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Young Joo Kim April 15, 2015

A Study of Mythological Figures in Catacomb Art

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Abstract

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By Young Joo Kim

Catacombs were built in Rome in the second century first when there was a need for more burial space. Along with the preexisting *columbaria*, catacombs served as mass burial systems for both Christians and non-Christians in Rome. Although catacombs were eventually out of burial use, they were still integrated by church and became Christianized monuments. Therefore catacomb art is generally considered as Christian art. The presence of mythological figures such as Orpheus, Hercules, and Sol Invictus can be observed in catacomb art before and after the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. The mythological figures likely represent Christ or reflect the virtues of Christ, namely His divinity and humanity. The presence of mythological figures in catacomb art indicates visual syncretism of Christianity and traditional religions in Rome. The relationship between the image of Christ and His identity in Rome can be observed by studying the imageries in catacomb art.

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Introduction:

Before Christianity was legalized by the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. by the emperor Constantine, there were already many Christians in Rome. Contrary to the popular belief, the Edict of Milan did not make Christianity the official religion of Rome but it granted the freedom of religion to all inhabitants of Rome.[1] Christianity before the Edict had experienced a rapid growth even during the period of persecutions. As a consequence of the new law, Christians were able to freely express their faith. This caused the Roman art market to become much more accessible to Christians. Funerary art was already one of the biggest segments of artistic production in Rome, and early Christians began to use already established forms of art and iconographies to create new Christian funerary imagery. In my research, I would like to explore how the legalization of Christianity influenced the development of early Christian funerary art and how the traditional Roman iconographies informed new Christian iconographies. Furthermore, I would like to discuss how the images of Christ were developed in a new environment that further supported the growth of Christianity.

Funerary art had a special significance for early Christians for several reasons. One reason is the conventional popularity of funerary art in ancient Rome. Many Romans believed in an afterlife whether they were Christians or non-Christians.[2] Greek mythologies tell stories about the Olympian gods and also the gods of the underworld (Tartaros). Many stories from the mythologies are inevitably associated with the concept of life and death. As a consequence, Greek mythologies provided popular themes in Roman funerary art. Many workshops that produced funerary art were in high demand; at this time mortality rates were

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[1] Kaatz (2013) 228.
[2] Cumont (1959) 70-71.

also much higher than today. Death was an imminent thing to Romans, often caused by wars, diseases, and unsanitary living conditions.

Traditional Roman funerary art includes funerary altars, cinerary urns, sarcophagi, and portrait statues. When burial traditions switched from cremation to inhumation, there was more popular demand for sarcophagi.[3] Elite people who had enormous wealth commissioned funerary monuments like marble sarcophagi and many built architecturally elaborate tomb monuments. Sculptural funerary monuments in marble survive in much grater numbers than the more fragile funerary paintings that decorated the walls and ceilings of tomb complexes.

My research will focus on the paintings from Christian catacombs. The paintings from Christian catacombs sometimes share the same subjects with the preexisting pagan funerary artworks; however, they do not necessarily share the same significance or artistic styles. I would like to explore how and why certain images are included in the paintings from Christian catacombs. Also I would like to explore how the change in Christian funerary art might have affected the idea of who Christ was to ancient Romans.

Catacomb Paintings:

In order to understand the function and the significance of catacombs in Rome, one should consider their topography and social dynamics in the contemporary Rome. Christian catacombs were not the first form of mass burial; *columbaria* were a preexisting form of mass burial that had been used since around 25 B.C.[4] The two terms *columbaria* and catacombs indicate two different types of burial systems, and there is no evidence of catacombs before the end of the second century.[5] A mass burial systems were necessary for socioeconomic reasons. When popular burial practice switched from cremation to inhumation

[3] Davies (2010) 21-22.
[4] Bodel (2008) 179.
[5] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 13.

in the late first century to the second century, it caused an increased demand for burial space.[6] One of the main differences between preexisting mass burial systems and catacombs is that catacombs provided an open space for burials of people from diverse social classes.[7] Although *columbaria* were also used by people from diverse social classes, they were more expensive to build than catacombs were.[8] When catacombs came into use, the Christian population in Rome consisted of various social groups. By the early of the third century Christians were not from the lowest social class; they were not senatorial aristocrats but they were people from the lower middle classes.[9] As a result, catacombs that held Christian burials were used by people from diverse social groups. This caused differences in the decorations of catacombs; catacombs were more elaborately decorated in parts where more affluent people were buried. Within catacombs there were *cubicula* where Christians of higher social status were buried; there were also communal galleries where more humble burials were placed.[10] Although there were disparities in decorations, there was an attempt to adorn all parts of catacomb burials at least with basic methods.[11] One problem in interpreting catacomb art is that only few samples from the burials in antiquity survive today; therefore the surviving evidence likely represents more privileged and wealthy group of people in Rome.[12] Therefore one should consider what catacomb art represents in this time period; they may not represent the entire Christian population. In addition to the inherent bias in the surviving sample, there is another problem in interpreting catacomb art as Christian art in general; not all Christians were buried in catacombs, and not all burials in catacombs are Christian burials. Early Christians were not forced or even recommended to be buried in

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[6] Bodel (2008) 181.
[7] Bodel (2008) 180-188, 219.
[8] Bodel (2008) 180.
[9] Brown (1971) 62.
[10] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 79.
[11] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 79-80.
[12] Bodel (2008) 179.

catacombs by church leaders.[13] It is reasonable to consider that catacomb burials do not represent Christian burials in total since there were already many different forms of funerary monuments in Rome. People could have chosen any type of funerary monument if they could afford to do so. Since many Christians were not from the lowest social class in the third century, there would have been people who chose to be buried in more elaborate monument than underground catacombs. It is also important to consider that catacomb art was likely not commissioned by deceased individuals. Therefore catacomb art may not even represent the idea of people who were buried in catacombs. Since catacombs are not individual funerary monuments, they represent the idea of a group of people in general, or they might represent simply what the artist or the owner of catacombs believed. There is little evidence to determine whether specific burials in catacombs are Christian or non-Christian. Thus it is plausible to suppose that catacombs included both Christian and non-Christian burials, but exact proportions cannot be determined.

If catacombs included both Christian and non-Christian burials, catacomb art involved both Christian and traditional Roman funerary imageries. As a consequence, confusion arises from looking at catacomb art; how do we interpret mythological figures that appear in catacomb art? Who and what do they represent in the catacomb context? In addition, what does the presence of mythological figures tell about catacombs? In order to explore these questions, one should first consider the historical background of catacomb art.

Catacomb paintings were more commonly created before the Edict was issued; there are differences between catacomb paintings before the Edict and after. Such change in catacomb paintings can be observed in the catacomb of Via Latina where two groups of *cubicula* present clearly distinct artistic styles.[14] Christians began to commission more varied

[13] Bodel (2008) 182.
[14] Tronzo (1986) 24-49.

types of funerary artworks after they received their religious freedom. This is reasonable because the Edict gave Christians the right to openly display their faith. In addition, the Edict would have encouraged more privileged group of society to convert to Christianity since the emperor himself endorsed the religion. It should be stressed, however, that catacombs were not used as churches but they were just used as funerary sites even before the Edict.[15] According to the contemporary topography of the city of Rome, the catacombs would have been very well known to contemporary Romans. Even if the catacombs themselves were underground structures, their size and complexity suggest that Roman officials would have known when catacombs were being built. In addition, the number of Christians was increasing rapidly since the early third century; the Christian population in Rome increased from approximately 7000 at the beginning of the third century to around 200,000 in the early fourth century.[16] Rome was a very crowded city, and early Christians would have not been able to "hide" in the catacombs because people would have known where the catacombs were. Instead, early Christians would have convened at private houses for worship. A verse from Acts 2:46 mentions that "They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity" and it does not mention catacombs. The "house churches" were in use before public church architecture was begun.[17] It is not possible to know how the house churches would have looked like because there is no visible evidence left for the Christian architecture above ground before Constantine.[18] Although Christian catacombs were not churches, there would have been religious events at catacombs just as Romans performed certain rituals at funerary sites since early Christians were Romans who converted to Christianity. Thus catacomb art can convey religious and funerary significance at the same time.

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[15] Athnos (2011) 26-27.
[16] Bodel (2008) 183-184.
[17] Lee (2013) 524.
[18] Krautheimer (1980) 18.

More importantly, it should be noted that catacomb art was also created after the Edict and many included didactic themes.[19] In fact, many catacomb artworks were created throughout the fourth century when catacombs were already established as mass burial sites. Catacombs are known to have begun from preexisting group tombs; their origins might not have been from Christian religion, but catacombs were organized by Christians by inserting Christian art and placing Christian burials. There would have been a need for burial system as a religious community at the end of the second century when Christianity experienced organizational growth.[20] Therefore catacombs, no matter what their architectural origins were, later became Christianized architecture when Christians chose to absorb the available architectural forms.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the presence of Orpheus (pp. 6-14), Hercules (pp. 15-23), Sol Invictus (pp. 23-28) figures and the depiction of Christ as a magician (pp. 28-32) in catacomb art. The choice of subject in catacomb art is related to how Christians and Romans imagined Christ. In addition, I would like to discuss how the images from catacomb art further shaped the idea of visualizing Christ and affected the growth of Christianity.

1. Orpheus:

In the wall fresco from the catacomb of Saint Marcellinus and Saint Peter in Rome, the Christ figure appears in the center (Figure 1).[21] At first glance the Christ figure has many similarities with a famous mythological figure, Orpheus. The representation of Christ as Orpheus is early Christian art is common, although there are many other common motifs used: the good shepherd, Adam and Eve, the fish, crucifixion, etc. The figure in the fresco has some characteristics that make Him look very different from the typical icon of Christ. He is

[19] Lamberton (1911) 508.
[20] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 15.
[21] Athnos (2011) 36.

very youthful looking, holding a lyre and wearing the classical attire of Greek poet. Orpheus and Christ were considered parallel in certain aspects in ancient Rome. Orpheus was known for his musical abilities; he used his songs to calm wild animals in forests. Orpheus' wife Eurydice was bitten by a snake and was sent to the underworld. To save his wife Orpheus went to the underworld and persuaded Hades to give her life back. On the other hand, Christ used his words (his songs, which are gospels) to cause people to repent, and he was sent to death as a result of sins of all people. Therefore it is analogous to what Orpheus did to his wife who was bitten by a snake and poisoned to death.[22] Both Orpheus and Christ tried to save their "brides," which correspond to Eurydice for Orpheus and church for Christ.[23] These similarities of the two figures would have caused early Christians to immediately recognize this figure as Orphic Christ figure. Also, although not present in this image, when Christ is depicted as an Orphic Christ figure, he appears with domesticated animals as well as wild, undomesticated animals that Orpheus figure usually appears with.[24] This is an example of adaptation of preexisting iconography from another religion to a new form of art so that the same image begins to convey a new meaning based on its context, which is in this case catacomb art.

The wall painting from the catacomb of Saint Marcellus and Saint Peter in Rome was likely created in the second half of the fourth century.[25] This indicates that the painting was created after the Edict was issued. This further indicates that the artist did not "hide" the image of Christ in the guise of Orpheus. This Orpheus figure that reflects the characteristics of Christ can be interpreted as an attempt to adapt a preexisting imagery to create a new imagery for a new god, Christ. Even if the burials in this specific *cubicula* might not have been Christian burials, its placement within the Christian catacomb complex in the fourth

[22] Huskinson (1974) 69-73.
[23] Athnos (2011) 36-37.
[24] Huskinson (1974) 70.
[25] Huskinson (1974) 87.

century suggests that this figure is likely an Orphic Christ figure. This painting represents the time period when there were still diverse religions in Rome and Christianity was experiencing unprecedented growth. This is an example of competition among old and new religions; Christianity as a newly admitted religion was trying to compete by absorbing already available images and giving them new meaning.

The painting was found in an arcosolium of the catacomb complex.[26] There is little evidence to determine what type of burials was placed in the arcosolium; however, the presence of wall decoration indicates that the burials likely belonged to more privileged group of people. This corresponds to its time period when Christian population consisted of more affluent people who were able to provide funding for architecture and its decoration. Along with many other preexisting catacombs, the catacomb of Saint Marcellus and Peter was expanded in the first quarter of the fourth century; a number of galleries with *cubicula* were created which included more pictorial decorations.[27] The Edict not only gave religious freedom to all people of Rome but also influenced the extensive burial network of Rome by increasing the number of conversions.[28] The increase in the number of *cubicula* suggests that more Romans began to convert to Christianity after the Edict.

The Orphic Christ figure appears in other catacombs too; in the catacomb of Domitilla, there is a Christ figure depicted as Orpheus (Figure 2).[29] He is seated on a rock and is holding a musical instrument. He is surrounded by a few animals including a goat, a sheep, a horse and some other ones; they all seem to be at peace under the control of Orphic Christ. His physical appearance is vaguely depicted. It is unclear what type of attire he is wearing and the only distinct feature is the musical instrument that he is holding with the

[26] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 104-105.
[27] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 37.
[28] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 37.
[29] Image Database for Biblical Studies, Yale Divinity School

right hand. The condition of this painting is not good causing ambiguity in deciphering its details. However it is clear that the figure in this painting does wear something that is clearly different from what the previous example wears. Mythological figures often appear in different types of costumes; therefore this is coherent with the contemporary artistic depiction of Orpheus in classical art. There is also difference in the type of musical instrument that he is holding. Unlike the previous example, this figure is holding a musical instrument that looks like an ancient type of flute. This is something different from the traditional Orpheus since Orpheus is known for his ability to play harp or lyre.

Using musical instruments to venerate a deity has been popular throughout not only in Christianity but also in other religions. In the Book of Daniel, it is written that people were commanded so that "when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments, bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue" (Daniel 3:5). God (Yahweh) was also worshipped with using various musical instruments. In 1 Chronicles, it is written that "David and all Israel were celebrating before God with all their might, singing songs and playing all kinds of musical instrument-lyres, harps, tambourines, cymbals, and trumpets" (1 Chronicles 13:8). Music was a central part of worship not only in Judaism but also in imperial religion from the Old Testament. As a result, Christians who equalized Christ with Yahweh from the Old Testament would have incorporated music into their worship too. After all, Christians believed in Yahweh and Christ at the same time because they were the same deity in Christian belief. Therefore, Orpheus would have been even more familiar to Christians who thought that music was important element to bring glory to their God.

The catacomb of Domitilla is known as the oldest system of catacomb network. Its name indicates that it was likely founded by a specific individual; unlike the catacomb of Saint Marcellinus and Peter, which was named after the martyrs, the catacomb of Domitilla

was likely named after the founder.[30] This particular painting was likely created in the third century before the Edict was declared.[31] Orphic Christ figures appear before and after the Edict of Milan; this indicates that the practice of using mythological figures in catacomb art began earlier than the Edict of Milan, and it continued throughout later centuries.

The catacomb of Domitilla also has another representation of Christ as Orpheus (Figure 3).[32] The main figure is very similarly depicted as the one from the catacombs of Saint Marcellinus and Peter. He is holding a lyre and is in Greek style clothes. He is surrounded by a number of birds and various animals like camel and bear. Orpheus in the Greek context does not include camels. This indicates the diversity of people in the same catacomb; therefore it implies that there were Christians from diverse geographical locations buried in the same catacombs in Rome. The reason why many catacombs include artworks that seem to be influenced from the Greek culture and mythologies is because all inhabitants of Rome would have been familiar with the stories. In addition, many early Christians were imported slaves or freedmen who were from the Greek provinces.[33] This Orpheus figure from the catacomb of Domitilla seems to wear a hat and is gazing at the birds and animals that listen to his music. Although his face has been erased, the overall face structure seems to indicate that he is not old. It is not possible to tell if he is bearded or not. Different physical characteristics of Orpheus figures from catacomb paintings correspond to the contemporary artistic depiction of Orpheus in classical art. Orpheus is polytheistic myth involves various types of depictions. Therefore, it is clear that the figure is Orpheus, not a good shepherd figure that has similar appearance with an Orpheus figure. The question is why he is depicted on so many Christian catacomb wall paintings as a central subject. This painting was found in

[30] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni (1999) 23.
[31] Image Database for Biblical Studies, Yale Divinity School
[32] Athnos (2011) 37; Huskinson (1974) 87.
[33] Athnos (2011) 31.

the cubiculum IV of the catacomb of Domitilla.[34] It was likely created in the second half of the fourth century.[35] Therefore, this painting was created after the Edict was issued. This supports that catacomb paintings are in simple artistic styles either they were created before or after the Edict.

To understand why Orpheus is present, one should investigate whom Orpheus represents. One common characteristic of these Orpheus figures is that they all appear with domesticated animals or birds. This seemingly corresponds with a specific verse from the New Testament. Verses from the gospel of John specifically describe Christ as a shepherd: "…you don't believe me because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me" (John 10:26-28). These verses correspond to the image of Orpheus figures in catacomb art; the three examples of Orpheus figures share the characteristic of Jesus as a good shepherd. Although Orpheus is not technically a shepherd since he appears with different types of animals, the personality that he shares with Christ still is the same. Orpheus leads wild animals so that they will be tamed; Christ leads a herd of sheep so that they will not get lost and follow Him.

The reason why the examples that I have discussed seem to be Orphic Christ figures and not exactly Orpheus is mainly because of the physical context. They are all found within catacomb context. Catacombs also contain polytheistic burials; however, the wall paintings represent the use of catacombs as Christian architecture. In addition, catacomb art was mostly not commissioned by individuals but were likely created for a group of people. Each cell of catacombs was filled with a number of burials. Therefore unlike individual funerary artworks, catacomb wall paintings likely represent the general belief that a group of people mostly agreed with. Since the above examples are from the catacombs that are primarily known for

[34] Huskinson (1974) 87.
[35] Huskinson (1974) 87.

Christian burials, it is likely that the Orpheus figures at least convey Christian significance. If the Orpheus figures are not Christ figures, it can be argued that they are not classical Orpheus but are Christianized Orpheus. Orpheus is known to have converted to monotheism at some point.[36] And whether this is true or not, it was widely used as an argument by later Christian writers because it "…was used to prove Orpheus' dependence on the one true revelation and to criticize the pagan gods and mysteries."[37] Early Christians might have imagined Christ to be like Orpheus, or Orpheus to be like Christ. Which one comes first is debatable but nonetheless it is still same in the two scenarios that a mythological figure becomes acceptable as Christian imagery.

The frequency of this imagery suggests that the idea of equating the Orpheus with Christ was prevalent in antiquity. One possibility is syncretism; the cult of Orpheus could have been widespread and then the impact of visual syncretism caused mixing of the two religious images. However, there is no enough evidence to suggest that the cult of Orpheus was so popular that there were many people from the Orphic cult who converted to Christianity.[38] In this case Orpheus is not a mythological character but he is rather divinized as a Christian deity. Another possibility is that it was a way to hide Christian faith. Since catacombs were not completely hidden spaces, it is reasonable to believe that early Christians chose to hide their faith even in catacombs. In this case Orpheus likely represents Christ but is in the guise of mythological character. Therefore in this case, the Orpheus-like central figures in the catacomb wall paintings are not Christianized Orpheus figures but Orphic Christ figures. It is most likely that early Christians believed it is appropriate to borrow the image of Orpheus without violating Christian doctrine necessarily. In addition, it was simply reasonable to use an available imagery if it does not contradict with the new belief. Orpheus

[36] Friedman (1970) 39.
[37] Jáuregui (2010) 222.
[38] Huskinson (1974) 70.

has qualities that resemble Christ, and he does not have to be Christ to be depicted in Christian art. Orpheus figure might have been used to convey the Christian ideas about Christ, but not to depict Christ directly. Orpheus' main deed, which was his attempt to bring back his wife from the underworld, was possible because of his semi-divine status. He was known as a son of Apollo or a Thracian king, and his mother was one of the nine Muses; his birth is linked with his special musical ability and his semi-divine status. His lineage includes both the divine and the mortal. This corresponds with the birth of Christ, which also includes both divinity and humanity. Therefore, the Orphic Christ figures would have been used to reflect the virtues of Christ by using available imageries of Orpheus.

Orpheus appears not only in Christian art but also in Jewish art. In the main panel above the Torah niche of the Dura synagogue, there is an image of Orpheus; the figure is calming the animals around him by playing a musical instrument. He is wearing a Phrygian cap; a Phrygian cap is often used as a symbol of royal crown in the Dura synagogue paintings. This figure is not Orpheus from Greek mythologies but more likely is the king David from the Old Testament.[39] Another figure of Orpheus-David appears in the floor mosaic from the synagogue in Gaza. He is holding a lyre and animals are listening to his music.[40] Both images contain a figure with a musical instrument calming wild animals, which identifies the figures as Orpheus; however, their physical contexts and changes in small detail shape the most plausible identity of these figures to be Orphic David figures. It is reasonable to place a parallel between the two significant individuals; Orpheus and David were both renowned musicians. Orpheus was famous for his virtuosity in playing lyre, and David wrote many famous lyrics, some of which are contained in the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament. Orpheus calmed wild animals, and David was a shepherd before he became the king. Both had a number of followed in their cultural groups. In this case of Orpheus-David figures, the

[39] Narkiss (1979) 369-370.
[40] Narkiss (1979) 369-370.

imagery of Orpheus is not used because of his semi-divine status. It is more likely that his talent in music and his identity as a soother of wild animals are used in this context of Jewish art. Although it may seem to be against the Ten Commandments to create an image, Jewish temples and architecture were ornamented with images without involving any form of idolatry.[41] In the period of Late Antiquity, Jewish art involved various forms and media such as wall paintings, floor mosaics, sculptures and household objects.[42] Many included biblical scenes; and these biblical scenes incorporated available imageries from classical art. Judaism was a recognized religion in Rome since long before the Edict. Themes from the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament in Christianity) were popular subjects of artworks in both Judaism and early Christianity. Therefore preexisting Jewish art would have also affected early Christian art during its developmental stage.

If Orpheus appears in artworks from various contexts of religions, one might wonder how Orpheus in classical funerary art looks like. A strigillated sarcophagus from Ostia includes an Orpheus figure in the center (Figure 4).[43] In this scene, Orpheus is in classical Greek attire and is holding a lyre, which identifies him as Orpheus. He appears with a sheep, but not a herd of many sheep; this scene is abbreviated and shows only necessary details. It is significant that he is not a portrait figure, which also supports that he represents Orpheus, not the deceased individual; still he is placed in the center of the sarcophagus. The two other figures in the front of the sarcophagus are educated philosophers; both male and female figures are engaged in a dialogue and Orpheus is in the middle scene. This indicates Orpheus' role as a mediator. In a funerary sarcophagus, a strigillated pattern was often used to symbolize death as a journey of seafaring. Orpheus figure in this case emphasizes his ability to cross the boundary between the living and the dead.

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[41] Narkiss (1979) 366.
[42] Narkiss (1979) 366.
[43] Birk (2013) 45.

2. Hercules:

If the Orphic Christ in catacomb art is an example of a mythological figure adapted into a depiction of Christ, it was not the only way to do so. Another mythological figure that appears in catacomb art is Hercules. Hercules is a hero from Greek and Roman mythologies. He was a son of Zeus and Alcmene, which gives him both divinity and humanity. He was a demi-god, which is also similar to what Christ meant to Christians; an important tenet of Christianity is Christ's divinity and humanity. According to Christian belief, Christ suffered under the crucifixion because he had a physical body of a mortal human being but he was resurrected because He is God. Early Christians would have seen the parallel that exists among Orpheus, Hercules, and Christ. Another possible reason for using Hercules to depict Christ is because Hercules simply was the most famous hero from Greek mythology. Maybe early Christians saw the similarity and used Hercules figure to associate with the heroic characteristic of Christ. Past emperors of Rome often associated themselves with mythological heroes in visual objects like coins and statues. Commodus often used the figure of Hercules to combine with his own portrait; associating himself with Hercules gave him not only divinity but also strength.[44] Early Christians living in the Roman world would have known the power of image from the examples of imperial use of images. In the world without high literacy, images were important ways of communication. And using the image of a mythological hero to represent a new god would have been reasonable to use artworks as a religious propaganda. This also corresponds to the fact that many early Christians who were buried in the catacombs were ex-slaves or freedmen from Greek world, which means that mythological figures were influential and cultural ancestors of many early Christians.[45] After all, the New Testament was at first recorded in Greek, not in Latin. This supports the idea that Greeks constituted large part of early Christian population. Even after Christianity was

[44] Marlowe (2006) 228.
[45] Athnos (2011) 31-32.

legalized in Rome, most elite Romans remained as non-Christians and majority of Christian population was composed of people from lower social status, many of who were from the Greek origins.[46]

A wall painting from the catacomb of Via Latina has a controversial representation of Hercules (Figure 5).[47] It is in fact known as a representation of Hercules, not Christ. Beverly Berg argued that the significance of this figure must be understood within its physical context.[48] If they were painted on pagan funerary monuments, their significance would differ. The physical and chronological contexts indicate that this figure is a Hercules-Christ or Christianized Hercules figure; this painting was created after the Edict of Milan.[49] Even though the subject matter of the wall painting is primarily from Greek mythologies, the subject matter also is a familiar story and has already available imagery. The myths of Hercules are related to the religious cult; however, Hercules is a familiar figure to early Christians who were well aware of his virtues as the most famous hero in the Greek world. Therefore, it is likely that early Christians chose to depict Hercules to convey his virtues that are also relevant to Christian teachings without worshipping Hercules necessarily. Same examples can be observed in other cultures that embraced Christianity in later periods. According to Berg, the artist would have painted Hercules to emphasize the value of courage and heroic qualities.[50] I agree with this statement; however, there also can be another interpretation because of subsequent paintings of Hercules in the Via Latina catacombs. Hercules does not appear just once; he appears in other paintings of the same cubiculum from the catacomb. When the series of wall paintings that depict Hercules is observed as a group together, they seem to depict Hercules as Hercules-Christ figure, not Hercules himself.

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[46] Krautheimer (1980) 29.
[47] Berg (1994) 225.
[48] Berg (1994) 219-234.
[49] Tronzo (1986) 17.
[50] Berg (1994) 224.

In the second painting in the cubiculum N, Hercules appears with Minerva in the joining hands motif (Figure 6).[51] It is very rare to see the motif of joining hands in Christian catacomb; the motif is used in traditional Roman contexts to express a marriage bond (*dextrarum iunctio*). In addition, this gesture can also be used to indicate greeting between two individuals.[52] This representation indicates that Hercules was connected to divinity although he had characteristics of a mortal person. Berg argues that the painter "has created an emblem of the support between man and woman" and this representation of Hercules signifies "the bond between the deceased couple."[53] However, I disagree with this point because of divinity of these two figures. The artist created a parallel image of a demi-god and a goddess to link their divinity together. Minerva is the patron goddess of Hercules, which also links them together. If they indeed represent the deceased couple, their faces would have portrait features; however, they are in a simple and non-naturalistic style. In addition, Minerva rarely is used to represent the deceased in traditional Roman funerary art. Hercules in this painting is also likely in fact a Hercules-Christ figure, which can be further supported by observing the next examples.

The third painting shows Hercules with a tree with a serpent (Figure 7).[54] This is a very interesting way to depict Christ or Hercules. In this painting, Hercules is holding a club, and the serpent is wrapped around the tree. The serpent with the tree is also present in the Old Testament. A famous story from Genesis involves a serpent that tricks Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, and Eve furthermore persuades Adam to also commit the sin (the Original Sin). The difference in this representation of Hercules and serpent is that Hercules seems to be victorious against the serpent. He is in heroic nudity, which also was popularly used in traditional Roman art to portray divinity. He is not accompanied with anyone else but he

[51] Berg (1994) 223.
[52] Wood (1978) 502-507.
[53] Berg (1994) 223.
[54] Berg (1994) 227.

forms an opposition against the serpent. Hercules in this representation is not Hercules or the deceased but is a Hercules-Christ figure. His power and divinity indicate that he is not Adam because "Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven" (1 Corinthians 15:47). Therefore Hercules in this scene is the second Adam who is conquering the source of sin (serpent). Hercules from the Greek mythology won against a serpent for at least twice; once he killed a snake that Hera sent to kill him as an infant, and he killed the Lernean Hydra as one of his twelve labors. A serpent in Christian idea represents the evil not only in Genesis but also in general term. Hercules' victories parallel with the victory of Christ as a second Adam who solved the problem of the Original Sin. In addition, it is another example of an adaptation of a preexisting imagery into a new religion. People who were buried in the catacombs in Rome would have been well aware of Hercules and his deeds. His victory over the snake when he was an infant and his encounter with the Lernean Hydra would have been a familiar story to many early Christians and Romans. As a result, this is an adaptation of available imagery into forming a new imagery.

In the last example Hercules this time appears with Alcestis (Figure 8).[55] Alcestis is a mythological figure; her husband, Admetus, was destined to have early death. He searched for anyone who would be willing to die in his place. Alcestis chose to die so that her husband did not have to face death. As a consequence, her husband persuaded Hercules to save Alcestis from underworld. Hercules goes to the underworld and brings her back to her husband. Just like Orpheus went to the underworld to bring Eurydice back, Hercules went to the underworld to bring back one's life. This not only parallels Hercules and Orpheus but also indicates the semi-divinity of Hercules, which links him to the divinity of Christ.

The sarcophagus of Metillia Acte is the most famous example that contains the

[55] Berg (1994) 226.

image of Alcestis and Admetus (Figure 9).[56] In this sarcophagus, the Alcestis figure is used as a portrait of the deceased. The deceased is depicted as a heroic figure that has the qualities of Alcestis.[57] She is not technically Alcestis because the figure has the face of the deceased; however, she has the qualities such as faithfulness, loyalty and devotion to her husband so that the deceased individual reflects the virtues of Alcestis. All figures in the scene of the sarcophagus are rearranged in a mythological theater.[58] Hercules figure in the Via Latina Catacombs is the main figure of this scene, but in the sarcophagus of Metillia Acte, he is a side figure who intervenes in the scene of her deathbed.[59] The two artworks that depict the same scene share the same subject and their funerary context. However, what distinguishes them from each other is what Hercules does in the scene, whom exactly each figure represents (the deceased, mythological figure, divinity, etc.), and what each artwork was meant to be within the funerary context. In the catacomb wall painting, Hercules is the central figure that brings back Alcestis to Admetus. In the sarcophagus, the scene where Hercules brings Alcestis back is located at the side; the central image includes Alcestis figure on her deathbed and mourners (including her husband) around her. The two artworks have focus on slightly different aspects of the same myth because the catacomb wall painting is focusing on Hercules' ability to cross the border of the living and the dead, and the sarcophagus is focusing on the heroic values of Alcestis, which are attributed to Metillia Acte. Another difference between the two artworks is that there is no portrait depiction in the catacomb wall painting. This is because the figures in the catacomb wall painting do not represent anyone in particular; Hercules likely represents Christ, or the virtues that Christ has. The fact that multiple sarcophagi that contain the scene of Alcestis and Admetus do not necessarily share the exact same imageries indicates that the story could have been modified by the

[56] Wood (1978) 500.
[57] Wood (1978) 500-502.
[58] Birk (2013) 27-28.
[59] Wood (1978) 501.

commissioner's will.[60] This also suggests that using mythological figures to portray the deceased was to attribute the same virtues and characteristics. As a consequence, same myth was used with emphasis on different parts of the myth because each individual had different idea about which virtues or characteristics to be attributed.

Another example of Hercules in a classical funerary art is the Hylas sarcophagus.[61] The front of the sarcophagus is decorated with the imagery of Hylas' abduction and Hercules' search for him. Hylas was a young companion and lover of Hercules. When he was abducted by water nymphs for his exceptional physical beauty, Hercules left the Argonauts and went to search for him with Polyphemus but they failed in the end. Hylas was dragged to the underworld; therefore this scene depicts Hercules in the underworld. In the sarcophagus, Hylas is depicted in the center and Hercules is the figure on the right side of the front of sarcophagus. Hercules appears as a side figure, along with Polyphemus; the Hylas figure and water nymphs are the main characters of the scene. This sarcophagus is unique because it presents a water nymph as a young boy in a portrait form. According to Stine Birk, the water nymph is likely the deceased son of the buried, and the Hylas figure represent the buried person in the sarcophagus.[62] Therefore this scene overall depicts their reunion in the underworld. Hercules figure in this scene seems to be not a portrait; his face is depicted in non-naturalistic style, which suggests that he is Hercules himself. He is depicted without Nemean lion's skin or a club, which causes difficulties in identifying him. He is depicted in nudity as many mythological heroes often are.

Hercules wears many different guises in different contexts. Hercules is also associated with the Lydian queen Omphale; Omphale was involved in Hercules' required servitude for her, and they were in a romantic relationship during Hercules' time of stay in

[60] Wood (1978) 503-504.
[61] Birk (2013) 146.
[62] Birk (2013) 146.

her kingdom. In the myth of Hercules and Omphale, Hercules appears as a female figure. Omphale instead wears a guise of Hercules, the male hero.[63] She wore his Nemean lion's skin and carried his club; on the other hand, Hercules wore clothes of a woman and did household works for her. The multiple guises of Hercules indicate the versatility of Hercules in different scenes. Therefore his appearance in certain artworks should be considered along with the physical, chronological and historical context.

One can observe the parallel between Orpheus and Hercules in catacomb art. Orpheus went to the underworld to save Eurydice although his attempt failed. Even after Eurydice was sent back to the underworld, Orpheus was able to come back to the world of living without any trouble. Hercules, on the other hand, went to the underworld to bring back Alcestis and he successfully did so. There was another incident when Hercules went to the underworld. Hercules went to the underworld also with Theseus once; this time he went to bring Persephone, who was the queen of the underworld. They did not successfully bring Persephone above ground. Instead, Hercules was able to come back alive but Theseus had to be punished in the underworld. Theseus, who was a mortal, did not escape the punishment for entering the underworld without a proper permission. However, Hercules' semi-divinity gave him the ability to freely cross the border between the life and the death. The parallel between the two famous demi-gods from the Greek mythology is what makes Orpheus and Hercules reflect Christ. They both represent divinity and humanity at the same time, which reflects the identity of Christ. The clear distinction between the divine and the mortal indicates that what divinity meant to early Christians. One of the significances of being divine was to be not restricted in the world of living. Being divine meant that one was free from physical death. Christ was believed as a divine being because he was known to have resurrected after death.

All of the four depictions of Hercules in the catacomb of Via Latina seem to imply

[63] Birk (2013) 148.

the same concept. They all reflect Christ in some way. Individually they seem to be just mythological depictions of traditional Hercules. However, like Berg argued, the paintings must be observed within their context. All of these four examples are found in the same Christian catacombs, and they are in the same artistic style. They are also in the same cubiculum (N). The continuity of images of Hercules indicates that the painter wanted to convey something. Some of the scenes are not the most typical scenes from pagan funerary art, which indicates that these scenes were depicted not because they were familiar subjects to the ancient Romans. Since catacombs are group tombs, it is unlikely that the figures represent specific individuals. The figures are all in a same artistic style and were dated to be from the same time spectrum (c.350-370 A.D.). It is most likely that the series of paintings signify one shared artist and a one continuous theme. And because of the physical context and the parallel between the virtues of Hercules and Christ, the four Hercules figures in the cubiculum N likely reflect Christ.

The catacomb of Via Latina is one of the most famous catacombs because the cells were all decorated with wall paintings.[64] The cells that the four Hercules figures are from were decorated in c. 350-370 A.D.[65] Other cells in the Catacomb of Via Latina were decorated in different time periods. This indicates that the Hercules figures were created several decades after the Edict of Milan was issued. It is significant because the Hercules figures were created instead of directly depicting Christ not because the artist wanted to avoid persecution or wanted to hide Christ in the guise of Hercules. The virtues of Christ were reflected in the Hercules figures because catacomb artists have not fully developed a new imagery yet and there were plenty of preexisting imageries of Hercules. This is a case where an already available imagery was used to carry a different significance.

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[64] Goodenough (1962) 114.
[65] Tronzo (1986) 17.

Why would Orpheus and Hercules be the characters who happened to become Christ figures? What type of qualities do they share? Orpheus was a musician, a poet, a shepherd, and a mythological figure. Hercules on the other hand was a mythological hero. They both convey strengths; they have different types of strength. Orpheus has spiritual strength in his music. Hercules had physical strength in his body and athletic ability. They have strength in common, and they also have divinity in common. Orpheus and Hercules both have experience of going to the underworld and coming back. Mortal figures in the Greek mythologies all went to the underworld but most did not really come back. Orpheus and Hercules are two human beings (partially divine), but they came back from the underworld. They crossed the boundary between life and death as a human, which Christ also did. Christ also is known to have gone to the underworld; He in fact died upon the cross. And the Apostles' Creed explains "crucifixus, mortuus, et sepultus, descendit ad inferos" and "tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit ad caelos." The verse that I would like to observe particularly is "descendit ad inferos" which indicates that Christ went to the underworld, and "resurrexit a mortuis" which indicates that Christ resurrected after physical death. Crossing freely the boundary between life and death is a common characteristic of Orpheus, Hercules, and Christ. Why this is important is because that is what gives divinity to all three of them.

3. Sol Invictus:

What the mythological characters in catacomb art share in common is that they provide a perspective towards Christ in antiquity. Orpheus on one hand represents the ability to put down the chaos. On the other hand, Hercules represents the heroic power and strength, which can be also associated with the miracles that Christ performed. The last example of mythological figure I would like to study is Sol Invictus. Unlike Orpheus or Hercules, Sol Invictus is a full god; he is a sun god who was often associated and equated with the Roman

emperors.[66] Sun is also considered as something divine in Christian text; in the gospel of Matthew, it says "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's Kingdom" (Matthew 13:43). This indicates that the sun conveyed the significance of extraordinary divinity in both imperial religion and Christianity. Now the question is what does Sol Invictus represent in the wall painting of Christian catacomb? Why is Sol Invictus depicted, and whom does Sol represent? Observations from the image of the wall painting suggest that Sol Invictus also represent or reflect Christ in catacomb art.

A fresco from the catacomb of Saint Marcellus and Peter includes the figure of Sol (Figure 10).[67] He is shown as riding a chariot with horses, which is a typical attribute of a sun god. Janet Huskinson argues that this is an example of using pagan deity to create Christian image of Christ. I agree with this point because the representation of Sol would not have been used to depict the deceased. The image of Sol Invictus was used by imperial powers as political propaganda. A number of Roman emperors tried to represent themselves as Sol Invictus because it gave them great authority. Nero raised a colossal statue of himself as Sol Invictus next to the Flavian Amphitheater.[68] Subsequent emperors changed the details of the statue to create their own political propaganda.[69] Constantine, who granted the religious freedom, also wished to equate himself with Sol Invictus.[70] A series of architectural programs completed by Constantine suggests that Constantine tried to visually equate his power with the power of sun god.[71] It is unlikely that early Christians represented themselves as what emperors were equated with; one of the main reasons why early Christians were persecuted and convicted was because they did not perform the imperial cult. As Pliny the Younger stated in his letter to the emperor Trajan, Christians seemed as atheists to the

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[66] Marlowe (2006) 226-229.
[67] Huskinson (1974) Plate IV.
[68] Marlowe (2006) 226.
[69] Marlowe (2006) 228-229.
[70] Marlowe (2006) 223-242.
[71] Marlowe (2006) 223-242.

traditional Romans because Christians rejected the preexisting deities of Rome.[72] Therefore early Christians would not have used the figure of Sol Invictus to represent themselves. Instead the sun god in the Christian catacomb is probably another Christ figure. The halo around his head indicates his divinity as a Christian deity.

Some might question why the painter would have chosen the "imperial" deity to depict Christ. It is true that Christians refused to worship emperors, but it is also true that Christians did not directly oppose to the imperial power. Jesus' teaching did not tell the disciples to revolt against the Roman control; instead Jesus said that "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God" (Mark 12:17). In addition, Constantine is known as a devout worshipper of Sol Invictus.[73] Constantine used the sun god as his political propaganda suggesting that he is not only a Christian but also a Roman emperor who kept the strong traditions. This was reasonable decision as an emperor since the majority of upper class of Rome was non-Christian.[74] Constantine was an emperor before he was a member of Christianity. After all, Christianity was introduced to Rome where the cult of Sol was already prevalent. It is reasonable for early Christians to consider that Christ would resemble Sol, who was *invictus* (unconquered).

The presence of Sol Invictus figure in catacomb art can have multiple explanations; one is that Sol was one of the main deities in Rome, and early Christians thought that the figure of Sol automatically carried a sense of divinity. Maybe they did not equalize Sol with Christ necessarily, but they could have used the figure of Sol to convey the divine power and glory of Christ. It is a reasonable explanation considering that early Christians did not have other ways to represent divine power since there were a dominant number of non-Christian representations of divinity already in Rome. As a result, the figure of Sol would have been

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[72] Pliny the Younger *Letters* 10.96-97
[73] Marlowe (2006) 230.
[74] Krautheimer (1980) 29.

borrowed to represent the divinity of Christ. Another explanation is that the worship of Sol by Constantine would have caused early Christians to think that the cult of Sol Invictus is not necessarily idolatry. Constantine's actions would not have caused to equate Sol Invictus with Christ, but his actions approved the cult of Sol Invictus as well as Christianity. In addition, it should be also noted that the cult of Sol Invictus is also a monotheistic practice. Unlike popular polytheistic beliefs in Rome the cult of Sol Invictus in fact shared the monotheistic element with Christianity. Therefore, Christ was equated neither with the emperor nor with the Sol Invictus. Instead the imagery of imperial power and divinity was borrowed to visually describe the authority and divinity of Christ.

Some Christians in later time periods might have considered using mythological figures in Christian art to be idolatry. However, many religions involve using elements from different religions to represent the deities. Especially Christianity had to imagine the image of Christ without much information. Christ did not really leave any personal portrait or even descriptions of his physical characteristics in the four books of gospel. Christians in antiquity might have known slightly more than modern Christians do. However, in the context within the city of Rome, still there would not have been much information about the physical looks of Christ. In fact, it is amazing how early the image of Christ was created; considering that Christ was crucified during the reign of the emperor Tiberius (14-38 A.D.), it is still incredibly early for the image of Christ to be made. Christianity was formed by using elements from other religions not only in visual representations but also in written or ceremonial representations. The most famous example of this would be the celebration of Christmas. Christmas now is believed to be on the 25th of December but none knows for sure what date the actual Christmas was. The Egyptian god Horus and Sol are also known to have been born on the same date. It was not chosen as the actual birthday of Jesus but as a symbolic date in many religions. This date is also connected to the cult of Mithras (god of

light), which predates the cult of Sol Invictus.[75] In addition, the celebration of the Saturnalia, the festival that began on December 17th, is also known as what affected the choice of Christ's birthday.[76] If Christianity chose to borrow from other religions in its celebration and ritual, it is reasonable that Christianity also borrowed images from other religions.

Another reason for using mythological figures was to be not offensive to the traditional Roman authority. Just like early Christians used the sign of Ichthus (the fish) to identify themselves as Christians without getting noticed, the use of mythological figures might have been a method to display their faith without getting unwanted attention.[77] Ichthus, which literally means the fish, has a special significance in Christianity because each letter of the word stands for the identity of Christ. Each letter of the word was translated to Christianized meaning; the letter "I" to *Iēsous* (Jesus), "CH" to *Christos* (Christ), "TH" to *Theo* (of God), "U" to *huios* (son), and "S" to *sōtēr* (Savior). As a consequence, early Christians who decorated the catacomb walls would have recognized symbolic and vague images. The sign of Ichthus is an example of Christianizing a simple imagery to convey religious faith.

The attempt to borrow mythological images to create Christian art is not only present in antiquity but also in later time periods. This is another reason why using mythological figures in catacomb art is not a deliberate act of idolatry. Many Christians did not mind the presence of non-Christian imageries; instead they incorporated traditional Roman art into Christian context. One example is the use of *orans* figure. The *orans* figure, which originated from the imagery of imperial worship in Rome, later was incorporated in Christian art as an imagery of prayer.[78] This exemplifies that Christians realized and acknowledged the visual impact and beauty of traditional art, and decided to keep it and even use it for their own

[75] Vermaseren (1951) 285-287.
[76] James (1947) 366-367.
[77] Athnos (2011) 45.
[78] Morey (1905) 149.

religious propaganda. Also using an established image lessened the amount of effort that is required to create a completely new image.

4. Christ the Magician:

So far I have discussed the presence of mythological characters in catacomb art. There are also depictions of biblical characters in catacomb art. The scenes from the Old Testament were often used in catacomb art; at this time the New Testament was not yet fully canonized. The scenes from the New Testament were also used in catacomb art, but the number increased in later Christian sarcophagi. Popular themes from the Old Testament include the story of Jonah, the sacrifice of Issac, and the creation of Adam and Eve. The characters from the New Testament, including Christ, are also used in catacomb art. It is important to observe how Christ and other figures are depicted in catacomb art and also in later Christian art; they change over time and location. In addition, Christ figures and the mythological figures that seem to reflect Christ in catacomb art share certain characteristics and virtues.

A wall painting from the catacomb of via Dino Compagni (Via Latina) includes the scene of Christ raising Lazarus (Figure 11).[79] Christ is holding a wand like a magician and is calling Lazarus to come forward. His attitude to the death of Lazarus is very interesting. The scripture tells us that he "wept" when he faced the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). Although he was going to give him back his life, Christ still expressed sorrow over the death. It is significant that Lazarus was not technically resurrected; he was given back his life but he was going to experience death at a later time. Lazarus did not become divine through this process. Therefore, Christ did not give his life back to make him divine. Lazarus, unlike Orpheus or Hercules, did not gain his life back on his own; therefore he is not divine in this scene. This

[79] Athnos (2011) 88.

scene does not emphasize Lazarus but characterizes Christ as a powerful magician. As Paul indicated in his letter, miracles constituted a large part of conversion in early Christianity. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul criticizes that, "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22 NIV). Paul was martyred during the reign of the emperor Nero; therefore, his statement gives information about the first century when Christianity was new to Rome. Signs and wisdom are listed as the two major elements that diverse people looked for. Looking at the Christ figure raising Lazarus in the wall painting, the painter did not depict Christ as someone who expresses sorrow over death of a friend although the gospel clearly mentions how he lamented about Lazarus' death. Instead Christ in this painting is powerful and has divine ability to control life and death. Representations of Christ as a magician are not rare in early Christian art.[80] Miracle scenes were a big part of earlier Christian funerary art; this corresponds to the use of heroic mythological figures in early Christian art. Christ's role as a magician parallels with Orpheus, Hercules, or Sol because the common characteristic of the three mythological figures: supernatural power. In addition to the importance of signs, miracle scenes had another advantage; they were often easy to fit in a single scene.[81]

One may wonder why early Christians would have depicted Christ as a magician and were against sorceries at the same time. Thomas Mathews argues that early Christians depicted Christ not as someone against sorceries or witchcrafts but as a magician who triumphs over any mortal sorcerer.[82] The image of Christ in the wall painting from the catacomb of Dino Compagni presents Christ with a wand. This does not equate Christ with mortal sorcerers but places Him above any other magician. Artists of early Christian artworks believed in this supremacy of the magic of Christ because "while magicians' tricks are

[80] Mathews (1993) 59-91.
[81] Mathews (1993) 61.
[82] Mathews (1993) 67.

illusions, Christ's were permanent and real."[83] Since He was relatively new in Rome, Christ had to resemble the preexistent deities and stand out among all of them to win the competition. Images were a large part of this competition of deities, and Christians chose to use the effectiveness of available images and transformed the images into symbols.

When studying the paintings from catacombs in Rome, it should be noted that catacomb art was different from traditional Roman funerary art such as sarcophagi, cinerary urn or funerary altar. Catacomb paintings are different from more individual funerary artworks. Catacomb artists might have been created paintings when each tomb chamber was getting filled. Another important characteristic of catacomb art is that it must have been familiar to non-Christians also. As mentioned above, it is most likely that not all burials in the catacombs were Christian burials.[84] This applies vice versa; not all Christians were buried in the catacombs. An important issue is that catacombs represent only a small fraction of entire early Christian burial population.[85] Therefore catacomb art cannot represent the idea of entire Christian population of this time period. However, catacomb art can tell what early Christians believed in general; repeated themes and the common factor among the figures indicate that catacomb art represents early Christian idea in general. In addition, how Christian church decided to use the catacombs as shrines and places for pilgrimage indicates that catacombs were integrated as Christian architecture in the end. Therefore, catacomb art reflects what general Christian population thought to be important virtues of Christ or of a Christian individual. More specifically, catacomb paintings reflect what Christians from middle-lower social classes believed because catacomb burials tend to be more modest than some Christian burials above ground. At this time, early Christian art and architecture were more humble than traditional Roman art and architecture; aristocrats were mostly non-Christian and

[83] Mathews (1993) 68.
[84] Elsner (2003) 114-125.
[85] Rutgers (2013) 299.

Christianity took longer time to adjust where there was more aristocratic power.[86] Many Christians were not the poorest of society but were actually from middle or lower social class.[87] This enabled them to create funerary monuments; there would have been many people, both Christian and non-Christian, who were buried without proper space or ritual. In catacombs, both were available at least if decorative art was not present.

I have discussed that the iconographies in catacomb wall paintings often contain biblical scenes from the Old Testament. According to Leon Rutgers, biblical scenes interestingly do not seem appear in Jewish funerary art.[88] One question arises here: Was depicting the deity in paintings allowed in early Christianity, but not in Judaism? This would not have been the case since there were depictions of Orpheus-David figures in the Dura Synagogue and also in the funerary chapel of Jerusalem. There are disparities in how Christianity and Judaism depicted biblical scenes, and this is partly because Christianity and Judaism technically do not share the same idea of God. Christian God has divinity and humanity at the same time. Therefore although Orpheus figures were used both in Christian and Jewish art, they convey different significances.

Regardless of the burials being Christian or non-Christian, the presence of mythological figures in catacombs does not indicate worship of those figures in church. They most likely indicate the presence of syncretism and coexistence of diverse deities that influenced the formation of the image of Christ. Just as non-Christian Romans venerated the deceased by creating artworks, early Christians would have used the same method not to venerate the deceased but to keep the traditional obligations to the deceased if they had proper means and materials. One of the most important traditions in Rome was to keep the memory of the deceased, alive which explains why funerary art market was already

[86] Momigliano (1963) 33.
[87] Krautheimer (1980) 18.
[88] Rutgers (2013) 511.

established in Rome. Romans were very conscious about setting up an image of them because an image meant creation of someone's memory. In Christian burials, to create a new imagery that can convey the virtues of Christ or the teachings of Christianity was keeping the memory of a religion and also of the deceased's life.

Conclusion:

In sum, catacomb paintings share a similarity with traditional Roman (non-Christian) funerary art in subjects. However they can carry different meanings in a new context. According to the observations made, the mythological figures in Christian catacombs likely represent Christ or the virtues of Christ. Their main characteristics are divinity and humanity, physical and spiritual power, and the ability to freely cross the boundary between life and death. This type of adaptation of preexisting imagery into new imagery was not uncommon. In fact, many Roman funerary sarcophagi contained mythological scenes from Greek mythologies adapted into Roman funerary context.[89] Catacombs, as a Christianized space, were decorated with Christianized imageries that reflect the contemporary perspectives toward Christ.

The entry of Christ has changed Rome; the change in funerary art market is visual evidence that testifies such phenomenon. There are socioeconomic reasons why Christianity experienced a dynamic growth among so many other religions. Many oriental cults had theories about afterlife and salvation, but Christianity had an idea of salvation on earth.[90] Christianity therefore offered exclusivity. Not only religion, but also politics, social classes, and other aspects of Rome experienced the impact of Christianity. Until Christianity eventually became the official religion of Rome, there was a series of changes in Rome that led to the declaration of Theodosius I in 391 A.D. However, it would be inaccurate to

[89] Birk (2013) 100.
[90] Brown (1971) 65.

conclude that the image of Christ has been consistent since His entry to Rome. As He entered Rome, the image of Christ had to be that of Christ in Rome, which was familiar to Romans who were at first dubious towards Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, as He travelled around the world, had to become Jesus of many different places.

A painting by the artist Kim Ki-chang demonstrates this clearly (Figure 12). In this 20th century painting, Christ is depicted as an elite man from the Joseon dynasty of Korea. This is the scene of the last supper; Christ is present with His twelve disciples who are all dressed as elite men of Joseon. Christ or His disciples in this representation is not a fisherman, a carpenter, or anyone from low social classes; instead He is depicted more as a religious leader, teacher, or philosopher. This is contrary to what happened in Rome; Christians in Rome were constantly engaged in the debate against intellectuals of the society in Late Antiquity. It took much longer for Christianity to adapt where there were more intellectuals in Rome.[91] On the other hand, Christians in Korea imagined Christ and His disciples as intellectuals.

I would like to end the discussion with the two quotes that are relevant to the idea of visualizing gods:

"One god, greatest among gods and humans, like mortals neither in form nor in thought…mortals think that the gods are born and have the mortals' own clothes and voice and form"[92] by Xenophanes of Colophon, and

"Think not to match yourself against the gods, for men that walk the earth cannot hold their own with the immortals"[93] by Homer.

Both are from before the arrival of Christ; Xenophanes of Colophon is a believer of

[91] Momigliano (1964) 32.
[92] Osborne (2004) 62.
[93] Homer *Book V. 440-443* pp. 57.

monotheism and Homer is famous for his works of polytheistic religion. Regardless of which religion, there is an idea that gods resemble mortals neither in forms nor in characters. At the same time, however, it is apparent that a growth of a religion is connected to a creation of images of gods in the forms that are familiar and closer to mortals. Whether which comes first, a growth of a religion or a creation of images, it seems that gods have to resemble mortals in some way to be widespread. This confirms the power of images in a religion. When a new religion enters a cultural group, each cultural group portrays their own god. A single deity becomes something diverse in different cultures or nations. An image of god, in return, affects how people think about the god that it is depicting. Thus there is a two-way dialogue between the image and religion, which should be observed along with the chronological and physical contexts.

List of Illustrations

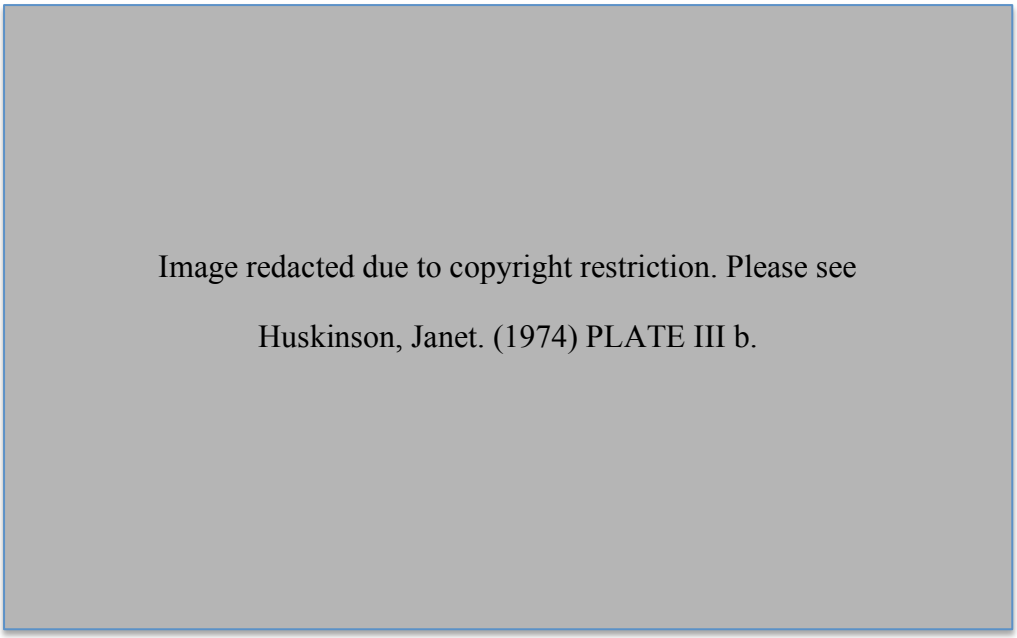

Figure 1 Orpheus figure from the catacomb of Saint Marcellinus and Peter. c. Late 4th century A.D.

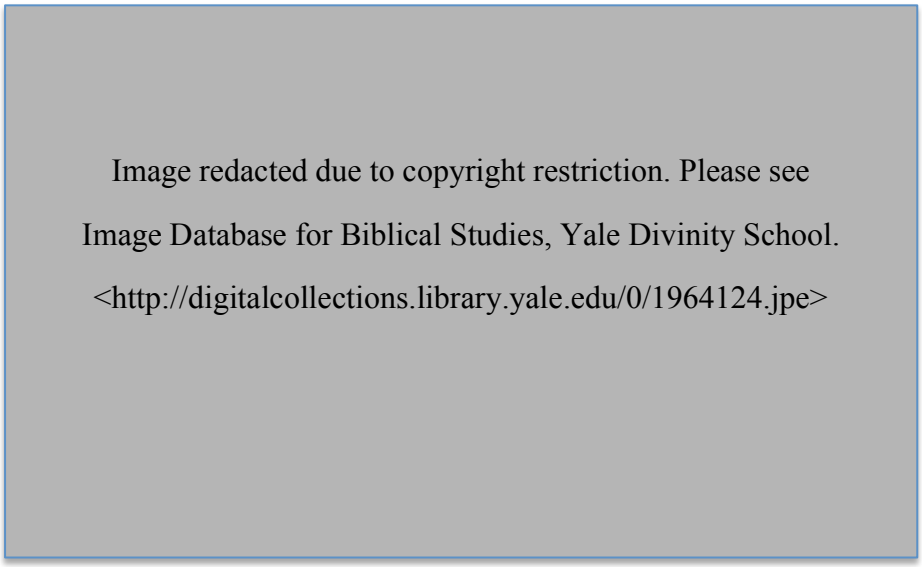

Figure 2 Orpheus figure from the catacomb of Domitilla. c. 3rd century A.D.

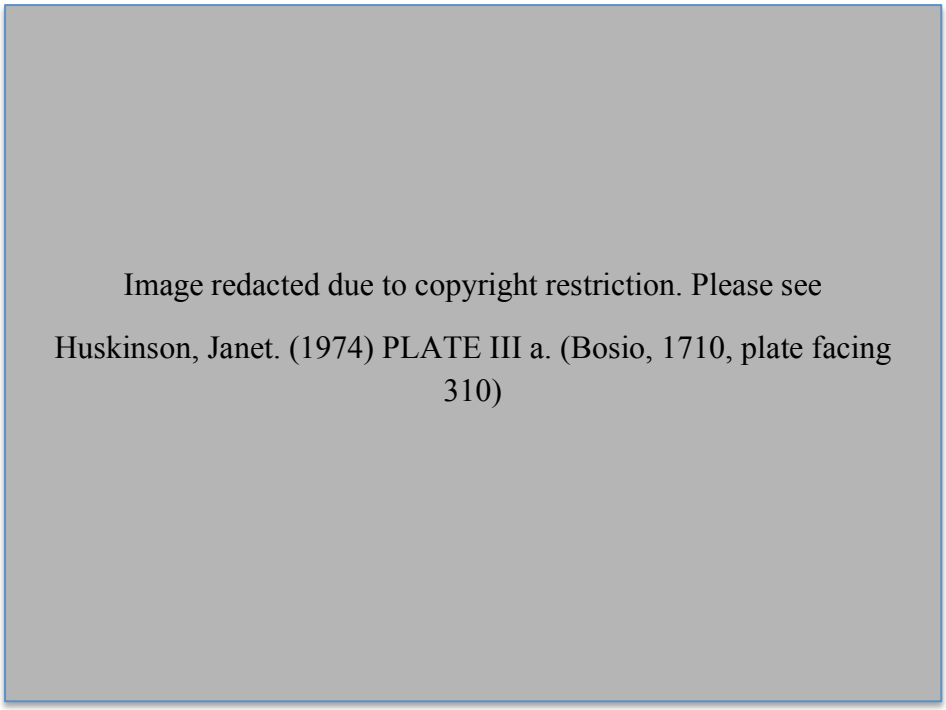

Figure 3 Orpheus figure from the catacomb of Domitilla. c. Late 4th century A.D.

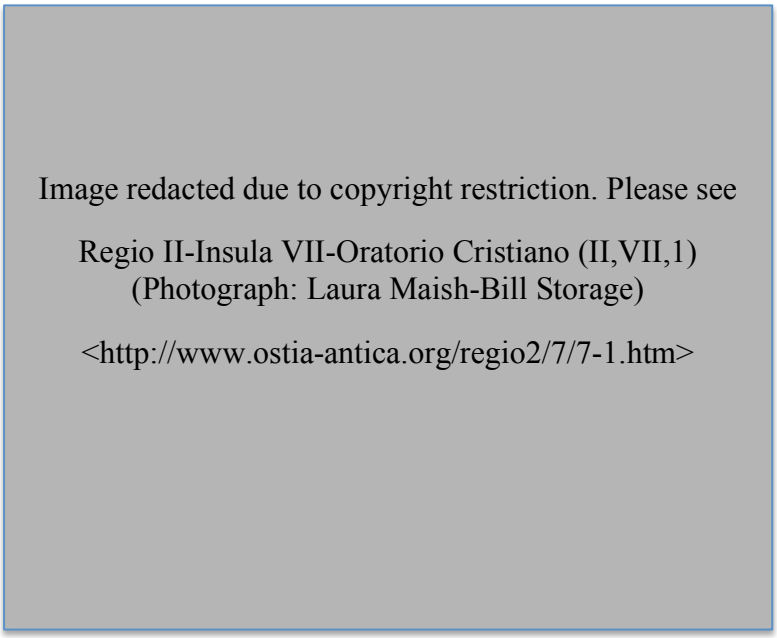

Figure 4 Orpheus figure from the funerary sarcophagus. Ostia.

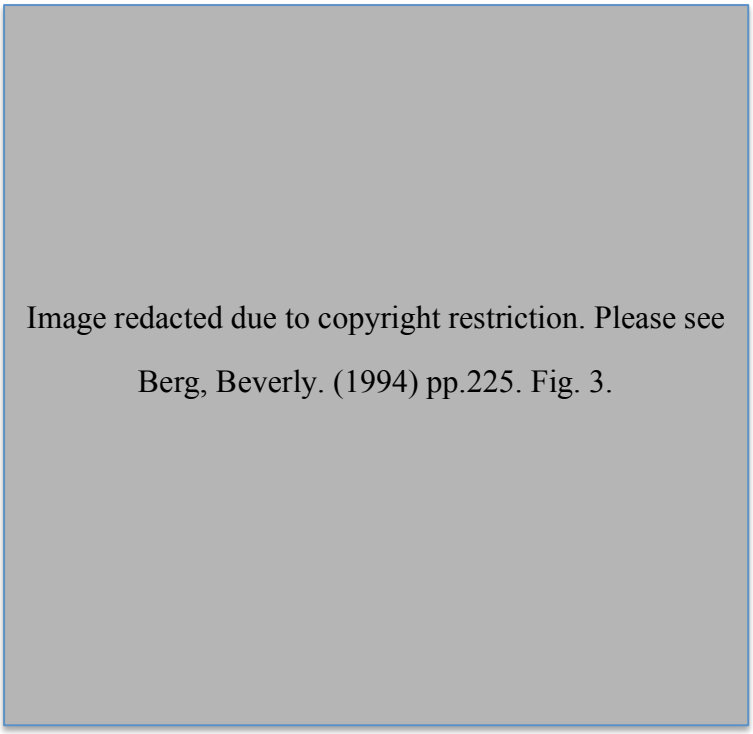

Figure 5 Hercules figure (defeating *death*) from the catacomb of Via Latina (cubiculum N) (sketch). c. 350-370 A.D.

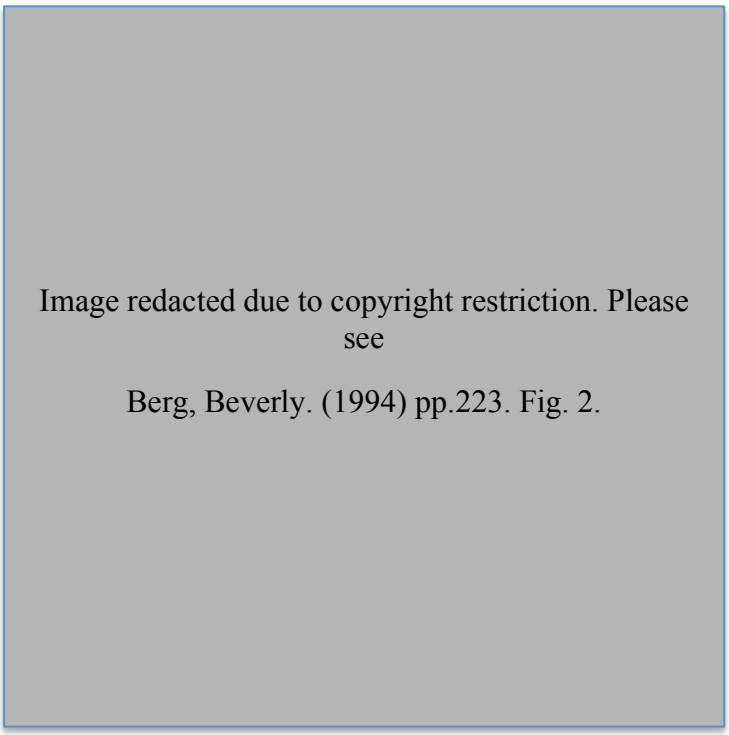

Figure 6 Hercules figure (*dextrarum iunctio* with Minerva) from the catacomb of Via Latina (cubiculum N) (sketch). c. 350-370 A.D.

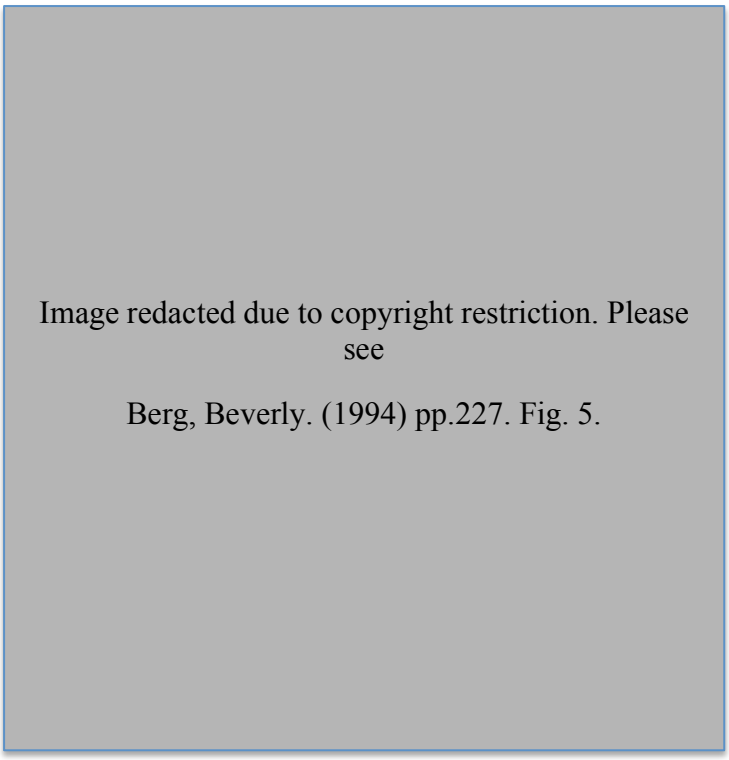

Figure 7 Hercules figure (victory against the serpent) from the catacomb of Via Latina (cubiculum N) (sketch). c. 350-370 A.D.

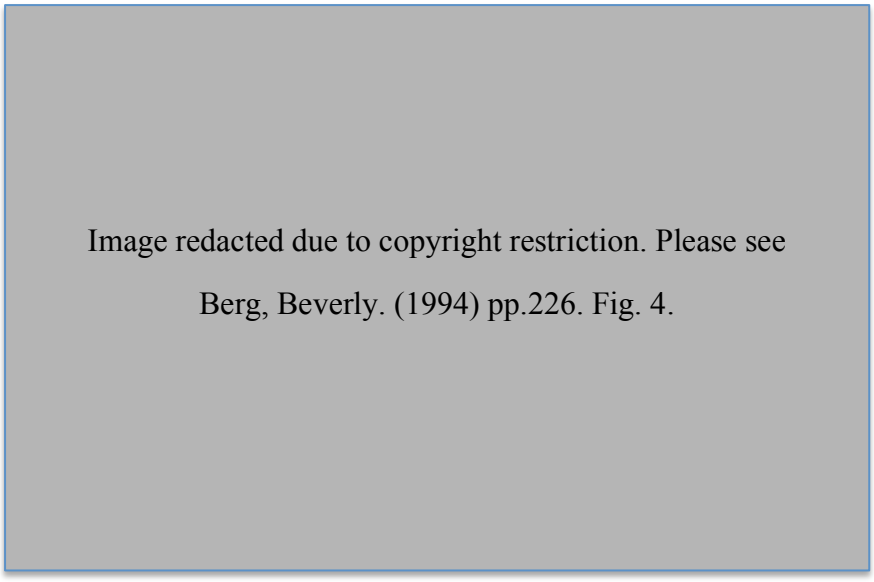

Figure 8 Hercules figure (myth of Alcestis and Admetus) from the catacomb of Via Latina (cubiculum N) (sketch). c. 350-370 A.D.

Image redacted due to copyright restriction. Please see

Index of Images, Part IX: Barbara F. McManus.

<http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/sacerdosfunrelief2.jpg>

Figure 9 Sarcophagus of Metillia Acte. Ostia. c. 161-170 A.D.

Image redacted due to copyright restriction. Please see

Huskinson, Janet. (1974) PLATE VI c. (Wilpert, 1903, pl. 160,2)

Figure 10 Sol from the catacomb of Saint Marcellinus and Peter. c. 300-350 A.D.

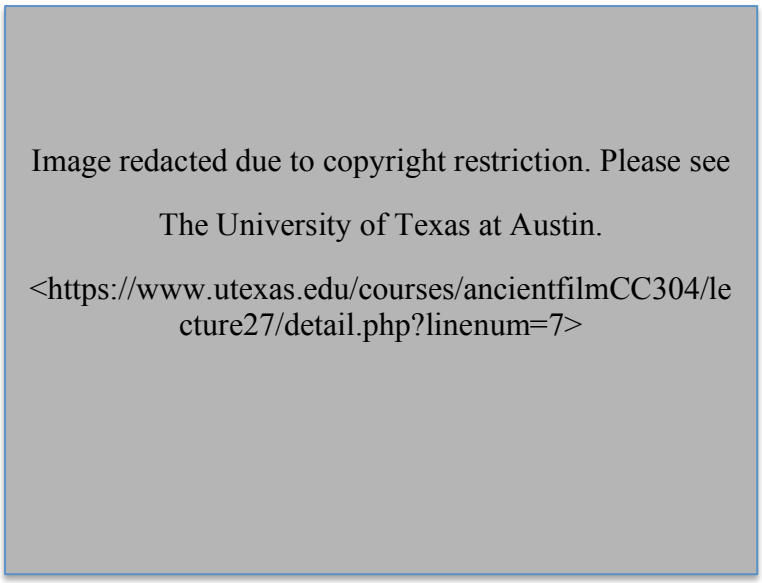

Figure 11 Christ raising Lazarus from the catacomb of Via Latina (cubiculum O). c. 350-370 A.D.

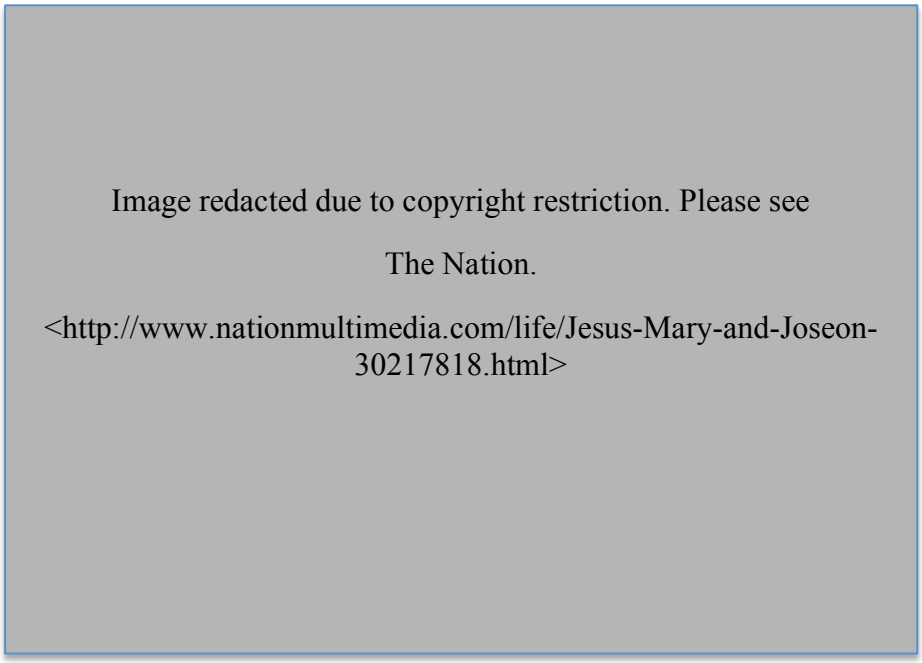

Figure 12 The Last Supper by Woonbo Kim Ki-chang. Korea. c. 1950s

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