The Fish: A Lost Symbol of Sexual Liberation?

RAYMOND J. LAWRENCE, JR.

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the sexual symbolism of the fish and its associations with the ministry of Jesus. His unconventional relationships with women, as well as the traditional accounts of his physical healings, are viewed from a perspective of intrapsychic psychology. These activities are then compared to the work of Freud and some vocational similarities between the two men are posited. The symbolic connotations of the fish and its reflection of unconscious processes are seen as mythological vehicles of liberation from sexual repression and concomitant social oppression.

Introduction

The association of Jesus with fish is an ancient link, the origins of which are lost to history. It must have been a symbol of some import, because it appears in several sources beginning as early as the second century, and by the fourth and fifth centuries fish became an emblem of the Lord’s Supper. In catacomb paintings it is portrayed in conjunction with the bread and wine.

The traditional explanation offered by Augustine early in the fifth century is that fish in Greek is an acronym for “Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Savior.” I-ch-th-u-s in Greek is the spelling of the word “fish.” Augustine adds that fish is an allegory of Christ’s “power to exist alive, that is, without sin, in the bottomless pit of our mortal life, as in the depths of the sea.”1 Augustine’s explanation, while plausible, is not persuasive. No other evidence supports this particular configuration of words: “Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Savior.” The acronym has the marks of a retrospective invention.

The fish as a symbol

The fish in its fish-ness was likely associated very early with the Jesus movement. Suzanne Langer tells us that a true symbol, as opposed to a simple
sign, must participate deeply in the substance of what it represents, as, for example, the cross of Golgotha does. Fish as an acronym is shallow and one-dimensional and does not demonstrate how fish or fish-ness touches the story of Jesus or his teaching in any profound way. Fish as acronym is merely an empty sign, not a symbol of anything.2

Fish are mentioned often in the New Testament, but none of the references suggest how fish might have been thrust forward as such a major symbol of the Jesus movement on a par with the bread and wine. Stories of mass feedings with a few loaves and fishes are told in each of the four gospels. Fish also show up in two resurrection stories. In one, the resurrected Jesus takes a piece of fish the disciples had cooked and eats it before their eyes (Luke 24:42). In another, Jesus calls from shore to the disciples who are fishing, instructing them to cast to starboard to make a catch. Coming ashore with a huge catch, Jesus invites them to breakfast, which consists of bread and fish (John 21:9ff). The kingdom of heaven is also compared to a dragnet (Matthew 13:47). The fact that several of the disciples were fishermen and that Jesus said he would make them “fishers of men” is a possible source of the symbol, and indeed is the basis for the revival of the fish sign in modern piety (Mark 1:17; Matthew 4:19). It is not persuasive, however. While Jesus is to some extent gathering people in his “net,” we are not presented with bread, wine, and a net, but bread, wine, and fish. Associations with fish are not principally the nets in which some fish are caught. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church is correct in acknowledging that the origin of the fish symbol is currently unknown, suggesting that it may have been borrowed from Babylonian or Indian mythology. It does not say, however, why we should be limited to those two particular traditions, and fish has virtually universal mythological associations.

In world mythology, fish as a symbol consistently carries two kinds of associations: sex and the unconscious. The fishy odor of female genitalia and the viscous and phallic shape of fish, reminiscent of the way the penis is aided by the female’s vaginal fluid, are roots of the link between fish and sex. So too is the fecundity of fish, the vast numbers of fish eggs produced. The invisible world of fish in water is the source of the association of fish with the unconscious and, by extension, of fishing with the exploration of the unconscious. As defined from the outset by psychoanalytic theorists, the unconscious is that “dark cauldron” teeming with life (fish) of which we are but dimly aware, a hidden body of content which discloses itself to us reluctantly in dreams, irrational behavior, slips of the Freudian tongue, and other “accidents.”

The fish symbol in mythology has a very long history and is widespread with good credentials. Paleolithic fish figurines have been found with the spiral of creativity on one side, and the labyrinth of death on the other—fish, death, and sex. Astarte in the ancient Near East was worshipped in the form of a fish. An Assyrian seal in 700 B.C. depicts a fish god fertilizing the tree of