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A Ghost on the Water? Understanding an Absurdity in Mark 6:49–50

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In Mark 6:49–50, the author dramatically defines the disciples' miscomprehension of Jesus through the insertion of the absurd: the belief that a ghost could walk on water.¹ Exegesis of the pericope of Jesus' walking on the water is enhanced by an understanding of ancient beliefs about ghosts, as described in tales of hauntings and similar phenomena in Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources. By identifying in this ancient literature characteristics common to the Markan account, one may detect how Mark initially establishes the expectation for a phantasmic appearance and then diverges significantly to emphasize the disciples' misconstrual of Jesus' messiahship.

There is currently a near consensus that the pericope that encompasses Mark 6:49–50 represents, at least in part, an epiphany.² This categorization has much to

I would like to thank Adela Yarbro Collins for her insightful reviews of previous drafts. A version of this paper was presented in the Synoptic Gospels Section at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in Washington, D.C., November 21, 2006.

¹ The "absurdity" of this belief in its ancient context will be documented below. For the sake of simplicity the author of the Gospel will be referred to as "Mark," although I acknowledge that this pericope may very well have come from a pre-Markan source. See Paul Achtemeier, "Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae," *JBL* 89 (1970): 281–84.

² E.g., John Paul Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea: Meaning and Gospel Functions of Matt. 14:22–23, Mark 6:45–52 and John 6:15b–21* (AnBib 87; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 72–73, 118; Robert A. Guelich, *Mark*, vol. 1, 1–8:26 (WBC 34A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 351; William Richard Stegner, who compares it specifically with the epiphany of Exodus 14 ("Jesus' Walking on the Water: Mark 6.45–52," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* [ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner; JSNTSup 104; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994], 212–34); Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27A; New York: Double-

do with parallels with other epiphanies, and, consequently, these parallels have been influential in the interpretation of φάντασμα. Some scholars have argued for direct allusion to the appearance of ΥΗΩΗ in the OT, and others for the prefiguration of NT resurrection motifs.³ Still others have seen the ostensible φάντασμα to be a foil to an actual “Christophany”; these scholars emphasize that the disciples actually think that Jesus is a ghost and therefore respond in fear instead of faith.⁴ Little has been done, however, to identify precise parallels to this account of a perceived ghost on a lake. Some have assumed that such an account is a sort of timeless tale, “wie es in den See-Erzählungen aller Völker und Zeiten spukt.”⁵ Others have simply noted the popular belief in apparitions among ancient people, emphasizing either

day, 2000), 429, 430; and Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 134. Ernst Lohmeyer considers the pericope an epiphany that has been combined with “die der Rettung aus Lebensgefahr” (*Das Evangelium des Markus* [1937; repr., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954], 134); Gerd Theissen agrees and deems it a “soteriological epiphany” (*The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* [trans. Francis McDonagh: Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983], 97); see also Joachim Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (2 vols.; EKKNT 2; Zurich: Benziger, 1978), 267–69. Moloney refutes Gnilka, arguing that evidence is lacking in the text for an original epiphany being transformed into a rescue story (Moloney, *Gospel of Mark*, 134 n. 92). Adela Yarbro Collins disagrees with Theissen’s emphasis on “an extraordinary visual phenomenon” but accepts that themes of both epiphany and rescue story are woven together in this pericope (“Rulers, Divine Men, and Walking on the Water,” in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi* [ed. Lukas Bormann et al.; NovTSup 74; Leiden: Brill, 1994], 211; see also 209–10 for a brief review of the positions of Dibelius and Bultmann).

³ J. Duncan M. Derrett notes the following Hebrew Bible epiphanies: “A φάντασμα was the chosen method by which ΥΗΩΗ appeared to Abimelech . . . and in the guise of an Angel inspired the fainthearted Gideon and proved the strength of the ambiguous Jacob. . . . The spirit of the Lord was moving over the waters, yet those personally present instinctively thought it a ghost!” (“Why and How Jesus Walked on the Sea,” *NovT* 23 [1981]: 345). See also Lohmeyer, who suggests a less direct allusion to similar OT accounts: “so ging einst Jahve an Mose auf dem Sinai oder an Elia auf dem Horeb ‘vorüber’” (*Evangelium des Markus*, 133). Among those who draw on NT resurrection motifs, Austin Farrer argues that the “apparition” of Jesus on the water is the “closest type” for “the apparition of the angel at the tomb” (*A Study in St Mark* [London: Dacre, 1951], 178). Joel Marcus notes parallels between Mark 6 and Luke 24 (*Mark 1–8*, 433). Rudolf Bultmann, in his revised *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, considered the possibility that Mark 6:48ff. was a misplaced resurrection narrative (*The History of the Synoptic Tradition* [2nd ed.; trans. John Marsh: New York: Harper & Row, 1968], 425; see also Johannes Leipoldt, “Zu den Auferstehungs-Geschichten,” *TLZ* 12 [1948]: 737–42, esp. 741).

⁴ E.g., Guelich, *Mark*, 351; and Moloney, *Gospel of Mark*, 134. See also John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, who argue for a “contrast” between the “illusion” of a specter and “the calming words and actions of Jesus” (*The Gospel of Mark* [Sacra Pagina 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002], 213).

⁵ E.g., Lohmeyer, *Evangelium des Markus*, 134–35.

Hebrew or Greek traditions.⁶ Although some of these sources indeed share certain characteristics with the account of Jesus walking on water, none of them mentions water, much less a ghost walking on water. A few scholars have attempted to locate a parallel sea-walking account. C. F. D. Moule cites Strack-Billerbeck as evidence that “Jewish popular belief often recounted the appearance of unusual apparitions on the sea.”⁷ Their primary example, however, is not only quite late, *b. B. Bat.* 73a, but also makes no mention of ghosts.⁸ The talmudic text instead recounts how sailors should use a special club inscribed with the name of the Lord to ward off extraordinary (but not ghostly) waves. Finding no informative parallels in Hebrew sources, others have turned to Greek. According to Eduard Schweizer, “Greek writers asserted that supermen and demons could walk upon the sea.”⁹ Yet “supermen” and the “demons” to which Schweizer refers are not ghosts.¹⁰ Adela Yarbro Collins has written a thorough treatment of the Greco-Roman texts that parallel Jesus’ walking on the sea and has quite convincingly demonstrated the wealth of evidence for gods, god-gifted rulers, and divine men walking on the sea.¹¹ This, however, problematizes the passage further. Since there exists abundant evidence for gods and godlike beings who walk the seas, and no evidence outside of this pericope for the appearance of ghosts on water, why would Mark record that the disciples thought that Jesus was a ghost? Before this question can be answered one must first determine the plausibility of an ancient belief that a ghost *could* walk on water despite the lack of evidence for tales where ghosts did walk on water.

⁶ For ancient Jewish traditions, see Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (1905; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 138; he cites Job 4:15ff.; 20:8; and Wis 17:4, 15 in support of this belief. See also Vincent Taylor, who cites similar sources (*The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* [London: Macmillan, 1966], 330). Derrett, in addition to the Hebrew Bible, cites several Greek sources, including Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*, 710; Plato, *Phaedo* 81D, *Timaeus* 71A; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4.62.5; Plutarch, *Dion* 2.4; and Lucian, *Philopseudes* 29 (“Why and How Jesus Walked on the Sea,” 345 n. 63).

⁷ C. F. D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 226–27.

⁸ Str-B 1:691. See also William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 236–37; alluding to Strack-Billerbeck, he, too, cites *b. B. Bat.* 73a as ostensible evidence for the “popular belief that spirits of the night brought disaster.” Str-B also cites *b. Sanh.* 44a, which warns against greeting people at night for fear of demons, and *b. Meg.* 3a, which mentions only Daniel’s fearful response to a vision. Neither of these additional citations includes any mention of water.

⁹ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), 141; no examples to support this claim are provided.

¹⁰ Although the Greek δαίμων can be used to signify “ghost,” the δαίμονες who walk on water are clearly gods not ghouls; see Yarbro Collins, “Rulers, Divine Men,” 207–27.

¹¹ Yarbro Collins, “Rulers, Divine Men,” 207–27. Stegner has unconvincingly challenged the divine man interpretation of the pericope based on the use of the word φάντασμα (“Jesus’ Walking on the Water,” 231); the problems with his position will be dealt with below.

I. TERMINOLOGY

Schweizer's use of the terms "supermen" and "demons," describing their frequent ambulation on the sea, demonstrates the importance of clarifying what is meant by the word φάντασμα, and how one should define a ghost. "Ghost" is certainly not the only possible translation for φάντασμα, and those who wish to emphasize the epiphanic nature of the appearance have a wealth of vocabulary from which to draw.¹² During the time that Mark was written, φάντασμα was used synonymously with "signs," or in parallel with "vision" (ὄψις) and "dream" (ὄναρ), or even to refer to an "angel" or heavenly being.¹³ Nevertheless, Rudolf Bultmann and Dieter Lührmann were correct to insist on the translation "ghost" for Mark 6:49, since the text seems to indicate that φάντασμα represents something other than the epiphany that the disciples were actually witnessing: they only "thought that he was a ghost" (ἔδοξαν ὅτι φάντασμα ἔστιν).¹⁴

Defining how "ghost" was understood in the ancient world is much more difficult than defining the word φάντασμα, which is only one of a series of words used interchangeably to signify "ghost" and also "god." Schweizer's assumption that "supermen" and "demons" who walked on water should be comparable to Mark's "ghost" would seem to have merit since, as Debbie Felton acknowledges, "terminology used to refer to types of ghost was vague, and the various words were often used synonymously."¹⁵ Philo, in his commentary *On the Giants*, insists that ultimately several words for "ghosts" and "divine beings" mean the same thing: "So if you realize that souls and demons and angels are but different names for the same one underlying object, you will cast from you that most grievous burden, the fear

¹² See nn. 3 and 4 above.

¹³ For synonymy with "signs," see Josephus, *J.W.* 6.297; 7.438; Plutarch, *Otho* 4.1–4. For examples of φάντασμα in parallel with "vision" (ὄψις) and "dream" (ὄναρ), see Josephus, *A.J.* 2.82. Philo uses φάντασμα almost exclusively in parallel with "dream"; see *Fug.* 126–30, 142–46; *Somn.* 2.101–66. For φάσμα as "vision," see Isa 28:7 and Job 20:8. For φάντασμα referring to an "angel" or heavenly being, see Josephus, *A.J.* 1.333; 5.277. It should be noted that some words for "ghost" (not φάντασμα) are also used for "divinity." J. R. Porter notes that "the Hebrew word rendered as 'apparition' in [Job 4.16] [הַמַּחֲזִיקִים] is sometimes used in the Old Testament of the numinous form of Yahweh" ("Ghosts in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East," in *The Folklore of Ghosts* [ed. Hilda R. Ellis Davidson and W. M. S. Russell; Mistletoe Series 15; Cambridge: Published for the Folklore Society by D. S. Brewer, 1981], 236; cf. 234–35); for example, the word הַמַּחֲזִיקִים appears also in Num 12:8 and Ps 17:15.

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann and Dieter Lührmann, "φάντασμα," *TDNT* 9:6. Translating φάντασμα as something other than an epiphany is further necessitated by the conclusion that the disciples' hearts were hard (Mark 6:52).

¹⁵ D. Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost Stories from Classical Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 25.

of demons or superstition” (4.16).¹⁶ Philo’s insistence on conflating these terms, however, suggests that many did not agree and thus did not consider the angels of heaven to be in the same category as the spirits of the dead. Thus, although Schweizer’s conflation of categories was argued in antiquity as well, those who were considered superstitious still distinguished, if not between terms, then between characteristics.

Ghosts are typically distinguished from deities first by their origin: they are the spirits or souls of dead human beings. Even though the notion that ghosts are “the souls of the deceased” is familiar to modern folklore, Everett Ferguson notes that it “was actually a fairly common Greek idea.”¹⁷ This understanding of the origin of ghosts appears also in Jewish writings. According to *1 Enoch*, the evil spirits that disturb humankind are the spirits of the giants who were begotten by the watchers and the daughters of men (15:7–16:1). *Jubilees* 10:1–13 suggests that fallen angels and evil spirits work together against humans and that, while many of the evil spirits of the deceased giants were already experiencing their condemnation, one-tenth were allowed to remain and torment humankind.¹⁸ This feature alone allows one to distinguish ghosts from those divine beings who could walk on water. According to Yarbro Collins, those who could walk on water included *living* heroes such as Hercules, Euphemus, and Orion, and also gods such as Neptune, who rides his chariot across the sea.¹⁹ There is, however, no account of the spirit or soul of one who had died walking on the sea.

Other distinguishing characteristics are particular to the *function* of the phantom. For example, all apparitions that materialize in order to warn the living of some impending danger share certain features: they typically take place in daylight, during times of danger such as war or political strife. These phantoms are frequently female and deliver their message of warning either in direct speech or through signs.²⁰ Two additional features have caused some to question whether these warning apparitions can indeed be called ghosts or if they are rather deities: they are abnormally large and their appearance is often accompanied by an earthquake or other physical manifestation of power.²¹ Thus, the particular features and functions of phantoms allow one to distinguish between ghost and god.

¹⁶ *Philo*, vol. 2 (trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 453, cited by Everett Ferguson, *Demonology of the Early Christian World* (Symposium Series 12; New York/Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1984), 83.

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Demonology*, 41. He here writes specifically of “demons”; however, as noted in the preceding paragraph, the terms “ghost” and “demon” are frequently used interchangeably (see also p. 42).

¹⁸ *Life of Adam and Eve* 16–17 describes the origin of these angels from heaven who rebelled and were cast down to earth. See Ferguson, *Demonology*, 76.

¹⁹ See Yarbro Collins, “Rulers, Divine Men,” 214–17.

²⁰ Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 6, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF APPARITIONS

In Mark, the ostensible phantom appears at night, specifically at the fourth watch, and causes fear. These few features are commonly associated with the haunting specter. Ghosts who haunt typically appear in dreams or at night and pester the living to have their remains properly buried. Cicero recounts the misfortune of two journeying Arcadians who stop for the night at Megara. After one is murdered the other sees his ghost in a dream: “As he slept on he saw another vision in which the same man begged him that he should not suffer his death to go unavenged” (*Div.* 1.57).²² Although in this account the ghost left its remains to seek his friend, it is more common for a ghost to haunt the location either of its death or of its remains. Pausanias records the ghostly battle that continues nightly on the plains of Marathon: “All night long there one can hear the sound of horses neighing and men at war” (*Attica* 32.4).²³ Besides the dreams, the need for vengeance or proper burial, and the location of haunting, there are three additional common features that, as noted above, appear more obviously in Mark: (1) ghosts appear at night; (2) though difficult to see, they look as they did in life, yet pale or shadowy; and (3) they cause fear and terror for the living whom they encounter. A fuller examination of how each of these three characteristics functions in Mark 6 and other ghost stories will make clear that Mark fulfills the audience’s expectations for a ghost story before he diverges in a significant way.

At Night

Each encounter with the spiritual realm narrated in Mark prior to the pericope encompassing 6:49–50 was an exorcism of a πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον, and each of these encounters seems to have occurred during the day.²⁴ The pericope in Mark 6, which includes an ostensible ghost sighting, is the first such account said explicitly to occur at night: the account begins in 6:47 “when it was evening” (ὄψις

²² Trans. Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 158.

²³ Trans. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 151. See also Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13.

²⁴ The exorcism in the synagogue can safely be assumed to have taken place during the day (Mark 1:23–27). The encounter with the Gerasene demoniac is less clear: they had entered the boats to cross the sea at evening (4:35). Jesus was sleeping on the boat (4:38), yet when they arrive there are no further references to time. The time of day does not seem to be significant for the pericope of the Gerasene demoniac; the conclusion, however, is narrated in such a way that the reader may assume it to be daylight: the herders observe the swine diving into the lake and quickly assemble the townsfolk to drive Jesus from their land (5:14–17). Mark 3:11–12 implies that Jesus had performed other exorcisms, but none of these is narrated.

γενομένης) and continues through the fourth and final “watch of the night” (τετάρτην φυλακὴν τῆς νυκτός) in 6:48. This is significant for the sighting of the φάντασμα, since night is the ideal time for spotting a disembodied specter. Compare the modern superstition of a “bewitching hour.”²⁵ In Pausanias’s description of the haunting of Marathon, the time is specific: “All night long,” he insists, “one can hear the sound of . . . men at war” (*Attica* 32.4). Night and darkness are also a primary theme in the Wisdom of Solomon, where a list of the Israelites’ blessings is followed immediately by a description of the terrorization of the Egyptians during the plague of darkness (17:1–17). Although intending to oppress the Israelites, the Egyptians become the ones “chained with darkness and fettered with a long night” (δέσμιοι σκότους καὶ μακροῦς πεδῆται νυκτός [17:2]).²⁶ It is in this dark and dreamlike state that they are tormented by “specters” (ινδάλματες [17:3]) and “faint phantoms” (φάσματα κατηφῆ [17:4]). Isaiah, in a warning to those who would engage in necromancy,²⁷ suggests that such conjurers might find themselves in the fellowship of those they summon: they will “not have a dawn” (אין־לו שחר [Isa 8:20]) and “will be cast into distress and blackness and the gloom of distress and darkness” (והנה צרה והשכה מעוף צוקה ואפלה מנחה [8:22]). Isaiah seems to be suggesting that those who consult ghosts become like ghosts, dwelling in the night. Mark, then, in this first allusion to a ghostly vision, and in contrast to the previous embodied specters of the exorcism accounts, selects nighttime as the ideal setting for such an occurrence.²⁸

The Fourth Watch

By narrating that the apparition was sighted during the “fourth watch of the night” (Mark 6:48), the author provides the account with another aspect of verisimilitude. The fourth watch, of course, encompasses the final hours of night: a time when the sun is not yet visible but its rays have just begun to illuminate the land. This is an important detail since, contrary to some depictions in modern media, in antiquity it was believed that ghosts did not glow; therefore, a minute amount of light was required for them to be seen.²⁹ Rather than luminescent, ghosts

²⁵ Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 6–7.

²⁶ For other references to night and darkness, see Wis 17:5–6, 14.

²⁷ Prohibited in Deut 18:11.

²⁸ In early Mesopotamian belief, evil spirits were thought to bring darkness as well as storms (Porter, “Ghosts in the Old Testament,” 222); whether such a belief was current in Mark’s time is uncertain.

²⁹ Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 55. Porter suggests that, in ancient Mesopotamia, ghosts “[emitted] a pale light, so that they were known as *khuu*, the ‘luminous ones’” (“Ghosts in the Old Testament,” 232). Porter’s etymological explanation of the Akkadian *khuu* is his only evidence for an ancient belief in the luminescence of ghosts; evidence from any other ancient culture is not extant.

are described as being as pale as death or as black as ash, having the image of their mortal body either in life or often at the time of their gruesome death.³⁰ Some may have believed that the visibility of such “shadowy apparitions (σκιοειδῆ φαντάσματα) of souls” was possible because they “were not set free in purity” from the visible realm (Plato, *Phaedo* 81D).³¹ Regardless of why such souls became “shadowy,” the common belief that they were implied certain conditions for a proper sighting. Since these phantoms do not produce light, they are usually seen at night by the aid of fire; and since they are “shadowy,” too much light would cause them to disappear.³² According to the passage from Wisdom of Solomon cited in the previous section, the Egyptians experienced their dark terrors with the aid of a “self-lit fire” (αὐτομάτη πυρά [17:6]). This motif, the necessity of some light, is common in a variety of other texts as well. Greco-Roman funerary festivities generally included a lamplit procession in imitation of Hecate, who, as the patron deity of ghosts, was frequently depicted carrying a torch “to help light the way in the gloomy underworld.”³³ Brutus, on the night before he was to lead his army from Asia into Europe, encountered an apparition at an ideal time for such a sighting. As Appian recounts, the ghost appeared to Brutus just as the light was dimming (μαραινομένου τοῦ φωτός).³⁴ In Mark’s account, the light is just beginning to dawn. This liminal period, between night and day, would provide the perfect opportunity for sighting a specter.

Fearful Response

At the sight of what the disciples believed was a ghost, “they cried out; for all saw it and were terrified” (καὶ ἀνέκραξαν· πάντες γὰρ αὐτὸν εἶδον καὶ ἐταράχθησαν [Mark 6:49–50]). Although there were a variety of ghosts with various intentions, those that appeared at night were typically the haunting sort, the kind that would inspire fear—a common motif in ancient ghost stories. This should come as no surprise since such a response remains typical of ghost stories today. Plutarch, who is usually skeptical of such things as ghosts, admits to their reality based on the testimonies of Dion and Brutus, “men of solid understanding and philosophic training” (*Dion* 2.5).³⁵ He then notes concerning these particular ghosts that they are “mean and malignant spirits” who “try to confound and terrify

³⁰ Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 14–16, 55–56.

³¹ Harold North Fowler, *Plato, I: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 282–85 (translation modified; emphasis added).

³² Traditionally at cockcrow (Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 7).

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁴ Greek text from Horace White, *Appian’s Roman History* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 366.

³⁵ Trans. Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch’s Lives* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 5.

[people]” (2.5–6).³⁶ This theme has appeared already in previous citations, such as Wis 17:15: “for sudden and unexpected fear overwhelmed them” (NRSV). J. R. Porter, contrasting the ghost tales of the ancient Near East to those of the Greco-Roman world, concludes that, in the Near East, ghosts were always considered “inimical to the living” and their “attitude was almost invariably one of fear and hostility.”³⁷ Even in instances of prayers to the dead, the hope was that the dead would intercede while maintaining their distance from the land of the living.³⁸ Fear is *the* reaction that an audience would expect in an account of a ghostly appearance.

III. WALKING ON WATER

Mark, then, has set the scene for a classic tale of a haunting specter through his use of the word φάντασμα, the nighttime hours, the faint light of an approaching dawn, and the disciples’ fearful response. Yet Mark diverges drastically from one key component of ancient ghost stories that involve water: ghosts cannot walk on water.³⁹ Several Greek and Latin sources demonstrate this ghostly inability.

Pausanias tells of a ghost that haunted the city of Temesa (*Elis* 2.6.5–11).⁴⁰ The ghost (δαίμων), referred to only as the “Hero,” was once a member of Odysseus’s crew, who had been stoned by the people of Temesa for raping one of the women of that city. After Odysseus’s departure, the ghost begins killing the people of the city. The Pythia refuses to allow the townspeople to flee and insists that they propitiate the spirit by building it a temple and offering it a beautiful young woman once a year. The scandal is resolved by the arrival of the famous Euthymus, who, upon seeing the virgin offering falls in love with her and defeats the Hero. The ghost’s demise is described in the following terms: “the Hero disappeared, sinking into the sea” (ὁ Ἥρωος ἀφανίζεται τε καταδύς ἐς θάλασσαν) (*Elis* II 6.10).⁴¹ In this instance, the ghost’s submergence into water signifies its destruction.

³⁶ Cf. Plutarch, *Superstition*, 165–66.

³⁷ Porter, “Ghosts in the Old Testament,” 219–20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ There are no accounts of ghosts and water in Hebrew (*pace* Strack-Billerbeck). Although πνεῦμα can be translated “ghost,” the πνεῦμα that goes upon the water in Gen 1:2 clearly corresponds to the category of “deity” rather than “the dead.” All accounts of ghosts and water that follow are from Greek or Latin sources.

⁴⁰ See also Strabo, *Geogr.* 6.1.5. Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 26–27.

⁴¹ W. H. S. Jones, *Pausanias, Description of Greece* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 40–41 (translation modified). This story about defeating a demon by driving it into the sea finds a parallel in Mark. In ch. 5, Jesus encounters a demon who identifies itself as Legion. Although the author of Mark would seem to distinguish between the characteristics of “demon” and “ghost,” the parallel is significant. After Jesus learns the demon’s name, presumably with the intent of banishing it from its host, the demon pleads with Jesus that he “might not send them out of the land” (μὴ αὐτὰ ἀποστείλῃ ἔξω τῆς χώρας [Mark 5:10]). Just as Pausanias’s Euthymus drove the ghost of the “Hero” ἐκ τῆς γῆς (Pausanias, *Elis* II 6.10), Jesus apparently

In an account by Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 1.13–19), water not only serves as the place of destruction for the dead but also functions as a boundary. In this tale, a man named Socrates is killed and then restored to life through magic. Various stories of reanimated corpses survive, and in many of these the revenant is described as a ghost.⁴² For instance, these reembodied beings “generally vanish suddenly without leaving their bodies behind.”⁴³ Even on those occasions when their corpses must be dealt with again, the revenant can still be considered a ghost. One such case is found in Phlegon of Tralles, *Mirabilia* 1. The deceased Philinnion has been frequenting her parents’ guest, Machates; but when she is discovered by her parents in Machates’ room, her body immediately becomes lifeless again.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the reanimated and embodied Philinnion is specifically called a “ghost” (τὸ φάσμα [1.18]).⁴⁵ Although Apuleius’s reanimated Socrates is never explicitly called a “ghost,” his tale may still be considered in this survey of ghost stories since he clearly falls into the category of “revenant.”⁴⁶

The first death of Socrates occurs as he sleeps. Although he is secure behind bolted doors, two witch sisters enter. Meroe slices open his neck, then reaches down into his body to pull out his heart. Panthia next plugs the wound with a sponge and warns him not to cross the river. Arising the next morning with no sign of the wound yet finding himself extremely thirsty, Socrates goes straight to the forbidden river for a drink. No sooner do his lips touch the water than the life begins to drain from his body once again (Apuleius, *Metam.* 1.19).⁴⁷ Water not only is given power through a curse to kill the already-dead Socrates—to kill a ghost—but also, because of that power, the water functions as a boundary.

intends the same fate for the ghost of Legion. At this point, however, the “unclean spirits” beg to enter a herd of swine (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 81C–D), and, although Jesus concedes, the demons suffer the same fate as Pausanias’s “Hero”: “they drowned in the sea” (ἐπνίγοντο ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ [Mark 5:13]). Even though it is the swine that are observed sinking into the lake, it is clear enough that the account is about the destruction of demons, not swine. The swine seem to serve as an observable manifestation of the defeat of the demons, since, as with the ghosts discussed here, in the daylight hours the semi-physical forms of the demons could not be seen. For other examples of physical manifestations of the departure of demons in daylight, see Josephus, *A.J.* 8.48; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 4.20.

⁴² See Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 26

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁴ See Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 159–61.

⁴⁵ Kai Brodersen, *Phlegon von Tralleis das Buch der Wunder: und Zeugnisse seiner Wirkungsgeschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 28.

⁴⁶ For a more detailed discussion of why Apuleius’s reanimated Socrates should be considered a ghost, see Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 28.

⁴⁷ Necdum satis extremis labiis summum aquae rorem attigerat, et iugulo eius vulnus dehiscit in profundum patorem et illa spongia de eo repente devolvitur eamque parvus admodum comitatur cruor; text from J. Arthur Hanson, *Apuleius, Metamorphoses* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 40, 42.

The notion of a river serving as boundary for the dead is common, especially in accounts that describe the ultimate dwelling place of the spirits, the abode of the dead. In the *Iliad*, the ghost of Patroclus reprimands Achilles for having forgotten him since his death and notes that until his corpse is properly interred the other spirits will not allow him to join them beyond the river (οὐδε μὲ πω μίσησθαί ὑπὲρ ποταμοῖο ἔωσιν [23.73]).⁴⁸ In the *Odyssey*, one river that separates the living from the dead is identified as Oceanus. Odysseus crosses Oceanus and proceeds until he arrives at the point where Cocytus, a branch of the river Styx, flows into the river Acheron (10.513).⁴⁹ Styx, the most famous of the waters that separate the living from the dead, is described in the *Aeneid* as hedging in the dead, barricading them into their rightful place: “its dreary water enchains them and Styx imprisons with his ninefold circles” (6.438–39).⁵⁰ Virgil also describes the means by which the dead enter their realm since they are unable to walk on water: Charon must ferry them across the river (*Aen.* 6.325–29). Of course, it is only the properly buried whom Charon will ferry; the unburied remain on the side of the living to haunt.

It seems that there also existed a concern for those who had died and were buried at sea. Since water is not a place for the dead, as has been demonstrated, a certain *scholium* on the *Odyssey* expresses the need for the souls of those who have perished at sea to return to land. The *scholium* responds to the story of Odysseus and his battle with the Cicones at Ismarus, wherein a number of his strongest men were killed before he fled with the rest into their ships. The *Odyssey* then continues telling of how, as they sailed away grieving the dead, Odysseus “called three times on each of the unfortunate companions who had died on the plain, slain by the Cicones” (9.62–66).⁵¹ The *scholium* reports that this act of calling on the dead three times was common when a person had died in a foreign land, since it allowed that person to return to the homeland.⁵² Following this remark, the *scholium* contains a note on those who died at sea: “Similarly the Athenians made cenotaphs for those who died at sea and set them beside the shore. They called their names three times, and this was how they came back.” Death at sea is portrayed in terms similar to death in a foreign land. Even for the sea-faring Athenians, the sea is considered a foreign place for the dead, a place where they cannot remain. That the cenotaph is not set up near other dead family members or even in a graveyard but

⁴⁸ Text from A. T. Murray, *Homer, The Iliad* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 498; see also Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 147.

⁴⁹ See Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 147.

⁵⁰ Trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, *Virgil* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 537; see also Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 148.

⁵¹ Trans. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 161.

⁵² *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Odysseam* 9.62 (Harleian MS no. 5674); trans. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 161. Greek text available in Gulielmus Dindorf, ed., *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Odysseam* (2 vols.; 1855; repr., Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1962), 411–12.

rather alongside the water suggests that it was necessary only to bring the souls out of the water.⁵³

Belief in the potential threat of water to the unburied spook must have led to the methods of ridding oneself of a particular ghost. Plutarch, in his rant against superstition (δεισιδαιμονία), describes those people who are deluded by their own dreams and entrust themselves to those beggars and imposters who insist on ritual or magic rites as a cure for these dream ghosts (ἔνυπνον φάντασμα) (*Superstition* 165–66).⁵⁴ Considering the frequency with which rivers and oceans are said to barricade ghosts, it should come as no surprise that the primary solution these “imposters” provide involves seeking refuge in the sea: “Immerse yourself in the ocean, and sit down on the ground and spend the whole day there” (βάπτισον σεαυτὸν εἰς θάλατταν καὶ καθίσας ἐν τῇ γῆ διημέρευσον [*ibid.*, 166.5–6]).⁵⁵

Water is, therefore, not the ideal location for a specter’s nightly stroll. Water is a hazard for ghosts. The sea serves as the final resting place for the phantom driven into it and presumably destroyed. Water is a boundary for spirits. Rivers function to impede the unburied dead from entering their rest and the buried dead from escaping their realm. Water is foreign to ghosts, and one who dies there must remain forever lost unless called to a cenotaph on the shore. Finally, since water is dangerous for the ghost, it can even be used as a defense to ward off unwanted spooks. It is clear that no one familiar with any of these accounts would believe that a ghost *could* walk on water.

IV. UNDERSTANDING MARK’S ABSURDITY AND INTERPRETING MARK 6:49–50

Mark includes several features common to classical ghost stories before diverging sharply in his insistence that the perceived ghost could walk on water. The reason for Mark including this absurdity can be understood best by comparison with one famous instance of a ghost story that also deviates from expectations: the Roman comedy of Plautus commonly called *Haunted House* (*Mostellaria*). The ghost story told within this play is understood to be a hoax by both the audience and all the characters involved except Theopropides, who is the object of the deception. Theopropides, the *credulus senex*, had returned home early from his business trip, but Tranio, his slave, wishes to keep him from entering the house. As expected

⁵³ Logically this practice should imply the temporary survival of the spirit of the dead in water and the movement of that spirit through water to land. Yet the author of this *scholium* shows no concern for this contradictory notion. The sole interest is the hasty removal of the spirit from water.

⁵⁴ Text from Frank Cole Babbitt, ed., *Plutarch’s Moralia, II* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 458, 460.

⁵⁵ Trans. Babbitt, LCL, modified.

from a *servus callidus*, Tranio had encouraged and abetted the son, Philolaches, in riotous living while his father was abroad. Now, with Theopropides unexpectedly approaching the house, and Philolaches' drunken friends still scattered about the floor, Tranio scrambles for a way to convince his master not to enter the home. Owing to Theopropides' superstitious nature, Tranio decides on the perfect deception: he would convince Theopropides that the house was haunted.

The tale that Tranio tells his master adopts many of the themes common to ghost stories. The ghost who is said to haunt the house is a guest who was murdered there long ago. This ghost appeared at night while a torch was still lit, and it appeared in the dreams of Philolaches (*Mostellaria* 479–95). Yet, as Felton demonstrates, Plautus's Tranio also diverges from audience expectation in several significant ways.⁵⁶ The first is obvious from the themes just listed: it would seem that Tranio has conflated two types of ghost story. In the typical haunted-house story the ghost is seen at night because the room is faintly lit by a torch. Tranio emphasizes that a torch was still lit, but he then proceeds to insist that Philolaches experienced the phantom in a dream. If in a dream, however, then there was no need to mention the torch. Furthermore, dreaming of ghosts is not a motif typical of haunted-house stories. Even in the play, Theopropides reacts with surprise and confusion that the ghost had appeared to his son while he was asleep instead of when he was awake (*ibid.*, 490–91). Tranio also claims to know that the corpse of the ghost is located in the house; yet, despite this claim, he gives no indication that he has attempted or intends to give it a proper burial—the typical solution to ghost problems.

Felton suggests that these divergences not only betray Tranio's improvisation but, more importantly, demonstrate just how credulous the *credulus senex* is. In Roman comedy it is typical for the *servus callidus* cleverly to control his master; however, in this case “the success of Tranio's story,” as Felton correctly observes, “depends not so much on [the slave's] own cleverness as on Theopropides' gullibility and superstitious nature.”⁵⁷ The divergences from what one expects in the story of a haunted house cause the tale to appear incredible and would certainly have stimulated laughter as the audience observed the bumbling Tranio attempting to hold his story together. Still more humor is engendered by Theopropides and his “willingness to believe such an inconsistent and unsupportable story.”⁵⁸ Felton suggests that Theopropides becomes the “most striking example” of the *credulus senex* within the Plautine corpus.⁵⁹ Theopropides earns this honor because of his insistence on believing a ghost story that diverges from audience expectation to such an extent that it appears absurd.

⁵⁶ Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome*, 55–60.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* “[W]e have to admit that Theopropides' stupidity and superstitious nature are largely responsible for the comedy” (*ibid.*).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

As Plautus does in *Mostellaria*, Mark presents several themes typical of classical ghost stories before diverging in a significant way. It is night, the time when there is at least the threat of phantoms looming. Jesus sees the disciples struggling to cross the lake against the wind and begins to walk toward them as light from the dawning sun has barely begun to illuminate their surroundings: the perfect time to sight a phantom. Yet it is not the nighttime hour nor the dimly lit sky to which Mark attributes the disciples' misconstrual of Jesus. Instead, he implies that their misunderstanding comes from "seeing him walking on the sea" (οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης περιπατοῦντα [Mark 6:49]). Mark suggests that the disciples thought that Jesus was a ghost when they witnessed him doing one thing that ghosts absolutely cannot do: walk on water. The Jewish and Greco-Roman audience, familiar with the sort of ghost stories recounted above, would have been particularly dumbfounded by the disciples' misunderstanding. If, in addition to this, one considers the research of Yarbrow Collins, then the disciples' misunderstanding becomes even more shocking.⁶⁰ Yarbrow Collins, as noted previously, reviews a wealth of Greco-Roman sources that describe divine men and gods walking on water. With so many prominent accounts, Mark's audience would certainly have understood Jesus' water-walk in terms of divine manifestation, yet the disciples in Mark do not.

While Theopropides' insistence on believing the absurd heightens the audience's awareness of his gullibility in Plautus's *Mostellaria*, in Mark the disciples' insistence on believing the absurd seems to emphasize, to the extreme, their failure to believe in Jesus. This is exactly what Mark records. After Jesus identifies himself, Mark describes the astonishment of the disciples, their lack of understanding, and the reason for that lack: their hearts were hardened (6:51–52). The disciples' lack of understanding has long been recognized as a Markan theme that appears throughout the Gospel.⁶¹ Here it forms a striking narrative portrayal of cognitive dissonance: the disciples clearly want Jesus to be something that he is not, to the point that they are willing to believe the absurd when Jesus approaches them as something much grander than they had imagined. Gods and divine men walk on water; ghosts do not. But when the disciples see Jesus walking on water, they believe the impossible rather than the obvious. Mark's insertion of this absurdity, "because they saw him walking on the sea they thought he was a ghost" (6:49), emphasizes in dramatic fashion the disciples' misconstrual of Jesus' messiahship.

⁶⁰ Yarbrow Collins, "Rulers, Divine Men," 207–27.

⁶¹ William Wrede argued that the disciples' unbelief formed part of a "messianic secret" motif in Mark (*The Messianic Secret* [trans. J. C. G. Greig; Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1971], 101–14; trans. of *Das Messiasgeheimnis in dem Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markus-evangeliums* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901]).