Seeing God

4

The question of God's invisibility was much discussed by theologians of the third and fourth centuries. Much of what they wrote about and debated concerned how God's "appearances" in several biblical stories meshed with the invisibility of God. Such Old Testament statements as that of Jacob, "I saw God face to face and my soul was saved" (Gen 32:30), and the report that Moses saw God "face to face" (Exod 33:11), and Isaiah's testimony that he "saw the Lord of hosts sitting upon a throne" (Isa 6:1), and many other "sightings" seemingly contradict the claim that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18).

Some early church Fathers explained those Old Testament appearances as actually pre-Incarnation appearances of the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, granted to those of great faith. We will not go into an analysis of the debate except to state that while the issue was much talked about among the theologians they did not react to the visual expressions of the invisible God in mosaics, paintings, and sculpture of the time. There is a very obvious disconnect between what was happening in popular faith based art and theological discussions.

In her book, "*Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity,*" Robin Margaret Jensen writes that either the theologians "assumed their arguments to preclude artistic portrayal" or they simply had not seen any portrayals, or chose not to oppose them if they had.[1] Whatever the reason it is during the fourth century that we find "a number of images meant as actual figures or as symbols of God". Much of what we'll explore in this part is based on Jensen's excellent book. Anyone who wants a thorough detailed presentation of this topic should seek it out.

Possibly the earliest representation of the Trinity is a 4th century painting in a catacomb on Rome's *Via Latina*.[2] The subject is the Old Testament story of Abraham and his three visitors at Mamre [**28**]. In the painting Abraham is seated with a calf at his side. He greets three "men" with a raised arm and hand. The three men in the painting look somewhat similar —the one in the middle is shorter— and the three stand very close together. Now, in the biblical story Abraham uses a greeting that addresses the three in the singular as, "My Lord." But he then invites the Lord to sit and "...refresh yourselves..." —using a plural form. The conversation continues to jump back and forth between the singular and plu-

28

***"Abraham and the Three Visitors at Mamre;"* 4th c. catacomb on the Via Latina, Rome.**

ral forms. Further on in the story "...the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the Lord." Abraham then draws near to the Lord. What follows is a conversation now taking place between only two characters in the story: Abraham and the singular "Lord". The two other men — now called "angels"— continue on to Sodom. It seems that the singular "Lord" that Abraham used in greeting the three men in the beginning of the story should maybe now be considered as having been addressed to only one visitor and not all three. We are left rather perplexed.

Well, all three "men" have been understood by both Jews and Christians as standing for God. Some church Fathers interpreted this theophany as an early announcement of the Trinity but others, following the Jewish tradition, take the three to all be angels and, therefore, messengers of God. But, there is no doubt that with both interpretations we are left with the impression that Abraham has spoken with God. [3]

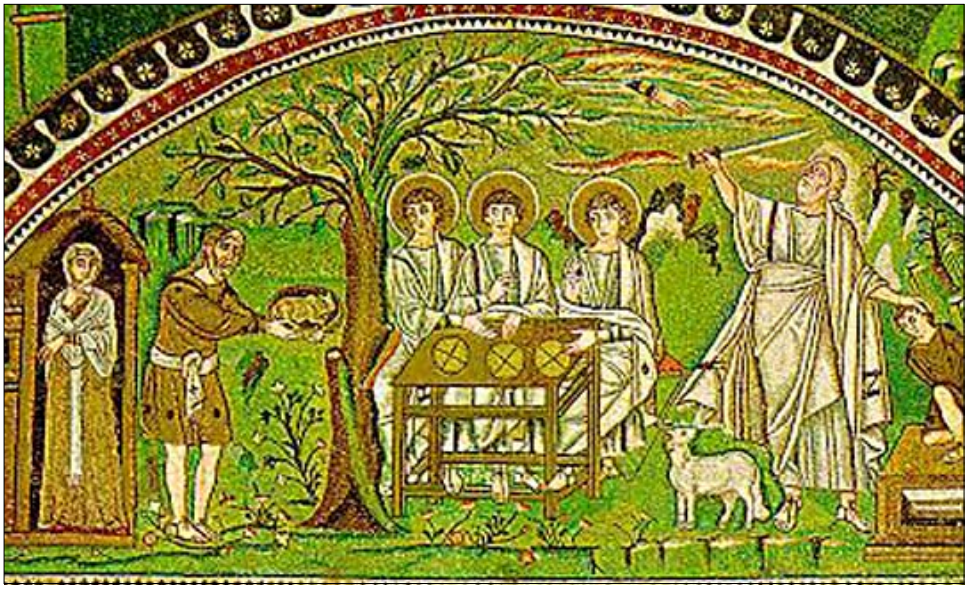
29

***"Abraham and His Three Visitors at Mamre;"* late 4th c. mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.**

There is another visual representation of this story that presents a more definitive interpretation. The episode of the *Hospitality of Abraham* also appears in a mosaic cycle of biblical stories in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, ca. 425 [**29**]. In the top of the panel we see Abraham greeting the three men with a bow. In this work, however, the center figure of the three visitors is not shorter but, rather, surrounded by a *mandorla* (a full body halo). Except for the mandorla the three men look alike. In the bottom half of the panel the three men are shown sitting at a table but this time there is no mandorla around the center figure. (Abraham, by-the-way, is shown twice; once, asking his wife to make some bread and, second, serving the bread to the three men. This is an artistic convention that is called *continuous narration.* It is a way of visually narrating several scenes of a story much like a comic strip but without the use of separate frames.) This representation of Abraham's hospitality may have been influenced by early church Father Justin Martyr's interpretation of the three men of

the story as actually the Son of God (Logos) accompanied by two angels.[4]

Another mosaic, this time from the 6th century, presents us with yet another rendition of Abraham and his visitors [**30**]. This one is from the church of San Vitale in Ravenna. It also has two parts. On the left is the



30

***"Abraham and his three visitors;"* church of San Vitale, Ravenna, mid -6th c.**

scene of Sarah and Abraham with the three visitors. On the right is Abraham at the moment he hears the voice of God stopping him from sacrificing his son, Isaac. The three visitors to Abraham are virtual look-alikes in dress and face. There does not appear to be any significant distinction among them.[5] This mosaic seems to have resolved all ambiguity in favor of the singular —the three together are understood as one (the Holy Trinity).

But are all these really attempts at the representation of the invisible God or are they merely literal presentations of the *facts* of the story. After all, the biblical story recounts the appearance of three men and isn't that all the artists have depicted? Of the three works we have looked at, the Santa Maggiore mosaic actually comes closest to representing the invisible God in a way not mentioned in the biblical account (through the use of the mandorla). Maybe, but if we look again at the San Vitale mosaic [**30**] and concentrate on the scene of Abraham and Isaac we will notice a hand reaching down from the sky. Presumably the hand is the "hand of God", a symbol of God's voice. The hand of God became a common symbol for God, or God's voice, in Christian art as, indeed, it had been in Jewish representations. A sarcophagus [**31**] from the 4th century depicts the hand of God giving the Law to Moses and —once again— staying the hand of Abraham.

There was, however, an effort by some to "portray the infinite and unknowable God without resorting to human features". Jensen notes that in the Arian baptistery in Ravenna (early 6th century) there is a non-figurative presentation of the Trinity consisting of an empty throne with a

31

***"Moses receiving the Law"* and *"Abraham offering Isaac"* from a 4th c. sarcophagus, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican City.**
Photo: Robin Margaret Jensen

cross set upon its cushion [**32**]. Similar typological or symbolic representations of God can be found in Santa Maria Maggiore, San Vitale, and also in the Orthodox baptistery in Ravenna as well as other places. "Sometimes a crown instead of a cross sits upon the throne and a dove may be shown above the throne." [6] That the empty *prepared throne* symbol refers to the Trinity is subject to some interpretation. For example, James Snyder in *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4th—14th Century,* interprets it as referring to the anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ in Judgment. Similar empty throne images were displayed with the insignia of the empire's imperial office to signify the presence of the divine emperor whenever official business and judgments were being conducted in his name. [7]

32

***"Cross enthroned"*, early 6th c. mosaic in the dome of the Arian baptistery in Ravenna.**

But portraying the Triune God as three human males persisted through the 4th century. Most interesting is an early to mid-4th century sarcophagus in the *Musée de l'Arles Antique*, France [**33**]. The sarcophagus has three registers. At the left end of the middle one we can see three male figures that represent the Trinity. God the Father is shown seated. The Holy Spirit is standing to the left of, and behind, the Father. The Son is also standing but to the right of the Father. The Son has his hand on the head of Eve (the scene depicts God as Creator). The Second Person of the Trinity —the Son, the Logos— is the one through whom the world is created and so is shown interacting with the physical world, symbolized by the figure of Eve. The Father is posed blessing his creation. The apostle Paul is also represented here standing behind Adam and next to the Son which brings to mind his teaching that Christ is the new Adam. [8]

33

4th century sarcophagus in the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France

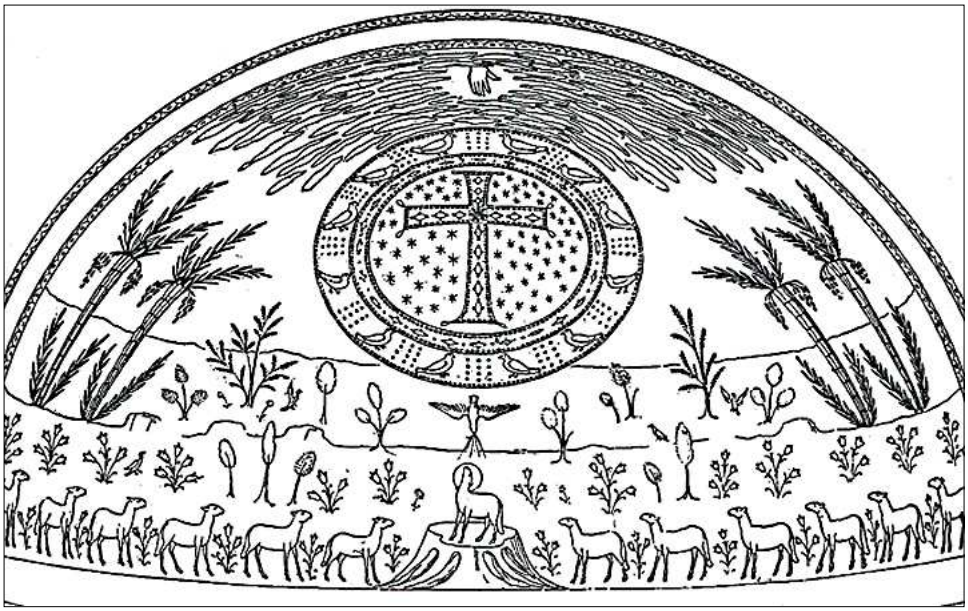
A second sarcophagus (4th century, *Museo Pio Cristiano*) [**34**], Vatican City, looks almost the same in its depiction of the creation of Eve. In this sarcophagus, however, Adam is shown in sleep, reclined. The three persons of the Trinity are shown as full bearded, slightly older look-alike

34

***Detail*, sarcophagus, 4th century, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican City**
Photo: Robin Margaret Jensen

men. In the previous sarcophagus the Logos is depicted as clean shaven and younger than the Father who has a full beard. The Spirit appears with a close cropped beard.[10] The Council of Nicaea settled a debate over whether the Son and the Father were "of the same substance" (the Orthodox position) or that the Son was, in some way, lesser than the Father (the Arian position). The council ruled in favor of the Orthodox position. This sarcophagus may have belonged to an Arian believer as the depiction of Christ as young may be an attempt to represent the subordinate nature of the Son to the Father. The point that I would like to stress here is that not only did artists tackle the problem of representing the invisible God but they even found subtle ways to suggest theological distinctions when representing the Trinity.

In "*Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4th—14th Century,*" James Snyder reproduced a drawing [**35**] that is a hypothetical reconstruction of the apse in the Basilica Apostolorum in Cimitile, ca. 400-402. The reconstruction is based on a description of the apse by Paulinus



35

Hypothetical reconstruction of the apse mosaic in the Basilica Apostolorum, Cimitile (James Snyder, after Wickoff), ca. 400-402

of Nola who commissioned the apse design of the Trinity for his basilica in Nola. It is a clear —and beautiful— image of the Trinity which makes use of both figurative and non-figurative images to represent the divine. It is a fitting work with which to end this part of our history. Both Snyder and Jensen quote Paulinus at length:

> *The Trinity glistens in full mystery: Christ stands as a Lamb, the voice of the Father sounds from the heavens, and the Holy Spirit flows out through the dove. A crown*

> *encircles the cross like a bright sphere, and on this crown are the crowns of the apostles who are represented by a choir of doves. The Holy Trinity meets as one in Christ, himself having Trinitarian signs: the voice of the Father and the Spirit reveal the divine, the purple and the palm indicate his kingship and triumph. He, himself the rock of ecclesia, stands on a rock from which issue the four sonorous streams, the Evangelists, the living waters of Christ.* [11]

Our examination of the representation of the invisible God in several works of early Christian art seems to suggest that not many considered it blasphemous for artists to depict the divine. Jensen, by way of explanation, notes, however, that the images or metaphors for God were not portraits but rather depictions of God taking action: handing down the Law, creating Adam and Eve, staying the sacrifice of Isaac, etc. But, she points out, it's also in the 4th century that portraits of Christ and the saints emerge as a stimulant to religious piety.[12] We turn our attention next to that development and its prelude to the iconoclastic crisis. ✠

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1 Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face, Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 115.

2 Jensen, p. 117.

3 I've misplaced this citation but I believe the thought comes from Jensen.

4 Jensen, p. 119.

5 Jensen, p. 118-119.

6 Jensen, p. 123.

7 James Snyder, *Medieval Art, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4th-14th Centuries*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), p. 48.

8 Jensen, p. 126-127.

9 Jensen, p. 128-129.

10 Jensen, p. 127.

11 Snyder, p. 63

12 Jensen, p. 129.