

FURTHER POSSIBILITIES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF MARK 14:51-52

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The two verses in Mark's gospel regarding a certain young man who fled naked, leaving a linen cloth in the hands of those who would arrest him, has been the subject of lengthy debate and the object of many theories, some of which have bordered on the ridiculous.¹ Despite the many pages that have been written on this nameless person, as Harry Fleddermann reports, "the episode still has not found a satisfactory explanation".²

Perhaps the most detailed analysis of the two verses in question can be found in Raymond E. Brown's book The Death of the Messiah, where all possibilities made up to the time are looked into in detail.³ After discussing the possibilities that the young man (Greek *nean...skoj*) represents the candidate for baptism, the author of the gospel himself (dismissed by Brown as "nothing other than imaginative flights of fancy"), the same character as the *nean...skoj* seated in the tomb on the Sunday morning, and even Jesus himself ("More adventurously, the young man is sometimes thought to represent Jesus"), Brown concludes that "the flight is parallel to the flight of the disciples and therefore ignominious ... Therefore he cannot symbolize Christ, or the model Christian initiate". If the gospel does intend a reference to the young man in the tomb, it is surely by way of contrast, as "The Jesus who was abandoned disgracefully by the last disciple and

left to face his hour of arrest and death alone is in 16:5-6 served by an angel who proclaims his victory over death".

The fact that the word *nean...skoj* is only found here and used again for the person in the tomb on Easter morning is, as Brown states, surely significant. The incident must have some deeper sense as the purely superficial event is hardly worth recording. However, if the young man is meant to parallel the disciples and their flight, as Brown suggests, surely the passage would be something of an anti-climax. How could an unknown and unnamed person bring the abandoning of Jesus to a climax after his own disciples, who have been with him and seen who he is, have left him?

There must be more to the passage than this. Brown is correct in linking the young man to the tomb on the Sunday morning, as surely the evangelist must have intended the same. The repetition of the word *nean...skoj* is paralleled by the repetition of the word *sindèn*, used here and again at the burial of Jesus for the cloth his body was placed in. It has often (and correctly) been pointed out that the young man sitting in the tomb was not wearing a *sindèn*, as the young man who fled naked, but rather a white robe, a *stol» leuk»*. This must mean that the young man who fled naked is not exactly the same person as the young man sitting in the tomb, although the repetition of the words *nean...skoj* and *sindèn* clearly link the two scenes. This must have been what the gospel writer wanted his readers or listeners to notice. The coincidence in vocabulary is too clear to be fortuitous.

That the young man who fled is meant to represent Jesus has been suggested many times.⁴ Brown describes this identification as adventurous, although offers no sound reason for such an adjective. Another reason he gives for

denying the identification is that Mark never mentions that the *sindèn* was left behind by the risen one. This is true, although if Jesus left the tomb, it can be safely assumed that he left the burial cloths behind – this at least is what happens in the other gospels. Brown adduces that John 20:6-7 cannot be invoked as that gospel does not use the word *sindèn*. However, the word used for the main burial cloth in the fourth gospel, the plural *tì ÑqÒnia*, is understood as a synonym of *sindèn* in the third gospel. Luke 23:53 tells us that Jesus was buried in a *sindèn*, and 24:12, describing what Peter saw in the otherwise empty tomb, uses *tì ÑqÒnia*. The two words obviously refer to the same cloth, otherwise the passage makes no sense. It is therefore possible to invoke John 20:6-7 to show how the risen one left the burial cloths behind in the otherwise empty tomb.

The parallel would thus appear to be that the young man who fled naked from a linen cloth does indeed represent Jesus, who on rising "fled" from the linen cloth he had been buried in. The flight of the young man in 14:51-52 is not "ignominious", but rather looks forward to the resurrection of Jesus.

None of the analyses of the passage have offered a satisfactory explanation of the reference to the young man's nakedness. It was most probable that Jesus was crucified naked. The best known image of a crucified and naked Jesus is the one visible on the piece of linen (*sindèn* in Greek) known as the Shroud of Turin. I am well aware that the very mention of this cloth will make many recoil, although before doing so, various points should be made. The Shroud has not been shown to be medieval, despite what is read in the newspapers and what is popularly thought. Among many arguments that could be used here, one will suffice – Professor Harry Gove, co-inventor of the AMS carbon dating method

used on the Shroud in 1988, and at the time a staunch defender of the medieval date obtained, has since declared that the dating is not valid.⁵ It is true that a large amount of poorly researched literature has been published about the Shroud, but that is also true of the Bible itself (much more so), yet that is no reason to dismiss either as a "fake" and ignore serious studies and publications on the subject. People do not give up Bible study just because books have been published claiming that Jesus was married and has descendants living today. No matter what one might think of the Shroud, the simple scientific fact remains that it exists and nobody has been able to explain the formation of its image of a naked crucified Christ.

If we take the nakedness of the Shroud image into account, this would provide a complete explanation of the reference to a naked man fleeing from a linen cloth. In turn this would also lead to the question, was the author of the first gospel aware of the survival of such a cloth (whether or not it was the same as the one now preserved in Turin)? Was he referring to a cloth with an image of a naked man on it, or was the reference purely to the resurrection (assuming nakedness as an integral part of crucifixion)?

The earliest reference to an image on the burial shroud of Jesus can be found in the Old Spanish Liturgy (also called the Mozarabic Liturgy), whose present form is attributed to the sixth and seventh centuries. The passage for the Saturday after Easter reads as follows, "Peter ran to the tomb with John and saw the recent imprints of the dead and risen one on the cloths".⁶

The context of the passage is clear and cannot be denied - the two disciples are running to the tomb after it has been reported empty, and saw

something related to Jesus on the burial cloths. Up to here there can be no argument. The only doubtful point comes when we try to analyze exactly what the two disciples saw. The Latin word is *vestigia*. The normal meaning of this word is "footprint" or "track", although it can also mean "trace", "mark", "sign" or "token" - this is much more general. The first meaning can be quickly dismissed as totally inappropriate in the context, which leaves us with some kind of mark or sign of Christ, something clearly related to his death and resurrection. This would seem to suggest that Peter and John saw the blood (death) and the body image (resurrection). There is very little else that could be seen on the burial cloths.

Even though this is a relatively early reference to an image on the burial shroud of Jesus, it cannot be inferred from there that the author of Mark's gospel was aware of such an image. My own conclusion would be that Mark 14:51-52 must be a reference to the tomb with no body inside, only the burial cloths, and to the resurrection. The double repetition of words (*nean...skoj* and *sindèn*) makes this conclusion almost inevitable. The naked body of Jesus did indeed "escape" from the shroud. Mark most probably was not aware of an image on the shroud (although this is not impossible), but the image of the naked crucified Jesus on the shroud kept today in Turin certainly corroborates the identification.

¹ For example, suggesting a possible homosexual encounter just because the man was naked under his clothing (are not we all naked under our clothes?) is simply not good textual analysis, regardless of what one might think about homosexuality in the Bible.

² Harry Fleddermann, CBQ 41 (1979) 412 – 418.

³ Raymond E. Brown, The Death of the Messiah (2 vols.; Doubleday 1994), 1. 294-304.

⁴ See for example A. Vanhoye, "La fuite du jeune homme un (Mc 14,51-52)", in Bib 52 (1971) 401-406; J. Knox, "A Note on Mark 14:51-52" in The Joy of Study (ed. S.E. Johnson, MacMillan 1951); E.L. Schnellbacher, "Das Rätsel des neaniskos bei Markus", in ZNW 73 (1982) 127-135.

⁵ On the documentary In Pursuit of the Shroud, produced by Reuben Aaronson and first shown on The Learning Channel in December 1998.

⁶ Ad monumentum Petrus com Iohanne cucurrit recientaque in linteaminibus defuncti et resurgentis vestigia cernit.