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The Matrilineal Cord of Rahab in the Via Latina Catacomb

Catherine C. Taylor

RAHAB, TAMAR, SUSANNA, MARY, AND EVE are all biblical women traditionally associated with sexually scandalous narratives in biblical text. Their stories are easily read initially as types of revealed shame that do not often carry that same burden for men in the story. Rahab's narrative is found in Joshua 2 and 6, and its legacy continues in the genealogical references found in Ruth 4 and Matthew 1 as well as in the typology of her conversion in Hebrews 11 and James 2. Rahab's story is ultimately part of a larger story about the sovereignty of Israel's God and the accounting of his interventions and deliverance in bringing Israel into the promised land of Canaan.¹

The image of Rahab, the sole Old Testament woman featured in cubiculum B of the Via Latina Catacombs, is located just at the entrance of the catacomb as part of the vault decoration. Rahab is pictured in a trapezoidal frame of red delineation. She is further framed by the window of her house, set in the outer walls of Jericho. She leans forward and grasps the cords tied to a small basket with two child-sized Israelite spies inside. She appears to be partially veiled, but most of her hair, parted down the center, is revealed. Though only part of her dress is

1. E. John Hamlin, *Inheriting the Land: A Commentary on the Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 8–15.



Rahab and the Israelite spies, vault fresco decoration in cubiculum B, Catacomb of the Via Latina, Rome, c. 315–25 CE. Photo Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology.

depicted, she appears to wear a traditional Roman-style stola. A fringed piece of cloth also hangs over the lower part of the fenestration. The only other decorative element is a cypress tree, common to funerary settings, framing the scene on the right side. At first glance, the image seems to be simply representative of the textual account, yet it seems slightly out of place among all the great patriarchs, deliverers, christological types, prophets, and heroes in the same chamber. However, our perspective changes when we see the image of Rahab, viewed on the vault just as one enters the cubiculum, as the connecting figure or link between Tamar, Susanna, Mary, and Eve in cubiculum A and the Moses and Joshua narratives in cubiculum C. Here she stands as a figure of initiation and wisdom.

Although this study will focus primarily on the image and narrative of Rahab in the Via Latina Catacomb in Rome, all of the above-named women are also depicted in fresco decoration in very close, even associative, proximity in the same catacomb. These women, including Rahab, have been the object of many readily available commentaries and works of art. They have often been portrayed and read as objects of sexual contrast necessary to delineate between sacred and profane action according to the holiness code and story of ancient Israel.² Yet each of these women ironically defies the clear-cut lines of sexual propriety within that same code in ways that were meant to capture the imagination of the viewer or reader. Even in late antiquity their stories were intrinsically connected with holy outcomes. Their lives were made holy through their matrilineal connections to Christ and also through their surprising association with the virtuous patriarchal wives. Understanding the symbolic elements in the early fourth-century Via Latina Catacomb painting of Rahab and how those same symbols were used in early Christian art and literature enables us to present a more precise visual exegesis for viewers within the context of late antiquity.

We typically encounter biblical women like Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Susanna, Eve, and even Mary, the Mother of God, as they appear across the complicated textual body of scripture and only within their isolated incidents of narrative. Drawing correlations between these women in visual images in the same way they are associated in textual accounts is, with some exceptions, uncommon.³ Yet, with close attention to the earliest iconographic and patristic sources, we find that they were familiar and extraordinary companions within the context of the early church.

2. Irene E. Riegner, *The Vanishing Hebrew Harlot* (New York: Lang, 2009), 161, 163, 180, 182, 204. See Jan Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: An Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17–26* (Leiden: Brill 1996).

3. Evidence for scholarly discussion of the women in the genealogy of Christ is plentiful. See Larry L. Lyke, "What Does Ruth Have to Do with Rahab? Midrash Ruth Rabbah and the Matthean Genealogy of Jesus," in *The Function of Scripture in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Craig Evans and James Sanders (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 262–84; J. P. Heil, "The Narrative Roles of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy," *Biblica* 72 (1991): 538–45.

Nevertheless, many biblical scholars have largely ignored the unique iconographic conflations that these women historically shared.

This oversight within traditional biblical scholarship occurs largely because primary source material from the late antique past has drawn heavily, if not solely, on text-based sources. This bias impairs our ability to see the full range of possibilities for interpreting the past. Scholars of ancient religious traditions must examine the nuances and significance of art and the material culture. Not surprisingly, the absence and dissolution of iconographic studies over time, and our own shortsighted privileging of textual sources over the visual record, have resulted in doing some violence and loss to the range of scholarly knowledge pertaining to scripture and the ancient world. This study aims to identify iconographic markers of holiness, action, and desire for the God of Israel in specific connection with Rahab during late antiquity and to demonstrate a more nuanced view of early Christian textual reception. The story of Rahab, arguably the most egregious female interloper celebrated within both the Jewish and Christian traditions, takes a surprisingly prominent position in both the art and text discussed here. By combining the fine points of style, iconography, text, and patristic commentary, a more holistic view of her narrative is possible.

Rahab represented: Style and formalistic considerations in the Via Latina Catacombs

Discovered in 1955, the Via Latina Catacomb is a sophisticated and relatively small wonder gallery of fresco-painted cubicula and corridors. This grand hypogeum—or series of underground chambers—was sacred ground, patronized and decorated according to the preferences of those who buried their dead here. Fourth-century evidence indicates that catacombs continued to be used for both Christian and pagan burials, even in the catacomb under discussion. For example, cubiculum O features pagan images of Tellus or Ceres depicted alongside Christian images. Regardless of whether the consecrated space was allotted to pagans or Christians, the Via Latina Catacomb is an elegantly aligned,

private burial complex that allotted consecrated space for those who could pay for it. Likely patronized by an elite social order of families, they were not bound by any formal dictum or standard set by the church or cult.⁴

The Via Latina Catacomb has been described as a commercial endeavor, while others have noted that the catacomb may have been patronized by a small *collegium* or even a finite group of single wealthy families who made private transactions with the *fossores*, or gravediggers.⁵ Private benefaction by families or even *collegia* meant that, here at least, significant resources were used to acquire burial spaces and decorate the groups of rooms. Whole families could rest together within cubicula, and members of households and social peers were sometimes included and interred in the gallery spaces near their patrons.⁶ The thirteen chambers of the catacomb, built in multiple phases as groups of rooms for familial burial, were likely decorated according to private wishes. This multiphase pattern of expanding catacombs as more burial space was needed is similar to that of galleries and cubicula found in the larger Christian cemeteries, with some exception for the more formal space within those catacombs associated with saints, martyrs, and early Christian devotees.

This study is limited to iconographic analysis of the earliest cubicula within the Via Latina Catacomb—cubicula A, B, and C. In use from 315 CE, these earliest cubicula were all painted with similar types of Old Testament images. These cubicula were very close in date, if not contemporaneous,⁷ and are arguably also comparable in date to regions Y and Z of the catacombs of Petrus and Marcellinus, dating to years

4. Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings and Jeanine Routier-Pucci (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 34–36.

5. Rebillard, *Care of the Dead*, 35; Jean Guyon, “La vente des tombes à travers l'épigraphie de la Rome chrétienne (III^e-VII^e siècle): Le rôle des *fossores*, *mansionarii*, *praepositi* et *prêtres*,” *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité* 86 (1974): 549–96.

6. Rebillard, *Care of the Dead*, 37–56.

7. William Tronzo, *The Via Latina Catacomb: Imitation and Discontinuity in Fourth-Century Roman Painting* (University Park, London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 24.

315–25 CE.⁸ William Tronzo has convincingly argued that these rooms were the second phase of construction in the catacomb following the earliest date of c. 300 CE for the initial shaft and corridor.

The catacomb in its entirety was likely completed by the third quarter of the fourth century with no further expansion.⁹ The architectural plan for cubacula A–C is decidedly Roman in origin with cubiculum C being a smaller squared-off extension to cubiculum B. The triangular arrangement of cubacula in the later phases (cubacula D–P) of construction show a decidedly Eastern influence with probable origins in Alexandria, Palmyra, or in Palestine with adaptations to suit traditional Roman use.¹⁰ Architectural influences from the East were obviously acceptable here and by no means precluded iconographic influences from the same geography.

The Jesuit priest, Antonio Ferrua, who first discovered the extent of the Via Latina Catacombs, suggested that the scenes painted within the catacomb lacked a coherent iconographic program. Upon closer reading, the images can be recognized for their close biblical tradition, visual precedents, and textual sources with more subtly intended and nuanced meaning than previously thought.¹¹ The seemingly dissociated, yet significant Old Testament scenes in cubacula A and B play off of each other in order to enhance the possible program of the whole set of cubacula (A–C). Whether the iconographic program was intentional or not, visitors to the catacomb who came to honor their deceased family members could have read and interpreted the inter-related scenes presented in these earliest chambers of the catacomb.

8. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 14–15.

9. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 17.

10. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 20–21. See also Nahman Avigad, *Beth She'arim III. Report on the Excavations during 1953–58* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

11. Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), xix. Denzey recognizes the catacombs as a prime location to find non-elite women in particular. Remarkably, very few books seek to read “women’s lives in early Christianity based on the material and physical evidence that women left behind, whether it be a tomb, an epitaph, or a funerary image.” Her book moves to fill that void, as does this study.

In many ways, the image of Rahab appears to be a connecting image, an initiatory wisdom figure who draws the collective and sometimes disparate scenes together because her likeness is strategically located on the vaulted ceiling at the entrance of cubiculum B. For the purpose of this study, cubacula A, B, and C will be further investigated in the order of B, A, C, followed by a close interpretation of the vault image of Rahab and the Israelite spies.

Cubiculum B: Connecting Rahab's cord

The entrance to cubiculum B features an arched doorway. The interior of the squared room contains four pillars carved in full relief, one in each corner. Double arcosolia or arched burial niches are carved into the left- and right-hand walls. Opposite the entrance is another arched passageway into cubiculum C. The fresco decoration of cubiculum B is replete with elaborate scenes that have never before been discussed as anything other than segmented narrative images.¹² However, I suggest that they could have been read consecutively with a kind of thematic unity.

The entrance to cubiculum B is flanked on the walls by two unusual scenes that are not previously known in Christian memorial art. On the left is Phinehas standing at attention with the bodies of Zimri and Cozbi on his spear (Numbers 2:6–15). Phinehas, a son of Aaron, does not hesitate to slay those who had crossed the Deuteronomic holiness boundary of marrying outside of Israel. His act of quick execution is understood symbolically as a kind of overarching atonement for the corrupted Israelites.¹³ For his zeal, God rewards him with a “covenant of peace,” interpreted as the inherited right to the Aaronic priesthood.¹⁴ The image of Phinehas at the entrance of the catacomb symbolizes protection and righteous action with the promise of perpetual peace and divinely appointed blessing.

12. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 51–65.

13. Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 228.

14. Coogan, *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 228.

The opposite side features an image of the account of Tobias with the fish from the book of Tobit.¹⁵ The text was likely composed in the late second century and received full canonical legitimacy by the late fourth century. Symbolically, this narrative had powerful associations with reverence for the dead and filial piety. Tobias was instructed to take the entrails of a fish and burn them to ward off the demon of death and then use the fish's gall to cure his father's blindness. These details situate this image as apotropaic in nature. Both flanking images, then, are protective and appropriate as figures of defense within the sanctuary space of the dead. These scenes were likely chosen for their apotropaic function—that is, turning away any evil influences and creating boundaries of healing and atonement; in effect, they acted as visual protectors for the deceased.

Without taking time to wholly unpack each scene found in cubiculum B in detail, recognizing collectively themed, related, and nuanced relationships is possible. There is a clear accumulation of disparate, familiar, and important narrative scenes, yet they can also appear to be arranged according to particular criteria or thematic iconography. For example, inside the entrance to the chamber, the left arcosolium and wall include scenes of the mortal fall, earthly trial and toil, physical dependency and vulnerability, the necessity for deliverance, and physical transiency. These scenes are all earthbound in nature as summarized in the following depictions:

- Adam and Eve exiting Eden through a doorway, clothed in skins
- The work of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel with their sacrificial offerings
- The discovery of Moses by the queen and her maidservants
- Joseph disguised and talking with his traitorous brothers
- Jacob finally bringing his family to Egypt to save them from famine

15. Tobit is the model of familial propriety when it came to burial. For a full patristic analysis on the piety of Tobit, see Rebillard, *Care of the Dead*, 100–103.

- Samson driving the foxes through the fields of the Philistines as a typology of preparation for a new kingdom on earth
- Finally, Lot fleeing Sodom as his wife is turned into a pillar of salt, an element of mortal dust

Each of these scenes is symbolic of the binding effects of the fall and of mortal striving for earthly reconciliation.

The right arcosolium and wall are, by contrast, scenes of heavenly vision, divine intervention, the prophetic mantle, and birthright blessings—in short, scenes of Israelite legitimacy and divine sanction. These scenes are heaven-bound and salvific in nature as summarized in the depiction of:

- The vision of Jacob's ladder
- The visitors to Abraham at Mamre
- Jacob giving the birthright to Ephraim in place of Manasseh
- Joseph in Egypt's dream of saving Jacob's lineage
- Elijah ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire with Elisha receiving his mantle
- Rebekah intervening in Isaac's meal and the savvy bestowal of the birthright on Jacob
- Finally, the angel of the Lord stopping Balaam on his way in order that he might become an oracle for God, prophesying the star and scepter, even Jesus Christ, whom God would raise up

The vault of cubiculum B containing the image of Rahab must be understood as a place of privilege where images are carefully selected because of their association with a higher, heavenly, or celestial realm. What do we find as we revisit the entrance vault? At the front, just at the entrance to the chamber, we see the partially preserved scene of Rahab lowering the spies in a basket from her window. Opposite her, at the rear of the vault and in a very fragmentary state, is a standing woman with a man holding her hand. The figures are unidentifiable beyond this

description; however, they may possibly represent the deceased. In the right quadrant of the squared vault appears a scene of Samson killing the lion. And to the left is Absalom hung in the oak tree. The central tondo is entirely missing.

Each of these scenes is entirely new both to early Christian visual representation and to funerary memorial.¹⁶ These are very unusual scenes to juxtapose on the prioritized place of the vault. Initial conjecture might suggest that the image of Absalom signified the grief and loss of King David for his son, a theme appropriate to a catacomb setting, while the scene of Samson killing the lion was one symbolizing the overthrow of the adversary, even death, through the strength of the Lord. However, upon closer reading, these scenes correlate well with the themes found elsewhere in this cubiculum of rightful kingdom, divinely appointed legitimacy, and epic restoration. The iconography of Samson slaying the lion from Judges 14:5–20 is closely associated with other ancient heroes like the Babylonian Gilgamesh and the Greek Herakles or Roman Hercules. Fighting and killing a lion after the spirit fell upon the hero indicated divine and royal power. This power was apotropaic in nature and ensured the rightful legitimacy of the hero's rulership.¹⁷ Likewise, the defeat and death of Absalom in 2 Samuel 18:9–15 are symbolically captured as Absalom is hanged and unseated from the mule, the royal mount for King David and his sons¹⁸ and the mount that signifies Solomon's true succession to the kingdom in 1 Kings 1:38–40. Both of these unusual scenes can thematically parallel the image of Rahab, who acts from her windowed vantage point as an initiatory wisdom figure. She aids and attests to the sovereignty of Israel's God over matters of rightful kingdom.

The narrative elements in cubiculum B can be gathered and visually interpreted by the viewer in a loose amalgamation of salvific themes.

16. Rahab is in fact also depicted in mosaic on the walls of Santa Maria Maggiore (432–440), but not until over a hundred years later and in a very different way.

17. Dominique Beyer, "Le palais de Sargon II, roi d'Assyrie," in *Le monde de la bible* (Paris: Bayard, 1990), 19–21, fig. 23

18. Coogan, *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 471.

Whether they speak to covenant Israel's mortal absence from and longing for God's presence and protective care or the heavenly vision of reconciliation, birthright, and legitimacy, all point toward boundaries of rightful or divinely authorized kingdom, promised land, and Zion in cooperation with God's law of holiness. Alternatively, this collection of images may be construed as ultimately disparate. Nonetheless, the aesthetic of early Christian art and homiletics tended toward loose associations that could then be, and were, elaborated upon according to the interpreter's agenda. Eschatological and salvific connections in both text and image often inclined toward elusive interpretation that required an initiated viewer. Even if a cohesive program escaped early fourth-century viewers, they could not ignore the fact that the image of Rahab was prominently placed and must have been considered within its own right.

Cubiculum B owes its interpretation to the Jewish narrative but at the same time cannot be separated from the conceptual eschatological connections early Christians were making with Old Testament types. Stressing the programmatic character of the scenes found in cubiculum B is not solely dependent on the narrative but is intrinsically connected to a more sophisticated, even abstract and hieratic, conceptual plan expressed in the continuity of visual symbols. For earliest Christians, these scenes were both symbolic and recognizable; choosing specific images to represent the deceased in the familial tomb was more likely to be deliberate than haphazard.

The remaining wall surfaces were decorated with personified victories, palm branches, and fully laden palm trees to further underscore the visionary, even apocalyptic, elements of the eschatological promised land. These details were appropriate for the memorial setting and symbolized the hope of the faithful living and dead that death itself would be conquered.

Cubiculum A: Tying Rahab to her sisters

The style of art in cubiculum A is close to that in cubiculum B. Cubiculum A was decorated at the same time as B, between 315 and 325 CE, and features a total of six female figures who are cited as major actors within their own narratives. These women include Eve alongside fallen Adam; Rebekah at Isaac's meal securing the birthright blessing for Jacob; Susanna and the elders surrounded by the fountains of her garden; Tamar seated and approached by her father-in-law, Judah; Job's wife serving him bread; and Mary at the Adoration of the Magi.¹⁹ I suggest that the identity and sheer number of women featured in cubiculum A, along with many of their matrilineal connections to Christ, may indicate the influence of a female patron in choosing the iconographic program or, at least, a deceased female honored by her husband, children, or relatives, perhaps associating her with these women. Considering the close textual parallels of these women during late antiquity, it is remarkable to find that they are also pictured here together. Furthermore, the proximity of these women to the image of Rahab in the next chamber allowed viewers to conceptually tie the cubacula together in a way that suggests Rahab was also one among their ranks of scriptural matrons. Her image is located in the space as a bridge figure and becomes a type of wisdom figure, even a deliverer standing at the metaphorical gates before the conquest of Joshua.

Cubiculum C: The Joshua connection

Approximately twenty-five meters from the ancient entrance, the double loculus extension to cubiculum B, cubiculum C, presents one of the most interesting series of Old Testament paintings in late antiquity. The styles of painting found in cubacula B and C are distinct. The manner of painting found in cubacula A and B is similar—naturalistic, almost impressionistic in terms of the treatment of the space. The figures tend

19. Antonio Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art* (New Lanark, Scotland: Geddes & Grosset, 1990), 60–71.

to be slightly more slurred, distended, and round when compared to the figures in cubiculum C, where the figures become more elongated and elegant.²⁰ The difference in style would indicate at least two different artists' hands, though they could possibly originate from the same workshop.²¹ As far as the specific scenes in cubacula A–C are concerned, Tronzo was clearly interested in the coherent program of cubiculum C yet asserted that the scenes found in A and B follow an arrangement common to the repertoire of Old Testament scenes without a cohesive iconographic program and therefore could only be loosely associated through their salvific themes.²²

A low pediment at the entrance to cubiculum C introduces an image of Noah in his ark. This scene, long associated with the cleansing power of water and salvation, presents a type for baptism and initiation whereby the giving of the law, sacrifice, and typology of the new law in Jesus could be read. The vault of the main room features a tondo, or round image, of Christ teaching. The arcosolium at the far end is decorated with typical scenes of Jonah, Adam and Eve, an orant deceased person, and a peacock in full resplendent glory signifying eternal life, all overseen by a small tondo with Christ as the Good Shepherd. In a particularly insightful iteration, Tronzo discusses the subjects and symbolism found on the walls and arcosolia of cubiculum C as “directly expressive of ideas, tied to an intellectual tradition, and thus giv[ing] more immediate access to the thought world of the patron or designer.”²³ Certainly, this is his aim in discussing the chamber and its program of the initiatory law given to Moses and the correlated typology of Joshua as forerunner to Jesus's fulfillment of the law.

According to Tronzo, a clear conceptual program begins at the back right side of the cubiculum with Moses's mission to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt. Moses first receives instruction as he removes his shoes in front of the burning bush. Next he leads the Israelites out

20. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 24.

21. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 25.

22. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 76–78.

23. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 51.

of Egypt by way of the Red Sea. Finally, at the end of Moses's mission, he strikes the rock for water as opposed to commanding water to flow forth in the name of the Lord. The Lord discloses this act as one of rebellion and a compromise of holiness in the eyes of the Israelites, thus necessitating Joshua's successive role in place of Moses and Aaron.²⁴ On the left side of the room appears a youthful Joshua, who will pick up the Lord's commission and fulfill the promise given to Moses to bring a new generation of Israelites into the promised land. The promised land is imaged as a temple structure, elevated on a platform with many stairs. It symbolically represents the place of ultimate sacrifice through the typology of the sacrifice of Abraham pictured just to the right of the temple on the niche wall. The conceptual program, read here as a kind of visual and textual commentary, is narratively and typologically elaborate, even though there is not an easy visual precedent to act as a model.²⁵ This would indicate some license on the part of the patron or artist to compose a sophisticated and innovative program, even one that was seemingly disparate, outside of official channels within the memorial setting.

If a complicated interpretation for the salvific Joshua story is found in cubiculum C, which is an extension of cubiculum B, then that interpretation may also be useful in considering and reading the scene of

24. Numbers 20:9–12 NOAB: "So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.'"

25. Several scenes in the earliest cubicula of the Via Latina Catacomb are without precedent or parallel in visual representation. Without a previous visual context, it is difficult to understand the iconographic function and meaning of such images. However, considering that images were meant to be read, and given the sophisticated reading of cubiculum C that is warranted by William Tronzo's interpretation, it stands to reason that in order to understand the program of cubiculum B we should also turn to concepts found in contemporary Christian writings.

Rahab at her window, a scene essential to the very narrative of Joshua and Israel's entrance into Canaan. Figuratively speaking, Rahab is the gatekeeper for crossing into the promised land. She is a type of wisdom figure in the same way that Mary, spinning the scarlet and purple for the veil of the temple at the time of the annunciation, took on ancient tropes of virtuous matronage.²⁶ Furthermore, her action as an initiatory figure parallels that of Susanna as a wisdom figure who vets and initiates Daniel as a prophet, even within the bounds of the Babylonian diaspora.²⁷ Rahab is the unusual, unlikely, and surprising antecedent to Israel's success as the Israelites prepare to enter the promised land.

Boundaried Rahab: Historical and archaeological context

The ancient Israelite cosmos was strictly divided between things common or profane and things sacred, holy, or set apart. Traditional boundary separations between the sacred and the profane were strictly delineated in order to prevent contamination of Israel's sanctuaries, her people, and her land. Failing to keep these holy boundaries was met with serious consequences—namely, the dilution or destruction of God's people and the dissolution of YHWH's presence in his sanctuary and land.²⁸ Separation and contamination were such weighty threats to Israel because they resulted in ultimate physical destruction, diaspora, and covenantal demise according to the holiness code. Symbols like Noah's dove, Elijah's mantle, and Moses's staff with the brass serpent were clearly privileged for their ability to align these narrative and theological boundaries with meaning and conceptual interpretation. Sacred iconography was a marker, a clear and important signifier in the

26. Catherine C. Taylor, "Painted Veneration: The Priscilla Catacomb Annunciation and the *Protoevangelion of James* as Precedents for Late Antique Annunciation Iconography," in *Studia Patristica* LIX, ed. Allen Brent and Markus Vinzent (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013), 21–38.

27. Catherine C. Taylor, "Educated Susanna: Female *Orans*, Sarcophagi, and the Typology of Woman Wisdom in Late Antique Art and Iconography," in *Studia Patristica*, forthcoming 2017.

28. Riegner, *Vanishing Hebrew Harlot*, 212.

ancient world that carried forward with the text right into the world of late antiquity. The earliest examples of and richest oeuvre for symbols, both old and new, within the early Christian world is found within the realm of the dead—namely, within the catacombs and among burial paraphernalia.

The fourth century, even in its earliest decades, was a transformative one. The growing diversity of thought that readily and quickly spread throughout the Mediterranean world would see differing orthodoxies come together across distances to finally collide in some of the most epic and decisive ecumenical councils in all of Christian history, including the Council of Nicaea in 325. Christianity itself brought distant lands closer together. Some scholars have argued that a high christological decorative program could not find place within late antique Christian contexts, especially in Rome.²⁹ However, when we look to the Roman east, particularly to the Dura Europos baptistery decoration, we find a grand exception and shared biblical tradition.³⁰ The visual influence from Dura Europos has long been recognized for its unique merging of both Jewish and Christian structures and imagery in a location known for its fertile Christian expansion and conversion—Syria. Judaism and its rites were likewise “sanctioned by their antiquity,”³¹ according to Tacitus, and it is not surprising that Christians were drawing on the Judaic heritage of textual convention. Additionally, it is no wonder that a new constituency of Christians in Rome, those whose programmatic visual discourse was decidedly diverse because of centuries of syncretic artistic tradition in the capital, were employing an equally sophisticated hierarchy of images from various sources to underscore their own manner of devotion, especially within small, privately funded catacombs.

Laconic images were typical within the context of death and memorial. To find concise images of Jonah or the Good Shepherd together

29. Mary Lee Thompson, “The Monumental and Literary Evidence for Programmatic Painting in Antiquity,” *Marsyas: Studies in the History of Art* 9 (1960/61): 36, 64–65.

30. Michael Peppard, *The World’s Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

31. Tacitus, *Histories* 5.4–5.

with orant figures representing the deceased was, without exception, the predominant fashion in third-century Christian memorial art. By the fourth century, the repertoire of images had expanded to include full programs of both Old and New Testament scenes that symbolically conflate with each other as in the Junius Bassus sarcophagus where many correlations, including the sacrifice of Isaac with the condemnation of Christ to the cross is clear, yet subtle. So, how did more complex and didactic images come to be part of the compositional elements of catacomb painting? Some claim that these scenes were derived from illustrated manuscripts in either codex or roll styles.³² However, chronological problems arise since codex evidence and examples were not compelling until the later part of the fourth century, much later than the earliest images in the Via Latina Catacomb. Tronzo, in his study of the catacomb, reasoned that Jewish texts in scroll format, many with illustrations, are viable candidates for inspiring the rich and diverse scenes found in the Via Latina Catacomb cubacula discussed here.³³ I would also argue that patristic commentary, along with the full scope of Christian discourse—including homilies, hymns, and letters—may have influenced the kinds of correlative scenes that were chosen for private commission. While these texts were not illustrated, they were still very influential in the ideological composition of memorial iconographic programs.

Old Testament imagery was not confined to text alone, but was increasingly brought to bear on new Christian art produced in its wake. The iconic visual stories found in Via Latina Catacomb cubacula A, B, and C share the deep biblical tradition of those found in the synagogue at Dura Europos.³⁴ Similar scenes common to both sites include Jacob's

32. See Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, *Die neue Katakomben an der via Latina in Rom* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1976); Dieter Korol, "Zum Bild der Vertreibung Adams und Evas in der neuen Katakomben an der Via Latina und zur anthropomorphen Darstellung Gottvaters," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 22 (1979): 175; Kurt Weitzmann, *Illustrations in Roll and Codex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 83–97.

33. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 20. See also Kurt Weitzmann, *Studies in Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971).

34. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 30.

vision, Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, the sacrifice of Isaac, the finding of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses at the burning bush and receiving the law, crossing the Red Sea, and scenes featuring Joshua.³⁵ Stylistically, the Dura Europos and the Via Latina frescos are very different, yet a continuity of theme at those sites affects both East and West by means of a more esoteric form of inspiration. Tronzo, in his same study, clearly admits that the style of painting in the Via Latina Catacomb has elements that hark back both to Roman traditions on the one hand and to a clearly distinct style of art on the other.³⁶ He goes on to say that the style of figures depicted in A, B, and C demonstrates a "coarsening of an ideal" and "a considerable narrowing of the creative horizon."³⁷ To the contrary, I suggest that a christological typology plays out in the collected scenes and includes women as initiatory matriarchal figures in complement to the patriarchal order. Choosing an old-fashioned, already legitimized style to depict this program was a socially ideal way to sanction Christian devotion within the private Roman catacomb. Although many of these scenes have no extant precedent in the visual culture of death and memorial, they were unlikely to be randomly chosen or improvised narrative scenes derived from a smattering of images from pattern books or other visual models. In the face of death, and considering the expense and commemorative aspects of burial, it is probable that the images chosen were deliberate. Although the original source for the catacomb iconography may never be known, it is important to recognize that subjective viewership of the image was indeed a form of visual and textual reception. Female Christian viewers and patrons could be influenced just as easily by their own models of lay piety and devotion as by direct contact with the word in text. Naturally, their interpretation of the images could have reflected their own roles as matrons within the household of Christ.

By the early fourth century, there has clearly been a shift in how a collection of images was displayed and read within the catacombs.

35. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 30.

36. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 31.

37. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 32.

Christian typological interpretation of Old Testament tropes, narratives, and figures was commonplace. Seemingly random scenes like Moses's dividing the Red Sea or Noah's ark could symbolize covenant baptism, whereas variations on the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace signified not only deliverance, but sanctification through the Holy Spirit.³⁸ On the one hand, venerable and age-old images associated with Christian fervor still acted as coherent typological symbols. Yet, it also became rather fashionable for patrons to adopt recognizable images as part of their memorial decoration simply because those images offered a visually authoritative pedigree for the increasingly aristocratic class of Christians, drawing on types from the Holy Land and the legacy of the past.³⁹ This was certainly the case in the Via Latina Catacomb, where evidence of private patronage points to a relatively wealthy clientele when compared with those in other communal catacombs.

Rahab described: Narrative and iconography

The scriptural narrative found in Joshua 2–6 features two Israelite spies entering Canaan in order to survey the land and then to report to Joshua in advance of Israel vanquishing the city of Jericho (Joshua 2:1). The story itself features three main scenes in which Rahab's voice serves as a powerful catalyst for the breach of walled boundaries, Israelite success, and the establishment of a new kingdom. Each scene consists of dialogue and the opportunity for Rahab's voice to declare a wise strategy aligned with the Israelite agenda. First, the named harlot, Rahab, hides the spies on the roof of her house under a large pile of flax and deceives the king's guard who come searching for them (Joshua 2:2–6). Second, Rahab extracts an oath from the Israelite spies that they will save her and her household when they return with their armies to destroy the city (Joshua 2:8–14). She then helps the spies escape by lowering them from her window outside the city walls by a cord and basket. Finally,

38. Robin Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 48–51, 79–84.

39. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 69.

Rahab and the spies covenant together to save all within the walls of her house if she will mark it with a scarlet thread tied to her window (Joshua 2:15–21). The covenant is kept,⁴⁰ Rahab is saved, and she is initiated into Israelite society, even to a position of honor as a wife.⁴¹ Clarifying the difference between the two distinct Hebrew words that delineate Rahab's rope or cord from the thread tied to the window is important. *Chebel*, translated as "cord" in the King James Version, is the word used in Joshua 2:15 to refer to the cord used to lower the spies and *chut* is used in Joshua 2:18 to refer to the "thread," as translated in the KJV, that Rahab ties to her window to save her household.

Chapter 2 of Joshua is one of the richest narratives in the entire book. The literary elements include irony, humor, symbolism, suspense, threat, sexual innuendo, and the triumph of the unlikely heroine. Regardless of differing translations of the Hebrew stems *zwn*, *znh/zny*, all of which assert prostitution on the part of the hostess or the idolatrous pursuit of deities other than YHWH,⁴² sexual innuendo is an unmistakable part of the story.⁴³ This is made blatantly clear even by the name Rahab, which means "to open" and which in Ugaritic epic references female genitalia.⁴⁴ Rahab's identity has created tension between the text and her interpreters. Those uncomfortable with Rahab being a prostitute have tried to soften the language to mean landlord (Aramaic version or Targum), innkeeper (Josephus, *Antiquities* 5.1.2), or

40. The Hebrew word *hesed*, which denotes the same kind of faithfulness between Rahab and Israel as that found in the covenant relationship between God and Israel, is used here. In requiring a covenant of the spies, she essentially argues for acknowledgment of her *hesed* toward the spies. See Jerome F. D. Creach, *Joshua* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 35.

41. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 4:5, 6:171.

42. Oral E. Collins, "The Stem ZNH and Prostitution in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1977), 70, 76. See also Riegner, *Vanishing Hebrew Harlot*, 9–13, 59, 68.

43. Christina Bucher, "The Origin and Meaning of Znh Terminology in the Book of Hosea" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1988), 119–20. See also Coogan, *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 323.

44. Creach, *Joshua*, 32.

“dealer of goods” (medieval Rashi), but the text itself plainly calls her a prostitute.⁴⁵

Her name suggestively links her profession and the expansion of the kingdom of Israel. Phrases concerning the Israelite spies who “entered” or “came into” and “spent the night” or “lay down” are double entendre for sexual intercourse and intimate a relationship between Rahab and the spie(s). Effectually, the symbolism is fraught with sexual innuendo, and eventually, the marriage between Rahab and Salmon or possibly Joshua himself⁴⁶ creates the matrilineal tie to the lineage of King David and Jesus.

Despite the reader’s association of Rahab with sexual deviation from the holiness code, she—like Tamar, Ruth, and even Susanna from the book of Daniel—is a savvy character. She not only thwarts the king’s guard but also negotiates an oath that will preserve her familial household. Moreover, her worthiness to be saved seems to hinge on her knowledge and acknowledgment of the Lord’s sovereignty, specifically the God of Israel’s sovereignty, and is expressed in Deuteronomic language.⁴⁷ This deep understanding of Israel’s destined entry into the land of Canaan has led both Jewish and Christian interpreters to conclude that Rahab fully converted and became part of the covenant community.⁴⁸ Moreover, Rahab’s speech identifies her as set apart, as the keeper of a particular kind of prophetic knowledge. She is able to “see” from her vantage point in the wall of Jericho and is the key figure in the story, enabling the success of Israel’s conquest.

Underneath the flax, the spies are dependent on Rahab for their safety and salvation. They are at her mercy. The primary site for their

45. Riegner, *Vanishing Hebrew Harlot*, 186–201; see also Gene M. Tucker, “The Rahab Saga (Joshua 2): Some Form-Critical and Traditio-Historical Observations,” in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Erfird (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 66–87.

46. Rabbinic tradition would have Rahab marrying Joshua with kings and prophets resulting from her union. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 4:5, 6:171. Matthew 1:5 names Rahab as the wife of Salmon, one of the spies, and mother of Boaz, and therefore, a direct ancestress of Jesus.

47. Creach, *Joshua*, 36–27.

48. Creach, *Joshua*, 36.

deliverance is in Rahab's household. Ultimately, their safety depends on her wisdom, her movements, her initiative, her clever disguise, all of which demonstrate her internal strength and her inherent virtue in keeping with ancient tropes of spinning. A multiplicity of arguments surrounding the possibility that Rahab was a Canaanite cult prostitute may have some relevance, and flax may have been used as a cult object to facilitate pagan fertility rites.⁴⁹ However, the narrative gives no indication that the flax is anything more than raw material. The most common ancient use for flax was for spinning and weaving into linen cloth. The rooftop was a favorable place to store flax as the morning dew and the daily sunlight would help weaken the stalks sufficiently in order to be able to open them and spread their fibers for use. As innuendoes go, the flax is equally laden with connotations of both sexual fertility and virtuous production, regardless of whether or not the materials were used for cult purposes. The amount of flax needed to hide the spies would indicate that the materials are used for economic purposes and for the maintenance of the household. Spinning and cloth production in the ancient world and within the biblical framework are just as likely to be associated with the virtue, strength, and preparedness of pious matrons (Proverbs 31) as it is with the rarified uses of the fertility cult.

Christian scripture, specifically Hebrews 11:31, further comments on the relationship of initiated otherness by naming Rahab, a Canaanite, as a faithful exemplar, even a saved prostitute, and builds upon the matrilineal connection found in Matthew 1:5, which lists her as one of the unlikely ancestresses of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, according to James 2:25, Rahab herself was justified or redeemed of her previous lifestyle by her salvific work in saving the spies, seemingly now with God's own approval.⁵⁰ Still, one would not expect the inclusion of Rahab alongside the great patriarchs and male heroes of the Old Testament where her image seems to be somewhat irregular and curious. This incongruity has been not been discussed beyond merely cataloging the

49. Creach, *Joshua*, 33, 39.

50. James 2:25: "Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?"

image.⁵¹ Scholars have overlooked this iconographic part of the catacomb and the figural and symbolic parallels between other images of Joshua and their relationship with Rahab, her household, the window, the binding cord, the scarlet thread, and the abundance of flax emphasized in the narrative.

Prophetic Rahab: Patristic sources

In order to further understand this singular scene of Rahab among all the great patriarchs, deliverers, christological types, prophets, and victorious heroes of Israel, we must understand the textual traditions that surround her. Looking to patristic commentary from the late third and early fourth centuries, we find a tradition that was easily transferable to the visual realm through the vehicle of imagination. Using patristic texts as source material for visual representation does not narrow the possibilities for programmatic interpretation; instead, they open a rather broad horizon for how scripture was used and understood. They demonstrate the potency, consistencies, and variations for interpretation of the same subject matter. Trends in decorative development during the fourth century tended toward conservative or old-fashioned styles with slow movement toward change. Patronage conceivably played a part in determining the artistic style of the age and, as E. H. Gombrich has discussed, if patrons wished to support an “ancient” tradition, particularly because it suited their iconographic interests, those wishes could easily be accommodated.⁵²

This same logic holds true for Christians who were interested in depicting Old Testament scenes in a way that, for them, also seemed old-fashioned. Stylistic choices may have, in fact, been a delineating element between what was respectably old and what was decidedly new and newly legitimate. Very ancient narratives, new to the geography of Rome and newly associated with Christian tropes are depicted in a

51. Ferrua, *Unknown Catacomb*, 72.

52. E. H. Gombrich, “The Debate on Primitivism in Ancient Rhetoric,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 24.

traditional, very Roman way in the Via Latina Catacomb. Tronzo, in his assertion that the earliest paintings here follow a single geographic tradition is shortsighted in that he analyzes only style.⁵³ Foreign elements of iconography were popular in funerary art through shared traditions and transferable media, particularly through illuminated manuscripts and artists' source books. The visual account of Joshua was recognized by Christians of the fourth century as christological, with obvious correlations between the name Joshua and Jesus and less obvious correlations between Joshua entering into the promised land and Jesus leading the way to eternal life. We have clearly enunciated the significance of finding Joshua's narrative in the Via Latina Catacomb as one that moves beyond the narrative to represent the conceptual message of deliverance and salvation to all Israel. It moves the viewer from the land and law of Moses into the promised land of grace with Joshua signifying Jesus⁵⁴ and his utter apocalyptic fulfillment. Rahab is a gateway figure for both Joshua and Jesus in first facilitating Israel's entry into Canaan and second in her matrilineal parentage to Jesus.

Joshua's name, or Yehoshuah with its alternative form of Yeshua, corresponds to the Greek spelling Iesous or Latin/English Jesus, clearly associating the son of Nun with the Son of God in a high christological sense. As early as the third and early fourth centuries, the book of Joshua was understood as an accounting of the mysteries of YHWH disguised in the typology of Christ. Origen (c. 182–250 CE) commented, "This book does not report to us so much the actions of the son of Nave, as it describes to us the mysteries of Jesus, my Lord."⁵⁵ Joshua, and therefore also Jesus, fulfills and succeeds the law of Moses with the gospel. The early church fathers used Joshua 2 to underscore their theology, particularly as it related to the open covenant of Israel for the gentile church. Rahab, as a typological character, specifically underwent this kind of exegetical transformation by the mid-fourth century wherein she is clearly associated as a type of the church, particularly

53. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 49.

54. Tronzo, *Via Latina Catacomb*, 61.

55. Origen, *First Homily on Joshua* 3.

the *ecclesia ex gentibus*.⁵⁶ As sexual irregularities and harlotry were most often associated with idolatry in patristic sources, it seems remarkable to highlight Rahab as a type of the gentile church. Rahab's confession of God's sovereignty and consequential inverse of heretical praxis, opening the salvific path to her deliverance and placing her within the ranks of sacred Israel are of particular interest among the early church fathers. That a foreigner and a harlot could breach this border within the reception history of the earliest Christian texts is remarkably bold and equally fascinating.⁵⁷

Even Rahab's scarlet thread and its relation to the blood of Christ and paschal Passover is the subject of early patristic comment.⁵⁸ Other early Christian interpretations of the text include Rahab as a model of faith, hospitality, and Christian patience—themes easily drawn from the narrative itself.⁵⁹ Both Clement of Rome⁶⁰ (d. 99 CE) and Origen also make a point of commenting on Rahab's ability to prophesy. Origen specifically envisions Rahab as a prophetic wisdom figure when he maintains, "Born a pagan, Rahab was now full of the Holy Spirit giving testimony to the past, faith for the present, and prophecy for the

56. Cyprian, *Epistle* 75.5.4: Because her whole family was saved from destruction, Rahab was a type of the church; Augustine (354–430) taught that Rahab feared God and thus represented the church and the gentiles; for him, Rahab was synonymous with the gentile church (Psalm 87:4). Jerome (c. 345–419) held essentially the same view and mentioned it twice in his *Letters* 52.3; see also Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 6.23.

57. It was not uncommon for early Christians to characterize gentiles as idolaters and prone to sexual improprieties (Romans 1:21–31). Even gentile converts suffered under this pattern of accentuating former idolatries and fornication, even if to make the dichotomous point clear (1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Ephesians 4:17–19; 5:3–8).

58. As early as the mid-second century CE, Justin Martyr (d. 165) claimed in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (a rabbi) that Rahab's scarlet thread was a symbol of the blood of Christ, by which those who were once harlots and unrighteous out of all nations were saved (111).[9]; Origen (c. 185–253/4) also held that the thread hanging from Rahab's window signifies the blood of Christ and thus redemption. He believed that Rahab "knew no salvation except for the blood of Christ." Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 3.5.

59. 1 Clement 12:1, 3, 8 establishes Rahab's faith and hospitality as sources of her salvation. Clement continues this trope in his *Epistle to the Corinthians* 17 on martyrdom.

60. 1 Clement 12: 8: "There was not only faith but also prophecy in this woman."

future.”⁶¹ However, even these interpretations are relatively narrow and ignore the layered matrilineal iconographic elements associated with Rahab in the textual account and in our catacomb image.

Rahab recovered: Ephrem the Syrian reads Rahab

Moving beyond the most well-known patristic interpretations of Christ's incarnation through its juxtaposition with women like Eve, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and even Mary, we find a fourth-century example of public liturgical celebration that features these same women for their very attributes of boldness and holy desire within the Syriac tradition. Susan Ashbrook Harvey has written about Ephrem the Syrian's (ca. 306–373) *Hymns on Nativity* that address the “image of the woman whose faith was sexually enacted in her body by means of holy desire.”⁶² She goes on to underscore the hymns sung at vigil services in celebration of the nativity feast by women's choirs in public and socially inclusive spaces.⁶³ These hymns reverse the order of shame and honor, replacing derision with praise and associating women like Eve, Tamar, Rahab, and Mary with faithful, though nontraditional or even scandalous, desires and actions that led to bearing heirs as legitimate as those given to Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth.⁶⁴ By the very fact that they are named together, these hymns also vindicate the holy desires of Mary as well as Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and even Susanna, who was wrongly condemned. Although these hymns were composed slightly later than our catacomb images, they demonstrate the general impact of the Marian association with Rahab and the other sexually scandalous women in the genealogy of Christ. They mutually raised the status of all

61. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 3.4.

62. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Impudent Women: Matthew 1:1–16 in Syriac Tradition,” *Parole de l'Orient* 35 (2010): 67.

63. Harvey, “Impudent Women,” 67.

64. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Holy Impudence, Sacred Desire: the Women of Matthew 1:1–16 in Syriac Tradition,” in *If These Stones Could Speak: Texts and Contexts*, ed. George Kalantzis and Thomas F. Martin (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2009), 27–48.

women, particularly matrons, who were instrumental in perpetuating social legitimacy of Christianity by the piety of their household and lay devotion.

Dating to the fourth century, Ephrem the Syrian's *Hymn De Nativitate* 9 depicts Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary as praised and vindicated for their recognition of the Messiah and his sovereignty. They are grouped together and associated with each other as women of boldness. They choose to cast aside their shame as outsiders for the sake of the God of Israel and are conspicuously named in the genealogical line of Christ, not in spite of their unusual sexual activity, but really because of it.⁶⁵ Ephrem's *Hymn* 1 presents a full cast of Old Testament personages who anticipate the Messianic role of Jesus Christ. Ephrem is known for the symbolic theology present in his hymns.⁶⁶ In the same fashion as our catacomb paintings, he draws Old and New Testament types together to create a system whereby the hearer/reader of the hymns is initiated into the world of Christian mysteries. Not only was meaning meant to be derived from symbolic types, those same symbols were understood by Ephrem as divinely designed for the very purpose of glorifying the initiated as they "opened, flowed and poured forth unto them."

In every place, if you look, His symbol is there,
and when you read, you will find His types.
For by Him were created all creatures,
and He engraved His symbols upon His possessions.
When He created the world,
He gazed at it and adorned it with His images.
Streams of His symbols opened, flowed and poured forth
His symbols on His members.⁶⁷

Ephrem's examples of female typology are fraught with rich allusions to beauty, order, and divinity. *Hymn* 1 specifically aligns Eve,

65. Harvey, "Impudent Women," 71.

66. Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 41.

67. Ephrem the Syrian, *Virg.* 20.12, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 348–49.

Ruth, Tamar, and Rahab in a way that exemplifies their maternity. Their maternity and even the behaviors that result in their maternity are all associated with the coming forth of the Messiah. His language invoking faith and requesting devoted imitation of these women is rich with life-giving maternal imagery. For example, Ruth's act of lying with Boaz indicates that she recognizes the "medicine of life" and "from her seed arose the Giver of all life."⁶⁸ Eve is likewise associated with Mary as one of her daughters who gave birth to [second] Adam. As well, the story of Rahab and Joshua emphasizes the symbolic elements of life and vision:

That Joshua who also plucked and carried with him some of the
fruits
anticipated the Tree of Life Who would give His all life-giving
fruit to taste.
Rahab beheld Him; for if the scarlet thread
saved her by a symbol from [divine] wrath, by a symbol she tasted
the truth.⁶⁹

Not only does Ephrem associate the tree of life with bearing fruit in Jesus, he emphasizes Rahab's own visionary reception in beholding Christ, an act that has everything to do with her matrilineal connection and her foresight in recognizing salvation. The hymn intimates at the necessity of female sexual perpetuation within the genealogy of Christ, by which the Son of Man comes into being. Christ is literally tied to Rahab by the scarlet thread of blood and mortality, and she is tied to him by the symbolic lamb's blood, the salvific Passover by Christ's own act of divine sacrifice, again made possible by his fleshy body, given to him by a woman.

Other key figures that also appear in the Via Latina Catacombs are also featured in Ephrem's *Hymn 1* as those who are vigilant in their typology; Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Elijah, and Moses are all named among those who watch for the Messiah. These very hymns were sung in celebration and in connection with the vigil kept from

68. Ephrem, *Nat.* 1.13, 65. See Ruth 1:16; 4:17.

69. Ephrem, *Nat.* 1.32.33, 68.

Christmas to Epiphany. Ephrem calls attention to both the patriarchal typologies for Christ and the matriarchal lineage necessary to bringing about his salvific acts, again all sung at the vigil to celebrate Christ's birth and to recognize him as King of kings.

Hymn 9, which accentuates Mary's unique circumstances of motherhood, also underscores by emphasis the female mediators of Christ's lineage and heritage. Ephrem returns again to the Old Testament female foils for Mary from the Matthean genealogy, including Tamar, Ruth, and Rahab, and treats them as exceptional women who recognize and anticipate the Messiah rather than describing them in opposition to the holiness code of chastity or disparaging their sexual behavior.

Because of You, women pursued
men: Tamar desired
a man who was widowed, and Ruth loved
a man who was old. Even Rahab,
Who captivated men, by You was taken captive.⁷⁰

Finally, Ephrem invokes themes of salvation specifically through these sexually desirable figures. Both *Hymn 18* and *Hymn 35* feature this kind of exegesis on Hebrew scripture and their fulfillment through Jesus.⁷¹ *Hymn 35*, in particular, turns our eye to the city of Jericho and makes mention of Rahab and her symbolic cord, "with the splendid thread of Rahab gird on his crown. By means of Rahab who was saved, sing his praise."⁷² This phrasing builds on Hebrews 11 and the depiction of Rahab as a salvific type. Rahab's cord here is overtly and symbolically associated with the glorious, yet mortal crown of Jesus, who is the conqueror suitable for praise precisely because he overcame the bounds of the mortal frame. Ephrem easily conflates Old Testament figures with the new mysteries of Christianity. He easily ties the Hebrew text to the earthly, even sexual desirability of the matrilineal women within Christ's

70. Ephrem, *Nat.* 9.7, 126.

71. McVey, *Ephrem*, 337.

72. Ephrem, *Virg.* 35.1, 416.

own genealogy in a way that engaged an inclusive group of women in the early church and underscored the mystery of Christ's divinity.

Rahab redefined: Holy boundaries, holy borders

Rahab's window, established as a type of delineating border zone, becomes a key symbolic element in understanding late antique reception of her image in the Via Latina Catacombs. If the book of Joshua is a typological account of the mysteries of Christ, and since Rahab is presented in detail at the beginning of the text, clearly Rahab is an initiatory wisdom figure, an apotropaic protector, even a foil type for Mary, the necessary guardian at the gate, the means of entry into the promised land. Rahab's vantage point at the high window in the wall underscores her role as one who "sees" from an elevated position. She recognizes, before her people, that the God of Israel is the one true God. She anticipates and negotiates deliverance for her family in the moment of Israelite invasion and in her role as matrilineal mother to Christ himself. Even the rope used to lower the spies offers potential for deep symbolism. Again, noting the difference between the Hebrew words *chebel*, or cord, and *chut*, or thread, is important. The spies' deliverance by way of the cord is fraught with birth associations. It is a binding, connecting cord in a color associated with blood and bloodlines. Rahab's appearance at her window represents the gateway to deliverance and is symbolic of the incarnation, even birth. The author of the text carefully notes this trademark element of the scarlet cord in the story. We need only look to the story of Tamar's twins by Judah to find this motif repeated in association with other births. Tamar's midwife tied a scarlet thread to Zerah's wrist to mark him as the firstborn to Judah (Genesis 38:27–30). The cord marker certainly connects the deliverance of birth—in a way similar to Rahab's story—with a bond, a token, and a birthright covenant.

To link Rahab's cord to the window scene, early Christian fathers took great care to shift its meaning to fit within a larger christological scheme, as we have already discussed. They preserved the potent,

salvific, even apotropaic or protective element of bloodline association for God's holy people, now mapped onto Christian communicants or those who recognized Christ as the Savior. In so doing, they excised the association of the matrilineal bloodline from the story and instead elaborated on the blood of the paschal Lamb sprinkled on the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt in order that the angel of destruction would pass over their households.⁷³ While the Passover blood is an effectual symbol prefiguring Christ's redemption for his people and salvation for Christian communicants, Rahab's red thread also recalls the blood on the doorposts with the sign that would save her household. In this way the cord of Rahab also takes on apotropaic attributes inherent even in its red color, a color associated with birth, love, and sacrifice. However, the thread tied to the window is *not* the cord by which the spies are bound to her for their deliverance through the same window. This is another symbol entirely. Without further unpacking the scarlet association with Christ's passion and his saving blood, let's return for just a moment to the connection of Rahab's cord and window as pictured in the Via Latina Catacombs.

While the Passover/passion correlation to Rahab's red cord is clear,⁷⁴ conflating the cord of deliverance with the thread tied to her window-frame is risky. A much later text will elucidate the idea of Rahab's prefiguration of Mary by associating her window to the opening womb of Mary during the incarnation. The thirteenth-century Bodleian Ms. 270b, fol. 95v, shows the encounter between Rahab and the spies in the uppermost tondo, while below Mary is met by Gabriel in a scene of annunciation alongside the crucifix. The text connects the red thread with the blood of Christ and the window of incarnation, but this interpretation is mistakenly applied to both the scarlet deliverance cord *and* the thread tied to the window. What has not been elucidated in both text and image is the clear delineation between these two separate symbols.

73. Exodus 12:21–23; and within the early Christian context, Hebrews 11:28.

74. Again this interpretation was effectual as early as 96 CE, when Clement of Rome associated the scarlet rope with the sign of the blood of the Savior that redeems all who believe in God and hope (1 Clement 12:7).

We needn't look so far as the Bodleian manuscript for a scarlet cord connection between Rahab and the annunciation to Mary. Annunciation associations with the scarlet cord were part of both the visual and textual discourse from the second century onward. The text of the *Protoevangelium of James* as well as small, domestic objects dating to the same period as our catacomb painting include the distinctive roves or thick strands of scarlet and purple wool assigned to Mary for spinning the veil of the temple.⁷⁵ The spinning connection to the annunciation was a commentary on Mary's virtuous matronage, her fertility, and her creative role as the mother of God.⁷⁶ Likewise, Rahab at her window, delivering the Israelite spies to safety via a scarlet cord, as pictured in the Via Latina Catacomb, is just as much a Christian symbol of her maternal role in the lineage of Jesus as it is a commentary on the high christological connection to the saving power of the paschal blood for all Israel.

Considering the close spatial and iconographic proximity of Eve, Tamar, Susanna, Mary, and Rahab within the Via Latina Catacomb, I believe reconsideration of their iconography is in order. These images were seen and visually read regularly as women, often associated with the households of the deceased, kept funerary vigil and liturgical rites in the catacombs themselves. These images fall far from the normative codification for meaning established within church buildings or monasteries. They are, by definition, domesticated and memorialized images that may have been commissioned and influenced in their program by women. Patristic sources and catacomb images attest to the influential rhetoric surrounding Rahab and may have influenced each other, a hypothesis that is ultimately unverifiable yet complementary to finding these scenes within the funerary setting of the Via Latina Catacomb.

Seeing Rahab for herself, as well as within close proximity to the other "scandalous" women depicted in the catacomb, allows us to visually read or interpret her image, not just as a mere player in the textual narrative or just in association with her sexual irregularities, but as

75. Taylor, "Annunciation," 27–29.

76. Taylor, "Annunciation," 27–37.

a multidimensional figure who was a guardian, a prophetic deliverer, a nurturing mother, a type of woman wisdom in her own right. This iconographic interpretation is accomplished for Rahab by recognizing her contribution to matronage, the matrilineal genealogy of Christ, and prophetic action, all underscored by the attributes of cords, threads, windows, and the abundance of flax for spinning. What we find then, in the early Christian representation of Rahab, is a conflation of prophetic vision and nontraditional holy desire toward the God of Israel. The most nuanced interpretations for this image are found betwixt and between the tension and ease of the text and are played out within the boundaries of early Christianity. This type of interpretive reception, though new, surprising, or even startling, helps us more clearly decipher the intent of memorial devotion outside of codified liturgy. Rahab, within the memorial context, becomes a model and type for bold and legitimizing piety practiced by late antique Christian women.

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