

The Meaning of the Acrostic ICTHUS (ἰχθύς) Fish

The association of the symbol of the fish with Jesus Christ has a long and intriguing history. It appears in the art of the oldest Christian catacombs which would have the symbol appearing as early as the 2nd or 3rd . Century (AD and CE). At the center of the Christian Faith is the astounding confession that Jesus Christ is God’s Son and the Savior of the world. The confession when shortened to the phrase, “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior” and when written in Greek, the universal language of the known world at the time of the New Testament, becomes: Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ. The first letter of each Greek word in this phrase spells the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ pronounced “**ICTHUS**” which is the Greek word for “**Fish.**” Prior to the Roman Emperor Constantine’s conversion to the Christian Faith in 312 (AD & CE) and his subsequent declaration of Christianity as the “official religion” of the Empire, the Christian Faith was viewed with scorn, derision, suspicion and as a subversive threat to the Roman Empire. Also prior to Constantine’s conversion and decree, Christians were often persecuted. Consequently, the symbol of the Fish not only summarized the heart of the Christian Faith but, in a time of persecution, it also served as a convenient way for fellow Christians to subtly identify themselves in public by discretely making the simple sign of the “fish” in the sand. The chart below shows the way the acrostic is constructed. Listed is the name of Greek letters that are used in the acrostic, the upper and lower cases of the Greek letters, the Greek words that comprise the acrostic, the English translation and the acrostic included in a simple outline of a fish.

(iota) I ἰ Ἰησοῦς (Jesus)

(Chi) X χ Χριστός (Christ)

(Theta) Θ θ Θεός (God’s)

(Upsilon) Υ υ Υἱός (Son)

(Sigma) Σ ς Σωτήρ (Savior)



Sources

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