Visual Exegesis

Dura Europos
The Roman Catacombs
Dura Europos
Pompeii of the Desert

- Established 3rd cent. BCE
- Dedication: 224-245 BCE
- Destroyed mid-3rd cent. CE
- Roman fortress town on Euphrates against Parthians
- Excavated in early 20th cent.
- Evidence of carnage and destruction; synagogue preserved
No Images

- Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8 “Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image nor any of manner of likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”
- “Thou shalt not bow down to them or serve them”
- These are not cultic images; there is a shift in thinking
- Strictness of prohibition depends on how threatened Israel felt
- Depiction of Word of God
Why Images?

• After destruction of temple, not as much emphasis on visual depiction
• Surrounding temples depicted their gods in glory and splendor
• Jews depicted the power of their God in the visual narrative depiction of salvation history
• Dynamic God in time and space
• Possible influence on catacombs
• Incorporation of midrash
• Does Christian art have its origins in Judaism?
Other Gods
The Synagogue
A Surprise!
Dura Europos Synagogue
Ezra Reads the Law
Abraham and the Stars
Jeremiah
Moses and Burning Bush
The Ark of the Covenant

*menorah, ethrog, lulab*
Moses in the River
Exodus and Temple
Exodus Crossing of Red Sea
Golden Calf
Moses Brings Forth Water
Aaron’s Temple - Tabernacle
Midrash on Elijah and Priests of Baal
Amos 9:3; Hos 13:1)
Elijah’s Sacrifice – 1 Kings 18

- 9th century BCE text – reapplied to 3rd century CE – midrashic technique – against the many gods of nature – lordship of Yahweh in pagan context
- Right arms of Elijah and his worshippers – pagan priests’ right arms droop
- Bull recognizes will of God and refuses to be sacrificed to Baal
Anointing of David
Ark Captured by Philistines
Get Rid of the Ark
Ezekiel – Valley of Bones
Resurrection of Dead
Esther and the King
Good Shepherd
Good Shepherd Dura Europos
Healing of Paralytic
The Catacombs
Which themes were chosen?

– OT themes predominate in pre-Constantinian era
– Moses striking the rock in the wilderness
– Abraham offering Isaac
– Jonah
– Noah
– Daniel
Which themes were absent?

– Jacob
– Joseph
– Joshua
– David
– Major prophets
NT themes

• Baptism of Jesus
• Raising of Lazarus
• Multiplication of loaves and fishes
• Healing of paralytic
• Wedding feast of Cana (water/wine)
• Woman at the well
• Missing: temptation, cleansing of temple
• Late: nativity, transfiguration, Last Supper, passion, and resurrection
Interpreting the Data

• Juxtaposition or proximity of one image to another
• Some form a ‘symbolic complex’
• Deliverance? Symbol of Jesus’ sacrifice?
• Most are funerary images and probably reflect beliefs about afterlife but are not necessarily limited to that
Popularity of OT themes

- 4 times as many as NT
- Jonah most popular, followed by Moses striking rock, Adam and Eve, and Daniel
- Early Jewish iconographic traditions? (prototype)
- Traditions of book illumination from Alexandria and Antioch?
- Liturgical texts?
Seeing the Truth

• Types >> OT >> divine providence; coming of Jesus
  – Binding of Isaac (crucifixion of Jesus)
  – Moses striking rock (baptism) 1 Cor 10:1-5
  – Noah (1 Peter 3:20-21;
• Not literal or historical; ‘see’ the truth in the image
• Visual allegories
Moses Striking Rock
Jonah Over the Side
Jonah Swallowed
Jonah Lying Under the Bush
Sacrifice of Isaac
Lazarus Come Forth
Lazarus Again
Cultural Adaptation

- Greco-Roman art and environment
- Jonah – sleeping Endymion
- Ascension of Elijah – Roman apotheosis
- Beardless Christ
- Roman clothing (philosophers)
Christ the Teacher

Note that Jesus is beardless
Multiplication of Loaves
Other Christs

- Christ is depicted as Orpheus and Helios
- These borrow on core cultural values
- Indicates the replacement of traditional gods with the new God
Sol Invictus or Mithras
Jesus or Mithras?
Deliverance?

- Deliverance in time of danger and persecutions
- Note themes from Daniel
- After Constantine Noah and Jonah are dropped
- 3 youths in fiery furnace are often linked with Noah in Ark – persecution and martyrdom
- This is noted by John Chrysostom, Tertullian, and Cyprian
Daniel and the Lions
Three Men in the Furnace
Adam and Eve
Magi
Mary and Isis
Woman With Flow of Blood
Woman at the Well