

# The Fish and the Flood

By Nigel Jackson

*'When the Flood rose high, We carried you in the floating Ark, making the event a warning, so that all attentive ears might heed it.'*

The Holy Quran, Surat Al-Haqqab 69: 11-12

*'But still to be explained is the entire symbolism of "fish" and "fisherman", which occurs in innumerable cultural contexts and always in connection with a "revelation", or, more precisely, the passage of a doctrine from the state of oblivion or "eclipse" to the state of complete manifestation.'*<sup>1</sup>

Mircea Eliade

The symbol of the Fish, whether pertaining to Christ and the fishermen-apostles - exemplified in the acrostic hierograph IXThVS derived from the Greek formula *Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ*: *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour* - or traditions surrounding the *Matsya Avatara* ('Fish-Avatar')<sup>2</sup> of Vishnu in the *Sanatana Dharma*, is a soteriological symbol signifying salvation, deliverance from the waters of death, and a hieroglyph of spiritual regeneration.

The deepening darkness, exhaustion of virtue, and spiritual decline of humankind toward the close of a temporal cycle, is the nadir which marks the precise point at which the Avatara of the Lord descends to preserve, restore and renew the eternal Dharma. According to the accounts of the *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Matsya Purana*, the archetypal progenitor, legislator and symbol of human intelligence, "Manu, the

<sup>1</sup> M. Eliade, *Yoga and Immortality*, chapter VII, note 45.

<sup>2</sup> The *Matsya Avatara* image, designed by Nigel Jackson, is portrayed on the cover of this volume of *Sacred Web*.

child of the Sun”, practised yogic *sadbana* upon the mountain ranges of Malaya until he attained spiritual realization and was granted a boon by Brahma, averring that he would preserve all living beings at the final dissolution of the universe. A small *sabhari*-fish which Manu rescued was in fact the *avataric* form of the Lord Vishnu and, as it grew to supernatural size, it prophesied to him, forewarning him of the coming waters of the Deluge. The Divine Avatara counselled Manu to preserve all the seeds of the life of the coming cycle, “those born of sweat, those born of eggs, or of water, and those living creatures that slough their skin” in a Divine Ark in order that they should survive the coming cataclysm, fastening the ship to a horn on the crest of the *Matsya Avatara* with a serpent-rope. The Divine Avatara, in fish form, drew the ark over the vast oceans to rest on the peak of “the northern mountain”, alluding to a ‘Hyperborean’ polar-axial significance. When the waters subsided, the Ark settled on the pinnacle of the mountain, the side of which was called “Manu’s descent”, whence Manu descended at the dawn of the post-diluvian world of the *Krita-Yuga* to transmit the revelation of the universal Dharma.

René Guénon in his essay ‘Some Aspects of the Symbolism of the Fish’ (in *Symbols of Sacred Science*) reminds us as follows:

During the cataclysm which separates this Manvantara from the preceding one, the Veda was shut up in a state of envelopment in the conch (*shankha*), which is one of the chief attributes of Vishnu.

Guénon notes the import of the conch borne in the hand of the *Matsya Avatara* as the container of the *Akshara*, the imperishable vibration of the *Pranava-Mantra - Om*. The *Matsya Avatara* thus saved Manu, the Seven *Rishis (Saptarishis)* and their wives the *Krttikas*, from the Deluge so that the world of the new cycle would be repopulated.

The Ark in Judeo-Christian tradition has long been contemplated via the symbolism of its mystical proportions as image and exemplar of the anatomy of the Divine Human, the *Homo Maximus*, Adam Kadmon, prolonged in the esoteric pattern of the ‘Second Adam’, the Mystical Body of Christ which is the eternal Ecclesia.

The soteriological import of the Fish in the context of the Deluge mythos, of the preservation and renovation of the Divine Word through

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