The Ichthus Acrostic
Usage of Greek for the Savior’s Name Among Early Christians

Contrary to claims that only Hebraic names for God and the Savior were used during Apostolic times; and that these were later replaced with “inferior” Greek names, there is historical and archeological evidence that the Greek names for God and the Savior were used by the early Christians¹ from the very start of Christianity.

One noteworthy example of this is the usage of the “fish symbol” or “Ichthus” (the Greek word for “fish”) by the early Christians during the Apostolic period². The Ichthus was an acrostic³ spelling out the Greek letters ΙΧΘΥΣ (Iota-Chi-Theta-Upsilon-Sigma), which are derived using the initial letters of the Greek expression; ΙΗΣΟΥΣ-ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ-ΘΕΟΥ-ΥΙΟΣ-ΣΩΤΗΡ⁴; pronounced "Iesous-Christos-Theou-Uios-Sotor" (i.e., “Jesus-Christ-God’s-Son-Savior”).

The Ichthus was used by early Christians as a “secret” symbol to reveal themselves and their meeting places to other Christians; and to associate themselves uniquely with the Savior God. These Greek letters and/or fish symbol were inscribed on walls, various artifacts and also used in early Christian manuscripts. In effect, the Ichthus was an encapsulation of the Christian message of the Gospel.

The Ichthus symbol was made by simply drawing two opposing, intersecting arcs; with the lines of the right-side extending beyond the intersecting point so as to resemble the profile of a fish. The Greek letters ΙΧΘΥΣ, spelling out the word for “fish”, were oftentimes inscribed alongside this symbol as well. Figure 1 shows what an original Ichthus symbol looked like.

![Figure 1. Typical Ichthus Inscription used by early Christians to identify themselves.](image-url)

¹ Along with this, not only were Luke’s gospel and the book of Acts written in Greek, but there is strong evidence that the entire New Testament was written in Greek. The apostle Paul would have preached the evangelical message of the Savior in Greek to the Hellenists (Acts 9:26-30) as well as preaching and debating with the Greek scholars and philosophers in their own language, e.g., in Athens and at the Areopagus (Mars Hill). See Acts 17:22-31.

² Usually dated from the late 1st century to early 2nd century (50—150 AD).

³ Some refer to the Ichthus as an acronym. Therefore, it may be helpful to note the subtle distinction between the terms acronym and acrostic—terms which many use interchangeably. An acronym, however, generally refers to a word that is formed using the initial letters of the successive words in a compound phrase or title. On the other hand, an acrostic generally refers to a composition where the initial letters of the successive words or lines in a phrase forms a word representative of the phrase.

⁴ The last word ΣΩΤΗΡ (Soter; i.e., Savior) in this expression is often found using the lunate (open) sigma C as ΣΩΤΗΡ on early Christian artifacts; as-well-as early Christian manuscripts, that spell out the word. In this case the acrostic is written as ΙΧΘΥΣ.
Although it is true that the symbol of a fish or fish-like image was used for centuries prior to and during the early Christian era by pagan cultures (e.g., the Phoenicians worshipped the “fish-god” Dagon, who was represented as half-man and half-fish); the Christians cleverly appropriated it without any allusion to pagan worship.

It was clever use of imagery for two reasons: (1) The acrostic itself spelled out the Greek word for fish and Jesus told His disciples they would be “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:10) and (2) since it was a symbol already predominately known it would not have aroused much suspicion among the Romans.

Figure 2 shows a picture of a late 2nd century inscription of the Ichthus carved into a marble slab found in the ruins of the ancient city Ephesus. Note that in this case, the symbol of a fish has been replaced with the symbol of an eight-spoked wheel—the result of superimposing all five Greek letters of the Ichthus within a circle.

Figure 2. Inscription of the Ichthus found carved into a marble slab in the ruins of ancient Ephesus; circa 180 AD.

It is believed by some that the symbol of a “wheel” replaced the original fish symbol as Christianity moved into the eastern Roman provinces of Asia Minor, modern Turkey (see 1 Peter 1:1 for a listing of these). Ephesus was located in one of these provinces.

There are many similar inscriptions with the ichthus (fish) that have been found dating from the Apostolic period, which of course confirms that Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς (Iesous Christos) were well-known and recognized as the Savior’s Greek names among the early Christians.

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5 Although some scholars date this inscription to the 4th century (~320 AD), such an inscription would not have been necessary so late in the history of the Church. Emperor Constantine (306—337 AD) officially sanctioned Christianity after his “conversion”, which brought Christians out of hiding and would have eliminated the need for Christians to use an inscription containing a covert symbol.
The Hebraic apostles, as well as their protégés, surely must have been aware of this but there appears to be no historical evidence of teachings trying to correct it either by (a) promoting the Hebraic names\(^6\) or (b) attempts to discredit the Greek names for the Savior\(^7\).

Another important piece of historical evidence that Greek was used by the early Christians comes in the form of a papyrus fragment known as the P98 Fragment, which dates to the early-to-mid-2nd century. See Figure 3.

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\(^6\) On the contrary, there is compelling evidence that the apostle John wrote in Greek is revealed by a papyrus fragment comprised of a single column with 19 lines per column from the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:13-20), which is written in Greek. This text is dated not more than 50 years after John wrote the original text. This would have been during the early-to-mid-2nd century or late Apostolic period. This papyrus fragment is known as “P98” and located at the French Institute of Oriental Archeology in Cairo, Egypt.

\(^7\) It should be noted that the Greek translation of the Old Testament (mid-3rd century to 2nd century BC), known as the Septuagint or simply LXX, was produced because the Jews living in Northern Africa had become so Hellenized by the 3rd century BC that most of them could no longer speak Hebrew. Ironically, in order for them to retain their Jewish roots, it was necessary to impart Old Testament truth to them in their “adopted” language of Greek. The Septuagint is written in Koine Greek and was in circulation among the Alexandrian Jews who were fluent in Greek, the common language in Egypt at the time, but not in Hebrew. Some sections of the Septuagint may show Semiticisms, or idioms and phrases based on Semitic languages like Hebrew and Aramaic. Other books, such as Daniel and Proverbs, show Greek influence more strongly. Because Hebrew texts lack vowel pointing the Septuagint may also elucidate pronunciation of pre-Masoretic Hebrew—many proper nouns are spelled out with Greek vowels. On-the-other-hand, it is extremely unlikely that all ancient Hebrew sounds had precise Greek equivalents. The Jewish historian Josephus considered the Septuagint on equal standing with the Hebrew text. Manuscripts of the Septuagint have been found among the Qumran Scrolls in the Dead Sea, and were thought to have been in use among Jews at the time.
This papyrus fragment contains the Greek text of Revelation 1:13-20 written not much more than 50 years after the apostle John wrote the original text, which reads in English:

And in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; 15 His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; 16 He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. 18 I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. 19 Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. 20 The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Lastly, it is significant to note that a Hebraic equivalent of the Greek Ichthus acrostic has never been discovered or has never been used in any Christian manuscripts. However, if it had, it would have been derived from the following equivalent Hebraic expression (note that Hebrew reads right-to-left):

יהושוע-מְשִׁיחָ—יהוה-בֶן—משיחא

or read from right-to-left

“Yâhowshua-Ma’shiyach-YâHWâH-Ben-Moshi’iy”

and pronounced in English as “Joshua-Messiah-Yahweh-Ben-Moshi”

The Hebraic acrostic inscription would have looked like this: יִשְׂרָאֵל and read right-to-left.