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SYMBOLS, ICONS, LITURGY

Eschatology in early Christian art

Vladimir Cvetković

Introduction

In most volumes on Christian Dogmatics, the section dealing with eschatology as a separate theological subject is the final one. This should not come as a surprise since these Dogmatics handbooks actually follow the structure of the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, which begins with the confession of faith in God the Father, continues with the Son, his historical Incarnation, the Holy Spirit and the Church and ends with the hope for eternal life, or eschatology (Louth 2013: 1).

In the following, I will demonstrate that in the understanding of the early Church, expressed through artistic symbols and images and complemented by liturgy, eschatology should not be placed at the end of history, as the finale of divine revelation and human fulfilment, but at the core of personal and historical drama. Although the New Testament writers and other second century Christian authors expressed their eschatological vision in writing, there is a striking lack of both Christian imagery as well as relevant literary material about ecclesiastical utilisation of this imagery, from the first two centuries of the Christian era (Hellemo 1989: 5). Therefore, this investigation focuses on the period from the third to the sixth centuries with regard to both the Christian imagery and the textual material which might serve as the dogmatic basis for this imagery.

First, by pointing to Christian depictions from the third and early fourth century, I will attempt to discern the distinctiveness of the Christian eschatological vision in comparison to the expectations regarding death and afterlife in other ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern religions, which influenced Christianity. Secondly, by use of imagery from the mid fourth to the mid fifth century, I will investigate the shifts in the eschatological focus caused by political and societal changes in the Roman Empire of the Constantine and post-Constantine era. Finally, by drawing on the Christian imagery from late fifth to the late sixth century, I will explore the connection between developments of Christian worship and ecclesial structures on the one hand and eschatological hope expressed in art on the other hand.

Christ as teacher and rescuer from death: Baptismal and funeral context

The eschatological hope of the earliest Christian communities was equally shaped by Christ's resurrection and the expectation of his second coming, because the resurrection constituted an essential component of the future hope (Rowland 2008: 57). Many first-century Christians