# Iconography of Hermas

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THE collection of early Christian writings called **The Apostolic Fathers** has as its longest writing **The Shepherd of Hermas.** Written in Rome probably at the end of the first century by Hermas, who was a slave before coming as a stranger to Christianity, the work called the **Shepherd,** a name taken from that of the mediating angel from which Hermas allegedly gains his message, is an early Christian writing composed of a number of purported visions from differing dates urging Christians to repentance and ethical conduct.

At the end of the second century and beginning of the third, **The Shepherd of Hermas** won its way into early Christian imagery and symbolism, notably within the Christian catacombs of Italy and possibly as far east as Dura-Europos in Syria. This fact, a living testimony of the influence of the book of Hermas, has received almost no recognition in modern scholarship.

On the ceiling of the vestibule or entrance to the catacomb of St. January in Naples[1] a portion of a multifarious painting shows three virgins bringing up out of the water stones with which to build a tower.[2] This represents a portion of the Ninth Similitude of Hermas which, summarized in part, is as follows: In the middle of a plain surrounded by twelve mountains stood a rock which had risen from the plain and now stood higher even than the mountains. Although the rock was old, it had a gateway carved out of it which appeared quite recent. Around this gateway, which shone with the brilliance of the sun, stood twelve virgins, the four most glorious at the corners, the others, glorious too, near the entrance. They were dressed for work with their right shoulders bared to carry some load and for this they appeared ready, gay and eager. They received orders from six men, tall and splendid, to bring out of the deep waters the stones, which were to be fitted into the tower. The virgins placed the stones on one another, passed through the gateway, and gave them to the men who built the tower. The tower was then built upon the great central rock with these stones. Other stones which did not pass through the hands of the virgins nor enter by the gateway were removed from the tower and thrown back.

The art in Naples preserves a bit of this allegory of the Ninth Similitude of the **Shepherd.** It shows the virgins bringing the stones, the Christian faithful, from the waters of baptism so that they may be fitted into the tower which is the church. There is no doubt about the meaning inasmuch as Hermas, almost too carefully, explains his own allegory in detail (Sim. IX, 12f.). The depiction overhead in the vestibule of the catacomb shows only three virgins representing the Christian virtues, whereas Hermas in his allegory presents twelve. Nevertheless, the relation to the text of the **Shepherd** is certain and the popularity of Hermas in the Christian world, which is now assured by means of iconography, very notably so in the region of the Italian peninsula, is thus recorded.

[1]Leclercq, "Hermas (Le Pasteur D'), *"Dictionnaire D' Archéolgie Chrétienne et De Liturgie Tome* VI, Pt. 2 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1925) pp. 2286, 2287.

[2]Cf. Leclercq, Vol. XII, Pt. 1, p. 723, figure 8686 for the complete depiction.

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Popular reading of the **Shepherd** must have persisted in Naples until the middle of the third century, and perhaps later, since this is the approximate date assigned to the higher level of the catacomb on which this depiction of Hermas is located. The lower level of the catacomb was apparently of an earlier date, and it may be assigned to the early third century.[3] The portraiture is described by Leclercq as a very remarkable work of art. It evidently now shows the effects of wear through the past seventeen centuries, since it is judged to have been exceedingly attractive when it was new, exhibiting much elegance and beauty.[4]

A second painting of about the same date found in the catacomb of Callixtus (about 200 A.D.),[5] a priest and overseer of this area of underground entombment, who later became bishop of Rome.[6] This painting represents the same allegory as that depicted in the catacomb at Naples, but distinguished here simply by the symbol of the new door or gateway to the tower (Sim. IX. 2) as described above. This literary imagery is to be understood in the common eschatological thought of that time, in terms of the immediacy of the end of the age, and of the **Parousia,** the second coming of Christ. It is through the new gate, through Christ newly manifest, that one enters the tower, the church which is of God and finds salvation. Kirsopp Lake seems to interpret the explanatory passage, Sim. IX, 12.3, apocalyptically In reference to the last days, his note reads: "The Greek means 'the consummation,' the time when this age or world-period is finished, and a new age will begin (cf. Mt. 13:40)."[7]

Although Lake's statement apparently indicates an apocalyptic interpretation, the essential dualistic element of two ages[8] with their two controlling, yet diametrically opposing rulers is not in evidence. Hermas' use of words which elsewhere may have technical connotations need not be understood to necessitate the transference of that meaning to the present context. On the contrary, this resembles the careless adaptation of terms from a variety of sources, not unlike the efforts of a modern preacher. It is discouraging that no more information about this particular painting, however, is available. One can only state that the influence of the book of Hermas has been recorded in the catacomb of Callixtus at the beginning of the third century along the Appian Way near Rome, indicating the popular use of **Hermas** in the area of Rome at this date.

Cabrol and Leclercq[9] record a **gemme gravee,** an engraving on a precious or semi-precious stone, which appears to be another illustration of Similitude VIII of the **Shepherd.** Such gems were often worn amound the neck of the faithful Christians as a religious ornament and symbol, and were often thought to be of magical significance. Many personal treasures of this kind have been turned up with the excavations at the burial places of the early Christians. On this gem, however, Hermas' revelation concerning repentance is represented by the allegory of the willow tree in Similitude VIII. The willow overshadowed the plains and mountains, and everyone called Christians came under its shelter. Beside it stood the tall and glorious angel of the Lord with a large sickle who continually cut branches from the tree and gave them to those people who were in its shadow. Although he gave out many twigs, the tree remained sound and strong, as before. Later they were called back, and they came in every conceiv-

[3]Leclercq, Vol. XII, Pt. 1, p. 722.
[4]*Ibid.,* p. 722.
[5]Leclercq, Vol. VI, Pt. 2, p. 2286.
[6]Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies* IX, vii (*ANF* V, p. 129).
[7]K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers II,* (Loeb Classical Library) (New York: G. P. Putnams Sons, 1930) p. 249, n. 1.
[8]Cf. Martin Rist the exegesis on Revelation in *The Interpreters Bible,* Vol. XII, p. 347.
[9]Cabrol and Leclercq, Vol. VI, Pt. 1, p. 851, no. 246, figure 5114.

able condition. Some were green and bearing fruit; others were moth-eaten, cracked, and withered. The Similitude continues in great detail, but the explanation is obvious. The figure of a man and a willow tree appear engraved on the gem recalling the strange allegory of Hermas recounted above. No other information is available, but this apparently is a depiction of the allegory in Similitude VIII.

Not far from the catacomb of Callixtus lies another painting which preserves the name of an otherwise unknown founder, Praetextatus. Within the catacomb of Praetextatus the main chamber is adorned with a number of depictions which represent the scene at Jacob's Well, the healing of the woman with an issue of blood, the resurrection of Lazarus, and an incident which, according to Paul Styger,[10] appears to be an illustration of Similitude VIII in the **Shepherd.** Although the painting of this Similitude is not described by Finegan, who, while utilizing Styger's work, only briefly refers to the illustration in his **Light From The Ancient Past,** attention should be drawn to the literary context of Similitude VIII as noted above. Styger reports that the illustration portrays a young man "im Pallium" receiving what are presumably branches of the willow tree, some of which are green, the others leafless. This painting lacks meaning outside the context of Similitude VIII yet its relation to the letter is indefinite. This depiction, along with the canonical representative mentioned above, adorns the catacomb of Proetextatus. From their style the several paintings are dated near the end of the second century.[11] Finegan, though, gives depiction of Hermas. Indeed, all that may be said is that it appears that the catacomb of Praetextatus holds another illustration of the allegory in **The Shepherd of Hermas,** one that provides evidence of the high regard in which this work was held by early Christians in Rome.

Even though both of these finds are identified with some uncertainty, the suggested interpretation appears valid. It is noteworthy that each find has been presented by a different scholar (one by Leclercq, the other by Styger), evidently quite unknown to and independent of each other. One cannot help but wonder if these two portrayals are not indeed accurately described and represent a scene which was at one time popularly known and depicted by early Christians.

The influence of Hermas may possibly be noted in other illustrations, such as the Good Shepherd, especially in those areas where the work of Hermas gained much vogue. Unless information is found which at present is not available, so far as is known, this suggestion cannot be proved. It would surely be logical, however, for the very prominent shepherd in the book of Hermas, who is the mediator and revealer of repentance and who is assuredly the alter-ego of Christ in canonical Christian writings (Luke 15:5 and John 10:11), to be of such influence that it might well pervade early Christian art or emphasize anew a popular symbol adopted by Christians.[12] One might especially wonder if this is not true of the art portraying the figure of the Shepherd in the second and third centuries near Rome, particularly in the case of the portrayal in the catacomb of Callixtus which contains a definite illustration of Hermas.[13]

[10]Paul Styger, *Die Romisches Katakomben,* (Berlin: Verlag für Kunstewissenschaft, 1933), p. 151. See also Jack Finegan, *Light From The Ancient Past,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Second Edition, 1959), p. 468.

[11]J. Finegan, *Light From The Ancient Past,* p. 468.

almost no information concerning this

[12]See Leclercq, "Pasteur (Bon)," Volume 6, Pt. 2, p. 2272f. for a detailed account of the iconography of the Good Shepherd including numerous illustrations. See also Finegan, p. 478.

[13]Finegan, p. 461; also pp. 457, 467, 478f. Also O. Marucchi, *Manual of Christian Archaeology,* (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1935), pp. 338f.

Even more may be said. The book entitled the **Shepherd** has as its main theme the concept of a second repentance permitted after post-baptismal sin. This is a Christian innovation for Hermas and a point over which there later arose much controversy, and it is the practical suggestion for which the book is remembered. The one who brings the message of repentance is the "angel of repentance" which is identified with the Shepherd or Christ as stated above. It is through the mediating message brought by the Shepherd that according to Hermas the Christian sinner finds salvation. Along with this, a martyrology is found in Hermas which encourages prospective martyrs to be strong in the faith and which urges them to await martyrdom eagerly, if not to seek actively after it. Such martyrdom washes away all former sin and brings the martyr eternal salvation with Christ who is, at the same time, the Shepherd.

In addition, it is to be remembered that the catacombs of Italy are known for being "the resting place of the righteous," including the martyred saints. Indeed, it would be exceedingly difficult to overemphasize the importance of the cult of the martyrs which developed around these early Christians who gave up their lives for the faith. Of utmost importance is the fact that depictions of the Good Shepherd, who may now be interpreted as the divine mediator of repentance, are very often repeated as one of the most popular of all icons in the catacombs.[14] It should be made clear that the attempt here is not to say that all depictions of the Good Shepherd are dependent upon Hermas. Could it not be, however, that the popular figure of the Shepherd in the catacombs was derived, at least in part, from the Shepherd-Christ figure of repentance in **Hermas**?

In would seem to be in order to digress for a moment for the purpose of describing the Good Shepherd figure. Not only is the Good Shepherd often depicted in Christian iconography (as many as eighty-eight times in the Roman catacombs), but it is variously represented. The Shepherd may wear a tunic of one kind or another, sometimes with a cloak over it. Usually he wears laced gaiters, the **udones** of real shepherds, or less often shoes. He stands with feet far apart, or with legs crossed. On his shoulders there is a ram or sheep and its head may be to the right or to the left. The legs of the animal are grasped in several different ways and sometimes it rests on the shoulders without being held at all. When only one hand grasps the sheep, often the other holds a syrinx or staff. Also a strap and bag at times hang from one shoulder or another. There are two important variations when the Shepherd does not carry a sheep on his shoulders. In this second type the Shepherd often has a dog at his feet or he is milking a ewe. Sometimes he is bearded. Occasionally, however, there is a confusion of types in that he carries a lamb on his shoulders.

There is also a difference in composition and grouping. In the West the composition is usually symmetrical, but in the East the asymmetrical composition with the Shepherd off to one side of his flock is the distinguishing characteristic. Also in the East the flock may be crowded together so that one sheep may not be distinguished from another. Such overlapping does not occur in the Western depiction. One more variable is noteworthy. The depiction of the Good Shepherd is found rather often in juxtaposition with the orans, a feminine figure, usually, with hands uplifted in prayer, or in juxtaposition with a depiction of Adam and Eve, a serpent, and the tree of paradise. This is neither accidental nor insignificant.

The symbolism of the Shepherd as seen in John (5: 11-15) apparently represents immortality while that in Luke

[14]Leclercq, "Pasteur (Bon)," Vol. 6, Pt. 2, p. 2272.

(15: 4-7) repentance. It is the latter which presents the Shepherd as carrying the sheep on his shoulders and was evidently the more influential of the two. The depiction of the Shepherd alongside the orans would seem to indicate faith and repentance or faith and immortality going hand in hand. The Shepherd in juxtaposition with Adam and Eve, more definitely indicating sin and repentance, is illustrated quite well by the following.

The ruins of Dura-Europos stand in the Syrian desert on the Euphrates River near Baghdad. These ruins, which first came to light in the 1920's are from a period not later than 256 A.D., the date of the Parthian destruction of the city, and are extremely significant for the understanding of early Christianity. A private house within Dura apparently was taken over about 232 A.D. and reconstructed for use as a church by the Christian community.[15] Within this Christian house-church a rectangular room in the northwest corner was used as a chapel and within it was a baptistery[16] and numerous frescoes and paintings. One or more of these may reflect some connection with **The Shepherd of Hermas.**

A majestic portrait of the Good Shepherd is depicted on a mural in the back of the chapel. The Shepherd, carrying a huge ram, not a lamb, a portrayal motivated by the classical **kriophoroi** (Ram Bearer) and later replaced by the figure of a man carrying a lamb, stands behind and to one side of his flock in a frontal view. The painting is in a meaningful juxtaposition with a smaller painting immediately below of Adam and Eve. The proximity of the depictions is intentional and significant.[17] The scene of Adam and Eve, including the tree and serpent, represents man's disobedience and fall. In contrast, the larger, more prominent portrayal of the Good Shepherd standing out above the former scene evidently symbolizes repentance, thus completing the story of man's fall and opportunity for repentance and salvation through the ministering shepherd. The idea may be initiated by the picture of the lost sheep given in Luke 15:4-7 which concludes, "Even so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." The two depictions together on the back wall of the chapel at Dura are in such a position that the Shepherd appears as the one who brings the grace of repentance to those who have gone astray. Further, the proximity of these paintings with the baptismal font and other baptismal symbolism may well reflect a tie-in with the work of Hermas entitled the **Shepherd,** which has baptism as an emphasis second only to repentance. Thus, there is not only an illustration here of repentance, but repentance in proximity with baptism. Although the conjectured relationship with Hermas is vague, the suggestion in this case is the most attractive of all. Admittedly, the evidence is not definite, but this in no way negates the possibility of the suggested influence.

It would be exceedingly difficult to say that **The Shepherd of Hermas** did not enhance the popularity of art depicting the Good Shepherd in the catacombs or at Dura-Europos. The influence of Hermas, at present, cannot be definitely acknowledged to have been directly responsible for any depiction of a shepherd, yet the possibility of influence is more than slight. If the statement of Marucchi is correct (i.e.) that

[15]Mikhail I. Rostovtzeff, *Dura-Europos and Its Art,* (Oxford: A. & H. Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. 100f. See also his 'Dura-Europos," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* Vol. II, pp. 287-291.

[16]P. V. C. Baur, "The Paintings in the Christian Chapel," *Excavations at Dura-Europos* (Fifth Season), ed. by M. I. Rostovtzeff, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1934), p. 255, suggests a *martyrion,* instead, on the basis of the size, which is too small for immersion. Note, however, the exception in the *Didache, 7.2f.*

[17]*Ibid., pp.* 259-262. Plates XLIV and XLIX.

the true symbol of repentance in the catacombs is the Good Shepherd.[18] then the influence of the message of Hermas upon the funeral depictions seems less conjectural and much more probable!

In addition, an unusual characterization of the Good Shepherd in the famous Inscription of Abercius seems to indicate some relationship with **The Shepherd of Hermas.** Abercius was a Christian, possibly a bishop[19] of Hieropolis in Phrygia, who at the age of seventy-two composed an epitaph relating his visit to Rome (ca. 160 A.D.) and return by way of Syria and Mesopotamia. The inscription engraved on three sides of a burial pillar is from the end of the second century. On the first side of the pillar a portion of the translation reads:

> My name is Abercius and I am a follower of the Good Shepherd.
> Who pasteurs (sic) His flocks of sheep on the mountains
> And in the meadows,
> Whose eyes are large, seeing everywhere;
> He has taught me the saving doctrines of life.[20]

The unusual feature of the Shepherd in this inscription is that he is represented as teaching: "He has taught me the saving doctrines of life." This is significant; of all the apocrypha or the works that were considered Christian scripture, the one which stands most prominent in portraying the Shepherd as teaching is that of Hermas. Indeed, the influence of Hermas seems likely once again. Nothing in the matter of time or place would forbid such a conclusion; in fact, just the opposite would be true. Abercius relates his experience of traveling to Rome, the home of Hermas and his popular work, and although this would not be required for knowledge of it, his presence in Rome itself, and at a time in the early or mid-second century, would bring him into a setting quite conducive to the influence of Hermas. Later in the inscription there is an allegory similar to that employed in Revelation (17:3-5, 9, 18), with Rome and its imperial majesty gaining high respect. Rome did have its influence upon Abercius and, it appears, so did **The Shepherd of Hermas.** If this conjecture is correct, once again the broad influence of Hermas may be seen.

To summarize the iconography of Hermas, two paintings appear as certain illustrations of Similitude IX, one in Naples and one in the tomb of Callixtus near Rome: two more icons, one in the catacomb of Praetextatus and the other on a broken gem, appear with somewhat less certainty to be illustrations of Similitude VIII; and, it has been argued, the various art forms of the Good Shepherd in the catacombs and at Dura may very well show the influence of the writings of Hermas among the early Christians. Such is the case also with the Inscription of Abercius. While the popularity of Hermas has been recorded in this manner, this has not been true for some of the accepted Christian writings. In fact, a number of the Christian scriptures have significantly failed to win such recognition. Could it be that modern scholarship has not given **The Shepherd of Hermas** the attention and respect it is due in accord with the popularity of its early day?

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[18]O. Marucchi, *Manual of Christian Archaeology,* p. 287.
[19]*Ibid.,* p. 298.
[20]O. Marucchi, *Manual of Christian Archaeology,* p. 299. Also Finegan, pp. 479-480.