Chapter Four

Jewish Influence on Earliest Christian Painting: The Via Latina Catacomb

Of the hitherto known catacombs, the one on the Via Latina discovered in 1955 is not only richest in pictorial decoration, but for this very reason also the most difficult to explain. Besides a depiction of the seated Christ, with Peter and Paul standing by, an unequivocally Christian motif, the ideologically significant grave decoration of this catacomb includes numerous pagan motifs. For example, Cubiculum N is decorated exclusively with Hercules scenes. However, the overwhelming majority of the pictures stemming from the second till the fourth quarter of the fourth century portray biblical scenes, among which the Old Testament scenes represent a definite majority. Since some of these scenes seem to refer to Jewish exemplars, the discovery of the Via Latina catacomb has re-enlivened the discussion about Jewish antecedents to Christian Bible illustration which has been going on since the beginning of this century. It was justifiably assumed that the exemplars for both the frescos in the Dura Europos synagogue and early Christian painting cycles, the oldest of which are in the Via Latina catacomb, were Jewish picture sequences. However, as happens often when a plausible theory appears to gain consensus, an objection was raised – in this case correctly described as a ‘step backwards’. It is therefore necessary to take up the problem anew and put the question whether the search for Jewish exemplars to early Christian art is at all necessary and proper.

The three preceding chapters have demonstrated the existence of a

95 Ferrua, Le pitture; U. Schubert, Spättes Judentum, 11-34; Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, Neue Katakombe; Tronzo, Catacomb.
96 Ferrua, Le pitture, pl. 108.
97 See discussion in Fink, Bildfrömmigkeit, 51-62 esp. 56.
widespread Jewish pictorial art, the oldest attestations for which come from the third century CE, but the beginnings of which can with probability be dated in the second century. This art arose in that sphere of Judaism customarily referred to as ‘normative Judaism’. Its Greco-Roman elements do not surprise us since similar phenomena were abundantly assimilated into Rabbinical Judaism. With great probability, the synagogue can be seen as a point of dissemination for Jewish art. Our task here is not to determine whether illustrated Bibles, Hebrew or Greek, or perhaps Aramaic paraphrases, or pattern books for the painting of synagogues were the mediators between Jewish and Christian artists, but to conclude – here with emphasis – that it was Rabbinic exegesis, not Alexandrian-Philonic, that influenced both the figurative representations in the Dura Europos synagogue and the Christian painting cycles. If one assumes that illustrated Septuagint manuscripts are the source, which is eminently possible, these must not be connected with Egypt, since the cultural power of Egyptian Judaism was broken after the suppression of the revolt in 115 CE. The illustrations themselves clearly indicate a Syro-Palestinian provenance, i.e., that area in which the Talmudic tradition arose and underwent its full development.

Now if Jewish art possessed a developed picture program already in the third century, i.e., at the time of the timid beginnings of a Christian art, as has been repeatedly emphasized, and such picture programs are also attested in Christian sources from the fourth century on, it is difficult to draw any other conclusion than that Christian artists employed optical Jewish exemplars. It can only be described as astonishing when, in an otherwise excellent study, the question concerning ‘Jewish influence in early Christian art’ is very earnestly put, yet is followed by the remark that this is ‘a question that we still cannot answer’. Here it seems to have been overlooked that concerning the relevant art monuments it is first necessary to ask whether these can be explained from Rabbinic sources, and only afterwards can it be asked whether, and to what extent, the originally Jewish exemplars have undergone Christian reinterpretation. For the answer to the first question the student of Rabbinic literature is responsible.

99 Cf n6 above.
100 Kretschmar, ‘Beitrag’; cf Gutmann, ‘Second Commandment’.
101 Weitzmann-Kessler, Frescos localize the assumed picture exemplars the area of Antioch.
102 Maser, ‘Irrwege’.
103 Tronzo, Catacomb, 76 (cf my review in Kairos 30-31 [1988-89] 251-3).
104 In some motifs, e.g., the Flood scene in the Ashburnham Pentateuch, originally Jewish motifs could have been mediated to Christian painters via the Apocrypha, which were widespread in the Christian realm. Jewish legend motifs may have been known in oral tradition to Church fathers as well, and via the Church fathers, may have served as a foundation for Christian illustrators. If however – as in most cases – we are dealing with statements which have their Sitz im Leben in the Rabbinic world, the Rabbinic material must be considered as exclusively relevant for comparison with picture composition.