Tuesday Night Study

**Mark 6-7**

***Jesus Walks on Water***

Commentators have seen many references in the water, including God’s power of the wind and the waves—to which the psalms refer, e.g. Psalm 77—and the parting of the Red Sea. Psalm 77 movingly says:

“When the waters saw you, O God,  
    when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
    the very deep trembled.  
17 The clouds poured out water;  
    the skies thundered;  
    your arrows flashed on every side.  
18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
    your lightnings lit up the world;  
    the earth trembled and shook.  
19 Your way was through the sea,  
    your path, through the mighty waters;  
    yet your footprints were unseen.  
20 You led your people like a flock  
    by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Yet to my mind the text is a much clearer allusion to Genesis 1: “In the beginning when God created[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-1a)] the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-2b)] swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

***Phantasma***: Jesus is here depicted as a like a phantasma—a ghost, but in fact pneuma, the Spirit of God who swept over the face of the waters. That I believe is the allusion here.

**The fourth watch of the night**: It is telling that the disciples’ straining at the oars occurs at night and that Jesus comes to them in the fourth watch of the night (poorly translated “early in the morning”); it is just before daybreak. Jesus speaks an illuminative Word, “be not afraid, I AM”—which our texts translate prosaically, be not afraid, it is I. The I AM is a reference, it seems, to Exodus 3:14 (“God said to Moses, ‘I AM who I AM’. He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”)

**A docetic Jesus?** In the history of interpretation, the ethereality of Jesus’ body has proved controversial. The Venerable Bede says: “Theodorus, who was Bishop of Phanara, wrote that the Lord had no bodily weight in His flesh, and walked on the sea without weight; but the Catholic faith declares that He had weight according to the flesh. For Dionysius says, ‘We know not how without plunging in His feet, which had bodily weight and the gravity of matter, He could walk on the wet and unstable substance.’”

**The peace of the Church?** Pseudo-Jerome says “…the wind and the storm ceased when Jesus sat down, that is, reigned in the ship, which is the Catholic Church.”

**They did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.** Nor indeed do commentators understand. At least, there is no consensus.

Donahue and Harrington say “Again multiple interpretations surface: from the disciples’ simple misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus’ power to multiply food, through a view that this power presents an incorrect Christology of Jesus as the powerful and available presence of God, to opinions that link the misunderstanding to the nature of the Christian Eucharist. The Markan Jesus would then be though to teach the Markan [215 D&H] community that Jews and Gentiles are to be united at the eucharistic banquet, since the early Christian Eucharist was associated with a meal …and since disputes over Jewish dietary laws were so widespread. The eucharistic interpretation is supported by the two feedings in two different territories and by Mark’s placing of this narrative before the discourse about clean and unclean food in 7:1-23”

The significance, I believe, is that the loaves are the meal of a new covenant: all nations will eat of Israel’s bounty—the crumbs that fall from its table, from the loaves of multiplication. Yet the disciples did not yet understand Christ’s messianic task to bring all nations to Israel—a great work of new creation, which is what the water-walking appears to signify.

And what, more particularly, it will mean is the abolition of divisions, as follows.

***Redefining holy and unholy: the tradition of the elders***

The sick are healed in Genessaret, and what is unholy is declared holy. The point is that Jesus redraws the boundaries which keep people apart. People themselves are not unholy; rather it is *what comes out of a person* that defiles. Holiness is therefore interiorised: it comes out from the heart, rather than coming in from without. One is holy if one has *trust in God.*

What in fact has *produced* defilement is language and the interpretative tradition laid on top of the divine Word. Again, commonplace language and law are seen to be agents of the Accuser; and Jesus comes to change our speaking.

It is in this context that we must understand the following episode.

***An unholy woman?***

**Dogs** The Gentiles were derisively called dogs, and at 1 Sam 17:43, “The Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’”

Here we find an instance of Markan irony, as some commentators put it; but more particularly it is a religious test (cf Mk 4; Isaiah 6). Has this supposedly unholy woman eyes to see and hears to hear? Has she trust enough in God? Jesus adopts the commonplace language of the crowd (the unholy, unbelieving crowd) as a subterfuge.

Why would Jesus travel all the way to the Mediterranean Coast, through the Gentile territories, and even come under her roofs (which the Pharisees, according to their tradition, forbade)? He cannot have done that merely to condemn the woman as a “dog”.

Ironically she, a foreigner and a woman, and therefore doubly unclean, has eyes to see where the Jewish disciples cannot. Nor indeed do the Pharisees, who in the supreme irony will demand a sign (*semeion*).

She whose story falls precisely between the two feeding narratives is the interpretive key to them both. Her words will prove prophetic: “even the puppies will eat the crumbs that fall from the Master’s table.” The crumbs, which had been collected in *seven baskets*, present a symbolic parallel to the *seven loaves* which will be offered to the Gentiles. Foreigners will be gathered in to the new Israel; and Jesus will feed the nations with *twelve loaves—*in token of a new covenant.

The meaning of all this is summed up in Isaiah chapter 56: salvation comes those outside the succession of Israel (and those who don’t perpetuate the biological line, eunuchs.)