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THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF THE CONTROVERSY STORIES IN MARK 2:1-3:6

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IT HAS long been agreed that the five controversy stories of Mark 2:1-3:6—the healing of the paralytic, the eating with tax collectors and sinners, the question about fasting, plucking grain on the sabbath, and the man with the withered hand—constitute a collection of conflict stories compiled either by Mark or by some earlier collector.¹ These five stories have not merely been collected in one place because of similarities in form and content but they have been constructed in such a way as to form a single literary unit with a tight and well-worked out concentric or chiasmic structure: A, B, C, B', A' (Mark 2:1-12, 13-17, 18-22, 23-28; 3:1-6). If these pericopes do indeed constitute a coherent *literary* unit, recognized by Mark as such, then a consideration of the literary structure will aid in understanding the individual elements within the collection and its meaning and place in the over-all structure of the Gospel of Mark. First, the chiasmic structure of the five stories will be established using formal, linguistic, and content criteria. Then the question of whether the structure is Marcan or pre-Marcan will be considered.

I

To begin with, the author of the gospel intended 2:1-3:6 to be viewed as a literary unit or sub-unit within his gospel. He set the section into a frame. The first chapter of Mark ends with Jesus' healing the leper, and the leper spreading the news "so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter" (1:45b). Ch. 2 opens with a complete break: "And when he returned to Capernaum" (2:1). The first thing Mark had Jesus do after not being able openly to enter a city is to enter a city. But Mark 3:7 picks up again right where 1:45 left off: "Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed; also from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea, and from beyond the Jordan and from about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, hearing all that he did, came to him"

¹Martin Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche* (Berlin: Trowitzsch und Sohn, 1919) 5-16; Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Scribner, 1934) 219; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1966) 91-92.

(3:7-8). Jesus once again is outside of the cities, and people are coming to him from every quarter; the places are now specifically named. The evangelist has blocked off the controversy section by means of a frame.

The five pericopes appear to be combined in a chiasmic pattern according to content: A, the healing of the paralytic, contains a healing of the resurrection type; B, the eating with tax collectors and sinners, concerns eating; C, the question about fasting, fasting; B', plucking grain on the sabbath, eating again; and A', the man with the withered hand, contains another miracle of the resurrection type. The chiasmic pattern is also to be seen in details of form and language.

The first and fifth stories, A and A', are constructed along parallel lines. They begin with virtually identical introductions: A: *kai eisēlthōn palin eis*, "and having entered again into" (2:1) and A': *kai eisēlthen palin eis*, "and he entered again into" (3:1). Both occur indoors: in one case a house, in the other a synagogue.

Both stories have the same form: a controversy apophthegm imbedded into a healing miracle.² This is a mixed form and relatively uncommon.³ The miracles are both of the resurrection type, not exorcisms; the paralytic and the withered hand are each restored. The verb *egeirō* is used three times in the story of the paralytic, and once in the parallel story of the withered hand in the rather odd expression *egeire eis to meson*, "get up to the middle" (3:3), which serves to bring the verb into the story.

In both stories the controversy apophthegm is imbedded into the miracle and set off from it by means of the repetition of Jesus' address to the man being healed: *legei tō paralytikō* in Mark 2:5 and 10; *legei tō anthrōpō* in Mark 3:3 and 5. In neither story do the opponents of Jesus openly state their opposition: in the first, A, Jesus knows that they debate in their *hearts*; in the last, A', Jesus is grieved at their hardness of *heart*. These are the first uses of *kardia* in the gospel,⁴ and the term is not used again until 6:52 where it is the disciples' hearts which are hardened. In both A and A', Jesus responds to unspoken opposition with a counter-question in good rabbinic controversy style: "Which is easier to say . . . 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk?'" (2:9) and "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm?" (3:4).

Then, by means of Jesus speaking again to the one being healed, stories A and A' revert to the miracle form. The miracle is completed, and the reaction of the onlookers described: "the impression the miracle creates on the crowd."⁵ The content of the reactions is not parallel but antithetical: to the healing of the paralytic, "So that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying 'We never saw anything like this!'" (2:12); to the healing of the withered hand, "The Pharisees

² Contrary to the opinion of Rudolf Bultmann (*The History of the Synoptic Tradition* [New York: Harper and Row, 1963] 12, 209), who views Mark 3:1-5 as an "organically complete apophthegm" not utilizing the style of a miracle story.

³ Bultmann, *HST*, 209.

⁴ Used twice in the first story.

⁵ Bultmann, *HST*, 225.

went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (3:6). The reaction in 3:6 is hostile, not admiring, but it seems nonetheless to fill the slot in the miracle form of the response of the audience.

Thus A, the healing of the paralytic, and A', the restoration of the withered hand, are constructed in a parallel manner as shown by form, by content, and by assorted linguistic details. I would propose that 3:1-6 has been composed by Mark in order to balance the story of the paralytic and to complete the sabbath controversy pattern (see below).⁶ The parallelism of structure, in any case, seems beyond accident.

The middle three pericopes, B, eating with tax collectors, C, fasting, B', plucking grain on the sabbath, contain several features which set them off from A and A'. None contains a miracle and all contain wisdom sayings or proverbs. In A and A' the cast of characters consists of Jesus, opponents, and the sick man. In B, C, and B' the cast consists of Jesus, opponents, and disciples. In all three, either Jesus or his disciples are questioned about their behavior; Jesus does not take the initiative.

The setting of B and B' within the over-all structure of the controversy section is somewhat more complex, since they are not only parallel in structure to each other, but B is set in relation to A, and B' to A'. Story A, the healing of the paralytic, deals with the issue of forgiveness of sins. Story B, the eating with tax collectors, has to do with Jesus' association with sinners. The two stories are joined by the catchwords *hamartia* and *hamartōloi*.⁷

B' and A', on the other hand, are both concerned with the sabbath law. In B' the Pharisees ask why the disciples do what is not lawful on the sabbath (2:24); in A' "they" are watching to see if Jesus will heal on the sabbath (3:2), and Jesus asks if it is lawful on the sabbath to do good or evil (3:4). The last two controversies are joined by the catchwords *tois sabbasin* and *exestin*.

Though in content B points back to A (the subject of sin), and B' ahead to A' (sabbath law), in structure and form B is parallel to B'. Story B opens with Jesus out of doors, beside the sea calling Levi from his tax office, calling a sinner who is in the middle of sinning (2:13-14). It closes with a proverb, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick," followed immediately by the implied christological saying, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (2:17).

Story B' similarly begins out of doors, in the fields, with the disciples breaking the sabbath law by plucking grain (2:23). It ends with the proverb, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" followed immediately by the christological saying, "So the Son of man is lord also of the sabbath" (2:27-28). The content in B and B' is different, but the structure or form is the same. In both cases the final proverb and saying justify the initial action.

⁶ Cf. Rudolf Grob, *Einführung in das Markus-Evangelium* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1965) 38-39.

⁷ Johannes Sundwall, *Die Zusammensetzung des Markusevangeliums* (Acta academiae aboensis humaniora IX:2; Abo: Abo Akademi, 1934) 15.

The central sections of B and B', however, are concerned *not* with sinners or sabbath, but both are concerned with *eating*. In B, Jesus enters a house (as story A took place in a house) and eats with tax collectors and sinners (2:15-16). The verb *esthiō* is used twice in the present tense. In B', Jesus refers to the scriptural incident of David entering the house of God (as A' takes place in a synagogue), eating the bread of the presence and giving it also to "those with him" (2:25-26). *Esthiō* is used twice in the aorist. In story B, Jesus and his disciples eat with tax collectors, something not lawful in light of the rabbinic laws of ritual cleanliness.⁸ In B' David and his followers ate that which was lawful *only* for priests to eat (Mark 2:26).

In story B, the eating is an integral part of the pericope; Jesus is questioned on his behavior in eating with tax collectors and sinners. Yet the response, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (vs. 17b), may refer not merely to the call to table fellowship⁹ but to the call of Levi in vs. 14. The relevance of the example of David's action to the breaking of sabbath laws in story B' is debatable,¹⁰ and the story reads more smoothly without the insertion of vss. 25-26. I suggest, therefore, that Mark (or an earlier collector) has inserted this OT reference into B'¹¹ because of its parallelism in content to story B, Jesus' eating with sinners, in order to balance his chiasmic structure. And in light of the chiasm, David's action may justify not so much the breaking of the sabbath law but Jesus' behavior in story B. David broke the law when he had need (*chreian eschen*, vs. 25); Jesus asserted that it was the sick who need a physician (*chreian echousin*, vs. 17).

The literary interrelationships and correlations of the first two and the last two stories seem sufficiently numerous and precise to establish that Mark 2:1-3:6 is a well-worked-out deliberate chiasmic structure. This leaves C, the question about fasting, as the middle section of the structure by definition. Story C is set apart from the pattern of the other stories. Each of the other four stories has an explicit setting; C is completely without any indication of setting. In the other four, the opponents are named; in story C, they are not specified.¹²

C itself consists of three separate units: vss. 18-19, a controversy apophthegm about fasting, with Jesus' response, in effect that it was a time for joy, not fasting;

⁸ If a tax collector even enters a house, all that is in the house becomes unclean, not merely what he has touched (Mishnah, *Tohoroth* 7:6).

⁹ Bultmann, *HST*, 18.

¹⁰ David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956) 67-71.

¹¹ The prevailing view has been that vss. 27-28 were added to vss. 23-26 (Bultmann, *HST*, 16-17; Taylor, *St. Mark*, 218). Recently, Arland J. Hultgren ("The Formation of the Sabbath Pericope in Mark 2:23-28," *JBL* 91 [1972] 38-43) and Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn (*Ältere Sammlungen im Markusevangelium* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971] 74-77) have argued that vss. 25-26 are an insertion into an earlier unit consisting of vss. 23-24, 27 (28).

¹² The verbs *erchontai* and *legousin* in vs. 18b are best understood as impersonal plurals, meaning in effect, "Jesus was asked." See C. H. Turner, "Marcan Usage: Notes, Critical and Exegetical, on the Second Gospel" *JTS* 25 (1924) 378-79.

vs. 20, the christological allegorization of the "bridegroom" and the justification of the fasting practice of the early church;¹³ and vss. 21–22, two apparently unattached sayings on the incompatibility of the old and new, which in their present context justify the new over against the old. The restatement of the apophthegm counter-question, "Can the sons of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them?" into the statement, "As long as they have the bridegroom with them they are not able to fast" (2:19), may have been done in order to produce a double saying to balance the two new-old sayings,¹⁴ with vs. 20, the allusion to Jesus' death, in between. The pattern: double saying, allusion to the crucifixion,¹⁵ double saying, in itself seems quite probable. But then the whole of vs. 18, contrasting the fasting practices of the disciples of John and of the Pharisees with the disciples of Jesus, would balance the phrase "new wine in new skins" (vs. 22c). The phrase, however, is not parallel in form to vs. 18 and is also of doubtful textual validity. Story C does not appear to be, as one might like, a precise chiasmic structure within itself, set within the larger chiasmic structure.

In terms of content, C fits very well as the center of the chiasmic structure. It is concerned with fasting, set between B and B' which are concerned with eating. Vs. 20, with its allusion to the crucifixion, is the center not only of C but of the entire controversy section. It is set over against the two outside stories, A and A', with their "resurrection" type healings. According to Nils Lund's laws of chiasmic structure, there is often a "shift at the center" where an antithetic idea is introduced.¹⁶ The death of Jesus is alluded to for the first time here. Also according to Lund, identical ideas are often distributed in the extremes and center of a chiasmic system:¹⁷ so here the extremes and center are concerned with death-resurrection (the verbs *egeirō* in A and A' and *apairō* in C) while the remainder of the system is concerned primarily with eating-fasting-eating.

Along with the chiasmic structure of the five sub-units, there exists also a linear development of hostility in the opponents from silent criticism to the questioning of Jesus' disciples, to the questioning of Jesus himself, to watching him, finally to plotting to destroy him. The opponents are designated in order as the scribes, the scribes of the Pharisees, the Pharisees, and finally the Pharisees with the Herodians. The attack of the opponents becomes increasingly overt in the sequence of stories. This may be a deliberate literary device used to lend a time-sense, a sense of progression, to an otherwise content-structured unit.

Thus the five controversy stories of Mark 2:1–3:6 form a tightly-constructed literary unit, predominantly chiasmic in principle: the first two stories have to do

¹³ These two units appear already merged in the Gospel of Thomas, logion 104. The last unit appears as logion 47.

¹⁴ The restatement is not necessary to establish the allegory, the bridegroom = Christ, since both Matthew and Luke drop the restatement but keep the allegory (Matt 9:15; Luke 5:34–35).

¹⁵ Crucifixion, of course, is not explicitly mentioned. The much milder verb *apairō* is used here and in the parallels, Matt 9:15 and Luke 5:35, its only occurrences in the NT.

¹⁶ *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1942).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

with sin; the last two with the sabbath law; the first and last stories deal with resurrection-type healings; the second and fourth with eating; and the middle one with fasting and crucifixion. This pattern is seen not only in content, but in details of structure, form, and language.

It would appear, furthermore, that the over-all chiasmic structure of Mark 2:1-3:6 has influenced the form of the individual pericopes within the section. The story of the man with the withered hand (A', Mark 3:1-6) may have received its precise form so that it would parallel A, the healing of the paralytic. The incident of David eating the showbread (2:25-26) may have been added not to fill out the pericope in which it is placed, but to balance another pericope altogether. The fact that stories B and B' each end with a proverb followed by a christological saying may not be the result of the independent development of each pericope but the result of the literary activity of the redactor setting the two pericopes in relation to each other, adding or deleting material as necessary.¹⁸ The settings, in a house in stories A and B, in a house of God and a synagogue in B' and A', are not necessarily ideal settings produced by the community for each saying, but may in part be the invention of the evangelist creating a literary whole out of separate incidents. The compiler of Mark 2:1-3:6 appears to have been more than a redactor, indeed a genuine author. If the form of individual pericopes has indeed been influenced by the incorporation of the pericopes into a larger literary structure, then to determine the form criticism and history of tradition of a pericope, one needs to consider not only the isolated pericope but also its setting in larger literary units.

II

Such a structure as found in Mark 2:1-3:6 does not occur by accident. Either Mark worked out the literary structure himself, or the entire section virtually as it now stands was created by some earlier writer or collector, and Mark incorporated the unit as a whole. On literary and theological grounds it would seem that the present structure is due to Mark. This does not, of course, exclude the idea that Mark was using earlier tradition or even an earlier collection of traditions to construct his section.

As a writer, Mark often "sandwiched" blocks of material.¹⁹ The setting off of material by means of a frame seems a natural extension of Mark's "sandwiching" technique. Therefore, the framework around 2:1-3:6 is quite as likely to indicate a Marcan construction as to indicate insertion of an already extant block of tradition. That Mark was sufficiently master of his material to create a fairly

¹⁸ For instance, there has been considerable debate as to whether Mark 2:27-28 is a unit, and if not, which verse was added later. See Hultgren, "The Sabbath Pericope," 38-43. One must also consider the possibility that Mark has added one or the other saying in order to balance the proverb — christological saying in vs. 17. Or perhaps, more probably, Mark may have added vs. 17b in order to balance vs. 28 and to tie the incident of eating with sinners to the call of Levi in vs. 14.

¹⁹ E.g., Mark 3:20-35; 5:22-43; 6:7-30; 11:12-25; 14:53-72.

elaborate chiasmic pattern has been shown by Lafontaine's and Beernaert's chiasmic literary analysis of Mark 8:27–9:13,²⁰ a section whose construction is generally agreed to be Marcan.²¹

Albert Vanhoye in his study of the passion narratives in the Synoptics²² demonstrates that it is Mark's habit to underline contrasts, a literary device used for a theological purpose. "Mark is not afraid to stun us; rather, he seeks to do so. He brings out contrasts, he underscores the paradox: the Cross is scandalous, it none the less reveals the Son of God."²³ The controversy section as a whole also emphasizes contrasts: eating/joy vs. fasting/mourning; resurrection vs. crucifixion. Viewed in this manner, the allusion to the crucifixion does not come surprisingly early in the Marcan scheme,²⁴ but it is for Mark a suitable literary climax. Theologically also, it is consonant with Mark's emphasis on the theology of the cross. Jesus' ministry is shown to be under the shadow of the cross from the beginning.

The controversy section fits naturally into the structure of Mark's gospel. Mark, after he showed the enthusiastic response of the crowds to Jesus in ch. 1, then demonstrated the hostility that these actions of Jesus aroused, which eventually resulted in his death. The conclusion in Mark 3:6, "the Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him," serves not only as a conclusion to the story of the withered hand, but also to the entire controversy section. To *this* result Jesus' actions lead.

Thus Mark employed the conflict stories theologically to place Jesus' life in the context of his death, and he used them in his narrative construction to show how Jesus' death historically was to come about. The controversy section appears to fit in with Mark's literary technique and with his theology; indeed, it is a good example of both.

The one fact not accounted for by the assumption of a Marcan construction from previously independent units of tradition is the occurrence of the title Son of Man²⁵ in stories A and B'. The title is not used in the suffering-eschatological

²⁰ René Lafontaine and Pierre Mourlon Beernaert, "Essai sur la Structure de Marc, 8,27–9,13" *RSR* 57 (1969) 543-61. For the use of chiasm in oral and written literature, see Charles H. Lohr, "Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew," *CBQ* 23 (1961) 424-27.

²¹ Dibelius, *Tradition*, 230; Taylor, *St. Mark*, 98; Sherman E. Johnson, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Black, 1960) 147, 154, 159; Ernest Haenchen, "Die Komposition von Mk VIII 27–IX 1 und Par.," *NovT* 6 (1963) 81-109; Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (London: SPCK, 1970) 66.

²² *Structure and Theology of the Accounts of the Passion in the Synoptic Gospels* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1967).

²³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²⁴ Albertz, *Sireitgespräche*, 5; Taylor, *St. Mark*, 211-12.

²⁵ If it is to be considered a title in this section; see Lewis S. Hay, "The Son of Man in Mark 2:10 and 2:28," *JBL* 89 (1970) 69-75. For two interpretations which understand the use of Son of Man in 2:10 and 2:28 as part of Mark's own theology, see Norman Perrin, "The Creative Use of the Son of Man Traditions by Mark," *USQR* 23 (1968) 360-61;

sense that Mark employs from 8:31 on.²⁶ Nor does its double use fit into Mark's literary pattern, as the allusion to the crucifixion does. The double appearance of the title implies that Mark is reworking a previous collection of conflict stories.

Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn in his recent study of earlier collections used by Mark arrives at the same result via the methods of form criticism, especially the determination of the *Sitz im Leben* in the community. He concludes that there was an earlier collection of four units: the healing of the paralytic, the eating with the tax collectors (without vs. 13-14), the question about fasting, and the plucking of grain on the sabbath without its OT reference.²⁷ Since all four concern Jewish praxis and are settled by appeals to christological arguments,²⁸ they serve the needs of the community against Jewish Christians who accept the full power of the earthly Son of Man.²⁹ Vs. 28, "the Son of man is lord *also* of the sabbath," concludes the entire collection, referring to the Son of Man's authority to forgive sins in the first story.³⁰

Kuhn interprets Mark's insertions of the OT reference (2:25-26) and the story of the withered hand (3:1-5) as a re-inclusion of Jewish-type arguments,³¹ the insertion of the call of Levi (2:13-14) and the conclusion in 3:6 as evidence of Mark's historicizing tendency.³² The earlier collection explains the appearance of the title Son of Man and also the "too early hints of Jesus about his death" in vs. 20.³³

Kuhn's reconstruction of the earlier collection with its explanation of the occurrence of the title Son of Man in Mark's controversy section is admirable. However, his explanations for the Marcan expansions are inadequate. More probably, Mark has reworked the material in order to create his chiasmic literary structure, which in turn brings out his meaning. Further vs. 20, the allusion to the crucifixion, is not a leftover from earlier tradition but the center of Mark's literary structure and the heart of his message: Jesus' life is to be seen as the way of the cross.

Mark was a writer of considerable literary skill if not of elegant Greek; it is only by paying attention to the literary structure he created that we can hope to interpret his gospel properly. Moreover, since the literary structure has in part determined the shape of the individual pericopes, it is also necessary to consider it when studying the form or tradition-history of an individual pericope.

John H. Elliott, "Man and the Son of Man in the Gospel according to Mark," *Humane Gesellschaft* (eds. Trutz Rendtorff and Arthur Rich; Zürich: Zwingli, 1970) 50-58.

²⁶ Another of the arguments of Albertz (*Streitgespräche*, 5) for a pre-Markan collection.

²⁷ Kuhn, *Sammlungen*, 74, 86, 87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82, 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73, 81, 83-85, 96.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74, 77, 86.

³² *Ibid.*, 86, 87, 223.

³³ *Ibid.*, 87