

# *The Bread and Fish Eucharist*

*In the Gospels and Early Christian Art*

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The fish is an ancient and enduring symbol in Christendom. It commonly appears on placards and bumper-stickers, generally with the word **ΙΧΘΥΣ** inscribed redundantly, and in churches, on banners and altar cloths. A border of fishes adorns the cover design for the volumes in the *Library of Christian Classics*. In Stamford, Connecticut, a whole Church building is designed in the shape of a fish. And why not? The fish antedates the cross as a Christian symbol, and no one is surprised to find cruciform churches.

When did the fish symbol first appear, and what did it mean to those who first gave it currency? The oft-repeated explanation is that it represented, acrostically, the Christological formula,<sup>1</sup> **ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ ΥΙΟΣ ΣΩΤΗΡ** : "Jesus Christ God's Son, Saviour." The implication is that one day a clever Christian, while repeating or reflecting upon the familiar formula, noticed that the first letters of each of its terms spelled the word **ΙΧΘΥΣ** , fish, after which he or someone else started drawing fish to represent the formula. The defects of this theory are too many to enumerate here.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt

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<sup>1</sup>Among them is the fact that the earliest known instance of the acrostic, in *Sibylline Oracles* 8:217-250, can scarcely be dated

that in time, probably by the third century, the acrostic was coming into use. But it also seems clear that the fish *symbol* preceded the acrostic formula.

All four gospels report that Jesus fed a multitude of 5,000 or so persons with five loaves and two fish. Also important in this connection are the reports of Mark 8 and Matthew 15 concerning his feeding of 4,000 with seven loaves and "a few fish," and the breakfast of bread and fish given to the seven disciples at John 21: 9-14.

Paintings on the walls of the earliest Christian catacombs in Rome, dating from slightly before 200 A. D., characteristically depict seven or eleven male figures, presumably apostles, seated at table, about to partake of two fish and five loaves.<sup>2</sup> Often twelve or seven baskets of fragments are represented in the foreground of these scenes. Whether these pictures were meant simply to commemorate episodes in the gospels, or were meant to represent the eucharist, or, perhaps, the blessed life at table in the messianic age, is not certain.<sup>3</sup> One or

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before 300 A. D., while Christian fish symbols may date from the middle of the second century. Moreover, in its earliest representations in Christian art, the fish typically is not alone, but in pairs, accompanied by either an anchor (if it is an anchor) or loaves (usually five) of bread. *Two* fish would not be necessary to represent the acrostic. The explanation that two fish are portrayed in the interest of symmetry is not persuasive.

<sup>2</sup>In the Callistus catacomb, for instance, the famous scene in the "Chapel of the Sacraments" which shows seven figures seated behind a cushion roll, with two platters, each holding a fish. In the same catacomb, chamber A5, a fresco with seven figures and a platter containing two fish (F. van der Meer, *Early Christian Art* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), plate 29b). Also the celebrated "Fractio panis" with its bright orange colors in the "Greek Chapel" of the Priscilla catacomb.

<sup>3</sup>Several scholars consider these scenes to represent the eucharist: e. g., Charles R. Morey, "The Origin of the Fish Symbol," *Princeton Theological Review*, VIII (1910), 432; Walter Elliger, *Zur Entstehung und frühen Entwicklung der altchristlichen Bildkunst*, Vol. II of *Die Stellung der alten Christen zu den Bildern*

both of the latter possibilities is likely, for the scene seems to have been of special importance, judging from its re-iteration. Also its association with the earliest known places of Christian burial would suggest that it somehow provided assurance of hope for the future of the living and the dead. Had not Jesus told his disciples that they would come and sit at table together in the Kingdom of God? The prospect of such a re-union appears also in Jesus' words to his followers at the Last Supper in the synoptic gospels, while the meal of bread and fish in John 21 may have been understood by that evangelist as an at least partial fulfillment of such hope.<sup>4</sup>

The appearance of fish symbols scratched or engraved on early Christian tombs and sarcophagi likewise suggests the sense of hope for the future life of the deceased, if not for re-union in the resurrection or coming age. The earliest Christian symbol, the anchor, evidently had such a meaning: it appears accompanied by such inscriptions as *spes* and *ἐλπίς*, and by the almost equally early symbol, two fish.<sup>5</sup> Two fish also

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*in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1934), pp. 81-82; Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 386.

<sup>4</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier calls attention to the "epiphanic" character of this and certain other meals reported in the early Christian writings, such as Luke 24:35 (also 24:42); Acts 10:40f.; Mark 16:14a; Revelation 3:20; *Gospel of the Hebrews* 7. The risen Jesus, he observes, is re-united with his followers *at table*: "The Origin and Function of the pre-Markan Miracle Catenae," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXIX (1970), 265-91. On the "epiphanic" character of early Christian, especially Johannine, cultic worship, see David E. Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), esp. pp. 45-135.

<sup>5</sup> For example, on a marble gravestone from the Priscilla catacomb, second level, an anchor with two fish, parallel, above and below the main shaft of the anchor. See Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, *Dictionnaire D'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1924) I: 2, col. 2017, fig. 571. Also, from the Domitilla catacomb, two fish, facing each other, with their mouths touching the flanges of a vertical anchor between them, in a

appear accompanied often by five loaves of bread, in these early Christian funerary carvings and inscriptions.<sup>6</sup> Bread and fish are also represented, if less commonly, in later basilica art (for example, the famous mosaic of the Last Supper in St. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna) and even in renaissance representations of the Last Supper (most notably, in Leonardo da Vinci's classic painting which exhibits a platter with, perhaps, seven fish on the left side of the table).

The balance of probability seems to lie in favor of the conclusion that some early Christians understood the fish in connection with the eucharist, and the eucharist in connection with the hope for resurrection or immortality and life in the messianic age. It has been suggested that Christians may have eaten eucharistic meals in the catacombs in the presence of these paintings and the remains of their loved-ones, looking for re-union with them, or possibly hoping thereby to infuse the deceased, vicariously, with the eucharistic *pharmakon athanasias*.<sup>7</sup> This is quite possible. However, there is no definite evidence that early Christians ate fish as eucharistic food, though there may be some suggestions of such practice (for instance, the Abercius inscription, cited below). The fact remains that these early paintings and engravings evidently representing the eucharist do not portray bread and wine; in

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manner suggesting contact with a double fish-hook (Cabrol I:2, fig. 557). The tombstone of Licinia Amiata, found in the Vatican hill, shows two fish, facing each other with a diagonal anchor or hook between them, and the words  $\text{IX}\Theta\Upsilon\text{ Z}\Omega\text{NT}\Omega\text{N}$  above them, and above that a laurel wreath and the initials D M (Cabrol I:2, fig. 570; see also fig. 569).

<sup>6</sup>For example, an engraving with five loaves over two fish which are parallel, one above the other, from Italy, perhaps Rome (Cabrol VII:2, col. 2028, fig. 6063); and the inscription "SYNTROPHION" over a row of five loaves between two fish, facing each other, from Modene, Italy. The inscription means, perhaps "intimate friend," but more literally, one who has been table companion. (Cabrol VII:2, fig. 6061).

<sup>7</sup>Thus Elliger, *Entstehung*, p. 82; E. R. Goodenough, "John, a

fact, wine appears only rarely. Instead the basic eucharistic elements are bread and fish, typically five loaves and two fish, accompanied in the catacomb paintings by twelve or seven baskets in front of a table at which seven or eleven figures are seated.

### Bread and Fish In the Gospels

The eucharistic conception of bread and fish seems to have been characteristic of second century catacomb art in Rome. But does the eucharistic interpretation of the feedings of the 5,000 and 4,000 date back into the first century? Did the evangelists so understand the meals? And was this conception already present in their sources? Several scholars recently have argued persuasively that the answer to these latter questions is yes: most notably, B. van Iersel,<sup>8</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier,<sup>9</sup> and J. M. van Cangh, O. P.<sup>10</sup>

Earlier, G. H. Boobyer had argued against a similar interpretation which had been advanced by A. Schweitzer and B. W. Bacon, urging that Mark regarded the feedings of the 5,000 and 4,000 as repetitions by Jesus of the mighty works of God from the time of Moses and as having messianic, but not eucharistic significance. Mark 6 and 8 together, Boobyer proposed, indicate that Mark meant to show that "Jesus had come to feed not only Jews, but also Gentiles: there was enough of God's bread for all."<sup>11</sup> Now it is very likely that Mark did

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Primitive Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXIV (1945), 172; Finegan, *Light*, pp. 365, 370, 385f.

<sup>8</sup> "Die wunderbare Speisung und das Abendmahl in der synoptischen Tradition," *Novum Testamentum*, VII (1964), 167-94. See also D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of Mark* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Achtemeier, "Origin," pp. 265-91.

<sup>10</sup> "Le Thème des poissons dans les récits évangéliques de la multiplication des pains," *Revue Biblique*, LXXVIII (1971), 71-83.

<sup>11</sup> "The Eucharistic Interpretation of the Miracle of the Loaves in

understand the two meals to represent the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the coming Kingdom. The number of baskets containing fragments, twelve and seven, suggests, respectively, Jews and Gentiles.<sup>12</sup> But such an emphasis

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St. Mark's Gospel," *Journal of Theological Studies*, III (1952), 161-71.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Luke who reports only one meal but two missions, respectively, of the Twelve to Israel and of the seventy (or seventy-two) symbolizing, evidently, the gentile world. Luke also reports that seven men, all with Greek names, were appointed to "serve tables" in response to "murmuring" by gentile Christians that their widows were being neglected "in the daily distribution" (Acts 6: 1-6). Walter Schmithals comments, "The seven deacons, obviously all Hellenists, have nothing special to do with the relief of the poor. . . . We must consider the seven to be the leaders of the Hellenistic section of the church." *Paul and James*, SBT no. 46, Naperville: Allenson, 1965, p. 17). As such they would have presided at the distribution of the eucharistic elements. We may infer perhaps, that the "tables" they were to serve referred to "the Lord's table," i. e., the eucharist. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:21 which refers to partaking "of the table of the Lord" and *Didache* 11:9 where "table" may signify the messianic banquet.) We learn from Acts 2:46 that the Jerusalem church "broke bread" daily. The "daily distribution" (ἡ διακονία ἡ καθημερινή) referred to in Acts 6:1 may well have included the Eucharist. (Cf. also Luke 11:3; "Give us daily, καθ' ἡμέραν, our bread for tomorrow.") In these early years, as we learn from Paul, the eucharist was not always separated from a more substantial meal in which the hungry were indeed fed (1 Corinthians 11:20ff.). Moreover, in the Jerusalem church all things were being held and shared in common. The daily "breaking of bread" would have been both a eucharistic meal and an occasion when the poor in the congregation were fed. More was intended in the selection of the seven than that they should become waiters at widows' tables. For this they would not have needed to be ordained formally by the Twelve with the laying on of the apostolic hands. It was understood that the Twelve had been authorized to distribute the eucharistic food (Mark 6, 8 and parallels). Now the seven were authorized to do the same for gentile Christians. That all this is not more clearly stated in Acts is

does not exclude the eucharistic character of the meals; instead, it would seem to presuppose a eucharistic understanding of these occasions. (For Mark, clearly, whatever modern historical and literary critics may think, there were two meals.) What Jesus was distributing was eschatological food, conveying assurance of participation in, if not sacramentally sealing the recipients for, the life to come of the coming Kingdom of God. The meal was a foretaste of the messianic banquet, at which many would come from East and West, North and South, to sit at table.<sup>13</sup>

Careful study of the gospel traditions respecting the meals shows that two developments were taking place simultaneously, as the traditions were retold and revised. On the one hand, there was a progressive subordination of the fish motif; on the other, an accentuation of the eucharistic character of the scenes.

1. *The subordination of the fish motif.* The account in Mark 6: 30-44 mentions fish five times,<sup>14</sup> and observes that the twelve baskets included remains of both bread and fish. Matthew and Luke alike omit two of these references to fish in their parallels to these verses. In the second meal story, the feeding

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probably due to Luke's desire to emphasize the aboriginal unity of seven disciples who breakfast on bread and fish which Jesus gives them in John 21 were also meant to represent gentile Christianity cannot be determined, though in view of the recurrent use of symbolism and allegory in this gospel the possibility may be considered. In any event, Mark's understanding of the seven baskets in chapter 8 appears to parallel Luke's understanding of the meaning of the mission of the seventy and the appointment of the seven. See also Charles W. F. Smith, "Fishers of Men" *Harvard Theological Review*, LII (1959), esp. 198f.

<sup>13</sup>Matthew 8:11 Luke 13:29; Cf. *Didache* 9:4; 10:5. See Nineham *Mark*, p. 178 and R. H. Hiers, *The Historical Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (University of Florida Press, 1973), pp. 64-70. Jewish expectations concerning such a meal are evidenced, e. g., in Isaiah 25:6-8; *Syriac Baruch* 29, and *1 Enoch* 62:14.

<sup>14</sup>Respectively, in vv. 38, 41a, 41b, and 43.

of the 4,000, Mark himself mentions fish only once (8:7).<sup>15</sup> Here, as in the parallels, the baskets contain "broken pieces" (κλάσματα), presumably of bread only.<sup>16</sup> It is not completely clear, in either the Matthean or Lukan parallels, whether the evangelists understood that fish were also distributed to the crowds: in both Luke 9:16 and Matthew 15:36, it is reported that Jesus took the loaves and the fish, "broke" and "gave" to his disciples, who distributed to the crowd. Presumably it was meant that the fish were "broken" and given along with the bread, even though this procedure and the description of it may be somewhat awkward.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the omission of a separate act of dividing the fish (as in Mark 6:41b and 8:7) derives from the later evangelists' desire to condense the details of the narrative.<sup>18</sup> But the version at Matthew 14:19 does seem intentionally to omit reference to any division and distribution of fish. From these later accounts the reader might suppose that although Jesus had initially taken both fish and loaves, after giving thanks he only broke and gave the loaves.

The subordination of the fish motif reaches its final stage in Mark's report of Jesus' subsequent discussion of the feedings

<sup>15</sup> Matthew here refers to them twice, at 15:34 and 36.

<sup>16</sup> See also Mark 8:19f.; Matthew 16:9f.; *Didache* 9:4.

<sup>17</sup> If, as may have been the case, the fish were "processed," i. e., salted and dried, "breaking" them would have been a more manageable, though still probably unusual, procedure. See below, footnote 49.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. van Cangh's theory of a separate fish meal ("Le theme," p. 72), which is proposed also by van Iersel ("Speisung," p. 176). The only "fish meal" in the gospels, however, is that eaten by Jesus himself at Luke 24:1f. But here it seems that an anti-docetic interest predominates. Moreover, implicitly the disciples have also eaten or were about to do so: two of them had, somewhat earlier, eaten bread at table in Jesus' presence, bread which he himself had taken, blessed, broken and given them, clearly a eucharistic proceeding (Luke 24:30ff.).



with his still uncomprehending disciples in 8: 14-21. Here only the breaking and distribution of the loaves is recalled; fish are not mentioned. It would seem that Mark himself de-emphasized the importance of fish in his account of the second meal (chapter 8): in his report of Jesus' later discussion with the disciples where only bread is mentioned, interest is directed to the *number* of baskets of left-over fragments. Our proposal here is contrary to Professor Achtemeier's suggestion that Mark tried to call attention to the fish in order to de-emphasize the eschatological character of the meal.<sup>19</sup>

From these observations it would appear that the synoptic evangelists found the references to fish unintelligible, unimportant, or — perhaps — even objectionable, and so attempted to reduce if not eliminate their prominence in these stories. We shall also see that the evangelists also tended to emphasize the eucharistic features of the two meals. From their standpoint it may have been thought that fish were out of place at a eucharistic meal. That fish may have been a peculiarly appropriate food for a eucharistic meal does not seem to have been their view. But that fish were distributed and eaten seems firmly embedded in the earliest accounts of the two meals.

Whether the process of subordination had begun in pre-Markan times, we cannot tell. But if Mark 6 gives the earliest version, it is clear that fish was at least as important as bread in the meal tradition as it came to Mark.<sup>20</sup> But that Mark himself regarded the fish as having any particular meaning

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<sup>19</sup>For Mark the number of baskets full of broken pieces is the main focus; it is the significance of the numbers that the disciples "do not yet understand." (See above, footnote 12.) Matthew's version represents a further process of interpretation or spiritualization; Jesus "did not speak about bread" and what the disciples were supposed to understand was that they were to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16: 5-12).

<sup>20</sup>Thus also van Canghai, "Le thème," p. 72. He does not, however, consider the eschatological importance of the meal or of the fish.

does not seem likely, in light of his subsequent subordination of the same in chapter 8. This consideration, as well as others, militates against van Iersel's proposal that Mark 6:41b and 8:7 are Markan interpolations. His proposal that these verses report "a special meal consisting of fish" seems unnecessary. The separate procedures with respect to bread and fish explain themselves grammatically: fish are not readily "broken," but must be divided, so that a separate verb and clause are needed to state the matter properly.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, van Iersel's theory does not really explain the presence of the fish at the meal in Mark 6, since he concedes that references to fish at 6:38 and 41a are part of the original narrative.

John 6 also reports that Jesus fed (about) 5,000 with five (barley) loaves and two fish: both loaves and fish were distributed, by Jesus himself, and eaten by the crowd (6:11f.) Afterward, however, the twelve baskets were filled only with fragments from the loaves, with no mention of fish, in line with the implicit absence of fish from the baskets of fragments in the Matthean and Lukan versions. The subsequent eucharistic and Christological discourses in John 6 refer, explicitly, only to bread; implicitly, perhaps, to wine (6:53-56),<sup>22</sup> but not at all to fish. Nevertheless, in John 21 the risen Jesus invites the seven disciples to have breakfast: he "came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish."<sup>23</sup>

2. *The accentuation of the eucharistic character of the feedings.* In the gospels' descriptions of the feeding narratives

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Matthew 15:36 and Luke 9:16 which say that Jesus took and *broke* both bread and fish. John 6:11 does not refer to "breaking" but seems to describe two distributions: first bread and then fish.

<sup>22</sup> That the references to drinking Jesus' blood may be a later sacramentalizing interpolation is suggested by the fact that drinking is not mentioned elsewhere in the chapter. Cf. the singular reference to water (baptism) at John 3:5 which probably is an interpolation (cf. 3:3).

<sup>23</sup> The latter phrase, καὶ τὸ ὀψάριον ὁμοίως, clearly echoes the statement in John 6:11, ὁμοίως καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὀψαρίων.

one observes several features suggestive of the eucharistic procedures later practiced by the church: the solemnity of the occasion (cf. 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34), the seating of the congregation, praying over the "elements," breaking bread and distributing through the Twelve to the seated assembly. Moreover, various of the terms used in describing the procedures are equivalent to, if not identical with, terms used in descriptions of the Last Supper and other eucharistic meals, such as those indicated in Luke 24, Acts 27, John 21, 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, and *Didache* 9 and 10. What is especially interesting is the fact that the later gospel accounts of the feedings of the 5,000 and 4,000 employ more of the specific terms used in the descriptions of the Last Supper and other eucharistic meals, thereby, whether intentionally or otherwise, stressing the eucharistic character of the two earlier occasions. When all of these traditions about meals are compared a number of observations can be made.

In the first place, five actions appear commonly in the course of the meals: the people sit and someone takes, blesses (or gives thanks), breaks and gives. Various Greek verbs and verb forms are used to represent these actions. Taking Mark 6 as the earliest version of the feeding of the multitude we find that except for Luke (which basically repeats Mark 6) the later gospel versions of the meal borrow terms and/or forms from the descriptions of the Last Supper in connection with all five reported actions:

a) Instead of ἀνακλίνειν, Mark 8, Matthew 15 and John 6 use the verb ἀναπείσειν which appears in Luke's description of the Last Supper. Moreover, John 6 also uses the term ἀνάκειμαι, which is used in all three synoptic reports of the disciples' reclining at table at the Last supper.

b) Instead of the form λαβών, Matthew 15 and John 6 use the aorist, ἔλαβεν, which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 11. The form λαβών, however, is also used in the synoptic reports of the Last Supper and in the

meal traditions in Luke 24 and Acts 27.

c) Instead of εὐλογεῖν (as at Mark 6 and parallels) Mark 8, Matthew 15 and John 6 give the verb εὐχαριστεῖν, which appears also in Luke 22, 1 Corinthians 11, and John 21 (D). See however, 1 Corinthians 10:εὐλογοῦμεν.

d) Instead of κατέκλασεν the verb appears without prefix in Mark 8 and Matthew 15, as is the case also in Mark 14 and parallels and in 1 Corinthians 11.

e) Instead of the imperfect form ἔδιδου the aorist ἔδωκεν is used at Matthew 14 and John 6, as at Mark 14, Luke 22 and John 21 (D). <sup>24</sup>

It could be, of course, that the terms and forms used in the accounts of the Last Supper were derived from those used in reporting the bread and fish meals, especially as described in Mark 8, Matthew 15 and John 6. If so, one would have to conclude that the versions we have of Jesus' procedure at the Last Supper were really based upon these traditions about his feeding of the multitudes with bread and fish. It would still need to be explained why the version at Mark 6 and its Lukan parallel do not so much reflect the eucharistic terminology used elsewhere. It might also be possible that both the descriptions of the feeding of the multitudes and the accounts of the Last Supper derive from a third or common source, perhaps the incipient eucharistic practices of the early if not Apostolic church. But in that case it would be a question whence these practices derived, if not from the tradition as to Jesus' activities as we have them preserved in the several gospel versions.

It seems most plausible to understand the versions of the bread and fish meal in Mark 8, Matthew 14, 15 and John 6 as somewhat later than those in Mark 6 and Luke 9, and to conclude that they have been revised, consciously perhaps, by incorporation or substitution of various terms and forms familiar in the churches' traditions concerning the Last Supper and, as it came to be practiced in the churches, the eucharist. Mark 6

<sup>24</sup> See also Matthew 14 and 1 Corinthians 10; also Mark 8:19, Luke 24:30, and Acts 27:35.

and Luke 9 seem, then, to have been the point of departure for the other accounts of the feedings of the multitudes, which are more (John) or less (Matthew 14) influenced by the Last Supper-eucharist reports.

A second kind of observation is this. In the accounts of the Last Supper, after Jesus breaks and gives the bread, he also takes, gives thanks and gives the cup<sup>25</sup> to the Twelve. In Mark 6 and 8 — in Mark 8 having “blessed” (εὐλογῆσαθ) them — Jesus distributes the fish to the crowd, presumably through the Twelve. Structurally, in the Markan feedings fish have the same function that wine has in the Last Supper.<sup>26</sup> There, all *drink* of it: *ἔπιον ἐξ αὐτοῦ πάντες*.<sup>27</sup> At the bread and fish meals, all *eat*: *ἔφαγον πάντες*. In either case *all* partake of the consecrated food.<sup>28</sup>

A third observation has to do with the gathering of fragments. In all synoptic versions of the feedings of the crowds the pieces (κλάσματα) are “taken up” (αἱρεῖν) and in John 6 they are “gathered” (συνάγειν). In the reports of the Last Supper there is no reference to fragments, but there is the assurance, if not of “gathering,” at any rate of re-union in the King-

<sup>25</sup> λαβῶν, εὐκαριστήσαθ, ἔδωκεν, Mark 14: Matthew 26.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the bread and fish meal in John 6, after which, in the discourses, wine (“blood”) replaces fish as the co-element with bread and functions with it as eucharistic medicine of immortality (6:53-56). John seems to understand wine eucharistically, but not so fish.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 14:23. Cf. Matthew 26:27, where this description is made into a command.

<sup>28</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 10 and Acts 27:33-38. In the latter, all eat after Paul’s example. If this was not a eucharistic meal it was an occasion for Paul to reassure his fellow-voyagers that they would not perish: vv. 34, 36. Did Paul understand that this meal would somehow mediate eternal life? Conceivably, Luke or his source may have demythologized or historicized this account of what was originally a eucharistic-messianic meal. Cf. *Syriac Baruch* 29:3f. (noted below, footnote 45) which promises that all will eat.

dom of God.<sup>29</sup> An eschatological meaning seems to have informed Mark's understanding of the fragments in both chapters 6 and 8: the twelve and seven baskets apparently represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the seventy gentile nations.<sup>30</sup> Those destined for the Kingdom are also represented by the gathered piece(s) of bread in the eucharist tradition set forth in *Didache* 9:4. Contrary to a common if slightly romantic explanation, the *Didache* reference is very likely *not* "to the sowing of wheat on the hillsides of Judaea," but to the gathering of the fragments left from the feeding of the crowd,<sup>31</sup> symbolized, perhaps, in the church's celebration by a piece of bread in the hand of the officiant.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the prominence of the

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<sup>29</sup>See Mark 14:25 and parallels; also Matthew 25:32 and Matthew 13:30, 47, where the idea of gathering (συνάγειν) the righteous into the Kingdom of God is indicated. The idea of the coming of the faithful into the Kingdom also appears in Matthew 8:11-12 Luke 13:28-30. See also *Didache* 10:5; Matthew 24:31.

<sup>30</sup>Mark 8:19-21. Cf. Luke's missions of the Twelve and Seventy, and his report of the seven gentile "deacons" appointed in Acts to provide for the needs of "the Hellenists" (*supra*, note 12). See also Mark 7:27f.: "bread" is first to be given to Jews and only then to "Greeks." For more in Mark as to the inclusion of gentiles — if only after Jews — see 3:7f.; 5:1-20; 12:1-11; 13:9f.; 14:9. That Mark was writing for gentile Christians is evident, e.g., in 7:1-4. There seems no doubt that Mark was concerned to show (as with Luke) that the new Church, its way and the Kingdom were for gentile believers as well as Jews.

<sup>31</sup>See esp. John 6:3 which tells that the meal of bread and fish took place among "the hills." Cf. Cyril C. Richardson, *et al.*, eds., *Early Christian Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics, Volume 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 175.

<sup>32</sup>See also *Didache* 10:5. Possibly in earlier times the Lord's Prayer was accompanied by the breaking of bread, but by the time of the *Didache* it was institutionalized separately (*Didache* 8:2ff.). Its basic petition was for the coming of the Kingdom of God, thus also for the coming of the days of the messianic meal, "our bread for tomorrow."

baskets of fragments in the early catacomb murals representing the Last Supper or a messianic meal suggests their importance in this connection. Something of the sort also seems implicit in the Johannine account of the feeding of the 5,000 where Jesus afterwards tells the Twelve to gather (συνάγειν) the remaining fragments, *lest any be lost* (6:12).<sup>33</sup> Whether the idea of the "remnant" which God would save underlies the representation of those destined for the Kingdom by "pieces" or "fragments" we cannot tell, but the concept is suggestive. John's use of the verb συνάγειν might connote the synagogue or assembly, i.e., the church, but it is not clear that he intended to suggest this. The church is indicated as the intermediate gathering place for the elect in *Didache* 9:4, and probably also in Matthew (e.g., 13:24-30, 36-43, 47f., where the verb συναγειν is used with reference to the eschatological gathering).

Structurally, then, the gathering of the fragments of bread and fish described in the stories of the feedings of the multitudes parallels the prospective re-union of Jesus with his followers in the Kingdom which is indicated in the traditions about the Last Supper. This may be only a matter of coincidence. But the tendency both in Mark 8 and John 6 is to imply that such a gathering represented not only the eucharist, but also participation in the life to come in the Kingdom of God. The implication in both cases is that those who partook of the "meal" would have a share in that age which was near, if not already at hand.<sup>34</sup>

It seems clear enough: the meal of bread and fish was understood in some connection with the eucharist quite early. The fish, at least in the later synoptic accounts and in John 6, seem to have been something of an embarrassment, and so

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Matthew 18:14. John 6:12, instead of being a misreading of πίετε ἐξ αὐτοῦ πάντες in Matthew 26:27, would seem to underlie the Catholic and Anglican idea that the consecrated elements must all be eaten.

<sup>34</sup> So also W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 178.

were de-emphasized if not eliminated entirely. Yet at the same time, the eucharistic understanding of the meal was increasingly intimated, particularly by the addition or substitution of terms and forms associated with descriptions of the Last Supper and other eucharistic meals. Nevertheless, some eucharistic conception seems to have been present from the very beginning, if in less developed form, as early as the version appearing in Mark 6 and Luke 9.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps there was a still earlier version which contained none of these eucharistic features. But we do not have such a version. In those presented in the gospels, as in the later artistic or graphic representations in catacomb engravings and paintings and in the breakfast described in John 21, the central elements were bread *and fish*.

### The Fish In Jewish Tradition

The obvious question then is: Why fish? There is no problem about bread. In the Kingdom of God, people would eat bread: Blessed are those who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God (Luke 14:15). Give us this day our bread for tomorrow.<sup>36</sup> But did *fish* have any eschatological meaning?

The late Edwin R. Goodenough proposed that in pre- and early Christian times some Jews observed a *cena pura* or special meal in which fish was eaten in anticipation of the

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<sup>35</sup>The similarities even here to Jesus' procedure at the Last Supper are too close to be merely coincidental. Perhaps this earliest version of the feeding of the multitude was already influenced by the church's traditions about the Last Supper. Or, perhaps, Jesus himself acted in a similar fashion on both occasions.

<sup>36</sup>Matthew 6:11 Luke 11:2. (See Hiers, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 68-69). See also in the DSS, *Rule of the Congregation*, col. 2, which describes the way in which the congregation is to partake of bread and wine with the messiah "at the end of days." See also *Syriac Baruch* 29:8, which speaks of the manna which those will eat "who have come to the consummation of time."



messianic banquet in the coming age. The fish, Goodenough suggested, represented the Messiah. That fish had such a meaning to any Jews, however, has not been established. And it must be said that very little by way of evidence supports the theory that a Jewish fish meal was eaten in anticipation of the Messianic Age.<sup>37</sup> But there also can be no doubt that some Jews, particularly those in apocalyptic circles, expected that fish would be the main dish at the Messianic banquet.

The sources for this expectation may go back into Isaiah and Job, if not into the old Babylonian story about the slaying of Tiamat by Marduk.<sup>38</sup> In Isaiah 27:1 the prophet proclaims that "in that day," i.e., in the coming eschatological time or at its outset, Yahweh will punish the two Leviathans and slay the dragon that is in the sea. Whether "punish" means to slay, and whether one, two or three creatures are referred to here is not really clear.<sup>39</sup> The term "fish" is not used here; or, for that matter, in Genesis 1: 20-22. But it seems clear that the term "fish of the sea" in Genesis 1:26 was understood to designate all the sea creatures brought forth on the fifth day. And in early catacomb art the "great fish" that swallowed Jonah is generally depicted as a serpent or sea dragon. In a general sense, at least, Leviathan seems to have been thought of as fish.

Job 41 represents Leviathan as a great sea monster, the prototype, physically, of the medieval Western if not Chinese dragon (especially 41:18-20). Here also there is nothing yet about eating the monster. But there is a suggestion that someone, not Job or any man, but God himself alone, can

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<sup>37</sup> See E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), V, 38-40, 48-53; XII, 100-01. That the fish was understood to represent *the messiah*, however, is not suggested in any of the sources cited by Goodenough.

<sup>38</sup> And or Rahab. See Job 26:12f., and Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> Pope sees this as a reference to Yahweh's future slaying of Leviathan "in the *eschaton*" (*Job*, pp. 329-30).

capture and kill Leviathan and his amphibious fellow-monster, Behemoth (40: 15-24).<sup>40</sup> Another canonical reference to the fate of Leviathan is in Psalm 74:13, 14. Here also the primeval defeat of Chaos or Tiamat is indicated:<sup>41</sup> "Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan, thou didst give him as food for the people<sup>42</sup> of the wilderness." Here the idea of slaying Leviathan for food is stated clearly, but evidently in the *Urzeit* rather than the *Endzeit*.<sup>43</sup>

The book of *Enoch* reports that the primeval monsters were once together, male and female, Behemoth and Leviathan, respectively. But then they were separated, the female to dwell in the ocean, the male on land, in a "waste wilderness" east of Eden (*Enoch* 60:7f.). *4 Ezra* also reports God's separation of Leviathan and Behemoth in ancient times and gives the reason: there wasn't room for both of them in the water. So the once-sea-going Behemoth was given land, a place with a thousand hills,<sup>44</sup> while Leviathan remained in the sea. Both were to be eaten by those whom God would choose (*4 Ezra* 6:49-52). That they would be food for those who would live in the Messianic Age is first stated clearly in *2 Baruch* 29:

And it shall come to pass when all is revealed. . . that the Messiah shall then begin to be revealed. And Behemoth shall be revealed from his place, and Leviathan shall ascend from the sea, those two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation, and shall have kept un-

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<sup>40</sup>Pope suggests that the meaning here is that Yahweh has already "subdued or slain" these ancient monsters "in primeval conflicts before the creation of the world" (*Job*, p. lxxxi).

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Genesis 1:2, 9f.

<sup>42</sup>Or "creatures," instead of "people."

<sup>43</sup>The term "people of the wilderness" is suggestive, both of Israel in the Sinai wilderness, and the crowds of 5,000 and 4,000 in "a lonely place" (Mark 6:31, 35) or desert (Mark 8:4). The text could have been construed as prophetic, either by Jesus or the authors/editors of the early tradition.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Psalm 50:10.

til that time; and then they shall be food for all that are left. <sup>45</sup>

Some such idea may have already been implicit in Ezekiel 47:9f., which looks for the availability of "many fish" of "many kinds" in the Messianic age, evidently for food. <sup>46</sup>

Several later Jewish traditions present variations on this theme: e.g., in the Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 74b-75a. Here we learn that God created two Leviathans, one male and one female. But to prevent the overpopulation of the world with Leviathans, he castrated the male and killed the female, "preserving it in salt for the righteous in the world to come." Likewise, God created Behemoth male and female. But to prevent their mating and filling the world, he castrated the male and cooled (froze?) the female, again "for the righteous for the world to come." Later in the same source, we are told, "Rabbah said in the name of R. Johanan: The Holy One, blessed be He, will in time to come make a banquet for the righteous from the flesh of Leviathan."

### The Eschatological-Eucharistic Fish in the Gospel Feedings and Early Art

From this kind of perspective, fish was the food for the messianic table, *par excellence*. From these sources we also see that *two* fish may have had special meaning in this connection. God would slay *two* Leviathans. Perhaps both would be food for the righteous. Or perhaps Leviathan and Behemoth would furnish this food. Both were originally creatures of the sea. What appears to be a Paradise scene in mosaic on the floor of a fourth or fifth century synagogue at Hammam Lif, Tunis, depicts two large fish, probably to be identified as the

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<sup>45</sup>*Syriac Baruch* 29:3f. This last phrase suggests the idea of a remnant; note that "all" of those left are to eat. Cf. Matthew 26:27, where Jesus tells the Twelve that they are "all" to drink.

<sup>46</sup> See also Ezekiel 47:12, and cf. Revelation 22:1ff.

Leviathans or fish for food in the messianic age.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the Gospel tradition reports that Jesus took two fish and the persistent appearance of two fish in early Christian art, whether with an "anchor" or with five loaves, is at least suggestive. The number could be only coincidental. But that two fish are mentioned in all four gospels is to be noted.<sup>48</sup> In any case the earliest accounts of the feeding of the crowd state that Jesus took fish<sup>49</sup> as well as bread, and distributed pieces to the crowds in a fashion that closely approximates the procedure at the Last Supper.

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<sup>47</sup> See Cecil Roth, ed., *Jewish Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 215, plate 81. Of this mosaic Roth comments, "The two fishes were ingeniously identified as the Leviathan and his mate, with reference to the Rabbinic mythology according to which, at the advent of the Messiah, these animals will provide food for the pious . . . ." *Jewish Art*, p. 218). Goodenough also thought it likely that these fish, which seem to hold a rope (hook?) in their mouths represented Leviathan. See *Jewish Symbols* III, figs. 887, 888; V, 4-5; XII, 98-99. Goodenough identifies one of the fish as a dolphin. The decorative panels beside this scene may represent the fertility of nature in the messianic age. Both the eating of the sea monsters and enjoyment of preternaturally abundant fruit of the earth are represented in the vision of *Syriac Baruch* 29. A trace of this double theme may also be seen as late as Peter Rubens' painting of "The Four Evangelists" which shows at its base two sea creatures (dolphins?), one of which has its head obscured or replaced by a cornucopia.

<sup>48</sup> The change to "several" small fish in Mark 8 may be accounted for in connection with this tendency in the later gospel versions to de-emphasize fish, or at any rate to see no eucharistic or eschatological meaning in them.

<sup>49</sup> According to Wilhelm H. Wuellner, the fish commonly available would have been "processed," i.e., salted: *The Meaning of 'Fishers of Men'* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), p. 28. According to *Baba Bathra* 74b, salted Leviathan would be eaten in the messianic age. Wuellner notes that bread and fish would have been staple food for Galileans and Judeans, and proposes that "the crowd that follows Jesus into the desert carries bread and fish with it as a matter of course." This might have been the case, although Mark's

Did Jesus himself understand the feeding of the 5,000 as a eucharistic-messianic meal, or was this understanding first placed upon the event in the pre-Markan or perhaps Markan representation of the meal? We cannot tell. Form and redaction criticism would forbid placing too much importance upon the sequence of events in the Markan narrative. According to the assumptions of most proponents of these methods of literary analysis, the evangelists would have had no knowledge or interest as to the actual course of events. Instead, they would have taken the separate pericopes preserved in such traditions as were available to them and fitted them at will into place in the stained-glass windows of their own theological designs. Nevertheless, we may point out that as Mark tells the story, the feeding of the 5,000 follows directly upon the return of the Twelve from their mission of preaching and exorcism throughout the towns of Israel. The Twelve, we learn, on Jesus' orders had been hastening through "all the towns of Israel," preaching repentance and proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had come near.<sup>50</sup> It is understandable that those who heard this message and were looking for the fulfilment of this great hope should mark these messengers and follow them upon their return to the one who had sent them. Mark tells us the crowds knew them and came running "from all the towns" (6: 33).<sup>51</sup> Did Jesus himself now

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report that the crowd had run "on foot from all the towns" suggests that this was an extraordinary situation. However, in the synoptic accounts, the bread and fish are not produced by the crowd — contrary to many a fine sermon on "sharing" — but are brought forth by the disciples. If the crowd did bring bread and fish along, so that there really was plenty of food available, Jesus' selection of *two* fish would be even more significant, suggesting that this number was chosen to represent the two primeval fish destined for the messianic banquet in the Kingdom of God which was near if not already beginning.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew 10:7, 23. Cf. Luke 10:9, 11.

<sup>51</sup> See R. H. Hiers, *The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970), pp. 66-71.

expect that the time for the coming of the Kingdom was at hand? <sup>52</sup> It is not certain, however, that Mark intended to show any connection between the return of the Twelve, followed by this crowd, and any anticipatory or inaugural celebration by Jesus of a messianic banquet in the wilderness. From Mark's standpoint the important thing was the impending crisis in Jerusalem. Mark knew that the Kingdom of God had not yet come in the time of Jesus, or even as yet in his own time. It is not likely that Mark perceived the meal in messianic terms, though, as we have seen, he may well have understood — and emphasized — its eucharistic significance.

Modern critics generally do not stress the importance of Jesus' proclamation and expectation of the imminent Kingdom of God. But if this message and hope was central to Jesus' own thinking, it is to be expected that what he did on this, as on other occasions, was related somehow to his beliefs about the coming Kingdom. He had sent the Twelve to proclaim the Kingdom and repentance throughout the land. Confronted, it seems, with the response of repentance and hope on the part of this multitude who had come forward, he now undertook to celebrate with this faithful remnant of Israel a symbolic prefiguration if not inauguration of the messianic banquet, that time when the righteous would eat bread, but particularly fish, in the Kingdom of God. Such a possibility would seem strange only to those who do not yet wish to recognize that Jesus shared the basic worldview of apocalyptic Judaism. <sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> It is even possible that Jesus had withdrawn to the "wilderness" in the first place hoping that the New Age might there begin to be actualized. Was not "the wilderness" the place where all flesh would behold the glory of the Lord, where the sick would be healed and the way prepared for the redeemed to march to Zion with everlasting Joy? And would not Leviathan be given as food for the people of the wilderness? See Isaiah 35: 1-10; 40: 3-5; Psalm 74: 13-14.

<sup>53</sup> Of such interpreters there are many. Some prefer to think, with Harnack, that Jesus' beliefs "spiritualized" Jewish apocalypticism; others, with Bultmann, that the earliest tradition, which

Certainly the traditional description of the episode as the "multiplication" of loaves and fishes is a misnomer. There is no mention in any of the versions of any such *multiplication*, whatever the baskets of left-over pieces might suggest.<sup>54</sup> Nor is the meal described in the synoptic gospels as a "miracle."<sup>55</sup> As the story becomes increasingly a "miracle" story the fish, as such, have less importance. Instead, attention is directed to other interests, e.g., the *number fed*.<sup>56</sup> In the earlier form, however, the focal emphasis is upon the *feeding* of the crowd with a meal which to Jesus, if not also the crowd, has special and profound meaning. If there is any historical basis for the story, it would seem that Jesus did actually "feed" some number of followers on some occasion, as the tradition has it, with five loaves and two fish, and not simply because they happened to be out late one evening and were hungry. He had urged his disciples, if not also the wider circle of his followers, to pray for and seek the Kingdom of God above all else. The crowd came seeking. Did Jesus then consecrate them for the Kingdom with at least a fore-taste of the messianic banquet? <sup>57</sup>

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probably can be assigned to Jesus, may be differentiated from apocalyptic Judaism. Both kinds of interpretation insist that Jesus' ideas were essentially different from those of Jewish apocalyptic thought.

<sup>54</sup> This aspect of the story may have been suggested to Mark or his earlier Jewish-Christian sources by 2 Kings 4:42-44, cf. 4:1-7. The presence of fish, however, cannot be derived from these Elisha stories. The attention given to the left-over pieces and baskets in Mark 8 and John 6 seems clearly to be a secondary development in line with the church's increasing self-consciousness as the gathering place of the elect. The seventh century Old Saxon *Heliand* translation of John 6 introduces an interesting variation on the equally non-Biblical idea of multiplication: "It grew in their hands, the food of each of the men."

<sup>55</sup> Cf. John 6:14.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 14:21; 15:38b.

<sup>57</sup> Thus also Nineham, *Mark*, pp. 178-80. See also Albert

Nevertheless it may be that the eucharistic-messianic understanding of the meal(s) dates back only to the pre-Markan church tradition. Perhaps the whole story was told, following the pattern of the eucharistic meal in the primitive church, as a way of showing that this sacred meal was for all the faithful, and not only for the Twelve, and perhaps also to show that the Twelve had been properly authorized to officiate and distribute the elements.<sup>58</sup> Even so, in its earliest versions the meal featured fish as well as bread. This would be strange if it had not been understood by those who created the story that fish, as well as bread, was proper eucharistic food. Such an understanding would have been available if not obvious to the earliest Jewish-Christian community, if not to Jesus himself. Apparently, however, the later church did not so understand the meaning of fish. The later gospel versions, as we have seen, play down the references to fish even while accentuating the eucharistic aspects of the meal; and in Acts, Luke describes the eucharist in the Jerusalem church simply as "the breaking of bread."<sup>59</sup> But the eucharistic significance of

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Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 379-80. Both recognize the connection between the meal and the messianic banquet, but neither mentions fish or its significance for the occasion.

<sup>58</sup> Thus van Iersel, "Speisung," pp. 180f. In the synoptic accounts the Twelve furnish the bread and fish (cf. John 6:8f.). Similarly, at the Last Supper the Twelve prepare the meal (Mark 14:16). In 1 Corinthians 11, however, food is brought by the various prospective communicants, but not shared as had been the rule in the primitive church of Acts 2. The early church's eucharistic meal to some degree seems to have been patterned after the Old Testament model of bringing sacrificial offerings to the Temple. See esp. Malachi 1:7, 12, where the Temple altar is designated as "the Lord's table" (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:18). See also Justin, *Dialogue*, 41. The representation of the eucharistic elements as sacrificial "gifts and offerings" has continued to the present time in various Christian liturgies.

<sup>59</sup> Bread was in any case the common element in the two types of



fish was not entirely forgotten after all, for in the earliest known catacomb inscriptions and frescoes, dating to the mid- and late second century, fish reappear, typically two of them, with an anchor or five loaves, representing — it would seem — the hope for the fulfilment of the promise of re-union and eternal life in the Age to come.

If we knew definitely that Mark had been written in Rome, we might conjecture that there was some connection between the traditions Mark reports as to the central place of two fish in the feeding of the 5,000 and this early Roman catacomb art.<sup>60</sup> The fact that the Abercius monument is located near Rome also suggests that it may have been in this vicinity that fish

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eucharist: bread and fish, bread and wine. Economic considerations may have been operative here; if the members of the Jerusalem church were indeed poor, bread would have been the least expensive "element"; and one which they would eat every day as common food. According to Acts the eucharistic "breaking of bread" was celebrated daily. Fish may not have been available every day, but we cannot be sure that fish was not sometimes eaten as well. "The breaking of bread" seems to have been a shorthand expression for the early church's eucharistic-eschatological meal. Was fish also distributed and eaten on some of these occasions? The Gnostic-Christian *Acts of Thomas* generally refers to the bread only in referring to the eucharist: chs. 20, 29, 49, 50, 133, 158; cf. 120. Perhaps, as in the later Catholic tradition after the withdrawal of the cup from the laity, bread was understood to represent (or constitute) both the body and blood of Christ. Neither Ignatius nor the *Didache* refer specifically to wine in connection with the eucharist. Fish is mentioned, apparently as eucharistic food, in the Abercius inscription (ca. 150-250 A.D.) and the probably somewhat later Pectorius inscription, along with wine in the case of the former. Other eucharistic references to fish are discussed by Morey, "Origin," *Princeton Theological Review*, VIII, 400-32; and IX, 268-89. See below, footnote 61.

<sup>60</sup> Note that even in Mark 8, Jesus' blessing and distribution of fish is reported (v. 7) despite Mark's omission of fish elsewhere in this chapter.

were particularly associated with the eucharist.<sup>61</sup> We might even be tempted to relate the Roman Catholic practice of eating fish on Friday and during Lent — in preparation for Sunday and Easter, the days celebrating and looking forward to the eschatological resurrection and return of Jesus as Messiah — to these earlier Roman Christian ideas.

What can be fairly certain is that either for Jesus himself or for quite early, and probably, Jewish Christians, the meal of bread and fish, of which we learn in the gospels, was understood as a eucharistic anticipation if not epiphanic participation in the blessed life of table-fellowship in the Kingdom of God. This connection between eucharist and eschatology has been neglected, for the most part, by modern interpreters to whom the whole pattern of Jewish and Jewish-Christian eschatological beliefs are unfamiliar or unwelcome. But it can clearly be seen, if in somewhat residual form, both in the gospels and other early Christian traditions and also in the catacombs. In the latter, as in the Fourth Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch, the expectation of life in the coming Kingdom of God has to some extent been “de-mythologized” or re-interpreted in terms of the hope for

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<sup>61</sup> See Morey, “Origin,” *Princeton Theological Review*, IX, (1911), 288-89. Morey’s translation is as follows: “. . . Faith was everywhere my guide and ever laid before me food, the Fish from the Fountain, the very great, the pure, which the holy virgin seized. And this she gave to the friends to eat (?), having a goodly wine and giving it mixed with water, and bread also.” (“Origin,” p. 272). See also Finegan, *Light*, pp. 384-85. The inscription at the tomb of Licinia Amiata, showing two fish with the expression ΙΧ ΘΥΣ ΖΩΝΤΩΝ is also suggestive: “Fish of the living” parallels “bread of life,” each understood, in effect, as “medicine of immortality.” But it may be that here ΙΧ ΘΥΣ does represent the acrostic formula: “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Saviour of the Living.” In that case, the two fish, engraved with the anchor may represent the earlier eucharistic-eschatological symbols, now, like the pagan “D M” (*dis manibus*, “to the divine shades”) and laurel wreath only traditional ornamentations rather than expressions of current beliefs.

eternal life, mediated by the eucharistic *pharmakon athanasias*.<sup>62</sup>

The anticipatory celebration of the future eschatological messianic banquet, as this was practiced and understood by Jesus and/or the early Jewish-Christian community, continued to be central to the life of the Christian churches so long as the Jewish-Christian hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God was central and vital. But as Christianity became more a Greco-Roman and generally gentile faith this form of hope for the future gave way to the longing for immortality, and it was increasingly understood that the way to this goal was through the eating of sacramental food.<sup>63</sup> What was once the central image for the future eschatological hope, the messianic banquet, then became the means to the experience of "realized" or immanent eschatology, through the medicine of immortality. With this understanding, especially it seems in Rome, fish, again with bread, was found to have meaning as symbolizing the eucharistic divine food. The relation between Jesus (his body and blood) and the eucharistic "elements" was already intimated in the Markan account of the Last Supper (14: 22-24). From here to the identification of fish with

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<sup>62</sup> See also *Acts of Thomas*, ch. 133.

<sup>63</sup> This development may well have been informed by several other complex associations with pagan, Jewish and Christian symbols and concepts. These would include the probable association of fish with immortality in ancient Roman funerary rites; the two fish (Pisces) of the Zodiac which turn up in various early Jewish catacombs and synagogue designs (See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, e.g., V, 3-13); and the association in the gospel traditions of the Jonah's great fish with the resurrection. Did the fish symbol function in the second century church as a special "sign" — the "sign of Jonah" — for the coming messianic redemption and, in this connection, the eucharistic meal? The catacomb art of the late second century undoubtedly blended several motifs, Biblical and otherwise. But there can be little question that the central symbols, however understood in terms of later conceptualizations, derived from the meal of loaves and fishes in the gospels.

Christ was only a short step, which then seems to have reached its final stage of re-interpretation and rationalization in the acrostic creed. The eucharistic and messianic significance that fish once had now became increasingly vestigial. Fish became one more Christological symbol, like the cross and the *chi-rho*, but still retained, in a generalized sense, the hope of salvation for the faithful.



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