

## **Naked Bible Podcast Transcript**

### **Episode 25**

#### **The Bible's Literary Context: Greco-Roman Ghost Stories and the Bible (Part 4 of 8-part series)**

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### **Summary**

In the last podcast episode we continued our series on studying the Bible in light of its various types of literature – its literary genres. We're going to continue that effort in this episode and shift gears into the New Testament.

I want to look today at two familiar episodes in the life of Jesus: the incident where he walks on the water and his disciples think they are seeing a ghost, and his appearances to the disciples after his resurrection. It may sound surprising, but the ancient world of which the NT was part actually had many stories about ghosts and what scholars call "post-mortem appearances" of the dead. New Testament scholars have investigated how the New Testament writers both utilized and subverted these genres in their attempts to communicate what it was they experienced and believed about Jesus.

### **Transcript**

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

In the last podcast episode, we continued our series on studying the Bible in light of its various types of literature—its literary genres. We're going to continue that effort in this episode and shift gears into the New Testament. I'll be quoting from a couple of scholarly journal articles in this episode, and so I've placed the references for those articles on the podcast website ([www.nakedbiblepodcast.com](http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com)) under the "Bibliography" tab by episode.

I want to look today at two familiar episodes in the life of Jesus: the incident where he walks on the water and his disciples think they are seeing a ghost, and his appearances to the disciples after his resurrection.

It may sound surprising, but the ancient world of which the New Testament was a part actually had many stories about ghosts and what scholars call "post-mortem appearances" of the dead. As such, these sorts of stories (as scholars have collected and studied them) form genres. And since they form genres (story types, so to speak), there are stock elements in each of these genres that came to be expected by readers in the ancient world. In other words, when somebody

wrote a ghost story or a story about someone coming back from the dead in the Greco-Roman period, there were expected components in those stories. There was a way you wrote one if you were an effective writer and communicator.

Taking all that into consideration, New Testament scholars look at how the New Testament writers both utilized and subverted these genres and their elements in their attempts to communicate what it was they experienced and believed about Jesus. You've probably heard preachers or Christian apologists claim that the New Testament stories about Jesus' resurrection and his miracles are unique. That's actually a bit misleading. The New Testament writers both conform to and subvert these genres. What do I mean? Well, on one hand, scholars know that the New Testament writers utilize virtually all the expected ghost story elements in writing about Jesus' appearance on the sea, as well as the elements expected in post-mortem appearances. In that sense, there isn't much that's new. Even details like Jesus eating by the seaside and his challenge to Thomas to touch his body and his wounds after the resurrection—those sorts of things can be found in classical Greek sources about ghosts and post-mortem appearances.

In Greco-Roman literature, sometimes ghosts were conceived of as physical. That might sound odd, especially when it comes to the resurrection. It might make you wonder, "What's different then?" if that's the case. The difference (and the subversion of these literary elements) comes when the writers recast certain elements or combine them in bizarre ways or sort of go beyond them, as though the stock ways of describing a ghost or a person back from the dead just aren't good enough to describe what's going on with Jesus. Frankly, that's the point.

Let's take both literary categories in order. We'll begin with the story of Jesus walking on the water and the disciples' misapprehension (that's being kind) that they were seeing a ghost. There's a recent scholarly article on this subject using a literary approach by Jason Robert Combs entitled "A Ghost on the Water? Understanding an Absurdity in Mark 6:49-50." That was published by the *Journal of Biblical Literature* in 2008. (Available [here](#).) If you can handle Greek, I recommend reading that article. I think you'll find it fascinating. If you don't read Greek, let me quote part of the author's conclusion. Writing about Mark's version of the incident with Jesus walking on the water, Combs says:

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Mark presents several themes typical of classical ghost stories before diverging in a significant way. It is night, the time when there is at least the threat of phantoms looming. Jesus sees the disciples struggling to cross the lake against the wind and begins to walk toward them as light from the dawning sun has barely begun to illuminate their surroundings: the perfect time to sight a phantom. Yet it is not the nighttime hour nor the dimly lit sky to which Mark attributes the disciples' misconstrual of Jesus. Instead, he implies that their misunderstanding comes from "seeing him walking on the sea" (οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης περιπατοῦντα [Mark 6:49]). Mark suggests that the disciples thought that Jesus was a

ghost when they witnessed him doing one thing that ghosts absolutely cannot do: walk on water.

I'm hoping you follow the point that Combs is trying to make here. He's saying that the writer (Mark) is tuned in to the Greco-Roman material—the way that you'd write one of these ghost stories and what you'd have ghosts doing—but he has Jesus walking on the water. The literate reader of Mark would have known that, "Wait a minute, this can't be a ghost because ghosts just don't walk on water. That's just not what ghosts *do* in ghost stories." But, again, the disciples come out sort of clueless. Let me continue with what Combs says.

The Jewish and Greco-Roman audience, familiar with the sort of ghost stories recounted above, would have been particularly dumbfounded by the disciples' misunderstanding. If, in addition to this, one considers the research of Yarbro Collins [a New Testament scholar], then the disciples' misunderstanding becomes even more shocking. Yarbro Collins, as noted previously, reviews a wealth of Greco-Roman sources that describe divine men and gods walking on water. With so many prominent accounts, Mark's audience would certainly have understood Jesus' water-walk in terms of divine manifestation, yet the disciples in Mark do not.

Again, here's the point Combs is trying to make: Anyone familiar with the literary elements of a ghost story would have known that Mark was not describing a ghost. He was describing a god—some divine figure. Mark cast the disciples as basically spiritually clueless or blind to something that should have been obvious. One more quote... Combs adds:

... in Mark the disciples' insistence on believing the absurd seems to emphasize, to the extreme, their failure to believe in Jesus. This is exactly what Mark records. After Jesus identifies himself, Mark describes the astonishment of the disciples, their lack of understanding, and the reason for that lack: their hearts were hardened (6:51–52). The disciples' lack of understanding has long been recognized as a Markan theme that appears throughout the Gospel. Here it forms a striking narrative portrayal of cognitive dissonance: the disciples clearly want Jesus to be something that he is not, to the point that they are willing to believe the absurd when Jesus approaches them as something much grander than they had imagined. Gods and divine men walk on water; ghosts do not. But when the disciples see Jesus walking on water, they believe the impossible rather than the obvious.

When it comes to the post-mortem resurrection accounts (shifting gears now to this other material about Jesus), another scholar—Deborah Thompson Prince—has produced an important literary study about how post-mortem experiences are described in classical Greek literature. Her article is entitled "'The Ghost' of Jesus: Luke 24 in Light of Ancient Narratives of Post-Mortem Apparitions." That was published in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* in 2007.

(Available [here](#).) I'll quote from her work as we continue, but listeners should know that I've posted two images of two appendices at the end of her article. The appendices list out the characteristics of post-mortem apparition appearances in Greco-Roman literature and how the Gospel writers apply and subvert them in their descriptions about Jesus. So after you're done listening here, I invite you to go up and take a look at that. (Available [here](#).)

Back to Prince's article, focusing specifically as she does on Luke 24. After a thorough investigation of the elements of post-mortem appearances in Greek literature, Prince writes this:

I submit that the method at work in Lk. 24 is an attempt to disorient the reader in order to reconfigure the traditions known to the author and reader in light of the disciples' extraordinary experience of the resurrected Jesus. After all, Luke can only describe Jesus' post-resurrection appearances with the vocabulary and literary models he has at his disposal. But what if these are deemed inadequate for his purpose, and no one type of apparition is thought sufficient to represent what the disciples had experienced? In this case Luke would be left with insufficient language and models. If, however, all possible models are incorporated, thereby displaying the breadth and magnitude of Jesus' resurrected presence, while at the same time the limitations of each model are highlighted, then the author is able to work within the parameters of the literary and cultural expectations of the audience to express a phenomenon that surpasses those expectations.

As with the earlier episode in Mark, a literate reader in the early Christian centuries would have read the accounts of the resurrected Jesus and *known* that the writer was just at a loss to describe what the disciples would have experienced. It would have telegraphed a simple but profound message... something like, "We'll do the best we can to describe this, but all the ways you and I are used to thinking about a return from the dead... they just don't cut it. This is beyond anything we can adequately express."

Once again, I hope you'll be encouraged and motivated to read your Bible in its own context, using the resources I discussed in earlier episodes of the podcast. You can find this sort of material. You just have to know where to look.