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Images of the Church in Early Christian Literature¹

THE STUDY OF ECCLESIOLOGY often deals with the institutional, external aspects of the church. Less attention has been given to the nature or essence of the church. One approach many have found helpful in studying the essential nature of the church is by way of the images employed in reference to it.

The value of this approach in regard to the New Testament was demonstrated by Paul Minear's impressive and influential compilation of *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (1960). I covered the images used for the church in the New Testament in my book *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (1996). Herwi Rikhof, *The Concept of the Church: A Methodological Inquiry into the Use of Metaphor in Ecclesiology* (1981), and Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (1987), examined imagery in contemporary theological discussion of the church. Less attention, however, has been given to the use of images for the church in Christian writers of the early centuries after the New Testament. Thomas Halton's collection of sources, *The Church* (1985), for the series *Message of the Fathers of the Church* (volume 4) gives only 10 out of 234 pages to

1. This paper is previously unpublished, but much of the content appears in my article on "Community and Worship" (2010). It began as a lecture at the International Reference Library for Biblical Research, Fort Worth, Texas, March 14, 2008, and at the Seminar on the Development of Early Catholic Christianity, Dallas Theological Seminary, April 3, 2008.

“The Images of the Church,” noting the church as sheepfold, as edifice, as mother, as bride of Christ, and as the sheet let down from heaven in Peter’s vision (Acts 10:9–16). E. Glenn Hinson’s nearly contemporary collection of sources, *Understandings of the Church* (1986), for the series Sources of Early Christian Thought gives no explicit treatment of images for the church.

This situation changed somewhat with the massive, nearly 700 page, work of F. Ledegang, *Mysterium ecclesiae: Images of the Church and Its Members in Origen* (2001).² Ledegang’s comprehensive study groups the scores of images and related terminology in the writings of Origen into six categories: body of Christ, bride of Christ, family, house and sanctuary, people of God, and “the earth and all that is in it.” For this paper I will take Ledegang’s six categories and give a passage from Origen and then some passages from Origen’s chronological predecessors and contemporaries.

What is immediately evident in these images for the church is that they all emphasize the communal aspect of Christian faith and life. This communal emphasis stands in contrast to the individualistic approach of so many of the expressions of Christianity in the modern Western world. Most of these images are rooted in Biblical usage. They, furthermore, testify not only to the importance of the church in Christian thought, but also to the relation of the church to key theological concepts.

BODY

My approach is to give a passage from Origen and then some passages from his predecessors and contemporaries. Of Origen’s extensive use of the body imagery I select one passage not from a commentary or homily that explicitly refers to its scriptural basis.

We say that the divine Scriptures declare the body of Christ, animated by the Son of God, to be the whole church of God, and the members of this body—considered as a whole—to consist of those who are believers. Since, as a soul vivifies and moves the body . . . , so the Word, arousing and moving the whole body, the church, to the things that need to be done, moves also each

2. Other works to be noted are David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (1995), with its chapter on “Tertullian’s ecclesiological images” (65–90): ark, ship, camp, body of Christ, Trinity, Spirit, mother, bride, virgin, school, and sect; and G. G. Christo, *The Church’s Identity Established through Images according to Saint John Chrysostom* (2006).

individual member belonging to the church, so that they do nothing apart from the Word.³

Origen in the context uses the analogy of the church to a body, animated by a soul, to support the union of the soul of Jesus, perfect man, with the eternal Word, Son of God; but he is drawing on 1 Cor 12:12 and 27 and Rom 12:4–5.

Origen's predecessor, Clement of Alexandria, made use of the body imagery for the church. In commenting on Ps 19:4–6, he quotes some who say that the "Lord's tabernacle is his body," but others say, "it is the church of the faithful."⁴ Clement of Alexandria, like Origen, uses this imagery of the church as the body of Christ to reason back to the nature of Christ. He alludes to 1 Cor 12:12 with the words, "As a human being consisting of many members . . . is a combination of two—a body of faith and a soul of hope—so the Lord is of flesh and blood."⁵ In an extended commentary on 1 Corinthians 6, Clement applies the language of body to the church; with special reference to verse 13 he says,

The church of the Lord is figuratively speaking a body, the spiritual and holy chorus. Those who have been only called these things, but do not live according to the word, are fleshly. "But this spiritual body," that is the holy church, "is not for fornication" [1 Cor 6:13]. It is not fitting in any manner, however little, to abandon the gospel for the pagan life.⁶

The homily we know as 2 *Clement*, wrongly ascribed to Clement of Rome, used the language of the church as the body of Christ to argue for the preexistence of the church. As Christ is preexistent, so is his body. The author stresses the close identification of the church with Christ, and he seems to take the body as the equivalent of the flesh of Christ. The result is an implicit argument against a Docetic/Gnostic disparagement of the flesh.

I do not think you are ignorant that the church is the living body of Christ. For Scripture says, "God made the human being male and female" [Gen 1:27]. The male is Christ, and the female is the church. And you know that the Books and the Apostles say that the church is not [only] of the present time but is from the

3. *Against Celsus* 6.48. My translations follow existing translations, but modified.

4. *Prophetic Eclogues* 56.

5. *Instructor* 1.6.42.

6. *Miscellanies* 7.14.87.3. Cf. *Instructor* 1.5.22, "Believers are members of Christ."

beginning. For it existed spiritually, as also did our Jesus. But he was manifested in these last days in order to save us. And the church, being spiritual, was manifested in the flesh of Christ . . . But if we say that the flesh is the church and the Spirit is Christ, then the one who abuses the flesh abuses Christ.⁷

Paul's image of the church as body of Christ must have worked itself into the Christian consciousness for it to be used so early for such different purposes from Paul's as to argue for the nature of Christ (Origen and Clement of Alexandria) and for the pre-existence of the church (2 *Clement*) as well as against sexual immorality (Clement of Alexandria and 2 *Clement*).

BRIDE

Origen applies the imagery of the bride to the church in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. He connects the language of body with that of a bride. Commenting on Paul's words, "Our bodies are members of Christ," he explains,

For when he says "our bodies," he shows that these bodies are the body of the bride; but when he mentions the "members of Christ," he indicates that these same bodies are the body of the Bridegroom.⁸

The words addressed by the Bridegroom to the bride in Song of Songs are "words spoken by Christ to the church."⁹ They "can be understood as spoken of this present age, for even now the church is fair when she is near to Christ and imitates Christ."¹⁰ Origen anticipates later individualistic spirituality in also applying the bridal imagery to the individual soul.

Methodius was a critic of Origen on some points of doctrine, but he shared with him the image of church as bride. Those who embrace the truth and are delivered from the evils of the flesh become "a church and help-meet of Christ, betrothed and given in marriage to him as a virgin, according to the apostle" [2 Cor 11:2].¹¹

7. 2 *Clement* 14.2–3, 4. Hermas, *Vision* 2.4 (2.8), says that the church was created first of all things.

8. *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.2 on 1:16.

9. *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.15 on 2:13–14.

10. *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.1 on 1:15.

11. *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 3.8.

Clement of Alexandria applies the purity of the bride to the church avoiding heresies. He interprets Rom 7:2, 4 to mean Christians belong to Christ as “bride and church, which must be pure both from inner thoughts contrary to the truth and from outward temptations [heresies].”¹²

Tertullian stresses that the church as bride comes to Christ as a virgin. Against the proclamation by a bishop (whether in Rome or in Carthage is not clear) of forgiveness for the sins of adultery and fornication, the rigorist Tertullian, who considered these sins unforgiveable by the church, protests, “The church is a virgin! Far from Christ’s betrothed be such a proclamation.”¹³

MOTHER

The most important aspect of family imagery for the church in early Christianity was that of the mother. The image of the church as mother was one of the most popular in early Christianity, for which there is a comprehensive study by Joseph C. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (1943).

Origen gave an allegorical interpretation of Prov 17:25 (“Foolish children are a grief to their father and bitterness to her who bore them”):

The church is our mother, whom God the Father betrothed to himself as wife. For always through her he begets sons and daughters for himself. And such as are educated in the knowledge and wisdom of God are a joy to both God our Father and the mother church.¹⁴

Origen is precise here that the origin of Christians is with God the Father and not with the church. It is through the mother that God begets sons and daughters. Others were not always so careful and sometimes spoke as if the children (Christians) derived from the church; probably if pressed they would have acknowledged the theological priority of God.

Clement of Alexandria has a striking passage combining the imagery of virgin and mother for the church:

12. *Miscellanies* 3.12.80.

13. *On Modesty* 1.8; on the church as a virgin, also 18.11 and *On Monogamy* 11.2 (“virgin church betrothed to the one Christ”) and *Against Marcion* 5.12.6. The church as bride of Christ in *On Monogamy* 5.7; *Against Marcion* 4.11.8; 5.18.9.

14. PG 17.201B.

One is the universal Father, one also the universal Word, the Holy Spirit is one and the same everywhere, and one is the only virgin mother. I love to call her church. This one alone . . . is both virgin and mother, pure as a virgin, loving as a mother. She calls her children and nurses them with holy milk, the Word suited to infants.¹⁵

Clement seems to have Mary, the mother of Jesus, in mind with the language of virgin mother, but his reference is to the church, and so is implicitly an early instance of Mary as an image of the church. This passage is an early instance of adding the church to the usual Trinitarian confession of belief in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as in the Apostles and Nicene creeds. It is to be noted that the milk supplied by this mother to her children is not her own teachings but the universal Word. Shortly before this passage Clement said, "The mother draws to herself the children, and we seek our mother, the church."¹⁶

Methodius, in the same section quoted above on the church as bride, used the imagery of motherhood for the church. The church "conceives believers and gives them new birth by the washing of regeneration [Titus 3:5]," because Christ implants the spiritual seed that "is conceived and formed by the church, as by a woman, so as to give birth and nourishment to virtue."¹⁷ Methodius, like Origen, is careful not to ascribe the generating power to the mother, but unlike Origen he ascribes the implanting of the spiritual seed to Christ and not to God (whose description as Father accords with Origen's language). Again, Methodius says that when the Word (Christ) begets in each one a true knowledge and faith, Christ is spiritually born in them: "Therefore, the church swells and travails in birth until Christ is formed in us [Gal 4:19]."¹⁸

Irenaeus, in his catechetical work *Demonstration* [or *Proof*] of the *Apostolic Preaching* 94, contrasts the church and the synagogue, "The Lord grants more children to the church than to the synagogue of the past."¹⁹ Elsewhere he says against heretics that those "who do not partake of the Spirit [of God] are not nourished into life from the mother's breasts."²⁰

15. *Instructor* 1.6.42.1.

16. *Instructor* 1.5.21; *Instructor* 3.12.99 says the same with reference to the church, "Let us children run to our good mother."

17. *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 3.8.

18. *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 8.8.

19. In chapter 98 Irenaeus says that the church throughout the world hands down the preaching of the truth to her children.

20. *Against Heresies* 3.24.1.

The *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* provides one of the early uses of maternal imagery for the church. The letter speaks of those who in persecution had denied the faith and then came back to faith in this way: "There was great joy to the Virgin Mother, who had miscarried with them as though dead, and was receiving them back alive."²¹ One of the Christians present signified this by making actions of giving birth.

Tertullian makes frequent use of the imagery of the church as mother. He employs the analogy of Adam to Christ as including Eve and the church:

For as Adam was a figure of Christ, Adam's sleep shadowed out the death of Christ, who was going to sleep a mortal slumber, that from the wound inflicted on his side might in like manner [as Eve was formed], be typified the church, the true mother of the living.²²

The language of Father and Son suggest a mother, and "our mother is the church."²³ Care for the martyrs in prison is described as the "provision which our lady mother the church makes from her bountiful breasts."²⁴ The statement in Gal 4:26 that the "Jerusalem above" "is our mother" prompts the comment that this is "the holy church in whom we have expressed our faith."²⁵

Latin Christianity's fondness for the imagery of church as mother is seen in Cyprian, who refers to the church as mother more than thirty times.²⁶ For instance, in his argument against accepting baptism performed by heretics he makes the following argument:

The Spirit cannot be received, unless he who receives it first exists. [His point is that one cannot receive the Spirit until first being reborn in the church.] As the birth of Christians is in baptism, and the generation and sanctification of baptism are with the one bride of Christ [the church], she alone is able spiritually to conceive and to give birth to sons to God. This being so,

21. Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.45; cf. the allusion in 5.1.49.

22. *On the Soul* 43.

23. *On Prayer* 2. *On Monogamy* 7.9 parallels the "one Father, God," and "our mother, the church."

24. *To the Martyrs* 1.

25. *Against Marcion* 5.4.8. Ledegang, *Mysterium ecclesiae*, p. 206, takes this not as Tertullian's comment but as part of his quotation from Marcion, who thus becomes the first to call the church mother.

26. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 81.

where and of what mother to whom is he born who is not a son of the church? If one is to have God as his Father, he must first have the church for a mother.²⁷

On this basis Cyprian gave his famous declaration against schism, “He can no longer have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother.”²⁸

BUILDING/TEMPLE

Origen could speak of the church as a house. “The church is the house of the Son of God.” And again, “The church or the churches, then are the houses of the Bridegroom and the bride, the houses of the soul and the Word.”²⁹

Origen applies the language of the temple to the church mostly in biblical passages about the temple. His commentary on John 2:13–17 includes these words:

Jesus always finds some such in the temple. For in what we call the church, which is the house “of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth [1 Tim 3:15],” when are there not some money-changers sitting . . . ?³⁰

The continuation of the passage in John 2:19–21 prompts Origen in his *Commentary on John* to combine the images of body and of temple, as does the Gospel of John, for the church:

If the body of Jesus is said to be his temple, it is worth asking whether we must take this in a singular manner, or must endeavor to refer each of the things recorded about the temple anagogically to the saying about the body of Jesus, whether it be the body which he received from the virgin, or the church, which is said to be his body . . .

One . . . will say that the body, understood in either way, has been called the temple because as the temple had the glory of God dwelling in it, so the Firstborn of all creation, being the image and glory of God, is properly said to be the temple bearing the image of God in respect to his body or the church. . . .

27. *Letters* 74.7.2.

28. *On the Unity of the Church* 6.

29. *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.3 on 1:17.

30. *Commentary on John* 10.23 (16).134.

We shall attempt, however, to refer each of the statements which have reference to the temple anagogically to the church . . .

Then each of the living stones, will be a stone of the temple according to the worth of its life here.³¹

Here, as is usual with him, Origen quickly moves from the corporate use of the image to the individual believer. The biblical material offered a rich lode from which Origen could mine moral and spiritual teachings.

Clement of Alexandria repeated the argument of early Christian apologists against material temples, while applying the terminology of temple to the church and the assembly of God's people.

Is it not the case that we do not rightly and truly circumscribe in any place the one who cannot be contained, nor do we confine in temples made with hands that which contains all things? What work of builders, stone cutters, and of handicraft can be holy? . . . If the sacred [*ἱερόν*] is understood in a twofold way, of God himself and of a structure in his honor, is it not proper that we call holy the church, which according to full knowledge is for the honor of God, is of great worth, and is not constructed by human skill . . . but is fashioned by the will of God into a temple? For I do not call the place but the assembly of the elect the church.³²

So, for Clement, in accord with the New Testament, God's temple now is not a place but the people assembled, the church.

For Tertullian, Christ, in contrast to the Jewish temple that was destroyed, "is the true temple of God."³³ But by extension Christians are "priests of the spiritual temple, that is of the church."³⁴ Alternatively, Christ was the rejected stone that became "the chief cornerstone," "accepted and elevated to the top place of the temple, even his church."³⁵ According to this imagery, it is the Holy Spirit who builds "the church, which is indeed the temple, household, and city of God."³⁶ The church is the spiritual

31. *Commentary on John* 10.39 (23).263–64, 267–68.

32. *Miscellanies* 7.5.28; *Miscellanies* 7.13.82 says with reference to 1 Cor 3:16 that "The temple is large, as the church, but small, as the human being." Ledegang, *Mysterium ecclesiae*, 320, lists Clement's varied use of the temple imagery: the cosmos, the soul of the Gnostic, the body, the body of Jesus, as well as the church.

33. *Against the Jews* 13.15. In *Against Marcion* 3.24, Christ is "the temple of God, and also the gate by whom heaven is entered."

34. *Against the Jews* 14.9.

35. *Against Marcion* 3.7.

36. *Against Marcion* 3.23.

temple, built upon Peter.³⁷ Individual Christians are themselves “temples of God, and altars, and lights, and sacred vessels.”³⁸

The theme of the spiritual temple replacing the physical temple in Jerusalem is expressed early in Christian literature by the *Epistle of Barnabas*, but the author applies it to the individual. The temple of the Lord is gloriously built when “having received the forgiveness of sins and having placed hope in his name, we became new.” “Therefore God truly resides in our dwelling place.”³⁹

The church as a whole is the building in *Hermas*, but this time it is a tower and not a temple. In the elaborate parable of the tower in the *Similitudes* “the rock and the gate are the Son of God.”⁴⁰ “The tower is the church,” and the stones placed in the building are those who take the name of the Son of God and are clothed with the appropriate virtues.⁴¹ In *Hermas’s Visions* that open the *Shepherd*, it is also stated that “The tower which you see being built is the church,” with the further comment that “the tower is built upon the waters” of baptism and “is founded on the word of the almighty and glorious name.”⁴²

PEOPLE OF GOD

Origen works with the theme of peoplehood quite extensively and in various ways. I select only one passage as illustrative of his approach. After contrasting the Egyptian people and the Israelite people and their respective priests, Origen addresses the congregation:

Examining yourself, consider to which people you belong and the priesthood of which order you hold. If you still serve the carnal senses . . . , know that you are of the Egyptian people. But if you have before your eyes the Decalogue of the Law and the decade of the New Testament . . . and from that you offer tithes . . . “you are a true Israelite in whom there is no guile” (John 1:47).⁴³

37. *On Monogamy* 8.

38. *On the Crown* 9.

39. *Barnabas* 16.8; the whole chapter is relevant.

40. *Similitudes* 9.12.1 (89).

41. *Similitudes* 9.13.1 (89); 9.13.4—15.6 (90–92).

42. *Visions* 3.3.3 and 5 (11).

43. *Homilies on Genesis* 16.6.

Here as elsewhere Origen identifies the true Christian people with the true Israel of Old Testament scripture.

In an extended discussion of different images for the children of God, Clement of Alexandria says that the Lord “calls us sometimes children, sometimes chickens, sometimes infants, and at other times sons and often little children, and a new people and a recent people.”⁴⁴ Without expressly using the word church, Clement implies it in the language of a people. He makes the contrast, “the old race [Israel] was perverse and hard hearted,” but “we the new people are tender as a child.”⁴⁵ “Formerly the older people had an older covenant, and the law disciplined the people with fear, . . . but to the new and recent people a new covenant has been given, the Word has become flesh, and fear is turned into love.”⁴⁶ The children of God “become a new, holy people, by regeneration.”⁴⁷

Alongside the word people Clement also uses the word “race” for Christians. Out of the Greek and Jewish peoples “there are gathered into one race of the saved people those who come to faith.”⁴⁸

Tertullian too develops the theme of the two peoples. He interpreted Gen 25:23 about the two nations and two peoples in the womb of Rebekah as referring to the older people of Israel (the Jews) and the later or lesser people, the Christians.⁴⁹ In all the nations now “dwells the people of the name of Christ.”⁵⁰ Tertullian assigns the designation “third race” to pagan critics and rejects it (*To the Nations* 8).

Justin Martyr uses the language of people and race in reference to the church in succession to Israel: “After that Righteous One was put to death, we flourished as another people.” He continues, “We are not only a people but also a holy people” and a people chosen by God.⁵¹ He affirms of Christians that “We are the true high priestly race of God.”⁵²

44. *Instructor* 1.5.14.

45. *Instructor* 1.5.19.4.

46. *Instructor* 1.7.59.1. Cf. *Instructor* 1.5.20.3, “In contrast to the older people, the new and recent people have learned new blessings.”

47. *Instructor* 1.6.32.4.

48. *Miscellanies* 6.5.42. Buell, *Why This New Race*.

49. *Against the Jews* 1.

50. *Against the Jews* 7.

51. *Dialogue with Trypho* 119.3–4. In 123 Justin quotes Old Testament passages to show that the church of the Gentiles is a new Israel, “counted worthy to be called a people” (123.1).

52. *Dialogue with Trypho* 116.3.

Early apologists presented Christians as a third (or fourth) race. The *Epistle to Diognetus* says that Christians in their religion “neither acknowledge those considered to be gods by the Greeks nor observe the superstition of the Jews,” but are a “new race or way of life.”⁵³ Aristides argues as follows: “It is evident to us, O King, that there are three classes of people in this world: the worshippers of those called gods by you, the Jews, and the Christians.” The Syriac version gives four by dividing the worshippers of other gods into barbarians and Greeks to go with the Jews and Christians.⁵⁴

ARK/SHIP

Among the images drawn from nature and objects in the world the ark or a ship is prominent. Origen was the first to work out the ark motif extensively in an ecclesiological sense.⁵⁵ In his *Homilies on Genesis* he drew lessons for the church from the instructions about the building of the ark. “This people, therefore, which is saved in the church, is compared to all those whether men or animals that are saved in the ark.”⁵⁶ He continues by interpreting the different levels in the ark as degrees of progress in faith, and he takes Noah as an image of Christ.

Therefore, Christ, the spiritual Noah, in his ark in which he frees the human race from destruction, that is, in his church, has established in its breadth the number fifty, the number of forgiveness.⁵⁷

This association of the ark with salvation went back to 1 Pet 3:20–22 and was extensively employed in the early church,⁵⁸ but Origen explicitly connects the ark with the church.

53. *Epistle to Diognetus* 1. The *Preaching of Peter* said, “Do not worship as the Greeks,” “neither worship as the Jews,” but “worship in a new way by Christ”—quoted by Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.5.

54. *Apology* 2. The body of the apology proceeds by discussing the Chaldaeans (“barbarians” in the Syriac), who worship the elements, the Greeks, the Egyptians, then the Jews, and finally Christians.

55. Ledegang, *Mysterium ecclesiae*, 376, following his discussion of Origen’s interpretations of the ark on 371–76.

56. *Homilies on Genesis* 2.3.

57. *Homilies on Genesis* 2.5. Fifty has the significance of forgiveness from the year of Jubilee and its release from debts.

58. Note Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 138.

Latin Christianity made much use of the analogy of the ark and the church. Callistus, bishop of Rome, argued that “the ark of Noah was a symbol of the church, in which were both dogs, wolves, and ravens,” and so he alleged that those guilty of sin could remain in the church.⁵⁹ Tertullian alludes to this argument, referring to the different kinds of animals (raven, kite, dog, and serpent) in the ark as representing different types of people in the church, but he insists that no idolater was in the ark, so “Let there not be in the church what was not in the ark.”⁶⁰ He had already anticipated the theme of the ark as a type of the church in his treatment of the flood in Noah’s day as a type of baptism. “The dove is the Holy Spirit, sent forth from heaven, where is the church, a figure of the ark.”⁶¹

Cyprian too argued from the ark as a type of the church: First Peter 3:20–21 proves that “the one ark of Noah was a type of the one church” and so only the baptism administered in the church (and not by schismatics) is valid; on this analogy those outside the church will perish.⁶² Thereafter the analogy of the ark and the church was common.

Different from the image of the ark was the non-biblical image of a ship, which Origen does not connect with the church.⁶³ Hippolytus makes an elaborate development of the comparison.

The “wings of the vessels” [Isa 18:1] are the churches; and the sea is the world, in which the church is set, like a ship tossed in the deep, but not destroyed; for she has with her the skilled pilot, Christ. And she bears in her midst also the trophy (which is erected) over death; for she carries with her the cross of the Lord. For her prow is the east, her stern is the west, and her hold is the south, and her tillers are the two Testaments; and the ropes that stretch around her are the love of Christ, which binds the church; and the net which she bears with her is the laver of the regeneration which renews believers . . . As the wind the Spirit from heaven is present, by whom those who believe are sealed. She has also anchors of iron accompanying her, that is the holy commandments of Christ himself, which are strong as iron. She also has sailors on the right and the left, assessors like the holy angels, by whom the church is always governed and defended. The ladder in her leading up to the sailyard is an

59. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.12(7).23.

60. *On Idolatry* 24.4.

61. *On Baptism* 8.4.

62. *Letters* 69.2.2; 75.15.

63. Ledegang, *Mysterium ecclesiae*, 643.

emblem of the passion of Christ, which brings the faithful to the ascent to heaven. And the top sails aloft upon the yard are the company of prophets, martyrs, and apostles, who have entered into their rest in the kingdom of Christ.⁶⁴

A similarly elaborate but different comparison of the ship to the church occurs in the Pseudo-Clementine literature:

For the whole business of the church is like a great ship, bearing through a violent storm people who are of many places and who desire to inhabit the city of the good kingdom. Let, therefore, God be your shipmaster. Let the pilot be likened to Christ, the mate to the bishop, the sailors to the deacons, the midshipmen to the catechists, the multitude of the brothers to the passengers, the world to the sea, the foul winds to temptations, persecutions, and dangers . . . Let hypocrites be regarded as like to pirates . . . In order, therefore, that sailing with a fair wind you may safely reach the haven of the hoped-for city, pray so as to be heard. But prayers become audible by good deeds.⁶⁵

The following chapter applies the comparison with specific exhortations to the different members of the church.

The earliest reference to a ship other than the ark as the church appears to be Tertullian, *On Baptism* 12. He was responding to those who suggested that “the apostles underwent a substitute for baptism when in the little ship they were engulfed by the waves.” Tertullian replied that that was different from being “baptized by the rule of religion,” and he then affirmed, “that little ship presented a type of the church, because on the sea, which means this present world, it is being tossed about by the waves, which mean persecutions and temptations.” A modern scholar, Erik Peterson, has argued that the ship as a symbol of the church is a recasting of an older conception of Israel in an eschatological storm at sea. Such imagery could go back to a lost apocalyptic book.⁶⁶

To return to my theses, this sampling of the rich variety of early Christian imagery for the church demonstrates the importance of the church in the experience and practice of early Christians.

64. *On Christ and Antichrist* 59.

65. Pseudo-Clement, *Letter of Clement to James* 14.

66. Peterson, “Das Schiff als Symbol der Kirche.”