MARKAN SANDWICHES:  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERPOLATIONS IN MARKAN NARRATIVES

Novum Testamentum XXXI, 3 (1989) 193-216

1. Introduction

Readers of the Gospel of Mark are familiar with the Second Evangelist’s convention of breaking up a story or pericope by inserting a second, seemingly unrelated, story into the middle of it. A good example occurs in chapter 5 where Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, importunes Jesus to heal his daughter (vv 20-24). A woman with a hemorrhage interrupts Jesus en route to Jairus’ house (vv 25-34), and only after recording the woman’s healing does Mark resume with the raising of Jairus’ daughter, who had died in the meantime (vv 35-43). Another example occurs in chapter 11 where Mark separates the cursing of the fig tree (vv 12-14) and its subsequent withering (vv 20-21) with Jesus’ clearing of the temple (vv 15-19). This technique occurs some nine times in the Gospel:

Mark begins story A, introduces story B, then returns to and completes story A.

These inserted middles have been variously indentified as intercalations,1 interpolations,2 insertions,3 framing,4 or, in German, as Schiebungen5 or Ineinanderschachtelungen.6 A more graphic description, and one I prefer, is to refer to Mark’s A-B-A literary convention as a sandwich technique.7

Until recently commentators on the Gospel of Mark have paid relatively little attention to this convention. This neglect is largely due to the influence of the form-critical method, the chief objectives of which are to recover, as far as possible, the units of oral tradition which became the building blocks of the later written Gospels.8 The quest includes the recovery of a possible Urmarkus, a written source which lay beneath the Second Gospel. As long as interest was directed to the sources of the Gospel of Mark (i.e., oral units and forms, historical background, earlier prototypes, etc.) rather than the canonical text, the Gospel of Mark as a literary product was judged rather like one of Cinderella’s ugly

---

American rhetorical critics, believe that the sandwiching of two stories together intends to establish a relationship between the stories, even if the exact nature of the relationship cannot be identified. Finally, a few scholars suggest that the purpose of Mark’s sandwich technique is not in itself literary but theological. In this respect John Donahue’s conclusions are the most specific. He argues that “Mark uses the technique of intercalation to underscore two major themes of his gospel, the way of suffering of Jesus, and the necessity of the disciples to follow Jesus on this way.”

2. Thesis

The purpose of this study will be to argue that Mark sandwiches one passage into the middle of another with an intentional and discernible theological purpose. The technique is, to be sure, a literary technique, but its purpose is theological; that is, the sandwiches emphasize the major motifs of the Gospel, especially the meaning of faith, discipleship, bearing witness, and the dangers of apostasy. Moreover, I shall endeavor to show that the middle story nearly always provides the key to the theological purpose of the sandwich. The insertion interprets the flanking halves. To use the language of medicine, the transplanted organ enlivens the host material.

The establishment of this thesis will require three investigations.

Mark, who uses the word “immediately” some 40 times, and who narrates his Gospel in an otherwise rapid-fire fashion, would need to create the illusion of a passage of time at these particular points?

2 Dewey says, “Intercalation is primarily a literary device and should be studied first in terms of rhetorical terms, to see how the intercalation affects the progression of the narrative” (Markan Public Debate, 22). R. Fowler says the technique “demands that the reader view these episodes together as a whole” (Loaves and Fishes, 165). E. Klostermann sees the technique as a “literary intention to place related material together” (Markus-Evangelium, 36). More specifically, T.A. Burkitt thinks the technique serves either to stress a parallel or a contrast between the two stories (Mysterious Revelation, 121). L. Gaston notes a relationship but cannot decide whether the surrounding story or the inserted story provides the interpretive key (No Stone on Another. Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970] 83, fn 1).

2 See R. Stein: “It is quite evident that when the Evangelist inserts a statement into some tradition that he does so in order to comment upon or explain that tradition to his readers. The investigation of this comment will therefore reveal something of the Evangelist’s particular theology...” (“Proper Methodology,” 184). Less specifically, H.C. Kee suggests that interpolations heighten dramatic impact of the material, but also that they make the material more acceptable to Mark’s community, or make Jesus’ trial and death better conform to what God ordained in scripture (Community of the New Age, 56).

2 Are You the Christ?, 62. Again, “[Mark] uses [the intercalated material] to cast over the whole gospel the shadow of the cross, and all intercalations contain some allusion to the suffering and death of Jesus,” ibid, 60.

stepsisters. Günther Dehn decreed that Mark was “neither a historian nor an author. He assembled his material in the simplest manner thinkable.” Bultmann said that “Mark is not sufficiently master of his material to be able to venture on a systematic construction himself.” Étienne Trocmé scoffed at Mark’s literary achievement: “The point is settled: the author of Mark was a clumsy writer unworthy of mention in any history of literature.”

The past two decades have witnessed the rise of new methods in Gospel interpretation. These have not supplanted form criticism,

but they have brought alternative perspectives to bear which have broadened and deepened our understanding of the Gospels. Of significance for this study is the structuralist approach. Structuralism is indebted to redaction criticism which rightly perceived that the authors of the canonical gospels were not witless water boys schlepping water from a spring (a creative oral tradition) to thirsty hordes (the readers). They were themselves creative theologians who molded the tradition which they received for their individual purposes. Structuralism, however, goes a step further and examines the literary patterns or structures which the Evangelists employed in the construction of their narratives. Not surprisingly, structuralists have had the most to say about Mark’s sandwich technique.

The current state of research on this issue reminds one of a scene in Wilson Rawls’s Where the Red Fern Grows. Night after night the hounds chase a raccoon to the same big oak, only to find that the “phantom coon” has eluded them. Similarly, not a few scholars have found their way to the right tree, but they have yet to produce the coon. That is to say, they re-

9 G. Dehn, Der Gottessohn. Eine Einführung in das Evangelium des Markus (Hamburg: Im Furche-Verlag, 1953) 18.
13 Von Debschütz (“Erzahlerkunst,” 193) says that “The art of a good narrator... intends to awaken in his listeners the illusion of a longer period of time or a larger spatial distance.” D. Nineham (The Gospel of St Mark, 112) says “(St Mark is fond of insertions between two halves of a single story, time being thus given for the initial action to develop.)” Also, Bultmann, Hist. Syn. Trad., 301-02. A time lapse, to be sure, plays a role in some sandwiches (e.g., 5:21-43; 11:12-21), but it is not itself the reason for the sandwich. If the creation of a time lapse were Mark’s intent, it would be necessary to address the question why
First, we shall attempt to define as precisely as possible the characteristics of a Markan sandwich. Second, we shall investigate whether there are any precedents for Mark’s sandwich technique in pre-Christian literature, particularly in the Hebrew Bible. And third, each of the sandwich units in the Gospel will require individual examination.

3. Characteristics of Markan Sandwiches

Each Markan interpolation concerns a larger (usually narrative) unit of material consisting of two episodes or stories which are narrated in three paragraphs or pericopes. The whole follows an A1-B-A2 schema, in which the B-episode forms an independent unit of material, whereas the flanking A-episodes require one another to complete their narrative. The B-episode consists of only one story; it is not a series of stories, nor itself so long that the reader fails to link A2 to A1.17 Finally, A1 normally contains an allusion at its beginning which refers back to A2, e.g., repetition of a theme, proper nouns, etc.18

On the basis of these criteria it is possible to identify nine sandwiches in the Gospel of Mark:

1. 3:20-35
   - A Jesus’ companions try to seize him, vv 20-21
   - B The religious leaders accuse Jesus of being in league with Beelzeboul, vv 22-30
   - A Jesus’ family seeks him, vv 31-35

2. 4:1-20
   - A Parable of the Sower, vv 1-9
   - B Purpose of parables, vv 10-13
   - A Explanation of the Parable of the Sower, vv 14-20

---

17 Redlich (St. Mark’s Gospel, 35) suggests that the five conflict stories between Mark 2: 1 and 3: 6 are an insertion, but this constitutes a unit of material so long that few readers would think of linking 3: 7 back with 1: 45.

18 The sandwich phenomenon under consideration here is not to be confused with smaller units of sayings-material, sometimes referred to as “insertions.” See, for example, the lists of such brief parenthetical units, and the attempts to categorize them, in F. Neirynck, Duality in Mark, 131-33; J. Donahue, Are You the Christ?, 241-43; and F.C. Synge, “Intruded Middles,” Exp T 92 (11.1981) 329-33. R. Fowler’s list in Leaves and Fishes, 164-65, follows Donahue’s. While not wishing to deny that Mark may have employed a sandwich technique on a smaller scale, the criteria for identifying insertions, often depending on the mere repetition of a word or phrase, seem to me notoriously subjective. Of a combined total of 58 “insertions” listed in Neirynck and Donahue, for example, the authors agree on only two!

---

3. 5:21-43
   - A Jairus pleads with Jesus to save his daughter, vv 21-24
   - B Woman with a hemorrhage touches Jesus, vv 25-34
   - A Jesus raises Jairus’ daughter, vv 35-43

4. 6:7-30
   - A Mission of the Twelve, vv 7-13
   - B Martyrdom of John the Baptist, vv 14-29
   - A Return of the Twelve, v 30

5. 11:12-21
   - A Cursing of the fig tree, vv 12-14
   - B Clearing of the temple, vv 15-19
   - A Withering of the fig tree, vv 20-21

6. 14:1-11
   - A Plot to kill Jesus, vv 1-2
   - B Anointing of Jesus at Bethany, vv 3-9
   - A Judas’s agreement to betray Jesus, vv 10-11

7. 14:17-3120
   - A Jesus predicts his betrayal, vv 17-21
   - B Institution of the Lord’s Supper, vv 22-26
   - A Jesus predicts Peter’s betrayal, vv 27-31

8. 14:53-72
   - A Peter follows Jesus to the courtyard of the high priest, vv 53-54
   - B Jesus’ inquisition before the Sanhedrin, vv 55-65
   - A Peter’s denial of Jesus, vv 66-72

9. 15:40-16:820
   - A Women at the cross, vv 15:40-41
   - B Joseph of Arimathea requests Jesus’ body, vv 15:42-46
   - A Women at the empty tomb, vv 15:47-16:8

---

20 The material in 14:1-31 can be viewed variously. E. Best (Temptation and Passion, 91) sees in it a “double sandwich.” I view it otherwise. The instructions for the preparation of the passover in 14: 12-16 appear to me as a neutral or buffer unit between sandwich 6 and 7.

21 Kee (Community of the New Age, 54), Neirynck (Duality in Mark, 133), and Fowler (Leaves and Fishes, 165) identify 15:6-15 / 16:20 / 21-32 as a sandwich. The material, however, fails to display the characteristics of a sandwich listed above and appears to be simply a part of the passion progression in 15:1-39.
A comparison of these passages within the synoptic tradition reveals that in two instances both Matthew and Luke follow Mark’s A-B-A order, in two instances neither follows Mark, and in five instances either Matthew or Luke follows Mark’s pattern. In other words, of Mark’s nine sandwiches, Matthew retains Mark’s A-B-A pattern five times and Luke retains it four times. That is not to say, however, that Matthew and Luke reproduce 50% of Mark’s sandwiches. Even though Mark’s A-B-A sequence is retained by one or the other, his intention is often lost.

The above comparison demonstrates that, over against Matthew and Luke, Mark shows a distinct proclivity for the sandwich technique. Given this fact, it may not be irrelevant to recall the Testimonium Papias. As recorded by Eusebius, Papias said that Mark “wrote accurately, though not actually in order” (akribôs èγραψεν, ou mentoi taxéi). Moreover, continued Papias, it was not Mark’s purpose to produce a catena of domínical sayings (all’ ouch hêspéρ suntaxin ton kuriâkîn poiômenos legión). Three times in the brief testimonium Papias attests that the reliability of Mark’s Gospel derives from the authority of Peter, thus assuring Papias’s readers that the testimony of Mark’s literary design.

4. Precedents for the Sandwich Technique in Pre-Markan Literature?

Before turning to Markan sandwiches it is worth inquiring whether the inserting of one story into the middle of another, wherein the middle story provides the hermeneutical key for the understanding of the whole, can be found in literature prior to Mark. The question is relevant to determine whether Mark followed a prior precedent, or whether his sandwich technique may be said to originate with himself.

There are many examples in ancient literature where an author interrupts one story with another in order to achieve a desired effect. A good example is the story of the scar of Odysseus in the 19th book of the Odyssey. Odysseus has been away from Ithaca for twenty years and on his return home he had disguised himself as a beggar in order to size up the opposition which has bested the faithful Penelope in his absence. So effective is his disguise that Penelope fails to recognize him. She nevertheless takes pity on the beggar and orders her maidservant and Odysseus’s old nurse, Euryclea, to bathe the stranger... whereupon Euryclea recognizes Odysseus by a scar on his leg. The scar provides Homer with the occasion for a (three-page) digression how Odysseus had received the wound by a wild boar, and information relating to his youth and parents. The insertion creates a momentary retardation of the plot, as E. Auerbach noted, and heightens suspense. The interruption is, however, a suspension of the plot, not an interpretation of it. It is an effective flashback by which Homer baits his readers at a crucial part of the story.

A similar though less effective digression is found in the Iliad (16.155ff), where Homer describes the aid brought by the Myrmidons in the midst of the ship-burning scene. As the flames leap the poet compares the heroic arrival of the Myrmidons with a pack of wolves, and even describes their troop formations and background on their leaders. Homer again makes dramatic use of the flashback to create suspense as well as to provide information which he felt necessary. From a literary-critical perspective, however, the insertion interrupts the plot, it does not interpret it.

It is sometimes difficult to judge if a pericope contains an insertion or not. In the sixth chapter of 2 Maccabees, for example, we read of Gentile atrocities in Jerusalem narrated in the third person (vv 1-11). This is followed by a theodicy in the first person in which the author averts that God’s punishment is for the purpose of...
The triumph of Yahweh’s grace over fallen Israel. The effect is enhanced by a prose (ch 1) - poetry (ch 2) - prose (ch 3) alternation in style. The restoration of Gomer from a harlot (ch 1) to a faithful wife (ch 3) depends on the divine decree in chapter two, namely, that love— and not damnation— will be God’s final word with faithless Israel. In other words, the resolution of the Hosea-Gomer story is contingent on the middle oracle which gives meaning to and restores a broken relationship.  

Another example of sandwiching is the David-Bathsheba story, into which the Nathan prophecy is inserted (2 Sam 11:1-12:25). In suspenseful narration the author recounts David’s intrigue and adultery with Bathsheba and the order of Uriah’s death (ch 11). In one episode David has broken three of the Ten Commandments— covetousness, adultery, murder— and has succeeded in avoiding detection. Or so it seems, until the narrator adds, “But what David had done was wrong in the eyes of the Lord” (11:27). Then comes Nathan’s parable about the rich shepherd who robbed his neighbor of his dear ewe lamb— and its devastating conclusion, “You are the man” (12:1-7). Thereafter follows a story of judgment (in the death of the child) and grace (in the birth of Solomon, vv 7-25). Central to the whole is Nathan’sparable, which breaks the continuity of the narrative yet provides the key to its understanding, for the parable allows David to see his action from God’s perspective. 

There may be other examples of sandwiching in the Hebrew Scriptures. Auernburg suggests that the death of Absalom in 2 Samuel 18:9-15 functions in such a manner. 29 It is not clear to me, however, how Joab’s killing of Absalom in the forest of Ephraim sheds light on the rebellion or its suppression. It seems simply to elaborate an element in a narrative rather than to interpret the narrative, much as we saw in Homer. By way of summary on the sandwich technique prior to Mark, we might say that although the suspension of a narrative for one reason or another was not uncommon in ancient literature, the use of an inserted middle to give new meaning or to resolve a tension in a host passage can be seen, to the best of my knowledge, only in the Hebrew Scriptures, and there seldom. The clearest examples of such a technique are the Hosea-Gomer and David-Bathsheba stories. But these stories differ from Mark’s sandwiches in one important respect: their B-episodes are intentional commentaries on the flanking A-episodes, whereas in Mark the B-episode is (with the exception of 4:1-20) always an independent narrative. Whether Mark is indebted to these stories (or others like them) for his sandwich technique, is doubtful, for neither of the stories is quoted or alluded to in Mark’s Gospel, and none of Mark’s sandwich

---


29 Mimesis, 14.
units alludes to earlier precedents. We are thus left to examine Mark’s material on its own.

5. Considerations of the Markan Sandwiches

Scholars concerned with Markan interpolations generally recognize the following five: 3:20-35; 5:21-43; 6:7-30; 11:12-21; 14:1-11. I shall begin with these passages and then consider four others which in my judgment exhibit sandwich characteristics: 4:1-20; 14:17-31; 14:53-72; and 15:40-168.

5.1 The Woman with the Hemorrhage and the Healing of Jairus’ Daughter, 5:21-43.

This is one of two Markan sandwiches preserved by both Matthew (9:18-26) and Luke (8:40-56), although both abbreviate Mark’s version. In the Greek the narrative of the woman with the hemorrhage (vv 24b-34) differs somewhat in style from the Jairus narrative (vv 21-24a; 35-43). Jairus’s story is a straightforward narrative related in the (historical) present tense, and most of the sentences begin with kai [‘and’]. The woman’s story, however, is narrated in the imperfect tense, there are fewer instances of initial kai, and in verses 25-27 there is a long complex sentence woven around six aorist participles. We cannot judge for certain on the basis of this evidence, but the central section appears somewhat less Markan stylistically. If so, Mark may have utilized a separate unit of material for the woman’s story, and the pericope would be a Markan composition.

More important is the juxtaposition of the stories. Jairus and the woman share only one thing in common: they both are victims of desperate circumstances, and apart from Jesus they have no hope. Otherwise their stories diverge. Jairus has a name and holds an important position. He is a ruler of the synagogue and hence a respected member of the community. He has enough prestige to ask Jesus to come to his house, and his presumption is not disappointed, for Jesus goes with him. The woman can claim none of these. Her name is not given (or known) and she has no position in society. Her only identification is her shame, a menstrual hemorrhage. Whereas Jairus approaches Jesus face-to-face, she approaches Jesus unaware and from behind.

Jairus apparently holds a religious advantage. But with typical Markan irony, Jesus reverses their roles, for it is the woman who displays the greater faith. Despite her embarrassing condition she pushes through the crowd, even past the disciples, hoping only to touch the back of Jesus’ garment. Is there an element of superstition in her faith? Perhaps. She is determined, however, to let nothing prevent her from reaching Jesus, and to this undaunted woman Jesus says, “Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace” (v 34).

The woman’s interruption has, of course, worked to Jairus’s disadvantage, for in the meantime his daughter has died. With that announcement Jairus’s hope fails him. Surely his servants are right, why trouble the Master further (v 35)? It is as though Mark were asking his readers, ‘Is there any hope for Jairus now?’ And his answer— coming from the mouth of Jesus— is a resounding ‘Yes,’ if Jairus does “Not fear, but believe” (v 36). But what kind of belief must Jairus have in a situation in which all human hopes are exhausted? The answer is given in Jesus’ command to believe (pisteuein, v 36): Jairus must have the kind of faith (pistis, v 34) the woman had! Faith knows no limits, not even the raising of a dead child, as Jesus goes on to demonstrate.

The insertion of the woman with the hemorrhage into the Jairus story is thus not an editorial strategem whose primary purpose is to create suspense or “to give time for the situation in the main incident to develop”. The woman’s faith forms the center of the sandwich and is the key to its interpretation. Through her Mark shows how faith in Jesus can transform fear and despair into hope and salvation. It is a powerful lesson for Jairus, as well as for Mark’s readers.

5.2 The Mission of the Twelve and the Martyrdom of John the Baptist, 6:7-30.

This sandwich is one of Mark’s more instructive, for the return of the Twelve (A’) is contained in a single verse (v 30). Matthew rearranges Mark’s account radically (10:1-5-15; 14:1-13). Luke (9:1-10) follows Mark’s order, but the interrelation between the mission and the martyrdom is largely lost because Luke is more interested in Herod’s anxiety (vv 7-9) than in the Baptist’s martyrdom.

On literary-critical grounds the martyrdom of the Baptist (vv 1429) exhibits several unique features. It is the only narrative in the Gospel which is not about Jesus. It is narrated in the Purity Regulations,” JBL 103 [4, 1984] 419-21] says the woman’s behavior ran counter to the prescriptions preserved in Lev 15:19-28. Jesus, she maintains, saw the woman’s faith, not her ritual uncleanness. See also D.M. Derrett, “Mark’s Technique: the Haemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter,” Bib 63 (4, 1982) 474-505.

C.H. Bird (“Some gar [‘for’] Clauses in St. Mark’s Gospel,” JTS NS 4 [1, 1953] 179-82) sees Jairus’s daughter and the hemorrhaging woman linked by the number “twelve.” Twelve, moreover, may signify Israel to Mark’s readers, indeed, Israel coming to faith in Jesus.

So Nineham, The Gospel of St Mark, 157. Von Dobschütz (“Erzahlerkunst,” 195) and Klostermann (Markus-Evangelium, 50) also regard its purpose solely as the creation of a suspenseful pause.

34 Unless one considers 1:2-8, although in this passage John is related to Jesus

---

As forerunner.


15 R. Fowler (Loaves and Fishes, 114-32) rightly asks why Mark sandwiched the death of the Baptist between the sending and return of the Twelve. Unfortunately, he fails to recognize that Mark relates the Baptist’s martyrdom to the Twelve as well as to Jesus’ impending crucifixion.

16 See W.R. Telford, The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree. A Reduction-Critical interpretation begins already in the synoptic tradition, for Matthew (21:12-22) reduces Mark’s sandwich (A— cursing of the fig tree; B— clearing of the temple; A— withering of the fig tree) to a simple sequence (clearing the temple— cursing the tree); and Luke replaces the fig tree miracle with a parable (13:6-9). Here also the oft-repeated opinion that Mark’s sandwich technique simply affords a necessary time lapse for events to occur fails to account for the creative and symbolic interrelation of the sandwich.

The interrelation of the clearing of the temple (vv 15-19), and the cursing (vv 12-14) and withering (vv 20-21) of the fig tree, is established at several points. For one, all the material between Mark 11:1 and 13:37 is oriented around the temple; this is itself a cue that there is a relationship between the fig tree and temple. There is also a clear parallel between “his disciples were hearing” (v 14) and “the chief priests and the scribes heard” (v 18). Above all, the fig tree is often in the Old Testament a symbol for Israel, and more than once Israel is judged under this symbol. “There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither,” said Jeremiah (8:13). In connection with this is the intriguing statement that “it was not the season for figs” (v 13). This statement surely has less to do with horticulture than theology. The word for “season” (kairos) is used at the opening of the Gospel, “The time (kairos) has come,” said Jesus, “the kingdom of God is near” (1:14). Kairos means a special, critical moment. There is no fruit on the tree because its time has passed. The leafy fig tree, with all its promise of fruit, is as deceptive as the temple, which, with all its bustling activity, is really an outlaw’s hideout (v 17).

Verses 15-19 have often been called the ‘cleansing’ of the temple. Cleansing, however, implies a removal of impurities and restoration to a rightful function, as envisioned, for ex-
ample, in Isaiah 55:1-8 or Psalms of Solomon 17:30: “He [Messiah] will purge Jerusalem (and make it) holy as it was even from the beginning.

(for) nations to come from the ends of the earth to see his glory.” But Jesus is not restoring the temple; he is pronouncing its doom. The fig tree, symbolizing Israel (see 13:28), has been found wanting and judged. Like the fig tree, the temple’s function is now “withered from the roots” (v 20; see Hos 9:16). Here more than elsewhere the A-episodes admitted also interpret the B-episode, for the cursing and withering of the fig tree do, in fact, foreshadow the destruction of the temple. But on a deeper level the B-episode remains the key, for apart from the clearing of the temple the cursing and withering of the fig tree remain an enigma. The cursing and withering of the fig tree, in other words, are a symbolic of Jesus’ activity in the temple. Jesus himself has replaced the temple as the center of Israel’s faith (15:38-39); salvation is found in him, not in the temple.

5.4 The Betrayal of Jesus and the Anointing at Bethany, 14:1-11.

The dividing of the plot to betray Jesus by the anointing at Bethany creates bitter irony at the beginning of the Markan passion. Matthew (26:1-16) retains the sandwich and its effect, but Luke (22: 1-6) recounts only the betrayal and omits the anointing. John (11:55-12:11) also maintains the semblance of Mark’s A-B-A schema, and identifies the woman as Mary, sister of Lazarus.

Mark hones a keen edge of contrast between the A and B parts of the sandwich. Judas, “one of the Twelve” (v 10), is in collusion with the religious leaders to betray his master. The betrayal plot reeks with intrigue: “the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how they might seize him by treachery and kill him” (v 1). In the Gospel of Mark the word “seek” (ζητεῖν) occurs 10 times, always in pejorative contexts. “To seize” (κρατεῖν) occurs some 15 times and carries predominantly negative connotations. Coupled with “treachery” (δολος) and “killing” (ἀποκτεῖναι), the description seethes with deception and violence. By contrast, “a woman came having an alabaster flask of nard ointment, extremely valuable, which she broke and poured on [Jesus’] head” (v 3). Mark stumble(s) over himself in Greek to emphasize the extent of her devotion by the expense of the ointment, which, to the chagrin of the disciples, was roughly estimated at a year’s wages! (v 5). This unnamed woman performs an act of devotion which results in a solemn pronouncement, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel may be preached in the whole world, even that which she has done shall be spoken in remembrance of her” (v 9).

The bracketing of the woman’s devotion by the betrayal plot creates an acid contrast between her faith and Judas’s treachery. Sacrificial faith or scheming betrayal? Tender devotion or intrigue? Is not Mark saying that in Jesus’ “hour” (14:35) there can be only one of two responses to him, that of the woman or that of Judas? Mark places the woman in the middle as the ideal.

5.5 Jesus, His Companions, and Beelzeboul, 3:20-35.

This unit is less obviously a sandwich. Neither Matthew nor Luke recognized Mark’s technique here, or, if they did, regarded it worth preserving, for both alter his sequence. The A-parts are only loosely connected and it is unclear whether Jesus’ mother and brothers in A’ (vv 31-35) are the same as his ambiguous “intimates” (hoi par’ autou) in A (vv 20-21). Incials D and W, in fact, identify hoi par’ autou with the scribes of verse 22. Moreover, it appears that verses 20-30 are a separate unit, the linking idea being the charge that Jesus was mad, both from his companions (exesti, V 21), and from the religious leaders (Beelzeboul echai, v 22).

Closer examination, however, reveals a sandwich in verses 20-35. The setting for both A parts is the “house” of verse 20, and in both Jesus is surrounded by the “crowd” (vv 20,32). More importantly, in both A parts the companions of Jesus (whether or not hoi par’ autou = Jesus’ mother and brothers)
try to suppress him. Mark says expressly in verse 21: “[Jesus’] intimate companions went out to seize him.” The verb “to seize” (krêtēn) is often in Mark used in the sense of preventing Jesus from fulfilling his mission, and the same is implied in A” by the use of “calling” (kalēin, v 31) and “seeking” (zētein, v 32). Equally telling is the contrast between “insiders” and “outsiders” in A: Jesus’ mother and brothers are “standing outside” (v 31); they are not “with Jesus” (peri auton kaklēi kathēmenous, v 34) nor “doing the will of God” (hos gar an poïēsi to thelema tou theou, v 35), which, according to Mark, is the chief characteristic of discipleship (see 3:14-15).

If 3:20-35 is a sandwich, what does Mark intend by breaking up the attempts of Jesus’ most intimate circle to straight-jacket him by the story of Jesus and Beelzeboul (vv 22-30)? The answer is a hard one: the attempt to restrain Jesus from his mission or redirect him to another course, even though it comes from his most intimate associates, nay, even from his mother and brothers, is ultimately as mistaken and blasphemous as confusing Jesus with Satan! To avert Jesus from his mission is satanic. This, of course, is precisely the point of Jesus’ stinging rebuke when Peter tried to prevent him from going to the cross. “Get behind me, Satan, for you do not understand the things of God but only the ways of man” (8:33).

5.6 Predictions of Betrayal and the Lord’s Supper, 14:17-31.

Mark’s account of the Lord’s Supper (vv 22-26) is flanked by two predictions of Jesus that the disciples will deny him. Matthew (26:20-35) follows the Markan order whereas Luke (22:14-23, 3134) disrupts it. In both the Markan predictions Jesus is alone with the Twelve. The first prediction comes at the beginning of the Supper (vv 17-21); the second occurs after the meal en route to the Mount of Olives (vv 27-31). Both predictions are met with disbelief by the disciples. In the first it is incredulity (v 19) and in the second outright disavowal (vv 29-31). With not-so-subtle irony Mark contrasts the theoretical fidelity of the disciples (“and they all said the same thing” [i.e., agreed with Peter not to leave Jesus], v 31) with their actual flight (“and they all left him and fled,” v 50).

What significance does Mark intend by placing the Lord’s Supper (vv 22-26) between accounts of denial and cowardice? The answer can only be to contrast the faithlessness of Jesus’ disciples to the covenant faithfulness of God. Eduard Schweizer rightly notes that A provides the background or relief against which B gains its specific character: “so immensely gracious is God and so limitless his gift.” It is a familiar theme from the prophets. Where human faithfulness fails, God’s covenantal love stands. We see substantially the same picture with Jesus praying alone in Gethsemane while the disciples sleep, dying alone on Calvary after the disciples have fled. God’s salvific covenant depends on his faithfulness, and it stands in spite of the faithlessness of his people. “Let God be true, even though everyone be a liar” (Rom 3:4).

5.7 Peter’s Denial and Jesus, Trial before the Sanhedrin, 14:53-72.

A similar sandwich occurs at the end of chapter 14 where Mark brackets Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin (vv 55-65) with Peter’s denial (vv 53-54,66-72). Luke (22:54-62,66-71) breaks Mark’s A-B-A sequence, but both Matthew (26:57-75) and John (18:15-27) maintain it. Mark and John contain two similar references to Peter’s warming himself (Mark 14:54 || John 18:18; Mark 14:67 || John 18:25), “a startling seam,” in the words of C.A. Evans. Three of the four Evangelists thus agree on an A-B-A sequence. Evans is probably correct that John’s agreement with Mark’s order is due to common oral tradition rather than reliance on Mark. This passage, therefore (along with 14:1-11 and 5:2143), may be evidence that some application of the sandwich technique already existed in the tradition which Mark received.

Luke’s order of relating Peter’s denial (22:54-62) and Jesus’ trial (22:66-71) as two separate episodes is certainly simpler.

---

There is a difference in Mark between misunderstanding (e.g., 8:14-21), which is regrettable, and opposition, which is damnable. In 3:20-35 Jesus’ companions exert pressure against his fulfilling his mission. Of 15 instances of krêtēn in Mark, 11 are negative (e.g., 6:17; 12:12). Of 10 occurrences of zētein in Mark, all are negative. Even kalēin is likely negative in v 31, for it is the only instance in Mark where someone other than Jesus is its subject.

See J. Fenton (“The Mother of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel and its Revisions,” Theology 86 (1983) 343-37), who argues that Mark’s harsh portrayal of Mary (which was softened by the later Evangelists) was part of his insistence that not even the privilege of flesh-and-blood relation to Jesus guaranteed— or was a substitute for— faith in Jesus.
Mark, on the other hand, opens the account of Jesus before the council with a tantalizing reference to Peter’s standing in the courtyard of the high priest... warming himself by the fire" (14:54). He proceeds to Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin (vv 55-56), and then returns to the sorry account of Peter’s denial (vv 66-72). What does Mark’s sandwich arrangement accomplish?

Two accents emerge sharply from the sandwich. First, Peter’s equivocation before the servant girl is the first time in Mark that Jesus is openly denied. Coming from the chief apostle it is all the more bitter. The disciples have misunderstood Jesus (8:14-21), Judas has secretly betrayed him (14:10-11), but Peter’s repudiation is the first open denial of Jesus. By contrast, Jesus’ confession before the chief priest, "I am [the Christ, the Son of the Most Blessed]" (v 62), is the first time in Mark that Jesus drops the veil of silence and openly confesses his identity. Jesus’ identity is thus revealed at the moment of his deepest humiliation and weakness. The juxtaposition of bold confession and cowardly denial forces upon the reader the terrible gap between Jesus and Peter. The stage is set for chapter 15 which also is built around the polemic (mockery in vv 16-32) and confession (v 39). This sandwich thus intensifies the truth of the previous one: the Son of God is faithful and true where his disciples are not, and their failure can only be seen for what it is in light of his suffering righteou-

5.8 **Joseph of Arimathea and the Women, 15:40-16:8.**

A sandwich of less importance occurs at the end of the Gospel.

Mark records that “women were watching [the crucifixion from a distance]” (gynaikes apo makrōthen theôreasai, 15:40). These same women are found again on Easter morning making their way to the tomb, having prepared spices for Jesus’ burial (16:1). They are anxious about who will roll the stone away (16:3), and their meeting with the angel at the tomb finds them bewildered and distressed (exethambēthisan, 16:5) and fearful (ephobounto, 16:8).

In between the crucifixion and resurrection Mark inserts the story of Joseph of Arimathea. Mark’s order is retained by Luke (23:49-24:8), but not by Matthew (27:55-28:8). Whereas the women watch the events (thērein, 15:40, 47), Joseph acts. “Joseph of Arimathea came... and dared to go to Pilate and request the body of Jesus” (15:43). Joseph, in fact, is the first individual since the woman at Bethany who acts from courage and conviction. In this oft-unnounced sandwich Mark reminds his readers that courage and conviction, not bystanding and beholding, are the characteristics of true discipleship.

5.9 **The Parable of the Sower and the Purpose of Parables, 4:1-20.**

The most important and most difficult sandwich in Mark occurs in chapter four where Mark divides the parable of the sower (vv 19) and its interpretation (vv 14-20) by the purpose of parables (vv 10-13). Both Matthew (13:1-23) and Luke (8:4-15) follow Mark’s arrangement. The literature on the enigmatic explanation of parables in verses 10:12 is extensive. It is curious how few scholars recognize this as a sandwich. One indication of a sandwich is the artificial arrangement of chapter four. The parable of the sower is set beside the sea (v 1), but the explanation takes place privately (kata monas, v 10). Without informing his readers of a change of location, Mark has Jesus again beside the sea in verse 35, which constitutes something of a contradiction.

If we have a sandwich here, and if the middle episode provides the key to understanding its flanking halves, what does this sandwich mean? The question continues to puzzle exegetes. Some scholars argue that the difficulty of verses 10-12 is due either to a mistranslation (from Aramaic to Greek), or to a mistaken arrangement of material. There is, however,
6. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that in some nine instances Mark sandwiches one story into the middle of another in order to underscore the major motifs of his Gospel. In some cases the inserted narrative illustrates an ideal (e.g., faith, 5:21-43), and in others, particularly in the Passion, it functions by creating a contrast between the ways of God and the ways of humanity. Almost always the insertion is the standard by which the flanking material is measured, the key to the interpretation of the whole. J. Donahue is correct in regarding the purpose of Markan sandwiches as theological and not solely literary, although, as our investigation evinces, their purpose cannot be limited, as Donahue supposes, to the way of Jesus’ suffering and the necessity of discipleship. They are equally concerned with the meaning of faith, bearing witness, judgment, and the dangers of apostasy. Our examination of pre-Markan sandwiches did not indicate that Mark patterns his sandwiches after an earlier design. Nevertheless, 5:21-43, 14:1-11, and 14:53-72 may indicate that some sandwiching existed in the tradition which Mark received. It is clear, at any rate, that among the Evangelists Mark employs the sandwich technique in a unique and pronounced manner. This appears to corroborate Papias’s testimony that the Second Evangelist was uniquely responsible for the design of the Gospel. Finally, the subtlety and sophistication of Markan sandwiches effectively dismisses the judgments of earlier scholars that Mark was a clumsy writer who produced an uncouth Gospel. It is increasingly recognized today that Mark was not only a skilled and purposeful theologian, but that he crafted a new genre of literature in his Gospel to narrate his theological understanding. Both his literary and theological craftmanship converge in his sandwich technique.

---

45 See footnotes 15-16.
46 See footnotes 9-11.
47 I wish to express my appreciation to Professors Otto Betz, Martin Hengel, and Eduard Schweizer for their helpful critiques of this study.