

Mark 14,51-52 and Coptic Hagiography

How late and with what uncertainty it came to be suspected that the author lay concealed in Mark 14:51 (Theodore Zahn, 1899)

One of the enduring riddles in the exegesis of the New Testament has been the identity of the νεανίσκος in Mark 14,51-52. There has been much debate with regard to the identity of the νεανίσκος, ranging from informed guesses to bizarre identifications, used only to further the particular cause of the exegete. Many modern biblical commentaries simply state that the νεανίσκος is to be identified with the evangelist and no more is said. One might well be forgiven for believing that this identification is simply the product of the 19th century school of biblical criticism that saw in every verse a secret, or even obvious, motive of the author, designed to convey some sort of information about the literary, social or theological standpoint of the author. In fact, we can now establish that the identification of the νεανίσκος of 14,51-52 with the Evangelist lies not in the minds of 19th century exegetes, but really much deeper, even to the 13th century.

The first responses to the question of the identity of the νεανίσκος seem to be random suggestions, based on supposed correlations with traditions of other New Testament figures. Thus we find the first identification of the νεανίσκος with James ‘the brother of the Lord’ in the Panarion⁽¹⁾ of Epiphanius of Salamis. This suggestion is put forward by Epiphanius as part of a meditation on the ascetical life of James; this ‘brother of the Lord’ wore but a threadbare sheet, that same sheet which was left by him in the garden. Ambrose uses a similar method, but in his mind it is not the sheet that tells us of the νεανίσκος’s identity, but rather his age, leading Ambrose to suggest, not James, but rather John the Evangelist⁽²⁾. The correlation between the identification of the νεανίσκος and developing hagiography is already manifest, but the question for such writers is not really the identification of the νεανίσκος himself, but rather how the subject of their writing can be identified with this otherwise unknown witness to the Passion. Aquinas tells us of further suggestions that follow this mode of identification⁽³⁾; Bede also sees in the νεανίσκος, the young disciple John, as does Gregory⁽⁴⁾. Others were keen to maintain his anonymity; both Theophylact⁽⁵⁾ and Victor⁽⁶⁾ simply

⁽¹⁾ *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (ed. F. WILLIAMS) (Leiden 1994) 640 (Books II and III [Sects 47-80, De Fide], Anacephalaeosis VII, Against Antidicomarians 13.2-3).

⁽²⁾ *Commentary of St. Ambrose on Twelve Psalms* (Dublin 2000) 86-87.

⁽³⁾ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Catena Aurea* (ed. J.G.F. – J. RIVINGTON) (London 1842) II, 299.

⁽⁴⁾ ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Morals on the Book of Job* (London 1844) II, 49.

⁽⁵⁾ AQUINAS, *Catena Aurea*, II, 299 and Migne, *Scripturae Sacrae Cursus Completus* (Paris 1839) XXII, 202.

⁽⁶⁾ POSSINUS, *Catena Graecorum patrum in Evangelium secundum Marcum* (Rome 1673) 326.

comment that the νεανίσκος was a servant at the house of John Mark who had been disturbed in his sleep by the brouhaha of the arrest.

The episode of the νεανίσκος is also suggested as having some sort of pedagogical role. Bede not only sees the young John, but also a wider lesson namely of betrayal and restoration and of the prudence of flight for those who are unable to undergo torture (?). Jerome uses the episode in a similar mode in his *Letter to Lucinius* (8), where he compares the νεανίσκος to Joseph's flight from the Egyptian woman in Gen 39,12. Whilst Jerome does not suggest that the νεανίσκος of Mark is a scriptural allusion to Joseph he is certainly the first to make the comparison with Joseph which would return later (9). But this is not Jerome's primary use of the episode, rather he writes to console a woman who has recently lost her husband and thus uses the νεανίσκος to demonstrate to the woman the need to avoid being fettered with the things of this world which keep us from following God.

Cajetan suggests in his *Ientacula* (10) that the νεανίσκος was a son or servant of the villa which was in the garden of Gethsemane. He comes to such an idea by eliminating any possibility that the disciples, such as John the Evangelist, could have been adolescents at the time of Jesus' Passion. Unlike Theophylact, Cajetan does not identify the νεανίσκος with the house in which the Passover has taken place, rather simply a house in the locality. Cajetan further elaborates that this νεανίσκος was asleep in house (this offers an explanation for his meagre dress), which was either in the garden itself or at least in the vicinity, and was awoken by the noise of the events that took place and out of curiosity went to see what was happening. Cajetan also insists that the use of the verb συνακολουθέω implies that the νεανίσκος was a follower or supporter of Jesus. It seems then that he takes the verb to have connotations of discipleship. Montefiore (11) discusses this briefly citing "and a certain νεανίσκος" seems to exclude the disciples.

The literary critical school produced a plethora of interpretations of the identity of the νεανίσκος that continues to this very day. It is in the 1830s that we see the first Western identification of the νεανίσκος with Mark the evangelist, who is equated with John Mark. Holtzmann (12) points us to Olshausen (13) as the root of this theory. Olshausen draws particular attention to the strangeness of this incident and asks the question why such an obscure incident would merit a place in the gospel. He concludes that there must be some great importance attached to the νεανίσκος and concludes that here Mark writes concerning himself. It is surprising that such identification should be found to have its roots in western biblical exegesis as late as 1830, as Zahn also remarks. For Olshausen the verses only find their significance

(7) AQUINAS, *Catena Aurea*, II, 299.

(8) *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Series II* (ed. P. SCHAFF) (Edinburgh – Grand Rapids, MI 1867-1872) VI, 153.

(9) A. LOISY, *L'Évangile selon Marc* (Paris 1912) 425.

(10) T. CAJETAN, *Ientacula Novi Testamenti* (Coloni 1706) 73-74.

(11) C.G. MONTEFIORE, *The Synoptic Gospels, edited with an introduction and a commentary* (London 1927) 350.

(12) H. HOLTZMANN, *Synoptische Erklärung der drei ersten Evangelien von Friedrich Bleek – Herausgegeben von Lic. Heinrich Holtzmann* (Leipzig 1862) II, 435-436.

(13) H. OLSHAUSEN, *Biblical Commentary on the New Testament* (New York 1859) III, 46.

when the identity of the νεανίσκος is made clear, such is the reason for the ‘silence’ of other commentators. Few seem to view his anonymity as particularly enhancing the gospel, rather only serving to add a mysterious question. On the basis of the lack of importance attached to this passage, indeed as we have shown above it is often used merely as a convenient resource for developing hagiographies, we should not be so surprised to find such a late western identification of the νεανίσκος with Mark. Holtzmann⁽¹⁴⁾ bases his exegesis of 14,51-52 on the assertion of Olshausen, which he expounds further. He sees that the νεανίσκος of Mark might be thought of as a signatory device and compares such a use of the νεανίσκος by the author of Mark, as the device of the ‘Beloved Disciple’ used by the author of John. Indeed it is the development of that idea in studies of John’s gospel which might certainly have influenced exegesis of these verse, even if subconsciously. Holtzmann refuses however to give a clear statement on the νεανίσκος’s identity and in fact refers to the sheer mystery of the passage and thus concludes that the identity of the νεανίσκος can never be known. In 1899 Zahn⁽¹⁵⁾ echoed Olshausen’s view that the νεανίσκος was John Mark. Zahn however attempted to demonstrate that the tradition of identifying the νεανίσκος with Mark lay within the work of Epiphanius, who in fact identified the νεανίσκος with James, as we have seen. Weiss⁽¹⁶⁾ takes to task the opinion of Zahn that the identification of the νεανίσκος with Mark is an early tradition, stating that Epiphanius’ identification of the νεανίσκος with James (not with John or John Mark) proves that Zahn’s attempts to find an earlier tradition for such an idea are flawed. Weiss’ main objective however was to demonstrate that the John Mark of Acts was the same as the evangelist.

Whilst hitherto it has been accepted that the identification of the νεανίσκος with the Evangelist Mark lay in the mind of Olshausen, we must in fact travel to Africa, in the 13th century to find its roots. It is in the MSS E1 = Evv., Copt.-Arab., London Brit. Mus. Oriental 1315 (Greg II), perfect, written in the Boharic dialect of Coptic, that we find the revealing Arabic footnote which tells that character is reported both as *y’qub bn yusf* and *mrqs ’l injili* ‘James the son of Joseph’ and ‘Mark the Evangelist’⁽¹⁷⁾. Mark, identified by the Copts as founder of the See of Alexandria and the ‘Beholder of God’⁽¹⁸⁾ is a figure of great veneration in that church and thus we ought not to be surprised to find that it is here, in Coptic hagiography that we find him first identified with the νεανίσκος. In the same way that Epiphanius’ hagiography of James saw him so similarly identified, so too does

⁽¹⁴⁾ HOLTZMANN, *Synoptische Erklärung der drei ersten Evangelien von Friedrich Bleek*, II, 435-436.

⁽¹⁵⁾ T. ZAHN, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Edinburgh 1909) II, 446-447.

⁽¹⁶⁾ J. WEISS, *Das älteste Evangelium. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markus-Evangeliums und der ältesten evangelischen Überlieferung* (Göttingen 1903) 404-411.

⁽¹⁷⁾ See also *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialect, otherwise called Meripytic and Bohairic, Volume I – the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark* (Oxford 1898).

⁽¹⁸⁾ SHENOUDA III, *The Beholder of God: Mark the Evangelist, Saint and Martyr, A Concise English Translation of the Fourth Edition* (St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church, Santa Monica, California, Sept. 1995) 16.

Mark first become the νεανίσκος — not through the literary critical methods of the 19th century, but through the pious devotion of the 13th century.

We see then that the author of the footnote finds agreement with Epiphanius in suggesting James, but also ventures an otherwise unheard of suggestion of Mark the Evangelist. The MSS is dated to 1208 and thus, on the basis that the Markan identification is not suggested but 'reported' we can suggest an even earlier, established, tradition that linked Mark with the νεανίσκος. The new light shed upon the identity of Mark's νεανίσκος by this hagiographical footnote not only allows us to see the Markan identification as reaching into the earliest periods of New Testament commentary, but provides a fascinating example of how two quite different forms of exegesis; the modern literary critical and the ancient hagiographical, can reach parallel conclusions.

St. Chad's Priory
7, Stocks Street,
Cheetham, Manchester, M8 8GG

Rupert ALLEN

SUMMARY

The question of the identity of the young man who flees naked at the end of the Markan Passion narrative has elicited a great variety of responses from exegetes. Early commentators merely referring to existing hagiography, often identifying the man as 'James, the brother of the Lord' because of his supposed aestheticism. In the 19th century the idea that the young man was a type of signatory device by the evangelist came to the fore in critical biblical literature. Research into Coptic MSS now reveals the identification of the young man with the Evangelist in fact finds its root in 13th century Egyptian hagiography.