
The Sign of Jonah

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The youngest of Christians learn and remember the story of Jonah. Whether it is Jonah being swallowed by a big fish, surviving within its belly, or being cast out and living to tell about it, Jonah's tale is memorable. Not only is the story of Jonah learned at an early age today, but it was also one of the very first narratives depicted in early Christian art. Jonah appeared on Christian sarcophagi and catacomb paintings in the fourth century.

The Jonah marbles usually are dated to the second half of the third century A.D. Four symbolic sculptures depict the events in the book of Jonah: *Jonah Swallowed*, *Jonah Praying*, *Jonah Cast Up*, and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*. In addition to these four, a well preserved *The Good Shepherd* sculpture completes the group. The Cleveland Museum of Art acquired these works in 1965. The five sculptures, ranging in height from 13 to 20½ inches, were carved from blocks of the same "white-grained, well-crystallized marble and are thought to have come from the same source in the eastern Mediterranean."¹ Recent analysis, according to the museum, identifies the Roman Imperial quarries at Docimium in ancient Phrygia (now central Turkey) as the source of the marble. These quarries supplied the Roman Empire with high-quality marble in the form of unfinished blocks that were used for sculpture, paving, and veneer. The location where the sculptures were originally found remains unknown. The entire group may have been unearthed together from a large pithos, or jar. All of the figures are finished, except for *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*.

We rarely find a group of free-standing sculptures like the Jonah marbles, which were probably meant to be seen in the round. And how do we explain the inclusion of the Christ figure, the Good Shepherd?

Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and events as announcing and prefiguring the ministry of Jesus or the church. Their interpretation of the book of Jonah was inspired by Jesus' mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders demanding a prophetic sign: "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky," Jesus warned them, "but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 16:4). In another passage, Jesus elaborates on this typology and identifies

his own ministry as the fulfillment of the sign of Jonah: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster [Jonah 2:1], so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation

of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” (Matthew 12:40-41; cf. Luke 11:29-32).

The sculptor integrated motifs from pagan culture in order to supply a piece of Jonah’s prophetic message to Christians then and now. A source for *The Good Shepherd* (Figure 2) may be the pagan criophorus figure; often he was shown bringing an offering to the altar, and, by the third century A.D., he represented the ram bearer with its connotations of philanthropy and loving care.² The Cleveland sculpture is one of the best preserved of the twenty-six extant marbles depicting the Good Shepherd, who commonly is beardless and youthful, and carries a sheep draped over the shoulders. The artist also incorporated the *contrapposto* stance, made known by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos in the fifth century B.C., with one weight-bearing leg straight and the other bent naturally as the weight shifts.

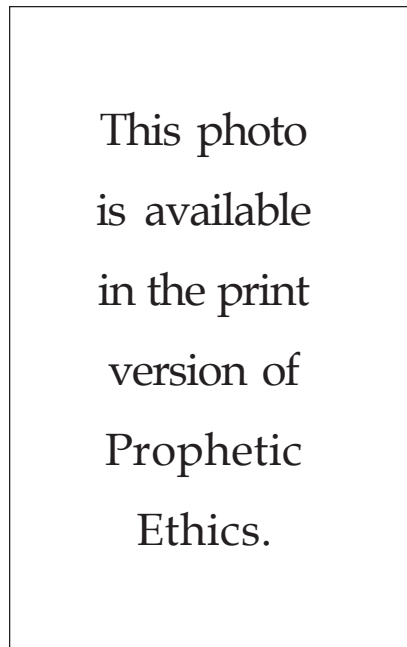


Figure 2. *The Good Shepherd*.
50 x 25.7 x 15.9 cm.

A visual representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd bore rich meaning for the early Christians during times of persecution because it symbolized a leader who would sacrifice his life for his flock; yet, as an already popular image among non-Christians as well, it did not draw attention to the persecuted believers. Later, after the peace brought by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 306, the Good Shepherd became the most popular symbol of Jesus Christ.

The rare qualities of this work include the use of a drill to add the contrast of light and dark in the hair. All of the Jonah marbles share this technical characteristic.

Jonah Swallowed (Figure 3) and *Jonah Cast Up* (Figure 1) are particularly dramatic representations in marble. They feature a *Ketos*, or Greek sea monster, that is part land animal and part fish. The early Christian artist likely borrowed from the *Ketea* found in Greek and Roman sculptures, wall

paintings, and mosaics, but found a new narrative in which the sea monster could function. The “large fish” (Jonah 1:17) is terrifying with such a monstrous body, recoiling back upon itself with its tail high above its head. This strong vertical representation, combined with the circularity of the two forms, helps us to identify the two figures as one.

Jonah within the belly of the fish is a far more difficult subject to depict. In *Jonah Praying* (Figure 4), the sculptor chose to show the sole figure of Jonah in the gesture of an orant, with arms outstretched and palms up, as he prays to God for deliverance. The bearded Jonah wears the same tunic as in the marble showing him under the gourd vine. The *contrapposto* stance, as seen in *The Good Shepherd* marble, invokes a figure at rest. These two pieces and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* (Figure 5) convey a sense of relaxation, meditation, and prayer in contrast to the scenes with the fish that are heightened in drama and action. This alternation of action and calm reflects the biblical story and creates a narrative flow among the five marbles. Although they can be studied and understood as individual pieces, as a group they tell a dramatic story.

Jonah Cast Up (Figure 1) continues the drama of the story and repeats the bizarre form of the fish. The bearded Jonah emerges from the fish’s mouth with arms extended and with a strong upper body visible. The fish possesses the head of a boar, wings of a bird, and paws of a lion. Its tail wraps up and over itself, almost touching Jonah’s right hand. The mighty regurgitation of Jonah depicts the power of God as the prophet is expelled from inside this sea monster; its force is not that of Jonah or the fish alone, but rather God’s action in answering Jonah’s prayers.

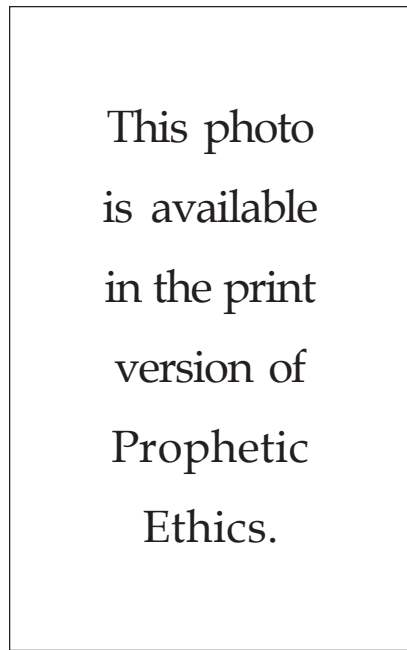
In *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* (Figure 5), the prophet reclines and relaxes. He raises his right arm over his head. The body position recalls river god types known throughout the Greek and Roman world. The shepherd boy in Greek mythology, Endymion, who slept eternally underneath a tree, may be an inspiration for this depiction of Jonah. Endymion symbolized repose, peace, and well being; here Jonah has received peace and rests in the calm after the events of the story. Beneath a creeping gourd, which

This photo
is available
in the print
version of
Prophetic
Ethics.

Figure 3. *Jonah Swallowed*.
51.6 x 15.55 x 26.2 cm.

symbolized resurrection in Roman art, Jonah contemplates the miracle of his salvation.

In these Jonah marbles we can glimpse into Christian life before its official acceptance in the Roman Empire. When, during the third and early fourth centuries, Christians were threatened by persecution and death, they found hope in the “sign of Jonah” that promised life would follow



death. The parallels between the three day period of Jonah in the fish and Jesus in the tomb allowed these believers to understand the prophecy of Jonah in a new way, as pointing toward the resurrected Christ who is the shepherd and savior of those who believe in Him.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Empire by the Edict of Milan in 313, artists portrayed Christ less as the simple Good Shepherd and more like a Caesar, with royal attributes such as a halo, purple robe, and throne. A separation occurred between Jonah and Christ in the visual art and theology of Christianity. As Christ became more regal, the popularity of Jonah’s story decreased significantly. Perhaps the concerns of the Christians expanded from uncertainty about their own death, which had been a very real issue during the early centuries, to the eternal kingdom of God after resurrection. Jonah’s words were not less important to this

Figure 4. *Jonah Praying*.
47 x 14 x 20.6 cm.

next generation of Christians, but Christ’s triumphant rule over the powers became more prevalent.

Abraham Heschel has pointed out that Hebrew prophets were both *foretellers* and *forthtellers*; their prophetic ministry included both predicting what God would do in the future (foretelling) as well as exposing the injustices of society (forthtelling). Jonah was a reluctant prophet who initially rejected God’s command to be foreteller and forthteller to the people of Nineveh. His disobedience led him to spend three days in the belly of a fish before he half-heartedly agreed to deliver God’s message to those foreigners.

Jesus, the Son of God, brought God’s prophetic message to the residents of Galilee and Judea. Unlike Jonah, Jesus was fully obedient to God’s command; in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed, “Not my will but yours

be done" (Luke 22:42), and this obedience led him to spend three days in the "belly of Death." Jesus' message of God's redeeming love, like Jonah's, was intended to be inclusive, inviting Jew and non-Jew alike to become people of God's kingdom (Matthew 28:16-20).

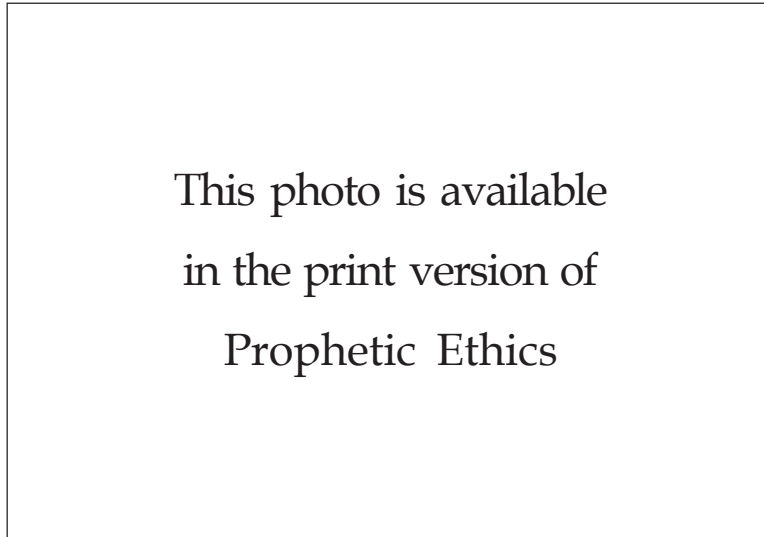


Figure 5. *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*. 32.1 x 46.3 x 17.5 cm.

NOTES

1 William D. Wixom, "Early Christian Sculptures at Cleveland," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (March 1967): 67-88k.

2 E. B. Lewis: 'Early Christian and Byzantine art, I, 2(i): Religious iconography, (a) Before c. 313', *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 5 November 2002), <http://www.groveart.com>

Jonah Swallowed (p. 57), *Jonah Cast Up* (p. 54), *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* (p. 59), *Jonah Praying* (p. 58), and *The Good Shepherd* (p. 56). Asia Minor, probably Phrygia (central Turkey), Early Christian, c. 270-280. Marble. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2002. John L. Severance Fund, 1965.237-241.



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