

## The Walking on the Water

Mark 6.45-53; Matt 14.22-34; John 6.16-21

The story of the walking on the water appears in three of the four Gospels, but surprisingly not all three Synoptic Gospels. Rather, it is found in Matthew, Mark and John. Luke does not include this episode, moving directly from the feeding miracle to the confession of Peter. In all three Gospels, the walking on the water comes directly after the feeding of the five thousand. In Mark and Matthew, it is followed by a summary of healings accomplished by Jesus (Mark 6.53-56; Matt 14.34-36). In John, the discourse at Capernaum on the bread of life comes next (John 6.22-59).

### The Shared Story

A comparison of the three passages reveals a core story that they all tell:

- Jesus' disciples get into a boat (without Jesus) and sail off across the sea;
- a storm arises;
- they see Jesus walking on the water and fear grips them;
- Jesus says, 'It is I' and tells them not to be afraid;
- Jesus gets into the boat/the disciples want Jesus to get into the boat;
- the danger passes.

The act of walking on water recalls Job 9.8, which praises God *who alone stretched out the heavens, and trampled the waves of the Sea*. In the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the verse reads: *who alone has stretched out the heavens, and walks on the sea as on firm ground*. Jesus' self-identification, *It is I*, is literally, 'I am' (*ego eimi* in the Greek). This is the expression by which God makes himself known in the Old Testament (Exod. 3.14; Isa 43.10; 51.12). The common story thus strongly conveys a sense of Jesus' 'divinity': Jesus acts in a uniquely God-like way by walking on water; he reveals himself to the disciples by uttering the words of divine identity, 'I am'.

### Mark

Mark tells how Jesus, from the mountain, saw the disciples in distress (either by the light of the moon or by superhuman vision). In typically vivid style, the Gospel writer speaks of the disciples straining at the oars against an adverse wind (v. 48).

According to Mark, he intended to pass them by (v. 48). This is a strange comment, which seems to indicate that Jesus does not want to relieve their plight. However, Mark is probably using the language of 'passing by' to suggest a theophany, or appearance of God.



In Exod 33.22, God 'passes by' Moses, revealing his glory, and in Job 9.8-11, God, who treads upon the waves of water, is said to 'pass by'.

Mark relates the astonishment of the disciples to their failure to understand the previous miracle: they did not understand about the loaves (v. 52). Their inability to comprehend the feeding of the five thousand somehow affects their capability of grasping this miraculous occurrence. He further states that their hearts were hardened (v. 52). Mark is more critical of the disciples than are the other Gospel writers. Hard-heartedness in the Bible is usually a characteristic of God's enemies (Exod 7.3, 13) or unfaithful Israel (Ps 95.8), so this is a particularly stinging criticism (cf. Mark 8.17).

## Matthew

Matthew's narrative of the walking on the water extends beyond the shared story. The continuation gives prominence to Peter, who receives extra attention in this Gospel (16.17-20; 17.24-27; 18.21-22). Matthew tells how Peter tries to walk on the water to reach Jesus. Peter asks Jesus, command me to come you on the water. Jesus invites Peter to come to him, and Peter leaves the boat and walks toward Jesus. But the disciple wavers, begins to sink and calls for help. His cry, Lord, save me (v. 30), recalls the disciples' cry for help in an earlier episode in Matthew (8.25). Jesus reaches out and catches him and rebukes him for his little faith (v. 31). 'Little faith' is minor theme of Matthew's Gospel (6.30; 8.26; 16.8; 17.20). Peter and Jesus get into the boat, and the wind stops. The disciples worship Jesus and declare him to be God's Son (14.33). The title 'Son of God' when applied to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels may be a way of talking about his status as messianic king (as in Matt 26.63), but here it seems to indicate his divine identity.

Matthew's distinctive vignette about Peter displays the same pattern of boldness, failure and restoration that characterizes Peter later in the Gospel, when he swears loyalty to Jesus (26.33, 35), denies him (26.75) and is re-commissioned (as one of the eleven, 28.16-20).

## John

John's narrative of the walking on the water is shorter and more compact than that of Mark and Matthew. It is also a little more cryptic. John statement's that it was now dark (v. 17) may have symbolic overtones. In John's Gospel, Jesus brings light into the darkness (cf. 8.12; 12.35, 46). The absence of Jesus is thus the absence of light.

John mentions the fear of the disciples but does not – in contrast to Mark and Matthew – relate it to the impression that they are seeing a ghost. Jesus' words, *It is I*, literally, 'I am', have special significance in this Gospel because of the various 'I am' sayings we have in it (e.g, 6.48, 51; 8.12).





When the disciples realise that the figure walking on the water is Jesus, they want to take him into the boat (v. 21). Unlike in Mark and Matthew, we do not read that Jesus actually

gets in, though perhaps we are meant to deduce that he does so. John does not indicate that the wind ceases; rather, he focuses on the boat's speedy arrival at the shore (perhaps making an allusion to Ps 107.30: *he brought them to their desired haven*).

## Summary

The three Gospel writers communicate the same story with different emphases. Mark accentuates the sense of a theophany, or appearance of God, by speaking of Jesus intending to 'pass by'. Matthew continues the story with Peter's unsuccessful attempt to walk on the water towards Jesus, and ends with a strong affirmation of Jesus' divine sonship. John indirectly points to Jesus' light-giving presence.

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