REVISITING THE ICHTHYS:
A SUGGESTION CONCERNING THE ORIGINS OF
CHRISTOLOGICAL FISH SYMBOLISM

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The symbol of Christ as a fish first appears in the extant Christian literature and material culture in the second half of the second century. Apart from the famous acronym/acrostic from the initial letters of Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτήρ (“Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior”), yielding the Greek word for fish, ἸΧΘΥϹ, the symbol appears especially in Eucharistic and baptismal contexts. In addition, one finds numerous pictorial representations of fish in the material culture, although it is often difficult to decide whether one is then dealing with an actual Christological symbol or not—fish can also stand for Christians or for food, or function as a mere decorative element. However, the Christological fish symbol itself is well attested by the end of the second century, and becomes extremely popular in the course of the third and fourth centuries, involving a complex network of meanings.

Much has been written concerning the origins of this fascinating symbolism. Direct pagan and Jewish influence have been suggested, and theories

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1 As Laurence Kant observes, “[I]t is helpful to note the distinction between the terms acronym and acrostic—terms which many scholars have used synonymously. An acronym, however, generally refers to a word that is formed from the initial letters of the successive parts of a compound phrase. On the other hand, an acrostic generally refers to a composition, where the initial letters of successive lines or verses form a word or a series of words.” (emphasis added). Laurence Harold Kant, “The Interpretation of Religious Symbols in the Graeco-Roman World: A Case Study of Early Christian Fish Symbolism” (3 vols.; PhD. diss., Yale University, 1993), 493.

2 With a few exceptions, I use the open/lunate sigma (Ϲ) in this essay because it is more common than the “four-bar” sigma (Σ) on early Christian artifacts that spell out the word, ἸΧΘΥϹ—early Christian manuscripts also commonly use the open/lunate sigma. See, e.g., Franz Joseph Dölger, Ichthys (5 vols.; 2d ed.; Münster: Aschendorff’sche Verl., 1928–1957; repr., Oberhausen: Metzler, 1999); and Larry Hurtado, The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

3 Thus Kant, “Religious Symbols.”
of Christian origin range from proposing the original catalyst to have been either the acronym itself, or the idea of the Eucharistic or baptismal fish, or several factors in various combinations. No clear consensus has been reached on the question, and recent scholarship has rightly stressed the multivalent nature of the symbolism, as opposed to simplistic solutions of previous studies that usually claimed one meaning and one origin for the symbol. Such solutions, once popular, include the fish as a secret symbol for persecuted Christians or as a symbol for Christ mystically sacrificed in the Eucharist. Thus, this book in honor of Professor Einar Thomassen, exploring aspects of secrecy and mysticism, offers an excellent context for discussing the origins and meaning of the early Christian fish symbolism. In fact, I would here like to suggest a new solution to this crux in early Christian studies. In what follows, after having discussed the main sources and previous solutions proposed, I will attempt to show how one specific invention may have acted as an important catalyst in the early development of the symbolism. This then led to a veritable explosion in the use of the image in early Christianity, allowing for the huge potential, present in pagan, Jewish and New Testament stories and traditions about fish, to be exploited.

The main passages from early Christian literature that deal with the Christological fish, have already been collected by Achelis and Morey (even earlier, Pitra had collected all early Christian passages dealing with a symbolic fish—recently, Kant has updated these collections), and I will summarize and analyze the evidence below. The material evidence has been collected and thoroughly discussed by Dölger, and only a few items can be added to his corpus. The relevant Jewish fish imagery, for its part, has been dealt with especially by Schetlawitz and Goodenough, and

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4 Kant, "Religious Symbols."
5 Hans Achelis, *Das Symbol des Fisches und die Fischdenkmäler der römischen Katakomben* (Marburg: Elwert, 1888), 6–54 (also includes inscriptions).
8 Kant "Religious Symbols,” 652–751.
9 Dölger, *Ichthys*.
10 E.g., the possibly Christian fish graffito from the Vatican necropolis (see below). See also Josef Engemann, "Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang," RAC 7: 959–1097.