

**Crucified Son of Man or Mighty One?:  
Mark's Chiastic Gospel Structure and the question of Jesus' identity**  
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The evangelist responsible for the Gospel according to Mark has been credited with being no more than a collector of materials, a poor author whose worse command of Greek suggests only the most rudimentary kind of education in the forms and rhetoric of his day. While some commentators do note the creative way that Mark (for lack of a better, shorter way to refer to the evangelist) uses his materials, such as his love for intercalation and his use of the rhetorical device known as a chiasm, others have challenged Mark's redaction even of the interesting series of controversy stories found between 2:1 and 3:6, suggesting that they were a pre-existing set. Dewey, in her dissertation on this passage has reviewed the various attributions and convincingly put forward the conclusion that the organization is, indeed, Mark's. (1)

Still, attempts to find an overall structure for Mark's gospel have been unsatisfying to date. While geographical and temporal markers have been used to break the text into sections, few see any organizing principles other than "pearls on a string." One study though appeared to hold some promise in attempting to describe a larger organizing principle. M. Philip Scott has suggested the presence of a chiasm that provides a framework for the entire gospel.(2) His organization of the work has much to commend it, and, as he suggested, it is surprising that this idea has not had more attention.

Still, Scott's use of the chiasm to organize Mark is not entirely satisfying. Perhaps it is the pervasive sense that he has allowed his devotion to "the mystery of Christ" to color his judgment. Surely his love for what he believes to be the central "mystery" of the gospel, Jesus' identity as God's son, made him less sensitive to the text's own pessimism with regard to the reception of the this news. He sees the development of the gospel as a "gradual development" of the meaning in Jesus' reply to the high priest (14:62).(3)

Perhaps it is his dependence on numbers, as his work is full of word counts that serve to support his conclusion that God's declaration of Jesus' sonship in the Transfiguration is the center of his chiasm. He seems to say that Mark counted the words of his different pericopes, arranging them to put the sentence, "This is my son" as close as possible to the center.

He would have done better to look to the text itself to find its "center of gravity", the tension between the two dominant Christologies of the gospel, between the crucified son of man that has been described in other studies of Mark. Had Scott read Mark just a little less optimistically, I believe that he would have seen that the center of Mark's gospel is not so much a single sentence from a heavenly voice, but the question, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter's confession, and Jesus' explanation of what being "the Christ" means, that he must be handed over to the authorities, die at their hands, and be raised on the third day. Peter's instantaneous response to Jesus' words only serves to highlight the centrality of the conflict.

Scott helpfully shows that Mark has used chiasmic principles (what Dewey calls extended concentric parallelisms) to organize the entire work. By missing the center, though, he missed the purpose of the structure, and the powerful meaning it intends to convey. The concentric parallelisms present in the gospel do not depend quite as much on the questions posed with regard to Jesus' identity as he suggests, either, though they do seem to contribute to it. Mark is far more prone to do this theology in a narrative framework, and so the actions of the characters in the drama contribute more to our search for Jesus' correct identity than do their words. For Mark, Jesus is what he does.

It is understandable, especially in light of the apparent "trptych" of references to Jesus' "sonship" referred to by David Ulansey(4) that the transfiguration might seem to be the center of the text of Mark, but instead, it seems to be a second beginning, a second baptism, if you will, introducing the second half of the gospel, when Jesus' identity will lead inevitably to his death on the cross. Jesus' self-revelation, and his explanation of what it means to be the Messiah remain the pivotal moment in the gospel.

Recognition of Mark's organizing principle resulted from an investigation of the meaning of the *inclusio* formed by the scenes of Jesus' baptism and his death on the cross. The rending of the heavens and the Temple curtain, combined with the two confessions of Jesus' sonship seemed as though they might be one arm of a large chiasm centered on the question to which both scenes were the answer, "Who do people say that I am." Upon further examination, it seemed more and more likely, that one pericope after another had been placed to create, after Peter's confession in response and Jesus' prediction of his Passion, a mirror image of the first half of the gospel. (Or, perhaps more accurately, the first half created to

mirror the second, as the Passion Narrative would govern much of the organization.)

The diagram of this arrangement looks like this:

- A Beginning - John points to Jesus 1:4-8
- B Jesus' baptism - The splitting of the heavens, "You are my son," 1:9-11
- C Jesus is tested in the wilderness 1:12-13
- D The parable of the sower 4:1-9
- E Raising of the young girl 5:21-43
- F The death of John the Baptist 6:14-29
- G Stilling of the second storm (exorcism of the deep) 6:45-52
- H Peter's confession 8:27-30
- X Jesus' first passion prediction 8:31-33**
- H' Transfiguration 9:2-10
- G' Exorcism of possessed boy 9:14-29
- F' Appearance of the rich (young) man 10:17-22
- E' Raising of the young man in Secret Mark (followed Mark 10:34)
- D' Parable of the vineyard 12:1-11
- C' Jesus is tested in the temple 12:13-27
- B' Jesus dies, the temple veil is split "Truly this was God's son." 15:33-39
- A' The "post-runner" the young man, points to Jesus 16:1-8

Aside from the thematic relationships of the various pairs, it seemed likely that, as Mark had tied the most obvious pair (The "B" pair) together with an additional "hook" word, splitting, or εσχισθη, there might be other hook words that would reinforce the relationships of the others. Indeed, in all but two of the sets there were words held in common that did tie them together. In one case where there was not a clearly defined hook word, there was still a very interesting set of opposed-but-related adjectives. In the other, their proximity to one another and their functional similarity probably eliminate the need for hook-words. It is necessary, though, to admit that in some cases the words tying sections together are used frequently enough to limit their value to some degree in these appearances.

The pairs and their links are:

Pair A - (1:4-8, 16:1-8) This is the pair with the "interesting set of opposed adjectives." Here we find two men, both pointing toward Jesus. John, however points to one who "comes after me," (ερχεται οπισσ μου) while the young man in the tomb points to one who "goes before you" (προαγει υμας).

Pair B - (1:9-11, 15:33-39) The beginning and end of Jesus' earthly ministry are marked by the naming of Jesus as God's son, but are also linked by "splitting," (σχιζομενους, 1:10, and εσχισθη, 15:38).

Pair C - (1:12-13, 12:13-27) Jesus is "tested", in the wilderness, and again in the temple. These pericopes are linked by forms of the word περιραζω.

Pair D - (4:1-9, 12:1-11) Jesus speaks to the people in parables, obviously linked by the word παραβολη, but also is linked by the reference to καρπον.

Pair E - (5:21-43, after 10:34) Jesus raises two people from the dead. These passages are linked by the state of the people Jesus helps (απεθανεν) but also by the way that Jesus helps them, by this grasping of their hands (κρατεω). While this verb occurs elsewhere in the gospel, it appears that it plays an important role in the way that Mark contrasts the first and second halves of the gospel. This will be discussed below.

Pair F - (6:14-29, 10:17-22) The death of John the Baptizer and the appearance of the young man who serves the matching narrative function in the second half of the gospel. Interestingly, the words that link these two passages are forms of the word for grief, λυπος and περιλυπουμενους.

Pair G - (6:45-52, 9:14-29) A pair of exorcisms. In the first pericope, Jesus calms the storm, thereby overcoming the demon of the waters. In the second, Jesus heals the possessed boy. It is prayer that provides the link between them, as Jesus is seen praying just before the stilling of the storm (προσευχασθαι) and he tells the disciples that it is only with prayer (προσευχη) that demons of that sort can be cast out.

Pair H - (8:27-30, 9:2-10) Peter's claim that Jesus is the Messiah, and the Transfiguration, where his identity is restated. This pair is linked by the stern command not to reveal what has been said, but they do not share the same verb.

The pairings merit a closer examination. They will be read and discussed "from the inside out," as this is the pattern in which the pairings would become apparent to the reader-hearer. Not until the last sentence of the gospel does, the first pair makes its extremely powerful statement.

Pair H - Peter's "confession" and the Transfiguration. This pair stands immediately to either side of Jesus' explanation of the nature of his

messiahship. It serves to heighten the tension created in the first half of the pair as Jesus "rebukes" Peter for his failure to accept what he has been taught. Lest we miss the importance Mark gives to this event, it is helpful here to note that the verb for Jesus' command to silence following the Transfiguration is the one ordinarily used by Mark for Jesus' commands to human beings, *διστειλατο*. However, the order given to the disciples following Peter's confession uses the verb otherwise reserved for Jesus' commands to the demons, *επιτιμησεν*. This word also describes Peter's private rebuke of Jesus and Jesus' public response to Peter. Here Mark's use of *επιτιμησεν* is his alone. Matthew, in his version of the scene has the first command to silence in the traditional human form. Only Peter's rebuke of Jesus uses the heightened form of the word. Jesus' response is not described as a rebuke at all.

For Mark, it appears that the blurring or substitution of human and demonic agencies that appear in later pairings find their origins here.

Pair G - The two exorcisms. In this pair, Jesus demonstrates mastery both of the demons that inhabit the sea, and cause the storm, and the demon that even his disciples could not cast out. In both elements of this pair, Jesus encounters the disciples, struggling in vain. In the one case, they are unable to cast out the demon from the boy, in the first, they struggle to row against the wind. In both cases, Jesus is seen at prayer just beforehand, overlooking the scene on the sea, or on the mount of the Transfiguration. Mark reinforces the importance of this connection by Jesus' comment to the others at the end of the pericope, "This kind can only come out through prayer." (9:29) Though it is difficult to say with certainty if this was Mark's intent, the two pericopes are tied together even more clearly when we realize that the verb translated "to row" (*ελαυνειν*) is also a word that can be translated "to drive." (What the disciples were unable to do to the boat or the demon.) In addition, this verb is sometime used to describe what a supernatural being does to a person possessed, one who is "driven." This pair brings to a close Jesus' confrontations with supernatural enemies. The blending of the two present in the middle-most pair finds its close here, as human beings step forward to take up the task of opposing Jesus.

Pair F - The death of John the Baptizer and the appearance of the young man. Were their presences at the beginning and end of the gospel not enough to tie them together as matching characters, the fact that the death of one is mirrored by the reader's first encounter with the other should suffice. The character of the young man (*νεανισκος*) emerges, especially

in light of Morton Smith's discovery of the suppressed portions of what is often called "Secret Mark", as the ideal narrative counterbalance to John. Jesus' raising him from the dead has suggested similarities to the raising of Lazarus in John. However, his narrative function, and the love shared by Jesus and the young man make him an even more attractive match for the "disciple whom Jesus loved." Both are beloved of Jesus, and both serve in the narrative as "ideal" followers.

Here, interestingly, the ideal disciple's first reaction to Jesus is rejection. And his rejection causes him grief. It is this grief that provided Mark with a verbal hook to the earlier story of Herod's execution of John the Baptist. Herod, too, is grieved as he decides against John, choosing the value of his oaths and his guests' favor over John's life. The young man chooses his wealth, and the initial reward is the same, grief (λυπος, περιλυπουμενους).

Pair E - Jesus raises two young people, a twelve-year-old girl and the young man (in Secret Mark). Linked by the states of the two people whom Jesus aids (death or apparent death) the two stories have an immediate and obvious relationship. As Mark has foreshadowed the crucifixion in the center of his chiasm in 2:1-3:6 (the absence of the bridegroom) so he has begun to lead the reader/hearer into considerations of resurrection in the first half of this pair. The leading becomes more forceful when, in the second half of the pairing, we hear phrases from we will hear again at the empty tomb, most especially the rolling away of the stone.

But it is not only resurrection that links the two pericopes. They are also linked by Mark's use of the verb κρατεω. Granted, this verb occurs with some frequency in Mark, but it occurs in a way that contributes to the tension between the first and second halves of the gospel.

In the first half, Mark generally uses this verb to describe what Jesus does for those he assists (1:31, 5:41, 9:27). In the second half of the gospel, it is used to refer to what Jesus' opponents want to do, or actually do to Jesus, laying hands on him. The occurrence of the verb in the passage from Secret Mark signals an end to the positive sense of "grasping", just as Jesus' commands to silence were concluded with the exorcism in chapter nine. (It also describes what Jesus' family wanted to do in the in chapter 3 and what Herod's men did to John the Baptist, 6:17). What is most interesting about these passages is that all but one of those cases where Jesus grasps someone to heal them in Mark, only Mark has this usage. (The exception being the occurrence in 5:41.) In the other cases, where

Jesus' opponents wish to lay hands on him, Matthew shares the verb (12:12, 14:1, 14:44, 14:46, 14:49 and also the case of John the Baptist, 6:17). It seems that perhaps Mark chose to reshape the use of κρατεω found already in the passion narrative and transforms it to heighten the contrast between Jesus and his opponents.

The intent becomes even clearer when Mark alone uses κρατεω to contrast the way that the "Pharisees and the Jews" "hold" to the traditions of their elders (7:3, 4, 8), while the disciples of Jesus "keep to themselves" the word of Jesus identity, revealed on the mount (9:10). What teachings the reader holds will determine whether the reader is touched and healed by Jesus, or will attempt to lay hands on him.

Pair D - Two central parables. Though the "Parable of the Sower" is often treated as the beginning of the "parables chapter" (ch. 4) it is set off from them by Jesus' conversation with the disciples and his explanation of it. It does appear to set the scene for another collection of parables, but it's strong links to the parable of the vineyard in chapter 12 suggest that it should be viewed first in conjunction with its later partner. Both parables concern themselves with the return of fruit from the earth. In the sower's parable, though, the opponents to the successful harvest are non-human while in the second, the obstacles to the return of fruit to the owner are the human stewards of the vineyard. This is in keeping with the way in which opposition to Jesus shifts from the demonic/natural world in the first half of the gospel, to human opposition in the second (as was suggested by the pairing of the exorcisms of the sea and the boy, above). By linking these two parables this way, Mark has managed to not only contrast good soil and poor, but soils which receive the word, responding in a variety of ways, with those who are supposed to be the caretakers.

Pair C - Jesus is tested, in the wilderness and in the Temple Mark makes his point about the substitution of human opponents to Jesus for supernatural ones most startlingly in this pairing of pericopes. Though the reference to the testing in chapter one is short, his opponent is Satan. This kind of opposition is characteristic of the first portion of the gospel. It ends when it is transferred to human beings, first in the person of Peter, whom Jesus equates with Satan in his opposition to Jesus self-disclosure. From that point on, it is human beings whom Jesus must confront. In the second half of this pair, it is the Pharisees and Herodians who take Satan's place and Jesus' "testers."

Pair B - Jesus' baptism and his death The way that these two moments in the gospel are linked has been demonstrated before.<sup>(5)</sup> The tearing of the heavens and the naming of Jesus as God's son are clear. What has not previously been noticed is that these do not form the termini of an "inclusio" for the entire gospel. That is left to the last pairing. What is worthy of note, however, is that the "divine/human" substitution pattern continues to hold true. In the first member of the pair, it is a divine voice that names Jesus, the heavens that are split. In the second, a human voice names Jesus as the human representation of the heavens is split.

Pair A - John and the Young Man point to Jesus. Here is the crux of the matter, the opposition which turns the entire gospel on the axis of Jesus' prediction of his passion. John the Baptist and the young man, now found in his baptismal sundon in the tomb, proclaim the Messiah. However, John points to one who "comes after him" (ερχεται οπισσ μου) and the young man points to the risen Jesus who "goes before you"(προαγει υμας).

Mark clearly intends to represent the two different images of Jesus, and the wildly different responses they will arouse in the people who hear them. Those who hold to the traditions of their elders become Jesus mortal opponents. The authorities, the Pharisees and the Herodians, take Satan's place as Jesus opposition. The keepers of the vineyard, even if the people bear fruit, will kill the son rather than give the owner of the vineyard his due.

John, even as the forerunner, looks back to the one who comes after, not forward. And the one he looks back to, the one he announces draws "all of the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." (1:5) He speaks of the Messiah who is "mighty," and this Messiah draws many people. John is replaced in the story by a young man (νεανισκος) who, after grieving his wrong decision, returns and becomes an exemplary disciple. He is baptized (also in Secret Mark) and remains to the last in the garden, fleeing only when the crowd tries to lay hands on him as well. (The last occurrence of κρατεω.) He is also present to welcome the women to the tomb and point the way to the risen Christ. But he points to the true Christ, the crucified Messiah who has risen from the dead, and the response is as much the opposite as it can be to that which John received." And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

This is the Christ Mark proclaims, the one that no one wants, the one rejected by the people once his identity becomes known. The entire gospel turns on the axis of the question of Jesus' identity, and whether or



not the reader/hearer will choose the triumphalist Messiah of John or the crucified Messiah, who is Jesus. His chiasmic structure serves to highlight the contrast between the two, and to differentiate between two very different proclamations of the Christ.

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1. Dewey, Joanna, "Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6" Doctoral dissertation for the Graduate Theological Union, July, 1977. pp. 72-98.

2. M. Philip Scott, "Chiastic Structure: A Key to the Interpretation of Mark's Gospel", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 1985, vol. 15, pp. 17-26

3. *Ibid.*, p. 17

4. Ulansey, David, "The Transfiguration, Cosmic Symbolism, and the Transformation of Consciousness in the Gospel of Mark," a paper presented to the Society of Biblical Literature, 1966.

5. David Ulansey's article being a good recent example, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110:1 (Spring 1991) pp. 123-25