is hidden from view, without necessarily making that nature an accomplice in its own concealment.[17]

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17. My thanks to an anonymous reader for this journal for helpful suggestions.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA ON SIGNET RINGS: READING AN IMAGE AT THE DAWN OF CHRISTIAN ART

Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogos* 3.59.2 has long played a pivotal role in the history of early Christian art. In it, Clement discusses appropriate and inappropriate images for the signet rings of Christian men. Clement once served as a source for the now outmoded theory of early Christian anti- or aniconism,[1] and his writings continue to offer fundamental evidence for still vexing questions concerning the origins and interpretation of the earliest Christian art. Since Clement wrote at virtually the same time that the first identifiable works of Christian art appear, *Paedagogos* 3.59.2 has become a *locus classicus* for both art historians and theologians.[2] As such, it has suffered the fate of many an overused authority; its meaning and import have become presumed. It is time to take a fresh look at *Paedagogos* 3.59.2 both to clarify the reading of the text and to reassess its significance to the study of early Christian art.

Paedagogos 3.59.2 reads

> Αἱ δὲ σφραγῖδες ἡμῖν ἔστων πελειὰς ἢ ἰχθὺς ἢ ναῦς οὐριοδρομοῦσα ἢ λύρα μουσική, ἣ κέχρηται Πολυκράτης, ἢ ἄγκυρα ναυτική, ἣν Σέλευκος ἐνεχαράττετο τῇ γλυφῇ, κἂν

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1. Two often cited older works presenting early Christianity as an- or anti-iconic are G. Ladner, "The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy," *DOP* 7 (1953): 5, and E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images before Iconoclasm," *DOP* 8 (1954): 85, but see also the views of H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art,* trans. E. Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), e.g., xxii: "The story of the iconic portrait opens when Christianity adopted the cult images of the pagans, in a complete reversal of its own original attitude, and adopted an image practice of its own," and 144: ". . . the Christian religion did not allow for any concession in its total rejection of the religious image. . . ." The evidence Belting cites is dated, including Kitzinger's 1954 article mentioned above, and works by Koch in 1917, Ellinger in 1930, and Kollwitz from 1953 to 1957. The first definitive challenge to this view came from C. Murray, "Art and the Early Church," *JThS* 32 (1977): 303–45, and *Rebirth and Afterlife: A Study of the Transmutation of Some Pagan Imagery in Early Christian Funerary Art,* BAR International Series, 100 (Oxford, 1981), 13–36; and more recently from P. Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (Oxford, 1994), esp. 3–14. The discussions of Clement in Finney, 42–53 and 111–16, are also helpful. A fine treatment of the myth of aniconism generally and with regard to several cultures may be found in D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989), 54–81. A useful survey of developments from 1986 to 1996 can be found in L. Drewer, "Recent Approaches to Early Christian and Byzantine Iconography," *Studies in Iconography* 17 (1996): 1–65.

2. The *Paedagogos* was certainly written sometime between 185 and 215 C.E. Various arguments have been proffered to date it more precisely, but none has been universally accepted; see P. Finney, "Images on Finger Rings and Early Christian Art," *DOP* 41 (1987): 181 and n. 1. The earliest identifiable Christian images appear c. 200; see A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton, 1968), 7. Finney, *Invisible God* (n. 1 above), 100–101, offers the salutary reminder that the absence of extant *identifiable* Christian art, or any Christian material culture, from before 200 is not the same as proof that none ever existed.

ἁλιεύων τις ᾖ, ἀποστόλου μεμνήσεται καὶ τῶν ἐξ ὕδατος ἀνασπωμένων παιδίων· οὐ γὰρ εἰδώλων πρόσωπα ἐναποτυπωτέον, οἷς καὶ τὸ προσέχειν ἀπείρηται, οὐδὲ μὴν ξίφος ἢ τόξον τοῖς εἰρήνην διώκουσιν ἢ κύπελλα τοῖς σωφρονοῦσιν.[3]

The crux lies in κἂν ἁλιεύων τις ᾖ, ἀποστόλου μεμνήσεται καὶ τῶν ἐξ ὕδατος ἀνασπωμένων παιδίων. This has usually been translated in some fashion as "and if someone (i.e., the wearer) is a fisherman, let him remember the apostle and the children drawn up from the water."[4] This is possible, but why would Clement single out fishermen? The nearest reference to fishing is 3.52.2, where Clement lists it as an appropriate leisure pastime. Clement's reader views fishing as a hobby, not a livelihood. Indeed, it is clear that *Paedagogos* was intended for an audience of some literary education and social means and standing. The work is full of allusions to and quotations from Greek epic, drama, and philosophy. Before and after offering his opinion on rings, Clement warns his male readers against dainty clothing (3.53.3) and long, flowing, braided hair (3.61.2)—advice scarcely applicable to fishermen. He makes clear that the men wearing these rings are persons involved in civic affairs, businessmen and landowners.[5] Would it not, in fact, be unusual for a fisherman to have need for and possess a carved signet ring in the first place?

That ἁλιεύων cannot refer to the wearer is further established by a second line of reasoning.[6] If this were the case, Clement would be saying that a *fisherman specifically* would look down at the image on his ring and think of the apostle or children being drawn up from the water. Why would only a fisherman read the image on his ring in this way? Would not any Christian do so? Furthermore, how would this fisherman obtain this meaning from an image of a dove or a lyre, which are among the images listed with the fish, boat and anchor?[7] Concentration on what the text has to say about Christianity's position on art, that is, whether this is some sort of grudging permission for Christians to use representational images, has led to the neglect of these sorts of fundamental and very practical questions.

From the context, it is clear that the fisherman or fishing scene Clement is describing must be an image of a fisherman or a scene of fishing *on a ring;* the fisherman is not the wearer of the ring. Ἁλιεύων is another in the list of possible signet images along with the dove, fish, boat, lyre, and anchor, which are mentioned directly before. As I construe it, the passage reads

3. Since the correct reading of the text is itself the first point to be discussed, I have not provided a translation at this point. A full translation appears just a few paragraphs below.

4. "The apostle" is most likely Peter, deduced from Clement's reference to him catching men like fish in *Paed.* 3.52.2. The "children drawn up from the water" is apparently a reference to baptism; "children" might not be literal here. For concise and convenient history of scholarship and discussion on the passage, see Finney, *Invisible God,* 108–15, and Murray, *Rebirth* (n. 1 above), 23.

5. 3.58.2: εἰ δὲ ἄρα δέοι καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐμπολιτευομένους καὶ ἄλλας τινὰς τῶν κατ' ἀγρὸν διοικουμένους πράξεις . . . ("And if it is necessary for us, while engaged in public business, or discharging other avocations in the country, and often away from our wives, to seal anything for the sake of safety, He [the Word] allows us a signet for this purpose only. Other finger rings are to be cast off, since, according to the Scripture, 'instruction is a golden ornament for a wise man.'").

6. Some have offered as a solution for κἂν ἁλιεύων τις ᾖ that when the wearer happens to be fishing at some time (though not necessarily a fisherman by trade) he will look at the symbol on his ring and think of the apostle. This, of course, begs the question why this person would not make these associations at other times as well. In my view, this is even more problematic than a fisherman in a posh frock and fancy hairdo.

7. L. Eizenhöfer, "Die Siegelbildvorschläge des Clemens von Alexandrien und die älteste Christliche Literatur," *JbAC* 3 (1960): 52, raised similar objections. Finney, "Images" (n. 2 above), 185, simply dismissed Eizenhöfer's ideas as "unacceptable on grammatical grounds," but gave no hint as to what he considered Eizenhöfer to have gotten wrong.

> Let our seals be a dove or a fish or a ship running in a fair wind or a musical lyre, such as the one Polycrates used, or a ship's anchor, such as the one Seleucus had engraved on his seal stone. And if it [the seal] should be a man fishing, it [the image on the seal] will call to mind[8] [i.e., call to the mind of the wearer] the apostle and the children drawn up out of the water. We who are forbidden to attach ourselves to idols must not engrave the face of idols, or the sword or the bow since we follow the path of peace, or drinking cups since we are sober.

A closer look at the language of the text favors ἁλιεύων as an image on the ring and not the wearer of the ring.[9] The subject of the sentence is "signets" (σφραγῖδες ἡμῖν ἔστων) followed by a series of predicates separated by ἤ. There is nothing that clearly marks a change of subject, such as δέ, in the clause containing ἁλιεύων, so that the subject of the verb of that clause (ᾖ) should still be the signet image. Ἁλιεύων τις forms another predicate, hence: "And if *it* should be a man fishing."[10]

Clement's list of acceptable images also builds in complexity to the ἁλιεύων clause in a conventional rhetorical form: two plain nouns (πελειὰς ἢ ἰχθύς), followed by a noun + adjective (ναῦς οὐριοδρομοῦσα), followed by two nouns + relative clauses (ἢ λύρα μουσική, ᾗ . . . ἢ ἄγκυρα ναυτική, ἣν), followed by one noun in a subjunctive clause (κἂν ἁλιεύων τις ᾖ). These six acceptable images are then contrasted with six unacceptable images, again in a pattern: a single plural noun (πρόσωπα), followed by a pair of singular nouns (ξίφος ἢ τόξον), followed by a single plural noun (κύπελλα)—all of which are modified by relative clauses—followed by a pair of plural nouns later in 60.1 (τοὺς ἐρωμένους ἢ τὰς ἑταίρας).[11] If ἁλιεύων did not refer to an image on the ring, the rhetorical structure and balance of the passage would be destroyed.

This clarification of the reading of the text reveals the true significance of the passage. Since the fisherman is an image, we are given a precious glimpse into how a leading Christian thinker at the beginning of the third century, the time of the emergence of the first identifiable Christian art, "read" an image and, arguably, expected his coreligionists to read it. The first thing to notice is what Clement does *not* say. The wearer will not be reminded of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, or of Jesus calming the storm on the waters, or of any number of other scenes from the gospels involving Jesus and fish, fishing, or the sea. Given the number of gospel references that Clement could have used, it is of the utmost significance that he used none at all. His view of the fishing image is not connected to a historical/biographical reading of the gospels. Granted, Jesus calls Peter a "fisher of men" in Mark 1:17 and Matthew 4:19, but Clement says the image will call to mind the apostle, not Jesus himself or the specific scene in the gospel. The viewer thinks of Peter, not specifically of Peter's call, or the scene of the call on the beach after bringing in the catch. A meaning that alludes to a sacred text is quite different from one that merely illustrates a text. Clement also says that the fisherman may remind the wearer of

8. See LSJ, s.v. μιμνήσκω, B.II; also Eizenhöfer, "Siegelbildvorschläge" (n. 7 above), 52.

9. In this analysis, I am particularly grateful for the advice of Prof. Amy Clark Gargola of the Classics Department of Miami University of Ohio.

10. This idea was first mooted in a slightly different form and with less elaboration by Eizenhöfer, "Siegelbildvorschläge," 52.

11. Πολλοὶ δὲ (note that the change of subject to the wearer here is signaled by δὲ) τῶν ἀκολάστων ἐγγεγλυμμένους ἔχουσι τοὺς ἐρωμένους ἢ τὰς ἑταίρας, ὡς μηδὲ ἐθελήσασιν αὐτοῖς λήθην ποτὲ ἐγγενέσθαι δυνηθῆναι τῶν ἐρωτικῶν παθημάτων διὰ τὴν ἐνδελεχῆ τῆς ἀκολασίας ὑπόμνησιν.

baptism. Here the meaning is ritual and liturgical and not based upon literal scripture, as there is no place in the Bible where baptism is connected to fishing.[12] Clement's reading of the image on the ring in this instance is also not bound by a text, but rather stems from the sacramental, mystical (in the Greek religious sense of mystery), experiential elements of Christianity. In a post-Reformation, postliterate world, we tend to scurry for a text to define an image, especially a religious one.[13] Clement's way of seeing the image on the ring and his method of constructing meaning from it is quite different from what we would tend to do.

In this passage, the meaning of an image is fundamentally associative and polyvalent, not literal and fixed; it is constructed through the viewer's own religious experience, not dictated by an external authority—even if Clement himself is engaged in delineating the boundaries of propriety. This passage thus also provides a dramatic example of what Jaś Elsner, in his groundbreaking work on late Roman and early Christian art, has termed "sacred" or "mystic viewing," a cultural shift characteristic of the passage into late antiquity.[14] According to Elsner, this transformation entailed a change in viewing preferences, in the way in which images were seen to convey meaning, from Classical "naturalism" to the "symbolic" character of late antique art, by which the viewer's religious initiation transforms the world of ordinary assumptions and can discern the genuine nonmaterial reality communicated by the image. Clement's leap, so to speak, from fisherman to apostle and baptism similarly leaves the world of the mundane and corporeal (i.e., the common everyday fisherman) for the abstract reality of preaching the good news (i.e., the apostle) and the mystical reality of rebirth through ritual initiation (i.e., the children drawn from the water).

Although the image on the ring can be transformed through mystic viewing, it need not be. The image in and of itself does not become holy or iconic. Just as the lyre on a Christian's ring is like the one used by Polycrates and the anchor like that used by Seleucus, so the fisherman can also remain secular and mundane. Hence Clement manifests another characteristic of Elsner's "mystic viewing"; his mode of viewing is polysemic, images are "paradigmatic and prescriptive" transmitting not fixed meaning but rather "methods for constructing meaning."[15] The viewer is key, and the reality of the image is constructed in a dialogue between viewer and image. Clement recognizes that the same image may be Christian or not and may have a variety of Christian meanings. Though Clement does not determine fixed meaning, he can nevertheless define boundaries. The eye of the beholder is crucial, but it is not sovereign in constructing meaning. According to Clement, certain images are inappropriate in

12. The description of the baptized as fish does, however, occur in patristic writings contemporary with Clement and the appearance of Christian art, especially Tertullian *De bapt.* 1, and Optatus of Milevis *De Schism. Don.* 3.2.1.

13. This insistence on defining an image in relation to and in subordination to an authorizing sacred text persists in quite recent and important work. Salient examples include T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, 1993), 54: "Departures from the scriptural version of events are always significant; they are red flags signaling the intervention of some special concern beyond the obvious storytelling interest," and P. Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity,* trans. A. Shapiro (Berkeley, 1995), 295: "That Christ should appear in the image of the philosopher-teacher was anything but obvious and certainly not so ordained by Scripture. Seeing a youthful Christ in the schema of the intellectual wunderkind, the Christian viewer may naturally have thought of his appearance before the Doctors, while the bearded Christ would have reminded them of the Sermon on the Mount."

14. J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity,* Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism (Cambridge, 1995), see esp. 4–7, 15–22, 88–124.

15. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (n. 14 above), 121, 282–83.

themselves: faces of the gods, drinking cups, weapons. It would appear then that some images are perhaps more fixed in their meaning, or carry their meaning with them in a more determined way. In Clement's view, at least, not all images are created equal, and not just any image can be subject to mystic viewing. Thus this passage gives us a final, salutary reminder of the complexity of interpreting the earliest Christian art. The way in which this art was viewed and the mode(s) in which it conveyed meaning involved a dialectic between viewer and viewed which we have only recently begun to fathom. To understand early Christian art, we must divest ourselves not only of modern theological presumptions, but also modern viewing habits and prejudices.

Thus we see that *Paedagogos* 3.59.2, correctly interpreted, offers something far more important than a grudging "permission" for Christian art, revealing its true significance for the intellectual and art history of early Christianity. Since it is now established that the fisherman in this passage is an image on a ring, we are given a precious glimpse into how a leading Christian thinker at the beginning of the third century, the time of the emergence of the first identifiable Christian art, "read" an image and taught his coreligionists to read it, a remarkable cultural artifact in and of itself. Furthermore, this mode of viewing presents, in terms of modern scholarship, an instance of mystic viewing in action. As such, it substantiates recent directions in art historical research[16] and shows that investigation into modes of viewing is grounded in the visual practice of early Christians themselves.

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16. The bibliography of recent work is voluminous. Some highlights include Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (n. 1 above); Drewer, "Recent Approaches" (n. 1 above); Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (n. 14 above); Finney, *Invisible God* (n. 1 above); G. Frank, *Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2000); R. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London and New York, 2000); Mathews, *The Clash Of Gods* (n. 13 above); and Zanker, *Mask of Socrates* (n. 13 above).