APOSTOLIC HISTORY AND THE GOSPEL

Biblical and Historical Essays presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th Birthday

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THE PATERNOSTER PRESS
CHAPTER XXII

THE CHI-RHO SIGN - CHRISTOGRAM AND/OR STAUROGRAM?

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Next to the ubiquitous IHS, the Chi-Rho sign has established itself in Christian tradition as perhaps the most popular of all Christian monograms. Its widespread use in the Church Catholic is usually attributed to its employment by the Emperor Constantine in the banner or Labarum - a word of still unexplained origin - which the first Christian Emperor commissioned for himself and his armies after his conquest of Rome and adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire.

The monogram is found in Christian art and tradition in two variant forms. The more familiar form is ΧΡ, with the Chi superimposed on the Rho, the traditional explanation of the sign as a monogram for XPτυΤός being obvious at a glance. The alternative form is that of a plain cross, the perpendicular stroke forming a Rho, thus -Ρ, the Chi letter apparently having been turned round to form out of what we now call a St. Andrew's cross, a traditional upright cross.

It is now certain that both forms of the "sign" are pre-Constantinian. Constantine may have popularized the monogram, in particular in the Chi-Rho formation; but he did not invent the sign; the discovery of both forms in pre-Constantinian graffiti in the Vatican¹ and of the perpendicular form in the Bodmer papyri (ca. A.D. 250) provide incontrovertible proof of their use long before the age of Constantine. Moreover, in the papyri, the perpendicular form is found as a contraction for Ταύ Rho in the Greek word οπόσ 'Cross', written, απός² and this latter discovery raises a number of new problems in connexion with the traditional sign.

Was it originally a sign for the Cross and not a Chi-Rho contraction for XPτυΤός, i.e., a staurogram rather than a christogram? Which of the two forms was the earlier? Was the staurogram sign original and later turned into a christogram, the Chi-Rho - XPτυΤός monogram being the result of an etiological explanation of the sign after its original meaning as a staurogram had been forgotten? Or are there other explanations? What is known about the origins and history of these "signs"?

² See below, p. 327.
The purpose of this essay is to look for some possible answers to these new questions raised by the recent discoveries.

I

Before the new discoveries the fundamental work on the subject was that of Max Sulzberger.1 In substantial agreement with the views of his predecessor, J. B. de Rossi, Sulzberger concluded that that most ancient monogram of Christ appeared in the form Χ in Asia Minor and in Rome about the year A.D. 270: the traditional Christian monogram Χ was not attested before the time of Constantine. Another form of the monogram, combining the christogram with the Cross, was simplified as Χ, and appeared a little before the middle of the fourth century A.D. at the same time as the first simple crosses ((chr), i.e., the Χ form was also post-Constantine. A serious difficulty in Sulzberger’s theory, of which he himself was fully aware, was the existence of a Christian inscription from Egypt, dated in the third century (on the grounds of script). where the form Χ was preceded by an Α and followed by an Ω. Sulzberger argued that this particular sign had been added to the inscription at a later date. In line with a popular form of explanation in earlier theories, Sulzberger also maintained: “Les monogrammes de Jésus sont de simples abréviations, empruntées à l’écriture paléenne, qui peu à peu sont devenus des symboles assimilés à la croix” (p. 447).

The next significant contribution to the discussion was made in 1925 by Jean de Savignac of the École des Hautes Études in Paris.2 Whereas Savignac had confined himself to a few observations of the contracted form Χ in P75 and P66, Aland investigated all occurrences of both noun and verb and, extending his inquiries to other papyrus texts of the New Testament. The contraction occurs frequently in both P75 and P66, both in both noun and verb. It seems to have established itself more securely in P66, but it is also attested in other Papyrus texts. The evidence is more than sufficient to prove that the contraction was a regular one at this early period (mid-third century).

Aland argues that the new Papyrus data gives us “not only the oldest form of the christogram, but also the possibility of explaining this much discussed sign” (p. 174). He suggests that in this form of the sign, we have an “Urform” or “Vorform” of the christogram, itself originally not a christogram, but a staurogram, i.e., a symbol of the Cross. He cites in support Lactantius’ account of the vision of Constantine: ‘communitus est in quique Constantinus, ut caeleste signum dei notaret in scutis atque its procolium committeret. facit ut iussus est et transversa X littera, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat’ (De mort. pers. 44, 5): this is interpreted by Aland: ‘Transversa X littera, d.h. doch wohl: er lässt das X senkrecht stellen und biegt den nun senkrechten einen Balken zu einem P um, so dass sich genau das Zeichen ergibt, das wir in P66 und seinen Nachfolgern finden: P.”

The Lactantius passage is one on which there have been wide differences of interpretation. Since Lactantius evidently understands the heavenly “sign” to be the christogram (Christum in scutis notat), the text has been emended to give this result, the most widely accepted conjecture being that

1 Savignac cites G. Lefèvre, Recueil, No. 423, and recently Maria Cramer, Das altägyptische Lebenszeichen in christlichen (kapitolinischen) Ägypten (Wiesbaden, 1955), pp. 8, 9, fig. 7 (1)
of Gregoire, to supply the capital letter I, viz., transversa X littera <X>, "the letter X being crossed by I with the head bent into a circle", (i.e., \( \mathbb{X} \), the regular christogram). This "centration" of Lactantius does not seem to have been entirely unquestioned with the desire to find a Chi-Rho symbol in the text. Aland’s translation seems the most natural one ("the letter X being turned round (transversa), its top having been given a loop"). The objection of Sulzberger that the latter sign was unknown before the Middle Ages is thus incorrect: the "heavenly sign" which Lactantius so describes was a staurogram, and this fully accords with his universal use of the expression caeleste signum as the sign of the Cross. We are then obliged, however, to assume that, in his interpretation of the staurogram, Lactantius has explained it as a christogram or confused it with a christogram (Christum in signo notat). With this explanation there is now no need to indulge in doubtful interpretations of the verb notat as meaning "inscribe the name of God in the form of a sign, d’un monogramme".

The new discoveries shed fresh light on Eusebius’s account of the vision of Constantine and its sequel. The story is told in Eusebius’s Life of Constantine (1:26–31). When the Emperor was seeking divine help against Maxentius, he and his army saw "the trophy of the Cross" (σταυροτριφεῖον τῆς Βασίλειας) illuminated in the heavens with a written message attached to it: "By this conquer!" (κοίμησον θύρα). On the following night Christ appeared to the Emperor in a dream "with the same sign that had appeared in heaven" (καὶ τῷ φανερῷ καὶ ὁσμίῳ σημείῳ) and commanded him to make a copy of it. This he did, placing a transverse bar on a long spear encased in gold to form a Cross. At the top of this cruciform standard there was fastened a wreath woven of precious stones and gold in which was the symbol of the Saviour’s epithet (lit., 'the saving epithet'), two letters signifying the name of Christ in which the Rho in the middle was crossed by a X.

Below this was a portrait of Constantine and his children, and from the cross-bar there hung a banner, the standard known as the Labarum. From coins of the period it is clear that the basic design of the cruciform, gold-encased lance with the "crown" or "wreath" was still in use. What is special of interest in this is the ‘cross-structure’ with the Chi-Rho sign at the top, as a staurogram foundation, with a christogram surmounting it. The report in the legend that it was an illuminated Cross which Constantine saw and that it was the ‘trophy of the Cross’ he modelled is substantially correct: the "sign" by which he conquered was the sign of the cross, a staurogram, but at the same time this was ingeniously combined with the christogram symbol in the artistic reproduction of the "divine sign". This combination of both forms of this early Christian symbol in the Constantinian banner suggests that they both come out of pre-Constantinian tradition. Archaeological discoveries, such as the Papyrus evidence, suggest that the pre-Constantinian origin of both forms: as noted above, particularly rich inscriptive material in this connexion has been discovered in the graffiti in the Vatican excavations.

**III**

Savignac’s theory of a pagan origin for these symbols, mediated by Gnosticism, e.g., the tracing of the staurogram form to Valentianus, is regarded as doubtful by Aland; more convincing evidence would require to be produced. Certainly, as Aland points out, the alleged presence of an Ankh symbol on the last folio of the Jung Codex does not appear to be borne out by the actual evidence: what is found, as the editors have noted, is the phrase δὲ Ἡ ᾨδος, i.e., Le Christ saint. On the other hand, Margherita Guarducci reports the presence of the Ankh sign among the Vatican graffiti, and it has been found elsewhere in Christian inscriptions.

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2. Institut, IV, 26, 42, 272; 278; cf. Moreau, p. 272, n. 13. Mais le verbe notare a un sens très particulier: il signifie exprimer un mot, une idée, au moyen d’une abréviation, en une ou deux lettres (Altheim, o., l. p. 261–60; note sur signum, c’est significare nota (cf. Christum notat et Serv., ad Aen., III, 42: la Sibylle fait connaître ses prophéties par des signa, ce qui veut dire nota litterarum – signifit eligere). Fr Altheim, dans le travail cité, remarque justement que la différence entre signum et nota n’est pas nette. Il a tort cependant de croire que caeleste signum Dei ne peut être autre chose que le signe de la croix. Il omet le caractère unique de l’expression chez Lactance. Dans tous les textes de cet auteur que nous avons cités, il s’agit ou bien de signum employé sans détermination, ou de symbole de la passion. Mais dans le cas qui nous occupe, signum est déterminé par Dieus, et signum Dei notare signifie Dieus notat significare, inscribere le nom de Dieu au moyen d’un signe, d’un monogramme. Il est évident inutile de supposer que le signe adopté devait nécessairement être cruciforme, et de lui donner la forme \( \mathbb{X} \). Cette croix monogrammatique n’apparaît guère avant le milieu du IVe siècle. (sic)


Whether this may have in any way influenced the staurogram is a debatable question; it may conceivably be an independent sign for ζωή αἰώνων which entered Christian tradition, through Gnosticism, from Egyptian sources. F. J. Döllger and E. Dinkler have sought to trace the origins of the staurogram/christogram symbols in the Hebrew-Jewish tradition rather than in Egyptian pagan sources. Impressive evidence from inscriptions on tombs and ossuaries has been produced to show that the cross sign was already used in pre-Christian Jewish tradition, in both the perpendicular and Chi-form (+ X); in every case examined “die Fundstelle oder der Text der Inschrift machten die jüdische Herkunft teils zweifellos, teils wahrscheinlich” (Dinkler, p. 161). Both forms of the cross represent the North Semitic, but also the old Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic letter for the Hebrew ταυ (τ), the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet, which has not only the meaning “sign”, but also “sign of a cross” (Dinkler, p. 163 ff.) and is used with the meaning of a “saving sign” or talisman at Ezekiel 9:4 ff.

Dinkler rightly attaches great importance to the Ezekiel passage for the subsequent development of the Tau symbolism. In the context of Ezekiel’s first Temple vision, Jahweh says to the “man clothed in linen, with a writing case at his side”: “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark (ταυ, + or X) upon the foreheads of all who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it. And to the others he said in my hearing, ‘Pass through the city after him, and smite;...’” The imagery is the same as in Ezekiel 9:4 and Exodus 12:22 £ Specially pointed out, this idea of being the “property” or cattle. The sign marks out those who belong to Jahweh and, therefore, are under his protection. The “sign” on the lintels of the doors in the Exodus story (Exod. 12:22 ff.) is to be similarly understood.

As B. Stade pointed out, this idea of being the “property” of deity is not a novel concept; humanity has always been viewed in this light in the Bible. The imagery is the same as in Ezekiel 9:4 and Exodus 12:23 ff. Specially important for the New Testament is the Damascus Document (CD ix.10-12b).

“...These [the ‘poor of the flock’, i.e., the Qumran community] shall escape during the period of visitation, but the rest shall be handed over to the sword when the Messiah comes from Aaron and Israel. Just as it was during the period of the first visitation, concerning which He spoke through Ezekiel ‘to set a mark upon the foreheads’ of them that sigh and cry, but the rest were delivered to ‘the sword that avenges with the vengeance of the covenant’” (Trans. Charles).
These passages show not only that the “sign of Jahweh” survived in certain circles as a kind of talisman and sign of divine ownership, but that it received a special emphasis in Jewish eschatology as a “messianic” sign with the same connotation. Moreover, it can scarcely be coincidence that the imagery in the New Testament and early Christian literature of the “signing” or “sealing” of the faithful are most numerous where a Jewish background or Jewish sources are most in evidence. Bousset surmised that the frequent mention in such passages of the “sealing” implied “that such bei Christen zur Zeit der Apokalypse es noch hier und da Brauch war, sich durch der Haut eingeritzte Namen (Gottes oder Jesu) gegen allelei Gefahren zu schützen”

As Dinkler remarks, the marking of the names of the Lamb or the Father, on the one hand, on the forehead of those who were thus “sealed” as δωλοι τοῦ θεοῦ (Rev. 7:3 ff; 9:14; 14:1; 17:10) and, on the other, those who bore the χαρέγγη τοῦ θεοῦ on head or forehead (Rev. 13:6 ff; 14:9; 16:2; 20:4) has its basis and inspiration in the Old Testament imagery, especially the ideas of Ezekiel 9:4 and Psalms of Solomon 15:6-9.

IV

The contribution of archaeology and the Papyri to our knowledge of such customs and practices is evident. If we can be confident — and the evidence from Jewish ossuaries and inscriptions seems conclusive — that the σημείωσις τοῦ ταύ in the double form ΧΡ and Χ was familiar in Judaism, then the origin of the double form of the Christian symbol ΧΡ and Χ may be explicable as deriving from such Jewish “signs of Jahweh”. The Chi (Χ) alone is attested in inscriptions for Christ; it occasionally is written ΧΧ. The vertical stroke may have been simply a means of distinguishing the Christian symbol from the Hebrew-Jewish Tau. In the Letter of Barnabas (9:8) the Greek Tau has already become a symbol of the Cross.

The evidence of the Papyri seems to point to the ΧΡ sign as the more primitive. The Vatican inscriptions, however, which have both, reveal that the ΧΙ-ΡΩ sign was also a Pre-Constantinian one. Since both forms of the Hebrew Tau, Χ and Χ, are found together, it is attractive to conjecture that the addition of the loop or the Rho was originally intended to indicate the word Χριστός, the first two letters of the name (as in most abbreviations). The Tau-Rho contraction seems secondary and etiological, for the use of the contraction ΧΡ for σταυρός, from the second and fourth letters, seems a little artificial. It seems to me probable, however, that the original sign, whether its base was a Χ or a Τ, symbolized a Cross, and that the addition of the loop or the Rho giving the contraction for Χριστός, not only identified the sign as a Christian talisman, but turned it into a christo-staurogram, i.e., it was, as Eusebius and Lactantius respectively describe it, σημείωσις σημείος, τοις σημείοις προσελκύουσι (Hist. Ecc. ix. 9, 10; de vita Constant. 1, 140, 21; 41); a signum veri et divini sanctitatis, signum passionis, signum immortae (Instit. IV. 26, 42; 27:2: 27:8; Epit. 46, 6-7; de Mort. X. 2).

In his rhetorical description of the Banner of Constantine with its mysterious Labarum, Gibbon (drawing on the Vita Const., but interpreting it freely) understood the symbolism of the ΧΙ-ΡΩ monogram in just such a manner (italics mine): “... the principal standard which displayed the triumph of the cross was styled the LABARUM, an obscure, though celebrated, name, which has been variously derived from all the languages of the world. It is described (Eusebius in Vita Constant., I. c. 30, 31) as a long pike intersected by a transversal beam. The silken veil which hung down from the beam was curiously inwrought with the images of the reigning monarch and his children. The summit of the pike supported a crown of gold, which enclosed the mysterious monogram, at once expressive of the figure of the Cross and the initial letters of the name of Christ.”

V

There are two possible answers to the questions this essay raised on the meaning, relationships and origins of the two traditional forms of the “ΧΙ-ΡΩ” sign. (1) The original Christian sign was ΧΡ, a staurogram, and this was etiologically explained as a ΧΙ-ΡΩ, and turned into a christogram, a monogram of Christ. (2) In the light of the antiquity of the two forms of the Hebrew letter Π + and Χ, as a sign for Jahweh in Hebrew and Jewish tradition, especially in its messianic and eschatological connotation, the addition of a loop in the first form, Χ+ becoming ΧΡ, and a Rho in the second, Χ becoming ΧΡ, turned this Jewish “Eigentums und Schutzezeichens Jahweh” into a Christian tropoion, a victory-sign of the Passion, designating not simply Christus, but Christus crucifixus.

1 Chapter xx (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon [New York, 1899 ed.], vol. II, pp. 266, 267).