WALKING ON THE WATER:
IS MARK 6:50 A DEITY OF JESUS PROOF TEXT?

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The story of Jesus walking on the water occurs with several variations in three of the four gospels — in Mark and Matthew among the Synoptics (Mark 6:45-52; Matt. 14:22-33) and also in the gospel of John (6:16-21). Luke for some reason does not make mention of it. In this brief article we will focus on the Marcan version, and in particular on one verse of that version, Mark 6:50, which Trinitarian interpreters have repeatedly used as a proof-text for the doctrine of the deity of Jesus.

A. ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης

One major authority classifies the story as "patently legendary."[1] Another conjectures that an error was made when this miracle story was translated from Hebrew to Greek: "When it was said that Jesus walked *by* the sea this was easily converted to *on* the sea, since the Hebrew word *al* has both meanings."[2] In the Matthean version of this story, Peter also walks on the sea:

> It was Peter who answered. "Lord," he said, "if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water. Jesus said, "Come." Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus across the water, but then noticing the wind, he took fright and began to sink. "Lord," he cried, "save me!" Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. "You have so little faith," he said. "Why did you doubt?" And as they got into the boat the wind dropped (Matt. 14:28-32).

A similar gravity-defying act is recounted of Elisha in 2 Kings 6:1-7, where he makes an axe-head float in the Jordan River:

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[1] Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, Penguin, 2001, 163.
[2] Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot: New Light on the History of Jesus*, The Disinformation Company, 2005, 272.

The brotherhood of prophets said to Elisha, "Look, the place where we are living with you is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, then, and each of us cut a beam there, and we will make our living quarters there." He replied, "Go!" "Be good enough to go with your servants," one of them said. "I will go," he replied, and [he] went with them. On reaching the Jordan they began cutting timber. But, as one of them was felling his beam, the iron axehead fell into the water. "Alas, my lord," he exclaimed, "and it was a borrowed one too!" "Where did it fall?" the man of God asked; and he showed him the spot. Then, cutting a stick, Elisha threw it in at that point and made the iron axehead float. "Lift it out," he said; and the man stretched out his hand and took it (New Jerusalem Bible).

In this light, what Jesus is said to have done is not totally *sui generis* or absolutely unique.

B. ἐγώ εἰμι

Other scholarly works, on the other end of the spectrum, treat the story highly as a place where Jesus revealed himself as GOD, and Exodus 3:14 is perceived as alluded to in the ἐγώ εἰμι ("It is I") whereby he identified himself to the twelve. For example, the New American Bible, famous for translating ἐγώ εἰμι as "I am" in the mouth of Jesus at seven places in the Gospel of John (8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8), has this to say at Mark 6:50: "It is I, do not be afraid!: literally, 'I am.' This may reflect the divine revelatory formula of Exodus 3:14." *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* follows suit and declares: "I am he: In the context of self-disclosure and theophany, this phrase must allude to the OT revelation formula (Ex. 3:14; Deut. 32:39; Isa. 41:4, 43:10 applied to Yahweh)."[3]

This line of thinking illustrated in these Catholic sources is not a new one and can be traced as far back as the 18th century. The Protestant commentator Matthew Henry in his marvelously skillful commentary (1706) says this on the words of Jesus at Mark 6:50: "He said, ἐγώ εἰμι — I am he, or I am, it is God's name when he comes to deliver Israel, Exodus 3:14."[4] In order to make the connection between Mark 6:50 and Exodus 3:14, Henry relies upon the literal meaning of ἐγώ εἰμι ("I am")

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[3] *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 611. More dogmatically, La Bible de Jerusalem (1998) says: "La formule 'c'est moi,' litt. 'je suis,' evoque le Nom divin, Ex 3 14-15."
[4] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1706, Vol. V.

and not its actual meaning ("It is I"). And both of his translations of ἐγώ εἰμι in this context are wrong. ἐγώ εἰμι here does not mean "I am he" or "I am." It means rather "It is I" or "It's me," as the New Jerusalem Bible puts it colloquially.

Near the end of the next century B. W. Johnson in *The People's New Testament* (1891) harps on the same string. He has this to say about the ἐγώ εἰμι of Mark 6:50:

> "It is I": Literally, I am. The same language used by Jesus in Jerusalem (John 8:58), for which the Pharisees would have stoned him, and in the Old Testament to designate Jehovah (Exod. 3:14). Here I should prefer to give it this meaning: Christ says not merely, "It is I, your Friend and Master"; he says, at least implies, it is the "I AM," who is coming to you, the Almighty One who rules wind and waves, who made them, and whom they obey.

Notice that he indicates that the text does note mean what he says it means but that it "implies" it. Again, like Henry, he does not rely upon the actual meaning of the Greek idiom, but the literal meaning. Moreover, observe that he equates the ἐγώ εἰμι of Mark 6:50 with the ἐγώ εἰμι of John 8:58. But they are not the same in meaning though the words are the same. The ἐγώ εἰμι of Mark 6:50 is to be translated "It is I" or "It's me." And the ἐγώ εἰμι of John 8:58 is to be translated "I am he" (see John 8:24 and 8:28; cf. 4:26) though Trinitarians have uniformly translated this clause in English as "I am" (NJB) or "I AM" (NAB) or "I Am" (JB), attempting thereby to link it with the name of GOD in Exodus 3:14 as it is translated in English.

Though examples could be multiplied, let one more suffice for now. More recently, Patrick J. Ryan in his book *The Coming of Our God: Scriptural Reflections for Advent*, *Christmas and Epiphany* writes:

> Mark, Matthew and John all connect with the feeding of the five thousand a subsequent epiphany of God in Jesus' coming to the disciples in a storm on the Sea of Galilee…Jesus demonstrated that he was not only not a ghost but that he was more than a miracle-working mortal prophet. Using the divine name to identify himself, "At once he spoke with them: 'Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid'" (Mark 6:50). "It is I" is, in Greek, more literally, "I am," the core of the divine name revealed to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:14).[5]

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[5] Paulist Press, 1999, 177-78.

Again a link is made between the Greek of Mark 6:50 and the English of Exodus 3:14, as we have seen above, which is like comparing apples and oranges. For a true link to be established between these two texts the Greek of Mark 6:50 should be compared with the Greek translation of Exodus 3:14 contained in the Septuagint. The divine name at Exodus 3:14 is not ἐγώ εἰμι. It is ὁ ὤν. Additionally, on the basis of his incorrect comparison, he concludes that Jesus was revealing himself as GOD in this story, and he classifies it as "an epiphany of God." (Daniel J. Harrington, S. J. in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* calls it a theophany in the quotation previously cited.) Both classifications are incorrect.

What can be said further about this interpretation which still persists today? Can a link be made between Mark 6:50 and parallels and Exodus 3:14? Was Jesus declaring himself to be the God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush when he walked on the sea and said "It is I" or, as the New Jerusalem Bible translates it, "It's me"? The answer is simply no.

Mark 6:50 cannot serve as a proof-text for the doctrine of the deity of Jesus. Why? Firstly, because there is no connection between the ἐγώ εἰμι of Mark 6:50 and the ὁ ὤν of Exodus 3:14 when the Septuagint is consulted and compared with the Greek text of the New Testament. The gospel of Mark was written in Greek for Greek-speaking Gentiles (see 7:3-4; 7:19b, cp. Matt. 15:17; 13:18, cp. Matt. 24:20). If the author had intended his readers to make a connection between the words of Jesus in Mark 6:50 and the words of Yahweh in Exodus 3:14, he would have put the same words in the mouth of Jesus here that Yahweh uses in the Septuagint. But he didn't. Obviously, then, they did not make such a connection, nor could they. It was not his intention that readers should so. An examination of Greek commentaries on Mark will confirm this. There are no Greek commentators at any period in the history of Christianity who draw a connection between Mark 6:50 and Exodus 3:14, and who use this text to prove the doctrine of the deity of Jesus.

Secondly, even in English there is no connection between the "It is I" or "It's me" of Mark 6:50 and the "I Am" of Exodus 3:14. (A similar error is constantly made at John 8:58.) Trinitarians try to make a connection by translating ἐγώ εἰμι at Mark 6:50 literally, "I am," and then comparing this with the English translation of the Hebrew text of Exodus 3:14. But this is an illegitimate exegetical procedure. ἐγώ εἰμι here does not mean "I am," and the literal translation of the name of GOD in the Greek of Exodus 3:14 (ὁ ὤν) is not "I Am" but "The Being" or "He Who Is." Furthermore, the Hebrew text for GOD's name at the

same place is literally "I Will Be" and not "I Am."[6] So, then, *neither the Greek of the Septuagint nor the Hebrew of the Massoretic text will support the Trinitarian interpretation of Mark 6:50 as a proof-text for the doctrine of the deity of Jesus.*

Thirdly, Matthew shows that the twelve did not come to the conclusion that Jesus was GOD when he said, "It is I." He says that after Jesus entered the boat, the twelve bowed before him and said, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matt. 14:33). A comparison of this text with Matthew 16:16 shows that this was a declaration by them of a belief that he was the Messiah, not a divine being. And this declaration at Matthew 16:16 receives high praise as a divine revelation. It would not have been so praised if the Apostles were supposed to have concluded that Jesus was God. Nowhere in the other two accounts can it be shown that the twelve concluded that Jesus was GOD because he said simply, "It is I" or "It's me." This conclusion of Trinitarian commentators was not the conclusion of the twelve. The author of the fourth gospel, who includes this story among the several other signs he selected, indicates quite plainly that it was included so that the reader might believe "that the Messiah, the Son of God is Jesus" (John 20:31).

Fourthly, and finally, Trinitarian interpreters[7] who see a double-entendre here in the ἐγώ εἰμι of the Greek text ("It is I" + "I AM") overlook the fact that Jesus did not speak Greek in this situation. Jesus was a Galilean Jew and spoke his native tongue in all of his dealings with the twelve. How were the disciples supposed to have comprehended a double-entendre in Greek when no Greek was spoken in the original setting?

Why do interpreters make this mistake, then? They do so from a Trinitarian bias which seeks to find proofs of their doctrine of the deity of Jesus in as many places as possible and also from a failure to carefully study the underlying Greek text. Anthony Buzzard has shown in his new book *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian* how widespread is a similar error at Mark 12:36, which contains a quote of Psalm 110:1.[8] When we see

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[6] See Exodus 3:12: "I will be (אֶהְיֶה) with you." This same word, אֶהְיֶה**,** is the word given as GOD's name at Exodus 3:14; וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה׃ וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלָחַנִי אֲלֵיכֶם. "And [Elohim] said to [Moshe, I-Will-Be-What-I-Will-Be]. He continued, 'Thus shall you say to the Israelites, '[I-Will-Be] sent me to you'" (New Jewish Publication Society Version, modified).

[7] Like Raymond Brown, *Introduction to New Testament Christology*, Paulist Press, 1994, 137, note 202.

[8] Restoration Fellowship, 2007, 86-87, 156-161.

Trinitarians committing such careless blunders of interpretation where the linguistic facts do not support their conclusion, we can be sure we are standing on solid ground and are not blinded by the mist of polemical fervor when we declare that they are wrong. Neither Mark 6:50 nor Mark 12:36, nor for that matter John 8:58, can be made to prove that Jesus was GOD. Mark 6:45-52 is accurately to be termed neither a theophany nor an epiphany of GOD. And Mark 6:50 does not "reflect the divine revelatory formula of Exodus 3:14." It means simply, "It is I" or "It's me."

At first, the disciples in the story thought that Jesus was a ghost (φάντασμα). Upon further enlightenment they became aware that he was a man, the man Jesus. Today's disciples look upon Jesus here and think that he was GOD (a term which Jesus in the gospel of John defines as a spirit/a ghost, John 4:24). They are in need of further enlightenment.