



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Who Was the Man in the Linen Cloth?

An Exercise in Measured Interpretation

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As many teachers have found expedient, one of my sons' elementary school Bible teachers in the Christian school they attended required a parental signature on completed test papers. As I looked over one of my younger son's tests, a True-False question caught my eye; I don't remember the teacher's wording, but the gist was this: "T/F – The young man following Jesus in the garden who ran away naked after the linen cloth he was wearing was seized by those arresting Jesus was Mark, the author of the second gospel." To receive credit, students were expected to mark "True." I had no quarrel with the question; I had asked a similar one on tests I had given to high school students. But if I asked it as a True-False question, I began with a provisional clause, e.g., "*Many students of Mark's gospel think that the young man ... was Mark identifying himself as the author.*" In my judgment, that is a more accurate conclusion from the evidence. Here's why.

Going back to the Church Fathers (Lane 1974, 527), some have conjectured that the young man in Mark 14.51–52 was Mark (cf. Bayer 2008, 1929). Approaching a definitive conclusion, Barclay declares that "by far the most probable answer [to explain why vv. 51–52 are there] is that the young man was no other than Mark himself, and that this is his way of saying, 'I was there,' without mentioning his own name at all" (Barclay 1956, 365). Less emphatic is McMillan who comments that, while "the young man's identity is not disclosed, ... it is possible that [he] was the evangelist himself" (McMillan 1973, 175). Cole opines that it could have been "an irrelevant Petrine memory ... stamped upon his mind ... not by its own importance, but by the events surrounding it." He finds this unlikely, however, since Peter was already fleeing and "such detailed observation was unlikely." He suggests that it could have been some other youth, but accepts as plausible the conjecture that it was Mark (Cole 1961, 224).

Hurtado points to a different reason for the reference, a possible "allusion to Amos 2:16, coupled with Jesus' description of the arrest as a fulfillment of prophecy (14:49)." The point is "to show that the action of Jesus' followers was all foreseen, just as Jesus' earlier citation of Zechariah 13:7 showed (in 14:27)" (Hurtado 1989, 243–244). Lane agrees that the Amos text "seems to offer a more substantial commentary upon this incident. The arrest of Jesus invites the crushing judgment announced by Amos, and not even the valiant shall be able to withstand that day" (Lane 1974, 527). Hurtado adds that it also may have had a literary function, foreshadowing references to details in the accounts of Jesus's burial and resurrection (Hurtado 1989, 243–244).

Morna Hooker states what we can know for sure: verses 51–52 "are a total enigma. Mark

gives no hint as to the identity of the young man—or if he does, we do not recognize it” (Hooker 1991, 352). The best we can say is that it is possible the young man was the gospel’s author.

Would I address the matter in a sermon or class? Yes, because it is a comment that puzzles many and students of Mark will likely hear or read the different conjectures about it. But I would be less concerned with the identity of the young man than with emphasizing what the incident shows about the chaos in the garden and how Jesus’s followers reacted.

I mention it here because it helps illustrate a cross-discipline application of an important interpretation principle: the application of the law of rationality to textual study. Logicians Frye and Levi reviewed their definition of that law of thought as follows:

Rational belief ... is reasoned belief based upon adequate evidence. The law of rational belief was stated in the form of an imperative: Accept without qualification only certainly true propositions; qualify the acceptance of any proposition that is only probably true by the sufficiency of the reasons for it. Expression of the law of rational belief emphasizes the fact that as rational beings we are under intellectual obligation, and accordingly recognize a distinction between what is believed and what *ought* to be believed (Frye and Levi 1941, 323).

Relative to historical and/or biblical interpretation, the law of rationality applies as follows: Based on the evidence available to us, including the historical-cultural and literary contextual evidence, we should affirm a conclusion about a text to be *certainly true* only if the evidence is adequate to warrant that conclusion. Conversely, if the evidence requires it, we should affirm as *definitively false* any conclusion that is obviously not true. But if the most we can say is that a conclusion is only *possible*, or at best *probable*, we should affirm no more than that. We gain nothing as expositors by exaggerating the evidence or shaping our presentation of a text to definitively assert what we think it might be saying or, worse, what we think it should say.

In light of New Testament appeals to know, believe, love, and obey the truth (cf. John 8.32; Rom 2.8; 2 Thess 2.10, 12; 1 Tim 4.3; 1 John 2.21), Jesus’s example (cf. Matt 22.26; John 18.37), and texts that indicate teachers of God’s word are to take truth-telling seriously (cf. Rom 9.1; 2 Cor 4.2; 6.7; 11.10; Gal 2.5, 14; 4.16; 2 Pet 2.2; 1 John 3.18; 3 John 8), we should expect no less.

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