Freestanding Sculpture

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The worshipping of objects was never authorized by either Jews or early Christians. In fact, their scriptures strictly forbade it. It was once thought that Christianity was founded in the eastern Mediterranean as a mystical cult that was an offshoot of Hebraic teachings in the Old Testament and that Christians had embraced literally the second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (Exod 20:4–5). However, both Jews and Christians depicted images in mosaics on floors and walls. They were neither aniconic nor iconophobic. Relief sculpture is found on numerous marble sarcophagi (see Chapters 3–4) and ivory diptychs (see Chapter 13). We also have a limited, but important, number of early Christian sculpted marble objects in the round and in relief.

The focus of this chapter is on select freestanding extant objects from the period c. 200 to 400 CE that are distinctly Christian in theme. These sculptures were not worshipped but were viewed during prayer and contemplation and utilized to comprehend the biblical narratives. Visual imagery was found in catacombs and burial places as the earliest church was virtually invisible to outsiders. “The signs and symbols that early Christians chose were illative and mediated, not direct and unmediated,” notes Paul Corby Finney. The meaning of the fish, that its Greek letters spelled out Christ, God’s son and Savior, was known to insiders, and the artisans borrowed heavily from Greek imagery. The objects were not direct references to spiritual reality or spiritual truth but indirect ones, and the viewer was to look beyond the objects to the stories and reality that lay behind them.

**Jonah and the Good Shepherd**

Early Christian art depicts narrative scenes from the Bible that are intentionally memorable. Whether it is the idea that Jonah can be swallowed by a big fish, survive within its belly or be cast out and live to tell about it, Jonah’s tale is not easily forgotten. Beginning in the third-century images of Jonah appeared on Christian sarcophagi and in the catacomb paintings. Joining these third-century images of Jonah in funerary art is the Jonah Marbles, a group of sculptures usually dated to the second half of the third century CE. There are four symbolic sculptures depicting selected events in the book of Jonah: *Jonah Swallowed* (Figure 5.1); *Jonah Praying to God*
Figure 5.1  Marble sculpture of *Jonah Swallowed*, Cleveland Museum of Art, 280–290. Late Roman, Asia Minor, early Christian, 3rd century. Marble; overall: 50.3 × 15.5 × 26.9 cm (19 13/16 × 6 1/16 × 10 9/16 in). The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1965.237.

Figure 5.2  Marble sculpture of *Jonah Praying*, Cleveland Museum of Art, 280–290. Late Roman, Asia Minor, early Christian, 3rd century. Marble; overall: 47.5 × 14.8 × 20.3 cm (18 11/16 × 5 13/16 × 7 15/16 in). The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1965.240.
Figure 5.3  Marble sculpture of Jonah Cast Up, Cleveland Museum of Art, c. 280–290. Late Roman, Asia Minor, early Christian, 3rd century. Marble; overall: 41.5 × 36 × 18.5 cm (16 5/16 × 14 1/8 × 7 1/4 in). The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1965.238.

Figure 5.4  Marble sculpture of Jonah under the Gourd Vine, Cleveland Museum of Art, 280–290. Late Roman, Asia Minor, early Christian period, 3rd century. Marble; overall: 32.3 × 46.3 × 18 cm (12 11/16 × 18 3/16 × 7 1/16 in). The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1965.239.

(Figure 5.2); *Jonah Cast Up* (Figure 5.3); *Jonah under the Gourd Vine* (Figure 5.4). In addition to these four, a well-preserved *Good Shepherd* (Figure 5.5) sculpture completes the group.

These five works were acquired, along with three pairs of male and female bust portraits, by the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1965. The eleven sculptures (ranging in height from 13 to 20 1/2 inches, or 33 to 52 cm) were carved from blocks of the same “white-grained, well-crystallized marble and are thought to have come from the same source in the Eastern Mediterranean.” Recent analysis, according to the museum, identifies the Roman Imperial quarries at Docimium in Ancient Phrygia (now Central Turkey) as the source for the marble.
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These quarries supplied the Roman Empire with high-quality marble in the form of unfinished blocks that were used for sculpture, paving, and veneer. The location where they were originally found remains unknown. The entire group may have been unearthed together from a large pithos, or jar.13

The high quality of the material and artisanship suggests that a wealthy Christian patron may have commissioned all of the sculptures and displayed the portrait busts inside the home.14 As freestanding sculptures, the Jonah marbles are rare. The figures were probably meant to be seen from three sides, in niches, though some might have been displayed in the round.15 Scholars debate the function of the Jonah Marbles, but recent studies argue that the group may have originally formed a domestic fountain group.16 There are documented examples of marble sculptures in fountains, domestic and public, between 200 and 400 CE.17 Eusebius also writes a description of “fountains in the midst of the market place graced with figures of the Good Shepherd . . . and Daniel in the Lion’s Den,” in his biography of Constantine.18 In the case of both the Jonah and Daniel narratives, Christians took Jewish scripture and gave them a Christological focus. The water theme of the Jonah Marbles would have been quite appropriate to a fountain setting in a domestic garden. The gardens in this period were places where family would take meals and congregate. Fleigel also believes that the gardens were the focal point for piety in a variety of forms, so it is not difficult to imagine the Jonah Marbles in such a context.19

Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish scholar, pointed out that Hebrew prophets were both foretellers and forthtellers, that is, their prophetic ministry included both a predictive aspect of telling what God would do in the future (foretelling) as well as a social aspect where the prophet exposed the injustices of society (forthtelling).20 Jonah was a reluctant prophet of God who initially rejected God’s command to be foreteller and forthteller to the residents of Nineveh. His disobedience led him to spend three days in the belly of a whale before he finally, though still only half-heartedly, agreed to deliver God’s message to the foreigners of Nineveh.

Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and events as announcing and prefiguring the ministry of Jesus or the church. Their interpretation of the book of Jonah was inspired by Jesus’ mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders demanding a prophetic sign: “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,” Jesus warned them, “but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (Matt 16:4). In another passage, Jesus elaborates this typology by identifying his own ministry as the fulfillment of the sign of Jonah: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster [Jonah 2:1], so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” (Matt 12:40–41; cf. Luke 11:29–32).

The Christological interpretation of the Jonah story was continued in the patristic period. From the late second century forward, Christian writers extended the Jonah–Christ typology, pointing to Jonah not only as a foreshadowing of Christ’s death and resurrection, but also as an assurance of the resurrection of all believers.21 For example, around 180 CE, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote regarding Jonah’s deliverance from the “great fish”:

[This was done] that man, receiving an unhoped-for salvation from God, might rise from the dead, and glorify God, and repeat that word which was uttered in prophecy by Jonah: I cried by reason of my affliction to the Lord my God, and He heard me out of the belly of hell [Jonah 2:2]; and that he might always continue glorifying God, and giving thanks without ceasing, for that salvation which he has derived from Him.22
Since belief in resurrection was central to Christian faith (1 Cor 15:12–19), this may partially explain why Jonah was “far and away the most popular story from the Old Testament in pre-Constantinian Christian art.”

In a letter to Deogratias in 409 CE, Augustine expounded further upon the Jesus/Jonah typology:

As to the question, What was prefigured by the sea monster restoring alive on the third day the prophet whom it swallowed? Why is this asked of us, when Christ Himself has given the answer . . . As, therefore, Jonah passed from the ship to the belly of the whale, so Christ passed from the cross to the sepulchre, or into the abyss of death. And as Jonah suffered this for the sake of those who were endangered by the storm, so Christ suffered for the sake of those who are tossed on the waves of this world. And as the command was given at first that the word of God should be preached to the Ninevites by Jonah, but the preaching of Jonah did not come to them until after the whale had vomited him forth, so prophetic teaching was addressed early to the Gentiles, but did not actually come to the Gentiles until after the resurrection of Christ from the grave.

And how do we explain the inclusion of the Christ figure as the Good Shepherd? One source for The Good Shepherd (Figure 5.5) may be the Greek Hermes Criophorus figure; often Hermes was shown bringing an offering to the altar, and, by the third century CE, he represented the ram bearer with its connotations of philanthropy and loving care. Its adoption by Christians would probably have passed unnoticed by pagan neighbors. Another possible pagan source is Orpheus who himself is depicted as a Good Shepherd in catacomb paintings and statuettes from the third century. The wild beasts that he soothes with his lyre are replaced by sheep and doves. Various reasons are given why and how Orpheus became a “purified pagan type” and a prototype for Christ as Good Shepherd.

A gospel reference to Christ as “the good shepherd” appears in John (10:11–16) but the sculpture more closely echoes the passage in Luke (15:4–7), with its detail of a sheep borne upon the shoulders of a rescuing shepherd:

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

The Cleveland sculpture (Figure 5.5) is one of the best preserved of the some twenty-six extant marbles depicting The Good Shepherd. The figure is a “type” sharing common compositional traits such as a youthful, beardless shepherd with a sheep draped over the shoulders. He wears a low-waisted tunic and holds the sheep with his left hand. His right hand grasps a crook, and he stands in a contrapposto position with one weight-bearing leg straight and the other bent naturally as the weight shifts. The artist surely knew of this fifth-century BCE stance made known by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos as copies were plentiful throughout the ancient world. Three small sheep and a tree trunk are visible at the base of the sculpture. The unique qualities of this work
include the use of a drill to add contrast of light and dark in the hair. This is a technical element shared by all the Jonah marbles in Cleveland.

The image of God as a shepherd watching over the flock of covenant people is a popular and powerful image in the Jewish Scriptures (Gen 48:15; Ps. 23, 79, 80, 100; Isa 40:11; Jer 50:7; Ezek 34:31). The image is transferred to Jesus in early Christian writings, and is adopted as a description/title for church leadership.28 A visual representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd bore rich meaning for the early Christians during times of persecution because it could symbolize a leader who would sacrifice his life for his flock, or Christ’s salvific care for the soul in the afterlife;29 yet, as an already popular image among non-Christians as well, it did not draw attention to the persecuted believers. Later, after the peace brought by Emperor Constantine in 306 ce, the Good Shepherd became the most popular symbol of Jesus Christ.

A youthful and beardless Christ appears in the Cleveland Good Shepherd (Figure 5.5) discussed above and also in the Vatican Good Shepherd (Figure 5.6). These two are the most frequently discussed and illustrated in the scholarship probably because of their excellent state of preservation. Although the provenance of the Vatican Good Shepherd is unknown, it also can be dated to the mid-fourth century. Unlike the Cleveland Good Shepherd, this figure wears a sleeveless tunic, or exomis, with cross-body purse draped over his right shoulder.30 He stabilizes the sheep on his back with both hands to create a sense of balance and ease to the figure. The bulk of the weight is effortlessly supported by his right leg while the left bends gently in a slight contrapposto stance. The head is turned to his left. Robert Milburn states that the pupil of the eye is slightly off center in order to emphasize the reflective upward glance that is found in sarcophagi dating from the middle of the fourth century.31 The striations of the exomis are defined yet delicate. The sheep’s curls are echoed in the hair of the shepherd to contribute to a regal portrayal when compared with the clumsy and bulky drapery of the Cleveland shepherd (Figure 5.5). The Good Shepherd figures may have appeared in the center of fountains as discussed above. Another possibility is that they may have been thought useful in protecting homes from misfortune.32

Jonah Swallowed (Figure 5.1) and Jonah Cast Up (Figure 5.3) are particularly dramatic representations in marble. The artist sculpts a ketos, or Greek sea monster, that is part land animal and part fish.33 Its hybridity adds to its repulsiveness. The Early Christian artist likely borrowed from the ketea found in Greek and Roman sculptures, wall paintings, relief sculpture, and mosaics, but found a new narrative in which the sea monster could function. The “large fish” (Jonah 1:17) is terrifying with such a monstrous body, recoiling back upon itself with its tail high above its head. This strong vertical representation, combined with the circularity of the two forms, helps us to identify the two figures as one.

Jonah within the belly of the fish is a far more difficult subject to depict. In Jonah Praying (Figure 5.2), the sculptor chose to show the sole figure of Jonah in the gesture of an orant, with arms outstretched and palms up, as he prays to God for deliverance. The bearded Jonah wears the same tunic as in the marble showing him under the gourd vine. The contrapposto stance, as seen in the Good Shepherd marble (Figure 5.5), invokes a figure at rest. These two pieces and Jonah under the Gourd Vine (Figure 5.4) convey a sense of relaxation, meditation, and prayer in contrast to the scenes with the fish that are heightened in drama and action. This alternation of action and calm reflects the biblical story and creates a narrative flow among the five marbles.

Jonah Cast Up (Figure 5.3) continues the drama of the story and repeats the bizarre form of the fish. The bearded Jonah emerges from the mouth with arms extended and a strong upper body visible. The fish can be clearly seen as the same form as in Jonah Swallowed. It possesses the head of a dog, wings of a bird, and the paws of a lion. The tail of the fish wraps up and
over itself and almost touches the right hand of Jonah. This composition is more horizontally oriented than the vertical *Jonah Swallowed* marble (Figure 5.1). The two figures are united much like the mythological character, the centaur. The centaur has the upper body of a man and the lower body of a horse. The forceful regurgitation of Jonah indicates the power of God as Jonah is expelled from the insides of this sea monster. The force is not that of Jonah alone but rather Jonah’s prayers answered by God’s involvement in his situation.

In *Jonah under the Gourd Vine* (Figure 5.4), the prophet reclines and relaxes. He raises his right arm over his head. The body position recalls river god types known throughout the Greek and Roman world. Endymion, the shepherd boy in Greek mythology who slept eternally underneath a tree, may be an inspiration for this depiction of Jonah. Endymion symbolized repose, peace, and well-being; here Jonah has received peace and rests in the calm after the events of the story. Beneath a creeping gourd, Jonah contemplates the miracle of his salvation. Viewers might have seen this posture as an allusion to resurrection to a blissful state, reclining in the shade of a fertile gourd vine.

In these Jonah marbles we glimpse Christian life before its official acceptance in the Roman Empire. When, during the third and early fourth centuries, Christians were threatened by persecution and death, they found hope in the “sign of Jonah” that promised life would follow death.
The parallels between the three-day period of Jonah in the fish and Jesus in the tomb allowed these believers to understand the prophecy of Jonah in a new way, as pointing toward the resurrected Christ who is the shepherd and savior of those who believe in him.

After Christianity became an accepted religion in the Empire by the Edict of Milan in 313, artists also portrayed Christ using imperial imagery, with royal attributes such as a halo, purple robe, and throne. This type becomes known as Christos Pantocrator. A separation occurred between Jonah and Christ in the visual art and theology of Christianity. As Christ became more regal, the popularity of Jonah’s story decreased significantly. Perhaps the concerns of the Christians expanded from uncertainty about their own death, which had been a very real issue during the early centuries, to the eternal kingdom of God after resurrection. The symbol of Jonah was not less important to this next generation of Christians, but Christ’s triumphant rule over the secular powers became more prevalent.

Jesus brought God’s prophetic message to the residents of Galilee and Judea. Unlike Jonah, Jesus was fully obedient to God’s command; in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed, “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42), and this obedience led him to spend three days in the “belly of Death.” Jesus’ message of God’s redeeming love, like Jonah’s, was intended to be inclusive, inviting Jew and non-Jew alike to become people of God’s kingdom (Matt 28:16–20).

Teaching figures

The marble known as Christ Teaching or Cristo Docente (Figure 5.7), whose provenance is unknown, is housed in the Museo Nazionale (Palazzo Massimo) in Rome. The youthful, beardless figure was originally known as the “seated poetess.” It was initially dated to the second century based on stylistic characteristics.

The youth holds a scroll in the left hand and has effeminate, delicate features and curly hair. The soft lines and drapery contour, enveloping the body but revealing the knees beneath, all contribute to an early date. A sculptural representation of Christ as teacher without a beard in the second century is highly unlikely for a variety of reasons. The bearded philosopher is another figural type taken from Greek sources by early Christian sculptors. Early interpreters may have resisted identifying this beardless Christ as a seated philosopher because beards were a typical feature of philosophers in antiquity, regardless of their particular philosophical associations. Lucian tells of the encounter between the Cynic philosopher, Demonax, and Favorinus, a eunuch philosopher. Favorinus asks Demonax which philosophical school he favors, and Demonax responds by asking how Favorinus knew he was a philosopher. When Favorinus answers he knows Demonax is a philosopher because he has a beard, Demonax chuckles at the notion that the beardless Favorinus can judge philosophers by their beards.

The depiction of Christ as youthful, beardless, and curly-haired appears on many early Christian sarcophagi, including the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (see Figure 18.5) and the Passion-Sarcophagus in the Vatican (see Figure 18.6). These are both securely dated c. 360 CE and the Christ Teaching should be considered a contemporary work and share this dating. A youthful Christ may be a precedent to Jesus among the elders that is a popular theme across the history of Christian art. Drawing on Luke 2:41–52, the only canonical Gospel text that describes Jesus as a child, later artists used the scene to foreshadow Jesus’s impending role as an adult as “Lord of the Temple.”

Scholars now date the Teaching Christ to the third century, concluding that the “second century” style continues into the third century in aristocratic and religious circles.

The bearded, philosopher type gets fully acculturated into Early Christian art by the late fourth century to the early fifth century, as seen in St Peter with a Cross (Figure 5.8) located in
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Figure 5.7 Marble sculpture of *Christ Teaching*, Museo Nazionale (Palazzo Massimo), Rome, early Christian. Museo Nazionale Romano (Palazzo Massimo alle Terme), Rome. Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali/Art Resource, NY.

The State Museum, Berlin. It depicts Peter as the traditional Greek philosopher type. The bronze statuette is 3 11/16 inches (9.4 cm) in height and shares the same curly hair and soft drapery as the other figures discussed here. It was reportedly found in a catacomb in Rome and is dated from the late fourth to the early fifth century. Peter is in a teaching pose, as is the seated Christ figure (Figure 5.7), with right hand raised in a speaking gesture. He carries a cross with its top shaped in the shape of the Greek rho from Christ’s monogram.

Another small bronze figure, also dating to the late fourth century, is the *Statuette of Saint Paul* in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Calgary, Sardinia. Paul, typically recognizable by his baldness and scroll, is a bearded, teaching figure. The apocryphal *Acts of Paul* 3.2 gives us a physical description of Paul that appears in repeated works of visual art beginning in the fourth century. The lower portion of Paul’s legs have been broken in this depiction but it has a similar size to the *St Peter* (Figure 5.8) discussed above (3 11/16 in). The bronze was discovered in the excavations of the Christian cemetery at Cornus, Sardinia. Its function is uncertain. It has been suggested that the figure may have been attached to the handle of a lamp.
Although there are still many unanswered questions regarding freestanding sculpture in the Early Christian period, one can examine figural types, study antique precedents, and reflect upon visual sources to formulate a fairly comprehensive understanding of the subjects, persons, and issues significant to the believers of the period.

Notes

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4 For this author’s commentary on the Junius Bassus sarcophagus (Figure 18.5) and the Munich *Ascension* ivory diptych (Figure 23.1), see Heidi J. Hornik, “The Influence of the Junius Bassus Sarcophagus on Italian Renaissance Art,” in “Let the Reader Understand”: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, ed. Edwin Broadhead (London: Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming 2018); Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *The Acts of the Apostles Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries, 2016), 22–23.


7 Finney, *The Invisible God*, 293.


12 Cleveland Museum of Art Object Files, reviewed April 5, 2017.


14 Snyder et al., *Art of the Middle Ages*, 5.


21 See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.20.1; 5.5.2; Tertullian, *On the resurrection of the flesh* 58; *Apostolic Constitutions* 5.7.12.


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31 Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, 80–81, fig. 48. (The quotation by Milburn is on p. 80; the photo of the Good Shepherd statuette being discussed is fig. 48 on p. 81.)
35 Lucian, *Demonax* 13.
41 Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 240.

Further reading