

THORDAY ATTILA:

THE ROLE OF THE *NEANISKOS* IN THE EASTER MYSTERY ACCORDING TO MARK

Mark's wording of the arrest of Jesus differs from the description of the other evangelists in that a certain young man appears in it. However, our attention would easily skim over him if we did not read about this mysterious figure any more. Astonishingly though, at another key-point of the passion-resurrection narration string, again a young man appears – unexpectedly, too – who announces the fact of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Textual criticism

The word *naked* (ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ) is missing partly or completely from 14:51 in the most notable Western text witnesses. It is missing from the W capital letter codex, as well as from the *c*, *k* manuscripts of Vetus Latina, whereas other text witnesses (Θ, *f*³) only bring in the word γυμνός. Based on this, noteworthy scholars like E. Lohmeyer, F. Neiryneck and V. Taylor draw the conclusion that the nakedness of the young man should be interpreted as “scanty clothing”¹. Their sweeping conclusion proves to be overly facile, based on the following considerations:

The omission found in the ancient manuscripts certainly served to avoid potential difficulties. The fact that Matthew and Luke left out this episode suggests that the issue was complete nakedness, and so they deemed the scene outrageous.² Thus, on basis of outer arguments (evidence of the most maiuscules codexes) as well as inner (*lectio difficilior*) ones, we regard the more difficult expression as trustworthy, and we will take much account of it in the further explanation the text.

We may observe two other problems of textual criticism. First, some codexes and manuscripts cite the last expression of 14:51 with a longer text variant: *and the young men laid hold of him* (καὶ κρατοῦσιν αὐτόν οἱ νεανίσκοι), and (οἱ δε νεανίσκοι κρατοῦσιν αὐτόν), respectively. Secondly, some text variants of the last expression (γυμνός ἔφυγεν) of 14:52 specify it with a complement (ἀπ’ αὐτῶν) that the young man is fleeing from those who have caught hold of him.³ Both of the above questions is thus answerable with the rule of *lectio brevior*.

The text to be examined is the following:

¹ Eg. NEIRYNCK, F.: „La fuite du jeune homme en Mc 14,51-52”, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 55 (1979), 64.

² Cf. BROWN, R.E.: *The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion narratives in the four Gospels*, vol. I., New York 1994, p. 295. See also GUNDRY, R.E.: *Mark. A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross*, Grand Rapids 1993, p. 882.

³ However, ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ would suggest that the young man is fleeing from Jesus.

⁵⁰ Καὶ ἀφέντες αὐτὸν ἔφυγον πάντες.
⁵¹ Καὶ νεανίσκος τις συνηκολούθει αὐτῷ
 περιβεβλημένος σινδῶνα ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ,
 καὶ κρατοῦσιν αὐτόν·
⁵² ὁ δὲ καταλιπὼν τὴν σινδῶνα
 γυμνὸς ἔφυγεν.

⁵⁰ *And they all deserted him and ran away.*
⁵¹ *A young man followed him*
with nothing on but a linen cloth.
They caught hold of him,
⁵² *but he left the cloth in their hands,*
and ran away naked.

Vocabulary

As for the meaning of the word „young” (νεανίσκος), it encompasses the age after adolescence and before coming into full adulthood⁴; the period when everybody has to make the fundamental decisions of life. The indefinite “somebody” (τις) emphasizes that the evangelist intends to leave the question of identity open, as in the narration about the “rich young man”⁵, so that everybody can apply the story to himself⁶.

The verb with the prefix (συν+ἀκολουθέω) occurs only three times in the New Testament. In Mark 5:37, it expresses the honoured position of Peter, James and John, i.e. it is only them who are allowed to be with Jesus when waking the daughter of Jairus. In our present passage, when all the disciples have run away, it is only the young man who “listened to him” (συνηκολούθει αὐτῷ). Finally, we can read the same verb with prefix in the scene of the crucifixion, when Luke gives expression to the affection of the women remaining with Jesus from Galilee with this compound word (23:49: αἱ συνακολουθοῦσαι αὐτῷ ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας). Although the verb appears 17 times in Mark and 18 times in Luke, usually referring to the crowd (Mar 2:15; 3:7; 5:24; 11:9) or the disciples (Mar 6:1; 10:32; 14:13), its variant with the prefix emphasises an intimate and privileged relationship. Whereas everybody has gone away from Jesus (14:54: Peter followed him from a distance: ὁ Πέτρος ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ), this particular young man remained his follower (συνηκολούθει αὐτῷ). Thus the prefix συν has a theological emphasis.

The meaning of the verb περιβάλλω is unambiguous: „throw over”, „wear, „put on”, „assume”, „wrap up”, but it is noteworthy that it only appears twice in Mark (14:51 and 16:5), and in both cases, in the same grammatical form (perfect middle participle).

The nature of the word σινδῶν has given rise to several questions among scholars, too. We are convinced that this is a shroud touching the naked body, and not an overgarment⁷, since Mark refers to the latter with the noun ἱμάτιον (2:21; 5:27.28.30; 6:56; 9:3; 10:50; 11:7.8; 13:16; 15:20.24). Considering that the word σινδῶν occurs only six times in the New Testament - among which two are in the passage being examined, and four in the description of the burial of Jesus (Mar 15:46; Mat 27:59, Luk 23:53) -, their connection to one another is remarkable regarding our topic.

The verb κρατέω occurs 15 times in Mark’s short gospel, in most cases with the meaning “to take hold of, arrest, take into custody” (6:17; 12:12; 14:1.44.46.49.51). In the healing scenes, it

⁴ Cf. BALZ, H. – SCHNEIDER, G. (eds.): „νεανίσκος”, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1991, vol. II, 459.

⁵ The man trying to follow Jesus declares that he has kept the entire law „from my youth” (10:20: ἐκ νεότητός μου; cf. Mat 19:20.22).

⁶ Cf. BROWN, R.E.: *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. I., 298.

⁷ Oppositely, F. NEIRYNCK, „La fuite du jeune homme...”, p. 64.

expresses that Jesus takes hold of the sick person (1:31; 5:41; 9:27), in the teaching of Jesus we may read about grasping (i.e. “keeping”) the traditions (7:3.4.8), whereas the disciples grasp the experience of the transfiguration of Jesus, keeping it in themselves (9:10).

Comparing the wording of the arrest of Jesus in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, we note something interesting: both evangelists mention that after Jesus is arrested, his followers run away, and then Jesus is brought to the high priest. Yet between these two movements, Mark expresses the violence of those seeking Jesus’ life by the young man being taken hold of (κρατοῦσιν αὐτόν), whereas Matthew explicitly writes about Jesus being taken into custody (26:57: Οἱ δὲ κρατήσαντες τὸν Ἰησοῦν).

In the passage being examined, the verb φεύγω occurs twice: in 14:50 the disciples run away (ἔφυγον), then it is this young man who runs away (14,52: ἔφυγεν). The disciples run away leaving Jesus behind, then the young man also runs away, leaving behind his linen shroud. It is worth noting that the verb being examined only occurs five times in the gospel of Mark. Apart from two previous occurrences (5:14; 13:14) and the two cases in the present passage, it again plays a key role in 16:8: when hearing the words of the young man sitting at the empty tomb, this time it is the women who break into a run.

Comparing this gospel with the other three, we may observe that Matthew does not mention a young man but the angel of the Lord (28,2: ἄγγελος κυρίου) and an angel (28,5: ἄγγελος), respectively, who is immediately followed by the appearance of the Lord Jesus himself (28:9-10). Luke speaks about men in brilliant clothes (24:4), then about the personal appearance of Jesus (24:15.34.36). After narrating the empty tomb, John expressly reports about Jesus’ appearance to Mary of Magdala (20:11-18) and then to the disciples (20:19.26). Consequently, it is only Mark who mentions a certain young man (νεανίσκος), it is only him who uses the verb περιβάλλω and it is only him who speaks about the women as fleeing from the scene. As opposed to the latter, according to Matthew they are joyfully running somewhere to bring the news to the disciples (28:8); the other two gospels record the scene in a similar way (Luk 24:9, Joh 20:18).

Being naked and being a disciple

Undressing represents a painful step in the transition which everybody who becomes a disciple of Jesus has to undergo. In this sense, being denuded is indispensable. The evangelist repeatedly emphasizes the fact that becoming nude is in close connection with following Christ. But this is only positive if someone undertakes poverty and nudity freely, just as it was done by the Son of God for us (cf. Fil 2:6-8; 2Co 8:9). The evangelist depicts Jesus’ total outer and inner denuding on the cross as his free decision motivated by love.

It seems that Mark intends to emphasise through the phrasing his conviction that the disciples inevitably share the fate of Jesus: by following him, they cannot avoid the consequences of their Master’s teaching. It follows that the aim of the spiritual leaders – i.e. taking hold of Jesus – extends to those who wish to remain with him.

After Jesus is arrested, the escape of the young man left naked – paradoxically – shows the implications of being a disciple. The wording calls to the reader’s mind the moment the disciples began to follow Jesus, when they appeared to leave everything in order to walk in the steps of the

Master. Contrary to this, at his arrest they leave Jesus, breaking into a run. Those who have heard Peter's words previously remember the words he said after the rich young man left: *"Look, we have left everything and followed you."* (10:28). The paradoxical situation now lies in the fact that although the young man indeed leaves everything he has (his only piece of clothing), in the present case he does this by running *away* from Jesus⁸.

The word γυμνός means actual nakedness. Yet the evangelist would not mention this if he only wanted to depict the physical nakedness of the young man. The narratives of Holy Scripture do not primarily intend to immortalise outer events, but rather to express what is going on in people's inner selves. In this case, this particular young man's fear of being dealt with in the same manner as his Master causes such a break in his identity that the image of denuding, of losing his human dignity, is particularly appropriate.⁹

Since the question of the nature of being a disciple impregnates the whole of Mark's work, so does he point this out repeatedly in the narrative of the Easter mystery. Those who have been called to follow Jesus and have set out on the way of being a disciple cannot easily turn their back on him. Upon the arrest of Jesus, Peter decides that he will follow his Master "at a distance" (14:54: ἀπὸ μακρόθεν) at least. But it is impossible to follow Jesus in such a reticent manner. The disciple is incapable of backing out of the course of events, and his anxious love draws him into the court of the high priest's house¹⁰.

Upon the death of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathaea, who had formerly renounced publicly to be a follower of Jesus, takes the courage to ask Pilate personally to have the body of Jesus delivered to him (15:43).

We may observe something similar in the behaviour of the women, who follow the crucifixion of Jesus sympathetically but passively, "watching from a distance" (15:40: ἀπὸ μακρόθεν θεωροῦσαι). When Saturday, the day of stillness, is over, the news of the resurrection leads them sooner or later, too, to take an active part in following the risen Christ.

Examining the examples of the *neaniskos*, Peter the Apostle, Joseph of Arimathaea and the women, we may observe that those who undertake to follow the Master – according to Mark – cannot remain outside the events concerning Jesus, but will sooner or later become part of them, too. This transition undertaken with Jesus, or the paschal or Easter mystery itself, will be the broader horizon in which we are going to examine the role of the *neaniskos* henceforth¹¹.

⁸ Cf. BROWN, R.E.: *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. I., p. 303.

⁹ Similarly, the person violating God's commandment feels naked – as the Book of Genesis writes about the first man (3:10).

¹⁰ Peter tries to remain anonymous, but his affiliation is revealed. This frightens him so much that he denies three times that he is a disciple of Jesus (14:66-72).

¹¹ On Golgotha, we reach the climax of the passion narrative, where Jesus and his disciples are vulnerable to the final downfall, the final nakedness. But just at the moment of the death of Jesus, this reveals the deepest humanity in man, too. In this crucial hour, the Roman centurion conducting the execution, Joseph of Arimathaea and some women are all present, "redeeming" the three groups of people who had seemed totally lost before the death of Christ – pagans, spiritual leaders and, in particular, the disciples.

The Easter mystery and the young man

Our above examinations witness to the fact that three key words (νεανίσκος; περιβάλλω; φεύγω) of the vocabulary of the passage being considered return in the passage 16:1-8; furthermore, these words are the most infrequently used words of Mark's gospel.¹²

14:51: νεανίσκος	14:53–15:47: the passion and death of Jesus	νεανίσκον : 16:5
14:51: περιβεβλημένος		περιβεβλημένον : 16:5
14:52: ἔφυγεν		ἔφυγον : 16:8

Considering the fact that the two passages frame the climax of Jesus' self-presentation, the narrative of the passion and the crucifixion, we may justly assume that the young man who runs away naked and the figure of the young man announcing the resurrection indicate a strong theological correspondence in Mark's gospel.

A parallel is drawn between the young man running away naked and the young man appearing in white clothes (cf. 16:5), as well as between the women running away wordlessly, full of fear, and the heavenly messenger. Whereas in 14:61 we can read that the young man takes off the linen shroud and runs away, in 16:5 the young man wearing the linen shroud remains seated majestically to announce Christ's victory over suffering and death.

On the one hand, the disciples are characterised by „unredeemedness”, on the other, the young man dressed in a white robe appears as the messenger of redemption. In John's vision, people dressed in long white robes are those¹³ who followed Christ both in his passion and death, and are now entitled to witness his victory. As Mark presents the experience of humiliation in following Jesus through becoming naked, God's recreating effect is expressed by the white robe of the young man. In Mark's wording, the white-dressed *neaniskos* is not an angel coming down from the heavenly sphere, but the figure of the disciple enveloped entirely in Christ's Easter mystery.

From nakedness to the white robe

Mark's ancient text variant ends with one single person remaining on the scene: the young man dressed in white sitting on the right. What significance does it have that the evangelist emphasising the downfall of the disciples finishes his writing with the *neaniskos* who is connected with the escape of the disciples (14:50) and the portrayal of nakedness (14:52)?

Passage 14:50-52 foreshows the passion and death of Jesus by the sign of being stripped naked in the human and spiritual sense. This momentum of the chain of events touches each disciple personally: it illuminates the unreliability of their wholeheartedness towards their Master, and strips them of all forms of false self-confidence.

However, the passage 16:1-8 refers to the resurrection of Christ sitting enthroned on the right of the Father, which creates a completely new situation and takes hold of each disciple one

¹² Cf. Perego, G.: *La nudità necessaria*, Ed. San Paolo 2000, p. 102.

¹³ According to the wording of the author of the Apocalypse, those who are dressed in long white garments (Rev 7:9: περιβεβλημένους στολὰς λευκάς; 7:13: οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκάς) are those who have persevered in following Christ to the end, who have “washed their robes white again” (7:14: ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναι) in the blood of the Lamb, and are now worshipping the throne and the Lamb.

after the other: they gain their full human dignity¹⁴, and then feel it necessary, in the light of the Easter mystery, to return to Galilee.

The experience of being stripped naked – both in a physical and a spiritual sense – is shocking and good-for-nothing in itself. However, this is necessary for the disciples in order to give themselves over completely to the mercy of Christ hanging on the cross: to awake to their own limits and unreliability, and thus to awake to the disproportion between Christ's self-giving and their own response to it¹⁵. Becoming naked is thus a necessary condition for the disciple to be able to assume the new honour of being a child of God¹⁶.

The *neaniskos* in passage 16:5-7 is the icon of the disciple, strengthening the disciples to have the courage to live the fullness of the Easter mystery. Denuding leads exactly to this: it is “necessary” in order to achieve a totally transformed identity, the key to which is given by the experience of the cross. In this sense, the risk of the disciple lies precisely in the fact that he is unable to transcend the scandal of Golgotha, or rather, in spite of transcending it, he cannot overcome his doubtfulness in front of the empty tomb. The silence caused by fear that concludes Mark's gospel points out the danger which every Christian is exposed to when pausing at the reaction of the *neaniskos* of 14:50-52. Yet the experience of every Christian should achieve the same maturity as the manifestation of the *neaniskos* in 16:5-7. Consequently, Mark's gospel ends with a contrast which forces the readers to make a decision.

If we look at the above examined passage in this way, the possibility arises that, in the present wording, it may have been used for baptismal education of the candidates¹⁷. We have previously pointed out that, in Mark's theology, the key figure of the young man comprises the opening and closing scenes of the Easter mystery. Then we demonstrated that these scenes refer closely to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now it becomes more understandable why the evangelist calls the figure appearing at the turning point of the passion and the resurrection *neaniskos*. Mark's whole work attempts to challenge his readers to follow the crucified and resurrected Christ trustworthily and maturely. He is convinced that those who intend to follow Jesus experience the same thing as what the apostle writes about the baptism of those who become followers of Christ (e.g. Rom 6:4; Gal 3:27)¹⁸. The disciple experiences becoming undressed as well as being dressed up in new clothes, and all this is in close connection with the life of the Master. The question arises of how the teaching of apostle Paul may have influenced Mark's theology, but answering this set of questions is beyond the confines of the present essay.

¹⁴ In the story of healing the Gerasene demoniac, Mark foreshadows the closing scene of his gospel, in that he describes the healed man dressed in a robe, and those who see this are seized with fear (5:15).

¹⁵ For Jesus, becoming naked is a way of being able to fulfil his Father's wish and to inaugurate his reign on earth. This reign is manifested in its fullness when it confronts the power of human viciousness and death by Jesus' voluntarily accepting suffering and embracing the cross. This vulnerability represents something beyond itself. Cf. Perego, G.: *La nudità necessaria*, Ed. San Paolo 2000, p. 227.

¹⁶ Cf. Haulotte, E.: „robe”, in: *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique* (edited by X. Léon-Dufour), Cerf, Paris 1970, p. 1145.

¹⁷ In the excursus of his dissertation, Giacomo Perego details the possibilities of this, cf. *La nudità necessaria*, p. 235-262.

¹⁸ The apostle illuminates the requirements of a renewed Christian lifestyle with the image of putting off old clothes and putting on new ones (cf. 1Th 5:8; Eph 4:22-23; Col 2:11; 8:10). Our hope is directed towards the fact that, after our death, it is God who will attire us in new clothes (cf. 2Co 5:4).