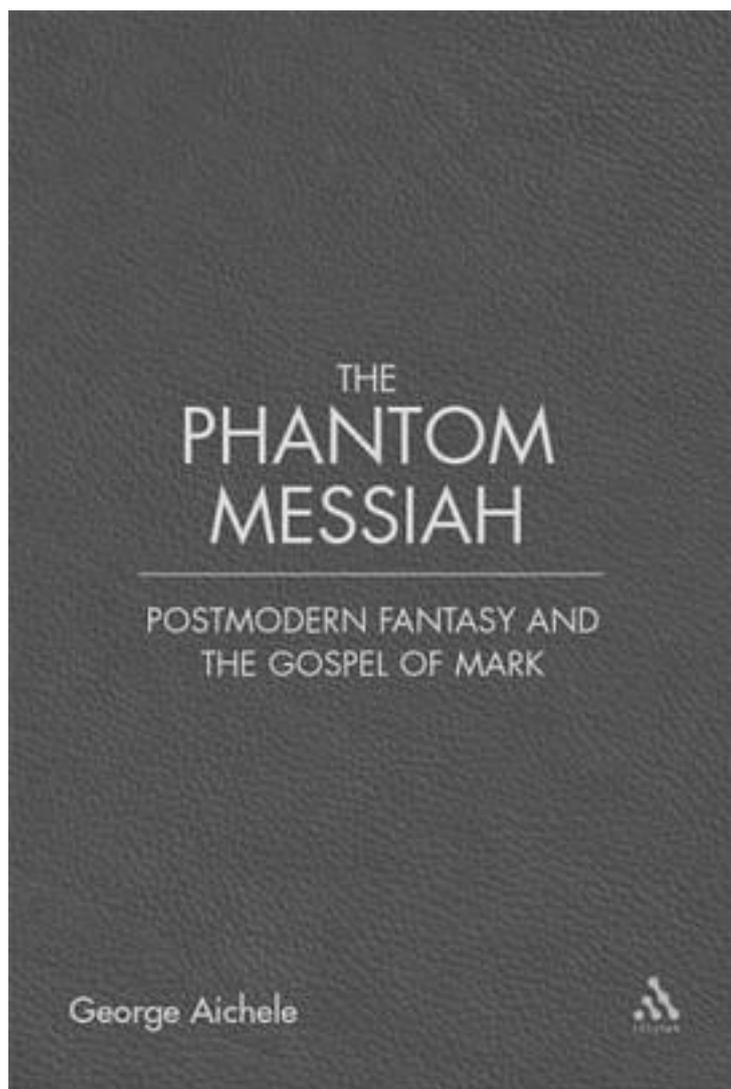


Phantom Messiah



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'[W]hen they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost (phantasma), and cried out; for they all saw him, and were terrified' (Mark 6:49, RSV). There is a growing awareness among biblical scholars and others of the potential value of modern and postmodern fantasy theory for the study of biblical texts. Following theorists such as Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gilles Deleuze (among others), we understand the fantastic as the deconstruction of literary realism. The fantastic arises from the text's resistance to understanding; the "meaning" of the fantastic text is not its reference to the primary world of consensus reality but rather a fundamental undecidability of reference. The fantastic is also a point at which ancient and contemporary texts (including books, movies, and TV shows) resonate with one another, sometimes in surprising ways, and this resonance plays a large part in my argument. Mark and its afterlives "translate" one another, in the sense that Walter Benjamin speaks of the tangential point at which the original text and its translation touch one another, not a transfer of understood meaning but rather a point at which what Benjamin called "pure language" becomes apparent. Mark has always been the most "difficult" of the canonical gospels, the one that requires the greatest amount of hermeneutical gymnastics from its commentators. Its beginning in media res, its disconcerting ending at 16:8, its multiple endings, the "messianic secret," Jesus's tensions with his disciples and family - these are just some of the more obvious of the and many troublesome features that distinguish Mark from the other biblical gospels. If there had not been two other gospels (Matthew and Luke) that were clearly similar to Mark but also much more attractive to Christian belief, it seems likely that Mark, like the gospels of Thomas and Peter, would not have been accepted into the canon. Reading Mark as fantasy does not "solve" any of these problems, but it does place them in a very different context, one in which they are no longer "problems," but in which there are different problems. A fantastical reading of the gospel of Mark is not the only correct understanding of this text, but rather one possibility that may have considerable appeal and value in the contemporary world. This fantastic reading is a "reading from the outside," inspired by the parable "theory" of Isaiah 6:9-10 and Mark 4:11-12: "for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand." Reading from the outside counters a widespread belief that only those within the faith community can properly understand the scriptures. It is the "stupid" reading of those who do not share institutionalized understandings passed down through catechisms and creeds, i.e., through the dominant ideology of the churches.

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