Surprised by the eye:
charting the fantastic in Mark 6.49-50

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ABSTRACT
Fantastic events, characters and settings are prominent in the Bible. This paper examines one particular fantastic event found in the episode of Jesus’ sea-walk (Mk 6.45-56). Viewing Mk 6.49-50 through the lens of the fantastic reveals divergent epistemological and ontological frames of reference within Mark’s story world; an imaginative bidimensionality where the natural and the preternatural orders meet and coalesce while still retaining their essential and defining attributes.

1 INTRODUCTION
J R R Tolkien (1988:66) once wrote, ‘God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves.’ While the quote may seem insidious to some and blasphemous to others, the belated addition of ‘and of elves’ turns up to playfully challenge readerly assumptions about God, angels, humans, and, of course, elves. The quote leaves the reader hanging somewhere between fiction and reality, insofar as the playful inclusion of elves exposes (among other things) the ontological and epistemological vulnerability of our assumptions about the biblical (story) world. Besides being delightfully subversive, the quote is, in fact, ‘fantastic,’ juxtaposing the seemingly real (God, angels, humans) with the seemingly non-real (elves). Such assertions are, however, by no means limited to the work of Fantasists such as Tolkien, but constitute the perennial root to all literature—including biblical literature. It is well known that fantastic events, characters, and settings punctuate the books of the Bible from beginning to end. It is the intention of this paper, therefore, to examine one particular fantastic event found in the episode of Jesus’ sea-walk (Mk 6.45–56), namely, the apparition of the phantom which the disciples witness on the Sea of Galilee (vv 49–50). Before proceeding, however, it will be necessary to define exactly what I mean when I speak of ‘the fantastic.’

2 DEFINING THE FANTASTIC
Most scholars define the fantastic as a type of literary mode. What exactly is a mode? Modes were introduced into the larger complex of genre theory to cope with the

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1 A much more detailed elucidation of the fantastic, as well as its place in ancient literature and the Gospel of Mark, is provided in my recent book (Young 1999).
2 See the survey of relevant material by the following: Chanady (1985:1–16); Cornwell (1990.3–41); Traill (1996:1–10) and Young (1999:49–111).

problem that, when speaking of genres, one needs to speak of essential things intrinsic to the genre, though most scholars recognise that these essential things continually change over time. The concept of a mode was developed as a means beyond this impasse. In distinction to genres, modes are substantive and internal, dealing with issues of narrative tone, attitude, subject and audience. Whereas genres have to do with the syntactical laws and requirements of an historically fixed form, modes touch on semantics, and govern questions intrinsic to the story world. While modes are structurally dependent upon generic forms, they are not bound to any particular form/genre. As Lynette Hunter (1989:22) observes, often ‘the form [i.e., genre] exists as a kind of climbing frame for the mode, vine like, to penetrate, or is the shape and color and texture [of the mode], the material existence of the frame immanent with the mode.’ In short, ‘mode’ refers principally to the qualities of the fictional world portrayed in the text, its structural and semantic features, and, with respect to the fantastic mode, its ontological and epistemological frames of reference.

Since all literary phenomena are studied, grouped, and defined by their relationship to other contingent phenomena, a modal approach requires that the scholar contextualise a particular narrative mode according to its relationship to other modes (Wicks 1974:241). This is particularly important in the case of the fantastic, because it is actually a hybrid of two other narrative modes: the realistic and the marvelous, respectively. Broadly speaking, realistic and marvelous narratives illustrate two tendencies evidenced throughout the history of literature: first, the tendency to mimic perceptual reality (i.e., realism); and second, the tendency to escape reality (i.e., the marvelous). Fantastic narration exploits features associated with both of these tendencies and is best understood as situated uniquely between the two poles of the realistic and the marvelous. It maintains that what it describes is ‘real,’ corresponding to normal conventions of reality, but at the same time makes use of the marvelous, and consequently contradicts those same conventions by introducing into the narrative that which cannot be harmonised with realism. The fantastic is essentially a hybrid mode, but there is little or no attempt to synthesise the disharmony within its hybrid structure.

3 See the excellent discussion of genres and modes by Alastair Fowler 1982:106–129.
4 Along these lines Northrop Frye remarks: ‘a survey of fictional modes has...shown...that the mimetic tendency itself, the tendency towards verisimilitude and accuracy of description, is one of two poles of literature. At the other pole is something that seems to be connected...with the usual meaning of myth. That is, it is a tendency to tell a story which is in origin a story about characters who can do anything, and only gradually becomes attracted towards a tendency to tell a plausible or credible story’ (1957:51, see also 33–34).
5 For the sake of greater clarity on this point, it would be possible to draw a vertical continuum of fictional genres with fantasy at one pole and the historical novel at the other. Along this (genre) continuum instances of the fantastic could appear anywhere, though, admittedly, they will tend to cluster around the fantasy end of the continuum; for, while it is true the fantastic has a place in any genre, the genre to which the fantastic is most central is—without dispute—fantasy; Rabkin (1976:29), Attebery (1992:1–17).
To be sure, the hybrid nature of the fantastic evokes a unique bidimensionality within the story world, the presence of two conflicting levels of textual reality: a natural/conventional reality (realism) and a preternatural/unconventional reality (the marvellous). These two conflicting realities create an ambiance of antinomy within the story world, which both originates in and is sustained by the intratextual clashing of divergent frames of reference and/or focalisations. Roger Caillois describes this structural antinomy as the 'rupturing of the text's overall coherence' so as to allow for 'the upheaval of the unusual within the mundane' (1966:9, my translation). Briefly stated, while evoking realism as the base from which to extend itself, the fantastic then introduces into the narrative all that defies realism—what is hidden within its cauldron of taboos, as it were—so as to create a topsy-turvy story world marked by a definable bidimensionality and concomitant antinomy.

3 EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS: MARK 6.49–50

3.1 Verses 49–50a

Verses 49–50a draws the reader immediately into the heart of the fantastic, where one is confronted with a cardinal theme running throughout all fantastic narrative, namely, the area of optics or vision—what one sees or does not see. In the ancient world, philosophers and poets held vision to be humankind's most noble and dependable sense. It is the most subtle of the human senses, and superior insofar as it requires no physical contact with its object to register its presence. The pre-eminence of the eye's perceptive capabilities rests firmly, however, in its overwhelming ability to orchestrate one's reality-forming processes, providing the overarching epistemological criteria for what constitutes real and unreal, truth and falsehood. As such, the act of

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6 On the correlation between seeing and reality see the discussions by David Lindberg (1976:ix–xx) and Laszlo Versenyi (1965:54–86, 91–103).
looking became the principal means for constructing a theory of reality. Of course, 'theory' is derived from the Greek θεωρία, meaning 'that which one looks at' (Bauer 1958:360), or, as Heidegger understood it, the disclosure or aspect of the sight itself (quoted in Versényi 1965:33–42). 'To have seen (εἰδειν) this aspect,' writes Heidegger (1977:164), 'is to know [truth/being]'. In other words, one's knowledge of reality is very much a theoretical matter; but vision, as we shall see, is always vulnerable to epistemological and ontological error (Lindberg 1976:99).

One should not be surprised, therefore, that the reality-forming powers of vision are no less integral to Mark's story world epistemology and ontology. To be sure, pivotal theological incidents are almost always seen by characters or refer in some way to sight (e.g. 1.10; 3.2; 4.12; 5.6, 14–15; 7.2; 8.18, 23–25; 11.20; 14.42; 15.32, 36; 16.6–7). In many cases throughout the gospel to see (εἰδειν) is also to know (ἰδεῖν); the same Greek verb (ὁρᾶω) embraces both concepts (e.g. 2.5, 10, 16; 3.5; 5.33; 6.20, 33–34; 9.8–9, 38; 11.20; 12.15, 24; 13.29; 16.5). Thus, seeing becomes the key criteria of Mark's story world epistemology.

In verses 49–50a the importance of 'seeing' is revealed in the syntax of the sentence itself: 'When they saw [δόντες]... they thought [ἔδειξαν]... and cried out [ἀφεξάμενοι], for they all saw [εἰδοῦν]... and were terrified [ἐταράχθησαν].' The initial participle δόντες is in a circumstantial relationship to the rest of the sentence, modifying the verbs 'they thought' and 'they cried out.' More precisely, it details the circumstances under which the main action takes place; that is, when or after they saw Jesus upon the water. The main verbs of 'thinking' and 'crying out' depend, therefore, upon an initial 'seeing.' This is further emphasised by the immediate repetition in the gar clause of 50a 'for they all saw...,' once again modifying the main action in verse 49. Here optical perception is linked to the disciples' cognitive processes and subsequent physical and psychological responses.

The disciples see 'Jesus' walking on the water, which they immediately perceive to be a φῶς. The word occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and its parallel in Mt 14.26. Its etymology is rooted in the Greek word φαίνω, 'to shine' or 'show' (Bultmann & Lührmann 1964). It usually denotes extraordinary or preternatural phenomena detectable to one's sensory (i.e., visual) perception.  

7 In Christendom, vision and its correlation with light formed the basis for metaphors expressing theological and moral truths. Such metaphors can easily be traced back to the Old and New Testaments, and in the latter, the Johannine corpus in particular uses 'light' and 'darkness' as highly charged theological terms.

8 Cf a related discussion by Stephen Moore (1992) with regard to Lukan epistemology.

9 In fact, the very last message conveyed to the disciples is that they should see Jesus in Galilee (Mark 16.6–7).


11 Bultmann & Lührmann 1964:2–3, 6. Its antonym would be something akin to κρύπτω 'to hide' or 'conceal'; see also Bauer 1958:454.
employed in profane Greek to describe ‘a night apparition, a vision in a dream, a prodigy, [or] a portent’ (Derrett 1981:345). In the Septuagint (LXX) it is used of frightening visions (e.g., Job 20.8), prophetic delusions (e.g., Is 28.7), mythical spectres (e.g., Hb 3.10; Wis 17.14–15), and evil spirits (e.g., 1 En 99.7). For the disciples, however, the sight of the phantom figure is a moment of revelation foregrounding the bidimensional nature of their (story) world, its inherent antimony and conflicting realities. This is confirmed by their responses of fear and terror, both of which disclose holes within their epistemological and ontological frames of reference.

The disciples’ fear and terror are emotions with which any reader can easily identify, given the fact they are confronted by a phantom, and because this is so, when the narrator depicts the disciples’ reaction as one of intense fear, he also bestows upon the narrative a skillful degree of realism. The disciples’ psychological reaction of fear (coupled with cries of terror) accurately portrays what any human being might expect if confronted by similar circumstances. Their reaction falls within the limits of what is plausible; it is consistent with the rules of conventional reality—though the sight they witness is not. The plausibility of their response is a rhetorical guarantee to the reader of the authenticity of what is being narrated. By emphasising that all (παντα) the disciples saw Jesus walking upon the water, the narrator displays an anxiety to assert this ‘truth,’ and thereby forestall any readerly suspicion of hallucination or trickery on his part.

Furthermore, it is precisely because their response is consistent with conventional realism, that it ironically bestows upon the marvelous event (i.e., the apparition/walking on water) a high degree of verisimilitude (i.e., truth value). In other words, because the disciples’ fear is a plausible and probable response to viewing a phantom walking on water, by an extension of this same logic the preternatural sea-walk also acquires a tangible measure of verisimilitude. If the reader accepts the disciples’ epistemological logic that ‘to see’ is ‘to know’ truth/being, then not only are their subsequent responses of fear and terror logically true/real, but, more to the point, the visual cause of their responses (i.e., the phantom figure) must also be true/real. But this visual cause is a ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ whose ontological properties lack all probability and plausibility within the normal conventions of realism, as the responses of fear and terror dramatically illustrate. Had it been otherwise, the disciples would not have been afraid. Ironically, what is normally considered unreal is allowed entrance into the domain of the real through a trick of reason, or what Aristotle referred to as ‘the false inference’. The result is that the phantom figure appears within the realistic domain

12 I.e., the narrative’s rhetorical logic that assumes and thus concedes that the disciples’ response is indeed probable and plausible.
13 In a discussion on story world ‘astonishment’ (θαυμαστός), Aristotle refers to such rhetoric as asserting ‘probable impossibilities’ (δίδυμα εἴκότα), and notes that the secret to such a rhetorical move rests in a ‘false inference’ (Poetics 24.8–10).
even though its ontological properties entirely contradict it. Consequently, the narrative frame is forced to expand beyond the boundaries of the conventionally real so as to include an inherent antinomy between the real and surreal, the natural and the preternatural, the realistic and the marvelous. The homogeneity of the disciples’ reality is indelibly fractured and subsequently bidimensional—or, better said, thoroughly fantastic.

3.2 Verse 50b

The terrifying sight of the phantom figure on the water is immediately (εὐθὺς) countered by the words, θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ εἰμί. μὴ φοβεῖσθε. This is the only occurrence within the sea-walking episode of reported speech. Here ‘scene’ in its technical sense of a coinciding of story-time and narrative-time is achieved. Spoken in the present tense, the words convey dramatic immediacy, the direct address approximating, as it were, ‘real time.’ This signals the high point or climax of the episode. The imperatives θαρσεῖτε and μὴ φοβεῖσθε are obviously intended to be words of comfort. Both occur frequently in the OT as imperatives of divine comfort (Bauer 1958:352), particularly the latter which appears 66 times in the OT, 36 of which are spoken by God or an angel; in another 12 instances divine protection affords the reason not to fear (Ball 1996:182). Both imperatives are highly charged theological terms and have the effect of drawing the whole scene into a ominous or epiphany-type ambiance.

Couched between these two imperatives is the enigmatic ἐγὼ εἰμί. How is one to interpret the ἐγὼ εἰμί of verse 50b? On the one hand, in this context it is quite appropriate to take it as an expression of identification, corresponding to the traditional Bultmannian category of an ‘identification formula’ (e.g., ‘I am here,’ or ‘It is I,’ or some equivalent; Bultmann 1971:225–226). Most commentators, on the other hand, detect a further polysemous dimension to the expression; but this is hardly surprising, given the truism that any singular rendering of ἐγὼ εἰμί begs predication and by default is bound to give rise to multiple meanings. This is especially true in the Hebraic tradition. In the Masoretic text (MT), the Hebrew equivalent oscillates easily between a proper name (יִקְרָא) and a predicateless verb (יִהְיֶה). In the LXX, the phrase ἐγὼ εἰμί is ubiquitous throughout, appearing no less than 175 times. In three noteworthy instances (Is 43.25; 45.19; 51.12) it occurs in the double form ἐγὼ εἰμί ΕΓΩ ΕΙΜΙ (‘I am “I AM”’). Here, once again, there is an oscillation or verbal stutter between a predicateless verb and a proper name.

14 Following this same line of thought, Nancy Traill (1989:38) observes: ‘it is characteristic of the fantastic that supernatural beings and events cannot be disauthenticated...[A]s a domain with full existential status, the supernatural is never explained away as a dream, hallucination, [or otherwise]. The entities of the supernatural domain are therefore never naturalized or assimilated into the natural domain’.

15 See the interesting discussion by Stauffer 1964:342–360.

16 See, for example, Ex. 3.14-15. Additionally, in the Massoretic text the combination יִהְיֶה, appears 197 times.
The implications of these linguistic relations between the MT, the LXX, and Mark’s rendering of ἐγὼ εἶμι in the context of the sea-walk are significant. The verbal parallels with the divine name would surely have been perceived by Mark’s implied reader. As David Ball (1996:177) maintains: ‘[A] single phrase containing ἐγὼ εἶμι may alert the implied reader to an entire thought world which is shared with the implied author. Those within the same cultural framework as the implied author would automatically understand the [divine] implications of the words ἐγὼ εἶμι’. Ball has in mind (among other things) commonly held hermeneutical habits shared by rabbinical exegetes; in particular he notes Hillel’s seven Middoth (Ball 1996:177; see also Urbach 1971). In this context it is quite reasonable to understand the ἐγὼ εἶμι in verse 50b as implying verbal analogies with the divine use of ‘I AM’ in the LXX and MT respectively. What is more, since the phrase is couched between two divine imperatives, conceptual analogies with the divine Name/Being are already established and indeed reinforced within the cluster of words themselves.

Be that as it may, one must never lose sight of the fact that Mark’s gospel is a narrative complete in itself, and thus does not necessarily need to be read solely with Old Testament parallels nor rabbinical exegesis in mind. What is more, one must keep in mind that Jesus’ reported speech is not an OT quotation, and that in the present context (and the larger narrative) it can have much more elusive and scandalous dimensions. It is necessary, therefore, to move beyond the limitations of OT ‘word-matching’ and consider verse 50b within the broader context, not only of this episode, but of (ancient) literary theory in general.

In this latter context, Jesus’ reported speech emerges as an occasion of προσωποποιία. In classical literature the objective of προσωποποιία was to introduce via direct discourse a (known) person or character with words ‘fitting’ (πρέπον) and ‘belonging’ (ολκεῖα) to that character and the subject matter (Stowers 1995:181), including the character’s θέωσις (i.e., psychological, moral, and cultural disposition). Its literary potential rests principally in the notion of character identification through verbal impersonation. A good illustration of this is when Jesus warns his disciples in Mk 13.16 against false messiahs who will impersonate him through the character of their speech, here with special reference to ἐγὼ εἶμι. Though not identical in context, in verse 50b the phantom figure’s reported speech impersonates, as it were, that which is ‘fitting’ and ‘belonging’ to God, thus equating his own persona with that of God’s.

To be sure, we may note, on the one hand, that only an omnipotent being could truly command with full force the imperatives ‘do not fear’ and ‘be of good cheer.’ In order for the imperatives to be meaningful, one must be able to guarantee without reservation the safety and security of those to whom they are spoken, and only an omnipotent character/being could guarantee this. On the other hand—and more to the point—the unpredicated rendering of ἐγὼ εἶμι is blatantly open-ended, and as such it not only conveys being but also a sense of absence or unknownness regarding its subject. This open-endedness effectively defers any possibility of pinning down the
absolute essence of its speaking subject, and thus semantic certitude is perpetually deferred by the unpredicated 'I am...?' In fact, the lack of any proper names within the sea-walking episode is a stylistic maneuver of the implied author that compliments this semantic deferral. For, while it is true that I have referred to the figure on the lake as 'Jesus' (mostly for practical reasons), actually the proper name never occurs throughout this episode. The name drops out of use in 6.30 and does not appear again until 8.27, almost three chapters later. The absence of the name reinforces at the level of discourse the quality of semantic incertitude which the phrase evokes at the level of story. Even when 'Jesus' does appear within chapter six, this same Jesus is attributed with no less than seven other identities as well. This places in bold relief the elusive nature of Jesus' story world identity, and may suggest that the implied author himself is uncertain as to his identity.

It was precisely this semantic precariousness that Matthew attempted (poorly) to dispel in his own re-write of this passage. Mark's account, however, retains the greater enigmatic nature of the phrase and the larger scene. The ontological status of the speaking subject is literally beyond objectification. The phrase conveys what is wholly 'other,' and, while suggesting that which lies beyond the threshold of language, it by default slips beyond the fringes of conventional reality into the otherworldly. This is what Rudolf Otto (1936:12, 31) aptly labeled the 'numinous,' and the being(s) who occupies this dimension as the 'Mysterium Tremendum'. Simply put, the statement ἐγὼ εἰμί, left unpredicated, becomes a reflexive statement of its speaking subject. The nominal 'I' reveals itself as 'nothing,' as no—natural or conceivable—thing, in the sense that its essential being is that to which nothing can be predicated. Hence, it conveys what is 'absolutely and intrinsically other than and opposite of everything that is and can be thought' (Otto 1936:30). Indeed Mark's use of ἐγὼ εἰμί upholds the theological notion of a semantically hidden deity, a concept which Northrop Frye preferred to locate within the pseudo-Dionysian tradition. God is hidden, remarks Frye, 'because all language about such a being dissolves into paradox and ambiguity... [Indeed], there is no such thing as God, because God is not a thing. All language in such areas has to carry with it the sense of its own descriptive inadequacy, and nothing but the mythical and metaphorical language that both says 'is' and 'is not' can do this' (Frye 1991:109, my emphasis). Mark's unpredicated rendering of ἐγὼ εἰμί implicitly—but eloquently—holds in tension both these concepts (cf. Burnett 1992).

17 The name occurs 79 times in Mark: six times in chapter 1, five times in chapter 2, one time in chapter 3, eight times in chapter 5, two times in chapter 6, one time in chapter 8, eight times in chapter 9, seventeen times in chapter 10, five times in chapter 11, five times in chapter 12, two times in chapter 13, eleven times in chapter 14; six times in chapter 15, two times in chapter 16.
18 These are 'carpenter', 'son', 'brother', 'prophet', 'John the baptiser', 'Elijah', 'Jesus' and 'I am'.
19 In 14.28 he has Peter ask: 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you upon the water' (Mt 14.28). Here the vocative 'Lord' is a non-sequitur, a stylist device concealing its own illogic.
Returning to the phantom figure who utters these words, the analogy is clear: the divine imperatives, the unpredicated rendering of ἐγὼ εἶμι, and the lack of any proper names in this episode all converge in the phantom figure who becomes the new dramatis persona whose namelessness traces a profound ontological and semantic instability within Mark's story world. It situates the phantom figure both within and without realistic frames of reference, since its defining attributes are perpetually deferred by the unpredicated ἐγὼ εἶμι, and foregrounds Mark's signifying systems as disruptive, unpredictable, and elusive.

But this is indicative of fantastic texts generally. Disruptive signifying systems are mobilised so as to suggest, to evoke, indeed to impose an (anti)presence upon otherwise realistic frames of reference, moving beyond words themselves to suggest that which is beyond them. In such cases, the fantastic, as Jean Bellemín-Noël remarked, functions 'to make as if [the text] lacks all correspondence between signification and designation, as if there are holes in one or the other systems of language and/or experience which do not correspond to their attendant homologues' (1972:5, my translation).

4 CONCLUSION

Viewing Mk 6.49-50 through the lens of the fantastic reveals divergent epistemological and ontological frames of reference within Mark's biblical story world; it reveals an imaginative bidimensionality that cannot be harmonised nor denied. For the disciples, the presence of the fantastic initiates an interrogation of commonly held assumptions concerning what constitutes reality/unreality, natural/preternatural, truth/falsehood, deity/demon. Essentially, the Markan narrator brings together two levels of story world reality and foregrounds the relationship between them as thoroughly problematic, and herein lies the rhetorical strength of the fantastic: while bringing together features which at once correspond to the realistic and the marvelous, the fantastic interrogates, questions, and ultimately undermines conventional norms associated with both, inducing a type of epistemological and hermeneutical vertigo both for story world characters and readers alike—including scholarly readers.²⁰

In this passage, the epistemological certitude of vision and the seeing of the phantom by the disciples upon the Sea of Galilee initiates a psychological process that escalates into a numinous ambience, a terror captured most succinctly by the use of psycho-centric terms such as 'fear' and 'terror' (not to mention hysterical screams). The narrative at this point becomes entangled with issues of human perception, epistemology and ontology. The reactions of the disciples betray the limits of their reality as well as the presence of the unknown and mysterious reality of the phantom figure. They are confronted with an impossibility and grope for an explanation with

²⁰ It is no secret that most scholars and commentators have tended to avoid this passage in Mark on account of the hermeneutical malaise it tends to induce.
which to identify the inexplicable, but none is provided. Their conventionalised reality is subverted. The preternatural status of the phantom figure is reinforced by the implied author's use of the unpredicated 'I am...?,' which serves to defer any notion of semantic certitude regarding the identity of this character. The absence of the proper name Jesus only reinforces this incertitude. Further, because the disciples' response to the numinous is confluent with the rules of realism, utilising the conventions of mimesis, it bestows a high degree of verisimilitude upon the marvelous actions and ontology of the phantom figure. The ensuing result is a bidimensional—fantastic—story world where the natural and the preternatural orders meet and coalesce, while still retaining their essential and defining attributes.

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