

Jonah in Early Christian Art Allegorical Exegesis and the Roman Funerary Context

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Introduction

Images of the prophet Jonah are found often in the wall paintings of the catacombs and the relief sculptures of Christian sarcophagi from third- and fourth-century Rome. How did these funerary images function as interpretations of Scripture for the ancient viewer? In this article, I will show how these images of Jonah in early Christian art were a form of *allegorical exegesis* insofar as they presented new, visual “readings” of the biblical story.

Allegory has traditionally been recognised as a form of symbolic interpretation. In allegory, elements of a story are understood not on their own grounds, but as symbols of other (spiritual) realities. Recently, however, scholars have begun to pay more attention to how allegory represents a way of reading texts that subverts old interpretations and presents radical new ones (Whitman 1987: 58). The word “allegory” itself combines the Greek words *allos* (“other”) and *agoreuein* (“to speak in the marketplace,” i.e. “publicly”) – put together, the word means “to say something other than” what was previously said (Dawson 1992: 3ff.).

The claim that early Christian art is “allegorical” is not uncommon among art historians. However, all too often, introductions to early Christian art leave such claims undeveloped or unsupported; in the case of Jonah art, the prophet is frequently identified simply as a symbol for Christ or the resurrection. As a result, too often biblical images like Jonah are presented without an interpretive context that might inform their proposed allegorical function. If these images are to take on any further significance for the study of early Christian communities, it is necessary to locate them properly in an interpretive milieu.

Here, I will be comparing the Jonah art of the catacombs and sarcophagi to the allegorical interpretations of Jonah given by early Christian writers. Understanding the allegorical writers of the early church as a larger interpretive community will help establish a context for understanding the visual “readings” of Jonah in this art. How was the story of Jonah read allegorically in early Christian literature? Is it possible to identify a distinctive perspective in writings circulating in the environs

of Rome? How do the depictions of Jonah in the catacombs and on the sarcophagi “say something other than” this interpretive tradition? As I will argue, early Christian images of Jonah functioned as new readings of the biblical Jonah story — readings that expanded significantly upon earlier literary traditions about Jonah.

The Allegorical Interpretive Context: Readings of Jonah in Early Christian Literature

A. An Allegorical Paradigm: Clement of Alexandria’s Reading of Jonah

In the study of early Christian allegory, much attention is given to Alexandrian writers and theologians such as Clement of Alexandria. Clement’s allegorical treatment of Jonah in his *Stromata* (or *Miscellaneous*) provides three helpful touchstones that will guide our search for allegorical technique closer to Rome: 1) a reading of Jonah as “sign,” 2) a group of biblical stories as a recurring context, and 3) allegorical readings of pagan mythology as a recurring context.

First, Clement (*Stromata* 1.118-123) identifies Jonah specifically as a sign (*sêmeion*) or figure, a theme that one observes already in the Gospel of Matthew:

But he answered him, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign (*sêmeion*); but no sign (*sêmeion*) will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah (*to sêmeion Iôna tou prophêtou*). For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster (*en tê koiliâ tou kêtous*), so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:39-40 [NRSV]).

However, Clement’s reading of Jonah as a “sign” has a slightly different emphasis. While Matthew concentrates on the length of time Jonah spent in fish’s belly, Clement (1.118) emphasises the prophet’s deliverance: “[Jonah] came forth out of the big fish” (*ho ek tou kêtous proelthôn*).

Second, Clement treats the story of Jonah in the context of other biblical images of deliverance. In the *Stromata*, Clement twice frames the story of Jonah with two stories from Daniel — the stories of the three men in the furnace and the story of Daniel in the lions’ den (*Stromata* 1.123; 2.104). These deliverance motifs in Daniel, in combination with other key biblical images, will prove a recurring interpretive context for allegorical readings of Jonah.

Third, Clement interprets the story of Jonah in the context of pagan mythological motifs and their fulfilment in Christian doctrine. In chapter five of his *Stromata*, Clement presents the dialogue between Jonah and the shipmaster as evidence that pagans possess an embryonic consciousness of God.

And Jonah, himself a prophet, intimates the same thing in what he says: “And the shipmaster came to him, and said to him, Why do you snore? Rise, call on your God that He may save us, and that we may not perish.” For the expression “your God” he makes as if to one who knew Him by way of knowledge; and the

expression, “that God may save us,” revealed the consciousness in the minds of heathens who had applied their mind to the Ruler of all, but had not yet believed (*Stromata* 5.135-36).

In the same section, Clement quotes a number of poetic and philosophical sources that are thought to express Christian truth in a cloaked, incomplete form. Clement’s mix of biblical interpretation and mythological references was not uncommon among early Christian allegorical writers: such writers wrestled with what has been called a “double impulse.” On the one hand, they desired to “demonstrate the unworthiness of the pagan gods;” on the other hand, they sought to defend Christian theology by drawing support from Greek and Roman epic poets and philosophers (Lamberton 1986: viii, 78-79).

B. Allegorical Readings of Jonah in and around Rome

The same three allegorical motifs – Jonah as sign, other biblical stories as context, and pagan mythology as context – appear in literature written or read in the vicinity of Rome in the second and third centuries CE. The language of “sign” and “figure” was applied to the Jonah story by a number of writers. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (107), Justin Martyr quotes and comments upon Matthew 12 (quoted earlier), where Jesus presents Jonah as a “sign” (*sêmeion*) of his upcoming passion. Justin’s summary of the story concentrates not only on Jonah’s being “cast up on the third day” but also on his preaching to the Ninevites and his “griev(ing)” under the “dispensation of a gourd.”

Irenaeus, whose connection with Rome is somewhat more limited, also calls Jonah a “sign” (*signum*) expressing God’s plan of salvation. In this pericope, instead of focusing on Christological issues, Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.20.1) reads the story of Jonah as a metaphor for the plight of humankind in the grip of sin, with Jonah understood as the representative of humankind and the fish as the “author of transgression.” In retelling the story, he too focuses on Jonah’s being swallowed and cast out by the sea-monster, a deliverance that leads to the repentance of the Ninevites.

Tertullian, who spent the early part of his life in Rome, and whose writings seem to have held some currency there (Quasten 1992: II.159, 224, 227, 233), also employs allegorical language in reference to Jonah. In his *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* (32), he reads the story of Jonah allegorically in order to lend support to the doctrine of bodily resurrection. Tertullian focuses on Jonah’s “coming forth from the fish’s belly,” emphasising that Jonah escaped “uninjured in both his natures — his flesh and his soul (*caro atque anima*).” Tertullian also relates the story of Jonah to the context of burial: he compares the big fish to “a coffin, or a tomb, or...some quiet and concealed grave” in which one would have expected Jonah’s flesh to be “consum[ed] and digest[ed].” However, Jonah’s body is preserved, and the fish instead also serves to “prefigure... men who are wildly opposed to the Christian name” (32).

In chapter 58 of the same work, Tertullian interprets the Jonah story again in

relation to the resurrection of the body. Again he regards the events of the story as “proofs and documents (*documenta*) of our own future integrity (*futura integritas*)” and as “figures of ourselves (*figurae nostrae*)” (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6). Again he focuses on Jonah’s being “swallowed” and “vomited out safe and sound” (cf. Tertullian, *Concerning Prayer* 17.4). Again the resurrection of the flesh is at issue, and again the Jonah story figuratively confirms the perfection of the resurrected body.

In the writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus of Rome, one can also see how familiar biblical stories are interpreted in relation to the Jonah story. In his work *Against Heresies* (5.5.2), Irenaeus presents proofs of God’s power to give eternal life. In addition to retelling the story of how Jonah was “cast into the deep, swallowed down into the whale’s belly, ...[and] thrown out safe upon the land,” the writer also refers to Elijah and Enoch, Adam and Eve, Elias, and finally the ordeal of Ananias, Azarias, and Mishael in the fiery furnace. Tertullian, in his treatise *On Fasting* (7.4ff.), refers the example (*exemplum*) of Daniel after recollecting the deliverance of the Ninevites in the book of Jonah. Elsewhere he mentions Jonah along with the three brothers in the furnace from Daniel, as well as Enoch, Elias, and God’s preservation of the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 58). In the writings of Hippolytus of Rome, one observes a similar biblical context. In his fragmentary *Commentary on Daniel* (2.36), the deliverance of Jonah is again associated with that of Daniel in the lions’ den. Finally, in an Arabic fragment of his *Commentary on Genesis* (90.14), Hippolytus reads Jonah in light of the story of Noah, emphasising a numerological connection and the theme of repentance.

Regarding the use of pagan mythology, I will mention only Tertullian’s interpretation of Jonah in his treatise, *The Chaplet*. In that work, Tertullian discusses the origins of things, countering inventions attributed to pagan myth with their fulfilment in events described in the Bible. He writes, “Let Minerva have been the first to build a ship: I shall see Jonah and the apostles sailing” (*The Chaplet* 8). Here, amidst the harsher attitude of the Latin West toward pagan mythology, one finds a similar perspective to that observed in Clement of Alexandria. Tertullian’s account is most interesting in that he presents an essentially visual reading of Jonah. Although he concedes Minerva’s chronological priority in the invention of ships, he insists on “reading” or “viewing” otherwise: “I shall see (*ego videbo*) Jonah and the apostles sailing.” Alternative readings of pagan mythology are also evidenced in early Christian funerary images of Jonah.

Images of Jonah in Early Christian Funerary Art

Having described the ways in which the story of Jonah was read allegorically in second- and third-century Christian literature, I now turn to funerary images of Jonah from third- and early fourth-century Rome — specifically, the wall paintings of the catacombs and the relief sculptures of Christian sarcophagi. While some of

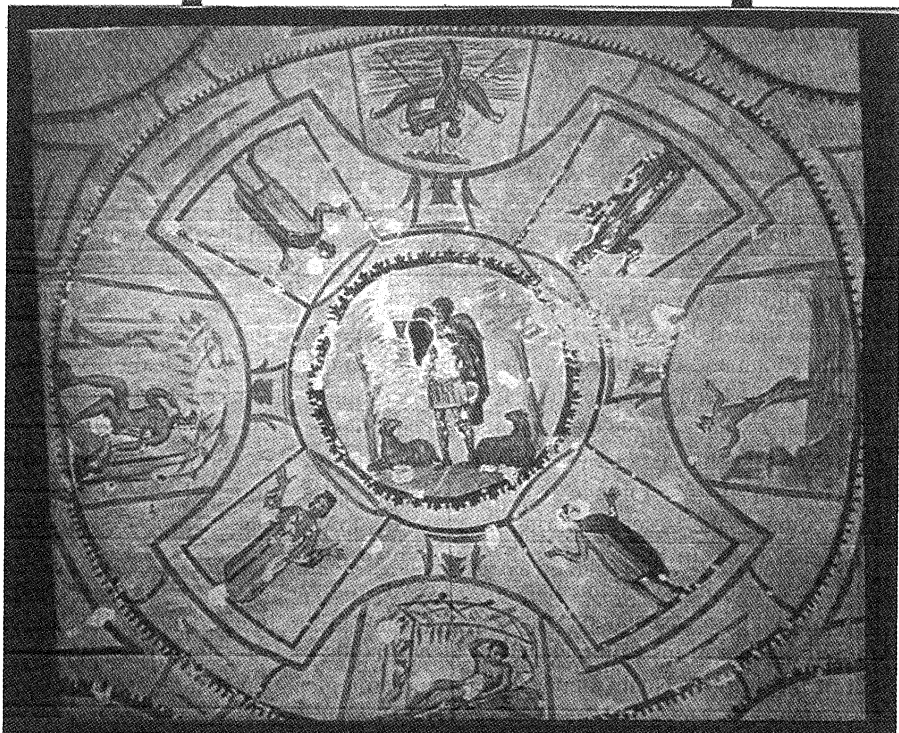


Fig. 1. Wall painting with four scenes from the story of Jonah: Rome, Catacomb of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus (from Wilpert [1903] II.61). Top center, Jonah thrown overboard; right, Jonah vomited up by the fish; bottom center, Jonah at rest; left, Jonah irritated; center, the Good Shepherd.

the catacomb galleries date from the middle of the second century CE, there is no visual trace of Christianity in the catacombs until the third century (Beckwith 1970: 8-9). The sarcophagi of interest to this study date primarily to the fourth century CE. I will show how these images of Jonah not only conformed to certain patterns established in second- and third-century literature but also expanded upon these patterns as well. Several questions motivate my study: How does the visual narration of the Jonah story diverge from the allegorical interpretive tradition? What can be said about the images themselves and their coordination in a narrative context? How does this Jonah-narrative relate to other biblical images and themes from pagan mythology? Finally, how might these contextual images also reveal allegorical innovation in the art?

A. Four Scenes from the Story of Jonah: A Narrative “Jonah-Cycle”

Four different scenes from the life of Jonah can be identified in early Christian funerary art (see Figure 1). The *first scene* most often depicts the crew of the ship tossing Jonah overboard into the awaiting mouth of a sea monster. In some of the paintings a half-swallowed Jonah is already disappearing down the monster’s throat. The representations of the ship, as well as the sea monster, seem to be derived from stock images of antiquity, especially the iconography of Jason’s mythic sea voyage (Wischmeyer 1981: 169-70). The *second scene* focuses on Jonah’s rescue from the mouth of the sea monster. The viewer sees the monster vomit an undoubtedly relieved Jonah out into the air. The *third scene* depicts a naked, reclining Jonah under a hanging vine or a gourd plant. Especially characteristic of this scene is the depiction of Jonah’s arm draped over his head in an attitude of repose. Finally, the *fourth scene* portrays a noticeably irritated Jonah under the same plant, presumably after his chastisement by God.

The first two scenes, those depicting Jonah being eaten and then spewed forth from the sea-monster, correspond to the basic elements of the Jonah-story most of interest to early Christian writers. Yet, except perhaps for a partially preserved wall painting at Cimitile-Nola near Naples (Korol 1987: Taf. 47), these scenes do appear as an isolated sequence in the art. Instead, the ship and vomit scenes usually appear within an expanded artistic narrative that culminates in one of the scenes of Jonah under the vine or gourd-plant. The episode with Jonah under the plant receives little attention from early Christian writers: thus, its prominence in the art represents a new development in the allegorical reading tradition about Jonah.

Of the two variations of Jonah under the plant, the image of a frustrated Jonah (scene 4) seems to be a secondary addendum to the primary image of Jonah at rest (scene 3). Scene four never appears on its own, and it appears together with the other three scenes only a limited number of times in the catacomb art (Wilpert 1903: II.61, 96, 100). Furthermore, this four-scene composition does not seem to have been utilised at all in the fourth-century sarcophagus relief sculptures (Spiegel 1978: 4, 7). The last scene simply drops out. The addition of this fourth scene may have been a later attempt to conform the artistic narrative more closely to biblical narrative. The scene also may reflect the artists’ desire for symmetry. In support of this view, I observe that the four-scene composition is always organised around a circular central space, and never in a linear narrative.

In contrast to the derivative nature of scene four, scene three is a crucial element of the Jonah-cycles. The image of Jonah at rest invariably appears as the final component of two- and three-scene paintings. Among the two-scene examples (comprised of scenes two and three), most present a visual narrative unified by a common background (Wilpert 1903: II.26, 45, 67, 82, 106, 122, 130, 160, 189). In these cases, the reclining Jonah seems to have just been spewed forth from the belly of the sea monster. There are no scenes that depict his intermittent mission to the Ninevites as told in the biblical account. Here the depiction of Jonah at rest departs from both its biblical and early Christian allegorical antecedents in terms of its

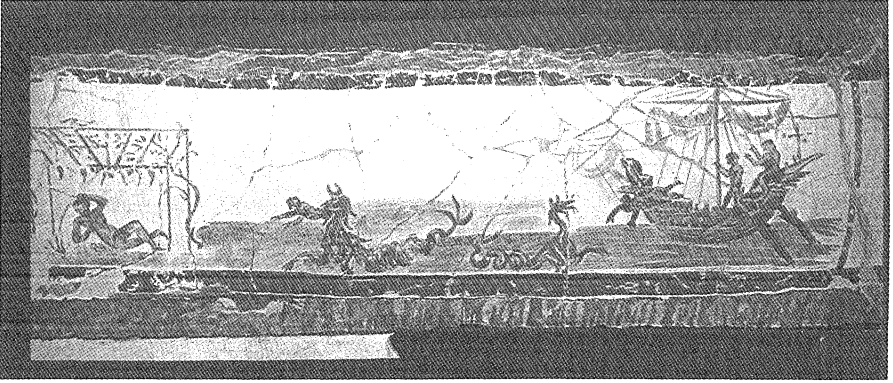


Fig. 2. Wall painting with three scenes from the story of Jonah: Rome, Catacomb of Callixtus (from Wilpert [1903] II.47, bottom). Right, Jonah thrown overboard; center, Jonah vomited up by the fish; left, Jonah at rest.

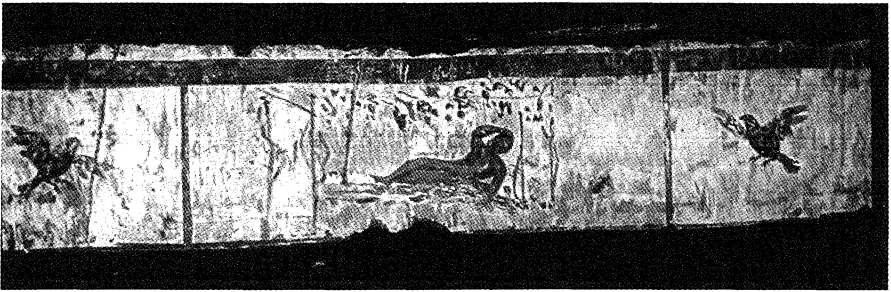


Fig. 3. Wall painting of Jonah at rest: Rome, Catacomb of Callixtus (from Wilpert [1903] II.47, top).

placement in a visual narrative (Spiegel 1978: 3, nt. 9).

The three-scene narrative appears in both the catacomb wall paintings (Figure 2) and the sarcophagus reliefs (Wilpert 1903: II.47, 131, 189; Deichmann 1967: II.888, 1010). On the sarcophagi, the resting Jonah is often enlarged for emphasis. Sculptors also highlighted this scene by differentiating the fluid, classical lines of the nude Jonah from the more squat, sketchy sailors that appear in the ship-scene. In addition, scene three is occasionally accentuated by means of narrative abbreviation or omission. In the Christian sarcophagi, we find examples in which the sea monster appears to have spewed forth an already reclining Jonah (Deichmann 1967: II.499, 589, 621, 770, 778, 794b, 795, 997), or the vomit-scene is omitted altogether. In the latter case, the ship and the sea monster swallowing Jonah serve as a visual prelude

to a more prominent scene of Jonah at rest (Deichmann 1967: II.674, 987). This technique of narrative abridgment reaches its extreme in the numerous, solitary scenes of Jonah at rest (Wilpert 1903: II.26, 38, 47, 56, 70, 89, 118, 172, 187, 224; Deichmann 1967: II.491, 522, 523, 591, 617a-b, 620, 717, 740, 750, 881, 925, 1037) – in these cases, this scene alone may represent the fully developed narrative cycle (see Figure 3). Given the fact that this scene of Jonah at rest does not figure at all in the allegorical readings of Jonah in the second- and third-century literature, the prominence of the scene in the art suggests its vital role in the visual reinterpretation of the Jonah-story. I will return later to the allegorical significance of this image.

B. A Familiar Context of Biblical Images

I have already identified a set of biblical themes that appear in conjunction with Jonah in early Christian literature. A similar group of images – especially images of deliverance – appears in proximity to Jonah in the catacombs and sarcophagi: Daniel and the lions, the three men in the furnace, Noah in the ark, and Moses striking the rock, to name only a few (Wilpert 1903: II.45, 58, 67, 89, 106, 118, 119, 122, 131, 172, 187, 205). Other biblical images and scenes – Adam and Eve, Job, the Good Shepherd, the raising of Lazarus – also appear together with the Jonah-narrative (Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1976: Anh. 2A, C; Wilpert 1903: II.45, 61, 65, 67, 69, 71, 106, 112, 113, 131, 203).

Occasionally these scenes are not simply juxtaposed, but even *incorporated within* the flow of the Jonah-narrative itself. This technique was utilised especially by sculptors, who were forced to compress a number of biblical scenes into the limited space provided by a relief surface. Thus, in the “Jonas sarcophagus,” one finds a version of the Good Shepherd, a fisherman hooking a fish, Moses striking the rock, and the raising of Lazarus interspersed among the scenes from the Jonah story (Grabar 1968: no. 147). These images evoke themes relevant to the funerary context — especially deliverance, divine presence, and the impassability of the body during times of trial.

C. The Use of Mythological Iconography

Mythological motifs also impinged upon early Christian representations of Jonah. From the earliest examples in the catacombs and sarcophagi, pagan motifs were adopted by artists who sought to portray the story of Jonah. Most notably, the nude figure of Jonah at rest was fashioned after ancient depictions of the mythological persona Endymion.

Who was Endymion? In Apollodorus’ *The Library* (I.7.5), the writer gives a confused account of Endymion’s genealogy, identifying Endymion first as the son of Calyce and Aetulus, but later noting the tradition that he was a son of Zeus. Apollodorus emphasises that Endymion’s “surpassing beauty” was such that the Moon fell in love with him. This tradition is transmitted up through the second

century CE by writers such as Apollonius of Rhodes (*Argonautica* 4.57), Pausanias (*Description of Greece* V.1.4), and Hyginus (*Genealogiae* 271). In addition to his distinguishing characteristic of physical beauty, Endymion was also known for receiving the gift of eternal sleep at the favour of Zeus. Apollodorus (I.7.5) writes, “Zeus allowed him to choose what he would, and he chose to sleep forever, remaining deathless (*athanatos*) and ageless (*agêrôs*).” Endymion’s eternal sleep is likewise attested by Plato (*Phaedo* 17.72C) and Cicero (*De finibus* 5.20.55). Indeed, the ideal form of a sleeping Endymion became a common motif in contemporary Roman sculpture in the second- and third-centuries CE (Gerke 1940: Taf. 11). The reclining posture of Jonah with his arm draped over his head resembles closely such portrayals of Endymion. The adaptation of this figure from the common stock of Greek myth further show how this early Christian funerary art has an allegorical function. In this art, the figure of Endymion has been interpreted differently – “re-read” as Jonah. Thus, the image of Jonah at rest once again proves to be a locus for the allegorical “re-reading” of earlier traditions.

Conclusion: Jonah as a Sign of Paradisiacal Rest and Bodily Resurrection

In view of their funerary setting and their biblical and mythological context, early Christian images of Jonah convey more than just a generic hope for a final resurrection. Instead, the art reflects a specific “exegetical” concern with the state of the human body after death. Tertullian expresses a similar concern when he speaks of Jonah’s “coming forth from the fish’s belly... uninjured in both his natures — his flesh and his soul” as a sign of the body’s preservation after death (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 32). The funerary art likewise includes this scene of deliverance, but adds the image of Jonah at rest as a visual “sign” of what Tertullian calls “our future (bodily) integrity” (58). Contextual biblical images like Daniel in the lions’ den and the three men in the furnace reinforce this concern for deliverance and the preservation of the body. Like Jonah in his escape from the whale, these characters emerge from the lions and the fire unscathed.

By using the ideal form of Endymion to represent Jonah, Roman artists were able to give visual expression to an eschatological hope – the perfect restoration of human bodies in the resurrection. Yet, for an ancient Christian viewer, the Endymion-form not only would have evoked the perfection of the resurrected body, but also the period of bodily rest that was thought to precede the final resurrection. A few chapters before he treats Jonah for the first time in *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, Tertullian discusses this bodily rest specifically in terms of Christian burial practice:

Thus we are furnished even with an allegorical defense of the resurrection of the body (*allegorice defensio corporalis resurrectionis*). When, then, we read, “Go, my people, enter into your closets for a little season, until my anger pass away,” we have in the closets graves (*sepulchre erant cellae promae*), in which

they will have to rest (*requiescere*) for a little while, who shall have at the end of the world departed this life in the last furious onset of the power of the Antichrist (27).

The funerary image of the reclining Jonah reflects a similar interest in the rest of the body after burial. However, the use of the Endymion's form as a visual expression of that rest moves beyond the bounds of the earlier allegorical interpretive tradition. In fact, Tertullian himself rejects Endymion as a suitable example for describing the *place* of heavenly repose — "Shall we then have to sleep high up... around the moon with the Endymions of the Stoics? No, but in Paradise..." (*On the Soul* 55). In contrast, the Roman artist embraces the figure as a means of expressing the nature of that rest.

Thus, in this image of Jonah, conceptions of paradisiacal rest and bodily resurrection are merged. As a new allegorical "reading" of Jonah, this funerary image ultimately reflected a specific exegetical and pastoral concern: faced with the everyday realities of death and burial, how might early Christians still visualise the resurrection of the flesh?

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Abbreviations

ANF = *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885-1896; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951-1956.

CCSL = *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953-.

CSEL = *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. Vienna: Geroldi, 1866-.

GCS = *Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*. Berlin: Akademie, 1897-.

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version Bible.

PG = *Patrologia Graeca*. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 volumes. Paris, 1844-1864.

SC = *Sources chrétiennes*. Edited by H. deLubac, J. Daniélou, et al. Paris: Cerf, 1942-.