

JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

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Abstract

It is often stated in theology books that there is not one explicit depiction of Jesus' crucifixion or of the empty tomb in the pre-Constantine period of time. Some scholars want then to conclude that the death and resurrection of Jesus were not that important in the early Church. In this article it will be shown that though the early Christians did not initially used the cross or the empty tomb as symbols, they did use numerous other symbols to confirm the belief of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

1. Introduction

Throughout all ages the death and resurrection of Christ have been seen as the basis of the Christian faith. Chilton (2000:237) correctly states as follows:

“Not only within the New Testament, but through the centuries ... Christianity represents itself as a religion of human regeneration.”

It is therefore surprising that there is not one single explicit depiction of Jesus' crucifixion or of the empty tomb in the pre-Constantine period of time (cf. Hornik and Parsons 2005:2). As a matter of fact, it is only from the seventh century and onwards that regular depictions of Jesus' death on the cross were made. The cross was therefore never used as a symbol in the first three centuries of the Christian era. Yet right from the beginning Christianity was widely known as the *religio crucis* – the “religion of the cross” (Tertullian, *Against the nations*, 12).

The reason why the early Christians refrained from using the cross as a symbol, was because the cross carried a negative connotation in the ancient

world (cf. Viladesau 2006:19ff). Furthermore, the early Christians were severely persecuted, and they therefore did not want to be reminded of the suffering and apparent “defeat” of Jesus. They preferred to focus on Christ’s victory, that is, his resurrection from the dead.

Nevertheless, we have no description in the Gospels of exactly how Jesus was raised from the death. Similarly, we do not have any depiction of this event in the early Christian art (Kirschbaum 1968:202). Neither is there any depiction of the risen Jesus (Apostolos-Cappadona 1994:290). This is only found in later ages. As a matter of fact, neither are there depictions of the empty tomb, except perhaps the one fresco in the baptismal room in the house at Dura-Europos (see Milburn 1988:12). On one of the walls in this “house church” is a depiction of the three women who came on the Sunday morning to visit Jesus’ tomb. Alongside the women is a portrayal of the tomb of Jesus. It is only after the fifth century and onwards that we do encounter representations of the empty tomb.

But this does not mean that there were not from a very early age other portrayals and symbolic representations of Jesus’ death on the cross and of his resurrection. Christ’s resurrection from the dead served as the basis for the faith that everybody will be raised from death. This belief is explicit in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, as well as in the paintings in the catacombs and in the relief works on sarcophagi (see Jensen 2002:156).

Many other symbols and signs were therefore used to depict the resurrection from the dead. Since the Christians were persecuted in the first three centuries, the catacombs were about the only place where they could really express their art skills (Milburn 1988:19). The catacombs served as a place where the early Christians could bury their dead, and were therefore associated with death. It is therefore not surprising that there are numerous narrative and non-narrative symbols referring to the resurrection from the dead. As a matter of fact, it is specifically in such a place where one would proclaim your belief in the resurrection. The purpose of this article is then to discuss the various symbols that were used in early Christian art to convey the message of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

2. Symbols and meaning

Since symbols played a very important role in the early Christian Church, it is important that we first of all make a few comments on the use of symbols. Thereafter we can discuss the symbols in the early Christian Art (till about 600 AD) which proclaimed Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. A simple symbol can, of course, say much more than many words or essays can tell us (Snyder 1985:13). When a man gives to his lover a red heart, it speaks volumes. That is why symbols are such an effective medium to give expression to the deepest emotions of one’s soul. Often one is not able to describe in words the emotions coming from your inner being. Symbols are also referred to as a universal

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language since it can be understood across cultures and languages (Ferguson 1961:7). Who does not know the meaning of a single tear drop running down a cheek? Symbols were therefore also used very effectively to express precious spiritual truths.

Clement of Alexandria (*The Instructor* 3.11.2) recommends that Christians should use only Christian symbols such as a dove, fish, boat or anchor. Yet it is important to remember that there is not something like a truly “Christian symbol”, since there is no symbol which has a pure Christian meaning. Each and every symbol that was or is being used within the Christian milieu, has a pagan history or background. The truth is that the early Christians merely took over the pagan symbols and filled them with new meaning.

The pagans, for example, depicted Dionysus (Bacchus), the god of wine, as a young shepherd with feminine features, standing between vine branches and bunches of grapes (cf. Harvey 1984:147). The Christians borrowed this symbol and portrayed Christ as a shepherd amidst vine branches (Milburn 1988:60-61). The early Christians indeed regarded Christ as their own “wine god” who surpassed Dionysus in all respects. Christ Himself said “*I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*” (Joh. 15:5).

Just like words, symbols too can have more than one meaning. Fire, for example, can be used as a symbol of God (God, for example, appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush), or of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ex. 3), or of God’s anger and punishment (cf. Ezek. 22:21) or of refinement and testing (cf. Prov. 17:3) or of Satan and the hell (cf. Rev. 19:20).

It is interesting to note that symbols can sometimes also have exact opposite meanings. A snake, for example, can be used as a symbol of wisdom and therefore also of Christ Himself (Cooper 1978:149), but it can also be used as a symbol of Satan (Sachs 1989:305). The context within which a symbol is being used (as in the case of words), is therefore very important when one wants to determine the meaning thereof. A naked woman on the wall of a brothel refers to sexual licentiousness. But when we see a naked woman on the window of a church, we will interpret it as referring to Eve and the sinless condition which was prevalent in the paradise. One therefore has to always interpret any symbol (just like any verse from the Scriptures) within its larger context.

3. Symbols and signs

The terms ‘symbols’ and ‘signs’ are usually used interchangeably. But technically speaking, it is possible to also distinguish between signs and symbols. Ferguson (1961:7-8) explains that a sign *represents*, it points to something, and takes its character from what is done with it. The **cross**, for example, *represents* the Christian faith and *points to* the crucifixion of Christ. A symbol, on the other hand, *resembles*. The Jews sacrificed a **lamb** on an

altar as a propitiation for sin. That is why the lamb is used as a symbol for Christ who was sacrificed as a Lamb of God to reconcile man with God. That is why it is said that a symbol has “deeper meaning” than a sign, because it is more completely identified with what it represents.

Symbols played an important role in the time when Christians were severely persecuted. With the help of symbols, Christians could express their solidarity with their fellow-believers, without necessarily being identified. The reason for this was that the symbols which they used, appeared to be innocent, or, at least, resembled the symbols which were also used in the pagan world.

4. Symbols and the resurrection

Because the corporeal resurrection of Christ took a central place in the homilies of early Christian theologians, it is no surprise that so many symbols were used to proclaim this truth. In the rest of this chapter, we will look at the different symbols that were used by the early Christians in the early Christian art of the first six centuries to express their faith in the resurrection from the dead.

As has already been said, there are no representations of the empty tomb in the first four centuries. But early Christian art is nevertheless full of symbols proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Let us now look at some of the most popular symbols that were used to convey this message:

5. Non-verbal symbols

5.1 Dolphin

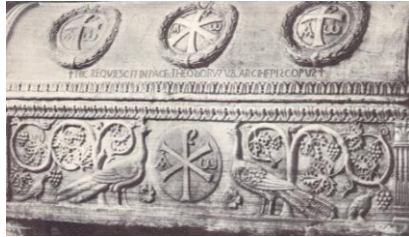
It is important to note that not all Christian symbols are necessarily based on one or other verse in the Bible. Some of these symbols were merely taken from the pagan world, and were filled with new meaning. The dolphin is a very good example. The dolphin as symbol was derived from the Greek-Roman iconography and was often depicted on tombs (Jensen 2002:159). The origin of the tomb symbol is to be found in myths that depict dolphins transporting people after their death to safety and to eternal life. That is why the dolphin came to be used as a symbol of the resurrection, because it proclaimed the message that death does not have the last say (Ferguson 1961:15). The tradition to depict the fish in the Jonah narrative as a dolphin, gave more impetus to the resurrection symbolism of the dolphin. And, as we will see below, the Jonah narrative was also interpreted as a symbol of the resurrection from the dead.

5.2 The ship (or boat)

The ship (or boat) had the same symbolic meaning as the dolphin, because the ship was seen as transport for the deceased from the dead to eternal life (Chapeaurouge 1987:62-66). It was therefore also a symbol of victory, and that

explains why it was so popular as a symbol on tomb stones. Other maritime symbols such as an anchor, were often depicted together with the ship, to express the meaning of security. Often a light house was also added to say that the deceased has conquered death, and has safely arrived at the harbour (Stander 1992).

5.3 Peacock



(fig. 1: Two peacocks and two vines on a sarcophagus)

The Bible never speaks of a **peacock**.¹ Yet the peacock was a very popular symbol in early Christianity. As is the case of all other symbols, it had many different meanings, but it was, inter alia, also used as a symbol for the resurrection (Cooper 1978:127; Stander 1996:291).

There are of course many reasons why the peacock was so popular in pictures of the heavenly paradise. Many church fathers referred to the beauty and splendour of the peacock (Tertullian, *Concerning the Soul* 33.8; *Concerning the Pallium* 3; Chrysostom, *Homily on Philippians*, PG 62.236; *Homily on Hebrews*, PG 63.223). The beautiful colours of the feathers of the peacock also reminded the ancient theologians of flowers and spring-time (Stander 1996:290-291). Spring itself was also regarded as a symbol of new life and resurrection, since it conquers the coldness of the winter. And the Church Fathers also saw the paradise as a garden abounding with flowers and roses.

But there were also other features of the peacock which persuaded the ancients to use the peacock as a symbol for the resurrection: The peacock

¹ The King James Version says that Solomon's ships were loaded with apes and **peacocks** (1 Ki. 10:22 which is also repeated in 2 Chron. 9:21). The Hebrew word תבניים which is translated here as 'peacocks', must perhaps rather be translated as 'baboons'. The Vulgate translates both occurrences of the Hebrew word תבניים as 'pavos' ('peacocks'), but the Septuagint translates it in 1 Ki. 10:22 as pelekhtw/n ('hewn stones'), while it is completely omitted in 2 Chron. 9:21. Furthermore, we read in Job 39:13 (*King James Version*) "Gavest thou God the goodly wings unto the **peacocks?**". In both the Old and the New Afrikaans translation of the Bible, the word 'peacock' in Job 39:13 (in the Afrikaans Bibles it is **verse 16**) is correctly replaced with 'ostrich'. We must therefore conclude that the word 'peacock' is nowhere found in the Bible.

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sheds feathers in autumn, and gets the most beautiful plumage in spring. Pliny (*Natural History* 10.22) refers to this process as ‘renasci’. It is therefore obvious why the peacock was such an apt symbol for the resurrection. And the ancients also associated the peacock with joy and pleasure which made it even more suitable to be used as a symbol for the heavenly paradise (Stander 1996: 291).

Another reason why the peacock was used as a symbol of resurrection and eternal life, is because the ancients believed that the meat of a peacock cannot decay (see Augustine, *City of God* 21.4; 21.7). That is also why the peacock is often found in portrayals of the heavenly paradise. Schwabe (1960:155) adds that the peacock was used as a symbol of the heavenly paradise because when a peacock unfolds his tail, it formed a wheel or a circle. The latter was also a cosmic symbol. The cosmic appearance of the peacock’s tail became even more realistic when the spots on the feathers were seen as stars.

There are also portrayals of peacocks drinking water from a bowl. These scenes are usually interpreted as referring to acquiring eternal life after having drunk from the Fountain of Living Water. These scenes therefore also have the meaning of new life, or of rebirth and resurrection. One should not, like Schwabe (1960:155), try to single out one of these reasons why the peacock was used as a symbol of resurrection, and then rejecting all the other reasons. Symbols are indeed sometimes both simple and complex. Symbols are often heavily loaded with meaning.

5.4 Phoenix

The phoenix (φοίνιξ) was a legendary bird which was exceptionally beautiful, and lived a fabulously long time. When the phoenix died, he miraculously regenerated itself out of its own decomposing remains (Cooper 1978:129; Van den Broek 1972). It is therefore not surprising that the Christians were so fond of interpreting the phoenix as a symbol of the resurrection (Jensen 2002:159; Chevalier 1996:752-753; Sachs 1989:286).

5.5 Butterfly

The butterfly is a very old symbol dating back from the pre-Christian era. It was used in the ancient world as a symbol of the soul. The cocoon was a symbol of death, and the butterfly a symbol of resurrection and new life. It is therefore not surprising that the early Christians borrowed the butterfly from the pagans as a symbol of resurrection (Forstner 1986:292-293; Rossow 1983:51). The earliest occurrence of the butterfly in a Christian context dates from the 5th or 6th century where it was used on a communion-chalice (Murray en Murray 1996:69). The reason why it was used on a communion-chalice as a symbol of resurrection, is based on Christ’s words:

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“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (Joh. 6:54).

5.6 Lion

It was believed in the ancient world that lions are born dead. They come to life three days after birth when the male lion breathes upon them. This caused the lion to become a symbol of resurrection (Cooper 1978:99). Moreover, the lion was also used as a symbol of Christ’s power, and of his majestic nature as the “Lion of Judah” (cf. Rev. 5:5). And it is with this power that Christ has saved us from the claws of Satan and of the death (Cooper 1978:99; Forstner 1986:276). This meaning therefore also reaffirms that the lion is a suitable symbol of the resurrection.

5.7 Tree

To understand the symbolism of the tree, it is important to first of all know that the Greek word ξύλον can be translated as either ‘tree’ or ‘cross’. The church fathers often played with these two meanings of the word ξύλον. They then pointed out that the tree of life in the garden of Eden brought **death** to mankind, while the tree of death (=cross) brought **life** to mankind when Christ died on it. As a matter of fact, there was even a legend in the Church that the cross was made of exactly the same tree as the one which stood in the Garden of Eden. According to legend, the angel Michael (after the death of Adam) instructed Eve to plant a branch of the tree in Paradise on Adam’s tomb. From this branch grew the tree, and it was moved by Solomon to the Temple garden. Later on it was discarded and thrown into the Pool of Bethesda, where it remained till it was taken out to be used for the cross of Jesus (Ferguson 1961:39). This explains why the regeneration of this tree was used as a symbol of resurrection (see also Forstner 1986:153).

5.8 The Palm tree

Though trees in general were used as a symbol of the resurrection, the palm tree specifically was used more than any other tree as symbol for the resurrection. The reason for this is since the Greek word for palm tree (φοίνιξ) is exactly the same as the word which is used for the phoenix (= bird) as well (Stander 2000: 83-84). And as we saw above (5.4), the phoenix (φοίνιξ) is a legendary bird which was capable of regenerating himself from its own ashes. It was therefore a very easy decision to use the palm tree (which was also known as the φοίνιξ), as a symbol of the resurrection.

5.9 Flowers

The Bible uses flowers as a symbol of the transience of mankind (see Ps. 103:15-16:

“As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

However, this is not the reason why Christians put flowers on a grave or on a bier. As a matter of fact, the bier and the tomb are enough frightening evidence of death. But because flowers were associated with the heavenly paradise, flowers on a grave also became a symbol of life after death (Forstner 1986:180-181). Within this context flowers are also used as symbol for the resurrection from the dead.

5.10 Ear (or grain) of wheat

Wheat or corn is used in many religions as a symbol of the continuation of life (Forstner 1986:190-191; Chevalier 1996:1097-1099). Paul's remarks (as in 1 Cor. 15:35-38) have, of course, contributed to the popularity of wheat as a symbol of the resurrection:

“But someone may ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.”

Wheat is also used as a symbol of the eucharist, since bread is one of the elements of the eucharist. And Jesus himself linked this bread with eternal life:

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (Joh. 6:51).

Wheat therefore became a very suitable symbol to convey the message concerning the resurrection from the dead.

5.11 The colour green and white

Each colour, too, had various symbolic meanings. As black is the symbol of death, green is the symbol of life. That is why the colour of the heavenly paradise (symbol of life after the resurrection) is always green. White is a symbol of purity, but because Jesus was clothed in white after his resurrection from the dead (Mt. 28:3), white (like green) served as a symbol of the resurrection and of the eternal life (Ferguson 1961:152).

5.12 The eagle

The Roman soldiers carried the eagle as a victory emblem. They depicted, for example, an eagle on their banners, and victorious generals also carried a symbol of the eagle on their staffs (Forstner 1986:221). The eagle was therefore in the ancient world strongly associated with victory. In the first three centuries the Christians refrained from using the eagle as a symbol with this meaning, since they severely suffered under the Roman authorities. They therefore preferred to use the eagle as a symbol of God's love, based on the words of Deuteronomy 32:11-12:

“Like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him.

But from the fourth century and onwards, after the Christians tasted victory and even became the religion of the state, the eagle was also used by the Christians as an emblem of victory. It became a symbol of the victory of the church, and also of Christ's victory over death (Forster 1986:211).

5.13 The number eight

Numbers also have symbolic meaning. In the early Christian Church the number eight was always used as a symbol of the resurrection from the dead. There are various reasons for this use: In the first place Jesus was raised from the dead on the eighth day after his royal entry into Jerusalem. Furthermore, the number eight is the first day of the second week. The first week consists of seven days, and it is a symbol of one's old life. The first day of the second week therefore becomes the very first day of your new life in Christ. That is also why baptisteries in the early Church had an octagonal shape. As it will be shown below, baptism itself also served as a symbol of the resurrection from the dead. And because the number eight was seen as a symbol of the resurrection, baptisteries were built with eight sides.

6. Narrative symbols

There are also several Biblical narratives that were used as symbols of the resurrection. Many of the narratives which were depicted in the catacombs, had this symbolic meaning. This is one of the reasons why these narratives were so popular in the catacombs. One should remember that the tombs served in the first place as cemeteries (see Murray and Murray 1996:93), and only in the second place as a meeting-place. Since the early Christian art of the first three centuries must be labelled as “funerary art”, one can expect that the theme of the resurrection should be very popular in this art. Let us now look at the narratives which were used as themes of the paintings in the catacombs, and which were interpreted as symbols of the resurrection from the dead:

6.1 Old Testament narratives

6.1.1 Noah in the ark (Gen. 6-9)



(Fig. 2: Noah in the ark)

Another very popular theme in the early Christian funerary art, is the narrative of Noah in the ark. This narrative was also used to convey various meanings, inter alia the meaning of salvation (Stander 2000:210). Since the early Christians were severely persecuted, the theme of salvation was very popular amongst them. It gave them hope, as well as something which they could hold onto. But the narrative of Noah in the ark was also used to convey the message of the resurrection of Jesus (Stander 2000:211).

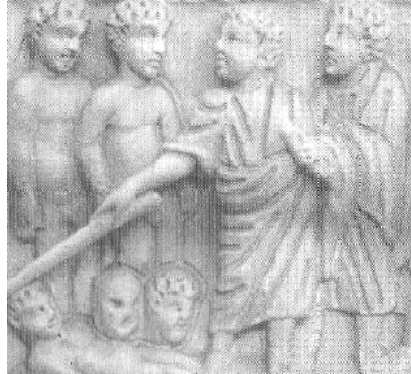
6.1.2 Moses striking the rock (Ex. 17:1-7 & Num. 20:1-13)



(Fig. 3: Moses striking the rock)

The story of Moses striking the rock (Ex. 17:1-7 & Num. 20:1-13) was one of the most popular themes in the catacombs. This narrative, as all the other symbols and narratives, carried manifold meanings (see Stander 1991). One of these meanings was that it was a symbol of the resurrection from the dead. Ambrose (*On the death of his brother Satyrus* 2.74) says, for example, that this story shows that even nature listens to God's commands. This is therefore proof that God can even revive the bones of a deceased person so that it can form a new body, as happened in the case of Ezekiel 37:1-8 (see below: 6.1.3).

Vision of dry bones (Ezekiel 37)



(Fig. 4: Ezekiel [= Jesus] raises the dead)

Both the Jews and the Christians interpreted the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 as a symbol of the resurrection from the dead (Wischnitzer-Bernstein 1941:47; Garte 1973:14). According to this narrative, there is a valley covered with many dry bones. God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to these bones that He will put breath into them, and that they will come to life. God will also give them sinews and muscles, and cover them with skin. He will then bring them back to life. Ezekiel obeyed, and God brought the bones back to life. The early Christians always interpreted this narrative as a foreshadowing of Christ raising the dead on the Day of Judgment (Jensen 2000:167). That is also how this story was interpreted in the early Christian works of art (see, for example, Justin *Apology*, 52; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.15.1-2; Tertullian, *Concerning the Resurrection*, 29-30; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 18).

It is interesting to note that the Christians' portrayal of this narrative was very concise. Usually it is depicted as someone with a wand in his hand, raising two of three persons from the dead. It was quite common in early Christian art to portray Jesus with a wand in his hand when He is performing a miracle. It is, therefore, very difficult to say whether this symbolic portrayal of the resurrection from the dead refers to Jesus, or to Ezekiel who was seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus.

6.1.3 Daniel and his friends in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3)



(Fig. 5: Daniel's friends in the furnace)

Chrysostom explicitly says that the story of the three young men in the furnace (Daniel 3) symbolizes or represents Christ's victory over death (*Homily 18.5 on 1 Cor.*). There are many fresco portrayals of the three young men in the fiery furnace. They are also portrayed on sarcophagi. Chrysostom explains why one can argue that this story foreshadowed the resurrection of Jesus. He explains this by using an image of the sun. When the sun is rising at dawn, even before you can see the sun beams, darkness fades away, and one can start seeing light. Similarly, even before the Sun of Righteousness (= Christ) appeared, death started to withdraw himself. Elsewhere (*Homily 7 on Philippians*) Chrysostom says that the story of the three young men was one of the many signs that pointed towards the resurrection of Jesus (see also Stander 2005:99).

6.1.5 Daniel and the lions (Dan. 6)

There are numerous portrayals in the catacombs of a naked Daniel between two lions. This scene is frequently found both in fresco paintings and in relief works on sarcophagi. The meaning of this portrayal is that just as the lions could not harm Daniel, similarly death will not have a hold over the deceased in the catacombs. The den of the lions represents Hades. As Daniel escaped alive from the lions' den, the deceased will return alive from Hades.

Jensen (2002:174-175) explains that one can perhaps explain Daniel's nakedness in the light of Greek-Roman iconography which portrayed heroes as naked. But Jensen thinks that it is even more possible that Daniel's nakedness served as a foreshadowing of the resurrection, as a symbol of regeneration, since one is born naked!

6.1.6 Jonah and the fish



(Fig. 6: Jonah is spewed out by a sea-creature)

The Jonah-narrative is also one of the popular themes in early Christian art. It is also one of very few narratives which is portrayed in series. This means that three or four different scenes of the same story are depicted next to one another. It usually consists of a scene where Jonah is thrown overboard, then a scene where Jonah is swallowed by a sea-creature, then a scene where Jonah is spewed out, and then a fourth scene where a naked Jonah is lying under a cucumber tree.

In this last episode a naked Jonah is depicted with a right arm which is raised above his head, and his right leg crossing his left leg. This posture is clearly an imitation of classical prototypes, for example the portrayals of Endymion in Roman art (Jensen 2002:173). The posture of both Endymion and Jonah tries to show that the death of blessed people is nothing but a peaceful sleep (Jensen 2002:173). But for Jonah it is merely an intermediary state, since the rest of the iconography also refers to the resurrection from the dead.

The first link between Jonah and the resurrection from the dead is, of course, to be found in the New Testament. Jesus says that “*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.* (Mt. 12:40). Various Church Fathers (such as Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.5.2; Tertullian, *Concerning the Resurrection* 32.3; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 14.18; see also Duval 1973 and Stoop 1972) use this narrative as proof of the resurrection from the dead. The fact that Jonah is portrayed as naked, is probably again referring to regeneration (see 6.1.5 above).

6.2 New Testament narratives

Apart from Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead, we read only about three other people in the New Testament who were raised from the dead. They are the daughter of Jairus (Mk. 5:22-43), the son of the widow from the town called Nain (Luk. 7:11-17), and then Lazarus (Joh. 11:1-44). The purpose of all three these Gospel accounts is to show to the world (even before Jesus was raised from the dead) that Jesus does indeed have authority over life and death. There are only a few portrayals of the first two accounts as symbol of the resurrection from the dead. Depictions of the raising of Lazarus, on the other hand, are frequently found in early Christian art.

6.2.1 The raising of Lazarus (Joh. 11:1-44)



(Fig. 7: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead)

The portrayal of this account is definitely the most popular theme in early Christian art. This miracle was, of course, performed only a week before Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead. It was therefore regarded as a powerful testimony of Jesus’ authority over death. This event was, as a matter of fact,

the last straw that broke the camel's back, and convinced Jesus' enemies that He should be arrested.

In the first place, Lazarus was regarded as a prototype of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, but it also served as a symbol of the general resurrection from the dead of all the believers (Snyder 1985:61). That is why the risen Lazarus was a popular figure on sarcophagi and on the walls of the catacombs. But it was not only the artists who loved this account. It was also popular in early Christian writings, because it clearly illustrated and symbolized the belief in the resurrection from the dead.

7. Actions as symbols

It is not only objects and narratives that are being used as symbols, but also actions. There were various actions in the early Church which were used as symbols for the resurrection. We know that the early Christians lay prostrate on the floor when they prayed to God during the week. But on Sundays they stood upright with hands lifted up, because Christ was raised from the dead on a Sunday (cf. Hamman 1992:707; Stander 1986).

Various actions when believers were baptised also symbolized the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 21). The descent into the water symbolized the death of Christ, and the ascent from the water represented his resurrection. Cyril of Jerusalem tells us that the threefold baptismal action (i.e. the fact that the baptismal candidate was immersed three times) refers to Christ's three days in the tomb. Colossians 2:12 played an important role in the development of this symbolism (*"having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead"*).

8. Conclusions

From the above it is clear that the early Christians used various symbols and signs to confirm their belief in Jesus' death and resurrection. One would expect that the cross would be the most logical symbol for Jesus' death, and that an empty tomb would be the most logical symbol for his resurrection from the dead. Yet not one of these symbols was used in the first three centuries. But many other symbols were used to confirm this belief. It is also clear that the resurrection of Jesus was indeed a central theme in the teaching of the early Christians. This can clearly be seen in the early Christians' works of art. And neither should one neglect to consider the extensive early Christian literature confirming the same belief in Christ's victory over death (though it was not the object of this study to discuss the relevant patristic writings). As Jensen (2000:182) correctly remarks:

"... both verbal and visual eventually come down to the same thing and reinforce one another".

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