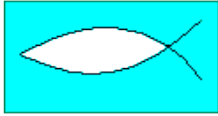


# The Ichthys

## The Meaning Of The Fish Symbol Used By Christians

(Researched by Donald E Koehler)

Historically one of the first symbols used by Christians to identify themselves to others was the fish. There is a literary reference made to the fish by Clement of Alexandria, born around 150 AD, that recommended his readers have their seals engraved with a dove or a fish.



Christians had been using the symbolic fish long before Clement of Alexandria was born in such Roman monuments as the Capella Greca and the Sacrament Chapels of the catacomb of St. Callistus. The fish symbolized the baptismal waters, the loaves and fishes, and Jesus' own declaration to the disciples to become "fishers of men". **See Matthew 4:19.**

The Greek work for fish, **Ichthys**, is a Christian acrostic which briefly but clearly described the character of Christ and His claim to the worship of believers: *Iesous Christos THEou hYios Soter*, i.e. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.



It is possible this Christian acrostic originated in Alexandria and was intended as a protest against the pagan coin from Alexandria, during the reign of Domitian (81-96), that was inscribed Theou hYios (Son of God).

The fish (Ichthys) held a meaning of high significance for the Christians. It was a brief profession of faith in the divinity of Christ -- that He was the Redeemer of mankind. Tertullian referred to believers in this way, "we, little fishes, after the image of our Ichthys, Jesus Christ, are born in the water".

The fish symbol was frequently found associated with such other symbols as the dove, the anchor, and the monogram of Christ. The monuments, too, on which it appears, from the first to the fourth century, include frescoes, sculptured representations, rings, seals, gilded glasses, as well as enkolpia of various materials. The type of fish depicted calls for no special observation, save that, from the second century, the form of the dolphin was frequently employed. The reason for this particular selection is presumed to be the dolphin was regarded as friendly to man.

A considerable number of objects containing the fish-symbol are preserved in various European museums, one of the most interesting, because of the grouping of the fish with several other symbols, being a carved gem in the Kircherian Museum in Rome. On the left is a T-form anchor, with two fishes beneath the crossbar, while next in order are a T-form cross with a dove on the crossbar and a sheep at the foot, another T-cross as the mast of a ship, and the good shepherd carrying on His shoulders the strayed sheep. In addition to these symbols the five letters of the word Ichthus are distributed round the border.

Another ancient carved gem represents a ship supported by a fish, with doves perched on the mast and stern, and Christ on the waters rescuing St. Peter.

After the fourth century the symbolism of the fish gradually disappeared; representations of fishes on baptismal fonts and on bronze baptismal cups like those found at Rome and Trier, now in the

Kircherian Museum, are merely of an ornamental character, suggested, probably by the water used in baptism.

## **Something Fishy**

References to fish in the Bible are:

### *Their Creation*

"Then God said, Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens. God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." **Genesis 1:20-22**

### *Their Purpose*

"The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything." **Genesis 9:2,3**

### *Determination of Clean or Unclean*

"Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams, you may eat any that have fins and scales. But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins and scales -- whether among all the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water--you are to detest. And since you are to detest them, you must not eat their meat and you must detest their carcasses. Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be detestable to you." **Leviticus 11:9-12**

"Of all the creatures living in the water, you may eat any that has fins and scales. But anything that does not have fins and scales you may not eat; for you it is unclean." **Deuteronomy 14:9,10**

### *Fishing Expeditions that Snare the Soul*

"Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them." **Ecclesiastes 9:12**

"You have made men like fish in the sea, like sea creatures that have no ruler. The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?" **Habakkuk 1:14-17**

## **Tall Fish Tales that are True!**

"He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to

Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break." **Luke 5:2-6**

"He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards." **John 21:6-8**

#### *Warnings by the Lord*

"The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks." **Amos 4:2**

#### *Miraculous Fish Events*

"But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours." **Matthew 17:27**

"But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights." **Jonah 1:17**

"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." **Matthew 12:40**

"And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people." **Matthew 14:19**

"Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people." **Matthew 15:36**

"When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break." **Luke 5:6**

"He replied, "You give them something to eat." They answered, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish--unless we go and buy food for all this crowd." (About five thousand men were there.) But he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." The disciples did so, and everybody sat down. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to set before the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over." **Luke 9:13-17**

