
THE IMAGERY OF MIRACLES ON CATACOMB WALL PAINTINGS OF EARLY CHRISTIANS IN ROME

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Abstract

The topic of miracles was ubiquitous in early Christian art, whether on sarcophagi, frescoes, glass or ceramics. Our article deals with the depiction of miracles on the preserved frescoes in Christian catacombs in Rome between the 1st and the 4th century AD. The study explains why the early Christian Church chose the topic of miracles in catacomb art and which are the most common depictions of individual miracles on frescoes. Based on a socio-historical method, it presents an analysis of early Christian frescoes depicting Jesus performing miracles of healing. It also compares individual frescoes with contemporary texts and comments on miracles. The frescoes of miracles in a religiously pluralistic environment represented a unique and original iconography created by the early Church, which preferred the depiction of miracles over the crucified Jesus or other motifs from Scripture.

Keywords: frescoes, healing, Christians, ancient art, Rome

1. Introduction

If we want to clarify the individual frescoes in Christian catacomb art, we must first look at the socio-cultural discourse of Christianity in ancient Rome, on which our research is based. The fact that ‘all roads lead to Rome’ also applied to the period from the 1st to the 4th century AD, i.e. an epoch in Roman history known as the imperial period. The main centre of the empire was the city of Rome, which was known for its religious and ethnic heterogeneity.

Jews had long enjoyed their status of *religio licita* (legally recognized religion) when Christianity began to enter the consciousness of Rome and the Roman population. In this multicultural city, Jews were also allowed their own administrative jurisdiction, that is, the free exercise of their own Jewish law within the city. Being a Jew had both a religious and ethnic denotation. However, Christians were not bound to Jewish ethnicity or politeum. From the point of view of the Greeks or Romans, Christianity had a very vague identity. Compared with other religious cultures, especially Judaism, Christians lacked

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independent cultural foundations that gave religions their identity and ensured respect for them in the Greco-Roman socio-cultural milieu. Thus, they lacked everything that would give their ideology a separate and clear cultural identity. Christians had only the words of Jesus, the memory of His life and death, faith, hope and themselves [1]. The question thus arises: when can we actually begin to talk about material Christian culture, which includes everything that is tangible (the product of a special culture, cities, buildings, goods, tools, weapons, furniture ...)?

To deal with this challenge, we focused our interest on one of the most tangible components of early Christian culture - the Christian art. Our research utilized the latest findings of Paul Corby Finney [1], professor of Roman Imperial and Early Church History at the University of Missouri in Saint Louis, who has devoted his work to Christian catacomb art and its connection to the pagan world. We then juxtaposed these findings with Edward Gibbon's research results [E. Gibbon, *The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*, <https://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap15.htm>, accessed on 12.01. 2021].

2. Artistic life of Early Christian Church

Paul Corby Finney's scientific endeavour is based on the theory that in the period from the 1st to 2nd century AD, Christians did not produce anything characteristic or uniquely differentiating in the material realm. Thus, Christians remained largely 'invisible' in archaeological records, unlike Jews who had left traces of their culture, such as fragments of buildings, floor tiles, funerary artefacts, etc. Compared to the Greco-Roman material culture, the Jewish material culture is relatively impoverished and inconspicuous, but it proves the ethnic diversity and independence of the Jews. (We refer here to the period dating from the reign of Augustus (31 BC - 14 AD) to the reign of Septimus Severus (145-211 AD).) Christians were present in Greco-Roman society during the first two centuries AD, but they were difficult to detect. The external features of their independent existence in the form of material elements were either very subtle, less extensive, or did not exist at all. Christians produced very few cultural artefacts during this period, including art, architecture, paintings, and sculptures. According to Finney, the reason for the absence of Christian art in the first two centuries was very simple. Christians lacked the land and capital needed to produce distinctive works of art. However, as soon as this situation had changed, Christians started experimenting with their own art forms [1, p. 108]. Since the 2nd century AD, Christianity experienced remarkable growth in the Roman Empire. Christian artistic work increased significantly toward the end of the 2nd century. In his seminal monograph, *The Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (Subtitle: *The progress of the Christian religion, and the sentiments, manners, numbers, and condition of the primitive Christians*), the late 18th century English historian, Edward Gibbon, presented and explained the

causes of the rise of Christianity in Rome. He formulated five basic points [<https://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap15.htm>]:

1. Inflexibility and intolerance (derived and learned from the Jews, but cleansed of the unsociable spirit);
2. The doctrine of the future life;
3. Miracles and miraculous powers attributed to the early Church;
4. Pure morality of Christians;
5. Community and discipline of Christianity.

Finney looks critically at Gibbon's work, accusing him of forgetting to mention the most important reason behind the rise of Christianity, namely adaptation. The adaptation of Christianity and the Christian community in Greco-Roman society is one of the main reasons for their success. They were no different from pagan neighbours - they had the same language, money, food, clothes, went to the same market, engaged in similar work activities. Based on this fact, Finney argues that they were 'invisible' in their material culture. At the beginning of their history, Christians adapted to their surroundings to such an extent that they could not be recognized as an alien social element.

As for early Christian art within their material culture, the first artistic expressions date back to the mentioned period of the 2nd century AD, when Christians, in parallel with their growing influence, gained control over their own property. Around the year 200, we encounter Christian pictorial language, murals and ceilings in Roman-Christian catacombs. Catacomb art is thus direct (in some cases partial) material evidence. This evidence is, in some cases, also based on written testimonies [1, p. 109-111]. Such evidence of Christian art and written testimony can be found in the famous passage in *Paedagogus/Logos Paidagogos* by Clement of Alexandria (cca. 150-215 AD) with reference to symbols [2]. Clement explains here and advises Christians to use rings with engraved specific images, such as a dove, a fish boat, an anchor, etc. because he considers these symbols to be Christian. He writes that Christian "seals are a dove, a fish, a ship or an anchor - not a sword or a bow, because Christians seek peace, and also not a cup for drinking because they must remain sober" [3, p. 18-19].

It is thus clear that the catacomb frescoes served as a means of spreading religious meanings. No one can say with absolute certainty the exact expression and evaluation of the iconography of the individual frescoes, and according to Finney, this would likely even be impossible [1, p. 184-185]. Therefore, if we base our research on the presupposition that Christian iconography originated from paganism, and thus paganism plays an important role in shaping Christian iconography, we must also work with the fact that catacomb art is a reference to Christianity and primarily refers to the context of the Christian faith. It is therefore difficult to determine the exact meaning of the frescoes of the iconographic art of the catacombs. In addition to the problem of interpreting iconographic art in the catacombs, we also come to the next unanswered question of what art patterns (motives) influenced the painters of the catacombs? Several authors (e.g. Wickhoff [4]) argue that, like Roman art influenced by

Etruscan art, Christian art, logically, came from a pagan Roman environment, as it was formed in Rome itself. Strzygowski has a different theory of early Christian art [5]. According to him, the influence on early Christian art does not come from Rome but from Oriental countries. Strzygowski thus distinguished between the art of coastal cities and the art of the interior, as he thought that the influence came directly from the Orient through coastal cities, from where it spread to the Western world. He claimed that the motifs of the catacomb paintings came from Alexandria and Antioch, whereas the types of depictions in early Christian art, such as the bearded Christ and Mary, came from Syria and Egypt. According to Marquand, Strzygowski substantiated his claims with a logical explanation that in Carthage, Ephesus, Alexandria and Antioch, the monuments were not preserved due to frequent and significant earthquakes, while Rome was lucky [6]. Other researchers tended to follow Finney's reasoning, describing early Christian art as a continuation of pagan painting and sculpture [1, p. 188-189].

3. The miracles in the Early Church

We now turn to the question of why frescoes depicting miracles became such a frequent motive in ancient times. As we have already outlined, according to E. Gibbon, one of the reasons for the rapid growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire was the presence of miracles in the early Church. He states that the miracles were to prove the divine origin of the Christianity to which it referred [<https://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap15.htm>].

The oldest testimony to the depiction and understanding of miracles in Christianity comes to us through the writings of the New Testament. In the New Testament, terms appear that are already used by LXX (Septuagint - the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament) to describe a miracle, i.e. *teras*, *sémeion*, *thaumasía*, *dýnamis* - power, deed of power, miracle. The continuity of meaning with the Old Testament is obvious [7, 8]. The Old Testament understanding of a miracle is demonstrated primarily in the events related to the exodus of Israelites from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land. Such powerful interventions of God in the history of the Chosen Nation clearly show the motives for the miraculous action of God. They testify to the reality of divine election and give a special meaning to the history of God's relationship with the beloved nation. The purpose of doing signs and wonders through God is to transfer the chosen nation from a state of ignorance to the knowledge of God, YHWH, the ways of His presence, the attributes and his power and greatness (Exodus 6.6-7, 8.18, 9.14, Joshua 3.7-10, 4.22-24). For the knowledge of God is a condition for witnessing the experience of liberation.

The New Testament texts of the Gospels justify the post-paschal confession that Jesus is the Son of God and the promised Messiah. Just as in the saving action of God, the revelation of the word and the deed form unity, so it was in the case of Jesus' teaching and action. The descriptions of Jesus' miracles were not about their historical documentation but about the message that with

the coming of Jesus began the time of salvation, the coming of the Kingdom of God. They revealed who He was. Through miracles, the listeners achieved a knowledge of the truth and faith in Jesus, the Son of God, and His mission to reveal the glory of God [9]. The extent of the miraculous activity of Jesus is significant in comparison with other parallels of biblical characters: Moses, Elijah, Elisha. This reflects His authority, which goes beyond the authority of Moses himself. Jesus' miracles were to be seen as the archetype of all true miracles and the key to their interpretation. Their ecclesial dimension is crucial because they have inaugurated the Kingdom of God here on Earth. Its visible stage is fulfilled through the Church. They were a harbinger and announced the presence of God's Kingdom here on Earth [10].

A number of miracles confirmed the teachings of Christ, his apostles and martyrs. The lame could walk, the dead were made alive (resurrected by Jesus), the blind saw, the sick were healed, the demons were cast out, the laws of Nature were broken many times, or disciples received the gift of tongues and prophecy. Gibbon further elaborates that our imagination and our reason are accustomed to long observing and respecting the unchanging order of Nature and are not sufficiently prepared for the visible action of the deity. In the first years of Christianity (during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD), the situation of believers was radically different. The pagans and Jews alike were to see for themselves that the Christian community exercised and was entitled to miraculous powers. These miracles were to be celebrated and performed in the name of faith in Christ and were to take on a deep impression of supernatural truths, the surest promise of God's favour, affection and the future bliss of Christians. Among other things, these miracles served to convince unbelievers; they were to become the ultimate proof of the truth of Christianity. They were usually performed in the presence of a large number of spectators on various occasions [<https://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap15.htm>].

According to Rusecký, the *novum* of the teachings of Jesus depend on the proximity of eschatological times and their fulfilment because God's saving government occurred (became present) in Him [9]. Jesus' inner connection with God's Kingdom is inseparable. Jesus' acts of power that He performed testify to the coming of the eschatological Kingdom of God. This is the basic function of Jesus' miracles. Through his miracles, He realizes the immediate proximity of God's government present already on Earth. There is a close connection between the proclaimed word of the Kingdom of God and its realization in deeds. Jesus' miracles revealed the mysteries of God's Kingdom while confirming its saving content. Miracles (such as healings and exorcisms) are a sign of the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom. This is in line with the belief of the Jewish apocalyptic thinking that with the coming of the Kingdom of God, evil will be bound [9, 10].

In connection with the miracles of the early Church, Lee M. Jefferson builds on Christ's miracles of healing [11]. Health and disease have been present in humanity's experience from the very beginning. Prayers for healing have thus been common among all peoples, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. In case

of illness, ancient people went to the doctor, which tended to be an expensive affair at the time. Alternatively, they sought out magicians to use spells to drive the illness away. With a request for healing, they fled to the gods and goddesses (Asclepius, Apollo, Isis, Dionysus, Hercules ...) of the Greco-Roman pantheon [11]. Asclepius was the Greek god of Medicine and healing [F. Graf, *Asclepis*, in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2015, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-853>, accessed on 19.01.2021]. In Rome, he was known as Aesculapius. He was a powerful physician, the son of Apollo, who was able to resurrect the dead (Tyndareus).

For Christians, Christ had such healing powers. In catacomb art, therefore, we find frescoes depicting Jesus, who performs these miracles and heals the sick. He is thus understood as a healer, a wizard/magician who heals and works miracles [11]. This fact is mentioned by Justín Martyr, who at the middle of the 2nd century AD penned the following observation: “When we say that (Christ) healed the lame, the paralyzed, the blind, and raised the dead, they seem to be talking about similar things that are said to have been done by Asclepius” [Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>]. Athanasius of Alexandria writes that Asclepius was adored as a healer, but he could not be compared to Jesus, who did not heal with herbs but healed them with His resurrection [11]. Origen argued that there is a potent divine source behind Jesus’ power. The main difference between a miracle and magic is that behind the miracle is a god and behind the magic is not [12]. From Quadratus of Athens (HE 4.1.1-2), who wrote the defence of Christianity addressed to Hadrian, there is a preserved testimony of Jesus’ enduring miracles of healing people [13]. Tertullian writes in the *Prescription Against Heretics* (ANF 3: 249) about the rules of faith, which mentions that Jesus Christ performed miracles and when He was crucified on the third day He rose from the dead [14]. A few references can also be found in his next work, *Against Praxeas* 27. In the book, *Demonstration of the Gospel* IV, 10, 15-14, I, Eusebius explains that Jesus, by His coming, enabled the human eye to see superhuman miracles, and His coming among us was for the healing of human souls. And His word is manifested by the performance of miracles [15].

On the other hand, the emphasis on miracles and the accompanying allegations of their occurrence were subjected to criticism, as the miracles of the resurrection contradicted Platonic soteriology. Perhaps the most famous critic of Jesus’ miracles was undoubtedly the philosopher Celsus, about who we also know from Origen’s *Contra Celsum*. Celsus does not deny in *The True Discourse* that Jesus actually performed miracles but rather denies the means of performing them. According to him, Jesus learned magic and magical abilities in Egypt. With his magical deception, He was able to deceive the lowest strata of the population, which were ignorant and immoral, whereas the philosophers of the upper class did not allow themselves to be deceived. He claimed that Jesus deceived people with witchcraft and was an evil demon. According to him, the Gospels are rewritten to support Christianity’s claims. In addition, Celsus is sure that the actions of Greek heroes are better than the miracles of Jesus, which

therefore makes them better candidates for divinity. Hence, the miracles of Jesus only served to deceive people to believe that he was the Messiah [16].

It is clear, then, that miracles and their very motive were so important to Christians at the time that they could not be overlooked even in early Christian catacomb art. We should not forget that the art of the catacombs was not created for the dead but for the living. We identify with Jefferson's theory that early Christians were more attracted to the image of God healing the sick and performing miracles than the image of the crucified Son of God. Jesus was to be promoted and proclaimed as the most powerful among the powerful. In the difficult times when Christians were severely persecuted, there was a need to believe in miracles. Jesus' power to heal and even to resurrect the body became all the more important and necessary [11].

3.1. *Virga virtutis* (a strong stick)/*Virga thaumaturgica* (magic wand)/*Rabdos*

In the iconography of miracles in catacomb art, we often encounter the depiction of a stick or wand in Jesus' hands. Besides Lee M. Jefferson [11], György Heidl also writes about this topic in his study *Early Christian Imagery of the 'virga virtutis' and Ambrose's Theology of Sacraments* [17], where the author explains the connection of visual Christian culture (depiction of a stick or wand) with the theology of the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist and resurrection. Heidl tries to clarify that the mallet in the hands of Christ in catacomb art is associated with initiation processes such as baptism (water gushing from a rock), the Eucharist (the miracle of the multiplication of bread and wine ...), or a kind of model of the cross. This theme of frescoes is also known as 'miracles with a wand'. These are images of Christ holding a wand to resurrect the dead, work miracles, or heal the sick. Specifically, these are frescoes of the resurrection of Lazarus, the reproduction of bread and wine, or a miracle in the Cana of Galilee. However, Heidl noted that nowhere in the Gospels one can find such a mention or reference to a 'magic' wand.

The question of the meaning of the symbol of the stick (wand) in Jesus' hands in early Christian iconography thus becomes highly relevant. In the catacomb frescoes, we see a wand in the hands of Jesus while performing miracles. In other depictions of Christ, such as the *Maiestas Domini*, Christ among the apostles, His baptism, the Good Shepherd etc., we do not encounter the wand.

In this context it is worth mentioning Psalm 110.2, where the Hebrew word *maṭeh* denotes both the sceptre and the staff with which Moses performed miracles in Egypt (Exodus 7.15, 17, 20; 14.16; Isaiah 10.26, etc.) By means of it he demonstrated the power of God, which even Pharaoh could not resist. The royal sceptre symbolizes all royal rule and power, which comes from the Lord. The Midrash Yelmeinu refers to the staff that accompanied many miracles throughout Israel's history (Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David, cf. Genesis 32.11; Exodus 4.3, 7.10; 1Samuel 17.40). In the future the Messiah will discover it and with its help will conquer all the nations of the world [18].

Virga thaumaturgica (as described T. Mathews and L. De Bruyne [19]) could be translated as the miraculous/life-giving/witching staff. In this sense, the staff would refer to an instrument that was directly related to the performance of miracles [20]. This would mean that Jesus was understood as a kind of magician who needed a magic wand to perform his miracles. This idea was proposed by Thomas Mathews in *The Clash of Gods*, who, in a chapter entitled *The Magician*, states that Jesus was understood as a magician precisely because of the wand or staff that identifies pagan magicians [21]. The wand as an attribute of a magician is also found in Classical literature, such as the sorceress Circe, who used the wave of her wand to turn people into pigs, or the god Mercury with his golden staff, which he could use to bring the dead back to life [21, p. 57-59].

However, Heidl and Jefferson are not proponents of this theory, as we have no knowledge at this time that wizards use a wand - *virga thaumaturgica* [17, 22]. For comparison, we could point to the stick of the already mentioned god-healer Asclepius, which was surrounded by a snake. However, Christ did not have a staff but rather a wand without a serpent [11]. A wand as a tool or attribute of a wizard is irrelevant in this case. We also start from the context of the time, when Christianity strongly rejected pagan lines, non-Christian magic, and therefore Christ should not be considered an offshoot of a pagan wizard. Nor is there a patristic text that refers to Christ as the wizard [17]. In this conception, however, Christ is understood as a healer who heals (Exodus 15.26, Matthew 9.12, Mark 2.17, Luke 4.23, 5.31). However, Jefferson points out in his study that in the Gospels (e.g. Luke and Mark), Jesus, the physician, is distinguished from other physicians who are similar to him in terms of healing but different in terms of the impact of healing on the patient (Mark 5.26, Luke 8.43) [22]. The stick in Christ's hands in early Christian art is understood not as a tool for a miracle but as an iconographic element that serves as a symbol of power and renewal, a kind of miraculous ability [22].

Jefferson points out another important aspect, namely that the early Christian interpretation of the wand (staff) must be examined in the context of two other exceptional figures who are the only ones holding a wand and who appear in early Christian art: Moses and Peter. Since the 3rd century, the image of Christ, who performs healings and miracles, appears quite often and mostly in a funeral context. This was the dominant image of Christ until the 5th century when the image of Christ the Victor became a priority [23; *The Acts of Peter*, in *Early Christian Writings*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actspeter.html>, accessed on 20.01.2021]. This typology was also associated with the figure of Saint Peter, where he is depicted on Christian funerary sarcophagi, where, like Moses, he strikes a rock with a stick [12]. Moses was one of the most important figures in the history of salvation. The stick in his hands is not missing on the frescoes with the motif of crossing the Red Sea or squeezing water out of the rock. This would indicate that the symbolism of miracles and sticks follows the Old Testament. We must draw attention to the figure of Moses, who here becomes the prototype of Christ. The rod of Moses must therefore be considered a wand in the hands of Christ. This wand is a symbol of spiritual power and

authority; Heidl calls it *virga virtutis* [17]. In the Old Testament, in addition to this meaning, we also encounter this image in other contexts: a stick as a measuring rod (Ezekiel 40.3-5), a symbol of protection and consolation (Psalm 22.4), a part of the property (Genesis 38.25), a stick for performing miracles (Numbers 17.3-8; Hebrews 9.4; Exodus 4.2-20, 7.9-20), the symbol of covenant (Zechariah 11.10), etc.

Miracles and the people who performed them were highly valued in ancient times. Proof of this is the work of Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospels*, which considers the miracles of Jesus to be evidence of the Gospel. He states that the healings and miracles of Christ “were evidence of his divinity” that legitimized his identity as the Son of God [Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospels*, 3.4.109ab, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_de_05_book3.Htm]. Against those who questioned the truth of Christ’s miracles, Eusebius claimed that Christ’s disciples were eyewitnesses and truthfully proclaimed Jesus’ miraculous deeds. Eusebius argued for Peter’s infallibility in defending Christ’s miracles and also described Jesus’ commission of disciples as a command to have higher goals than the Jews under the commandments of Moses [Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospels*, 3.5.109.123, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_de_05_book3.htm].

Jesus’ miracles and healings, and those of his other disciples were powerful signs that attracted attention and aroused faith. Miracles were part of the Jewish and Christian faith reaching back to Moses, witnessed in Jesus and transmitted to Jesus’ disciples, especially the Apostle Peter. Eusebius’ text reveals how strongly the emphasis on miracles was present in early Church documents (see Augustine, *The Usefulness of Belief* 15.33 (CSEL 25.41)) [23]. It is thus a form of connection between the Old and New Testaments, where certain personalities or situations of the Old Testament are the forerunners of the New Testament actors. Most of these themes have become a popular subject for depiction in the catacombs. Within the theme of miracles, we could use the following form of typology by Alan Watts (Table 1) [24].

Table 1. Old Testament ‘prefigurations’ and their New Testament equivalents.

Old Testament	New Testament
The Assumption of Elijah the Prophet (2 Kings 2.1-12)	The Ascension of Christ (Luke 24.50-53)
The miracles of the Prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4.1-37): the multiplication of the widow’s oil; raising of the Shunamite’s son	The miracles of Jesus Christ: the miracles of loaves and fishes (John 6.1-15), the raising of Lazarus (John 11.1-44)
Jonah and the Whale (Jonah 2.1-11)	The Death and Resurrection (Luke 24.1-12)
The deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego in the furnace (Daniel 3.1-100)	Salvation from hell
Susanna and the Elders (Daniel 13.1-64)	Persecution of the Church by the Jews and pagans
Tobias and the Fish (Tobias 6.1-9)	The Healing Christ

The Old and New Testaments bring us many narrations of miracles, miraculous situations, or miracles of healing performed by prophets, Jesus Himself or the apostles. Nevertheless, in the catacombs, we encounter the depiction of only individual motifs, i.e. only certain miracles and situations. According to the available frescoes of miracles in the catacombs, we can clarify which selected miracles in the catacomb art were taken from the Old and which were from the New Testament. The term miracle, in this case, means motives and situations that are also described as a miracle in Scripture.

In the classification, we drew from the classification made by Clark D. Lamberton from his study *The Development of Christian Symbolism as Illustrated in Roman Catacombs Painting* [25].

Table 2. The images of miracles in the New Testament.

Topic	Centuries of occurrence and painting of frescoes	The occurrence (expressed numerically)
Raising of Lazarus	II-IV	54*
Woman with issue of blood	II-IV	5
Paralytic healed	II-IV	20
Multiplication of loaves	II-IV	32
Healing of blind man	III-IV	7
Healing of leper	III-IV	3
Unclassified miracle scenes	III-IV	2
Wine miracle at Cana	III-IV	3
Daughter of Jairus	IV	1
Healing of demoniac	IV	2
Total	-	129

* according to the records of the Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra, the depiction of Lazarus is 63 times

According to Table 2, we see that it is mostly a depiction of the miracles of healing from the New Testament and thus the miracles performed by Christ - specifically 129 depictions. However, the data in the table do not apply to all catacombs, and thus the number of individual frescoes may vary depending on the individual catacombs. Undoubtedly, the Old Testament also abounds in stories of miracles, but of the Old Testament, only miracles associated with Moses, Jonah, Daniel and the three young men in the burning furnace and others occur the most - specifically, we have 196 images (Table 3). Although it may seem at first glance that there are more New Testament miracles, Table 3 shows us that more depictions of miracles come from the Old Testament. These are, then, miraculous situations in the life of the individual, in which God intervenes in the form of a miracle, and thus their depiction was more frequent by the early Church.

Table 3. The images of miracles in the Old Testament.

Topic	Centuries of occurrence and painting of frescoes	The occurrence (expressed numerically)
Daniel among lions	I-IV	39
(not with lions)	III	1
Moses striking rock	II-IV	68
Moses - other than at rock	IV	6
Babylonian Children (Daniel 3.1-100)	II-IV	19
Jonah	II-IV	58
Tobias	III-IV	3
Translation of Elijah	IV	1
Rain of Manna	IV	1
Total	-	196

In his study, Jefferson classifies miracles into three basic groups, focusing only on miracles from the New Testament, especially the Gospels [22]:

1. healing miracles (healing of a paralytic, a blind man, and a woman suffering from blood flow);
2. nature miracles (transformation of water into wine in the Cana of Galilee, reproduction of loaves of bread and fish);
3. raising the dead (resurrection of Lazarus, Jairus' daughter).

However, it differs from Lamberton's theory in the dating of frescoes. According to Jefferson, frescoes of Jesus as miracles do not appear until the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century [22].

4. Depiction of selected miracles on the frescoes of the catacombs in Rome

We have already outlined that miracles in the early Church were able to evoke sincere devotion and faith. These were mainly miracles of healing from the Scriptures, which were reflected in the catacombs on the murals. Of course, we can also find images and themes of miracles on sarcophagi, various objects made of glass or ceramics, but this is not the subject of our study. Before we start by describing the individual frescoes, we want to point out a few things. When Jesus began His prophetic mission, He claimed to have been empowered by the Holy Spirit and proved His power by miracles of healing (among others). Jesus' healings always took place in the context of people's faith and forgiveness of their sins. Jesus' power touched the faith of those who needed healing, and by their faith they were healed. Jesus Himself said, "... , your faith has made you well" (in Greek "ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε", Luke 8.48, 7.19, 18.42; Mark 5.34, 10.52; Matthew 9.22). In the stories of miracles, when Jesus meets the sick, there is usually a note about the severity or duration of the disease. Jesus healed only if one had real faith, usually using no complicated external gestures - just a simple touch and a few words [26]. In one miracle, however, He used a distinct gesture. It is the story of the healing of a man who

had been blind since his birth (John 9.1-11). Jesus spat on the ground, mixed his saliva with the dirt and used the mud to rub the blind man's eyes. Then He sent him to wash into the pool of Siloe, where the man regained his sight. Washing is also a symbol of baptism, which is the inner healing of people from sin and evil [27]. The depiction of Christ in catacomb art is intended to inspire faith in the early persecuted Church to awaken faith in Jesus divine power who heals people with the touch of His hands or a stick, which makes him a much better healer than are those of the pagan traditions [20, 23].

4.1. Fresco - Jesus heals a man who is paralyzed

We find a story about the healing of a paralytic in Mark 2.1-12, Matthew 9.1-8, Luke 5.17-26 [28]. In this story, Jesus points out that His healing of this man means forgiving his sins. In the story, Jesus tells the paralyzed, "Get up, take your bed, and go home". In the art piece, we can see how a man holds his bed behind his head on his shoulders and is shown walking. The fresco depicts the successful recovery of the patient and is, therefore, a narrative character of the fresco. All frescoes are very similar in design. When describing the story, the evangelists also point to the words of the people that they had never seen anything like it, which is confirmed only by the drama and popularity of the story. This motif can also be found in the Dura Europos synagogue in Syria (early 3rd century AD), where Jesus also appears on the fresco treating paralytic with an outstretched right hand [22]. Another story about the healing of a paralytic is found in Matthew 8.5-13 and Luke 7.1-10 (the healing of a sick servant of the centurion) [28, p. 56]. This story, however, is most likely not portrayed in the catacombs.

4.2. Fresco - Jesus heals a blind man

The depiction of the healing of a blind can be found in catacomb art, but this scene is depicted on sarcophagi even more often. There are several stories in the Gospels about the healing of the blind man - the healing of the blind man from Bethsaida (Mark 8.22-26), the healing of the blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10.46-52, Matthew 20.29-34, Luke 18.35-43) and the healing of a man who was blind from his birth, mentioned above in connection with Jesus' gesture of rubbing his eyes (John 9.1-41) [28, p. 61-62]. In the frescoes, we can see the man raising his hands up to pray (symbol *oranta*/praying). Next to him stands Christ, who is relatively larger than the blind man and touches the man with His hands or fingers [29; *Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO - Pri, D, 7*]. The healing of the blind person points to Christ, who physically meets the believer and heals him with his touch.

4.3. Fresco - Jesus heals a woman suffering from a haemorrhage for twelve years

In the Gospels of Mark 5.21-34, Matthew 9.18-26 and Luke 8.40-48, there is the story of a woman who had been suffering from blood flow for 12 years. In the story, the woman touches Jesus' clothes and is healed at that moment. This is also depicted in the frescoes where a woman touches Jesus' dress, believing she can be healed [*Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO - Lau, L, 63*]. In another image, a woman kneels under Jesus and clutches the hem of His tunic. As soon as the woman touches Him, Christ realizes that healing power has come out of Him. Here, Christ points to the woman - either as a recognition that she had touched Him or as a blessing [*Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO - Lau, L, 54*].

4.4. Jesus and the wedding feast of Cana

The story of the miracle in the Cana of Galilee can only be found in the Gospel of John 2.1-11 [28, p. 165]. According to John the Evangelist, the first miracle (miraculous sign) in Cana of Galilee is the first act of the Son of God's self-revelation, which is then completed with His sacrifice on the cross. The miracle of turning water into wine was proof of the unity of God the Father with the Son. And just as God revealed His power in the miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt until they were led to the Promised Land, so was the glory of Jesus revealed as historically tangible to His disciples. This miracle caused the disciples to know who He was, and this became the basis of their faith. On the other hand, by faith they confirmed his union with the Father (John 2.11) [29].

In the fresco [*Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO - Lau, F, 14*], Christ stands above the vessels, to which He points with a mallet, depicting a miraculous act, while a banquet is held behind Him. The depiction of a miracle in Cana of Galilee can be understood in catacomb art as the so-called eating ritual with the dead - a form of a typical Roman banquet mentioned in the writings of Paul, Ambrose and Augustine. Margaret Miles argues that these forms of frescoes should have resembled a liturgical action. It is, therefore, a sacramental procedure in the catacomb space, which could be carried out by members of the deceased [30]. There is also a focus not on earthly but eternal life [20, p. 314-315]. In the story, Jesus turned the water (in six stone vessels) into wine at the wedding feast, which heralds the Last Supper and establishes the Eucharist.

4.5. Jesus' miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fish

A description of these miracles is found in Mark 6.30-44; Matthew 14.13-21, 15.32-39; Luke 9.10-17 and John 6.1-14 [28, p. 169]. In the story, Jesus fed the crowd of 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, and after that, His disciples

gathered twelve baskets full of leftovers. In another story, Jesus multiplied seven loaves and some fish. As with the miracle in Cana on the catacomb frescoes, here Jesus points the wand at the baskets at his feet, which indicates a miraculous act [*Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO – Anp, B, 7*; *Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO - Lau, H, 29*; *Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO - Lau, G, 46*].

4.6. Jesus raises various persons from the dead

There are several resurrection scenes in catacomb art. Among the best-known motifs is the resurrection of Jairus' daughter - a twelve-year-old girl (Mark 5.21-43, Matthew 9.18-26, Luke 8.40-56) [28, p. 64] and the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11.1-46) [28, p. 66]. The fresco of the resurrection of Jairus' daughter is often difficult to recognize. Usually, Jesus touches the girl's bed with the cane. The resurrection of Lazarus is the most common miracle depicted in the frescoes because the story was considered to contain the most impressive form of a miracle. In addition, the story emphasized to Christians the ultimate resurrection of the dead and provided comfort to the family of the deceased. These frescoes are very easy to recognize [*Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO – Din, G, 8*; *Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO – Anp, B, 3*; *Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO – Cal, E, 67*; *Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO – Dom, L, 52*; *Archivio Pontificia Commissione Di Archeologia Sacra - STO - Lau, G, 13*]. Lazarus is depicted as a mummified figure who seemed to come out of a funeral home, the so-called *aediculum*. Jesus is depicted in the fresco with a wand that emphasizes the miracle aimed at Lazarus. It looks like He is urging the character to wake up and get up. The figure of Lazarus is much smaller than Jesus. Lazarus is the symbol of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and his bandaged body with flax ropes is a forerunner of the empty tomb of Jesus and the sails left behind by Him [22, p. 316-317]. Miracles of resurrection are very common, especially in the Apocryphal Acts. Their task is to emphasize the power of the Christian God over the life and death of man. It is a reference to the eternal life that those who believe in Jesus will receive it. Thus, it is not only about the physical effect of the resurrection to new life but also about the theological understanding of conversion as the resurrection from the state of death in which the sinful person is. It is the message of the transition from death to life through the conversion of the sinner [31].

5. Conclusions

As part of our research, we focused on early Christian art in the period from the 1st to the 4th century AD. Our attention was directed at the theme of depicting miracles in the frescoes of Christian catacombs. These frescoes show

to us that the Early Christian Church and piety were imbued with sincere faith in the miracles of Jesus. This may have been one of the reasons why Christianity established itself so quickly in the pagan Hellenized world as a powerful religion early after its emergence. Within the Greco-Roman and Jewish environment, there was a need to create a purely Christian visual theme that would refer to the Christian faith. The priority of miracles and the depiction of Jesus' miracles in the catacombs visually and narratively point to Jesus as a mighty God, a physician, a healer who heals people, helps them, and frees them from suffering. The healing of Jesus was ubiquitous in frescoes and art, as well as in the Gospels or other Early Christian writings. Frescoes such as the healing of a paralytic, the healing of a blind man, a woman suffering from blood flow (etc.) show the importance of these stories for the Early Church communities. They needed to be reminded of Jesus' healing power. A typical example of the catacomb funeral art is Jesus' miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus, which symbolizes the resurrection. This miracle depicted in the catacombs became the most popular and was considered one of the greatest miracles performed by Christ. The frescoes based on miracles in the catacombs served as a basic form of analogous stories from Scripture and, on the one hand, as a promotion tool of the Christian faith in Jesus and His miraculous divine power.

In conclusion, we can state that the individual motifs of miracles show us that Christians at that time were well familiarized with the Gospel of John, as evidenced by the individual frescoes. These were miracles such as the transformation of water into wine in Cana of Galilee, the resurrection of Lazarus, and the reproduction of bread and fish, which have their specific representation in John's Gospel. In the frescoes with this motif, Jesus is depicted using a mallet or wand to perform them. Interestingly, we can only find such depictions in the Gospel of John. In other miracles, Jesus is depicted in the frescoes only with the gesture of a raised or outstretched hand. For example, Jesus is not found at all in the frescoes of the healing of the paralytic.

There is no doubt that the motif of depicting miracles in the early Christian Church and art was a ubiquitous and very important part of the Christian faith. Its main purpose was to declare the uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God. This interpretation is also confirmed by the works of the Church Fathers. The frescoes of miracles in a religiously pluralistic environment represented a unique and original iconography created by the Early Church.

It is clear, then, that the motive of miracles was so important to Christians at the time that they could not be overlooked even in Early Christian catacomb art. We identify with Jefferson's theory that early Christians were more attracted to the image of God healing the sick and performing miracles than the image of the crucified Son of God. Jesus was to be proclaimed as the most powerful among the powerful. In the difficult times of Christianity, it was necessary to believe in miracles that could change the believers' life situation in the temporal life as well as his/her eternal destiny.

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