

Introduction

Early Christians were drawn to using images in religious settings, revealing a very human desire to include visual aspects in devotional environments. Clement of Alexandria, like other early church authors, discovered in his fellow Christians a pervasive desire to create images, and this desire forced him to police the practice. Clement urged his audience to utilize certain types of symbols, such as doves, ships, and anchors, and to reject images he deemed negative, such as swords or prostitutes.¹ If Christians were going to use images, they should be cautious, and the nascent church should have some element of control over the practice.²

What stands out in Clement's text is that, early on, Christians found value in art and imagery. Early Christians were interested in visualizing their faith, with or without the endorsement of the clergy. Clement concedes to the whims of his congregation, after which early Christian art develops speedily, creating symbols such as an anchor or a fish or making images of Jesus. In doing so, early artistic examples of Jesus suggest that early Christians understood how the visual medium could convey deeper theological truths concerning their religion. They realized that art has the power to project difficult concepts while written texts and even sermons have some limitations. Thus, an image of Jesus performing miracles can neatly advertise Christianity while promoting important aspects of the nature of Christ.

The power art wields can be realized in our contemporary world. When I was in graduate school, the topic one day in our church history course was the christological controversies and the writings of Athanasius. *On the Incarnation* was dry material for the novice, and it was quite easy to get frustrated and confused concerning the nature and salvific action of Christ. At one point during the lecture, the instructor projected an image of a wooden icon of Christ

1. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.11 (ANF 2.286).

2. Clement is not unaware of the dangers of art; in fact, at parts of his later writings, he is still adamantly against their use. See *Stromateis* 5.5.

from the sixth century (Figure 1).³ He then discussed Athanasius's comparison, in his treatise, of an artistic image to the enduring necessity of Christ

While I had understood the basic comparison Athanasius was making, the deeper, more fundamental theological truth still eluded me until I saw the image. Given that I was in the dark regarding the tradition of early Christian art and iconography, my initial confusion was predictable. With the visual aid in class, Athanasius's reasoning was finally clear. The faded outlines yet lasting color of the portrait of Christ illuminate Athanasius's theology. The use of an early Christian artistic example served to illustrate patristic theology. And as I began to explore the numerous examples of fourth- and fifth-century images of Jesus performing miracles, my understanding of the early church was illuminated and deepened with the help of early Christian art.

For the student and scholar of early Christianity, the benefits of delving into early Christian art are quite tangible. Images from different eras of Christian history elucidate significant developments in the tradition, greatly enhancing the understanding of theological and historical movements. Christian art is a useful and effective medium to shed light on different aspects of Christian history, as students and observers can readily witness how images and architecture created centuries ago are connected to the relevant theological movements in the same period.

When examining the corpus of the earliest Christian art, one is initially entranced with repeated nonnarrative images and symbols, such as an anchor, a fish, or the Good Shepherd, or narrative scenes from Scripture, including figures such as Noah, Jonah, and Daniel. Of course, early Christians also began to create images of Jesus, involving narrative scenes from the gospels or nonnarrative images of Jesus depicted in the guise of rival gods. In early Christian images of Jesus, the images that show Christ performing healings and miracles stand out not only in their sheer number but also in their manner of depiction. For example, Christ healing the paralytic or raising the dead while wielding a wandlike instrument is a vivid and continuously repeated image in the early centuries. This book aims to examine why the theme of Christ performing healings and miracles was so popular for Late Antique Christians and to answer the question, What was the purpose of depicting Jesus as a healer and miracle worker?

Inevitably, careful attention to the chronology of images of Jesus will reveal that the image of Christ performing healings and miracles became ubiquitous in Late Antiquity, especially in the fourth century, and dissipated

3. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 14.8 (NPNF 2.4.44; PG 25, 120C-D).

after the fifth century, nearly disappearing altogether.⁴ Scholars have attempted to interpret these images of Christ, concluding that the motif of Christ performing miracles portrayed Jesus as a philosopher or a magician. The pervasiveness of this image of Jesus can be partially explained by a rivalry with Christian opponents. The most reasonable interpretation of the theme's ubiquity addresses the context of the images and cognate texts of the early Christian writers. Early Christian images such as Christ performing miracles touted the superiority of Christ against all rivals in an effort to make Christianity the sole expression of true religion in the realm. Thus, the image of Jesus performing miracles was not isolated but signified a repeated theme for Late Antique Christians: Jesus is the miracle worker par excellence, superior to any rival deity.

The insistent theme of what can be called Christ the Miracle Worker occurred not only in art but in Christian texts as well, and the genres shared a common purpose: to promote the virtues and abilities of Jesus at the expense of competitors to Christianity. In the Synoptic Gospels as well as John's gospel, the miracles of Christ were given prominence. There are over thirty-five references to the healing power of Christ in the four gospels, the most belonging to Matthew. In early Christian texts, Jesus' superior healing ability was so emphasized that the statements reveal that Jesus' status as the greatest healer was disputed.⁵ Augustine of Hippo preached that Jesus is "the complete Physician of our wounds" and emphatically stated that Christ "and no other" is the ultimate

4. For example, in G. Bovini and Hugo Brandenburg, *Repertorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage*, Band I, *Rom und Ostia*, ed. F. W. Deichmann (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1967), a catalog of Christian sarcophagi in Rome and Ostia, miracles and healings outnumber images of Christ enthroned in majesty (the *traditio legis*) by a considerable margin. The enthroned images of Christ make up a little more than half of the number of occurrences of Christ healing the blind. Specifically, in the Roman catalog there are over forty examples of the enthroned Jesus to seventy-one occurrences of the healing of the blind. See Deichmann, *Ikongraphisches Register für das Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage* Band I, *Rom und Ostia* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1967), 122–24. As will be discussed later, the number of scenes of Christ's miracles in catacomb art and relief sculpture makes this theme the predominant one in early Christian art of the third and fourth centuries.

5. See Gerhard Fichtner, "Christus als Arzt: Ursprünge und Wirkungen eines Motivs," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 16 (1982): 8. Fichtner believes the early church authors are addressing the competition with Asclepius. As evidence, he cites Ignatius, *Eph.* 7.2; 20.2; Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 2.30.1; Justin, *1 Apol.* 22.6; Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 8.7; 21.3; Tertullian, *The Crown* 8.2; *Apology* 23.6; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 1.15.3; 1.15.23; Arnobius, *Against the Pagans* 1.48–49. See the following pages for more. On p. 8, "The direct confrontation between Asklepios and Christ occurs albeit rarely in the writings of the early church fathers.." He also notes the influence of Philo as well on p. 12: "Philo's influence on the theology of the Greek church fathers should not be underestimated."

healer.⁶ These are words that provide comfort and succor but also suggest a degree of competition with other cults.

This book also offers a title for this theme of Jesus performing miracles: “Christ the Miracle Worker.” *Christ* is, of course, a designation—a title, not a name. But in the fourth century, early Christians were drafting a Christology for their religion in text and art. Early Christians were interested in the Christ of faith rather than the Jesus of history, so the designation “Christ the Miracle Worker” appears apt.

Largely, the theme of Christ as the definitive healer and miracle worker was utilized to provide comfort for the living, often in a burial context. The images of Christ the Miracle Worker in Late Antiquity appear in a funerary context either in catacomb art or relief sculpture such as sarcophagi frontals. So the evidence that suggests the popularity of this theme is mostly funerary, and the context reveals the mind-set of the early Christian viewer. Christ the Miracle Worker was a handy template to provide consolation to Christians in more ways than one. The theme also reassured Christian audiences of the superiority of Jesus in a pluralistic religious environment and the security of the life beyond. Sermons and polemics were limited in their ability to convey these messages concerning Jesus. Art and imagery provided a medium to express Christ as a supreme miracle worker more vividly and in a more engaging manner than polemics or sermons. An examination into the prevalence of this theme underlines the utility of art as a means of community expression. The implementation of the image of Christ as a powerful healer and miracle worker illuminates what Christian life was like in Late Antiquity.

However, Christian art did not appear in the fourth century as fully developed. Early Christians created their visual language by observing and borrowing elements from the world around them. Early Christian art was marked by the commingling of Christian and non-Christian themes that clearly signal the remarkable experimentation that was under way in Christian art of the fourth century. This art was syncretistic, utilizing images, symbols, and themes from the Roman world to create a visual language. Some elements and motifs (such as the *traditio legis*, the giving of the law) during this period became deeply ingrained, while other features fell out of the visual canon (for example, the image of Christ utilizing a staff to perform a miracle largely disappeared after the fifth century).⁷ Having examined catacomb paintings at

6. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 3.2 (CCSL 36.21; NPNF 1.7.19).

7. Grabar discusses the innovation of early Christian art in *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968). Three articles that discuss enigmatic themes and features reflecting such experimentation are Robin M. Jensen, “The Economy of the Trinity at the

Domitilla or Via Latina, we may conclude that Christian viewers in Rome likely had little difficulty with non-Christian images such as Ceres, Hercules, or even depictions of Christ in the semblance of other gods. Jás Elsner has argued that Christians viewed pagan scenes allegorically, and the audience at Roman catacombs or other funerary environments could recognize Christian themes such as resurrection in non-Christian images such as Hercules rescuing Alcestis from Hades.⁸

In early Christian art, there is a strong corpus of images of Jesus dressed in the guise of competing gods. Christ was represented as Helios in the third-century mosaic of Tomb M in the Vatican necropolis beneath St. Peter's, as Orpheus in the catacombs of Rome, and (if the art historian Thomas Mathews is to be believed) as Jupiter in the mosaic of Sta. Pudenziana.⁹ Such portrayals of Jesus in the guise of a rival god exudes a message of superiority and supersession, and the theme of Christ the Miracle Worker exhibits Jesus subsuming perceived religious threats—a visual “clash of gods,” as Mathews so memorably described it.

After viewing the manifold images of Christ performing miracles, one might ask why the Christian populace was so determined to portray Jesus as a miracle worker. In fact, early Christians naturally emphasized the importance of healings and miracles, given the prominence they enjoyed in the Greco-Roman world. Healings and miracles were important in the cultic life of non-Christians, as evident in the cult of Asclepius. The most common evidence of healings and miracles is found in ancient texts. Often the documentation of a successful healing was left at the temples of Asclepius engraved in stone, clay, or wood tablets known as *stelai*, praising the effectiveness of the god's therapeutic power. Healings and miracles were captured in narratives demonstrating some type of divine intervention that can only be described as supernatural. These narratives were cataloged in diverse Greco-Roman works attributed to Diodorus Siculus, Cicero, Pliny the Elder, Aelius Aristides, and Julian the

Creation of Adam and Eve,” *J ECS* 7, no. 4 (1999): 527–46; Lee M. Jefferson, “The Staff of Jesus in Early Christian Art,” *Religion and the Arts* 14, no. 3 (2010): 221–51; and Jefferson, “Superstition and the Significance of the Image of Christ Performing Miracles in Early Christian Art,” *Studia Patristica: Proceedings from the Fifteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies*, vol. 44 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 15–20.

8. Jás Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 271–72. Elsner continues his discussion of syncretism by using the Hercules Via Latina cycle to suggest the non-Christian influence on Christian visual language. See also his *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

9. For a Jupiter-Pudenziana discussion, see Thomas Mathews, *The Clash of Gods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 97–109.

Apostate. They are also found in Jewish and Christian scripture, most notably in the canonical gospels. Recognizing that healings and miracles were not isolated in their importance to early Christianity, one can begin to understand why early Christians were so fascinated with miracles. But by examining the textual emphasis on miracles, one can also understand why early Christians produced so many images of Christ's miracles. The healing and miracle stories of Asclepius and Asclepius iconography can reveal such an understanding of the image of Christ the Miracle Worker. Any interpretation of the art must take into account Christian and non-Christian textual accounts of healings and miracles, the Asclepius cult, and its relevance in Late Antiquity—something not often done in existing approaches to religious studies.

The ubiquity of miracles and miracle imagery in early Christian texts and art has prompted attempts to answer why the theme was so prominent. Yet “miracle stories,” Greco-Roman or otherwise, were not thoughtfully considered until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the advent of biblical form criticism, scholars such as Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann began to take notice of the miracle stories. The stories, though, were often dismissed as evidence of Christianizing of pagan narratives and were considered non-Christian material, and thus not relevant for any useful gospel study.¹⁰ Miracle stories narrowly featured Jesus performing tasks as the Miracle Worker, not Jesus the “herald of the Kingdom of God.”¹¹ In any subsequent Christian inquiry, the stories of the miracles of Jesus were intentionally neglected as not containing any real value.¹²

This pattern of interpreting Christian tradition was deeply affected by the seminal work of Adolf von Harnack, one of the first social historians of the early church. One can easily recognize the influence of his *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* on most church historians and biblical scholars. Harnack argued that early Christians were preoccupied with sickness and intentionally couched their faith as a religion of “salvation or healing.”¹³ Nonetheless, the study of the miracle stories declined, in part due to Harnack's persuasive theory of the Hellenization of Christianity. Harnack's

10. Dibelius labels Jesus' miracle stories with the patronizing label “tales” in his *From Tradition to Gospel*, trans. Bertram Lee Wolf (New York: Scribner, 1965), 70. Also see Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

11. Dibelius, *From Tradition*, 80.

12. *Ibid.*, 79.

13. Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. and ed. James Moffatt (New York: Harper, 1962), 108. The phrase quoted is emphasized in italics in the original.

position proposed “an almost complete isolation of primitive Christianity from its historical environment.”¹⁴ As a result, miracle stories in Christianity were not compared with similar instances in Greco-Roman religion.¹⁵ The miracle stories could not be properly considered without placing them in historical context.¹⁶

Later scholars consider this move unfortunate and rather too simplistic. Ramsay MacMullen notes that Harnack’s work *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* included thousands of source references but not a single non-Christian source, implying that the Christian mission was created *ex nihilo*. Robert Wilken has recently offered a counterargument to Harnack’s established theory that Christianity was thoroughly Hellenized in the first centuries. Instead, Wilken argues that the obverse appears to be true: Hellenism was thoroughly Christianized by the early Christian writers from Origen to John of Damascus.¹⁷ This is not to say that early Christians were *not* influenced by Hellenistic or Jewish writings. Rather, the early Christians were so influenced by them that the culture was transformed by Christianity into something unique.

Wilken’s theory obviously applies to early Christian thought. His theory is also applicable to early Christian art. Christians appropriated the artistic corpora that were available to them, including the visual imagery of their non-Christian neighbors. Pagan artistic elements were effectively Christianized. Christ often appears quite like rival gods Jupiter, Dionysius, Sarapis, or Asclepius. Stylistic traits of rival gods such as Jupiter, Sarapis or Asclepius were incorporated into the depictions of Christ, with the intention of characterizing Christ as the most powerful god. Scriptural episodes that involved Christ were featured in early Christian art following 200 CE, and among these, the miracle stories were the most popular.

Still, Harnack planted the seed of inquiry in his analysis of healing and miracle in early Christianity, particularly the question of the similarities between Jesus and rival gods. He cited several ancient sources as evidence of

14. W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard Clark Kee (London: SCM, 1973), 206.

15. Arguably, Harnack’s position weakened his ability to compare the early images of Jesus to Asclepius, as witnessed in the opening quotation. However his position was not primarily concerned with imagery.

16. Howard Clark Kee criticizes Dibelius for this move quite eloquently in his *Medicine, Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 76–77.

17. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), xvi–xvii.

this phenomenon, but he claimed that the greatest testimony is found in the popularity of the cult of Asclepius. The god of healing, Asclepius, enjoyed great prominence in Late Antiquity, largely due to the fervent belief that the cult could cure bodily ills and provide comfort. As Christianity began to grow, Christians encountered several non-Christian deities that influenced their perception of Jesus and were conceivable threats. One of these figures was Asclepius, and as a result, Christians further emphasized Christ's abilities as a healer and physician. As I will show, the evidence for the Christ-Asclepius conflict is apparent in the writings of the early church.¹⁸ The early church authors were aware of the Asclepius cult and were hostile to its existence.

Art and imagery of Late Antiquity is an underestimated body of evidence that reflects the dispute with the competing cult of Asclepius. Images of Christ performing healings and miracles were quite abundant in the second, third, and fourth centuries and rapidly proliferated toward the end of this time period.¹⁹ Harnack hints at such a visual competition, or at least an influence, in his landmark text:

No one has yet been able to show that the figure of Christ which emerges in the fifth century, probably as early as the fourth, and which subsequently became the prevailing type in all pictorial representations, was modeled upon the figure of Asclepius. The two types are certainly similar; the qualities predicated of both are identical in part; and no one has hitherto explained satisfactorily why the original image of the youthful Christ was replaced by the

18. For an alternative view, Thomas Heyne suggests that the case for a Christ-Asclepius conflict stretches the patristic evidence, and that early Christians were neither preoccupied nor interested in physical healing and the Asclepius cult. See Thomas Heyne, "Were Second-Century Christians 'Preoccupied' with Physical Healing and the Asclepian Cult?" *Studia Patristica: Proceedings from the Fifteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 44:63–69. Although he focuses on the apostolic fathers, Freyne does not adequately treat the evidence from Justin Martyr that suggests a rivalry with Asclepius.

19. In terms of periodization, "Late Antiquity" is slightly ill defined and is often used as a catchall phrase for the transition from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages. However, for the purposes of this study, it is used throughout to refer to the period of the mid-second century through the fifth century. Even in this usage, it is not a perfect term. It cannot be said that "Late Antiquity" began in the second century, although features of the religious and cultural developments that arose in the fourth century began to appear in the second century. The images central to this book emerge in the fourth century, and while the term Late Antiquity is perhaps overburdened in its usage here, its limitations are noted from the outset of this book. There is much quibbling about when Late Antiquity began. See Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1–4; and Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

later. Nevertheless, we have no means of deriving the origin of the Callixtine Christ from Asclepius as a prototype, so that in the meantime we must regard such a derivation as a hypothesis, which, however interesting, is based upon inadequate evidence.²⁰

Harnack suggests that a parallel between Christ and Asclepius existed. Christians in Late Antiquity were heavily interested in healing. Bishops including Polycarp were instructed to take care of the sick as an embodiment of the ministry of Jesus, and to visit them directly.[footnote]Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 6; Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47. Recently, studies have demonstrated the existence of a competition between healing cults such as the cult of Asclepius and Christianity, even asserting as Hector Avalos does that Christianity was a low-cost, less cumbersome health care option than any other cult.²¹ Scholars such as Avalos, Amanda Porterfield, and R. J. S. Barrett-Lennard have argued that attention to healing was a major factor in the growth of Christianity.²² This book will assess the parallel in text and art of Jesus and his healing rival, Asclepius.

The image of Christ the Miracle Worker cultivated a strong sense of self-definition among early Christians. By incorporating elements of prominent healing cults, as well as the influence of magic and miracles in Late Antiquity, the image of Christ the Miracle Worker served as a unifying and supplanting figure. Early Christians selected suitable elements from pagan and Jewish culture and incorporated them for their benefit into narrative and art, and thus provided a Christian understanding to Hellenistic motifs. Just as Robert Wilken argues that early Christians transformed Greco-Roman culture into something new, I contend that the same can be said for early Christian art. The art and

20. Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 118–19. The predominant image of Christ that Harnack was referring to was the bearded Christ.

21. See Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Erich Dinkler, *Christus und Asklepios* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1980); Hector Avalos, *Health Care and the Rise of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 93; R. J. S. Barrett-Lennard, *Christian Healing after the New Testament: Some Approaches to Illness in the Second, Third and Fourth Centuries* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994). Avalos's conclusions will be discussed in the following chapter. While the Asclepius cult was not precisely “free,” it too offered a low-cost and ubiquitous option to the sick.

22. Also see Morton Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); and Evelyn Frost, *Christian Healing* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1940); also the volumes of Ludwig Edelstein and Emma Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1945).

imagery of Christ the Miracle Worker appropriated artistic elements of Late Antique culture and transformed those elements into representations that were similar to their antecedents, but uniquely Christian.

While Christian art was syncretistic, any blanket claim that all figures in Christian art were derivative is problematic. For example, the images in the Christian catacombs were influenced by Roman prototypes. In the Callistus catacomb and beyond, Endymion became Jonah, a Roman stevedore became the paralytic, Osiris became Lazarus, and a Greco-Roman magus, philosopher, or physician was possibly the prototype for Jesus. The images in the catacomb of Callistus certainly reveal pagan influences, but any conclusions that early Christians were purely imitative are specious. Such an argument is shortsighted without viewing the immediate context of the image under discussion, the accompanying scenes, and the narrative purpose.²³

Since Christian art borrowed elements from the visual resources available in Late Antiquity, it was up to the viewers to use their belief system to fill the image with meaning.²⁴ The burden of interpretation was placed upon the viewer. Patrons, sculptors, and viewers were not indifferent as to how their subjects were depicted in imagery. Images that contain features such as Jonah's resemblance to Endymion and the appearance of Hercules and Orpheus in the catacombs can be explained: Christians were influenced by the pagan imagery surrounding them. Christian patrons ordered a specific image, and sculptors crafted it using the accustomed mode of depiction, which is the resulting appearance of early Christian images.²⁵ Without adequate evidence detailing the intent of the artist, it is impossible to determine the exact authorial intentions for these early images of Christ. However, with the multiple examples of Christ performing healings and miracles, it is easier and perhaps more illuminating to assess how viewers responded to these artworks. And in the absence of any reliable reports gauging audience reaction of these images, the best possible measure of an early Christian response can be gleaned from patristic texts. The early Christian viewers understood Christ as a healer and

23. P. C. Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 186. To be clear, Finney believes that the early Christians were creating something unique; however, his statements regarding image prototypes can be misinterpreted. Finney defends the early dating of Callistus convincingly, although this dating should still be considered uncertain.

24. This is the view of Jás Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 153, and more recently, James Francis in his paper "Biblical Not Scriptural: Perspectives on Early Christian Art from Contemporary Classical Scholarship," *Studia Patristica: Proceedings from the Fifteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies*, vol. 44 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 3–8.

25. See Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 153ff.

miracle worker, greater than any other in an environment that included more than a few.

The images of a miracle-working Christ under discussion did not appear *ex nihilo*. The images of Christ healing and performing miracles were similar to images of heroes and Olympian gods, but they were created in a context of antagonism between Christians and pagans. Christians likely received the images of a miracle-working Christ with the echo of invectives from Christian leaders in the background.²⁶ A Christian observing an image of Christ in the act of healing may be reminded of the perils of entering a temple of the cult of Asclepius. The healing Christ cured one's body and soul, while going into the Asclepieion for a remedy put one's soul in peril. Moreover, these images largely occurred in a funerary environment, reminding observers of the future resurrection and life through Christ. Early images of Christ provided a sense of understanding and identity to early Christians. Viewers could witness their chosen healer and miracle worker as greater than any rival, for not only was Christ's brief tenure as an earthly healer efficacious, he continually provided for the future life.

By the late fourth century, the image of Christ healing and performing miracles had not only persisted but increased. In a post-Constantinian age, when Christians were more or less secure from persecution, the image of Christ the Miracle Worker was more popular than in the earlier age of Christian persecution. This fact challenges the long-held understanding of twentieth-century art historians who argue that post-Constantinian art largely reflected the imperial cult by featuring an enthroned Jesus. Post-Constantinian Christians were secure from persecution but not from illness, and the data this book offers reveal a greater interest in healing and miracle-working imagery. The influence of the imperial cult upon early Christianity, including its impact on Christian art, has been well established in twentieth-century scholarship by figures such as Ernst Kitzinger, André Grabar, and Hans Belting.²⁷ Arguing from the perspective of imperial worship, these scholars suggested that Christian

26. For example, consider Tertullian's attack against Christians attending the games or partaking in pagan festivals in *On the Shows* 13, ordering them to keep their gullets free from any contagion of idol food, (Translated by T. R. Glover. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA, 1931. Also see Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 38.1. More recently, see Daniel Boyarin, *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

27. André Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art, 200–395* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966); also see Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images before Iconoclasm," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 8 (1954), 89; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 106.

images involving Jesus radically shifted following Constantine. Images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd or as a benevolent philosopher or miracle man evolved into an image of an enthroned king, mirroring the emperor. Mathews notably challenged this position in his work *The Clash of Gods*, calling the imperial argument the “Emperor Mystique.” While Mathews is not totally wrong, nor completely right, his work claims that fourth- and fifth-century images of Jesus need to be reevaluated without resorting to a myopic focus related to imperial worship that creates a visual “game of thrones.”²⁸ That reevaluation is the driving purpose of this book.

Miracle imagery likely proliferated in post-Constantinian Christianity partially because church leaders did not desire their congregations be fractured in their observance. Sermons and treatises of early Christian figures such as Ambrose and Augustine reveal the utility of preaching Christ as the supreme physician and miracle worker. Congregants were likely tempted to participate in myriad pagan festivals and rituals that included the healing cult. To curtail what may have been a losing battle, church leaders preached sermons of Christ the physician and miracle worker, reminding their hearers of the ultimate Christian “healing” in baptism, the perils of idolatry, and the final resurrection made apparent by the miracle-working Christ. The homiletic theme of Christ the Miracle Worker corresponds to the popularity of the visual image; they both send their audiences a similar message of Christian superiority.

In an era when Christ had less threatening opponents, the image of Christ performing healings and miracles was used by early Christians to promote a distinct and powerful image of Jesus to the ears and the eyes of the populace. This study will focus on the rise and eventual predominance of the image of Christ the Miracle Worker in the early Christian era, examine the contributions of early Christian writers, and demonstrate that this early Christian image appropriated elements of various religious traditions. These traditions included the healing cult of Asclepius as well as the person of Moses in order to create an unrivaled religious figure, a supreme god.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Much of this book treats the art of Christ the Miracle Worker. But the initial chapters assess the textual references to miracles and healings in order to lay an adequate foundation for the discussion of the art and imagery. The initial chapter examines the role of healing and miracles in non-Christian sources.

28. For example, I contend with Mathews’ interpretation of the wand of Jesus as a mark of a magician. See my “The Staff of Jesus in Early Christian Art,” *Religion and the Arts* 14, no. 3 (2010): 221–51.

After providing some background on physicians and magicians in Late Antiquity, it assesses primary evidence of the role of healing and miracles, beginning with Celsus. This is followed by a treatment of magic and a discussion of Apollonius of Tyana, a figure whose hagiography promoted him as a Christ-like being.

The second chapter assesses the Christian references to miracles and healings, focusing on the early Christian writers of the second and third centuries, such as Justin, Clement, and Origen. It also treats the mentions of miracles and healings in fourth- and fifth-century authors such as Ambrose and Augustine. In early Christian texts, one can witness a keen interest in promoting Jesus as not only a healer, but the preeminent healer, hinting at a competition with healing cults like the cult of Asclepius.²⁹ Furthermore, early Christians cite the title of Christ the Physician consistently in their polemics. In Greek and Latin authors such as Arnobius of Sicca, the message is clear: earthly physicians and the healing gods rely on terrestrial means to procure healings, while Christ relies only on his divine power to effect cures. Christ heals with his physical presence through touch and voice, and does not prescribe treatments, potions, or medicines to administer healings, as in the cult of Asclepius.

The subsequent chapters treat the theme of Christ the Miracle Worker in early Christian art, beginning with images of Christ performing specific healings that are mentioned in the gospels: the healing of the paralytic, the woman with the issue of blood, and the healing of the blind. The image of Christ performing healings and miracles conveys the theme of divine relief and resurrection. The artworks also appear in different artistic genres. This book analyzes the evidence of Christ the Miracle Worker on the walls of the catacombs and the carvings on sarcophagi frontals. While there is room for distinction between catacomb images and sarcophagi images, the funerary context of each illuminates the value of the image for early Christian audiences.

The final chapter addresses the most vexing stylistic element of the image of Christ the Miracle Worker. More often than not, the depiction of Christ performing healings and miracles includes a curious implement wielded by Jesus. The figure of Jesus holds what can be construed as a staff or a wand. The staff of Jesus is a puzzling accessory, and initially it is mysterious to see Christ depicted in such a way. Art historians such as Thomas Mathews have notably argued that the wand indicates that Jesus is in fact intentionally portrayed as a magician.³⁰ However, the wand in Christian art of the third and fourth

29. The term persists into the scholastic period. Bonaventure will continue the tradition of identifying Jesus as *Christus medicus*, demonstrating that the depiction of Christ as a physician did not lose its import over time, *Sermones dominicales* 50.2.

centuries is not necessarily evocative of magic, philosophy, or any other non-Christian influence and is not really a wand at all, but a staff. The instrument is possibly meant to recall the miracle worker Moses and depict Jesus and Peter as the “New Moses” of the Christian faith.

While Mathews may overstate the association between Jesus and magic, he correctly insinuates the competition between Jesus and rivals that is addressed in Christian iconography. The image of Christ the Miracle Worker was polyvalent; a Christian viewer could recognize Jesus as the New Moses bearing the staff as well as recognize Christ as greater deity than a healing rival like Asclepius. There are no handy museum placards by these images that reveal what an early Christian context thought of them. With the images involving the staff, particularly in the scenes of the striking of the rock, the sacrament of baptism appears to be emphasized as well. Moses, healing, and baptism were all possible interpretations that were congruent with a fourth-century context that stressed the authority of the church. The miracle images, especially the ones featuring the staff, exhibit the development of Christian iconography and also illustrate that there is not one solitary interpretation. Miracles were the currency of the faithful in Late Antiquity. The third-century Alexandrian author Origen highlights this trait by noting the great esteem granted Moses for his miracle-working ability, claiming that Jesus followed in his wake.³¹

For early Christians, Jesus was the singular figure who could supplant the abilities of any rival. While authors of the early church make the superior attributes of Jesus clear in sermons and texts to the faithful, Christian art preached a sermon to their audience in paint and stone. To suggest there is only one interpretation of these images of Jesus for either early Christian or contemporary audiences is a mistake and neglects the complexity and syncretistic function of Christian art as well as the importance of the images themselves. More significantly, such a solitary interpretation neglects the polyvalence of Christian art. The overall theme of Christ as a dominant miracle worker was crucial enough to early Christians that it dominates the landscape of their burgeoning artistic language. This book will explain why it was so important and apparent in the visual record of early Christian art, and why Christ the Miracle Worker was so popular for the early Christian audience.

30. See Mathews's chapter “The Magician” in *Clash of Gods*, 54–91.

31. Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.45; 3.24 (PG 11, 947A-C; Chadwick).