WHY AND HOW JESUS WALKED ON THE SEA

BY

J. DUNCAN M. DERRETT

London

Jesus’ miracles as narrated in Mark can be taken as symbolic statements without necessarily implying that any actual event served to inspire them. This is how a fine piece of research takes the Cursing of the Fig Tree ¹). The Walking on the Lake, however, is extremely difficult to imagine as having been fabricated ex nihilo. The story is therefore an aporia in many senses at once. Nevertheless that strange Walking (Mark vi 45-52, Matt. xiv 22-33, John vi 16-21) is often thought to be an archaic symbolic representation of the impact on Christians of their experience of Christ ²). Since the time of the apostles it has been a mystery. BETZ has pointed to Mekilta on Exod xiv 22-25 implying ³) that an ancestor of David plunged into the Red Sea and was rescued by Moses’ lifting up his rod: but Nahshon did not walk on water, and our story has no rod. Mark is particular not to give us a clue: unless we are to understand that the Lord (Mark’s favourite designation for Christ) was the Son of God in a very real sense ⁴), and his actions, however curious in practical, historical terms, are, properly

understood, manifestations of YHWH personally present on earth. This clue enlightens many an obscure passage, even our present scene; which I, for my part, visualise as a youthful figure, dressed like the prophet Ezekiel in the Dura-Europos frescoes, scuttling across the Lake of Tiberias. It is highly unfashionable to seek for the historical-rational antecedents of Markan stories, but the facts bearing on this one have remained unknown.

The Walking on the Sea and Indian prototypes

W. Norman Brown fostered the suspicion that the motif came from India via Buddhism, where it was at home. Brown is still cited, but he served the subject ill. The theme of a rescuer making the rescued walk on the sea is Rgvedic, a millennium older than Christ. The Buddhist theme is influenced by Jewish and possibly even by Christian contacts. Matthew's Hellenistic world could have known of Buddhist motifs; but by the same token Jewish themes were known to Buddhists. The Vinaya-pitaka has a story depicted at Sanchi, and pre-Christian. But the Buddha does not walk on water but on dry land. In not less than three

5) W. N. Brown, The Indian and Christian Miracles of Walking on the Water (Chicago and London, 1928). He does not mention that walking on the water (sic) is one of the ten (imaginary) iddhi-s or "psychic powers" attributed in Buddhism to the adept: Rhys Davids and Steede, Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary, 121, s.v. H. W. French, at Pali Buddhist Rev. 2/1 (1977), 45.

6) Notice L. Bieler, Theios Anr. Das Bild des göttlichen Menschen in Spätantike und Frühchristentum I (Vienna, 1935), 96. R. Pesch, Das Markus-evangelium I (Freiburg, 1976), 36I n. II.

7) RV 1.116.3-5, 117.14-15, 118.6-7, 7.68.7, 7.69.7, 1.112.6.1, 119.4.8, 1.158.3, 6.62.6, 8.5.22, 10.39.4, 40.7, 65.12, 143.5 (cited in Myriantheus' order). Note 1.117.15: ajohavid aśvinā taugryo vām prožhāh samuddram avyathir jaganeন. Bhujyu of Tugra, thrown into the sea, after three days and nights called to the Aśvins and walked on the sea without wavering. They took him in their chariot. L. Myriantheus, Die Aśvins oder arischen Dioskuren (Munich, 1876). It is impossible that Brown could have been unaware of this mass of material.

8) Derrett at ZRGG 19 (1967), 33-64, 22 (1970), 19-44, 24 (1972), 153-5. For the "man who stands above a river" see Dan x 4-5, xii 6-7. No one can say what legendary and other motifs influenced the author of Daniel.

9) Brown, op. cit., 20. Mahāvagga 1.20.16. The Third Buddhist Council held at Pātaliputra about 137 years after the death of the Buddha may or may not have settled this passage amongst the items of the canon (it almost certainly did) (A. K. Warder, Indian Buddhism, Delhi, 1970, 13); but the Sanchi reliefs (dated by the script, etc.) cannot conceivably be later than the first Christian century, and of course depict notorious episodes.