

What is a Markan Sandwich?

Mark sometimes starts off with one **partial** story or event (A¹), inserts another **complete** event (B) and then finally **concludes** the original story (A²) in an A¹-B-A² format. The central characters in each story never seem to cross (e.g. Jairus and the bleeding woman), the initial frame is left unresolved until the end, and the location seems to change.¹ Rather than exuding chronological exactness, many scholars think these sandwiches or intercalations are a Markan literary device that offer us clues to a proper interpretation of the gospel. It is also possible many of these features are meant simply to help listeners in an oral culture. Up to 20 sandwiches have been proposed in the gospel of Mark by various scholars. The nine below are the most commonly agreed upon with the six in bold being widely accepted as examples of this phenomenon: Mark (**3:20-35**, 4:1-20, **5:21-43**, **6:7-32**, **11:12-25**, **14:1-11**, 14:17-31, **14:53-72**, 15:40-16:8). It is hard to dispute this is a common literary device employed by the evangelist.²

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¹ Tom Shepherd (1995). The Narrative Function of Markan Intercalation. *New Testament Studies*, 41, pp 522-540

² For a listing of other literary devices commonly used in Mark, see Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*. Matthew and Luke sometimes retain the Markan sandwich while at others rearranging the material.

[A] A Listing of Markan Sandwiches: 3:20-35, 4:1-20, 5:21-43, 6:7-32, 11:12-25, 14:1-11, 14:17-31, 14:53-72, 15:40-16:8.
Of the 20 proposed, nine are presented below. The first 6 are the most widely agreed upon.

[01] Jesus's Family and Beelzebub: Mark 3:30-35

A¹: Jesus's family sets out to stop him
B: Jesus is accused of having Beelzebub.
A²: Jesus reveals his true family.

[02] Jairus and the Bleeding Woman: Mark 5:21-43.

A¹: Jairus pleads with Jesus to heal his daughter.
B: The bleeding woman touches Jesus and is healed by faith.
A²: Jairus's daughter is healed.

[03] Sending out the Twelve and John the Baptist: Mark 6:7-32.

A¹: The twelve are sent out
B: John the Baptist is beheaded
A²: The twelve return (vs 31)

[04] Cursing of the Fig Tree and Cleansing of the Temple: Mark 11:12-25.

A¹: Jesus curses the fig tree.
B: Jesus cleanses the temple.
A²: The fig tree withers.

[05] The plot to kill Jesus and his anointing: Mark 14:1-11

A¹: The religious leaders plot to kill Jesus.
B: Jesus is anointed.
A²: Judas agrees to betray him.

[06] Peter's Denial and Jesus's Trial: Mark 14:53-72.

A¹: Peter enters the courtyard.
B: The trial of Jesus.
A²: Peter denies Jesus.

[07] Parable of the Sower and Purpose of Parables: Mark 4:1-20

A¹: Jesus tells the parable of the sower.
B: Jesus tells us the purpose of parables.
A²: The parable of the sower is explained.

[08] Jesus's predicts failures of his followers and the last supper: Mark 14:17-31

A¹: Jesus predicts his betrayal
B: The last supper
A²: Jesus predicts Peter's denial.

[09] The Women and Joseph of Arimathea Mark 15:40-16:8

A¹: The women watch
B: Joseph buries Jesus
A²: The women and the tomb.

[B] A Deeper Look at Their Form

The central characters never seem to cross. Tom Shepherd writes: “In the intercalation of Mark 3 we never meet Jesus' relatives during the narration of the Beelzeboul controversy with the scribes, nor do the scribes appear in the outer story of the intercalation. The same is true of Jairus and his daughter, on the one hand, and the woman with the haemorrhage, on the other hand, in Mark 5. In Mark 6 the disciples are not present in the dramatic story of John's beheading, and the Baptist does not appear in the story of the disciples' mission. In Mark 11 the fig tree is never mentioned in the inner story and the religious leaders and the temple do not find a place in the outer story. In the first intercalation in Mark 14 Judas the betrayer is never referred to in the inner story and the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus remains in the inner story. Finally, Peter is in the outer story at the end of chapter 14 and Jesus, as an active character, is only within the inner story.”

The framing story is left wide open when the inner story starts. Shepherd writes: “In Mark 3 Jesus' relatives 'go out' to seize him. The outcome of their mission is left suspended during the inner story and is only resolved upon reentry to the outer story. In Mark 5 Jesus begins a journey to save Jairus' daughter, but the outcome is left open across the inner story. In Mark 6, knowledge of the outcome of the disciples' mission is unfilled until reentry into the outer story. In Mark 11 the outcome for the fig tree is untold until reentry into the outer story.”

The Location tends to change with the inner story. Shepherd writes : “In storytelling focalization and defocalization refer to the manner in which story participants are brought together spatially and temporally and then dispersed at the end.” While this sounds complicated it means the location in the first half of the framing story is different from the location of the inner story. For example, Jesus is by the lake when he meets Jairus but *en route* to his house when the incident with the bleeding woman happens.

Bas M.F. van Iersel writes: “One of the characteristics of Mark is that two episodes are sometimes connected to form what used to be called a 'sandwich construction'. It means that one episode is embedded into another, like the filling between two slices of bread.”

John Dominic Crossan writes: “the purpose of the intercalation is not mere literary show; it presumes that those two events—call them the “framing event” and the “insert event”—are mutually interactive, that they interpret one another to emphasize Mark's theological intention”³

³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* pg. 106.

[C] Difficulties Created by the Sandwiches

A well-known sandwich occurs with the story of the healing of Jairus's daughter acting as bookends for the hemorrhaging women. Was Mark in this instance simply relaying chronologically correct information about the ministry of Jesus? Jesus healed the woman with the hemorrhage *en route* to Jairus's home? If the connection of the Gospel of Mark to Peter is accepted, these types of details would be expected! However, in order to support this interpretation we would be required to look at every potential Markan sandwich and see how Matthew and Luke record the same incidents in their own Gospels. Sometimes they retain the sandwich and sometimes they do not. Sometimes the evangelists follow Mark's order and sometimes they do not. Two types of problems emerge from the sandwiches. 1) The gospels disagree with one another on certain details and 2) internal chronological details arise.

In the example above, when we read Matthew's version, the little girl is already dead—so dead that flutists have already been hired! Robert Gundry writes, "By contrast, Matthew adds flutists and a crowd because in his version the girl has been dead from the start and plenty of time has been elapsed for flutists to be hired and a crowd to gather."⁴ The mourning arrangements have already been made in Matthew. This discrepancy is hard to reconcile.

Mark 5:23	Matthew 9:18	Luke 8:42
"My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."	⁸ "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."	⁴² for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying.

Two Separate Stories

Gundry cautions us: "We have no right to deny the possibility that the one happened during the course of the other. It is the stuff of life that events are often intertwined. We can speak confidently about a Marcan technique of sandwiching - i.e. of his artificially moving one story into the middle of another - only if special reasons incline us to think so. Those reasons will have to arise out of textual details. Unless they do, we may assume traditional or historical interconnection. Under that assumption it is still possible to think that Mark wants his readers to see an anticipation of Jesus' delivering Jairus's daughter from death in his delivering the woman from her malady, or that Mark interprets the woman's deliverance as a deliverance

⁴ Robert Gundry, *Mark A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, pg. 283. See also Josephus in *Jewish War*, 3.9.5 § 437

from death similar to the deliverance of Jairus's daughter. At the very least, the interruption of the story concerning the daughter by the story concerning the woman heightens tension with respect to the daughter's fate: for the daughter is at the point of death.”⁵

We do have good reasons for viewing this as a sandwich, however. In all probability, these two stories do not originally belong together but Mark narrated them this way. Readers might think we have three Gospel accounts and therefore, three independent witnesses to these stories being linked together in history. But scholarship has determined Matthew and Luke were probably not written by their namesakes and were literarily dependent on the text of Mark for much of their information so this argument cannot be sustained. There is some evidence Mark brought two stories together: The NJBC (pg 607 claims “the style in which they are told points to a separate origin. The story of Jairus’s daughter (5:21-24, 35-43) is told in short sentences , with few ptc. And in the so-called historical pres. Tense; the story of the woman with the flow of blood (5:25-34) is narrated in longer sentences using many ptc. And in the aor. and impr. tenses.” Gundry thinks the change to past tense in the woman’s story may serve to slow it down and heighten suspense exactly at the moment the author wants it to move faster for the sake of the little girl (ibid, pg 288). While this is certainly possible, the mere presence of a sandwich and the supernatural disappearance of the crowd when Jesus goes to Jairus’ house both suggest Mark’s redactional hand which some think is also betrayed when Jesus knows the woman specifically touched *his robe*. Jesus is admonished by his disciples for asking who touched him (Mark 5:31) as an entire crowd surrounded and pressed on him. The text says he knew power had gone out from him in that bustling crowd, He did not know who touched him yet somehow he specifically knew it was through the touching of his robe and not his body that the person was healed. That curious detail does suggest Mark is most certainly editing two traditions he inherited about Jesus together

Fig Tree Chronology

The incident with the fig tree also has conflicting details in Matthew and Mark. Mark has Jesus curse the fig tree, then the temple “cleansing” occurs and the next day Peter sees the fig tree and says “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered” (see Mark 11:12-22). Matthew tells us plainly that the fig tree withered immediately (Matt 21:18-22) and the disciples *apparently* witnessed it. Matthew also puts the temple cleansing before the incident with the fig tree which comes *completely* after it in his Gospel. Mark sandwiches the cleansing into the fig tree story. We should also note the gospel of John puts the “cleansing” of the temple towards the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Unless we want to suggest multiple “cleansings” and a curious rash of withered fig trees sprouting up around Jerusalem whenever

⁵ Robert Gundry, Commentary on Mark.

Jesus showed up, its best to consider parts of the gospels as non-chronological and recognize the literary devices of each evangelist and their tendency to tweak, expand and omit material in telling their own version of the story. Harmonizing minor conflicting details in some of these narratives may then simply miss the point. The fig tree scene itself might be why Jesus, after triumphantly entering Jerusalem and going to the temple in Mark, just looks around and anti-climactically withdraws. In Matthew and Luke—both dependent on Mark-- he “cleanses” the Temple immediately. In their mind this is how a Messiah proper should have acted or maybe that is actually how he did act! But in Mark the sandwich does not allow this. While it is possible to consider parts of the Gospels as relying precise, chronological details an eyewitness would know, and it is possible some of the sandwiched material happened that way, we certainly cannot maintain *all* of the gospels do this *all* of the time. Direct comparison of them in a rules this out.

Internal Problems

In Mark 4 there are odd changes of scene. Jesus is on a boat, alone with his disciples explaining something and then back on the boat teaching as if nothing happened. Joanna Dewey writes, “The first problem, that of the internal audience, is inescapable and insoluble. The narrative opens with Jesus in a boat on the lake, teaching the crowd on the shore (4:1-2). Then, in v. 10, a change of scene is depicted, and Jesus is along with the twelve and those with them. In vv.33-34, the conclusion of the discourses, the narrative assumes that Jesus has been continuing all along to address the crowd. And in vv. 35-36, Jesus is depicted still sitting in the boat. Nowhere in the narrative is the reader informed how Jesus could be alone with his disciples yet remain seated in the boat addressing the multitude.”⁶

A similar chronological problem occurs in Mark 1:45 and 2:1. At the end of chapter one we are told: “Jesus could no longer go into a town openly but stayed out in the country, and people came to him from every quarter.” What does Jesus immediately do in the narrative? In 2:1 he goes into a place Mark just said he could not! “When he returned to Capernaum after some days . . .”. Mark 3:7 makes much more sense coming after 1:45: “Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him.” Mark 2:1-3:6 is a self-contained unit with a strong chiasmic-like structure. It evinces knowledge of careful literary design and appears to intrude upon the more seamless narrative continuity between verse 1:45 and 3:7.

⁶ Joanna Dewey, Markan Public Debate, p 147

[D] What do we make of the errors?

In some cases the charge of an error assumes (incorrectly) these texts were concerned with relaying chronological information. The details most certainly contradict at a few points but ancient authors were not as concerned with such exactness or chronological narration. The mere fact of the abrupt scene change in Mark 4 from boat to alone and back to the boat suggests the author did not. Joanna Dewey writes, “It is not clear, however, that the shift in internal audience and setting was a real problem for first century readers. The discrepancy remains as obvious in Matthew (Mt 13:1-2, 10, 34, 36), and is softened but not obviated in Luke (Lk 8:4, 9, 19).” We also saw similar shifts in Mark and Luke’s healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12, Lk 5:17-26). That John could put the temple “cleansing” early in Jesus’s ministry and use it as a vehicle for Christology also points this way. Ancient authors were not as fixated on the exact order of events as modern readers. Non-chronological narration was an acceptable literary convention of the time. A lack of chronological exactitude is only an error if that is what the author was striving for. If material is intentionally embedded within other material, it becomes obvious that ancient authors were just that, *ancient* authors.

Mark takes inherited traditions about Jesus and purposefully employs literary devices for reasons to be discussed more fully below. The author is not a modern historian concerned with whether the fig tree literally withered immediately after Jesus cursed it or whether or not that occurred before or after the incident in the temple. He is an adaptive story teller in a society driven by narrative and he is not interested in teaching precise chronology. In this case, Mark contrasts one story about Jesus with another for emphasis and to make deeper theological points about proper Christian discipleship. The truth of Mark’s narrative thus rises or falls based upon what he is teaching us about discipleship. Citing this as an error is pedantic and akin to chastising a poet for saying something like “the rocks will jump.” We don’t see this as an error in a poetic work because we understand the genre of a poem allows for such things and is not limited to precise scientific statements about reality. Likewise, small narrative developments and the adaptation of stories was standard fare when Mark wrote. Thus, Mark and Matthew conflict on the timing of the withered fig tree because the former has employed a literary device and sandwiched the cleansing of the Temple in between its lack of fruit and withering. His narrative *requires* time for the tree to wither. Matthew does not retain Mark’s sandwich here but otherwise, both are relaying the same tradition of Jesus cursing a fig tree.⁷ The presence of a literary feature in Mark but not Matthew requires a slight change in timing between them. Mark embeds the temple cleansing into the fig tree cursing *on purpose*. The stories are naturally related. The fig tree represents the temple leaders in both narratives. Jesus wasn’t simply exasperated by a tree with no figs on it was he? Mark sandwiches the temple

⁷ Luke only has a parable involving fig trees. Whether you think the scene is historical or created by Mark, either way, calling the timing difference between Matthew and Mark an error seems to miss the literary mark.

cleansing and fig tree accounts together because they are teaching the same thing. The temple is not bearing fruit because of the corruption and blindness of the Jewish leaders and will wither and be destroyed just as the fig tree will. Did the fig tree wither immediately or the next day is beside the point.

The appeal to non-chronological narration does not resolve all questions in my mind, however. The fig tree narrative discrepancies are fully explicable by the presence of the sandwich but another Markan intercalation is not so easily harmonized. We can still ask if the girl was dead (Matthew) or still alive when Jairus met Jesus (Mark and Luke). Matthew retains the gist of the Markan version but changes some of the details and shortens the account. It is possible Matthew's version is historically correct though we cannot know this for sure. Matthew does have a tendency to shorten Mark's miracle stories. Craig Blomberg wrote:

“As consistently throughout his Gospel (and esp. with miracle stories), Matthew abbreviates Mark, this time to such an extent that he seems to contradict the parallel accounts (Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40–56). Instead of coming to plead with Jesus while his daughter is still alive, Jairus apparently arrives only after her death. Yet to call this a contradiction is anachronistically to impose on an ancient text modern standards of precision in story telling. What is more, in a world without modern medical monitors to establish the precise moment of expiry, there is not nearly so much difference between Matthew's *arti eteleutēsen* in v. 18 (which could fairly be translated “just came to the point of death”; cf. Heb 11:22) and *eschatos echei* in Mark 5:23 (which could also be rendered “is dying”). What is important is not the precise moment of death but Jairus's astonishing faith.”⁸

The daughter dies quickly in the story either way but Matthew having flutists already being hired is a complication for Blomberg and those who try to bizarrely claim Matthew records a second statement to Jesus by Jairus while Mark and Luke record an earlier one. The latter harmonization reeks of desperation. Either Mark altered the story for dramatic flair (an Luke followed him) or Matthew corrected it by truncating it and changing some details in the process. We must appreciate the storytelling liberties authors of ancient bios were able to take. If these differences and *errors* are the extent of Christian creativity, or make up the brunt of it, we are in excellent shape and in no position to doubt the historicity of the basic form of these stories on this basis. One might compare these divergences in the gospels with the differences in how Josephus—an elite writer with well-educated audiences in mind, himself retells the same events in divergent ways!

⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 160.

Papias's comments on Mark

Mark was never thought to be written in order in the first place. Our earliest reference to it comes from Papias ca. 110 CE as preserved in the writings of Eusebius.

The Elder also said this, "Mark, being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he remembered he wrote accurately, but not however in the order that these things were spoken or done by our Lord. For he neither heard the Lord, nor followed him, but afterwards, as I said, he was with Peter, who did not make a complete [or ordered] account of the Lord's *logia*, but constructed his teachings according to *chreiai* [concise self-contained teachings]. So Mark did nothing wrong in writing down single matters as he remembered them, for he gave special attention to one thing, of not passing by anything he heard, and not falsifying anything in these matters."

This tradition is earlier still since it comes from John the elder. Per Papias, Mark is based on the imperfect remembering of the teachings of Peter, but it was not written in the order in which things were spoken or done. To be honest, this fits a document with intercalations and literary features quite well. The entire gospel might itself have a chiasmic flavor and 2:1-3:6 is definitely a self-contained literary unit. Whether or not this attribution is accurate is an open question, but it tells us that Mark was not thought to be as complete as some other gospels and the author was responsible for its compositional design.

Edwards concludes: "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 craftsmanship converge in his sandwich technique."

To conclude this section, we must always realize that the gospels are ancient works written using ancient standards, expectations and literary conventions. What is acceptable to us *today* is not the same as to what was acceptable *then*. Some of these discrepancies are easily resolved by this realization but some conflicting details between the stories certainly remain.

[E] Should we eat a Markan sandwich? Their Purpose.

If we see the text as inspired and want to understand the full nuance of Mark's presentation of Jesus then we must come to grips with his literary devices. At the same time, we should not underestimate our Western sensibilities and tendency to overanalyze literary nuances in the gospels. Yarboro writes:

“Recent studies of orality have placed the whole question of intercalation in a new light. In light of such studies, Paul J. Achtemeier argued that “[t]he Markan technique of intercalating stories is a way of allowing one story to function as an inclusion for a second, thus aiding the listener in determining when both stories have concluded.”¹⁸ In this regard, he cited Werner Kelber to the effect that “such intercalation is more likely to belong to the oral nature of the material than to anything like manipulation of the written text in the form of ‘interpolations.’”¹⁹ Since Mark was written to be read aloud by a single reader to a gathered group, the purpose of aiding the listener is likely to be the intention of the author. Modern literary critics should then be cautious about exaggerating the degree to which the intercalated stories are intended to interpret one another. The discernment of complex literary designs may indeed be illuminating of the Markan text, but they probably should not be attributed to the author’s intention. “

An *inclusio* is a unit of thought demarcated by a similar formula at the beginning and end of the material. All four Gospels themselves seem to have an *inclusio* or sorts: in Mark Jesus is called the Son of God at the beginning and end (1:1, 15:39); in Matthew Jesus is named Emmanuel or “God with us” close to the beginning and at the end He says “I am with you always” (Matt 1:22, 28:20); in the Lukan prologue we learn the author is writing an orderly account about all the things that have been *fulfilled* among them and right before the ascension Jesus the word is mentioned again by Jesus along with the things he *fulfilled* (Luke 1:1, 24:44-48); in John it is declared early and late at the original ending of the Gospel that belief in Jesus results in life in his name as children of God (1:12, 20:30-31). Starting and ending with the same concept is good storytelling. Anyone knows that a speech can be wrapped up effectively by appealing to its beginning. This happens in the Gospels as a whole and can occur for smaller units of material. We must realize that most Christians early on could not read and did not own any individual works of the Bible. Many would only have heard the Gospel of Mark as it was read to them. Reading aloud itself was very difficult in antiquity. In the texts itself the words were sometimes abbreviated and they ran into one another. Spaces, paragraphs, punctuation and any type of organization was completely lacking. Try reading the text below:

againheenteredthesynagogueandamanwastherewhohadawitheredhandtheywere

watching him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath so that they might accuse him and he said to the man who had the withered hand come forward then he said to them is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath to save life or to kill but they were silent he looked around at them with anger he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man stretch out your hand he stretched it out and his hand was restored the pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the herodians against him how to destroy him

It is a bit jarring at first and helps to illustrate how structure in such an oral environment could be provided by things like repetition or parallelism. Subtle indications of where one story begins and ends are needed. With all this in mind we must respect the caution provided here by Yarboro. Some scholars think discrepancies within a story mean Mark put two literary sources together. Regarding the potential Markan sandwich in 4:1-20, Achtemeier questions this:

“If the need to provide oral/aural clues to the one who listens to the document. Of course the NT documents were written down, but they were written, and would be read, as we have seen, in a way far different from that to which we are accustomed, and much closer to an oral than to a print environment. It may well be the case that the inconsistencies one can find, say, in the Gospel of Mark are more likely to be due to the orality of that document, and hence the need to provide oral clues for its understanding, than to its author's combination of various written sources.”⁹

He provides one example in a footnote of a scene we discussed above:

“One example: Jesus and the boat in Mark 4; he gets in it (v. 2); the boat is ignored (v. 10); he is assumed still to be in it (v.35). In this case, v. 35 may well be intended to form the inclusion with v. 2 to indicate the conclusion of Jesus' speech on parables, a need that overrides a need for narrative consistency.”

Dewey writes: “Robert Stein is conservative in his estimate of the usefulness of the intercalations for determining Mark's theological concerns. For if “both incidents took place at the same time or were located in the same place,” or if they deal with a similar theme, the intertwining may be irrelevant for Markan thought. Only if it can be demonstrated that one pericope helps to interpret the other are sandwiches of theological interest. Stein fails to see (or agree) that the device of intercalating episodes by definition brings them into some sort of

⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity*, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 109, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 3-27

literary relationship with each other. It is the job of the rhetorical critic to determine in each instance what the function of the intercalation is—to indicate a passage of time, to retard the action in order to heighten dramatic tension, for emphasis, contrast—and then to see how that helps to understand the meaning (theology) of the text.”

Scholars thus posit different explanations for the sandwiches. Edwards thinks the inner story is the key to understanding the entire sandwich:

“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.”¹⁰

Donahue argued this as well but he went further and tried to find a single theological pattern in all the sandwiches regarding discipleship and the suffering of Jesus. “Mark uses the technique of intercalation to underscore two major themes of his gospel, the way of the suffering of Jesus, and the necessity of discipleship to follow Jesus in this way.” This is certainly true of some of the sandwiches but not all. There is no “one size fits all” key that unlocks all of the intercalations and we must recognize as Dewey wrote “intercalations may function differently from each other.” Some scholars maintain the point is to draw a parallel or simply provide a contrast.

It should be noted that a careful study of Mark 2:1-3:6 reveals a chiasmic-like structure and well composed literary unit that interrupts the flow of the narrative. Mark seems to love irony, has a tendency to shock his readers and wrote in such a way that many scholars have discussed what is termed “the messianic secret.” Not to mention the ink spent discussing how the gospel ends (uncomfortably for some) with the women running away scared and in silence. I do believe the sandwich is a way of emphasizing certain teachings and Mark is capable of literary flair. There is nothing inconceivable about Mark using sandwiches to push a theological agenda but must the inner material be the interpretive key to the frame?

Yarboro offered us caution against this thesis up above and I think Edwards, despite excellent exegesis, goes a bit too far in his conclusion. I believe that the inner story and flanking material are often *mutually interpretive*. The placing of the sandwich does add and/or intensify meaning via contrasts in most instances. I am skeptical of the central story being some sort of Rosetta stone we can use to unlock the secrets of the entire narrative. In some cases the frame and inserted story retain their basic meanings when separated (e.g. Jesus’s trial and Peter’s denial).

¹⁰ James R. Edwards, MARKAN SANDWICHES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERPOLATIONS IN MARKAN NARRATIVES, *Novum Testamentum* XXXI, 3 (1989) 193-216

These items are not just pure literary show. They are part of the storytelling process and some may predate the writing of Mark's gospel. Most Christians could not read and did not own written Gospels. They would only hear the text read aloud. Such links in the stories might make them easier to remember and understand. Readers would be helped in knowing when two particular stories end. These sorts of literary devices compel us to dig and dive deeper into the Bible in order to understand the message God intended Mark to provide to us and his first listeners. We will look at some examples below. Studying our Sacred Scripture for the right reasons, is never a bad thing and hopefully helps bring us closer to God. I find the themes of faith, discipleship and God's faithfulness in many of Mark's sandwiches to resonate with me deeply on a spiritual level.

[F] Exegetical Analysis of Markan Sandwiches: Faith, Discipleship and Covenant.

If we look at the sandwiches in Mark we quickly see the issue of proper discipleship is being taught in many of the examples. Discipleship requires proper faith and action but in the end God's love and grace sustains it all.

[01] Jairus and the Bleeding Woman: Mark 5:21-43.

A¹: Jairus pleads with Jesus to heal his daughter.

B: The bleeding woman touches Jesus and is healed by faith.

A²: Jairus's daughter is healed.

The healing of Jairus's daughter serves as the bookends for the healing of the bleeding woman. Mark is a Gospel of contrasts and irony. First the similarities: the age of the girl (12) and the suffering period of the woman (12 years) may be intended at literary parallels. The number is not only symbolic of the twelve apostles but represents the twelve tribes of Israel which the number of apostles was meant to evoke in the first place. In both cases Jesus is their only hope and it is the daughter of Jairus who needs to be healed and also a woman Jesus calls "daughter." But that is where the similarities stop and the differences begin. Jairus has a name and is male, the unnamed woman is female and "Her only identification is her shame, a menstrual hemorrhage."¹¹ He is wealthy while her resources are spent. He gets a face-to-face meeting with Jesus while she must approach through a crowd from behind. He is the leader of a synagogue and commands respect and presumably maintains high standards of ritual purity. She is not any of those things. These two individuals are polar opposites and Mark did not put them together by chance. We will see similar contrasts when we look at other sandwiches.

¹¹ Edwards, *ibid*, pg 204.

This unnamed woman worked harder and took greater initiative, fought through a crowd and had so much faith she knew that all she needed to do was touch the robe of Jesus who explicitly tells her that her faith has healed her. This miracle story stands in opposition to what is normally observed. The woman is not healed by any specific action of Jesus unlike the daughter of Jairus and so many others. It was not just touching his robe that healed the woman. Jesus tells her that it is her faith that heals her and his name for her is significant: "**Daughter**, your faith has healed you; go in peace." He calls this spent and exhausted woman, "Daughter." What a wonderful word. You can feel the compassion and love Jesus had for her. She may be at the end of her means and insignificant in the world's eyes, but she is a daughter to Jesus just as the little girl is a daughter to Jairus.

The story takes a bad turn after the woman is healed. People come to the reverent Jairus who fell on his knees before Jesus and tell him to stop bothering the teacher as his daughter is dead now. The story presumes it is natural so suppose a miracle worker could heal a sick little girl but their power would not be able to transcend death itself. Markan readers 40 years after the death of Jesus know this type of attitude represents a lack of faith in Jesus who must comfort the understandably distraught Jairus by telling him: "Do not be afraid; only believe." Yarboro writes, "The exhortation "Do not fear" is both an expression of consolation and a call for courage. The encouragement "just trust" as a present imperative, calls for continuing confidence in Jesus' ability to heal, in spite of the fact that death has intervened."¹²

Furthermore, the men at the house laugh at something Jesus says. While we can sympathize with the horror of distraught individuals at the loss of a child, nothing should ever cause us to doubt the ability of Jesus. As the story illustrates, Jesus doesn't even have to be consciously involved in a miracle. So powerful is he that someone can merely touch his robe with faith and be healed. Imagine what He can do if He is actually trying! The woman serves as a lesson for Jairus, the members of his household and Markan readers. Social status, power and worldly reputation is completely irrelevant. No matter who you are, rich or poor, respected or ostracized, pure or impure, true faith in Jesus is what matters.

It is our job, no matter how bad things get, to emulate the faith of the bleeding woman. Jairus had everything *worldly* to his advantage in his encounter with Jesus but it didn't constitute any actual *faith* advantage. Christians know that storing your treasures up in heaven is the only way and that role reversals (the first shall be last) are prominent in Jesus's teachings. Jairus needed

¹² Hermeneia Commentary on Mark pg 284-285

to keep his faith, to have the same type of faith the woman did. He is not a villain in the story but serves as a foil for the woman whose faith is the ideal we must all strive for.

Edwards writes, "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."¹³ The men with Jairus show little faith as do those in his home who mock Jesus for stating the girl is just sleeping. Edwards writes, "The insertion of the woman with the hemorrhage into the Jairus story is thus not an editorial stratagem 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."¹⁴

Social status doesn't matter. True or unbridled faith in Jesus is required for discipleship.

[02] Sending out the Twelve and John the Baptist: Mark 6:7-32.

A¹: The twelve are sent out

B: John the Baptist is beheaded

A²: The twelve return (vs 31)

Mark 6:7-13 features Jesus sending out the apostles in groups of two with the authority to cast out demons and heal the sick. After giving them a list of requirements this is precisely what they go out and do while preaching repentance. It is 17 verses later (Mark 6:30) that we read: "The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." What happens in Mark 6:14-29? We are told a story about the beheading of John the Baptist. Though the scenes are connected in how they compare and contrast Jesus and John and how Herod heard of the disciple's activity, Mark could have easily concluded the first story and jumped into the second. That the conclusion to the sending of the comes later certainly makes this intentional.

Why is this scene sandwiched in between the sending of the twelve and their return? The first story teach that disciples have to be all in for the kingdom of God to the point of not worrying about what they will wear, eat, where they will sleep or even their own life (look at the lilies of the field)! Put the kingdom first and trust in God for literally everything. That is why "He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in

¹³ Edwards, *ibid*, pg 204

¹⁴ Edwards, *ibid*, pg

their belts, but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics." Bock writes: "Beggars and itinerant philosophers who sought donations often used a traveler's bag to collect money (Diogenes Laertius 6.13, 22). Jesus forbade its use on this trip. They could take sandals, but they were to wear only one tunic. The second tunic often served as a bedroll for the poor. They were to trust that God would care for them through the hospitable reception of others."

The inner story has several potential meanings. As noted above, there is a contrast between Jesus and John and this possibly resolves some early competition between two movements. Another interpretation is provided by Shepherd who writes: "Jesus sends the Twelve on a mission of preaching the Gospel of repentance. Herod sends to seize John the Baptist and then sends to have him beheaded. Thus, as Herod is the immoral king who beheads the prophet of God, Jesus is the righteous king who sends forth his emissaries with the message of repentance."

John is presented as the forerunner of Jesus in Mark who along with his audience knows what happened to both Jesus and also John. If John the Baptist could be murdered for his convictions, what the disciples were doing was also dangerous and could very well lead to the same fate. Edwards writes, "There is surely more than one motif at work in the Baptist's martyrdom. The most obvious and important is the parallel between the death of the Baptist and the death of Jesus. Mark clearly intends to show that as John was the forerunner of Jesus' message and ministry, so too is he the forerunner of his death. John is righteous and suffers silently, and the same will be true of Jesus. Both Herod and Pilate are Roman officials, both are vacillating and pusillanimous in the face of social pressure, and both condemn innocent men to death. "

Edwards goes on to write, "The rather awkward appending of the return of the Twelve (in only one verse!) to the story of the Baptist's death must mean that Mark saw a relationship between missionaries and martyrdom, between discipleship and death. This is precisely Jesus' teaching in 8:34, "If someone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." The cross, of course, was an instrument of death. . . . Mark says the same thing in sandwiching the Baptist's death into the mission of the Twelve: discipleship may lead to martyrdom. The disciple of Jesus must first reckon with the fate of John. Thus, John's martyrdom not only prefigured Jesus' death, it also prefigures the death of anyone who would follow after him!"

Discipleship requires a follower to be all in and might cost them their life.

[03] Cursing of the Fig Tree and Cleansing of the Temple: Mark 11:12-25.

A¹: Jesus curses the fig tree.

B: Jesus cleanses the temple.

A²: The fig tree withers.

The fig tree is clearly juxtaposed with the temple which is not bearing fruit due to the corruption and blindness of the religious leaders. This is the reason Jesus is said to have “cleansed” the temple. Those in charge are failing in their duty and will be utterly destroyed because of it.

Edwards writes:

“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,⁴⁰ “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).”

Discipleship requires bearing good and obeying God. Destruction is the alternative.

[04] The plot to kill Jesus and his anointing: Mark 14:1-11

A¹: The religious leaders plot to kill Jesus.

B: Jesus is anointed.

A²: Judas agrees to betray him.

Shepherd writes: “Judas’ action is betrayal unto death, the woman’s action is anointing for burial. Judas clearly represents failed discipleship, the woman represents faithful discipleship.

There is a clear contrast here. A woman *generously* anoints Jesus with a very expensive perfume worth a year's wages. Judas *greedily* betrays him for money but how much? Mark does not even say. Judas's greed is so great and his valuation of Jesus so low that as Shepherd writes, "he is not worth even a *set sum* of money." Disciples must be givers, not takers.

Discipleship is costly and requires much of us. Namely, unbridled devotion to Jesus.

[05] Jesus's Family and Beelzebub: Mark 3:30-35

A¹: Jesus's family sets out to stop him

B: Jesus is accused of having Beelzebub.

A²: Jesus reveals his true family.

The sandwich nature of this incident is less obvious to me. If it is in fact a sandwich it obviously features a discipleship component. Those who do the will of God are Jesus's family. The kingdom of God trumps all, even biology. Bock writes: "The concept of a spiritual family expressed in this saying is multiply attested, pointing to its authenticity (Matt 12:50; Luke 8:21; John 15:14; Thomas 99 but lacking any reference to sister and speaking of this group entering the kingdom; Gospel of the Egyptians 9:11)."¹⁵ Though in this case one does not need to see the framed story as the hermeneutical key to the entire narrative.

Discipleship tests our allegiances. It crosses all familial and social boundaries. Kingdom first.

[6] Peter's Denial and Jesus's Trial: Mark 14:53-72.

A¹: Peter enters the courtyard.

B: The trial of Jesus.

A²: Peter denies Jesus.

The contrast is strong in this sandwich. Peter is questioned by a servant girl and Jesus by the high priest. The chief priests and Sanhedrin testify *falsely* about Jesus (Mark 14:56), the servant girl *correctly* identifies Peter being a follower of Jesus (Mark 14:67). Jesus **affirms** his identify (Mark 14:62) while Peter **denies** his own (Mark 14:68). Mark is exacerbating Peter's denial and failure by sandwiching Jesus' trial within it. Jesus affirms and is sentenced to death, Peter denies and lives. Jesus gives a faithful confession of his Messiahship and receives the sentence of death. Peter fulfills Jesus's prophecy while Jesus is beaten with the word "prophecy."

¹⁵ Mark A New Cambridge Commentary, Darrell Bock, pg 171

Edwards notes: “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 . . . 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 righteousness.”

It doesn't really matter if the sandwich is here or not. Peter's failure is still horrific and Jesus's sacrifice is still the ultimate act of grace and compassion. Yet In the narrative Peter serves as a foil for Jesus and it brought to my mind the end of Romans 5 and beginning of chapter 6 where Paul says: “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase?” Peter's sinful behavior serves to magnify the faithful behavior of Jesus and shows how grace “abounds all the more” in such cases. It also serves as a model for discipleship.

Discipleship requires unashamedly professing Jesus even in the face of death.

Three other Potential Sandwiches:

These are three sandwiches less scholars agree on:

[07] Parable of the Sower and Purpose of Parables: Mark 4:1-20

A¹: Jesus tells the parable of the sower.

B: Jesus tells us the purpose of parables.

A²: The parable of the sower is explained.

Joanna Dewey writes, “To be sure , Mark 4:1-34 has a looser structure than that to be found in 2:1-3:6. Nonetheless, there seem to be sufficient congruent parallelisms of content, form and hook words to posit a symmetrical pattern.”

Edwards writes: “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?"

This is another potential incident of a sandwich and whether it is one or not, the account is certainly about discipleship. The contrast between insiders and outsiders makes that clear. In v. 11 Jesus says, "'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables.'" I take this in the sense of the cross being foolishness to those who are perishing. If you think the statement about parables being meant to confuse belongs to Mark and not Jesus, an explanation of why the Jews largely rejected Jesus as Messiah is something thought to be the historical impetus for it. Either way we learn that disciples are the insiders who understand Jesus where others outsiders. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Of course, in Mark, the disciples themselves did not fare so well in understanding Jesus's parables or a lot of his teachings and this single verse is one of the most difficult to explain in the entire New Testament.

Edwards writes, "The purpose of parables, and above all the parable of the sower (v 131), is like the cloud which separated the fleeing Israelites from the pursuing Egyptians. It brought "darkness to the one side and light to the other" (Exod 14:20). The same cloud which condemned the Egyptians to their hardness of heart also protected Israel and made a way for her through the sea. That which was blindness to Egypt was revelation to Israel. And so are the parables. For those outside they are opaque; for those inside they are light and revelation."

Discipleship comes with a recognition of who Jesus is

[08] Jesus's predicts failures of his followers and the last supper: Mark 14:17-31

A¹: Jesus predicts his betrayal

B: The last supper

A²: Jesus predicts Peter's denial.

The disciples meet both predictions with disbelief. Edwards writes: "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)."¹⁶ Edwards continues: "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

¹⁶ MARKAN SANDWICHES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERPOLATIONS IN MARKAN NARRATIVES *Novum Testamentum XXXI*, 3 (1989) 193-216

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.”⁵¹ 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).”

While our faith and discipleship can fail, God is always faithful.

[09] The Women and Joseph of Arimathea Mark 15:40-16:8

A¹: The women watch

B: Joseph buries Jesus

A²: The women and the tomb.

Matthew identifies Joseph as a Christian but I do not know if Mark believed that or was privy to such information (John calls him a secret one) so I am hesitant to force it onto his gospel. In Mark proper, a member of the Sanhedrin, the group responsible for murdering Jesus courageously requests his body and buries him. This might be an indicator Mark thinks of Joseph this way as well as it would otherwise be very odd to describe a member of this despised group favorably but this is not certain. There is possible a contrast and Markan irony here. Why are the male disciples of Jesus nowhere to be found? They have fled. Who buries Jesus? Not his families or closest confidants but his enemies. The women are certainly better off than the male disciples as at least they are attempting to observe Jesus’s body so that they can anoint it, but they follow from afar, they too misunderstood Jesus as they run off in silence in 16:8 and readers of Mark know Jesus was already anointed for his burial (see 14:6-9).

Discipleship requires “courage and conviction, not by-standing and beholding.

Discipleship is certainly not the only theme or even necessarily the central one in all of these Markan sandwiches, but it is certainly an important one and part of Mark’s theological program:

“Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, ‘If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.’” [Mark 8:34-36]