Fish Symbolism

by S. H. Hooke

This brief sketch of the history of one element in the vast vocabulary of symbolism is offered in respectful and affectionate homage to a great scholar. The offering may be regarded as having a certain appropriateness, since the fish in one of its aspects is a symbol of immortality, and Dr Margaret Murray would seem to have discovered the secret of immortality. Fifty years ago I had the privilege and pleasure of learning from Dr Murray the first rudiments of Egyptology, and she still goes on dispensing to students the treasures of her rich and varied scholarship.

Beginning with Egypt, as is fitting, we find that the sacred oxyrhynchus fish devoured the phallus of Osiris, according to various forms of the Osiris myth. This implication of the fish as a symbol of the divine source of life is developed in the Hellenistic period as appears from a tomb painting from Gamboud,¹ in which the mummy, lying on a lion bed is gazing at an oxyrhynchus fish above him. Here the sacred fish replaces the usual Ka bird symbol, indicating the hope of immortality. Egyptian priests were forbidden to eat fish at all, although fish-eating was obligatory for the laity on certain days of the month.

Fish symbolism in Mesopotamia appears in various forms. Berosus preserves the ancient Sumerian tradition that the earliest kings before the Flood, headed by Oannes, came up out of the Red Sea in fish-like form, bringing the earliest civilization with them. On the well-known Lamashtu tablet, apotropaic in significance, two priests are represented in fish-masks standing by the bed of a sick person, warding off the attacks of Lamashtu and her attendant evil demons. One of the forms assumed by Ea, the god of magic and friend of mankind, was the goat-fish. A different and very important aspect of Mesopotamian fish-symbolism is the mythical sea-monster Tiamat, vanquished by Marduck, and reappearing in Ugaritic mythology as the Hydra Lotan, slain by Baal, and as

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Leviathan of Hebrew mythology, slain by Yahweh. Leviathan acquired an eschatological significance in later Rabbinical speculation and became the fish-course in the Messianic banquet enjoyed by the righteous in the Messianic age. In ritual scenes depicted on various cylinder seals, we frequently find a fish accompanied by a rhomb or lozenge; the latter element is usually interpreted by archaeologists as representing the female vulva. Hence the fertility aspect of the fish symbol is here strongly emphasized.

Mrs Van Buren has collected the Mesopotamian material relating to fish symbolism, and suggests that the fish, as coming from the sea, is connected with the underworld, and has chthonic associations. She also suggests, however, that in very early times they symbolized life, and that the later conception of re-birth caused them to be used in funerary rites. On some Mesopotamian seals birds are depicted as eating or attempting to eat the fish, and in this connexion Professor Erwin Goodenough, to whose monumental work on Jewish symbols in the Greco-Roman world this article is largely indebted, has made the interesting comment, 'This conception of the destruction of life as itself a hope of life is a paradox which we shall see constantly recurring with other symbols, to the point that it is the dead Saviour on the cross which is the most hopeful symbol of life in our civilization. And our hope of life is symbolized as we, like the ancient birds and the people at the banquets, eat the life symbol in the torn flesh of the murdered saviour.'

Early Hebrew tradition evidently regarded Dagon, the Philistine god who was so humiliatingly shattered by the presence of Israel's sacred ark, as a fish-god. But it is now generally recognized that Dagon is the Mesopotamian god Dagan, a corn-god, never represented in fish form. Nevertheless Syria had its fish-goddess, Atargatis, whose priests offered fish daily on her altars, and the evidence would seem to indicate that fish was a ritual food of the priests, but was tabu to the layman. An aetiological legend explaining the fish tabu related that Atargatis was born from an egg brought up from the Euphrates by a fish and hatched by a dove; hence fish was not eaten as food. The legend also points to the

2 E. Goodenough, op. cit., fig. 16.
4 E. Goodenough, op. cit., p. 16.
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diffusion of the fish symbolism from Mesopotamia to Syria and Phoenicia.

In Greece the dolphin, though not a fish but a mammal, became the centre of piscine myth and symbolism. It was associated both with Dionysus and Apollo. There is rich symbolism in the well-known legend of the kidnapping of the young Dionysus by Tyrrhenian pirates; the god changed the pirates into dolphins, and the mast and rigging of the ship into a vine with clusters of grapes. Eisler suggested that in the orgiastic rites of the Maenads a fish might have been torn in pieces and devoured; but his evidence does not seem convincing on this point. The dolphin is also closely associated with Eros and Aphrodite. Indeed the dolphin is associated with so many gods that, as Professor Goodenough has said, it is clearly a symbol in its own right and is 'an excellent example of the vocabulary of the symbolic lingua franca of the period'.

Underlying the various dolphin legends is the symbolism of the saviour-god, the psychopomp, carrying souls to immortality. This is borne out by the frequent use of the dolphin as a symbol on Jewish and Christian graves.

In early rabbinical teaching we find that the fish has become a symbol of the pious swimming in the waters of Torah, and it would seem most probable that Tertullian must have had Jewish symbolism in mind when he compared Christians to little fish swimming in the waters of baptism. But fish symbolism reached its climax in the early Christian use of the fish as a symbol of Christ. It is not clear whether the fact that the letters of the Greek word for fish form an acrostic of the initials of Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour, gave rise to the symbol. It is more probable that the symbol came first, and that the acrostic was an afterthought.

The main reason, however, for the use of the fish as a symbol of Christ lay in the Eucharistic significance of fish as associated with bread as the food of the faithful at the Eucharist. This transformation of the symbol begins with the eucharistic interpretation of the feeding of the five thousand, an interpretation which is as early as the Fourth Gospel. In various representations of the Last Supper in early Christian art, bread and fish are depicted on the table, where fish takes the place of wine as one of the two elements in the Eucharist.

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In Jewish apocalyptic and in later rabbinic speculation the great fish Leviathan, originally a symbol of destruction and hostility, has become the food of the faithful at the Messianic banquet in the age to come.