

PLEASE READ BEFORE PRINTING!

PRINTING AND VIEWING ELECTRONIC RESERVES



Printing tips:

- To reduce printing errors, **check the “Print as Image”** box, under the “Advanced” printing options.
- To print, **select the “printer” button** on the Acrobat Reader toolbar. **DO NOT print using “File>Print...”** in the browser menu.
- If an article has multiple parts, print out only **one part at a time**.
- If you experience difficulty printing, come to the Reserve desk at the Main or Science Library. Please provide the location, the course and document being accessed, the time, and a description of the problem or error message.
- For patrons off campus, please email or call with the information above:

Main Library: mainresv@uga.edu or 706-542-3256 Science Library: sciresv@uga.edu or 706-542-4535



Viewing tips:

- **The image may take a moment to load.** Please scroll down or use the page down arrow keys to begin viewing this document.
- Use the **“zoom”** function to increase the size and legibility of the document on the screen. The “zoom” function is accessed by selecting the **“magnifying glass”** button on the Acrobat Reader toolbar.

NOTICE CONCERNING COPYRIGHT

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproduction of copyrighted material.

Section 107, the “Fair Use” clause of this law, states that under certain conditions one may reproduce copyrighted material for criticism, comment, teaching and classroom use, scholarship, or research without violating the copyright of this material. Such use must be non-commercial in nature and must not impact the market for or value of the copyrighted work.

Electronic Reserves materials are connected to an instructor’s reserve list. By accessing this password protected document, you are verifying that you are enrolled in this course and are using this document for coursework.

The complete text of the U.S. copyright law is on Reserve at both the Main Library and Science Library Reserve Desks.

Early Christian Views of Visual Art: Historical Analyses

The very fact that we may study Christian art from the turn of the third century is likely due to the fortuitous survival of certain sites, in particular those that were underground (catacombs) and safe from future



Fig. 5. Jonah at rest: Scene from Jonah cycle, Catacomb of Callistus, Rome (© The International Catacomb Society. Photo: Estelle Brettman).

Fig. 6. Moses striking the rock in the wilderness, Catacomb of Callistus, Rome (© The International Catacomb Society. Photo: Estelle Brettman).



urban renewal or deliberate destruction during earlier eras of persecution or later periods of Christian iconoclasm (especially in the eastern part of the Empire). Because of such vicissitudes of survival, whether the corpus of catacomb art points to a significant change or development in Christian tradition and practice around the turn of the third century may be a debatable point. However, the absence of any significant and definitively Christian artworks prior to this time has often been

taken as evidence that, for a century and a half, the church had no large body of clearly recognizable visual art of its own. If this is so, the painting of these catacombs signaled a watershed moment, when the church changed its habits, traditions, convictions, or values and created a distinct form of art where there once was none—a form based on a combination of familiar and newly invented motifs.

The positing of such a radical shift suggests a possible theological or social transformation within the community—a change of perspective that allowed something to exist that would have been seen as problematic in the previous era. Alternatively, this shift may merely imply a

change in the community's social or economic circumstances. Historians have offered different theories to account for this change of pattern. To some interpreters, earlier generations of Christians consciously decided that visual art was to be rejected because it amounted to idolatry and was tainted with the vanity of pagan decadence. For these interpreters, Christians were acting like law-abiding Jews, taking the prohibition of graven images to heart, thus neither making nor using fig-



urative artworks (despite evidence that actually demonstrates a widespread use of figurative art among Jews—see below). The production of visual art at the beginning of the third century consequently indicates a change in attitude toward that prohibition, perhaps capitulating to popular culture, or extending a grudging tolerance to new converts who were less zealous or theologically conscious and wished to continue their traditional pagan practice of embellishing their family tombs (at least) with images.⁴

A different theory takes a more progressive and positive view of the development of recognizably Christian examples of visual art. Instead of seeing the advent of visual art in Christianity as a signal of the loosening of discipline or a mark of decadence, this view argues that the appearance of art was a natural development of an evolving faith, as it came to have its own modes of expression and communication. If one assumes that such new modes require a period of gestation before they emerge on the scene, then it stands to reason that Christians first used those symbols and motifs that were available and generally understood, having come from the iconographic vocabulary of the common culture. Of course, although these “borrowed” images were adapted for Christian use and endowed with meanings that conveyed key aspects of the new religion, they might not be obviously “Christian” to the majority of viewers then or now. Eventually these symbols and motifs would be entirely transformed, and new ones would emerge, about the same time as adherents as well as new converts achieved the necessary social, economic, and intellectual stability necessary to generate a religious material culture of their own.⁵

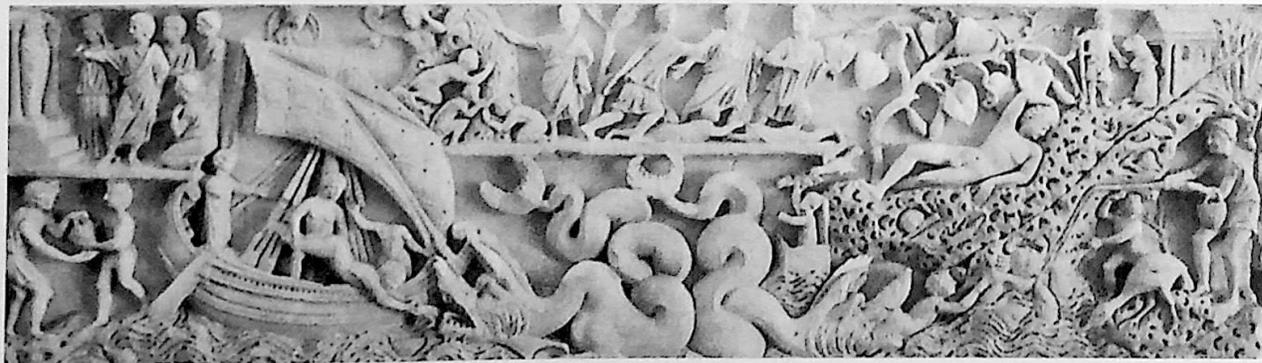
Both points of view assume that the apparent emergence of Christian art at the turn of the third century indicates that at that time Christianity became engaged with its surrounding culture in a different way than it had been previously. Either Christian practitioners ceased to be so

Fig. 7. Baptism of Christ, Catacomb of Callistus, Rome (© The International Catacomb Society. Photo: Estelle Brettman).

distinct from certain aspects of pagan society and religion (in particular from its rich artistic tradition), or they began to produce a distinctive iconography that would clearly identify them, instead of adapting religiously generic images. The main difference between the two perspectives is whether such cultural engagement and/or artistic development is understood as signifying the erosion or the elaboration of a distinct theological identity. In the first view, Christians became more like their pagan neighbors, and in the second, they became more markedly Christian (at least in their visual art). Both views accept that Christian iconography in the early third century marks a cultural evolution—whether that evolution was a good thing for the religion itself is also the subject of some disagreement.

Other explanations have been offered for the lack of Christian visual art from the first and second centuries. One argument, that the first generations were expecting an immediate end to the world as they knew it, presumes that believers saw no value in (or had no time for) making visual expressions of faith. Only when the *parousia* (Christ's return) was seen to be indefinitely delayed was there widespread effort to establish the kind of cultural permanence that would include tombs, churches, and collections of sacred texts. Another theory, that almost all older artifacts were lost or destroyed owing either to the vicissitudes of persecution (the destruction of Christian objects and buildings) or the consequence of urban renewal (when older and less opulent churches were torn down to make way for new building in the fourth century), is supported by archaeological finds. The Christian building at Dura Europos, for instance, survived because it was deliberately covered over as a defensive move by a Roman garrison. Burial places likewise survived because they were left intact, perhaps out of respect, but also because they were underground and therefore not as subject to destruction. In fact, this latter argument also serves to explain the very limited context and geography of those artifacts that can be dated prior to the Constantinian era, which brought an end to persecution but also marked the beginning of monumental, large-scale, and significantly permanent building projects, many of them adjacent to or incorporating these very burial grounds.

Fig. 8. Jonah sarcophagus, late 3rd cen. CE, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican City (Photo: Author).



Despite these various theories, many historians still assume that the first- and second-century church consistently repudiated the creation of figurative art for theological reasons. As Mary Charles Murray so clearly showed nearly a quarter-century ago, leading historians of Christianity as well as many important art historians often assumed that the religion was, from its origins, characteristically hostile to all kinds of pictorial art. She cites articles and books published from the 1950s to the date of her own article in the late 1970s by such prominent academics as John Beckwith, James Breckenridge, Ernst Kitzinger, and Henry Chadwick, scholars whose work is still very influential.⁶ For example, in his now classic study, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, first published in 1977, Kitzinger wrote at the end of his first chapter:

There is no evidence of any art with a Christian content earlier than the year A.D. 200. In all likelihood this is not merely due to accidental losses. The surviving monuments of Christian pictorial art which can be attributed to the first half of the third century bear the marks of a true beginning. Moreover, one can find in Christian literature of the period reflections of a changing attitude toward images and their role in religious life. That attitude was undoubtedly negative prior to this period.⁷

As evidence of this negative attitude, many of these historians of the past century, like the iconoclasts of the eighth, collected ancient written testimonies that could be interpreted to suggest that the early church was officially anti-image. This historical perspective was examined and refuted by Charles Murray, followed in detail two decades later by Paul Corby Finney. Briefly, however, the sources that historians most often cite as evidence of early opposition to pictorial art are short excerpts from the writings of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. For instance, Henry Chadwick, in his widely read *The Early Church* (first published in 1967), wrote: "The second of the Ten Commandments forbade the making of any graven image. Both Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria

Fig. 9. Jesus healing and working wonders, Christian sarcophagus early 4th cen. C.E., Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican City (Photo: Author).



regarded this prohibition as absolute and binding on Christians. Images and statues belonged to the demonic world of paganism.” Actually in reference to a rather polemical aside by Irenaeus, although identifying his informant by name, Chadwick continues, “In fact, the only second-century Christians known to have had images of Christ were radical Gnostics, the followers of the licentious Carpocrates.”⁸

In this short quotation, Chadwick claims that the so-called Second Commandment (Exod 20:4-5a; Deut 4:16-19; 5:8-9) was normative for the early church in respect to visual images. Here Chadwick repeats the predilections of earlier scholars and takes early Christian aniconism for granted. Chadwick further cites the writings of Tertullian and Clement to imply that Christian teaching at the time generally forbade “images and statues” of any kind as belonging to the demonic pagan world. However, the actual sources themselves are far less clear about the matter of visual art in general than they were about idolatry, specifically.

For example, an often-cited excerpt from Tertullian’s treatise *On Modesty* has been judged to condemn any use of religious pictures (in this case, of a shepherd) on chalices used during the eucharistic meal.⁹ The text, however, actually denounces those who favored a laxist approach to forgiveness after baptism, in particular the author of the treatise *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Since Tertullian associated such eucharistic cups with this treatise (because of the shepherd image), he assumes that those who had such implements believed that they could be forgiven transgressions such as drunkenness and adultery. Tertullian’s objection to the image on these cups was an objection to what it signified (a lack of moral rigor), not to its mere existence as a piece of art.

Furthermore, Chadwick suggests that the production of visual art occurred first within heretical sects, specifically among Gnostics. His evidence for this association of art and heresy comes mainly from Irenaeus’s treatise *Against Heresies*, written in the late second century. Listed among the many undesirable practices and traits of the Carpocratians, such as practicing sorcery and astrology, Irenaeus also accuses them of making and honoring images—according to him, a practice peculiar to this sect. Irenaeus even notes that they had a portrait of Jesus, fashioned by none other than Pilate and honored with garlands and other unnamed traditional pagan offerings (probably lit candles and incense):

They also possess images, some of them painted, and others formed from different kinds of material; while they maintain that a likeness of Christ was made by Pilate at that time when Jesus lived among them. They crown these images, and set them up along with the images of the philosophers of the world; that is to say, with the images of Pythagoras, and Plato, and Aristotle, and the rest. They also have other modes of honoring these images, after the same manner of the Gentiles.¹⁰

While this short excerpt demonstrates Irenaeus's assumption that honoring portrait images was a reprehensible characteristic of certain heretics, he offers no general condemnation of visual art, whether secular or religious, narrative or iconic. What he apparently objects to is the inclusion of Jesus with the other philosophers, and the crowning and honoring of their images.

Art and Idolatry in the Early Third-Century Christian Writings

Because Tertullian (ca. 200 c.e.) was deeply concerned about the problem of Christians being ensnared in a polytheistic culture, his treatise *On Idolatry* extends the definition of idolatry far beyond anything to do specifically with pictorial art. For Tertullian, idolatrous practices include preoccupation with the way one dresses, the foods one eats, or the pursuit of sexual pleasures or material wealth—all things that humans mistakenly take for having intrinsic value and that they honor more than God. In regard to visual art, for example, Tertullian worries about the temptations that artisans must face and the fact that both their skills and their tools could be misused: "There are also other species of very many arts which, although they extend not to the making of idols, yet with the same criminality, furnish the ingredients, without which idols have no power. . . . No art exists that is not mother or kinswoman to some allied art; nothing is independent of its neighbor."¹¹ Tertullian even urges those in his audience who make their living by craft to use their skills to make useful objects that could not possibly serve the purpose of polytheistic worship. Rather than sculptors, these folks should be plasterers, roof menders, or marble masons in the building trades.

However, recognizing that some fine artisans earn their living by making ostentatious and luxurious objects, he allows that it is better to gild slippers than to fashion a statue of Mercury or Serapis. Tertullian may have had Acts 19:23-41 in mind as he wrote this, comparing the predicament of Demetrius and the other Ephesians whose income depended on making and selling images of the goddess Diana. Tertullian, wishing to support artisans in their work and not to reduce them to poverty, suggests that they find other avenues for their craft and merely avoid making images of the pagan gods.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 160–215 c.e.) approached the problem of figurative art from an angle more characteristically his. Less concerned about Christian engagement with the habits and pleasures of Roman culture than Tertullian was, and not as fundamentally disturbed by the construction of images of the gods as a profession, Clement adapts Platonic teachings to offer a more complex discussion of the inferiority of

an image to its likeness, and the potential for the confusion of likeness and prototype on the part of those who view art. Attending to the deceptive power of imitation as well as the attraction of both material and natural objects, Clement sees danger in the human tendency to misunderstand the image—and to fail to distinguish between representation and reality—between the sensible and transcendent realms. And because objects of worship are not always only human-made idols, he extends his concern to include even the mistaken veneration of things found in the natural world. It was in this respect that he reminds his audience of the biblical prohibition:

What is more, we are expressly forbidden to practice a deceitful art. For the prophet says “Thou shalt not make a likeness of anything that is in heaven above or the earth beneath.” . . . But as for you, while you take great pains to discover how a statue may be shaped to the highest possible pitch of beauty, you never give a thought to prevent yourselves turning out like statues owing to want of sense. . . . Here the host of philosophers turn aside, when they admit that humans are beautifully made for the contemplation of heaven, and yet worship the things which appear in heaven and are apprehended by sight. . . . Let none of you worship the sun; rather let him yearn for the maker of the sun.¹²

Clement’s objection to images is clearly different from Tertullian’s. His concern is not so much the adoption of polytheistic practices or being captive to the alluring aspects of popular culture, but misunderstanding what it is that deserves honor—what the “true image” is. He follows a well-known Platonic axiom that images made by artists (or even things of the natural world) are only reflections of reality and should not be confused with the eternal and ideal Form (or in Clement’s case, the Maker) that transcends any earthly creation. However, he also argues that, properly understood, images can serve the useful function of reminding the viewer of a higher truth—which is why, although he generally disapproves of jewelry, he lists the appropriate images for Christian signet rings (a dove, a fish, a ship, a lyre, or an anchor) and urges the faithful to avoid seals with images of the gods, weapons, drinking cups, or scenes of sexual intercourse. The former symbols draw the eye and the mind away from themselves and toward the reality they represent, while the latter indicate a life of idolatry, indulgence, and even licentiousness. On the other hand, modest Christian symbols on everyday objects of some practical necessity did not constitute a form of idolatry.¹³

In the *Stromateis* (or *Miscellanies*), the last of his treatises and the most esoteric of them all, he continues with that same theme and this time credits Moses with the original formulation, later taken up by Pythagoras:

"Don't wear a ring, nor engrave on it the images of the gods," enjoins Pythagoras; as Moses ages before enacted expressly, that neither a graven, nor molten, nor molded, nor painted likeness should be made; so that we may not cleave to things of sense, but pass to intellectually known objects: for familiarity with the sight disparages the reverence of what is divine; and to worship that which is immaterial by matter, is to dishonor it by sense.¹⁴

Clement's problem with visual art poses a distinct set of issues. In another place in the *Stromateis*, Clement claims that the injunction an artist breaks is not only that against making idols but also that against robbing the divine prerogative in the act of creation.¹⁵ In these passages we see how Clement develops his own version of the doctrine of imitation, asserting that a work of art is deceptive, intended to fool the viewer into mistaking a mere copy for its model, into confusing the imitation with the reality. Perhaps Clement was cognizant of Pliny's critique of artists of old, who prided themselves on work so convincingly lifelike that viewers mistook the image for something real. Zeuxis, for instance, is said to have painted a child carrying grapes that caused birds to fly down to pick at the fruit.¹⁶

After Tertullian and Clement, the matter of early Christian attitudes toward pictorial or figurative art becomes more complex, perhaps in part because the art itself has begun to be made and owned by the Christian community. Probably the most vehement condemnation of figurative art prior to the iconoclastic period comes from Origen's argument about Christianity with the polytheist Celsus in the early third century. Origen's argument is similar in certain respects to Clement's objections to visual art as setting up false objects of worship, although at first it appears to draw a parallel between faithful Jews and Christians regarding the biblical injunction. In his long and complicated defense of Christianity, Origen argues that Christians are at least as enlightened on the matter of the vanity of images as the philosophers were. He also defends the Jews against what was apparently a fairly vicious attack by Celsus on their culture and religion, which he saw as an earlier form of Christianity. Jews, according to Celsus, were "fugitives from Egypt, who never performed anything worthy of note and never were held in any reputation or account."¹⁷

Taking exception to this unfair characterization and turning the tables on Celsus by pointing out that he represents a religion that worshiped images of "corruptible human beings, and birds, and four-footed beasts," Origen offers an example of a particularly praiseworthy accomplishment of the Jews, citing their observance of the prohibition as found in Deuteronomy (4:16-18):

Among [the Jews] God is recognized as nothing else, save the One who is over all things, and that among them no maker of images was permitted to enjoy the rights of citizenship. For neither painter nor image-maker existed in their state, the law expelling all such from it; that there might be no pretext for the construction of images,—and art that attracts the attention of foolish people, and that drags down the eyes of the soul from God to earth. There was, accordingly, among them a law to the following effect: “Do not transgress the law and make to yourselves a graven image, any likeness of male or female; either a likeness of any one of the creatures that are upon the earth, or a likeness of any winged fowl that flies under heaven, or a likeness of any creeping thing that creeps upon the earth, or a likeness of any of the fishes which are in the waters under the earth (Deut 4:16-18).”¹⁸

Origen also praises the Jews for the associated injunction (a “venerable and grand prohibition”) against looking up to heaven lest seeing the sun, moon, and stars one should be led astray to worship them (Deut 4:19). Clearly, Origen worries more about the worshiping of idols than about the making of images but, nevertheless, thought that the Jews should be praised for their intolerance of visual artists, lest such work be a pretext for or temptation to idolatry.

In his homilies on Exodus, Origen turns again to the biblical prohibition, but he offers an important distinction between the terms “idol” (*eidōlon*) and “likeness” (*homoīōma*). According to his reading of the Greek translation, Exod 20:4 prohibits the making of both (“You shall not make for yourself an idol nor any likeness of those things which are in heaven or which are in the earth or which are in the waters under the earth”). To justify this distinction, Origen turns to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. He notes that the apostle says that “no idol in the world really exists,” while at the same time saying that “there may be many so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords” (1 Cor 8:4-5). Since Paul seems to have deliberately omitted any claim that likenesses, like idols, were nonexistent, Origen argues that it is one thing to make an idol and something else to make a likeness. The essential difference between the two is that the likeness shows something that actually can be seen (for example, a bird, fish, sun, or moon), while the idol comes entirely from the human imagination and never occurs in nature (for instance, a ram’s head on a human body). This is why Paul can call idols nonexistent. But, as Origen points out, both likenesses and idols were prohibited by the Second Commandment, just as both were forbidden either worship or adoration (Exod 20:5), and the possible excuse that no harm comes from adoring “non-existent” things is thus invalidated.¹⁹

In fact, Paul clearly distinguishes between idols and likenesses, as he never uses the word “idol” (*eidōlon*) in any positive sense, in contrast to the term “likeness” (*homoīōma*), which often has a positive meaning. In addition to the above-cited text from 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of idols, idolatry (*eidōlolatrea*), and idolaters as deceived sinners, led

astray by the mute idols (1 Cor 12:2) and given up by God to lust and degradations of various sorts (Rom 1:24-27). Paul does not, apparently, distinguish between idols and likenesses according to their model's occurrence or nonoccurrence in nature. They simply have no life and cannot speak (compare 1 Cor 10:19).

Origen's argument points to a problem, however, in regard to the different ways the New Testament Gospels and Epistles use the terms "likeness" (*homoiōma*) and "image" (*eikōn*). For example, in the story of the coin with the portrait of the emperor (Mark 12:16), the word used for that representation is "image" (*eikōn*), while in Acts 14:11, the crowds mistake Barnabas and Paul for gods in human likeness (*homoiōthentes*). In Rom 8:3, Paul says that God sent his own Son in the likeness of human flesh (*homoiōmati sarkos*), although he later says that those who love God will be conformed to an image (*eikōn*) of his Son. In 1 Cor 11:7, men are the image (*eikōn*) and glory of God, just as humans bear the image (*eikōn*) of the man of dust (1 Cor 15:49) and will someday bear the image (*eikōn*) of the man of heaven (1 Cor 15:49). In 2 Cor 4:4, Christ is the image (*eikōn*) of God. Whereas in Phil 2:7, Christ takes the form (*morphōn*) of a slave and is born in human likeness (*homoīōmati anthrōpōn*), in Colossians he is the image (*eikōn*) of the invisible God (1:15). According to Jas 3:9, humans are made in the likeness of God (*homoiōsin theou*), and in 2 Cor 3:18, Paul writes that humanity will be transformed into the image (*eikōn*) of the glory of the Lord. Apart from the first example (the coin portrait), the general rule seems to be that earthly representations have "likeness" while divine similitude and future transformations are spoken of in terms of "image."

Despite Paul's claim that idols are nonexistent objects, these late second- or early third-century Christian writers worried about the pagan practice of idolatry, and to some extent they associated the making and use of visual art in general with that practice. They realized that certain kinds of artworks could be misunderstood and abused or draw veneration or worship, and, in particular, they warned against making images of the pagan gods or other implements of pagan cult worship. Furthermore, they worried about the temptations of the surrounding pagan culture and its alluring attractions. Most Christian converts were former polytheists, and aspects of that polytheism were ubiquitous. Christians could not enter the home of a non-Christian neighbor without encountering the domestic shrine to the family's tutelary gods and ancestors, nor could they go into the public baths or theater, attend the games, or even enter ordinary public buildings without confronting statues of the gods and portrayals of their myths on doorposts, floors, walls, and ceilings.²⁰ Because of their high risk of contamination, painters and sculptors, along with actors and even teachers of classical literature, were barred from baptism until they could demonstrate that they had left

professions that produced, used, or even brought them into the proximity of these kinds of images.²¹

Resisting idolatry was not easy for Christians who lived in urban settings at that time. Their surroundings were filled with the temptations of luxuries as well as with signs and tokens of polytheistic religions. Greco-Roman cults depended on images, rituals, and public spectacles; they did not draw upon texts of sacred scriptures (apart from those myths found in the writings of Homer and Hesiod) or dogmatic statements of faith. The traditional gods had shrines that were open and reflected civic pride and identity. Almost any aspect of daily life, even just passing through certain neighborhoods, brought early Christians into contact with images of the traditional Greek and Roman gods. Therefore, the earliest Christian writers who have been presented as objecting to pictorial art were actually pointing out inherent dangers that attached to the making or even admiration of things that were made for polytheistic cult. Given the wide distribution of such objects in the everyday world, even the most stalwart Christians might be implicated in a kind of accidental idolatry, even if they tried to steer clear of anything that might tempt or unwittingly taint them.²²

That Christians were unable always to avoid the images is apparent from the instruction about what they might do if they came into contact with the idols. Apparently some Christians practiced explicitly disrespectful behavior toward images or their altars. Tertullian refers to Christians spitting or blowing on smoking altars as they passed by, and according to the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, Christians offended pagans by spitting on statues of the gods, perhaps as a way of protecting themselves against inherent and ever-present danger.²³ Tertullian assures martyrs that one of the advantages to their imprisonment is the fact that they no longer have occasion to see strange gods or bump into their images and no longer can be even accidentally involved in some pagan feast or sacrifice.²⁴ Cyprian also urges Christians to avoid looking at the idols, even declaring that Christians who did not avert their eyes from the images were guilty of a form of apostasy, and their subsequent tears of penitence (a literal cleansing of the eyes) were a way to make satisfaction to God for their sins.²⁵

Thus, the typical early Christian theological position on visual art was less an objection to art as such than an attack on *non-Christian* images that invited worship and activities that drew the faithful into the values and practices (both religious and secular) of the surrounding culture. Significantly, these first- and second-century writers said almost nothing about *Christian* art, either because there was very little (or none) in their purview or because if there was, they did not see it as problematic. Clement's recommended motifs for Christian signet rings offer such an example. Furthermore, these writers said very little about art that was basically secular or neutral and without obvious pagan reli-

gious associations, such as images of fish, birds, shepherds, or grapevines. Such art may have been like the gilding of slippers, to borrow a phrase from Tertullian, and not especially troubling by itself. Notably, however, these were the very sorts of images first adapted for Christian use and perhaps given specific Christian meaning.

A century or so later, Athanasius wrote a treatise against the “errors of the pagans” that attacked idolatry in language similar to these earlier writers, while hinting at his subsequent construction of an incarnational theology that would elevate material existence by its incorporation into divinity. For Athanasius, the definition of idolatry is based less on actual worship of specific material objects than on the distracted soul turning toward earthly pleasures and away from divine things. Humans who indulge their lusts come to find their gods in material things and, as they fall lower and lower, come to set up idols made of ordinary and lifeless material, deifying the shapes of animals as well as ordinary mortals and mistaking the image for its model, dragging them even further into the mud of their vile passions (cf. Rom 1:22-25).

The true God, on the other hand, is incorruptible and cannot be represented through or in destructible materials, nor can God appear in such exotic diversity of forms. Athanasius, interestingly, also claims that image worship is condemned by Scripture, but he omits a mention of the Decalogue, turning instead to Ps 115:4-8 (“Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands”) and Isa 44:9-10 (“All who make idols are nothing. . . . Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good?”). In addition, Athanasius makes an argument that worshipers of idols actually dishonor the skill of artists, who should be more highly honored than the products of their craft. However, he would claim the more skillful the artist, the more likely the image will be seen to summon the deity, rather than generate homage for the maker of that image.²⁶

Jewish Background for Christian Rejection of Visual Art

We have noted that some historians of Christianity (and of Christian art) cite Christianity’s Jewish roots as a reason for its apparent reticence regarding visual art. Such an assumption takes chronologically contemporary Jewish aniconism for granted, as well as a self-conscious Christian acceptance of this heritage as the basis for a similar aniconic position. Although the preceding review of the documentary evidence shows that some second- and third-century Christian condemnations of idolatry cited the repudiation of graven images in the Ten Commandments (which they did not see as specifically Jewish), apart from Origen’s argument with Celsus, actual Jewish practice never figured predominantly in their arguments.²⁷ In fact, scholars have argued that the

Decalogue itself generally played a minor role in Christian theological reflection before the mid-second century and moreover was often misunderstood, abbreviated, or quietly sidelined.²⁸

Added to that, the ways that Jews themselves understood the injunction against graven images at this time (or any time) are neither clear nor consistent. The Hebrew Scriptures themselves offer some internal contradictions, if we note that the apparent condemnation of figurative art is shortly followed by vivid descriptions of the cherubim set up in the tabernacle over the mercy seat (Exod 25:17-22). A bronze serpent healed the Israelites in the wilderness from snakebite (Num 21:8-9), and the figurative decorations of Solomon's temple included lions and oxen as well as cherubim (1 Kings 6-8). Enacting the Decalogue's prohibition of graven images may date no earlier than to the religious reforms of images of King Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E.—reforms that may have had political motivations as much as religious purity at heart (2 Kings 23).²⁹ The iconoclastic destruction of the high places coincided with a centralized juridical and religious power in Jerusalem and its temple. Thus the prohibition came to be understood as prohibiting any sculpted figure that might be taken as an image of a god or otherwise draw the people of Israel into polytheism (the worship of foreign or multiple gods) and idolatry (the worship of divine images) and away from the exclusive worship of their one, invisible God. No one is allowed to paint or sculpt an image of God according to the book of Deuteronomy, because no one actually knows what God looks like (Deut 4:15-18).³⁰

Jews in the Greco-Roman period, like Christians, consistently condemned images associated with other religious cults, especially when they were required to tolerate or even worship those images by foreign occupiers or Roman governors. Such repudiation is evident in the polemic against worshipping Baals and Astartes in Judges 2, the humorous description of Bel and Nebo hanging off pack animals in Isaiah 46, or the 1 Maccabees account of Jewish resistance to the desecrations and anti-Jewish practices instituted by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In the first century C.E., Josephus criticized Solomon for allowing images in the temple, and he records Jewish repudiation of certain kinds of figurative art (including images of living creatures and God), especially their refusal to set up images of the Roman emperor, which, he explains, was an allowance made by the Romans themselves to the Jews.³¹ In his history of the Jewish war, Josephus tells about Jewish riots in opposition to Roman imposition of images of the gods or the effigies of the emperor (busts or portraits attached to the standards). Not only did Jewish law generally forbid figurative images, but these portraits were particularly offensive because the Romans wanted to set them up at particular Jewish holy places. Moreover, he insists, the Romans themselves had granted Jews the right to abide by their ancient religious laws. Like the

later Christian apologists, Josephus also casts Jewish convictions as parallel to sound philosophical teachings, that images were useless things, worthy neither of humans nor of the divine.³²

Philo, the Jewish Alexandrian philosopher, objects to figurative art on even more self-conscious philosophical terms. Philo's treatise on the Decalogue asserts that those who worship the sun, moon, or other heavenly bodies are less grievously in error than artisans who fashion images out of wood, stones, or precious metals, "the workmanship of which, either by statuary, or painter, or artisan, has done great injury to the life of man," by undercutting the soul's mainstay—namely, the proper conception of the ever-living God.³³ The poor souls that the artisans have deceived with their work misunderstand not only the nature of God, but also the difference between the creator and the object of creation. Furthermore, they attribute some kind of life or soul to dead and lifeless matter to which the artist gives shape, tossing the remaining material away for a lesser purpose.³⁴ It would be better, he says, to deify the sculptors rather than their statues, or for the artisans themselves to worship their tools or their hands instead of their products. In another place, Philo describes Moses as a "man as far removed as possible from any invention of fables and who thinks fit only to walk in the paths of truth itself." The outcome of such resistance to pursuits of the imagination is that he "banished from the constitution, which he has established, those celebrated and beautiful arts of statuary and painting, because they, falsely imitating the nature of the truth, contrive deceits and snares, in order, through the medium of the eyes, to beguile the souls which are liable to be easily won over."³⁵ Here Philo's negative view of art is detached from the prohibition of the Commandments and is based on its ability to deceive and seduce naïve viewers.

Despite Josephus's historical record and Philo's philosophical argumentation, archaeological discoveries of the past century have demonstrated that Jews of the first several centuries of the Common Era held varying and sometimes even positive views of figurative art, even art made for religious contexts. These discoveries have included a variety of media, motifs, and venues: frescoes of various birds, animals, or dolphins found in the Jewish catacombs of Rome and on sarcophagi; figurative motifs (including zodiac figures and representations of the god Helios) found on mosaic floors of synagogues in the Galilee between the fourth and sixth centuries; and, more significant, the mid-third-century monumental frescoes filled with figurative painting in the Dura Europos synagogue.³⁶ Documents dated to these same centuries suggest that at least some Jewish leaders were (like their Christian counterparts) more concerned with the practice of idolatry than with the making of pictorial art as such. While urging Jews to avoid contact with an idolatrous Gentile culture, they took a variety of stances on visual art,

often permitting Jews to make and own images so long as they did not worship them.³⁷ For example, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, the third-century Rabbi Johanan apparently tolerated images painted on walls, and Rabbi Abun permitted the making of images in mosaic.³⁸ Other rabbis clearly considered figurative images dangerous and urged Jews to shun them.³⁹ Even when we find a Christian reference to Jewish aniconism, such as Origen's cited above, we must decide whether this was based on actual observation or only a projection of a useful assumption.

Thus, Jewish aniconism in the second and third centuries C.E. may have been mainly directed against Jewish worship of foreign images, not against visual art in general, or even against enhancing the interiors of synagogues with figurative decoration. It is unlikely, therefore, that Christians emulated their Jewish neighbors' aniconism. Instead, early Christian motivations for resisting figurative art were, like Philo's, shaped by philosophical arguments about the deceptive and distracting qualities inherent in art or were based on concerns that making or using art would eventually draw the faithful into the idolatry associated with the surrounding culture. The early apologists present Christianity as an intellectually and spiritually enlightened faith, and they clearly hoped that their arguments would appeal to the sensibilities of a philosophically sophisticated audience. They could easily have believed themselves on fairly safe ground attacking images as illusory and even dangerous, since the respected Greek sages essentially agreed with them.⁴⁰

In any case, neither concerns for observing the biblical commandment against images nor awareness of the philosophical critique of imitative art seemed to have daunted the individuals who first decorated the walls of the Christian catacombs in the early third century. The artisans and their clients did not understand what they were doing as idolatry, probably because the work was not intended, designed, or executed so as to attract any kind of worship. It was not like the fashioning of images of the pagan gods. The images they created were essentially symbolic, narrative, or didactic and not likely to be mistaken for idols nor invite worship.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that if Christians began to make and use significant and characteristic visual art of their own around the beginning of the third century, it was not because most first- and second-century Christians were generally iconophobic or unanimous in their views on the matter of images. Once this art began to appear, it became immensely popular and influential, as it was widely dispersed and copied by others, first near and then far. At the same time, we know that church authorities had a continuing concern with the problem of idolatry, not identified with the making of images but perhaps related to it. Art, in particular art made for a religious context, was something that, while permissible, required management and control to

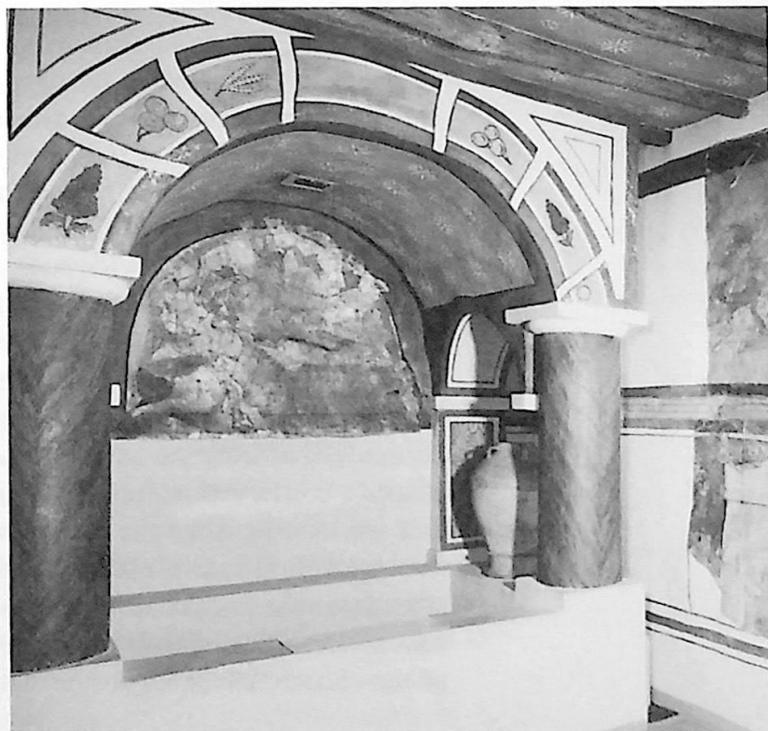
ensure that it was understood in its proper sense. In other words, it should include only appropriate images (excluding certain forbidden ones) and be as different from a pagan idol as possible.

The Earliest Examples and Types of Christian Visual Art: Church Regulation

Obviously, such definitions and regulations only make sense for a time when Christian images were being produced in enough quantity to make these policies necessary. As we have seen, Christian writers of the second and early third centuries seem unaware of any significant amount or type of Christian art worthy of condemnation. Their objections were aimed at the art of others, pagans or perhaps Christian heretics, and not at their own coreligionists. The warnings against idolatry were warnings against the cult images of other religions, not against Christian artworks. Based on this lack of awareness, we might reasonably conclude that Christians produced very little religious art, or that what they did produce was so innocuous that it neither attracted attention nor raised concerns.

In the third century, however, the material situation began to change. In addition to the modest domestic objects that may have seemed uncontroversial (small pottery lamps with images of the Good Shepherd, for example), the catacomb frescoes in Rome, relief carvings on sarcophagi and tomb epitaphs, and early evidence for wall paintings in churches demonstrate that change. Of these, the most important existing example is the decorated baptistery found in a Christian house church at Dura Europos, with its frescoes depicting biblical scenes (ca. 249 C.E.; fig. 10). Above the font, an image of the Good Shepherd and his flock stand over the smaller figures of Adam and Eve. The side walls contain painted scenes particularly appropriate for a baptismal space: the healing of the paralytic, the stilling of the storm, the walking on the water, and the woman at the well, as well as a somewhat enigmatic painting of three women carrying lamps approaching a tent-like structure (variously identified as the three

Fig. 10. Reconstruction of the interior of the Christian baptistery, Dura Europos, mid-3rd cen. C.E. (Photo: Rights and Reproductions Department, Yale University Art Gallery).



women arriving at the empty tomb; three of the five wise brides carrying their lamps to the tent of the bridegroom; or virgins escorting Mary to the temple, an illustration of a passage in the *Protoevangelium of James*).⁴¹

Based on the example from Dura, it seems likely that other early Christian buildings were similarly adorned. We do know that Christian buildings were demolished during the great persecution of the early fourth century, and their walls may well have been enhanced with paintings.⁴² Despite certain distinctions in style, the similarity between some of the themes found on the Dura baptistery walls and motifs from the Roman catacombs also suggests some common influence and perhaps even some shared models. Although we have no extant examples, it seems possible that certain influential prototypes (illuminated biblical manuscripts, perhaps) provided patterns or cartoons contained in circulating books of artisans' motifs that could account for some level of consistency.⁴³ In any case, given the certain fact of an emerging and distinctive Christian iconography, church authorities may well have tried to regulate the trend, especially if they continued to be concerned about the snares of the surrounding pagan religious or even secular culture.

Surprisingly, however, we do not have much evidence of such reaction. The earliest known regulation of Christian visual or figurative art comes from a canon of a local church council held in Elvira, Spain, about 305 C.E. Curiously, the canon's meaning is a bit ambiguous. Two different translations of a key Latin clause in that canon are possible, resulting in two rather different meanings. The Latin reads: *Placuit picturas in ecclesia esse non debere, ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus depingatur*. One possible translation is: "There shall be no pictures in churches, lest what is revered and adored be depicted on the walls," while a second reverses the verbs and modifiers of the second clause, that is, "lest what is depicted on the walls be revered and adored."⁴⁴ The first translation, which seems the more grammatically straightforward, prohibits pictures because of the danger that certain sacred or holy things or persons might be inappropriately portrayed (or even exhibited to view).

If one accepts this as a limited prohibition, then perhaps other images might be permissible (perhaps in other places than the walls of a church), or at least not as problematic. The second translation demonstrates a concern that viewers might confuse the image with its model and mistakenly offer the image some kind of adoration or worship, thereby falling into idolatry, in which case the prohibition primarily attends to the potential for misuse, not exactly on the images themselves. Nevertheless, both translations appear to prohibit art on the walls of the church, albeit for somewhat different reasons. Furthermore, the

canon offers demonstrable evidence that pictures had arrived in the church before the time of Constantine.

Subsequent documents continue to show that the existence of religious art was less controversial than how it was used or understood by those who viewed it. Authorities felt that they needed to exert some leadership or control over a potentially problematic, but also a potentially useful, resource. Paulinus, the late fourth-century Bishop of Nola, saw visual art as a way to enliven the basilica he founded in honor of Saint Felix. Explaining his motives for adorning a church building with representations of living individuals, which he admits was an unusual custom, he claims that he did it largely to attract the “rustics” who would otherwise spend their time feasting and drinking at the tomb of the martyr, rather than coming inside the church.⁴⁵ Thus, in time, pictorial art was acknowledged to have benefits, especially as a didactic or inspirational aid.

Such usefulness was again asserted, two centuries later, in two well-known epistles of Gregory the Great to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles. In these letters, Gregory admonishes his brother bishop for banishing images from churches in his diocese (one of the first known instances of iconoclasm directed at Christian images), yet praises him for his firm stance against idols. Gregory acknowledges that even though images have their dangers, they should have not been destroyed, for art also has its positive uses:

For pictorial representation is made use of in churches for this reason; that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books. Your fraternity therefore should have both preserved the images and prohibited the people from adoration of them, so that persons ignorant of letters may have something so that they may gather knowledge of the story and the people might not sin through adoration of a picture.⁴⁶

A year or so later, Gregory discovered that Serenus had disregarded his exhortation (using the excuse that he thought Gregory’s letter had been forged), and he fired off an even stronger statement: “For it has been reported to us that, inflamed with inconsiderate zeal, you have broken images of saints as though under the plea that they should not be adored. And indeed, in that you forbade them to be adored we praise you; but we blame you for having broken them.”⁴⁷ And, reiterating his point about the value of pictures for the illiterate (especially for the “nations,” that is, the local non-Latin readers or speakers), Gregory furthermore noted that such pictures “of saints’ stories” had a venerable and ancient precedent. He concludes his argument by claiming that such images also raised the viewer’s sensibility beyond the sensible objects and toward the Divine through an awakening of love for that which they portrayed. Leaving

aside the problem of what image Gregory might have meant when he referred to reading by “looking at the walls,” it is clear that he considered certain “appropriate” images of things deserving of devotion when he made his case for the value of visual images. Since Gregory speaks of saints’ stories, we may assume that what he refers to are representations of biblical stories or episodes from the lives of saints.

The issue, then, was about how images were actually regarded, not about their existence per se or even their placement in churches. Given that the ecclesial authorities (at least initially) supervised the construction and decoration of the earliest Christian catacombs in Rome—it seems logical to assume that someone officially approved the decoration of the Christian building at Dura—we may conclude that the kinds of images produced for and placed in these spaces were judged acceptable by local church authorities at the time. The elaboration of Christian buildings gained enormous momentum in the fourth century, initially fueled by the patronage of Emperor Constantine. By Gregory’s time, the view that the images had no place in the church would likely have been regarded as out of step as well as unpopular, which is perhaps why a significant part of Serenus’s congregation went into schism against their bishop.

In the mid-fourth century, however, the motifs and themes of Christian art had just begun to change, deemphasizing the symbolic and narrative art of the third and early fourth centuries in favor of the more dogmatically derived representations of Christ’s passion, enthronement, and triumph. The visual art was still edifying, but those previously popular biblical narratives that showed the Old Testament heroes or the works of Jesus (for example, his healing or wonderworking) were gradually supplanted by images of Jesus handing over the law to his apostles or being judged by Pilate. The depiction of Jesus’ mission or divinity was thereby changed from an emphasis on the deeds of his earthly ministry to an emphasis on the events of his passion, ascension, and judgment. By the end of the fourth century, this development went another step further, when explicitly devotional images of Christ and portraits of the saints also began to appear. These images had a role in the developing cult of martyrs and saints, not only by honoring a holy person with a portrait, but also by playing a part in the cult itself, in parallel development with the cult of relics, which started to appear at the shrines of martyrs.

As we have noted, the earlier symbolic and narrative images, perhaps even the dogmatic images of the later fourth century, were not intended to attract prayer or veneration. Their purpose was to symbolize or illustrate a key aspect of Christian belief (such as the love of God or Christ for the individual believer, the resurrection of the dead to Paradise) or to offer a visual reference to a biblical story that might convey central Christian beliefs or values, or to serve as christological or sacramental

types. Even the later visual representations of Christ's passion, resurrection, or enthronement were more edifying than iconic. They were meant as visual presentations of Christian teachings, and they paralleled certain verbal modes including homilies, hymns, and catechetical instruction. They were meant to instruct viewers in the fundamentals of the faith or to inspire them to offer praise and thanksgiving. The images narrated certain actions in the past that one could, in a sense, "watch" rather than mediating a living holy presence that one could engage in the present. These narrative images were Scripture presented in pictures rather than words; they pointed to God's salvific acts of history as a sign of hope and promise for the future.⁴⁸

By contrast, the new images that began to appear in the late fourth century offered encounter more than edification. These were the portraits of Christ or the saints that omitted specific narrative context or background and instead presented a likeness of their subject for its own sake.⁴⁹ Portrayals existed of the deceased, made for their own tombs and sometimes set into scallop shells or medallions, but these were not "holy images."⁵⁰ And although often described as a representation of Christ, the figure of the Good Shepherd was not a portrait of Christ but a metaphor expressing the qualities of Jesus as a loving caretaker of souls. Scenes of Jesus or the apostles show them as characters in specific stories or settings performing or witnessing certain acts or works. These are not portraits as such.

This lack of early Christian portraiture cannot be explained as an accident, but rather as the result of a conscious effort to resist idolatry by producing art that primarily served a didactic function. Early Christians seem to have known that the simple representation of Christ's or a saint's face, without any narrative context, had the potential to attract devotion or worship. In the first three or four centuries, this was dangerously similar to the ways that images of the traditional Roman gods might be treated. Thus, by limiting the kinds of visual art forms that could be deemed acceptable, idolatry was avoided, even while symbolic or narrative art was permitted. Christians differed from their pagan neighbors by avoiding a certain *kind* of image, not by avoiding images in general. At a later time, when a different kind of danger or need was perceived, a new kind of image could emerge and find its place in Christian practice and theology—the holy portrait.

Portraits: A Particular Kind of Problematic Image

Perhaps the most often-cited patristic condemnation of holy portraits is found in a famous letter purported to be from Eusebius of Caesarea to Emperor Constantine's sister, the Augusta Constantia (married to his

rival in the east, Licinius), in which he refuses her petition for a painted portrait of Christ and reproaches her for her theological naïveté:

Since you have written referring also to a certain image [icon] of Christ that you wanted us to send you, which image of Christ do you mean? . . . that which is true and unchangeable and which bears the characteristics of his nature, or that which he assumed for us, the figure, that is, that he took in the form of a servant? . . . But certainly you are asking for an icon of the form of the servant and that of a bit of flesh, which he put on for us. . . . Who would, then, be able to draw with dead and inanimate colors, or in sketches, the glittering and sparkling scintillations which are so very precious and glorious? The divine Apostles on the mountain could not even endure to look at him, and they fell on their faces confessing that they could not bear the sight.⁵¹

In a longer version of the letter (found in a different document collection), Eusebius adds: "But if you mean to ask of me the image, not of his form transformed into that of God, but that of the mortal flesh before its transformation, can it be that you have forgotten that passage in which God lays down the law that no likeness should be made either of what is in heaven, or what is in the earth beneath?"⁵² According to this letter, the bishop's objection to the empress's request emerged out of a dual concern. On one hand, he believes that it was impossible to present a true image of the incarnate Divine Son without denying the reality of both his human and divine natures, since each is so inextricably bound up with the other that it is impossible to represent the union itself in a visual form. On the other, he points to the Second Commandment, which he interpreted to be against likenesses in general. Significantly, both arguments anticipate the objections of the Byzantine iconoclasts.

Finally, Eusebius asserts that, because such images simply did not exist, he could not honor the empress's request in any case: "Have you ever heard anything of the kind either yourself in church or from another person? Are not such things banished and excluded from churches all over the world, and is it not common knowledge that such practices are not permitted to us alone?" By way of illustration, he offers a personal anecdote, telling of a time when another woman brought to him a picture of two men in the guise of philosophers, claiming that they were Paul and Christ. Because the object offended him, Eusebius confiscated it. Eusebius also refers to images of Simon Magus and Mani to demonstrate the association of painted portraits with, in his opinion, the worst sort of heretic.⁵³

Drawing conclusions from this document about an early Christian repudiation of visual art (specifically portraits of Christ) is difficult because the text contains several troubling inconsistencies when compared to other writings of Eusebius. The last argument directly contradicts mentions he makes elsewhere of figurative images, for instance of a (now lost) bronze statue group in Caesarea Philippi that showed a

kneeling woman with her arms outstretched in supplication to the upright figure of a well-dressed man. The locals held this to be a representation of Christ healing the woman suffering from hemorrhages, an event reported to have taken place at this very site. Eusebius neither denies its identity nor denounces its existence. He even commends the Gentiles who set up the statue as a sign of their thankfulness and notes that the locals believed the statue bore the likeness of Jesus, which was easily recognizable from other painted images that he had himself seen, and he also mentions other portrait likenesses of Peter and Paul:

Nor is it strange that those of the Gentiles who, of old, were benefited by our Savior, should have done such things since we have learned also that the likenesses of his apostles Paul and Peter, and of Christ himself, are preserved in paintings [*graphais chromaton*], the ancients being accustomed, as it is likely, according to a habit of the Gentiles, to pay this kind of honor indiscriminately to those regarded by them as deliverers.⁵⁴

Eusebius's comment here has strong parallels with the much earlier critique that Irenaeus launches against the Carpocratians, who honored portraits of Jesus with garlands and probably with prayers, and, in particular, one reported to have been made by Pontius Pilate. Irenaeus further claims that these images of Christ were set up on a par with images of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, which to him was typical of the behavior of a certain kind of Gnostic.⁵⁵ If we take these two testimonies together, even though widely separated in chronological time, we might conclude that the making and honoring of religious portraits were typically associated with heretical groups, pagans, or well-meaning but misguided recent converts who continued to practice what these Christian leaders considered to be "old idolatrous customs."

The authenticity of Eusebius's letter has been challenged on other grounds as well. One leading theory suggests that it may be a forgery from a much later period, incorporated into the *florilegia* of the iconoclasts in the mid-eighth century and refuted in the acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 C.E.).⁵⁶ As we have noted, Eusebius's theological arguments seem to be more characteristic of the disputes from the era of iconoclasm than from the theological polemics of the mid-fourth century. The difficulty of showing the dual natures of Christ in a single portrait image could arguably have been understood only after the terms had been set in the christological controversies of the next century.

Whether or not we accept Eusebius's letter as authentic, additional and somewhat more reliably authentic testimony to the resistance to Christian portraiture in the late fourth century can be cited in this regard. Several fragments of the writings of Epiphanius of Salamis, otherwise known for his condemnation of a variety of heresies, attack the practice of making and honoring images of the saints, particularly those

he has seen painted on walls or woven into curtains. His writings also seem to indicate that, in his view, this is a somewhat new practice, and he urges his readers (in one case the Emperor Theodosius and in another Bishop John of Jerusalem) to stop the practice outright. Refuting the defense of images that must already have been circulating, he declares:

You may tell me that the Fathers abominated the idols of the gentiles, whereas we make images of saints as a memorial to them and worship these in their honor. It is surely on this assumption that some of you have dared to plaster the walls inside the house of God and by means of different colors to represent pictures of Peter and John and Paul, as I see by the inscription of each of these false images, set down through the stupidity of the painter and according to his own inclination.⁵⁷

Epiphanius goes on to point out that a portrait of an exterior appearance is merely a representation of something that is dead and useless, especially since these saints are now deceased. When we next see them, he says, these saints will be conformed to the image of Christ and “adorned with glory.”⁵⁸

Visual portraits, as we have defined them, are different from narrative or symbolic images, in that their primary purpose is to present an individual human (or divine) countenance to viewers for contemplation. They usually are presented frontally, sometimes as full figures, but often only the bust or face. Contemplation, of course, can lead to rapt attraction and then all too easily to veneration, which is the point at which the portrait is especially vulnerable to misunderstanding or misuse, and why most third- and fourth-century Christians may have deliberately avoided them. Artworks whose primary purpose is to portray the face and general character or personality of a subject claim to achieve some kind of “likeness”—either realistic or expressive, and internal as well as external—rather than presenting that subject as an actor (whether incidental or central) in a larger composition. As we have seen, based on available evidence, such early Christian resistance to portraits implied no general resistance to figurative art that occurred within a larger narrative frame and made no claim to present a “real likeness.”

The absence of early Christian portraits is even more striking when we consider that the art of portraiture was well established in the Roman world and was, in fact, extremely popular among the upper classes at the time when Christians were beginning to produce plastic and graphic art.⁵⁹ We cannot credit a lack of cultural prototypes, then, for the absence of portraiture in early Christianity. An alternative explanation—that this particular kind of art emerges only in segments of the population (the wealthy upper classes) who had the resources to commission such things—fails to note that other artworks would also have

depended on this kind of patronage. Artwork is more or less costly depending on the quality of the work, not on its subject matter. We must conclude that something in particular about portraits made them off-limits for early Christian visual art, and, as we have seen, it was not the prohibition of figurative art per se. What made portraits different in early Christian thought was their similarity to the idols of the polytheists. Furthermore, as representing a "likeness," portraits were deceitful. They falsely pretended to be something they were not. To some extent, the supposed letter of Eusebius to Constantia or the arguments of Epiphanius made a point not totally out of sync with sentiments expressed by the philosophers. The images of the saints were arguably "invented" by the artists out of their imagination. The image could not contain the total reality of who Christ was, even in his human incarnation.

Thus, the objection to portrait images, as with earlier objections to visual art in general, drew as much upon the classical philosophical tradition as upon any ancient Jewish precedents. In other words, one might say that for some early Christian teachers, Plato was as significant a source as Moses for the Christian perception that all portraits, and especially divine images, should be avoided (even though they may have argued that Moses was the original source for such teaching). From a philosophical point of view, a portrait's danger stems from its deceptive or mistaken claims to present something beyond surface reality and from its potential for confusing viewers' identification of the external and finite with the spiritual and infinite. In Christian terms, such confusion could only lead to apostasy or idolatry, and, as such, it was associated either with polytheistic practices or with heterodox theology (for example, the Carpocratians).⁶⁰

However, several excerpts from second- and third-century writings reveal a particular reservation about portraits, even among certain Gnostics. First, a short section in the second- or third-century (probably Valentinian) *Acts of John* relates the story of a certain wealthy man, Lycomedes, praetor of the Ephesians, whose wife, Cleopatra, was miraculously healed by John. The grateful Lycomedes, wishing to have a portrait of John so that he might venerate his image, commissioned a painter to make the likeness in secret, without John's knowledge. Lycomedes, overjoyed to have the portrait, put it in his bedroom, hung garlands on it, and set lamps and an altar before it. When John discovered what Lycomedes had done, he was severely critical, accusing him of continuing to live as a pagan. Lycomedes responded: "He alone is my God who raised me up from death with my wife. But if besides that God we may call our earthly benefactors gods, it is you, my father, whose portrait I possess, whom I crown and love and reverence, as having become a good guide to me."⁶¹ John took a look at the image and was startled to see his own face for the first time (as well as flattered by its beauty).

Nevertheless, he repudiated Lycomedes, neatly summing up the problem of image and likeness, reiterated the classical argument, and, in words that Epiphanius would later echo, declared:

As the Lord Jesus Christ lives, the portrait is like me; yet not like me, my child, but like my image in the flesh; for if the painter who has copied my face here wants to put me in a portrait, then he needs the colors that were given you, and boards, and the shape of my figure, and age and youth and all such visible things. But do you be a good painter for me, Lycomedes. You have colors which he gives you through me, that is, Jesus, who paints us all from life for himself, who knows the shapes and forms and colors which I tell you to paint with: faith in God, knowledge, reverence, kindness, fellowship, mildness, goodness, brotherly love, purity, sincerity, tranquility, fearlessness, cheerfulness, dignity, and the whole band of colors which portray your soul and already raise up your members that were cast down and level those which were lifted up, which cure your bruises and heal your wounds. . . . In brief, when a full set and mixture of such colors has come together into your soul it will present it to our Lord Jesus Christ undismayed and undamaged and rounded in form. But what you have now done is childish and imperfect; you have drawn a dead likeness of what is dead.⁶²

This brief account parallels a somewhat unreliable record regarding the (polytheistic) Emperor Alexander Severus (ca. 208–235 C.E.), who is said to have set up a pantheon of gods, heroes, and philosophers in his private chapel, including images of Jesus, Apollonius of Tyana, Abraham, Alexander the Great, and Orpheus. The emperor's mother, Julia Mammea, had summoned the theologian Origen for a conversation, so the story may have been based on some factual detail.⁶³ Again, we are reminded of Irenaeus's claim that the Carpocratians set up images of philosophers (such as Plato, Pythagoras, and Aristotle) as well as of Jesus and offered them crowns and other signs of veneration ("like the Gentiles"). Of course, in each case, portrait images of Christ are associated with the opposition—heretics or pagans.

In summary, the problem of portraits was at least twofold: they were likely to be misused—set up and covered with garlands, scented with smoking incense, illumined with votive candles, and offered worship or prayer like the idols of the polytheists—and they were false and imitative copies of something that was absolutely beyond their ability to represent. The distance between model and image was unbridgeable, in the prevailing worldview, which regarded the making of images as one of the lowest levels of participation in reality or truth. The truth was understood to be beyond containment in physical or material creation, and the work of human hands was perceived as imitative at best. The usefulness of art was in the realms of the symbolic and didactic, where it referred directly to the intellectual and cognitive realm of ideas and arguments, stories and lessons. And visual representations of stories and lessons are unlikely to attract offerings of flowers, incense, or even prayers.

As we have seen, the criticism of portraits as essentially fraudulent did not emerge first within Christian theology but was a standard philosophical truism that can be traced all the way back to Plato's doctrine of mimesis, in which the earthly "copy" is many steps removed from the reality of the eternal "model."⁶⁴ This standard philosophical adage was carried forward into the Christian period in the thinking of the middle and neo-Platonists, but most notably Plotinus (ca. 205–270 C.E.), who was said to refuse any attempt to have his portrait made. His rebuff incorporated the standard Platonic objection: "Is it not enough to carry about this image in which nature has enclosed us? Do you really think that I must also consent to leave, as a desirable spectacle to posterity, an image of the image?"⁶⁵ His disciple and biographer, Porphyry (ca. 232–305 C.E.), began his *Life of Plotinus* by recounting how the foremost portrait artist of the day, a certain Carterius, attended Plotinus's public lectures so that he could observe the philosopher and catch his "most telling personal traits" in order to produce from memory (and clandestinely) a sketch that could then be circulated among friends for their critique and suggestions until a lifelike portrait had emerged. Such a portrait would have been a sort of hybrid of "from life" and "from memory"—an attempt not simply to capture an external likeness but also to represent the character of the model.⁶⁶

Since the Christian church emerged in this cultural milieu, we must assume that converts not only were familiar with the practice of making and using portraits but were possibly also aware of the criticism of that practice. If so, they may have adapted this criticism to reflect their own theological issues—asserting, with Plotinus, that portraits mistook the external world for the true (invisible and ideal) one or that they were products of a materialistic and idolatrous culture that adherents to the new faith ought to reject on general principle. If such objections were taken from the philosophical sphere into the Christian theological one, we may also assume that concern with the dishonesty and even danger of portraits could run deep within the intellectual tradition, affecting the everyday practice of Christians, including the art they created to express their faith.

Evidence for Christian adoption of Platonist objections to art may be found within the wider Christian intellectual circles including the writings of Valentinus (ca. 120–160 C.E.), who offers a criticism very similar to Plotinus's, but from a century earlier:

However much a portrait is inferior to an actual face, just so is the world worse than the living realm. Now, what is the cause of the [effectiveness of the] portrait? It is the majesty of the face that has furnished to the painter a prototype so that the portrait might be honored by his name [either of the model or the painter]. For the form was not reproduced with perfect fidelity, yet the name completed the lack within the act of modeling. And also God's invisible [nature] cooperates with what has been modeled [Adam] to lend it credence.⁶⁷

In this short fragment of Valentinus's teaching, as reported by Clement of Alexandria, the Gnostic Christian philosopher raises his concerns about the problem of visual representation between general statements about artistic verisimilitude and the impossibility of producing a true likeness comparing the inadequacies of human art with God's creation of Adam in the image and likeness, thus making a "credible portrait" of a certain kind.

In conclusion, we see that the early church struggled with the problem of artistic representation at all kinds of levels, a struggle that no doubt hampered the artists and worried the theologians. The Mosaic prohibition of image was perhaps only one of their considerations. The desire to be distinct from the surrounding culture, with its almost inherent idolatry, to avoid any visual representations of the Divine nature, and to encourage images that were essentially didactic is evident both in the literary sources and in the extant material evidence. Yet the portrait image did finally appear toward the end of the fourth century and throughout the fifth and sixth, rapidly becoming an essential form of Christian visual art, at least on a par with narrative imagery. We must ask what theological, cultural, or artistic forces were responsible for this important transition in the composition of Christian iconography.

The First Portraits

Of course, much of this transition took place in tandem with radical changes in the church's status and support. After Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 314 C.E., the circumstances of the church changed abruptly from persecuted cult to state-supported religion. The practice of decorating burial chambers with biblical narrative scenes was soon expanded to include portraits of the saints. Churches were built and decorated as well, stimulated at first by imperial patronage and money, but also by a gradually emerging argument for the value of visual art for the church.⁶⁸ In addition to the statue of Christ and the woman in Caesarea Philippi (which causes him to note that he has also seen portraits of the saints Peter and Paul), Eusebius reports that Constantine commissioned sculptural figures of the Good Shepherd and Daniel for public fountains in Constantinople.⁶⁹ According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, that same emperor donated nearly life-sized figures of John the Baptist and Christ in cast silver to the Lateran Baptistery while the Lateran Basilica was supplied with silver statues of Jesus and his twelve apostles (none of these are known to exist today).⁷⁰

By the late fourth century, portraits of Peter and Paul began to be included in the iconographic programs of the catacombs and appeared on other media, such as gold-glass and gems. In the fifth and sixth centuries, portraits of the saints and Christian heroes (apostles, martyrs,

and bishops) were added to the frescoes of the Roman catacombs long after burials ceased in these places, particularly at the sites where their remains were interred. The emerging cult of the saints in the fourth and fifth centuries brought pilgrims to these places, where they might share a commemorative banquet to honor the holy persons near their mortal remains. Jerome, for example, mentions regular Sunday visits to the catacombs when he was a boy in Rome “to pay homage to the sepulchers of the apostles and martyrs.”⁷¹ The art of the catacombs changed from symbolic and narrative images to representations of the saints buried therein, or portraits of the martyrs, apostles, or Mary in company with the deceased.⁷²

Just prior to the emergence of saints’ portraits, however, the first examples of portraits of Christ appear, including one in the vault of a burial chamber in the Catacomb of Commodilla, showing the head and shoulders of Jesus featuring a full dark beard and long wavy hair (fig. 11). Dated to the late fourth century, his head is framed by a halo and on either side we see the letters *alpha* and *omega*. Christ’s face seems to float on a patterned background of squares and rosettes, perhaps meant to represent a coffered ceiling. Elsewhere in this catacomb are images of the denial of Peter and of Christ shown between two martyrs (or

Fig. 11. Bust of Christ, Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome, mid- to late 4th cen. C.E. (Photo: Italy/Held Collection, Bridgeman Art Library).



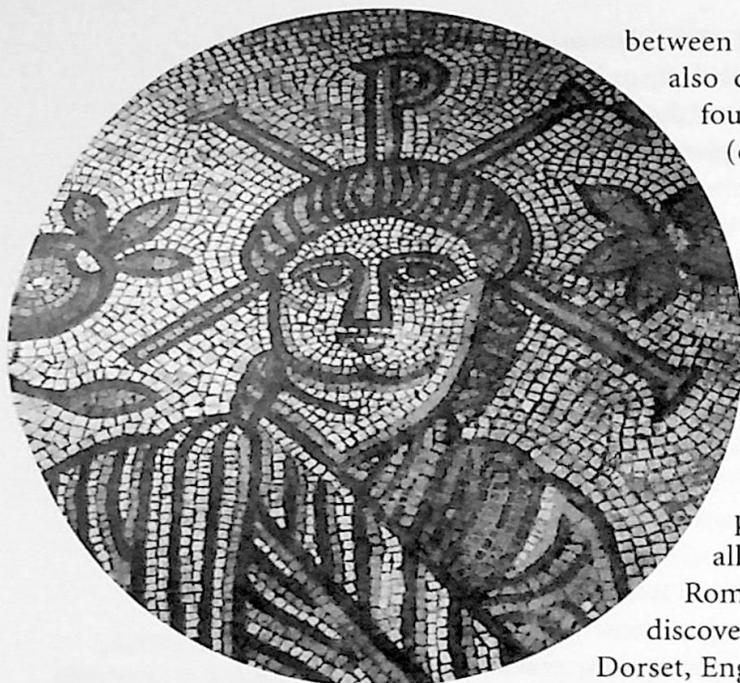


Fig. 12. Mosaic Portrait of Christ from Roman Villa at Hinton St. Mary, Dorset, late 4th cen. CE, London, British Museum (Photo: Author).

(fig. 12). A medallion in the center of this large mosaic shows Jesus with quite a different facial type than that of the Commodilla or Ostia images. This portrait of Jesus, which may have been placed originally in the domed ceiling, shows him beardless and wearing a rather mild expression. His hair is light in color and pulled back from his face. Instead of a nimbus, he has only a chi-rho monogram behind his head; on either side are pomegranates, the symbolism of which is somewhat unclear—perhaps of his passion or of abundance in the resurrection. At the corners of the mosaic are personifications of the four seasons—a popular secular theme in Roman art, especially pavement mosaics. Adjacent to this composition is another, smaller mosaic portraying the mythological figure Bellerophon slaying the Chimera (or perhaps a Christianized version—Christ slaying the Chimera).⁷⁴

A statuette, now assumed to be a portrait of Christ seated and holding a scroll, was discovered in Asia Minor and is now housed in Rome's Museo Nazionale (fig. 13). The work generally has been dated to the late fourth century, although both its date and its identification as an image of Christ have been questioned.⁷⁵ The beardless, youthful, and almost feminine appearance of the figure has recently been discussed in some detail and certainly offers contrast with the images from Commodilla and Ostia in particular.⁷⁶ The figure in this case bears more resemblance to the figure of Christ on mid-fourth century sarcophagi, including the tomb of Junius Bassus, now in the Vatican (fig. 14). Although the original context of this statuette is unknown, it appears to have been designed to be an independent work of art, not a part of a group or larger composition.

between Peter and Paul). Another such image, also dated to the late fourth century, was found at Ostia Antica, made of opus sectile (colored marble). Like the Commodilla image, Christ's head, here framed by a simple nimbus, also has a dark beard (but in this image with a pronounced fork) and long dark curly hair. The face of Christ alone, without any background or context, had become a subject of art and perhaps an object of devotion.⁷³

A third famous late fourth-century portrait of Jesus comes not from Rome at all but from a mosaic pavement in the Roman villa (or perhaps small house church) discovered in the 1960s at Hinton St. Mary in Dorset, England, and now in the British Museum

Concurrent with the development of visual art for the church, along with explanations of its potential value, was a fading concern about idolatry in the late third and early fourth centuries. This may have been because the surrounding culture was gradually becoming Christian (and thus less threatening), or because the traditional gods were steadily disappearing from the scene, or perhaps, even more significant, because the focus of theological condemnation moved from the dangers of idolatry to the controversies about the person and nature(s) of the savior. The demons that entrapped the people into worshiping the vain and empty creations of human hands now had another way to drag the unwary into perdition, through false teachings rather than through the worship of false gods or the veneration of idols. Pagan gods were no longer the competition and threat that they were in the first centuries, and the secular world was something to be accommodated rather than avoided. Until the beginning of the eighth century and the outbreak of iconoclasm, portraits of the saints, Mary, and even Christ were hardly a matter for concern.

Instead, images of saints as well as scenes taken from the Bible became more and more popular for church decoration. Intended to inspire awe as well as to teach, the artwork in church was as much a mode of theology as the writing of treatises or delivering of homilies, and it was as effective a means of nurturing devotion or pious emotion as any of the rhetorical arts. However, even though the material evidence certainly demonstrates

Fig. 13. Statuette of seated Christ as teacher, early to mid-4th cen. C.E., Museo Nazionale (Palazzo Massimo alle Terme), Rome (Photo: Author).



that portraits of the saints, Mary, or Christ had arrived, at least one provincial but famous bishop at the turn of the fifth century was worried about how the existence and popularity of such images still might lead his congregation astray. Noting that some of the better educated pagans in his city had turned the tables and actually were chiding Christians for being “adorers of columns, and sometimes even of pictures,” Augustine grants that such things are taking place (“would to God that we didn’t have them”) and notes that the practice is defended by what will become the standard Christian argument: “We,’ they say, ‘don’t adore images, but what is signified by the image.’”⁷⁷ Augustine objects to such an argument by pointing out that it would be wiser to pray directly to the saint rather than to the image of that saint, an argument that might seem eminently sensible if posed to a congregation that was unattached to such visual and material aids to prayer. Whether his congregation was persuaded or not (we have no surviving icons from Hippo) is ultimately less interesting, however, than the fact that, according to Augustine, Christians are being accused of the very acts their authorities had formerly ridiculed in others.

Fig. 14. Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, 357 C.E., Treasury of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

