
Christian Iconography and Biblical Interpretation

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Abstract

Since the Bible is regarded as the most important source of Christian iconography and iconography in return is the visual interpretation of the Bible, the relationship between Christian iconography and biblical interpretation is noteworthy. In some cases this relationship is such that the visual representation is actively involved in the interpretation of the biblical text and is not a mere passive illustration of the text. In order to better understand the different periods of Christian iconography, it is also important to consider the biblical interpretive methods. This article, first summarily introduces the two important schools of Antioch and Alexandria; and then moves on to show the reflections of the teachings of these two schools on early Christian art, with which it was contemporary. Attempts will then be made to show this relation in the different examples of the iconography of this era, and to compare it with that of the later periods.

Keywords: Iconography, Interpretation, Antioch School, Alexandrian School, Bible

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Introduction

Since the Bible is the most important source for Christian iconography, a lot of biblical events, themes and scenes have been taken by Christian art. The approach of Christian art in the adoption of the Bible has not always been the same; it means that, in the course of history, Christian art has tried to illustrate biblical themes in light of the dominant interpretative trends of the era. In this respect, it can be claimed that even Christian iconography should be regarded as a kind of biblical interpretation, as it is indicated by historical examples. These historical examples also point out different trends of biblical interpretation. Therefore, gaining insights into Christian iconography and its functions would not be enlighteningly possible without regard to these interpretative trends and the interpretative functions of images (icons) in Christian art.

1) The Role of Visual Interpretation

As different examples in Christian art show, images have had (different) interpretative functions in different periods of Christian iconography. The Focus of this Article will mainly be on examples of early Christian art (the initial four centuries of Christianity), because the early Christian iconography particularly in catacombs, was in the most part, a means for expressing the religious doctrines of the Christians, rather than being mere artistic expression.

Thus, its dominant themes, both in the

explicit representation and the symbolic representation corresponded to sacred texts, those of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, as well as liturgical and patristic texts (Ouspensky, 1978, p.66). Furthermore, this period is approximately coincident with the blossoming of theological schools of Alexandria and Antioch, each of which took a different approach to biblical interpretation. The school of Alexandria had the biggest impact on the iconography of this period, such that its impact can be traced throughout the Christian Middle Ages and even in the modern era.

It should be noted that iconography in general means basically a visual interpretation, but what is important in the development of Christian iconography is its coincidence with the different trends in Christian theology and in the understanding of the Bible. Even the Christian theology can be regarded as one of the main factors of this development (Hughes, 2004, p. 179). In this respect, the role of biblical interpretation as one of the most important sources of iconography becomes evident.

On the interpretative role of images in Christian art, it should be pointed out that Christian iconography was seeking not only to represent visible appearance, but it considered the invisible aspects or spiritual content of what was represented (Ouspensky, 1978, p.65), in the way that sometimes this content distanced itself from its original context and thus took a new meaning. For example, we can mention those Christian images, which have benefited a lot from

the Greek-Roman symbols, and have at the same time separated these symbols from their original context, i.e. paganism, and given them a new meaning. This approach to Christian iconography, which was accompanied with changes in the value of symbols, can be seen as a new interpretation of paganism. In addition, the task of Christian iconography was not only to illustrate, rather, this artistic representation had an active role in the interpretation of Holy Scripture. It is obvious that, this cannot be extended to Christian iconography as a whole, because in many cases the images had a passive role toward the interpretation of the text.

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In connection with the above problem, Saint Bonaventure in the thirteenth century similar to Gregory the Great, believed that the images were created for the uneducated, who may, through the images, understand that which they cannot read in scripture (Williamson, 2004: 67). Hence the visual interpretation of the Bible was important as well as its written interpretation in the Christian world, in the way that they differentiated between two kinds of images: narrative images (*storia*) and non-narrative images (*imago*). The importance of narrative lies in the fact that they replaced written texts by an event or series of events. This sort of images had more paideutic value. In this period the ethical-paideutic importance of images alongside their other functions - including interpretative function - were propounded.

The most famous example of ethical-paideutic interpretation of images goes back to the edict of Gregory the Great. He regarded images as “a book for the illiterate”. He says: “what is written belongs to the educated; the images let the illiterate read by seeing (*videndo legant*), on walls in churches what they are unable to read in books. Hence the illiterate read what they should, in pictures. Therefore, images could fulfill a useful purpose, not only in stimulating religious feeling, but also in conveying the important messages of the scripture to those who could not read them (Ibid, p. 66). According to this view, the image not only helps to stimulate religious feelings and emotions, but also is the bearer of the message and the interpretation of the Bible for a group of believers. This issue becomes more important, when it is known that before the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages, a great number of believers were not familiar with the original languages of that Book, therefore, the images, taken from the text of the Bible, were useful for both the illiterate and this group of believers.

Coincident with this Christian approach to the Christian art, the foundations of Moral or Typological Interpretation of Scripture was generated in the Christian world. This sort of interpretations, which is found even in the late medieval classifications of the interpretative approaches, was seeking the normative significance of the Bible in times

and lives of believers (Gerondin, 1994: 32). This interpretative approach towards the image is also accompanied with other attempts in subsequent centuries. Venerable Bede, a British monk in the eighth century, in addition to the paideutic function of images, sees the role of images not only in mentioning the holy history (for example The crucifixion of Jesus, The miracles of Jesus and so on).

He made a distinction between what the image viewers foreknew and what they learned by images. The former is indeed their interpretation and reading of the Bible, whereas the latter is the issues that they could not understand from the Bible; and the images helped them to have a new understanding of Bible passages (Williamson, 2004: 67). Such beliefs about the significance of image show that the common conception about the function of the image in the Christian West is based on biblical exegesis .

2) Christian Iconography and the Interpretive Heritage of the Bible

Many researchers believe that the root of the problems of modern hermeneutics can be traced back in the Jewish and Christian biblical hermeneutics, such that they regarded Philo of Alexandria as the original founder of the hermeneutic Tradition. Of course, the Greek interpretative tradition should not be disregarded, because the Jewish exegetical tradition arose from Hellenistic culture. The Jewish exegetical tradition

has learnt from the Greek tradition how the stories and rituals of the ancient Greeks have real meaning and can be considered as inspired patterns by the gods , which explain the relationship between gods and mankind (Janes, 1998, p.64). Jews began to interpret the Song of Songs of Solomon by borrowing the Greek interpretative tradition in Homer's and Hesiod's works. In the Greek tradition in return we should not ignore the effects of Sophists and especially the Stoics. Because the interpretive tradition by Stoics emerged from the response to this need that traditional texts should be adjusted with the mentality of their time. This need, which was rooted in the preservation of Greek literature and heritages, had a considerable influence on the tradition of biblical interpretation (Ferraris, 1996: 7). As we will see, in the interpretation of the Bible, the Christian iconography gave the priority to the requirements of its time.

2.1) The Judaist Interpretive Heritage

Unlike the Greco-Roman interpretative heritage, which tends to the interpretation of literary, historical and law texts, the interest of the Judaist interpretive heritage was in the Bible text and its revealed aspect. In this tradition, four interpretative trends emerged, which will be mentioned briefly because of their influence on the Christian world.

1) Literalistic interpretation of the text, that interpreted the text literally, and whose largest concern was law and ethical texts.

2) *Midarshi* method of biblical

interpretation, which had Seven Rules of Bible Interpretation and insisted on the importance of historical context.

3) *Pesher* method of biblical interpretation, which claimed special knowledge of the holy mysteries and attributed the Bible prophecies to the contemporary events (see: Jeanrond, 1991: 14-22).

4) Allegorical interpretation: The dominant figure of this sort of interpretation was Philo of Alexandria, who was influenced by the interpretative tradition of Stoic. He believed that in many cases we cannot understand the Bible literally, for example when the Bible speaks about the Tree of knowledge and life (Genesis 2: 9), we have no choice, except to understand the text on the basis of the signs and allegories in it. In Philo's view, we can realize the real meaning of the text in light of the allegory; in this respect he compared the relation between literal and allegorical meaning to that between soul and body (Grondin, 1994: 27). Of course, he pointed out that only few people are able to understand the hidden implications of the text. Philo's opinions about interpretation had the greatest effect on the Christian interpretative tradition, especially on the school of Alexandria and thereby contributed to the development of Christian iconography.

2.2) Christian interpretative heritage

Unlike Jewish interpretative heritage, which paid attention to the revealed aspect

of word of God (*Jehovah*) in the Bible, Christian interpretative heritage adverted to the events in Christ's life, his mission, death and resurrection. Therefore, for the Christians the experience of Jesus Christ as a fulfillment of the Divine promise, became subject to interpretation (Fearguson, 1986, chap 9). Thus, the literal interpretation was replaced by Christ-centered interpretation. This difference in interpretation led Christians to interpret the Old Testament in light of their own views. Because, on the one hand, Christians did not emphasize on Jewish Law and on the other hand, the early Christians were trying to prove that Jesus is the same Messiah, who was promised in the Old Testament. In spite of differences, an underlying relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament seemed necessary. With regard to this issue, Christians were compelled to go beyond the literal meaning of the Old Testament (Janes, 1998: 64). With this description, the tendency of Christians to allegorical and typological interpretation is justified.

Given the above explanation, the most important challenge of Christian interpretations was the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. The interpretation of the Old Testament in the Christian tradition begins with Jesus himself. He, like other Jewish commentators of that time, believed that the Old Testament is a Divine revelation, as well as the Old Testament passages cited again and again in the New Testament. (Some instances being: Luke 4:4, Matthew

4:4, Mark 17:11)

In Jesus-centered interpretation of Saint Paul as well, we see the explicit references to the Old Testament, but he intended to make interpretations allegorically or explain things through allegoroumena. For example: “Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar... Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children” (Galatian, 4, 24-25). In this text Saint Paul interpreted infertility as the situation of Jerusalem, when under captivity of the Jewish Halakha war, and fertility as the situation of Jerusalem in his time . Through this interpretative method, applied by Saint Paul, we see the positions of Early Church Fathers about the unity of the two Testaments and their interpretations.

Of course the role of Epistle to the Hebrews, which was influential in the field of Christian interpretation, should also be considered. This Epistle, in its use of the Old Testament and the images of it, did not have many similarities with Saint Paul’s Method, but tried to provoke the Christians to understand the allegorical meanings of the text. In this Epistle there are also people and allegories that have a high frequency in Christian iconography, for example, the use of “anchor” (Epistle to the Hebrews, 6: 19), which became the symbol of “hope” in the early Christian iconography.

The interpretive tradition, whose starting

point can be found in Saint Paul, resulted in two major schools of interpretation: The schools of Alexandria and Antioch in early Christianity. The former believed that we can understand the ultimate mysteries of the Scriptures through the interpretation of symbols. The latter traced the historical facts in text. However, both schools influenced the development Christian iconography; the school of Alexandria’s method of interpretation had more effect on Christian art. Considering the importance of their views in interpretation, some of their main ideas are mentioned here.

2.2.1) The School of Antioch

The Antiochian school believed in the historical and literal meaning of the Bible. Therefore, it is said that its adherents were influenced by the schools of literalist and *Midrash* Exegetical Interpretation of the Torah’s Text, and they reacted to the Philo’s and Origen’s interpretive method. They did not regard even the interpretative method of Paul on Epistle to the Galatians (4: 22-28) as allegorical and believed that if we consider interpretation of the Bible allegorically, then the events in book and historical reality of its revelation becomes questionable. Therefore, one of the criticisms on the allegorical interpretations is the neglect of the biblical historical reality, while they believed that Saint Paul believes in this historical reality. They mentioned for example, the story of Adam and Eve in which elements like Adam, Heaven, Satan, etc. have historical

reality; in fact, Saint Paul has explicitly referred in the Epistle to the Romans (18: 5) and the Second Corinthians (3: 11) to these historical facts. In addition, they condemned the allegorical interpretation to heresy, innovation and Gnosticism. One of the most prominent figures of this was John Chrysostom, whose approach in the later Middle Ages was also highly praised by Thomas Aquinas.

The reflections of this interpretative trend can be seen in the symbolic representations of early Christian art, as the symbols in these representations are taken directly from the Bible and are somehow trying to express its content literally. Many of these symbols which belonged to the Old Testament, are: fish, lamb, anchor, ship, tree, vine, wheat, etc. (Evdokimov, 1996: 173). It should be noted that it was necessary to use the symbols and allegories of the Bible and the symbolic language of Art in the early centuries of Christianity, because some issues for various political, social and cultural reasons were not expressible explicitly. Therefore the use of symbols in the Bible, which was rooted in the pre-Christian culture, at least maintained the relationship of the community of believers with the Bible and was somehow the visual repetition of this book. Of course, it should be noted that if we judge solely by the appearance of Symbols and historical basis, we have to admit the reflections of pagan Roman-Greek art in Christian art, too. Thus, in studying the symbolic representations of early Christian art _ even

though most of it is taken from the literal meaning of the Bible_ we cannot attribute them purely to the Christian origin, without regard to allegorical interpretations. Due to this problem, as we will see hereafter, from the seventh century onwards, the symbolic representations in Christian iconography became scarce, because it was replaced by an alternative approach.

2.2.2) The School of Alexandria

The dominance of Philo's teachings about interpretation –which in early centuries influenced the interpretive approaches of Church Fathers, especially Origen- is evident in the Alexandrian realm in the first century AD. The essence of the interpretive views of this school can be summarized thus: the real meaning of biblical events is not merely literal and historical, but they have a spiritual and allegorical meaning (Huges, 2006, p. 176). The interpretative views of this school were actually a response to this need of Christians to face the special challenge of spreading the message of Jesus and extending its implications for Judaic Law. One basis of [t] his teaching, the Mosaic Law and especially its Messianic prophecy could no longer be understood literally (Grondin, 1994, p.28). According to The Apocalypse of John: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more...” (21:1). With regard to this view, the New Testament has presented the “types”, which

have apparently no background in the Old Testament. Therefore, beside the allegorical interpretation of the Bible, emerged the Typological Interpretation of the Bible. This sort of interpretation, which saw its origin and legitimacy in the New Testament: “These things happened to them as examples [types] and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come”! (1 Corinthians 10:11), regarded the people and events of the Old Testament as prophecies concerning Jesus Christ in the New Testament. For example, in this interpretive approach, Moses, the leader charged with delivering Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and leading them into the Promised Land (Exodus 12 : 37_14 : 31) , was seen as a foreshadowing of Christ, who delivered humankind into eternal salvation by his death on cross (Williamson, 2004, p. 72). This approach tried to solve the problem of the union of both Testaments, the Jesus Christ Advent Prophecies in the Old Testament and the gleaning of Moses’s Sharia (John 5: 46) and believed that the New Testament reveals the spirit that can be understood from the words of the Old Testament.

The prominent theorist of this interpretive approach is Origen. Origen believed that the Bible contains three levels of meaning, corresponding to the threefold Platonic division of a person into body, soul and spirit. In Origen’s view, the first level is related to literal and historical meaning, which is appropriate to the ordinary people and corresponds to the bodily level. The next

level is devoted to the moral and typological meaning of the text, which is available only to the believers, and corresponds to the human soul. The third level, which contains the allegorical meaning and belongs to a specific group of believers, corresponds to the human spirit and reveals the secret of the Divine Logos. Origen saw this level as gift of God to Christians enabling them to progress from the visible to the invisible, from the material to the intelligible. He even acknowledged that the Holy Spirit or the real author of the Bible has hidden the deeper meanings under the veil of common stories, which will be clear only for a particular group (Grondin, 1994: 30). He believed that if biblical interpretation has a view other than this, many of the statements contained in it (including the creation in six consecutive days) will be meaningless and moreover we cannot link both Testaments.

Although the Origen’s approach justified the relationship between the two Testaments, this approach also faces problems, two of which will be mentioned here: first, the typological interpretations didn’t pay attention to history and removed many of the historical events in the Bible and this approach is incompatible with the dominant tendency of Christian theology which considers the Incarnation of the Son of God, and the salvation human Beings within history; And even with this approach, the Incarnation can be interpreted otherwise than official church reading. Another problem is the distinguishing between typological and allegorical

interpretations (the second and third level). Because the distinguishing between them is not easy and even Augustine and many thinkers of the Middle Ages saw these two very closely, and basically did not feel any need to distinguish between them (Hughes, 2004: 177). Whereas many of early Church Fathers have emphasized the distinction between typological and allegorical, the latter of which in their opinion belongs to the pagan. In this respect, the interpretive approach of Origen on the one hand follows that of Philo's approach, and on another hand is different from it (Grondin, 1994, pp. 29-30).

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In comparison to the School of Antioch, the interpretative approach of the School of Alexandria had more influence on Christian iconography. The reflection of this approach can be seen especially in the early Christian iconography; such that with regard to the existing conditions, the paintings of the Christian catacombs have represented more an allegorical and symbolical function of the Bible than paying attention only to the literal meaning of it. The study of these images shows that from the second to fourth centuries, in the Christian iconography we see the dominance of the Old Testament scenes (almost four times more than the New Testament scenes), whereas logically it should be vice versa (Jensen, 2000: 68). There are several theories about this, among which we can mention the influence of Jewish iconography in Dura-Europos on Christian iconography. But insofar as this issue is related to the present article,

three factors can be named: One is the use of symbols and giving them new meaning; the other is the reaction of Christian theologians to the non-Orthodox teachings of Marcion about the lack of authenticity of Septuaginta (Ibid: 70); the third factor is the usual interpretation of the Old Testament stories in pre-Constantine period. Since this period was coincident with the persecution of Christians, the Christians preferred depicting the Old Testament scenes to the explicit representation of these persecutions and regarded these scenes as the presence of God as the Savior from the dangers (Ibid: 74). Of course, the Christian iconography did not always incorporate into the text of the Bible and in many cases the painters used the same method of typological interpretation and depicted the images in accordance with the context and background of the Christian thinking of their times.

Concerning the use of typological interpretation in Christian iconography, multiple samples in Early Christian iconography can be found, suffice it to mention a few of them here. According to the early Christians, as opposed to the other Christian teachings, the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ had a priority, such that Christians in confronting with the Jews made a special emphasis on this issue. In the iconography of this period among different scenes in the Old Testament, a few scenes are more frequent like the story of Jonah, the Sacrifice of Isaac and Noah's story. Christians regarded the story of Jonah as the reflection of death and resurrection

of Jesus, and the sacrifice of Isaac as the story of the crucifixion of Jesus (the Son of God) according to Divine (the Father) Providence or they interpreted according to the New Testament, the story of Noah (First Epistle of Peter, 3: 21 -20) and Israel's Red Sea Crossing (Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 10: 2) as baptism (Ibid: 85). However, their interpretation of baptism provides also for death and resurrection. "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death. Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Epistle to the Romans, 6: 3-4). Another example of paintings in Christian catacombs, which had a broad reflection and indicated the Condition of Christians in that period, was the image of the three Hebrew young men who refused to worship king Nebuchadnezzar's statue and were thrown in the furnace of fire. Historically this image is seen as an indication to the Christian martyrs of pre-Constantine period, as Tertullian saw this image as an evidence for encouraging to self-sacrifice and martyrdom (Jensen, 2000: 81). This issue will find more importance, when it is known that Tertullian's interpretative approach was close to the school of Antioch (Ferraris, 1996: 14). But on the other side, this image was considered as a mysterious hint to the bodily resurrection or to the passages of the New Testament: "and these three are one. And there are three that bear

witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one" (The First Epistle of John 5: 7-8) It should be noted that after the Constantine period, with the establishment of the Christian Empire, another reading of the Bible was governed in the Christian world.

As we saw in the examples above, many works in early Christian iconography have paid attention to the allegorical and symbolical character of the images. From this perspective, many of these images are important for their visual aspects and the key to their understanding can be found simply in the written text (the Bible) . According to this, the referral character of the images is brought to attention, therefore in facing with the text the painters functioned as the biblical commentators of that time.

Considering that at the time of the establishment of the Christian empire, the expectations of the interpreters of the Bible was different from the past, changes are seen in the position of Christian Theology . In this period, theology based on resurrection is replaced by political theology, which intended to gain the issues of its time from the Bible. Therefore it paid less attention to the literal reading of the text and sought symbols and allegories in the Bible, in order to consolidate the dominant church teachings. Such an approach to the sacred text had an impact on the iconography of this period, too, such that the images of Noah, Jonah, etc., faded and a distancing became observable from the death and resurrection of images in this period. Moreover, instead

of this type of images, the scenes of ritual worship, the New Testament and the statue of Christ seated on throne predominated; even Jesus is depicted no longer as a teacher or healer, but he was represented quite in a formal pose (Jensen, 2000: 91).

The Attention of the iconography in this period to the explicit representation and dismissal of the symbolic representation of the first centuries goes back to the common beliefs of the church in this period. The Seventh Ecumenical Council (692) expressed explicitly in some paragraphs of its legislations, the principles of sacred art, and under these principles the negation of symbolic representation was on the agenda. Of course, it should be noted that the negation of symbolic representation by this council didn't mean to reject the allegorical interpretation, but presupposed such a reading of the text, too. The members of this Council emphasized decisively on the non-literal reading, the example they had in mind was the symbol of the lamb in early Christian iconography. Although this symbol is used in both Testaments, but the members haven't found the use of symbols instead of explicit representation proper and have regarded this sort of representation as simply relying on the literal meaning of the text (Ouspensky, 1987: 94). Their reason went back to their interpretation of this verse of the New Testament: Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father

also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him (John, 14, 6-7). They believed that in this verse the truth is as person and his image, therefore, the church must besides speaking about him, try to show him, too (Ouspensky, 1987: 95). Even this emphasis of members shows the importance of the visual interpretation besides the written interpretation of the Bible; it also indicates that from the perspective of the Church, the applying of common interpretative patterns in the case of images taken from the Bible, is inevitable, too. Of course, the distinctions between the written text and the visual text should not be neglected.

Although these two schools (Alexandria and Antioch) emerged in the first centuries of Christianity their influence on the interpretive attitude of medieval ages until the religious reform movement and then up to the emergence of modern hermeneutics still remained in force, in a way that the typological interpretations were still the most common interpretative form of artistic representation (Hughes, 2006: 174). The use of this form of interpretation in the iconography of the following centuries did not have the same kind of evidences of the first few centuries of Christianity, but it used the typological interpretations as religious propaganda; as these sorts of interpretations have had a great advertising impact. For example, since the fourteenth century, the art of embellishing books with regard to typological interpretations of the Bible which was called *Biblia Pauperum*,

proliferated.

The illustrations of these books paid attention to the typological interpretations, such that the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is placed beside the scene of the sacrifices Isaac (Williamson, 2004: 74). Of course, these books in order to give some further insight to readers, used inscriptions on the lower part of the images, which explained the necessity of putting the scenes from the both Testaments together.

Conclusion

Based on the facts discussed in this article and with regard to the examples, which can be found in Christian iconography, we can acknowledge that interpretative trends in the Christian world had a very important role in the development and expansion of artistic representation and Christian iconography has adapted itself to the interpretative methods of the Bible, in the way that it can be regarded as a visual form of biblical interpretation.

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