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Abstract

Using images of Jonah in early Christian funerary art as a case study, this article explores questions of reception and the nature of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and images of Jonah, especially as they appear in the Roman catacombs. I will argue that while the images do not represent a straightforward interpretation of the biblical text qua text, this reception of Jonah is not as divorced from the text as one might suspect. Indeed, both the biblical book of Jonah, in particular the psalm uttered in Chapter 2, and the funerary images highlight Jonah's position on borders between real and imagined social spaces, chaos and order, and death and life. As such, the images, when read as an entanglement of text, art, and ritual, reflect and support socio-religious crossings between Romans, early Christians, and Jews as well as ritual crossings between the living and the dead.

1. Introduction [*]

In the burial chambers beneath the city of Rome, where the dead were once laid to rest, Jonah is perpetually alive, diving into the deep, bursting out of the mouth of a sea creature, hands raised in prayer, and placidly reclining beneath a vine laden with gourds. On the walls, the ceilings, and even between the niches (*loculi*) built to accommodate bones, Jonah appears as a bright and lively figure. Simply but boldly painted, each scene in the story circumscribed by thick red and green lines, he shares space with the three youths in the fiery furnace, Isaac about to have his throat slashed, Noah bobbing along in an ark built for one, people feasting, peacocks, vines, praying figures, the good shepherd, and more. Although his story never appears in isolation, his image – indeed, his presence – is the most popular biblical subject in early Christian funerary art, appearing a number of times in the pre-Constantinian period and then, by the middle to late Constantinian period,

[*] I would like to thank the faculty and doctoral students who participated in the Text, Image, Artifact Colloquium (Fall 2021) at the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology, where my thinking on Jonah in early Christian art expanded immensely. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer for BiKu/BiA, Brooke Lester, Sara Koenig, and Jacob Kinnard, all of whom generously offered up a number of insightful and useful suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.

some one hundred times.[1] This raises a perhaps obvious question: why? The story of Jonah is but a blip in the context of the Hebrew Bible, a few lines in a vast collection of texts. As an Israelite, Jonah is barely hanging on to the family tree, and as a prophet, he has the thinnest of credentials (he only preaches five words). Indeed, he is dismissed as a false prophet in the Talmud (b. Sanh. 89a). So again, why was Jonah so widely celebrated in the catacombs and in early Christian funerary art more broadly? To come to some understanding of how we got what seems to be – to invoke an image from the story – a perfect Jonah-storm, a range of cultural-historical questions certainly need to be considered. But because we are dealing with physical images here, we also need to consider how this art – simple paintings intended for 'display' in dark rooms – might have functioned in its ritual, spatial context. We need to ask not only what were these paintings doing in the catacombs, but also what did these paintings do, and how did they do it.

The Jonah images produced in Rome during the early Christian period present the scholar of biblical reception with a number of challenges and opportunities.

1. The first challenge stems from a reconsideration of labels and definitions. Even something so simple as referring to the images of Jonah in the catacombs as examples of early Christian art is, as Couzin argues, "deceptively transparent" in part because "in relation to late antiquity, 'Christian' may project an overly confident sense of homogeneity and clarity at the boundaries of religious affiliation."[2] Further, the particular way in which early Christianity functioned as a religion needs attention.[3] Delving into definitions may seem pedantic, but in truth, the work of interrogating our assumptions and our taken-for-granted language often yields new answers to old questions, or even better, leads us to formulate new questions.

2. Another challenge emerges when we begin to ask questions not only about beliefs but also about the kinds of practices and rituals that were performed in the spaces populated with images of Jonah, Noah, Daniel, and other biblical and non-biblical figures. The mortuary context matters a great deal for our understanding of the images as does the surrounding iconography, much – but not all – of which is arguably Christian.[4] However, given the absence of a developed and institutionalized form of Christianity, we cannot assume that anything uniformly – or even distinctly Christian – was going on in 'Christian' mortuary rituals.

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[1] Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, 69.

[2] Couzin, "'Early' 'Christian' 'Art,'" 380. See also Smith, Rethinking 'Early Christian Art'.

[3] See, e.g., Barton / Boyarin, Imagine No Religion; Nongbri, Before Religion; Boyarin, Border Lines; DeMaris, The New Testament in its Ritual World.

[4] It has proven almost impossible to confidently identify a distinctly Christian archaeology earlier than the third century. See, e.g., Bowes, Early Christian Archaeology.

3. While the Jonah images in the catacombs would seem to have clear roots in the Hebrew Bible's story of Jonah, upon closer inspection, the serial images reveal quite a bit of dissonance with the biblical tale. Just to name two of the most obvious mismatches: the images tell a story of Jonah that deals not at all with the prophet's experiences in Nineveh, arguably a crucial part of the biblical book. Further, the visual account concludes with a naked Jonah reclining blissfully under a vine instead of angrily demanding to die. In what way are the Jonah images a 'reception' of the book of Jonah?[5]

4. Questions about the uneasy link between the biblical Jonah and the Jonah of the catacombs raise another set of questions about how to interpret images. To fill in the gaps in our understanding, should we rely on texts written by religious specialists (such as Origen, Irenaeus and Tertullian)? Or should we privilege material evidence as way to access the views and experiences of those who practiced popular or lived forms of Christianity? Of course, we will want to consider an array of sources, but the data one prioritizes and the methods one uses will yield quite different interpretations of the images' significance and function. Further, assumptions about the function of Christian art, namely, that it is primarily symbolic and didactic, obscure other ways Romans and Roman Christians likely experienced art, especially in a ritual setting.[6]

Each of these challenges informs my argument that Jonah is an especially apt image – using that term in its broadest sense – to support and enable socio-religious crossings between Romans of all stripes as well as ritual crossings between the living and the dead. Indeed, Jonah's popularity in the catacombs can be attributed to the images' status as a boundary object, which in science and technology studies and sociology, refers to "objects which are plastic enough to respond to the local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites."[7] David Chidester, bringing Star and Griesemer's work into the realm of religious studies, suggests that boundary objects play a key role in religious formations because of such a "dialectic of plastic adaptability and robust continuity."[8] Jonah's material presence in Rome during the early Christian period is a boundary object in that it is

> situated at the intersection of different interpretive communities… The boundary object is flexible in that it is subject to multiple interpretations, but its materiality, as an object, sustains continuity through these multiple engagements.[9]

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[5] 'Which Jonah' and 'Which bible?' are equally important questions but not ones I will have space to address robustly in this article. See Erickson, Jonah.

[6] Jensen, Ritual and Early Christian Art, 587; see also Elsner, Ritual Eyes, 29–30, 48.

[7] Star / Griesemer, Institutional Ecology, 393.

[8] Chidester, Religion: Material Dynamics, 13.

[9] Chidester, Religion: Material Dynamics, 13.

The context and popularity of images relating to Jonah suggests that Romans, with their protean and overlapping social, familial, and religious identities and deep-seated reverence for tradition, saw Jonah as a powerful and adaptable means to express important beliefs, practices, and rituals surrounding death and the afterlife.

At the end of the article, I will return to questions of reception and the nature of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and these images of Jonah in the catacombs. I will argue that while the ritual context is essential for thinking about the images' meaning, the contextually driven, cultural-historical meaning is not as divorced from the text as we might suspect. Indeed, the biblical book of Jonah, in particular the psalm uttered in Chapter 2, provides the catacomb images with a set of powerful tropes, a rich array of imagery that moves between poles of chaos and order and death and life. These tropes reflect and refract a matrix of traditional ideas about death in the ancient Mediterranean world while also modeling creative adaptations of those ideas. Further, attention to the ritual elements embedded in Jonah 2 allows us to appreciate the ways in which the poem mirrors the ritual world and sensoria of the catacombs, a world characterized by liminality and inhabited by non-obvious beings and altered through ritual seeing.

The psalm, itself a re-used ritual text, and the story of Jonah swallowed and ejected by a 'big fish', feature boundary and border crossings of the most dramatic sort. And it is Jonah's position on the boundary that makes him the perfect gathering site for Romans, Christians, and Jews and the ideal bridge between the living and the dead.[10]

2. The Images

Depictions of Jonah in early Christian art are unique in that scenes from the narrative are serialized.[11] Rather than appearing as a single image, as with the presentation of other biblical narratives, the visual rendering of Jonah's story presents it not only *as a story* with a beginning, a middle, and an end, but also as a ritual journey, from life to death to transformation. The iconographic program, which consists of three or four (or rarely five) moments in the narrative, contains some variation but is remarkably consistent across contexts (bowls, catacombs, sarcophagi).

The first scene features a boat with two or three sailors and Jonah on the deck. Typically, the sailors are depicted in the act of tossing a compliant-looking Jonah

[10] The idea that Jonah is a bridge between the living and the dead is not new, of course. See, for example, Stuiber, Refrigerium interim.

[11] Jensen, Early Christian Images and Exegesis, 71. While Jonah continues to appear in post-Constantinian art (e.g., Via Latina catacombs), the serial scenes of his story are depicted only rarely after 325–350. Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, 199, n 55.

overboard.[12] The second and third scenes depict a serpentine sea monster, first in the process of ingesting Jonah and next, in the midst of gracefully expelling him (see Fig. 1). Often Jonah's arms are raised in prayer and perhaps even in triumph. The depiction of the sea monster is consistent with Matthew's use of the term *ketos*. Matthew compares Jonah's "three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster (*ketos*)" to the three days Jesus spent "in the heart of the earth" (Matt 12:40). That said, the dragon-headed sea monster also looks quite similar to the sea monster from the story of Perseus and Andromeda, a well-known and widely visualized myth of a sea monster (*cetus*) defeated by a hero.[13]

Fig. 1: Jonah in the Catacombs of St. Domitilla.

The final scene depicts Jonah lying naked in repose beneath a plant with large leaves, sprouting gourds. This image is only loosely – or better, momentarily – tied to the corresponding scene in the biblical text. In MT, YHWH does appoint a plant (a "gourd plant" LXX)[14] to grow up over Jonah, and Jonah is happy about the plant (Jon 4:6), but in the very next verse, God appoints a worm to destroy the plant (Jon 4:7), leaving Jonah miserable and asking to die (Jon 4:8). Images of Endymion, a shepherd who was granted eternal sleep along with eternal youth and also regularly featured on sarcophagi, likely provide the template for this scene. However, other Greek deities, including Ariadne and Dionysos, are also featured in this position. The pose, therefore, may broadly express a paradisiacal life.[15]

[12] The earliest examples of Jonah images are in the Catacomb of Callistus, which contains eight separate images of Jonah (Cubicula A3 and A6, the "Cubicula of the Sacraments") and on the dome of a cubiculum in the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus. For a reading of the catacombs as a heterotopia, see Smith, Foucault's Heterotopia in Christian Catacombs.

[13] See for e.g., Perseus and Andromeda, a fresco from the east wall of a room in the villa, Boscotrecase, dated to roughly 90–10 BCE. (Metropolitan Museum of Art. Rogers Fund, 1920). Perseus freeing Andromeda after killing Cetus, a fresco from the Casa Dei Dioscuri, Pompeii. 1st century CE. Notably, the creature is labeled KETOS on a Corinthian vase from the 6th century CE.

[14] Old Greek *kolokynthē*.

[15] Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 349. See, e.g., Sarcophagus with the Triumph of Dionysus (Acquired by Henry Walters with the Massarenti Collection, 1902), Sarcophagus Dionysos & Ariane (Louvre, Ma 1346).

3. Catacombs and Religious Boundaries

Between the late first century and end of the second century, catacombs, underground burial grounds, came to replace tombs or *columbaria*. In *columbaria*, burial was limited to members of the paterfamilias and projected messages of exclusivity, architecturally and administratively. "Upon entering a *columbarium,* one recognized the traditional boundaries of place in the Roman world – border stones, a circuit fence or wall marking the perimeter of the plot, the four walls of an enclosed rectilinear space."[16] By contrast, catacombs were "open, ill-defined spaces, infinitely expandable (or at least creating the impression of being so) and offering little or no external public aspect."[17]

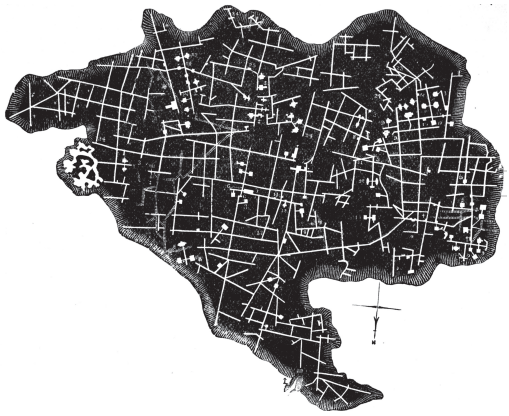

Fig. 2: Map of the Catacombs of Callixtus, 1881.

Until recently, many scholars and archeologists assumed that burial sites were organized by religious affiliation.[18] However, it is increasingly problematic to label a cemetery or catacomb uniformly or exclusively Christian. As Mark Johnson observes, "archaeologists are no longer surprised when they find obviously pagan or even obscene representations in tombs thought to be Christian."[19] Jewish and Christian tombs sit side by side at Agrigento and Noto Antica in Sicily. Lamps with Jewish symbols and lamps with Christian symbols appear together in catacombs near Syracuse.[20] And in Rome, there are numerous examples of pagan and Christian burials clustered in a single tomb, including the pagan burials at the *memoria apostolorium* (so named for housing relics associated with Peter and Paul) in the Catacombs of San Sebastiano.[21] Although the burial sites listed belong to differ-

16 Bodel, From *Columbaria* to Catacombs, 219.
17 Bodel, From *Columbaria* to Catacombs, 220.
18 Bodel, From *Columbaria* to Catacombs, 222.
19 Johnson, Pagan-Christian Burial Practices, 50.
20 Up until well into the third century, it is impossible to distinguish between Jewish and Christian burials. See McCane, Roll Back the Stone, 112.
21 Johnson, Pagan-Christian Burial Practices, 52. One cubicula (the cubicle of Jonah) contains four paintings of Jonah, which date to the end of the fourth century. The notable pagan burials are the tombs of Clodius Hermes, the Innocentiaries (a funeral club), and the Ax.

ent decades and cemeteries, they serve to illustrate the point that Roman burial grounds were not strictly segregated according to religious affiliation.

Therefore, our context for the Jonah images is characterized by "mixed burials, tombstones with a disorienting mix of Jewish, Christian, and Roman symbols, and a community of early Christians that dined and celebrated in the cemeteries alongside their non-Christian neighbours."[22] Further, the placement, design and organization – social and architectural – of the catacombs heightens the experience of the liminal. In the catacombs then, Jonah is not only a boundary object but a boundary crosser.

4. Jonah's Christian Side

I have suggested that the material images of Jonah function as a boundary object to explain his popularity and function in early Christian art. However, another plausible explanation is that Jonah, as a type of Christ, represented a particularly Christian hope for the afterlife among early Christians. The Jonah images do indeed accord with a typological reading of Jesus' death and resurrection. I will briefly explore this interpretation before shifting my focus to how the Jonah images function in the context of Roman ritual practices around death and the dead, rituals designed to negotiate the deceased's transition from life to death and to maintain social bonds between the living and the dead. Even if labeling the images of Jonah that appear in the catacombs 'Christian' is arguably anachronistic,[23] an emerging Christian ethos and aesthetic is evident in the early biblical images.[24]

In general, when interpreting early Christian art, interpreters take into account the larger composition and the other images contained in the adjacent iconography ("inter-visuality") as well as the physical space the images occupy (see Fig. 3). Also relevant are Christian writings that point not only to how biblical texts were interpreted but also to beliefs about God, morality, identity, and Christian practices and teachings. Ancient viewers' beliefs were formed and shaped by worship, particularly preaching, hymns, and prayers. How early Christians heard biblical stories used and interpreted in these contexts influenced their renderings in visual art.[25]

Two motifs that were important to early Christians are evident in the basic artistic rendering of the narrative: 1) Jonah's three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, which parallels Christ's three days in the tomb (Matt 12:40); and 2) Jonah delivered from the fish belly and lying in repose under the vine, representing

[22] Gudme, Mortuary Rituals, 354; see also Johnson, Pagan-Christian Burial Practices.
[23] Kotrosits, The Lives of Material Objects, 18.
[24] Jensen, Compiling Narratives.
[25] Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, 64–93; Jensen, Early Christian Images and Exegesis, 71–73.

deliverance from distress. Jonah's movement from death (or near-death) to a blissful Edenic moment could be understood as a typological depiction of Christ's death and resurrection.[26]

Fig. 3: Cemeterium Maius.

Irenaeus reads Philippians 2 as figuring the descent of the Word to a human existence of obedience, which culminates in suffering and death and ends with an ascent of the crucified Christ to heaven (Against Heresies 4.24.2; 3.12.9). The new "obedience to death" (Phil 2:6–11) is the obedience of the "new Adam," which stands in contrast to the disobedience of the Adam in Genesis 2–3 (Against Heresies 5.16.3). The Jonah images emphasize this posture of obedience to death and depict him as willingly accepting his fate to be thrown off the boat and swallowed by the fish. Thus Jonah's "obedience to death" mirrors Christ's stance and models ideal Christian piety, the end result of which is Jonah's "rest" in a garden, a setting that represents a paradisical afterlife.

This happy ending, foreshadowed by Jonah's prayerful acceptance of death in the first scene, runs somewhat counter to depictions of death in Greco-Roman funerary art, which visually depict the community's ritual acts of mourning and commemoration in the wake of an individual's death. In the classical representation of death, "expressions of profound grief imbued the story and serve as an end point in the tragic narrative."[27] By contrast, the extant Christian art from sarcophagi and the catacombs' cubicula does not visually depict these Greco-Roman rituals associated with death. Rather, the pictorial cycles based on biblical stories

[26] Jensen, Early Christian Images and Exegesis, 75.
[27] McGowan, Death is Swallowed Up in Victory, 109.

show the subjects in prayerful, even joyful poses, in the face of death.[28] Consistent with the first images of Jesus' crucifixion that may have developed out of the early images from the catacombs, "the *fact* of death was not principally recalled, but rather instances of deliverance *from* death."[29] Thus what is represented in the Jonah cycles is firmly linked to particularly Roman-Christian conceptions of Jesus' victory over death and the implications for individual Christians, who anticipated their own deliverance from death in a bodily resurrection.

While one can and should appreciate these connections between the Jonah images and Christian beliefs about death and resurrection, the significance of the Jonah images shifts somewhat when one considers it from the vantage point of lived religion. Lived religion or ordinary Christianity focuses on the everyday experience of non-specialists engaging in acts of communication and social exchange with gods and other transcendent agents. "Material symbols, elaborate forms of representation, and ritualization (Bell 1992) are called upon for the success of communication with these addressees."[30]

It is to an exploration of Jonah through the lens of lived religion that we will now turn.

5. Jonah Among the Dead

While a quick survey of early Christian writers suggests that beliefs about the afterlife coalesced around resurrection, the reality on the ground was far less monolithic. Early Christian beliefs about the afterlife were diverse, ranging from the conviction that death was an annihilation to a vision of the dead as depleted and shadowy versions of their former selves to a hope, sometimes vaguely defined, in the perseverance and continuity of the soul.[31] That said,

> in spite of this diversity and development in *beliefs* about the afterlife, the *practices* directed towards the dead remained fairly constant throughout the first centuries of the Common Era and furthermore these practices were more or less the same among Romans and Jews/Christians.[32]

In terms of what the Jonah images might say about the afterlife, we can perceive that his death takes place in the middle of the composition or midway through the

[28] Elsner, Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph, 145–166; Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 243–252.

[29] McGowan, Death is Swallowed Up in Victory, 103.

[30] Raja / Rüpke, Archaeology of Religion, 4. Similarly, in his analysis ancient Mediterranean religion, Stanley Stowers distinguishes between two different modes of religiosity. The first he calls "the religion of everyday social exchange," where the focus was on the making of offerings, and the second, "the religion of literate cultural producers, which relies upon the former but redefines practice as a product of the mind." Stowers, The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings, 35.

[31] Hope, Roman Death, 97–120; Davies, Death, Burial and Rebirth, 1999.

[32] Gudme, Mortuary Rituals, 364.

story. In this way, death is relativized; it does not mark the endpoint of life. This sounds like a Christian idea. Christians believe that their death 'in Christ' is not final because they anticipate a resurrection in the future. What mortuary rituals suggest, however, is that the dead are, in a way, alive now. While they certainly are not alive in the same way that living people are, they are "socially relevant and invested agents, and interaction with them is governed by pragmatic, local, and traditional concerns rather than dependent on any system of afterlife beliefs". As Gudme concludes, "the dead lived on as part of their communities through the mortuary ritual practices performed by the living."[33] In interpreting the Jonah images in the catacombs, therefore, "one required text is ritual."[34]

Broadly speaking, mortuary rituals are of two types and as such have two functions.[35] The first type consists of rituals for inhuming or interring the dead. Burial was a means to insure the "separation of the soul and its existence thereafter in another world among "the good gods", the *manes*."[36] The second type of ritual is concerned primarily with commemoration, designed to enable the living to commune with and honor the dead. Such rituals were embedded in annual festivals of the dead, the best documented of which are *Parentalia* (mid-February), the festivals of violets (March), and the festival of roses (May).[37] Commemoration events (*refrigeria* [meals] or *laetitiae* ['Happy Times']) also occurred on the deceased's day of death and at times, on their birthday, when the dead would host the festivities and families and friends would gather to eat and drink at the graveside.[38]

MacMullen argues that these practices indicate not merely care for the dead but ancestor worship. In Latin, the dead were designated as gods, *dii* or *divi* (as *manes* or *parentes,* and sometimes with an added *immortales*); similarly in Greek, the dead were *theoi* or *heroes*.[39] Further, families made offerings of oil and wine to their deceased ancestors, often placing these gifts on an altar or a *mensa* (a table over the grave) or by pouring them into libation tubes. These offerings functioned like sacrifices and worked to maintain mutually beneficial relations between the living and the dead. According to the logic of social exchange and reciprocity, the dead, like the gods and other transcendent beings, were seen as "interested parties" when it came to the lives of the living.[40] While gifts given at the gravesite did not guarantee blessings or good luck for the living, they did contribute to maintain-

33 Gudme, Mortuary Rituals, 364.
34 Peppard, The World's Oldest Church, 32.
35 Also see MacMullen, The End of Ancestor Worship, 488.
36 MacMullen, Roman Religion, 111.
37 Jensen, Dining with the Dead, 107–120; Hope, Roman Death; MacMullen, Christian Ancestor Worship in Rome; MacMullen, The End of Ancestor Worship.
38 MacMullen, The End of Ancestor Worship, 492.
39 MacMullen, Roman Religion, 113.
40 Stowers, The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings, 37.

ing positive relations with the dead and the spirit world. No one wanted to anger the dead.

Eventually, ancestor worship (the commemoration of kin) among Christians came to focus on saints, the heroes of the Church. As Peter Brown has famously argued, the cult of the saints "designated dead human beings as the recipients of unalloyed reverence, and it linked these dead and invisible figures in no uncertain manner to precise visible places."[41] But as MacMullen notes, "the close relation between the two kinds of worship – of persons deceased both common and uncommon – is very striking."[42]

6. Seeing Ritually

What happens to our understanding of the Jonah images when we are attentive to the spatial-ritual context in which they appear – and to the power of rituals to effect what images can do or become?

Elsner emphasizes that when images were encountered in the context of ritualized actions, they became highly charged, even agentive. Ritual broke down barriers between the real and the imagined as well as between the god and its representation. Reading Pausanias and Lucian's descriptions of their ritual encounters with art, Elsner argues that the person or the god represented in the image could, through ritual, actually come to inhabit the form and interact with the viewer. Thus ritual-centered visuality

> may be defined in many ways – as the putting aside of normal identity and the acquisition of a temporary cult-generated identity, or as the surrendering of individuality to a more collective form of subjectivity constructed and controlled by the sacred site.[43]

Elsner's work leads us to ask: what relationships and what collective forms of subjectivity were enabled, even 'constructed and controlled', by the catacombs and the images of Jonah that animated those spaces? With the barriers between the living and the dead, the human and the divine, and the visual and the actual ritually and spatially dissolved, what kinds of encounters and exchanges were possible?

If we follow Elsner, it is not sufficient to conclude that Jonah merely signifies or represents the Christian hope in resurrection, that the image is a type of Christ and as such teaches and reminds the living that their – and their kin's – death 'in Christ' is not the end of the story. Encountered through a ritual gaze, the Jonah images were infused with and were capable of emanating power, power associated with supernatural realms and accessible in liminal spaces.[44]

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41 Brown, Cult of the Saints, 40.

42 MacMullen, Roman Religion, 116.

43 Elsner, Roman Eyes, 24.

44 Peppard describes how Jaś Elsner engages in analysis that takes into account not only ritual seeing but also ontological difference. Peppard, The World's Oldest Church, 36.

It is possible that Jonah, along with the other heroes from the Hebrew Bible and Greco-Roman texts depicted in these tombs, functioned as a kind of precursor to the saints – the uncommon, glorified and deified dead, a cross between a god, a hero, and an ancestor.[45] The image, then, reverberated with some of the potency of a god. I say *some* of the potency because in the ancient world, divinity existed on a continuum and varied locally.[46]

In our case, that agency was actualized in a particular place (the catacombs) and through particular rituals and practices (mortuary rituals), largely about the exchange of gifts. That exchange of gifts between the living and the dead falls under the category magic.

7. Magic: Influencing the Dead

Broadly speaking, 'magic' in the sense of 'small acts of ritual power' was an important aspect of everyday religion or lived religion, especially in the vast subterranean burial grounds of Rome.[47] Even if people practicing something like Christianity took comfort in a new hope for the dead, "the cemetery brought all types." Burial grounds teemed with the restless dead (those who died violent deaths or who were not protected by baptismal rites) and demons who thrived in the deep, dank darkness of the catacombs.[48] The Christian dead, even if they had found eternal refreshment in Christ, inevitably lay in proximity to more fearsome spirits and powers. As Denzey Lewis writes,

> both inscriptions and material culture from Rome's catacombs indicate that the saints did not dwell alone in the afterlife, but jostled for space with the souls of the ordinary dead… ancestral spirits, other minor divinities such as nymphs or water gods and, by the fourth century, malevolent entities that late antique Roman Christians would not have hesitated to term *daimones.*[49]

Much of the magic one can perceive in the material remains is apotropaic, that is writing, imagery, and other artifacts intended to ward off the more frightening

[45] In Origen's Against Celsus, Origen responds to Celsus's claim that Christians "assert that a man who lived a most infamous life and died a most miserable death was a god" (Cels. 7.53; Chadwick, Origen, 440). According to Origen, Celsus argues that other heroes, "who have died noble deaths and are sufficiently distinguished to have a myth about them like the gods," are far better candidates for deification than Jesus. The list of proper heroes includes Greeks (Heracles, Asclepius, Orpheus, Alexarchus) and two figures from the OT: Daniel and Jonah. Celsus opines, "A far more suitable person for you than Jesus would have been Jonah with his gourd" (Cels. 7.53; 443).

[46] Selz, The Divine Prototypes, 33–45. The volume in which Selz's essay appears, Religion and Power, explores the continuum between humans and gods and divinity as a nuanced category (Brisch [ed.], 8–9). See also Stowers, The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings, 40.

[47] Denzey Lewis, Popular Christianity and Lived Religion, 259, 261. See also Bohak, Ancient Jewish Magic and Magic in the Cemeteries of Late-Antique Palestine.

[48] See e.g., Jerome, Comment. In Ezech. XX.40.

[49] Denzey Lewis, Popular Christianity and Lived Religion, 262.

forces lurking within the catacombs and to protect the dead as well as the living. Although most of the magical material, such as graffiti, amulets, and other grave goods, was removed from the catacombs during haphazard excavations and eventually "tidied up to be transformed into showcases of paleo-Catholic piety," some artifacts presumed to be amulets were retrieved and now reside in the Vatican collection of catacomb small finds.[50] One such amulet is carved in the form of an ivory ship with Jonah being lobbed overboard, inscribed with the Greek, *Eusebii zēseis!* ('Eusebius, may you live!'), while another features a rewritten version of the psalm in Jonah 2.[51] Rings inset with gems carved with images of Jonah have also been recovered; two have sard gemstones engraved with the three typical scenes of the Jonah story alongside Daniel and the lions (?), an orant, and the Good Shepherd (see Fig. 4)[52] and another features a carnelian gem, carved only with the Jonah scenes (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 4: Carnelian Gem. Roman (3./4. century BCE)

Fig. 5: Intalgio, Good Shepherd and orant with Jonah.

Further, conjecture about apotropaic function is not restricted to small artifacts. In Christian as well as Jewish catacombs, "the act of inscribing prophylactic images and words on or around the loculus closing of graves" often functioned to protect the dead from demonic interference.[53] By extension, catacomb paintings of biblical scenes around burials may have functioned apotropaically.[54]

In this world of non-obvious beings, ranging from friendly and hostile, it is possible that the images of Jonah participated in and channeled the crackling power of the place. The images of Jonah, which surrounded the bodies and bones of the

50 Denzey Lewis, Popular Christianity and Lived Religion, 260.

51 The ship is inv 62588 in the Vatican collection; the text of the Jewish amulet is printed in Sasson, Jonah (214–215), originally published in Schafer / Schlüter / Mutius, Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, 144–145 (S 343.60–62)

52 British Museum 1856,0425.10. See Dalton, Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities, 25–26.

53 Denzey Lewis, Popular Christianity and Lived Religion, 267.

54 Vikan has proposed that in early Byzantium, art objects associated with holy sites and healing shrines, including images of saints, were medico-magical, meaning that healing was achieved through gazing on these images or through physical contact with art objects (e.g., Symeon's *eulogia* tokens). Vikan, Art, Medicine, and Magic.

dead (on *loculi*, large niches for inhumation burials lining the walls of the chambers) with images of a man's release from death/evil, likely served as a form of benevolent protection for the dead (see Fig. 6). In these lively, unsystematically painted tombs then the dead are, in effect, placed *in* scripture, situated "literally within the scriptural scene."[55]

Fig. 6: Images of Jonah appear on the ceiling, just above a loculus (Catacombs of Saints Marcellinus and Peter).

More benevolent forces, especially ancestors, would have had their power tapped in the service of the living. Although non-obvious beings were not predictable, dead kin were capable of dispensing good luck and oracles.[56] Thus for the living, the Jonah images of near death and deliverance painted on the walls and low ceilings of the catacombs, were not merely orthodox illustrations of God's promise and power but a spell of sorts, an image capable of radiating the vitality of the spirit world. As such the image, as an amulet but also as a sort of oracular artifact, was a way to access that vitality along with the hope and desire for life and to harness it to the bodies of the living.

In sum, Jonah does not just represent a good death. Rather his presence – as an ancestor (a proto saint), a source of blessings and protections, a charm for the afterlife – becomes available in and through both the image and the performances of the mortuary rituals.

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[55] Denzey Lewis, Popular Christianity and Lived Religion, 269. Thinking magically, it is also possible that these images were understood to be gifts. Karen Stern views the mortuary and devotional graffiti performed on the behalf of the dead as a type of gift that appears to have been seen to comfort the dead and influence the dead to provide benefits to the giver in turn. Stern, Graffiti as Gift, 137–157.

[56] As Stowers writes, "the dominant epistemological mood in the religion of everyday social exchange was uncertainty …about how and when the gods act and about their moods and desires" Stowers, The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings, 39.

8. Entrance into Paradise

Up until this point, I have emphasized the ritual practices and contexts that the population of Rome held in common. However, the art suggests something distinctly Christian as well. If we conceptualize religious affiliations, not as singular and determining identities equally potent for each individual in every situation, but rather as varied and contextual, we can appreciate how early Christians distinguished themselves from non-Christian Romans – or, engaged in the process of becoming Christians – through their selection of catacomb images.[57]

The Jonah images, as they correspond to Christian baptismal practices, beliefs, and processes of identity formation, allowed the living not only to ritually encounter the dead in revivified form but also to experience the paradise of the afterlife. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker argue that, especially in visual and architectural manifestations, for early Christians, heaven and paradise existed, not on a spiritual plane but in the world. "The paradise of the dead existed simultaneously with this life, and it could be accessed through rituals and altered states of consciousness"[58] While mortuary rituals invited Christians to enter an Edenic realm where they could commune with the dead, baptism was also designed to open that gate into paradise. The intense training that preceded baptism was designed to prepare Christians to live in the world as a paradise, a world as already transfigured by Jesus and reopened as an Eden to those who looked to Jesus as a model of the divinity within them. "Spiritual disciplines were essential to being at home in the world as paradise. To experience the Spirit of God in all things and the beauties of this world, early Christians cultivated acute attunement to the life around them."[59] Jensen cogently argues that "the baptistery was …a tomb and a womb."[60] The burial chamber was similarly configured to express links between death and rebirth. Paradise, therefore, was accessible through baptismal as well as mortuary rituals.

Through this lens, Jonah's harrowing sojourn in the belly of the *ketos* appears as an intense spiritual training or testing ground, something to be boldly confronted

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[57] Regarding imperial roman religions, Jaś Elsner has argued, "a given religion was not so much an identity to be conferred on believers as an identity to be claimed and competitively redefined by different groups of adherents." Elsner, Archaeologies and Agendas, 127.

[58] Based on the writings of Irenaeus, Cyprian, Theodore of Euchaita, Hippolytus of Rome, Basil the Great, Ephrem, Augustine, and others, Brock and Parker argue that "the early church – before and after Constantine – taught that paradise was a place, a way of life, even an ecosystem." Brock / Parker, Saving Paradise, 90. See Chapter 4. By contrast, see Origen, On First Principles, in Delumeau, History of Paradise, 16.

[59] Brock / Parker, Saving Paradise, xix.

[60] Jensen, Living Water, 38. Ignatius of Antioch was the first to articulate the idea that by his baptism, Jesus overcame the water, an idea also evident in Paul's claim that, by his death and resurrection Jesus overcame the chaos associated with water. Individuals who partake in baptism with Jesus participate in the same victory over death and chaos (Rom 6:3–4).

rather than merely feared.[61] In this way, the images of Jonah have what Annabel Jane Wharton has called a "haptic" dimension, meaning "art meant to be not only viewed with one's eyes, but experienced by one's body in motion."[62] They are haptic in that they depict Jonah's body as surrendering and submitting to death, embodying a posture of trust even when all appears dark and hopeless. Through Jonah's raising of his hands, gliding into the mouth of the *ketos*, and reclining, the bodies of the mourners are coaxed to perform bodily what we might consider to be an exclusively internal attitude of faith and trust. Jonah's fluid acceptance of displacement, death, and pain leads to peace and rest in paradise (see Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Jonah in repose, Catacomba di Ciriaca.

The dead are imagined to embody these same postures on their journey into a new phase of existence just as the mourners express solidarity with the dead by enacting the experience of death. In this way the living, in effect, accompany the dead in their transition, but they also embody the dead, making them ritually present. In this liminal process, the boundary between the living and the dead dissolves to the extent that they can share a meal together in paradise.

This assurance of an on-going life in paradise for the living and the dead is also essential to the construction of the martyr's identity. In Perpetua's account of her martyrdom (she was killed in 203), she dreams of "a dangerous metal ladder

[61] As Jonah emerges from the sea monster's mouth, he extends his arms, perhaps to evoke the *orant*, a person praying, standing with arms outstretched from the elbows. Biblical characters, including Noah and Daniel, strike this pose, as do anonymous individuals who are depicted alone and without narrative context (e.g., the woman praying in the Cubiculum of the Velata at the Catacombs of Priscilla). In Roman society, the image, which captures the pose of the goddess Piety, communicated the traditional value of filial piety and promoted it as an imperial notion. Robin Jensen argues that the use of the *orant* in Christian funerary art was also an attempt to invoke the notion of piety, as devotion to family, within "the new, adopted family – the Church." Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, 20.

[62] Wharton, Refiguring the Post Classical City.

with a 'serpent of wondrous size' guarding its base and weapons for tearing flesh on its rungs."[63] As in the story of Jonah, an encounter with a serpent-like creature represents the middle stage of the Christian's passage through death and into a new life. Through the lens of Christian martyrdom, Jonah's entombment in the body of the fish was not a terrifying end but rather a difficult but endurable stage on the way to a new life in a garden paradise.[64] Jonah, like Perpetua and other martyrs, confronts death with confidence and even joy. As Davies writes of Perpetua, "In her visions she is not so much leaving this world as going to another. If the one to which she is going is all good, then the one she is leaving must be all bad – hence the joy of suffering."[65]

9. On Reception

In the wake of this extended discussion of the Jonah images' significance in the context of the Roman catacombs, one might start to wonder what any of it has to do with the biblical book of Jonah. Actually, I would say: quite a bit.

9.1. Death and Life in Jonah 2

The language of the second chapter of Jonah is dense with mythopoetic images that parallel those that inform the mortuary rituals and the visual-spatial language of the catacombs. As in the catacombs, in the psalm uttered by the character Jonah (Jon 2:2–10),[66] the language and the imagery traverse back and forth over the line of life and death and play on birthing images that anticipate not merely birth but also death. Ron Hendel observes that

> the conceptual background of this psalm, what we may call its implicit metaphysics, relies on a basic tension between life and death…. As Pedersen and others have emphasized, these oppositions are not set in a static structure. The world is "a mixture of life and death, of light and darkness",[67] it is in a state of dialectical and periodic struggle…, [a] conceptual dichotomy [which] is manifested in the spatial structure of the cosmos"[68]

63 Brock / Parker, Saving Paradise, 68.

64 Brock / Parker, Saving Paradise, 31–32.

65 Davies, Death, Burial, and Rebirth, 213. Boyarin proposes that "we think of martyrdom as a 'discourse,' as a practice of dying for God and of talking about it, a discourse that changes and develops over time and undergoes particularly interesting transformations among rabbinic Jews and other Jews, including Christians, between the second and the fourth centuries." Boyarin, Dying for God, 94.

66 The Hebrew and English versification in Jonah 2 is different by one verse. The Hebrew numbering is used throughout.

67 Pedersen, Israel: Its Life and Culture, 1:470.

68 Hendel, Myth and Mimesis, 3.

Further, the poem charts the cartography and cosmology of the temple and the underworld even as it turns back and forth the double-sided image of womb and tomb.

Although the narrator introduces the "big fish" in what initially seems to be a demythologized way, it is significant that God appoints a sea creature "to swallow" (*liblōaʿ*, 2:1) Jonah because it activates the image of death as a swallower. In a number of biblical and ancient West Asian texts, Death opens wide his great mouth to swallow and consume his victims.[69] That Jonah finds himself in the stomach of a swallowing creature of the sea signifies his death and entombment.[70]

Mythopoetic and cosmic geographical elements in the poem accumulate to reinforce the idea that Jonah has been consumed by death. He describes himself as being overpowered by the sea, pulled down into watery locations associated with places of distress and death (*məṣûlâ*, "the deep"; *bilbab yammîm*, "in the heart of the seas"; *nāhār*, "river"; *mišbārêkhā wəgallêkhā*, "your breakers and your waves" [v. 4]; *mayim*, "waters"; and *təhôm*, "sea" [v. 6]).[71] The landscape of the underworld emerges with striking clarity in v. 7. The terms *ʾereṣ* (here, "underworld") and *ʿôlām* ("forever") can both refer to the underworld.[72] Sheol is often imagined as a prison contained by gates or bars,[73] and one can find the entrance to the underworld at "roots of the mountains" (*qiṣbê hārîm*).[74] Finally, it is from the pit (*šaḥat*, v. 7), the dark and lifeless underworld, that Jonah is delivered (literally, "brought up").[75]

And yet, alongside these images of death, or often on the other side of these images, are tropes of life restored, birth, and even resurrection. His stay in the belly of the fish is slated to last "three days and three nights" (v. 1). In Hosea the third day is linked with God's intention to revivify and restore Israel after the nation's destruction: "In two days he will revive us. On the third day, he will raise us up and we shall live in his presence" (Hos 6:2).

Even as, both the belly of the fish (vv. 1–2) and the womb of Sheol (v. 3) suggest death, they also reveal womblike features capable of affording comfort and protection. This duality is also inherent in the Hebrew Bible's depiction of the earth, which is imagined as a womb from which life springs forth (i.e., "Mother Earth") and as the underworld ("earth"), which snuffs out life.

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69 Exod 15:12; Num 16:30, 32, 34; Pss 69:16; 106:17; Prov 1:12; cf. Isa 25:7.

70 Ackerman, Satire and Symbolism, 220–221.

71 Gen 7:11; 8:2; Exod 15:5; 2 Sam 22:5; Ps 42:8; Ezek 26:19; 31:15; Tromp, Primitive Conceptions of Death 54–66, 147–151; Cooper, Ps 24:7–10, 42–43.

72 Pss 22:30; 71:20; Jer 17:12–13; Isa 26:19; Eccl 3:21; Sir 51:19.

73 Pss 9:13; 107:16, 18; 142:7; Isa 38:10.

74 See Job 28:9; Deut 32:22.

75 See Erickson, Jonah, 293–300.

Birth imagery is further suggested in v. 2 when the masculine noun for fish (*dāg*) from v. 1 appears in a feminine form (*dāgâ*). In this way, the fish is "feminized", introducing a new set of metaphorical associations. As a result, the fish's belly can be appreciated as womblike (see this meaning of *mēʿeh* in Gen 25:23; Ps 71:6; Isa 49:1; Ruth 1:11; see also 2 Sam 7:12; 16:11; Isa 48:19). In the belly or womb of the fish (*mimməʿê dāgâ*), readers might imagine that Jonah is not merely entombed but "en-wombed," a connection made more explicit in v. 3 in the expression "womb of Sheol."[76]

Further, the same watery locations in the depths (*təhôm*, *yām*, *nāhār*), listed in vv. 4 and 6, that are associated with death are also places of vitality, the sites of many a divine abode.[77] And standing between the watery verses is "your holy sanctuary" (v 5). Jonah's expectation that he will escape YHWH's sight – his sense that he is being pursued and surrounded by death – is defied when he finds that he continues to gaze at YHWH's sanctuary.[78] Brought into focus by Jonah's vision of the sanctuary, the watery spaces in vv. 4 and 6 recall the cosmic geographical idea that the waters beneath the earth function as both the temple's source of abundant fertility and its terrible power, situated as it is on the boundary between fecundity and death.[79]

At the axis of the poem in v. 7, Jonah goes up (*ʿlh*) and his prayer goes toward God (*wattābôʾ ʾēlêkā*) and enters into the sanctuary (*ʾel-hêkāl*), evoking a worshiper's movement into the temple. As a complex signifier of Eden, fertility,

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[76] Almbladh, Studies in the Book of Jonah, 25.

[77] Ezek 31:4; Prov 3:20; cf. Ps 78:15–16; Clifford, The Cosmic Mountain; Callender, Adam in Myth and History, 185–86, 215.

[78] The finite verb (*ʾôsîp*) functions as an auxiliary to the infinitive *ləhabbîṭ*, suggesting a continual experience of divine presence ("I continue to gaze").

[79] Mesopotamian and Israelite cosmic geography reinforce the link between the conceptual domains of temple and the waters (*yammîm*, *nāhār, mayim, təhôm*) and between the poetic lines in vv. 4–6. In Canaanite mythology, El's abode is located at the "sources of the two rivers," in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep" (Baal Cycle: CTU 1.2 iii 4; 1.3 v 6–7; 1.4 iv 21–22; 1.6 i 33–34; Aqhat: CTU 1.17 vi 47–48; see also CTU 1.100:3). Further in Sumerian and Akkadian texts, the underground waters (Akk. *apsû*) are the realm of Enki/Ea, the god of water, wisdom, and fertility. It is on these waters Enki's "house" sits, constituting the source of vitality and fertility for Enki's temple on earth and for the land when it is conceived more broadly as Enki's domain. The depths that fuel the fertility of the god, which is particularly potent in his house, also testify to the god's power to destroy. The act of unleashing the flood waters to destroy the earth and its inhabitants indicates the life-giving and life-destroying potential of the waters (see Atraḫasis; Gilgamesh 11; Gen 6–9, esp. 7:11).

The homology of temple and the underground waters flowing from the cosmic fount is evident in biblical literature as well. In the vision of restoration of the temple in Ezek 40–48, the underground waters are channeled up from the underground sea, through the temple and into the surrounding lands, bringing life and renewal to everything they encounter (see esp. Ezek 47:1–12; also Joel 4:18 [Eng 3:18]; Zech 14:8; Gen 2:6–15; see, among others, Wenham, Sanctuary Symbolism, 19–25).

and divine presence, the temple evokes hopes for new life, resurrection, and the world to come.[80] Poetically, Jonah has journeyed from the underworld to the temple, where God's presence and holiness is radically manifest.[81]

The metaphor of childbirth is also present in the prose as well as in the first stanza of the poem. Jonah's "journey" is cast as a fetus's progress toward birth, which in the ancient West Asian world was fraught with risk and the real prospect of death. In Mesopotamian incantations, the fetus is imagined as traveling in a boat (or as a boat), making its way from the 'quay of death,' over the womb waters, which are indistinguishable from the fertile underground waters of the earth, toward the quay of life.[82] Along the way, the baby encounters engulfing waters and "breakers" (as in Jon 2:4, 6) and threatens to remain firmly fixed behind the womb's doors and bolts (as in Jon 2:7), at risk of becoming trapped in the land of the dead, where its journey began. The birthing mother's experience is also characterized by distress. In the Hebrew Bible, the metaphor of "a woman giving birth" is often used for people in crisis, crying out, writhing, becoming faint or weak and expressing feelings of being bound or encroached on (*ṣr*) and surrounded (*sbb),* often by waters.[83]

While death is a ubiquitous risk associated with childbirth, the journey's proper destination is the port of life. Jonah appears to be moving in the death-current, but the childbirth trope reframes Jonah's death as a birth. In this way, the metaphor creates an expectation that a successful passage from death and (back) to life will result in a "new creation" of some sort.[84] This movement from death to life and the anticipation of a transformed life, achieved through a death – real or metaphorical – parallels the views and practices around death that we find in the catacombs.

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[80] Levenson, Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel, 82–90; Stager, Jerusalem and the Garden of Eden.

[81] E.g., Ps 30:4, 10, 12–13 [Eng. 30:3, 9, 11–12]; cf. Pss 9:14–15 [Eng. 9:13–14]; 87:1–2; 116:3–9; Janowski, Arguing with God, 253–259; Gunkel / Begrich, Introduction to Psalms, 133–134.

[82] Bergmann, Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis, 52–54.

[83] The term *sbb* appears in Ps 18:6 // 2 Sam 22:6; Pss 22:13, 17; 88:18 (see similarly, *ʾpp*, Ps 18:5 // 2 Sam 22:5). The word "breakers" (*mšbrym,* 2:4) is also found in the semantic field of childbirth. In the singular (*mšbr*), it can mean "the opening of the womb" or "the point of giving birth" (2Kgs 19:3; Isa 37:3; Hos 13:13). The plural form, *mšbrym*, is most commonly used figuratively in combination with other images associated with birth (2 Sam 22:5; Pss 42:8 [Eng. 42:7]; 88:8 [88:7]). Bergmann, Childbirth as a Metaphor, 79–80, 131–133.

[84] For the detailed argument, see the excursus, Birth Imagery in 2:1–7, in Erickson, Jonah, 310–313.

9.2. Ritual Readings of a Ritual Text

The poem in Jonah 2 also features the discourse of ritual practice, one that is supported not only by performative language associated with ritual activity but also by the rich rendering of temple space in the poem.

As is well established, the psalm in Jonah 2 is, form critically speaking, a psalm of thanksgiving. As such, Jonah's narrative of deliverance includes a harrowing description of distress (vv. 4, 6, 7), an account of YHWH's intervention to rescue him (v. 7), and an offering of thanksgiving sacrifices and fulfillment of vows (v. 10).

Images of God's deliverance of the psalmist from Sheol are prominent in psalms of thanksgiving (Pss 30 [esp. vv. 3–4 (Eng. 2–3)]; 68 [esp. vv. 20–21 (Eng. 19–20)]; 116 [esp. vv. 3, 19]). While "resurrection" in these psalms does not attest to a generalized hope for life after death, psalms of thanksgiving do affirm God's power to save a supplicant from near death or a death-like experience.[85] Jonah's deliverance features a crossing from death to life and replicates the metaphorical movement of the thanksgiving psalm. When YHWH brings Jonah's life (*nefes*) up from the Pit, Jonah responds by fulfilling vows and offering up a thanksgiving sacrifice, a gift that not only represents gratitude but also seeks to bring near the divine presence.[86] After Jonah makes gifts and vows, YHWH commands the fish to vomit Jonah out of its belly (v. 11), completing Jonah's resurrection from "death."

The thanksgiving psalm finds its *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) in the cult. As public proclamation, it unites individual and collective praise as a means to reactualize and reconstitute both the individual's and the community's relationship to God. These psalms enact a spatial movement from Sheol to temple (e.g., Pss 30:4 [Eng. 30:3]; 116:3, 8, 9, 19; cf. Ps 18:17 [18:16]) as well as an emotional shift from crying to praising (Ps 30:6 [30:5]), revealing the psalms' function as returning the supplicant to a "space of liveability," by performing a "transition to a new life."[87]

Within the context of the book of Jonah, the *Sitz im Leben* of Jonah's psalm is obviously not the temple. That said, ritually and rhetorically, when Jonah performs his thanksgiving psalm and the actions that accompany its words (e.g., making sacrifices), his character constructs a temple in the space of narrative and in the belly of the fish.[88]

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[85] Levenson, Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel, 35–66; Janowski, Arguing with God.

[86] The final couplet of the poem (v. 10) explicitly refers to the ritual aspects of the thanksgiving form: the fulfilling of vows and the offering of sacrifices in the temple. The first-person verbs of ritual action (*ʾezbəḥâ, nādartî ʾăšallēmâ*), preceded by the phrase "as for me, with a voice of thanksgiving" (*waʾănî bəqôl tôdâ*), suggest that Jonah is not only speaking about these thanksgiving rituals but actually performing them.

[87] Janowksi, Arguing with God, 261–262.

[88] For a full version of the argument, see Erickson, Jonah, 300–310.

Jonah's actions "in the temple," performed as they are in the aftermath of YHWH bringing him up (v. 7), suggest that his ritual actions, performed on the other side of death, so to speak, function as rite of passage. He is, at least for a narrative moment, transformed even if the book of Jonah depicts this transformation ironically. The context and movement of the psalm suggest that it is the ritual itself that restores the individual to the community, moving them ritually from illness and isolation back into communal life. Further, as a returnee from death, the recipient of YHWH's deliverance witnesses to the possibility of transformation and revivification and in turn revives the community with their testimony. In these ways, relationships between worshippers and with God – social bonds between humans and the divine – are affirmed and strengthened through the ritual process.

While the Jonah images in the catacombs do not constitute a straightforward instance of biblical art or function as mere illustrations of the biblical text (if such a thing is even possible), the parallels between the ritual and metaphorical elements in the psalm in Jonah and the mortuary rituals performed within the catacombs and mirrored in the motifs of so many of the wall paintings, are striking. That is because the Jonah images in the catacombs are attuned to the book of Jonah's rich images of chaos and order and death and restoration, themes that are especially "transferable to the contingencies of human experience."[89] Thus they prove to be deep-structurally consistent with metaphors and mythological motifs in the book of Jonah. Further, as a re-used ritual text, Jonah's psalm not only poetically describes but performs the journey from death to abundant new life. In this way, the motif of death and resurrection known from the psalm of thanksgiving is individualized and particularized in the narrative, and the ritual that performs that transformation finds expression in a radically new context.

10. Conclusion

When read "at the nexus of Bible, art, and ritual," the Jonah images carry and convey a variety of meanings.[90] Further, as the social lives, local contexts, modes of religiosity, and experiences of viewers interact with the layers of tradition and meaning embedded in the biblical texts and their visual retellings, different resonances in the images of Jonah surface. Jonah might appear to a viewer as a type of Christ or as a hero delivered from death by his god; a tangible expression of hope for the afterlife or for resurrection and for the restoration of a fallen humanity; a model for Christian transformation – by baptism – in this life and so a model for how to negotiate the death-dealing forces one encounters in this life; a martyr delivered by God, a sort of embodied proclamation of faith or a testimony to God's saving deeds; the hero of the ritual journey from life to death to a transformed state

89 Hendel, Myth and Mimesis, 5.
90 Peppard, The World's Oldest Church, 37.

of existence; a presence infused with the vitality of the spirit world; an apotropaic artifact, capable of protecting the souls of the dead from malevolent forces; or a saint or an ancestor to be worshipped and gifted so as to channel blessings or luck to worshippers. In each of these iterations and manifestations, Jonah is a figure who haunts the boundaries and crosses borders and so facilitates an array of crossings from the ritual, to the social, to the spiritual and theological.

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Fig. 3: Wilpert 1903, II:171. https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.1339#0207

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Fig. 6: Wilpert 1903, II:60 = https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.1339#0062

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