



Women Accompanying Virgin Mary in Crucifixion Scenes: A Study in the New Testament Scenes

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Abstract

Christ's salvation was represented in Crucifixion scenes; though salvation is the core of the Christian dogma, it was rarely represented. The main incident was mentioned in the New Testament in the four gospels with almost the same narration. The Christ is nailed to the cross surrounded by Virgin Mary and a few women accompanying her Mathew 27:55-56, Mark 15:40, Luke 23:49, John 19:25. Earlier researches had studied the crucifixion as a rare scene, but this paper will focus on the female figures who accompanied the virgin during this event and their artistic depictions on icons¹ from the 8th to the 14th centuries.

Introduction

The biblical story of the earth' creation, the fall of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from Eden is described in the Bible in its initial four chapters of the First Book of Moses; and Genesis which explain how the world and Man were created, and the purpose of human life. (Draus, 2017).

Following the Fall of Adam and Eve after their sin, God promised of Redemption and salvation of men kind. In preparing for this he sent messengers and made covenants with "Noah", "Abraham", "Moses" and prophets of Israel (Malan, 1882). According to Christian dogma; Jesus had offered himself for this salvation; he came to liberate Adam and Eve and their righteous descendants from Hell (Tradigo, 2006).

The themes of creation and redemption have occupied the attention of Christian theology from its early inception. Jesus the Christ is regarded as the world's creator and its redemption who initiates salvation for fallen humanity (Wayne, 1992); and was initially promised and symbolically acted out in the sacrament of baptism; that is for

¹Icons play an important role in the celebrations during festival days and pilgrimages; like the feasts of the Holy Cross, Palm Sunday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost; on Good Friday the priest envelops the icon of the Crucifixion in a white veil of linen and places it on the altar (Gawdat, 2009).

the baptism of Jesus and his crucifixion² are considered two main incidents in his earthly life (Caneday, 2004).

My theme on this paper is to track women depiction who accompanied Virgin Mary through this important event.

- Who are those women?

The Gospels other than John did not mention Jesus' mother or Mary of Clopas as being present; instead they name Mary of Jacob (Mark and Matthew), Salome (Mark), and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew).

The Gospel of John mentioned that the three Marys "Jesus' mother; his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene" stood near the cross (John 19:25). The Synoptic Gospels report that many women who followed Jesus from Galilee observed his crucifixion "from a distance" (Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:40-41; and Luke 23:48). Mark adds that "among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome" (Mark 15:40b), while Matthew specifically identifies "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" as present (Matthew 27:56) (Hornik, 2009).

- Mary of Magdala "the Magdalene":

Her name was deeply associated with a fusion of several biblical and legendary figures. Luke mentioned a "Mary, called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils", and that she was healed of evil spirits (Luke 8: 2). The same narration was mentioned in the gospel of Mark "9 Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils" (Mark 16: 9) (Klerck, 2015).

She was also mentioned as one of the women who attended Jesus crucifixion (Matthew 27: 56, Mark 15: 40, John 19: 25). John described Mary's presence at Christ's burial, and her attempts to anoint his body on Easter Morning in his gospel (John 20: 1-18).

²The crucifixion is defined as "the act of nailing or binding a person to a cross or tree, whether for executing or for exposing the corpse (Metzger and Coogan, 1993) according to the new international dictionary: "Crucifixion was one of the most cruel and barbarous forms of death known to man. It was practiced, especially in the times of war, by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Egyptians, and later by the Romans". (Douglas and Tenny, 1987). Excerpts from the Stela of Amenophis IV, shows an impalement of crucifixion. (Smith, 1976), The Abbott Papyrus also mentionsthe same type of punishment(Peet, 2005). Crucifixion was also used by the early Persians in the 6th century BC; it was brought by Alexander the Great to the eastern Mediterranean countries in the 4th century BC. The while the Phoenicians introduced it to Rome in the 3rd century BC(Retief and Cilliers, 2003)Crucifixion was also a form of punishment during the Roman Empire in Palestinian and Judea regions among the Jews. This event was portrayed in the four canonical Gospels; Jesus himself had referred to his crucifixion before his death. "And when Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples: You know that after two days is the Passover¹³ which the Son of Man be surrendered till be crucified" Matt. 26:2 (Akrami, 2016).

Matthew, Mark and John. She was described as a witness to Christ's resurrection (Matthew 28: 9, Mark 16: 9, John 20: 16–17) (Haskins, 1993).

By the resurrection of Jesus and the end of his earthly life; canonical gospels mentioned nothing else about Mary Magdalene³; on the other hand; apocryphal sources dating from early centuries; such as 'Philip's and 'Mary's Gospel', mentioned different aspects such as physical attraction between Mary and Jesus (Maisch, 1998); The notion of Mary Magdalene being a repentant sinner can be traced at least as far back as Ephraim the Syrian in the fourth century (Hooper, 2008). She had attended two events in Jesus life: the crucifixion and the resurrection⁴, she was also the first to speak with Jesus on the Easter morning and to tell what she had witnessed (Catafygiotu, 1987), she was described as the brave woman who stand by Jesus in his hours of suffering (Thompson, 1995) (Good, 2005), furthermore she was sometimes represented as a faithful follower at the foot of the cross (Elizabeth, 2013). It is important to note here that the New Testament did not associate Mary Magdalene with prostitution or sexual immorality of any kind. (Clark-Soles 2010)

- **Mary the mother of the sons of Zabdee**

She is the mother of two apostles of Jesus the Christ namely John⁵ and James; her name was mentioned in (Matthew 20:20-21); when she asked for the heaven for her two sons; while the Gospels do not mention Zebedee again, the mother of James and John became a follower of Jesus, interceding with him on behalf of her sons and being present at the Crucifixion Matthew 27:55–56; Luke 23:49, 55; 24:1–10; and John 19:25. The mother of Zabdee was sometimes identified with Salome, and the sister of Virgin Mary; making them first cousins of Jesus and relatives of John the Baptist (Alan, 1994) .

- **Salome**

The name "Salome" was mentioned for only once in Mark's gospel⁶; describing her as the third of the three women who followed Jesus through his crucifixion in Galilee; and witnessed his crucifixion from a distance (Mark 15:40-41) and also among the women who witnessed his burial (Mark 15:47); she was also one of the women who went to the tomb of Jesus on Easter day along with Mary the mother of James (Mark 16:1).Salome was also identified as the first person to bear witness to his Incarnation and who helped Virgin Mary through her labor time (Bergman, 1990).

³Mary Magdalene was also incorporated in the term of (composite Magdalene). This term means that Mary Magdalene was identified with the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Althaus, 2009).

⁴ She was among the women disciples who went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus the Christ with myrrh-oils but they found the tomb empty; thus, angels appeared proclaiming that Christ had risen from the dead. (Matthew 27:55–61, Matthew 28:1–10, Mark 15:40–16:11, Luke 23:50–24:10, John 19:38–20:18) (Botha, 2003).

⁵Apostle John: he was mentioned in the first three Gospels as the son of a prosperous Galilean fisherman named Zebedee, who owned his own boat and was able to hire day laborers to assist him and his sons in their work; he also had a partnership with brothers Peter and Andrew, and all four left their fishing business when Jesus called them to follow Him in full-time discipleship (Parker,1962).

⁶Salome's name was not mentioned in other canonical gospels except for Mark; most probably because; she was not widely known as Mary Magdalene or Mary the mother of James and Joses (Baucham, 1991).

- Mary of Clopas “Cleophas”

She had attended the day of the crucifixion, standing by the cross. (John 19:25) on the evening of the same day she went to the tomb with Mary Magdalene (Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47), she also had brought sweet spices to anoint Christ’s body on the Easter morning (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56) and was one of those who had "a vision of angels, which said that he was alive." (Luke 24:23). Mary of Clopas was the mother of two of the Christ apostles namely James, Joses, most probably she was also the sister of Virgin Mary (Wood, 1996).

Her husband Clopas was mentioned in Luke’s gospel that; he was one of the two disciples; who accompanied Jesus after his resurrection moving from Emmaus on the Easter day to their way home (Luke 24:35) (Watson, 1997).

Table 1

Gospel’s record on women present on the Crucifixion:

Mathew 27:55-56 (KJV)	Mark 15:40 King James Version (KJV)	Luke 23:49 (KJV)	John 19:25 (KJV)
<p>⁵⁵ “And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: ⁵⁶ Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedees children”.</p>	<p>⁴⁰ “There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome”</p>	<p>⁴⁹ “And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things.”</p>	<p>²⁵ “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.”</p>

Table 1

Women present on the crucifixion day:

Mathew 27:55-56 (KJV)	Mark 15:40 (KJV)	Luke 23:49 (KJV)	John 19:25 (KJV)
<p>1- Mary Magdalene 2- Mary, mother of James and Joseph 3- The mother of the sons of Zebedee</p>	<p>1- Mary Magdalene 2- Mary, mother of James the younger and Joseph 3- Salome</p>	<p>Many women</p>	<p>1- Mary, mother of Jesus 2- Mary Magdalene 3- A sister of Mary, mother of Jesus 4- Mary of Clopas</p>

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- Iconographical study:

There is an actual lack of Crucifixion scenes especially in early Coptic art; Crucifixion was regarded as a severe punishment practiced only on slaves or non-roman citizens (Murray, 1998).

Jesus was usually depicted in the form of a healer, victor or in the common depiction of the Virgin and the child, the divinity of Jesus in heaven or on the Judgmental day (Margaret, 2000). The earliest crucifixion depiction was only symbolic; sarcophagi panel from the 4th-century forms an early image of the Crucifixion; below the crossbar are the two soldiers guarding the tomb; while his glorification is symbolized by the birds and the wreath (Margaret, 2000). Pl: 1. a later example from the British museum dates back to the 4th century shows Jesus on the cross, with opening eyes and outstretched arms in a standing position unlike ordinary mortal people suffering no pain reveal his victory upon death. (McGowan, 2011) Pl: 2.

- The Early depiction of women on crucifixion scenes:

The most elaborated depiction is a manuscript from end of the 5th century and the beginning of the 6th century known as Rabbula manuscript, kept in Florence (Beckwith, 1970).

- **Pl. 3:** The scene is divided into two registers; the crucifixion scene is depicted on the upper one gives a detailed description of the crucifixion day; women are depicted on the right side wearing long garments surmounted by shawls covering their head; unfortunately no names are accompanied in the text mentioning the name of the three women; only the name of Jesus “the king of Jews” is seen on the text”. (Hawkes, Teeples, Groen, and Alexopoulos, 2013). The three Marys are depicted with deep emotions seen on their gestures and body attitude; sadness and mourning is very strongly depicted; the three of them are looking upright to the holy scene; while the first women are touching her face with her right hand as a gesture of horror and pain. On the left side of the cross stands Virgin Mary wearing the same type of *maphorian* easily recognized by her halo, standing next to St. John.
- **Pl.4.** By the sixth century and toward the eighth century; the depiction of the crucifixion scenes became more elaborated and fuller of details. The two roman soldiers were replaced by Virgin Mary and St. John; an icon from the monastery of Saint Catherin in Egypt dates back to the 8th century (Nelson and Collins, 2006). This piece of art is executed by using the tempera technique. “*The three Marys*” are not shown here, only Virgin Mary is depicted wearing the maphorian; while her head is surrounded by a halo; she is depicted raising her two hands in a praying attitude on the other side John the Baptist is depicted in almost the same size; which creates a symmetrical view along with the central figure of the crucified Jesus.
- **Pl.5.** This magnificent icon from the 11th century is kept at the monastery of Saint Catherine (Nelson and Collins, 2006), it is divided by painted domes into three registers; each one is commemorating a certain event from the left: the entry of Jerusalem moving to the main scene of the crucifixion; while the resurrection is depicted on the far right. The main scene of the crucifixion is cleverly executed and full of emotions. Jesus is occupying the central part; while Virgin Mary is depicted accompanied by a group of women widely known by the “Three Marys” while the

left side the two Roman soldiers are depicted. Back to the women surrounding the Virgin they are all depicted wearing the *maphorian*, supporting her. Mary is not depicted with a halo, but she be recognized by the golden rim surrounding her shawl, pain and sadness are reflected on somber features of the ladies. Byzantine influences can be recognized in the golden background and the lavish decoration of the whole scene.

- **Pl. 6.** An elaborated Syro- Palestine icon from the 13th century represents a crucifixion scene kept in the monastery of the Syrians at Wadi al- Natrun. (Gabra and Skalova, 2003)

The scene represent Jesus the Christ with a naked upper torso with his arms stretched and nailed to a wooden cross; he is represented in the middle of two thieves surmounted by angels on both sides, the scene is portraying the main events of the crucifixion day: the roman soldiers, Christ clothes' distribution among them, the sun and the moon, the head of Adam. But unfortunately, the colours had faded giving no obvious details of the lower part. The scene is full of energy that attracts the viewer eye through many details that give a full aspect of the crucifixion day.

On the right side of the cross Virgin Mary is depicted mourning her sole son on the cross her facial features shows pain and surrender she is raising her arms in a praying attitude, wearing the *maphorian* which covers her head leaving her neck uncovered; she is surrounded by women, commonly known by the "*Three Marys*" mourning and supporting her standing just next to Mary; they are dressed in *maphorians* well, somber features and pain are the dominant feeling a mixture of different artistic influences are gathered in this icon: the golden background, the detailed scene full of movements and emotions are Byzantine influence while the figures' features are following the Coptic artistic style.

- **Pl.7.** Another example similar to Wadi al- Natrun's icon; is a triptych icon of the crucifixion and the Holy Week Events; from Egypt or Palestine; 13th century in the Coptic museum in Old Cairo(Gabra and Eaton-Krauss, 2006); in which the painter tried to imitate the Byzantine style; thus the icon combines unusual Eastern and Western elements. The suffering crucified looks Italian while other elements especially biblical characters have oriental features, at the foot of the Cross stands John the apostle and one of the Roman centurions. (Gabra and Skalova, 2003)

The virgin is presented suffering pain and sorrow; she cannot hold herself in a standing attitude; supported by women around her "the *three Marys*" their hands are embracing her body; her head is held upright watching her sole son in pain. Women around her are holding her body as not to fall on the ground, their heads and eyes are turned toward her; except for the one behind; her eyes are watching the crucifixion scene. Somber features of the four ladies are well expressed. They are all dressed in *maphorian* covering their bodies and parts of their hair. Their outfit is elaborated and had a strong colour except for Virgin Mary as she usually is presented in a black or dark *maphorian*. Their facial features are following a pure Coptic artistic style they show

pain, sympathy and helpless emotions. Their hair flow on their shoulders in curly waves, the painter did not mention the name of the bible figures.

- **Pl.8.** An icon shows the scene of crucifixion in Egypt from the church of St. Claudius, Meir Upper Egypt; dates back to the 14th century. The icon includes some byzantine influences can be recognized in the golden background; the elongated crucified figure (Gabra and Skalova, 2003) while the figures features are influenced by the Coptic artistic style.

This icon seems so similar to the Coptic museum icon; Mary is represented swooning accompanied by a group of women mourning her and trying to keep her standing; the artist is so clever in showing her passion and torment as well as women accompanying her known by “the *Three Marys*”; their facial features are suffering from great pain and sympathy. They are represented holding and embracing her; affection is clearly shown in the scene, they are suffering great pain but trying to support her on this great day. The four ladies are dressed in a “*maphorian*” covering their body and heads leaving their neck uncovered; colours of the *maphorian* varies from dark brown to dark blue, virgin Mary is depicted in black *maphorian*, only Mary is distinguished by the halo surrounding her head; there is no inscriptions indicating the names of the three ladies.

- **Pl.9.** A beautiful coloured wooden icon dates back to the 14th century from the church of St. Barbara in Old Cairo depicts the crucifixion scene, the icon contains a beautiful mixture of both byzantine and Coptic influences along with some Arabic statements; the classic aspect of the crucifixion is presented here in the form of the crucified Jesus as a central figure on the right side of the cross Virgin Mary is depicted wearing the *maphorian* surrounded by only two of the “*three Marys*”. They are all depicted with a halo on their head and standing next to her. The woman just behind the Virgin is raising her right hand in the same way the virgin does. The byzantine influence can be identified in the golden background while the biblical figures and their facial features are purely Coptic; unfortunately, no inscriptions are mentioning the name of the figures.
- **Pl.10.** An interesting icon from the church of Keriakos, Tahta (Daniel, 2003) depicts the crucifixion scene in a different form; the women are shown on both sides of the cross and not only centered around Virgin Mary as usual. The one to the right is represented holding her both hands in front of her chest watching the great event with somber features, the other woman is depicted on the other side most probably standing next to St. John; she is holding her fist near her chest while the other hand holds her clothes; their facial features shown pain and sympathy but surrender as well; they are all dressed in *maphorian* but here it is colored with different straps, the icon is unique as it is the first time women are depicted on both sides of the crucified figure.
- **Pl. 11.** An icon from the suspended church in Old Cairo; most probably dates back to the 18th century depicts a crucifixion scene but in a unique depiction; Mary Magdalene is presented kneeling underneath the Christ’s feet holding the cross. She is the only woman depicted in the scene; she is wearing *maphorians* similar to that of

the virgin; both of them are represented with a halo around their heads, her name is mentioned in Arabic script next to her. Mary Magdalene had played an important role during the main incidents of Jesus' the Christ life.

Closing Remarks:

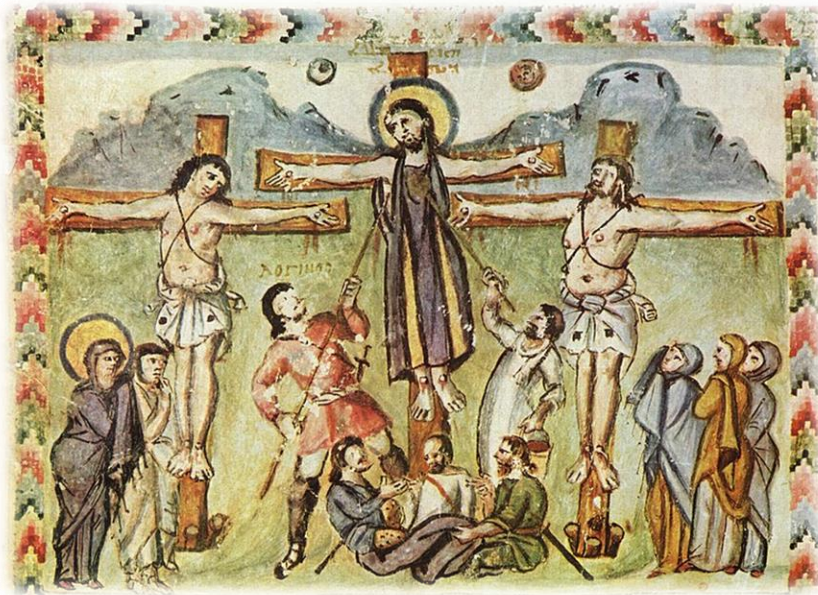
- The early depiction of the crucifixion was rather symbolic than realistic; in early centuries the empty cross was surrounded on both sides by the two tomb guardian soldiers; who were later on; replaced by the two figures of Virgin Mary and St. John; the depiction of the group of women appeared on a later date; around 12th century; despite this fact the classic depiction of St. John and Virgin Mary continued to be pictured as well but on a smaller scale; as a depiction of John sayings in his gospel: **“Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (John 19:25-27).**
- “The depiction of Virgin Mary in crucifixion themes had followed the same Coptic tradition of portraying her on the right side of Jesus the Christ ' daughters were among thy honorable women: upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir; “(Psalm 45:9), while St. John is always portrayed on the right.
- Despite the existence of Rabulla manuscript that dates back to the 5th century which describes the biblical figures in details; this detailed depiction was not found in Coptic artifacts except on a later date, in most crucifixion depictions depended on portraying the group of women as a custom narration of the crucifixion story with no mention of the women's name except for a very few examples. The Coptic artist did not make a clear differentiation between women even through their outfits. In most cases they were depicted in a group of three women; commonly and traditionally known by the three Marys; maybe that was due to the different interpretation of the figures mentioned in the four gospels; and their hard analogy.
- On the moment of Christ death on the cross he gave his last words to St. John as he was pictured closed eyes; while through the whole day which was full of events before his death; women were represented surrounding Mary; I can interpret here that; icons represented with Mary and John are portraying the moment of his death; while others where women are depicted are telling the incidents of the crucifixion day.



PL.1. Sarcophagus, Cemetery of Domitilla
After (Margaret, 2000)



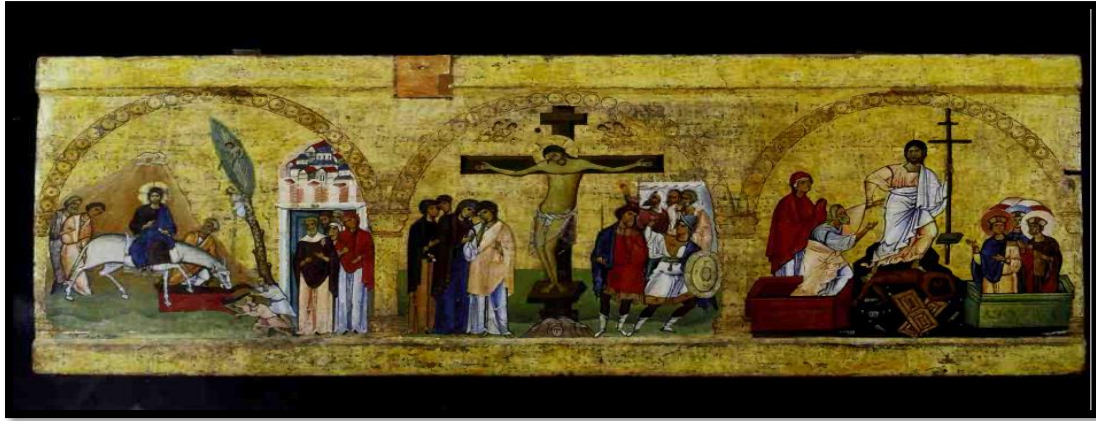
PL.2. Door panel; British museum
After (Margaret, 2000)



PL.3. Illuminated manuscript known by Rabbula manuscript
After (Beckwith, 1970)



PL.4. Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai
After (Nelson and Collins, 2006)



PL. 5: An Epistyle from the monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt
After (Nelson and Collins, 2006)



PL.6. A Syro- Palestine medieval icon Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi al- Natrun
After (Gabra and Skalova, 2003)



PL.7. A triptych icon, Coptic museum
After (Gabra and Eaton-Krauss, 2006)



PL.8. An icon of the crucifixion, church of St. Claudius, Meir Upper Egypt
After (Gabra and Skalova, 2003)



PL.9. An icon of the crucifixion, church of St. barbra,
After <https://www.gettyimages.com/>



PL.10. An icon of the crucifixion, Church of St Keriakos, Tahta, Egypt
After (Daniel, 2003)



PL.11. the Suspended church

After: https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/coptic_1.shtml

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- <https://www.gettyimages.com/> Accessed on 20 August 2020, 10.00 pm

النساء المصاحبات للسيدة العذراء في مناظر الصلب دراسة في مناظر العهد الجديد

رضوى مصطفى

مدرس بقسم الارشاد السياحي، معهد الألسن العالي للسياحة والفنادق

المفص

إن قصه خلق الأرض وسقوط آدم وحواء والطرد من عدن تم تكرها في الكتاب المقدس في فصوله الأربعة الأولى من كتاب موسى الأول و كذلك في سفر التكوين الذيشرح كيف خُلق العالم والإنسان، والغرض من حياة الإنسان. لقد تم تمثيل صلب المسيح في بعض الأيقونات و على الرغم من أن الخلاص هو جوهر العقيدة المسيحية، إلا أنه نادرًا ما تم تصويره و لقد تم ذكر الحادثة الرئيسية في العهد الجديد في الأناجيل الأربعة بنفس الرواية تقريبًا. حيث وضع جسد السيد المسيح على الصليب محاطًا بمريم العذراء وعدد قليل من النساء المصاحبات لها متى 27: 55-56، مرقس 15: 40، لوقا 23: 49، يوحنا 19: 25. ولقد قام باحثون سابقون بدراسة الصلب كمشهد نادر لكن هذه الورقة البحثية ستركز على الشخصيات النسائية التي رافقت العذراء خلال هذا الحدث وصورهن الفنية على الأيقونات من القرن الثامن إلى القرن الرابع عشر. ولقد تم تمثيل صلب المسيح في بعض الأيقونات وعلى الرغم من أن الخلاص هو جوهر العقيدة المسيحية، إلا أنه نادرًا ما تم تصويره و لقد تم ذكر الحادثة الرئيسية في العهد الجديد في الأناجيل الأربعة بنفس الرواية تقريبًا. حيث وضع جسد السيد المسيح على الصليب محاطًا بمريم العذراء وعدد قليل من النساء المصاحبات لها متى 27: 55-56، مرقس 15: 40، لوقا 23: 49، يوحنا 19: 25.

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الخلاص؛ الصلب؛
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