

THE NAKED RUNAWAY AND THE ENROBED REPORTER OF MARK 14 AND 16: WHAT IS THE AUTHOR DOING WITH WHAT HE IS SAYING?

ABRAHAM KURUVILLA*

There is no question that Mark 14:51–52 is a major crux of Mark’s Gospel—the account of a “young man” fleeing naked from the scene as Jesus was arrested.¹ These verses are “a total enigma,” concluded Morna Hooker. A “bizarre episode,” said Eugene Boring. Francis Moloney called it a “strange passage.” “Confusing” and “unclear,” labeled Robert Stein. “[M]akes no sense as an actual incident,” claimed Robin Scroggs and Kent Groff. “Whimsical,” declared John Knox.² This degree of interpretive chaos has resulted in an inordinate amount of speculation, inversely proportional to the evangelist’s reticence, as many a scholar and preacher has exercised upon this crux his or her own expository creativity. The reason for these hermeneutical acrobatics is obvious: if 14:51–52 is erased from the account—which apparently is what Matthew and Luke did in their respective Gospels (Matt 26:56–57; Luke 22:54)—what is left actually makes for a seamless reading of a coherent story.³ But, as far as scholarship can tell us, those two verses remain in the canonical version and final form of the Gospel of Mark; and so, preachers have to make some sense of this perplexing text situated in this locus in Mark’s passion. Hence, the proliferation of explanations, particularly dealing with the identity of the “young man” (νεανίσκος) in 14:51–52, who “appears out of nowhere at the wrong place in the story, at the wrong place in the text, like a clown at a funeral, this τις [a certain] young man, this unnamed literary follower following the departure of all followers.”⁴ Howard Jackson concludes that, “freed of the shackles of narrative coherence and contextual integrity, many

* Abraham Kuruvilla is associate professor of pastoral ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, 3909 Swiss Ave., Dallas, TX 75204.

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² Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Black’s New Testament Commentaries; London: A & C Black, 1991) 352; M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (NLT; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 403; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 299; Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 674; Robin Scroggs and Kent I. Groff, “Baptism in Mark: Dying and Rising with Christ,” *JBL* 92 (1973) 531–48; John Knox, “A Note on Mark 14:51–52,” in *The Joy of Study: Papers on New Testament and Related Subjects Presented to Honor Frederick Clifton Grant* (ed. Sherman E. Johnson; New York: Macmillan, 1951) 27.

³ Therefore, Hatton calls this two-verse incident in Mark 14 “a textual gap, a gash in the narrative” that upsets the text and the reader (Stephen B. Hatton, “Mark’s Naked Disciple: The Semiotics and Comedy of Following,” *Neot* 35 [2001] 43).

⁴ *Ibid.* 45.

scholars have proposed that the passage's purport lies in a tangled skein of various Christological or baptismal allegories, prefigurations, typologies, and symbolisms reaching out far afield. . . . The improbability of these schemes is inherent in their very tortuousness, and, equally, it is at times palpable in statements of their expositors."⁵

This essay will review the speculations of the young man's identity and propose *not* an identification of this protagonist, but the theological agenda of the evangelist, that will hopefully render this rather cryptic vignette more lucid. In particular, it is the intent of this paper to enable the preacher to employ this text in Mark 14 as the basis for a sermon that, respecting the biblical thrust and momentum of the narrative, provides valid application for transforming lives for God's glory.⁶

I. WHO WAS THE "YOUNG MAN"?

1. *Was he Mark?* Vaguely evocative of an Alfred Hitchcock cameo, one theory—and one widely held—posits that the naked runaway in these two verses was Mark, the author, painting himself into a corner of the canvas. The identification of the νεανίσκος with Mark apparently goes back a long way in history. In a 13th-century Coptic (Bohairic) manuscript, Rupert Allen discovered a revealing Arabic footnote that identifies the young man both as *y'qub bn yusf* (= James son of Joseph) and *mrqs 'l injili'* (= Mark the Evangelist).⁷ Many scholars are agreed that the incident is redolent of personal experience; so, Vincent Taylor: "[N]o good reason can be suggested for the recording of the incident unless it rests on a genuine reminiscence."⁸ William Barclay declares with conviction: "Whatever may be true, we may take it as fairly certain that Mark put in these two verses because they were about himself. He could never forget that night. He was too humble to put his own name in, but in this way he wrote his signature, and said, to him who could read between the lines, 'I, too, when I was a boy, was there.'⁹

Ben Witherington generates this scenario: "It is possible that Judas had led the posse to John Mark's house where the Last Supper may have been

⁵ Howard M. Jackson, "Why the Youth Shed His Cloak and Fled Naked: The Meaning and Purpose of Mark 14:51–52," *JBL* 116 (1997) 273–74. Interestingly, rather than committing himself to any particular identification of the "young man," Walter Lowrie tells us that "[i]n the first place, it [the episode] reminds us that this was a 'youth movement'" (*Jesus According to St. Mark: An Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* [London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929] 520–21).

⁶ This goal, accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit, is, of course, the intended outcome of all preaching.

⁷ Rupert Allen, "Mark 14,51–52 and Coptic Hagiography," *Bib* 89 (2008) 267–68. The manuscript in question is Oriental MS 1315, E¹, Bohairic-Arabic (London: British Museum). In the West, however, Olshausen seems to have been the first to popularize this identification (Hermann Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary on the New Testament* [New York: Sheldon and Co., 1859] 46).

⁸ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1966) 561. He goes on to suggest that such a report of an eyewitness guarantees the tradition of Jesus' arrest (ibid. 562). Likewise, Stein: "it is a historical reminiscence" (*Mark* 674).

⁹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 404.

held . . . , and not finding Jesus there, went on to Gethsemane, being trailed by John Mark, who hastily threw some clothes on.”¹⁰ All of this is, of course, not without merit. After all, John Mark’s mother’s dwelling appears to have been a popular gathering spot for the first Christians (Acts 12:12); the Last Supper, quite plausibly, might have been conducted there as well. One must also remember that John Mark is the one who abandoned his role in Paul’s mission (Acts 13:13; 15:38). In other words, “Mark’s point is not, ‘I was an eyewitness’ but rather ‘I ran away, too!’”¹¹ Nevertheless, one must remember the assertion of Papias, the early 2nd century bishop of Hierapolis, that Mark “neither heard the Lord nor followed him” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15).

2. *Was he Jesus?* Albert Vanhoye, considering the similarity between the young man and Jesus, observes that the naked runaway’s account is “*une sorte de préfiguration énigmatique du sort de Jésus*” (= a sort of enigmatic prefiguration of the fate of Jesus): both are arrested (κρατέω: Mark 14:44, 46, 49, of Jesus; and 14:51, of the young man); both have something to do with a linen cloth (σινδών: 14:51, 52, of the young man, and 14:56 [x2], of Jesus); and both “escape” their respective coverings: one by fleeing naked, the other by resurrection.¹²

That the young man in a white garment at the empty tomb in Mark 16:5 (the enrobed reporter of the resurrection) is depicted “sitting on the right,” the appropriate locus of the Messiah (Mark 12:36 and 14:62, citing Ps 110:1), appears to further the argument that symbolically equates the two young men (the νεανίσκος in Mark 14:51–52 and this one in 16:5) with Jesus. Gundry seems to agree as he asserts that the naked runaway’s exploit anticipates the resurrection of Jesus, with the leaving behind of his linen cloth (14:51–52) serving as a preview of Jesus’ implied leaving behind of his own linen cloth, his burial shroud (15:46). “Though neither young man is Jesus himself, together they represent him in his death, burial, and resurrection.”¹³ In the same vein, John Knox considers Mark 14:51–52 proleptic: “Is it then too fanciful to suggest that this apparently whimsical story of the young man and the linen cloth

¹⁰ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 382 n. 96.

¹¹ Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark* (Believers Church Bible Commentary; Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2001) 355. The deserter rejoined Barnabas subsequently (Acts 15:39) and would later realign himself with Paul, too (2 Tim 4:11). The theme of restoration, thus, may not have been far from Mark’s mind as he composed his Gospel; more on this motif later.

¹² Albert Vanhoye, “*La fuite du jeune homme nu (Mc 14,51–52)*,” *Bib* 52 (1971) 405. So also Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mysteries in the Gospel of Mark,” in *Mighty Minorities: Minorities in Early Christianity—Positions and Strategies: Essays in Honour of J. Jeruvel on His 70th Birthday* (ed. David Hellholm, Halvor Moxnes, and Turid Karlsen Seim; Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995) 19–20.

¹³ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 862. For Gundry, the whiteness of the garment of the young man at the tomb represents the resurrected life (see Rev 7:9; 19:14; *ibid.* 863). Hamilton, though, thinks that the young man inside the tomb may actually have been the *same* young man who fled naked, functioning as a witness linking the arrest of Jesus with the resurrection of Jesus (Neill Q. Hamilton, “Resurrection Tradition and the Composition of Mark,” *JBL* 84 [1965] 417).

got into the gospel tradition because Mark, or some early community, saw in it an anticipation of the empty tomb, with which this Gospel culminates?"¹⁴

3. *Was he John?* In light of John 18:15–16 (the account of a disciple who followed with Peter and entered into the high priest's courtyard after Jesus had been arrested), the fourth-century bishop Ambrose (*Exposition of Psalm Thirty-Six* 60) identified Mark's naked runaway, the last to follow Jesus in Mark's Gospel, as John the beloved disciple, ostensibly a young man at the time of the passion of Jesus. Peter Chrysologus (c. 380–450), in his *Sermon* 78, observed that John ran away naked, while Peter, in his denial of Jesus, became *morally* naked.¹⁵ But if the naked runaway were John, how does he reappear at the foot of the cross (John 19:26)? The Venerable Bede not only saw the escapee as John, but also discerned a moral lesson of betrayal, restoration, and—surprisingly—"the prudence of flight" for those incapable of withstanding trial.¹⁶

4. *Was he James?* There is a patristic tradition that James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem, dressed in a linen garment all his life (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.6). In the fourth century, Epiphanius explained this as James's continuing to wear the same garment that was once abandoned by him, as recounted in Mark 14:51–52.¹⁷ The medieval commentator Theophylact (c. 1100; *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Mark* 14:50–54), likewise, asserted that the naked runaway was James.¹⁸

5. *Was he "Joseph"?* An anonymous seventh-century commentary on Mark that was attributed to Jerome (347–420) says: "This is like the case of Joseph, who leaving behind his tunic, fled in the nude. . . . Whoever wants to escape from the hands of wicked people, let them mentally abandon the things of the world, and flee after Jesus."¹⁹ Jerome actually did compare the scene of Mark 14:51–52 to Joseph's flight in Gen 39:12: "to escape the Egyptian woman Joseph had to leave his garment with her. And the young man who followed Jesus having a linen cloth cast about him, when he was assailed by the servants had to throw away his earthly covering and to flee naked" (*Letter to Lucinius* [Letter 71] 3). There is, no doubt, some similarity between Gen 39:12 (LXX: καὶ καταλιπὼν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ . . . ἔφυγεν) and Mark 14:52 (καταλιπὼν τὴν σινδόνα

¹⁴ Knox, "A Note on Mark 14:51–52" 29. But there is no indication in Mark's Gospel of Jesus' burial shroud being left behind in the empty tomb, as is there in the Fourth Gospel; thus the parallel between the Mark's naked runaway abandoning his garment, and Jesus' resurrection is rather strained.

¹⁵ So also Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job* (3 vols.; Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845) 2:153–54.

¹⁶ Bede is cited by Aquinas in *Catena Aurea: Gospel of Mark* 299.

¹⁷ The *Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (vol. 2: Books II and III [Sects 47–80, De Fide]; ed. F. Williams; Leiden: Brill 1994) 640.

¹⁸ The 13th-century Bohairic MS with an Arabic footnote naming the young man as "James son of Joseph" was noted earlier.

¹⁹ Michael Cahill, *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 109–10.

γυμνὸς ἔφυγεν). And while Genesis 39 does not, the OT pseudiepigraphical work *T. Jos.* 8:3 does claim that Joseph fled “naked” (γυμνός). Moreover, Gen 41:42 (LXX) puts Joseph in a στολή, the same garment Mark’s young man in 16:5 was clothed in (σινδών, the “linen cloth” worn by the naked runaway, however, is absent in the Genesis account). Herman Waetjen, therefore, sees a Joseph typology in the incident of Mark: “Joseph” fleeing in Mark 14:51–52, and “Joseph” exalted in 16:5. He also makes much of a supposed allusion in the Markan account to Amos 2:16: “‘Even the bravest among the warriors will flee naked in that day,’ declares the LORD.” According to Waetjen, that Scripture is fulfilled here in Mark 14:51–52.²⁰ However, there is no σινδών in the prophecy; moreover, that Amos text has “warriors” not “young man,” and διώκω (LXX) instead of the φεύγω found in Mark 14. Thus the allusion is, at best, tenuous.

Austin Farrer goes further: he adds an actual “Joseph” into the equation—Joseph of Arimathea, who wraps Jesus’ body in a σινδών (“linen cloth,” Mark 15:46). Thus, for him, the three incidents—the young man running away naked leaving his linen cloth, Joseph who shrouds Jesus in a linen cloth, and the young man in the tomb now wearing white (16:5)—are all held together by the name “Joseph.”

Joseph the Arimathean was indeed a Joseph, for as he had begged Pilate’s permission to bury Jesus, so Joseph the patriarch had begged Pharaoh’s permission to bury Israel, which cost him a troublesome journey. Now just as a Jew could not hear the story of a Joseph who fulfils the pious duty of burial under difficulties, without thinking of Joseph the patriarch, so he could not hear of a boy who leaves his coat in his captors’ hands and escapes without thinking of the same patriarch; the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife being a favourite moral tale for the instruction of the young. Thus, of our three allusions, two are Joseph-themes: but what of the third? Joseph was stripped, first by his eleven false brethren, then by Potiphar’s wife: he was buried in prison and believed by the eleven to be dead. But in due course he appeared to them as though alive from the grave, clothed in a robe of glory as the man of the king’s right hand: he said to them, ‘I am Joseph.’ But his brethren could not answer him, *for they were confounded*. Compare the women, confronted not, indeed, with the new Joseph in person, but with one who wears his livery, and unable to speak, *for they were afraid*. A glance at the Greek Old Testament will show the exactness of the verbal parallel.²¹

There are problems with such speculations from OT texts—the absence of “linen cloth” or “white” in the Joseph story in Genesis 39–41, for one; but even more, a lack of discernible purpose in Mark’s making the allusion (if he did) renders this speculation, also, suspect. One tends to agree with Raymond Brown, that “some of this Joseph imagery stands at cross-purposes—if Jesus is Joseph, then being buried by Joseph does not help.”²²

²⁰ Herman Waetjen, “The Ending of Mark and the Gospel’s Shift in Eschatology,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1965) 119–20. William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 527, holds to this theory as well.

²¹ Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (London: Dacre, 1966) 144–145 (emphases original).

²² Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 1:301.

5. *Was he Lazarus?* Yet another creative option was suggested by Michael Haren: the naked runaway in Mark 14 was Lazarus of Bethany. John 12:10–11 indicates the chief priests plotting to kill Lazarus after his being raised from the dead. Thus the enigmatic figure of Mark 14 who is seized (14:51) could conceivably be Lazarus, likely also a young man, judging from his rather unexpected demise (John 11:21, 32). And Gethsemane, between Bethany and Jerusalem, would not be an odd place for Lazarus to be located; neither would his presence at Jesus' side be unexpected, considering that he owed the latter a huge debt. However, there is no real reason that Lazarus should have remained anonymous in Mark's account, despite Haren's conjecture that "that those 'on the run' do not get written in Gospels." One is also hard pressed to explain Lazarus' scant clothing; Haren considers it emblematic of his recent occupation of a tomb.²³

6. *Was he a baptismal initiate?* Much has been made of a possible baptismal allegory in the whole affair of the naked runaway and the enrobed reporter. Augustine Stock thinks that Mark was composed as a "Christian Passover Haggada," the young man's nudity and subsequent clothing in white signifying the attainment of new life and the donning of post-baptismal clothing (Gal 3:27; Col 2:11–13).²⁴ Thus the nakedness and flight in 14:51–52 symbolizes dying in Christ, and the reappearance of the young man in white symbolizes rising with Christ.²⁵

The baptismal allegory theory was given a significant boost with Morton Smith's publication of *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, containing an 18th-century copy of a fragment of a letter supposedly written by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–217) that reveals the existence of a secret and expanded version of Mark.²⁶ One specific expansion seems to have occurred after Mark 10:34. This insertion contains two stories; the first, pertinent to Mark 14:51–52, describes Jesus raising a νεανίσκος back to life. Later that

²³ Michael J. Haren, "The Naked Young Man: A Historian's Hypothesis on Mark 14,51–52," *Bib* 79 (1998) 527–28, 530–31.

²⁴ Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989) 375. So also Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008) 228–29. John Dominic Crossan agrees; he notes further that the young man is "the neophyte in the Mkan [Markan] community and therefore is that community itself, including Mk. It is not the risen Lord and neither is it some accidental angel who delivers the message: it is the Mkan community of those reborn in the resurrected Christ" ("Empty Tomb and Absent Lord [Mark 16:18]," in *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14–16* [ed. Werner H. Kelber; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976] 148).

²⁵ Scroggs and Groff, "Baptism in Mark" 540–41. In support of the resurrection symbolism, they cite the motif of white clothing in Rev 7:9, 13; 3:4–5, 18; 6:11; and the proper seat of the believer with Christ in heaven (Col 3:1–3; Eph 2:4–6; in fact, the authors call these epistolary texts "a commentary on Mark 16:5"; *ibid.* 543). But as Scroggs and Groff themselves admit, the earliest texts that talk about a change of clothing as part of baptismal praxis date to the latter half of the second century—*Gos. Phil.* 21–25; *Gos. Thom.* 36–37; *Acts Thom.* 121, 133, 157; Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition* 21.3, 20; etc. (*ibid.* 537–38). Far too much is being made of resurrection allusions here, neglecting the clear theme of restoration of the fallen disciples that resounds in the final pericope of Mark 16:1–8 (for this, see below).

²⁶ Text and translation in Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 446–50.

youth comes to Jesus by night (and remains with him overnight), wearing a linen cloth over his naked body (περιβεβλημένος σινδόνα ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ = 14:51, verbatim), and Jesus proceeds to teach him the mystery of the kingdom of God. The text of the letter that quotes the “secret” gospel of Mark ends here. But Smith goes on to conclude, in a melodramatic and lurid interpretation (nude baptism? homo-eroticism?), that these nocturnal goings-on were disrupted by “police” and that the young man fled naked—the source of Mark 14:51–52.²⁷ Michael Cosby has justly criticized Smith’s speculations.

[Smith’s work] is the primary example of the tremendous amount of historical weight that Mark 14:51–52 has been made to bear. Far from being a rather insignificant or even comical historical memory, for Smith these two verses become the key for unlocking the mystery of the historical Jesus. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to observe that he is hardly concerned in his study with determining precisely how this brief episode fits into the Markan narrative or what it reveals about Mark’s ability as an author.²⁸

A. H. Criddle, with a statistical analysis of its vocabulary, has shown that the purported letter of Clement is more likely an imitation in the Clementine style, seeking to employ words found in Clement but not in other early Church fathers, and to avoid words not found in Clement but found in other patristic writers.²⁹ Francis Watson also concluded, in a convincing argument, that “the letter is manifestly pseudonymous,” and that “it is clear that the author of this letter is Morton Smith, who claimed to have discovered it.”³⁰ In any case, there was obviously angst about the peculiar story in Mark 14:51–52 that necessitated imaginative explanation, fabricated or otherwise.

II. WHAT WAS MARK DOING?

1. *Markan artistry.* The multiplicity of hypotheses has led some to conclude that the episode of Mark 14:51–52 is, at best, an unsolvable puzzle or, at worst, a meaningless insertion by the author. Morna Hooker labels the incident as having “no obvious theological significance.” For Stein also, the omission of this misadventure from Matthew and Luke is proof of its “lack of any obvious theological meaning.” To Scroggs and Groff “[i]t bears no relation to anything or anyone past, and afterwards the young man seems to disappear

²⁷ Ibid. 237; see also Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 97–114. At least one problem immediately arises: if this young man found earlier in the “secret” Gospel is to be identified with the later one depicted in Mark 14:51–52 of the canonical Gospel, the indefinite τις with νεανίσκος in the latter episode needs explanation.

²⁸ Michael R. Cosby, “Mark 14:51–52 and the Problem of Gospel Narrative,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 11 (1984) 222.

²⁹ A. H. Criddle, “On the Mar Saba Letter Attributed to Clement of Alexandria,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995) 215–20.

³⁰ Francis Watson, “Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of The Mar Saba Letter and The Secret Gospel of Mark,” *JTS* 61 (2010) 170. One would also question the authenticity of this letter because of its late attestation and its uncertain provenance; Smith, until his death in 1991, never clarified these issues to scholarly satisfaction.

forever,” and “a great deal of perplexity remains.” Josef Schmid echoes these sentiments, noting that this episode “appears to be irrelevant to the purpose of Mark’s story.”³¹

But all these negative evaluations assume that Mark was an inept writer and compiler, who hardly knew what he was doing or why. Such a conclusion is unwarranted; of sloppy editing, Mark knows nothing. At the very least readers must acknowledge, as a first premise, that the author was doing something deliberate and purposeful with what he was saying. For biblical interpretation, such a presumption is a fundamental precept of charitable reading, the first reflex of the reader that accords the text the benefit of such an assumption of congruence.³² Indeed, closer examination of the Gospel does reveal that Mark is “the product of an enormously subtle and sophisticated theological mind.”³³ Samuel Sandmel claimed that “whoever wrote Mark was neither simple writer, nor a simpleton, but an artful writer usually in full control of his pen.” Kenneth Bailey is convinced that “Mark has *consciously* and *deliberately* selected events and arranged the order of his selection for *clear discernible theological* reasons.”³⁴ David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie concur:

Our study reveals Mark’s narrative to be of remarkably whole cloth. The narrator’s point of view is consistent. The plot is coherent: Events that are anticipated come to pass; conflicts are resolved; prophecies are fulfilled. The characters are consistent from one scene to the next. Literary techniques of storytelling, recurring designs, overlapping patterns, and interwoven motifs interconnect the narrative throughout. There is also a consistent thematic depiction of the human conditions, faith, God’s rule, ethical choices, and the possibilities for human change. The unity of this Gospel is apparent in the integrity of the story it tells, which gives a powerful overall rhetorical impact.³⁵

³¹ Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* 352; Stein, *Mark* 674; Scroggs and Groff, “Baptism in Mark,” 532; Josef Schmid, *The Gospel According to Mark* (trans. and ed. Kevin Condon; Staten Island, NY: Pauline Fathers and Brothers of the Society of St. Paul, 1968) 273.

³² Understanding involves a starting assumption, an “initiative trust, an investment of belief,” which is an act of charity towards author and text. George Steiner calls this a “radical generosity” (*After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* [London: Oxford University Press, 1975] 296). To begin with doubt, Booth warned, “is to destroy the datum”—the material and subject of interpretation; a primary act of assent and surrender is the essential first step in approaching a text (Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988] 32).

³³ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 9.

³⁴ Samuel Sandmel, “Prolegomena to a Commentary on Mark,” in *New Testament Issues* (ed. R. Batey; London: SCM, 1970) 49; Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Fall of Jerusalem and Mark’s Account of the Cross,” *ExpTim* 102 (1991) 103 (emphases original). Iverson also concludes that “Mark’s Gospel is a well-crafted, cohesive narrative whose structure is congruent with the exegetical details and theological message of the text” (Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: ‘Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children’s Crumbs’* [LNTS 339; London: T & T Clark, 2007] 4). So also Geddert: “Perhaps our most important assumption is that Mark’s Gospel . . . is not the work of a bungling, inept, careless tradition-compiler, but of a careful, intelligent, and subtle communicator of truth” (Timothy J. Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* [JSNTSS 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989] 27).

³⁵ David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 3.

Mark's is a carefully constructed Gospel with a simple, non-duplicated, linear movement—beginning in Galilee, continuing “on the way,” and ending in Jerusalem (see below); it addresses the larger theme of what it means to follow Jesus “on the way,” on the “Trip of Discipleship” (Mark 8:3, 27; 9:33, 34; 10:32, 52):³⁶ “Mark has brilliantly interwoven a historical narrative of a journey with a theological discourse on discipleship (8:27–10:45). . . . *The ‘cross’ is a way of living, not only a way of dying.* . . . The whole journey is the way of the cross.”³⁷ The structure of the Gospel is as follows:

- A In the desert (1:1–13)
- B **In Galilee** (1:16–8:21)
blindness to sight (8:22–26)
- C **On the way** (8:27–10:45)
blindness to sight (10:46–52)
- B' **In Jerusalem**(11:1–15:39)
- A' At the tomb (15:42–16:8)

As Tzvetan Todorov declared: “No narrative is natural; a choice and a construction will always preside over its appearance; narrative is a discourse, not a series of events.”³⁸ In other words, Mark is purposefully *doing* something with what he is *saying*. He seeks “to do something to the hearer or reader” and “the Gospel is designed to seduce us permanently.”³⁹ Philip Scott puts it well: “The quarryman delivers the heaps of stone; the architect needs the stones cut and dressed. Mark was not a quarryman; he was an architect,” and, as one, he was working with an intentional blueprint.⁴⁰ This essay is intended to move readers towards a discernment of that plan evidenced in Mark's literary *action* in/with Mark 14:51–52.

2. *Pragmatics.* To reiterate, authors, including Mark the Evangelist, are *doing* something with what they are *saying*. This concept of communication as an action or event (*doing* something) hinges upon the notion that “meaning” involves more than the semantics of the inscription (= *sentence* meaning); it involves the pragmatics of the text as well (= *discourse* meaning)—what speakers/authors *do* with what they say/write, those aspects of meaning not

³⁶ The word ὁδός (“way”) occurs sixteen times in Mark: 1:2, 3; 2:23; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:3, 27; 9:33, 34; 10:17, 32, 46, 52; 11:8; 12:14. The concept of following Jesus “on the way” is, of course, not foreign to the NT. The picture of the Christian life as a pilgrimage is widely utilized therein: Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22 (where Christians are said to belong to “The Way”); Jesus himself is the “way” (John 14:6); and “walking” (περιπατέω) is virtually a synonym for conduct of life (Rom 6:4; 13:13; 14:15; Gal 5:16; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 2:12; etc.). Besides a number of chiasms in the Gospel, evidence of careful composition includes the well-known “sandwich” structures or intercalations—literary structures with two halves of an outer story “sandwiching” an inner one (see Mark 3:20–35; 5:20–43; 6:7–32; 11:12–25; 14:1–11; and 14:53–72).

³⁷ Geddert, *Watchwords* 152 (emphasis original).

³⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, “Primitive Narrative,” in *The Poetics of Prose* (trans. R. Howard; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) 55.

³⁹ Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 10.

⁴⁰ M. Philip Scott, “Chiastic Structure: A Key to the Interpretation of Mark's Gospel,” *BTB* 15 (1985) 18.

secured by a semantic theory.⁴¹ That, of course, does not preclude an inquiry into textual semantics. Indeed, pragmatics incorporates, and is built upon semantics; an understanding of the text involves, in the first place, grasping its semantic content. Yet, as the field of pragmatics claims, the semantics of an utterance is not the whole story: the goal is to apprehend what the author was *doing* with what he was *saying*. The crucial interaction to be discerned by the interpreter is that between author and reader *by way of the text* employed as an instrument to accomplish specific aims and elicit specific responses.⁴² The text is not an end in itself, but the means thereto, an instrument of the author's action of employing language to project a transcending vision—the "world in front of the text."⁴³ Literary works of any kind are thus essentially referential phenomena. *Macbeth*, for instance, is not a brochure detailing the history of Scotland or depicting the dynamics of palace intrigues; instead, the play demonstrates what it is to gain a kingdom and lose one's soul: that is what Shakespeare was *doing*.⁴⁴ Or take the genre of a non-textually mediated narrative, the Hollywood western movie. Depicting a particular society in the southwestern United States of the late 19th century, the "western" goes beyond panoramic vistas of wild frontiers and narratives of horses, outlaws, sheriffs, and gunfights. An implicit, to-be-inferred theme in these cinematic stories refers to "the way depicted actions embody, instantiate and/or formulate ethical knowledge and values." Thus the film genre of the western projects a world with the themes of individual rights, responsibilities, and codes of honor in the face of evil. Such a world is projected for all time, not just restricted to the historical era of the narrative; so much so, if that medium were inspired, it would be authoritatively advocating a certain kind of behavior for all its future audiences, beckoning them to inhabit the projected world with its particular

⁴¹ See Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 12, 17; idem, *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000) 9, 168; and François Recanat, *Meaning and Force: The Pragmatics of Performative Utterances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 1–27. An important notion in the comprehension of the pragmatics of utterances is that of speech acts, for which see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (2d ed.; ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 99–100, 109, and John R. Searle's adaptation of Austin's ideas in his *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), and *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁴² Martin Nystrand, "An Analysis of Errors in Written Communication," in *What Writers Know* (ed. Martin Nystrand; New York: Academic, 1982) 70.

⁴³ Paul Ricoeur's concept of the "world in front of the text" provides a helpful category to understand the conceptual thrust of the text, the *action* of the author. See his "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics: Ideology, Utopia, and Faith," in *Protocol of the Seventeenth Colloquy, 4 November 1975* (ed. W. Wuellner; Berkeley: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1976) 1–28; and idem, "Naming God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979) 215–27. For an account of this Ricoeurian concept and its utility for biblical hermeneutics pertaining to preaching, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS 393; London: T & T Clark, 2009) 142–90.

⁴⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964) 63–64.

brand of ethics.⁴⁵ In sum, a narrative, particularly a textual one, not only tells the reader about what actually happened; it is also a literary instrument—the author is *doing* something with what he/she is *saying*.

In biblical hermeneutics, too, pragmatics asserts that the text of Scripture is an instrument of action, the agent that effectively promotes an alignment of the lives of the faithful to the demands of their God. For the most part, what the author was *doing* in and with the text is recoverable from the text itself. Such a transaction does not entail a subjective free-for-all interpretive endeavor that has no bounds. The text remains the primary means of access to both the semantics and pragmatics of the utterance. There is no non-textually mediated access to the truths of God and his relationship to his creation that is as authoritative as Scripture; its text is the only reliable source of its pragmatic element. Thus the discernment of what Mark was *doing* with what he was *saying* ought to be squarely focused upon the concrete elements of the text.⁴⁶

In other words, one of the critical undertakings of pragmatics is the consideration of the text itself, for the purposes of preaching. It is the text which must be privileged, for it alone is inspired. While the events *behind* the text may be revelatory, they are not inspired and thus not expressly “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). That, of course, is not to claim that the events so described in the biblical text did not happen, but simply that it is the Holy Spirit’s *accounts* of the events that are to be attended to for life transformation, not the re-creation and deciphering of those behind-the-text events themselves. All this to say that the text is not merely a *plain glass* window that the reader can look *through* (to discern some event behind it). Rather, the narrative is a *stained glass* window that the reader must look *at*.⁴⁷ A stained glass window is carefully designed by the craftsman in accordance with a particular theme, style, location in the building, size and structure of window, nature and availability of glass, demands of patron, expertise of artist, etc. The glass, the stains, the lead, the copper, and everything else that goes into its production are meticulously planned for the appropriate effect, to tell a particular story. So, too, with narratives, textual or otherwise. The interpreter must, therefore, pay close attention to the text, not just to what is being said, but also how it is being

⁴⁵ Peter Seitel, “Theorizing Genres – Interpreting Works,” *New Literary History* 34 (2003) 285–86. Such implied thrusts of texts—what authors are *doing* with what they are *saying*—are usually facets of ethical value; they are especially evident in proverbs and maxims. “Birds of a feather flock together,” for instance, semantically makes a statement about avian social behavior, but also projects a world in which readers, being warned of guilt by association, eschew questionable company. When texts function in this manner, they are not only portraying what *actually* happens (historic reality: τὰ καθ’ ἑκάστον the specific, in Aristotelian terms), but also what *generally* happens (τὰ καθόλου the universal; Aristotle, *Poetics* 9.1–4, 9–10). See also Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis* 11–52.

⁴⁶ For the conception of “what the author is doing” in a biblical passage as the “theology of that pericope,” and for the value of pericopal theology in homiletics, see Abraham Kuruvilla, “Pericopal Theology: An Intermediary between Text and Application,” *TrinJ* 31 NS (2010) 265–83.

⁴⁷ This metaphor is borrowed from Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 196.

said and why, in order that the agenda of the author may be discerned—what the author was *doing* with what he was *saying*.

3. *Events behind Mark 14:51–52.* Instead, for the most part, much attention has been lavished upon attempting to dissect out the intricacies of the actual event that lies *behind* the text; in this case, behind Mark 14:51–52: Who was the naked runaway? Who was the enrobed reporter? Where did they come from? What were they doing? Why were they clothed as they were? And so on. A typical reconstructive surgical operation of the event behind the text is the speculative endeavor of Lewis Johnson. He exclaims:

[T]he situation was surely this: After the supper, when Jesus goes out to Gethsemane, He will not let the young host go with them. No need for this dear lad—I imagine him to be a youth of about eighteen or twenty—to run into danger. He had better go to bed. But the lad’s restless anxiety will not let him sleep; and after a while he gets up and runs after them, and arrives at Gethsemane just in time to witness the arrest. In mentioning his own narrow escape Mark is certifying the fact that he himself did witness the arrest of Jesus. And because he witnessed it, and was on the spot with Peter, he is exactly the man, eager to see what the outcome might be, who would urge Peter to come along to the High-Priest’s palace, where he knew he had the entry. The incidents surely all hang together.⁴⁸

Unlike Johnson, Mark does not appear to be interested in such an exhaustive recounting of the event behind the text. Why then was this cameo included? Granting the author the benefit of a charitable reading and assuming (with good evidence) the coherence of his composition, the interpreter must ask: What was Mark *doing* with what he was *saying*? Calvin was right, when he asserted about Mark 14:51–52 that “[t]he chief point is, to ascertain for what purpose Mark has related this transaction.”⁴⁹

4. *What was Mark doing with Mark 14:51–52?*

a. *Symbol of failure.* The juxtaposition of the brief episode of Mark 14:51–52 with that of the disciples fleeing is telling. Following upon the betrayal by Judas and the arrest of Jesus (14:43–49), “they all [the disciples] left him and fled [φεύγω]” (14:50). Immediately, in 14:51–52, there is the account of a young man who was “following him” and who, when seized, abandoned his garment and fled (φεύγω). It is significant that this youth is described as having been “following” Jesus (συνακολουθέω). To follow was what the disciples had been called by Jesus for (ἀκολουθέω, Mark 2:14; 8:34 [x2]; 10:21); and following was what they had already been doing (ἀκολουθέω, 1:18; 2:14, 15; 6:1; 10:28, 52). “Following” is therefore “a sign, a code word, an image trig-

⁴⁸ Lewis Johnson, “Who Was The Beloved Disciple?” *ExpTim* 77 (1965–66) 158. Harmonizing the Gospels in this fashion is a common practice in the dissection of the event behind the text. Unfortunately such a *modus operandi* flattens the unique theological landscape of each Gospel writer.

⁴⁹ Calvin concludes that Mark’s purpose was to depict that “those wicked men raged with cruel violence, when they did not even spare a poor young man, who had left his bed, almost naked, and run, on hearing the noise” (*Calvin’s Commentaries on Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Part III, on Mark 14:51).

ger, for discipleship.” Thus Mark is semiotically pointing to the young man as a “disciple.”⁵⁰ The disciples followed; the young man followed. The disciples fled; the young man fled. Here, then, in the picture of the naked runaway, followers have become “flee-ers”: “The ignominious flight of this anonymous sympathiser serves in the narrative context to underline the complete failure of Jesus’ friends to support him when the moment came.”⁵¹ They had once left all to follow, to *go after* Jesus (1:16–20; 2:14; 10:28–31; also see 8:34). Now, in the abandonment of virtually everything by the young man—even the shirt off his back—readers are being told that that the disciples had left all to *get away from* Jesus.⁵² The motif of “leaving everything” to become a disciple had now become the disgrace of “leaving everything” to become a non-disciple!⁵³ Thus, “the youth who runs away naked is the negative counterpart of the ideal disciple portrayed elsewhere in the Gospel.” This was a *reversal* of the call to discipleship.⁵⁴ With irony, then, Mark displays the naked runaway as symbolic of the total abandonment of Jesus by the band of disciples who fled to escape the baleful consequences of association with their Master.

b. *Shame of abandonment.* But why recount this little scene in Mark 14:51–52? Had not Mark already shown the disciples to have fled, in 14:50? Why, then, the repeat performance symbolized in the story of the young man, in 14:51–52? The only substantive difference between 14:50, the fleeing of the disciples, and 14:51–52, the fleeing of the young man, is that the latter had an unfortunate wardrobe malfunction. This difference is not insignificant. The nudity (mentioned twice: 14:51, 52) vividly points to the shamefulness of the abandonment by the disciples; nakedness, of course, is undesirable and to be avoided (Matt 25:36; James 2:15; Rev 3:17; 16:15). So this discomfiture in

⁵⁰ Hatton, “Mark’s Naked Disciple” 36, 38. The verb συνακολουθέω (related to the more common ἀκολουθέω) is used only one other time in Mark, to note the presence of the inner circle of disciples with Jesus (Mark 5:37)—Peter, James, and John, the privileged three who were also present at Jesus’ transfiguration (9:1), and who kept him company in Gethsemane (14:32). Perhaps the employment of συνακολουθέω in 14:51 symbolically underscores the dreadfulness of the abandonment by the young man in this hour of crisis, the dereliction of one who had been following exceptionally closely.

⁵¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2002) 597.

⁵² “[T]he young man mimics the disciples by following Jesus (as do the disciples), by fleeing (as do the disciples), and by fleeing after following (as the disciples flee after following).” The “following” and “fleeing” follow rapidly upon each other in Mark 14:51–52—for Hatton, this is “comedy,” a “caricature” of the disciples (Hatton, “Mark’s Naked Disciple” 45).

⁵³ Boring, *Mark* 404.

⁵⁴ It was “a dramatization of the universal flight of the disciples”—a commentary on 14:50 (Harry Fledderman, “The Flight of a Naked Young Man [Mark 14:51–52],” *CBQ* 41 [1979] 415). This fleeing does not come as a surprise: all along the disciples had failed to discern Jesus’ mission of suffering (Mark 4:13; 6:51–52; 7:14–23; 8:14–21—the theme of the first movement of the Gospel, located in Galilee); when told about it by Jesus, they failed to accept Jesus’ mission (8:23–38; 9:33–37; 10:35–45—the theme of the second movement of the Gospel, “on the way” to Jerusalem). And now in the third movement of the Gospel, located in Jerusalem, they were being faithless to their Master: they had all fled! In fact, when the disciples abscond (Mark 14:50) immediately after Jesus refers to the Scriptures (14:49), “[i]t looks for a moment as if they had waited for the mention of the Scriptures as the signal to take flight” (Bas M. F. Van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary* [trans. W. H. Bisscheroux; London: T & T Clark, 1998] 440).

Mark 14 points to the disgraceful unfaithfulness on the part of those who had been called to follow, and those who had, at least for some time, followed. They had chosen shame over fidelity to Jesus.⁵⁵ At the Mount of Olives, on his way to Gethsemane, Jesus had warned his disciples that they would *all* fall away (14:27); Peter had protested that even if *all* fell away, he would not (14:29); and the rest of the disciples—*all*—were vehemently denying their future faithlessness (14:31). Yet, now, in 14:50, they *all* flee (πᾶς in all these instances). Shame! The most recent abandonment of a garment was that performed by Bartimaeus in Mark 10:50, 52—a joyful jettisoning of cloak to follow (ἀκολουθέω); in contrast, here was a shameful shedding of linen to flee (14:52).⁵⁶

The remainder of this paper will provide two coordinate pairs of statements (I.A. and I.B.; II.A. and II.B.) that synthesize the textual elements dealing with who is wearing what and why. Mark, it must be noted, is unusually interested in attire in his account of Jesus' Passion. Thus far, we have:

I.A. ung man's (νεανίσκος) linen cloth (σινδών) shed in shame during the abandonment of Jesus by disciples

Jackson explains:

Capping the account of the arrest, the motif's vivid picture of abject terror and shameful nudity in cowardly flight admirably reinforces a scene in which the ruling emotion is the desperate impulse to save one's own skin, the mood of "Every man for himself" . . . It points up all the more glaringly still the shame of the disciples' own flight in the face of their failure to accept the necessity of Jesus' passion. . . . Far from being the pointless or superfluous addition it is often condemned for being, then, the incident of the flight of the naked youth is in fact in its entirety both literarily and theologically crucial to the account of the arrest.⁵⁷

How is this account of shame theologically crucial? What is Mark doing with this clothing motif?

c. Exchange of clothing. "Linen cloth" (σινδών) occurs twice in Mark 14:51–52. What is immediately striking is that the only other instance of σινδών in this Gospel refers to the linen burial shroud of Jesus, in Mark 15:46; there also the word occurs twice. In addition, γυμνός occurs twice in Mark 14:51–52 as well. In this connection, one might remember that Jesus himself was stripped *twice* during his humiliation: once when he was disrobed to dress him in purple,

⁵⁵ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SacPag 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002) 417.

⁵⁶ As a simple rectangular sheet, the σινδών was quite liable to get detached from the one wearing it, in the event of a sudden movement. Jackson, "Why the Youth Shed His Cloak and Fled Naked" 280–85, provides examples: Homer, *Iliad* book 2, line 183, during Odysseus's flight; Euripides, *Ion* lines 1208–9, during a fight; Lysias, *Oration 3*, during an attempted kidnapping; and in Demosthenes, *Oration 21*.215–17, as the orator attempted to escape a surprising confrontation.

⁵⁷ Jackson, "Why the Youth Shed His Cloak and Fled Naked" 286–87. Thus it comes as a surprise to read Lowrie's claim: "Whoever he was, this youth was more courageous than the Apostles—as brave as anyone could be who had not an unwholesome desire for martyrdom" (Lowrie, *Jesus According to St. Mark* 520–21). One does not generally consider fleeing from a hostile scene in the buff as indicative of an intrepid character.

and again as the purple was removed to replace his own garments (15:17, 20). So now we have:

I.B. Jesus' linen cloth (σινδών) worn in death

Here then, is a clever narrative strategy: in utterly discreditable circumstances, the disciple is stripped of the σινδών he wore, and a σινδών becomes Jesus' burial cloth following an equally degrading assassination. Putting I.A and I.B together one arrives at the first literary "clothing transfer" (indicated by the arrow) in these curious incidents:

I.A. Young man's (νεανίσκος) linen cloth (σινδών) shed in shame during the abandonment of Jesus by disciples

→**I.B.** Jesus' linen cloth (σινδών) worn in death.

In a subtle switch, the young man's linen cloth "becomes" Jesus' linen shroud—the garment of shame now buries Jesus in death. "The garment is acting as a 'cipher,' so much so that narrative details are expressed for the sake of this aspect (i.e., its explicit mention at the arrest and its explicit purpose)."⁵⁸ That, of course, is not to assert that it was the one and same linen cloth worn by the young man that became Jesus' burial cloth. Rather, the garment is cleverly utilized by the narrator as a literary device. Neither does the literary nature of the narrative deny that there, indeed, was a young man who shed his linen cloth and that Jesus was actually wrapped in one before his burial. The veracity of the events described should be not negated, even while we observe the narrator crafting a potent literary device for the furtherance of his theological purpose. What exactly the purpose is for this literary device and cipher becomes clear as one examines the account of the announcement of Jesus resurrection, in Mark 16:1–8.

d. *Sheet of glory.* In that account in Mark 16, we find the only other use in all of Mark of the word νεανίσκος—earlier employed for the naked runaway in 14:51, and now in 16:5 for the enrobed reporter. This is a significant parallel. Why does Mark go to such lengths to connect one young man with another? He could certainly have called the reporter of 16:5 an "angel"—until now he has shown no reluctance to label heavenly messengers as such (1:13; 8:38; 12:25; 13:27, 32). In light of the fact that the messenger at the empty tomb was, in fact, an angel (as attested by Matt 28:2, 5; indeed, there was more than one—Luke 24:23; John 20:12), Mark must have had some purpose in being cagey and discreet. Not that labeling an angel νεανίσκος was being meretricious and deceptive. Angels have been so called in 2 Macc 3:26, 33; 5:2; Josephus, *Ant.* 5.8.2 §277 and 5.8.3 §279 (here the angel of the LORD of Judges 13 is described both as ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ and as νεανίας ["young man"]); Tob 5:5, 7, 10 (where Rafael is also referred to as ἄγγελος and νεανίσκος); *Herm. Vis.* 3.1.6; 3.4.1; etc.⁵⁹ The only reason for Mark's unique appellation, calling the angel νεανίσκος in

⁵⁸ J. David Hester, "Dramatic Inconclusion: Irony and the Narrative Rhetoric of the Ending of Mark," *JSNT* 57 (1995) 77.

⁵⁹ Moreover, in Mark 16, the young man's words are authoritative; he interprets divine actions and words; he is seated on the right; he wears white as do heavenly beings (Dan 7:9; Mark 9:3; Acts 1:10; 10:30; Rev 4:4; 19:14); and his appearance induces fear (Gen 15:1; 21:17; Jdg 6:23; Dan 10:12; Matt 1:20; Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10). All of these are typical of other biblical angelophanies and

Mark 16:5, then, must have been to create an overt link to the other (and only) *νεανίσκος* in Mark, in 14:51–52. What would be the theological purpose of such a link? What was Mark *doing*?

There is one other word that links these two incidents in Mark 14:51–52 and 16:5—the verb *περιβάλλω* (“to wear”). Indeed, these are the only two uses of the word in the entire Gospel (as was also the case with *νεανίσκος*). Thus, the issue of clothing is foregrounded again—who is wearing what and why seem to be a matter of concern for Mark. There is no linen cloth (*σινδών*) here in Mark 16; instead, this last *νεανίσκος* is clothed in a white robe (*στολή λευκός*, 16:5). So now we have:

II.B. Young man’s (*νεανίσκος*) white clothing (*λευκός*) at the empty tomb

The young man had “given away” his linen when he ran away naked (14:51–52). And Jesus had been “given” that piece of cloth (15:46). So where did the young man now suddenly obtain a white robe at the empty tomb? Remarkably, there are only two uses of the adjective “white” (*λευκός*) in the entire Gospel: here in 16:5, and earlier in 9:3 at the transfiguration of Jesus, where he is depicted as wearing “white” garments (*τὰ ἱμάτια . . . λευκὰ*). Mark 9:3 then gives us one more statement of who is wearing what:

II.A. Jesus’ white garment (*λευκός*) worn in glory at the transfiguration

Putting II.A. and II.B. together, one arrives at the second literary “clothing transfer”:

II.A. Jesus’ white garment (*λευκός*) worn in glory at the transfiguration

→**II.B.** Young man’s (*νεανίσκος*) white clothing (*λευκός*) at the empty tomb.

Thus another nuanced reassignment of apparel is accomplished: Jesus’ white garments “become” the clothing of the young man at the tomb—the garment of glory now is the young man’s apparel.⁶⁰ The combination of the two clothing transfers (I and II) reveals a remarkable substitution:

I.A. Young man’s (*νεανίσκος*) linen cloth (*σινδών*) shed in shame during the abandonment of Jesus by disciples

→**I.B.** Jesus’ linen cloth (*σινδών*) worn in death.

II.A. Jesus’ white garment (*λευκός*) worn in glory at the transfiguration

→**II.B.** Young man’s (*νεανίσκος*) white clothing (*λευκός*) at the empty tomb.

It appears, then, that garments have been “exchanged” (in a literary sense, of course): the linen cloth the young man wore, and that was stripped from him

numinous occurrences. This “young man” *was* an angel—that was the event *behind* the text. See Boring, *Mark* 445.

⁶⁰ Again, this is not to assert that Jesus in Mark 9:3 and the young man in 16:5 shared the self-same garb; the clothing motif is merely a literary device the Evangelist employs for his theological purposes. Nor does this deny that both Jesus and the young man, in their respective events *behind* the text, did wear white. Interestingly, on both occasions where “white” garments show up—at the transfiguration and at the scene of the resurrection—there is “astonishment” on the part of beholders: at the former, the crowds are said to have been “astonished” (*ἐκθαμβέω*, 9:15); at the latter, the women are duly noted to have been “astonished” (*ἐκθαμβέω*, 16:5, 6). Outside of these two uses, there is only one other use of the verb in the Gospel, in 14:33, where it functions as a homonym meaning “distressed.” Indeed, in the entire NT, Mark’s Gospel is the only text where this word is found. Neither does the LXX employ *ἐκθαμβέω* in the canonical books (however, it is found in Sir 30:9).

rendering him naked (14:51–52), covered Jesus’ body in the tomb (15:46). In exchange, the white garment Jesus wore at his transfiguration (9:3) now covers the young man (16:5).⁶¹ In other words, the runaway’s garment of shame in Mark 14 “becomes” Jesus’ garment of shame in Mark 15; and Jesus’ garment of glory in Mark 9 “becomes” the reporter’s garment of glory in Mark 16.

e. Restoration after failure. The young man’s garment of shame buried Jesus; Jesus’ garment of glory restores the young man. That it is a restoration is clear from the position of the young man at the tomb: pointedly, Mark tells us he is seated on the right (καθήμενον ἐν τοῖς δεξιotois, 16:5); none of the other Gospel writers give us this right-sided location of the angel.⁶²

This not-so-subtle literary prestidigitation represents the rehabilitation of the disciple—the naked and shamed one is clothed, and this with the clothing of glory of his Master, Jesus, while the latter takes on the clothing of shame of the former. Mark 10:45 (“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”) is thereby depicted in a more picturesque fashion: Jesus bore the disciples’ sin and shame. This might also be considered the Markan version of 2 Cor 5:21: “He made him who knew

⁶¹ Fledderman, however, does not see any connection between the two young men in Mark 14:51–52 and 16:5; the fact that they are clothed differently (linen in Mark 14; white in Mark 16) establishes their dissimilarity for him (“The Flight of a Naked Young Man” 418). Equally skeptical about such connections is James A. Brooks, declaring that “it strains credulity to see any association between the two pieces of linen” and asking “what would be the point of the contrast [between the two ‘young men’]. Furthermore, the first young man is a human being; the second, an angel” (*Mark: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture NIV Text* [NAC 23; Nashville: Broadman, 1991] 238 n. 64 and 238 n. 65). In our reading, the connection between the two young men makes good sense; the sharing of νεανίσκος and περιβάλλω in those two pericopes substantiates this idea, not to mention the shared occurrences of unique key words (νεανίσκος, συνδόν, περιβάλλω, and λευκός). On the other hand, looking at the verbal connections between the transfiguration and the resurrection (λευκός, of Jesus’ garment, 9:3, and that of the young man, 16:5; and ἐκθαμβέω, the amazement of the onlookers in 9:15 and 16:5, 6), some scholars have suggested a compositional operation working backwards. According to them, Mark cherry-picked elements from the resurrection appearance of Jesus to craft his transfiguration scene, and then proceeded to predate his creation in the earthly life of Jesus. See Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark—Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 118–19. Thus, this νεανίσκος is Jesus, after whom Mark modeled his transfigured Jesus, white garments and all. The use of ὄφθη (Mark 9:4) is a technical description of resurrection appearances (Luke 24:34; Acts 13:31; 1 Cor 15:5, 6, 7, 8), as also is the radiance of the clothing at the transfiguration (Mark 9:3; see Acts 9:3–4; 2 Cor 3:18); the cloud of Mark 9:7 signifies the vehicle of Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:9; Rev 11:12); and the presence of translated OT heroes, Moses and Elijah, attest to Jesus’ being received into the heavenly realm (ibid. 119–20). That Jesus is referred to as νεανίσκος or νεανίας (and also as παῖς or παιδίον [“youth”])—see *Acts John* 73, 76, 87, 88; *Acts Thom.* 27; *Acts Andr. Mth.* 18, 33—also seems to connect the “young man” at the tomb with Jesus, not to mention the former’s Messianic seat on the “right” (Mark 16:5). Referring to the transfiguration, Scroggs and Groff assert: “Whatever the original meaning of the story might have been, however, the transformed Jesus can be none other than Jesus in the resurrection mode of being” (“Baptism in Mark” 534; also see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007] 795, for the same sentiments). All this notwithstanding, the explanation proposed in this paper, congruent with Occam’s razor, fits better with Mark’s theological purpose, at the same time respecting his historical veracity and compositional integrity.

⁶² John orients the angels one at the foot and the other at the head where the body of Jesus had been lying (John 20:12). It is conceivable that Mark was choosing to call one of these two positions “right,” in order to promote his unique theological goal.

no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” The position of the young man now clothed in white is “on the right” (16:5), the rightful position of the Son of God (Mark 12:36/14:62 = Ps 110:1), a position, Mark wants his readers to understand, that is now shared by the enrobed reporter who was once (symbolically, that is) a shameful, naked runaway.

In sum, the art of the narrator paints a remarkable picture: the fleeing young man, symbolic of the disciples who had abandoned Jesus and had themselves fled, escapes shamefully naked, leaving behind a linen cloth that buried Jesus. That is what the Master was given by disciple—a *garment of shame*. But at the resurrection, there is a young man, sitting on the “right,” no less, and clothed gloriously in a white robe that Jesus had worn at his transfiguration. That is what the disciple is given by the Master—a *garment of glory*. This artistic portrayal of the “exchange” of garments (quite unlikely to be a literal exchange, of course, but rather a literary and theological one) bears an implicit promise: there is hope for disciples who have failed to discern, to accept, and to be faithful to the mission of Jesus. There is hope for all who will follow Jesus on this Markan “Trip of Discipleship,” albeit stumbling and failing, clumsy and hesitant. Because of what Christ did, the shame is exchanged for glory. Yes, there is hope, indeed!⁶³

The specific, and seemingly redundant, mention of Peter (“tell his disciples *and/even* [καὶ] Peter,” Mark 16:7), in the command of the young man to the women at the empty tomb, was to remind that disciple (and the rest of Mark’s readers) that failure was not a dead end. There would be forgiveness, there would be restoration—there is hope for those who have failed in their discipleship. Those who had shamefully abandoned Jesus (and equally disgracefully denied him) were now being offered the hope of restoration. There would be a new beginning, for a new iteration of the “Trip of Discipleship” had just been announced. The promise of a new start, by means of a return to the point of origin, Galilee, had been given by Jesus in 14:28; here, in 16:7 that promise is affirmed once again: Jesus would be waiting for them in Galilee to resume the “Trip of Discipleship.” Who will join Jesus as he leads his followers, once again, “on the way,” on a renewed journey of discipleship? “To be a faithful disciple is to take up the cross and follow Jesus on the road to the passion. It is to walk from ‘Galilee’ to ‘Jerusalem.’”⁶⁴ It turns out, thankfully, that there is forgiveness and restoration for those who may have faltered and failed. Anyone can get back “on the way” to following Jesus, and even the cryptic end of the

⁶³ While van Iersel does not make the connection between the white garment of Jesus at the transfiguration and that of the young man at the empty tomb, he recognizes the motif of restoration: “That the young man who has run away naked at Gethsemane reappears at the tomb dressed in a white robe to become the messenger of the resurrection shows that his failure has been forgiven” (Mark 504). See also Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 369. Such an interpretation is not an attempt to belittle the historicity of the events. The fidelity of the narrator to fact is not in question at all. The events did happen as they did; Mark simply chose what events to narrate and what not to—all in the service of his theological purpose of depicting what it means to be on “Trip of Discipleship” with Jesus. In service of this goal, he organizes actual events into a theologically powerful narrative.

⁶⁴ Geddert, *Watchwords* 167.

Gospel at 16:8 turns out to be a beginning—a renewed call to discipleship.⁶⁵ “The Lord who from the opening words had ‘a way’ (1:2–3) is the Jesus who has been constantly under way during the narrative. This Jesus does not now rest in peace, but is still under way, going ahead of the fearful disciples.”⁶⁶ The invitation is open: Will you follow?

III. CONCLUSION

Thus “Mark 14:51–52 is a tiny compendium of Mark’s theology of the passion. In a sense the little pericope is Mark’s signature. Like many an ancient or medieval craftsman Mark retreats completely behind his work. This little summary of his theology is the only signature he wants.”⁶⁷ Unlike the goal of most commentators through the ages, Mark is not so much interested in announcing the precise physical identification of the naked runaway as much as he is in propagating his theological thrust—the restoration of fallen followers. And to do so, he chooses to connect one “young man” with another, one linen cloth with another, one whiteness with another—all for the sake of the rehabilitative “exchange” he wishes to portray. The reader’s appreciation of the narrator’s art (which is inspired by the Holy Spirit as is every other element of the biblical text) will determine whether that theological thrust is discerned and accepted, and whether believers will change their lives in order to be faithful to what they are called to be and do—to follow without fear, without fleeing. And if it so happens that they do fail, there is hope for restoration.

Who, then, is the naked runaway? He is Every Disciple, shamefully feeble and fallible. And the enrobed reporter? That one, too, is Every Disciple, gloriously restored by the grace of God, through Jesus Christ!

⁶⁵ I accept the Gospel as ending at Mark 16:8 (the “shorter” ending); the majority of scholars appear to hold this view. For comprehensive summaries on Markan endings see, in addition to standard commentaries, Daniel B. Wallace, “Mark 16:8 as the Conclusion to the Second Gospel,” in *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: 4 Views* by David Alan Black, Darrell Bock, Keith Elliott, Maurice Robinson, and Daniel B. Wallace (Nashville: B & H, 2008) 1–39; J. Lee Magness, *Sense and Absence: Structure and Suspension in the Ending of Mark’s Gospel* (SBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Michael W. Holmes, “To Be Continued . . . : The Many Endings of the Gospel of Mark,” *BR* 17 (2001) 12–23, 48–49; Aída Besançon Spencer, “The Denial of the Good News and the Ending of Mark,” *BBR* 17 (2007) 269–83; and Robert H. Stein, “The Ending of Mark,” *BBR* 18 (2008) 79–98.

⁶⁶ Boring, *Mark* 446.

⁶⁷ Fledderman, “The Flight of a Naked Young Man” 418.