

The Centrality of the Cross: Literary and Theological Reflections on Mark 15:20b-25

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Abstract: This study addresses two issues of exegesis and interpretation in the Gospel of Mark. It points to the presence of simple but elegant literary practices in the gospel, disputing the claim that the evangelist was merely the clumsy editor of prior sources. Mark's passion narrative (14:1-15:47) is an extended example of intercalation. At the centre of the story of the Roman crucifixion (15:1-47), the author locates the description of the crucifixion of Jesus (15:20b-25). Its central literary location reflects the heart of the Markan Christology: Jesus is the crucified Messiah and Son of God.

ALTHOUGH LONG A PART OF THE ARMORY of those who approach the biblical text from a predominantly literary perspective, the identification and interpretative use of literary structures such as chiasms, inclusions, and various forms of parallelism within the New Testament is still something of a moot point. One can debate whether or not these structures are more in the eye of the interpreter than in the text, and no doubt there are times when too much is made of them.¹ In some brief statements, clear literary patterns may emerge naturally, as can be observed in such every day writing as editorial comment in daily newspapers. For example, a comment on the organisation of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China, runs: "Fabulous in achievement, flawed in execution."² The antithetic parallelism between the contradictory "fabulous" and "flawed", enhanced by the use "achievement and "execution", does not surprise us. Such sculptured expressions are part

1. This is not the place to debate this question. See, for example, the warning from Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand. Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 151-52, and the enthusiastic recent support for the study of chiasms in the New Testament from John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 1994); also, John W. Welch and Daniel B. McKinlay (eds.), *Chiasmus Bibliography* (Provo UT: Research Press, 1999).

2. *The Age* (Melbourne) Friday, August 15, 2008, p. 12.

of careful writing, and we accept and enjoy it. We should not deny that such literary flair might be present in the literature of the New Testament, much of which is the result of many years of careful editorial writing and rewriting.³

But it is a far cry from these simple expressions that can flow naturally in flashes of rhetoric in most languages, to the often exaggerated claims for the use of the literary structure of the chiasm in the New Testament. There have even been serious claims that whole books of the New Testament are structured around a chiasm.⁴ Nevertheless, the use of circular arguments, where authors come back to where they began, and the repetition of themes and geographical settings, reminding readers that they have been here before, are certainly present within the writings of the New Testament, however one assesses them. One only need think of the presence of the two miracle stories that take place in Cana in John 2:1-11 and 4:46-54. The desire of this first century author to have the reader recognise the literary, and perhaps theological, relationship between the episodes is made explicit in authorial comments that introduce or conclude them: "This the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee" (2:11); "So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine" (4:46); "This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee" (4:54).⁵

Whether or not they can be called chiasms in the strict sense, the regular use of a literary pattern called "sandwich constructions", or "intercalations", in the Gospel of Mark is universally recognised. A narrative begins, is interrupted by another narrative that is told in its entirety, and the opening narrative is then brought to a conclusion (see 3:20-35; 4:1-34; 5:21-43; 6:7-30; 11:12-26; 13:5-23).⁶ Mark did not invent

3. A long editorial process is most likely for the four Gospels. This is not the case for the authentic Pauline Letters, written to address specific situations in the early Church, and often called "occasional literature". See Francis J. Moloney, *The Living Voice of the Gospel: The Gospels Today* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2006) 14-42.

4. See, for example, Albert Vanhoye, *A Structured Translation of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1964); Peter F. Ellis, *The Genius of John: A Compositional-Critical Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1984); George Mlakuzhil, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* (Analecta Biblica 117; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1987).

5. For a summary, see Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 192-99.

6. See, among many, John R. Donahue, *Are You the Christ? The Trial Narrative in the Gospel of Mark* (SBLSDS 10; Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973) 58-63; the present study is a development of Donahue's work on 14:53-65. See also Howard C. Kee, *The Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (London: SCM, 1977) 54-56; Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 128-34; James R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives", *Novum Testamentum* 31 (1989): 193-216; Tom

this literary pattern, but he used it effectively. It is often claimed that the Gospel writers would not have had sufficient literary sophistication to consciously generate narratives constructed in this way, but the regular appearance of such structures in Mark cannot be gainsaid. It can be claimed, at least for the Gospel of Mark, that there is no point in wondering whether or not Mark used these literary patterns. The presence of intercalated narratives is so common that the task of the interpreter is to assess what the author is trying to say when he uses them.

MARK 14:1-72

I have argued elsewhere that the Markan passion narrative as a whole (14:1-15:47) can be read as an extended use of this simple but effective literary technique.⁷ The case for eleven intercalated scenes, forming the structure of the first half of the narrative, 14:1-72, is comparatively easy to make.⁸ Traditional criteria for setting the “limits” of a Gospel pericope, change of time, place or characters, establish the presence of eleven scenes in 14:1-72. What is fascinating, however, is the fact that as pericope shifts to pericope, the reader finds a shift in the character(s) at the centre of each passage. Mark alternates passages that present “other characters” with the person and activity of Jesus as the dominant feature. The division of the material into these eleven scenes is reasonably obvious, and can be regularly found among scholars who have no interest in the literary structures that I propose.⁹

In several of the episodes that I regard as focusing upon “other characters” (see vv. 17-21, 26-31) Jesus is present, and is the speaker. However, he does not speak of himself, but of the future failures of Judas, Peter and all the disciples. The focus is upon Judas and Peter. Similarly, Peter, James and John are present (although largely absent as they fail to “watch”) in Gethsemane (vv. 32-42). The focus of the episode is the prayer of Jesus to the Father, not Peter, James and John. In this sequence of events, generated by the juxtaposition of episodes alternately highlighting the disciples and Jesus, the disciples move

Shepherd, “The Narrative Function of Markan Intercalation”, *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 522-40; Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6* (SBLSDS 48: Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), especially pp. 131-180.

7. Francis J. Moloney, “Literary Strategies in the Markan Passion Narrative (Mark 14,1-15,47)”, *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 28 (2003): 5-25; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003) 275-336.

8. For detail, see Moloney, *Mark*, 276-309.

9. See, for example, Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1966) 526, 562; Josef Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1981) 397-451.

dramatically toward their final failure in 14:50 (“And they all forsook him, and fled”) as Jesus moves steadfastly toward the cross. Full of fear the disciples flee, and the narrator adds a parable to comment upon their fear and flight in vv. 51-52. They are naked in their nothingness, as Jesus moves towards his predicted destiny of the suffering Son of Man, Christ and Son of God.¹⁰ As a group, the disciples do not reappear in the story, although they are promised a future “sight” of this risen Jesus in 16:7, fulfilling the earlier prophetic statement of Jesus in 14:28: “But after I am raised up, I will go before you into Galilee.”

The sequence dealing with Jesus, the disciples and the Jewish leaders (14:1-72) unfolds as follows, with [A] focusing upon “other characters” (the disciples) and [B] focusing upon Jesus.

[A] 14:1-2: The plot of the Jewish leaders

[B] vv. 3-9: The anointing of *Jesus*

[A] vv. 10-11: Judas, *one of the Twelve*, joins the plot of vv. 1-2

[B] vv. 12-16: *Jesus* sees to the preparation for a Passover meal

[A] vv. 17-21: Jesus predicts the betrayal of *Judas, one of the Twelve*

[B] vv. 22-25: *Jesus* shares the meal, giving bread and wine to *the disciples*

[A] vv. 26-31: Jesus predicts the future denials of *Peter* and the flight of *all the disciples*

[B] vv. 32-42: The prayer of *Jesus* in Gethsemane

[A] vv. 43-52: *Judas, one of the Twelve*, along with representatives of the Jewish leaders arrest Jesus, and *all the disciples* flee

[B] vv. 53-65: The self-revelation of *Jesus* at the Jewish hearing

[A] vv. 66-72: *Peter* denies Jesus three times.

The eleven brief scenes in this arrangement shift systematically from portrayals or predictions of disciples’ failures to a presentation of the person of Jesus. Poignantly, and importantly for the Markan understanding of discipleship, at the very centre, in the sixth scene (vv. 21-25), the failing disciples and Jesus share a meal. The central Markan theme of Jesus’ never-failing presence to his ever-failing disciples is succinctly articulated by means of this literary structure.¹¹

MARK 15:1-20A, 20B-25, 26-47

My interpretation of 14:1-72 as a whole may not be universally accepted, but there are few scholars who do not see the natural sequence of the eleven scenes in the passage. The same cannot be said for the sequence and relationship of the various literary units that serve to

10. See Moloney, *Mark*, 299-300.

11. See Francis J. Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004) 159-81, esp. 173-76.

report the events of the remaining part of the narrative, 15:1-47. Given the lack of clear indications in the text that make a reader aware of the movement from one stage to another in the narrative, many suggest that the message is articulated by means of larger blocks of material. For example, Josef Ernst, among others, suggests that vv. 1-15 function as a literary unit and vv. 20b-41 as another.¹² The suggestion I would like to defend below, that the scene reporting the crucifixion of Jesus (15:20b-25) lies at the heart of the structure of 15:1-47, is not without its problems. In this section I will present some more general indications that point to the possibility of a continuation of a series of alternating scenes, similarly shifting between scenes that focus upon Jesus and then "other characters" as the central figure(s) in the sequence. The more objective criteria of a change of place, time and characters are not so prominent in 15:1-47, and thus more subtle criteria for the establishment of the scenes must be sought.

The disciples, having left the scene at 14:50, never reappear. Similarly, the other leading characters in 14:1-72, the leaders of the Jews, do not direct the action. They lurk in the background, influence the crowds and hurl abuse at Jesus, but the trial and the form of execution is Roman. In 14:1-72 changes of location marked turning points: Jesus in Bethany (see 14:3), the upper room (see vv. 12-16), Gethsemane after the final meal (v. 32), and Jesus led to the house of the high priest (v. 53). In 15:1-42 there are only three changes of location: Jesus is led to Pilate (15:1), to Golgotha (v. 22) and to a grave (v. 46). Other criteria, however, direct the readers' focus.

MARK 15:1-20A

It appears that the scenes that run from 15:1-20a can be divided into four scenes, although there is no unanimity on this. A rapid description of these scenes suggests the following development of the narrative:

- 15:1-5: The self-revelation of Jesus as the Roman hearing begins. *Jesus dominates the action*, and Pilate introduces the royal theme, accepted by Jesus.
- vv. 6-11: The destiny of Barabbas is determined. Pilate and the crowd dominate the action, and Jesus never appears in person.
- vv. 12-15: Pilate proclaims Jesus as King, but scourges him and his destiny is determined. Jesus returns to the scene, ironically proclaimed as King, scourged, and delivered up for crucifixion. *Jesus is at the centre of the action.*

12. Ernst, *Markus*, 451, 462-63.

vv. 16-20a: The Roman soldiers ironically proclaim the truth as they mock Jesus. Pilate's ironic proclamation of Jesus as King is acted out in the soldiers' mocking enthronement and coronation. Jesus is led to the cross.

MARK 15:20B-25

The events that follow, in vv. 20b-39, focus entirely upon the crucifixion of Jesus, and events that take place during his agony until he dies (v. 39). The next major change of character in the narrative comes with the introduction of the women in vv. 40-41. Are there any indications generated by a closer reading of the text that suggest a more detailed literary and theological structure for Mark 15:20b-39? The location is always the same (Golgotha), and the focus upon the crucified Jesus is relentless. But other elements in the narrative suggest that vv. 20b-25 might form a self-standing literary unit, and that vv. 26-39 are to be associated with vv. 44-47 as *consequences* of the crucifixion of Jesus, reported in vv. 20b-25.

There is scant agreement among scholars on the limitations of this pericope, found at the centre of the Mark 15. Some run the passage on to v. 26, where the inscription placed upon the cross is described,¹³ others to v. 27, to include the two robbers.¹⁴ Some would go as far as v. 32, embracing the whole scene before Jesus' death (see vv. 33-39),¹⁵ while others regard vv. 20b-41 to be so tightly interwoven that it is impossible to discover different scenes.¹⁶

Three major literary factors point to vv. 20b-25 as a unit, and vv. 26-32 as a separate unit.¹⁷ Scholars agree that the passage opens with v.

13. See, for example, Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark* (London: SPCK, 1971) 342; Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1976) 339-42.

14. See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 2:902, 935; Joachim Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (5th ed.; EKKNT II/1-2; 2 vols; Zürich/Neukirchen/Vluyn: BenzigerVerlag/Neukirchener Verlag, 1998) 2:314.

15. See, for example, Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Marc* (Études Bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1920) 396 (for vv. 20b-22 as a unit), 399 (for vv. 23-32 as a unit); Dennis E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark* (Penguin New Testament Commentaries; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963) 420-21; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* [17th ed.; Meyers Kommentar; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967] 341; William L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 560-62; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1991) 371-72.

16. See Taylor, *St. Mark*, 587; Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (6th ed.; THKNT 2; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1973) 311-12.

17. See also Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (HTKNT II/1-2; 2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1976-77), 2:474-75, although I would not share his confidence about this literary shape already being in place in a pre-Markan passion narrative.

20b: "And they led him out to crucify him (ἵνα σταυρώσωσιν)." The events described in vv. 21-25 are entirely concerned with things done by the Romans to Jesus as he is led to Golgotha (vv. 21-22) and crucified (vv. 23-25). No direct speech is recorded, and the subject of every major verb is the third person plural, "they", i.e. the Roman soldiers (see v. 20b: "they led", v. 21: "they compelled", v. 22: "they brought", v. 23: "they offered", v. 24: "they crucified", "they divided", v. 25: "they crucified."). Mark renders five out of these seven verbs, although all translated in the past tense, in the historic present: "they lead" (v. 20b), "they compel" (v. 21), "they bring" (v. 22), "they crucify" (v. 24), "they divide" (v. 24). This is a feature of the Greek language which an author can use to make the past more vivid.¹⁸ Only the verb used to describe the offering of wine (ἔδιδου) is not in the present. The imperfect tense adds both variety and relief to the steady repetition of violent actions done to Jesus, indicating that this particular process went on for some time. The passage concludes, looking back to the purpose of the soldiers' leading Jesus out in v. 20b: "It was the third hour, and they crucified him (καὶ ἑσταύρωσαν αὐτόν). The verb is in the aorist tense, decisively concluding a long series of actions done to Jesus. The verb σταυρώω appears only three times in the passage: at the beginning (v 20b) and at the end (v 24a; v 25). In vv. 24-25 the soldiers did what they set out to do in v. 20b.

Secondly, the literary form and the content of vv. 26-32 differ from vv. 20b-25. Vv. 26-32 are highlighted by direct speech (see vv. 26, 29b-30, 31b-32a) as Jesus is abused, and the truth is ironically proclaimed. The passage opens with a reference to the two robbers who were crucified on either side of Jesus (v. 27), and it closes by returning to them (v. 32b). Also, vv. 15:20b-25 focus upon something that happens *to Jesus*: he is crucified. What is done to him, however, appears to be done in absolute silence. Not a word is spoken.¹⁹ The following passage (vv. 26-32) is dominated by others, the inscription, those who passed by, the chief priests and the scribes, and the robbers who all hurl abuse at Jesus.²⁰

18. See Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (ed. and trans. Robert W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 167, § 321: "The historic present can replace the aorist indicative in a vivid narrative of the events at which the narrator imagines himself to be present; the *Aktionsart* usually remains punctiliar in spite of the present tense form."

19. Roman crucifixions were not marked by silence, but by screams of abuse and pain, and the wailing of those associated with the crucified. See, for a graphic description, Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (London: SCM, 1977), especially pp. 22-38. The atmosphere of silence that permeates Mark 15:20b-25 serves the author's literary and theological purposes. It does not reflect what actually happened at this gruesome event.

20. On the possibility of recovering the pre-Markan primitive core for the Markan crucifixion account, see Brown, *Death*, 2:904-905. He sceptically concludes: "Here as elsewhere one may detect early traditions (shared independently by the Gospels) but...we

Schematically, the literary unity of vv. 20b-25 is suggested by the following features:

v. 20b: And “they” led him out to crucify him (ἵνα σταυρώσωσιν αὐτόν). The verb “led out” (ἐξάγουσιν) is in the historic present.

v. 21: “They” compelled Simon to carry the cross. The verb “compelled” (ἀγγαρεύουσιν) is in the historic present.

v. 22: “They” brought him to Golgotha. The verb “brought” (φέρουσιν) is in the historic present.

v. 23: “They” offered him wine. The verb “offered” (ἐδίδουν) is in the imperfect tense, the only action not in the historic present, used to show that this action went on for some time.²¹

v. 24a: “They” crucified him. The verb “crucified” (σταυροῦσιν) is in the historic present.

v. 24b: “They” divided his garments. The verb “divided” (διαμερίζονται) is in the historic present.

v. 25: And it was the third hour when they crucified him (καὶ ἔσταυρώσαν αὐτόν). The verb “crucified” is in the aorist tense.

This simple but eloquent presentation of Jesus’ crucifixion by the Romans “at the third hour”, fulfilling the Scriptures, forms the centrepiece of Mark 15:1-47. As I will demonstrate below, it is the fifth of nine scenes. Mark 15:20b-25 is not only the culmination of much that has been anticipated by the Gospel as a whole, but 15:1-20a has prepared for it, and the events and words reported in 15:26-47 depend upon it. The brutal starkness of the scene is imposing.²² No one speaks as the Roman soldiers lead Jesus out to crucify him, and systematically go about their gruesome task. The steady use of the historic present adds immediacy to the narrator’s report. The silence, so much in contrast with the scenes that surround the passage, where chatter and insult can be found (see vv. 16-20a; vv. 26-32), highlights the fact that Jesus is alone as he submits to the actions of the Roman soldiers. The only rays of light come from the allusion to Psalm 22:19, and the first indication that this took place “at the third hour”. Crucially, in v. 20b the passage opens with the

cannot reconstruct with serious probability a preMarcan narrative, even if we have good reason to think one existed” (pp. 904-905).

21. An exaggerated reading of chiasms was exemplified during an oral presentation of this study. A person in the audience pointed out that the only verb not in the historic present was found right at the centre of the narrative. This is uncalled for. The author used the imperfect tense to indicate that the action that happened in the past went on for some time. See Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar*, 169, §§ 325, 327.

22. It is perhaps this starkness which has led many to the surprising conclusion that “these verses lack the sort of unity which may be expected” (Charles E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* [CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959] 453).

indication that Jesus is led out to be crucified (ἵνα σταυρωσῶσιν αὐτόν), and closes by announcing that he was crucified (ἔσταύρωσαν αὐτόν) at the third hour (v. 25). These hints promise the reader that, in a mysterious way, God's design is being worked out in this brutal murder (see 10:45; 14:36).

MARK 15:26-47

Once the uniqueness of vv. 20a-25 as a literary unit is established, the rest of Mark 15 unfolds more naturally. As there were four scenes leading into the centrepiece of the narrative, there are four that follow.

- vv. 26-32: Passers-by and the Jewish leaders ironically proclaim the truth as they mock Jesus. The action is carried by the passers by, Jesus is ironically proclaimed as King, Saviour and Christ. Noise and motion re-enter the story, after the silence of vv. 20a-25. The passage opens and closes with reference to the crucified thieves (vv. 26 and 32).
- vv. 33-39: Jesus dies and is proclaimed Son of God. The second reference to time, "and when the sixth hour had come" (v. 33) introduces the dramatic and densely theological report of the three hours that lead to the death of Jesus "at the ninth hour" (v. 34). It closes with the confession of the Roman centurion, "seeing" Jesus' breathing his last breath: "Truly this man was the Son of God" (v. 39).²³
- vv. 40-41: The women at the cross. A new set of characters is introduced. The reader is told the names of three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome (v. 40b).²⁴ Other women are introduced

23. There are a number of theories concerning traditions and the history of the composition behind vv. 33-39 (see Brown, *Death*, 2:1083-88). Again there is no agreement on the literary unity of the passage in its present form. Some would bring the scene to a close at Jesus' death in v. 37 (see, for example, Lohmeyer, *Markus*, 344-45; Brown, *Death*, 2:1032-33). Many add vv. 40-41 as a form of conclusion (see, for example, Nineham, *St Mark*, 426; Lane, *Mark*, 570-71; Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* [Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984] 131-32; Hooker, *St Mark*, 374-75; John Painter, *Mark's Gospel: Worlds in Conflict* [New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1997] 206-208; Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Beginning of the Gospel. Introducing the Gospel according to Mark* [2 vols.; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999] 2:296-98). The centurion's confession, and his sight of Jesus' expiring, links vv. 38-39 to vv. 33-37. The leap-frog use of the women in vv. 40-41, 47, 16:1 suggests that their role as characters in the narrative calls for its own focus. See also Schweizer, *Mark*, 351-52; Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 2:491-92; Anderson, *Mark*, 344-45.

24. The introduction of these names, without explanation, and especially the reference to James and Joseph, also without explanation, could indicate that the women and the two sons were known to the community. See, for example, Lagrange, *Saint Marc*, 410; Taylor, *St Mark*, 598; Anderson, *Mark*, 348-49. This does not necessarily mean, as Lane, *Mark*, 577, among others, would argue, that their presence substantiates the historicity of the details of the Markan cross scene. See Nineham, *St Mark*, 431.

- (v. 41b). Information is also provided about both the past and the present relationship between these women and Jesus.
- vv. 42-47: The burial of Jesus. The final episode in the Markan passion narrative serves as a bridge. It closes the story of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion and points the reader toward the day following the Sabbath (see 15:42; 16:1).

CONCLUSION

On the basis of this suggestion that vv. 20b-25 form a literary unit at the centre of Mark 15, the following literary structure emerges.

- [A] 15:1-5: The self-revelation of *Jesus* as the Roman hearing begins
[B] vv. 6-11: The question of Barabbas
[A] vv. 12-15: Pilate ironically proclaims *Jesus* innocent and King as the Roman hearing closes
[B] vv. 16-20a: The Roman soldiers ironically proclaim the truth as they mock Jesus
[C] **vv. 20b-25: The crucifixion of *Jesus***
[B] vv. 26-32: Passers-by and the Jewish leaders ironically proclaim the truth as they mock Jesus
[A] vv. 33-39: The death of *Jesus*, proclaimed Son of God
[B] vv. 40-41: The women at the cross
[A] vv. 42-47: The burial of *Jesus*.

The central (fifth) scene of the nine episodes that form the Roman process is the crucifixion of Jesus (15:20b-25). The precise term one should use to describe this literary pattern could be debated. Is it an extended use of intercalation, an extended use of chiasm or step parallelism? I would personally opt for the first suggestion, as it does not fit the criteria for a chiasm or for parallelism.

Be that as it may, the Roman process, the crucifixion and burial of Jesus bring Mark's christological proclamation to its high point. The disciples do not appear, and thus at its centre is the crucified Christ.²⁵

25. In two rich studies, J. P. Heil, "Mark 14,1-52: Narrative Structure and Reader Response", *Biblica* 71 (1990): 305-32, and "The Progressive Narrative Pattern of Mark 14,53-16,8", *Biblica* 73 (1992): 331-58, has also developed a structure on the basis of similarly related scenes. I differ radically, however, from his approach for two basic reasons. In a literary approach major characters must play a role in the determination of structure. In his attempt to produce two balanced structures of nine scenes (three sets of three intercalated scenes) in 14:1-52, repeated in 14:53-16:8, Heil associated the Peter scenes (14:53-54, 66-72) with the Roman process, the crucifixion and the resurrection (14:53-16:8). This separates Peter from a narrative that has been dominated by disciples, in which Peter's denials are the culmination (14:1-72). A parallel problem emerges with the association of 16:1-8 with 14:53-15:47. The unspoken main character of 16:1-8 is God, and this looks back to 1:1-13 (see Moloney, *Mark*, 339-54). My second major difficulty is Heil's placement of the meal

This literary pattern throws into relief the christological climax of the Gospel in the description of the unrelenting suffering of the innocent Jesus, King of the Jews (15:2, 9, 12, 14, 18, 26), the Christ, the King of Israel (v. 32), and Son of God (v. 39). Paradoxically, on the cross the claims made by the narrator for Jesus in 1:1-13 are shown to be true (15:1-47). In the midst of the rejection and the suffering, new characters appear, "outsiders" like Simon of Cyrene (15:21), the centurion at the cross (v. 39), the women (vv. 40-41, 47) and Joseph of Arimathea (vv. 43-46). They are the first hint of a newer generation of disciples whose following (v. 21), commitment (vv. 40-41, 47), belief (v. 39) and courage (vv. 43-46) have their beginnings at the cross.²⁶ None of this, however, would be possible without a report of the physical crucifixion of Jesus at the third hour. The events of the sixth and the ninth hour (vv. 33) depend upon it. Not only is the event of the physical crucifixion of Jesus grimly reported in Mark 15:20b-25, but it forms the literary centrepiece of Mark 15:1-47.

Mark makes it clear in the first verse of the Gospel that he has no doubt that Jesus is the Christ (1:1). However, Mark's understanding of Jesus' messianic status is entirely determined by the historical fact that Jesus of Nazareth was unjustly crucified. It is *on the cross* that Jesus is the Christ. Not only is this impossible for his opponents to understand (see 15:31-32), but within the story of the Gospel of Mark, it is also impossible for his disciples to understand (see 8:31-33; 9:31-32; 10:32-41; 14:17-21, 27-31, 50). He saves others, only because he perfects his messianic role on the cross (15:29-31). This remains the crucial enigma of the Christian tradition, solidly founded in the Markan interpretation of Jesus as the Christ. The messianic function of Jesus of Nazareth has been

scene (14:22-25) and the crucifixion (15:16-32) as flanking episodes in the central sandwich. Eleven scenes in 14:1-72, on the basis of the presence of the disciples and nine in 15:1-47 on the basis of Roman action (and see the culmination of 15:39, roughly parallel to Peter's denials) places the meal and the crucifixion at the centre of each setting. The fact that, over the years, Heil has found the same structure in three of the four passion and resurrection narratives (see also J. P. Heil, *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus: A Narrative-Critical Reading of Matthew 26-28* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991]; J. P. Heil, *Blood and Water: The Death and Resurrection of Jesus in John 18-21* [CBQMS 27; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association, 1995]) makes one suspicious.

26. The evidence points to a well-articulated assembly of pre-Markan traditions and more original Markan contributions. The theological and literary unity of Mark 14-15 disappears in attempts to trace a pre-Markan passion narrative which judge that certain sequences "do not fit", or "follow smoothly" (A. Y. Collins, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992] 104), "do not follow coherently" (*ibid.*, 105), "disturb the context", (*ibid.*, 108), and so on. The multiplicity of opinions (reflected in Collins' excellent overview) indicates the speculative nature of the criteria used to determine what is Markan and pre-Markan. The better option is that, whatever traditions Mark may have been using, he has created a well articulated and unified theological and literary narrative.

best summarised by Jesus himself, as he explained to his disciples: "For the Son of Man also came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). Here we see the blurring of distinctions between the designation of Jesus as "the Christ" and "the Son of Man". But they are distinctions rightfully blurred, as they point to the single saving event of the crucifixion.

The death of Jesus reveals that he is the Christ and the Son of God (see 15:26-39). Yet, Mark began his Gospel by claiming that this was "good news". How is that possible? Is there no sign of a victorious Messiah, as one might get in some Jewish streams of thought (Psalms of Solomon, Dead Sea Scrolls), or the return of the Son of God to his Father, as one finds in other places in the New Testament (Paul, Luke and John)?²⁷ No such signs of ultimate victory for the Christ and the Son of God appear in the Markan interpretation of Jesus. He is the Christ and the Son of God as the crucified one. Only in the Markan presentation of him as the Son of Man is the crucified Jesus vindicated through the resurrection on the third day (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). He will return as judge in glory at the end of time (8:38; 13:24-27).²⁸ *For Mark, Jesus is the crucified Christ and the crucified Son of God.* It is in and through crucifixion that Jesus fulfills God's messianic design, and shows that he is the beloved Son of God, in whom the Father is well pleased (1:11; 9:7; 15:39). Thus, the tragic end of Jesus' life is not a dreadful fate that simply falls unjustly upon him. Mark wants his readers and hearers to be aware that the crucifixion of God's Son and Messiah are part of God's larger design. This aspect of the christology of the Gospel of Mark is a sign of the originality of the author's interpretative activity.

This unique and surprising theological agenda led Mark to shape his story of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus (15:1-47) in a way that places the physical crucifixion of Jesus at the centre of the narrative (vv. 20b-25).

27. For a thorough recent, but minimalist, survey of the biblical notion of "messiah", see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One who is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). As James C. VanderKam writes in his review of this book (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 [2008]: 600-601), "Is it necessary to restrict its application to those places where an agent is actually called a messiah?"

28. On this element in the Markan Christology, see Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller*, 143-52.