

## WHEN HOPE TENSION COLLIDE: A PROPOSAL FOR THE OUTLINE OF MARK

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**ABSTRACT:** Through a narrative criticism approach, this article describes how the theme of hope-and-tension form a common thread for the entire Gospel of Mark. Understanding how Mark maintains hope and tension throughout his Gospel will help readers explore Mark's Gospel in a more vivid, integral, and relevant way.

**KEYWORDS:** *gospel of mark; narrative criticism; disciples of Christ.*

**ABSTRAK:** Melalui pendekatan kritik naratif, artikel ini mendeskripsikan bagaimana tema pengharapan-dan-ketegangan membentuk suatu benang merah untuk keseluruhan injil Markus. Mengerti bagaimana Markus mempertahankan pengharapan dan ketegangan di keseluruhan injilnya membantu para pembaca mengeksplorasi injil Markus dengan cara yang lebih hidup, integral dan relevan.

**KATA KUNCI:** *injil markus; kritik naratif; murid-murid Kristus.*

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The Gospel of Mark is a goldmine for the Gospel's scholars who want to do a narrative criticism. The lack of discourses, the fast pace of Mark's storytelling, the colourful character of the disciples, the miracles of any kind done by Jesus, the exorcism against the Devil and confrontation against the Jewish authority that are so intense, and an enigmatic ending, all offer an opportunity for those who want to see in Mark, a very engaging literature. It is no wonder that we can find more noticeable narrative criticism work on Mark than on Matthew or Luke.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See David Rhoads, Joana Dewey, Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Mary Ann-Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark's Audience* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989). For Matthew, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress,

Below we would like to propose our own outline of Mark. We agree with Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie that “Mark’s story is unified around one overall goal: Jesus struggles to establish the rule of God in the face of obstacles and opposition,”<sup>2</sup> with two notes: (1) Jesus in the Gospel of Mark does not only struggle but also gains victory in the midst of his struggling. For this, those authors will agree because they also say, “what looked like a tragedy turns out to be triumph: Jesus is resurrected, and his projected return in power and glory will vindicate him.”<sup>3</sup> But we would like to stress that this glory does not only come at the end when Jesus is resurrected. Actually, throughout his gospel, Mark maintains both *tension* and *hope*; “tension” because everything looks so fragile and can fall into ruin any time, but also “hope” because somehow what Jesus says in the Parable of the Seed proves to be true, “He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear” (Mrk 4:27-28). In the Gospel of Mark, no matter how great the tension is, or how hopeless the situations are, the wind and waves still know the voice of their master.

(2) Mark is not only about Jesus, but also about his disciples. Even in a sense, the characterization of Jesus’ disciples is richer than the characterization of Jesus himself. It would be too reductionist to depict the disciples as fallen from the start to the end, and even more reductionist to portrait them as positive only at the beginning but negative toward the end. According to Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, “while Jesus will triumph in the end, the plot is tragic for other characters.”<sup>4</sup> But we would like to show below that “while Jesus will triumph in the end, the plot is tragic for other characters, *except for the disciples.*” In the Gospel of Mark, the first can be the last and the last can be the first. But also in the Gospel of Mark, the first can be the last, and then be the first again, and vice versa. And we can see all these in Mark’s portrait of the disciples.

Therefore, based on these two notes, we would like to “improve” Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie’s proposal to become: “Mark’s story is unified around *two* overall goals: (1) Jesus struggles, *and manages*, to establish the rule of God in the face of obstacles and opposition; (2) The disciples struggle, *and will manage*, to follow the rule of God in the face of obstacles and opposition.” Hope *and* tension come up again and again throughout

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1988). For Luke, see Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers 2007). For John, Alan Cuelpepper

<sup>2</sup> Rhoads, Dewey, Michie, *Mark as Story*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

the Gospel of Mark.

Below is our proposal for the outline of Mark. As a note, we give greater attention to how Mark ends each section. We see that before moving to another section, Mark always gives a distinct end, to maintain the audience’s attention. As we have stated, Mark builds “hope and tension” throughout his gospel, and one effective way for him to do that is to end each section in a certain way. Like a TV series which is always “to be continued’ when the tension is up, to arouse the curiosity of the viewers, Mark does a similar thing at the end of his sections. Mark’s reader will always find some tension at the end of each section, that invites them to continue reading or hearing the next section. We can see that in the table below and in the explanation of each section.

	<b>Inclusio and Parallel</b>	<b>Section’s Ending</b>	<b>What did Jesus do and teach?</b>	<b>What did the disciple do? And what did they need?</b>
1. Mark 1:1-15	Inclusio: The Gospel 1:1; 1:15	(+) Jesus starts preaching (1:15)	The Action of Jesus: 1. Anointed by the Spirit after being baptized by John 2. Enduring Temptation 3. Start preaching the Gospel	
2. Mark 1:16-3:19	Inclusio: Disciples’ Calling and Appointing 1:17; 3:13	(-) one of the Jesus’ closest disciples is a betrayal (3:19)	The Action of Jesus: 1. Calling the first four disciple 2. Appointing the Twelve 3. Exorcising in a synagogue 4. Healing: Simon’s Mother-in-Law and the Leper 5. Confrontation: 5 <sup>5</sup>  The Teaching of Jesus: What is the difference between the old and the new wineskins?	Following Jesus  Display no negative characteristic

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<sup>5</sup> The confrontation is because Jesus forgives sins (Mrk 2:1-13), accepts sinners (Mrk 2:14-17), does not command his disciples to fast (Mrk 2:18-22), allows his disciples to pick the heads of grain on the Sabbath (Mrk 2:23-27)and heals on the Sabbath (Mrk. 3:1-6).

3. Mark 3:20- 6:6a	Inclusio: The Rejection 3:20; 6:6a	(-) Jesus wonders at the unbelief of the Nazareth people (6:6a)	<p>The Action of Jesus</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stilling the sea</li> <li>2. Teaching the Twelve privately</li> <li>3. Exorcising: at Gerasene</li> <li>4. Healing: Jairus' daughter and hemorrhage woman</li> <li>5. Confrontation: Beelzebul, with family, and at Nazareth</li> </ol> <p>The Teaching of Jesus:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the meaning of his exorcism ministry?</li> <li>2. What is the nature of the Kingdom and why not all can see it?</li> </ol>	<p>Display a lack of faith and a lack of understanding</p> <p>Need understanding and an unhardened heart</p> <p>Need faith and courage in facing the storm</p>
4. Mark 6:6b- 8:21	Inclusio: Disciples' Mission and Disciples' Failure 6:7; 8:21	(-) Jesus wonders at the disciples' failure to understand (8:21)	<p>The Action of Jesus</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Two Feeding Miracles and walking on the water</li> <li>2. Sending the 12</li> <li>3. Exorcising: the Syrophenician daughter</li> <li>4. Healing: use saliva</li> <li>5. Confrontation: concerning tradition and the sign from heaven</li> </ol> <p>The Teaching of Jesus</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What will be happen to those who reject?</li> <li>2. What is true piety in the Kingdom?</li> </ol>	<p>Share in Jesus' ministry</p> <p>Heart becoming more hardened, lack of faith and understanding</p> <p>Need understanding and an unhardened heart</p> <p>Need faith and courage in the case of lack of provision</p>
5. Mark 8:22- 10:52	Inclusio: The Healing of the Blind 8:25; 10:52	(+) The blind man faithfully following Jesus (10:52)	<p>The Action of Jesus</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Transfiguration</li> <li>2. Preparing the 12 for his departure</li> <li>3. Exorcising a man's son after</li> </ol>	<p>Begin to see and understand who Jesus really is</p>

			<p>transfiguration</p> <p>4. Healing: two times healing the blind</p> <p>5. Prophesying: three times prophesying his passion</p> <p>The Teaching of Jesus</p> <p>1. What is the demand of the Kingdom?</p> <p>2. How to enter and to serve in the Kingdom?</p>	<p>Need a humble heart to serve</p> <p>Need faith and courage to make a sacrifice</p> <p>Need prayer to be able to win over the demon</p>
6. Mark 11:1-14:11	<p>Beginning: Preparing the entry</p> <p>Ending: Judas-Woman-Judas</p>	<p>(-) The betrayal of Judas</p> <p>(+) Woman who anointed Jesus (14:3-11)</p>	<p>The Action of Jesus</p> <p>1. Cursing the Fig Tree</p> <p>2. Sending his disciples to prepare his entry to Jerusalem</p> <p>3. Confrontation: 5<sup>6</sup></p> <p>4. Prophesying: Jerusalem's fall and his second coming</p> <p>The Teaching of Jesus</p> <p>1. Who has true authority over the Kingdom?</p> <p>2. What preparations are needed for the coming of the Kingdom?</p>	<p>Prepare the entry of Jesus</p> <p>Need faith and courage to remove the mountain</p> <p>Need prayer and a forgiving heart</p> <p>Need a humble heart like the poor widow</p>
7. Mark 14:12-16:8	<p>Beginning: Preparing Passover</p> <p>Ending: Woman-Joseph-Woman</p>	<p>(-) The fleeing of Galilean women</p> <p>(+) the courage of Joseph of Arimathea (15:40-16:8)</p>	<p>The Action of Jesus</p> <p>1. Resurrected from the death</p> <p>2. Sending his disciples to prepare his last Passover with them</p> <p>3. Confrontation: The trial of Jesus</p> <p>4. Prophesying:</p>	<p>Prepare the Passover</p> <p>Need a humble heart to accept Jesus' prophecy</p> <p>Need faith, courage, and</p>

<sup>6</sup> The confrontation is caused by (1) Jesus cleansing the temple (Mrk 11:15-18), (2) Jerusalem's authority demanding explanation of Jesus' authority and him telling the Parable of the Vine-growers (Mrk 11:22-12:12); (3) the Pharisees and Herodians asked about paying tax (Mrk 12:13-17); (4) the Sadducees asked about resurrection (Mrk 12:18-22); (5) Jesus warned the scribes (Mrk 12:41-44).

			Peter's Denial 5. Starting Eucharist and Praying at Gethsemane  The Teaching of Jesus: What is the hope of the Kingdom?	prayer to faith- fully follow Jesus
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Some general comments before we discuss each section: (1) All sections before Jesus enters Jerusalem start and end with an *inclusio*. For the remaining two sections (six and seven), after Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, there is a parallel between them in how they start and end. Both start with the disciples preparing something for the Lord and end with a sandwich (A-B-A) composition. (2) In how each section ends, Mark has tried, and succeeded in our opinion, to maintain tension throughout his Gospel. (3) The Markan Jesus is the very active one. He does miracles, prepares his disciples, exorcises demons, heals various sickness, debates the authority, prophecies, and marches toward his passion. Besides, he also preaches and teaches. (4) The disciples' portrait in Mark is highly developed. Pondering what happens to Jesus' disciples is important if we want to grasp the purpose of Mark.

### 1.1. Preparing the way for the Proclaimer of the Gospel (Mrk 1:1-14)

Different from Luke and Matthew, Mark emphasizes Jesus as the baptizer of "the Spirit," without mentioning "fire" (cf. Mrk 1:7; Matt 3:11; Luk 3:9). Combined this with (1) the Spirit impelling Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil, (2) the major role of exorcising in the picture of Markan Jesus, (3) the association between the Beelzebul accusation when Jesus performs so many miracles, with blaspheming the Spirit; we can conclude that for Mark, Jesus is full of the power of the Spirit,<sup>7</sup> and is going to remove the Devil from his throne to plunder back and save his own people. From the very beginning, and throughout the Gospel, the picture of Jesus as more than a Conqueror plays a significant part, and becomes the vital ground for the hope.

Therefore in *each* section, after Jesus starts his mission and before he arrives at Jerusalem, Mark always puts at least one story about Jesus exorcising demons. Jesus exorcises demons in a synagogue in Capernaum

<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the heaven opens and the Spirit descends upon Jesus (Mrk 1:10-11), Joel Marcus refers to 4Q521 1:6, "which reapplies the vocabulary of Gen 1:2 to an eschatological empowerment of human beings," *Mark 1-8*, AB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 160.

(Mrk 1:21-28; section 2); Jesus conquers the Gerasene Demoniac (Mrk 5:1-20; section 3); Jesus grants the request of the Syrophenician Woman to release her daughter from the unclean spirit (Mrk 7:24-30; section 4); Jesus manages to release a son that is possessed with a spirit (Mrk 8:14-29; section 5). And if we observe carefully, Mark gives a very detailed report of all those stories. Jesus as the conqueror is indeed an important theme for Mark.

This first section ends with Jesus' proclamation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in *the gospel*," (Mrk 1:15, emphasis added), which forms *inclusio*, because we read that the first section starts with, "The beginning of *the gospel* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mrk 1:1, emphasis added). The first section ends on a positive note.

## **1.2. The Initial Confrontation (Mrk 1:16-3:19)**

The Markan Jesus quickly plunges himself into confrontations. In the very beginning of his ministry, after calling his first four disciples, Jesus of the Gospel of Mark displays his authority over demon in a synagogue at Capernaum (Mrk 1:21-28). As the Christ and the Son of God who is filled by the Spirit, Jesus has authority beyond measure and the demons are among the first who have to admit it. Besides showing his authority over demons, Jesus displays his authority over many diseases (see especially Mrk 1:40-41), and before too long, he turns his face toward the scribes. In this section, the confrontation between Jesus and the authorities happens no less than five times: (1) Jesus heals the Paralytic while declaring that his sin is forgiven (Mrk 2:1-12); (2) Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, and eats with sinners (Mrk 2:14-17); (3) Jesus confronts their habit of fasting (Mrk 2:18-21); (4) Jesus confronts their understanding on Sabbath (Mrk 2:23-27); (5) Jesus heals on Sabbath (Mrk 3:1-11). At the end of the day, the Pharisees make a conspiracy with the Herodians on how they might destroy Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, the tension is aflame since the very first beginning.

All these confrontations are framed by the calling and appointing of Jesus' apostles. This second section starts with Jesus calling his first four disciples, i.e. Simon, Andreas, John, and James (Mrk 1:16-20) and ends with Jesus appointing the Twelve (Mrk 3:14-19). Therefore, since the very beginning, and throughout the Gospel, Mark puts confrontation in the context of discipleship, and on the other hand, he puts discipleship hand in hand with confrontation between Jesus and his enemies.

In the midst of confrontations against the demons and the authorities, the company of the disciples should provide a consolation for the heavily-burdened Messiah. And in this section, the disciples still cause no problem for Jesus. We do not read about Jesus having to rebuke them, or

them showing lack of faith and understanding. Mark indicates implicitly that the calling of the disciples, especially the first four ones, is a miracle in itself. Although at a glance this calling seems ordinary, we concur with Joel Marcus who comments, “Mark’s movement of the call narrative to the head of the section has made the obedience itself into a miracle. The very absence of psychological motivation here and in Mrk 2:14 ... is unusual for an ancient call narrative serves to emphasize the overwhelming power of Jesus’ word.”<sup>8</sup> By placing the calling of the first four disciples as early as this, before they see any extraordinary action of Jesus or hear his remarkable teaching, Mark provides a hint that will be confirmed later when Jesus talks about the Parable of the Sower, that behind the disciples’ calling and understanding, there is a hand of the Almighty, the Source of every hope.

However, when everything seems to be fine with the disciples, right in the last verse of this section, i.e. Mrk 3:19, we read, “... and Judas Iscariot, who *betrayed* him” (emphasis added). With this statement, the second section ends and the story is “to be continued.” Mark leaves his reader wondering about what is going to happen to Jesus and his disciples. Hope and tension begin.

### 1.3. The Growing Confrontation (Mrk 3:20-6:6a)

This third section starts and ends with the rejection of Jesus (Mrk 3:20-35; 6:1-6a). In the opening scene, through a sandwich arrangement (Jesus’ relatives – the scribes – Jesus’ relatives), Mark compares the reaction of Jesus’ relatives who are afraid that he has lost his mind (Mrk 3:21; 31-34), with the accusation by the Scribes that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul in doing his miracles (Mrk 3:22-27). Although all three Synoptics record the accusation, “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons,” the specific charge “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” can be found *only* in the Gospel of Mark (Mrk 3:22). It is interesting to note how close it is between accusing Jesus of loosing his senses and accusing him of being “possessed by Beelzebul.” This supports Jesus’ explanation of the Parable of the Sower that if someone has not been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, then even Jesus’ closest relatives can have such a misunderstanding about him (Mrk 4:11). However, although both accusations against Jesus are very close to each other, they are *not* identical: Jesus mentions the danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit only to the scribes. In all Synoptics, Jesus never says that his

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 185. Marcus argues that Mark must draw on a pre-Gospel source for 1:16-39, which he names the pre-Markan Capernaum source, and contends that the reaction of the first four disciples “may have been rendered more plausible by the brothers having previously witnessed miracles of Jesus,” 185. However, we do not have to accept this hypothesis to admit that it is at least uncommon that someone would just leave everything and follow someone whom he has never heard before.



family are in danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

In answering the Beelzebul accusation, Jesus provides the reason behind his exorcism, "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house" (Mrk 3:27). From Jesus' answer, we can detect the reason why Mark emphasizes the exorcism by Jesus, and the connection between Jesus' exorcism and the Spirit: By inserting Jesus' exorcism in each section before he arrives at Jerusalem, Mark reminds his readers that Jesus is a conqueror. Just as Jesus never fails to conquer the demons, he will not fail to conquer the authorities in Jerusalem. With his resurrection, he truly plunders the devil and saves his people. And because of that, the Markan congregation can put their trust in him, not matter how difficult their condition is.

Jesus himself has to face a very difficult situation. The Beelzebul accusation is reinforced by the rejection from both the people of Gerasene (Mrk 5:1-19) and the people of Nazareth (Mrk 6:1-6a). One striking similarity between both accounts is that we do not know exactly why these people react so negatively toward Jesus. Although most readers would quickly draw the conclusion that the people of Gerasene beg Jesus to leave because he has made them lose too many swines, Mark himself does not give any indication that those who implore Jesus to leave *are* the owners of the swines.<sup>9</sup> And if they are the owners, why do they not confront Jesus for causing them such a significant financial loss? Why do they simply implore him to leave? The only hint that Mark gives us is that they are afraid. But why are they so afraid? Why is it that in other places, we do not see this kind of fear when people see Jesus cast demons out of someone?

Similarly, it is unclear why the people of Nazareth react so negatively toward Jesus. While their initial reaction can hardly be gentler, they immediately take offense at him. All Mark says is that it is because they know Jesus' relatives. But why does this fact change their reaction so drastically? Mark gives no other clue, but we can see the parallel between the rejection in Gerasene and the one at Nazareth, and conclude that both Jews *and* Gentiles have taken offense at Jesus. The situation is very difficult for the Messiah and his disciples.

The enigmatic nature of these rejections reinforces what Jesus says in Mark 4:11-12. Although it is not necessarily that by this Mark is endorsing predestination, here we meet with a Divine passive, which means that Mark puts the rejection toward Jesus under the realm of God's sovereignty.

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<sup>9</sup> See Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, "But in the story it is the townspeople, not the herders, who ask Jesus to leave, and no hint is given that they are the owners of the pigs," 346.

Without ignoring or taking human stubbornness easily, Mark sees God as the final determiner.

This interpretation is confirmed by Mark's choice of Jesus' parables. Comparing Mark's Parable Discourse (Mrk 4:1-34) with Matthew's (Matt 13:1-50) and Luke's (Luk 8:4-18), it is interesting to see that while all start with the parable of the sower, they choose different parables thereafter. Luke's discourse is the shortest one: after the Parable of the Sower and its explanation (Luk 8:4-15), Luke adds only one more parable, i.e. the parable of the Lamp (Luk 8:16-18), to reinforce the importance of listening to the word carefully and keeping it inside the heart.

Moving to the Gospel of Matthew, readers will find that after the Parable of the Sower, Matthew adds no less than six other parables, i.e. the Parables of the Tares among Wheat (Matt 13:24-30; 36-43), the Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31-32), the Leaven (Matt 33-34), the Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44), the Costly Pearl (Matt 13:45-46), and the Dragnet (Matt 13:47-50). Both the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven teach about the influence of the Kingdom, while from the Hidden Treasure and a Costly Pearl we learn about the preciousness of the Kingdom. The last pair, the Tares among Wheat and the Dragnet, talk about the selection process of the Kingdom: not all who seem to enter the Kingdom truly belong to the Kingdom. From these additional parables, we conclude that with the parable of the Sower, Matthew wants to emphasize the importance of human responsibility, which is in accordance to his more mature readers. Those whose heart is a good soil *must* produce good fruits abundantly.

Mark provides a different emphasis from the same Parable of the Sower. After this parable, Mark adds the Parable of the Seed that Grows by Itself (Mrk 4:26-29), and the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mrk 4:30-32). From this combination, Mark wants to emphasize the Divine sovereignty, "he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows – how, he himself does not know" (Mrk 4:27).<sup>10</sup> Importantly, right after the Parables Discourse, Mark records that Jesus stills the storm with his word (Mark 4:30-32).

In this way Mark balances hope and tension in this section. On the one hand, God's grace upon Jesus' disciples is real and unbeatable. But on the other hand, if Jesus, or a reader of Mark, expects a satisfactory response to

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<sup>10</sup> Contra Tolbert whose opinion is, "The parable, as Mark is using it, is neither about the small beginning nor the large ending, but rather it underscores the *cause* of the amazing transfiguration, the earth itself," and, "For the Gospel of Mark, it is simply the hard and painful truth that some people are in essence good and other are not" *Sowing the Gospel*, 162-3. Our objection is if this was the view of Mark, what would then be the meaning of Mark 4:11?

Jesus at this point, he will definitely be disappointed. The disciples start to demonstrate a lack of faith (Mrk 4:40) and understanding (Mrk 4:13). It is as if only a matter of time before their heart will show the sign of hardening. Thus the contrast between hope and tension is high in this section, even higher than in the previous one. The reader is urged to keep them both while continuing to read to find out what the result is.<sup>11</sup>

#### **1.4. The Fall of All Hope? (Mrk 6:6b-8:21)**

With this we arrive at one of the “darkest” sections of the Gospel of Mark. The lack of progress of the disciples is unbelievable: they not only lack courage and understanding, their hearts are also hardened, which is worse (Mrk 6:52). Jesus concurs when he harshly rebukes them, “Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember ...” (Mrk 8:17-18). This gloomy section ends with one last question from Jesus, as if expressing his frustration, “Do you not yet understand?” (Mrk 8:20).

Thus, has all hope fallen? Will human stubbornness prevail? Before going any further, it is time to note that after the opening section that ends in positive tone (Mrk 1:15), the ending of the next three sections gradually becomes more and more negative. Section two ends with a shocking information that in the midst of Jesus’ unbeatable authority, one of his twelve most important disciples is a traitor (Mrk 3:19). Section three ends with Jesus wondering at the Nazarene’s unbelief (6:6). In this section Jesus has been made “frustrated” by the inability of his disciples to understand and to believe. So, has all hope fallen?

As hope is not without tension in this gospel, tension is also not without hope. Through the confrontation with the Pharisees on the matter of tradition (Mrk 7:1-23) and through the healing of a deaf man in the region of Decapolis, Mark shows the importance of heart and that sometimes it does take more effort before true healing of the heart can be produced (Mrk 7:31-37). We can be sure that it is no coincidence that in the section when the

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<sup>11</sup> Some spot the incoherence of the disciples that despite having the mystery of the Kingdom, they still fail to understand the meaning of the Parable of the Sower, which makes Jesus wonder. For Beavis, “[T]he fact that the ‘mystery’ is conveyed to the disciples only ‘with explanations’ is not an ideal state of affairs; it is made necessary by the disciples’ incomprehension,” *Mark’s Audience*, 139. What is the explanation for this discrepancy? Does it mean that Jesus’ disciples do not actually receive the mystery of the kingdom? However, if that was the case, why would Jesus still need to wonder about them? If that was the case, the enigma would lay, then, not in the fact that the disciples have got the mystery of the Kingdom and yet still need an explanation, but in the fact that Jesus still wonders though he already knows that the disciples do not actually receive the mystery of the kingdom. Considering the capacity of the Markan Jesus, the first case is more reasonable than the second one.

heart of the disciples becomes so problematic, the major conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is regarding the matter of heart. In rebuking the Pharisees who give so much emphasis on the outside, Jesus sternly emphasizes the significance of the inside part of a man, which is his heart, through which everything comes out of. In juxtaposing the discussion about the heart and the story about the miserable heart of the disciples, Mark highlights the utmost importance of taking care of one's heart.

Secondly, in the healing of the deaf at Decapolis, that occurs only in the Gospel of Mark, we find a process that never appears in other healing stories, "Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him 'Ephatha!' that is, 'Be opened!'" And only after all these efforts, "[H]is ears were opened, ... and he began speaking plainly" (Mrk 7:34-35). And because this healing happened at Decapolis, we are reminded of the previous exorcising story that happened at the same place. While in the earlier case, the people implored Jesus to leave, now thanks to the confession of the man who has been freed from the demons by Jesus, the people of Decapolis show such a different response to him. In addition, apart from this positive response from the people of Decapolis, the faith of a Syrophenician woman is also very encouraging (7:24-31). Thus, in highlighting the importance of heart, Mark at the same time shows that God is able to cure the heart. These two incidents put readers' hope alive while they continue to wonder, "Could this miracle happen also in the hearts of Jesus' disciples?"

### **1.5. Hope Wins but Tension Remains (Mrk 8:22-10:52)**

Mark leaves his readers wondering at the end of the previous section. Although some incidents would be enough to keep the lamp of hope alight, the darkness that surrounds the heart of the disciples seems too thick to be penetrated. However, as a skillful writer who dares to let the situation in his story to become as bad as possible because he knows exactly how to turn it around, Mark in this section masterfully clears out the fog.

After the three consecutive sections end with disheartened information and statement, this next section of Mark starts and ends with the healing of the blind (Mrk 8:22-26 and 10:46-52). This *inclusio* is programmatic for the whole picture of the disciples in the Gospel of Mark. The choice of the healing of the *blind* is hardly a coincidence. In the first healing, Mark records that it sometimes takes time before the previously blind can see clearly. Sometimes even after the miracle has happened, he can only see human "like trees, walking around." But worry not, because after Jesus' second touch,

he “began to see everything clearly” (Mrk 8:22-25). Then Mark puts the second healing of the blind, symbolically to mean that the disciples would not only begin to see; but, as in the case of Bartimaeus, they may also begin to follow Jesus on the way of the cross (cf. Mrk 10:52).

But can this interpretation be sustained in a closer reading? Is Peter not to be rebuked by Jesus after he dares to refute Jesus’ first foretelling of his death (Mrk 8:33)? Is it not true that they still fail to cast out a demon (Mrk 9:18)? Is it not also true that they still seek to know who the greatest is (Mrk 9:33-34) and who is the one that would sit on the right and on the left of Jesus (Mrk 10:37)?

The answer to all these questions is, of course, “yes.” However, this does not mean that Jesus’ disciples show no progression. First of all—and this is important—starting from this section, the disciples are no longer accused of having a hardened heart, neither by Mark nor by Jesus; Peter finally understands who Jesus truly is. Although Mark 9:19 (“And he answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me”) may seem to negate this, our careful examination reveals that, it is more probable that Jesus is rebuking the crowd instead of his disciples in this particular case.<sup>12</sup> “Them” in Mark 9:19 must be linked with 9:15, “And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him.” In fact, after verse 14, the disciples seem to retreat to the background. Moreover, we read in Mark 9:28-29 that Jesus and his disciples discuss the matter privately and not loudly. After being rebuked by Jesus, the disciples would usually not dare to ask anything further.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, the progression is shown by the fact that in this section, Jesus teaches them about how to serve in the new community that he is going to build. If in the previous section, there are links between Jesus’ teaching about the heart and the hardened heart of the disciples, here we find links between Jesus’ healing ministry and his instructions to serve (Mrk 9:33-37; 42-48; 10:13-16). Jesus gives these instructions because he knows that his disciples would be able to accept and practice them.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Morna D. Hooker, “The sweeping condemnation of Jesus’ whole generation seems more appropriate to a general indictment of the nation’s failure to respond to him, rather than to a rebuke of the disciples for their lack of faith in his power,” *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, BNTC (Peabody: Hedrickson, 1991), 225. She also makes an apt observation, “when Jesus himself was unable to perform cures in 6:1-6, it was the inhabitants of Nazareth (not Jesus!) who had insufficient faith.

<sup>13</sup> Although we have to agree with France that, “The antecedent of αὐτοῖς (and therefore the identity of the γενεὰ ἀπίστος) is not clear,” *The Gospel of Mark*, 365. Adela Yarbrough Collins has a similar opinion, “The referent of the ‘faithless generation’ is ambiguous,” *Mark*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 437. For those who argue that Jesus primarily rebukes his disciples see Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, AB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 659.

Thus, Jesus' disciples are still lacking in faith, courage, and humility, and these deficiencies linger even till the very last verse of Mark. However, these shortcomings should not blind us to the fact that the progress does happen, as small as it is. Thanks to the power of Jesus, the disciples' heart is no longer hardened, and they start to understand. The progress is not astounding. Nonetheless, it is real. The crucial question is whether this progress would continue or the disciples would revert to their own "bad" habit.

### 1.6. Hope and Tension in Jerusalem (Mrk 11:1-14:11)

Although the lack of faith and the lack of courage are present in this section, (and it gets worse in the next section), the fruit of the Kingdom is already starting to be produced by Jesus' disciples. While in the previous section the disciples learn in order to understand, in this section they learn in order to serve. This (and the next) section begins with the disciples preparing Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem and the last Passover. These signs mark a good progress; they start to work for Jesus.

Although the disciples were sent on a mission trip long before Jesus arrived at Jerusalem (Mrk 6:6b-12), and although they were involved in the feeding miracle (Mrk 6:41), it is here, in preparing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, that they are actually serving *Jesus himself*. In serving him they do exactly as he commands. This is clear when we compare these two consecutive verses:

[A]nd said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately'" (Mrk 11:2-3)

And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go" (Mrk 11:4-6)

This comparison shows the portrait of the disciples who are listening, obeying, and serving. The change of heart, which has started before their arrival in Jerusalem, continues after they arrive in this city. They still need to learn how to persevere in prayer. Of course, they still need more faith and more courage, but that does not mean that they show no fruit.

Moreover, we can also detect the parallel in ending between this section and the next section: both end with the sandwich composition. In Mark 14:1-10, we meet the scribes and the chief priest (Mrk 14:1-2) – the unnamed woman (Mrk 14:3-9) – and again the chief priest *plus* Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve (Mrk 14:10-11). In sandwiching these stories, Mark provides the best example of the last that becomes first and the first that becomes last.

The actors in these stories cannot be more contrasting. At the top and bottom parts of this sandwich, we meet with (A) men; (B) the noble ones; in the middle we meet with (A) woman; (B) the unnamed one. Contrasting this woman with Judas Iscariot is also very enlightening: (1) while Judas received money from selling Jesus, this woman, in order to be able to serve Jesus, sacrificed the most, if not the only, precious thing that she had. (2) Ironically, while Judas received such positive response from the chief priest that they “were glad when they heard this,” (Mrk 14:11), this woman got an indignant response (Mrk 14:5). Mark ends this section with *both* negative *and* positive responses. However, in a sandwich composition, we must weigh the middle segment more than the outer ones. Therefore, although the evil people can be so horrible, this unnamed woman shows that the fruit produced from hearing and understanding can be so wonderful and bountiful.

### 1.7. Hope and Tension until The End of the Day (Mrk 14:12-16:8)

At the first sight, it seems that the positive trend that has been building since section five vaporizes completely in this last section. Within this section we meet with the disciples who fail to listen carefully to Jesus’ warning that the shepherd would be struck and the sheep shall be scattered (Mrk 14:27). Peter is sure that he is not going to fall (Mrk 14:29-31).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, he does fall later (Mrk 14:66-72). The disciples who fail to remain on guard in Gethsemane (Mrk 14:32-42), who run away when Jesus is arrested (Mrk 14:43-52), who betray him (Mrk 14:66-72), and the female disciples who are afraid (Mrk 16:1-8), (who can be compared to the disciples who were in the boat during the storm, Mrk 5:40; 6:51-52) — these are enough to dissipate the positive picture that the reader of Mark’s Gospel gets thus far. Now it seems that everything has been brought to null. All these incidents are of course a setback for the disciples, are they not?

As strange as it first seems, a more positive reading is justified. First of all, Mark’s final section starts with the preparation for the last Passover (Mrk 14:12-16). Once again we meet with the disciples who serve. Moreover, this time they are the ones who take the initiative and ask Jesus where he wants to celebrate the Passover (Mrk 14:12; cf. Mrk 11:1). As in the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem (Mrk 11:1-14), Jesus’ disciples still have a serving heart.

More importantly, although they deny that they will betray him, this denial comes from an *opposite* motivation to Peter’s rebuke to his master for foretelling his passion. Peter rebuked Jesus because he was afraid to suffer;

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<sup>14</sup> Peter “accidentally” says that what Jesus says is plainly wrong, which is very similar to his response when Jesus foretells his passion for the first time.

but now they refute him because they are *willing* to suffer with him, a *totally* different motivation! Peter's cry of remorse is an additional proof that he is indeed willing to suffer with his Master and deeply regrets his failure. And the fact that the women from the tomb are given a command to share the good news with the other disciples is an indication that even after Jesus' death, his disciples still gather in one place. Otherwise, how can we expect these women to trace them one by one?<sup>15</sup>

Thus once again, the disciple's flesh is indeed weak, but their heart and their spirit are still fine. Their problem at this time is no longer a hardened heart. What they lack is a steadfastness in prayer. They are fallen because they do not realize that although "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mrk 14:38). Critically, although may be not realized by many Markan commentators,<sup>16</sup> with this statement, Jesus himself and of course Mark actually affirm that the disciples' *spirit* is in good condition!

Last but not least, the way Mark ends his gospel shows that while he is not trying to cover up the tension, his use of the sandwich technique shows that there are still many reasons for hope. Most Markan interpreters have focused on the fact that the three women "went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mrk 16:8). Since early Christianity, this "incomplete" and "anti-climax" ending has perplexed many Christian scribes; some of them even try to help Mark in "completing" the ending of his Gospel. We would like to propose that, in seeking to understand Mark's enigmatic ending, we need to realise that he uses a sandwich composition to end his Gospel: the women of Galilee (Mrk 15:40-41)—Joseph of Arimathea (Mrk 15:42-46)—the women of Galilee (Mrk 16:1-8).

As in the previous sandwich, the contrast in the last part of Mark is very stark indeed. These women used to follow and to serve Jesus, since he was in Galilee, while Joseph Arimathea is "a prominent member of the Council" (Mrk 15:43), Jesus' arch-enemy. Moreover, although these women

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<sup>15</sup> Contra Tolbert who argues, "The real tragedy of the Gospel [of Mark] on the human level is the failure of the disciples, the rocky ground that Jesus has worked so hard to cultivate," *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 195, and Linden Youngquist who says, "With respect to the disciples in Mark, we may characterize them as seed sown on rocky soil," "Matthew, Mark and Q: A Literary Exploration," in Becker and Runesson, ed. *Mark and Matthew I*, 233.

<sup>16</sup> The affinity between this phrase and a *Christian* life is underlined by Marcus, "It is doubtful ... whether Mark's Christian readers could have heard the sentence 'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak' without thinking of their own continuing battle with 'the flesh' and support by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:17), *Mark 8-16*, 980. In other words, the experience of Jesus' disciples in this story is the experience of a Christian instead of an apostate. More tellingly is Raymond Brown, whom according France "argues that Jesus' words apply to [Jesus] himself as well as to the disciples: the purpose of his prayer has been to overcome his human weakness which shrinks from fulfilling the Father's will," *The Gospel of Mark*, 587. All these indirectly confirm our conviction that although the disciples' flesh is weak, their spirit is fine.



used to follow and serve Jesus since he was in Galilee, at this very critical moment, they, ironically, are “looking from a distance” (Mrk 15:40). When they finally come to Jesus’ tomb, they are already too late—Jesus is no longer there.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Joseph “went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus” (Mrk 15:43). While these women are waiting behind the line, Joseph takes initiative to come forward. Thereafter, in a stark contrast, “[the women] *were afraid*” while “[Joseph of Arimathea] *gathered up courage*”! Joseph is as afraid as these women, but he mustered up courage for himself.

Thus, in the Gospel of Mark, the last can be first, but can also go back to being last again. On the other hand, the first can be last, but that does not mean that he or she has to remain last. At the end of the previous section, an unnamed woman who is the last from the society point of view has become the first, while the Jerusalem nobles, who should be the first, turn out to be the last. But here, the women become last, and a prominent member of the Council becomes first.

Once again, in a sandwich arrangement, we must focus more on the middle part, instead of on the top and bottom. Therefore, although the Gospel of Mark ends with the story of the scared and silent Galilean women, Mark’ last word is Joseph of Arimathea, who “gathered up courage” to come to Pilate and bury Jesus’ body.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, although the word “gospel” does not appear in this section, it is justified if we relate “the gospel” in the beginning of Mark with the news about Jesus’ resurrection at the end and conclude that the gospel is a good news because Jesus is the true Lord who has not only conquered demons and the Jewish authorities, but also death. The focus on Joseph of Arimathea and the resurrection of Jesus makes the tension in the Gospel of Mark ending with hope.

## 1.8. Conclusion

From our investigation on Mark, we can draw two key implications.

1. Mark uses simple and effective rhetorical tools to deliver his purpose. Using the sandwich technique, *inclusio*, and a shocking ending for each section, Mark succeeds in engaging his readers. In maintaining hope and tension from the beginning until the end, Mark keeps stimulating his readers, reminding them to be on guard, challenging them not to become complacent, and encouraging them to keep moving forward, with the confidence

<sup>17</sup> Contra France who see these women as “true disciples,” *The Gospel of Mark*, 665.

<sup>18</sup> We cannot discuss the enigma of Mark’s ending here. For that see Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1088-1096; Hooker, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, 391-394; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 685-688. As far as we can say, it looks like many Markan interpreters do not see “a sandwich structure” in this section.

that God is in control. Mark refuses to treat human weaknesses and human stubbornness lightly, but he also never fails to see the higher power.

2. Although it is the shortest among the Synoptics, the Gospel of Mark has its distinct quality and is written with a clear purpose in mind. It is arguable that no other gospel can be as effective as Mark in maintaining the balance between tension and hope. Mark never treats the situation lightly; but he also never lets the situation, no matter how bad it is, to overwhelm the hope. And as a pastor, I will preach from Mark if my specific purpose is to strengthen my congregation when hope and tension collide.

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