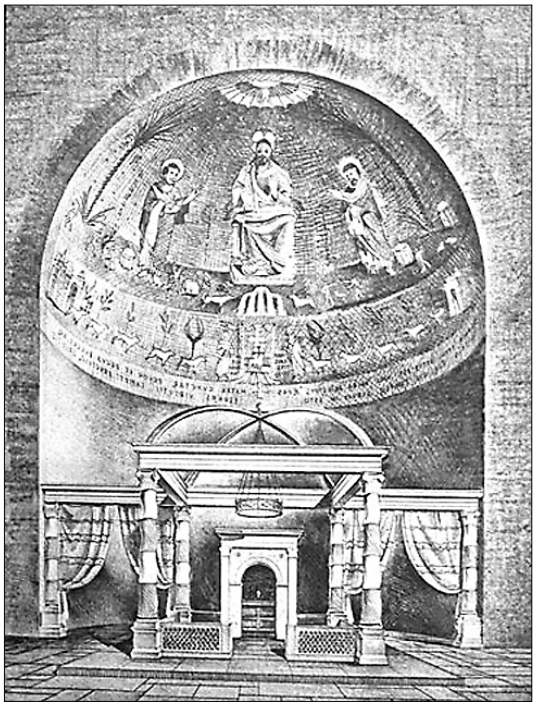
First 'dogmatic' images

The period 313 – 500 was foundational in the development of Christian art. In the previous two parts of this chapter we examined the development of church architecture during this period of official recognition of Christianity in the Roman Empire. We turn now to the development of Christian doctrinal pictorial art during the period —images meant to illustrate a theological concept or dogma. The repertoire of narrative imagery continues and is even expanded but it is dogmatic imagery that is the important development.



152 ***Original altar and apse of old St Peter's, Rome;*** ca. 350.

The apse fresco indicated here is conjecture based upon later drawings. The upper half of the apse is of the *Dominus legem dat Peter* type image placed within a garden environment (paradise).

<http://inillotempore.com/blog/pivot/entry.php?id=632>

Numerous heretical and political challenges as well as societal changes during the period of recognition influenced the visual representations of the essential doctrinal beliefs of Christians. By the beginning of the sixth century the basic dogmatic imagery of the Christian Church, with the exceptions of images of the crucifixion and some Marian themes, was established. There would be future variations but the essential thematic designs would remain constant throughout subsequent centuries.

We are so certain, today, of our understanding of Jesus Christ and of what his role in history is that it is difficult for us to appreciate just how unclear it all was back in the early centuries. Basic issues remained disputed such as the nature of Jesus Christ –human or divine (or *in what way,* or *to what extent,* human or divine)?—and his relationship to God the Father (was Christ 'begotten' or 'made'?). The political sphere also exerted its influence. With legalization and the patronage of the emperors came a tug of war over which had authority over the other. Was the emperor over the Church or the Church over the emperor? Also, the competition between the new faith and traditional paganism challenged Christianity to define itself visually relative to the old pagan beliefs. How was it different; how was it similar? There was even the problem of how to depict Christ. What should he look like? What, in fact, *had* he looked like? Is it proper and right that he be depicted at all?

We will leave the controversy over the use of images in worship, and the question as to whether Christ and the saints should be depicted, until we take up the matter of the iconoclastic controversy. For now, it is enough to say that while Christian writers often hotly criticized the pagans for the worship of gold and silver idols they seemed to not take much notice of the prominent use of images in Christian worship during the 4th and 5th centuries. (Extravagant decoration of churches ***was*** criticized, but, not so much the use of images.) The legalization of Christianity seemed to beg for some kind of impressive art if for no other reason than to instruct new initiates in 'orthodox' Christianity. Perhaps that is the possible explanation for the mostly mute response of the Christian theologians to the surge in the production of religious images.

We don't have a great deal of liturgical art –decoration in churches-- to examine before 350. We assume that some works existed

and there is evidence that there were some impressive frescos [152] but, unfortunately, those are long gone and so for the period immediately following legalization we have to be content with surveying the final phase in the production of funerary or catacomb art or relying on textural references.

We will proceed by discussing the probable reasons for the introduction of new subjects during this period.

In competition with paganism

The magic wand

One of the most interesting of the new subjects was actually introduced in the 3rd century, a little earlier than the period we are currently exploring. It is not strictly speaking a dogmatic image although it firmly established for history our understanding of the human personality of Jesus. We see the subject in catacomb paintings and on sarcophagi: Christ working his miracles using a magic wand [153]. Nothing, of course, is mentioned in scripture –the Gospels—of Christ ever using a wand to work miracles. The inclusion of a magic wand in the storytelling paintings and carvings therefore intrigues us and so we search for a reason.[1]

153 *The Raising of Lazarus*, sarcophagus carving, Lateran Basilica, ca. 340; Musei Vaticani, Rome.

Christ raises Lazarus with the aid of a magic wand.

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) p 55

Magic was an important part of the ancient world; there were rituals and incantations for nearly everything, but most especially for health issues.[2] Health was an issue for Christians as well, of course, and so representations of Christ's miracle cures were ubiquitous in funerary art, on objects of everyday use, and ecclesiastical objects. In fact, the miracle stories could be viewed as the one unifying theme among the several seemingly disjointed pictorial presentations in early Christian art during the third century and first half of the fourth century.

Depictions of Christ using a magic wand to cure people may be explained in light of the magic worked by pagan magicians who did use magic wands. The wand invites the comparison between Christ and his pagan rivals. There were, however, some critical differences between Christ's magic 'tricks' and the magicians'. First, Christ took no payment for a miraculous cure; he did not perform a miracle as entertainment for profit. His purpose, unlike the magicians, was to lead people to a fuller, better life. Secondly, He performed miraculous cures without using spells and incantations which were essential aspects of ancient magic rituals. Rather, Jesus performed miracles in his own name. Thirdly, magicians'

154 (right) ***Sarcophagus Fragment with Miracle Scenes*****,** ca 300-310; Museo Nazionale delle Terme, Rome

(from left to right) the *Cure of the Woman with Issue of Blood*, the *Sermon on the Mount*, *Cure of the Paralytic*, and the *Cure of the Leper*. In each cure image Christ touches the person with his hand. The use of a magic wand eventually disappears from images of Christ working miracles once paganism had lost its official appeal.

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) p 70

155 (above) ***Adoration of the Magi,*** Christian sarcophagus, ca.

The subject may have appeared in the 4th c. in celebration of the victory of the *New Law* of Christ over the old law of the 'demons' (pagan gods of ancient Greece and Rome).

156 (top) ***Moses Using a Magic Wand to Cause Water to Flow from a Rock,*** Roman catacomb ca. 4th c.

<http://www.catholic-convert.com/Portals/0/Moses-Peter%20sm.jpg>

magic tricks were illusions but Christ's miracles were real and permanent.[3]

Also –aside and apart from magicians' magic and use of wands - and relative to the pagan gods of healing-- Christ had a better, more appealing bed-side manner. Often he is "*seen in Christian imagery walking among his people, touching, stroking, comforting, pressing his warm and life-giving hands on them, and working a very visible magic.*"[4] Personal, compassionate human touch was never part of the representation of the pagan gods associated with curing. It was, however, central in the depiction of Christ's miracles[154]. Even when he is shown using the wand he is seen among the common people. This image of the personal, compassionate Christ was a welcome relief in the world of late antiquity when so much of life was dehumanizing. Clearly, Christ's magic and healing power was better than what the magicians and pagan gods could offer. The inclusion of a magic wand in depictions of Christ effecting cures had a relatively short life, disappearing from Christian imagery once paganism had sufficiently faded as a serious official competitor. The image of a compassionate and personal Christ, however, defined him for all future generations.

Christ seemingly inherited his magic powers from his precursor in the Old Testament, Moses, who is sometimes shown in Christian art of the same period also wielding a magic wand in, for example, parting the red sea using his staff and -in the desert- commanding water to flow from a rock by hitting the stone, also with his staff.[5] Moses even used his staff to best pharaoh's magicians in a magic contest.

The theme of the superiority of Christ's magic over that of sorcerers and the pagan gods may also be partly responsible for the appearance in Christian art of the story of the *Adoration of the Three Magi*[155]. Magi were knowledgeable experts when it came to evil spirits and magic. It is possible that the appearance and popularity of the magi story during this time of intense competition with paganism was a signal to the pagan world that the power of the old gods –'demons' as the Christians called

them- had finally met its match in Jesus Christ.[6] The experts –the magi– had recognized, and officially declared, Christ the victor.

Contra Arianism

Arius, a priest of North Africa, propounded a heresy that was one of the first to plague the Church following Constantine's recognition of the Christian religion in 313. Debate centered chiefly in the Eastern Roman Empire, in Alexandria and Antioch, Egypt and Syria. Briefly, Arius taught that Jesus was not God as the Father was God but rather was made by the Father and therefore had a beginning. The Son, therefore, had not always existed (was not co-eternal with the Father). It became a serious challenge to the faith with perhaps more than half of the bishops identifiably Arian at one point.[7] The disunity caused by the uproar in the East was too much for Constantine the Great to ignore and so he called a Church council (the First Council of Nicaea, 325) that met and drafted a creedal formula that condemned Arius and upheld that Jesus the Christ was of the "same substance" as the Father and was "eternally begotten" of the Father, not made by the Father. The eternal divine Logos took on human flesh and became man in Jesus Christ.

157 (below) ***Gandhara Buddha,*** 1st-2nd c. A.D., Tokyo National Museum

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gandhara_Buddha_%28tnm%29.jpeg> *Wikipedia:en:User:World Imaging (talk)|World Imaging (talk)]] at the English Wikipedia project.*

158 (top right) ***Christ with Halo,*** Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome, late 4th c.

159 (right) ***Christ in Glory,*** mosaic, Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome, 4th c.

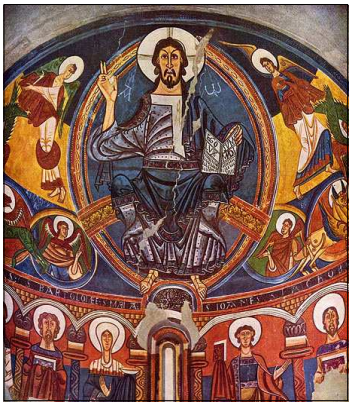
Christ is fully surrounded by a spherical aureole.

The halo and aureole/mandorla

To stress the divinity of Jesus, a symbolic design element was employed that had no obvious precursor in Greek and Roman art but seems to have been imported from the orient. When we now see a figure represented with a halo[159 behind the head of a painted or sculpted image we instantly identify the figure as holy –or divine. That symbol of holiness or divinity appeared in Christian art in the second half of the 4th century. The halo, however, had its origins in 2nd century India and central Asia in representations of Buddha[158] and other holy persons or beings. At first, in Christian art, the halo was reserved to Christ but eventually was applied to representations of any saint and even, sometimes, the emperor. Christ's halo became distinguishable from others by the addition of three arms of a cross (or three rays of light) inscribed on the round shape behind his head.

Other symbolic shapes, the *aureole* and *mandorla*, surrounded the entire figure. They appeared in Christian art at about the same time as the

halo. Christ is represented standing or sitting full-figure in front of an oval shape. Often the figure of Christ oversteps the edge of the shape. The mandorla is often alleged by some art historians to be derived from the *imago clipeata* or Roman shield image but it too is of Buddhist origin.[8] The halo and mandorla/aureole are visual clues that the image represents orthodox Christian belief.



160 *Christ in Glory,* *ca. 1220, Museo d'Arta, Barcelona, Spain*

*Majestas Domini (*Christ in Glory*)*

The *Majesta Domini* (Christ in Glory) dogmatic image employs the aureole or mandorla shape to help communicate Christ's divine nature. In the image, Christ is presented in total glory in front of a numinous burst of either golden or multi-colored light (an aureole) or sharply defined mandorla (oval shape) of many colors[160]. Sometimes, Christ is seated on a symbolic globe of the cosmos. In this way the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity is depicted as the divine all-powerful Ruler of the universe. Whether seated or standing he is almost always shown full figure. To the sides of the central figure often appear the figurative symbols of the four evangelists or writers of the four gospels, Matthew (winged human), Mark (winged lion), Luke (winged ox or bull), and John (eagle).

The earliest *Majestas Domini* image in a church setting that we know of is a mid 5th century small apse mosaic in the chapel of *Hosios David* (Blessed David) attached to a monastery in Thessaloniki[161]. A young Christ appears in front of a radiantly colored aureole, seated on a rainbow. Four abbreviated creatures –the symbols of the four evangelists- flank the central figure of Christ and are partially overlapped by the transparent aureole. Below Christ, the four rivers of paradise flow from a hill. Christ holds a scroll that reads "I am the spring of living water." The scene represents Chapter 4 of the Biblical Book of Revelation. The writer of that book, St. John the Evangelist, is shown seated to the far right in the mosaic, calmly writing what he is seeing. The figure seen cringing and turning away in terror on the far left, hiding from the vision, is the Old Testament prophet, Ezekial. Ezekial had a similar vision to that described by John in Revelation except the abbreviated creatures were four headed beasts known as *tetramorphs*. Depicted in this mosaic are the two contrasting images favored by the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity. The Old Testament vision of the god-head, Ezekial's vision, was favored by the Eastern Church. The New Testament vision revealed to St. John was favored by the Western Church[9].

161 *The Vision of Ezekiel,* apse mosaic in Blessed David Chapel, Thessalonica, ca. 425-50.

The *Hosios David* type *Christ in Glory* is assumed to have been a popular image in the churches of Constantinople because they were fre-

quently deployed in the apses of Egypt and Armenia. Some survive in Cappadocia. Constantinople, as the Eastern capital would have influenced the decoration of these churches.[10] At the time, the image was known as the *theandric* or god-man image.[11]

The *Majestas Domini* became one of the foundational dogmatic image types in Christian art as it depicts Christ as a man but radiating all his divine glory as the absolute ruler of all the universe. We will find the image deployed in nearly every period even down to the present.

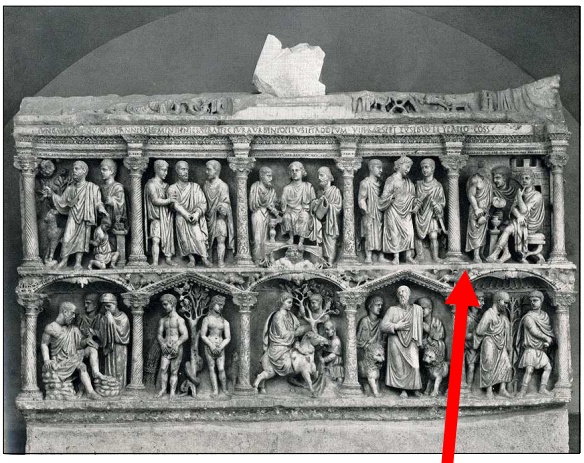
The Theotokos *(*Mother of God *or* God Bearer*)*

Images we see today of Mary seated on a throne holding the Child Jesus on her lap originated in the late fourth century and probably derives from an ancient Egyptian image of the goddess Isis holding the god Horus on her lap and suckling him. But the Christian dogmatic basis

162 ***The Adoration of the Three Magi,*** left side of triumphal arch mosaic, Santa Maria Maggiore, 4th c.

of the imagery clearly dates to the period following the Council of Ephesus (431) which proclaimed the doctrine that Jesus was one person consisting of two complete natures –divine and human- unified but maintaining the fullness of each. The Virgin Mary, the Council proclaimed, was to be called *Theotokos* (God bearer) because she bore and gave birth to God as a man. A beautiful 5th century mosaic program[162] that was created for the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome celebrates the dogma. Included are images that show Mary's exalted status. On the left side of the triumphal arch the mother is depicted sitting on a throne next to her young son who is seated on an oversized throne, a symbol of his divinity. Christ is attended to by heavenly angels. The context of the scene is the adoration of the magi, who are represented to the right of Mary and acknowledge for all the world the coming of a great King. The

star of the magi appears in the center of the group of angels behind the child Jesus. The symbolism of all this is unmistakable: Mary is the *Theotokos* or God Bearer; she is the ark of the new covenant, Jesus Christ - the Word of God made man. This image would be abbreviated in subsequent depictions with the mother regally arrayed on a throne and holding the child in her lap. Her lap became the earthy throne of her son. The enthroned Madonna with Child became visual shorthand for the doctrine of the Incarnation.



163 (below, top) ***Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus***, marble, ca. 359, Museo Storico del Tesoro della Basilica di San Pietro, Vatican City

Anti-imperial themes

Christ before Pilate; Peter and Paul before Nero

Several subjects appeared during the 4th and 5th centuries that contrasted the humble authority of Christ with that of arrogant imperial earthly power. No doubt the subjects were a reaction to the horrifying persecution initiated by Diocletian at the end of the 3rd century and which continued on into the beginning of the fourth, ending with the ascendency of Constantine the Great. The Great Persecution had come as a shock to the Christians, many of whom had risen to high levels in the imperial court and in the military during the previous period of relative peace. These new subjects communicated the dogma of the triumph of Christ over all earthly power.

164 (above, bottom) ***Christ Before Pilate, Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus***, marble, ca. 359, Museo Storico del Tesoro della Basilica di San Pietro, Vatican City

It is interesting that scenes of Christ's passion and crucifixion are absent from the earliest Christian art. We examined in the last chapter the possible reasons for the absence of the cross in the early centuries. The crucifixion is not represented during the following period of recognition, either, but is approached obliquely through peripheral scenes from the passion such as the arrest of Christ and his standing before Pilate.[164] It is as if the actual point of the appearance of those scenes was other than relating the story of the passion. If we move beyond a mere literal reading of, for example, the story of Pilate's interview of Christ, we find that Jesus, in his silent humility, actually stands up to the emperor's representative and trumps ar-

rogant imperial power by rising from the dead on Easter Sunday[12]. The message would not have been lost on the Christians who lived through the last great persecution of the Church. The memory of that persecution would live on for some time even after its sudden end and eventual legalization of the faith. The promise of ultimate reward for faithfulness to Christ in the face of the most brutal of earthly persecutions would sustain Christians down through the centuries.

Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

The gospel story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Passover probably also appeared in Christian art in reaction to the Great Persecution. In this case the scene strongly contrasts Christ's humble procession into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey with the show of imperial power displayed in scenes of the emperor's *adventus* into Rome

165 ***The Emperor's Adventus,*** Arch of Galerius, Thessalonica, 300.

166 ***Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem*** from a sarcophagus with scenes from the Lives of Saint Peter and Christ, marble, early 300s (with modern restoration), Roman

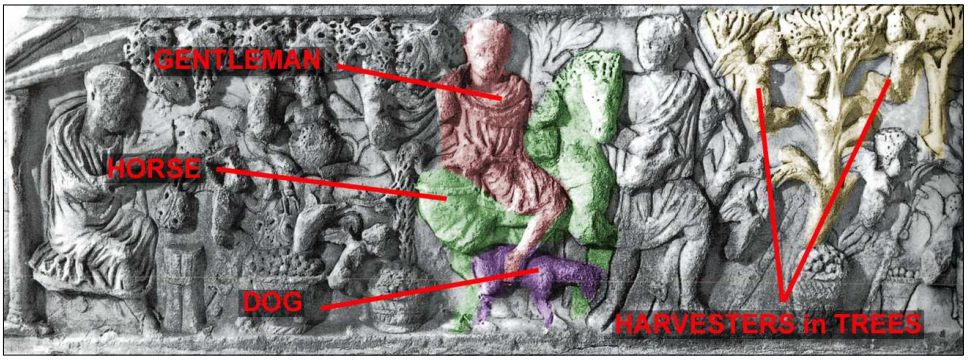
in a royal chariot or cart.[165] Both scenes show us a procession but Christ enters Jerusalem to be sacrificed for the sins of many while the emperor enters Rome to lay claim to the city.

At first glance the *Entry*[166] images seem similar to the adventus scenes but the contrasting messages are in the details.[13] There is the donkey, a humble beast of burden, which contrasts with the proud imperial chariot of the emperor. Christ wears the garb of a philosopher indicating a person who deals in higher, spiritual issues while the emperor wears the uniform of a warrior general who deals in earthly blood and guts. Christ is accompanied by his apostles who also wear philosophers' clothing. The emperor is escorted by contingents of armed infantry and cavalry. Crowds of people wildly greet Christ, spreading cloaks on the ground before him and waving palms. There are no crowds greeting the emperor. Christ greets the people with a blessing. The emperor stares straight ahead, not condescending to acknowledge anyone or anything. The message is clear: Christ's power is so far above earthly power that no impressive display is necessary. Even after earthly

167 *Gentleman's Homecoming,* sarcophagus, early 4th c., Berlin

Such homecoming scenes may be the design source for the Christian story of Christ's triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem the weekend before his crucifixion.

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003)



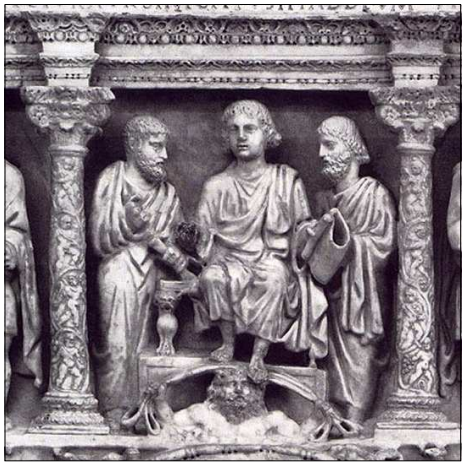
power has its way with Christ on Good Friday he will triumphantly rise from the grave on Easter Sunday. The crucified and risen Lord is the hope of persecuted Christians.

The visual motif of the *Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* may actually have derived from formulaic homecoming or hunting scenes of gentlemen common on pagan sarcophagi of Roman noblemen.[14][167] It is also on the sarcophagi of Christian noblemen where we first find the *Entry* scenes. Imperial *adventus* scenes, on the other hand, never appear on sarcophagi. Hunting and homecoming scenes reflected the life style of noblemen and so were common motifs on their sarcophagi. The motif called for the nobleman to be depicted as a hunter on horseback with a hunting dog sniffing the ground under the horse or a nobleman returning home to his estate while his servants harvest an abundant crop of, say, olives. This was the same kind of formula as we find in the *Entry* scene where Christ rides a donkey with a foal underneath. The trees in harvesting scenes on the coffins of the pagan noblemen may have provided the models for the palm trees in the *Entry* compositions. The harvesters harvesting the olives are the models for the citizens of Jerusalem gathering palms in palm trees. With a little reworking, sculptors transformed the hunting and harvesting scenes found on the sarcophagi of pagan Roman noblemen into the Christian *Entry* design found on the sarcophagi of Christian noblemen.

The *Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*, in story and in image has become iconic, standing in pointed opposition to all worldly power.

Dominus legem dat Petro (the Lord gives the law to Peter).

A most interesting newcomer in Christian art during the fourth century was the image of Christ seated -or standing- and handing a scroll to St. Peter in the presence of St. Paul.[168] Sometimes both apostles are receiving scrolls. The depiction has come to be known as the *Dominus legem dat Petro* or, the Lord gives the law to Peter. It also is known as the *traditio legis* (giving of the law) but that title we will reserve for a composition that includes all the apostles. In some examples of *Dominus*



168 (right) ***Dominus legem dat Petro*,** detail from the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, marble, ca. 359, Museo Storico del Tesoro della Basilica di San Pietro, Vatican City

legem dat Petro Christ sits or stands with his feet on Caelus, the Roman sky god.[168] The image is, of course, fictional; it is not historical narrative –the scene never happened. But it is a doctrinal and symbolic image that proclaims that the new law of Christ has defeated the world of the ancient gods and goddesses (represented by Caelus) and all the worldly powers that invoked them. The two apostles symbolize the proclamation of the new law to the entire world for Peter symbolizes the Jewish wing of the Church and Paul, the Gentile wing. (The new law –Christ– was proclaimed to the Jews, first.) The new law is, therefore, for everyone –Jew and Gentile.

169 (below, top) ***Traditio Legis*,** front of a sarcophagus in the Museo Archeologico, Ravenna, 5th c. In this image Christ stands upon a hill in paradise. A husband and wife are shown to the

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) p 130

170 ***Distribution of largesse,*** detail of the north frieze of the Arch of Constantine, Rome Italy, 312-315

What is this 'new law' of Christ? To the Apostolic Fathers of the Church –the earliest Christian preachers and writers- it is new knowledge, a fresh life, and immortality. It is the abandonment of idolatry and union with Christ through whom we receive new and everlasting life with God. Through Christ, God has called us from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge[15]; He has rescued us from the darkness of error.[16]

Does the *Dominus legem dat Petro* show forth an anti imperial theme? Yes, because it represents Christ as a law-giver. Only rulers –emperors- proclaim laws. Christ is clearly presented as a law giver and as such is in competition with the imperial authority. The message, of course, is that God's law supersedes all earthly laws especially laws instituted with invocations of the pagan gods. God's law will always ultimately triumph. The truth of that article of faith must certainly have been evident to the 4th century Christians who had just recently emerged from the dark night of the Great Persecution to the bright light of recognition as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

There are two possible sources for the pictorial composition of the *Dominus legem dat Petro.* The first could be Roman imperial iconography of emperors distributing largesse[170], receiving bounty, sitting in judgment, or distributing aid, instructions or awards to approaching figures.[17] In these scenes the emperor is seen sitting or standing and presenting

171 *Deceased as philosopher or an educated Roman*, pagan sarcophagus, 4th c.

various objects or scrolls to figures lined-up or 'stacked-up' to his right and left.

Another possible source for the *Dominus legem dat Petro* is the type of image carved on sarcophagi that suggested the deceased was an educated Roman[171]. The seated figure was depicted holding and reading a scroll, usually with others standing or seated around him. The fact that the image of the 'deceased as philosopher' disappears from Christian sarcophagi at about same time that the *Dominus legem dat Petro* motif shows up on them suggests the pagan scene was replaced with the Christian one.

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[1] Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) p 54

[2] Mathews 66

[3] Mathews 67

[4] Mathews 92

[5] Mathews 72

[6] Mathews 84

[7] St. Jerome: *"The whole world groaned and marvelled to find itself Arian."*

[8] Mathews 117

[9] James Snyder, *Medieval Art, Painting-Sculpture-Architecture, 4th-14th Century*, (New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1989) p 107-08

[10] Mathews 116

[11] Mathews 117

[12] Mathews 91

[13] Mathews 25

[14] Mathews 33

[15] 1 Clement 36, 2

[16] 1 Clement 59, 2

[17] *Traditio Legis*, October 7, 6:09, 2010 <a href="http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/3501/Traditio-Legis.html">Traditio