ἐγώ εἰμι in Mark and John: Exploring the Johannine Trajectory of a Received Memory of Jesus

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Abstract: The regular use of the ἐγώ εἰμι formulation is a critical component of the Fourth Gospel's christological presentation and has long been regarded as uniquely Johannine. Renewed focus on the possibility that John knew and reworked Mark has opened new vistas for thinking about John's employment and reshaping of his received materials. Against that backdrop, this article suggests that Mark 6:45–52—the scene in which Jesus walks on water and which includes one of three ἐγώ εἰμι pronouncements in Mark—is a clear theophany and is ultimately foundational for the development of John's broader christological vision.

Key Terms: Christology, gospels, history, "I Am," Gospel of John, Gospel of Mark, narrative, theophany

It has long been recognized that the consistent use of ἐγώ εἰμι by the Johannine Jesus is among the most distinctive features of the Fourth Gospel's christological presentation.[1] In both absolute and predicated constructions, the "I am" formula is ubiquitous throughout the gospel.[2] While

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1   I am grateful to Dr. James Barker and Dr. Rafael Rodriguez, both of whom read and commented on earlier drafts of this article and made numerous suggestions for improvement.

2   Altogether, the absolute use of ἐγώ εἰμι appears ten times in six different passages in the Fourth Gospel: 4:25–26; 6:19–21; 8:18–30; 8:54–59; 13:16–20; 18:3–9; cf. also 9:9, where Jesus refers to others saying ἐγώ εἰμι. In each, Jesus emphasizes something important about his identity and mission. The second type of ἐγώ εἰμι pronouncements in John appears with a predicate, and each applies a specific image to Jesus. The predicates introduce titles that are reminiscent of important themes or images from Israel's story, often appealing to something of religious significance in the Hebrew Bible. These include "the bread of life" (6:35, 48); "the bread/living bread which came down from heaven" (6:41, 51); "the light of the world" (8:12); "the gate for the sheep"

the clause appears elsewhere on the lips of Jesus in moments of christolog-ical import (e.g., Matt 14:27; Mark 6:50; 14:62; Luke 22:70; 24:39), there is little doubt that it plays a more significant role in John's vision of Jesus than elsewhere in the New Testament.[3] Though each gospel has its own unique portrait of Jesus and its own literary and theological mechanisms for accomplishing that end, there is much to be gained from exploring the potential connection between them. This essay takes as its starting point the renewed interest in the relationship between the Synoptics and John.[4] I specifically have in mind the growing recognition by scholars that John represents a "re-written" or "transformed" Mark.[5] The longstanding ques-tion is of course: If John knew the Synoptics, then why does the Fourth Gospel differ so significantly in so many important ways?[6] Moody Smith famously noted that the relationship between John and the Synoptics "has

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(10:7, 9); "the good shepherd" (10:11, 14); "the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6); and "the vine/true vine' (15:1, 5).

3 There are obvious questions about how to understand and translate the clause in each of these constructions. Some translators opt for "it is I" or "I am he" as a way of elim-inating confusion or awkwardness in the English syntax. I will argue below that this practice occasionally detracts from the broader literary and theological ideas at play. Catrin Williams, in her exhaustive study *I am He: The Interpretation of 'ANI HU' in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT 2/113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), argues that neither the phrase אני הוא in the Hebrew Bible nor its Greek translation ἐγώ εἰμι has a direct connection to the divine name or its interpretation in Exod 3:14. However, this does not suggest that later interpreters were incapable of finding a con-nection between the two.

4 Recent years have witnessed a revival of the idea that John was familiar with or used one or more of the Synoptics. Among others, see Steven A. Hunt, *Rewriting the Feed-ing of the Five Thousand: John 6:1–15 as a Test Case for Johannine Dependence on the Synoptic Gospels*, StBibLit 125 (Frankfurt: Lang, 2011); James W. Barker, *John's Use of Matthew*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Jesper Nielsen, "Johannes und Lukas: Szenen einer Beziehung," in *Rewriting and Reception in and of the Bible*, ed. Jesper Høgenhaven, Jesper Nielsen, and Heike Omerzu, WUNT 1/396 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 125–62; and Wendy E. S. North, *What John Knew and What John Wrote: A Study in John and the Synoptics*, Interpreting Johannine Literature (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress, 2020).

5 On this, see the excellent essays in Eve-Marie Becker, Helen Bond, and Catrin Wil-liams, eds., *John's Transformation of Mark* (London: T&T Clark, 2021). The publica-tion of this volume appears to mark a new consensus that assumes John's familiarity with Mark.

6 For instance, one of the most distinctive features of Mark's portrayal of Jesus is his practice of casting out demons. There are no exorcisms in the Fourth Gospel. The Markan Jesus regularly speaks in parables as his primary way of instructing the crowds. By contrast, the Johannine Jesus usually speaks in lengthy discourses. Most scholars believe that there are no parables in the Fourth Gospel (though the recent work of Ruben Zimmermann has tested this consensus; see *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015]). Irrespective of one's position regarding the literary relationship between the two gospels, it should be con-sidered implausible that those responsible for the Fourth Gospel were unfamiliar with traditions portraying Jesus as an exorcist or a preacher of parables, so this remains an area ripe for discussion and debate.

frequently been a source of fascination for exegetes" and that the question "has a tantalizing quality, because evidence seems to point in contrary or opposing directions at once."[7] Recent work on this question has been instructive and has suggested several avenues that will prove fruitful for our considerations here.

This essay is admittedly exploratory.[8] I am working with the hypothesis that John knew, used, and reworked Mark. For our purposes here, I proceed under the assumption that those responsible for the final form of John's Gospel had direct access to some form of Mark's *written text.* This allowed incorporation, alteration, and omission of material explicitly derived from the Second Gospel. However, I am leaving a number of questions open or unanswered. The most important of these is whether John was trying to supplement, compete with, or replace Mark altogether.

With this assumption in place, I begin by employing a historically situated, narrative-critical approach to the text and proceed by examining Mark's use of ἐγώ εἰμι, particularly in the scene in which Jesus walks on water (Mark 6:45–52). I argue that the scene represents a theophany in which Mark presents Jesus as God's divine agent.[9] From there, I make the case that Mark's scene serves as a significant literary and theological source for John's rendition of the feeding of the five thousand and walking on water. I suggest further that the Markan Jesus's "I am" language and imagery in 6:50 was foundational for John's broader christological vision. In other words, without the Markan scene in which Jesus walks on water, we might not have ended up with the classic metaphorical "I am" sayings memorialized in John's Gospel.

Mark's Use of ἐγώ εἰμι

The Markan Jesus uses the clause ἐγώ εἰμι three times (Mark 6:50; 13:6; 14:62). Although each has implications for Mark's Christology and its

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7   D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), xv. This identical claim has been made by numerous scholars deliberating on the difficult relationship between the Synoptics and the Gospel of Thomas.

8   This type of thought experiment is not new. Compare, e.g., Benedict Viviano, "John's Use of Matthew: Beyond Tweaking," *RevBib* 111.2 (2004): 209–37; and more recently, Chris Keith, "'If John Knew Mark': Critical Inheritance and Johannine Disagreements with Mark," in *John's Transformation of Mark*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Helen Bond, and Catrin Williams (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 31–50.

9   Throughout this essay I use the term "theophany" when discussing a manifestation of the divine presence. Others occasionally use the terms "epiphany" or "Christophany" to describe this reality, and I am not, in principle, opposed to the use of either term.

potential impact upon the Johannine memory of Jesus, my argument here will focus exclusively on the scene in which Jesus walks on water (6:45–52).[10] The terrified disciples see Jesus, believe he is a ghost, and need reassurance, so he responds: θαρσεῖτε, ἐγώ εἰμι, μὴ φοβεῖσθε. With others, I contend that ἐγώ εἰμι in the immediate and proximate contexts of this pericope should be read as a theophany.[11] Moreover, the combination of these three clauses in rapid succession, along with other elements of the pericope, clearly echo theophanies in the Hebrew Bible. Such an interpretation, however, is often obfuscated by the common English translation of ἐγώ εἰμι as "it is I" (or "I am he") in Mark 6:50. Albeit somewhat enigmatic, "I am" (as the clause is typically translated in the Fourth Gospel) would highlight the christological importance of the scene.[12] Nevertheless, commentators have routinely regarded this scene as having less christological import than what I am proposing in this article.[13]

An Examination of Mark 6:45–52

This scene immediately follows the feeding of the five thousand (6:31–44). Jesus and the Twelve have departed to an isolated region (v. 31, a "desert place," ἔρημον τόπον), a spatial setting in which large groups of people are moving about (v. 33). Such a description can evoke memories of Israel's wilderness experience after the exodus, especially since the miraculous

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　　　I have simply chosen to employ "theophany" because I think it better expresses the ideas I am trying to communicate.

10　There is not space here to consider the other two Markan instances of ἐγω εἰμί. While all three are significant, I am most interested in tracing the connection between the water-walking scenes in Mark and John.

11　Someone might object that ἐγώ εἰμι, common in Hellenistic Greek social discourse, does not necessarily communicate christological importance (cf., e.g., Matt 24:4; Luke 1:19; John 9:9; Acts 26:29). While this is true, the use of ἐγώ εἰμι here is one piece of a larger complex of issues pointing toward a christologically significant moment in the gospel.

12　E.g., ESV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, NRSV, RSV all have "it is I." In an interesting departure, NLT has "I am here."

13　For example, Adela Yarbro Collins notes in her magisterial commentary that "Jesus' words, 'It is I' (ἐγώ εἰμι), serve primarily to let the disciples know that it is Jesus whom they have seen. Occasionally in the LXX, God is portrayed as saying, 'It is I' or 'I am' (ἐγώ εἰμι), but this expression is used of human beings as well" (*Mark*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 335). Cf. also C. K. Barrett (*The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1978], 281), who downplays the Markan text as a theophany. For a more sympathetic reading of the epiphanic/theophanic significance of Mark 6:45–52, however, see Barry Blackburn, *Theios Aner and the Markan Miracle Traditions: A Critique of the Theios Aner Concept as an Interpretative Background of the Miracle Traditions Used by Mark*, WUNT 2/40 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991); and Patrick J. Madden, *Jesus' Walking on the Sea: An Investigation of the Origin of the Narrative Account*, BZNW 81 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), among others.

feeding of a large crowd resembles God's miraculous feeding of the Israelites with manna in the wilderness.[14]

Mark also evinces strong connections to shepherd imagery from the Hebrew Bible. I particularly have in mind (1) the explicit recognition in v. 34 that the crowd looked like "sheep without a shepherd" (ὅτι ἦσαν ὡς πρόβατα μὴ ἔχοντα ποιμένα) and (2) the narrator's comment in v. 39 that Jesus had the crowds "sit down by groups on the green grass" (καὶ ἐπέταξεν αὐτοῖς ἀνακλῖναι πάντας συμπόσια συμπόσια ἐπὶ τῷ χλωρῷ χόρτῳ).[15] This imagery is an important element as it relates to God's shepherding of Israel and Moses's role as a surrogate shepherd of God's people. There is thus an incremental accumulation of material in Mark 6 relating to Israel's experience with YHWH, particularly in the exodus and wilderness wanderings.

In v. 45, Jesus instructs his disciples to enter the boat and leave for Bethsaida. This instruction provides Jesus the narrative space to dismiss the crowd and then gain physical distance from the Twelve as he departs to pray on a mountain (v. 46). The ascent of the mountain is yet another topographical connection to the exodus story that should not be overlooked.[16] When evening comes (καὶ ὀψίας γενομένης), Jesus is alone on the land (v. 47) and sees his disciples in the middle of the lake "straining at the oars" (βασανιζομένους ἐν τῷ ἐλαύνειν) because of a heavy wind (v. 48ab).[17] During the fourth watch of the night—a period between 3 and 6 a.m.—Jesus walks out to the disciples on the water with the goal of "passing them

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14 There may also be a connection between this pericope and 2 Kgs 4:42–44, where Elisha commands his servant to feed a hundred men with twenty loaves of barley bread and some new grain. Not only does this meager food miraculously feed the multitude, but we read that "they ate and had some left over" (MT ויאכלו ויותרו; LXX καὶ ἔφαγον καὶ κατέλιπον). Similarly, Mark 6:42–44 notes, "All ate and were satisfied. And they picked up twelve baskets full of broken pieces of the bread and fish" (καὶ ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν· καὶ ἦραν κλάσματα δώδεκα κοφίνων πληρώματα καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν ἰχθύων).

15 This reference to the "green grass" may also have a connection to imagery from Psalm 23 in particular, but it may also be drawn from garden-variety imagery connected to the shepherding profession.

16 On the importance of mountain imagery in the Second Gospel, see Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); and, more recently, Jamie Davies, "Apocalyptic Topography in Mark's Gospel: Theophany and Divine Invisibility at Sinai, Horeb, and the Mount of Transfiguration," *JTI* 14.1 (2020): 140–48.

17 In Mark's narrative time, there is some ambiguity associated with how long it takes Jesus to see the disciples and walk out to them on the water. Verse 47 indicates that this scene takes place as evening (ὀψίας) came—a designation that usually refers to late in the day or early in the evening (cf. LSJ, s.v. "ὀψίος" 1; BDAG, s.v. "ὀψίος" 1). However, in v. 48, Mark indicates that Jesus walks out to the disciples "about the fourth watch of the night" (περὶ τετάρτην φυλακὴν τῆς νυκτὸς), which is a period between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. This narration gives the impression that Jesus stood observing the disciples for a long period (and that they were struggling to row for a long period) before he walked out to them on the water.

by" (καὶ ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν αὐτούς, v. 48c). On its surface, this seemingly innocuous clause sounds like Jesus is trying to "sneak by" his disciples. However, the verb παρέρχομαι carries far greater weight, suggesting that the scene represents a theophany.

First, it is not insignificant that παρέρχομαι also appears in the LXX theophany texts in which God appears directly to both Moses and Elijah (Exod 33:19, 22; 34:6; 1 Kgs 19:11).[18] In Exod 33:18, Moses requests to see God's glory. In vv. 19–23, God announces his intentions to pass before Moses (MT עבר; LXX παρέρχομαι, vv. 19, 22) and allow him to see the tail end of his glory. God subsequently hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers him with his hand, only removing it after he has passed. Then in 34:5–8, God passes by Moses (MT עבר; LXX παρέρχομαι, v. 6), allowing him to glimpse a portion of his presence.[19]

Similarly, in 1 Kgs 19:9–10, Elijah expresses to God his despair at being "the only one left" in service to YHWH (v. 10). In response to this—and presumably as a way to help Elijah strengthen his resolve to continue following him—God announces that his presence is about to pass by (MT עבר; LXX παρέρχομαι, v. 11). All of this is illustrated in table 1 below:

Table 1: παρέρχομαι in Theophany Texts of the Hebrew Bible (LXX)

Exodus 33:19 LXX	NETS
καὶ εἶπεν· <u>ἐγὼ παρελεύσομαι πρότερός σου</u> τῇ δόξῃ μου καὶ καλέσω τῷ ὀνόματί μου, Κύριος ἐναντίον σου· καὶ ἐλεήσω ὃν ἂν ἐλεῶ, καὶ οἰκτειρήσω ὃν ἂν οἰκτείρω.	And he said, "<u>I will pass before you</u> in my glory, and I will call by my name 'Lord' before you. And I will have mercy on whomever I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I have compassion."

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18 Ernst Lohmeyer recognized the significance of παρέρχομαι nearly ninety years ago in his article "Und Jesus ging vorüber," *Nieuw theologisch tijdschrift* 23 (1934): 206–24. See also Harry Fleddermann, "'And He Wanted to Pass by Them' (Mark 6:48c)," *CBQ* 45 (1983): 389–95; and George Parsenios, "Defining and Debating Divine Identity in John: The Influence of Classical Language Literature," in *John's Transformation of Mark*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Helen Bond, and Catrin Williams (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 67–76, who also note the importance of this verb.

19 In a recent article, Bruce Henning makes the intriguing, though I think incorrect, suggestion that the phrase ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν αὐτούς in 6:48 should be understood as "he wanted them to come near" and serves as an indication of Jesus's desire for his disciples to participate in his miraculous activities. This, he argues, is supported by Matthean incorporation and redaction of this scene into his own gospel. See "Mark's Miraculous Disciples: ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν αὐτούς (Mark 6.48) as Jesus' Desire for the Disciples to Walk on Water," *JSNT* 45 (2022): 66–80.

Exodus 33:22 LXX	NETS
ἡνίκα δ᾽ ἂν <u>παρέλθῃ ἡ δόξα μου</u>, καὶ θήσω σε εἰς ὀπὴν τῆς πέτρας καὶ σκεπάσω τῇ χειρί μου ἐπὶ σέ, ἕως ἂν παρέλθω·	Now, whenever <u>my glory passes by</u>, then I will put you in the hole of a rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I pass by.
Exodus 34:6 LXX	NETS
καὶ <u>παρῆλθε Κύριος πρὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ</u> καὶ ἐκάλεσε· Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς οἰκτίρμων καὶ ἐλεήμων, μακρόθυμος καὶ πολυέλεος καὶ ἀληθινός.	And <u>the Lord passed by before his face</u>, and he called, "The Lord, the Lord God is compassionate and merciful, patient and very merciful and truthful.
1 Kings 19:11 LXX	NETS
καὶ εἶπεν· ἐξελεύσῃ αὔριον καὶ στήσῃ ἐνώπιον Κυρίου ἐν τῷ ὄρει· ἰδοὺ <u>παρελεύσεται Κύριος</u>.	And he said, "You shall go out tomorrow and shall stand before the Lord on the mountain; behold, <u>the Lord will pass by</u>."

The use of παρέρχομαι in Mark 6:48 tightly connects to two significant theophany scenes in the Hebrew Bible.[20] As Mark's scene continues (v. 49), the disciples see Jesus walking upon the sea and believe him to be a ghost (ἔδοξαν ὅτι φάντασμά ἐστιν), resulting in their terror (v. 50a). Jesus consoles the disciples with the words θαρσεῖτε, ἐγώ εἰμι, μὴ φοβεῖσθε. Regarding ἐγώ εἰμι in this passage, David Mark Ball acknowledges that the clause could simply mean "it is I," but he prefers a double meaning—that is, a deeper meaning revealing Jesus's divine identity in addition to his human identity.[21]

In this pericope, I find Mark's use of ἐγώ εἰμι to be unambiguously revelatory since the clause is surrounded by two other theophanic verbs, θαρσεῖτε and μὴ φοβεῖσθε.[22] The admonitions "take heart" and "do not fear" characteristically accompany theophanies in the Hebrew Bible. In the MT, אל-תירא appears a total of forty-two times,[23] and in twenty-six of them, God or the Angel of YHWH is the one speaking. In at least three

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20 Joel Marcus boldly asserts that παρέρχομαι was "almost a technical term for a divine epiphany in the Septuagint" (*Mark 1–8*, AYB [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002], 426).

21 David Mark Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications*, JSNTSup 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 185.

22 There are, of course, numerous LXX occurrences of θάρσει/θαρσεῖτε where one human being is addressing another (cf., e.g., Gen 35:17), including cases where Moses and Elijah are the speakers in question (Exod 14:13; 20:20; 1 Kgs 17:13). However, its use in theophany texts must be taken into consideration, especially in its combination with ἐγώ εἰμι and μὴ φοβεῖσθε—two other commonly used clauses in theophanic texts of the Hebrew Bible.

23 The related construction לא תירא appears three times in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 1:29; 3:22; 31:8), though it carries a different force than אל-תירא.

other instances, either the words of YHWH are being quoted or a prophet is speaking under the direction of the Spirit of YHWH.[24] These Hebrew phrases appear in at least seven different Greek renderings in the LXX, including (1) θαρσεῖτε, (2) θάρσει, (3) μὴ φοβοῦ, (4) μὴ φοβεῖσθε, (5) μὴ φοβηθῆτε, (6) μὴ φοβηθῆς, and (7) οὐ φοβηθήσεσθε. See the following chart for an illustration of how these various translations appear throughout the LXX.[25]

Table 2: "Do Not Fear" Accompanying Divine Speech and Theophany in the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint

	Context	MT	LXX
Gen 15:1	God speaking to Abram	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Gen 21:17	Angel of YHWH speaking to Hagar	אל-תיראי	μὴ φοβοῦ
Gen 26:24	God speaking to Isaac	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Num 21:34	God speaking to Moses	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβηθῆς
Jos 8:1	God speaking to Joshua	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβηθῆς
Jos 10:8	God speaking to Joshua	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβηθῆς
Judg 6:23	Angel of YHWH speaking to Gideon	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Isa 10:24	God speaking to the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Isa 41:10	God speaking to the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Isa 41:13	God speaking to the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Isa 41:14	God speaking to Jacob and the men of Israel	אל-תיראי	(missing in LXX)
Isa 43:1	God speaking to the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Isa 43:5	God speaking to the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Isa 44:2	God speaking to the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Isa 51:7	God speaking to the people	אל-תיראו	μὴ φοβεῖσθε
Isa 54:4	God speaking to the people	אל-תיראי	μὴ φοβοῦ
Jer 30:10	God speaking to the people	אל-תירא	(missing in LXX)

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24 See 1 Chr 22:13, where David is speaking to Solomon but quoting what YHWH said to Moses; see also 2 Chr 20:15, 17, where Jahaziel, the son of Zechariah, speaks under the direction of the Spirit of YHWH to all Judah.

25 Below we will see that Mark uses both common LXX words one would expect in the context of a theophany, whereas John uses θαρσέω only in 16:33 but uses—and seems to prefer—φοβέομαι elsewhere (6:19, 20; 9:22; 12:15; 19:18).

Jer 42:11 (LXX, 49:11)	God speaking to Johanan the son of Kareah, his commanders, and all the people	אל-תיראו (twice)	μὴ φοβηθῆτε (twice)
Jer 46:27 (LXX, 26:27)	God speaking to Johanan the son of Kareah, his commanders, and all the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβηθῇς
Jer 46:28 (LXX, 26:28)	God speaking to Johanan the son of Kareah, his commanders, and all the people	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Dan 10:12	Angel of God speaking to Daniel	אל-תירא	μὴ φοβοῦ
Joel 2:21	God speaking to the people	אל-תיראי	θάρσει
Joel 2:22	God speaking to the people	אל-תיראו	θαρσεῖτε
Hag 2:5	God speaking to Zerubbabel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the people	אל-תיראו	θαρσεῖτε
Zech 8:13	God speaking to Israel and Judah	אל-תיראו	θαρσεῖτε
Zech 8:15	God speaking to Israel and Judah	אל-תיראו	θαρσεῖτε

To summarize, the broader context of this scene evokes numerous parallels to the exodus and wandering in the wilderness. Also, Mark's παρέρχομαι language recalls significant theophanies to Moses and Elijah.[26] Last of all, Septuagintal theophany texts are replete with "do not fear" and "take heart" admonitions (μὴ φοβεῖσθε and θαρσεῖτε). In that light, it seems evident that Jesus's ἐγώ εἰμι pronouncement in Mark 6:50 is intended as a theophany. Accordingly, I would advocate for translating the verse in English as, "Take heart. I am. Do not fear!"

The question arises as to what this theophany means for Mark's presentation of Jesus. Timothy Geddert refers to Mark's "implied YHWH Christology," but I think he goes a bit too far by affirming that Mark wants the reader to identify Jesus as God.[27] We should be careful not to overlay

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26 Here we recognize a connection to texts involving Elijah and Moses, which subtly prepares the audience for a second Markan theophany during the transfiguration (9:2–13), where both Elijah and Moses appear directly.

27 See Timothy Geddert, "The Implied YHWH Christology of Mark's Gospel: Mark's Challenge to the Reader to 'Connect the Dots,'" *BBR* 25 (2015): 325–40. This same type of affirmation is made by those who argue for an early high Christology. In particular, see the treatment of Mark in Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

our assumptions about John's "I am" Christology onto Jesus's words here. I do not regard Mark's use of ἐγώ εἰμι in this passage as the strong claim to divine identity as regularly occurs in the Fourth Gospel. There is, though, an ambiguity associated with its use, in a manner similar to Hebrew Bible texts in which an angel or human emissary is referred to as God/YHWH. For example, in Gen 16:10–13, Hagar is met by the angel of YHWH (MT מלאך יהוה, v. 10) and consoled by the words that she will give birth to a great nation. After this encounter, Hagar attributes this conversation to YHWH himself, whom she names "the God who sees," for she says, "I have seen him here that sees me" (כי אמרה הגם הלם ראיתי אחרי ראי, v. 13). Another example is found in Gen 32:22–32, where Jacob wrestles with "a man" (MT איש, v. 25) at the ford of the Jabbok into the early morning. This "man" is clearly an angelic figure, and after Jacob is blessed, he renames the site of this encounter Peniel (פניאל, "face of God"). Of this entire event, Jacob proclaims, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved" (כי־ראיתי אלהים פנים אל–פנים ותנצל נפשי, v. 31). In Genesis 16 and Genesis 32 respectively, divine and human agents not only function as agents of God but are literally equated with God. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the "angel of YHWH" (מלאך יהוה) and the "angel of God" (מלאך האלהים) are interchanged with YHWH or God.[28]

These interchanges between God and God's agents, common in narrative literature of the Hebrew Bible, are similarly in play here in Mark. When he walks on water, the Markan Jesus functions as an agent of the divine presence, and his "I am" language should be read against that backdrop. Overall, Jesus's use of theophany language in Mark does not immediately suggest a full-blown "divine man" Christology as in the Fourth Gospel or in other early Christian writings with a more highly developed Christology (e.g., Hebrews, Colossians). Yet in Mark, I concur with the nuanced position of Michael Kok, who opines that "Mark's theological conceptualization of Jesus is more fittingly described as a 'divine agency' rather than a 'divine identity' Christology."[29] Mark's ἐγώ εἰμι pronouncement in 6:50 is an important step along the road to the more robust "divine man" Christology found in the Fourth Gospel.

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28 E.g., in Gen 31:11–13, the angel of God is identified (v. 11) but later exclaims, "I am the God of Bethel" (v. 13); in Exod 3:2–6, the angel of YHWH is identified as appearing from the burning bush (v. 2), after which YHWH (v. 4) recognizes that Moses has turned aside and eventually self-identifies as the God of the patriarchs (v. 6).

29 Michael Kok, "Marking a Difference: The Gospel of Mark and the 'Early High Christology' Paradigm," *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* 3 (2016): 101–24, here 124.

Mark's ἐγώ εἰμι as a Precursor to John's "I Am"

As stated at the outset, this essay is exploratory in nature and works with the hypothesis that John both knew and reworked Mark's Gospel. I undertook a similar thought experiment in a previous publication, examining John's "Good Shepherd" παροιμία in light of the Synoptic parables and raising the question: What historical information can reasonably be inferred as part of the literary construct known as the implied audience?[30] I identified at least three pieces of historical or extratextual information embedded in that intratextual construct: (1) the implied audience of the Fourth Gospel knows Hellenistic Greek; (2) the implied audience has a degree of familiarity with some of the conventions and sacred writings of Second Temple Judaism, notably the feasts and various writings of the Hebrew Bible; and (3) the implied audience already knows the story of Jesus but is experiencing the Johannine version for the first time. Here I would like to double down on these insights with particular focus on number three.

The implied audience of the Fourth Gospel not only knows what I am referring to as "the story of Jesus," but more specifically the perspective on Jesus relayed by the Gospel of Mark. For the sake of argument, how might Mark's ἐγώ εἰμι pronouncement(s) have influenced John's overall christological outlook? The ἐγώ εἰμι saying in John 6:20 appears in a seemingly reworked version of Mark 6:50.[31] This is John's first ἐγώ εἰμι saying to have a Markan parallel. The similarities between these two texts in their proximate contexts is illuminating. Numerous scholars have explored the relationship between John 6 and Mark 6 in greater detail, and I will not

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30 Christopher W. Skinner, "The Good Shepherd παροιμία (John 10:1–21) and John's Implied Audience: A Thought Experiment in Reading the Fourth Gospel," *HBT* 40 (2018): 183–201. On this question, see Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 147–72, and the related response by Wendy E. S. North, "John for Readers of Mark? A Response to Richard Bauckham's Proposal," *JSNT* 25 (2003): 449–68.

31 It has long been known that John 6 contains some of the closest verbal and structural parallels to the Synoptics. On this question, Paul Anderson—a major critic of the idea that John is directly dependent upon Mark—notes that "one may infer twenty-four points of contact between John 6 and Mark 6 and twenty-one contacts between John 6 and Mark 8. On close scrutiny, however, the number of *identical* contacts among these forty-five potential similarities is zero" ("John and Mark: The Bi-Optic Gospels," in *Jesus in the Johannine Tradition*, ed. Robert Fortna and Tom Thatcher [Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 175–88, here 178).

attempt to reproduce every aspect here.[32] Table 3 summarizes the strongest verbal parallels between the two narratives.[33]

Table 3: Verbal and Structural Parallels in Mark 6 and John 6

Mark 6:32–44	John 6:1–14
6:34: <u>πολὺν</u> <u>ὄχλον</u>	6:2: <u>ὄχλος</u> <u>πολύς</u>
6:38: <u>πέντε</u>, <u>καὶ δύο</u> ἰχθύας	6:9: <u>πέντε</u> ἄρτους κριθίνους <u>καὶ δύο</u> ὀψάρια
6:39–40: <u>ἐπὶ τῷ χλωρῷ χόρτῳ</u>. καὶ <u>ἀνέπεσαν</u>	6:10: <u>χόρτος</u> πολὺς <u>ἐν τῷ τόπῳ</u>. <u>ἀνέπεσαν</u>
6:44: <u>πεντακισχίλιοι ἄνδρες</u>	6:10: οἱ <u>ἄνδρες</u> τὸν ἀριθμὸν ὡς <u>πεντακισχίλιοι</u>

Mark 6:45–52	John 6:15–21
6:45: τοὺς <u>μαθητὰς</u> <u>αὐτοῦ</u>	6:16: οἱ <u>μαθηταὶ</u> <u>αὐτοῦ</u>
6:45: <u>ἐμβῆναι</u> <u>εἰς τὸ πλοῖον</u>	6:17: <u>ἐμβάντες</u> <u>εἰς πλοῖον</u>
6:47: <u>ὀψίας</u> <u>γενομένης</u>	6:16: <u>ὀψία</u> <u>ἐγένετο</u>
6:48: <u>ἄνεμος</u>	6:18: <u>ἀνέμου</u>
6:49: οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν <u>ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης περιπατοῦντα</u>	6:19: θεωροῦσιν τὸν Ἰησοῦν <u>περιπατοῦντα ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης</u>
6:50: καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· θαρσεῖτε, <u>ἐγώ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε</u>	6:20: ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς· <u>ἐγώ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε</u>
6:51: καὶ ἀνέβη πρὸς <u>αὐτοὺς</u> <u>εἰς τὸ πλοῖον</u>[34]	6:21: οὖν λαβεῖν <u>αὐτὸν</u> <u>εἰς τὸ πλοῖον</u>

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32 Among others, see Ismo Dunderburg, *Johannes und die Synoptiker: Studien zu Joh 1-9*, Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae Dissertationes Humanarum Literarum 69 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1994); Ian D. McKay, *John's Relationship with Mark: An Analysis of John 6 in the Light of Mark 6–8*, WUNT 2/182 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Manfred Lang, "Andersheit und Musterwissen: Beobachtungen zum Verhaltnis Johannes und die Synoptiker anhand von Johannes 6,1–71," in *Studies in the Gospel of John and its Christology: Festschrift Gilbert van Belle*, ed. Joseph Verheyden, Geert van Oyen, Michael Labahn, and Reimund Bieringer, BETL 265 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 189–204; Wendy E. S. North, "Reading Mark and Writing John: The Feeding of the 5,000 in Johannine Perspective," in *Gospel Reading and Reception in Early Christian Literature*, ed. Madison Pierce, Andrew Byers, and Simon Gathercole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 122–40.

33 Given more space, we could certainly include the important Matthean parallels that occur here. For example, in Matt 14:14–32 we have nearly everything except the "grass" in Mark 6:39. Matthew 14:21 has "approximately" (ὡσεὶ) as in John 6:10. Further, as in John 6:19, Matt 14:21 adduces the disciples' "fear" before Jesus exhorts them not to be afraid. Following James Barker (see full bibliographic details in n. 4 above), I also want to affirm that we cannot completely rule out John's use of Matthew as well as Mark in this instance.

34 It is important to acknowledge that the two personal pronouns in Mark 6:51 (αὐτοὺς) and John 6:21 (αὐτὸν) have different antecedents (the disciples in Mark; Jesus in John).

In the first Johannine section above (6:1–14), there are close correspondences with Mark's vocabulary, even if John considerably rewrote the account, particularly by changing word order and inserting phrases. John's rewriting seems especially oriented toward adding details and smoothing out Mark's rough syntax. There are dozens of similar examples in which both Matthew and Luke alter the received Markan text, either in the service of their own distinctive literary and theological contributions or more proper grammar and syntax.[35]

In the second Johannine section above (6:15–21), the correspondence to Mark's vocabulary is even stronger, particularly between Mark 6:49–51 and John 6:19–21. The two texts share eighteen words in common, most of which appear in the same order. The "I am" pronouncements are especially close and compelling for our considerations here:

> Mark 6:50: καὶ   λέγει αὐτοῖς· θαρσεῖτε, ἐγώ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε
> John 6:20: ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς·   ἐγώ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε

Other than the insertion of a pronominal article and the changing of conjunction from καί to δέ, the only alteration is the omission of θαρσεῖτε. John likely regarded that verb as redundant since it communicates substantially the same thing and is occasionally used interchangeably with μὴ φοβεῖσθε.[36]

I argued above that Mark intends his water-walking scene as a theophany. If John understood Mark in this way, then John clearly upped the ante with the aim of exploring a much more explicit "divine identity" Christology. Going forward, Mark uses ἐγώ εἰμι only two more times (13:6; 14:62). By contrast, from chapter 6 on, John repeatedly develops new understandings of Jesus's identity via ἐγώ εἰμι formulations. Unlike Mark, whose story begins with an adult Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, John's starting point is the incarnation (1:14). Accordingly, John's literary

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35 When we compare how both Matthew and Luke make use of Mark's Gospel, one interesting observation is that both regularly change his Greek prepositions, often in the same texts. Hellenistic Greek had nearly two dozen prepositions from which to choose. By contrast, Hebrew and Aramaic had only four primary prepositions, each of which was used to express a range of ideas. Mark's limited use of prepositions is further evidence to support the observation that Mark is thinking in Semitic categories while composing in Greek (viz., bilingual interference).

36 I am not convinced by arguments that such strong verbal agreement results from secondary orality—however that might be conceived. Among others, this argument is made by Michael Labahn in his monograph *Offenbarung in Zeichen und Wort. Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte von Joh 6,1–25a und seiner Rezeption in der Brotrede*, WUNT 2/117 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); see also his article "'Secondary Orality' in the Gospel of John: A 'Post-Gutenberg' Paradigm for Understanding the Relationship between Written Gospel Texts," in *The Origins of John's Gospel*, ed. Stanley Porter and Hughson T. Ong (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 53–80.

audience is prepared for theophanies throughout the ministry of Jesus. I would go so far as to suggest that Jesus's ministry in the Fourth Gospel is one extended theophany, with certain episodes being more obvious than others.[37]

Compared to its ubiquity and significance in the Fourth Gospel, the ἐγώ εἰμι formulation is barely a blip on the christological radar of Mark's Gospel. Nevertheless, it is not merely plausible but indeed probable that Mark's incorporation of this formula—no matter how subtle—influenced an essential feature of Johannine Christology. If we start with the prominence of this formulation in the Fourth Gospel and work backward, it can be easy to downplay the significance of this "I am" saying in Mark as well as its potential impact upon the Johannine textualization of Jesus. But if we work forward from the hypothesis that John knew and significantly rewrote various elements of Mark's Gospel (a hypothesis to which many scholars have now returned), it becomes more plausible to envision this Markan mustard seed blossoming into one of the great trees in the Johannine garden. Against this backdrop, I propose that Mark's subtle but powerful use of θαρσεῖτε, ἐγώ εἰμι, μὴ φοβεῖσθε propelled the development of John's absolute and predicated uses of the "I am" formulation. John took this raw piece of Markan material and transformed it into a foundational literary and theological theme, a key component to the Johannine memory of Jesus.

THE JOHANNINE TRAJECTORY OF A RECEIVED MEMORY OF JESUS

In this article there are many moving pieces. I began by taking up the hypothesis that John knew and reworked Mark. Second, I argued that Mark's source text (6:45–52) represents a theophany in which Jesus is presented as God's "divine agent." Therein I clarified that, albeit distinct from John's "divine identity" Christology, Mark's "divine agency" Christology was an important source for Johannine theology. Third, I connected the Markan and Johannine uses of ἐγώ εἰμι, with Mark 6 serving as an important literary and theological source for John. Finally, I conclude here that, while John is beholden to Mark for much of his written material, John's unique portrait of Jesus is not ultimately beholden to Mark. John did not employ

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37 John's conceptualization of Jesus as revealer of the Father is foundational to our understanding of the Gospel's christological program, and much has been made of this theme in Johannine scholarship. For more on this, see Christopher W. Skinner, "The Johannine Cross as Revelation of the Father: Finding a Cruciform God in the Fourth Gospel," in *Cruciform Scripture: Cross, Covenant, Participation*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner, Andy Johnson, Nijay Gupta, and Drew Strait (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 56–71.

Mark's written text as substantially as both Matthew and Luke did, and his presentation of Jesus (like theirs) is unique and represents a singular achievement in the development of early Christian understandings of Jesus's identity. John's memorialization of Jesus followed the already long and complex christological explorations that preceded it to emphasize strongly the divine identity of Jesus.