

The Staphylus Episode. Nonnus and the Secret Gospel of Mark

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As a grown boy, he would show himself
as a girl, in saffron robes and veils.

R. ROBERTSON, *The Coming God after Nonnus*



The present paper aims at demonstrating the Christian overtones of the Staphylus/Botrys episode in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* and its privileged association with the Lazarus story (*John* 11) as rendered in the *Paraphrasis*. It also sets the Secret Gospel of Mark (SGM) and the *Dionysiaca* episode side by side, drawing attention to their contextual narrative and notional affinity. This has a bearing on the question of the SGM's authenticity.

The SGM is known only from two short fragments cited in a mutilated letter of Clement of Alexandria found in 1958 in the Mar Saba monastery West of Jerusalem by Morton Smith (1915–1991) and published fifteen years later by the same scholar.¹ The conditions of discovery and the authenticity of this document have ever since been a subject of inconclusive and at times acrimonious debate.² According to Clement (or “Clement”) Mark produced “a more spiritual gospel for the use of those who were perfected” relying on notes of his own and of Peter's. Some scholars, however, including Morton Smith,

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1 Smith 1973 (text: 448/450).

2 *Status quaestionis*: Foster 2005; Paananen 2012; Burke 2013 is a fine collection of essays from which P. Foster in his *Foreword* (p. xxi) concludes that “the riddle of *Secret Mark* is not solved yet”. M. Meyer's integration of SGM's *νεανίσκος* in canonical Marcan theology in his contribution “The Young Streaker in Secret and Canonical Mark” (Burke 2013, 145–156) is particularly relevant.

have suggested (though without proof and perhaps anachronistically) that the Secret Mark's passage had a function in the baptismal ritual of Clement's community.³ According to the letter, at the time of Clement the SGM, kept at the Church of Alexandria where Mark had left it, was not destined for wider distribution, but was accessible only to an initiated élite: *Letter to Theodore* 450.1: ἀναγινωσκόμενον πρὸς αὐτοὺς μόνους τοὺς μουμένους τὰ μεγάλα μυστήρια. According to the letter, the Carpocratians, a Gnostic heresy known for their sexual licence, bribed an Alexandrian elder to obtain a copy. In that copy they read the phrase γυμνὸς γυμνῶ concerning Christ and the youth of Bethany. To refute this Clement cites Secret Mark's *ipsissima verba*:

Καὶ ἔρχονται εἰς Βηθανίαν, καὶ ἦν ἐκεῖ μία γυνὴ ἧς ὁ ἀδελφὸς αὐτῆς ἀπέθανεν· καὶ ἐλθοῦσα προσεκύνησε τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· Υἱὲ Δαβίδ, ἐλέησόν με. Οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτῇ· καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀπῆλθεν μετ' αὐτῆς εἰς τὸν κήπον ὅπου ἦν τὸ μνημεῖον· καὶ εὐθὺς ἠκούσθη ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου φωνὴ μεγάλη, καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀπεκύλισε τὸν λίθον ἀπὸ τῆς θύρας τοῦ μνημείου· καὶ εἰσελθὼν εὐθὺς ὅπου ἦν ὁ νεανίσκος ἐξέτεινεν τὴν χεῖρα καὶ ἡγειρεν αὐτόν, κρατήσας τῆς χειρὸς· ὁ δὲ νεανίσκος ἐμβλέψας αὐτῷ ἠγάπησεν αὐτόν καὶ ἤρξατο παρακαλεῖν αὐτόν ἵνα μετ' αὐτοῦ ᾗ· καὶ ἐξελθόντες ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου ἦλθον εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν τοῦ νεανίσκου· ἦν γὰρ πλούσιος· καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ἕξ ἐπέταξεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· καὶ ὁψίας γενομένης ἔρχεται ὁ νεανίσκος πρὸς αὐτόν, περιβεβλημένος σινδὼνα ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ, καὶ ἔμεινε σὺν αὐτῷ τὴν νύκτα ἐκεῖνην· ἐδίδασκε γὰρ αὐτόν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὸ μυστήριον τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ· ἐκεῖθεν δὲ ἀναστὰς ἐπέστρεψεν εἰς τὸ πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου.

They came to Bethany, and a woman was there whose brother had died. She came and prostrated herself before Jesus, saying to him, 'Son of David, have mercy on me.' But his disciples rebuked her. Jesus became angry and went off with her to the garden where the tomb was. Immediately a loud voice was heard from the tomb. Jesus approached and rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. Immediately he went in where the young man was, stretched out his hand, and raised him by seizing his hand. The young man looked at him intently and loved him; and he began pleading with him that he might be with him. When they came out of

3 "The pericope may have been read at the baptismal service preceding the pascha", Smith 1973, 168, cf. Foster 2005, 51. Talley 1982 articulates an attractive hypothesis for an Alexandrian liturgical pattern involving the reading of the Marcan pericope on Lazarus Saturday, abolished through Athanasius, but taken up in Constantinople by supplanting Mark with John. See, however, Brown 2007.