Fish and Fishing Symbolism in the Synoptic Gospels: AAR/SBL, 11/94
NOT FOR CITATION AND QUOTATION WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR
Laurence H. Kant, Cornell University

In terms of cultural symbolism, fish and fishing imagery figure prominently in the Synoptic gospels. In addition to the call of the fishers (Mk. 1.16-20; Matt. 4.18-22; Luke 5.1-11) and the various multiplications of fish and loaves, one can cite the miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5.1-11; the parable of the net in which the good and bad fish are separated in Matt. 13.47-50, the story of a fish caught on a line with a coin miraculously found in its mouth which was to be used to pay the Temple tax in Matt. 17.24-27, and the description of Jesus' snack on broiled fish during his resurrection appearance in Luke 24.41-43. While working on my dissertation on early Christian fish symbolism, I found that the significance of fish in early Christianity could only be understood in light of their function in the Graeco-Roman/Near Eastern world. In using this material to tell a story and to illustrate the teachings of Jesus, gospel writers assumed a whole host of meanings that encompassed every dimension of life at the time—economic and social relations, diet and cuisine, propagation and death, oratory and missiology, understanding of the natural world (whether scientific or folkloric), even astrology and prophecy. Consequently, I became interested in how fish and fishing functioned as symbols—that is to say, multivalent condensations of cultural meaning—that were used and adapted for a variety of teaching purposes.

Fish symbolism in early Christianity was always multivalent, relying on a complex network of meanings that included a wide-ranging variety of references. First and foremost, fish were food, providing a basic staple of the ancient diet both in solid and liquid form (as in fish sauces). The consumption of fish was sometimes viewed in itself as a refined activity, such that the Rhodians seem to have regarded meat eating as barbaric in contrast. Large fish frequently functioned as status symbols and were associated in ancient Judaism with holiday meals. Small fish, when eaten individually, often revealed the low means of the consumer, though they could be highly regarded when puréed in elegant sauces (or when swimming in groups, which made

them strong as a unit, or when certain small fish could seemingly perform miraculous actions, such as the sucking fish, which could supposedly stop a hip in its tracks). In fact, fish sauces were used as a condiment for virtually all kinds of food in the Mediterranean region, including legumes, starch, and meat.

Fish were associated with death in a number of ways: they were offered to Chthonic deities (such as Hecate) or to the deceased themselves at funerary meals; they appeared in folk stories about dolphins, which were regarded in the ancient world as fish and which were said to have borne the dead on their backs for burial; and fish were thought to be eaten in messianic or paradisiacal settings (e.g. the banquet depicted in the catacomb of Vibia). In addition, fish bore an element of sacrality. Some fish were sacred to various deities, and were kept in sacred ponds, and these consequently were not allowed to be consumed. Paradoxically, fish were sometimes eaten because they were sacred. On account of their magical powers, other fish were used for divination and prophecy. Stories abounded in which divinities including Aphrodite metamorphosed into fish. And, to the consternation of many Greeks and Romans, there were piscine divinities that were part human such as the Syrian fish-goddess Atargatis and the Babylonian fish-god Oannes.

Fish interacted with human beings in more immediate and practical ways, such as saving their lives and engaging their friendship and love. Tame fish were cultivated as beloved pets, and schools of fish were compared to flocks of sheep. Many fish (especially dolphins) were said to have human qualities and were described as music-loving, friendly, communal, intelligent, affectionate, peaceful, monogamous, etc. Small fish were sometimes used to designate human souls. Greeks and Roman even used fish names as actual <u>cognomina</u>, such as Lucius Licinius Muraena or Lucius Licinius the Lamprey. And this possibly even influenced the use of the ΙΧΘΥΣ acronym as a name for Christ.

In the ancient world, fishing was regarded as an occupation for the economically and socially disadvantaged so that its practicioners were regarded as working exceedingly long hours and as having boorish manners. At the same time, fishing served as a metaphor for

oratorical persuasion and missionary activities, so that Petronius describes the orator as a fisher who must use the right "bait" to catch "the little fish," while the zodiacal sign of Pisces was associated with rhetoric.

In astrological interpretation (which was extraordinarily popular in antiquity), the sign of the fish—Pisces—signified salvation for individuals, and, in a universal sense, pointed to the final death of one age and the birth of a new transforming era. This tradition is also found in Jewish texts, and I have argued that, at least in the memory of the later Church, the birth of Jesus was associated with the triplex conjunction of Juppiter and Saturn in the fish sign of Pisces. Fish and the watery realm in which they lived were regarded as alien, and were therefore associated with supernatural phenomena: from that which was frighteningly perilous to that which was awesomely mircaculous. The terrestrial waters, which were believed to be one interconnected ocean sheath for the earth, were understood as a liminal realm where sky and earth, heaven and the underworld, and life and death all met. And this liminality applied to fish as well. Because they were for the most part silent creatures, fish were also connected to the esoteric mysteries of certain religious groups, including Pythagoreans and probably Christians. As creatures that were believed to be forever (or almost forever) awake, fish may have been connected to divinities, whose eyes were always alert to the activities of human beings. And finally, because of the great quantity of life in the seas and oceans, salt water and fish were associated with fertility and sexuality. In fact, small fish were thought to multiply quickly and in great numbers, while large fish were regarded as phallic aphrodisiacs. It should come as no surprise that one of the patron deities of fishers was the phallic god, Priapus.

As can be seen from this summary, there are several antithetical elements in ancient fish symbolism: small and large, death and life, sacred and secular, not to mention the paradoxical fact that sometimes sacred fish are prohibited from consumption, and at other times, they are encouraged. It is this complexity that helps to make the fish such an effective symbol for early Christians.

In general, early Christian fish and fishing symbolism (whether in the New Testament or

later) depended upon the ubiquitousness of fish in the ancient world. For one living in the contemporary North America or Western Europe, it may be difficult to imagine the extent to which fish were a part of ancient life. In the normal meal in the Mediterranean world of antiquity, one would have seen, smelled, and eaten fish—regularly sized fish; large, heavy and magnificent fish on special occasions; tiny salt fish (e.g. sprats, sardines and minnows); and fish sauces which were used on every kind of food imaginable. In the air of a typical ancient city street, one would have smelled the odors of fish wafting from the fish markets, which were so popular in the ancient world, from the smoke of fish (especially small ones) grilled on open fires outside buildings, from the factories in which rotting fish were laid out in the sun for the preparation and creation of fish sauces, and from the fish that were set out on altars as offerings to chthonic deities. Travelling on the road from city to city, one would have inhaled the smell of fish coming from the sacks of salt fish that travellers on roads carried with them on their shoulders as their nutritional sustenance. In addition, one would have seen fish depicted everywhere in paintings, relief work, sarcophagi, mosaics, and other media, found both in homes and cemeteries. Especially common would have been scenes of banquets and scenes of sea life. Everywhere one went, one would have encountered fish in one form or another.

In Christian interpretation after the New Testament period, fish symbolism was closely and explicitly tied to baptism and the eucharist, as well as to missionary activity. Let me summarize the multitude of texts.

In the case of baptism, small fish could refer to those being baptized, while a large fish could point to Christ, the one who baptizes. The very use of fish to represent human beings follows a pattern in Graeco-Roman tradition, which can use fish to refer to persons and can describe fish themselves in human terms. And by using fish to represent a sacred figure (Christ), Christians are drawing on the tradition of venerating some fish as sacred, as well as the mythological tradition that some gods metamorphose into fish. At the same time, a large fish suggests the generative powers of missionaries, who were able through their persuasive skills to produce large numbers of converts, often pictured as small fish. Through the miraculous waters of

baptism, which (like the all-encompassing ocean sheath) connects death to life, those who are baptized are rescued from dangerous waters and brought to life-giving ones. Using fish symbolism makes special sense, since baptism combines life and death. The division of large and small fish—Christ and Christian converts—also corresponds to their status and the hierarchy of their relationship, though naturally the position of the new Christians has been elevated by their conversion, just as small fish can be praised in special circumstances.

Likewise, in their depictions of the eucharist, Christian writers make use of similar referential combinations. Here Christ as a large fish symbolizing bread and wine was ingested, with the implicit promise of eternal life. But there is also a connection to death, in that the eucharist recalls the death of Christ, so that death and life are once again combined. That they are consuming a large fish suggests the status both of Christ himself and the aspirations to status of the members of the community. Also found are references to Christ himself as a broiled fish, which refers to the crucifixion and to its rememberance in the eucharist, which is symbolized by fish.

Other aspects of fish symbolism are also relevant. The comparison of missionizing Christians to fishers suggests that early Christians were representing themselves as socially and economically disadvantaged at the same time that they were connecting themselves to an oratorical tradition of persuasion. By using fish, early Christians were probably also casting themselves in an eschatological context, since fish, whose symbolism encompassed both death and life, pointed astrologically as Pisces both to the death of the present oppressive age and to the life-bearing commencement of a new kingdom.

The association of fish with silence also figures in early Christian texts. In the inscription of Avercius, the earliest extant datable Christian inscription, from Hierapolis in Phrygia (c. 200 CE), there is a connection made between the inscription's assertion of the mysterious character of certain Christian language and its mention of the fish, which is itself a symbol of secrecy. In this same inscription is also found a linkage between fish and possibly the notion of perpetual vigilance. Other Christian texts (actually with some early Christian iconography) follow Graeco-Roman traditions by presenting schools of fish in terms of flocks of sheep, thus connecting the metaphor of Jesus as shepherd and Christians as sheep to that of Jesus as a large fish guiding Christians as small fish out of the turbulent seas of this world and into the sheltered waters of baptism.

Also prominent in early Christian interpretation is the use in some instances of the Greek word for fish, ἰχθύς, as an acronym for Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτῆρ ("Jesus Christ Son of God Savior"). It is first found explicitly in the third century in Book Eight of the Sibbyline Oracles, where there is an additional "sigma" added for σταυρός ("cross), which is in fact likely tied to the discussion of the death and crucifixion of Christ in the final stanza of this poem (ll. 224-50). But even when it is not spelled out, the ΙΧΘΥΣ acronym seems to have been assumed by Tertullian in Chapter One of De Baptismo, in which he describes Christians being baptized according to the fish; here "fish" is not translated into Latin, but kept in Greek as ἰχθύς, therefore suggesting that the actual letters of this word had special significance. In this instance, as elsewere, ἰχθύς functions both as an acronym and as a symbol referring to baptism, as well as to Christ who is presented in the form of a large fish.

In general, fish and fishing symbolism in the synoptics is not as referentially explicit or as comprehensive as it is in later Christian interpretations of those same texts. No persuasive evidence exists for the use of the ΙΧΘΥΣ acronym in the New Testament. Although human beings seem to have been associated with fish in the call of the fishers, the miraculous catch of fish, and in the parable of the net, there is no compelling evidence in the gospels for the direct representation of Christ as a large fish or (for that matter) as any kind of fish. While some NT

writers probably intended certain passages to refer to baptism and to the eucharist, these references were not conveyed by explicit statements, but rather most likely relied on the evident implications of the context and on the ensuing assumption that those in the know would understand. In this way, New Testament texts employed fish symbolism in a similar fashion to the Avercius inscription, which, although very different in content, also never explicitly states the reference of its large fish to the eucharist, baptism, or to Christ; but in the context of other items in the in~scrip~tion—bread and wine, a spring or a font, purity, a virgin, faith, a shep~herd, and Paul—those references were clearly presumed. In this way, the NT and the Avercius inscription employ the fish to signify Christian identity through contextual allusion. Beside the Avercius inscription, the earliest Christian tombstones do this by displaying one or two fish as images, probably serving as fertility symbols in the midst of death.

I would now like to mention a few of the components of New Testament fish and fishing symbolism.

In the call of the fishers, the designation of those who are called to follow Jesus as fishers of human beings was probably drawing on the oratorical tradition of describing persuasion in terms of catching fish. At the same time, the use of fish to point to disciples or to converts is probably related to the ancient association of fish with fertility; by describing followers of Jesus as fish, Mark and Matthew were likely implying that this movement would multiply quickly and in great numbers. This is especially emphasized, and apparently made explicit, in Luke 5.1-7, when the gospel describes the nets of the fishers, which were formerly empty, as now overflowing with fish. Finally, by emphasizing that it was fishers who were among the first followers of Jesus, the gospels represent the earliest Christians as economically and socially disadvantaged. Although this might not have reflected actual reality in the world of Palestine, or in the Mediterranean world in general (since we know from inscriptions that fishing could in fact be a prosperous profession), it does indicate that early Christian chose to represent themselves as stereotypically poor and marginal.

In the multiplications of the fish and loaves, the authors are of course presuming the

importance of those items in the ancient diet. And by multiplying fish in great numbers, Jesus is associating fish with their natural fertile capacity for multiplying themselves. The reference to small fish in Matt. 15.34 and Mark 8.7 (ἰχθύδια) is further connected to this ancient notion of fish fertility, but also probably indicates that the disciples had themselves been preparing a meal for common people. Generally, the multiplication of the food is probably related to the missionary context of attracting more followers to the movement, not only as an impressive demonstration of a miracle, but also as a symbolic representation of missionary multiplication: Just as fish multiply, so also will Jesus's followers. In the feeding of the five-thousand, the ref~er~ence to two fish possibly should be seen in an astrological context. Whether the mention of these fish has something to do with an anticipation of the eucharist is unclear to me.

In the parable of the net, I would guess that Matthew is drawing on the traditional association of fish with death. Once again there is a possible astrological context, since Pisces was viewed as a symbol of the end of an age, as Matthew itself says (Gk. ἐν τῇ συντελείᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος). In Luke's description of Jesus' snack on fish in his resurrected state, the fish is also probably connected to death. And, in fact, the term for broiled fish in Luke (Gk. ἰχθὺς ὀπτός) could also be used in regard to the fish that were eaten at gravesites by members of Graeco-Roman funerary societies and that were employed as sacrificial foods offered to chthonic deities. Finally, the fish with a coin its mouth, which was used to pay the Temple tax, in Matt. 17.24-27 not only was derived from folk traditions about valuable treasures miraculously found inside fish, but also from the notion that large bodies of water, and the fish inhabiting them, were associated with supernatural phenomena; anything could happen in water and among the creatures dwelling therein.

These are a few of the salient features of fish symbolism in the Synoptic gospels. Of course, each reference has a whole host of associations that would need to be added. For example, the association of fish with death in later Christian texts often implies the possibility of further life, and that would certainly be applicable in New Testament passages, especially for the parable of the net and Jesus' post-resurrection fish meal. In turn, this combination of death and life finds

expression in astrological symbolism, as well as in the ritual of baptism, which also promises death and life. All of this symbolism was set in the context of water as a magical realm, which in ancient mythic traditions was considered to be geographically situated near the realm of death—the underworld—but at the same time teeming with life.

In general, fish and fishing imagery in early Christianity condensed in one symbolic complex all the dimensions of life and all the tensions and contradictions inherent in the birth and growth of this new religious movement.