation - including the fiercest beasts - thanks to the reconciling work of Christ.

Another typology started appearing both in catacomb paintings (see the frescoes in the catacomb of Priscilla) and among sarcophagi reliefs in the third century: it was the image of the three youths in the fiery furnace (from the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament) who were 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 youths who escaped unscathed from the fire evoked the resurrection of the bodies. The furnace was seen indeed as the final judgement of God from which the righteous would exit unharmed to enter paradise. The refreshing "moist wind" (Daniel 3:50) recalled the refrigerium as a symbol of eternal rest. The fire also evoked the voluntary sacrifice of the martyrs.

The aforementioned images are only a small 'sample' of a much wider iconographical



programme which cannot be examined in depth in this article (for example, Jesus' raising of Lazarus was also interpreted as a foreshadowing of the universal resurrection). Suffice to say that early Christian art, through the coexistence of its rich symbolic layers, was meant to convey the dearest hope of the faithful: the hope in a peaceful afterlife in the presence of the Lord and in the communion with the other departed. This is what Christians celebrate when they enter the Easter mystery.

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