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The Young Man Who Fleed Naked

J. M. Ross

The little incident recorded in Mark 14:51-52 has long been a puzzle to commentators. It seems to break the continuity between 50 and 53, and does not appear in the corresponding places in Matthew (26:56-57) and Luke (22:53-54). For these reasons Weiss (1903) thought the story must have been inserted by a later hand, so that the copies available to Matthew and Luke did not contain it. But if so it is difficult to account for the fact that the verses occur in all extant manuscripts and versions of the gospel; if they had been missing from some early copies, surely the Alexandrian editors would have excised them. In any case this hypothesis does not solve the difficulty: why should Mark or anyone else have inserted the story at all? There are five explanations to choose from.

(1) Loisy<sup>1</sup> adopted Keim's hypothesis that the story had been invented in the early church in order to provide a fulfilment of the prophecy in Amos 2:16; that "On that day the strong man shall flee naked". To this Brandt had objected that Mark does not tell the story as a fulfilment of prophecy, but Loisy correctly retorted that Mark often alludes to OT prophecies without making the allusion explicit. (Examples can be found not much further on in this gospel at 14:61; 15:24; 29:36 and 27-28, where the fulfilment of prophecy is made explicit only in the Byzantine manuscripts; Mark, unlike Matthew, was writing largely for non-Jewish readers who would not be interested in such allusions.) Others have thought that the incident was imagined with reference to the story of Joseph fleeing from Potiphar's wife (Gen 29:12).

Many commentators since then (including A.E.J.Rawlinson, Vincent Taylor, and F.F.Bruce in New Peake) have thought explanations of this type

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Loisy, Les Evangiles Synoptiques (1908) II.591.

improbable because the story reads like a genuine reminiscence. In any case it does not sound like a midrash designed to illustrate either of these OT passages: Gen 29:12; was not in point because no one at the time of Jesus' arrest was trying to flee from temptation; and if anyone was to fill the part of the "strong man" in Amos 2:16; it should have been Peter or another of the apostles, and he should have been wearing armour, not an expensive linen cloth.

(2) Much more popular has been the conjecture that the young man was Mark<sup>2</sup> himself. This explanation is at least as old as Hahn<sup>2</sup>, who saw in this curious incident "the monogram of the painter in a dark corner of the picture". Among British commentators who have, with varying degrees of confidence, approved this suggestion have been A.B. Bruce, H.G. Wood, A. Plummer, A.E.J. Rawlinson, P. Carrington, C.H. Turner and A.M. Hunter. Others, however, including Vincent Taylor, F.F. Bruce, E. Schweizer, H.G. Moule, Dennis Nineham, Hugh Anderson and S. Johnston, have dismissed this explanation as a mere conjecture unsupported by any positive evidence.

Not only is there no positive support for this explanation (the fact that this incident is omitted in Matthew and Luke is not significant, for the authors of those gospels often pruned from Mark what they regarded as unessential surplusage); there are in fact weighty considerations that point against it. "More detail might be expected if Mark were speaking of himself" (Taylor); chapter 14 does not read like the account of an eye-witness (Schweizer); the awkwardness of the connection with verses 50 and 53 implies that Mark was dependent on a source for the incident inserted at this point (Nineham). According to Papias<sup>3</sup>, Mark had neither been a hearer of the Lord nor one of his

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by A.B. Bruce in The Expositors' Greek Testament (1905).

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Eusebius, H. E., 3. 39.

followers, and this is likely to have been a genuine tradition because it does not place Mark in a favourable light. It must also be questioned whether a first-century writer would have introduced himself anonymously into the account of Jesus's arrest; if he had been personally present, surely he would have made it clear that the account is based on first-hand evidence, in the manner of John 19:35; and 21:24.

(3) Some writers, like P.Schanz (1881), E.Schweizer,<sup>4</sup> F.J.Mally in The Jerome Bible and H. Fleddermann<sup>4</sup> have taken the view that the identity of the young man does not matter because the object of the story was simply to give a concrete example of the terror inspired by the "sauve qui peut" situation. The difficulty about this is that Mark had already made clear that every one of Jesus' followers had abandoned him and fled; it does not heighten the tragedy to add what happened to a minor character in the drama. Mark's actual words (which some copyists attempted to improve, as shown in surviving textual variants) were *καὶ νεανίσκος τις συνηκολούθει αὐτῷ* "And moreover a certain young man was also following him". The story is told as if to make an additional point; if it were merely an illustration of the desertion of Jesus it would have been more appropriately introduced by *γάρ* than by *καὶ*. The puzzle remains.

(4) Different from all the foregoing is the explanation attempted by Professor Morton Smith in his book<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria and the Secret Gospel of Mark. Smith's theory is that the young man was wearing a ceremonial garment over his naked body because he had just been baptized by Jesus and instructed by him in the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. He bases this theory on the recent discovery of

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<sup>4</sup> In Catholic Biblical Quarterly 41 (1979) pp.412-18.

<sup>5</sup> Morton Smith, Clement of Alexandria and the Secret Gospel of Mark (Harvard University Press, Boston, 1973) pp.176-177

part of a letter written quite possibly by Clement of Alexandria, containing the text of additional material following Mark 10:34 which the writer believed to be part of Mark's gospel withheld from general publication. This material describes the raising from the dead of a young man who afterwards spent a night with Jesus receiving from him instruction in the mystery of the Kingdom of God and "clothed with a linen garment over his naked body" (the Greek words are identical with those in Mark 14:51). Smith believes that the newly-found text was part of, or anterior to, Mark's original gospel and contains a reference to baptism administered at night with secret magical rites; if so, the story at 14:51-52, with its identical wording, could be another allusion to this practice. All this, however, remains in the realm of conjecture. There is nothing about baptism in the "secret gospel" itself, and the fragment contained in the recently-discovered letter reads more like a clumsy pastiche by someone trying to imitate Mark's style. It cannot be relied on as evidence that Jesus baptized at all, or as elucidating in any way the story in 14:51-52.

(5) There remains the explanation that the incident was narrated as a fulfilment of Amos 2:16; not however as a story invented for the purpose, but as an actual fact. This explanation has received little notice from commentators: it was rejected by Taylor and Cranfield but admitted as possible by Nineham and accepted by Hoskyns and Davey<sup>6</sup>. If this was why Mark included the story, we need not ask who the young man was or why he was wearing nothing but a σιῦδονα on a cold spring night. Of these incidentals many explanations are possible, but the point is that the curious occurrence did happen, and its memory was handed down in the early church because it showed that the crucifixion was a "day of the Lord" such as Amos had foretold. In verse 49 Jesus is recorded as saying

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<sup>6</sup> On p. 89 of The Riddle of the New Testament, by Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey (1931).

that his arrest had to take place in order that the scriptures should be fulfilled. At 51 Mark is saying, in effect, "and here is an example from an otherwise trivial incident, which those who know the scriptures will recognise as a fulfilment of prophecy."

The allusion to Amos 2:16; may seem far-fetched to our way of thinking; but so do many other NT references to the OT. What relevance has the weeping in Ramah or the sorrows of Rachel (Jer 31:15) to Herod's massacre of the innocents (Matt 2:18)? What connection has the death of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:20) with the imprecations in Psalms 69:25 and 109:8? By NT times the Jews had come to find in their scriptures many references to the coming Messiah; now that Messiah had come, the Christians were able to take the process a stage further.

It may be objected that the LXX version of Amos 2:16; will not sustain an allusion to the young man of Mark 14:51 for it prophesies that "the naked man will pursue on that day" (ὁ γυμνὸς διωξεται ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ). The whole verse in LXX makes very poor sense, and that may be one reason why Mark did not quote it; but it is perfectly possible that the incident of the strong man fleeing naked was noticed at the time by Christians familiar with the Hebrew. The way is therefore clear for the adoption of this as the only likely interpretation of an otherwise puzzling passage.

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