

## THE FISH IN CHRISTIANITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

A COLLECTION of the scattered stories of the fish in pagan worship, as treated in previous articles, would be of little interest to us were it not for the fact that the fish has also been for centuries a most sacred symbol in Christianity. In fact the fish has been identified with Christ, and we have found it pictured again and again in the catacombs of Rome where it is assumed to be an evidence of Christian faith, and what in addition is interesting and instructive is the coincidence that the symbol of the fish is quite frequently associated both in paganism and in Christianity with the symbol of the dove. Just as Lucian speaks of the sacredness of these two creatures in one and the same sentence, and as the fish and the bird appear together on funerary basins in China, so we find them often represented side by side on one and the same tombstone of the early Christians.

Christianity did not flash upon mankind in a finished state. It grew and adapted itself rapidly, but step by step in a normal process of evolution. Its sacred symbols, the cross, the lamb and the fish, were not ready-made and the type of the Christ ideal in art remained undecided for many centuries. We are told that for a long time Orpheus took the place of Jesus, and Christian archeologists have claimed that the substitution was made because during the time of persecutions Christians concealed their belief in Christ under a pagan symbolism. This interpretation however is forced. If their consciences allowed them to hide their faith under the pretense of a pagan cult why did they suffer martyrdom at all?

Historians have gradually come to the conclusion that the theory of the secrecy of early Christian worship and stories of Christian persecutions, though not untrue, have been greatly exaggerated, and it has been claimed with good reason that some persecutions were pure fiction invented for the edification of pious souls.

It is plausible that if people painted an Orpheus in their funeral chapels they believed in Orpheus, and when they no longer believed in the letter of the myth, Orpheus remained to them the symbol of immortality and as such they continued to depict him on their tombs. To those however who became Christians the figure of Orpheus found its fulfilment in Christ. Thus we see in the Orpheus pictures a pagan element that lingers longest. Far from being a substitute for Christ, we think that it was gradually supplanted by the picture of Christ.

It seems quite probable that for a while the pagan beliefs lingered with the Christians who clung to old customs as much as they cherished the new interpretation that had become dear to them. The more clearly Christian doctrines became defined, the fewer were the pagan elements retained, and those symbols alone continued in use which in one way or another had adapted themselves to the new religion.

This is best seen in the fish. The fish was dear to Christians before they knew why. Christians were compared to the fish, and this is accidentally done in the Gospels. Many of the apostles were fishermen, and Jesus promises them that they shall become fishers of men. In the same connection the kingdom of heaven is compared to a net (Matt. xiii. 47). The Jonah story is remembered in its symbolical meaning with reference to immortality (Matt. xii. 40; Luke xi. 32); further we read in the Gospels of fish meals taken in a mystical, almost sacramental, way with miraculous multiplication of food, as also after the resurrection of Christ in John xxi, a passage where it is told that fish are roasted on coals and eaten.

All these references to fish in the New Testament are of a general nature and nowhere can we find the slightest hint that Christ himself should be called a fish. Similar ideas are expressed in the old Testament. In Jer. xvi. 16 God promises to send many fishers, "and they shall fish" the children of Israel from among the Gentiles. Even Buddhism, as we have seen, represents Buddha as a fisherman, and in the same way Christ is originally not a fish but a fisher. Clement of Alexandria quotes a hymn which reads:

“Ἀλιεῦ μερόπων  
τῶν σωζομένων,  
πελάγους κακίας  
ἰχθῦς ἀγνοῖς  
κίματος ἑχθροῦ  
γλυκερᾶ ζωῆ δελεάζων.”

“Fisherman of mortals  
Of the ransomed heirs,  
Sav’st from sea of evils,  
From the heinous ocean  
Fishes pure and holy  
With sweet bait of life.”

The tradition that the Saviour was a fish was not unknown to the Jews, for the word fish in Hebrew, *Dag*,<sup>2</sup> being in number value 4+3, was identified with the Messiah, and the Messiah himself is called fish or *Dag*.<sup>3</sup> In the Talmud the fish is the symbol of innocence on the basis of Micah, vii. 19, and the birth of the Messiah is to take place when Jupiter and Saturn meet in the constellation of the fishes (Pisces).<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the Jewish tradition Christ is not compared to a fish in the early church during the first century. So far as we know, the first thus to refer to him is Tertullian who lived from 150 to 230, a few years earlier than Origen; but Origen does not seem to have known of Christ as a fish, and we must observe that Tertullian is a Roman and the fish-symbol has its center in Rome.

Tertullian says in his essay on Baptism (Chapter I), "We little fish following the ΙΧΘΥΣ, our Jesus Christ, are born in water [baptism] and cannot be saved otherwise than by remaining in water." It is not sure whether Tertullian knew of the Christian interpretation of the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ which is an acrostic from the words Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτήρ, "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour," for this acrostic became prominent in Christian literature in the third and fourth centuries, and found its classical expression in the Sibylline oracles where it appears in Book VIII, verses 217 and following.

From the Sibylline books it has been quoted by St. Augustine (*De civ. dei*, XVIII, 23) and Eusebius (*Or. con. ad coetum SS*, XVIII). The acrostic itself is frequently mentioned in the fourth and fifth centuries especially by Bishop Optatus of Mileve (*De schismate donatistorum*, III, 2), Maximus of Turin (*Tractatus quatuor contra paganos*), and Paulinus (*Epis. XIII ad Pammachum*); and the idea of Christ as a fish grows on Christians until Severianus of Gabala says, "If Christ had not been a fish he could not have risen from the dead."

The origin of this symbol cannot be sought in the New Testament but must come from another, an independent source. Indeed it seems that the symbol was used before the interpretation of the acrostic had been invented. The fish was used in the catacombs mostly but not exclusively by Christians and its interpretation as ΙΧΘΥΣ seems to be secondary.

<sup>2</sup> דג

<sup>3</sup> See Buxdorf, *Synod. Jud.*, XXIV.

<sup>4</sup> See Münter (*Sinnbilder*, page 49) who refers to *Abrahamel* and other sources.

The interpretation comes as an afterthought which endeared to Christians this pre-Christian symbol of immortality.

Strange to say, the Sibylline oracle spells the word *Christos* as "*Chreistos*." Another well-ascertained instance of the spelling *Chreistos* is recorded by Münter in his *Sinnbilder* on Plate I, No. 2, where a gem is pictured with an anchor and two fishes and the inscription "Ἰησοῦς Χρειστός." The spelling is assured in the oracles because the letters *e* and *i* have their special verses in this peculiar acrostic poem, but we must bear in mind that the spelling *Christos* was not as yet settled in the second century, for Justin Martyr used still another spelling, *Crestos*, which also is well assured, for Justin comments on its meaning in the sense of the Greek word *chrestos* meaning "useful," an unmistakable evidence that he himself prefers this spelling at least in the passage referred to. But we may add that otherwise the spelling *Chrestos* is the better version according to the best manuscripts, and we may therefore positively say that the spelling *Christos* has been decided on only since the derivation of the word "Christ" from the Greek *χρίειν*, "to anoint," has become universally accepted.

Obviously the original meaning of the word *Christos* is still an open question. The word *χρίειν* means more "to besmear" than "to anoint," and we may be sure that if it really had been intended as a translation of the Hebrew "Messiah," the Greek translator would have used a more dignified word. The probability still remains that the name *Christos* was the title of a saviour, used broadly among certain classes of people, and became finally established in the general sense of saviour corresponding to the Hebrew Messiah.

The suggestion has been made that *Christos* might be a corrupt form of the Sanskrit name *Krishna*, but how shall we account for the change of *n* to *t*? And in lack of any further evidence nothing positive can be said on the subject.

The Sibylline oracles date back to the beginning of the third century. Being a collection it is a matter of course that many oracles are of an older date.

An English translation of this acrostic by Neale was published in *The Open Court* of June, pages 332 and 333.

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The similarity between Christian and pagan symbols can scarcely be accidental, and we become more and more assured of an historical connection by observing that among the tombstones containing the symbols of the dove, and especially of the fish, there are many

which must be regarded as doubtful while some are unequivocally pagan, and at least one is Jewish. Accordingly we have a connecting link between paganism and Christianity, and the peculiarity is that in all cases the fish serves as a symbol of immortality, and is therefore especially used in connection with funeral ceremonies. We see in the monuments of ancient Babylonians that the priests at the sick bed engaged in keeping away the goddess of death are dressed in fish skins, presumably in commemoration of Oannes or Odakon, which indicates that the dead have to become fish like Oannes in order to pass together with the setting sun through the ocean of death and thus survive this dangerous state of transition.

A crossing of the ocean becomes the symbol of the conquest of death, and thus the ship has, in the same sense as the fish, become a symbol of salvation. We find the emblems of the ship in the most ancient tombs of the Mediterranean races, and the Teutons in ancient times preferred to be buried in tree boats. We have reason to believe that some of these boats were never used in the water but had been made for the purpose of burial which goes far to prove that the underlying idea is of a religious or a symbolic character.

The church is commonly represented as a ship, and in Buddhism the same symbol has been used since the days of its founder. Since Buddhism spread and took root among the large masses, the Buddhist church accented this innovation by claiming to be a large vessel or Mahayana in contrast to the Hinayana, the small vessel or little boat of the older church. The Buddhist canon is full of references to what is called the ocean of life and death, symbolizing Samsara, the world of Mara the evil one, the deity of death. Nirvana is the safe shore, or the island on the other side of the water. Buddha passes over the ocean of life and death and walks on it as one would walk over flagstones, while his disciples who are firm in the faith will be able to follow him over the stream dry shod. The same story is told of Jesus and Peter in the Christian gospels.

Again for the same reason birds of passage, especially cranes and wild geese, have become symbols of transmigration and of immortality. We find them pictured in the frescoes of the Buddhist caves in India, and they are frequently alluded to in the folklore of Tibet, China and Japan, but they are less used as religious emblems in the West.

In this connection we will incidentally remark that the main symbol of Christianity, the cross in all its several shapes, as the simple Greek cross, the Latin cross, the swastika or Buddhist cross,

the *cruv ansata* or hooked cross, i. e., the key of life of the Egyptians, was used before Christianity among all pagan nations, being regarded as a sacred symbol to ward off evil, but it has received the name of cross, and its interpretation as the martyr instrument on which Christ died, only in Christian times. Before the Christian era and in its first century this same symbol, the two intersecting lines, or the "thwart" as we propose to call its general form, was called the *signum salutis* or "the sign of salvation"; but since the second century this same symbol has been so identified with Christ's cross that the latter (though merely called "wood" in the New Testament) is now commonly thought to have had the form of a thwart.

The same process which changed the thwart into a cross has taken place with the fish. The fish, the ancient symbol of resurrection, continued to be used as an emblem of immortality, and was used as a talisman to ward off evil. The pagans used it as well as the primitive Christians, but the later Christians gave it a new interpretation. They saw in it a symbol of Christ the Saviour. The pagan interpretation was the more easily superseded as the original pagan significance had long been forgotten and its use had become a mere habit of tradition. The dove met with the same fate. It was the symbol of Istar, the Great Mother goddess, and became the emblem of the Holy Ghost, who was regarded in primitive Christianity as the mother of the Logos. The Koran still identifies Mary with the Holy Ghost, and if the word *pneuma*, spirit or ghost, in Greek had been a feminine noun as it is in Hebrew (*ruakh*)<sup>5</sup> it is not improbable that the Christian trinity would have remained a trinity of God Father, God Mother and God Son, such as it was in several other religions, especially in Egypt where in many temples the trinity consists of Osiris, Isis and Horus.

Thus the dove naturally took its place as the emblem of the Holy Ghost and the passage in the New Testament in which it is said that the Holy Ghost descended upon Christ in the form of a dove canonized this emblem for all Christian churches.

If a new thought takes possession of mankind we invariably find that it assimilates the traditional customs but gives to them a new interpretation. The old forms remain but they are filled with new meaning. So it happened with the symbol of the cross, so with the dove, so with the fish.

The underlying meaning of them remained practically in all

<sup>5</sup> רוח

cases the same in spite of the unlimited variety of applications. This is most apparent in the fish which, from the beginning down to Constantinian Christianity and even further, represented man's hope of immortality. It served as an emblem of the Saviour and a talisman for the protection of the soul on its journey through the ocean of death.