

Exegetical/ Textual Analysis of:

Jesus walking on water (John 6:16-21)

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Introduction: Literary Context

John 6:16–21 forms part of a pivotal section within the Gospel of John, occurring after the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–15) and prior to Jesus' Bread of Life discourse (6:22–59). Rather than serving as an isolated miracle account, the episode contributes to John's broader purpose of revealing Jesus' identity through a series of signs that invite faith. In John's Gospel, these signs function not merely as miracles but as revelatory acts that disclose Jesus' identity and encourage belief. The passage details Jesus' approach to his disciples as they struggle across the Sea of Galilee during the night, culminating in his reassurance, "It is I; do not be afraid." Positioned between a miraculous provision of bread and a discourse concerning belief and eternal life, the narrative appears to prepare the reader for the theological teaching that follows while further developing John's presentation of Jesus' divine authority.

John 6:16–17

The opening verses establish both the geographical setting and the narrative tension that prepares the reader for the ensuing miracle. Following the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples depart alone by boat for Capernaum while Jesus remains behind. The mention of Capernaum provides continuity with the wider narrative, as it becomes the setting for the Bread of Life discourse that follows (6:22–59). John's repeated emphasis that "it was now dark" and that "Jesus had not yet come to them" heightens the sense of uncertainty and anticipation before the miracle unfolds. Throughout the Gospel, darkness frequently carries symbolic overtones alongside its literal meaning, although here it also serves to underline the disciples' physical separation from Jesus as they begin their journey across the lake.¹

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), I, pp. 671–672.

John 6:18

Verse 18 introduces the crisis that forms the backdrop to Jesus' miraculous appearance. John notes that a strong wind was blowing and that the sea had become rough, emphasising the disciples' growing vulnerability as they crossed the lake without Jesus. Sudden storms were a recognised feature of the Sea of Galilee owing to its geographical setting, making the circumstances historically plausible. At the same time, the turbulent sea contributes to the narrative tension, placing the disciples in a position of uncertainty before Jesus reveals himself. Within the wider biblical tradition, the sea frequently represents forces beyond human control, making Jesus' subsequent approach across the water a striking demonstration of authority over creation rather than merely an extraordinary display of power.²

John 6:19

After rowing "about three or four miles", the disciples find themselves well out on the lake, emphasising both their physical isolation and the seriousness of the storm. It would appear John includes this specific detail to heighten the dramatic tension, indicating that they are beyond the immediate safety of the shore when Jesus appears. The narrative appears to place the miracle at the point of greatest vulnerability, reinforcing the disciples' dependence upon Jesus rather than their own efforts.³

The narrative reaches a climactic moment as the disciples see Jesus "walking on the sea". Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John offers no description of the mechanics of the miracle, instead presenting it with remarkable simplicity. The emphasis falls not upon the mechanics of the miracle, but upon what the event reveals about Jesus' identity. As one of John's signs, the miracle points

² Keener, *The Gospel of John*, I, p. 674.

³ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, I, pp. 673-674.

beyond itself to reveal Jesus' identity rather than merely demonstrating supernatural power. In keeping with the wider purpose of the Fourth Gospel, the focus remains on Jesus' self-revelation as Lord to the disciples rather than on the miraculous event itself.⁴

Within the Old Testament, mastery over the sea is repeatedly associated with God's sovereign authority (e.g. Job 9:8; Psalm 77:19), suggesting that John's readers would recognise this miracle as more than an extraordinary act of power. The narrative suggests that the disciples' fear stems not only from the storm, but also from their encounter with a revelation that challenges ordinary human expectation.

John 6:20

Jesus' response, "It is I; do not be afraid", arguably forms the theological centre of the passage. The expression translated "It is I" derives from the Greek phrase *ἐγὼ εἰμι*, which may simply function as a statement of identification, yet within John's Gospel it frequently carries deeper theological significance. Barrett argues that John intentionally allows readers to hear echoes of God's self-revelation, understanding the *ἐγὼ εἰμι* formula as evoking the presence of an active and self-revealing God.⁵

Whether understood as an ordinary self-identification or as a deliberate theological echo, Jesus' words immediately replace fear with reassurance. His declaration not only calms the disciples' anxiety but also reveals the true significance of the miracle, shifting the reader's attention from the miraculous event to the identity of the one performing it. John's placement of the phrase immediately after Jesus' appearance on the sea may therefore invite readers to consider who Jesus is as much as what Jesus does.⁶

⁴ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), pp. 202–03.

⁵ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edn (London: SPCK, 1978), pp. 242–43.

⁶ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 203.

John 6:21

The disciples' willingness to receive Jesus into the boat appears to mark a transition from fear to acceptance, demonstrating that his words of reassurance have transformed their response. The final statement that "immediately the boat reached the land to which they were going" has generated considerable scholarly discussion. Some commentators understand this as an additional miracle, while others regard it as John's concise way of bringing the episode to its conclusion.⁷ In either case, the narrative emphasises that Jesus' presence brings both safety and the successful completion of the journey, reinforcing the passage's presentation of him as the one who exercises authority over both creation and the circumstances confronting his disciples.

Conclusion

John 6:16–21 functions as considerably more than a narrative describing a miraculous event. Read within its literary context, the passage serves as a further revelation of Jesus' identity between the feeding of the five thousand and the Bread of Life discourse. The verse-by-verse analysis demonstrates how John employs darkness, the turbulent sea and the disciples' fear to prepare for the revelation of Jesus' authority and reassuring presence. Theologically, the sign points beyond itself to the one who exercises authority over creation and invites faith in his identity. Rather than focusing on the mechanics of the miracle, John directs the reader towards the person of Jesus, making this episode a significant contribution to the Gospel's wider Christological purpose.

⁷ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, I, pp. 673-674.

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