

Helios in the Synagogue and Sol Invictus Buried with the Saints: Iconography in Judaism and  
Christianity in Relation to the Roman World

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## Helios in the Synagogue and Sol Invictus Buried with the Saints: Iconography in Judaism and Christianity in Relation to the Roman World

The year is 26 CE and Pontius Pilate has just become the Roman prefect of Judea. As he marches into Jerusalem, his troops carry the Roman standard, adorned with the bust of Caesar. While this would be expected anywhere else in the empire, in Jerusalem, this is a bold move made by the new prefect, and is seen by the Jewish population as a provocative one. A protest is held at the Roman capital of Judea, Caesarea. Here, the Jews insist that the standards be taken down, vowing they will die before they allow the Law of Moses to be broken. Pilate, struck by the people's zeal, has the standards removed (Antiquities 18, 55-59).

This was not the first time the Jews had resisted the presence of pagan iconography in Jerusalem, nor would it be the last. For centuries, the Jews had practiced an aniconic faith, and, as this episode demonstrates, they were willing to die to keep it that way. This tradition of aniconism holds true for the vast majority of Judaism in antiquity. The major exception to this practice arises in the early third century CE and lasts until approximately the seventh century CE.

This thesis will seek to examine the tradition of aniconism in Judaism and Christianity and attempt to explain the adoption of iconography during the third century in light of Emile Durkheim's theory of social ritual. Due to the wide variation of images represented in Christian and Jewish art, this research limits itself to examining depictions of Sol/Helios who is often shown in conjunction with the zodiac. The use of iconic art following the seventh century in the two faiths will be discussed, including causes for the diminished role of iconography in Judaism and its continued growth and use in Christianity.

In order to discuss this topic, we must first define what is meant when we speak of an icon or iconography. An icon is any person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of

something else. In turn, iconography is the visual images and symbols used in a work of art and their interpretation. As can be inferred then, aniconism stands opposed to the use of icons and iconography. More specifically however, aniconism is worship without the use of statues or images. In the context of Judaism and Christianity, we should understand this to forbid only the depiction of God and human beings and not necessarily animal forms, as shall be seen.

The foundation for aniconism in Jewish religious practice is laid down in the Law of Moses. The Ten Commandments clearly state “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Ex. 20:4-5a New Revised Standard Version). This imageless worship of God set the Israelites apart from the worship practices of Egypt, which they were leaving, and would set them apart from the practices of the people in the land of Canaan, which they were to enter.

As we continue through the Hebrew Bible, we see that the prohibition is not so much against creating images of living things, but concerns creating images of things in the likeness of God or a god. This is evidenced in the inclusion of golden cherubim in the divinely mandated construction of the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:17-22), as well as in Solomon’s Temple, which included depictions of lions, cherubim, and oxen (1 Kings 7:25, 29, 36). What is not seen in the sanctioned cult of ancient Israel, however, is any iconic representation of God or human beings. God could not be represented because there was no one and nothing like the God of the Israel (Ex. 20:2-3). Further, man could not be depicted due to the belief that God created man in his image (Gen. 1:27). Though Jewish religious practice cannot be described as homogeneously aniconic, as seen in the use of asherot cultic statues (Dever, 1982), aniconism is a characteristic seen within the archaeological record of the ancient Israelites (Mettinger, 1995). By at least as

early as the eighth century up until the sixth century BCE, aniconic practice was beginning to go hand in hand with the monotheistic beliefs of the Israelites (Levine, 2012, p. 30). This can be seen in the Biblical account of the iconoclastic reforms that took place under King Josiah of Judah (2 Kings 23:6, 2 Chron. 34:1-4).

During the Persian and Hellenistic Eras (536-141 BCE), archaeological data produces remnants of life in Judea that would seem surprising in light of the aniconic practices of the centuries prior. Most of the art from this period is found on coins; some of which, though minted in Judea, bear depictions of human and mythological beings. It is important to note that many of the iconic motifs found on coins during this time period copy or are reminiscent of the types of coins being used by the respective Persian and Hellenistic powers to which Judea was subject at this time. Examples of iconic coins include those depicting pagan deities, a coin portraying a warrior with the head of a Persian king, and coins bearing the image of important local leaders (Figure 1) (Levine, 2012, p. 33). It is also important to realize that while these iconic depictions were a part of Jewish society, they were not a part of their cultic practices.

Following the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE and the Babylonian Exile, iconic cult practices were abandoned without exception. This came as the result of the Deuteronomistic reforms that had begun with Josiah and continued through the exile. These reforms saw the exile and the destruction of the Temple as divine judgment for straying from the laws God had given them, and encouraged Jews to rededicate themselves to the Law of Moses (Albertz, 2004, p. 101). As a result, apart from the numismatic representations, no evidence exists to suggest human images were portrayed in any other aspect of Jewish life or worship during this time period.



Figure 1. Yehud Coins 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE: (1) front facing head; owl with inscription “Yehezqiah the governor”. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/images/Ancient\\_coins/Smallsilvercoin.jpg](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/images/Ancient_coins/Smallsilvercoin.jpg) (2) helmeted head of Athena; owl. Retrieved February 26, 2014 from <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/Coins2/66406p00.jpg>

It is during the Hasmonean Period (141-63 BCE) that a strict aniconic policy emerges in Judea. The Hasmonean Dynasty came to power following the Maccabean Revolt against Antiochus IV, who had attempted to put an end to Jewish worship of God, outlawing the observation of the Sabbath, prohibiting circumcision, and going as far as sacrificing to Zeus at the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Macc. 6:1-11). The Jewish author of I Maccabees blamed Jews who had gone too far in assimilating to Greek culture for the persecution under Antiochus (Goodman, 2007, p. 49). In response to this, Hasmonean rule was to be characterized by its decidedly Jewish and religiously devout nature. During this time period, and indeed, for the next three centuries, the Jewish people were very opposed to the use of any sort of iconic imagery.

A fraternal power struggle brought the Hasmonean Dynasty to its end. By the 60s BCE, Rome had come to control most of the eastern Mediterranean; Hyrcanus and Aristobulus both knew that their success hinged upon Roman backing. Each brother attempted to out-bid the other in trying to buy the support of the Roman general, Pompey. In 63 BCE, Pompey marched on Jerusalem and won control, at least nominally, for Hyrcanus. In reality, the territory of Judea had been greatly reduced, Hyrcanus, while he held the position of High Priest did not hold the title of king, and the territory was required to pay tribute to Rome (Goodman, 2007, p. 52).

Hyrchanus would manage to remain in power as High Priest in Jerusalem until 40 BCE, when Aristobulus' son, Antigonus, convinced the Parthians to capture Hyrcanus, winning Antigonus the seat of power. His rule, however, would be cut short by the arrival of Herod the Idumean, who would come to be known as Herod the Great, with Roman backing. It would be Herod who would successfully ride the changing tides of political power in Rome and usher the *Pax Romana* into Jerusalem.

In many ways, Roman society could not have been more different from Jewish society. The starkest contrasts were undoubtedly found in religion. Where Jerusalem had one temple and one God, Rome had many of both. Relevant to discuss here are the cult of Sol/Helios and the imperial cult.

Sol was the Roman name for the Greek god, Helios. He was understood to be the driver of the sun chariot and the only being capable of controlling the horses of the sun. The chief attribute of Sol was his crown of rays and he was often shown wearing a purple raiment. The doors of his palace were thought to be adorned with the twelve signs of the zodiac and a sketch of the entire universe (Fontenros, 1940, p.434). Sol was often portrayed in his quadriga, and is later portrayed with one hand raised in a gesture of power and the other holding a globe, representing his power as ruler of the heavens (Dunbabin, 1982, p. 71). Also referred to as Sol Invictus, "the unconquered sun", the imagery of the god was often closely associated with the imperial cult (Dunbabin, 1982, p.70; Marlowe, 2006, p.227; Turcan, 2013, p.72; Weinstock, 1971, p.382). The cult rose in popularity, coming to the forefront of attention in the third century due to the devotion of the emperor Elagabalus and later Aurelian (Halsberghe, 1972, p.94; Levine, 2012, p. 248).

The concept of the imperial cult came to Rome from the Greek East. Divine cult was first offered to the Hellenistic kings of Asia Minor in the late fifth, early fourth centuries BCE (Price, 1986, p.26). As Rome expanded east, victorious generals were exposed to the concept of worshipping living rulers as gods. Though it would never have been accepted in the Late Roman Republic, some generals allowed honors associated with the imperial cult to be bestowed upon them in the Greek world (Kleiner, 2010, p. 48). An example of this can be seen in the gold starter coin issued by Titus Quinctius Flaminius in 197 BCE bearing his portrait head (Figure 2) During this period, Roman policy prohibited the portrayal of living people on their currency which could only bear images of deities, personifications, or heroes (Kleiner, 2010, p. 48). By 191 BCE, there was an established cult to Flaminius in Greece, where he was hailed as *soter*, “savior”, in Chalcis, Corinth, and Argos (Kleiner, 2010, p. 97).



Figure 2. Gold Starter Coin of Flaminius 197 BCE. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from [https://c2.staticflickr.com/6/5224/5769713999\\_056bb68c24\\_z.jpg](https://c2.staticflickr.com/6/5224/5769713999_056bb68c24_z.jpg)

The first Roman to be officially elevated to divine status was Julius Caesar, voted a *divus* (a deified mortal) by the Senate in 42 BCE after his death. His successor and adoptive son, Octavian, who would take the name Augustus, established a cult and built a temple in the Roman Forum for the worship of the deified Caesar. As for Augustus himself, though he would claim the title *divi filius*, “son of a god”, he would never claim to be a god himself, at least not in

Rome. During his lifetime however, the cult of Augustus would spread throughout the empire (Kleiner, 2010, p.97). Following his death, Augustus would be voted a *divus* by the Senate like his predecessor. This was a standard that would continue to be followed for most of the emperors of Rome. To varying degrees, the emperors that succeeded Augustus were less careful about drawing divine parallels or claiming divine rights than had been Augustus. Still, a delicate balance of status between god and man had to be maintained by the living emperor (Price, 1986, p.184). Ultimately though, the imperial cult served as a religious unifier in the polytheistic landscape of the empire (Elsner, 1998, p.131)

Images were central to the practice of the imperial cult. Depictions could be used to ascribe divine characteristics to the emperor that he could not claim in person, but could be promoted through a statue or relief carving (Price, 1986, p. 184). Examples of this can be seen in the statue of Augustus as Imperator from Prima Porta or in the statue of Hadrian from Pergamum (Figure 3). Representations of the emperor, whether in the form of a statue or a bust might have sacrifices made to them, or at least made in their honor (Price, 1986, p.188). Images of the emperor were also carried in processions at imperial festivals and on other occasions (Price, 1986, p.189). This use of images in the imperial cult was an extension the pre-existing practices for worshiping the gods of the pantheon. Since the archaic age in Greece (600 BCE), the gods had been depicted as humans, grounding them in the world in which they were worshiped and connecting them to the people who worshiped them (Price, 1986, p. 181). In the same way, the imperial image provided a concrete object of veneration for the imperial cult. Unlike the emperor, who was set apart and distant in Rome, his image could be among the people who worshiped him. Artistic representation was not just a reflection of religion; it was religion (Elsner, 1998, p. 135)





Figure 3. The Emperor as Divine (1) Augustus as Imperator from Prima Porta, marble, c. 20 BCE; divine attributes include the emperor's bare feet, the dolphin and the cupid supporting the statue connecting him to Venus, and the cosmological setting of the scene depicted on the cuirass. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from [https://verbasapientiae.pbworks.com/f/1208925884/roman\\_augustus2.jpg](https://verbasapientiae.pbworks.com/f/1208925884/roman_augustus2.jpg) (2) Hadrian from Pergamum, marble, principate of Hadrian; the emperor is portrayed naked, a symbol of divinity in Classical sculpture. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from <http://www.gotourturkey.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Hadrian-Bergama.jpg>

Despite the obvious potential for conflict, Jews existed peaceably under Roman rule until 66 CE. Rome respected what they saw as Jewish idiosyncrasies and even made exceptions to policy in Judea. These included granting them exemption from honoring the imperial cult and locally minting coins that continued to be aniconic, even after Judea came under the control of Roman governors (Goodman, 2007, p. 374, 398).

What is seen consistently throughout the first and second centuries however is that when Jewish aniconic practices were violated, unrest and violence were certain to follow; such was the case when Pilate entered Jerusalem in 26. Likewise, unrest erupted when Caligula threatened to erect a statue of himself in the Temple in 41. Perhaps the largest resistance to iconography came in 132 CE in response to Hadrian's plans to rebuild Jerusalem as a pagan city, complete with

statues and a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount. These plans were the immediate cause of the Bar Kokhba revolt, which would ultimately result in Hadrian's plans coming to fruition, with an added incentive to erase the nation and religion of the Jews from the region (Scheidlin, 1998, p. 54).

Though aniconism was not the impetus for the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66, it is crucial to examine the conflict, as its outcome, namely the destruction of the Temple in 70, so drastically alters the face of Judaism. A series of mild disturbances related to Jewish dissatisfaction with incompetent Roman governors in Judea came to a head in 66, when a young priest persuaded his counterparts to stop the sacrifice made on behalf of the Roman emperor to the Jewish God. These offerings were in lieu of the observance of the imperial cult in Judea. This act of rebellion had to be put down by Rome, and as a result of bad timing and politics outside of Judea itself, the conflict escalated, ultimately resulting in the devastation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (Goodman, 2007, p. 403-423).

Prior to its destruction, the Temple had stood as the center of Jewish life and religion. Festivals celebrating everything from the deliverance out of Egypt, to the harvest, to the atonement for sins all took place at the Temple in Jerusalem. It stood as the center of Jewish government, thought, and society. For the Jews, the Temple was a symbol of unity and representative of what it meant to be Jewish. Above all though, the Temple was the dwelling place of God on earth. Every year during the pilgrim festivals, Jews would gather together from across the empire to assemble before their God in Jerusalem (Deut. 16:6; Ex. 23:14-17; Ex. 34:18-23). The centrality of Jerusalem and the Temple, in a practical sense, was a contributing factor in maintaining the aniconic nature of Judaism. Unlike the Romans, Jews had no need to ground their belief in carved images or representations. The Jewish God was not separate from

his people like the gods of the Roman pantheon or even the emperor. The Jewish God made his dwelling place on earth amongst his people at the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Temple was destroyed by Titus in 70 CE, followed by the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem under Hadrian in 135, this centrality of place led Judaism to be shaken to its core.

Amid the chaos unfolding between the Jews and the Roman Empire, a new faith was coming into its own. Christians, as they were known, were the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, a man who lived and taught in Judea during the first half of the first century CE, until he was put to death by means of crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. Followers of Jesus believed that he was the Christ, the promised Messiah of the Jewish scriptures. For the first few decades of Christianity, it was seen as a sect within Judaism. After 70 however, and then again after 135, Christians began to see and present themselves to the world as a group apart from Judaism (Goodman, 2007, p. 488). Nevertheless, Christians saw the Hebrew Scriptures as the foundation for their own faith. Within the sacred texts of the “Old Testament” were prophecies and revelations concerning the Messiah, which they saw fulfilled in Jesus. Likewise, though the ritual laws of Judaism were judged to be irrelevant to Christian believers, the Hebrew Scriptures were still considered a standard for moral living. As a result, to refine Christian theology and develop doctrine, writers of the New Testament and early church fathers turned to the Hebrew Bible for support.

Injunctions for Christians to avoid the idols of pagan cult practice are seen early in Christianity. Paul instructs the Christians of Corinth to “flee from the worship of idols” (1 Cor. 10:14). This can be dated circa 50 CE based on the account of Paul’s missionary journeys in the book of Acts, which finds Paul in Corinth shortly after the brief expulsion of the Jews from Rome under Claudius in 49 CE (Matthews, 2010, p. 1954). Likewise, the author of 1 John

instructs believers to “keep [themselves] from idols” (1 John 5:21) circa 100 CE (Perkins, 2010, p. 2137). Writings from the end of the second century become even more explicit concerning what the Christian attitude toward icons should be. In 195, Clement of Alexandria writes “Let our seals be a dove, a fish, a ship scudding before the wind, a musical lyre..., or a ship’s anchor... We are not to draw an outline of the faces of idols (since we are prohibited to cling to them)” (Bercot, 1998, p.36). Similarly, Tertullian writes in 197 condemning the use of images, specifically their use in the imperial cult, saying:

We know that the names of the dead are nothing, as are their images. But when images are set up, we know enough, too, who carry on their wicked work under these names.

We know who exult in the homage rendered to the images. We know who pretend to be divine. It is none other than accursed spirits (Bercot, 1998, p.352).

Tertullian likewise holds the Jews up as an example in their aniconic practices, writing “Pompey the Great, after conquering the Jews and capturing Jerusalem, entered the Temple. But he found nothing in the shape of an image, even though he examined the place carefully” (Bercot, 1998, p.352).

Christians, like the Jews, had their own struggles as outsiders to the iconic Roman cult practices. Though large-scale persecution by the Roman state was rare, general mistrust of Christians within the empire was widespread (Goodman, 2007 p. 509). Christians were seen as dangerous atheists because of their refusal to worship other gods (Goodman, 2007, p.488). The suspicion with which Christians were regarded in Roman society during the first three centuries CE is recorded by Minucius Felix and is shown to be connected to the cult’s aniconic practices. “Why do they make great efforts to hide and conceal whatever it is that they worship, when honorable deeds always rejoice in being made public, while crimes are secret? Why do they

have no altars, no temples, no recognized images?” (as cited in Goodman, 2007, p.507) .

Throughout the first and second centuries, Christians struggled to find their place in the Roman world, not as a faith, but as a normal part of society (Goodman, 2007, p. 511-513).

It is this history of iconography within Judaism and Christianity leading up to the third century that would seem to make the adoption of icons unimaginable in the two faiths, especially an icon such as Sol, so closely tied to the imperial cult. Yet, beginning in the third century we see the adoption of iconic images in both Judaism and Christianity, with Sol Invictus being found frequently, both within the synagogue and buried with the saints.

Theologically, contemporary Jewish rabbis even seemed to be willing to tolerate the images that arose in the third century. This can be seen in the Babylonian Talmud in the tractate regarding foreign worship, which seems to make room for one-dimensional human images (Avodah Zarah 53a). Christian theologians, on the other hand, do not seem to be willing to formally qualify the use of images. Yet, while the voices of the church fathers remain fiercely opposed to the use of icons (Bercot, 1998, p. 353- 354), still we begin to see iconography used by Christian believers beginning in the third century.

Some of the earliest evidence of iconic art in Judaism and Christianity comes from Dura-Europos. The city of Dura-Europos first came under control of the Roman Empire in 115 CE during Trajan’s campaign into Mesopotamia. Dura’s location along the Euphrates River, northwest of Damascus between Ctesiphon and Palmyra in present day Syria, made it an important crossroads between Parthia and the Mediterranean world. Dura had been founded by the Seleucids circa 300 BCE and was later conquered by the Parthians in 113 BCE. After coming under the control of the Romans briefly two centuries later, the Parthians reclaimed Dura in 117 CE until 165. Dura would then be recovered by Rome, only to be conquered by the

Sasanians in 256. It is under Roman control in the late second, early third century, that the small Jewish community in Dura converted a private home into a synagogue (Kleiner, 2010, p. 259).

The synagogue was uncovered in the 1930s during the Yale excavations at Dura under Carl Kraeling (Bickerman, 1965, p. 127). The walls of the synagogue at Dura are covered in murals depicting narratives from the Hebrew Bible which were likely painted circa 244-245 CE when the synagogue was remodeled and enlarged (Kraeling, 1979, p. 361). Among the scenes included are depictions of the story of Moses and the Exodus, Aaron performing his duties as high priest, and Samuel anointing David as king (Figure 5-1). The style of the Dura synagogue murals are consistent with the artistic trends of the Roman Empire in the third century, with the figures portrayed in mostly frontal rows and actions depicted through stylized gestures (Kleiner, 2010, p. 261).

The church at Dura was also uncovered during Kraeling's excavations in the 1930s (Stokstad, 2014, p. 221). Like the synagogue, the church dates to the third century and was a converted private home. The walls of the room containing the baptistery are decorated with different narrative scenes from the life of Christ. These include his miracles and the arrival of the women at the tomb before discovering his resurrection (Figure 5-2). The space also includes images meant to communicate Christian theology. Above the baptismal basin, a fresco depicts Adam and Eve after the fall, which is juxtaposed with Christ as the Good Shepherd, representing the passage of the Christian convert from sin to salvation (Stokstad, 2014, p. 221).



(1)



(2)

Figure 4: Dura-Europos (1) Aaron carrying out his duties as high priest in the Tabernacle, scene from the Dura Synagogue, wall painting, 245 CE. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from [http://ssmith.people.yosu.edu/ecbyzwebpage/aaron\\_tabernacle.jpg](http://ssmith.people.yosu.edu/ecbyzwebpage/aaron_tabernacle.jpg); (2) Baptistry and scene depicting the women coming to find the empty tomb from the church at Dura, before 256 CE. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from <http://k35.kn3.net/taringa/1/7/5/7/9/9/71/mabelesp/FD9.jpg?5500>

Though neither the synagogue nor the church at Dura contain images of Sol or the zodiac, the iconic art found in Dura-Europos is important to note, as it provides the earliest dating examples in both Judaism and Christianity. The location of Dura-Europos at the edge of the empire and the multiple turnovers between 115-256 CE give key insight into why iconic art emerges in Judaism and Christianity during the third-century.

Before additional analysis is undertaken, however, further examples concerning the depiction of Sol and the zodiac in Judaism and Christianity should be considered. Discussed here are the synagogues at Hammat Tiberias, Sepphoris, and Bet Alpha as well as Christian examples predating Constantine's Edict of Milan from the Tomb of the Julii and the Sarcophagus from la Gayolle.

During the third and fourth centuries, Tiberias was a leading city in the Galilee and home to the main rabbinic academy in Palestine under R. Yohanan (Levine, 2012, p. 243). Excavated in 1961 by Moshe Dothan, the synagogue at Hammat Tiberias stood in various stages from the mid-third or early fourth century through to the eighth century CE. It is the fourth century

mosaic floor that depicts Sol and the zodiac. The sanctuary of the synagogue was oriented south toward Jerusalem and featured a nave with one aisle on the west and two on the east. The nave featured a three panel carpet mosaic floor. From north to south, the progression of the panels depicts the following: (1) eight dedicatory inscriptions in Greek filling nine squares flanked by two lions; (2) the zodiac cycle with a depiction of Sol at the center and personifications of the four seasons situated at the four corners of the panel; and (3) a Torah shrine surrounded by an assemblage of Jewish symbols and ritual items including a pair of menorahs, shofars, and incense shovels (see Figure 5) (Levine, 2012, p. 245).

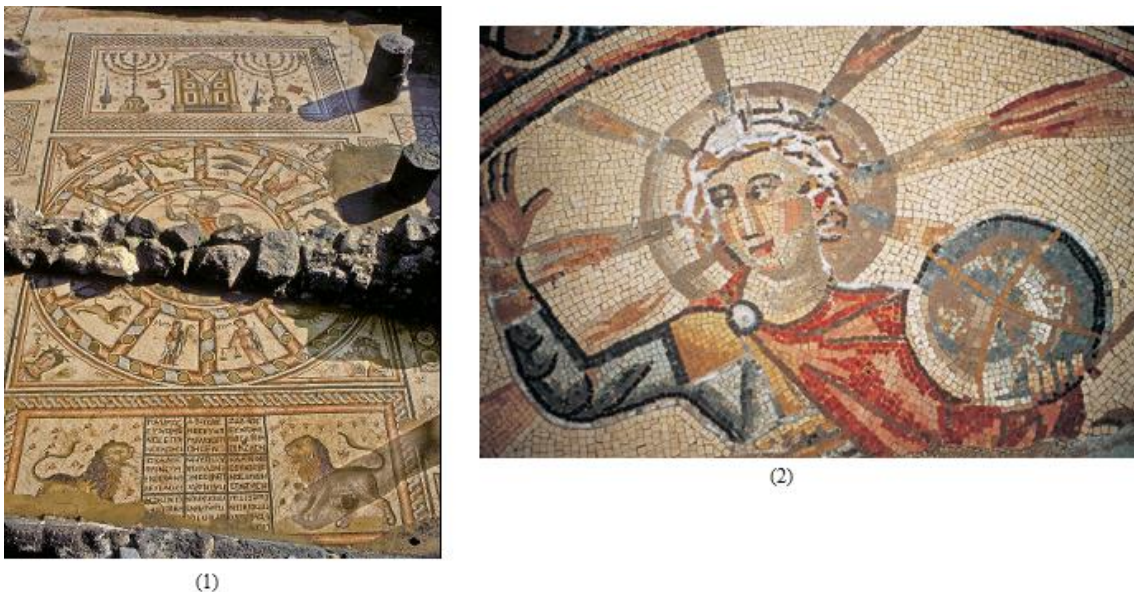


Figure 5. Hammat Tiberias Synagogue, polychrome mosaic, 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. (1) Overview of Hammat Tiberias mosaic floor. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from [http://cojs.org/cojswiki/images/thumb/8/8b/Hamat\\_Tiberias\\_Synagogue\\_Mosaic.jpg/300px-Hamat\\_Tiberias\\_Synagogue\\_Mosaic.jpg](http://cojs.org/cojswiki/images/thumb/8/8b/Hamat_Tiberias_Synagogue_Mosaic.jpg/300px-Hamat_Tiberias_Synagogue_Mosaic.jpg) (2) Detail of Sol from the Hammat Tiberias mosaic. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/Mosaic\\_Floor\\_in\\_Synagogue\\_at\\_Hamat\\_Tiberias\\_02.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/Mosaic_Floor_in_Synagogue_at_Hamat_Tiberias_02.JPG)

The center panel depicting Sol and the zodiac is the earliest representation of this type. Sol is represented in the typical fashion, wearing a crown of rays on his head with one hand raised in a gesture of power while the other holds a globe. While the preservation of the Tiberias mosaic is not complete, it seems reasonable to assume that he stood in his quadriga. Surrounding



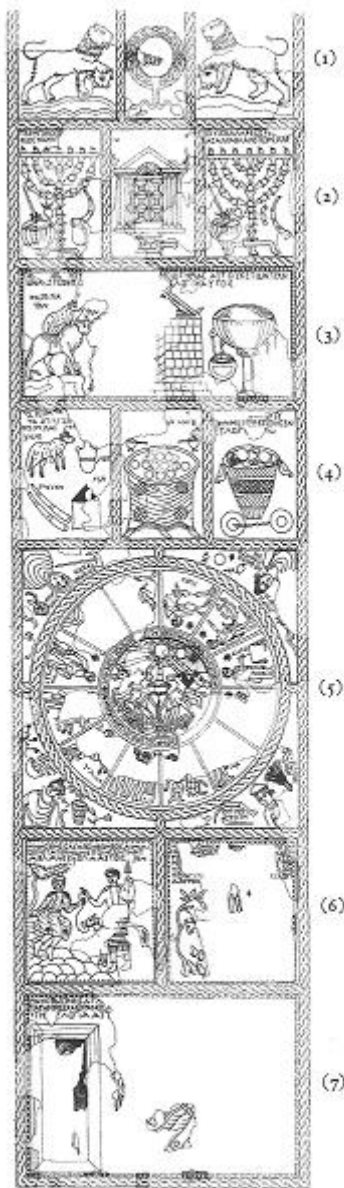


Figure 6. Schematic drawing of Sepphoris synagogue mosaic 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Adapted from *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity...* (p.262). by L.I. Levine, 2012, New Haven: Yale University Press

him are the signs of the zodiac, labeled in Hebrew. Overall, it is clear that the mosaic was done with care and great artistic skill.

The next synagogue to take into account is the synagogue at Sepphoris, excavated by Zeev Weiss of Hebrew University in 1993 (Fischer, 2008, p. 700). Like Tiberias, Sepphoris was one of the leading cities of the Galilee during the first several centuries CE. During both the Jewish War and the Bar Kokhba revolt, Sepphoris had taken a pro-Roman stance, helping it to achieve and maintain its political and social prominence. Likewise, the presence of R. Judah I. at the height of his career circa the turn of the third century further increased the city's importance for Jews (Levine, 2012, p. 260). The layout of the synagogue at Sepphoris is slightly unusual in that it is narrow and asymmetrical, only has one side aisle, and is oriented to the northwest, away from Jerusalem. Most unusual however, and most important, is the synagogue's mosaic floor. Dating from the early fifth century, the mosaic is divided into seven panels instead of the more typical three seen at Tiberias and at Bet Alpha.

The bottom panel of the mosaic (Figure 6-7) is thought to depict the visit of the three angels to Abraham; the next scene (Figure 6-6), subdivided into two portions, portrays the Binding of Isaac. The largest panel and the center piece of the mosaic (Figure 6-5) contains the zodiac cycle and a Sol-like depiction. To follow the design of the mosaic, starting from the top and working back down toward the central zodiac panel, the

uppermost panel (Figure 6-1) is divided into three subparts. In the central subpanel, a dedicatory inscription is enclosed within a wreath. This panel is flanked by a lion clutching the head of an ox or bull on each side. Below that, (Figure 6-2) Jewish symbols and ritual items such as the menorah and shofar are displayed flanking a Torah Shrine in a panel that is again subdivided. The final two panels (Figure 6-3, 6- 4) portray images and themes from the Tabernacle (Levine, 2012, p.262-264).

The panel depicting Sol and the zodiac at Sepphoris is less stylized than the earlier depiction at Tiberias (Figure 7). Instead of portraying Sol Invictus, the mosaic at Sepphoris replaces him with a sun surrounded by ten rays. One ray extends into the quadriga below to give the impression the sun is riding in the chariot. The zodiac wheel in the Sepphoris mosaic also differs from the more standard representation found in the Tiberias mosaic. Most of the figures in the Sepphoris zodiac are young men, portrayed barefoot. Additionally, the Hebrew name of the month and a star are included for each of the signs. Finally, the four seasons, captioned in both Hebrew and Greek, are identified by more attributes than would normally be expected in this context (Levine, 2012, p.264).



Figure 7. Detail of panel depicting Sol and the zodiac from Sepphoris, polychrome mosaic, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from <http://carta-jerusalem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Zippori-synagogue-floor-mosaic8.jpg>

The final synagogue to be examined is Bet Alpha. Located in the Jezreel Valley, the Bet Alpha synagogue was excavated in 1929 by Eleazar Sukenik on behalf of Hebrew University (Levine, 2012, p. 280). Unlike Tiberias and Sepphoris, next to nothing is known of Bet Alpha apart from the information provided by archaeological excavation. Taken together with numismatic evidence, the Greek inscription found near the entrance to the central nave dates the synagogue to the early sixth century (Levine, 2012, p. 281). Bet Alpha was constructed according to a typical Byzantine basilica plan, with a courtyard, narthex, and hall divided into a nave with two side aisles by two rows of pillars. Oriented north to south, the structure faced Jerusalem (Levine, 2012, p. 280). Like at Tiberias, the Bet Alpha mosaic floor is divided into three panels, which presented following the orientation of the building, are as follows: (1) a scene depicting the Binding of Isaac; (2) the zodiac cycle framing a depiction of Sol; and finally (3) a Torah shrine flanked by menorahs, shofars, and other Jewish symbols and ritual items. The artistic depictions are executed with far less skill than those of Tiberias and Sepphoris. The

figures are two-dimensional and static, presented frontally, with little attempt to represent realistic body proportions. Yet, while artistically naïve, the archaeological preservation is paramount (Figure 8-1).



Figure 8. Bet Alpha Synagogue, polychrome mosaic floor, 6<sup>th</sup> century CE (1) Overview of Bet Alpha mosaic floor. (2) Detail of Sol and the zodiac from Bet Alpha mosaic. Photos taken June 2014 by Elena Durnbaugh

Just as was the case at Tiberias and Sepphoris, the panel containing Sol and the zodiac cycle is the largest at Bet Alpha. Sol is portrayed at the center of the zodiac cycle, and though somewhat cartoonish, is easily identifiable by his crown of rays and the quadriga in which he rides. Only the heads and the forelegs of the horses which pull the chariot are depicted. Sol is set emerging from the backdrop of the night sky in his quadriga. Around him are the signs of the zodiac, labeled in Hebrew, with the personifications of the four seasons depicted in the corners of the panel (Figure 8-2). There is a discrepancy in the Bet Alpha zodiac though, in that the seasons do not line up with their proper months; i.e. the personification of spring is lined up with the summer months, summer with fall, and so on (Levine, 2012, 284).

Each of these sites has sparked a great deal of scholarship proposing different interpretations for the images of Sol and the zodiac in a Jewish religious context. These interpretations range from cosmopolitan adaptation (Levine, 2012, p. 257), to Messianic expectations (Weiss, 2005, p. 225-62), from a priestly emphasis (Levine, 2012, p. 269-277), to mystical interpretation (Magness, 2005). While these interpretations may serve to explain the iconography at an individual location, they fail to provide a satisfactory explanation for why the images were adopted in the first place beyond the popularity of the cult in the third century. Likewise, they fail to take into account the adoption of similar iconography within Christianity at the same time.

An example of iconic Christian art depicting Sol can be seen in the third century Tomb of the Julii. Located in the Vatican Cemetery underneath St. Peter's Basilica, the mosaic ceiling was uncovered during the excavations of Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins which began in 1939 (Smothers, 1956, p. 293). The oldest of the mausoleums in the cemetery date circa 125 CE. The Tomb of the Julii, in its Christian context, dates to the third century, though the mausoleum had been used earlier by pagan owners (Smothers, 1956, p. 300). The upper portions of the three walls of the vault are decorated with polychrome mosaics, depicting Christian themes. At the center, Christ is depicted in the guise of Sol Invictus. In the mosaic, the Christ figure stands in a chariot which can be presumed to be a quadriga, though the mosaic is not preserved in its entirety. Likewise, he is crowned with rays and raises his arm in a gesture of power, in his other hand, he holds a globe. The image is surrounded by vine tendrils.



Figure 9. Tomb of the Julii Christ as Sol Invictus, polychrome mosaic, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE. Retrieved February 26, 2015 from <http://studydroid.com/imageCards/0v/27/card-32579317-front.jpg>

Yet another example of Christ depicted as Sol is found on the Sarcophagus from la Gayolle. This sarcophagus, found in southern France, also dates to the third century. The depiction of Sol Invictus is interpreted to represent Christ based on its concurrence with other commonly used Christian motifs on the sarcophagus. The relief shows a frontal bust of Sol, identified by his raiment and the rays that surround him, to the left and above a baptism scene (Huskinson, 1974, p.79). Though the identity of the figure said to represent Sol is debated amongst scholars, due to the similarity of attributes and the location of the figure situated above the baptism scene, it does not seem implausible that this should correctly be identified as Sol representing Christ.

As stated previously, current scholarship regarding the emergence of iconic art in Judaism and Christianity circa the third century provides little explanation regarding why the iconic images were adopted in the first place. Explanations citing religious pluralism and the popularity of Sol Invictus in the third century are not sufficient. Though these things were

certainly contributing factors, the short history of Christianity and the much longer history of Judaism show that popular practice was not a powerful enough force to alter these religions. Rather, the causes of the religious pluralism should be considered in light of the state of the Roman Empire in the third century CE. Likewise, Christianity and Judaism should be looked at in the context of their positions within the empire circa the year 200. When these two factors are considered in light of Emilie Durkheim's anthropological theory of social ritual, a better understanding for the seemingly sudden adoption of iconic art within two previously aniconic cult practices can be gained.

Religious pluralism was a hallmark of the way religion was practiced in the Roman Empire. It was Rome's pluralistic approach to religion, held together by the glue of the imperial cult, which allowed the empire to exist without the religious contention that would characterize Christian Europe and, to some degree, the Islamic Empire during the Middle Ages and the Medieval Period. By the third century, however, the glue was beginning to come undone.

As a whole, the empire since Augustus had been under reasonably adept leadership. Though the first century saw a few exceptions, the second century was ruled by a series of capable men, known today as "The Five Good Emperors". This chain of successful imperial succession would be broken, however by the ascension of Commodus to the seat of power in 180. Unlike his predecessors who had been adopted by the emperor to fill the role, Commodus was the biological son of Marcus Aurelius and was entirely unfit for the office he inherited. Reflective of this, he was murdered in 192. Three months later, his successor Pertinax would experience the same fate. The next emperor, Didius Julianus, also did not last the year. Septimus Severus would claim the imperial title next, and by fighting destructive civil wars was able to cling to power. After defeating his rivals, Severus was able to engage in successful

military campaigns for the empire until his natural death in 211. The imperial title was then passed on to Severus' biological sons, Caracalla and Geta, who were intended to inherit the empire jointly. Caracalla, however, murdered his brother in 212 to claim power, but was himself murdered not long after in 217. Such would be the pattern for most of the third century.

Between the death of Severus in 211 and the ascension of Diocletian in 284, there would be a total of 24 Roman emperors (Luttwak, 1979, p. 128). As a result, the imperial cult was nearly possible to maintain.

On top of the empire's internal instability came external aggressors. Rome was faced with larger and more powerful enemies than they had seen in the past, such as the federations of the Franks and the Alamani and the new Sassanid Empire (Luttwak, 1979, p. 128). In such an environment, people sought a source of unity and stability, which they found in the rituals and icons of different cults.

According to Emile Durkheim's theory of social ritual, totems, or icons, are powerful representations of ritual (Durkheim, 1912). In his work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim argues that even in the absence of ritual, totems are capable of evoking the powerful emotions of the ritual with which they are associated (Durkheim, 1912). Likewise, it is through rituals and ritual totems that a group is built and a society maintains a collective consciousness.

In the crisis of the third century, we see the citizens of the Roman Empire turning to new cultic rituals and ritual totems in the attempt to maintain a collective consciousness to bind together their society. Included amid the chaos of a crumbling empire were the Jewish and Christian groups. They, like the rest of the Roman population, sought unity and stability;



however the stability they hoped to find was not only within the empire, but also within their respective cult practices.

With the Temple gone, the Jews dispersed to the far corners of the empire, and the city of Jerusalem altered beyond recognition, the Jewish faith was faced with crisis following the failed Bar Kokhba revolt of 135. The center of Jewish life, religion, and thought, had been destroyed. In light of Durkheim's theory, Jerusalem served as the ritual totem for the Jews following the destruction of the Temple in 70, which had brought Jewish ritual to a halt. Their expulsion from Jerusalem in 135, however, resulted in the loss of their ritual totem, which up to that point had maintained the strong collective consciousness of the Jewish people and served as a source of unity and strength in the face of pagan Rome. The absent center of focus for the Jews during a time of imperial upheaval and religious reinvention opened the door for the adoption of contemporary pagan iconography such as Sol. This use of icons can be seen as an attempt to bind Jews together, not only as a religion, but as a part of the greater empire.

The Christians, like the Jews, found themselves lacking ritual totems in a time where building a group and maintaining a collective consciousness was of great importance. Unlike the Jews however, it was not that the Christian ritual totem had been lost, so much as that it had not yet been sufficiently developed. We saw Clement of Alexandria recommending possibilities for Christian seals in his writings circa 195, "a dove, a fish, a ship scudding before the wind, a musical lyre..., or a ship's anchor" (Bercot, 1998, p.36). This would suggest that by the dawn of the third century, Christianity did not yet have a unifying symbol. As Christians entered into the third century, a symbol of this nature was necessary, not only because of the imperial crisis, but because the third century would bring the first state initiated persecution of Christians since the time of Nero (Goodman, 2007, p. 510). Pagan iconography provided a much needed established

set of symbols for the Christians. Because of the prominence of Sol in the empire, the image was familiar to the ever growing number of converted pagans. Furthermore, the use of the icon bound Christianity to the rest of the empire in a time where it was important they not appear as an outside threat.

The idea that Judaism and Christianity adopted iconic images as ritual tokens to be a part of a collective consciousness in a period of instability is supported by the fact that iconic art is first seen at Dura-Europos. It is the precarious position of Dura on the weakening edge of the Roman Empire that may have led Jews and Christians to first use iconic art. The use of images would have brought them together, not only within their own groups, but with the other cultic groups in their community.

Given these ideas, the diminished role of iconography in Judaism and its continued growth and use in Christianity can now be addressed. By the sixth century, a canonical iconography for Christianity would largely be in place and used freely, except for a period during the eighth century known as Byzantine Iconoclasm (Elsner, 1998, p.223, 259). Judaism, however, by the dawn of the seventh century had returned to being largely aniconic. This is due to the changes that had taken place in the world and the role iconography had played within the two faiths.

By the seventh century, the Roman Empire had transformed into the Byzantine Empire. Half the size, the Byzantine Empire could no longer hold on to Palestine, allowing the Islamic Empire to enter and fill the power void in the Levant. During the third through seventh centuries, the Jews had rebuilt their faith. The Mishnah was codified circa 200; the Jewish calendar, on which Jewish ritual was dependent, was fixed in 359; and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds were completed in 500 and 600 respectively. In these texts, Judaism found a new ritual

token. After the Islamic Empire gained control of Jerusalem in 638, Jews were once again allowed to settle there (Dosick, 1995, p.363). Likewise, Islam, as Judaism had been for so long, was aniconic. The combination of these different factors resulted in the natural fading away of iconic images in Jewish cult practice.

The fourth century had transformed Christianity from a persecuted subgroup to the state religion of the Roman Empire. Just as the imperial cult and its iconography had been important in uniting the Early Empire, so now were Christianity and its iconography used to bring the empire together. Under Constantine and the Christian emperors, the image of Christ as Sol Invictus were developed, becoming the ritual token that Christianity had lacked. Images were also important due to their role in spreading the message of Christianity, as gaining converts was a central part of the faith.

The adoption of iconic images in Judaism and Christianity in the third century CE is a major departure from the established aniconic traditions of both faiths. Emile Durkheim's theory of social ritual, however, provides helpful insight regarding the sudden emergence of iconic practice. The Jews, who had long practiced an aniconic religion, had been thrown into a state of religious upheaval upon the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE followed by their expulsion from Jerusalem in 135. This resulted in the loss of the strong collective consciousness that had previously been maintained by the Jewish people. The loss of the Jewish ritual token, Jerusalem, opened the door for the adoption of pagan iconography during the imperial crisis of the third century. This served to unite the Jews as a faith and also with the empire itself. Similarly, Christians needed a ritual token to bind themselves together in the face of the religious and political turmoil of the third century. Finally, iconic practice fades from Judaism upon the rise of the Islamic Empire; sacred texts had come to be the new ritual token for Judaism. Iconography

in Christianity, on the other hand, became an important part in uniting the Roman and later Byzantine Empire, just as the imperial cult and its associated images had been important during the Early Empire.

The iconography of the Roman Empire was rich, intimately tied to not only the practice of religion, but also to Roman politics. In light of this, studying the use, or disuse, of iconography within Judaism and Christianity under the Roman Empire provides us with unique insights regarding how these two groups fit into the greater Roman world.

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