

Today we see an interesting feature of Mark's Gospel, the sandwiching of two seemingly unrelated stories. He first starts telling us about Jairus' daughter then switches to the story of a woman afflicted with a hemorrhage, and then back to the story of Jairus' daughter. This may seem a bit unusual, but it is not the only instance in which Mark does this sort of thing. This literary device is called an *inclusio* and there are ten or more occasions in Mark's Gospel where he uses this technique.

At first we might just think that Mark is recounting a sequence of events, and indeed that may be true at one level. But the Gospels are not meant to simply be strict linear descriptions of events, like we might find in a newspaper or history book. So, what value is there in sandwiching these two stories together over just telling one story and then the other?

If we look closer, we can find some interesting clues why Mark did this. Notice that the woman was afflicted for twelve years and Jairus' little girl was "*a child of twelve*". The little girl was the daughter of a synagogue official and Jesus refers to the afflicted woman as daughter. This suggests that there is a more significant connection between these two stories than just their temporal relationship and Mark intends for them to be read together. It is reasonable to conclude that he has something to say beyond the stories themselves.

Today, when we read the Scriptures, we naturally interpret them through our twenty-first century eyes. But to dig deeper into their meaning we need to look at them as a first century Jew would see them and ask, what guided their interpretation of these two stories?

A first century Jewish reader would be very familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, and interpret the Gospels with that familiarity. We, unfortunately are not as familiar with the Old Testament, and that can lead to missing significant messages contained in the Gospels.

Bishop Robert Baron suggests that the key to unlocking the deeper meaning in this Gospel is found in the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is the Old Testament book that spells out the Jewish Law and all its proscriptions. It was the Law that defined who Israel was as a people. To be a pious Jew was to live by that Law. In a very real way the Law was their identity.

Looking through the lens of Leviticus we can form a more complete understanding of the plight of the afflicted woman. According to Leviticus, a woman afflicted with a flow of blood was considered unclean (*Lv 15:25 ff*). Every article of furniture on which she sat became unclean, every bed she lay upon became unclean. Anything she touched became unclean. Anyone who touched her became unclean. For twelve years this woman was considered to be unclean and untouchable, not unlike a leper. She would have been ostracized from Jewish society, worship, family and friends. Her affliction was much more than a physical ailment, it made her a pariah. Yet her faith and hope were so great that she was bold enough to reach out and touch Jesus. But, by this act, according to Jewish law, she would have made *him* unclean.

Similarly, Levitical law was very clear about the dead. Anyone who touched a dead body would become unclean (*Lv 21:1 ff*). Only the dead person's nearest relatives were allowed to touch the corpse to prepare it for burial. Yet, after arriving at Jairus' house and being told that the little girl was already dead, Jesus reaches out and takes her hand. It may not seem significant to us, but it would have been shocking to a Jew because, according to Leviticus, this act would have rendered Jesus unclean.

But that's not what happened. In both of these stories, Jesus did not become unclean, just the opposite occurred. The woman was healed of her affliction and thus became clean again. The young girl was brought back to life, so she was no longer a cause of uncleanness. They were both given back their lives. The precepts of the Law were reversed.

With this perspective, Mark's account of these two events and their interesting juxtaposition, reveals a deeper lesson. Israel is being redefined as a people. No longer will they be defined by the book of Leviticus and the laws it contained. Jesus' actions supersede the Law. Israel's spiritual identity will no longer come from the rules and precepts of the Law, their spiritual identity now comes from Jesus.

We see this new identity unfold in the Acts of the Apostles. Remember the story of Peter's dream at Joppa, when he sees a sheet descend, and on it are animals both clean and unclean. A voice says "*slaughter and eat*". Peter refuses, because as a pious Jew who follows the Law, he would never eat unclean animals. He is told three times "*What God has made clean, you are not to call profane*" (*Acts 10:10-16*).

Peter is being given a new spiritual identity, one that is not subject to the old Levitical Law. Because of his experience Peter acknowledges the change, when he visits Cornelius, a Roman centurion. He says: *“You know that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with, or visit, a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean. And that is why I came without objection when sent for.”* (Acts 10:28-16)

Also in Acts we hear about the lifting of the requirement for circumcision to be a Christian. Circumcision was one of the most central laws of the old covenant and at the Council of Jerusalem, the question of whether or not to require Gentile converts to be circumcised, is debated. Paul and Barnabas had come down from Antioch to present the question: should the Gentile converts be required to follow the Levitical Law, that is, to become Jewish first before they could become Christian (Acts 15:1 ff)? The decision was no, adherence to the Law was not required. The result of the council was the important understanding that it is grace, not the Law, that saves.

In these episodes we see a new identity being formed. The deeper lesson that Mark is teaching us is that the new Israel, which is the Church, is defined in relation to Jesus. It is not the regulations of Leviticus that matter, it is how we follow Jesus that matters. When we are defined by laws we focus on our failures, which can blind us to God’s love. When communion with Jesus defines us, we focus on God’s love, which empowers us to do what he does, to reach out to those who are suffering, the marginalized and spiritually dead, and brings them back to life.

And when we struggle, we can allow ourselves to be touched by Jesus and experience his healing in ourselves. It is through personal contact with Jesus that life flows, that life is restored. Mark is telling us the story of the creation of the Church, the new Covenant, with its new law: to love as Jesus loved, doing what he did, pouring out love for others, regardless of social pressures, regardless of the cost.

As Jesus said: *“Love one another as I love you.”* (John 15:12) That is what defines us as a people.

Intercalation - enclosing or “sandwiching” one story in the middle of a different story (forming an A1, B, A2 pattern), so that each affects the interpretation of the other. The technique of intercalating one story within another occurs multiple times in Mark. Here are some examples.

<b>A1)</b> 2:1-5 – A paralytic is brought to Jesus <b>B)</b> 2:6-10 – Dispute over Jesus’ authority to forgive sins <b>A2)</b> 2:11-12 – Jesus heals the paralytic	<b>A1)</b> 3:20-21 – Jesus’ family goes out to restrain him <b>B)</b> 3:22-30 – the Beelzebul controversy <b>A2)</b> 3:31-35 – Jesus’ family arrives; who is his “true family”?
<b>A1)</b> 4:3-8 – Jesus tells parable of the sower and the seed <b>B)</b> 4:10-12 – Why does Jesus speak in parables? <b>A2)</b> 4:13-20 – Jesus explains parable of the sower and the seed	<b>A1)</b> 5:21-24 – Jairus asks Jesus to heal his dying daughter <b>B)</b> 5:25-34 – a hemorrhaging woman touches Jesus’ clothes <b>A2)</b> 5:35-43 – Jesus raises the daughter of Jairus to life
<b>A1)</b> 6:7-13 – Jesus sends out the twelve apostles on a mission <b>B)</b> 6:14-29 – the death of John the Baptist is recalled <b>A2)</b> 6:30-31 – the apostles return, reporting what they had done	<b>A1)</b> 8:22-26 – Jesus gives sight to a blind man near Bethsaida <b>B)</b> 8:28—10:45 – three passion predictions; discipleship teachings <b>A2)</b> 10:46-52 – Jesus gives sight to blind Bartimaeus near Jericho
<b>A1)</b> 9:1 – the coming of the Kingdom of God in power <b>B)</b> 9:2-8 – the Transfiguration of Jesus <b>A2)</b> 9:9-13 – the coming of Elijah and of the Son of Man	<b>A1)</b> 11:12-14 – Jesus curses a fig tree outside of Bethany <b>B)</b> 11:15-19 – Jesus expels sellers and buyers from the Temple <b>A2)</b> 11:20-25 – the fig tree is withered; the importance of faith
<b>A1)</b> 14:1-2 – chief priests want to arrest and kill Jesus <b>B)</b> 14:3-9 – a woman anoints Jesus at Bethany <b>A2)</b> 14:10-11 – Judas arranges to betray Jesus to the chief priests	<b>A1)</b> 14:54 – Peter enters the courtyard of the high priest, and sits by a fire <b>B)</b> 14:55-65 – Jesus is interrogated by the council of the chief priests <b>A2)</b> 14:66-72 – in the courtyard, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times